

# **The S.O.D. Trequel**

**Kay Santillo**

## Foreword

The strange, semi-autobiographical fiction continues as the new millennium arrives, bringing with it more of what the old millennium did, but with a different date.

Sandra keeps trying to make sense of life amid its seeming senselessness and discovers the freedom of a new kind of spirituality. This leads her to meet a group of people who are welcoming, open, honest, searching and ever so slightly insane. This suits her very well indeed. It also helps her through a part of her life that becomes dense with other people's happenings – other people's happenings that she is very much involved in, of course, whether she wants to be or not.

Yet life keeps moving inexorably onwards, until by the end of this book, Sandra has completed five decades of life. Five decades! Now that sounds scary, but every cloud has a silver lining (or in this case a pink/lilac one, see cover) and 60 is now considered the new 40. Quite where that leaves 50 is uncertain, but no doubt *The S.O.D. Quad* will have something to say. I really hope so, because I plan to start writing it soon.

Au revoir!

Kay Santillo, June 2010.

## CHAPTER 1

It was September 1999 and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was amazed to be having a 47<sup>th</sup> birthday. As she stood in the kitchen, she wasn't amazed so much at the fact that she was still alive, but the fact that she'd been alive for so long without really noticing.

"Happy birthday, life mate," said Osborn, patting her on the bottom before proceeding to butter his bagel. They had stopped referring to each other as husband and wife five years before, after a very painful reassessment of their married life.

"What's wrong with calling me Sandra? And men pat *old* women on their bottoms," muttered Sandra while Osborn buttered.

"I'm sorry," replied Osborn looking into her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"I seem to be losing direction in my life again," said Sandra sadly, looking for the marmalade in the saucepan cupboard. "I mean, what do I do but soak up other people's problems like a giant sponge? Well, a size 14 sponge, anyway. Not only that, but I think I might be going senile, I actually washed my armpits twice this morning by mistake."

"It's when you wash them twice deliberately that you've got to worry," offered Osborn. "It means you've got smelly..."

"Anyway, you've got two armpits, so what's the problem?" their dark-haired 23-year-old son Gulliver asked as he entered the kitchen silently (until he spoke). "Happy birthday, Mother! I bought you a card, but I forgot to post it."

"But Gulliver, you still *live* here!" exclaimed Sandra.

"Oh yes. I'll go and get it then."

"He's such a twit," mused Sandra wonderingly. "I wonder who he takes after?" she continued to wonder wonderingly.

"His parents," said Osborn dryly, wiping off some dripped butter from his chest with a wet cloth.

"Here you are," announced Gulliver, presenting Sandra with a card. To her surprise, he presented her with a surprise present as well. "Thought I'd forgotten you, huh? Well, as they say, I saw this and thought of you."

"I don't know what to say," said Sandra, proving herself wrong.

"Actually, Almond's got your real present," explained Gulliver. "I left it in Cardiff last weekend by mistake, so this is your unreal present."

"How long have you been going out with Almond now?" asked Sandra, as she opened Gulliver's present curiously. "Whatever can this be?"

"Three years – and it's a fridge magnet in the shape of a banana."

"You had me worried for a moment, but why did it remind you of me? I suppose I do love bananas."

"Mother, you *are* bananas," said Gulliver, sweetly. "Must go, or I'll be late for work. *Fischer & Chipmann* have been hot on punctuality lately. I'm aiming for promotion, so I don't want to find myself in the frying pan, let alone the fire."

"Bye! You're nuts!" called Sandra forward.

"Leave my anatomy out of this!" called Gulliver back.

"He *is* nuts," remarked Osborn, as Gulliver closed the front door behind him. "Right then, what would you like to do today?"

"It's your day off, what would you like to do?"

"It's your birthday and I asked first."

"Oh, I don't know."

"What don't you know?"

"I don't know."

"I know," said Madeleine, their blonde-haired 18-year-old daughter, upon entering the kitchen. "You could have a pub lunch in a pub, go for a walk, go to the cinema, go shopping, then come home for a birthday cake tea. Happy birthday, Smutti!"

"Thanks, Mad," said Sandra. "I'll really miss you calling me Smutti and calling Dad Varti when you go to university. We haven't really got any spare cash to follow your suggestions, though. What are you doing today?"

"I'm going into Plymouth with Drew, he needs some new jeans. We could be around for your birthday cake tea, though," replied Madeleine, grinning.

"Have you by any chance bought Mum a cake, Mad?" whispered Osborn to his daughter, who shook her head. "OK, I'll get one." He winked conspiratorially, much to Sandra's amusement.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think," said Madeleine, "I keep getting preoccupied about leaving home."

"You'll do fine," said Osborn consolingly. "Don't worry."

"Me worry?" replied Madeleine a little too brightly. It was probably her orange and cerise nightdress, thought Sandra, as she heard the postperson battle with the letterbox.

"Mail!" exclaimed Madeleine, jumping up to go to the front door. "I wonder if it's that new postie with the perfectly formed pert little male bottom?"

"She doesn't change," Osborn smiled at Sandra, although opening his mouth to let the words come out.

"Oh, I don't know, she's always giving me lots of clothes to wash," said Sandra distractedly. "It'll be great when I only have yours and mine. I mean, I've been a mother for nearly a quarter of a century and I'm still deluged with socks and underwear everywhere I turn. What's this sock doing in the tea caddy? Why is it called a caddy? Oh, it wasn't meant to be like this, but I'll miss them so *much* when they do eventually go."

The duality of life overcame Sandra for a moment, as she tried unsuccessfully to pour herself another cup of tea whilst surreptitiously wiping her suddenly moist eyes with the sleeve of her dressing gown. The ensuing crash jolted her, but not a lot. 'I should have let go of the mug,' she thought, as she watched the tea spill out over the edge of the kitchen top and onto the floor.

"It's OK, I'll pick up the pieces," said Osborn quickly, although Sandra just managed to catch his words.

"Another mug..." remarked Sandra quietly.

"We've got loads," remarked Osborn even more quietly.

"I keep breaking them," remarked Sandra even more quietly than Osborn.

"Sorry, did you say something?" asked Osborn quite loudly.

"I keep breaking them," repeated Sandra. "Why are you being so nice to me? Is it because I'm old?" She scrutinised him intently for a moment. 'Or are you feeling guilty about something?' she thought, as a wave of insecurity from the past seemed to attack her from nowhere. 'Where did that come from?' she thought sadly. 'I thought all that business was over and done with.'

"I know," said Osborn, his voice filtering through Sandra's thoughts, "we'll go out for coffee, that always perks you up."

"That's an old joke, just like me."

"Hey, on what grounds did you jump to that assumption?"

"I don't know, probably just the truth about where I am on the life scale gradually filtering through."

Later in the afternoon, Sandra and Osborn sat on a bench strategically placed on a cliff path, at the top of a hilly bit, looking out to sea.

"What do you see?" asked Osborn suddenly.

"See? I see sea," replied Sandra.

"No, what do you see when you look at me?"

Sandra turned to look at him appraisingly. He wasn't at all bad for his age, just turned 49 with a well-proportioned body, a kindly face when he remembered to smile and his remaining hair now showing more grey than dark brown. "I see someone who is familiar and not familiar," she said familiarly. "Someone who has been very unhappy in the past and who is still trying to find out what happiness means – what the meaning of life means – Osborn, what are we doing here?"

"I thought you liked to walk along this path?"

"Yes, I do. No, I meant what are we doing here with our lives? I thought that doing a degree in psychology was going to give me direction and knowledge and maybe even a job, but I still feel kind of lost. In fact, my sense of direction hasn't improved at all. I thought that recovering from your affair and us learning to love each other

truthfully and honestly would be a reason for living the rest of my life. Well, it is, but there's got to be more."

"I used to freak out whenever you said that," remembered Osborn.

"I used to freak out when you freaked out," remembered Sandra. "We must have been a freakish pair."

"Now I'm freaking out about myself," continued Osborn freakishly. "It was great to achieve chartered engineer status, but it hasn't exactly changed my life at the university. In fact, it's becoming excessively political in there and that's resulted in so much backbiting and backstabbing."

"You want to watch your back, then."

"I do. My boss really seems to have it in for me."

"Who's your boss again?"

"Bill Bustard."

"I love that name. I don't understand why he's got it in for you, though."

"He doesn't think that someone on the technical staff should do as much teaching as I do. He keeps trying to thwart me and the constant threat of being thwarted is beginning to wear me out. I want a rest. I feel older. I'm sure there's more to life, but I haven't found out what it is, despite my brush with religion."

"Yes, I must admit I did think it was a bit off when they asked you to take a double shift on their cleaning rota, but we've both learned that religion isn't our route to – whatever – haven't we?" Sandra shaded her eyes to look out to the horizon.

"Definitely. What about God, though?"

"Ah, God. Yes, God. Oh my God!"

"You still have a relationship with God then?"

"No! Yes! I don't know! I think there's someone drowning out there! Look, just left a bit from those rocks, they must be in trouble all that way out."

"It's just a buoy."

"Oh, how dreadful – we'll have to ring the coastguard!"

"Sandra, come back, it's just a buoy! A b-u-o-y!"

"Oh. Maybe it's time for me to have my eyes tested again. It's so necessary to see clearly – in more ways than one."

"I see."

Sandra smiled. "Osborn, I do still love you."

Osborn smiled. "I love me too."

"Idiot!" Sandra swiped Osborn's thigh playfully. "*Do you love yourself, though?*"

"Yes, I think so. I know we need to love ourselves before we can love other people properly. I *try* to love myself."

"Good, because I need you to love *me* properly."

"Can't I love you a bit improperly, over there on that mossy tussock by the grassy hillock?"

"Mmm," considered Sandra, looking at him wonderingly and feeling stirrings of warmth. "This sun is quite hot. I still want you to love me properly, though." She stood up, as the warmth became definitely warmer. 'You loved *her* improperly,' she thought suddenly. 'Oh God, it's still there. Parts of it are still ready to catch me out, just when I think I've let it go. I'll have to do something about it.'

"Sandra?" Osborn touched her breast gently.

"Please love me improperly," said Sandra, with tears in her eyes. 'Damn,' she thought as she turned away from Osborn, running towards the mossy tussock by the grassy hillock. 'I forgot to bring any *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*.'

Madeleine looked a little flustered when she greeted Sandra and Osborn on their return from the mossy tussock by the grassy hillock. "Did you buy a birthday cake?" she asked brightly. Her cheeks looked very pink. "Guess what, Drew and I made a surprise birthday cake for you, it's still in the oven. Drew had to go home, though."

"Oh good," said Sandra. "I don't mean good that Drew had to go home, I'm used to him being around here after two and a half years. No, I mean good because we forgot to buy a cake and my parents are calling later. They can have some of your cake."

"No!" said Madeleine, looking very alarmed, as the cooker's buzzer went off.

"Why not?" asked Sandra curiously.

"Because..." began Madeleine.

"Hi!" they heard Gulliver shout loudly, as he opened the front door. "Another busy day at the office!" He came into the kitchen and looked at them meaningfully. "Grandma and Grandad Dullkettle are on their way in."

"Oh God – good!" exclaimed Sandra, as her in-laws Sybil and Basil appeared in the doorway with a suspicious looking parcel. "Hello! Would you like some birthday cake?"

"Yes dear," said Sybil, putting the parcel down. "Happy birthday, Sandra. I hope you like your present, it's a cute little garden gnome. Osborn told me you do a lot of gardening these days. He's part of a collection – the gnome, not Osborn. Ha-ha! We can collect the whole set for you over the next few birthdays and Christmases, if you like."

"Ah!" ejected Sandra, wondering whether to tell Sybil how much she violently disliked garden gnomes.

"A collection like that might be worth something in a few years' time," said Basil, frowning slightly as he took off his coat. "Ouch! I've been having a lot of trouble with my chest lately and my hiatus hernia's not been too good, either."

"Here are your parents, Sandra," said Osborn as the doorbell rang.

"Let's go and sit down," said Sandra faintly, feeling a little dizzy with conflicting emotions. "Mad, bring in the cake when it's cooled?"

Half an hour later, after welcoming her parents, opening their presents, making polite and impolite conversation and having happy birthday sung to her, Sandra started to feel as if she actually was 47.

"How does it feel to be 49 then, dear?" asked Sybil, as she attacked her piece of birthday cake.

"It's Osborn who's 49, I'm only 47," replied Sandra heatedly. She'd been forced to turn on the fire, as Basil had been complaining bitterly that it was cold.

"Oh, that's nothing when you get to my age," continued Sybil, picking out a clove from the cake and inspecting it closely.

"How old are you, Grandma?" asked Gulliver politely, suddenly spitting out an unidentified chunky object on his plate.

"Almost as old as I am, eh Sybil?" said Sandra's 76-year-old father, Leonard, just before he made a strange throaty noise. "Good heavens, what's this?" he spluttered, extricating a slightly melted miniature plastic water pistol from his mouth.

"Oh, you've found the surprise prize, Grandad!" said Madeleine, looking rather sheepish. It was probably her latest hairstyle, thought Sandra. "Actually, I meant it for Mum, I didn't know you were coming here."

"I see," said Leonard, looking somewhat askance at his granddaughter. "Well, you're still full of surprises. As a behaviourist, your behaviour always fascinated me."

"Not the behaviourism!" expostulated Sandra and her mother Caroline in unison.

"Oh, all right then, I'll be on my best behaviour," chortled Leonard, delighted at his own joke.

"Once a psychologist, always a psychologist, I'm afraid," apologised Caroline, suddenly chewing furiously.

"Oh, don't be angry with him, Mum," said Sandra. "Oh, you're not. Is it something you're eating? What is it?"

"I think it's chewing gum," said Caroline, pulling something sticky from her mouth. "Oh, excuse me, it's stuck to my dentures."

"I'm sorry!" blurted out Madeleine. It was really no good blurting in. She jumped up and headed towards the door. "The cake was meant to be a sort of joke, but it's gone all wrong, just like me!" She fled the room and ran upstairs.

"Oh dear, another self-concept crisis?" asked Caroline with difficulty, looking at Sandra worriedly. "I didn't mean to make a fuss. I've got some great stuff for cleaning dentures."

"Don't worry," said Gulliver, from where he'd been sitting relatively quietly in the corner. Just lately, family gatherings seemed to stop his natural flow of conversation.

"Madeleine said that she and Drew had an argument, that's why he went home. She didn't want to spoil your birthday tea by saying anything, Mother."

'It wasn't a bad birthday, as birthdays go,' reflected Sandra as she lay in bed that night, 'although to be perfectly honest, I still feel trapped in my daughter and daughter-in-law roles. Mum in particular always wants me to see her every Tuesday and Thursday and play *Scribble*. She's so competitive and she's started to be quite verbally abusive. I don't know whether I find it amusing or not.

'She and Dad have completely given in with their garden now and leave it all to me. Osborn is still Mr Fix-everything-under-the-sun for his parents too. Oh, I know our parents mean well, but there seems such a discrepancy between how they see life and how Osborn and I see life, not to mention how Gulliver and Madeleine see life. I suppose middle-age is a good vantage point for seeing all viewpoints, but that puts a certain amount of pressure on Osborn and me to be the understanding ones. That is, the ones in the middle who get pushed and pulled from both sides of the age gap. Phew, I'm a bit hot.' She flung an arm out of bed.

'I can't help wondering if I'm wasting my life, but I can't see what to do with it. I loved psychology, but I definitely did my degree when I was too old to make a career out of it. Besides, I was an anxious wreck by the time I'd finished, what with Osborn's affair with Sindy and all the worries of those insane three years.

'Now I'm nearly menopausal and Madeleine's about to go away to university. Cardiff seems so far away. I'll miss her so much, it's just beginning to dawn on me. Things seem decidedly rocky with her and Drew. Life changes so stealthily, you never seem to notice until – well, until you notice. Has Osborn put on the heating?' She flung another arm out of bed.

'I think Gulliver's happy with Almond, apart from the fact that she's in Cardiff and he's here and the weekend travelling tires him out. Thank heavens he's got a real car now instead of his old Land Rover. It was so clanky and it had that scary fungus growing on the dashboard – such a difference from his first yellow Mini. Oh well, I guess he and Almond are doing OK and he'll leave home one day, although I'll miss him like mad when he does. Imagine coming home and not finding crumbs all over the kitchen top, or various Gulliver-type items strewn all over the house...

'Mind you, Osborn leaves crumbs on the kitchen top sometimes. Poor Osborn, he really has no choice but to stay at work in that awful university and earn money. That still makes me feel incredibly guilty, although I work hard to make our house a home for him and that, frankly, is easier said than done. I can't help but find housework so utterly mindless and boring. I mean, when you lie in bed at night and plan what wash cycle you're going to do the following day, it's bad! I think I need to do a white wash tomorrow. Wow, it must be thundery weather, I'm beginning to sweat.' She flung a leg out of bed.

'There must be a meaning to life, there absolutely has to be and I couldn't find it at all in religion. Neither could Osborn and between us, we really tried. Actually, Osborn keeps mentioning Terry at work and his strange beliefs. I must admit, I'm so intrigued when he describes the conversations the two of them have, about destiny and universal love and angels and there being no such thing as coincidence and all that.

'At least Osborn has someone to have interesting spiritual conversations with. I know I enjoy having conversations with Alison, she's been a good, faithful friend over the years. She's confined by her church religion, though, so I don't feel free to talk about spirit matters and spirit definitely does seem to matter.

'Fancy Dad giving me a bottle of rum for my birthday, just because I once said I like a nice rum and Coke. He's a dear old soul, he does listen to me these days. Not many people do listen to each other when you think about it – not really listen, anyway. Osborn said that Terry's a good listener. What else was it he said about him? I can't quite remember, I wasn't really listening. Gott in Himmel, what's wrong with me, I'm boiling up here...' She flung another leg out of bed. 'Ouch! It's a good job our bed isn't all that high off the ground.'

## CHAPTER 2

The following day, Sandra was visited by her old school friend, Gina. The two of them had kept in touch over the years – the many years – the very many years – but Gina had always been a busy, sociable person who made flying visits on her way somewhere else. Now, though, she seemed quite relaxed and happy to sit in Sandra's sitting room. In fact, she was relaxed so much, she was almost lying down.

"I'm so tired," she complained from her prone position, with her long, slightly greying fair hair belying her progressing years, "and it always feels so good sitting on your sofa."

"You're sitting on the chair today."

"Oh, can we change? That's better, I can put my feet up. Do you mind?"

"No, of course not. I like people to feel comfortable here."

"I'm sure I had something to tell you, but it's gone. Oh well, I suppose it'll surface later, things usually do. Have I seen you since the total eclipse? It really freaked me out."

"No, I don't think we met in August. I loved the eclipse, but I know what you mean about it feeling freaky." Sandra was transported back in time (though only in her mind) to the 11<sup>th</sup> of August, when the moon had totally eclipsed the sun in the south-west of England. She and her family, along with many other local people, had stood in a field close to their home and watched with awe as the light of the sun had gradually disappeared. It had unfortunately been a cloudy day, but the effect of the sudden absence of daylight in the late morning had caused Sandra the strangest feeling, that she was slipping off the face of the Earth. The people standing in the field had suddenly seemed inconsequential compared to the inexorable movements of planet Earth, the moon and the sun. However, when daylight had begun to return, she'd felt an almost primeval sense of renewal and euphoria that she was sure she would never forget.

"Did you hear, Sandra? You look like you're on another planet. I was saying that I bumped into Delia in *Safebury's* the other day, which is what I was trying to remember. She said there was going to be a school reunion next month and how about the three of us meet up, as well as any others we're in touch with. She gave me her phone number in case we decide to go. What do you think?"

"A school reunion? At school? Wow, how scary. Fascinating, though."

"I've got Kay's address, we exchange Christmas and birthday cards. Do you still write to Emily?"

"Em? Yes, I do, but nowadays we email more than anything else. You'd enjoy the Internet, I'm sure, Gina. If I can do it, you can do it, believe me!"

"No, I really don't like the idea of it at all, it's just not me somehow."

"Fair enough, I know I took a while to feel more or less OK with it. A school reunion, though – I don't suppose many people would remember me, I was always quiet and usually slipped under the radar."

"God, I remember slipping on the hockey pitch when that flaming ball hit me. I had a terrible headache, my father almost went to complain to Miss Chance, but I told him it had been an accident. I didn't want him embarrassing me to high heaven."

"Yes, I remember you swore quite shockingly," said Sandra, remembering Gina of the old days, when she would swing her long, fair hair around according to her feisty demeanour. "I felt so sorry for you and it made me hate hockey even more than I already did. In fact, I didn't enjoy any outdoor sport at all."

"Indoor sport?"

"No."

"Delia was in the hockey team, wasn't she?" asked Gina.

"Dee was, yes. So was Em, but I don't think Kay was."

"It's quite fun reminiscing, isn't it," remarked Gina. "Do you fancy going to that school reunion, then?"

"Why not!" Sandra felt on the cusp of being ready to take an opportunity that had suddenly presented itself, no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential. "I didn't especially enjoy school days, but I do feel a strange affinity with our old class mates."

"Very strange. No, so do I. I'll ring Dee and write to Kay and you can email Em?"

"Let's do it, it'll be fun! I'd like to see the old building again – the cloakrooms, the library, the smelly biology lab where Pansy Wellgood was given a detention for fainting when Miss Treat dissected a pregnant rat..."

"Ah, the good old days." Gina sat up with a sigh. "I must go, Andy's got a half-day off so we can crack on with decorating the sitting room."

"How's it going? Have you got the hang of wallpapering yet?"

"Ah, you'd best drop that sticky subject," grimaced Gina as she walked out to the porch. "I'll let you know when I've spoken to Dee and Kay. See you later!"

That same evening, Osborn came home with news that Terry from work had asked them to a workshop for spiritual development the following weekend at their home in North Cornwall.

"A workshop?" squeaked Sandra. "Spiritual development? Working at what? Will there be things for sale?"

"I'm not entirely sure what it'll be like, but Terry said that we should find it very interesting and we'll meet some lovely people."

"What about his wife?"

"Kerry? Yes, I'm sure she's lovely too."

"That's not what I meant. Does she know about you and me?"

"Yes, she knows we've been searching for enlightenment, or answers to life's confounding questions, for some considerable time."

"That's true. Oh, why not. I've been feeling a loss of direction for so long, so maybe this is the way to go."

"Or destiny?"

"Hmm. That sounds scary. It'll be the day after we take Maddy to Cardiff, though." As she said the words, Sandra felt a huge wave of emptiness wash over her at the thought of life without Madeleine. 'I'm not sure I can bear it,' she thought sadly, 'but I'll have to, like every other mother whose barely grown-up child goes away to university to fend for themselves in the big, wide world and meet loads of unknown others who will influence them and lead them into strange and dangerous places.'

"What's wrong?" asked Osborn gently. "You needn't be scared, I'll be there."

"What? Oh no, it's not that. I was thinking about life without Maddy and how different life will feel. It's all so uncertain. Yes, I'll go to the workshop."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain. I suppose we were lucky that Gulliver didn't go away to university. I wonder if he'll ever leave home."

"Me?" asked Gulliver, as he entered the room unheard. "I can't wait to leave home, no offence. Is anyone listening to me? Almond and I were talking last weekend..."

"You mean, you're going to get engaged, or set up house together, or something?" asked Osborn hopefully. "But she's there doing her degree and you're here working."

"Don't I know it," replied Gulliver ruefully. "It's so hard trying to keep up a long-distance relationship. No, I meant that we were talking last weekend, after that row we had the weekend before, when we ended up not talking."

"You had a row?" asked Sandra, slightly startled. "You never said."

"I'm like you," said Gulliver thoughtfully. "I need to think about things and try to make sense of them before I can articulate to other people. Still, I'll get over it. I'm going to see Damien tonight, by the way, so don't cook for me. Hi Mad, I didn't hear you come in."

"Hi," said Madeleine quickly. "I just came in to say I'm having tea with Drew tonight, is that OK?"

"That's fine, darling," replied Sandra. "You'll spend some time with us before you go, though, won't you?"

"What, now?" Madeleine looked confused.

"No! Before you go to Cardiff. You know, hang loose with the wild set, groove with the in crowd, tangle with the – the other students you'll meet." Sandra tried to keep

her voice bright, but the resulting mix of words and barely concealed sadness caused Madeleine to look at her mother strangely.

"I'll be OK, you know," she said, coming to give Sandra a hug. "You have to let me go." She waited patiently for a few moments. "Smutti, you have to let me go!"

The day had arrived with its relentless sense of inevitable change. The packing had been finalised the previous day, Madeleine had been to say goodbye to her friends and to both sets of grandparents and Drew had left their house very late the night before.

"Are you OK?" Sandra looked at Madeleine as they both stood in the porch, noticing her puffy eyelids. "Oh darling, I know it's hard to say goodbye to your boyfriend, but Gulliver said he's fine about giving Drew a lift to Cardiff any weekend he wants."

"I'm OK," replied Madeleine with a sigh. "Let's just get it over with, please?"

"Well, I'm ready," said Osborn, coming in from packing cases and boxes in the car. "It was tricky, but I managed to squeeze everything in." He looked at Madeleine. "Maddy, are you OK?"

"Oh Dad, not you as well," said Madeleine with a feeble smile. "I've got my new mobile phone and I'm not leaving the country."

"You are, you're going to Wales!" exclaimed Sandra, putting on her jacket. "Oh well, at least the weather's good today."

"Right, this is it," said Madeleine, as she opened the front door of the only home she had ever known, turning to look back into the house one last time. Sandra noticed with dismay that there were tears in Madeleine's eyes and a great wave of sadness engulfed her. Then, as Madeleine left the house, it was as if the moon had once more eclipsed the sun, stealing the daylight and causing her to feel as if she was slipping off the edge of the Earth.

The following day, Sandra found herself in the sitting room of Terry and Kerry Perry in an old cottage in deepest north Cornwall. She had the strange feeling that she was now inhabiting a parallel universe, after having slipped out of her usual one the moment they'd finally said goodbye to Madeleine. It had been a successful day on the whole, Sandra was thinking sadly, as Madeleine had met her flatmates in her particular hall of residence; had been shopping with her parents to stock up on food for the near future; had eaten lunch with Sandra and Osborn for the last time in ages and then finally, excruciatingly, had hugged them both and shut the door after them with what seemed like sudden abruptness.

'I suppose she wanted to get to know her flatmates,' reasoned Sandra to herself, still feeling a great pang of hurt at the memory. 'It's understandable, it really is.'

"...so let's all go around in turn and introduce ourselves," said the voice of a woman wearing annoying bangles, who Sandra suddenly realised had been speaking for the last few moments. "Shall we start with this new lady on my left?"

"Me? Oh no, I'm sorry, I was in another world," said Sandra, feeling herself blushing uncontrollably.

"Ah, another psychic," said the woman wearing annoying bangles. "That's good. How long have you known you have the gift?"

"The gift?" squeaked Sandra helplessly.

"I'll go first, Claire," said Terry, smiling at Sandra with understanding eyes. "It can be a bit daunting when you're new and I'm quite an old-timer, after all. Right then, I'm Terry and I've been on this particular spiritual pathway for about eight years now."

Sandra's levels of panic gradually subsided, as Terry briefly described how he had been divorced a number of years before and had eventually met Kerry, who'd introduced him to a spiritualist way of life. They had decided to marry and their dearest wish was that their new home together could be used for spiritual development, such as workshops like the one today, as well as a place of healing. Kerry joined in at this point and said how she was so happy that everyone was there.

'How lovely,' thought Sandra, as a woman in her possibly early forties, with long blonde hair and an appealing smile introduced herself as Angelica Lux, saying softly that she was aware of a lovely angel in the far corner of the room.

'I wonder who she means?' thought Sandra, looking curiously towards the corner of the room. 'She can't mean that man with the big mole and the hairy ears, surely? Oh, it's his turn next!'

"Hello, I'm Derek Vinn, but most people call me Del," said the man with the big mole and hairy ears. "I've been interested in spiritual matters for many years and have recently become interested in past lives."

'Past lives,' thought Sandra with interest. 'I'm having enough trouble with this one, I don't think I could cope with any more. Mind you, it makes sense of so many people who die prematurely because it means they can come back for another go. Yes, I think I like that idea, it's always worried me about babies who – oh no, Osborn's speaking and then it's me!'

"I'm Osborn and I'm somewhat new to this side of things," Osborn was saying, looking uncharacteristically rather uncertain. "I'm married to Sandra and we have two grown-up children. I've always wanted to make sense of our existence as humans, but as I was going through life asking endless questions, they seemed to lead to more and more questions, rather than answers. Then Terry came to share my office a couple of years ago and he and I have had some really interesting discussions that I feel have gradually pointed me to this pathway. It's as if Terry has opened gateways and shown me possibilities that I want to follow up."

"Thanks mate!" said Terry, as Osborn came to a halt. "I'm really glad you're here today and Sandra too. Your turn now, Sandra?"

"Hello, I'm Sandra," said Sandra as brightly as she could, feeling her heart beating madly and wondering if she would have a hot flush. "I'm married to Osborn and – uh – he asked me to come along today. I tried to find answers in the church, then I studied philosophy and psychology, but although I've always felt a sense of knowing some things, I have a sense of there being so much more that's just beyond my understanding."

"That was well put," remarked a woman with long black hair and sparkling blue eyes, whose turn it was to speak next. "I'm Wanda White and my particular pathway is with Wicca. I've always felt I'm a solitary person, but I feel very much at home here."

'She's a witch!' thought Sandra suddenly. 'She looks very kind – but she's a white witch! Wow, what would Osborn's parents say? This is great, these people are so fascinating. They're not interested in mindless convention in the slightest and they're obviously comfortable just being themselves.'

"I'm Rodney Pointer," said a silver-haired man with glasses, "but I like people to call me Rod. I developed an interest in dowsing a while ago and since I moved to this area last year, I've met so many wonderful people." Rod smiled benignly around the group and then turned enquiringly to a curly-headed man of indeterminate years sitting next to him.

"Hi, I'm Leo Capricorn and you've guessed right, I'm a Piscean. Ha! No, to be honest, I'm a Virgo and although my real surname is Capricorn, I'm actually called John and my middle name is Leonard. I became interested in astrology when my cat's death by a piece of falling masonry was foretold in the *You and Your Stars* column in the..."

Sandra found her mind wandering again, as she struggled to remember the details of all who had spoken. She caught Osborn's glance and returned it with a smile, as Terry, who was leading this particular workshop, asked them to get together in pairs to do an exercise.

'Oh no,' thought Sandra with dismay, 'one of my nightmares! Who on Earth can I pair up with out of this lot?'

"Ah, we seem to be the last ones left floating around," said Del Vinn to Sandra, as she gazed up at the big mole on his right cheek. "Will I do?"

"Yes, of course," squeaked Sandra. "I'm not sure what we have to do though?"

"So," continued Terry, as everyone looked up expectantly, "I thought we'd start by some creative waxing."

Sandra felt herself beginning a hot flush of volcanic proportions at that point, even though Terry explained with twinkling eyes that each pair was going to be given a candle and a piece of paper. One of the pair would create an image by dripping wax onto

the paper with their eyes closed and their partner would then interpret the meaning of the wax image. They would then change over their waxing tasks.

As the group candle session got under way and Sandra's hot flush abated, she found herself listening with great amusement to the comments from the other pairs, such as failure to light the candle at all, hot wax dripping on skin, match problems and faulty wicks. Del had suggested she drip wax first and as she was congratulating herself on being able to carry out the exercise with no problems, she accidentally extinguished the flame by an excess of wax.

"Oh no, my wax has waned! I've gone out!" she exclaimed, looking up at Del. "Does that mean I'm going to die?"

"Good heavens, no," replied Del kindly. "It just means your wax was flowing a bit too freely, that's all."

"Is that bad?" asked Sandra anxiously. "Should I light up again?"

"Why not?" said Del. "Don't worry so much, life's too short."

"The wick's a bit too short, I think that's the problem," said Sandra, peering at the wick. "Oh, never mind, I've got some wax on my paper in a funny sort of splodge. Would you like to do some waxing now?"

After Del had waxed sufficiently, he set about interpreting Sandra's wax image, saying she seemed to be a gentle soul who was a little afraid of splashing out but whose ideas were sometimes far reaching – this was due to the large splurge of wax that had resulted when the flame had accidentally been extinguished. His earnest interpretation caused Sandra to smile, as she took a sneaky look at Osborn and his partner Wanda White. Osborn was speaking to Wanda very intently as they both gazed at their wax images.

"So, what's your interpretation of my wax?" asked Del, as Sandra was forced to draw her gaze away from Osborn and Wanda.

"Oh! Well, I would say that – goodness, that's a big lump there." Sandra felt a terrible giggle forming in her abdomen and tried valiantly to suppress it. "I – sorry – I'd say you like to go deep?" Sandra made a very strange noise as the terrible giggle escaped, causing others in the room to look around anxiously.

"Are you OK, Sandra?" asked Terry kindly.

"Yes, thank you." Sandra's voice was little more than a whisper. "It just reminded me of when I went to visit the practice nurse to have my ears syringed." The descendent of the original terrible giggle came bursting out in a strange little elongated shriek. To Sandra's relief, though, several others joined in her mirth.

"Yes!" said Kerry, before letting rip to a full-on earthy laugh.

"Ha-ha!" said Claire, waving her bangles around rather noisily and agitatedly.

"I like it!" said Wanda, smiling at Sandra.

'I liked it,' thought Sandra, as Osborn drove them home after the workshop had ended and everyone had indulged in one of Kerry's delicious home-made muffins and some tea. 'I actually liked it, even though it was really a bit mad. Quite a bit mad. Come to think of it, that's probably *why* I liked it. No, it wasn't just that, the people there were all lovely. They were simply being themselves and not trying to be socially acceptable or better than each other.

'I wonder what the creative wax business has to do with spirituality, though? I preferred the meditation we did after lunch because it was so relaxing, although I didn't actually see anything like most of the others were saying. Osborn seemed to see things from what he said. I was too much aware of what was going on in the room and outside the room and hoping no more bodily noises would escape from me without my consent. I think I made a fool of myself with all that giggling, but I couldn't seem to help it.

'Those flower drawings we did for our partners were interesting. I must say, Leo was very kind when the rose I drew for him turned out like the detritus from a badly performed operation. I suppose motive and intent are more important. I hope so, anyway. I felt awful when he drew me a lovely daisy and said I was pure with a sunny centre. I used to feel like that, but I'm pretty sure I'm fading and tired-looking now, with a few insect bites and significant weather damage.

'Terry and Kerry are a particularly welcoming couple. I'm glad we put our names down for the meditation workshop next month, even though I don't know much about that sort of thing. I don't know much about anything that went on today particularly, except that somewhere deep down, it felt right. It's lovely that my life and Osborn's life seem to be heading in the right direction now.'

"Oh crap!" exclaimed Osborn, breaking suddenly into Sandra's reverie. "I've taken a wrong turning, I'm pretty sure we should have gone left back there."

### CHAPTER 3

Sandra picked up the receiver almost absent-mindedly, as the phone rang one morning the following week.

"Mum?"

"Maddy!" shrieked Sandra. "How are you, my darling?"

"I'm lost."

"Oh no," said Sandra, her heart zooming into her boots. "It's early days yet, though, and if you try to hang on in there, I'm sure you'll find some light at the end of the tunnel. There must be student counsellors there you can talk with?"

"No Mum, I was just ringing to hear your voice because I'm trying to find where to go for my next lecture and I've got a bit lost, that's all. I'll be fine, honestly. I got a bit homesick for a minute and wanted to ring you. It's really good here, I'm going out tonight with Carys and Joss. Are you OK, Mum? Are Dad and Gulliver OK?"

"Yes, we're all doing well, but I miss you so much, Maddy! Are you really lost? You'll have to ask someone the way."

"Yes, I will. I love you, Smutti."

"I love you so much, Maddy."

"The school she is the wisdom, slowly wrested from the years, by countless generations and a myriad heroes won..."

Sandra stood in the large hall of her old school, singing the old school song with an uncanny feeling of being in the wrong place on a time continuum. It wasn't so much the brightly coloured clothes the old school inmates were wearing, or their differing shapes and sizes, as the memory of how they'd all used to look in their brown uniforms, some with their hair tied back in bunches or pony tails.

"Oh marvellous our heritage, for we today are heirs..."

'Strewth, that's Pansy Wellgood over there! I must say, she's a lot thinner than she used to be, but I'm not sure it actually suits her. She was kind to me once, I remember, when Herr Braun told me off for sniggering in Double German. I was only thinking that his hair wasn't brown at all, it was grey. That's not even funny. Mind you, Em found it amusing when I told her – but Em and I used to find lots of things amusing that other people didn't seem to at all. I'm glad she came to this reunion and Gina too – not to mention Kay and Delia.'

"SINE LABE DECVS!" The school song finished resoundingly with the school motto and the old girls, in both senses of the word, looked around at each other with a mixture of embarrassment and nonchalant pride. The welcome talks and address from the head teacher were now over and they were liberated to wander around their old school until the free afternoon tea.

"Shall we walk around together, the five of us?" Gina asked Sandra, as they filed out of the old familiar wooden doors of the hall.

"Yes, that'll be more fun," agreed Sandra. "Besides, I can't exactly remember my way around, it's been such a long time. I can see Em coming out over there and Delia's with her. Where's Kay?"

"I saw her chatting with Pansy Wellgood," said Gina, looking back towards the wooden doors. "I'm sure she'll join us – yes, here she comes."

Sandra spent the next hour or so wandering around the school with her four old school friends, feeling warm and weird. She felt a little lightheaded when they all visited the biology lab. The strange chemical smell was still there and the distressing memory of

Miss Treat holding up a pregnant rat by its tail, after having slit its abdomen, suddenly seemed to flash through her mind.

"I used to hate this room," she said to Gina, "and I used to hate Miss Treat."

"Did you pass Biology O-Level?" asked Gina.

"Yes, I did quite well as I remember," replied Sandra, grimacing. "Let's get out of here."

"The windows are still the same," said Em a little while later, when they were visiting the ordinary classrooms. "There's the wooden pole with the metal hook on the end that we had to use to shut the window when the teachers asked us."

"They never asked me," said Kay, "because I was too short. Well, that and the fact that I accidentally broke a window pane with the pole once."

"Happy days!" said Delia. "Can we visit the hockey pitch now?"

"Not the hockey pitch!" said Gina, looking horrified. "In a minute, Dee, I have to work myself up to that one, I feel a headache coming on."

"Em and I used to have English in this room," reminisced Gina. "Were you in our English set, Sandra?"

"No, I don't think so," remembered Sandra, "because I used to have Miss Redd and you used to have Miss Pell."

"Oh – only I kind of remember you and Miss Pell having a spot of bother here once and she made you stand up for the rest of the lesson."

"Yes! That was because I wouldn't answer her question and then I got into a state where I wouldn't say anything at all, which seemed to enrage her. The more she got enraged, though, the more I couldn't say a word. It was weird."

"You were a bit weird, Sandra."

"Thanks, Gee."

"Look at this writing the pupils have been doing on the blackboard, they've written a welcome to us old girls!" exclaimed Em, as Gina, Kay and Delia were wandering out of the room into the corridor. "I feel like writing something back to them."

"Oh, go on, write something," encouraged Sandra, who was still standing in the doorway. "They'll love that."

"What shall I write?"

"Something rebellious."

"OK. Nobody's coming, are they? It's ridiculous, I feel quite naughty, as if Miss Pell will come in and give me a detention."

"She was ancient all those years ago, so you're safe unless her spirit haunts these parts, roaming around on the lookout for all those who spell words wrongly. Quick Em, someone's heading this way!" Sandra smiled as Em dropped the chalk and practically ran out of the room. They sauntered along the corridor, trying not to giggle helplessly, as two grey-haired old girls stepped cautiously into the English room.

"What did you write?" asked Sandra, as they began to look for the others.

"What you said, "Something rebellious". I couldn't think of anything else," replied Em wryly. "Oh. Sandra?"

"What?" asked Sandra, looking slightly alarmed.

"I spelt rebellious wrong – it's only one b, isn't it?"

"Miss Pell will come and get you!" laughed Sandra, as they began to run to where they had just noticed Gina, Kay and Delia heading out towards the hockey pitch.

"Walk, don't run!" said a voice from a doorway. "Oh, sorry girls," said the owner of the voice, as a smart-looking woman in her forties stepped out of the doorway. "I used to be a prefect and it's all coming back to haunt me."

"Behold the hockey pitch!" said Delia, as they stepped onto the grass. "I wish I had my hockey stick."

"I've still got mine," replied Em, "but I use it to get apples down from my apple trees, they've grown a bit too tall."

"I hated hockey because it was too rough and I hated netball because I was too small to score," said Sandra, thinking back over the years.

"It didn't apply to outside the netball pitch, though," remarked Gina, "because as I recall, you met Osborn when you were still at school."

Later, they all walked companionably from the school playing fields to find the free afternoon tea. It was slightly chaotic, but good to sit down finally, swig tea and consume some calories.

"This is nothing like school dinners," said Kay, enjoying a home-made buttered scone spread with strawberry jam. "Do you remember school dinners?"

"I'll never forget school dinners," chorused four voices.

"The cheese pie wasn't bad," said Delia, "but the meat they used to dish out was quite dire."

"I hated it," said Kay. "I was traumatised for life, I still don't eat meat any more."

"What about the salads, do you remember the salads?" asked Gina.

"I'll never forget the salads," chorused four voices.

"I'll never forget that time when Pansy Wellgood asked Miss Stake if she could be disencumbered," said Em. "Miss Stake gave her a detention for being cheeky."

"Did you know that Pansy has cancer?" asked Kay quietly.

"I thought she was looking a bit thin," replied Sandra. "Is she OK now?"

"I don't think so, I bumped into her mother at the hospital when I was there with my neighbour and her mother said she was with the oncologist. I had a quick chat with Pansy earlier on, but she didn't mention it."

"Poor Pan," said Delia. "Oops, I'd forgotten we used to call her Pan. She never liked it, she used to say she wasn't a cooking vessel, even though she was always getting into hot water."

"I wonder what's happened to everyone in our year?" said Gina thoughtfully. "In the grand scheme of things – well, you never know who's going to die early, do you."

"On that happy note, I must go," said Em. "Can we meet up again, do you think? It's been good."

"Yes, let's!" said Delia. "We've all got each other's details now, haven't we? It's good some of us are in email contact." She winked at Gina. "I'll give you a ring, flower."

"You were the Flower," retorted Gina. "It was such a pretty surname – pity we called you Dee!"

"Well, excuse me, Gina String!" exclaimed Delia.

"Oh no," groaned Em. "If we're going down the name road, I'm definitely off. Au revoir, old mates one and all."

"Au revoir Miss Barrister!" called Kay, grinning madly.

"You too, Miss Cole!" called back Em.

"I feel left out," said Sandra sadly. "My name doesn't work like all yours used to."

"Ah, but you were in a class of your own," said Gina, smiling. "I haven't forgotten that your initials used to spell SOW."

"Oh, you pig!" cried Sandra, grinning at Gina. "Hey, isn't it really good now we feel we can abuse each other verbally like we always used to."

"Speak for yourself," said Delia, as she got up to go.

"Yep, every man for herself," said Kay, also standing up to go. "Byeeee!"

Sandra picked up the receiver almost absent-mindedly, as the phone rang one afternoon the following week.

"Mum?"

"Maddy!" exclaimed Sandra. "How are you, darling? Well settled into student life now, I expect?"

"Oh Mum, I'm lying on the bed in my room and I don't feel very well. I had to go to the surgery and have my meningitis jab and they kept me waiting for so long that I started to feel all hot and dizzy."

"Poor Mad, it's not fair, is it! What happened? Did you have the jab? Were you on your own? Were you OK?" Sandra felt waves of helplessness wash over her, knowing she was powerless for the first time to help Madeleine in any immediate physical way.

"I went on my own because I didn't want Joss and Carys to see how scared I am of needles. I had the jab and I managed to walk home somehow, but I felt awful and I still feel weird now. Carys made me a hot drink when I got in and Joss has offered to cook for me tonight, but Drew still hasn't rung and Smutti..."

"Darling?" Sandra's voice began to waver in sympathy, as she heard Madeleine's voice breaking, followed by some loud sniffs over the phone.

"I wish you were here." Madeleine's voice sounded so small, thought Sandra, as she felt her heart being pulled very painfully to the Cardiff University hall of residence where her beloved daughter lay feeling lonely, unwell and missing her – although thankfully immunised against meningitis.

"I miss you so much, Maddy," she replied, "but you'll feel better soon and you did so well to go and be immunised all by yourself when you were scared. You'll feel better after a night's sleep, I'm sure of it. Don't forget you can come home for Reading Week in November if you want to." Sandra tried very hard to inject a bright, positive note into her voice.

"I do want to. I'd better go now, my phone needs charging. I love you!"

"I love you too, darling. Bye."

A few hours later, Gulliver arrived home with Almond, who he had met from the train station. They were both currently sitting conventionally in the sitting room, pretending to watch *TFI Friday*.

"Oh well," said Gulliver nonchalantly, "I guess we'll head off to my room now and unpack Almond's bags – er, bag."

"Thank you for tea," said Almond politely. "It was – lovely."

"You're welcome," replied Sandra. "Before you go, though, what does TFI stand for?"

"I think it's open to interpretation," said Almond, "although my brother insists that it stands for..."

"Right!" interjected Gulliver. "Er – right."

"...*Thank Fish It's Friday*," continued Almond. "He *is* doing Marine Studies at uni, though."

"Oh?" enquired Osborn. "I thought he wanted to be a doctor?"

"Yes, he had his heart set on being a cardiologist, but then he saw that episode of *Casualty at Holby ER* that was in the news recently and he developed a phobia about pulsating organs."

"Ah, a bit of a drawback," replied Osborn. "I had a similar sort of phobia when I was made to go to Sunday school as a boy and Mr Wellard was organist."

"We're off now then," said Gulliver pointedly.

"Will you be around tomorrow?" asked Sandra hopefully.

"Not if we can help it," replied Gulliver, grinning obliquely at his bemused parents.

"Do you think they're happy?" Sandra asked Osborn, when Gulliver and Almond had disappeared.

"I'm not sure," replied Osborn. "He seems OK, but you can never really tell. He's 23 and when I was 23, I was married to you."

"Your point is?" asked Sandra a little tartly.

"I'd been disengaged from my parents years before I was Gulliver's age."

"But your parents were – your parents. Did they ever engage with you the same way we've been, or tried to be, with Gulliver?"

"No, I guess not. I think they were engaged with Lawrence, who had the advantage – or disadvantage perhaps – of being the firstborn. When I look back, though, I'm really not sure, because he left home as soon as he could."

"It seems to me that they tried to be engaged with Lawrence, but when you were born two years later, they were positively vacant with you, except as the family scapegoat. When Kirsty came along nine years after you, she was the long-awaited, adored daughter and they were definitely engaged with her. Oh, it's all so unfair, it still makes me wild."

"I'm too knackered to be wild, you'll have to put up with me tame. I'm fed up with this programme, where's the remote control?"

"I don't know, it must be somewhere close by."

As Sandra lay in bed that night, she found herself far from sleep and began to think of the book she wanted to start writing.

'No matter how I look at it, I really want it to be about my life,' she thought, rubbing her left kneecap. 'That seems very egotistical and conforming to type as far as novelists go, although I do use a computer. I'd have to make up different names for everyone and how much of an open book do I want my life to be? And would anyone actually want to read it?' She rubbed her right kneecap.

'I just can't let it go, though – or is it that it won't let me go? Anyway, it feels so much like it was when I had my poetry phase. Sadly, that seems to be waning greatly now that poetry magazine that liked some of my work has stopped publishing. Oh dear, I'm 47 and I'm still trying to find myself. I really wish I wasn't so elusive. I suppose I simply feel that writing things down helps somehow. It's more than that, though, it's a distinct creative urge, separate from any other motivation. It does seem a bit self-centred, but it's me. It really is who I am – so I'm going to do it!' She rubbed her left kneecap again.

'I'll start tomorrow. Well maybe Monday would be better, because it's the weekend tomorrow. Mind you, I'm seeing Gina on Monday morning and Alison on Monday afternoon and I'm going over to Mum and Dad's on Tuesday. Come to think of it, I'm going into town on Wednesday and Mum and Dad's again on Thursday. Oh, I'll just start now. How exciting!' She rubbed her right kneecap again.

'I'll lie here for a while and get the names of the characters right. Then of course, I need to formulate the first chapter, so I have the right framework. I'm so ready to do this, it feels like it's all inside and dying to get out. Once I have the framework and actually start to write, the words are bound to flow, I can guarantee it. Probably.' She rubbed both kneecaps and made rather a strange face in the dark.

#### CHAPTER 4

It was Monday afternoon and Sandra was sitting in Alison's sitting room, sipping tea and listening to Alison's tales of life at the local church. While Sandra was sympathetic – very sympathetic – to Alison's discomfiture at never quite feeling she belonged, Sandra knew she could never go back to church. However, she felt strangely reluctant to share her recent spiritual experiences at Terry and Kerry's workshop.

"You used to go to church, didn't you?" asked Alison, the light from the window behind her shining on her short, red-tinted hair.

"For a while, but I found it didn't really answer my questions about life as we know it, or even life as we don't know it!"

"I like the services – well, parts of them – but I thought people who went to church were supposed to be caring. I thought the church was supposed to be a family, but when I was away ill for six weeks, nobody called or even rang to ask how I was, not even the vicar."

"That doesn't seem very caring," agreed Sandra. "Even if the vicar was busy, you'd have thought someone would wonder where you were and ring to ask. I don't suppose another church is possible?"

"Well, we've been going to this one for years and it's where the children were baptised."

"How are Helen and Sam?"

"More or less fine. You wouldn't exactly think Helen's 26 the way she still goes out with the girls sometimes. We still go shopping together now and then, though, which is great. Mind you, she said I embarrassed her the other day and she wished she could disown me."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing! Helen started it anyway. We were standing in front of the bath and shower section in *Wellies*, where I was dithering mightily about some *Mood Melon Froth Balls* I fancied and she told me I ought to splash out. I only laughed out loud a bit, although Helen said I shrieked. It's true that I did startle an old lady, who dropped the bottle of *Passion Flower and Jojoba Minty Bath Gel* she was looking at and someone had

to call for Store Maintenance to come and clean it up. Then the old lady felt a bit faint and had to sit down, so they had to find a chair for her. I stayed to talk to the old lady, but she told me to go. It was then I noticed that Helen was right at the end of the depilatory section and looking daggers at me."

"Oh dear! Gulliver still says I embarrass him, but Maddy seems to be..." Sandra's voice tailed off as she remembered Madeleine was three hours up the motorway in Cardiff.

"Are you bereft with her being away?" asked Alison sympathetically.

"Yes." Sandra made a rueful face and tried to carry on brightly. "Is Sam still going steady with Karen?"

"He's only talking of getting engaged to her! Dirk isn't at all happy, he suspects Karen's basically lazy and uses Sam to make her life easier."

"It's hard, isn't it. You think while your children are small that it'll be somehow easier when they grow up, but the worry and the pull on your heart is still there. It's always there, actually, just different – but despite all the heartache and stress and mind-boggling problems and financial outlay and daily never knowing what's coming next – you really wouldn't change it for the whole world."

"There speaks a mother! By the way, I saw your mother at church last Sunday, but she left before I could say hello."

"She was at church? Gosh. I'm seeing her tomorrow, I'll tell her you saw her. Small world, isn't it."

"It certainly is. Do you remember Laretta Lane who used to be in Sam's and Gulliver's class?"

"Ye-es, I think so. Was she the one who was sick in the wormery?"

"That's her! Well, I met her mother in Five Street the other day and she told me that Laretta's expecting twins by Simon Swift."

"No! Not the Simon Swift who used to be in Sam's and Gulliver's class as well and set fire to the greenhouse?"

"That's the one. They've started to run their own market garden outlet down by the allotments, but the allotment people don't like them and planted some cannabis, in both senses of the word..."

"Alison said she saw you at church, Mum," mentioned Sandra the following day, as she sat with her parents sipping coffee.

"Alison?" Caroline seemed somewhat vague, thought Sandra, and not for the first time recently.

"My friend, Alison. Her son Sam used to be in Gulliver's class."

"Oh, I can't remember all the names you've told me."

"I can remember all the names you've called me, though," quipped Leonard, who was sitting at the dining room table with his latest jigsaw puzzle.

"I can too," laughed Sandra. "The names Mum called me, I mean – but come to think of it, the names she called you, too!"

"Happy days," said Leonard. "Ah, this three-in and one-out piece goes here."

"He sits there for hours," remarked Caroline. "Yes, I started going to church a while back, because I wasn't feeling fulfilled. You don't fancy going to church any more then, because you and Osborn did for a while, didn't you? Why did you give it up?"

"I – umm – we found it wasn't answering the questions about life that we were asking, I suppose. It felt too much like a social club and we never really felt we fitted in. Alison finds that, too."

"Oh, you young people, you're always expecting so much. Maybe life seems simpler at my age, but I really can't be bothered with all that self-centredness. What's wrong with a bit of acceptance and loyalty?" Caroline sniffed rather loudly.

"I'm not young, I'm 47!" retorted Sandra, surprised and upset by Caroline's apparent attitude.

"You're young as far as I'm concerned," replied Caroline. "I can't help thinking that people are a lot more selfish these days compared to what they used to be. When we were young, we certainly never had all the things you have nowadays."

"Oh well, I'm going in the garden now," said Sandra, "I need to transplant that azalea you wanted me to shift and the weeds are running rampant in the winter border." She got up rather abruptly and escaped into the back garden.

'God! What's got into Mum today?' she thought, as she picked up the necessary garden implements and headed towards the azalea. 'She's starting to become ageist, if the way she goes on about young people these days is anything to go by. Anyway, I'm *not* young! I know I'm 47 compared to her 74 – how interesting, our figures are transposed – but I've got four decades under my belt and heading for a fifth. I've been a mother for 23 years, so she just can't write me off as being young and selfish. Selfish! What a sodding cheek, after all the hours I spend working in hers and Dad's garden, out of the goodness of my heart.' She jabbed the fork into the ground and wiggled it around vigorously, working her way around the plant.

'I've had two children, as opposed to her only having me. Not only that, I married and left home when I was 18. What's happened to her? I used to think she was kind, far-seeing, intelligent and compassionate, but today she sounds cranky and narrow-minded – and she's taking it out on me, which isn't fair.' The azalea came up amid a large flurry of earth and Sandra carried it triumphantly to its new home in the opposite border.

'I thought we had something special, her and me. I wrote her that poem that took me absolute ages and I really thought she understood me. It feels as if she shut me out today, good and proper, just because I'm not in my seventies like she is. She didn't want to listen to me. She just couldn't be bothered, like she said. Well, what if I couldn't be bothered to do her weeding for her?

'I know it's Dad's garden too and to be honest, he doesn't do anything to speak of out here these days either, but he's worried about his heart, I know he is. The exercise would do him good, I'm sure, but he chooses to go out walking with his *Old Ramblers* group instead. I suppose once you've been through a major operation like he has, you have a different outlook on life, but it still means I'm landed with the gardening. God, look at all those weeds.' She got down on her knees and started to dig a hole for the azalea with a trowel.

'I wish I had a brother or a sister, or multiple varieties of both, then I wouldn't feel quite as alone as I do now when I'm with Mum and Dad. The future with them getting older and older and only me to look after them scares me rigid. No, actually it makes me all floppy and trembly with fear. What if they get really ill and infirm and have a colostomy bag, or need to use a wheelchair, or go senile, or – oh God, I really can't bear it!' Tears filled her eyes as she tried the azalea in the hole for size. She sniffed and remembered she'd completely run out of *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*.

'Damn, the hole's still too small. I hate feeling like this, but it seems like Osborn and I are just moving out of the time when our children are dependent on us, only to find that our parents are approaching a critical age when they could very well become dependent on us instead. I feel so trapped! I know Osborn has a brother and a sister, but Lawrence is somehow not nearly as equipped as Osborn is for looking after Basil and Sybil. As for Kirsty, she lives in her own world, which is conveniently 250 miles up the motorway.' She tried the azalea in the hole for size again.

'That's better, in you go. Hey, that looks good, you lovely plant – be well and thrive! Oh, I *do* love working outdoors with the earth and the plants and the flowers, underneath the blue, expansive sky. Wow, that's a dark cloud over there, it looks like rain's coming. I'd better do some weeding before it arrives. The garden seems to heal my soul. At least the flowers and plants can't hurt me like people do – ouch! You nasty thorn, you've made me bleed!'

It was already the middle of October. The meditation workshop had started after Terry had given a brief introduction about the history, practice and uses of meditation and an introductory meditation was underway. The same people who had attended the previous workshop were there, with the addition of a man of around 50 called Frank Bull. They were all sitting in a circle of sorts, in Terry and Kerry's comfortable sitting room with its interesting diversity of seating.

Completely relaxed with eyes closed, they were following Terry's voice as he led them down a path, through a door, over a bridge and along another path to a wooded area towards an upturned log by a stream, where they were to sit and look at their surroundings for about 15 minutes.

'15 minutes!' thought Sandra testily, as she wandered around a pile of rotting leaves, noticing some fungi as she tried to find a comfortable place to sit on the log. She was aware of an insistent itch on her right elbow and heard Angelica Lux, who was sitting somewhere to her left, sniff loudly.

'I want something to lean against, I need a convenient tree behind the log,' decided Sandra at last, trying to envisage a convenient tree. 'Oh, it's no good, I keep slipping off the log. I'll just keep standing and wander around a bit. I wish I could scratch my elbow. I wonder how Osborn's getting on, I notice he's sitting next to Wanda White again. Still, she's lovely and she gave me a really nice hug when I came in.

'Of course, she gave Osborn one too – but actually, everyone hugged us, which was quite comforting once I'd managed to get over the embarrassment factor. I didn't half clunk glasses with Rodney Pointer, though, I wasn't expecting him to bend over quite as much to get down to my level. It was a bit of a soft, squashy hug with Kerry, which is one of the hazards of two women hugging! Oh no, I mustn't smile, I'm supposed to be deep in meditation on the log...' She forced down the mischievous giggle that was attempting to escape, but which resulted in a loud gulp.

'God, I bet people heard that. I bet Terry heard it and is looking at me right now. I so mustn't open my eyes, which makes me want to open them so much. At least my elbow's not itching any more. Damn, it is, because I've reminded myself of it. Oh, come on, how much longer? Perhaps I should try the log again. Where is it?

'Hold on, I saw some bluebells then – was I imagining them? Hey, is that a deer over there, peeping out from behind the camellia? What's the camellia from our garden doing here? I recognise it from the way I pruned it a bit too enthusiastically on the left side. Oh no! My stomach's going to rumble.' She tried to shift position surreptitiously in her chair to deflect the growing gurgle, but the chair gave a loud creak and Sandra felt the beginnings of a hot flush creeping inexorably up from her middle regions to her chest and then to her cheeks, causing her heart to beat unnaturally fast.

'Sod it, that's all I need, I'm starting to feel a bit panicky and I haven't felt like that for ages! I shouldn't swear in a meditation, should I? I don't think I'm very good at this. Oh! Who's that shadowy figure over there by the edge of the stream?'

"It's time to come back," came the sound of Terry's voice, as it then softly led them back from the log along the path, over the bridge, through the door and along the path until they were back in the room and told to open their eyes.

"Well, you all looked so peaceful," said Terry, smiling. "We'll go around the circle now and see what you have to report. How about you, Claire?"

"I started to follow you Terry, but I found myself in a white, marble building, being led into a bright room with a high ceiling inlaid with the most wonderful crystals..."

"I started to follow you Terry," said Del when it was his turn, "but my spirit guide was waiting for me and we went to a place overlooking the sea, where we sat and talked about one of my previous lives..."

"I started to follow you Terry," said Leo when it was his turn, "but I suddenly found myself sitting on the top of a mountain and looking at the stars..."

"I started to follow you Terry," said Angelica when it was her turn, "but I met this beautiful, incandescent angel, who I seemed to melt into and we went somewhere so lovely I can't even begin to describe it..." Angelica sniffed into a tissue she pulled out of a pocket in her multicoloured long skirt.

"I started to follow you Terry," said Wanda when it was her turn, "but I turned off into a meadow and started to pick wild flowers. Then I was finding herbs everywhere and putting them in a basket I had, intending to use them to heal people..."

"I started to follow you Terry," said Kerry when it was her turn, "but then I was suddenly in this Native American settlement with my spirit guide, Upright Feathers. He was telling me how pleased he was that our house is being used to gather people around the camp fire, so to speak..."

"I started to follow you Terry," said Rodney when it was his turn, "but I was diverted to a wild looking place high on some moorland and found myself walking along with my dowsing rods, trying to find a special ley line that's been lost for centuries..."

"I tried to follow you Terry," said Osborn when it was his turn. Sandra felt her heart beating a little fast in anticipation of what Osborn would say. "I went across a lovely Japanese-style bridge and found the upturned log in the woods. I sat on it for a while, but then went to the stream, bent down and put my hands into the water and was really surprised to find it was deep – so deep that it seemed almost bottomless. It was so cool and soothing. Then when I stood up, I saw a reflection in the water of a shadowy figure who seemed oddly familiar in a way I just couldn't fathom..."

"I followed you all the way Terry," said the new man Frank when it was his turn, "but I wasn't sure I was there at all, to be honest. I'm afraid sometimes that I live up to my full name, Frank Lee Bull. I've tried meditation before and I just end up feeling that I'm making it all up in my own head..."

"I tried to follow you Terry," said Sandra nervously when it was her turn, "but I couldn't get comfortable on the log and then I was aware of my elbow itching and my thoughts began to run away with me. However, I did see some bluebells, a deer and a camellia and then right at the end I imagined I saw a shadowy figure by the stream..."

After Terry had commented positively on everybody's account (which Sandra thought was no mean feat) and talked at some length about people differing greatly in how deeply they were able to meditate, it was time for lunch. People started to move into the adjoining room or wander into the garden, but Sandra and Osborn stood looking at one another, unsure what to do and where to go.

"I still feel like an outsider," whispered Sandra furtively.

"OK, let's go outside then," replied Osborn, obviously feeling quite happy. He led the way out through the porch and the front door of the old cottage, into the small but very interesting garden.

"This is lovely," said Sandra, immediately feeling better. "You can tell this place is a few centuries old, look at that tree. Well it's old, but looking at these plants, it's been treated with great care over the years. Oh!" She turned the corner and almost fell into Rodney Pointer, who was standing and looking intently at a large granite rock.

"Hello, it's such a lovely day," remarked Osborn to Rodney, who looked up startled.

"Indeed," replied Rodney, frowning slightly. "I think this rock is unhappy in this position, I feel it wants to be moved a few degrees. I might ask Terry if we could dowse later and find out."

"Wow," was all Sandra could think of to say.

"Have you been dowsing for a long time, Rodney?" asked Osborn, reaching out and feeling the rock. "Yes, I can feel – something – like flowing energy."

"Do call me Rod. I've been dowsing for as long as I can remember, me and my father before me."

"What do you dowse with?" asked Osborn, his hand still on the rock.

"Branches, rods, pendulums..." Rod and Osborn stood companionably together in conversation, as Sandra started to feel an old familiar sense of not really belonging.

'I even feel like an outsider outside,' she thought sadly, surprised to feel tears pricking her eyes. 'I like the workshops when we're actually doing things and learning things, but I really come unstuck in the social part of it. Perhaps I can hide over there by that tree and eat my sandwiches quickly.'

"Hello Sandra," said Terry brightly, as Sandra approached the tree. "How are you finding it?"

"Oh fine," replied Sandra, but realised it was rather silly not to speak the truth. "I'm feeling a bit like an outsider," she said in a small voice, "but I know I'm just being silly."

"You're not being silly," said Terry, looking into her eyes. "I can understand you might feel a bit overwhelmed with all this if it's new to you. I know Osborn tells you about our conversations at work, but being amongst us all here is a different kettle of fish. Come on, don't be shy!"

"But that's it," replied Sandra, her voice much stronger with conviction. "Deep down I *am* shy. It's who I am, but people don't seem to understand it, they treat it like it's a malfunction. I've tried so hard over the years to fight it and be someone else who's socially acceptable, but I'm me and I don't really know *why* I'm me!" To her complete chagrin, tears filled her eyes.

"Hey, it's OK – come on, have a hug!" Terry opened his arms and enveloped her in a comforting hug that was clean-smelling in a pleasingly masculine way. "We're all on a journey of discovery." He let her go and smiled. "I suspect the meditation opened doors you perhaps need to venture through, but in your own time and in your own way. I hope you enjoy this afternoon's meditation, but don't be too hard on yourself. Even if you just sit there and relax, it's OK by me."

"Thank you, Terry." Sandra smiled gratefully, as two big, embarrassing tears rolled ignominiously down her cheeks. She surreptitiously reached into her pocket for some *Mood Matching Toilet Roll*, but remembered her current lack of them.

The afternoon's guided meditation was thankfully a gentle affair for Sandra, involving a peaceful, pleasant walk through a spiritual garden, as she decided to meet anyone in the spirit world who happened to present themselves.

To her surprise, she was aware again of a shadowy figure, but could make out no features, or even if the figure might be male or female. In the end, she decided she was imagining things, but felt strangely calmed by Terry's lunchtime hug and comforting words, so decided to enjoy the peace of the afternoon, aware of the sun outside and the birds twittering madly in the garden. She didn't even mind when people in the group afterwards reported meeting all sorts of interesting beings, including late members of their own family, angels, animals and spirit guides.

"Did you enjoy the workshop?" she asked Osborn, as they drove home in the bright, low sun of an October afternoon.

"Yes, I did! I'm particularly interested in spirit guides. I feel a real connection with the reflection I saw in the stream in the first meditation, as if it's possibly my spirit guide." Osborn's voice was quietly excited.

"You really feel at one with all this, don't you – and also with all the people in the group we saw today?" Sandra tried very hard not to let an element of envy creep into her voice.

"I do. It feels as if my life's been leading towards this all the time, even including my parents making me go to Sunday school. It's all part of it, as if I had to know what *didn't* feel right for me."

"Yes, that makes sense. I don't think I feel as comfortable with everything as you do, though, you seemed to click instantly with everyone."

"It just feels *right*. It was interesting that Wanda and I both saw a female wolf in the second meditation, it made me go all tingly."

"Yes, it made me go all – something – too." Sandra remembered her discomfiture at hearing about this. "I wonder why you both saw a she-wolf," she said with a raw edge to her voice.

"You're OK about all this, aren't you?" Osborn glanced quickly across at Sandra.

"Yes, fine. Terry was very kind and supportive to me, he's a good soul. I like Kerry too, she has a wonderful laugh. I think I'm afraid you'll go on without me, that's all, because you fitted in so well today and I didn't. You get on so well with people and I don't."

"Why would I leave you behind?" Osborn sounded anxious, noted Sandra with surprise.

"I don't know," replied Sandra, "except that we both went off the trail a few years ago and..."

"Sandra!" Osborn's voice cut through Sandra's mist of gloomy memory. "We're on this journey together and that's the way it's meant to be, I'm so sure of that. We complement each other and I have a strong feeling we're meant to be doing something together on the road ahead, so – shit! I've gone past that bloody turning again!"

## CHAPTER 5

Mid-October had somehow turned into mid-December. It was a bright, crisp, hopeful morning as Osborn and Sandra drove up the motorway to Cardiff to visit Gulliver and Almond before collecting Madeleine to bring her home for the Christmas holiday. Sandra sat watching the scenery go by, feeling little bubbles of happiness bursting from her abdomen and floating all around her body, causing her to smile from time to time.

'I'm so happy that Madeleine will be home for a few weeks,' she thought serenely, as more little bubbles burst. 'I've been rather concerned about her recently, she's been very up and down about Drew. He seems to be messing her around a bit emotionally, although the two of them seemed fine when she came home for Reading Week last month. I find it so hard, though, when she rings up and she's upset, because I can tell it from her voice in an instant. I feel so helpless because she's physically unreachable.' Sandra's hand found its way across to Osborn on its own accord, where it slipped comfortingly underneath his thigh.

"You OK?" he asked, glancing across.

"Yes, I was thinking how good it'll be to see Madeleine for more than a few snatched days. Reading Week was good, but she tried to catch up with her friends and see her grandparents and spend time with Drew, so – I miss her so much – all the little everyday things we used to share with her."

"So do I," replied Osborn. "She's got a lovely energy about her, even when she's in a bit of a dodgy mood."

"She seemed quite interested in our recent spiritual explorations with Terry and Kerry, especially when you said you'd made that appointment for you and me to have our spirit guides painted. I'm quite surprised, to be honest, I thought she'd pooh-pooh that outlook on life, like Gulliver does."

"He pooh-poohs it quite kindly," said Osborn, "but he's seemed a bit distant lately."

"It's all the time he spends with Almond in Cardiff," replied Sandra, as Osborn suddenly leant on the car's horn.

"You stupid moron!" he exploded, as he manoeuvred madly to avoid the car that had pulled out to overtake without seemingly noticing his car. "That was so close. What a reckless lunatic!" He regained a position of safety and exhaled noisily. "I'm sorry, that was *really* close."

"I know, my heart's still jumping around!" squeaked Sandra. "I hate cars."

"It's not the cars, it's the drivers," replied Osborn mechanically.

As Sandra's chemicals gradually sorted themselves out, she fell once again into a reverie about life in the middle lane.

'I wish Osborn would get back in the slow lane for a while,' she mused, 'I feel much safer there. How on Earth does Gulliver cope with travelling up and down to Cardiff almost every weekend? He's definitely been rather stressed lately, although he and Almond seem happy enough together. I can't help missing the way he and I used to joke a lot, but I suppose that now he's understandably preoccupied with life at work and life with Almond.'

'Ah, we're back in the slow lane, good. I bet Gulliver uses the fast lane up this motorway, thank heavens I'm not there to see it. I'm glad *Fischer & Chipmann* sent him to Germany for a few days with a colleague last month, it certainly widened his horizons. I'm not sure I understood what he meant about the Frankfurters and the *Gute Scheisse* nightclub, but there you go. I wish this blue car in front would go! Come on, get a move on, you're going far too slowly. That's better, back in the middle lane.'

'We don't seem to have seen much of Osborn's parents in the last few months, it's been really good. Yes, all quiet on the in-law front, although Sybil seemed a little pale and fretful on her birthday and Basil was his usual obnoxious self. Fancy forgetting to buy her a present, what a git! He kept hinting heavily to Osborn about the dripping shower too – and the faded garden fence – and the smell in the cloakroom.'

'I'm so glad Osborn deliberately didn't take the hint this time and play the expected Mr Fix-it-all-because-I'm-too-tight-fisted role. It's so diabolically unfair the way

they hardly ever ask big brother Lawrence to fix things for them. He looks as if he's put on a bit of weight recently. As for revered sister Kirsty, all we ever hear is that she's too busy for everything that involves the family. Oh, it's all so ridiculous, it makes me want to throw up!

'I'm glad Dad's over that bug he had, but it took him a while. At least he was well enough in time to go to his various Christmas lunches. Mum seems more or less back to her normal self, although she's really fretting about getting everything right for Christmas Day. Mind you, I didn't really expect her to invite Almond and Drew along for Christmas lunch, so that was very kind. I must admit, though, I get so bored over there sometimes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but they seem to expect it and look forward to it. Also, there are usually lots of little jobs I help them with – not to mention the garden, which is turning into a big job. I wish they'd hire a gardener, but that would probably cost the earth.

'Wow, there's the bridge, we're almost there! It's a pity about the extortionate toll. *How* much?! It's a good job Gulliver and Madeleine are worth it. Oh, I'm so excited, my bubbles are bubbling again!'

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Madeleine asked Sandra, as she put on her jacket and gave Sandra a goodbye hug. "It's really good of you to let me go to have my spirit guide painted instead of you, I feel quite excited! Well, I'm a bit apprehensive, to be honest, I haven't got a clue what to expect. What if I haven't got a spirit guide?"

"I'm sure we all have a spirit guide," replied Sandra. "Terry and Kerry showed us the paintings that Ken Farr did of their spirit guides and they were really good. I can have mine painted later on, I just feel strangely happy that you want yours painted."

"It feels right," said Madeleine. "I can't explain it. I hope I don't want to go to the toilet halfway through, though, an hour's a long time when you're a bit nervous."

"I'm sure that'll be OK," smiled Sandra. "If Ken Farr said you can take a book to read, it can't be all that formal. It'll be fine, I know it will."

More than three hours later, Sandra heard Osborn and Madeleine returning and hurried to open the front door. They each got out of the car and walked up the drive, carefully carrying a canvas in front of them.

"Let's have a look!" said Sandra impatiently, as they stepped into the house. "You seem to have been gone ages. How was it?"

"It was fine," replied Madeleine, smiling serenely at her mother. "I have a Native American man as my spirit guide," she announced proudly, setting down her canvas on the table. "Ken was very friendly and relaxed and said he saw an angel come in at the end. He said that although my guide appeared first of all as an old man and he started to paint him that way, the guide then asked to be painted as a young man, so I'd identify with him more."

"It's true, I was watching it when Ken changed track on the canvas," added Osborn. "It was fascinating! He sat there sort of looking into the distance, daubing away at the canvas and then using a smaller brush for the finer strokes. Apparently, Ken himself can't paint, but a spirit painter connects with him and off they go, painting what Ken sees psychically."

"Wow," breathed Sandra. "So who's your spirit guide, Osborn?" she asked curiously, trying to peek at the canvas Osborn was still holding closely in front of him.

"It's an old Chinese gentleman," replied Osborn, setting the canvas down on the table beside Maddy's. "Ken said he and I have known each other all our lives – literally – and we're like old friends." Osborn's voice wavered a little before a huge smile erupted. "I've always felt bereft on the friend front compared to other people, so when Ken said about him being my old friend, I had shivers up and down my entire body."

"Yes, it wasn't the lack of heating, either," joined in Madeleine excitedly. "It was just the right temperature in there. He had all these lovely paintings hanging on the walls. It was great, you *must* go, Mumsie." Madeleine hugged Sandra happily. "Thank you again. I must go, I'm dying for a pee."

It was 23:00 on New Year's Eve 1999 and Sandra was alone in the sitting room with a glass of sherry, watching the television showing scenes of the new millennium arriving at different places around the world.

'This seems such an amazing time in planet Earth's history,' she reflected, looking at herself in the side of the sherry glass. 'I'm not sure I like sherry – we buy it every year, but all we do is drink it. What a crying shame that everyone caught that nasty virus this Christmas.' Tears welled up in her eyes for a moment. 'Still, we made it through Christmas Day at Mum and Dad's and I think Drew and Almond quite enjoyed themselves. It was only poor Osborn who was ill then, he must have brought the virus home from the university. He was so mad at that guy for going into his office and coughing and sneezing all over the place. What an irresponsible thing to do.' She sipped some more sherry.

'I must say, it's spoiled our holiday and especially this once in a thousand years happening. I hope Gulliver and Almond are well enough at Almond's parents' house and haven't given it to them. I also hope Mum and Dad are OK, it's worrying when they're both ill at their age, I must ring them tomorrow. I can hear Maddy still coughing upstairs, she's suffered quite badly, poor soul.

'Osborn's over the worst, but what about his mother actually saying she didn't love him as a child! I couldn't believe it, except I happened to be standing there and heard it myself. He dragged himself to their house on Boxing Day at their insistence, because Kirsty and Karla had decided to grace them with their presence and then his mother landed that one on him! I presume she wanted to get things off her chest, but didn't she realise he was feeling ill? Did she even notice, because she was so wrapped up in her own guilt?' Sandra angrily gulped a mouthful of sherry.

'It's what we always suspected, but to hear it so baldly like that – and I did notice her hair's thinning quite a lot now she's 77 – well, it was a shock to *me*, let alone Osborn. He took it very well. *Too* well, to be honest, he just carried on listening to her and still kind of sympathising with her when she was going on and on about Lawrence and then Kirsty. I'm glad he told both of them afterwards what she said, but Kirsty obviously thought he'd misheard and Lawrence took a bit of persuading.

'I'm so glad I heard it for myself, although I kind of wish I hadn't. If my mother had told me she hadn't loved me as a child, I'd be devastated. I wonder if that means she loves him now? It all seems dysfunctional and weird, no wonder Osborn did what he did to me if he didn't really know what love was – not that I'm excusing him. God, it's almost six years ago now when he and Sindy broke my heart.

'Oh, I don't want to think about *that*, I'm trying so hard to leave it in the past where it belongs. The trouble is, she's my cousin and part of my family and therefore it's in the present sometimes whether I want it to be or not. I'm so utterly glad, with every fibre of my being, that it's not six years ago right now.' She drained her glass.

'Well, it's another half hour until midnight, I'll pour another small one. Oops! Oh well, I might as well drink it, I don't like waste. Not that I want to get wasted – ha! I'm glad I can amuse myself so easily. I wonder if I should make some new millennium resolutions? No, I can't be assed, as Madeleine would say. I wonder how that saying sprang up? That's another thing that drives me mad about language, the way people these days aren't taught the right forms of verbs like spring or ring. 'I rung him', if you ever! I suppose that's just confusing the past tense with the past participle...

'God, I'm getting tired, I wish this new millennium would hurry up. I wonder why words float my boat, so to speak – or so to write, because writing is the thing – *my* thing! I'm so happy I'm well underway with the book writing, I can't believe it's happening so easily, like it was there inside me all the time, waiting to be expressed. Actually, I found it quite hard to get the characters right and now I'm worried I'm making them too personal and easily recognisable as people from my life. Is it fair to them? Am I being self-indulgent? Is it a load of crap? Now that's a word that's become prevalent, as if it's an expression of the current collective consciousness. Shit, I think I'm making my brain hurt.' She gulped another mouthful of sherry.

'This stuff isn't so bad after all. I might as well finish the bottle, everyone else is too ill to drink it! I must get some more writing done tomorrow. Only ten minutes to go,

we're nearly there. I hope we all have a good 2000. Gulliver seems kind of OK at the moment, although he wants to move out and live with Almond – which is difficult, as she's doing so well at Cardiff uni and he's doing really well in his job here.

'I know, I'll light a candle and ask for right-being for us all this coming year. I think that's what Terry says, right-being. Right-being for the future, for all of us and for the universe, because we're all part of the whole. There! I do like candles, they're kind of bright and uplifting. A toast to us all on our journey into the unknown – God no, that sounds too scary.' She gazed into the candlelight, sipping thoughtfully.

'I think Madeleine's settled in at uni, although I feel there's still a bit of tension and uncertainty between her and Drew. Still, I can't make it right for her and they seem to be good friends, whatever else they are. Somehow, I feel really comforted that she had her spirit guide painted and I think she feels strangely comforted too. It's a lovely thought, that we all have a spirit guide. I wonder who mine is? Are you there, spirit guide of mine? Please can I get to know you in 2000? I do feel ever so slightly envious that Osborn knows who his spirit guide is already, but it feels right for him that he does and I'm glad we're on this part of the pathway together.' She made herself more comfortable on the sofa and continued sipping.

'Osborn's had such a rough time at work lately with Bill Bustard gunning for him. You really wouldn't expect a boss to treat people the way he treats Osborn. I think Osborn's strong enough to take it and not be bullied by Bill, but it shouldn't be that way. He comes home terribly stressed sometimes, which is why it's so great that he loves all the spiritual stuff.

'Apart from that, though, everyone needs to do something they want to in life, some underlying ambition that's part of who they are. I did psychology and now I'm writing my book, so I suppose I feel more or less OK. Or do I? I don't know. Osborn's always wanted to fly, ever since he was in the Air Training Corps. He probably would have made a good pilot if his father hadn't refused to sign his papers to join the RAF when he was 15. How could he *do* that, after he'd let Lawrence join the RAF when he was 15? Unbelievable! Maybe Osborn should save up for some flying lessons, that would really give him a lift.

'Oh, here we go! Five – four – three – two – one – it's 2000! Yay! Oh damn, I've spilt the sherry. Never mind, happy millennium everyone! Pity there's nobody here – alone again, naturally. Well, goodnight world, I'm off to bed.'

"No, I'm fine," said Sandra testily to Osborn, as she filled the kettle with water the following morning. "Just a bit tired, that's all. I've got a bit of a headache, too."

"I feel better this morning," said Osborn. "How about I make us some pancakes?"

"Er – no, I'm not terribly hungry to be honest, I'll just have some toast. You go ahead and make some, though, if you fancy them." She tried to sound a hundred times brighter than she felt.

"I'll have some if you're making them, Dad," said Madeleine, entering the kitchen in her dressing gown. "I feel much better this morning. By the way, there's an awful sticky patch of something on the carpet in the sitting room that I stepped on, it needs wiping up."

"I'll do it," said Sandra, guiltily remembering the spilt sherry. "I'm glad you're both feeling better, by the way, it's a good start to the year."

To celebrate his much-improved health, Osborn had driven them to the nearby coast with a packed lunch to sit and look out over the sea.

"We can't see the sea for the mist!" exclaimed Sandra, as Osborn parked the car. "It's a very odd mist, it's clinging inland to certain areas of the cliff and the fields behind. It's very picturesque."

"It's a mystic millennium mist," said Madeleine from the back seat.

"Yes!" responded Osborn. "Maybe it's an omen that 2000 is going to be a good year. Where are the sandwiches? I'm starving."

An hour or so later when they went home after their mystically misty lunch, Gulliver and Almond had returned from visiting Almond's parents.

"Dad, I'm afraid Auntie Kirsty rang to say Grandad's been taken into hospital. They think it might be gallstones."

"So much for a good year," sighed Osborn. "Oh well, at least Kirsty and Karla are there with Mum."

"Ah, the other thing was that their neighbour rang and said they seem to have a small leak in their house, so they're going back to Hunterdon tomorrow."

"OK. Well at least we can relax for the rest of the day and maybe watch that video I had for Christmas – *The Sixteenth Sense*, or whatever it was. Or maybe we could watch that one you had *Gulliver, American Floozy?*"

"Ah. Uncle Lawrence was visiting today, so they wondered if we'd all like to go to Grandma and Grandad's house this evening for a get-together."

"Bugger," was Osborn's immediate response.

"I can't go," said Madeleine with a trace of relief. "I'm going to Drew's to look after him, because he's caught the virus and his family are going out."

"I suppose Almond and I can go," said Gulliver with a trace of reluctance. "Karla's got a good sense of humour and Auntie Kirsty said they sneaked some alcohol into the house without Grandad knowing."

"What about Grandma? She'll be there," said Sandra, thinking how much she would love to stay at home too.

"We'll put it in mugs, she won't notice," replied Gulliver.

"Oh well, if we walk there, I can ease the pain that way too," said Osborn, perking up slightly. "I could take that bottle of *Admiral Morgan* rum Lawrence gave me for Christmas."

"I'm really sorry Dad," said Gulliver, looking pained, "but Mum's dad rang after Kirsty did and said that they've run out of so many things that he wondered if you could give him a lift to *Safbury's* first thing tomorrow, because Grandma's still got an awful cough."

"It's a conspiracy," said Osborn, shrugging his shoulders resignedly, "and the millennium's less than a day old!"

## CHAPTER 6

January 2000 had disappeared in a miasma of wintry-type days filled with what seemed like boring routine jobs to Sandra, interspersed with bouts of writing that helped her to keep her sanity.

'Or is it insanity?' she wondered, as she closed the computer file. 'It's no good, I've lost my drift. Or do I mean I've caught my drift, because I've drifted off altogether? Still, it's Saturday, so Osborn and I need to go shopping when he finally vacates the bathroom. Ah, the phone, I wonder who that is?'

"Hello darling!" she said as she heard Madeleine's voice. "Are you OK, you sound a bit funny?"

"I don't know how to say this, but I'm waiting for the bus to come home. I was going to stay with Drew, but it's all gone wrong again..." Madeleine's voice went disjointed and watery.

"What do you mean, you're at Cardiff bus station?" Sandra tried to quell her rising anxiety.

"No, I'm in Plymouth, so I'll be home in about 40 minutes if that's OK? I wasn't going to tell you I was coming home this weekend, but I can't be home and not tell you and everything feels wrong anyway. Oh, here's my bus..."

"We'll see you soon, don't worry! I love you! Bye!"

Sandra's heart plummeted on the spot, while her mind raced around trying to find explanations for Madeleine's odd behaviour.

An hour later, Madeleine had arrived home and the three of them sat in the sitting room with a hot drink, as Madeleine explained her sudden, flying visit.

"I haven't been feeling very good about myself and – I haven't been eating much. I arranged to come and stay with Drew this weekend to make myself feel better, but he broke up with me again." Madeleine put down her mug as pent-up tears began to flow.

"I'm glad you told us and came here anyway," said Osborn, as he got up and went to hug Madeleine, who sobbed noisily on his shoulder for a few sodden moments, while Sandra sat stunned by the news that Madeleine hadn't been eating much. She knew that Madeleine would play down this fact so as not to shock her, which meant that Madeleine had hardly been eating at all.

"How long has this been happening?" asked Sandra in a low voice, as Osborn disengaged from Madeleine. "I'm sorry darling, I haven't got any *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*."

"Just after Christmas," replied Madeleine quietly. "It's OK, I've got tissues. I felt so huge after all the Christmas food and Drew kept talking about this girl he was friends with and I've started to smoke a bit too. I can't seem to keep these things from you both, it feels wrong, even though I know you won't like it."

"I'm glad you can trust us enough to tell us," said Sandra, as Osborn nodded agreement. "We just want you to be well and happy – but Maddy, smoking's a killer and it won't do you any good at all, especially since you had mild asthma as a child."

"I only do it socially," said Madeleine in a wavering voice. "It seems to help me feel as though I fit in with the others a bit better. I'm sorry, I don't want to upset you."

"Look darling, don't worry about that right now, what's important is that you look after yourself," said Sandra. "You need to eat so that you can function properly. I know that Drew means a great deal to you and it's been so difficult with him here and you in Cardiff. I can understand that you've had your ups and downs." Sandra wondered briefly what to say next. "You can't let him affect your wellbeing so much, though, it won't do you any good at all! You're a lovely, special, wonderful person in your own right and you don't need him or anyone to define your self-worth."

"Oh Mum, you sound so Mum-like!" A brief smile flitted across Madeleine's eyes.

"Mum's right," said Osborn, gazing at Madeleine. "I feel like shaking Drew by his shoulders, but I know that won't do any good. I like him very much, you know I do, but he can't mess you around like this."

"I know," sighed Madeleine. "I know it with my head, but my heart seems to feel differently. I feel better speaking with you two, though. Thank you." The tears began to flow again, but somehow more gently.

The three of them sat for some time, discussing various aspects of life in general and Madeleine's life in particular. Then the day gradually passed in comforting, domestic normality, as they ate some lunch, went shopping for food, tidied up a cupboard in Madeleine's room, cooked home-made pizza for tea and watched *The Aquamarine Mile*.

The following morning, Sandra was pleased to note that Madeleine didn't look quite as pale, although the thought of her returning to Cardiff on the 13:15 bus that afternoon loomed like a dense, dark cloud on the horizon. The three of them stood in the kitchen – which was a feat in itself because the kitchen was small – and chopped various vegetables for a nourishing lunchtime stew.

"I feel so safe here," said Madeleine suddenly. "This is my safe place. Well, not the kitchen in particular because it's frankly sometimes like a war zone. No, I mean this house with you two. I promise I'll do my best to look after myself in the future."

This promise reverberated in Sandra's head later, as they stood at the damp, depressing, windy bus station and watched Madeleine step onto her coach.

"She looks so small and alone," she said in a strangely low voice to Osborn, as Madeleine's waving hand disappeared with the departing coach. "I'm not at all sure I can bear it."

"I'm here with you," replied Osborn in a somewhat muted voice. "I just wish Madeleine could be here with us too."

It was mid-March and Sandra was sitting in Ken Farr's studio, attempting to read the book she had brought with her to while away the hour that Ken said he would take to paint her spirit guide. Ken seemed to be in his early forties, with brown hair and an overlong fringe that he kept flicking out of his eyes.

'It's a shame I picked up the wrong book to bring,' she mused, as Ken sat looking into the distance every now and then, before dabbing paint somewhat frenetically onto

the canvas. *'Death of a Double-Glazing Salesman* is a bit banal. I'm glad Lawrence lends books to Osborn now, they're really much closer these days and seeing each other far more frequently. I wish I had a brother or a sister, although I've started to see my cousin Belinda a bit now. She's really lovely, which makes up for the bitch cousin who betrayed me. Shit, I shouldn't be thinking things like that, Ken might be able to see into my mind! How scary, I don't even like seeing into my mind sometimes.' She looked at Ken in alarm, but he was staring at a space above her head. She restrained a sudden urge to look up above herself to see what he was looking at.

'I should try to meditate a bit, I suppose, to create harmony and balance in my aura,' she thought, forcing herself to concentrate on the room. 'There are certainly some lovely paintings of Ken's hanging around this studio, I do like colourful pictures. I must say, Gulliver's new widescreen television was great last night, I was so pleased he actually asked us into his room to watch it with him. I'm not sure I enjoyed *Batman Plays Cricket*, it was too silly, but Gulliver laughed a lot, which was good to hear. He seemed a bit sombre when Almond was here last weekend, even when Lawrence came over and we all played *Frisk!*

'It's a pity Maddy wasn't with us too, she always used to enjoy a good board game. I so hope she's OK. God, I could worry myself witless about her if I let myself, but I think the saving grace is that she talks to us both, which is brilliant. Of course, it's not easy to hear that she hasn't been eating and is smoking socially, but you have to take the rough with the smooth. When someone trusts you enough to tell you their truth, it's incredibly important to accept what they say, even though you're dying a thousand little deaths inside. Festering fishcakes, I'm off again, I was meant to be creating harmony and balance in my aura.' She wriggled slightly in her chair and closed her eyes, breathing deeply in order to relax. Unfortunately, *Death of a Double-Glazing Salesman* flopped onto the floor and Sandra bent down noisily to retrieve it, glancing as she came up into Ken's startled gaze.

'He knows what I'm thinking, I swear it! He knows I'm all nervous and anxious and really quite tired and drained. Talking of drains, I think Osborn's father went a step too far when he asked him to clear their blocked drain and I think Osborn went a step too far when he actually did it. Osborn and I seem to be doing a lot for our parents recently, it's all getting too much and too taken for granted.

'I know we've started to really enjoy gardening, but painting my Mum and Dad's old, decrepit and extremely long fence, as well as Osborn cleaning their drive and patio and grouting bits and pieces all over the place is an entirely different matter. As for me, week after week on my hands and knees battling with the weeds, or pruning huge bushes that have been left to grow wild – how come it's always left to us?

'Are we mugs, or are we good people who help others? I'm not at all sure sometimes, but all I know right now is that I really, really need to pee! Oh dear, I must hold on. He must be nearly finished, surely? So much for me and my balanced, harmonious aura.'

"Well, you have a very colourful aura," said Ken suddenly, as he put down his brush and regarded Sandra. "I've finished painting your spirit guide and I'd like to say a few words about what came to me while I was painting, if I may?"

"Yes, of course," replied Sandra, her heart pumping madly in anticipation of being told she needed to change her ways and become more balanced and harmonious.

"Your guide seemed quite shy at first," began Ken, "but soon stepped forward, surrounded by some lovely colours. The head was covered by a shawl, or scarf and this indicated that you tend to hide yourself away a little. It would be good if you could emerge fully, as you have such potential and are capable of so much. In your aura there is a rather dense, clouded area, which seems to be the remains of a past hurt that needs addressing, so you can move forward and truly be your uncovered self.

"Remember that your greatest teacher is your own self," he continued after a short pause. "We all choose our parents and your family unit seems very close to you, as if you all have a lot to learn from each other. Your spirit guide has very clear eyes and looks out directly at the world, as you do. I wasn't told your spirit guide's name, but if you ask, all should be revealed in time. Do you have any questions?"

"Yes. I was wondering what the name of your guide is, the one who paints through you?"

"White Spirit. What I really meant was, do you have any questions concerning yourself?"

"Yes. Could I possibly use your toilet, please?"

The phone rang almost as soon as Sandra and Osborn returned from Ken Farr's. Sandra set down the image of her spirit guide reverently onto the table, gazing into the amber coloured eyes that gazed back at her. It was a strange feeling, one she found hard to define.

"Hello Maddy!" she heard Osborn say as he answered the phone. "Yes, we're back. How are you?"

After Osborn had spoken with Madeleine for a while, obviously putting his mind at rest that she was coping well enough, Madeleine asked to speak to Sandra.

"I had to ring to find out how it went with your spirit guide," she said brightly. "Is it male or female? What nationality? I so wish I could see it!"

"I'm really happy you rang, Mad," replied Sandra, feeling unexpected tears misting her eyes. "I wish you could see it, too. I'm not entirely sure if it's male or female, to be honest, but I think I would plump for female. She's small and she has some sort of head covering and her eyes look as if she's from somewhere like Tibet, or Mongolia, or even Eastern Europe."

"Your geography sounds as precise as mine, Mumsie. What colours did Ken paint around her?"

"Well, there's some green and blue and yellow and purple and there's a murky coloured area that Ken said is the remains of a past hurt that I need to address." Sandra stopped, wondering briefly if she perhaps shouldn't have mentioned that to Madeleine.

"What else did he say?"

"He said that I need to emerge fully and I'm capable of a lot. He said we're our own best teachers, which seems quite profound – and he said something really weird, that we choose our own parents."

"Wow, food for thought."

"I know. Speaking of food, darling..."

"I'm fine, I'm eating shedloads, you don't need to worry." Something about Madeleine's tone of voice alerted a sixth sense in Sandra's psyche, but it was so brief and minimal that she carried on as if it hadn't happened.

"Maddy, thank you so much for ringing, I'm really happy you're interested in all this – and I love you calling me Mumsie!"

Gulliver's reaction that evening to Sandra's spirit guide was the same guarded but unmistakable interest that he had shown previously about Osborn's and Madeleine's.

"I'd love you to have your spirit guide painted too," said Sandra hopefully, as Gulliver stood looking at the canvas that was still drying on the table.

"I'm not sure what I think about it all," he replied truthfully. "Almond certainly doesn't believe in any of it."

"Would you have yours painted if we paid?" asked Sandra casually.

"We'll see," replied Gulliver noncommittally. "Mother, what are you doing at Easter?"

"Oh, I don't know, we haven't made any concrete plans yet."

"I thought you'd decided to leave the drive the way it is?"

"What? Oh, you moron! It's good to see you still like to joke with your dear old mother, though."

"It helps to pass the time."

"What were you saying? What's Easter?"

"It's a Christian festival that was originally a pagan one to mark the rites and wrongs of spring – or something. No, I was just wondering what was happening this year, because Almond was asking if she could stay here for a few days."

"Ah, a full house then."

"I didn't know you were into Bingo. Is it OK if she stays?"

"Yes, I like Almond and she isn't loud or intrusive. We usually see my parents on Easter Sunday, though, I'm not sure what to do about that."

"We could all go out to lunch maybe, but there's the cost to consider."

"It's a big but, too, at the moment."

"Don't be personal, Mother. I could cook lunch."

"We'll go out, I think! I'll see what Dad says and I'll ask Grandma and Grandad about it on Tuesday. *The Crooked Croatian's* very reasonable, but we might have left it too late to book."

"What about *The Butcher's Apprentice*? Damien told me they do a great carvery there."

"Dad and I don't eat meat, remember?"

"Maybe we'll be able to squeeze into *The Countess's Cleavage* then, there's usually ample room in there."

The following Monday afternoon, it was Alison's turn to visit Sandra. As soon as Sandra answered the door, she knew Alison was bursting to impart some news.

"You'll never guess what, Sam and Karen are expecting!" she said triumphantly. "I'm going to be a grandma!"

"Wow!" said Sandra, genuinely pleased for her friend. "When's the baby due?"

"Early September," replied Alison, still beaming. "It doesn't seem very far away. Karen wasn't sure of her dates and wanted to wait until her first scan before she told people. I can't really imagine Sam being a father."

"It doesn't seem long ago that you were walking him to school. I can remember that time he was given the part of a sheep in the nativity play, much to his annoyance. He gave it his best, though, by making loud sheep noises all the way through."

"I was mortified. Actually, I was secretly proud that he made quite realistic sheep noises." Alison smiled at the memory.

"Gulliver was the back end of a cow, he really had the hump about that."

"Pity they didn't have any camels in the play, then!"

The phone rang not long after Alison had departed in a haze of excitement. It was Gina, who also sounded somewhat excited.

"You'll never guess what, Adam and Sarah are expecting!" Her voice was rising happily as she spoke. "A baby! I'm going to be a granny!"

"Wow, that's wonderful!" said Sandra, experiencing déjà vu. "How exciting, I'm so pleased for you!"

"It was a surprise, but now we're used to the idea, I just can't wait. Sarah hasn't had a scan yet, but she's definitely pregnant. They're not sure where they'll be living, but I said they can stay with us for a while. I don't think Andy's terribly keen, but he's said yes and it's family, isn't it – and I love babies – and I meant to tell you that Delia rang me and asked if we could all get together soon, so I said I'd ask you to email Em and I'll ring Kay to fix a date." Gina ended somewhat breathlessly.

"That'll be good. I expect everyone's a bit busy over Easter, but I'm sure we'll sort it out between us."

"I must go, I'm really tired. It must be all this granny business!"

Sandra stood at the ironing board with a nearby glass of wine, mulling over recent events. Osborn was sipping his wine at the computer, as he tried to get to grips with a challenging game of *Arachnoid Solitaire* after a trying day at the university.

'That university is getting worse from what he says,' thought Sandra, as she started on a double duvet cover. 'All this prolonged stress can't be doing him any good whatsoever, especially with Bill Bustard being so nasty. At least Terry's there, though, to talk about the good stuff. I can't seem to talk about spiritual matters with Alison and Gina, although Alison often talks about God and the church. She seems so unhappy with the church, I wish I could help in some way. Still, she's really made up about being a grandma.' She turned the duvet cover around.

'So is Gina – fancy them both telling me their news on the same day! I don't suppose I'll be a grandma for a while. I'd have to be a grandma, I couldn't cope with being a granny. It's really odd how very similar words have such different connotations for different people.

'Talking of connotations – or maybe I mean implications – I've a pretty good idea what Ken Farr meant when he said there was a dense, clouded area that I need to address before I can move forward. It's Sindy. I need to forgive her, I know I do. That's going to be hard, because I've tried to get to that point and have never quite made it. I wonder how I can achieve forgiveness proper? At the moment it's definitely forgiveness improper.' She turned the duvet cover around.

'I must stop pushing it away whenever I think of it, I suppose. I have to accept that it happened, accept the hurt and accept that life will never be completely free of the family reverberations for me. Oh! I shivered all the way down my back then! I remember the phrase I seemed to come into this world with – *Love is the answer*. I'm sure it is, in fact I *know* it is. The trouble is, I don't think I could ever love *her*, because I still never want to set eyes on her ever again in my entire life. I wonder if I could send love to the whole situation, would that help? If my motive and intentions are to forgive and do the best I can while still remaining honest and true to myself, then surely it would work?' She turned the duvet cover around.

'I'll do it! I need to move forward so much. How should I do it, though? Terry and Kerry always seem to light candles when we're there, so I could light a candle. I've got that lovely purple one Gulliver gave me for Christmas. Actually, I've got that pretty pink one that Madeleine gave me for Christmas, too. It would be like having part of them there with me, a spiritual part of them. I could have my spirit guide painting there, too. I'd want to be physically alone, though. I wonder what my spirit guide's called? Wow, I actually feel quite excited now, as if this really is the right way to go.' She turned the duvet cover around.

"Oh, sod it, what am I doing?" she suddenly exclaimed aloud. "I've ironed this duvet cover at least twice over!"

"Yes!" shouted Osborn. "I've done it! I've actually won a game of *Mega-Difficult Arachnoid Solitaire*!"

## CHAPTER 7

It was a Friday at the end of March and Sandra sat in front of the patio doors that looked out onto the garden. She had lit the two candles that were each a present from Gulliver and Madeleine and she sat looking at the painting of her spirit guide, wondering what to do next. Suddenly she leapt up and went to the bedroom in search of what seemed like a missing item.

'I know I don't wear my wedding ring any more, because it came to feel like a conventional constriction around my soul as well as my finger, but it's still a revered symbol of the deep and chosen bond between Osborn and me this lifetime. How odd, I said 'this lifetime' – but where is it? I know it's here somewhere! I just want to have it near me when I do this thing.' She felt surprising tears welling up in her eyes.

'I'd better have some tissues with me too. Ah! Here it is. I don't think I'll put it on, I'll just put it in front of – goodness, I almost said a name then! Who are you, spirit guide? The name's gone again, maybe I should ask formally somehow. Well, I'm ready to roll.'

She sat still and silent, consciously slowing her breathing which had become rather shallow and rapid, with the odd sensation that she was about to leap off a cliff. She knew she was facing the choice whether to go ahead and forgive, or carry on as she had been doing over the last six years, holding the hurt of Osborn's and Sindy's betrayal close to her chest. In fact, it was inside her heart, like the deep wound of the knife she'd felt piercing her heart on the catastrophic day she'd read Sindy's intimate, descriptive and totally shocking letter to Osborn. As she pondered all those graphic memories, the tears started to flow. She teetered on the edge of the cliff for a few moments and then suddenly knew it was time to let go and fall.

"Osborn and Sindy, I can never condone what you did, but I accept your humanness. I know you were both hurting, but the pain I felt because of your actions was almost lethal. I felt as if neither of you considered me, nor cared about me, nor loved me, like I always felt I considered, cared about and loved you." She spoke the words aloud, so that they would be expressed without doubt to the world outside and would therefore become real.

"I forgave you long ago, Osborn, because I understood where your pain had come from and there was a point where I was part of it. I can never forget what you did and I'll always wish you hadn't done it, but I know that we're meant to be together. I know it in the deepest recesses of my soul and somehow that makes it easier to bear." She blew her nose determinedly for a few moments.

"Sindy, I still don't understand how you could have done what you did to me, knowing that our mothers are sisters. You live hundreds of miles away from the majority of the family, who live here and who I've had to hide my massive hurt from in order to protect your mother. It feels like I've had to deal with the fallout from your selfishness to the detriment of myself. However, it's water under the bridge and I want the water to flow away from the bridge and be taken into the sea, where it will be transformed into life-giving waters for the creatures of the ocean of life. Sindy, I forgive you."

Sandra had leapt off the cliff, but she wasn't falling. She felt held by a wonderful sensation of complete and unconditional love, as she acclimatised to her new surroundings. After a while, she felt she was floating, gently and blissfully, back down to Earth. She continued to sit in front of the patio doors for some considerable time, gazing out at the garden and sensing a new horizon.

'It's like seeing with another sense,' she thought far-sightedly, 'or just glimpsing something that you know is there, even though you can't make it out clearly. It's as if I'm looking through a glass darkly. I really should clean these windows, I can't remember the last time I did. Well, it looks like I'm fully grounded and life must go on – but wow, I feel so good!'

It was Easter Saturday in the third week of April and a beautiful spring day that beckoned Sandra out into the garden to clear the weeds and prepare for summer flowers. Unfortunately, she was in Basil and Sybil's sitting room with Osborn, Madeleine, Gulliver, Almond and Lawrence. They had just eaten lunch and were looking around at each other, wondering how to pass the afternoon until they could decently escape.

'I suppose we could always indecently escape,' mused Sandra, 'but they did cook lunch for us and they always give us an Easter Egg and they're getting on a bit now, so I must be kind. I'll never actually like them for the way they behave, mostly for the way they treated Osborn as a child and the way they still treat him now, but I do respect them as human people who have grown old.'

"We haven't bought any Easter Eggs this year," announced Basil suddenly, "because chocolate's very bad for you. I've never liked it, which is just as well, because the cardiac consultant told me to keep off it, amongst other things."

"What other things?" asked Lawrence, looking at his father suspiciously.

"Fatty food, spicy food," replied Basil curtly.

"So that's why you put turmeric and chilli in with the buttered sausage en croute," said Lawrence. "Anyone for a game of cards?" he asked the others, turning his back on his father.

"I'll play!" chorused five desperate voices.

"I'm not sure I have any playing cards now," said Sybil, frowning. "I had a clearout for church and gave away lots of things I don't use any more."

"There are still too many ornaments and books and knick knacks and odds and ends everywhere," said Basil testily. "They really clutter up the place."

"The family gave us lots of those as presents!" said Sybil in a shocked voice.

"Well, we don't need any more presents. Don't give us any more presents, we haven't got room for them," continued Basil petulantly.

"How are you getting on at uni, Almond?" asked Sandra, painfully conscious of the increasing negativity in the atmosphere.

"Fine, thanks," replied Almond. "It's good to have a break, though, I like this part of the country. Gulliver and I were thinking of having a week's holiday in Cornwall in the summer."

"Will your parents allow that?" asked Basil, glowering.

"Yes," replied Almond, looking uncertain.

"My parents will allow it too," mentioned Gulliver conversationally.

"I know, I've got that card game I won at the Pentecost party at church last year," said Sybil excitedly. "*Jesus!*"

"Sybil! Are you blaspheming?" thundered Basil.

"What, dear? I was just remembering the name of that card game, it's called *Jesus!* I'll go and get it."

Three hours later, after *Jesus!* had helped to pass the afternoon, they all made an escape that might have been decent if only they hadn't all vied with one another to be through the front door in what could only be called indecent haste.

The following day, it was time to see Sandra's parents. Osborn had managed to book a table for lunch at *The Countess's Cleavage* and they all felt quite relaxed as they sipped a glass of wine and talked amongst themselves. Sandra had never been one for talking to strangers anyway.

"I still haven't bought new curtains for the sitting room, Sandra," said Caroline. "I can't make up my mind about the colour. I've seen a lovely red pair, but green in the same design looks good and so does the blue. I was wondering if you could come into town and choose them with me next week. What do you think about colour?"

"Well, I would say that you should go with the ones you like best," replied Sandra, her heart sinking at the thought of shopping for curtains with her mother when she had so much to do in her own home. "What does Dad think? You tend to like green and he likes blue, but you say you like the red ones? The only thing I would say is that the sitting room gets quite a lot of sun and red curtains fade more readily."

"How can that be?" asked Gulliver. "If they fade, surely they'd lose the redness?"

"What?" asked Sandra a touch grumpily. "Oh, you're being you again."

"I've seen this lovely watercolour painting, too," continued Caroline, "but again, I'd love your opinion before I buy it, Sandra."

"In my opinion, Grandma, watercolour paintings are overrated," said Gulliver, sipping his wine.

"Oh, you cheeky boy!" retorted Caroline. "In what way?"

"Well, they look a bit wishy washy and I can't understand why anyone would want a picture of water anyway, because it hasn't got much colour."

"Oh Gulliver," remonstrated Almond appreciatively. "Water has a lot of colour when it reflects other things, like the sky..."

"That's a large body of water, though," replied Gulliver thoughtfully.

"Ah," said Leonard, suddenly perking up. "Talking about a large body, here comes the waiter with our food."

"Your chicken salad looks good, Maddy," said Sandra as the waiter deposited the plates, attempting to gloss over her father's innocent, throwaway remark. She realised that she had become ultra-sensitive to any allusion to weight, body size, food, diet or anything at all that in Madeleine's eyes might be taken the wrong way.

"Good enough to eat," replied Madeleine quite brightly. "I'm really hungry."

"How are you getting on at university, Madeleine?" asked Caroline, as they all sorted out cutlery, serviettes and condiments. "How's the food situation? I remember having a lot of toast and baked beans when I was a student."

"Oh, it's fine," replied Madeleine a little too quickly. "There's a baguette shop around the corner and lots of cheap places to eat."

"That's good," said Caroline, "we don't want you wasting away to nothing."

"So how are you, Dad?" asked Sandra, desperate to divert the food-related conversation away from Madeleine. "How's your *Old Ramblers* group these days?"

"Well, funny you should mention that," said Leonard sombrely, "although it's not actually funny. I heard this morning that one of our members has passed away. He went

on a three-mile walk with us around Paper Tor on Dartmoor yesterday and we all stopped for a cream tea on the way home. He really enjoyed it. He was fine in the evening, his wife said, but he went to bed last night and woke up this morning dead!"

"Er – Dad," said Sandra, suppressing a terrible impulse to laugh, which resulted in a strange throaty noise.

"What, love?" asked Leonard, looking at her strangely.

"Nothing – bad taste," was all Sandra could manage to say.

"But you haven't started your meal yet, Mother," said Gulliver. "Actually, that squashed butternut roasted loaf looks all right to me."

"I tried a bit of date loaf the other day," remembered Leonard, "but to be honest, I wouldn't give a fig for a date – ha! Get it? Fig for a date?"

"Oh Len," sighed Caroline, "you're incorrigible."

"Is that another German word in French?" asked Leonard. "This wine's gone straight to my head, I usually have beer."

"Have you got many Easter Eggs, Sandra?" asked Caroline, ignoring Leonard's remark.

"No, Basil and Sybil didn't give us one," replied Sandra, "but that's sort of OK, because I don't want to put on any more weight." She instantly glanced at Madeleine, realising what she'd said. "I like chocolate, though," she continued hastily, "I read an article that said it's good for you and besides, we all need a little bit of what we like."

"I'll hold you to that," said Osborn from the depths of his squashed butternut. "You haven't made an apple pie for ages."

"Why do our conversations always seem to revert to food?" remarked Sandra exasperatedly, wondering how Madeleine must be feeling.

"It's OK, Mumsie," said Madeleine quietly, as if she'd read Sandra's mind. "This chicken salad is lovely," she said more loudly. "I noticed they had apple pie on the dessert menu, Dad." She smiled at Osborn, but Sandra was unsure whether the smile had also emanated from her eyes.

Sandra lay in the bath that evening, with the bubbles up around her chest. She wasn't normally keen on water, but felt the need to be on her own for a short while, rather than watch the video of *Saving Ryan's Privates* with the others.

'I suppose today went reasonably well,' she thought, as a few bubbles popped around her. 'Maybe I'm being too sensitive about Madeleine and that could be counterproductive, so I must stand back and let go a bit. She's an adult now, although at 18 these days they seem to want to have all the perks of adulthood and none of the responsibilities. I sound so old and grumpy. It's true, though, I was about to be married at her age and ready to take on cooking roast dinners on Sundays and making the Christmas cake in October. I must have been mad! Besides, Maddy seems OK and assures me she is, so I just have to trust her – and I do at some deep, fundamental level, which actually feels quite comforting. I'm so glad she's given up smoking.' She wiggled her toes around, dispersing more soap bubbles.

'Gulliver seems fine with Almond again, so I can relax about those two. He's on the right road, I'm sure he is, even though he can't wait to leave home and live like an adult in more than the age he's attained. I've noticed he still hides behind humour, he really doesn't like any overt sign of emotion. Mum and Dad, on the other hand, sometimes seem these days to be more like children than adults – fancy squabbling over their Easter Eggs like they did!

'It was good of Dad to pay for our pub lunch, though, to say thank you to us for all our help. It feels so important to be acknowledged, it almost makes everything all right. Although if what Terry was saying about it being vital to be balanced, things shouldn't be all right, they should be in the middle – or equally left and right – sort of left or right. Oh dear, I'm going bananas now.' She splashed around a bit, looking for her flannel.

'I must remember to get some bananas tomorrow and some apples and satsumas. Maddy said she'd walk down to Five Street with me like old times, I look forward to that. It's Easter Monday tomorrow, though I don't know if the fruit shop will

be open. Damn, I don't want a fruitless walk to Five Street! Oh, I'm so glad I can make myself laugh, I feel ready to face *Ryan's Privates* now. Actually, no I don't, I saw the trailer and it looked a bit in your face. I'll just stay here for a while and try to meditate.' She wriggled around to find a comfortable position, but caught her toe in the plug chain. 'Ouch! Oh no, that's that down the drain, I can't be bothered to put more water in. Gosh, I've gone a bit wrinkly and that's not just old age.'

A few days later, Gulliver drove Almond and Madeleine back to Cardiff. Osborn had already gone back to work and Sandra tried not to feel too disoriented as she tidied, cleaned, dusted and vacuumed her loneliness away. She was glad that the following day she'd arranged to meet her cousin Belinda in Plymouth. Belinda was nine years older than Sandra, but they had always kept in touch over the years, albeit rather sporadically. Belinda's mother had been Sandra's mother's older sister, Sandra's beloved Auntie Felicity, who had unfortunately died at the age of 48.

The following day found Belinda and Sandra sitting in *The Coffee Bean*, sipping coffee and asking about each other's lives.

"How are your Mum and Dad?" Belinda asked, looking at Sandra with kind, hazel eyes.

"More or less fine," replied Sandra, "although they've slowed down a bit and they seem to rely on Osborn and me quite a lot more. I suppose it's par for the course, especially when you're an only child."

"Yes, Sindy's the same with Auntie Lily, especially since Uncle Billy died," remarked Belinda. "Do you and Sindy still write to each other?"

"We – umm – no, we fell out," said Sandra, finding it impossible to tell an untruth to Belinda, who looked at her in surprise.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry. To be honest, I always found her too self-centred and I wasn't sure about her daughter, either. In fact, both of them seemed a bit spoilt to me. Gosh, I sound horrible, I don't mean to be. I just feel I can be honest with you."

"I feel the same with you, Belinda," said Sandra, experiencing a melting of resolve inside herself. Before she knew it, she was telling Belinda about Sindy and Osborn and all the resulting pain and secrecy and repercussions over the last six years. She knew her pulse was racing and her cheeks were very flushed, but she felt a great relief that she no longer needed to keep up a pretence with her loved and trusted cousin.

"I never dreamt you'd been through any of this," said Belinda. "I wish I could have helped you at the time, you must have been through hell."

"It did feel like hell," replied Sandra ruefully. "I've forgiven them both, because it felt the right thing to do, although I couldn't forgive Sindy until a couple of months ago. I still never want to see her again, though, and I still have nightmares about her sometimes. I'll never understand how she could have done what she did without realising or caring how badly it would affect everyone." Sandra drained the last of her coffee that had gone completely cold. "Thank you so much for listening, Belinda, I feel that you've healed the word 'cousin' for me, after she so thoughtlessly destroyed it."

"I'm glad," replied Belinda thoughtfully. "You've always seemed more like a sister than a cousin to me. I haven't told anyone yet, but my sister's fallen out with me, big time."

"Hetty's fallen out with *you*? But you're so kind and thoughtful to everyone! Goodness, Auntie Felicity would have hated you two falling out, wouldn't she?"

"Absolutely. That's what I said to Hetty, that poor Mum would have turned in her grave – except she was cremated, of course." Belinda gave a small, grim smile.

"Oh dear. What happened?" Sandra covered Belinda's hand with her own for a moment.

"Well, it's a long story, but..."

Sandra listened carefully, noticing that Belinda's cheeks also became flushed as she explained, with a significant amount of agitation, how Hetty seemed to be using Belinda as a scapegoat for all sorts of personal reasons that were clearly nothing to do with Belinda herself. Sandra could sense the deep hurt that was emanating from Belinda and decided to suggest they have another cup of coffee.

"I'm buying you a doughnut too," said Sandra, as she got up to buy the coffee. "It's wrong, but it's right and I think we both need a bit of wrong but right just now."

An hour and a half later, after Sandra had hugged Belinda goodbye and carried out a hopeless search for *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*, she sat on the bus home, nevertheless feeling that a weight had been lifted from her heart.

'How unusual,' she mused, 'I thought people usually feel weights are lifted from their shoulders. I hope I haven't made it difficult by telling Belinda my dark secret, because it *does* feel like a burden to keep it from people. I'm glad she was able to tell me about Hetty, though, so that it felt more like an equal sharing. I think I trusted her enough to tell her because I know she doesn't judge people and her fundamental motive in life seems to be to help others, sometimes even to the detriment of her own self.' She sat for a while as the bus pulled in at a bus stop for more passengers.

'It's so vital not to judge others, because – strewth, what *is* that woman wearing? It looks dreadful, she's far too old for a top like that. Actually, it's very difficult not to judge others, because were we perhaps sitting there judging Sindy and Hetty? It didn't feel like we were, because I think our genuine motive was to try to understand *why* they did what they did and *why* they are like they are – but I don't really know, it's a bit of a minefield.

'God, that man's really bad-tempered, there was no need to speak to the driver like that, the ignorant git! Oops, I'm at it again, how do I know what's going on in his life? He might be a perfectly lovely person who's just had a diabolical day and we certainly all have diabolical days and behave questionably sometimes. We should be more compassionate and forgiving and welcome all souls into our sphere of love and understanding. Sod it, he looks as if he's coming to sit next to me! No! Go past! Not me! Not me! No!'

"Hello," murmured Sandra politely to the man's grunt of acknowledgement as he sat down beside her, whacking his elbow into her side in the process. "Lovely day."

## CHAPTER 8

It was nearing the end of May and Sandra was hosting a school friend reunion. It had been quite difficult to find a day suitable for Gina, Emily, Kay and Delia, but between them they'd finally managed it.

"This is exciting!" said Delia, as she came in the front door and handed Sandra a home-made quiche. "I hope this is OK, I just threw it together before I came here."

"It smells great," replied Sandra. "You're so good, the rest of us are just contributing supermarket food."

"How do you find the time to cook?" asked Kay. "It takes all my time to buy, bung in the oven, eat and wash up."

"I make time," replied Delia, smiling. "I got up half an hour earlier this morning."

"Wow, that's dedication," said Emily. "You must be a lark. I'm an owl, I get up in the morning with enough time to get ready, eat breakfast and go to work."

"I'm the same," said Kay. "I have to get everything ready for the next day the night before, even if I stay up till gone midnight to do it."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," said Gina, "I'm a lark, I catch up with a load of jobs in the morning when it's all quiet. What about you, Sandra?"

"I'm a tit, I forgot to buy extra bread for sandwiches," said Sandra, grimacing.

"Don't worry, I brought rolls," said Gina. "What sort of tit are you, a blue tit?"

"A great tit?" suggested Emily wickedly.

"No, that's me!" shrieked Kay mirthfully, laughing so much she had to put down her mug of tea.

"I'm a lesser-crested tit," said Gina quickly, laughing so much she had to put down her mug of tea.

"I must be a warbling tit," joined in Delia, laughing so much she had to put down her mug of tea.

"As long as I'm not a bearded tit," said Sandra happily, laughing at everyone laughing. "Oops, I've spilt my tea..."

The rest of the morning followed as it had started, with gales of laughter at each other's remarks. After lunch, though, a calm seemed to descend and the conversation steered itself to weightier matters.

"I can't lose weight," remarked Emily, "and I do try. Sometimes."

"I've noticed that I've put on weight lately," said Kay, "even though I haven't changed what I eat. I thought of going to *Weighty Watchers*, but then a friend asked me if I wanted to go to art classes with her, so I went there instead."

"Good for you," said Gina. "I always liked art at school. Do you remember Miss Plott?"

"Do I just, Gee," said Sandra clumsily. "She wore the most clashing coloured clothes I've ever seen."

"Em, you were quite good at art, as I recall," said Delia.

"Yes, I enjoyed it. I got in Miss Plott's bad books, though, when we were studying Fine Art and I put F.Art on my folder. Sadly, she didn't have much of a sense of humour," replied Emily, giggling at the memory.

"I wouldn't mind going to art classes," mused Delia, "but my knowledge of drawing is far too sketchy."

"Dee, you're funny," laughed Sandra. "Did you mean to say that?"

"What?" asked Delia, looking surprised. "Oops, I've spilt my tea now!"

"How are your parents these days, Sandra?" asked Kay a few moments later.

"Oh, they're doing OK," replied Sandra. "Dad still makes bad jokes from time to time and spends hours doing jigsaws, but Mum's quite involved with her groups. They seem to have aged a lot recently, though."

"Mind you, we're approaching 50," put in Emily soberly.

"Oh Em, thanks for that," retorted Gina. "Mum was only in her fifties when she died. So was my uncle and so was my next-door neighbour."

"Gee, are you trying to scare us?" asked Kay, smiling. "Actually, my mum was quite young when she died and so was yours Em, wasn't she?"

"Yes, so was my cousin and the woman down the road."

"You know we saw Pansy Wellgood at the school reunion," said Kay, lowering her voice reverentially, "well, I saw in the local paper that she'd died."

"Let's change the subject," said Gina brightly. "What are we all doing for the rest of the week? I'm going to Whitsands."

"I'm going to a funeral tomorrow," replied Emily. "I'm going to be doing some gardening after that, though, if the weather holds."

"I'm going to the Eden Project," said Kay, "I'm really looking forward to that, I've heard great things about it."

"I've got a nature trail to sort out for my Brownies," said Delia. "They love it outdoors. Actually, so do I."

"Me too, I've discovered a passion for gardening lately," said Sandra. "Hey, we all seem to like flowers and gardening and walking and being outdoors."

"Perhaps next time we should all go for a walk overlooking the river near here," suggested Gina. "It's only a few minutes' walk away. Andy told me they're making a nature reserve and a wild flower meadow. He said the hawthorn was looking spectacular the other day and there was loads of cow parsley."

"Osborn and I saw some orange tip butterflies there last week," said Sandra. "Osborn loves butterflies."

"I love buttercups," remarked Emily, "there are usually loads of them out this time of year."

"Celandines and campions," added Kay.

"It all sounds lovely, we'll definitely have to go there next time we meet," said Delia enthusiastically. "We'll have a field day."

It was early June and Sandra was in the sitting room of Terry and Kerry's atmospheric old house, waiting for the workshop entitled *Who Am I?* to begin. Everyone was seated as usual in a circle. Osborn was next to her on her right, chatting comfortably to Wanda on his right, whereas Leo on her left was having an in-depth conversation with Frank Lee

Bull on his left. Sandra tried to still the gradually uprising sense of not belonging that was threatening to engulf her, by pondering over the mad month of May that had just elapsed.

'It really was quite full-on, but with happenings that seemed to come from other people. There were some nice happenings, like celebrating Dad's 77<sup>th</sup> birthday with a fish and chip supper at his request. I'm so glad Gulliver came along too, I could tell Dad was pleased. He paid for us all too, bless him. It's a pity Madeleine wasn't there, but she seems to be reasonably OK at Cardiff.

'I was a bit concerned about her fling with that Welsh boy – not because he's Welsh, but because she's still very much emotionally attached to Drew. He seems to keep her hanging on and she allows it and even seems to need it. When they're together, they do seem to go together, but I suspect he has certain issues of not being unconditionally loved and is unwittingly trying to work them out via Madeleine, who has different issues of her own.

'It was odd when she rang home a couple of weeks ago all depressed and after he'd spoken with her, Osborn went all depressed too. To be honest, that happens to me sometimes. I suppose it's because we love her so much. It's very hard to put down the phone and know there's nothing we can do except trust that she'll find her own way through her troubles and that somehow, in the great cosmic order of life, this is all meant to be. Is it really? I do wonder sometimes.

'It felt good when Lawrence asked us all to go to the pub for his 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday. He's 52 though, we're all getting so old! Madeleine missed out again, but I have the feeling she currently struggles with public eating anyway. She tries valiantly to cover it up, but I know she's uncomfortable and can't wait to escape. I wish she could be well and happy, that's my greatest, ongoing hope for her. Lawrence was definitely happy that day, he certainly likes his ale. He likes his own jokes too!

'I'm so glad for Osborn's sake that Lawrence is far more present in family life nowadays, it feels good. Lawrence still can't get on with his father at all, but at least he's more or less there alongside Osborn, which is a relief for both Osborn and me. Kirsty still lives in her own little world, full of her latest ideas and ways to make money. I must confess I'm quite interested in what she calls her publishing business, which is more or less just a printing business, now that the vast field of Information Technology has taken off so much.

'Talking of IT, Gulliver seems to be doing well at work, which is brilliant. Fancy him buying a tropical fish tank and somehow managing to fit it into his boyhood bedroom with his huge TV and computer and bed and wardrobe. He only really uses his room on weekday evenings, though, seeing he still spends most weekends at Cardiff.

'I wonder if he'll buy a house here with Almond when her degree finishes. I hope so, it'll be fun! The four of us got on well when Almond came for the weekend and we all went to Tintagel. She didn't seem to mind when we all tramped into that New Age shop and Osborn had that conversation with the woman at the till about healing crystals. I must say, I never realised that crystals needed healing...'

"So, let's start!" said Kerry suddenly. "Who are we? Who am I? What do I mean when I ask myself who I am?"

After a preliminary discussion about how people tend to define themselves, the group were set the task of writing down on a piece of paper who they thought they were. At this point, Sandra experienced a certain discomfort as she remembered her initial sessions in 1991 with the psychologist Isabel Dell, a friend of her mother's. Feeling she had travelled a long way since then, she still found it very difficult to express who she was. She was comforted, however, to notice that other people also seemed to be finding it quite hard.

After this, they paired off and wrote down who they thought their partner was. Sandra was paired with the psychic Claire, although Claire's generous opinion was that everyone in the room was psychic, they were just at varying stages of developing their psychic ability. After five minutes of this torture (according to Sandra, who was afraid that Claire could see how inadequate she felt), they were asked to discuss with each other what they'd written.

"You go first, Sandra," said Claire, her eyes twinkling. "Tell me who I am."

"Oh no!" replied Sandra with genuine horror. "I wouldn't presume to know who you are, I found this really difficult."

"You wrote some things down, though," said Claire kindly. "Don't worry, your higher self will have guided you."

"Really?" Sandra looked astonished. "I have a higher self?"

"We all do, darling," replied Claire, smiling and shaking her bangles slightly. "You would have gone ahead and written what came to you via what you might call your intuition, but what I would call your higher self. Whatever you've written, it will be all right, because you wrote it with a good motive, as we all did here today."

"Gosh," said Sandra, still feeling highly inadequate. "Well, I wrote that you're someone who is very spiritually aware and you feel you want to share this with other people. You *enjoy* sharing it with other people. You sometimes get frustrated that society is so physical, but your connection with the higher plane helps you to see the wider picture." Sandra faltered, realising she was looking steadily into Claire's eyes.

"Go on, darling, you're spot on."

"Gosh." Sandra tried hard to sustain her focus on Claire, rather than be amazed that she seemed to be doing OK. "Umm – I wrote down that you're very colourful and you love nature. You may have had a less than easy childhood, but this has helped you to become the compassionate, far-seeing person you are today. I hope that's not too personal?"

"It's all about being personal today," said Claire, smiling again. "Thank you for that, Sandra." She placed her hand on Sandra's knee with a jangle of bangles.

"Gosh," replied Sandra, as Claire withdrew her hand. "Thank you."

"Well, it's my turn to speak about you now. I feel you are a wise soul who is learning to trust in her own wisdom," began Claire. "If you could relax and go with the flow of the universe a bit more, you would understand that you are very clear-sighted in the ways of your fellow humans. You are compassionate and are not afraid of the depths, which allows you to empathise with others in their distress. On the other hand, you love to see the sky. I had an image of you standing underneath the stars, looking upwards with your arms outstretched." Claire stopped for a moment and gazed at Sandra.

"Gosh," said Sandra, feeling she should respond.

"It comes to me that while you have such feeling for your fellow humans, you tend to hide away from them, as if you've been hurt at some time, in some life. There's a mistrust there, so that you only feel truly safe in your own company. You feel you are a lonely soul, but you are in fact very much connected to all of Creation." Claire opened her arms wide with another jangle of bangles.

"Gosh," breathed Sandra.

"It also comes to me that you have a more recent hurt – even a great pain that you have sought to heal. I feel it *is* healing and you'll learn a great deal from this experience that's been given to you. It's a hard concept to understand that those who hurt us the most are those who love us the most and have agreed to participate in this particular lesson of life."

Sandra found herself unable to speak at that point, not wanting to voice her disbelief. She had immediately thought of Sindy and how what Claire had said could in no way be true. It was too big to take on board and she began to feel her heart racing uncomfortably.

"I can see this feels wrong to you," said Claire softly. "Let it go, it will all come right in time. In all of this, Sandra, if something doesn't feel right for you, don't worry about it. Put it on a back burner, perhaps, or even discard it for now. Your heart is good and your motive is pure, so what will be, will be meant to be. I sound like a demented apiarist! Ah, that's another aspect of you that's beneficial, your natural ability to laugh and see the lighter side of life, while still perceiving its pain." Claire glanced into the room. "I think we're meant to be rejoining the circle. Are you OK?"

"Yes," replied Sandra thoughtfully, her head spinning slightly. "I wish I could remember all you said, it was so good."

"Here, you can take my piece of paper," said Claire, handing it to Sandra. "I hope you can read my untidy scrawl."

"Thank you," said Sandra. "Here's mine for you if you want it."

"Thank you, darling," replied Claire, folding it and putting it in her pocket.

The next exercise was a group one, in which they all remained sitting in a circle and went around the group to each person in turn, writing down what colour, flower and animal they perceived to best express that person. Sandra enjoyed this and once she'd got over her fear of speaking to the group when it was feedback time, she felt she'd been able to contribute quite well.

Osborn seemed to be in his element, to Sandra's slight surprise. She had perceived Osborn as deep blue, a camellia and a bear. He had perceived her as violet, a daisy and a wolf. There was much laughter as each person spoke around the circle and when it was lunchtime, the mood was high.

Sandra and Osborn stayed in the sitting room to eat their sandwiches, along with several others. The conversation flowed quite gently and naturally, with Osborn speaking a lot and Sandra a little. To Sandra's relief, it was soon time for the afternoon's exercise, which Kerry told them was to be a form of meditation.

"We're going to look a bit deeper into ourselves this afternoon," said Kerry, looking around the group seated once more in a circle. "I'm going to lead you into a fairly deep relaxation, followed by a meditation in which you can ask questions of your higher self." Sandra caught Claire's smiling glance, as Kerry paused.

"This is easier than it sounds," she continued, smiling. "I'll start off by suggesting questions such as 'Who am I?' and 'What is my soul purpose?' Then, after a few questions of this sort, I'll leave you for a while to ask your own questions. Then we'll have a round robin for anyone who wants to say anything, or discuss anything and then we'll all have a cup of tea and a muffin and that's it! Is everyone ready? OK then, let's go on a trip..."

To Sandra's amazement, she was able to relax fairly easily and found herself following Kerry's meditation with interest. After guiding them to their safe place (which for Sandra was her own garden) and then onto a path that meandered a long way through some lovely scenery, Kerry led them calmly and gently to what she called The Temple of Learning. Here they went inside and were greeted by a being who would show them to a room that was set aside especially for them. To her surprise, Sandra thought she recognised her spirit guide, although it was only a fleeting, sense that was hardly visual.

She then felt that she was taken up (exactly how she was unsure) into quite a spacious room, but was instantly drawn to glass doors that led onto a big balcony with a glass balustrade surrounding it on its three sides at chest height. Without hesitation, she walked to the doors, opened them and stood on the balcony, overlooking a wonderful mountain range that almost took her breath away. The glass balustrade gave an impression of being close and at one with the mountains from a safe position. Far below was the valley floor, but it was the mountains that drew her attention. She heard Kerry's voice asking them to find somewhere comfortable and after wandering around uncertainly on the balcony for a few moments, completely unsure where to settle, she finally sat against the wall on a big, soft purple bean bag that seemed miraculously to appear.

Kerry was asking them to be still and to connect with their higher self, but Sandra was unsure how this should happen. She looked around for her spirit guide, but she seemed to have disappeared. Sighing, Sandra sat still, wondering if she would remain there unconnected throughout the meditation. It was a lovely view, so she gazed at the different mountain tops and the shapes of the clouds that were gathering around them. The sky was a wonderful mix of blues and the clear yellowy orange of the setting sun. Her heart leapt in appreciation of this beautiful vista and suddenly she noticed her reflection in the balcony's glass balustrade. To her amazement, she saw not her normal physical self, but the hazy outline of what she could only describe as a Sandra-shaped body of moving energy particles. Transfixed with wonder, she heard Kerry saying it was time to start asking their questions, beginning with 'Who am I?'

'Who am I?' she asked, although she was unsure who she was asking. Somehow, though, it didn't seem to matter, as she was feeling so good.

'A soul of compassion and clarity, who is armed with the strength of gentleness. A soul who listens and sees.' To Sandra's disappointment, the voice stopped.

'What is my life's purpose?' she asked hesitantly, obediently following Kerry's guidance.

'To experience that which will enhance your understanding. To expand your wisdom and to serve the greater good.' The voice stopped once more.

'What do I seek?'

'To be understood.'

'Why am I me?' The question bounded from Sandra unbidden. To her frustration, she felt an answer was forming, but it was inaccessible. She tried to grab hold of the essence of the answer, but the more she tried, the further it escaped her. As she became agitated, she realised she was no longer on the balcony, but back in the room with the rest of the group.

They were all very still and silent and remained that way until Kerry gently guided them all back to the room. Sandra was relieved to see Osborn smiling at her and wished she could talk with him immediately. However, it was incredibly interesting to hear other people's experiences when feedback time came. Sandra began to feel that she wasn't so odd after all, since everyone appeared odd, even Terry! When it was Osborn's turn, Sandra listened intently.

"I found myself on Samson on the Isles of Scilly," he began, "which is a special place for me. I was sitting on a rock on the beach, face to face with my spirit guide, who is like an old friend. In fact, I was calling him my Old Friend. I asked him who I am and he told me to tell him who I see when I look in the mirror. I started to describe my physical appearance, but he stopped me and told me to describe the person I am.

"I found myself saying that I'm sensitive and caring and have a universal love for others, but at the same time I can be selfish. I'm a motivator and give encouragement. I have great enthusiasm. I'm a good listener, but at the same time there are occasions when I don't listen. I can be irritating, but also very loving. I can be tolerant, but there are times when I'm not. I would like to think that I'm not prejudiced, but I know that I am. I have many other desirable attributes, as well as many undesirable attributes." Osborn seemed to draw breath at this point before continuing.

"My Old Friend told me to keep looking into the mirror and to tell him what my gifts are. I replied that they are caring, loving, listening, encouraging, motivating, teaching, counselling, commitment and friendship. I feel that I'm able to help others in an effective way when I'm being helped and guided with the words of wisdom and enlightenment from whom I now know as my Old Friend."

"That's good," said Kerry encouragingly, as Osborn appeared to falter.

"It was all rather intense and mind-blowing and I'm afraid I stopped being aware of your voice, Kerry. I forgot to ask about my life's purpose, which was what I really wanted to do."

"That's OK, Osborn, you can talk with your spirit guide again in meditation whenever you choose and ask him whatever you like," replied Kerry. "You're in control here – but I would say that as you seem to go into meditation quite deeply, tell yourself beforehand that you're going to come out of it in 20 minutes, or however long you want. It's also very helpful to write down what you experience in each meditation, as it's amazing how we all move on and develop over time without realising it."

As she lay in bed that night, Sandra attempted to process exactly what she was feeling in relation to the workshop. 'Osborn seems so different sometimes when he's with others,' she thought wonderingly. 'I suppose we all display what we feel is our best side, because who wants to exhibit their negative side, after all? I must say, I feel a bit unsettled after all that stuff today. I'm still not sure who I am and why I'm me. I suppose an image of the real me will develop in time, but since this new millennium started, I feel as if I'm not being used to my potential at all, which is actually beginning to feel uncomfortable and scary. Oh dear, snap out of it, Sandra!'

After a while, she drifted into sleep and dreamed she was at the cinema, watching a movie of her own life. It felt peculiar being a spectator, but she enjoyed seeing remembered scenes of her childhood, adolescence and then life with Osborn. As it reached the time of Osborn's betrayal, however, the screen seemed to lose its clarity and Sandra started to blink her eyes in an effort to see better. It was no good, the picture was distorting and then finally, the screen went blank. She woke up with a start, thinking how her life needed to be lived, not processed and trying very hard to articulate the words: 'I'm afraid I'll run out of film.'

## CHAPTER 9

It was already the third week of August and a family gathering was taking place at *The Ploughperson*, to celebrate Caroline's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. Everyone had finished their main course and now sat talking while they awaited their various desserts. Sandra sat with a rum and Coke in her hand, semi-listening to all the conversation around her and pondering over the previous few months that seemed to have whizzed by while she hadn't been looking.

On her left sat Madeleine, listening to one of Lawrence's anecdotes about his colourful RAF past, while on her right sat Gulliver, who was answering Sybil's enquiries about Almond. Sandra noticed that he was drinking rather a lot – to dull the pain, she presumed and made a mental note to engage with him in conversation when Sybil finally gave up.

Sitting opposite to Sandra was Osborn, flanked by Caroline to his left and her younger sister, Sandra's Auntie Lily and the mother of Sindy, to his right. Auntie Lily had travelled by herself on the train for hundreds of miles from Grimsford to stay with Caroline and Leonard for a fortnight. While she really liked Auntie Lily, Sandra had found it incredibly hard to look at her without thinking of her as the mother of Sindy, the bitch cousin who'd metaphorically plunged a knife into her heart by having her sordid little affair with Osborn.

'I've forgiven Sindy, I mustn't think of her in those terms anymore,' thought Sandra with a sense of old, remembered pain. 'It was Osborn too, I have to be fair. God, I wish I didn't have to keep revisiting all this whenever something to do with this part of the family comes up. I wish Auntie Lily hadn't come...' She sipped her rum and Coke.

'I reckon this is a test,' she thought suddenly, sitting up straighter as the thought assailed her. 'I'm being tested about forgiveness. I have a choice here, I can choose either to stand by my decision to forgive and let go, or to renege completely and grab back all the terrible, sickening thoughts, the hate and the pain. Well, no choice there then, it's forgiveness for me!' She sipped more rum and Coke.

'It's been a weird summer really. I was glad Madeleine managed to cope well with that job Osborn found her in the office at work. She had a blip when her fling with that Welsh boy ended, but I don't think it was that serious in the grand scheme of her life. I don't know how I feel about Drew, though, and the way she keeps turning back to him and vice versa. Still, we can't interfere and she seems – well, she's still laughing at Lawrence's jokes! I'm glad Lawrence is spending more time with us, I know Osborn enjoys that a lot. I feel very comfortable with Lawrence now – except maybe when he goes off on one about the buses or the weather, or some conspiracy theory or other.' She sipped more rum and Coke.

'Poor Gulliver, he's really stuck with Sybil, she's relentless. He seems happy enough, though. Oh, he's talking about computers now, she's looking more than slightly confused. I hope he doesn't tell her that joke about the hard drive and the depressed IT consultant. I must say, I was quite surprised when Karla told us that joke, although I think it was a bit derogatory to males, so that kind of makes sense. Kirsty looked a bit abashed, I'll give her that.

'I thought Osborn and I did quite well with their garden makeover in July. Of course, the yucca incident was unfortunate, but to be honest, Kirsty's lucky she's got a brother and sister-in-law who'll travel all the way to Hunterdon to get down and dirty for her. Mind you, Karla paid us well. I hope Kirsty's publishing business takes off, she said

she'll soon be having a go at that small humorous book I wrote. It was a really just a bit of a distraction from my semi-autobiographical novel, but I've certainly had great fun writing it. I wonder how many people will understand that *Sensitive Health Issue Topics* is an acronym? Shit, it sounds a bit stupid.' She sipped more rum and Coke.

'Our four parents are still doing reasonably OK, although they're always in trouble with jobs that need doing. I worked my fingers to the bone pruning that huge forsythia at Mum and Dad's. Well, not exactly to the bone, but they were very sore. The worst thing is, the sodding thing will grow madly again and Mum says she likes it and doesn't want to get rid of it. I sound awful, like a crazed plant murderer, which is silly because I love all plants, I really do.

'Well, maybe not Mum and Dad's roses when their thorns gouge out a bit of my flesh, or that creeping convolvulus that grows through from their neighbour's garden, or their horrible holly bush that – what?! I don't believe it! Osborn just asked Auntie Lily how Sindy is!' Sandra felt her heart jump alarmingly, before plummeting into an old nightmare world that was filled with tortuous memories. She struggled hard to stay in her chair in *The Ploughperson* in the current world and was saved by Gulliver digging his elbow into her side.

"Mother!" he hissed. "Say something to me – anything – please! She's just asked me if pole dancing is the national dance of Poland. I can't stand it, I'm going insane!"

"Thank you so much," responded Sandra tearfully, touching him compulsively on the arm. "Sorry. Pole dancing? Ha! Oh look, here's your *Zesty Lemon Pudding...*"

"Oh, that looks nice," said Sybil, leaning over to inspect Gulliver's dessert. "I ordered a – what was it called? A *Passionate Fruit Syllabus*, or something."

"How are you doing, Mad?" asked Sandra, not trusting herself to look at Gulliver.

"I won't be able to eat all this," replied Madeleine, pointing at her *Small Ice Cream Surprise*. The surprise was obviously that it was anything but small. "Will you help me?"

"I'll help you," said Lawrence from Madeleine's other side. "I purposely didn't eat much today, so I've got a little space."

"What did you order, Sandra?" asked Osborn from across the table. Sandra looked up at him as he smiled happily next to Sindy's mother, but found herself unable to reply. She looked down at the table in front of her, where her *Melting Chocolate Heaven* had just arrived, feeling that she was in mortal danger of re-entering hell.

"That went better than I anticipated," said Osborn, as they arrived back home after saying goodbye to everyone. "You were quiet?"

"You asked Auntie Lily how Sindy was," replied Sandra when she was sure that Gulliver and Madeleine were out of earshot. "It hurt and brought back horrible memories. Why did you ask about *her*? Just hearing you say her name felt so – *awful* – it's been bad enough having to pretend to her mother that all of that never happened, but to hear you say her *name*!" Tears began to fall, as Osborn grabbed her rather roughly to him.

"I'm sorry! I didn't even mean to sit next to her, but I somehow ended up there and I had to talk about something. I didn't even think! I'm so sorry, Sandra, but we're past all that now and it means nothing to me."

"Well, it meant something to me," said Sandra with a heavy heart. "I forgave you and I forgave her, but sometimes it feels like I have to go on and on forgiving, each time it rears its ugly head."

"I love you," said Osborn, sounding slightly desperate. "I'd take it all back if I could, but I can't. We're OK, aren't we?"

"Yes, we're OK," replied Sandra wearily, sighing and wiping her eyes. "I just can't bear to hear you say her name, that's all."

It was the second week of September and Sandra was having a 48<sup>th</sup> birthday. It hadn't started off particularly well, as the day before, Madeleine had rung them in tears from her second-year accommodation in Cardiff to say the electricity supply had been cut off. She was the first one of four to have moved, for an extortionate rent, into an old, large,

draughty, depressing house and by the sound of her voice on the phone, she was feeling lost, lonely and afraid. Sandra had immediately been aware of alarm bells and had been exceptionally glad that Osborn had taken over and had arranged for Madeleine to stay overnight at Almond's flat, where Gulliver had arrived for the weekend.

After a morning of phone calls to and from Madeleine and the South Wales electricity company, Osborn had finally sorted it all out and now sat with Sandra in a *Costalot* coffee shop in Plymouth, where both of them sipped at their standard *Coffee Mocha Choc* that was actually very large.

"This is good," said Osborn, sipping appreciatively. "I'm sorry this has been a funny day so far. Madeleine said she's really sorry this happened on your birthday."

"I just want her to be OK," replied Sandra, sighing. "Thank you for sorting it all out. It's been such a strange year so far. I feel totally inundated with other people's stuff. I started out with such high hopes of starting afresh, travelling a meaningful spiritual path, writing and finishing my novel and being an all-round together person. Well, I'm starting to achieve all roundness – which isn't good and I shouldn't be drinking this for a start." She took another sip.

"We're on a meaningful spiritual path, though, aren't we?" asked Osborn, frowning slightly. "I know you haven't finished your novel, but Kirsty's going to publish your small book. Besides, I wouldn't know what to do if you were a totally together person, it would be too scary."

"What?" Sandra looked up from the inside of her *Coffee Mocha Choc* and saw Osborn smiling at her. "You pig! I like it when you smile, you didn't used to do much of that. I can't believe you were 50 last month, but we didn't do anything very exciting to celebrate."

"I told you I didn't want a big fuss and I meant it. I enjoyed our small get-together. I had everybody I love the most there – you, Gulliver, Madeleine, Lawrence, your parents..."

"My parents?" asked Sandra, raising her eyebrows. "What about yours?"

"They're problematical," he replied. "In a totally different way to you."

"Oh pooh," said Sandra warmly. "Come on, let's go shopping, I'm beginning to be in a birthday mood. Maybe you can even help me find some *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*."

"Well, I'm not in a birthday mood any more," said Sandra later that afternoon, after she and Osborn had said goodbye to Basil and Sybil, who'd called around to give Sandra her birthday present. "How can I tell them I don't like garden gnomes?"

"Just say it?" Osborn shrugged his shoulders.

"Like the way I said to them that I don't like salty caramel chocolate, potpourri scented dishcloths and extra-strong celery? It's not just that, though, it was the way they plonked themselves down here and proceeded to tell us all that's wrong in their lives, as if it's your fault. Your father practically gave you a list of what he wants you to do! Maybe they were miffed that we didn't ask them here for lunch or tea."

"I'm sorry." Osborn looked aggrieved.

"It's not your fault, it must be because it's my birthday and I can't stand the thought of one of those stifling family get-togethers with them complaining about what we give them to eat because it gives them indigestion, or brings them out in a rash. Oh well, it's nearly time to go over to Mum and Dad's for tea, at least they make an effort for my birthday. I'm glad Gulliver's coming with us, but I miss Madeleine so much."

An hour later, Sandra, Osborn and Gulliver sat in Leonard and Caroline's sitting room eating fish and chips from a newspaper.

"I'm sorry I didn't have time to buy anything special like I usually do," said Caroline, sniffing, "but life's been so hectic lately. I've had so many lunches and theatre trips come all at once now summer's just about over. I've even been roped into helping with the Harvest Supper at church."

"I didn't think they were into that sort of thing," said Leonard, grinning.

"Len! Be quiet and pass the salt, please."

"I thought you shouldn't have extra salt with your high blood pressure, Mum," commented Sandra, aghast at the amount of salt Caroline was shaking over her chips.

"Oh, I don't have very much," said Caroline dismissively. "Besides, we've always had salt and we're still alive."

"Yes, but..."

"I'm fine with my pills. Anyway, I think people worry too much about what they eat. In the war, we were grateful for anything."

Sandra decided to take the subject of salt with a pinch of salt and finished her own fish and chips in silence. Talk of the war had started Leonard reminiscing about what his mother used to cook from wartime food rationing, which led to how he'd been an auxiliary fire warden and how much he'd hated going in the bomb shelters, even though Plymouth was blitzed so badly. Sandra always loved to hear her father's war stories, but as she listened, she began to be very aware of the great rift between her parents' generation and all succeeding generations. She wondered if Gulliver was bored, but he seemed to be fascinated.

'Maybe it's just me,' thought Sandra guiltily. 'I expect too much of them, they're in their mid to late seventies, after all.'

"Cup of tea, anyone?" asked Caroline. "Ouch, my sciatica's troubling me lately."

"I'll make some tea," said Sandra, smiling.

"Oh no dear, Dad's always fussy about how much milk you put in, he likes it a bit stronger than what you do and he likes his to be the first one poured out of the pot. Ouch! Just you wait till you get to my age, Sandra, it's all right for you young things!"

'Well, that was a weird evening,' reflected Sandra as she lay in bed that night. 'On the whole, it fitted in very well with the weird day and the weird year so far. Money for a present and no birthday cake. Not that I particularly mind, but it felt so *different* with them tonight. They couldn't wait for us to go, either. Dad was yawning his head off and it wasn't even 9 pm. Oh well, life changes or else it wouldn't be life. It did feel a bit uncomfortable, though.'

'I do wish Mum would stop going on about me being young, because I'm *not* young. It's not that I want to be old, I just want to be allowed to be my own age. I'm 48 – wow, halfway to 96! I really need to get on with what I want to do, whatever it is. It's definitely writing, so I need to crack on with my novel. I must email Kirsty to ask how she's getting on with *SHIT*.

'Actually, what I'd really like to do tomorrow is tidy Madeleine's room and Osborn wants me to help him get the garden ready for the herb wheel. Also, I'm terribly behind with washing clothes and I need to cut my toenails. God, I've got so many loose ends and what I really, most definitely want above everything else right now, is tight ends!'

The phone rang the following morning with an excited Alison at the other end. Sandra fortunately was at home to answer it, having embarked on the rather enormous task of tidying Madeleine's room (with Madeleine's permission).

"I'm a grandma!" said Alison joyously. "Karen had a baby girl early this morning and I've already seen her! Sam rang me just after she was born and asked if I wanted to visit the hospital. She's so small, you forget how small they are when they're born."

"I'm so pleased for you all," responded Sandra, smiling at the news and the fact that Alison was so excited. "What's she called?"

"Tamsin," replied Alison, calming down a little. "It sounded strange at first, but it seems to suit her. I can't believe Sam's a father and Dirk and I are grandparents."

"How heavy was she?" asked Sandra, trying with some difficulty to remember how it felt when a baby was born and what questions should be asked.

"7lbs 4oz," replied Alison, "and she's got lots of black hair. Sam said she looks a bit like me, but Karen said she looks like Sam. I think she looks a bit like Karen's mother, but it's early days yet."

"I look forward to seeing photos," said Sandra. "Don't forget to take loads!"

"We have already!" replied Alison. "That reminds me, I won't be able to see you tomorrow, because we'll be seeing them again. They need a few things they forgot to buy, so we'll be making another trip to *Parentcare*."

Three weeks later, Sandra had just finished tidying Madeleine's room and was surveying her handiwork. The bookshelves were newly dusted and much neater; the wardrobe was tidier and all the clothes left inside were clean; the drawers held neatly folded underwear; the bed was made with a new pink and purple duvet set; the carpet had been vacuum cleaned thoroughly and there was a new bedside lamp. The overall effect was pleasing, but while Sandra was sure Madeleine would be happy with it, she felt slightly bereft that her mission was accomplished, as well as an overriding sense of sadness that she realised was purely and simply because Madeleine wasn't there.

The phone rang just in time to save Sandra from zooming in a downward spiral. An excited Gina was at the other end.

"I'm a granny!" she said joyously. "Adam and Sarah had a baby boy early this morning and I've already seen him at the hospital. He looks so small! I'd forgotten how small newborn babies are."

"I'm so pleased for you all," responded Sandra smiling at the news and the fact that Gina was obviously so elated. "What's he called?"

"Reece," replied Gina, calming down a little. "It sounded a bit funny at first, but he looks like a Reece. I don't know how they'll get on in their tiny flat, but at least they have their own place now. I'm so happy Andy and I are grandparents!"

"I'm glad it's working out," said Sandra. "How heavy was he?"

"7lbs 8oz," replied Gina, "and he's got fine, fair hair, but not a lot. I think he looks just like Adam was when he was a baby, but Sarah said her mother thinks he looks like she did."

"I look forward to seeing photos," said Sandra. "I bet you've taken loads."

"Haven't we just! Well I must be off, I've got to buy a few bits and pieces from *Parentcare*. I've been in that shop so many times lately, they really should have an offshoot branch called *Grandparentcare*!"

## CHAPTER 10

"Sandra, you're a bitch of the highest order!" exclaimed Caroline, as Sandra placed a 7-letter word on the *Scribble* board. "I wanted to put my word there."

"Well, it was my turn," responded Sandra, unsure whether or not she minded being called a bitch by her mother. "I'm not a bitch," she added a little petulantly.

"Oh, you know I don't mean it," replied Caroline. "It's all part of the game. That's twice you've done me out of 70-odd, you know."

"Mmm." Sandra remained unsure of her own reaction.

"Did you see Belinda last Thursday, by the way? When I rang Lily, she said that Belinda had rung her and mentioned you two were meeting."

"Yes, we had two coffees and our usual two-hour chat. It kind of wears me out a bit, but I really enjoy seeing her."

"Have you told her about Sindy and Osborn? I know you and Belinda are quite close these days and it crossed my mind. I just worry that Lily will find out."

"Yes, I did tell Belinda, but only because I know I can trust her completely." Sandra sighed inwardly because her mother was obviously in questioning mode. "Belinda understands that Auntie Lily doesn't know and – well, she understands the whole situation, really."

"Do you think Sindy knows that I know?" Caroline looked up from her tile rack and scrutinised Sandra.

"I don't see how she would know," replied Sandra tiredly, averting her eyes from her mother's penetrating gaze. "I'm sure she doesn't know that you know."

"Oh well, I just wondered. I still feel it's unfair that I have to carry the burden of knowing, when Lily, Basil and Sybil live in blissful ignorance. How about Lawrence and Kirsty, do they know?"

"No, they don't," replied Sandra a little shortly, wishing she could escape.

"I'm sorry this upsets you, but I just wonder about these things, I'm a sensitive soul, you know. Oh, hell and utter damnation to you Sandra, your wretched w has stopped me putting my brilliant word down!"

"Mmm." Sandra could think of no other response to her mother's words.

"Never mind, I think I've got another word. Oh no, I haven't! Oh dear, it's hard to have inspiration when you've got a hand like mine. How was Belinda, anyway?"

"She was worried about..."

"Ha! I can go there and get 27! Not bad in the circumstances, which are very wearing, thanks to you."

"She was worried about her cat and her next-door neighbour and her brother-in-law and Hetty..."

"What's wrong with Hetty now, for goodness sake? Lily was telling me how Hetty and Belinda have fallen out."

"It's Hetty that's fallen out with Belinda, she told me all about it. Belinda's tried her hardest to make up. She sent a nice *Sister* birthday card to Hetty, but Hetty sent her a nasty letter saying not to bother sending any more cards because she'll just tear them up, like she did with that one."

"That's dreadful. At least my sisters never fell out with me, or me with them. The three of us got on very well, although I did feel that Lily and Felicity felt I was the odd one out. They thought I was a bit snobby because I went to grammar school and they didn't. On the whole, though, the three of us have always been quite close. Sisters can be a great comfort."

"I wouldn't know. Well, I can finally put the q here and get 48."

"Oh, so you had the bloody q, you bitch!"

"I'm not a bitch."

"I know, I've just got to let off steam with someone. I haven't sworn since the last time you were over here."

"Is that a compliment? Don't forget you had the x, the z and the j." Sandra began to feel that she was in some sort of battle and was being forced to fight for herself.

"I've had my usual vowel problems, though. What were we talking about? Oh yes, sisters. I was devastated when Felicity died at only 48. Can you imagine having to deal with that? Does Belinda talk about her mother much?"

"Yes, sometimes. She was asking what photos we have of her. I was very upset too, you know, when Auntie Felicity died. She was someone in between a second mother and a grandma to me."

"Was she? Oh, you little sod, Sandra, you've spoilt my 'verve' – I was going to get rid of two v's in one brilliant move!"

"Mmm." Sandra felt a certain amount of ire beginning to rise and tried to distance herself emotionally. "You're very competitive," she found herself saying.

"That's what it's all about, isn't it? You want to win, don't you?" Caroline looked at Sandra somewhat accusingly.

"It's a game to me, it's only a game," replied Sandra truthfully. "I enjoy the actual playing of it," she added a little less truthfully.

"Well, I look forward to it every week, just being able to sit here and let it all out. I like the way Len pushes off to the back room and listens to the radio when we're playing. Oh, I'll have to go here and get rid of just one v, I suppose. It's all your fault, Sandra."

"24 is actually very good for a v. How's Dad getting on, I thought he looked a bit pale?" Sandra decided to ignore her mother's provocative comments.

"He hasn't been out walking quite as much recently, but this October's been such a wet month. He still goes out to the pub with some of the walking group sometimes, but he thinks far too much about food, if you ask me. Oh! Hello Len, what are you up to now?"

"Charming! I was thinking what we could have for tea," replied Leonard, who had poked his head around the door. "What about fishcakes, mashed potatoes and some marrowfat peas? I thought I'd make a start on the potatoes."

"It's only half past three!" exclaimed Caroline. "Have a cup of tea with Sandra and me in a minute when we've finished this hellish game."

"I thought you liked it," said Leonard, smiling at Sandra. "You're always quite raucous, I must say – well, your mother in particular. Anyway, I'm off to the kitchen."

"Silly old fool," said Caroline affectionately. "Oh well, we've nearly finished, only a few more tiles left. I haven't got a hope of winning with all my bad luck. It's your go, Sandra."

"Yes. Your score is 398 and mine's 332, by the way. I had that run of nothing but vowels in the middle, if you remember. Anyway, I've got another 7-letter word."

"Oh, you naughty little girl! I could smack you – hard!"

"I'm 48, Mother."

"Yes well, you've just thwarted me again, you absolute sod!"

"You'll probably still win, you've got seven tiles left and I've only got four."

"Rubbish, you always get the best tiles at the end and I get the dregs. Oh well – I don't believe it – yes! I've got a 7-letter word! How brilliant is that? Never mind, Sandra, you did your best, poor little chicken. I'll make some tea while you finish off, I could do with a *Semi-rich Tea*. What a good game this has been!"

'What a diabolical game,' thought Sandra as she walked home half an hour later, with her mother's voice still echoing in her head. 'Well, it was really good as far as 7-letter words go, but I feel as if I've survived an onslaught. She even called me a naughty little girl, if you ever! I used to think her verbal abuse during *Scribble* was funny, but now I'm beginning to think she's using me to boost her own ego.'

'God no, how awful of me to think that, because she's normally very kind. It's only when we play that stupid game. I can't help feeling that I'm wasting my life when I sit there being the butt of my mother's frustrations. This is *my* life, Mother, I need to be me! I think I'll light a candle when I get home and connect to the good stuff – to my spirit guide. It feels like the right thing to do.'

Ten minutes later, Sandra sat in front of a brightly burning candle, calm and smiling, as she felt a wonderful energy flowing throughout her body and mind. She had felt the need to have a pen and some paper beside her, although she hadn't been sure why. As she breathed deeply and slowly, she found herself asking her spirit guide to indeed guide her along her life's pathway. She was then immediately aware of words in her mind and picked up her pen in preparation. The idea of a spiritual journey seemed to have entered her consciousness effortlessly and she began to write with ease and a sense of such timelessness and beauty that tears often filled her eyes.

Around half an hour later, she took herself, her candle and her paper to the computer and transcribed what she'd written into a file named simply *The Journey*. When she had finished and extinguished the candle with awe and thanks, she realised she was feeling completely at peace.

'I shall be writing more about this and I'll need to share it with others,' she thought serenely. 'Maybe I'll be able to publish it – maybe Kirsty will do that. For me right now, though, I know that whatever life throws at me on my own journey along life's pathway, I'll actually be able to deal with it.'

'I don't think I can deal with this,' thought Sandra agitatedly, as she was being propelled up the motorway towards Cardiff. It was early November and Gulliver was taking Sandra and Osborn along with him on one of his weekend visits to Almond. Over the last few weeks, Sandra had become increasingly worried about Madeleine, who seemed to be showing signs of worsening depression.

The first phone call to put Sandra on yellow alert had been when Madeleine confessed how after an argument with Drew over the phone, she'd sat down and made a list of her complete calorie intake for a week. This had obviously upset Madeleine, who told Sandra she felt much better after speaking at some length with her mother.

Sandra had recounted all this to Osborn, having had Madeleine's permission to do so. Osborn had naturally been concerned, but problems at work with Bill Bustard seemed to be taking precedence. Things had become so bad that Osborn had even applied for a job where Gulliver worked, at *Fischer and Chipmann*, but with no success.

However, a further phone call from Madeleine two weeks later had caused great jangling alarm bells to ring in Sandra's head and immediately upped the situation to red alert, when Madeleine had described how she'd found herself thinking of what to write in

suicide notes to various people. Without hesitation, the decision had been made to visit Madeleine as soon as possible. Sandra was very grateful to Gulliver and Almond, who'd been happy to have Sandra and Osborn stay with them in Cardiff for the weekend.

'Almond's really very friendly,' thought Sandra, remembering their visit to the Plymouth Aquarium during Almond's recent weekend stay with Gulliver. 'She needn't have asked us along, but she really seemed to want us there and we had a lot of fun. I quite enjoyed those fish jokes, although she must have thought I was an easy target. How was I to know she wasn't being serious when she asked me why goldfish are orange? Even Osborn knew that one, although water doesn't actually make them rusty, of course.

'I didn't even realise she was joking when she asked me what fish swim only at night. Starfish! I like that one. What was the other one I liked? Oh yes, where do fish wash? In a river basin, that's so cool. My favourite one was what happens when jellyfish get cold. They set! Ha! Oh my God, how can I be laughing when my beautiful Madeleine is in such trouble?' Sandra gazed out of the window miserably at the waterlogged fields and the full rivers.

'It's been a terrible, wet autumn. When I say 'my' Madeleine, of course, I don't mean it in the possessive sense. I know she's not mine, she's her own lovely person on her own life pathway and Osborn and I have been privileged to share her journey in an intimate way so far. What a rocky, dangerous place she's walking along now, though. I can't help wondering how and why she got where she is. What went wrong?

'I feel we've always affirmed her and always listened to her, although when Osborn and I were having our troubles, I don't suppose we did listen to her very well. God, I was so busy surviving myself in my final year at uni, that I failed to recognise her first brush with anorexia for some time. I find it very hard to forgive myself for that, except that I really was trying to survive after the double betrayal and the chronic anxiety. I'm pretty sure I was on the road to agoraphobia, but I was so determined to finish my degree and it took almost all of my energy. Was I being selfish? God, I really hope not. Why have I gone back to saying God? I suppose it's easier than saying Divine Creator, or Great Spirit. Oh, I'm so terribly concerned about my beautiful Madeleine.'

"I'm OK really," said Madeleine, as Sandra and Osborn sat in her room in the dark, drab, old house that Madeleine was currently calling home. "It's so cold here, though, I often go to bed just to keep warm."

"It's good that Carys and Joss are here as well, because at least you know them from last year," said Sandra doubtfully. She was still reeling from the shock of how Madeleine's thin, bony frame had felt when they'd hugged on arrival.

"Yes, although Carys is always with her boyfriend and Joss is always out with other friends. To be fair, she does ask me to go with them, so I do sometimes and last week Carys bought me a fleecy mattress protector she saw in a sale."

"This room is draughty," said Osborn, getting up to peer in the corner. "There's a hole in the floor here. These windows are terrible, too." Sandra wondered if he was trying to concentrate on material problems in order to distract himself from his thin, pale, shadow of a daughter. Her own senses seemed to be heightened as she tried to take in every small detail of Madeleine and her situation, but somewhere inside her own head, a part of herself was trying calmly and rationally to find any way whatsoever that she and Osborn could help.

"I'm looking forward to tomorrow," continued Madeleine brightly. "It's nice of Gulliver and Almond to take us to the Brecon Beacons, I've never been there. I hope it won't be too cold, though."

The weather the following day turned out to be fortuitously sunny and after stopping to buy sandwiches for lunch, they all enjoyed the drive out to the wild, green expanses of the National Park. Gulliver took them first of all to a reservoir, where they all went for a picturesque, short walk. When they'd returned to Almond's flat the previous evening to sleep, Sandra and Osborn had warned Gulliver that Madeleine might not have much energy to go for a long walk. What was concerning Sandra, however, was how Madeleine would cope with lunch.

After moving on to park within reach of a waterfall, Sandra found out. While everyone else opened their plastic packet of sandwiches eagerly and ate the contents hungrily before moving on to crisps, bananas, apples and cake, Madeleine sat slowly nibbling at one sandwich. Sandra tried to eat slowly herself, so that she was still finishing her second sandwich when Madeleine turned to her with a despairing look.

"I can't eat any more," she whispered to Sandra, with tears in her eyes. "What shall I do with this?" She handed her remaining sandwich in its packet to Sandra as if it were a dangerous substance.

"It's OK, you've done well," murmured Sandra reassuringly, but her heart had plummeted and despite everyone's best intentions, the rest of the day out felt like a muted, unhappy experience. Sandra tried to be bright and upbeat for Gulliver and Almond, who were doing all they could to help, but inside her heart was bleeding for Madeleine. All Sandra really wanted to do was to hold her and tell her that everything was going to be all right – even though she knew that at the moment, everything was absolutely wrong.

The following day, Sandra and Osborn had arranged to call for Madeleine to take her clothes shopping with them, as lots of Madeleine's clothes had become too big. Sandra had spent a large part of the night lying awake, looking at the unfamiliar ceiling and listening to the sudden squally wind and rain, which had now thankfully eased.

They left the car at Almond's flat in the earlyish Sunday morning and walked the streets of the big city on slippery pavements full of fallen leaves. As she almost tripped over a misplaced paving slab, Sandra felt as though she was in a surreal nightmare world and wanted very badly to wake up at home, with Madeleine safely there with them all, complaining to Gulliver about his bad jokes and painting her toenails an unusual colour, while watching *Neighbours at Home and Away*.

An hour later, as the three of them were walking around the underwear section of *Marks and Spender*, Sandra began to feel slightly relieved that Madeleine seemed to be her normal self, happily searching for a pretty turquoise bra in her size. Osborn seemed completely unfazed about where he was, which also caused Sandra to smile and think that Cardiff wasn't such a bad place after all.

"How about matching knickers?" asked Osborn. "What size are you, Mad?"

Sandra glanced up in alarm at Osborn's unintended reference to Madeleine's size, but the moment passed smoothly and they continued to shop quite harmoniously. Sandra felt as if she would buy anything for Madeleine if only it would give her confidence in herself. Money was as tight as ever, especially with Christmas looming, but Sandra would happily have foregone all her own presents if it would erase the pinched, tense look from Madeleine's face.

"I love shopping with you two," said Madeleine cheerfully, as they queued at a café to buy a snack lunch. "I'll just have a bread roll and some of that flavoured water, I'm not very hungry."

"Are you sure?" asked Sandra, looking anxiously at Madeleine, before realising she must on no account push her in any way whatsoever. "That's OK, I'm not very hungry, either."

As they sat in the crowded café and consumed lunch, Madeleine became very quiet. She began to fidget in her chair and kept bending down to look in the various bags of shopping. Sandra was aware of Madeleine's discomfort and looked at Osborn with worried, raised eyebrows. He returned the look with worried, raised eyebrows of his own.

"It's no good, I can't stay here!" said Madeleine suddenly. "I feel all hot and weak, I think I might faint."

"I'll come outside with you," said Sandra instantly. In a moment of recognition, she had realised that Madeleine was having a panic attack.

They stood outside the shop, with Madeleine gradually calming down as Sandra talked soothingly and matter-of-factly about her own experiences of panic attacks. She was unsure if Madeleine was really listening, but was trying to normalise the situation so that Madeleine wouldn't feel like an alien in a dangerous world, the way Sandra had felt when she had first experienced panic attacks.

Osborn left the café and joined them both outside. Without a word, he enveloped Madeleine in a hug. To Sandra's surprise, Madeleine made no attempt to break free, uncaring for once what other people would think. After a few moments, she disengaged and looked down at the ground with tears in her eyes.

"Can we go home now?" she asked quietly, extracting a tissue from her pocket to wipe her eyes. Sandra felt her heart contract, knowing Madeleine meant her dark, dingy, room in the dank, depressing Cardiff house, rather than the safe haven that had once been her home.

A while later, the three of them sat in Madeleine's room sipping tea, while Madeleine unpacked her bags. "Thank you for these," she said, taking out the turquoise bra and matching knickers, the black top and the dark blue jeans that Sandra and Osborn had bought her. "I'll go and try them on." She disappeared into the bathroom.

"She's really not OK," said Sandra quietly and sadly.

"I know," replied Osborn, frowning. "I feel so helpless. I'm glad we bought her some clothes to help her feel better, she's so terribly low."

"I wish she was closer to home. At least she's got some friends here, but this house is dreadful. No wonder she's depressed."

They continued to sit in silence, until Madeleine came back into the room.

"It's no good," she said, dropping the clothes onto the bed. "They're just not right. They're hideous and *I'm* hideous!" She began to cry uncontrollably.

"Hey – let it all out," said Osborn, getting up and hugging her. Madeleine made an attempt to avoid his arms, but soon gave in and sobbed against his shoulder. Sandra sat still, thinking desperately how to help.

"I think you should go to see a doctor, darling," she said quietly when Madeleine had regained her composure and was sitting red-eyed beside Osborn on the bed. "It's obvious you need a little bit of help and there's no shame in that whatsoever. Loads of students find university life very hard, especially living away from home. Will you go to see a doctor?"

"Yes," whispered Madeleine. "I know I can't go on like this. What about the clothes? I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry about the clothes, I'll take them back to *Marks and Spender* in Plymouth," said Sandra soothingly. "You just concentrate on getting yourself better." Sandra felt perilously close to tears herself.

"Thank you," said Madeleine wearily. "I'll ring up tomorrow. I'm really tired now, what time are you going back to Almond's?"

"Well, we'll have to get up at 6-ish tomorrow morning, so I suppose we ought to be making a move," replied Osborn. "I hate to leave you like this."

"You'll be coming home in less than six weeks for Christmas," said Sandra, smiling wanly in a desperate attempt to encourage Madeleine to face the immediate future. She realised she needed to do this for herself as well.

"Yes. You won't force me to eat anything, will you?"

"No!" Sandra was shocked to the core at the fear in Madeleine's voice. "No my darling, of course not. You're in control. I just want you to be OK." Sandra's tears made it to the surface of her eyes.

"I'll be fine, honestly," said Madeleine bravely, as Sandra and Osborn finally and very reluctantly prepared to leave. Only a few minutes later, as they stood on the pavement looking back at Madeleine standing at the front door and waving goodbye, Sandra felt as if her entire being was shrieking at her not to go and leave Madeleine all on her own.

"I'm sorry to ring you, Sandra," said Caroline on the end of the phone, a mere half-hour or so after they'd arrived home the following morning, feeling totally exhausted. "Our fence blew right down on Saturday night, while you were away. We had some terrible wind here, it was so frightening! Dad and I didn't know what to do, we were really worried. Could you ask Osborn to come over and take a look at it? By the way, how was your weekend in Cardiff? I expect you had a lovely time."

## CHAPTER 11

It was a beautiful sunny Saturday in early December. Sandra and Osborn had followed Terry's invitation to join him at a Mind, Body and Spirit Fayre, but although everything taking place in the hall was colourful and intriguing, Sandra felt almost overcome with emotion and what promised to be a bad headache. After she and Osborn had wandered around the various displays and stalls, they came across the space where Terry and Claire were offering spiritual healing. They had recently finished with one client and welcomed Sandra and Osborn very warmly.

"Are you enjoying it?" asked Terry, after they'd all hugged. Sandra was getting used to hugging in public. At first she'd found it difficult, but Osborn had taken to it like a born hugger.

"Yes, it's fascinating," replied Osborn. "I see Ken Farr's here. I'm intrigued by the Kirlian photography too, but what interests me most is the mineral and crystal stall. I may have to buy something."

"That's great, mate!" said Terry. "Go with what you feel, it's always best. How about you, Sandra?"

"Yes, it's really interesting. I love the music that's playing but I'm finding it a bit overwhelming, to be honest. I've got a bit of a headache." Sandra smiled wanly, as she felt insidious waves of panic activating unwanted old responses in her mind and body.

"Have some healing?" Terry proffered the healing chair and after a quick glance at Osborn, who nodded encouragement, Sandra sat in it. She wondered what would happen.

'I can't feel much more anxious than I do already,' she thought, as Terry recommended she shut her eyes and relax as if entering a meditation. Meanwhile, Claire had knelt on the floor in front of her and had taken hold of both her hands. Sandra felt a little embarrassed about that, but followed Terry's advice and tried to relax. However, her heart continued to beat very quickly and she was totally unable to blot out the background hubbub of all the people in the hall. She tried to concentrate on the music and was a little more successful, as her mind seemed to take her over the events of the last few weeks.

'I'm glad Madeleine finally got to see a doctor who listened to her,' she thought, as Terry put his hands on her shoulders. 'That feels comforting. I can't believe that first doctor treated her so harshly, he had her life in his hands. Dr Effingham would never be like that. I felt so helpless that evening when she rang up in tears to tell us about that dreadful doctor.'

'I'm glad Osborn went into fighting mode and rang the Cardiff surgery to complain. The practice manager was very good, I'm sure she'll qualify fully when the time comes. Anyway, she did well to recommend Madeleine make an appointment with that good doctor, who actually listened to her. I think the antidepressants are helping, although she's been prone to viruses since she went back to uni. I wish Claire would let go of my hands, I feel fidgety.' She attempted to move her hands slightly in the hope that her hands might be freed, but Claire held on resolutely.

'I'm worried about Dad, too. It was quite a shock last week when he went for his normal cardiac check-up and was told he has to have two more tests and possibly an operation. I'm not sure what sort of an operation, but he was really upset and so was Mum. She went into one of her depressions, like she used to do when I was a child. I never know what to say to her when she's like that, because it's as if she's totally blocking me out.'

'We all assumed Dad was doing OK, but it just goes to show that you never know. It'll be absolutely terrible if he dies and I'm left with her to look after. God, what an awful thing for me to think! How totally selfish – but it *will* be terrible, it's so difficult sometimes being an only child. Shit, I shouldn't be thinking things like this, Terry and Claire might be able to sense it.' She shifted slightly in the chair.

'I need to connect with my spiritual self a bit more here, I'm not really feeling anything special. It's not at all like when I tune in to write *The Journey*, that happens almost instantly. I haven't felt able to do any of that for a while. I haven't written any

more of my semi-autobiography, either. It scares me that people might actually read it – I mean, people I know who are characters in the book.

'I need to somehow make them understand that it's first and foremost a novel. Does it mean I'm using them for my own ends? I really hope not. It's so difficult, as some of what I've written so far actually happened and some of it most definitely didn't! Oh dear, life is full of moral dilemmas. The title's a bit dodgy, too, I'm worried that people will find *The S.O.D. Saga* too tasteless. Oh, please don't take too long with this, although to be fair I do feel a bit calmer. I'm sure Terry's moved to my right side now.'

She opened her eyes slightly to see if she could see Terry, but looked straight into Claire's eyes instead.

'Oops! Eyes tight shut! My heart seems to have slowed down, that's a relief. My hands are a bit sweaty, though. I can hear Osborn chatting with someone, it sounds like Wanda, I didn't know she was here. It's a pity Kerry had to be somewhere else today, she seems like a busy soul. Why is life so busy, so mega-hectic, so freaking frenetic...'

"Are you with us?" came Terry's voice softly in her ear, as Claire squeezed Sandra's hands before finally letting them go.

"Oh – yes! Thank you, that felt good." Sandra smiled at Terry, wondering what to say. "It was really good just to sit down for a while. Yes, very good. Oh! I didn't mean the healing wasn't good, because it was definitely, yes, *asso* – absolutely..." Words seemed to be tripping over themselves on Sandra's tongue.

"I felt you were a bit anxious," said Claire, smiling.

"I'm sorry." Sandra began to feel the need to escape and tried to communicate to Osborn with her eyes.

"Don't be sorry," said Terry, "have a hug. Hugs are good."

"Oh, I know. Osborn loves hugs, he's a horn bugger!"

It was three days before Christmas and the atmosphere had finally calmed down in the Dullkettle household. A week before, Gulliver had driven Almond and Madeleine home from Cardiff. Madeleine had come home for Christmas and Almond had come to see a mortgage consultant with Gulliver, before returning to Somerset to spend Christmas with her family. To Gulliver's relief and delight, they'd been told that Gulliver's salary alone would allow them a mortgage of £70,000.

That morning, a part of Gulliver's Christmas present from Sandra and Osborn had arrived in the post. A few weeks previously, Sandra had sent off a photo of Gulliver to Ken Farr, who had started to paint people's spirit guides by tuning in via photographic likenesses. Sandra had eagerly taken out the canvas from its padded envelope and gazed at the face of an enigmatic looking monk with far-seeing eyes. She had no idea what Gulliver would make of his spirit guide, but hoped he would approve. She was currently dusting the fireplace and arranging Christmas cards, pondering deeply over the previous few weeks.

'It's been so manic, I haven't even looked at all these cards properly. Mind you, I've lost a few pounds without even trying, so every cloud has a silver lining. I'm glad Osborn was able to take Madeleine to hospital today for the x-ray on her leg. Poor soul, along with everything else, including a difficult visit to the dentist last week, she has a painful leg that she can hardly walk on at times.

'At least the GP she saw here was kind and listened to her. I must confess, I was surprised her leg was giving her so much trouble when I walked to the surgery with her. It *is* worrying, amongst everything else. What a strange card, whoever heard of a Christmas bunny, for heaven's sake?' Sandra relegated the Christmas bunny to her pile of rejects behind a fluffy Christmas cat ornament.

'I'm getting quite peed off with Osborn going out so much with his Radio Amateur crowd, what's all that about? I mean, it was one thing having meetings at the university after work, but now he's started going out drinking with some of them. He seems to have a lot of fun with them and it feels a bit as though he's trying to be young again and forget his responsibilities. There's a part of me that understands that and thinks he *should* have fun. If anyone's entitled to it, he is – but like everything in his entire life, he becomes so enthusiastic, he seems to go completely over the top.

'I can't seem to help it that after Sindy I find it impossible to trust him 100% and I've spent so much energy turning my insides out trying. Now he's talking of going camping overnight with the bright young things of the Radio Amateur group and even a weekend away. I just don't like it, it really unsettles me and heaven knows I'm unsettled enough at the moment as it is!

'It's his life, though, I can't stop him living it. I don't *want* to do that, but I wish he'd be a bit less into them. That's a bit of an unfortunate phrase, I must be getting paranoid. God, there's a card here from one of them – Bluebell, what a bizarre name. That one goes behind the fluffy Christmas cat!' Sandra shoved it rather aggressively behind the ornament.

'Christmas is such a peculiar time, it seems to highlight everything, as well as cause a load of extra work. I can't believe Basil chose yesterday to ask Osborn to mend his water butt. I wish Osborn had told him to go and do something rude with his own butt! That's not very spiritual of me, I must be more forgiving. Well, at least that's something I managed to do this year. I kind of wish Sindy knew how much effort and sheer willpower it took me to forgive her. No! Auntie Lily's written Sindy's name on her Christmas card! I can't stand it, I don't want that bitch's name on my fireplace.' Sandra tore the card in half and went to shred it, just to make sure.

'Goodbye to all that! It still goes on, though, because every time Mum mentions Auntie Lily or Sindy, it touches the forever sad place within me and I simply have to live with it. Talking of Mum, I wonder why she wanted us to take her to the cemetery this Christmas to put flowers on her parents' grave? She hasn't done that in decades as far as I know. Maybe Dad's heart condition has affected her more than I think.

'She was still quite depressed that day we took her and Dad to buy a Christmas tree. She was a bit better when we took them food shopping, though. We seem to have done a lot of taking the oldies around lately, what would they do if we lived away, like Kirsty does? Actually, I'm quite surprised that she and Karla are coming here for Christmas again – two years running, what do they want? God, there I go again! This is a lovely card, my favourite colour, purple. Ah, it's from Terry and Kerry, I should have guessed. That one's not going behind the fluffy Christmas cat.

'I'm so pleased I wrote some more to *The Journey* yesterday, in amongst the mayhem. With any luck, I'll finish it early next year. Kirsty said she was bringing down the final draft of *Sensitive Heath Issue Topics* for me to check, so that's good. I wonder where Madeleine is, she must still be in her room. She stays in there quite a lot, but I understand she needs time alone. It's good that she recognises this need, it feels like progress. In fact, I can tell she's progressed already by the way she talks.

'I'm so glad I had that very open and honest discussion with her last week, I was amazed at her level of self-awareness. She seems to be afraid of her own mood swings at the moment, although she says the antidepressants are stabilising her. I'm alarmed at how thin she is, though, I had to try hard not to show any reaction when she showed me her thighs. God, it was awful. Poor Maddy, what are you *doing* to yourself?' A shaft of pain shot through Sandra's heart and she nearly knocked the fluffy Christmas cat off the fireplace altogether.

'I feel so honoured that she trusts me enough to tell me how she truly feels. It's a journey of growth for us both, that's for sure. The depth of her sadness and unhappiness is dreadful, I still can't really understand how it's come to be like this. It's so complex. Instead of being one amorphous mass like I felt it was at first, though, after our talk I think I see different aspects and pathways. It's a real triple whammy – anorexia, anxiety and depression – and she's only 19.

'Thank God she's so mature for her age, that gives me great hope. Every time I think about it, I keep coming back to the fact that I'm pretty sure the fundamental issue is of her learning to love herself. Once she does love herself, I feel she'll be able to care for herself on all levels. In the meantime, though, I reckon I'm her number one carer, with Osborn a close second. I hate the thought of her going back to uni after Christmas, but it has to be. What a ridiculous card, I'm not sure if it's meant to be a robin or a decorative vulture. Behind the fluffy Christmas cat with you!' She moved the cat forward to accommodate the growing pile.

'It's as if Madeleine currently has two distinct selves, one being the irrational, dysfunctional self and the other the rational self who can see what the irrational self is doing. I think the two selves can be integrated, but it's going to take a lot of time and effort. Even her eczema's kicking in now, it seems so unfair. I was really afraid of saying the wrong thing when she asked me how noticeable it was.

'As for what she's eating, she's really trying. It seemed pitiful that all she ate for tea the second evening she was home was some broccoli and swede. I had to listen to her suggestion, though, as well as faithfully follow it through. Then it was a third of a can of spaghetti hoops – and it was incredibly hard to resist the temptation to make it more than a third. I've *got* to keep her trust, or we're lost. It felt so good yesterday, when she had two pieces of toast for lunch, instead of one. I hope I didn't overdo it by hugging her, but I was genuinely pleased. What in the name of all that's holy is on this card? A piece of Cheddar cheese, or a slab of marzipanned cake? Another one for the fluffy Christmas cat!' Sandra pushed it to the back of the pile impatiently.

'It was wonderful when she had that talk in the kitchen with Osborn and me and said she knew for sure that both Osborn and I love her. I'm not sure about her and Gulliver, to be honest, it feels as if there's some work to be done there. What did she eat yesterday? Half a tin of potato and leek soup and half a cookie. I think the half a cookie was a psychological breakthrough. Also, today it was half a can of spaghetti hoops, which is measurable progress! I'm pleased she's started to take the multivitamins I bought her as well.

'Generally speaking, it's all promising, but there's such a way to go. She's very apprehensive about Christmas Day at Mum and Dad's and Boxing Day with Osborn's family. So am I, to be honest, because she's so utterly vulnerable. Still, I've explained to Mum and Dad and they seem to understand. Osborn said he's drummed it into his parents not to say anything about how she looks or what she eats, too. All we can do is try to enjoy Christmas.

'I think I just heard her bedroom door open. Well, I hope Gulliver's enjoyed his work party today, he was looking forward to it. Yuck, another silly teddy bear with tinsel wrapped around its neck. Off you go behind the fluffy Christmas cat. Oh!' Sandra watched in horror as the protesting pile of rejected cards cascaded sideways off the fireplace onto the floor, knocking over her mug of tea in the process. The fluffy Christmas cat had meanwhile slid forward and fallen at the feet of a surprised Madeleine, who'd just entered the room.

"You had a good party then?" said Osborn to a slightly flushed and beaming Gulliver, who'd returned home via taxi.

"Yes! They gave me a Christmas bus – bonus."

"Now that's something the university would never dream of," replied Osborn. "*Fischer & Chipmann* never replied to my application, you know. Oh well, it obviously wasn't meant be."

"No," said Gulliver, sitting down on the sofa beside Madeleine, who was ensconced in a book. "Here Lil Sis, you can have the prize I won in the Christmas draw as consolation. Has Almond rung yet? I need to finalise arrangements for my Christmas visit to her house. I'm a bit scared of her mother."

"She hasn't rung yet," replied Osborn. "What's this, then? A chocolate – what?!"

"Ah, the phone!" exclaimed Gulliver, leaping up to go and answer it. "God, who put that fluffy Christmas cat there?"

Fifteen minutes later, Gulliver came back into the room looking bewildered and deflated. He resumed his position on the sofa beside Madeleine as if in a daze.

"Are you OK?" asked Sandra, somewhat apprehensively.

"You might as well all know," replied Gulliver slowly, "that as from now, Almond and I are on a break."

"What do you mean, a weekend break?" asked Sandra dully, fearing the truth. "Over Christmas?"

"No Mother, a permanent break as far as I see it. She said that having a mortgage and moving here is too much for her right now. To be honest, I think it's been

coming for a while, but..." he faltered slightly. "Well, it looks as if you'd better ask your parents if there's room for one more at their Christmas dinner table."

Sandra was having a dream that was more of a memory. She had not long given birth to Gulliver and was lying in her hospital bed, gazing at him in his crib, as he looked around at his new world and started to screw up his little face and make small noises of distress. 'You're so lovely,' she was thinking. 'You look so innocent and yet so self-possessed, lying there with your perfect little nose and mouth and your soft black hair.'

'Thank God you're a boy and you'll never have to go through all that pain I've just been through. It was a stormy birth, wasn't it, my darling! Don't worry, my lovely brave boy, I'll always be here for you, our bond will never be broken.' With that, she got carefully and somewhat painfully out of bed, leaned over the crib and picked him up, cuddling him gently to her and rocking him softly to sleep.

The scene changed and Sandra was resting at home in bed, having given birth to Madeleine two days previously. Osborn's family had arrived en masse and were being noisy in the sitting room. Sandra had just finished feeding Madeleine and lay propped up in bed, cuddling her new daughter who was wrapped in a soft, white blanket. She looked down at her, feeling totally at peace with Madeleine safe and warm in her arms. 'You're so beautiful,' she was thinking. 'This feels so natural – comforting, comforted and comfortable – giving and receiving – nourishing.'

Suddenly she was in the present, kneeling beside Madeleine's bed and stroking her daughter's hair while she slept. 'On a spiritual level, my darling, I'm wrapping you in a warm, safe blanket of love,' she whispered. 'I'm helping you to grow, even though I can't do the growing for you. Later on, you won't need the blanket and your growth will be accomplished without my input. But for now, I gladly give you all the love I can, to nourish you and help you to learn to love yourself.'

## CHAPTER 12

"You're looking well," said Sybil to Madeleine, as she opened the front door to the four Dullkettles. "You've filled out nicely. Your dad said you'd been having trouble, but you're looking fine to me. Come in, everyone's here, we've lots of food for you all."

Sandra could feel Madeleine hesitating in front of her, but she stepped inside, looking pale and wary. At that moment, Sandra felt she could hit her mother-in-law for her insensitive remark, but she somehow managed to hold on to the idea that maybe Sybil had simply been trying to help in her own misplaced way.

"Did you have a good day yesterday, then?" asked Basil, as they were all sitting around a little awkwardly ten minutes later.

"Yes we did, thank you," replied Sandra. Her mind went back to Christmas morning, when the four of them had been together in the sitting room, opening their presents like the original nuclear family. It had somehow felt as though emotions were running much more deeply than previous years, but it was as if the presents themselves were an expression of love and there had been lots of love between the four of them.

Gulliver had even seemed to like his spirit guide painting, although he said little. 'We're all a bit bruised and battered, but we're still alive and here together,' she mused, as Sybil offered them nuts and Basil talked about the stuffed duck they'd had for Christmas lunch.

'I could still feel the love when we went to Mum and Dad's too,' remembered Sandra, 'which was a great relief and comfort. I loved them both for just letting Maddy be, without leaving her alone. I think with my parents that despite all their surface daily fretting and triviality, when it comes down to the really important issues, they're there and batting on our side – which is a farcical analogy for me, the least sporty person I know.'

'Maddy did so well yesterday too, but I think even the small amount of alcohol she had depressed her and sent her floundering around emotionally for a short while. Mind you, I think it helped her to say to Gulliver that she loved him. I think that'll give him food for thought. How strange that is, the anorexic giving the non-anorexic food for

thought. God, I don't like the label anorexic, I shan't use it again. On the whole, it was a good day and we made progress, so let's hope today doesn't set her back.

'Gulliver's been brilliant, despite what must feel like his world collapsing in on him. It's taken a toll on him, because he seems to have caught a cold and I'm not surprised. It's not everyone who'd go to collect their ex-girlfriend from her student digs after she'd broken up with him the day before, drive her to her home and then drive back home again himself the same day. He must have travelled hundreds of miles and exhausted himself, poor lad – man.

'I'm pleased he wants to go ahead with the house hunting and not because it means he'll be leaving home, but because it's what he wants and needs. He's matured such a lot in these last few years and not just in age – 24, wow! I think he knows that the breakup with Almond is permanent, which is so sad, but we just have to trust that it's meant to be and someone else will share his life with him.

'I still feel very sad about it myself, because Almond was beginning to feel like a part of the family – but what can you do, except love them and go along with wherever their life takes them? I'm proud of Gulliver and Madeleine, they're both doing so well, despite what life has been throwing at them.'

"It's good to have everyone here together for once," remarked Sybil. "Lovely for Lawrence and Kirsty to be here together at the same time."

'Oh, don't start, please,' thought Sandra tiredly. 'What about Osborn, for pity sake, you mad old bat?'

"What about me, Mother?" said Osborn brightly but firmly, much to Sandra's delight.

"Oh, you know what I mean," replied Sybil, "You live close by. It's good to have Caroline and Leonard with us too." She beamed at Sandra's parents, who were sitting with politely bemused expressions on their faces.

"Well, lunch should be ready shortly," said Basil loudly. "I've had to split us up, I've put Lawrence, Kirsty, Caroline, Leonard, Gulliver and Madeleine with us at the big table and the rest of you at the small table."

"I think Madeleine would prefer the small table with us," said Osborn quickly. "Karla can take her place."

"What? No, it works out better my way," continued Basil. "Sit up all of you and we'll start to dish up."

"Where would you prefer to sit, Maddy?" asked Sandra hurriedly.

"With you and Dad at the small table," replied Madeleine, looking uncomfortable and worried, "but I don't want to cause any fuss."

"You're not causing a fuss," said Osborn. "You don't mind swapping places, do you, Karla?"

"No, I don't care," replied Karla, "I'm just interested in the food, I'm starving."

The salmon, roast potatoes and vegetables would normally have been appetising to Sandra, but the fracas of the two tables had caused a certain amount of tension and as Madeleine's plate was brought in piled up with food, Sandra felt anything but hungry.

The noise at the big table thankfully grew louder, as Sandra heard Osborn asking Madeleine quietly if he could help her out. She passed across her piece of salmon to his plate as if he'd saved her life and the next ten minutes or so at the small table were spent uneasily eating – or in Madeleine's case, pushing food around her plate and eating what could only be described as small morsels.

"Everyone finished?" asked Basil eventually. "I'll help Sybil clear the plates." He came over to the small table and went straight to Madeleine's plate. "Is that all you've eaten? It's not enough to feed a fly! You need to eat more than that, you're looking too thin."

Sandra could hardly believe her ears. She looked at Madeleine, who was looking down at her plate and then looked at Osborn, who was gazing incredulously and thunderously at his father. For a moment she felt sick, but Basil carried on collecting the plates as if nothing had happened, oblivious to the torment he was leaving in his wake.

The next hour or so passed in a daze, as various people either sat around in various places, or followed various pursuits. Madeleine was sitting on the sofa between

Lawrence and Gulliver when Kirsty appeared with her camera and proceeded to take photos of them, asking them to smile and put their arms around each other. Madeleine's sense of being helplessly trapped travelled in palpable waves over to where Sandra was sitting opposite her and as soon as she possibly could, Sandra managed to take Lawrence's place on the sofa beside Madeleine.

More time passed in a haze of total discomfort. Suddenly Sandra realised that Madeleine was crying silently. She turned to Madeleine with an enquiring glance, as Madeleine simply turned towards her and buried her face in Sandra's arm. Sandra looked up startled into her mother's worried gaze.

"Take her home," said Caroline. "She's upset."

"I will," replied Sandra immediately. "Come on darling," she whispered to Madeleine. "I'll walk home with you. I'll just go and tell Dad."

Five minutes later, Sandra and Osborn were walking home on either side of Madeleine. Sandra herself felt extremely glad to escape into the cold air, having begun to feel very claustrophobic in the crowded house. Osborn offered his handkerchief to Madeleine and put his arm around her as they walked.

Madeleine stopped crying and began to talk to them both, of how she couldn't seem to stop her feelings for Drew, how she still wrote down her calorie intake every day and how a period had started that morning, after having had none for three months. She also confessed that the GP in Cardiff had suggested she have some counselling, but Madeleine had said no because she hadn't felt able to face it. As they walked along, it felt to Sandra that the three of them were very much together on that particular part of their individual life journeys. Despite the exceptional difficulty of the day, the feeling gave her a great deal of comfort.

There were two hours left of 2000 and Sandra, Osborn and Gulliver were sharing a bottle of wine to celebrate its passing. Gulliver's cold had become a little worse, so he'd decided to stay in with them and they were about to watch *The XL Files* movie *Fight the Future Flab*. The four days that had passed since Boxing Day had been much calmer, the memory of which still kept passing with a measure of disbelief through Sandra's mind. She sipped her wine as Gulliver went to fetch the DVD from his room and Osborn went to fetch another bottle.

'I hope Madeleine's OK with Drew tonight,' she thought anxiously. 'It was kind of his family to ask her along as well with them for a meal. I honestly thought she'd turn the offer down. I have no idea what's happening with those two, but I hope she can cope with it all. Still, she's seemed brighter these last few days. She coped much better with the crowds at the sales in Plymouth than when we went shopping with her in Cardiff in November.'

'Back then it felt as if she was still sinking, but now it's beginning to feel as if she's gradually starting to break the surface. She even bought a blue jumper and a red cardigan instead of the usual black. She's such a beautiful, bright person underneath all her pain. When she tried the clothes on, it felt to me that the new Madeleine is beginning to emerge – the new Madeleine who loves herself and isn't afraid to be herself. I know she says it's the antidepressants doing their work, but it's *her* doing the work. The antidepressants are helping by *allowing* her to do the work.' She continued sipping her wine thoughtfully.

'She and Gulliver had a good conversation yesterday after he came back from the estate agents. I'm really glad he opened up to her and asked her about ex-lovers becoming friends. She was very honest with him. Fancy the 19-year-old explaining to the 24-year-old – it shows how emotionally mature and intelligent she is, as well as very articulate.'

'Gulliver's showing a great deal of maturity too, in the way he's dealing with Almond's rejection. I think he's feeling very uncertain about how much they can still be friends. I still feel a bit sore and sorry about that, to be honest. Never mind, Osborn and I had a lovely walk with Gulliver in the snow on Dartmoor and that wonderful sunset almost felt like a kind of blessing. I think the three of us were having a bit of a bonding session there, although I'd never put it that way to Gulliver! He still seems to shy away

from emotional talk, unless he gets to the point where there's not much option, like his talk yesterday with Madeleine. What's taking him so long finding that DVD?' She took another sip of wine.

'Yesterday was a good day. I was quite uplifted by that conversation with Maddy. She shows real progress by trying to replace her belief that food is fat with the belief that food is good – and all initiated from completely within herself. She even ate a dumpling with some vegetable stew too, how promising is that? God, it seems only a week ago that she would have contemplated a dumpling with complete and utter horror.

'I think it's all becoming a bit clearer in my own mind. Madeleine's input helps so much for me to understand and I'm pretty sure she understood when I talked about her recovery being on three levels. Firstly, the purely physical level, whereby her body needs sustenance however it comes by it in order to function.

'Secondly, the cognitive-behavioural level – and thank heavens I experienced my own spot of cognitive-behavioural therapy – whereby she needs to try to change her negative automatic thoughts of food is fat into positive ones of food is good, which results in better eating from subjective choice.

'Thirdly, the deep emotional level, where she needs to deal with past events that have obviously harmed her psychologically. This is the level we haven't explored much yet, although I would think that work at the second level will probably have a limited positive effect on the third level. From what she says, her subconscious is already trying to help her face her past hurts by dreaming about them. So, I'd say that progress is well under way at all levels, which is brilliant. Ah, here they both are, now we can watch the film!'

As they sat down and started to watch the opening sequence, the phone rang. Osborn went out to the hallway to answer it and came back after a few minutes with a worried frown.

"That was Drew to say Maddy collapsed in the restaurant. They called for an ambulance and the crew checked her over, but after she came around and told them about the anorexia and the antidepressants, they said it was obviously a reaction to the unusual amount of food and alcohol she'd had. She's fine and the ambulance crew said they'd discharge her as long as someone takes her home."

"I'll go," said Gulliver quickly, "I've hardly had any wine at all."

"I'll come with you," said Osborn. "Are you OK, Sandra?"

"Yes," replied Sandra, unable to find any further words to voice her alarm.

An hour later, the four of them were in the sitting room, vaguely watching *Goodbye and Up Yours 2000* in between bouts of conversation. Madeleine was in her pyjamas and looking very woebegone, but Sandra felt heartened by the fact that she'd chosen to spend the rest of the evening with them, rather than escape to her room. It felt unutterably right that after all they'd been through recently, the four of them were all there together for what could very well be one last time.

"I thought that it was only going to be Mum and me seeing in 2001, but I'm glad you two are with us," said Osborn, echoing her thoughts.

"I don't think I was meant to go out tonight," remarked Gulliver. "I was meant to go and collect you, Lil Sis." He reached out and uncharacteristically patted her head fondly.

"I'm really sorry," said Madeleine. "I just wanted to be normal and go out for a good time with Drew like I used to."

"I think you rushed it a bit, that's all," said Sandra. "You'll be able to go out again, but you need to take it a little bit easy for a while. Small steps."

"I know you're right," replied Madeleine. "I think it's helped me to realise how physically low I am, which doesn't feel too good. I don't think I'll be going out with Drew again, though, he seems to have moved on." Madeleine's face looked sorrowful for a second before she recovered herself. "Anyway, he's going to be living in London from next week."

"I'm sorry it's still a bit tricky with you and Drew, but it's good if tonight has helped you to understand how you are physically," said Sandra softly. "I'm concerned

about when you go back to uni, though. How about telling the doctor you'd like to take up the offer of some counselling?"

"OK," replied Madeleine, sighing. "I'm afraid that when I go back, it'll be the same as it was before I came home."

"It can't be exactly the same as before, because you've moved forward," said Osborn kindly.

"Also, the mere fact that you've been eating has changed the way you were then and also all the talking has almost certainly helped to release your innermost negative feelings," said Sandra, smiling at Madeleine.

"It's impossible to go back, you can only go forward," added Gulliver, sighing. "Unless you're in *Back to the Future*, or you've perfected time travel, or else you cross the dateline travelling east – what? Hey look, it's nearly midnight!"

"Happy 2001," said Osborn uncertainly.

"A lot better than 2000, anyway," said Sandra hopefully.

"Much, much better than 2000," added Madeleine tentatively.

"I wonder if I should try *Date Line* on the Internet?" mused Gulliver randomly.

"Well, that was difficult," said Sandra to Osborn, as they walked away from the bus station, after having waved goodbye to Madeleine, who was returning to university for exams. "I'm glad she's so open with us now, but I felt sad when she asked us if life's easier at home when she's not there. She's in such turmoil, I really hope she can survive."

"Us too," replied Osborn, grasping her hand. "How about coming back to the uni with me for a coffee? I don't feel up to facing Bill Bustard and all his little tricks yet. Actually, he's off this week, there's probably nobody much around."

"Hello you two!" said Terry gaily, as Sandra and Osborn walked into the office that Terry and Osborn shared. "Happy 2001 – a space odyssey. Remember that film? Great! Anyway, how was it for you?"

"Are you sure you want to know?" asked Osborn, smiling and grimacing at the same time, which produced a really strange effect.

"In that case, how about I treat you to coffee?" suggested Terry. "You look as if you could use one and I'm freezing in here, I think they've got the heating off."

Fifteen minutes later, the three of them sat in the fragrant warmth of the nearest coffee house off campus. Osborn had contributed doughnuts and they all sat eating in sticky companionship for a while.

"Naughty but nice," remarked Terry, licking his fingers. "Thank you, mate, that hit the spot. So you had a difficult time?" He gazed enquiringly at them both from across the table.

"Yes, Gulliver's long-term girlfriend broke up with him and Madeleine's not OK," replied Osborn. He went on to describe the Boxing Day fiasco with his parents and other highlights of their recent life, as Sandra sat listening while attempting to finish her doughnut as daintily as she could manage.

"Hmm, it sounds like things are hotting up in the spiritual stakes," said Terry, once Osborn had stopped speaking. "You're moving along your life pathway and all these trials are actually brilliant learning experiences. I know that must sound harsh, but it's very likely that you all agreed to go through this together before you came to our lovely planet Earth."

"What about Madeleine?" blurted out Sandra. "She was having suicidal thoughts. What if she'd gone through with it?"

"She didn't, though, did she," replied Terry softly.

"But what if she had?" persisted Sandra, having voiced a dark fear that had been lurking inside her for months.

"Then she would have gone Home and most probably would have come back in a different body to go through a similar learning process all over again," said Terry. "As for you and Osborn, we would have looked after you, after your spiritual wellbeing, as much as we could. Even your physical wellbeing if necessary, until you were healed and strong enough to start looking after yourselves again."

"I've never had much success with friends," said Osborn quietly, "but I feel as if you're a true friend, Terry."

"I *am* a true friend and so are you two to me," replied Terry, smiling. "I'm not sure I should say this, but..."

"What?" asked Sandra expectantly, smiling back and suddenly feeling significantly more relaxed.

"You both have a blob of sugar on your nose."

## CHAPTER 13

It was Tuesday in the third week of January and Sandra was sipping coffee with her parents in their sitting room.

"How's Gulliver?" asked Caroline, after she'd finished telling Sandra about her latest triumph with the church Ladies' Fellowship group raffle.

"He's found a house," said Sandra happily. "I haven't seen it yet, but Osborn went looking for houses with him and says it's a really good buy. It's about half an hour's walk away from us, so he'll have his freedom, but he's still reachable. It seems perfect, but we're all on tenterhooks now until the sale goes through OK. He seems happy and he went to see Almond last weekend." Sandra had been unsure whether to divulge this information to her parents.

"Do you think that was wise?" asked Caroline, looking askance.

"I think it's what he wants at the moment, to be friends with her still." Sandra heard herself sounding defensive.

"Yes, but he stayed the weekend. Does that mean they still, you know..."

"I *don't* know, it's none of my business," said Sandra sharply, wishing her mother wouldn't ask so many pointed questions. For a moment it felt as if the atmosphere could be cut with a knife.

"Well, I just can't help worrying about him and Madeleine." Caroline sniffed and looked defensive herself.

"How *is* Madeleine?" asked Leonard, from the depths of his favourite comfortable chair, where he'd been sitting quietly, taking everything in.

"She's doing OK," replied Sandra, wondering again how much she should divulge of Madeleine's struggle with her life at Cardiff. "She's seeing a counsellor now."

"Is that helping?" asked Caroline, looking steadily at Sandra.

"I think so, but I have my doubts that she's getting to the root cause of all this. It's obvious that school was a prime factor, though, because Madeleine had a letter about going to school to collect her A-level certificates when she was home last time and she couldn't face it. She was really upset at the thought of having to step inside the school entrance again, so I went to collect them."

"What about that x-ray on her leg?" came the voice from the chair.

"I rang up about it for her and it was normal, thank heavens. She still has a lot of trouble with it, though, it's quite peculiar," replied Sandra, sipping her rapidly cooling coffee.

"How did her visit to the doctor go? It was yesterday, wasn't it?" Caroline was back firing the questions.

"Yes." Sandra hesitated before deciding to tell the complete truth. "She was prescribed some stronger drugs." Sandra was remembering Madeleine's tired voice on the phone the previous evening, as she'd explained how she'd been feeling worse, as if the first prescribed antidepressants had stopped working. The good news, however, had been that Madeleine had confided in Joss and Carys and although she'd felt embarrassed at having cried on their shoulders, she now felt less alone.

"Oh Sandra," Caroline put down her cup noisily on its saucer. "Aren't you alarmed?"

"Of course I'm alarmed!" replied Sandra heatedly. "It's no good me falling to bits, though, is it? I need to be strong to help her."

"Absolutely," said Leonard from his chair. He seemed about to say something else, but no words came to fruition.

"I wasn't going to tell you this, but I had a dream about Madeleine," said Caroline in a rush, looking agitated. "I was on a boat, I think it was some sort of ferry. I was standing at the rail, looking out at the view with Madeleine beside me. She was really thin and she suddenly just seemed to slip over the side of the boat into the water. I tried to hold onto her, but I couldn't. I was horrified, but it seemed there was nothing I could do. It was so real. She was floating face down in the water and her hair was splayed out all around her, it was so distressing..." Caroline stared at Sandra, as if willing her to say something.

"I – well, I expect it's your natural fear for her surfacing in a dream, which is actually quite good," replied Sandra lamely. Her own heart had plummeted severely and she felt she was shaking uncontrollably inside at the image of Madeleine face down in the water.

"I didn't want to upset you," continued Caroline, "but it was so vivid, it really disturbed me and I always seem to end up telling you everything anyway."

"You didn't tell *me* about it," remarked Leonard quietly.

"It's all right, you needed to tell me," said Sandra, trying to put her mother's mind at rest, as well as control her own inner shaking.

"She needs looking after," said Caroline quietly. "So does your dad. He's been down lately, haven't you, Len."

"Me? Well, I've got my appointment through now for a – let me get this right – for a trans-oesophageal echocardiogram. Then I've got to have other tests."

"Oh dear, life's not easy, is it." It was a statement, but a questioning look passed between Sandra and Leonard.

"I'll be fine, don't you worry about me," said Leonard, a brief smile crossing his face.

"I know what'll cheer us up," said Caroline suddenly, "a game of *Scribble*."

"Well, that's it, I'm off to the other room for some peace and quiet," said Leonard, rising slowly from his chair. "Too much stress and excitement for me, listening to you two at it tooth and tongs. Do I mean that? Hammer and nail? Anyway, I'm off!"

Sandra felt in a bit of a daze as Caroline went to get the *Scribble* and the game commenced. 'I wish Mum hadn't told me her dream,' she was thinking, 'although that's very selfish of me. I've got that image in my mind now, I must stop seeing it and concentrate on positive aspects. I'm glad Maddy told Joss and Carys, because they really seem to care about her and the important thing is that now she's letting them. That helps me not to feel so helpless because of the distance between us.'

"Oh Sandra, I'm having tremendous vowel trouble here," came Caroline's voice later, filtering its way into Sandra's thoughts. "I bet you've got all the good tiles as usual."

"If you could only see my hand," countered Sandra tiredly. 'You might stop thinking you're so hard done by,' she continued in her mind. 'I can't help worrying about Madeleine, Gulliver and now Dad. Even Osborn's having a really hard time at work. I think he was right when he said Maddy's letting stuff out bit by bit, at her own pace on her own time scale. I'm really glad I can empathise with her, to some extent at least, about the stress and anxiety of being a student at the same time as dealing with deep, emotional hurts. I'm glad too that when it all feels too much and she wants to run away, she wants to run home here to us and her safe place.'

"Well, I think I've been quite brilliant again," said Caroline brightly as she placed tiles on the board. "You've got to hand it to me, I'm a whiz with words!"

"Very good," replied Sandra automatically, gazing at the board. "You've let me put my 7-letter word down now."

"What? What are you doing, you foolish girl? Oh Sandra, I do hate you! Not really, but you know what I mean."

'Do I know what Mum means when she lets it all come flying out in my direction during *Scribble*?' thought Sandra, as she stood at the ironing board later that day. 'Sometimes I think it's funny and sometimes I simply don't feel up to it, like today. She has no idea of the full extent of my worries. Now the question of Maddy's third-year option of going to

Germany has raised its ugly head. It's too much, I feel completely overwhelmed. Why am I ironing this manky old t-shirt of mine, anyway? That can go in the rag bag!' She hurled the t-shirt across the room with a certain amount of pent-up frustration.

'I don't see how she'll cope in Germany, she's having enough trouble coping in Cardiff right now. To be honest, I was peed off when Osborn told her he'd done some research and found out that the drug she's taking can cause sleep problems, which I must admit she certainly seems to be having. Then he pressed her a bit about asking the doctor if it was OK to take St James' Wort, which was a step too far in my eyes and it turns out it *isn't* OK. It's too much for her to deal with at the moment, she finds it hard enough having to tell her personal tutor what's going on.

'Even that counsellor seems a bit ineffectual, to be honest. Maddy is dealing with anorexia, she doesn't just have eating problems because of depression. I wish she could see a professional who could take care of her complete health and wellbeing. I felt so honoured, though, when she told me on the phone that when she feels very low, she wants to speak with me to feel better. I need to get her past that, actually, to be able to centre in herself again. Oh, it's so hard – and why am I ironing this ridiculous top of Osborn's that he's had for decades? It's about time it joined the others in the rag bag!' She flung the top across the floor with a certain feeling of abandonment.

'It's all a bit of a strain while Gulliver's buying his house as well. It's the waiting that gets to you – not to mention the dreadful fear that it'll all fall through at the drop of a hat when the vendor's sale is problematical and you're told it may or may not happen. Gulliver seems philosophical about it, but I'm sure it must be taking its toll somewhere in his psyche.

'I know everything's taking its toll in Osborn's psyche, because he's been quite distant lately. Positively bad-tempered, in fact, especially when I accidentally banged him with that cupboard door. How was I to know he'd sneaked up behind me when I'd been on my knees, head first in the damn cupboard looking for the old metal colander? Life is too ridiculous, like me ironing these Blue Dwarf pyjamas of Gulliver's. They've even got a hole in the crotch, so out they go to rag bag heaven!' She threw the offending items across the room with a certain feeling of rebellion.

"Mother!" exclaimed Gulliver who had just burst into the room and found himself adorned with his old Blue Dwarf pyjama bottoms. "The house purchase can go ahead!" He twirled the pyjama bottoms around triumphantly in the air above his head.

"Oh, that's wonderful," said Sandra, feeling her heart lift at the welcome news. "You're home early. Would you like a cup of tea? I've had enough of this silly ironing."

"I'm glad you've realised at last that it's silly to iron pyjamas," said Gulliver. "These are ridiculously old, I've been meaning to tell you to get rid of them for ages. I'll make tea." He bounded from the room, obviously delighted with his good fortune.

"So, you're really going to leave home at last," said Sandra, as they both stood in the kitchen a few minutes later. "The kettle's boiled, by the way."

"What? I hope not – no, it's OK, it's only the water that's boiled."

"You don't know how good it is to hear you joking like your old self again," said Sandra, smiling at her son as he put a teabag into each of two mugs.

"Steady on, I'm still only 24," he replied, grinning. "Yes, you're going to be free of me forever. No more moaning about me spending more time than you in the bathroom, no more complaining about my dirty dishes left on the kitchen top. I'll wash these later, by the way. No more of my friends walking through your house, no more of my clothes to wash or iron. Your dearest son is about to leave the nest and spread his wings in the outside world like the real go-getter he actually is."

"Ha!" exclaimed Sandra, catching his upbeat mood. "You may be a go-getter, but there's no way you're a put-backer."

"Well at least I'm not obsessive about tidiness," replied Gulliver. "What are my mugs doing in with yours? You know I like them kept in my cupboard."

"You twit! Thanks for the tea. Oh! I knew there was something on my mind..."

"Are you sure?"

"Shut up. Yes, you know you ordered some furniture from that local shop – do you know if they do home delivery?"

"Oh, I wouldn't think so, they're quite small and there's not much call around here for those flat pack homes."

"Gulliver! I'd throw something at you if I wasn't holding my tea."

"You've already thrown my old pyjamas at me, you mad old moose."

"You'd better watch your tongue!"

"Whatever for, I've got better things to do with my time."

"Do you know what?" Sandra smiled again at Gulliver. "I'm going to really miss you."

"Me too," replied Gulliver, looking down at his tea. "Mind you, I'll still see me all the time, as well as you and Dad now and again – and Maddy and the others – and could I borrow that sandwich toaster you never use now? And the spare kettle? And have you got a spare frying pan? And a mixing bowl? Measuring spoons? Spatula? Multi-function can opener?"

"Gulliver, I do love you." Sandra was grinning helplessly.

"Yes, me too," muttered Gulliver, "but don't hug me."

"She's really grown since I first saw her," whispered Sandra above the sleeping form of baby Tamsin, as a proud Alison displayed her granddaughter, stretched out on her sitting room carpet underneath a soft pink blanket. "I suppose that was just after she was born, though."

"What is it now, 5<sup>th</sup> of February? She's five months old," said Alison, pulling the blanket down from where it might have been tickling Tamsin's cheek. "She sleeps quite well, she'll stay like that for at least another hour."

"She looks so comfortable, I wish I could curl up on the sitting room floor underneath a soft pink blanket," remarked Sandra, smiling down at Tamsin.

"Feel free," replied Alison, "although the only other blanket I have is yellow. You do look tired, actually, is life still troublesome?"

"Just a bit," replied Sandra, as they both sat down and started to sip from their mugs of tea. "Maddy rang last night sounding awful with a cold and a nasty cough. I hate it when she's ill and there's nothing I can do to look after her, especially now when she's so vulnerable. Gulliver's OK, but the waiting to move into his new house is beginning to get to him and we can hardly move in our house because of all the stuff he's bought for his house! Dad's not OK, his heart's obviously wearing out and he has to have various tests, so Mum's not exactly calm and I get both barrels sometimes. Osborn's parents still turn to him and fully expect him to fix every small thing that goes wrong in their lives, which causes Osborn to become even more frustrated and exhausted, especially when work is horrible and it normally is because his boss is gunning for him. I feel as if I'm stuck in a spider's web, caught right in the middle of it all." Sandra smiled at Alison apologetically for her tirade of woe.

"What about you and Osborn?"

"Us? It doesn't feel like there's much time for us lately, although I suppose we try our best." Sandra felt unable to tell Alison about their ongoing spiritual explorations, which at that moment she realised gave them both a shared focus and a more understanding outlook on their current trials.

"Dirk and I had a stupid argument the other day, mainly because he doesn't seem able to communicate with me on any other level than the purely mundane. When I mention it, he clams up altogether and then I get madder and madder until I explode in his direction. We don't even seem to have sex any more." It was Alison's turn to smile apologetically at Sandra.

"It's not easy, is it." Sandra found herself avoiding a similar reply about sex, mainly because it would be untrue. "Still, you've got the church?" she enquired lamely.

"I wish! I don't have any problems with God as such, it's the people. Actually, it's probably me, I don't seem to fit in. I know I seem very gregarious, but I'm really quite the opposite inside. I didn't tell you about the *Flipping Pancake Social* evening in the church hall. Dirk was out with his work skittles team, so I went there on my own. I got to the hall and stood outside and heard all the clatter and chatter inside, but I couldn't face it, so I went home again."

"Oh Ally, I'm so sorry, I can really empathise with that. I did that once when I went to a *Love Your Buns* bakery evening years ago." Sandra and Alison began to laugh helplessly at themselves, trying not to vent too much, so as not to wake the still sleeping Tamsin.

"We usually manage to have a laugh, don't we," spluttered Alison, looking down at Tamsin. "Hello, she's started to squirm and screw up her face, that's not a good sign."

"What does it mean?"

"It means you'll get to see her awake and I'll get to change her nappy and squirt the room with air freshener."

It was a bright, clear day in mid-February, as Sandra and Osborn were striding across a relatively flat area of moorland on Dartmoor. Their cheeks were stinging and their noses were running, but the walking itself was like a healthy release.

"Walk a bit slower?" asked Sandra, as they started to come across a rocky area. "You know I'm a wimp about where I put my feet."

"OK," replied Osborn, stopping to blow his nose anyway. "Look at the view, I wish I had my camera."

"It feels so good to be out here, though, doesn't it?" asked Sandra, gazing at the rolling vista and the distant tors. "I'd forgotten how good! We haven't had nearly enough time for ourselves lately. It's not that I begrudge Gulliver and Madeleine one second of my time, but I suppose I'm feeling the expectations of our parents more than usual because of all the energy I'm expending on our two at the moment."

"Still, Gulliver's house survey was fine and now he's signed the forms and got his magic moving date – 2<sup>nd</sup> of March! He's certainly enjoying training for the Four Peaks Challenge and he seems a lot more like his old self now."

"I suppose so. He jokes like he always did, but I sense some underlying unhappiness. That's quite normal in the circumstances, I suppose. Oh, I don't know, I feel so strongly that I want to clear up all sorts of things in life, but I can't, because the time's not right yet. I'm still very worried about Maddy, she's had one virus after another and she's having awful trouble sleeping, even with the sleeping pills. I can't help feeling that what she really needs is a few months of continuous, cohesive care." Sandra stopped, surprised at her own words.

"What are you saying, that you think she should come home?" Osborn's voice was strained.

"I suppose I am, but it needs to be her own decision. I know it'll be hard financially, but I feel that her life's at risk here." Sandra noticed a bank of cloud forming in the distance.

"I feel torn, I really do. It seems that all my life I've struggled and worked so hard to earn money, yet I love Maddy and Gulliver so much, I'd lay down my life for them. This money issue, though..." He blew into his hands. "I'm getting cold standing here. Come on, we need to keep moving, it's not a good idea to stand still for long."

"Yes, it was a lovely walk, but on the way home Dad wanted to stop at Grandma and Grandad Dullkettle's because we haven't seen them for a while. Then Grandad actually gave Dad a written list of jobs he wanted him to do! Can you imagine?"

"Poor Dad." Madeleine's voice on the phone sounded genuinely sorry. "Mumsie, I feel so bad at causing you both so much trouble." A suspicious sniffing noise came over the line.

"Are you OK, darling?"

"No, not really. I'm trying so hard, but I can't seem to concentrate on anything. I struggled to get to a lecture today, even though I felt it was the last place on Earth I wanted to be and when I got there, it had been cancelled. It felt such a disaster, my reaction was completely out of proportion. Then later on, I saw the counsellor and she signed me off."

"What? That's ridiculous, you're still struggling. Oh Maddy!" Sandra heard Madeleine give in to tears at the other end of the line.

"I'm sorry," came Madeleine's sad little voice.

"Come home." The words escaped from Sandra unbidden. "Oh Maddy, why don't you come home? You need proper care."

"Do you mean that?" Sandra thought she could detect a note of hope in Madeleine's voice.

"Yes, I do. Everything in me tells me it's the right thing to do." Sandra felt strangely calm and resolute.

"What about Dad? What will he say?" Madeleine sounded doubtful.

"He'll understand, I'm sure of it. He loves you so much that – well, we'll all get through this together somehow. I *know* Dad and I can help you, darling, I just know it."

"OK Mumsie. Thank you so much! Is Dad there? Can I speak to him?"

## CHAPTER 14

"Maddy's coming home," said Sandra to her mother, who was lying in bed looking pale and drained. "She had to make a decision now because of her third year abroad. I'm so glad she's not going to Germany after all, I tremble to think what that would have done to her."

"I'm glad," replied Caroline weakly. "I'm sorry about this, Sandra, I really think it was food poisoning from that chicken risotto I had at the weekend."

"Well, as long as you're drinking water, I'm sure you'll feel better tomorrow," said Sandra, hoping she was right. "Anyway, I've made a good start on painting your new fence. Pity Osborn and I only finished painting the old fence last year, though."

"Yes. You've got green paint on your nose – and your cheek – and your forehead – and your neck..."

"It was a bit windy. Well, I expect Osborn will be home with Dad soon. I don't know how long a trans-oesophageal echocardiogram takes, but they've been gone for hours, so – oh! Is that the car? Yes, here they are now, I'll go and see how Dad is."

"It wasn't quite as bad as I'd expected," said Leonard a few moments later, sinking gratefully into his comfy chair. "I'm glad to be home, though. Thank you for taking the day off, Osborn, we must all have a pub lunch sometime, my treat." He smiled tiredly at Osborn. "How's Mum, Sandra?"

"She's OK, she should feel better tomorrow," said Sandra encouragingly. "Now are you sure you two don't need anything before Osborn and I go home?"

"No love, I'm going to have a little rest and then I'll cook myself some bacon and egg. See you tomorrow?"

"What? Oh, of course, it's Tuesday tomorrow. Yes, I'll be over as normal."

As she left her parents' house with Osborn, Sandra felt the spider's web closing in on her again, with no respite in the foreseeable future.

"Mother! I've got them!" Sandra heard Gulliver's excited voice from where she was attempting to make a gangway from the inner hallway to the sitting room, through Gulliver's mounting piles of house-moving objects. She gave up and went to greet him.

"Gosh," she said reverently, as he dangled his house keys in front of her nose. "It's really happening. You took a half-day off work then?"

"Yes. Do you want to come and look around the house with me?" asked Gulliver, smiling invitingly.

"How can I refuse? You're grinning like an idiot."

"No I'm not, I'm grinning like a really quite intelligent person who just happens to have bought a house!"

Fifteen minutes later, as Gulliver led Sandra around his new domain, she felt herself being caught up in his excitement, noting with pleasure that the two-storey house built in the 1960s was well-situated and in very good condition.

"Mother? Come into the garden."

As she stepped out through patio doors into the cold air of the back garden, she felt her spirits rise. It was a cared for, fair-sized garden for a single man and it promised happy times. She and Gulliver walked around the garden, noticing different plants and commenting on what could be changed.

"I think I'll plant some fruit bushes here and I might have to chop that small tree down and the fence looks a bit dodgy." Gulliver was chattering away just like he had as a young boy on Christmas morning. Sandra felt herself smiling at his excitement. She also began to notice, though, that it was tinged with a small amount of trepidation.

"How do you feel about living here on your own?" she asked in a quiet moment, after they'd moved back inside the house and were currently looking at the kitchen.

"It feels a bit strange, but I like the idea of freedom," came Gulliver's somewhat muffled reply from where he was investigating the inside of a cupboard.

"So do I," replied Sandra sadly. "Grab it while you can."

"Well, you and Dad will be free of me and all my stuff now," said Gulliver, moving on to investigate the cupboard under the sink. "It'll be good to be independent."

"That's true."

"Mmm." Gulliver was looking around at the curtainless windows. "I don't suppose you and Dad could help me a bit with a few jobs this weekend, could you? There's quite a lot to do before I move in on Monday."

Three days later, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March, Sandra felt as though a quantum leap was taking place. Gulliver had hired a van in order to travel to Cardiff, where he would be collecting the last of his possessions from Almond's flat, before collecting Madeleine and bringing her home. He would then be moving into his own house.

Sandra sat in her currently cluttered sitting room, sipping tea with Gina and feeling as if her psyche was inhabiting a different dimension to the one she was physically trapped inside.

"...so I suggested to Adam and Sarah that they try some solid food, because Reece is five months old, for heaven's sake. The trouble is, Adam looks up all this stuff on the Internet and it says to give babies milk only for the first six months. I swear that Reece cries so much because he's hungry, but Adam and Sarah would rather believe the Internet than me."

"It must be so frustrating," replied Sandra, "because it's not as if you have no experience whatsoever." She smiled wanly and wondered where Gulliver was and what Madeleine was feeling.

"Anyway, enough of that. What about this get-together at Easter that we talked about? Shall I ring Kay and Delia and you email Emily?"

"Yes, that sounds great." Sandra tried unsuccessfully to inject a modicum of enthusiasm into her voice.

"You're quiet, Sandra? I've been talking too much – tell me what's happening in your world." Gina smiled and sat expectantly, but fortunately it was only her pose.

"Gulliver's moving out today and Madeleine's coming home." It was a relief to talk about it out loud and Sandra found herself starting to relax as she explained recent events to her friend of almost four decades. "We never knew what life was going to bring when we had our babies, did we?" she said ruefully.

"Not a clue. Mind you, I wouldn't have believed anybody if they'd tried to tell me – and I think you did a bit, after Gulliver was born. No, I just can't understand these people who have babies willy-nilly." Gina and Sandra looked at each other and both burst out laughing with remnants of schoolgirl glee. By the time Gina left half an hour later, Sandra's psyche was a little more physically centred, so that she was able to spend the afternoon clearing up Gulliver's room with a slightly lighter heart.

"We're here," said Gulliver tiredly and redundantly, just over four hours later. "I'm knackered."

"I'm not surprised," replied Sandra, relief flooding her being. "You're here, though."

"I'm here, I'm really here," said Madeleine wonderingly, "and it smells like home always does." She launched herself into Sandra's arms for a hug.

"You're here," said Osborn, who had just arrived home from work behind them. "You made good time, Gulliver. I'm sorry I couldn't come with you today, but I couldn't get out of that teaching, no matter how hard I tried. Bill Bustard's being – Bill Bustard."

Anyway, let's have a cup of tea and then I'll help you load the rest of your stuff from here and take it to your house. Maddy, it's so good to see you! Hug?"

A while later, when Osborn and Gulliver were busy adding items to Gulliver's hired van, Sandra smiled at Madeleine, who seemed a little dazed.

"I'm so glad you're here, darling. Your recuperation can start properly now. So, tomorrow we need to register you at the surgery and make an appointment with Dr Effingham. Actually, you could see a different doctor if you wanted, say a female doctor? I'm not rushing you, am I?"

"No, I know it needs to be done and I'd like to do it as soon as possible. I like Dr Effingham, but would you come in with me when I see him?"

"Of course I will, although you'll have to tell him you want me there, or he'll think I'm being a pushy mother." Sandra was experiencing great warmth that Madeleine trusted her enough to want her there with her at what was essentially a very personal, intimate time.

"I do feel safer here. I've thought about your suggestion to move into Gulliver's old room after we decorate it the way I'd like – and yes, I'm happy to do that, although I feel a bit of a wrench to move out of my old, small room." Sandra noticed the dark shadows underneath Madeleine's eyes.

"Well, you don't need to move out yet. In fact, it's all in your time, because that's the way it'll work best." Sandra smiled encouragingly as Madeleine yawned.

"Actually, I've been thinking what colours I'd like my new room to be," said Madeleine, beginning to twirl her hair tiredly.

"Yes?" asked Sandra, hoping desperately that Madeleine wasn't going to say black.

"Pink, turquoise and lilac," replied Madeleine. "Do you mind if I go and lie down for a while? I feel so tired."

It was mid-evening and after the four Dullkettles had shared a fish pie together, followed by yoghurt and more tea, it was time for Gulliver's departure.

"I really must go," he said with a trace of reluctance. "I have to make up my bed and do all sorts of domestic things. I'm glad I took the rest of this week off, I'm going to need it to sort everything out."

"I'm at the end of a phone if you need advice about anything," said Osborn, as the four of them wandered out to the porch.

"Do you mean a 24-hour confidential listening service if I experience dark and despairing thoughts?" asked Gulliver, as he stood uncertainly at the door.

"Oh, come here!" said Osborn, as he grabbed hold of his son and hugged him. Sandra smiled as she noticed that Gulliver returned the hug quite naturally.

"Bye, Lil Sis," said Gulliver, as Madeleine also hugged Gulliver. "Come and visit whenever you like."

"I will," replied Madeleine politely. "Thank you for collecting me today."

"Well, I'm not being left out," said Sandra, moving forward and hugging Gulliver, aware of suddenly feeling emotional. "Do you know," she said a little quietly, after they'd disengaged, "despite all the years that you've wanted to move out on your own and all the years I've dreamed of not having your mess to contend with any more and of having more space to put things – I really don't want you to go."

"I know," he replied, looking suitably sombre. "Actually, is it OK if I call around tomorrow and collect my fish tank and those old books you said were still in the loft? Could you feed my fish tomorrow morning, by the way? I don't suppose you're here for lunch at all? I could buy pasties..."

A week had passed, during which Gulliver had taken his sister and his grandparents to see his house, in between settling in and even starting to work on his back garden. He also seemed to have a growing circle of friends, who helped to fill in the hours when he wasn't working.

Sandra had mostly stopped lying awake at night wondering how he was coping on his own, but that was mainly because she was now lying awake at night wondering how

best to deal with the coming months of Madeleine's recovery. She had just spent the previous night lying awake trying to work out how she should explain the true situation to Dr Effingham in a way with which Madeleine felt comfortable.

"Well, it's time to go," she said to Madeleine at 08:10 the following morning. It was a bright, hopeful morning for sometimes volatile mid-March. "Are you ready to go?"

"I've been ready for half an hour," replied Madeleine tiredly. "I couldn't sleep again and when I did, I was having nightmares. I feel quite shaky."

"I'll be with you. We can do this!" Sandra smiled at Madeleine, feeling a calmness of resolve inside that she'd had no idea she possessed.

Three-quarters of an hour later, Madeleine and Sandra were sitting in Dr Effingham's room, as he pondered deeply on what Madeleine had explained to him. Sandra realised that she was only really being needed as moral support for Madeleine, which was a relief, as she actually had no confidence in her own powers of articulation.

"I think an antidepressant that addresses both the depression and anxiety is the way to go," he said at last, still fingering his chin. "It will probably take two to four weeks to kick in, so be patient – be a patient! Oh dear, I'm sorry, I do have a slight inappropriate humour disorder. Although, when is a disorder appropriate? Anyway, moving swiftly on, you shouldn't drink alcohol. Is that a problem?"

"No." Madeleine shook her head impatiently. Sandra could tell that she was feeling uncomfortable and longing to escape.

"It might also affect your sex-drive," continued Dr Effingham. "Is that a problem?"

"No," replied Madeleine, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. Sandra also found herself trying to shift nonchalantly from one buttock to the other in an effort to show she was completely unfazed about the mention of her daughter's sex-drive. She crossed her leg suddenly and her slip-on shoe fell to the floor with a little thwack.

"So how do you feel about talking things over with a counsellor?" asked Dr Effingham, glancing momentarily across at Sandra.

"I'd love to," replied Sandra, with a desperate stab at humour, but Dr Effingham raised an eyebrow questioningly. "I'd love Madeleine to see a counsellor, if that's what she wants."

"Madeleine?" Dr Effingham smiled enquiringly.

"Yes, I'd like that." Madeleine's voice was quiet and Sandra was ultra-aware that her daughter was tiring quickly.

"Your leg?" she prompted Madeleine.

"Your leg?" asked Dr Effingham.

"My leg," responded Madeleine. "Yes, my leg. I'm still having trouble with my leg, even though the x-ray in December was normal." She sat back, looking exhausted.

"Hmm." Dr Effingham consulted the computer for a few moments, before sitting back and smiling kindly. "Well, I think for now that we'll address the main reason why you're here. I'll print out your prescription and I'll book you in to see Jane." He typed busily on the keyboard for a while, before looking at Madeleine and smiling again. "I shall want to see you again in a month's time when the medication has kicked in, unless you experience anything that worries you, of course."

"Thank you," said Madeleine in almost a whisper, standing up and almost falling over Sandra in an attempt to escape.

"Thank you," said Sandra, forgetting her shoe had fallen off. "Oh. Sorry, my shoe. Thank you." She also made as hasty a retreat as was politely possible.

The next four weeks seemed to pass by in a daze. Gulliver had succumbed to flu, which laid him low for at least two weeks. Sandra had found it particularly difficult to think of him suffering alone in his house and had made every effort to help him out with his shopping, his house and his garden.

He rang fairly often for a chat, which was a relief to the maternal part of her soul and she made sure he knew he was welcome to visit at any time, especially while he was recuperating. He took her up on her offer fairly frequently, until he became well enough to return to work. Unfortunately, the Four Peaks Challenge he'd been training for had

been postponed due to the escalating foot and mouth epidemic, but as Gulliver himself liked to say: "Shit happens."

In the meantime, Madeleine seemed to find great therapeutic value in making friendship bracelets for hours on end, listening to music and decorating her new bedroom. She had moved into the now pink, turquoise and lilac room the previous day and reported that she'd slept reasonably well the first night.

The drugs seemed to be having the effect of what Madeleine described as deadening her emotions, so she could face the battle of gradually easing herself into eating a relatively normal, healthy diet. She had been to her first session with Jane the counsellor and had come back with a tale of how she'd been asked lots of questions about her parents and her family background. It had touched Sandra's heart the way Madeleine had been incensed with Jane's intimation that Sandra and Osborn may have been the cause of her anxiety, depression and eating disorder.

Sandra hadn't seen much of Alison or Gina and had decided to postpone the Easter get-together with her old school friends. She still saw her parents at least twice a week and endured the verbal abuse of *Scribble* with the philosophical viewpoint that it was doing her mother some good. Sometimes they even had a good laugh together, as of old. Her father had seen the cardiac consultant, who'd advised leaving things as they were. Apart from the constant gardening, which seemed to be taken for granted nowadays, life in her parents' direction was relatively smooth.

Osborn's father, however, had spent a few days in hospital the previous week with what had turned out to be a severe angina attack. Osborn was still experiencing a large amount of stress at work and spent a lot of time frowning and biting his nails. Sandra was convinced his decision to decorate the two upstairs rooms wasn't helping. On the plus side, he'd bought a DVD player and he, Sandra and Madeleine often spent an escapist hour or two watching a DVD they'd borrowed from Gulliver's collection.

The second week of April had arrived and after another day of domestic jobs, including Osborn painting the upstairs bedroom walls and Sandra cutting the wildly overgrown front grass, Osborn had given Madeleine a lift to her second doctor's appointment. They had returned quite optimistically, which was balm to Sandra's somewhat agitated, worn out soul and her rapidly tiring, clapped out body.

"Dr Effingham's referred me to a physiotherapist for my leg," said Madeleine, taking off her jacket. "I feel such an idiot, but it really does hurt when I walk any distance at all."

"How about the antidepressants?" asked Sandra, thinking how glad she was that Madeleine was able to talk with her and Osborn so freely.

"He gave me another prescription," replied Madeleine. "I hope you don't mind, but I said I'd go around to Drew's house tonight because he's back at home for a week. He rang me while you were out cutting the grass."

"OK. Are you sure it's the right thing for you to do?" Sandra couldn't help but voice her instant concern.

"What do you mean?" Madeleine sounded defensive, noted Sandra with dismay.

"I'm a bit concerned that he still seems to affect you emotionally," replied Sandra as gently as possible. "You've been doing so well since he's been in London and I suppose I'm afraid that he'll reawaken things in you."

"I'll be fine, you just have to trust me."

"I do trust you, darling." As Sandra said this, she realised that she really did trust Madeleine to know innately what was best. "You've travelled such a long way already on your road to recovery. Hug?"

"That's more than I get," remarked Osborn grumpily, as Sandra and Madeleine hugged. "By the way, the Radio Amateur group has arranged a camping trip for next weekend. I'll only be away for one night. I must ask Gulliver if I can borrow his tent."

'It feels as if everyone is getting on with their own life,' thought Sandra tiredly, as Madeleine went to her bedroom and Osborn went to the bathroom. 'Everyone except me, which is an old, old feeling. How on Earth did this happen again? I must get on with my own life, I must. What *is* my life, though – and is it going anywhere at all?'

## CHAPTER 15

The following weekend had arrived and Osborn was preparing to leave on his Radio Amateur camping trip. As Sandra watched him filling his rucksack with various food items from the kitchen, as well as the flask that they used to take with them on trips in the long-lost days when they were much freer, her heart seemed to lurch within her.

"I wish we were going on a camping trip together," she said wistfully.

"You don't like the idea of camping," replied Osborn distractedly.

"I like the idea of camping, it's the probable reality I'm not too keen on. I'd give it a go, though. Anything to feel as though I'm living my life a little."

"Well, I've got to live my life too. Besides, Bluebell's put a lot of energy into helping me organise this weekend."

"I see. So what about all the energy I've put into our whole life together?" Sandra stalked from the kitchen in a red mist of sudden, confused rage. She sat on the sofa in the sitting room, trying to decipher her feelings.

A few moments later, Osborn followed her into the room. He seemed to Sandra to be moving with an air of rushed distraction, his mind already on his forthcoming trip.

"I'm off then, but I've got my mobile phone. I should be back early tomorrow evening, if all goes to plan."

"See you later." Sandra found herself unable to speak any further and the fact that Osborn kissed her goodbye on the cheek instead of on the lips sent her deeper into depression.

She wandered up the stairs to their bedroom and stood looking out of the window at the world outside with tears streaming down her face, feeling alone, discarded and a little afraid. She mourned the lack of any *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls* very much and was so deep in misery that she was unaware of footsteps on the stairs, followed by a knock on the door.

"Mumsie?" Madeleine came into the bedroom and went straight up to Sandra, putting her arm around Sandra's shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"Oh! Nothing much." Sandra swallowed quite hard, choking a little. "Honestly, nothing for you to worry about, just me feeling sorry for myself." She found she didn't want to look Madeleine in the eye, so continued staring out of the window.

"Is it Dad going away on this weekend thing?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. I feel a bit lost, or something, that's all. I'll probably do some gardening, that always cheers me up."

"It's started to rain. Why don't you get on with some writing, that always seems to cheer you up too. By the way, what happened to *Sensitive Health Issue Topics*? I thought Kirsty was supposed to have published it by now?"

"Oh, that! You might as well call it *SHIT*, it's a lot easier! Every time she sends me an amended copy after I've proof read the sodding book from cover to cover, I find she's done something slightly different to the font, or the page size or whatever, so that the pages themselves have altered and it's messed up something else. I've just about given up. You're right, though, writing *The Journey* cheers me up. What about you, what will you do today?"

"I think I'll make a few more friendship bracelets and then this afternoon Drew's popping around before he goes back to London. Is that OK?"

"Yes, of course. I'm glad you two are still friends. You feel OK about him now, do you?" Sandra finally felt able to look at Madeleine.

"Yes, I think so. Anyway, I probably won't be seeing him for ages after today, so you've no need to worry."

"I'm your mother, Maddy, worrying about you is second nature to me."

"It works both ways. I worry about you and Dad sometimes too."

"Do you? Thank you, darling. Not that I want you to worry about me – us." Sandra turned around and gave Madeleine a sudden, heartfelt hug.

As she sat alone on the bed later with her paper and pen, Sandra found herself writing a letter to Osborn. It seemed silly when they lived together, but it was a relief to pour out her recent feelings of anguish that she hadn't quite realised were building up.

'Well, there's nothing new in there,' she thought, as she read what she'd written. 'Just another cry of desperation that we seem to have no time for each other, which in its turn seems to be creating some current insecurity in me. Or maybe it's old insecurity. Whatever it is, it's painful. He does seem to be very involved with the Radio Amateur group, though.'

'I suppose I have no interest in all that whatsoever, but I can't help wishing Bluebell wasn't so prevalent in all his Radio Amateur conversations. It seems such a silly name to me, I find it really irritating. Still, I've chosen to trust him – but I never, ever realised that deciding to trust someone was such a difficult, tortuous experience. Oh, I'm tired of struggling with all that, I think I'll do some more writing on *The Journey*, it must be nearly finished by now.'

"I finished writing *The Journey* yesterday," said Sandra to Osborn, as he sat sipping tea on his return from the camping weekend. "I'm glad you had a good weekend. I missed you."

"I missed you too," he replied. "We had a lot of fun, they're a great bunch of students. I'll miss them when they finish their degrees. Bluebell's keen for us all to keep in touch."

"Hmm," replied Sandra. She found herself deliberately changing the subject. "I felt a bit down yesterday and wrote you a letter, but I don't suppose you'll want to read it?"

"OK," said Osborn distractedly. "God! I think I left Gulliver's sleeping bag in the – oh no, I remember putting it into the boot before I put the tent in. Speaking of the tent, I must air it properly before I give it back to Gulliver. I've got some clothes that need washing too, it was a bit muddy, I'm afraid. What were you saying?"

"Nothing. Maddy had a letter yesterday saying that her first physiotherapy appointment's next week."

"That's good. Oh, I forgot to tell you that Kirsty rang when I was getting ready to go camping yesterday and she asked me to tell you that she's printed 100 copies of *SHIT*."

"What? But there's still a big error! I didn't tell her it was OK to go ahead with the printing!" Sandra felt like screaming. "At least I gave the book the right sodding title."

It was mid-May and the weather was balmy. Sandra and Osborn were walking along the garden path to Terry and Kerry's house for a workshop on angels.

"It's lovely to be here again," said Osborn happily, as Terry opened the door and the hugging began.

"It's been quite a long time, but you're here now," said Terry expansively. He seemed to have gained a few pounds. "How are you, Sandra?"

"I'm OK," replied Sandra, with as much gusto as she could muster. The fact was that she had sunk to some serious depths the previous day, for no apparent reason. Madeleine showed every sign of doing well with the counsellor, the physiotherapist and her medication. She had even made a trip to Cardiff to sort out accommodation for September, when she would be returning to university to re-take her second year.

"You'll be OK here," said Kerry astutely, coming forward to hug Sandra. "I've been to one of Angelica's workshops before and they've got a real feel-good factor. Come in and make yourself at home."

"Thank you," whispered Sandra. She was finding the kindness almost too much to bear and escaped into a chair that was furthest away from the centre of the room.

"Right, we're all here now, so let's make a start!" called out Angelica loudly into the buzz of conversation a few moments later, making Sandra jump. "We'll form a circle, so bring your chairs around. Sandra, you're way out there, come on into the circle."

"Sandra's always been way out," said Osborn jokingly.

"Thank you," replied Sandra. "I'll take that as a compliment." As she moved her chair, she wondered how she could make such a normal response to being way out, when she'd begun to suffer from a relentless, thumping headache and was feeling a great weight of despair that threatened to engulf her.

"The first thing I would like to say is welcome to all of you and to all the angels who'll be joining us," began Angelica. "There's a lovely big golden angel here already..." Her eyes became faraway and unfocused.

"Yes, I thought there was," said Osborn. "In the corner over there, but sort of stretching over the room."

"Indeed!" replied Angelica, beaming at Osborn as Sandra gazed at him in astonishment, widening her eyes involuntarily and causing herself increased pain from her headache.

"Well done, mate," said Terry kindly.

"OK. The second thing I would like to say," continued Angelica, "is that when we enter into a workshop such as this, we need to leave all our troubles at the door, so they don't cloud the room with negativity. Now I sense that not everyone has done that, so we'll all close our eyes and relax and ask our guardian angels to help us."

Sandra closed her eyes, feeling immensely guilty that she was obviously clouding the room with negativity. She tried to relax as best as she could and asked her guardian angel to help her. The ensuing silence was profound.

'Well, if you're there, guardian angel of mine, you're as quiet as I am,' thought Sandra. 'I do feel better sitting here quietly, though – almost peaceful. I'll gather up all my troubles in my mind, put them in a bag and carry them to the door. God, they're heavy, I don't think I can lift them!' She tried not to panic as she heard people around her beginning to shift in their seats, signalling that the exercise was drawing to a close. Suddenly, a swift indefinable movement startled her into opening her eyes and she realised she felt much lighter. Her head was still aching slightly, but she felt almost normal – in a way out sense, of course. She looked around at the others, wondering if her guardian angel had indeed helped her.

"That's better," said Angelica encouragingly. "What I'd like to do now is to have a little talk about what angels mean to us individually. We'll go around the circle in turn, but don't worry about saying the right thing, or saying anything at all, I just want to open the angel energies and also sense a little bit about each of you, so I can gear the workshop to suit us all." She smiled at Osborn. "Would you like to start us all off, Osborn?"

"OK. Well, to be honest, I've not really given angels much conscious thought, but I've been aware of them," said Osborn. "In my meditations recently, I've encountered the archangel Michael, but I'm not entirely sure why he's there."

"The archangel Michael often brings a very powerful cleansing energy, using light and truth," replied Angelica thoughtfully. "That's really promising, Osborn, it sounds like your pathway is being cleared for future events."

'What future events?' thought Sandra suspiciously. 'I mean, it sounds great for Osborn, but he's my life partner and – and – and what is Del talking about, a dream about a doorkeeper? Angel bouncers? God, I've just remembered that dream I had the other night...'

"Well, I had a dream about an angel recently," said Sandra when it was her turn. "I was sitting in our sitting room, as you do..." She paused, but no-one tittered. "I suddenly noticed that there was a circular hole in the ceiling that was open to the heavens and I was aware of an angel called Uriel – is that right?" She looked towards Angelica enquiringly.

"Yes, the archangel Uriel," replied Angelica, nodding.

"Well, Uriel was sending me down some energy. It was lovely and golden, but that's all I can remember," she finished a little sadly.

"The archangel Uriel will give you peace by means of your own determination and by transmutation of the difficulties and perhaps negativities of your life," said Angelica kindly. "If you have inner conflicts or stress, Uriel gives you release from worries and fears."

"Gosh. Thank you," replied Sandra, as Angelica finished smiling at her and began smiling at the next person in the circle.

'That sounded really good,' mused Sandra, as Rod started to talk about dowsing for angel energies. 'It did make me sound like a bit of an emotional mess, but if I'm

honest, I suppose I'm veering towards that right now. Trust Osborn to have strong, positive feedback from what he said, while I was told about negativities and stress. What did she mean about transmutation? It sounds like something from *Planet Trek*. Interesting though, I'll look it up on the Internet. What *is* Leo talking about? Birth angels by the degrees of your sun sign? I think my headache's coming back.'

The rest of the day was spent in various angelic activities, including card readings, sand readings, an angel meditation and finally, much to everyone's surprise, a lucky dip which yielded a small packet of handmade angel cards, complete with a raffle number.

"It's wonderful to see you all so filled with a sense of fun," said Angelica, laughing. "It's a very uplifting vibration that the world so badly needs. Has everybody got their raffle tickets? Well, the second prize is this lovely piece of rose quartz that I've asked the angels to bless. Who has number four?"

"Oh, it's me!" said Claire, becoming a little rose coloured herself. "Thank you, Angelica."

"Now for the first prize, which is a free hour's reading from me, at a time of your choice made by future appointment," said Angelica, smiling. "I've asked the angels that the right person will be given this prize. So let's see, who is the chosen one who has number two, please?"

"I have," replied Osborn, somewhat incredulously, looking at Sandra and raising his eyebrows. "Wow, I don't normally win anything."

"I look forward to seeing you later," said Angelica, her eyes twinkling. "Don't forget to give me a ring soon to arrange an appointment."

"Thank you," said Osborn, obviously slightly embarrassed.

"Well done, mate," said Terry encouragingly. "Angelica's good." He winked wickedly at Angelica, who smiled angelically back.

"I like these get-togethers, it's fun talking about our old school days," said Delia of the curly hair, as she sat on a sofa in Sandra's sitting room beside Emily of the shoulder length hair.

"You always were a gossip," replied Emily teasingly.

"Oh, that's so untrue!" retorted Delia. "Actually, I hate gossips, they often end up saying derogatory things about people, as if they make themselves feel bigger by belittling others – or something."

"You did psychology, didn't you Sandra?" asked Kay of the short-bobbed hair, sipping from her mug of tea as she sat on the other sofa beside Gina of the long hair.

"I did, but it seems years ago now, like a different phase of life," replied Sandra. Two weeks had passed since the angel workshop, but she was still fighting waves of depression that on some days seemed as if they would submerge her.

"I know what you mean," chipped in Gina brightly. "I met someone who lives in the same street I used to before I got married and it seemed like she was from a different life."

"How's your daughter, Kay?" asked Delia. "Hayley, is it?"

"That's right. She's fine, thanks. No steady boyfriend, just lots of unsteady ones! No, not really, but she certainly plays the field, unlike I ever did. She really enjoys her job and she's looking for her own little house to buy now."

"That's good," replied Gina "My Kate's still living at home and shows no sign of moving out, but she seems quite happy, which is the main thing."

"Cool," said Emily. "My Annabel's moved out, but she still spends lots of time with me. How's Maddy, Sandra? She wasn't too well the last I heard."

"She's a lot better than she was," replied Sandra, not entirely happy that the spotlight of conversation was on her. "She's definitely recovering, although she told me this morning that she was feeling a bit lonely. Her leg's a lot better since she had physiotherapy, she can just about walk on it normally now without pain. Apparently, it was connected to her general state of being, which seems weird, but I suppose it's a mind and body connection."

"I'm glad she's better," said Kay kindly. "How about Gulliver?"

"He's fine, thank you," replied Sandra, smiling. "Actually, he says he's a bit lonely too, living in his house on his own. He said he might get a cat. Osborn, Maddy and I usually take pasties to his house every Sunday lunchtime and then stay for a couple of hours, it's become a sort of ritual." To her surprise, Sandra found it a comfort to talk about her current life.

"It's good to keep in touch," said Gina. "Mind you, sometimes I wish that Adam and Sarah wouldn't keep in touch quite so much! I'm only joking, I love being a granny to Reece."

"How's your granddaughter, Em?" asked Delia.

"Into everything," replied Emily quickly. "I don't see why I haven't lost about two stones at least since she's been born, but possibly the compensatory chocolate has something to do with it."

"Talking of food," said Sandra, when the tittering had died down, "I'll start to put some food on the table. Did you say you've got some rolls, Gina?"

"I've got rolls," replied Emily, smiling suspiciously. "Rolls of fat."

"Oh, don't talk to me about rolls of fat," joined in Kay. "I had a shock when I looked at myself naked in the mirror the other day, as you do."

"I don't," mused Delia reflectively, "it's too frightening."

"You've got nothing to worry about, Dee!" retorted Emily. "You're a slim creature of great – slimness."

"Well maybe, but the face tells a story," said Delia, grimacing. "I've got loads more wrinkles, I swear it's since the menopause."

A cacophony of groans erupted in the room, followed by a prolonged conversation about experienced symptoms, many and varied. As Sandra started to prepare the food between the sitting room and the kitchen, she half-listened to the discussion of random periods, hot flushes and restless legs with a smile.

'It's good to know we're not alone,' she thought as she opened a packet of rolls and started to cut them open. 'Where's Gina? She said she was coming out to help me, I'm doing this all on my own!'

## CHAPTER 16

The end of June had arrived, bringing a few hot, dry weeks to an end. Sandra was sitting opposite Angelica in a very small but cosy room in Angelica's house, while Angelica tuned in psychically to her angels and whoever else was available. Osborn had persuaded Sandra to come along with him for a reading of her own while he claimed his prize of a free reading from the angel workshop back in May. Sandra had to pay for her reading, of course, but Osborn's idea had seemed a good one at the time. Now she wasn't quite so sure, as after gazing intently at Sandra for a few moments, Angelica sighed deeply and closed her eyes.

"OK my friend, as I listen to your vibrations, I'm very much aware I've got this lady with me from your mother's side of the family and she's trying very hard to help you come to terms with life. It's as if I want to look back with you at a kind of healing process where for the last few years in particular, spirit have been very close to you, trying to heal old wounds.

'if you can do this, you'll find that as you go forward, there's going to be a new you – a more confident you. It's almost as if you've got to trust a bit more. There have been happenings in your life that have knocked you sideways and spirit have brought you, and are trying to bring you, very much into balance now."

"Gosh." Sandra was lost for words, as Angelica continued talking in a rather rapid voice, of putting past hurts behind her and moving forward trustingly into the following year, when she would find her true self.

"You may not believe it now, but all the things that have happened to you have been for your highest good. There's been a lot of soul growth and spirit are telling you to love yourself, to go forward in truth and know that things are settling down.

'I have a grandfatherly sort of gentleman here from your father's side of the family and he's wanting desperately for you to be at peace inside yourself. It's as if he's

standing looking out to sea, because in many respects the sea was his life and he found the sea healing. He's showing me a beautiful sunset and there's so much love that he's giving to you. He's asking you to go forward in that love, to feel safe in that love and to feel safe in a relationship. Do you know why he says that?"

"Ye-es, I think so," replied Sandra hesitantly, wondering if her initial thought of Osborn was correct.

"Well, he's giving me a little smile now as if to say yes, you do understand. He's telling you to trust in spirit, to trust in your own intuition and also in your own emotions. He's telling you to lean on his words and to know that everyone who is coming through for you today wants one thing, for you to be happy. He wants you to stand and look out to sea and when you do this, to think of him and let him be your strength."

"Thank you," whispered Sandra, very close to tears, as she felt the link of her paternal grandfather, who had been a Medical Officer in the Royal Navy. She had no time to ponder on this, however, as Angelica was continuing almost without drawing breath.

"I'm very much aware that I have a beautiful little nun here on a guide capacity to you. She's so thrilled to be walking by your side and she's trying, she says, to keep you on a road that is more even, because you've been very up and down lately. She's taking you by the hand and she's saying that you have this gift within you and that together you will do inspirational work. She's saying you must never put yourself down in any shape or form, because there is no need. All the love and compassion you have inside you – send it out into the world."

"My spirit guide," breathed Sandra, still very close to tears.

"I just saw a beautiful purple butterfly, it flipped right past me! Butterflies to me mean spirituality, or change. It's as if spirit are telling you to let go of the past and all that's hurt you so much inside. There have been tears and loneliness behind you, but each time those that love you in the spirit world and those watching over you in a guide or helper capacity will not let any harm come to you. And because you're so sensitive, there are a lot of things that very much hurt you, but they're telling you not to despair because they're walking by your side. They're telling me that you're going to go into the spiritual essence of life quite deeply – that you might wonder if it's meant for you and whether you're worthy."

"Yes," said Sandra simply.

"Your beautiful little nun has come in again and is very close to you. She's telling you that you are worthy of many things, but you do not feel the worthiness. You need to honour and love yourself more. All these good things are coming up for you, but because of the past – and I keep being dragged back to this – it's haunting the future, like a kind of ghost and you need to push it all behind you, because there's an awful lot for you to look forward to. It's as if they're wanting you to relax all the muscles of your being and to heal this inner child of yourself – to heal all the nervousness and all the tension. They're saying that what is meant for you, my friend, will never go past you. Does that make sense to you?"

"I'm not quite sure about my inner child..."

"Well, that's what they're saying to me, that even back in your childhood there were times that needed to be healed there. And there were times when you felt so – it's like a desperate feeling coming over me and it's like every so often through the years, this desperate feeling keeps coming and it's like a kind of fear, can you understand? And it's about all these things that you've had to deal with and things you've been trying to shut out mentally, but you've not quite managed it in some shape or form.

'It's as if there's some insecurity there and it's as if you're afraid of being hurt. Let me tell you, though, that there's this wonderful feeling of the unconditional love of spirit all around you and it's almost as if they're willing you to keep positive and to gain the inner peace that your soul seeks and needs. They're saying that you have a life and you need to enjoy it a bit more, to laugh a bit more, because there was a time in your life when the laughter was there. You could laugh, but it's almost as if that sparkle, that full laughter that was there is not with you, does that make sense?"

"It *has* been difficult to laugh," responded Sandra, trying hard not to cry.

"Would you know about a baby in the spirit world? It's like this feeling of love is coming in around me and this soul in the spirit world has grown up into a very special soul. It's as if this male spirit is very close to you and is entwined with your spirit. He's helping you right now, with this wonderful unconditional love."

"I had a miscarriage and I always felt it was a boy," said Sandra, her demeanour brightening perceptibly. Her thoughts seemed to drift off for a few moments and she came back to the present again with a slight jolt, thankful that Angelica was making a tape recording of the entire reading.

"...because you send out a lot of thoughts on what I call a prayer wavelength and spirit want to tell you that they've been heard and they *will* be acted upon. They're telling me that sometimes you shut yourself off. They're saying that there's something in your subconscious you're not fully aware of and now they're bringing in this blue healing light and placing it down around you. There are still some things you haven't fully realised yet.

"There are words of truth that spirit say to you about things you've shied away from in the past because they've been too hurtful and you haven't wanted to face up to them, but the only way to deal with situations like these is to come head to head with them and face them full-on. You're not alone and there's a whole lot of love around you. Everyone coming in today has wanted one thing, for you to be at peace and be happy."

"Thank you," said Sandra, beginning to tire rapidly.

"I'm very much aware," continued Angelica, "that there's someone on the Earth plane around you at the moment who is needing a helping hand and the spirit world are telling you to continue sending out your thoughts, continue giving the love. Is there anything you want to ask?"

"I can't think of anything," responded Sandra, knowing she would have a hundred questions, but none of them were surfacing.

"OK, well I'm going to bring this to a close, but I just want to say to you to take all the love that's being given for you today and know that everything is as it should be. And you concentrate on *you* – you getting it right – and everything will fall into place." Angelica gazed at Sandra, smiling beatifically.

Sandra spent the next hour in a complete daze in Angelica's sitting room with a magazine on her lap that she completely failed to read, while Osborn was given his reading. Finally, Osborn emerged from Angelica's very small but cosy room clutching a tape and looking somewhat distracted.

"Well," said Sandra a short while later, as Osborn began to drive them both away from Angelica's house. "How was it for you?"

"Far out," muttered Osborn. "I can't quite get my head around some of it, I need to listen to the tape about a hundred times and try to make sense of what she said."

"Me too," replied Sandra, comforted that Osborn was feeling the same way as she was. "It was good, but a bit out of this world."

Later that evening, Sandra and Osborn sat in the back garden with a glass of wine, mulling over their unusual morning.

"This is a bit spicy," said Sandra, frowning slightly. "Have you managed to understand more of your reading? When I listened to your tape, I felt as though yours was all about how special you are. You know, that stuff about you having gifts and being used for wonderful work in the future and even having been a disciple in a past life. I know it doesn't help to compare, but mine seemed all about how wounded I've been."

"There was a lot in yours about being a lovely, sensitive and compassionate person," said Osborn kindly.

"Yes, but you're apparently going to be teaching, healing, counselling, channelling and all manner of wondrous works," said Sandra, her voice rising in alarm.

"Don't forget there's a measure of interpretation in all of this," replied Osborn firmly.

"I'm sorry, I just found it a bit frightening and a bit surprising that we appear to be perceived so differently. It's made me feel insecure again."

"Sandra, I couldn't be where I am today without you being you."

"Yes, but I'm where I am today because I'm me!" Sandra watched a bee determinedly gathering pollen. "Mind you, you've had a hand in that too. Just as you've got to where you are now because of yourself as well as me – and our parents and significant others."

"This is becoming complicated. Would you like more wine?"

"We're meant to be sticking to one glass a day. Oh, sod it, yes please!"

Another month had passed, bringing a slightly rainy July to an end. Sandra was walking along on a Tuesday morning with Madeleine, who was on her way to her final counselling appointment. Sandra noted with pleasure that Madeleine was walking quickly, which meant that her leg had fully recovered, but Sandra herself was feeling quite stressed. She'd received a phone call that morning from Caroline, telling her that a biopsy taken from the removal of a mole on her father's chest had revealed malignant cells.

"You're far away, Mumsie, are you OK?" asked Madeleine, breaking into Sandra's thoughts.

"Yes, I'm OK," replied Sandra quickly. "Actually, I was thinking about Grandad, it was a bit of a shock about his malignant melanoma."

"I know," replied Madeleine. "It seems that suddenly the grandparents are all getting old and having problems. People my own age used to tell me I'm lucky to have all four grandparents still alive and I *am*, but I know it's a worry for you and Dad."

"You're not wrong there," said Sandra wryly.

"Talking of Dad," continued Madeleine, "he seems a bit remote sometimes. Don't get me wrong, because if there's a special problem he's there and he's absolutely great, but for all the everyday minute by minute stuff that I've been through – and I know I've been really horrible to you sometimes – I've felt it's you who's been constantly by my side. It's as if I always come up against this wall of love and although I've kicked against it and tried to knock it down, or escape around the side, I can't. I understand at last that you really do love me and I fully accept it now." Madeleine's voice started to waver.

"Oh Maddy," said Sandra, smiling a little mistily at her daughter. "I've always loved you from the very minute I knew you were inside me! I've always tried to tell you and show you, because it feels so utterly natural. I don't know why you had such a hard job to accept it?"

"I don't know, it's hard to explain. I've always known, but I somehow wouldn't let myself believe it."

"Well, I'm so glad that you believe it now. Have you been talking about all this with Jane?"

"A bit, but sometimes she looks depressed herself and I don't feel it's quite right to talk about my stuff. Don't look so horrified! She's helped to get me thinking my own thoughts along certain lines, if you know what I mean and I feel more in control now. I know I'll always have issues about food and eating and body size and all that, but I want and need to get on with my life. That's why I told her I wanted one final counselling session."

"So you're definitely going back to Cardiff in September?"

"Yes. It feels right."

"I'll miss you, but you're right, it *does* feel right."

"Right, we're at the surgery. Mumsie! You're going to walk on into Five Street, remember?" Madeleine was smiling.

"Right! See you later, darling. I hope it goes well."

When Osborn arrived home from work in the twilight zone (but only at certain times of the year) between late afternoon and early evening, Sandra knew he'd had a trying day.

"My father's in hospital again," he said wearily. "This is becoming a habit. Mum rang me at work and I had to ask for time off to go and see him this afternoon."

"Is it his heart again?" asked Sandra, her own heart sinking rapidly.

"Yes, it is. They're treating it as if it's a heart attack, but to be honest, I wonder sometimes if my mother tends to panic and ring for an ambulance. Oh God, who's that on the phone? I'll get it, it's probably Lawrence. Hello? Oh, hello Kirsty."

After a half-hour conversation with his tearful sister, Osborn finally sat down to eat, but as he lifted his knife and fork, the phone rang again.

"I'll get it," said Sandra, "I'll tell whoever it is that you're eating and you'll ring back. Hello? Oh, hello Mum."

"I'm sorry to bother you Sandra, but you asked me to let you know about Dad. Well, they've given him another appointment for a follow-up biopsy, although they do think they took it all away. Dad's chest is still very painful, though, and so he was wondering if Osborn could drive him to hospital this time?"

"Poor Dad. Well, Osborn will probably be visiting Basil in hospital anyway, so it's quite likely he can do that. It's a good job it's summer and Osborn doesn't have any teaching commitments at the university." Despite her deep concern about her father, Sandra felt duty bound to mention that Osborn actually had a life of his own and wasn't just there as a convenience for needy parents.

"Basil's in hospital again?"

"Yes, his heart..."

After she put the phone down a few minutes later and realised that her own food had grown cold, Sandra sighed heavily.

"What's wrong?" asked Osborn tiredly. "Sorry, I should have put it in the oven to keep warm."

"It's not that – *I'm* sorry I never learned to drive," she said, gazing at him. "It's not fair on you. If I could drive, I could help you out. I should have learned when I was 17, but we were saving to get married then and after that, we were saving for a house and then Gulliver and Maddy came along and – and Lawrence doesn't drive and my father's given up driving and your father is about to – and Kirsty who *can* drive lives away and Gulliver who can drive has his own life and I wouldn't want him to feel he was a convenience for us all anyway..." Her voice trailed off in despair. "It feels like the world is falling in again. No matter how hard I try to keep everything balanced and OK, life has different ideas. Sod it, the freaking phone again! Who the hell is it this time? Hello?"

"Sorry Mother," said Gulliver hesitantly. "You sound a bit stressed. I was ringing to check about Saturday?"

"Saturday? Saturday?" Sandra searched in vain for something relevant in her brain relating to Saturday. "What's Saturday?"

"My fence?" prompted Gulliver uncertainly.

"God, your fence! I'm so sorry, Gulliver."

"You don't have to come if it's too difficult," said Gulliver warily.

"No! Don't take offence about your fence, I can't think straight at the moment, that's all. What time would you like us to come over?"

"Any time, whenever you're ready. Is Uncle Lawrence coming too?"

"I think so, yes."

"And Maddy?"

"I'm not sure, I don't think she can decide one way or the other."

"Sitting on the fence, hmm?"

"It's been fun today," said Madeleine, as she helped Sandra to clear up the lunchtime dishes at Gulliver's house on Saturday. "I'm glad I came. Uncle Lawrence is enjoying himself, too. Look at him out there laughing with Gulliver." They both gazed out of the kitchen window.

"I think the lunchtime beer may have helped," replied Sandra, smiling. "Oh, it's lovely to have a day that's worthwhile and enjoyable too, because it's been such a worrying week, what with one thing and another."

"Still, Grandad's second skin biopsy was clear and Grandad Dullkettle's heart attack was an angina attack," said Madeleine. "Things could be a whole lot worse."

"Definitely," replied Sandra. "Don't get me wrong, darling, I'm happy that it's all turned out reasonably well in the end. You finished your counselling successfully, too."

"I said the words Jane wanted to hear," said Madeleine, darting a quick glance at Sandra. "I was thinking I might like to be a counsellor myself in the future – but I'm not sure, it's only a thought."

"I think you'd make a brilliant counsellor," replied Sandra honestly. "You're very astute, you listen well and you're not afraid to be honest, or confront people when you feel it's right. You handle conflict well too. I'll never forget that day when Dad and I were arguing horribly about what to do and you came along and told us we were getting nowhere and you directed us to do this and that. We were so taken aback. You were magnificent!"

"I do feel much stronger now," said Madeleine, "except as far as Drew goes. I can't seem to let him go, even though I know it's the right thing to do. Don't worry, though, I won't do anything silly. You can trust me."

"I *do* trust you," said Sandra, "I always have, even in the midst of your anorexia. It's as if I can sense your pure soul in amongst all the craziness of life."

"You have a lovely soul too, Mumsie," said Madeleine. "Gulliver! How's it going?"

"Fine," said Gulliver breezily. "The wind's getting up a little bit, though. Uncle Lawrence says it's those pickled onions. Are you making tea?"

"Yes, I will do," replied Sandra, smiling. "Oh, was that your doorbell?"

"I'll go," said Gulliver quickly. "It might be Bryony."

"Bryony?" asked Sandra and Madeleine in unison.

"Bryony Stanpool. She's just a friend..." came Gulliver's receding voice, as he raced to answer the front door.

## CHAPTER 17

It was early September 2001 and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was having a 49<sup>th</sup> birthday. She wasn't entirely depressed, but she was having a good stab at it, interspersed with a burning resolve to be positive and see the good things in her life.

'It's funny how I only use my middle name on forms and on my birthday,' she mused in a quiet moment in the café section of the garden centre, as Osborn collected coffee while Gulliver and Madeleine sent text messages. 'I think I'd like a mobile phone one day, I like the idea of text messages, because it means you can communicate with people without having to talk to them. I'm still a bit of a loner at heart, how awful. No, it's not awful, it's who I am – which is awful – ha! God, I wish I wasn't so up and down these days.' She jumped up to gesticulate to Osborn where they were, before sitting down again heavily.

'I must lose some weight, it's creeping on insidiously and I really don't eat huge amounts at all. Maybe I should buy an exercise video – or DVD. I like DVDs, they're kind of neat, unlike untidy tapes that can unravel, or get caught in the machine, or degenerate after a lot of use. It means you have to get rid of all your video tapes, of course, not to mention invest in DVDs, but I positively enjoyed the switchover from music cassettes to CDs. I've got quite a comprehensive collection of CDs now...'

"Deep in thought?" asked Osborn, as he placed the tray on the table. "Oh, I've forgotten the sugar."

"We don't take sugar, Dad." Madeleine put her mobile phone away and looked up. "Thanks for the coffee. I did actually ask for hot chocolate, but this is fine."

"Thanks for the coffee, Dad." Gulliver also put away his mobile phone. "Happy birthday, Mother!" He lifted up his cup, complete with its saucer that had stuck to its bottom. "Oops, I've got a wet bottom. I want to say that I'm going to pay for our pub lunch, to say thank you for helping me with the fence."

"Thank you! I really enjoyed that day," said Sandra. "I didn't actually help with the fence, though. You said that you and Lawrence enjoyed that day, didn't you?" Sandra looked questioningly at Osborn.

"Yes, we had a good system going with the three of us," replied Osborn. "Talking of fences, we still need to finish painting your parents' fence, but I don't know when I'm going to fit it in. Do you realise we haven't had a holiday at all this year? It seems all I've done is take days off to go and see to people's problems. Usually our parents."

"I'll finish painting their fence," said Sandra, feeling her own mood plummet in the wake of Osborn's. "I always seem to get the wretched stuff on me in the strangest places when I paint, but it's something I can do."

"I'll help," said Madeleine. "I like painting."

"I'd love you to help, but don't forget you've got your part-time job to consider." Sandra regarded Madeleine with a smile, marvelling at how well she was looking. "I'm so pleased Dad managed to find you temporary work in his department's office for a few weeks."

"It's only because of the new student intake," replied Osborn. "It was simply a case of good timing. Plus me speaking nicely to the right people, of course. Besides, Madeleine needs the money."

"I'm really grateful for all your help, don't think I don't realise what you've done for me, financially and otherwise," said Madeleine. "This isn't about me, though, it's Mum's birthday. Are you sure you didn't want to do something more exciting than coffee in a garden centre and lunch in a pub, Mumsie?"

"This is exactly where I want to be, right here, right now," replied Sandra, smiling. "It's not going to be so easy for the four of us to be together in the future, so I just took the opportunity that presented itself today."

"Talking of the future, I have some news," said Gulliver nonchalantly. "*Fischer & Chipmann* are sending me to America for ten days."

"I thought you meant they were sending you there permanently for a minute," said Sandra, her eyes having widened considerably. "This coffee's strong."

"Actually, I think I'd rather settle in Canada or New Zealand," said Gulliver thoughtfully. "No, it's only for ten days, but I have some free time and I'm pretty near where your penfriend lives, so I was wondering whether to call by and see her. What do you think?"

"Dolores?" asked Sandra incredulously. "In Colorado? Well, I can give you her email address. I'm sure she'll be pleased to see you, she's always saying it's her dream to meet me and the family. How exciting! Are you going with anyone else?"

"Yes, there are three of us, but I'll visit Dolores on my own. I must get on with the arrangements if I'm going to meet her, it's only a week or so away."

"Wow, life certainly changes all the time," mused Sandra. "Except for me personally at the moment, I seem to be locked into an endless round of washing, weeding and *Scribble* with a mother who's turned verbally abusive throughout the game. Still, there are worse things."

"I have a verbally abusive mother too," said Gulliver conversationally. "By the way, when I come back from the States, I'm probably going to get a cat from the animal shelter."

"You are? Oh, I love cats," said Madeleine fondly. "I wish I wasn't allergic to them."

"Bryony said she'd come to the animal shelter with me to choose a cat," said Gulliver nonchalantly. "She has a cat herself, so she knows how to look after them."

"Bryony Stanpool?" asked Sandra. "Wasn't her brother in your class at school and didn't you have a bit of a schoolboy crush on her when you were 7 or 8?"

"You're not wrong," grinned Gulliver. "Actually, I asked her to go out with me, but she said it wouldn't be fair, because she's going to do an MSc at Swansea."

"Really? You're a bit of a dark horse!" said Osborn. "It's a pity she turned you down."

"Shit happens," replied Gulliver evenly. "I understand her reasons."

"You're still friends with her, though, which is good," comforted Sandra. "I'm really enjoying this, the four of us having a chat over coffee. Actually, we've all finished, so shall we have a walk around the garden centre before we go off to the pub?"

"If we must," replied Gulliver with resignation.

"What, amongst the plants?" asked Madeleine with alarm.

"OK, it's your day," said Osborn with a birthday-type indulgent smile.

The following Wednesday evening, Sandra found herself seated in a large, long room beside Osborn, gazing nervously at a picture of a rainbow on the wall opposite. They were waiting for someone to come and interview them, to assess whether they were suitable for enrolment on the healing course that was beginning that same evening.

How exactly it had come about was a slight mystery to Sandra, who only knew Terry had suggested to Osborn that they might be interested. When Osborn had run this idea past Sandra, she'd been aware of some mixed emotions. However, they all seemed to result in one fact, that the thought of not doing the course along with Osborn was worse than the thought of doing the course with him.

"So, what brought you along this evening?" asked a kindly, white-haired gentleman nine minutes and thirty-seven seconds later, after Sandra had sat in a daze listening to Osborn's articulate and in-depth reply to the same question.

"Well," started Sandra, with Osborn's words of a longstanding interest in healing and spirituality echoing in her head. "I – I don't exactly know why I'm here, except that it feels right. Also, the thought of not being here is worse than the thought of being here." She finished with an embarrassed little laugh, having decided to be completely honest.

"That's fine," replied the man, smiling encouragingly after seemingly having surveyed her inner depths for a few seconds. "I'm sure you'll both fit in here very well, you can join the class right away."

The class was small when they were shown into a cosy room, where only four others and a fair-haired fiftyish female leader were sitting. Sandra tried to find a chair by the door, but the only two spare seats were on either side of the leader.

"Hello," said the leader smilingly, as Sandra and Osborn sat down somewhat self-consciously. "We were just introducing ourselves and I was saying how I became interested in healing about ten years ago when I was diagnosed with cancer."

Two hours later, Osborn and Sandra were driving home, after having listened to a general introduction about healing over the centuries and having taken part in some yogic breathing exercises.

"Did you enjoy it?" asked Sandra, after they'd each remained silent for a while. "I can't say it wasn't quite what I expected, because I wasn't exactly expecting anything."

"I enjoyed it," replied Osborn thoughtfully. "I have a burning need to find out all I can about this side of life while I'm on this side of life."

"You did seem relaxed," replied Sandra. "I wish I could relax more easily, but I seem to be wired up differently to you."

"In more ways than one," remarked Osborn. "We don't seem to have had much time for each other at all lately."

"You mean...?"

"Yes, it's been ages."

"It has," agreed Sandra. "What's brought all this up now, though, pardon the expression? It seems strange after a spiritual sort of evening."

"I know. You know what my brain's like, it's all over the place most of the time. I suppose I'm very relaxed, that's all. Hey! You total tosser! Cut me up, why don't you, you bloody, moronic idiot! Take away all my road space, you utter brainless bastard!"

"How did you find my longstanding penfriend Dolores, then?" asked Sandra, as she sat in the passenger seat of Gulliver's car on their way to the animal shelter.

"Well, she met me at the airport," replied Gulliver, "and I recognised her right away. To be honest, though, she was carrying a sign that said my name."

"You twit, you know what I mean! I know she made you ring up from her house to let us know you'd arrived safely, but you normally don't talk properly like that. You sounded unusually polite."

"I *am* unusually polite. No, it was fine, I enjoyed staying with them all. She really wants to meet you, that's for sure."

"I know, I find that a bit scary, but that's just me. I'd love to go to Colorado, it sounds like a beautiful place, especially up in the mountains."

"It *is* lovely up there. They took me to Pikes Peak, which is over 14,000 feet high. There's the most wonderful view, you'd love it."

"I would, I find mountains uplifting. Who knows what the future will bring? I'm glad you had a really good time. Well, we're here already, I'm quite nervous."

"There's no need, I'll just get the cat cage from the boot."

Ten minutes later, Gulliver stood in the animal shelter reception area filling out some forms so that he would have legal ownership of the cat that he and Bryony had chosen on an earlier visit. Sandra stood beside him, trying not to look at the pictures of distressed animals that decorated the walls. As she gazed at a notice about some forthcoming car boot sales and financial targets, a young girl came in with the cat cage that Gulliver had brought with him.

"Hello," said the lady who was dealing with Gulliver, bending down to look into the cage. "Well, here she is. Come on Boots, you're going home!"

A lump came into Sandra's throat at the thought of a poor abandoned cat that now was on its way to a new home with Gulliver. She felt her heart strings twanging alarmingly and was glad when she was seated in the back of Gulliver's car, with the job of keeping the cat cage steady while Gulliver drove carefully home.

"You can talk to her if you like," he said, looking in his rear-view mirror. "I'm not calling her Boots, by the way, it reminds me too much of *Wellies*."

"You mean the chemist?"

"Yes."

"You could call her after *Smashingdrug*? Only joking, what *are* you calling her?"

"Happy," he replied. "I couldn't really think of a name, so Bryony suggested Happy."

"It's a good name," replied Sandra, smiling. "Happy? Are you OK in there? I'm your human grandmother!"

"Well, I guess it's time to go," said Osborn to Madeleine, as Sandra took one last, lingering look around the room in Cardiff that was going to be where Madeleine would spend a great deal of time for the next nine months. After that, the spectre of a year in Germany arose, but it was too hard to think about, so Sandra just smiled and hugged Madeleine after Osborn had finished.

"You'll be fine here," she said encouragingly. "It's a much cosier little house than last time, it's really quite homely."

"I know," replied Madeleine. "I feel good that Carys and Joss still want me to live with them, even though they're in their final year now." She gulped a little. "Still, it's all looking good, I'm glad Dad found me that part-time job, because apart from the money, it's eased me back into the real world again."

"Well, if you need any help, or anything at all, you know where we are," said Sandra rather helplessly.

"I know. I'll miss you both so much, but it's time to move on." Madeleine smiled uncertainly. "Take care!"

"You too, darling. Bye!"

As Sandra and Osborn walked to the car, the sight of Madeleine framed in the doorway, smiling and waving, was one that Sandra carried with her all the way home as a precious memory in her heart.

As soon as they arrived home, the phone rang with the news that Basil had again been taken to hospital with chest pains.

"This is relentless!" exclaimed Osborn after he'd put down the phone on a very tearful Sybil. "She seemed quite put out that we were taking Madeleine back to Cardiff today."

"Well, she'll have to learn that we're not here at her beck and call," replied Sandra. "It makes me so angry that she feels you're on tap for whenever she needs you. God, listen to the clichés, I must be really tired."

"I know *I* am," said Osborn. "I told her there's nothing I can do today, but I'll take her in to see him tomorrow."

"It's Sunday tomorrow, I was hoping we could go to the garden centre for coffee, or maybe out for a walk," said Sandra, "just to escape somewhere before another week kicks off and term time starts for you at the university."

"We can still go to the garden centre," replied Osborn determinedly. "I'm tired of not being able to live my life the way I want to."

"Me too," said Sandra, wondering briefly if Osborn living his life the way he wanted to included dreams, ideals and wishes that Sandra herself would find acutely uncomfortable. It seemed quite sad that a walk or a garden centre were as far as her current wishes went. As for dreams and ideals, they seemed unreachable.

The following Tuesday afternoon, Sandra was at her parents' house as usual, after a worrying morning that had started with Leonard asking Caroline to ring the doctor because he was having a funny turn with his heart. The doctor had arrived to check him out and had left with the diagnosis that it was an angina attack brought on by indigestion. Leonard had sat in his chair for the rest of the morning looking woebegone, with his GTN spray by his side.

"At least we can play *Scribble* this afternoon," said Caroline, sighing, as Leonard went to listen to the radio in the back room. "I always look forward to *Scribble* so much, it really helps us to relax."

'Us?' thought Sandra wryly, as she went to get the board. 'Helps *us* to relax? It certainly doesn't help *me* to relax. There are many ways in which I'd like to relax and none of them is playing *Scribble* with my insanely competitive mother. Oh well, I suppose I'm helping her, it can't feel very comfortable when your partner has had a bad angina attack.'

"Oh Sandra, you've started already with that stupid word, you naughty little girl, I need to smack your bottom!" Caroline had settled in her chair and was viewing the *Scribble* board with anticipation.

'Oh, leave me alone, I'm a grown woman for pity sake,' thought Sandra tiredly. 'I want to go home and do some of my own things, like writing and gardening and just being in my own space, physically and metaphorically. Why do I come here twice a week like some pathetic cross between a school girl doing detention and a home help on zero pay? God, do I really feel like that? How dreadful, I had no idea! When did it start to go so wrong with my mother and me? Or could it possibly be that my eyes are gradually opening? Oh, I feel so mixed up and I think I've got a cold coming...'

"I'm doing my nut here with these diabolical vowels," said Caroline. "You've got all the luck as usual, you wretched girl, I could scream!"

'I could also scream, Mother,' thought Sandra wearily, 'with loud abandon and with great feeling, at the diabolical waste of sitting here making random words from letters on tiles that will be emptied back into the bag when this tortuous game has finished. What is the point? The only possible way I can accept this meaningless charade of intellectual fun, when I have so much actual work to do back in my own home, is to think I'm doing it for you, as a pure, unfettered gift from me.'

"Yes! I've done it! Well, I reckon I'm a genius to make a 7-letter word from this lot of complete and utter rubbish! Let's see if I have better luck now and get some decent tiles this time. You're quiet, Sandra."

"Am I? Sorry, it's all this concentration."

"Oh no, look what you've made me pick this time, no vowels at all! Sandra Watercross, it's all your fault!"

'I don't believe it,' thought Sandra, as exhaustion began to creep into her soul. 'How many years have I been married? Thirty years – three sodding decades – and she just called me by my maiden name.'

"I'm feeling better now," remarked Leonard, as he opened the door on his way through to the kitchen. "How about cold ham and sauté potatoes for tea, Caroline? I can hear you two are having fun."

## CHAPTER 18

It was the beginning of October and Sandra was once more seated in Terry and Kerry's sitting room in their lovely old cottage in deepest Cornwall. She and Osborn had been looking forward to this particular workshop for some time, as it was being run by the psychic artist Ken Farr, who had painted their spirit guides. Ken sat looking enigmatic as he addressed the group, occasionally flicking long, brown fringe hair out of his eyes.

"Simply draw what comes flowing from inside you without thinking of what you're doing," he said, smiling at the eleven people who sat poised with a piece of paper and various writing and drawing implements at the ready. "Colour is crucial, but you'll be led to pick a certain colour. I shall also be joining in and drawing. So, let's go with the flow and enjoy!"

Sandra took a deep breath and prepared for inspiration to seize her. She began to be aware of the others in the circle as they started to draw, one by one. Realising she had distracted herself by wondering what they were drawing, she tried to shut them all out and focus on her own blank piece of paper.

'Please show me what to draw,' she asked her spirit guide hopefully, as she picked out a green felt tip pen from the carton in between her and Del Vinn. 'God, Del's away with a vengeance, he certainly got stuck right in.' She breathed deeply and gazed once more at the blank paper.

'Please show me what to draw,' she beseeched her spirit guide expectantly, as she changed the green felt tip pen for a blue one. 'God, I wonder what Wanda's expressing by all those flourishes?' She breathed deeply and centred herself once more in an effort to focus on the blank paper.

'Please show me what to draw,' she begged her spirit guide frantically, as she changed the blue felt tip pen for a pink one. 'God, Osborn's well into it, he's colouring something in over there with a great deal of concentration.' She dragged her own concentration back to her still blank piece of paper with great difficulty.

'Please show me what to draw,' she implored her spirit guide desperately, as she changed the pink felt tip pen for a purple one. 'Oh, sod it, I'm going to draw a tree!'

It was a colourful tree, as far as trees go, with an intricate root system, lots of leaf-shaped leaves and some unusual fruit. There was a sort of blip in Sandra's mind when she realised she was unsure how the branches came out of the trunk, but she took artistic licence and filled it in as if it didn't matter. She even drew birds, butterflies, flowers, grass, a sun and then a full moon to go with it, as well as some interestingly-shaped clouds, stars, bees, dragonflies, bushes, shrubs, stinging nettles...

"OK, can I draw you back to the circle, please," came Ken Farr's voice into the stillness of the psychic artistry. "You all looked very peaceful and purposeful. What I propose to do is for each of us to pass our drawing to the person on our left and then we'll take it in turn to hold up the drawing we've been given so that everyone can see and we'll say what comes into our mind about the drawing we've been handed.

Sandra handed her work of art to Leo Capricorn on her left and then gazed with fascination and dread at the drawing that Del on her right had handed her. She looked up and noticed Osborn accepting Angelica's drawing and smiling happily at her before handing his drawing to Wanda and sharing a knowing smile with her.

"Let's start with you, Osborn," said Ken, whereupon Osborn launched into a long and very plausible angel-oriented interpretation of Angelica's angel-oriented drawing. Sandra looked deep into Del's artistic offering that she was holding, hoping for inspiration. She started to feel panicky.

"Very good, Osborn. Wanda?"

"Well, this beautiful waterfall that you've drawn shows me a lot of water flowing in all directions..."

"Do you need to go and use the little room upstairs, mate?" asked Terry with a sudden grin.

"Or were you a plumber in a previous life?" joked Del.

"A bad plumber by the sound of it!" exclaimed Rodney. "Sorry Wanda."

"That's OK, laughing's good," said Wanda, brushing her black hair out of her smiling blue eyes. "Yes, water as the water of life, so I feel that Osborn is a very giving person and is destined to reach a lot of people as his journey unfolds. I feel a strong connection with him, as if we may have shared certain parts of our previous life journeys together..."

Half of Sandra continued to listen as Wanda said many more good things about Osborn and his life journey that she apparently felt strong connections with, while the other half of her gazed at Del's drawing and wanted to run screaming from the room.

It was Claire's turn next to interpret Wanda's drawing, which Claire seemed to do with ease and then Del proceeded to competently interpret Claire's drawing, while Sandra's heart began to pound like a bass drum player on speed.

"Very good Del," said Ken appreciatively. "Sandra?"

"I..." Sandra gulped and then cleared her throat. "I'm not quite sure what to say about Del's drawing, it seems to be quite abstract." She looked up at Ken, who was sitting expectantly, as were the rest of the circle.

"Just say what comes without thinking about it," prompted Ken, smiling.

"Just open your mouth and speak some words," suggested Terry kindly. "That's what I do."

"Don't I know it!" said Kerry. "Sorry Sandra. Just go for it and don't worry, because whatever you say will be fine."

"OK," said Sandra somewhat breathlessly. "Well, in the first section of the drawing, this big black bird here that looks like a vulture seems to be sitting on the blackened dead tree waiting for – something. Then in the next section, there's all this fire that suggests – I don't know, an inner conflagration or the fires of hell, or something. Then in the final section, this upright structure looks to me like – like – well, like a male member." She tailed off in horror at her own words, as a hot flush of mammoth proportions began to spread inexorably up to her chest, neck and finally her cheeks.

"I'm sorry?" asked Claire, looking mystified. "A male what?"

"Member," muttered Sandra. "Oh, I must be wrong, take no notice of me! I expect it's a tree of some sort, with no leaves or branches."

"Very interesting," mused Del, "because when I was drawing, I felt as if I was actually expressing some horror from a few previous lives. The vulture, for instance, was when I was a young Native American girl and witnessed the brutal murder of my mother and father by the white man. I hid in a cave, but came back to our camp to witness a scene of utter devastation. The fire was almost definitely when I was working in a bakery in this country at the turn of the last century and my bread caught fire in the oven while I was canoodling with the master baker's daughter. The whole place went up in flames and us with it. The last drawing? Well, I know I was a young man called Ram in India and I – had problems."

"Thank you, Del, that was fascinating," said Ken quickly. "It all backs up your interpretations too, Sandra."

"Maybe you could run a workshop here on past life regression?" asked Rodney. "Of course, you can dowse for past lives, but I know it's your particular interest, Del."

"It is indeed, Rod," replied Del. "I'd be happy to run a workshop if Terry and Kerry are happy."

"Absolutely," said Terry. "I'd love to find out what I've been up to these last few centuries and beyond."

"Well, moving swiftly on," said Ken, "I believe it's Leo's turn to interpret Sandra's drawing now. Leo?"

"OK, well I take it from this tree and the intricate set of roots going way down into the ground, that the element of Sandra's sun sign is earth. There's a feminine feel to the way the leaves are very prettily adorning the tree and the detail of the flora and the insects helps to give an impression of an analytical person. The sky with its sun, moon and stars is interesting and I have the impression that this small yellow object here is the planet Mercury. I would say on balance that Sandra's a virgin."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Claire, looking unsettled.

"He means I'm Virgo the virgin," explained Sandra, smiling at Leo's small creased, sixth-decade facial features, "which I am!"

"Lovely, lovely," said Ken, beginning to look a little tired. "Righty-ho, where are we? Who's next?"

"My turn to do Leo," said Kerry happily. "Would you like some water, Ken? You're looking a little wan."

"I've always been a little wan," replied Ken, smiling at Kerry, "but please don't hold it against me."

The workshop progressed in the same light-hearted vein for the rest of the day, which was a great relief to Sandra. She was surprised to find that by the end of it, she'd really enjoyed herself.

'It's lovely being with like-minded people,' she thought, as she and Osborn travelled home along the narrow, winding Cornish roads. 'I wonder what Osborn's thinking? He does seem to get along well with Wanda – and Angelica now. He certainly enjoys hugging them, but I mustn't be insecure. I seem to get along quite well with Terry, although Terry gets along well with everybody.'

"Did you enjoy it?" asked Osborn suddenly, breaking into her thoughts. 'You seem to get along well with Terry now.'

"Yes, he's a kind person," replied Sandra. "Are you interested in that past life regression workshop they were talking about?"

"I don't know..." said Osborn cautiously. "I seem to get some bad vibes when I think about that. I'm really not sure."

"Oh well, never mind, it's not for a while, anyway. I must confess, though, that reincarnation makes a great deal of sense to me, I don't know why I didn't think of it before, but I suppose it's probably because Christianity's dead against it. I wonder if we've been in past lives together?"

"I expect so, you feel old to me."

"Charming, thank you."

"No, I don't mean it like that. I mean that I feel I've known you for ages and ages, as if we're old soul mates."

"OK then, old soul mate, what shall we have to eat tonight?"

An unseasonably warm October slipped by with its usual round of gardening and *Scribble*, visits to and from Alison and Gina, another 12-day spell in hospital for Basil (though not in the Wicca sense), Sunday lunchtime pasties with Gulliver and Happy, a miserable head cold and another two healing course evenings in which they learned about auras and chakras.

Osborn seemed distracted and often came home from work exceptionally tired and snappy. He had continued to meet weekly with his Radio Amateur group, but Sandra was comforted by the fact that he seemed to talk openly about them, as far as she was able to tell.

'If he had anything to hide, he'd keep it to himself, I should imagine,' she mused, as she walked to her parents' house at the beginning of November. 'Mind you, how do I know if he's keeping anything to himself? God, I so wish I could trust him 100% like I always used to before – oh, I refuse to torture myself, I'm too tired.'

'I'm really sick of sleeplessness, hot flushes, headaches and mood swings. I'm also sick of Osborn's parents ringing up so frequently to ask him for help, not to mention the fact that Lawrence seems to be keeping away from them again because his father keeps upsetting him. Where does that leave Osborn? No wonder he tries to spend time out of the house? But where does that leave me? Going bloody bananas, that's what! Damn, I meant to buy some bananas, we've run right out again.'

"I'm in trouble," said Caroline woefully to Sandra, before she'd even said hello to her mother. "I sort of remember reaching up to get something and I twisted my back a bit. I haven't been able to move much at all, it's very painful." She looked at Sandra woefully. "It shoots right down my leg and I can't seem to find comfort anywhere."

"Oh dear," said Sandra sympathetically. "Have you been to the doctor?"

"No. You know me, I hate going to see the doctor."

"Yes, but..."

"Anyway, all they do is give you painkillers."

"They give you medical advice and the benefit of their many years of training and experience."

"I suppose you're right. What do *you* think is wrong?"

"If it's going down your leg, it sounds like it might be sciatica, but I'm not a doctor. I have it sometimes going down my leg, it seems to come from a place I hurt in my back when I gave birth to Gulliver."

"You get it? But you're young!"

"I'm nearly 50, but this isn't about me. You really should go and see about it if it's causing you so much pain."

"Oh, all right. What's depressing is the thought that I can't sit comfortably anywhere to play *Scribble* today."

"Oh dear."

"I suppose I could try, though. Could you get the *Scribble* board?"

The first week of November had passed in rather a dismal, rainy way. Sandra had just returned from a trip into town, where she'd attempted to start buying Christmas presents for people from both herself and her mother, who was unable to walk very far. She made herself a mug of tea and settled at the computer to relax by playing a few games of *Impatience*.

'Actually, I'll check my emails,' she thought idly, 'while I eat this banana. All that scouring the shops has made me hungry, you'd think they could pay for decent cleaners. Ah, one from Gulliver.'

"What? Oh no!" Sandra dropped her banana and re-read Gulliver's email in the vain hope that she'd made a mistake. "Please erase my email address at *Fischer & Chipmann* from your address books because I no longer work for them." Her heart had sunk dramatically as she'd read it aloud. "He's been made redundant," she said sorrowfully. "Oh, poor Gulliver!"

That evening, when Gulliver called around to see his parents, he seemed quite philosophical, although a slight tremor was discernable in his voice from time to time.

"At least you know it wasn't because you're a bad worker," said Sandra, in an attempt to comfort him. "You can't help it that they're closing the Plymouth branch."

"The trouble is, there's now a whole load of people in my field looking for jobs here and there's practically nothing in the south-west anyway. I'll probably have to move upcountry."

"There are much better opportunities the nearer you get to London," said Osborn helpfully. "I could put you in touch with some of them perhaps, I know a lot of reps and I've personally dealt with a load of companies over the years."

"Your house – your cat – your fence," said Sandra mournfully, then realised she needed to be positive for Gulliver's sake. "Well, it's a new opportunity," she said brightly. "I'm sure everything happens for a reason." Her voice tailed off, as she wondered if the reason was that he needed to move away from her and Osborn, in order to be completely independent and go-getting and meet a soul mate and make a fortune and achieve all the life tasks that he wouldn't be able to achieve in his home town.

"Shit happens," replied Gulliver inscrutably. "Don't worry, Mother, I'll be OK. I'm a bit unhappy about Happy, though, she was becoming really settled."

"Well yes, but it's too early to worry about anything properly until you know what's happening," said Sandra, worrying about Gulliver's entire future.

"So you're saying I can worry improperly?" asked Gulliver, grimacing. "I'd better go, I suppose. If you could let me know of possible companies that might be interested, Dad, I'd be grateful. Could you take a look at my CV too?"

Somehow or other Christmas Eve had arrived, after weeks of what felt to Sandra like strange times, trying to walk along her own life path whilst being buffeted in all directions by winds that blew against her, trying to push her backwards.

She'd only been able to concentrate sporadically on writing, which meant that her semi-autobiographical novel was progressing very slowly and her inspired writing had come to a temporary halt. So had the gardening until the weather was slightly warmer. She'd managed to finish Caroline's Christmas shopping in time, as well as her own, but Osborn had been forced to take time off work to take Basil and Sybil shopping, as Basil continued to suffer from intermittent angina attacks.

Sandra and sometimes Osborn had also had to feed Happy on occasions while Gulliver went to job interviews at various places around the country. Quite soon, an interview at Fleet resulted in a job offer that Gulliver accepted, to start in January.

Meanwhile, Madeleine had been coping well back at university and apart from some financial problems and one worrying phone call when she'd rung feeling melancholy, she seemed balanced and happy. This was due in no small part, Sandra felt, to the fact that she'd found a new boyfriend. He seemed to be good for Madeleine and somewhat of a steadying influence after the uncertainty of Drew, which admittedly felt like a relief.

Leonard had been for an angiogram, which had involved another day off work for Osborn, to ferry him in and out of hospital. The result of this had caused an emotional shock wave, in that Leonard had been advised to have a second heart bypass operation that included a faulty valve replacement. What with Caroline's sciatica, the atmosphere had been difficult whenever Sandra visited her parents, even to the extent that she'd been insanely glad to have the odd game of *Scribble* to focus on – she felt it was definitely insane to want to play *Scribble* with her mother and some of the games were unquestionably mad.

However, Christmas Eve had arrived, Madeleine was home for two weeks and Gulliver had come to spend the evening with them. Sandra was rather perturbed that Osborn had seemed very stressed when he'd arrived home from work at midday for the Christmas holiday. There was a heaviness about him that wasn't pleasant in the slightest. She hoped that he would soon feel lighter for all their sakes, but mostly his own.

"Would you like a drink?" Sandra asked Gulliver, as he took off his jacket and put it in its usual place, on the floor. "We do have a coat rack, you know!"

"I do know. Did you know I know? What have you got to drink? Actually, I'm driving, tea will be fine."

"Osborn and Maddy, would you like a drink?" asked Sandra, peering around the sitting room door, where they were idly watching the *Only Fools and Asses Christmas Special*.

"I thought we were keeping the alcohol for later," replied Osborn morosely.

"This *is* later. It's Christmas Eve and we bought it to drink – and we deserve to drink it," said Sandra, trying to keep her voice bright.

"It's OK, I'll have tea if you like," said Madeleine, who had obviously caught on to the undertones.

"No, have some alcohol!" said Sandra, her eye twitching. "I'm going to have a shot of *Admiral Morgan* with some Coke – and ice – and lemon!"

"It's all very well getting all festive and free, but the money to buy all this stuff doesn't come from nowhere," said Osborn, frowning and looking thunderous. "I'm the one who has to earn it and the responsibility's all on me. I can't help but be worried when my boss is systematically trying to take away all my teaching and possibly my job and people are dependent on me." He got up and left the room, slamming the door.

"He means me," said Madeleine miserably, as the sound of Osborn's footsteps could be heard thumping up the stairs.

"And me," added Sandra. "It's not true that the responsibility's all his, though, I've always been responsible about money. I've seen to all the bills and made sure our bank balance is OK – sort of – ever since we got married."

"It sounds as if work's getting to him," suggested Gulliver, looking uncomfortable.

"I understand that, but you've got to live your life as best you can, moment by moment and have some enjoyment. How often do the four of us have the chance to spend an evening together? Christmas Eve, too! I budgeted for a bit of alcohol that we don't normally buy. It wasn't as if we were going to get through all of it tonight, for heaven's sake!" Sandra could hear her voice rising in frustration and made an effort to calm down. "Well, we still have the evening. I expect Dad will join us a bit later. Didn't you want to play a game, Maddy?"

"I did as well," said Gulliver. "I can't bear the thought of watching TV on Christmas Eve, it goes against the grain. That's a thought, I might have a tot of whisky when I get home."

"It feels a bit tense to play a game now though," said Madeleine uncertainly. "Should you go up and see if Dad's OK, Mumsie?"

"I suppose so," replied Sandra, knowing that Osborn was most likely either to ignore her or turn on her at this stage. "I'll make some tea and take him up a mug."

Ten minutes later, she returned downstairs, having spoken to Osborn to no avail. He had been lying in bed in the dark and hadn't replied to her question if he was OK. It was obvious he wasn't OK, of course, but she was so aware of Gulliver and Madeleine downstairs feeling awkward. She was also fighting her own anger about the missed opportunity of a simple but happy evening together that he had taken away from them all. She'd placed the tea on his bedside table and left the room, refusing to be defeated by negativity.

"He's gone to bed," she said in reply to Madeleine's questioning eyebrows, although the rest of Madeleine listened as well. "So! What's it to be? *The Crazy Weather Game? Monotony? Clueless? The Game of Your Life? Obuggerit?*"

"Scribble?" suggested Gulliver. "Mother! Don't throw that fluffy Christmas cat at me!"

## CHAPTER 19

Christmas Day arrived as Christmas Days do. That is, like any other day, but loaded with a strange anticipation of fun, angst, food and presents that may or may not hit the spot. Sandra awoke with an annoying tickle on her chest, but it wasn't Osborn, as Osborn had already awoken with a lingering sense of depression that he found hard to shift. However, Madeleine did a good job of jollyng them along and by the time they'd opened their presents and presented themselves in a presentable manner at Gulliver's house, they were feeling reasonably Christmassy. For the present, anyway.

"I wish you'd come to our house this morning to open presents with us," mused Sandra, as Gulliver made them all some coffee. "It wasn't the same without you."

"It's OK, I was happy with Happy," replied Gulliver. "She's pleased to see you, she's gone a bit mad!"

"She's a very mental moggy aren't you, you beautiful pussy?" purred Madeleine, putting her face close to Happy's and stroking her repeatedly. "Atchoo! You're such a pretty cat. If I was a man cat, I'd definitely be after you."

"Lil Sis!" remonstrated Gulliver. "I'm getting a bit worried about you."

"I've missed her," said Madeleine, kissing Happy on the top of her head. "Do you know what you're going to do with her yet?"

"Auntie Kirsty said she might take her, seeing she has a few cats already," replied Gulliver, "which would be a weight off my mind."

"That's good," said Osborn, still unsmiling. "I suppose we'll be seeing her and Karla tomorrow at my parents' house."

"Ah, the Boxing Day Rebellion," said Gulliver, grimacing "Well, I always feel rebellious there, anyway."

"So do I," chorused three other voices, excluding the cat's.

"Today's Christmas Day, though," said Gulliver with what seemed to Sandra like an air of excitement. "I have a special present for you all. It's a sort of thank you for helping me out with things – and also because I know you've always wanted to go there."

"Where?" asked Sandra and Osborn simultaneously.

"Colorado, to see Dolores and her family," replied Gulliver, his eyes twinkling. "I'm going to pay for our flight tickets."

"What, there and back?" squeaked Sandra agitatedly.

"What, me as well?" asked Madeleine hopefully.

"What, you're not joking?" asked Osborn incredulously.

"Yes! No! All four of us, there and back and I'm not joking!" replied Gulliver, unable to stop himself from grinning like a Happy cat.

The Boxing Day Rebellion was well underway, with the four Dullkettles, Lawrence, Kirsty, Karla, Caroline and Leonard sitting around with glazed expressions as the lunchtime buffet was being placed upon the table.

"I was wondering," announced Gulliver, who'd earlier secreted a bottle of rum about his person to consume with his morning coffee, "if a glassy-eyed expression is a glazed gaze?"

"So someone who wears glasses and has a glassy-eyed expression has a double glazed gaze?" asked Osborn, who'd also partaken of Gulliver's secreted bottle of rum.

"What about someone with a glass eye?" asked Lawrence, who'd likewise indulged in the secreted rum bottle.

"A single glazed glaze," responded Madeleine, who'd been persuaded without much persuading to participate in the rum sharing.

"What about if someone's wearing sunglasses?" asked Leonard, who'd been delighted to be offered a share in the secreted rum.

"They just see through glass darkly," offered Sandra, who'd also had a hand in emptying the secreted rum.

"Gulliver, you know that secreted rum," said Lawrence thoughtfully, "does that mean you're leaking the stuff?"

"That's not funny, Uncle," retorted Madeleine. "It would mean – I don't know what it would mean. Are you OK, Dad? You weren't OK yesterday."

"I'm fine," replied Osborn. "Work's getting to me, Bill Bustard is a right bastard."

"A left bastard as well, I should think," remarked Gulliver, glancing over at his grandparents to see if they were listening.

"Lunch is ready!" called Basil suddenly. "Come on, up to the table and less of the language, please, there are ladies present."

"There are?" Sandra giggled to Madeleine, who giggled in return.

"I can hear you two," said Caroline. "I'm a lady!"

"So am I," joined in Sybil, adding the last of the plates of food to the table. "Where's Kirsty?"

"She just nipped outside," replied Karla. "She left something in the car."

"She's always going outside to get things from the car," remarked Sybil. "Her memory must be like a sieve."

"Or else it's all gone up in smoke," said Lawrence, raising an eyebrow.

"She gave up smoking years ago," said Basil darkly. "Ouch, my chest, I need to sit down."

"Come on Leonard," said Sybil. "Help yourself to some duck pâté, or how about some turkey and ham pie?"

"Is there anything vegetarian?" asked Osborn.

"Yes, there's a vegetable, potato and chicken crumble," replied Sybil, "or a vegetable and bacon risotto."

"Er – OK. Sandra and I will just have some roast potatoes and carrots and – any cheese?" Osborn scanned the table hopefully.

"I need to lose some weight anyway," said Sandra, wondering if there were enough roast potatoes to go around. "I bet you're glad you're back to eating meat, Maddy."

"You were very difficult last year," said Basil from his chair. "You hardly ate a thing."

"What shall we do after lunch?" asked Sandra brightly, feeling as if she would like to thwack Basil lightly across the head – and possibly not very lightly.

"I've brought a game with me," said Kirsty, coming in from outside with a pall of cigarette smoke clinging to her. "It's a murder mystery on a CD and we all play different parts. It should be fun."

"I'm not sure it's in the spirit of the birth of our Lord," said Basil doubtfully.

"Oh, come on, Dad," wheedled Kirsty, "it's just a bit of fun."

It wasn't quite so much fun as complete mayhem when the game was attempted over an hour later. Sandra began to sound a little hoarse from laughing, due to hysteria and also yesterday's tickle on her chest that she was trying to forget. However, a conclusion was mirthfully reached and the older faction settled down to chat sporadically amongst themselves, in between closing their eyes for a few moments, while the middle faction and the younger faction played cards.

"Come on Karla, you join in as well," said Kirsty to a reluctant Karla.

"Oh, if I must," responded Karla gamely.

"I had a taxing problem," Leonard was saying to Basil, "but luckily I know someone from *Age Worry* and they sorted me out."

"I had a taxing problem with my waterworks," butted in Sybil, "but the doctor sorted me out."

"I don't have any taxing problems," said Caroline airily, "I let Len see to all that."

"I had a taxi problem last week," said Basil. "They didn't come at the right time, so I rang them up again and gave them what for."

"What dear?" asked Sybil vaguely. "What did you give them for what?"

"Sandra, what are you doing!" expostulated Lawrence, as the *Ono* game gathered speed. "I got rid of two of those and you just gave me one!"

"Pardon?" asked Gulliver, grinning. "Hey Maddy, that plus-4 you gave me has knocked me for six!"

"It's all right for you," said Kirsty, "I haven't been!"

"Try Pennasods," replied Karla. "*Ono!*"

"*Ono?* Oh no!" moaned Osborn. "I've got at least 20 cards in my hand, I'm losing disgracefully."

"You'll get over it, Dad," said Maddy. "*Ono!*"

"Oh no, not you as well!" said Sandra. "Oh, me too! *Ono!*"

"Who's winning?" asked Lawrence, looking enquiringly at Madeleine, who was bravely keeping score.

"Mum's top and Dad's bottom," replied Madeleine.

"Gross," said Gulliver nonchalantly.

"Out!" said Karla to a cacophony of groaning.

"It didn't go too badly yesterday after all, did it?" remarked Sandra to Osborn, as they sat sipping tea after lunch. "Oh, the phone..."

"I'll get it," replied Osborn. "I have a strange feeling."

"I have plenty of those," said Sandra, as Osborn stood up awkwardly and spilt tea down his new Christmas top. "I'll answer the phone, you see to yourself."

To her surprise, it was Lawrence, sounding extremely upset. From the tremor in his voice, it was obvious that he was close to tears.

"I'm sorry to bother you with this," he was saying, "but I've got to talk to someone about it."

"What is it?" asked Sandra, trying her best to sound calm and concerned, while actually feeling unsure and scared about what he was going to say.

"I just had an awful phone call from Kirsty, ranting and raving at me about how awful I am to Mum and Dad..."

"I thought it went quite well yesterday?" offered Sandra, as Lawrence paused to steady his voice.

"Yesterday was a false pretence," replied Lawrence. "Kirsty accused me of making Dad ill because I don't go to see them enough and when I do see them, I upset them by the way I am with Dad. Well, the truth is, it's the way he is with me! He's continuously making sly little digs all the time about me being homosexual – which I'm not, as it happens. He was outside the door when I came out of the bathroom yesterday and he called me a raving queer – again."

"Shit!" Sandra couldn't stop herself from exclaiming aloud.

"Yes, it is. I wondered if you realised what he's actually like underneath the religious veneer. Just because I never married. I had the chance, but do you know what stopped me? It was the thought of introducing her to them!"

"I'm so sorry. I've heard your mother make comments in the past about you being a bachelor and saying you need a woman to look after you, which is complete nonsense – but what your father says is dreadful."

"He says I'm a misogynist."

"I'm surprised he knows the word. I'm sorry, I don't mean to belittle anything. They just live in their own little world and don't understand you."

"No, it's worse than that, he's vindictive and always has been. I reckon he's got at Kirsty and she's stupid enough to believe him, but she's got no right to ring me up and accuse me of what she did."

"Absolutely. Lawrence, here's Osborn, he's making signs for me to hand you over to him, OK?"

"OK. Thank you, Sandra."

As Sandra handed the receiver to Osborn and heard Osborn responding to what must have been Lawrence repeating what he'd just told her, she felt a mixture of emotions for her in-law family. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed that Basil was trying to manipulate his family and Kirsty was displacing her own guilt about hardly ever seeing her parents on to Lawrence.

When Osborn replaced the receiver, he sighed and looked at Sandra tiredly.

"He's really upset, isn't he," she said redundantly.

"I don't think I've ever known him so upset," replied Osborn. "I don't know if you heard, but I've arranged for Lawrence and me to go around to Mum and Dad's while Kirsty's still there and have a family discussion, to try to get things out into the open."

"Do you think that'll work?" asked Sandra doubtfully. "I hope it does, I really do, but there are so many undercurrents that have been flowing very deeply over the years. I really think Kirsty was wrong to accuse Lawrence like that, though – and it's you again, trying to sort everything out."

"Look, it's no good you getting upset about it, I owe it to Lawrence and myself to try to get to the bottom of all this." Osborn's voice was decidedly cold.

"I wasn't getting upset," replied Sandra, hurt at the way he seemed to have shut himself off from her. "I'm on your side and I've been on your side ever since I met your crazy, mixed up family, so don't make it about me!" She attempted to ignore her sudden rush of anger, but banged her elbow on the kitchen cabinet. "Ouch! Would you like some fresh tea?"

Two days later, Sandra and Madeleine were taking a walk to the local fruit shop, while Osborn and Lawrence were at Basil and Sybil's for the family discussion.

"I hope they all get on OK this afternoon," said Madeleine, voicing what Sandra was thinking. "Dad's seemed very tense lately, especially about money."

"I know," replied Sandra. "I don't think it helped me having new varifocal glasses right before Christmas, but I couldn't help it that my old glasses broke. Then my wretched tooth broke and I had to pay for root canal work. I'm falling to bits! He was bad enough before this family fiasco, so I hope it doesn't make it worse."

"At least you don't have to worry about me now," said Madeleine, glancing at Sandra. "I promise I'll be very careful with money, I know finances have never been easy for you both."

"That's true," sighed Sandra. "I still feel guilty that I never contributed to the family coffers. I did try with that relief library job that went nowhere, though, not to mention my degree that could have led to a job if I hadn't been in a complete mess with anxiety after..."

"Mumsie, you shouldn't feel guilty!" said Madeleine vehemently. "If it hadn't been for you being at home most of the time when I came home from school every day, I'm positive that we wouldn't have been anywhere near as close as we are now – and I know for a fact that it was that closeness that enabled you to help me through anorexia."

"Thank you, darling," replied Sandra, very close to tears. "I must confess that at some deep level I do feel I did the right thing. Life is so strange."

"I bumped into Drew the other day when I was waiting for the bus to go into Plymouth," confessed Madeleine suddenly. "It felt quite awkward, as if we were being polite to each other."

"At least you weren't being rude to each other," said Sandra warily. "I'm glad you feel more settled now with your new boyfriend. It feels like you've moved on?"

"Ye-es," replied Madeleine as they arrived at the fruit shop and stood looking at the outside display. "Nobody can stay in the same place forever. Shall we go in, then?"

"How did it go?" asked Sandra, when Osborn and Lawrence returned. "I'll put the kettle on, you're both looking very tired and drained. You were gone a long time."

"It all went pear-shaped," replied Osborn, flopping down on the sofa. "It started off OK, but when Lawrence began to ask questions that Dad didn't want to answer, Dad suddenly said he had chest pains. Mum was all set to ring for an ambulance, but I had my suspicions about the timing and how he was behaving."

"I thought it was a bit too coincidental, but I was glad you stepped in," said Lawrence honestly, looking at Osborn.

"Kirsty didn't help, by saying she'd call the ambulance herself," recalled Osborn. "I think she knew I meant it by the tone of my voice when I told her to go away and leave it to me."

"So how was your father?" asked Sandra, forgetting to put teabags in the teapot. "Was he really just putting it on?"

"Oh yes," replied Osborn. "I told him to calm down and got him to breathe more slowly and he seemed to give in and did exactly what I said. It was a bit like a panic attack, I think."

"A very timely panic attack," said Lawrence bitterly. "I know for sure now that he'll never be honest with me and he never had any intention of being so today. Did you notice that Mum looked as if she was about to speak on a couple of occasions, but Dad shut her up?"

"Yes, I did. Dad's bullied her for so long, she can't see any other way of behaving. And despite Kirsty once being the apple of her father's eye, he still manipulates her too."

"He tried to bully me once," remembered Sandra. "It was something about my dad. I was angry with what he said, so I looked him in the eye and told him the real situation. It was none of his business anyway. I didn't give a fig what he thought of me, I had to stand up for what was right."

"Good for you," remarked Lawrence. "Unfortunately, when I tried to stand up for what was right with my father, he just used to hit me."

"Me too," said Osborn. "The last time he hit me was when I was 17 and I just kept getting up again. In the end, Mum came out of the kitchen and told him that if he hit me again, she'd leave him."

"I thought I heard about that once on the grapevine," said Lawrence. "I'd already left home when that happened."

"So she did stand up to him – and on your behalf," said Sandra to Osborn. "You must feel good about that?"

"It kind of makes up for the time she went for me with a leather strap," said Osborn sadly. "Look, all this old talk is driving me bananas, is that tea ready yet?"

"Yes," replied Sandra, beginning to pour. "Oops – hold on, I'll just add the tea. So have things been left OK with your parents and Kirsty?"

"Hardly," replied Osborn. "I see you made it to the fruit shop today, those satsumas look good. Help yourself, Lawrence. We'll have this and then we'll go to Gulliver's and order some takeaway. I'm glad he's invited us over this evening, we can have an evening of normality. Well, as normal as it gets with Gulliver, I suppose, since he's as nutty as a fruitcake."

## CHAPTER 20

The first two months of 2002 had been and gone, leaving some changes in their wake. Gulliver had started his job for the phone company *Bangia*, living in a flat in Fleet. He had taken Happy to live with Kirsty and Karla and after only five days of putting his house on the market, had been offered £15,000 more than he'd paid for it a year previously. By the end of February, the contract had been signed and Gulliver's material ties with his home town came to an end.

In the middle of the month, Sandra and Osborn had been awoken a little before midnight one Saturday by a phone call from Sybil to inform them that Basil was in hospital yet again. Angioplasty was recommended, but when the procedure started, it was discovered that his blood vessels were too fragile to continue. He was sent home to

make the most of the rest of his life, which included ringing Sandra and Osborn very frequently to tell them all about his aches, pains, twinges and itches and to point out (very pointedly) how he never went out any more.

After being recommended in December for a second bypass and faulty valve operation, Leonard had been advised on a further visit to a cardiac consultant that it was unadvisable to have an operation at the age of 78. This had brought a sort of strange but uneasy relief to the family, but Leonard himself had seemed to accept it and carried on with his life more or less as he had before.

Otherwise, life seemed to settle down slightly. Madeleine took her half-year exams with pleasing enough results and Lawrence seemed to accept that nothing would change with his parents. Caroline's sciatica faded into the background and she once again resumed activities with her various social groups.

Osborn continued to be stressed at work and often came home muttering and expostulating about Bill Bustard and the ever-changing policies of the university. He still met with the Radio Amateur group, but Sandra noticed that their excursions were now fewer and when the current group of final year students left the university in early summer, it was likely to come to a natural close.

In between life with two sets of ageing parents who had gardens and countless minor problems (not to mention her own and Osborn's garden and countless minor problems) Sandra managed to fit in some writing, both of the semi-autobiographical and the inspirational kind. She and Osborn also continued with their healing course and made frequent visits to Terry and Kerry's house for a variety of workshops, as well as becoming members of a newly-formed Awareness Circle.

They were currently sitting in the Awareness Circle on a Tuesday evening in early March, practising psychometry, which in this instance involved everyone being handed an item that Terry had collected surreptitiously from each of them on the way in. They were in the process of going around the circle, intuiting psychically from the object what it conveyed to them and whose it was.

"I would say this was a greatly loved object," said Claire, turning a pendulum on a neck chain over and over in her hands. "I sense quite a history of searching and strength – maybe strong words? I feel that the owner is someone who won't give up easily and will search wherever is necessary, no matter how unlikely. So, I would say this is perhaps Rod's?"

"It's mine all right!" exclaimed Rodney. "I lost the bloody thing for ages and there were some strong words, I can tell you. I didn't want to give up looking for it because it cost quite a bit. I had trouble, even when I dowsed for it. I found it in the compost heap in the end."

"Well done, Claire," said Terry, picking up another object from his secret supply under a tea towel on a small table beside him. "Now, who will tell me whose this is? Osborn?"

"Ah," said Osborn, fingering the key that Terry had handed him. "A key – hmm – I think I sense female energy? I'm seeing darkness..."

"Shall I turn up the light, Osborn?" asked Kerry mischievously.

"No, it's darkness from the past," continued Osborn, lost in his extra-sensory perception. "It's as if the key helps the past darkness to change to light – but I'm not sure whose it is." He looked around the group. "Wanda?"

"You're right," replied Wanda, smiling at Osborn with her mysterious blue eyes. "This is the key to my front door. When I moved to my current house in Cornwall from upcountry, it felt as though I'd left a lot of darkness behind me, but now I'm living in the light."

"That's really good, Wanda – and Osborn too," said Terry encouragingly, amid murmurs of approval. "OK, the next object is this one and I'll hand it to Sandra."

"Oh! Thank you." Sandra gazed at the smooth, pebble shaped piece of heaven-knew-what mineral that Terry had given her. "I – umm – I'm trying to think what this is. Could it be haematite?" She tried in vain to think of other names she knew.

"I don't think you can get pink haematite," said Claire kindly.

"Oh! Of course not. Possibly fluoride, then?"

"Er – toothpaste fluoride?" Kerry's eyes were twinkling.

"Oh, I meant fluorite! Well, whatever it is, it feels almost comforting, but exciting too. I feel as if it's travelled well. I don't know who it belongs to, though." Sandra scanned the group, remembering whose objects had already been identified. "Could it perhaps could be Leo's? Del's? Angelica's? Kerry's?"

"Which one, dear?" Terry smiled encouragingly.

"Leo's?"

"No, it's not mine," replied Leo, smiling sympathetically at Sandra.

"OK. Kerry's?"

"No, I'm afraid not," smiled Kerry. "I wish it was, it's interesting."

"Well, I have a choice of two, then!" joked Sandra, feeling her embarrassment levels rising. "Angelica's?"

"The angels of discernment are not with you tonight, my darling," replied Angelica seriously.

"It must be Del's," said Sandra, feeling a hot flush erupt throughout her entire body.

"It is indeed," responded Del. "I use this lovely rhodonite palm stone to help me with past life regressions. People tend to be a bit anxious and it helps to calm them into a more meditative state."

"There's something else that would be good for that," said Terry, frowning slightly. "I can't think what it's called, but I'm sure it would be beneficial. Sodalite?"

"I'm sorry?" exclaimed Del. "Only joking, you're right, I use sodalite also, it's brilliant. It clears away old mental patterns, harmonises the conscious and subconscious, brings inner peace and helps us to understand our true feeling, to name but a few benefits."

"That's my sort of stone," said Sandra aloud without thinking. "Even its name. I so need a bit of sodalite in my life."

Easter had arrived, bringing with it Gulliver, Madeleine and unnecessary but delectable amounts of chocolate.

"I *really* must lose some weight," said Sandra, as she gazed at the Easter Egg her parents had given her. "This looks lovely, I can't wait to open it."

"Me too," said Gulliver, "but I'll be good and open my own instead of yours."

"What? Oh, you're being you." Sandra looked at Madeleine, who hadn't said anything about her Egg. Although Madeleine was so much better and had been eating normal amounts for many months, it seemed like chocolate was always a potential danger zone.

"I'm not really into chocolate," said Osborn, "but I do like a bit now and again."

"Too much information," replied Gulliver, grimacing. "My knee's still a bit sore, but I really enjoyed that walk on Dartmoor yesterday."

"So did I," said Osborn. "We must do it more often Sandra, we used to enjoy it."

"Not again!" expostulated Gulliver. "Do you think I'm going to have dodgy knees?"

"They'll match your dodgy brain," replied Madeleine. "What have you done to your knee?"

"I knelt on it," replied Gulliver. "I might have done it during that extreme game of squash I had."

"I could give you some healing later," offered Osborn conversationally. Sandra looked up in surprise. Although she was interested in the healing course, she never exactly looked forward to course evenings, whereas Osborn seemed to have greeted it like an old friend. He'd even started to go into work early each morning to meditate in the office before anyone else was around.

"Is that what you do with your Druid friends?" asked Gulliver, looking slightly askance. "I'm not sure."

"The offer's there," replied Osborn, as Caroline appeared from the kitchen, looking very hot and agitated. Leonard was still doing battle with the cooker, from the various sounds making their way into the sitting room.

"It's almost ready," announced Caroline. "Sit up at the table, you mustn't let it go cold."

Thirty minutes later, they had all finished a lovely roast meal, but Sandra was rather concerned about Caroline's still deeply flushed cheeks and Leonard's look of exhaustion.

"You really needn't have asked us here for lunch," she ventured. "I know how much it takes it out of you and I feel rather guilty."

"We've always done it," replied Leonard, smiling tiredly. "It's traditional."

"It's the dishing up I don't like," said Caroline. "What's the alternative?"

"We could cook for you?" offered Sandra, hoping the answer would be negative and then feeling selfish for hoping.

"Oh no," said Leonard. "Maybe we could go out to eat next time, like we did once before – although it was so crowded and the potatoes weren't a bit like mine. I don't think they parboiled them."

"The vegetables were rubbish too," remembered Caroline. "I hate hard vegetables."

"There's nothing like a home-cooked meal," said Leonard, sighing. "I think I'll just go and sit in my chair, if you'll excuse me."

"I'll do the dishes," exclaimed Sandra, jumping up.

"I'll help you!" came the voices of Osborn, Gulliver and Madeleine.

Ten minutes later, Osborn was washing dishes, Sandra and Madeleine were wiping them and Gulliver was attempting to put them away.

"Did you want to escape to the kitchen, like I did?" asked Sandra conspiratorially. "You don't normally all jump at the chance to do dishes."

"It doesn't feel like it used to with Grandma and Grandad," replied Madeleine. "It's as if the spark's gone out of them both."

"Yes, you're right," said Sandra. "It feels as if life is moving on inexorably and we all have to move along our life course whether we want to or not."

"You sound as if you don't enjoy life at times, Mumsie," observed Madeleine shrewdly.

"Oh, I do enjoy it," replied Sandra, trying hard to think of what she enjoyed. "I enjoyed going to see *Lord of the Balls* at the cinema – and I enjoyed watching *The Pop Idol Factor* – and I enjoyed our weekend with you at Fleet, Gulliver – and I always enjoy being together with you all." She smiled at Madeleine and Gulliver. "You know I miss you both like part of my own heart's missing, but you're moving on into your own lives, which is the way it should be and I just want you both so much to be happy!"

"We want you to be happy too," said Madeleine, giving Sandra a hug. She disengaged gently and gazed at Osborn, still with his hands in the washing up bowl, washing dishes vigorously. "You too, Dad, you're quiet. Are you happy? Do you enjoy life?"

"Me? Ye-es, on the whole I do. I don't like the politics at work, or the way Bill Bustard's systematically trying to take away my teaching, which is the one thing I enjoy the most – and I don't like the way my parents have treated us over the years, especially me, to be honest – and I don't like having the financial burden I feel I have – and I don't like being so tired a lot of the time – and I don't like not having enough time to do what I'd like to do – but yes, I'm happy and I enjoy life."

"What do you actually enjoy doing?" persisted Madeleine, frowning curiously. It was something to do with the way she was placing her eyebrows.

"I enjoy doing the healing course and going to Terry and Kerry's for the workshops and the Awareness Circle..." started Osborn, splashing his hands around purposefully in the washing up bowl.

"What would you like to do if you had enough time?" asked Sandra, noticing he had failed to mention enjoying anything the two of them did exclusively together.

"I'd like to travel a bit more and do more photography and I still have this hankering to fly. I'd like to do some more landscape gardening too, because I really enjoyed doing our garden. I think what I'd really like to do, though, is to give up work and pursue the more spiritual side of life."

"You would?" asked Sandra, somewhat incredulously, her heart sinking without her consent, because his wishes for the future were far more outreaching than her own.

"Yes. Any more dishes? I'll just give the cooker a wipe. How about you, Gulliver and Maddy?"

"No, I don't need a wipe," replied Gulliver. "I'm fine. Work's going well, I enjoyed that trip to London. Did I tell you I've bought the tickets for America? I should say Denver, because that's where we'll be landing. Bryony said it's cool over there – well, hot in July when we'll be going. I can't wait!"

"Bryony Stanpool?" asked Sandra. "You're still seeing her then?"

"Yes, we keep in touch," replied Gulliver enigmatically. "What about you, Lil Sis, are you enjoying life?"

"I'm not enjoying Economics," replied Madeleine swiftly. "German's OK, though, sort of. Student life is fine, apart from the lack of money, but I'm just glad that I feel better."

"How about the boyfriend?" asked Gulliver. "I don't know where any of these dishes go, I've had to make a pile."

"He's fine," replied Madeleine. "He's asked me to visit his place in Sussex in the summer, before I go to Germany."

"Sussex is a nice place," replied Sandra, her heart sinking for a second time at the thought that Madeleine's year in Germany was drawing ever closer. "Have we all finished here? I guess it's time to go in and play some *Ono*. Oh no! What are all these dishes doing here, I didn't see them! I hope none of them are broken..."

"What about us?" Sandra found herself asking, as Osborn noisily shut the wardrobe door while they were preparing for bed that evening. "I noticed today that you didn't specifically mention anything you enjoyed about us?"

"What do you mean?" asked Osborn in an irritated voice as he got into bed. "I mentioned things that we do together, like the healing course and the Awareness Circle."

"Yes, I know," replied Sandra, not wanting to deepen his irritation. "I kind of had this idea that if we had more time, we'd spend quite a bit of it together – just us, like we used to?"

"Of course I'd like to spend more time with you, that's taken as read."

"Nothing's taken as read," said Sandra quietly, getting into bed herself. 'Not since your affair,' she was thinking, despite her best intentions otherwise.

"Look, this seems to me to be about your own insecurity and I need to sleep. If you're thinking things, they're in your own head. Goodnight."

Sandra found herself unable to answer. She turned over away from him and listened as his breathing gradually became slower and deeper. She found tears escaping from her eyes and tried to pull out a tissue from the box as noiselessly as possible, in order to wipe her eyes. Life wasn't the same somehow without the comfort of *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*, which appeared to have completely gone off the market.

'Sometimes,' she thought sadly, 'it seems to me that I'm always considering you, even in little ways like trying not to make a noise with a tissue, whereas you seem to expend so much energy considering others and then you're far too tired to consider me! The balance seems wrong somewhere – or is it me being self-centred, or expecting too much?

'I know your family never taught you not to bang doors shut, or stomp up the stairs in hard-bottomed slippers, or talk loudly on the phone beside me when I'm actually in the middle of doing something that requires a bit of quiet, but I've tried very hard to tell you nicely that these things really annoy me.' She dabbed a tear from her left eye.

'When you told me to face the boiling kettle away from the kitchen cupboard because it would eventually warp the wood, I took that on board and I face the flaming kettle away from the flaming cupboard every flaming time. I have to do that, because *you don't!* You told me to do something and then you fail to do it yourself, how annoying is that? When you tell me not to do things, or to do things a certain way and explain the reason why, I do my *best* to remember...' She dabbed a tear from her right eye.

'As for the supermarket bag packing, don't let me get started on that! You just take over completely. When it was all coming down the conveyor belt thick and fast that time and I packed some things in a bag to help, you actually asked me what I was doing! How do you think I felt when the checkout girl heard that? How do you think it affects my self-confidence, which for some reason has always been quite dodgy anyway?' She wiped another tear from her left eye.

'Is it that you simply don't think of me like you once used to, in what seems like another lifetime? Am I hankering for the past? God no, I'm not – no way! Well, maybe just that little way, when I knew I was important in your life, right there in my heart and deep down in my bones. Now I'm really not so sure. What I would like is for us both to move forward into – I don't know. It's been so crazy for so long, I honestly don't know!' She wiped another tear from her right eye.

'I think I'm afraid that you'll go zooming on ahead of me into this spiritual healing thing and get involved with loads of people, so that I'm left behind on the periphery of your life. I can't deal with lots of people like you can. I'm fundamentally a quiet, reserved, reflective person and all these years I've spent trying to be more extraverted and joining groups have been incredibly difficult. So many people seem to want me to be who I'm not.

'Well, I'm not doing that any more, I'm too tired. God, what a farce – all these years I've been trying to find out who I really am by doing things, when all the time I simply needed to listen to myself!' She stuck her head under the duvet and attempted to blow her nose as quietly as possible.

'I'm sure it's all been for a purpose, though. Everything is learning material, everything adds to the whole, everything is – oh, thank you!' Osborn had turned over in his sleep and elbowed her painfully in the chest. She put her head out of the duvet again and blew her nose as loudly as she could.

## CHAPTER 21

Sandra was sitting with her cousin Belinda in *The Coffee Bean* in Plymouth city centre on a late May morning, ensconced in a corner seat as they talked over the past few months since their last meeting.

"I'm so glad you're my cousin," said Belinda reflectively, glancing in the mirror above the alcove. "It feels really good that you accept me as I am."

"It works both ways," replied Sandra. "That means a lot to me too. It's so ridiculous really, when people want you to change from who you actually are."

"I know. As if you can be anyone else! I feel as if I've talked so much about my family, though. How about yours? How's Osborn?"

"He tends to be a bit stressed and low lately. I feel sorry for him, but I really wish he'd see the good side of his life and be a bit more positive about everything. You know, see the doughnut instead of the hole. It's very difficult to gauge him sometimes, because one day he's all upbeat and the next day he's all depressed. He definitely enjoys the healing course we're both doing, though."

"It's lovely that you're doing it together, I'm sure it does you both good. Is work still getting to him? I know what it's like to have a horrible boss."

"Yes, work doesn't help at all. Still, we're due to go to Colorado at the end of next month and stay with my penfriend since childhood, Dolores."

"That's really exciting! Are you looking forward to it?"

"Yes and no. The closer it gets, the more frightened I become of the flying, so I try not to think about it. Dolores is excited, she keeps sending Osborn and me emails about all sorts of things, like asking where we'd like to visit and advising us to drink lots of water when we get there, because it's so hot and dry. I wish we could just translocate there and back without having to fly."

"Isn't that funny, I've never flown and I really want to, it's one of my ambitions."

"I wish you could take my place on the plane! Life is so peculiar, we all want different things and we so often don't fully appreciate what we *do* have. It's that doughnut and hole situation again. Actually – would you like a doughnut?"

Ten minutes later, Sandra and Belinda had finished wiping the sugar from their fingers and were sipping a fresh cappuccino.

"I shouldn't have had that," said Belinda. "I enjoyed it, though. How's Gulliver?"

"He seems fine. Work's OK, he's made friends and he's really excited that we're all going to Colorado at his instigation. He came home for the weekend recently, it was lovely to spend some time with him again. I do miss them both."

"How's Madeleine?"

"She seems fine too," replied Sandra. "I'm so proud of her for going back to Cardiff and retaking her second year. Gulliver drove the four of us and Lawrence to *Barbados Inn* on Easter Monday and she was really happy, it was great! Mind you, I'm sure she's not quite as happy now, because it's exam time."

"Oh dear. I always dreaded exams at school, I was useless. I still am."

"Belinda, you're *not* useless at all! You're lovely and so many people love you for who you are. We're all good at different things. You're so friendly with everyone you meet, whereas my tendency is to avoid people."

"Now you're putting yourself down! I know your mum and dad always look forward to seeing you, Auntie Lily said so when I rang her the other day."

"Ye-es, that's good, but I do feel like a workhorse there sometimes. I've recently been pruning an old forsythia in their front garden yet again and it's such hard work. I suggested that it was in the wrong place and it was only going to get harder to look after, but Mum said she likes the yellow flowers in spring. I didn't half scratch myself with it on Tuesday. Their heathers are really out of hand as well, but Mum's been a bit stressed and depressed lately. I'm sorry, I'm moaning my head off."

"That's OK, you sound a bit tired. I hope your mum's OK. Maybe she worries about your dad. How is he?"

"He seems a bit tired too, but he tries to keep up with life as he knows it." Sandra wondered whether to tell Belinda that a few nights ago, she'd found herself penning what could only be termed a tribute to Leonard, which had somehow seemed to enter her head, giving her no rest until she'd written it out.

"I hope he's OK, he and your mum were always kind to me. I'm hoping my sister doesn't try to get to them, like she's tried to with other family members."

"What do you mean? Has Hetty been saying things about you again?"

"Yes, she's been what you might call really stirring it, so goodness knows what people think of me." Belinda looked downcast.

"Belinda, anyone who actually knows you, also knows that you're simply not capable of being mean or horrible, or whatever the hell it is she says. You always put everybody above yourself. In fact, you go a bit too much the other way sometimes!"

"Thank you, Sandra, you're a kind person."

"I'm not kind – well, I hope I am – but I mean that I'm being truthful. Honestly, if anybody believes in her distorted lies at face value without checking anything out with you directly, they're just not worth it."

"It's good to hear you say that. Sometimes I think I'm a horrible person at heart to think the thoughts that I have sometimes."

"You're human – and I know what you mean about having uncomfortable thoughts, because I certainly find myself saying awful things to Mum in my head when we're playing *Scribble*." Sandra smiled and decided not to elaborate, remembering that Caroline was a much-loved auntie of Belinda's. "Families are such fun, aren't they," she said, managing somehow to grimace with a smile.

"We must have another get-together soon," said Gina, as she and Sandra finished their mugs of tea in Gina's sitting room and Sandra prepared to go. "I seem to have been so busy with life lately. Now Reece is 20 months old, Adam and Sarah rely on me more and more to look after him. I love it, but he kind of takes over a bit."

"I wonder if our generation's a bit soft sometimes, although it doesn't feel right to be other than what we are. What I mean is that we're expected to look after our parents and I'm not saying that's wrong, except perhaps for the expectation that we'll drop everything in our own life at a moment's notice to go and sort them out. That's been our

experience with Osborn's parents, anyway and now mine seem to expect me to do everything they can't do – or can't be bothered to do. At the same time on the other end of the scale, we have our children who've been a lot more reluctant than we ever were to grow up and be responsible for themselves."

"I know what you mean about children."

"Yes, I realise your experience of parents is different to mine, with your mum and dad already gone and I'm always aware that I still have my parents. That kind of makes me feel even guiltier when I'm moaning about them!"

"Don't worry, Sandra, we're all dealt a different hand in the card game of life."

"Aren't we just. It was as if we were expected to leave home, marry and take complete responsibility for our own life, which I was quite happy to do at 18, to be honest. Well, I was happy at the time, although I *have* wondered on and off if it was too young. Our children's generation, though, seem to have had a completely different message from society and the media, to enjoy themselves because they're young. The trouble is that being young is continuing until they're in their thirties, which means that people of our age have both ends of the scale tending to lean on them. We're caught in the middle, which is exactly how I feel – trapped by responsibility for others. God, I'm sorry Gina, I've really ranted!"

"Don't be sorry, it makes a change from me ranting. I must admit it seems that Andy and I feel a lot freer than you do now our parents have gone. We've got another generation on the scene, though, demanding our help and attention. Just wait till you have grandchildren..."

"I must confess I don't feel ready for that, because both Osborn and I feel so weighed down by the oldies. Mind you, if a grandchild happened, I know we'd be absolutely delighted. The thing is, I don't *mind* doing everything I can for Gulliver and Madeleine, because it's a rough old world out there. In fact, it feels absolutely *right* to be there for them. If we hadn't had a really good relationship with Madeleine, heaven knows what would have happened and I'm so utterly glad to the core of my being that we helped her through and will continue to do so for as long as we can. Sorry, I'm still ranting."

"Carry on, don't stop the flow!"

"The thing is that I'm positive it didn't feel that way for our parents when we were growing up. Osborn's brother left home at 15 and Osborn at 17 and there was no emotional or physical help forthcoming for them, it was a case of their parents having got them off their hands. As for me, when I left home at 18, my mother had an affair and told me as if it was a great sacrifice that she'd waited until I'd got married so that Osborn could take care of me. In other words, I was off *her* hands and she could do what she liked!"

"Your mother had an affair?" Gina's eyes had widened considerably. "I knew there was some trouble, but it all seemed OK when your mum and dad got back together again."

"Yes, she had an affair, although I was so naive at the time that I never really thought of it as that, sex and all. It only actually dawned on me when Osborn had his affair, which sounds ridiculous. I thought so highly of her, I suppose I simply blotted it out. Then she went and lived in Grimsford with Auntie Lily and Sindy for three long years, when I was newly married, still a teenager and still needed her. God Gina, I don't know where all this is coming from."

"I told you, don't worry."

"In the end, she realised she missed having a husband and family, so she came home. She was lucky that Dad took her back. Then she had grandchildren nearby and was able to see them regularly, whereas heaven knows where Gulliver and Madeleine will settle. Somehow, I'm sure it won't be here. Well, talking about all this has kind of consolidated it for me and made it more real. I think I'm drawing to a natural close, though. Thank you for listening."

"You're very welcome. I hope you haven't made yourself late, though, I know you meant to leave a while ago."

"It's OK, I clocked the time."

"Clocked the time?" Gina and Sandra dissolved into girlish laughter, as Sandra actually got up to go.

Ten minutes later, she'd just arrived home and was thinking what to have for lunch when the phone rang.

"Hello?" She had more or less decided on a cheese sandwich.

"Good afternoon, could I speak to Osborn Dullkettle, please?"

"I'm afraid he's not here at the moment." It would be cheese and pickle.

"Ah. Are you Mrs Dullkettle?"

"Yes, I am." With cherry tomatoes and a couple of sweet silverskin pickled onions.

"Good. I'm calling on behalf of Tavistock Hospital, trying to arrange his cyst removal procedure as a day case."

"Oh!" Visual thoughts of the cheese and pickle sandwich with cherry tomatoes and sweet silverskin pickled onions on the side were replaced by disturbing visual thoughts of the cyst on Osborn's forehead being cut out.

"There's a slot that's become vacant tomorrow at Tavistock, but I need to speak to Mr Dullkettle directly and right away, if possible. I don't have a work number, does he have one?"

"Yes, I'll give it to you..."

A few minutes later, Sandra replaced the receiver, all thoughts of her lunch, particularly the sweet silverskin pickled onions, having left her mind. The phone rang again, before she had even moved away.

"Hello?" She heard her voice sounding anxiously suspicious, which was an unusual combination.

"Sandra, it's Mum." Caroline's voice had a decidedly fretful timbre to it. "I've been trying to ring you, but you've been on the phone to someone else. Dad's been taken into hospital with a suspected heart attack. The trouble is, I've got the carpet people due at any moment to lay the hall carpet and I can't just leave them to it. Could you come over to see to them, while I go in to the hospital?"

"What? Dad might have had a heart attack?" Sandra tried not to feel unduly alarmed, remembering Basil's numerous ambulance trips to the hospital with unstable angina attacks.

"Yes, but I don't know what to do about the carpet people. Can you come over? I'm sorry, but you're the only one I can call."

"OK, I'll be over. I'll have to give Alison a quick ring to let her know I can't see her this afternoon." Sandra sighed and felt the spider's web closing in ever more tightly.

Five days later, Sandra woke up on Saturday morning feeling incredibly glad it was the weekend and a miraculously free day lay ahead for both her and Osborn. She lay in bed, listening to the birds singing and thinking how relieved she was that the mad week was over.

'I felt split in two on Tuesday,' she mused, 'with Dad in hospital and Osborn having his minor op. Dad had Mum, though, so I feel I made the right choice. It was a bit traumatic for Osborn having that cyst cut out, especially with his needle phobia and his allergy to local anaesthetic. He did very well. So did I, sitting in that ward for hours on end with him!' She sighed and looked over at Osborn's forehead, where the incision was healing well.

'I think Dad understood that Osborn was told to rest all day Wednesday. Thank heavens that Auntie Lily arrived to stay with Mum, it's funny how that was all pre-arranged. It wasn't much fun for Auntie Lily, but she's a lovely soul – I can't imagine how she could have a selfish bitch daughter like Sindy. Maybe she and Uncle Billy pandered to Sindy's every whim too much, so that she felt she could have exactly what she wanted. God, why am I thinking of her again, that's just a step too far! It's because Auntie Lily's here, of course.

'Anyway, at least Osborn and I went to see Dad as soon as we could, on Thursday. He looked so tired and vulnerable, but also calm and resigned. I think Mum's confused about whether he's going to have angioplasty or another operation. Whatever

it is, it's going to be traumatic for him, poor soul.' Sandra gazed at the curtains, wishing she could see the sky.

'I wonder if it's too early to make Osborn a mug of tea? Maybe in about half an hour. He's been so tired this week. Why are we all so tired? I'm just glad we can please ourselves today. What could we do? Perhaps a short walk on the moors, or a visit to a nice garden somewhere? Osborn seems to like taking photos of flowers. No! The phone! Is it about Dad?'

Sandra shot out of bed, adrenaline rushing as she ran down the stairs and lifted the receiver in record time. She heard Basil's voice with a mixture of relief, impatience and dread, as it was only 07:27 and he had woken Osborn from a much-needed sleep.

"Sandra? Sybil's been taken to hospital. She passed out this morning and I couldn't rouse her, so I called for an ambulance. They said something about diabetes. Is Osborn there? I need to speak to him."

The following day, Sandra and Osborn gave Caroline and Auntie Lily a lift to a local garden centre for their lunch, then collected them afterwards and drove them to the hospital. Here they went to see Leonard and Sybil in turn, both of whom seemed quiet but comfortable – as much as anyone can be comfortable in a hospital bed in a hospital ward in a hospital, with an unknown medical future to face.

The next day, they went to Cardiff to collect Madeleine, which although tiring, felt like a breath of fresh air after all the recent hospital visits. The thought that this now brought Madeleine's year in Germany ever closer was a bit of a downer, but Sandra had decided to trust that everything was happening as it should and realistically, there wasn't a thing she could do about it. Madeleine seemed resolved to face the challenge with a very positive outlook, which in view of her past troubles, Sandra felt was extremely brave.

The day after that, Osborn was messed around by Basil to a ridiculous and completely unnecessary extent, involving taking time off work to go and collect Sybil's Canadian cousin from his hotel, take him to the hospital to see Sybil, then take him back to Basil's house.

Sandra became quite confused as to what had actually taken place. She only knew that Basil had gone too far and was using and abusing Osborn's helpful nature, causing him to reach dangerous levels of stress. Madeleine had been shocked by Osborn's appearance and had persuaded Sandra and Osborn to go out that evening to the Awareness Circle at Terry and Kerry's, as she knew that they would both benefit from being there. She was right and they returned home later that evening feeling ready and able to face the next day.

The next day brought a day off work for Osborn to take Caroline and Auntie Lily out for a visit to a local beach. Sandra and Madeleine also went along, but Sandra spent the whole day in a state of uncomfortable anxiety that Auntie Lily would talk to Osborn about Sindy. It happened, of course, since Auntie Lily appeared to idolise Sindy. Sandra couldn't help wondering, as she sometimes did, how Auntie Lily would react if she knew what Sindy and Osborn had done. However, it was a moot point and the day continued as well as could be expected – in a linear direction and thankfully ending.

A week later, Sandra sat at Leonard's bedside with Osborn, while Caroline and Madeleine went to find some tea.

"Auntie Lily got home OK yesterday," said Sandra, trying hard to think of things to say, since sitting in hospital wards tended to dry up all coherent thought. "She said she thought you were looking quite well."

"I've got some news, love." Leonard shifted in his bed. "I'm definitely on the waiting list for another bypass and a valve replacement operation."

"Gosh. Well, that's the best thing," replied Sandra, wondering wildly if Leonard at 79 was strong enough to survive another major operation.

"I don't have any other options," said Leonard. "Well I do, but I still feel I have some life left to fight for."

"Of course you do," said Osborn brightly, momentarily covering Leonard's hand with his own. "You have lots of life left to live."

"I'm sorry we're going to Colorado right now," said Sandra glumly. "The timing seems all wrong and I worry about you and Mum."

"We'll be fine, love, you go and enjoy yourself. Life needs to be lived, you know."

Half an hour later, Leonard walked slowly along the hospital corridor outside his ward with Sandra, Osborn, Madeleine and Caroline. At the end of the corridor, they all stopped to say goodbye. As Sandra disengaged reluctantly from her father's hug, she couldn't help wondering if it was the last time she would ever see him alive.

## CHAPTER 22

Sandra sat between Madeleine on her left and Gulliver on her right, cruising at 548 mph at an altitude of 36,000 feet, feeling the fear and having no choice but to do it anyway. Osborn was across the aisle to Madeleine's left, ensconced in a novel.

Sandra wished with all her heart that she could be ensconced in anything at all, as the minutes and hours gradually dragged by. She kept checking the information screen, anxious to see the plane's progress northwards via the Great Circle route over Greenland and then thankfully southward towards Denver.

"OK, Mumsie?" asked Madeleine tiredly for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Yes," replied Sandra untruthfully. "I think Gulliver's asleep."

"No, I'm not," came Gulliver's voice from underneath a BA blanket. "I'm just trying to pass the time."

"You must need to go for a pee by now," said Madeleine to Sandra. "Come on, I'm going, so you can come with me."

"Not in the same cubicle?" asked Gulliver, grimacing.

"Don't be ridiculous!" retorted Madeleine, as Sandra prepared to rise from her seat and gingerly walk along the floor of the metal container in which she could plunge to her death at any moment.

"Come and look out here," said Madeleine encouragingly, as they stood outside the occupied toilet cubicles, awaiting their turn. "It's lovely – it's good therapy – look!"

"Wow," said Sandra unconvincingly. It wasn't so much that the sight of Canada thousands of feet below her own feet wasn't breathtaking, but more that so much of her energy was being taken up by trying to stay sane and not run along the length of the plane, begging to be let out.

After another excruciating few hours, the plane finally began to descend on its approach to Denver. It began to bump and sway and as the descent became steeper, so Sandra hated it more. When it finally happened, touchdown seemed messy, first the left side and then the right. Sandra was so tense, she was clenching everything.

As the blessed moment finally arrived and they were at last able to leave the plane, the heat immediately hit them. Sandra didn't care, as the euphoria of still being alive was wonderful. Standing for an interminable amount of time in the Immigration queue later, though, she felt as if the last of her strength was disappearing. However, they were all allowed into the country, collected their suitcases, passed through Customs and walked tentatively towards the exit.

It was easy to spot fairly tall Dolores, very tall Martin and their not very tall 14-year-old daughter Hollie waiting just outside, as Dolores was practically jumping up and down in excitement, her mid-length brown hair bouncing around as much as she was. As soon as she was able, she ran up to Sandra and hugged her, but Sandra found it difficult to hug back, due to the bags she was still carrying.

"I can't believe it!" exclaimed Dolores with a somewhat high-pitched North American twang. "After all these years, it's a dream come true!"

"At last," murmured Sandra with a low-pitched, south-west English burr. She was so tired that words were failing her.

About an hour and a half later, after collecting a rental van and driving to Dolores and Martin's house, they were all sitting outside on the deck that surrounded the back of the split-level house, sipping water and eating sandwiches and snack biscuits. Osborn seemed to be ignoring any tiredness he was feeling and was being talkative and friendly, but Sandra and Madeleine were finding it harder to speak. It was obvious that Gulliver

had previously visited them, as he was very relaxed. To Sandra's surprise, he revealed that he'd had an awful flight, as his dodgy knee had been hurting, he'd had a continuous headache and had been feeling sick.

Dolores and Martin's 21-year-old son Jace arrived and after quietly introducing himself, sat down beside Madeleine. He and Madeleine had been writing to each other infrequently over the years, but it seemed to Sandra through her haze of exhaustion as if there was an instant rapport between them.

"You're tall like your dad, Jace, you make me feel quite small," said Osborn chattily. "Is Jace short for Jason?"

"No, it's just Jace and it means the moon," replied Dolores. "I had a bunch of names to choose from when I was expecting, but one night I couldn't sleep and looked up at the moon just as Jace gave a mighty kick, so that was it."

"What about Hollie?" asked Osborn.

"I just like the name Hollie," replied Dolores, looking across at dark-haired Hollie, who was smiling shyly. "You're not prickly at all, sweetie, are you?"

Sandra almost fell asleep somewhere around this point and hardly remembered anything until the following morning. Unfortunately, it was about 04:50 the following morning and as soon as she opened her eyes, she was aware of a pounding headache and not being able to breathe very well.

"It's probably the tree pollen," said Dolores later at breakfast. "I was like that when we moved here from Texas, I expect you'll get used to it."

The next few days were spent locally, exploring various favourite places of Dolores, Martin and Hollie, such as a restaurant cum video game arcade called *Rave and Duster's*, a mountain picnic area, a Chinese restaurant (followed by a visit to Martin's office), the shopping mall and a walk along a creek. Jace made frequent appearances, as he had taken two weeks' vacation from his job and he and Madeleine started to spend a lot of time together.

However, Sandra found she was becoming increasingly uncomfortable about the way things were not progressing between herself and Dolores. After the grand met-you-at-last hug at the airport, it felt as if Dolores was expecting Sandra to behave in a way that she was simply incapable of behaving.

"I've tried to explain to Dolores over and over again throughout the years how quiet I am and how I find socialising so hard. I've been nothing but truthful with her while we've been writing to each other and she's always said how lovely I am and how it's great to be me. Me being me, that is. Now she's actually met me, it feels for all the world as if it's not great to be me at all and I'm a huge disappointment. Do you think it's a cultural thing?" Sandra was mulling over with Osborn her growing sense of unease, as they converged in the privacy of the guest bedroom.

"It could be, I suppose," replied Osborn. "I seem to be getting on OK with her and Martin's a really nice guy, too."

"Yes, he *is* really nice and I'm glad you're getting on OK with Dolores, but how do you perceive the way she's acting towards *me*?" asked Sandra, with some exasperation.

"She seems to be waiting for you to approach her," replied Osborn thoughtfully.

"Exactly," said Sandra. "I know she asked me to go on that short drive with her yesterday to deliver a letter and that was fine, we talked normally. I say normally, but she mentioned a Pot Luck supper they're having here tonight with their church friends and she told me not to worry – which immediately makes me worry. No, I have a suspicion it started to go wrong the first day we arrived, when I was so exhausted and overwhelmed. I told her before we came how scared I am about flying, so she must have realised how knackered I was."

"You do go very quiet and withdrawn when you're knackered," said Osborn.

"I can't help it, speech is the first thing to go. Gulliver seems to be the same." Sandra began to feel perilously close to tears. "She gets on well with him, too, it's just me! I feel as if she's constantly observing me, expecting me to be someone I'm not – maybe someone from my letters that she wanted me to be – someone she seems to have made me up to be in her own head."

"You can only be yourself," said Osborn quietly.

"Well, I *was* being myself!" replied Sandra heatedly. "The first breakfast was OK, because Dolores had already had hers and Martin was at work, but that first lunchtime felt quite odd. I was last at the table because my headache had got so bad that I decided to resort to painkillers and went to the bedroom to get them. I sat down, as you would, but she never said anything, although I can remember her looking at me. Gulliver had to whisper to me that it was a help-yourself lunch. I felt quite silly, but surely it would have been the most natural thing for her to tell me quite openly to help myself as soon as I arrived?"

"Yes..."

"Can I come in?" The sound of Madeleine's voice followed a polite knock at the door.

"Yes!" Sandra felt strangely tearful again as Madeleine entered the room and sat comfortably on the end of their bed. "How are you?"

"Tired. It's a bit difficult sharing Hollie's bedroom really, although she's lovely. Jace stays up late and by the time he walked me back here last night, I was afraid to disturb Hollie, so I slept on the couch."

"Your clothes *are* a bit crumpled." Sandra smiled at Madeleine. "You're getting on well with Jace, though?"

"Yes, but you don't seem to be getting on too well with Dolores, Mumsie?"

"I know, Dad and I were just talking about that. What do you think?"

"I think the American culture is very extraverted and we're not. Jace's friends find me really quiet. I'm so tired, though, can I come and have a nap here when you're at breakfast? I feel a bit awkward in Hollie's room."

"Yes, of course! I do miss you, Maddy." Sandra noticed Madeleine's startled glance. "But I'm glad you're having a good time with Jace."

The Pot Luck supper was underway. Sandra was sitting deliberately in a corner next to Osborn on the deck, as friends of Dolores and Martin kept arriving.

"Hi! How are *you*?" came the often-repeated phrase in their direction, as the conversation level around them rose relentlessly in volume.

"Very well, thank you," came the often-repeated reply from Sandra, willing whoever it was to go and talk with someone else. A few people sat next to Osborn for a while and he held the conversation with ease, but Sandra felt herself trying to shrink inside her own psyche as she began to harbour a suspicion that she was actually a focus of the evening.

"So, you're the long-awaited Sandra!" came the voice of a large man, who sat down opposite Sandra and looked into her startled eyes. "We've heard so much about you! It's great that you're here and we can all meet you. How long have you been penfriends with Dolores?"

"About 39 years," replied Sandra quietly.

"Sorry?" The man leaned over closer to Sandra. "Don't be shy now!"

"About 39 years," repeated Osborn loudly on Sandra's behalf.

"Whoa, that is amazing!" exclaimed the man, thankfully focusing his attention onto Osborn.

Although he was now engaged in conversation with Osborn, the man kept glancing at Sandra, who felt herself becoming hotter and hotter, until she almost felt faint. She noticed yet another couple arriving and being pointed to the deck in her direction, before making a sudden decision to stand up and leave.

"Excuse me," she said, trying to smile brightly as her head began to swim. She leant down to the level of Osborn's ear. "I can't stand this," she muttered, "I'm really sorry."

In the blessed sanctuary of the much cooler guest bedroom, she sat on the bed and calmed her breathing. A sudden knock came on the door.

"Come in?" called Sandra fearfully.

"Are you OK?" asked Dolores, standing in the doorway and looking at Sandra with questioning eyes that seemed to be somewhat accusatory.

"Yes, I'm fine, don't worry about me," replied Sandra, ten times more brightly than she felt. "Honestly, just go and enjoy your evening, I'm fine in here."

Dolores left without a word, but Sandra had the distinct feeling that she had transgressed in Dolores's eyes.

The following morning confirmed this suspicion, as Dolores seemed to avoid Sandra and went about the business of packing up for their four-day trip to South Dakota. The atmosphere was so awkward that Sandra decided to do something about it. She approached Dolores and said she was sorry about the previous evening, even though in her heart she felt she'd been the innocent victim of her penfriend's desire to show her off to her friends. If it had all been a little less showy and if Dolores had been open about her motives in the first place, Sandra felt she would have been better armed to cope with the situation. She decided to be honest to Dolores in the hope that Dolores would be honest back.

"I felt like a sitting duck," she explained, as Dolores looked as if she was trying to gather her wits about her at this unexpected turn of events.

"Have you ever sought professional help for your condition?" asked Dolores stiffly.

"I – tried to explain. Look, I know you're busy. Let's talk about this when we come back from South Dakota." Sandra gave Dolores a hug to affirm her good intentions, but had the sinking feeling that she had already been prejudged according to North American standards, where being anything less than a total extravert was regarded as having a 'condition'.

"OK," replied Dolores doubtfully, disengaging herself.

"I've been worried about Dad too. It was so difficult leaving him behind in a different continent, not knowing if I'd see him again." The truth gave Sandra confidence. "I wonder – it's a bit of a cheek, but could I ring home just for a few moments to ask Mum how he is?"

"Sure, go ahead. The phone's in my office next to the computer." Dolores smiled politely but the smile completely failed to reach her eyes.

"Mum?" The sound of her mother's voice on the other end of the phone caused strange, unbalancing emotions to swirl around Sandra's entire being.

"Sandra?" Caroline sounded disbelieving.

"Yes, it's me! How are you and how's Dad?" Sandra geared herself up to face possible bad, or at the very least, disquieting news.

"He's been sent home to wait for the operation. He's been home for two days now." Caroline's voice was tinged with exhaustion.

"It must be tough for you. Are you coping OK?"

"Yes, I am. It's a relief not to have to go into the hospital every day, to be honest. Would you like to speak to Dad?"

"Yes!" Sandra felt herself almost holding her breath.

"Hello, love." Leonard's voice was tired, but comfortingly familiar.

"Hello, Dad! It's so good to hear your voice." Sandra tried to ignore the lump in her throat for the rest of the very brief, but very heartfelt conversation.

As Gulliver drove the van further past the state line of South Dakota, Sandra gazed out at the landscape wonderingly. On their journey, which had started at 07:20 and had taken them from Colorado, up into Wyoming and on into South Dakota, the landscape had changed from flat expanses of grass, to rocky outcrops, to small towns, to forests and hills and flat expanses again. The temperature seemed to rise steadily, according to the gauge of the thankfully air-conditioned van, hitting 103° Fahrenheit at one point.

"Wow!" said Gulliver suddenly. "I just had tingles all up and down my spine. Look at those burned trees."

"I'm glad the forest fires are more or less under control now," said Sandra, gazing out of the window at the swathes of black, burned tree remains.

"I know what you mean about tingling up and down your spine," said Osborn. "I had the same, this place feels special. Are you OK driving? I'll take over if you want."

"I love the driving," replied Gulliver happily. "This van's great. I don't know why Dolores and Martin decided to bring their car, I thought the whole idea of hiring a van this size was so we could all travel in it together?"

"I think Dolores is very unhappy with me," said Sandra sadly. "Oh! I just had tingles up and down my spine too!"

"It's a pity Madeleine and Jace are asleep," remarked Osborn, turning around to the seat behind.

"Still, it's nice that Jace chose to travel with us," said Sandra, although she strongly suspected the only reason was so he could be with Madeleine.

An hour or so later, they arrived at Custer, where a thunderstorm was rolling around high in the mountains above. After being allocated their rooms at a spacious motel, Gulliver sat out on the balcony, watching the storm.

"He's having a great time," remarked Sandra. "I hope Madeleine will be OK in the same room as him and Jace."

"I'm sure she'll be fine," replied Osborn. "Jace is a great guy."

"Watch yourself, you're picking up the American lingo," said Sandra. "These twin beds of ours are huge!"

"I think they're queen beds," said Osborn, starting to unpack methodically. "No wonder there's plenty of room for Hollie in Dolores and Martin's room."

"Everything's so big in America," remarked Sandra, sighing. "I'm convinced I'll go home a stone heavier."

Two hours later, Sandra sat fully sated (and possibly a stone heavier) in a local eating place cum gift shop. She had consumed a veggie burger and French fries, followed by a hot fudge sundae. Osborn had also chosen the veggie burger, but the others had enjoyed a huge, succulent buffalo steak. After wandering around the gift shop, Dolores seemed anxious to herd everyone into the van to fulfil their evening agenda, which was a visit to Mount Rushmore.

The approach to Mount Rushmore was fairly crowded as Martin parked the van and they all clambered out into the very warm evening air. As was happening all the time now, Dolores walked ahead with Martin, while the rest of them followed dutifully behind.

"This feels a bit like a school trip," whispered Sandra to Osborn, as they were led into another gift shop. "I never quite know what's happening next, or where we're going. Gulliver, do you know what's happening next?"

"I think we might be seeing some sort of show," replied Gulliver, as he began to accompany Sandra and Osborn around the gift shop. Madeleine and Jace had chosen to remain outside, Sandra noticed.

"Well, a little communication wouldn't have gone amiss," remarked Sandra tersely. "I'm sorry, I know Dolores and Martin worked very hard to get this trip organised, but it seems a bit odd to accuse me of having a communication condition and then cease to communicate with me at all!"

"Come on, it looks like we're on our way outside again," observed Osborn fifteen minutes later. "I just saw Dolores and Martin leave the shop. They're not communicating with me, either. Have they got Hollie with them? Where are Maddy and Jace?"

Having alerted Madeleine and Jace, the whole group followed Dolores and Martin as they led the way to an amphitheatre that faced the huge 60 foot sculptures of presidents Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln. As they all filed into a row of seats, Sandra noticed that Osborn was obviously trying to mend bridges and sat down next to Martin. Sandra found herself at the end of the row, next to Gulliver. This suited her well, although she felt a pang of loneliness that Osborn seemed to have abandoned her for Dolores and Martin and Madeleine had deserted her in favour of Jace. She made a conscious effort to pull herself together and be present in the moment – a most unusual moment, in the warm evening air of South Dakota, facing the iconic sculptures of Mount Rushmore, with Gulliver beside her.

"I think the show's starting in a minute," whispered Gulliver, looking at images starting to appear on the large screen at the front of the amphitheatre. "I'd rather have just wandered around and taken photos."

"Me too," whispered Sandra. "Do you think we can sneak away?"

"We might get a detention."

"I could write you an explanatory note. I could say you were overcome with the great North American culture and needed to go and weep in the toilet?"

"Bathroom, Mother. Bathroom without a bath. What about you?"

"I'm rapidly going past caring. Oh dear, we're too late, it's started. Shall I swoon with emotional fervour, so that you have to accompany me to the gift shop to buy loads of fridge magnets to take home to little old England?"

"Sssssh!" A woman from the row in front turned around and looked crossly at Sandra and Gulliver. This had the desired effect of rendering them speechless, but it also rendered them full of suppressed laughter. It became a feat to keep the laughter in, but it passed a bit of time as the self-congratulatory history lesson on the screen began.

As it progressed and the suppressed laughter gave way to suppressed boredom and tiredness, Sandra began to feel really quite indignant at the insistence that the USA was built on an ideal of liberty, even though they had systematically taken away and destroyed any liberty that the Native Americans had once enjoyed. Therefore, when the show drew to a close, the national anthem began to play and the crowd rose to salute the flag, Sandra remained seated, as did Osborn, Gulliver and Madeleine. However, Osborn and Madeleine then rose (no doubt because they were seated in between their host North Americans), which left Sandra and Gulliver to make a decision. As people began to sing the national anthem, Sandra and Gulliver decided at the same time to be polite and stand up.

"I'm not singing, though," said Sandra fiercely to Gulliver.

"We could sing our own national anthem, that would be fun."

"England's history is nothing to sing about either," replied Sandra, as the four presidents glared stonily down at them all.

## CHAPTER 23

The following morning, they all convened at 09:00 for an *al fresco* breakfast on the balcony. Martin then drove everyone in the van along a Wilderness Trail, which included sightings of donkeys, deer, prairie dogs and buffalo. They stopped for lunch at Keystone, which seemed basically to be a main street with shops and eating places in the style of the Wild West. It seemed rather incongruous to Sandra that they were hallowing the Wild West cowboy theme whilst selling so many Native American artefacts in the gift shops.

The afternoon's itinerary took them to Crazy Horse Mountain, which was one of Dolores's favourite places. They entered the large visitor complex and followed along behind Dolores and Martin as usual, to watch a short film of the place's history. Dolores marched straight to the front of the rows of seats, but Sandra hesitated, still standing at the back.

"I hate sitting in the front," she said to Osborn, remembering the days of her anxiety attacks in university lecture theatres. "I've got quite a bad headache and I really don't want to sit at the front. You sit with them, but I really can't. I'll be fine here at the back."

"I'll sit with you," replied Osborn. "I don't especially like the front, either."

"Thank you," replied Sandra, looking at him gratefully. She then noticed the others entering the room and deciding where to sit. Hollie joined Dolores and Martin at the front, but Gulliver, Jace and Madeleine joined them at the back.

"I've made it difficult for everybody," whispered Sandra guiltily to Osborn.

"Don't worry about it," replied Osborn. "We're all old enough to choose where we sit." Sandra smiled at him, but felt sad that the rift between her and Dolores had somehow become even wider.

The short film was enlightening. The United States had apparently seized the site for their Mount Rushmore sculptures from the Lakota tribe after the great Sioux war of 1876-77, even though the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 had granted them the Black Hills forever. Crazy Horse had been a respected Oglala Sioux warrior and the massive

sculpture of Crazy Horse sitting on his horse with his arm outstretched was intended to be a metaphoric tribute to Native Americans. A white man had apparently asked Crazy Horse derisively where the land that he'd fought so hard to defend now lay. Crazy Horse had pointed across the landscape and said: "My lands are where my dead lie buried." Work had begun in 1948 and the face of the sculpture had been completed in 1998, but the rest was so far incomplete.

After the show and without a word, Dolores and Martin led them to board one of the buses that would take them on a guided tour to have a closer look at the sculpture. When it was the turn of Sandra, Osborn and Gulliver to board, however, they were politely told the bus was full and another one would be along shortly.

"Another instance of the rift between us," remarked Sandra quietly. "I can't bear this."

However, when their bus arrived and they were delivered to the much closer viewpoint of the carved mountain, they were allowed off the bus to take photos. The sky was becoming rather overcast, but the air was still very warm.

"I can't make up my mind what to think of this," said Osborn quietly, after he had finished with his camera.

"What do you mean, Dolores or the mountain?" asked Sandra, still gazing up at the huge, partly finished statue.

"Well, both – but I actually meant the mountain. I have a feeling that this is the sort of thing a 'new' American would do, not a Native American."

"You mean the way of the Native American would be to leave the mountain wild and free?"

"Exactly. Ever since we've arrived in South Dakota, I've felt that we're in this wonderful land, but we haven't been able to *feel* the land."

"Yes. What I'd really like to do is to go somewhere and sit on the earth, breathe the air and connect with the place. I'd like to feel it, like you said, not just be shown what the white man has defaced it with." Sandra gazed sadly up at Crazy Horse on his rocky promontory.

"I know what you mean, but that sounds a bit harsh. I think this was supposed to be a sort of apology to the Native Americans."

"Maybe sometimes it's just not possible to heal a chasm of differing beliefs." Sandra found she was thinking of Dolores once again.

The rest of the day was spent wandering around the exhibitions of Native American artefacts and the various arts and crafts on sale. It was fascinating and strangely humbling to see Native Americans selling their wares, although Sandra was unable to shake off the feeling that it was all somehow strangely unbalanced, as the proud Native Americans were forced to abide by economic standards of the 'new' Americans.

She watched Dolores go up to one Native American dressed in his tribal clothes who was selling CDs of his music and ask to have her photograph taken with him. As she looked at the two of them posing for a slightly embarrassed Martin, she was comforted by a feeling that the spirit of the Native Americans had not been, and never could be, captured and conquered.

Later that evening, though, as she found herself alone in the motel room while Osborn went to liaise with the others about the following day, the enormity and sheer disappointment of the whole experience with Dolores overcame her and she wept uncontrollably for several very painful, but ultimately healing moments.

The next day started with a rendezvous at 08:00 for breakfast in the motel's eating place. This proved popular, as Gulliver was finally able to fulfil a small dream and order an egg sunny side up to go with his pancakes. Dolores and Martin had their eggs easy over, while the rest of them enjoyed some rather lovely hot pancakes with maple syrup. As usual, Dolores sat with Martin and there was very little communication with Sandra.

The main focus of the day was a long drive in the van to Wyoming, to see Devils Tower. Sandra longed to put in an apostrophe but found out that it was named without one, due to a silly geographic naming standard eliminating apostrophes from names.

After an enjoyable drive through the often wild and expansive scenery, they arrived at Devils Tower without an apostrophe. As usual it was a shock to the system stepping out of the air-conditioned van into the hot air – and there was very hot air at Devils Tower. However, after a short foray in the gift shop, they all followed Dolores and Martin on the trail around the tower. Sandra was fascinated by the rock formation itself, which according to the leaflet she had procured, was formed from volcanic rock and grandly known as a monolithic igneous intrusion.

The fact that Devils Tower was a sacred place to the Native Americans added interest, as she'd read that to the Lakota tribe it was Mato Tipila (Bear Rock). By far the most prevalent connection with the tower, though, seemed to be that it had been used in the film *Close Encounters of the Thirteenth Kind*.

"Another instance of the conquering immigrants taking over the sacred places," remarked Sandra to Osborn, having become separated from the rest as they waited in a blessedly shaded wooded area for Jace and Madeleine, who were lagging behind.

"The conquering immigrants came from England," replied Osborn. "It's a sobering thought. Ah, here they come."

"I'm glad they're just wandering along in their own time," said Sandra. "That's what I'd like to do a lot more in my life – our lives – but it doesn't seem to happen."

"Are you guys OK?" asked Martin, suddenly appearing from beyond a tree. "Dolores was a bit concerned."

"Yes, we're fine," replied Osborn. "This is some place." He fell into step beside Martin as they continued, which left Sandra to wander along beside Gulliver, who had been happily darting around and doing his own thing with his camera.

"You really love photography, don't you," she said, as they walked out from the shade into full sun. "God, this is hot!"

"You don't seem to be getting on with Dolores," said Gulliver suddenly. "I thought you'd really love this holiday."

"Oh, I *do* love it here," replied Sandra, remembering that the flight tickets had been Gulliver's gift. "I really do, I think it's a wonderful place and I wouldn't have missed it for the whole world. I don't know what's happening with Dolores and me, but I know I can only be myself and not be someone she wants me to be. Are *you* enjoying it?"

"Oh yes, I love it here too. I want to go to the mountains more, though. I'm sure you'd enjoy a visit to Pikes Peak, where they took me when I was here last year. You drive up and up and up the mountain, it's great!"

"That's very American somehow, driving up a mountain."

After paying the required \$30 at the foothills of the famous Pikes Peak, Gulliver began to drive Sandra and Osborn 19 miles up the mountain. Sandra was sad that Madeleine had decided to spend the day with Jace rather than with them, but she had the strong feeling that Madeleine was on her own life path and needed to explore each detour that presented itself.

There were mile markers as they drove slowly up the gently winding road. Sandra gazed in wonder at the landscape, watching the trees, the flora, the sky, the changing horizon and the road ahead, marvelling at the overall effect of the scenery. At this level, according to the information guide she was consulting, there were grass meadows, plenty of pine trees and juniper woodlands.

It was recommended to get out of the car at various stopping places, in order to acclimatise to the altitude and also to drink plenty of water and eat snacks to avoid possible nausea and dizziness. This was no problem, as the stopping places proved to be good photo opportunities.

According to the information guide, they left the Foothills Zone at 8,000 feet and entered the Montane Zone. The trees were still very much in evidence – junipers, spruce, Douglas firs and Aspen groves, while on the ground there were various shrubs and wild flowers. Sandra was a little disturbed to read that black bears and mountain lions inhabited this level, but was too entranced to worry unduly.

They decided to stop at a Visitor Center at one of the mile markers, where they enjoyed an ice cream and afterwards wandered around the shop to stretch their legs.

"Crystals!" exclaimed Osborn, looking at a very tempting display stand. "Wow, this one feels very powerful."

"Are you on your Druid trip again?" asked Gulliver, looking at the display. "How do you know it's powerful?"

"Pick one up and hold it in the palm of your hand," said Osborn. "What do you feel?"

"It feels like it's vibrating," replied Gulliver wonderingly. "Interesting. I never thought a vibrator would feel quite like this."

The toilet was interesting too, as Sandra discovered later, when she found herself sitting above what basically felt like a draughty hole in the ground.

"It was very strange," she said laughingly to Osborn and Gulliver, after she'd explained about the hole. "It kind of added something to the experience, though."

"You're saying the hole added something to the whole experience?" asked Gulliver, grinning and then groaning. "That was bad, I must be developing altitude sickness. You don't have any drugs, do you? I'm getting a bit of a headache."

"So am I, actually," replied Sandra. "I've got some here somewhere."

"Can I have a couple?" asked Osborn. "That tooth I had filled just before we came here is really beginning to hurt."

"I feel like a drug supplier," remarked Sandra, handing out the little white pills. "Oh well, let's carry on. Onwards and upwards!"

The road onwards and upwards turned out to be unpaved with a number of switchbacks. At 10,000 feet they entered the Sub-Alpine Zone, which seemed to be where the altitude really affected the vegetation. Although there were lots of spruce trees, the further they gradually wound their way upwards, the shrubs and bushes disappeared and Sandra thought it was a good job that she implicitly trusted Gulliver's driving.

"There aren't many trees and the ones that are here are really stunted," she remarked.

"That's the wind and the cold," replied Osborn. "We haven't seen many animals. My tooth is really hurting."

"My head's still aching," said Gulliver. "I think I saw a squirrel earlier, but I was concentrating on driving."

"Yes, keep concentrating!" said Sandra laughingly. "Stop whenever you want to, though, to look at the view."

The view continued to delight, as they passed into the Alpine Zone at 11,500 feet. They were above the tree level and the only vegetation was very low to the ground. They stopped to take photos of wild flowers and also noticed different mosses and lichens growing on boulders.

"This is wonderful," said Sandra, gazing around in awe. "It's so beautiful. The guide says the plants on alpine tundra take 75 years to grow half an inch. It's fantastic!"

"Are you feeling OK?" asked Gulliver. "I'm actually not being funny, I think this view's amazing too. I meant you're not being affected by altitude sickness or anything, are you?"

"I felt a bit lightheaded when I got out of the van, but it was momentary. I can't be bothered to think of myself, this is just incredible. Look, an eagle or some large bird."

"It's not much further to the top," said Osborn. "It's getting quite a lot colder. My tooth's killing me, but this view is almost worth it."

The view at the top was a little scary, thought Sandra as she gazed out at a sheer drop over one side. It was quite windy and the temperature had dropped to 49° Fahrenheit. Although the dizziness came over her again once or twice, the knowledge that she was at the top of a mountain was more than enough to keep her on a high.

"This is another peak experience," she said happily, after they'd all taken photos of each other. "Shall we go into the Visitor Center?"

It seemed a little incongruous to see quite a large number of people inside what looked like an everyday gift shop and café, even though they happened to be 14,115 feet up the top of a mountain.

"Look, you can have some *O2 Therapy* if you want for \$8," said Gulliver. "The air is only 60% at this level, apparently."

"I don't think I'll bother, thank you," replied Sandra, smiling. "I think Dad's really suffering with that tooth, so we'd better not hang around up here. I'll just go to the toilet and then buy a couple of fridge magnets."

The slow descent, as the day gradually progressed towards evening, was nearly as enjoyable as the ascent had been. They stopped several times to take more photos, including once when a very obliging yellow-bellied marmot sat on a rock and posed for them. However, before they knew it, they'd rejoined civilisation proper in the warmer air at the bottom of the mountain and were heading along the road back to Denver – back to Dolores and Martin and back to the strangeness.

Sandra, Osborn and Gulliver sat eating breakfast on the deck in the warm, fragrantly pine-laden Colorado air. Madeleine and Hollie were still asleep, while Dolores and Martin hadn't yet been sighted. This was unusual, as Dolores was usually up not long after dawn. There were only a few days of the holiday left and they were trying to decide how to spend them.

"Hi!" Martin's pleasant voice suddenly came into hearing, as he joined them on the deck. "How are you guys?"

"Fine thanks," replied Osborn. "Is Dolores OK?"

"She's suffering from vertigo," replied Martin. "She asked me to speak to you. So, the situation is this – there are several options..." As Martin spoke of various possible places to visit, Sandra couldn't help wondering with a soupçon of guilt if Dolores was actually suffering from her own dashed expectations of the idealised Sandra she'd created over the years, but decided that was too egotistic.

"Dolores said that if you choose to visit our church, she'll be able to come with us, but she's not up to the other places," finished Martin suddenly.

"Church?" echoed Sandra and Osborn together, while Gulliver sat with his mug of coffee in his hand, looking bemused.

"I think – umm – Buffalo Bill's grave?" suggested Sandra fearfully into the uncomfortable silence.

The trip to Buffalo Bill's grave with Martin turned into an unexpected pleasure, as Martin's sense of humour flourished and they all felt able to be themselves, with no expectations or undercurrents. It was simply a simple day doing simplistic touristy things and it helped Sandra to put the dynamics of the Dolores situation into perspective.

On one of the remaining days, Dolores felt well enough to take part in the last whole two-family outing to Estes Park, one of the places she'd often mentioned in her letters. It seemed more like a town geared for tourists, filled with eating places and souvenir and craft shops, but as Dolores and Martin led them into the place they'd chosen for lunch, Sandra felt glad they were all together again.

However, they were very much left to their own devices for the final two days. Madeleine made the most of her time with Jace, while Sandra, Osborn and Gulliver took to the mountains again. The atmosphere deteriorated so much that on the Sunday they were due to fly home in the afternoon, Dolores and Martin went to church and then out to lunch by themselves. The others tried to make the best of the situation by talking and joking amongst the packing, more for Jace and Hollie's sake than anything else. Once, when moving from bedroom to kitchen, Sandra met Jace coming the other way.

"Hi," said Jace, smiling at Sandra. "You OK?"

"Yes," replied Sandra, totally unable to think of a further reply. What had warmed her to the bones, however, was Jace's genuine, uncomplicated but essentially understanding smile.

The strangeness continued as they drove to Denver airport and stood outside in the burning heat to say their final goodbye – because Sandra knew without a shadow of doubt that it was the final goodbye for her and Dolores. When the hugging began, she forced herself to override her own reticence and took the lead to hug Dolores. She felt sure that Dolores was a good soul with a good heart, but for some reason she had expected Sandra to be and to act differently.

"Take care and thank you for everything," said Sandra, aware of the sun beating down unforgivingly on her head.

"You too. I know you don't find the flying easy," replied Dolores.

"That's an understatement," said Sandra with a small laugh, while her heart and mind began adjusting to the long journey home – and how she would find her father.

## CHAPTER 24

"I wasn't sure how I was going to find you," said Sandra to her father, as tears filled her eyes unexpectedly at the familiar sight of Leonard in his comfy chair.

"Just through the back door and into the front room as usual," replied Leonard, looking slightly pale but otherwise coping well.

"Oh Dad! You can't be too bad if you're still making awful jokes. How are you really, though?"

"I'm OK, love. I finally had a letter this morning with a date for the op." Leonard seemed excited.

"When is it?" Sandra's heart started to beat faster now the necessary but dreaded date was in writing.

"The 29<sup>th</sup> of July," replied Leonard, picking up the letter from the side of his chair. "I go in the day before."

"Well, it's good to have a date, isn't it?"

"Oh yes, although I'd prefer a bacon sandwich."

"What? Oh no, I think I'm losing my sense of humour."

"Don't do that, dear," remarked Caroline, bringing a tray of tea into the sitting room. "Are you over the jet lag? You look quite tired."

"Yes, it was a tiring sort of time, although Colorado's a wonderful place, especially the mountains." Sandra could feel her whole being lighting up at the memory of the mountains.

"What about Dolores?" asked Caroline, with her usual penchant for asking the very questions Sandra didn't want to answer. She tried her best to explain fairly what had taken place, without sounding too judgemental or dramatic. However, she could see Caroline's face clouding over as she spoke.

"I think it's dreadful how she treated you. You were a guest in a strange continent – a very strange continent, if that's the way they behave."

"Martin was always kind and uncomplicated, although it seemed like he was being pulled by Dolores all the time. You can read the journal I wrote, if you like, I'm not very good at explaining things." Sandra found herself wanting to change the subject, as it was still hurting rather a lot. She had taken the time and trouble to write a long, explanatory and conciliatory email to Dolores almost as soon as she'd arrived home, but there had been no reply. "How's your garden?"

"Oh, not too bad," replied Caroline. "The grass needs cutting and those flowers you planted seem to be dying."

"Has it been dry? Have you watered them?" Sandra found herself becoming irritated, as she felt the familiar sense of garden responsibility being pushed firmly back onto her.

"I suppose we haven't had much rain," considered Caroline, as Leonard regarded them both. "I did prune a bush, it had bits sticking out that were annoying me. I don't like weeding, I'd much rather prune."

"Prune? No, the bacon sandwich definitely still has it," muttered Leonard wistfully.

A week had passed in which Osborn had taken a day off work to take his mother to the Eye Infirmary; Gulliver flew off for a mini-break to Zurich and Prague with a work colleague; Madeleine visited her Welsh boyfriend; Osborn discovered a major problem with the roof and Sandra washed half the clothes in the entire household.

"I'm sorry about the clothes ailer," she apologised to Alison while handing her a mug of tea. "It started to rain and they were almost dry, so they just need a bit of airing. I didn't realise we owned so many clothes."

"Tell me about it – but not really. We had Tamsin staying with us last weekend while Sam and Karen went to a wedding in London and I'd forgotten how messy a two-year-old can be! She insists on feeding herself and although we put a bib on her, she gets so much food everywhere, even down her pants. That's another cause for washing clothes, because they've started potty training her." Alison made a wry face.

"Wow, I can vaguely remember what it was like, it literally drove me potty. I was so glad when they were more or less reliable. It must be really lovely, but somewhat tiring to be grandparents?"

"Definitely. It seems to leapfrog you on into another phase of your life. When I think that we were both going to that Assertiveness Group that Jasmine ran only ten years or so ago, it seems like another era. I do think I'm a bit more assertive, but I have a suspicion that it's come from being older and not worrying half so much what others think of me." Alison grimaced lightly.

"Yes, I'm the same. I used to be afraid to take clothes back to shops for a refund, but now I do it without thinking. That was the trouble really, I wasn't thinking the last time I went to return a top to *Marks and Spender*. I emptied the carrier bag on the counter and realised it was the wrong bag, it had some of Madeleine's and my old knickers in that I was going to cut up for rags. I nearly fainted on the spot. I'm not going back there ever again."

"At least they were clean." Alison managed to grin and grimace at the same time. "Weren't they?"

"Well, now you mention it... Yes, they were clean! Honestly, I'm always washing things. Clothes, dishes, windows, myself."

"I know what you mean, I was washing a pile of dishes just before I came here."

"So was I, we were in sync!"

"It's not just the washing, though, is it? I mean, after the washing it's the drying, although I mainly just let dishes dry by themselves. I always seem to be hanging clothes on the washing line and then taking them down because it starts to rain and then hanging them up again. It would be easier if I didn't have a hang-up about hanging up the clothes in the first place." Alison began to smile at her own words.

"What's your hang-up about hanging up clothes?" asked Sandra mirthfully.

"Well, I need to hang them straight and in order. You know, socks all facing the same way and pants in increasing order of size, as you do." Alison noticed Sandra's raised eyebrows. "You don't, do you."

"I *do* sort of start out that way, but then I get so bored with it, I just think 'hang it' and bung them up any old way."

"We do have some funny conversations, don't we? If she could have heard us having this conversation ten years ago, Jasmine would have excommunicated us from her group on the spot."

"Yes. She'd have done it assertively, though."

In late July, Osborn had taken the day off work to take Leonard into hospital. Sandra and Madeleine had called by to say au revoir to Leonard and had walked home feeling distinctly odd, wondering if they would ever see him again.

As it turned out, they saw him much sooner than expected, as he was sent home the following day with a story of how his blood had antibodies and they would have had to send to Bristol for matching blood. This was something that should apparently have been checked previously. The sense of anticlimax they all felt was profound and it was with some relief that Sandra and Osborn escaped for a day to Terry and Kerry's house the following weekend, for a workshop on spirit-led drawing and painting.

"I can't draw or paint at all," confided Sandra to Terry as they all had a hot drink before the workshop started, "but it feels so good to be here in another world that's not my current world of responsibilities and friction and trepidation and disappointment."

"Responsibilities?" asked Terry kindly.

"The usual ones of being caught between a younger generation and an older generation and somehow being expected to be the responsible adult for both of them at all times and in all situations."

"Ah. Friction?" asked Terry sympathetically.

"The ordinary friction of trying to please everyone. Well, Osborn in particular at the moment. Also, the extraordinary friction of our recent holiday in Colorado, when my penfriend seemed to reject me for who I am, because I apparently didn't live up to her expectations."

"Ah. Trepidation?" asked Terry wonderingly.

"Knowing that in a month or so Madeleine has to go to Germany all on her own to live in a strange place and attend a German university, where she knows absolutely nobody – and wondering how she'll cope with her recent history."

"Ah. Disappointment?" asked Terry apprehensively.

"Many and varied, I think, although possibly I'm mostly disappointed in myself for not having the mettle to grasp life by the wotsits and do my own stuff regardless. How can you *do* that, though, when you have so many people who look to you for help?"

"There comes a point when you simply have to help yourself," mused Terry, sipping his ginger, raspberry and mint tea. "Or let others help you for a while. Why don't you just relax and enjoy the workshop today? Let yourself go and draw and paint whatever comes, it could be surprisingly beneficial."

"Not if you knew my drawing or painting," smiled Sandra, feeling herself gradually beginning to loosen and unfold in the comforting and uplifting presence of Terry and the rest of the group, gathered to enjoy the spiritual ambience of the old cottage and the freedom of their own souls.

"I enjoyed that," said Sandra, as she and Osborn drove home in the warm early August late afternoon. "It was good to be free to be ourselves, if only for a few hours. My drawing was definitely questionable, though."

"To be honest, I found the whole workshop slightly questionable," replied Osborn surprisingly. "I think it was the woman leading it rather than what it actually entailed, she seemed a bit – mad."

"Ah, but what's mad and what's different?" asked Sandra, gazing at the blue sky above the wild hedges along the roadside. "Or is that a moot question?"

"I don't know what a moot is, so it's a mad question."

"Life's mad lately, I'm not enjoying it. When can we just be us?"

"Now you're definitely being mad. How can we possibly be us with so much going on, not only for other people but for us as well? We're going to have to get our roof repaired before winter and that's going to cost a lot. We really can't afford it after the Colorado holiday, so I think I'll have to ask a builder guy I know and tell him I'll labour for him."

"But you don't like ladders after your – ladder incident. You're not as young as you used to be. It's hard work humping tiles around on a roof, surely?"

"I don't seem to get much chance for humping these days."

"Perhaps we should concentrate on nights."

"You're always so tired." Osborn's voice was difficult to gauge.

"Are you joking? You're always tired too!" Sandra felt she needed to stand up for herself, just in case this was a serious issue.

"I miss you," said Osborn baldly. His hair had thinned considerably in the last decade.

"I miss you too. Oh look! A balloon!"

"Wow! I'd so love to be up in the air right now," said Osborn, glancing up at the balloon and sighing extremely wistfully.

"I feel as if I am already," said Sandra quietly, "and in danger of going into freefall without a parachute."

In early August, Leonard was admitted into hospital the day before his rescheduled operation, this time with a go-ahead for his already tested blood. It was now the morning of the operation that was scheduled for midday and Sandra was working in her parents' garden, so that she could carry on with some necessary work while being there as moral support for Caroline.

'So much to clear up,' thought Sandra, as she attacked the vast array of weeds. 'Why is it always me on my hands and knees, digging in the dirt? Well, it's earth, of course – or sod in old-speak. Maybe that's why I feel an affinity? Ouch! Sod it, I've cut myself with these old secateurs. I feel a bit faint...'

An hour later, Sandra was indoors with Caroline, toying with some sandwiches that Caroline had made for lunch. They were both obviously aware of what might be happening to Leonard at that moment, while trying to maintain some nearly-normal conversation.

"...so I had to sit down in the garden for ages, because every time I tried to stand up, I felt faint again," recounted Sandra, wondering vaguely what was in her sandwich.

"What? You sat down in the garden? You didn't feel like working?" asked Caroline, as if from a distance.

"No, I told you, I cut my finger on your old secateurs," persisted Sandra, while her finger still throbbed painfully.

"Len was looking for the secateurs the other day to do a spot of pruning, but I told him not to strain himself, that you'd look after it for him." Caroline bit into her sandwich and started to chew slowly.

"Maybe when he gets over this op he could do some gentle pruning," suggested Sandra hopefully. "I'm finding it very hard to cope with this garden as well as our own." She chewed her own sandwich with a total lack of enthusiasm.

"Osborn works in your garden, though, at least you've got a vigorous man to help you." Caroline continued to chew stoically.

"Osborn's been helping Basil and Sybil with *their* garden," Sandra pointed out, while lifting up one side of her sandwich and peering at the contents. "Mum, you've given me meat!"

"Oh, it won't hurt you for once. Oh no, the phone!" Caroline looked at Sandra as if for help and then stood up resolutely and walked into the hallway to answer the insistent and annoyingly loud ringing tones.

"Yes, I'm his wife," Sandra heard Caroline saying. "Oh no! Oh..." Caroline's words faded into a miasma of shock, as Sandra's imagination zoomed down the road of her father's death on the operating table. Her initial reaction was one of terrible emptiness at the thought of life without seeing her father again. She began to feel a little faint once more, but tried to calm her breathing and prepare herself to be there for her mother, who would no doubt be in shock.

"This is terrible," said Caroline, entering the sitting room and resuming occupation of her chair. "They're sending him home again. The previous operation overran and they've postponed Len's operation until next week. They asked if he had transport home, so I said his son-in-law would collect him."

"What? I thought – oh – I'd better ring Osborn." Sandra's emotions played pinball for a further few moments before she managed to get her head together and went to Caroline's phone to ring Osborn at work. It had occurred to her that her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday was the following week, but it seemed to have little or no importance in what was currently taking place.

"What a day," was Osborn's tired response. "I had a phone call from Kirsty just after I got in here this morning to say she's found a lump in her breast and has an appointment for a biopsy. Then I had a phone call from Dad to tell me that Mum saw her doctor this morning with a pain in her back and is having an x-ray this afternoon. The builder guy I know is coming around after work to put up some scaffolding for our roof repair. What's going on? It's crazy!"

"I'm sorry I had to bother you too," said Sandra miserably. "Mum told the hospital you'd collect Dad before I even knew he was still alive."

"Don't worry, I'll be there as soon as I can," replied Osborn, sighing. "It's a good job the students aren't back yet. I might as well take the afternoon off and prepare things for the roof. God, it never rains but it pours."

"That's especially dodgy when your roof's compromised," replied Sandra, trying desperately to lift the gloomy atmosphere of the phone call. There was no response. "I'm sorry, I'm only trying to help..."

"I know you're trying. No, it wasn't you, I was just thinking about calling in at Q & B on the way into the hospital. God, this roof problem's really getting on top of me. Any day now I shall start to think about it in bed at night."

"I'm glad we managed to fit in a get-together before school starts again," said Gina, as Delia arrived with a home-made quiche. "You're so good, Dee."

"Thank you, Gee," replied Delia. "I wasn't sure I would be able to come actually, because Mum's not too well today. Hello Em!"

"Hello Dee! I'm glad you did come, it's important to do some things for yourself. Also, I really like your quiches."

"That's good then, my joy is complete! I like your hair, Kay, what have you done to it?"

"Thanks. It's a new colour – *Unnatural Auburn Blonde*, or something." Kay gave a little swish of her hair, which was difficult, as it was short.

"I've decided to go *Natural Grey Blonde*," said Gina. "I'm a bit afraid of dyeing, to be honest."

"I was until I read that book, *Feel The Fear And Dye It Anyway*," offered Em. "Then it was fine until I had that unfortunate incident with the *Hot Dusky Red* that was on special offer. Funny how you remember these things..."

"Your hair looks nice, Sandra," said Kay kindly. "Are you one of the dyeing-to-be-vain group, or the be-your-balanced-self group?"

"I'm dyeing-to-be-vain," replied Sandra, smiling. "To be honest, though, I tried to go grey gracefully and decided it wasn't me."

"Does that mean you're not balanced?" asked Em wickedly.

"I don't know, I can't work it out," replied Sandra. "Mind you, I feel unbalanced after the last couple of months."

"Tell us all about it," prompted Delia. "Then I'll tell you my stuff, because I'm feeling a bit unbalanced too."

"I had vertigo," said Gina, "and I know that's physical, but I'm sure it was because there was far too much being expected of me. What about you, Em?"

"I've always been unbalanced, dear, but that's not important right now. I've had trouble with Ivan lately, though."

The next hour passed so quickly that only some loud stomach rumbles reminded them it was time for lunch. Then, after they'd all eaten comfortably together, they settled down with a mug of tea for more conversation.

"We really should do this more often," said Delia. "It feels so good to be among like-minded friends of our own age and be able to discuss anything under the sun in a reasonable manner."

"I'd like a reasonable manor," said Gina wistfully. "One that's not *too* big, but one where I can have a big kitchen and a proper dining room, a sewing room, a utility room, another few bedrooms for grandchildren, a walk-in wardrobe, a TV room for me and one for Andy..."

"It would mean more rooms to keep clean and heated in winter," said Delia thoughtfully, "but I'd love a bigger kitchen."

"It would mean a lot more windows to see to," reflected Kay. "We've just had all new PVC windows put in and I'm hoping they'll last me out, because they cost so much."

"I read that PVC windows aren't all they're cracked up to be," said Emily. "I know we've all got them now, but the old wooden frames everyone used to have lasted much longer."

"I was hoping our new windows would last for 20 years – plus," said Kay.

"20 years?" asked Gina amid a general hubbub about PVC windows.

"20 years plus," corrected Kay.

"Oh, I didn't hear the plus," replied Gina.

"The plus was an addition," said Kay.

"What *are* you two talking about?" asked Delia. "Sandra, Em and I were saying how many triple glazed salespeople we've had lately."

"Careful," put in Sandra somewhat randomly.

"What, they come in threes now?" asked Em somewhat wickedly.

"You're being rude now, Em Barrister!" chided Delia somewhat laughingly.

"Living up to your name," chuckled Kay. "Not that I'm living up to my own name, of course."

"Nor me, Kay Cole, nor me," added Gina somewhat repeatedly. "Not anymore, anyway, my g-string days are well and truly up the creek without a paddle."

'It was so good to laugh again today,' thought Sandra, as she lay in bed that night. 'Somewhere along the way these last few years, I've almost forgotten what it's like to be light-hearted. I mean, we've all got problems – Dee with her ageing parents – Em with her roving husband – Kay with her noisy neighbours – Gee with her mad boss. It felt so liberating to air them in an understanding but weirdly uplifting atmosphere and we've definitely all drooped in the last few years. Well, those among us who are droopable, that is.' She checked her droopable bits to see how much they were drooping.

'Oh dear. Yes, I do so wish Osborn and I could still laugh together like that in a truly harmless way, although Gee nearly choked when she had that laughing fit. Alison and I laugh together and so do Gulliver, Maddy and I. Mum and I used to laugh and Dad chuckles, but Osborn seems quite a serious sort of person now – although I do see him smiling and laughing with other people, which has always struck me as somewhat unfair. I suppose he could say the same about me laughing with others. I'm not a serious person, though, I love to laugh at life's madneses, even if it gives me extra laughing lines around my eyes and mouth.' She checked her laughing wrinkles to detect any change for the worse.

'Oh dear. I suppose we've had a lot to contend with recently. That episode with Dolores knocked me for seven bordering on eight. She still hasn't replied to my emails, I don't know what to think. As for our parents, it's becoming so difficult as they all get older. It's especially hard with Dad right now, he must feel like he's waiting to jump off a cliff. Then there's Maddy going to Germany, which I can't bear to think about, although I have to. God, I hope she'll be OK over there! I feel so helpless, but all I can do is trust her – and I do, except that I hope there's no recurrence of the anorexia. I notice that she still looks in mirrors sideways and pats her stomach. What will she do when she becomes menopausal and more prone to unreasonable belly bulges?' She checked her unreasonable belly bulges.

'Oh dear. Actually, what *is* the reason for menopause and ageing in general, if not a slow run-down to death? God, I'm depressing myself, I must think of something to laugh at – anything – anything at all? Oh, it's no good, I can't think of a thing. Me, who loves to laugh at life? God, this is so ridiculous, it's totally sodding laughable!'

## CHAPTER 25

"I can't believe you're actually going," said Sandra dolefully, as Madeleine sat clutching a mug of tea in the sitting room, waiting until it was time for Osborn to drive her to the train station.

"I'll be fine," replied Madeleine firmly, but Sandra could tell she was putting on a brave face. "Thank you for helping me to get everything in my case, Dad."

"It's quite heavy," said Osborn sombrely. "I hope someone can help you with it on and off the train."

"You can help me on the train with it here and Gulliver can help me off the train with it at Fleet," replied Madeleine brightly. "Then when I go to London, Gulliver can help me on the train with it and at the other end..."

"Someone will help you, I'm sure," said Sandra wildly, not wanting to continue her sudden image of Madeleine struggling with her large suitcase on a strange platform on a strange station with strange people. She pondered for a moment how strangers were by definition strange. "It's really good that you're spending the weekend with Gulliver," she continued. "I do, of course, wish that the four of us could be together – but I understand it's good that the two of you have some together time. Oh Mad, I'm so sorry, I'm wittering quite badly."

"It's OK, Mumsie," replied Madeleine softly. "I'll text Dad to let you know I'm safe. You should really have a mobile phone, so I could text you as well."

"Yes, that would be great," considered Sandra. "Still, Dad can text you with any news of Grandad's operation when it finally happens."

"I'm really sorry I'll be away for that," said Madeleine, this time with shadows passing across her face. "I hope it all goes well, I'll be with you in spirit."

"I know you will, darling," replied Sandra, as Madeleine finished her tea and put down her own special lilac mug for the last time in ages.

"We're all connected," said Osborn restlessly, looking at his watch. "Talking of connections, we'd better go."

Half an hour later, the three of them, plus Madeleine's quite heavy case, stood on the cold, windy platform beside the train that would whisk Madeleine away and out of physical contact for three and a half months. A part of Sandra felt as though she would like to hang on to Madeleine and beg her to stay, but she managed to curtail her maternal instincts and smiled as brightly as she could.

"This is it then, Mumsie," said Madeleine, approaching for a final hug.

"I'll write to you," said Sandra resignedly, as she inhaled the scent of Madeleine's hair shampoo. "Your new hairstyle looks really good," she added, knowing that Madeleine's confidence still needed boosting as much as possible.

"I know you're not so keen on the darker dye," replied Madeleine, disengaging gently, "but I felt I needed a fresh start. New hair, new me!"

"You look great," said Sandra, "and you know how much I'll miss you. I love you!"

"I love you too, Mumsie, there's really no need to worry about me. By the way, I've left your birthday present with Dad." Madeleine turned to hug Osborn. If Sandra could have seen through the excess water in her own eyes, she may have been able to notice the excess water in Madeleine's eyes.

A few minutes after Osborn had helped Madeleine on to the train with her quite heavy case, they stood and waved as the train started to move and Madeleine disappeared from view. An immense wave of sadness and emptiness threatened to engulf Sandra completely, but Osborn took her hand as they both turned resolutely to walk back along the platform, out of the station and on into the next part of life.

The next part of life turned out to be an evening of phone calls. Kirsty rang to say her breast lump was nothing to worry about and asked what they were going to do about Sybil's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday; Sybil rang to say her back x-ray had shown nothing extraordinary; Caroline rang to ask if Osborn was still able to take Leonard into hospital for his third operation date; Lawrence rang to say that Kirsty had rung him and what were they going to do about Sybil's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday; and an annoying young man with a strange mid-England accent asked if they were satisfied with their energy provider.

That night Sandra lay in bed feeling like a startled, stranded dolphin, although to be fair she had no idea what a startled, stranded dolphin felt like. She finally slipped into a rather disjointed sleep and dreamed that she was in a rowing boat, attempting to reach a small island that was just out of reach. She knew that the island was her own. However, not only were her arms too tired to use the oars properly, but she realised that other people kept appearing inside her boat, or holding on to it from the water as if they wanted to climb in. She recognised Basil, Sybil, Kirsty, Dolores and others she knew, but was unsure about their identity on waking. She saw the sea was becoming rough and tried to shout to the people to warn them.

As the sea started to overwhelm her little boat, she rose to the surface of her consciousness for a few moments, but then found herself in Germany. She was on her way to meet Madeleine, who had settled into her new accommodation and had made some friends. Sandra wandered along the strange streets for a while looking for Madeleine, but then realised she had found where Madeleine was living and simply stood outside, gazing at the building and imagining Madeleine coming and going in her daily routine. She finally woke feeling weary and disoriented, but sighed and knew she must face the coming day.

The coming day came and went after Sandra had spent a few hours lovingly and heart-wrenchingly cleaning and tidying Madeleine's room, while Osborn had spent a few exhausting hours starting to repair the roof alongside the builder guy he knew.

The next day was the day Madeleine was flying to Germany. Strangely, Sandra woke for the day at 03:30 hours, which was the time Madeleine was leaving Gulliver's flat for Stansted airport. She extricated her arm from underneath the mattress and unwrapped her legs from around Osborn's waist, hoping she would wake less strangely the following morning.

All day, however, she couldn't stop herself thinking of Madeleine. In her mind's eye she went over and over again how Madeleine would be arriving in Germany feeling tired and scared, having to register with a bank before she could be allowed into her accommodation, finding out how everything worked and where she had to go in the university, having to speak to people in German... She tortured herself endlessly, longing for some communication from Madeleine and wishing mightily that she had her own mobile phone.

By the time Osborn came home from work, she was exhausted and could barely speak. Osborn hardly spoke either, but that was because he was out on the roof again, as the weather was still dry. However, as they prepared for bed, Sandra couldn't help but express her anxiety for Madeleine.

"I'm being such a mother, but I've been worrying all day that Maddy's OK," she said forlornly.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, I had a text message from her earlier," said Osborn off-handedly.

"What?!" Sandra froze in her complete inability to understand Osborn's casual forgetfulness.

"She's fine, she registered with a bank and got into her accommodation fairly easily. She even met an English girl right away."

"Did you not think that I'd be worried out of my mind all day and waiting for some communication?" A whole load of Sandra's fears for Madeleine had fallen away, only to be immediately replaced by a sense of enraged hurt that Osborn had failed to tell her what she'd most been longing to know.

"I'm sorry!" He was defensive. "It slipped my mind. I have the roof to think about. It's exhausting me, but I *have* to think about it and put it right. You should have asked me!" He banged the wardrobe door and flung himself into bed.

"OK, I should have asked you, but you could have *told* me!" Sandra flung herself into bed, feeling tears of frustration in her eyes because she knew it had been a failure of communication on both their parts. She tried very hard to forget her disappointment at Osborn and concentrated on the good news that Madeleine was safe and had coped well with her first daunting day. However, it was some considerable time before she managed to fall asleep.

The day of Leonard's third admittance to hospital had dawned. At 14:00 hours, Sandra accompanied Osborn as he drove Caroline and Leonard to the hospital. After she'd said goodbye to her father and wished him well, she watched him walking as upright and surely as ever into the building, where his chest would be cut open and invasive, gory procedures carried out on his heart. She was filled with deep admiration for him, although she couldn't help wondering yet again if that was the last time she would ever see him alive.

Sandra and Osborn then paid a visit to a nearby garden centre for a while, before collecting Caroline and taking her home. It felt like another strange and difficult day and another tense and uncomfortable night when sleep was hard won.

The next day, Sandra went to be with Caroline once again on the day of Leonard's operation. She spent the morning in the garden, therapeutically battling with the weeds and being extra careful with the secateurs, although a part of her wished she was working in her own garden that badly needed some of the same treatment. After a somewhat subdued lunch, the *Scribble* board came out and a long, slow tortuous game ensued. By 16:30, Sandra felt drained and needed to go home.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to go home. At least no phone call from the hospital has got to be good."

"I suppose so. What time do you think I should ring that number they gave me to find out how he is?"

"I don't know. What do *you* think?" Sandra instinctively felt she didn't want to make any decisions that her mother might later disagree with.

"Six? They should be able to tell me something by then."

"Yes, that sounds good. Let me know?"

"Of course. Will I see you tomorrow? It's Tuesday..."

"Yes, I'll come over as normal." Sandra smiled tiredly and walked away, feeling conflicting emotions at the way her insides seemed to be screaming at her to take some time for herself, even if it was to do her own gardening and her own housework.

However, when she heard Caroline's voice on the phone at almost eight that evening, telling her that the operation had finished successfully and that Leonard was on a ventilator and would be in intensive care for the next day or two, she felt very sorry for her mother. She imagined how Caroline must be feeling, having to spend the night alone after a long, anxious, exhausting day. After she put the phone down, she remembered the rest of the family.

"Can you text Gulliver and Madeleine, please?" she asked Osborn, suddenly overcome with exhaustion herself. "Belinda asked if I'd let her know too. She gave me her mobile number. If I had a mobile phone, I'd do it myself, because I'm way too tired to speak to people."

Two days later, Sandra and Caroline caught the bus into hospital to visit Leonard for the first time. He had purposely told them not to visit the day after the operation, as he knew he would be a frightening sight and probably still rather out of it. Sandra harboured a secret fear that he would still be a frightening sight and she would be rather out of it when she fainted with shock.

As they walked into the ward, however, they quickly saw him in an ordinary bed in an ordinary semi-public place in the ward. He smiled when he saw them, but his eyes seemed fixated on Caroline, as if gazing at her was a life support. He looked tired and drawn, with tubes and a catheter still attached, but he was very much alive. Sandra stood and watched as he drank in the sight of Caroline, trying to tell her he might need a pacemaker.

"What? You're slurring your words a bit." Caroline seemed agitated. "What do you mean about a pacemaker?"

Just then a physiotherapist came to take Leonard through a few exercises. Sandra watched in amazement as her father did breathing exercises, then got out of bed and marched up and down on the spot as directed. He was even attempting to joke with the physiotherapist, but Sandra was sure that wouldn't be held against him. She felt absolutely, unutterably proud of her amazing, brave father, who only two days before had been sliced open and had his heart artificially stopped so that it could be cut and stitched. When she and Caroline said goodbye, she realised that she and her father had hardly spoken, but somehow there had been no need.

"He's slurring his speech, I'm worried he's had a stroke," said Caroline as soon as they left the ward.

"What? Oh, I don't think so. They'd know if he'd had one." Sandra felt a twinge of annoyance at her mother's negativity.

"Well, I'm not so sure. People have slurred speech after strokes, you know."

"Yes, I know, but he was very alert considering what he's been through and he did very well with the physiotherapist. He doesn't have any paralysis..."

"I don't like this business about needing a pacemaker, either. He didn't have to have one last time."

"No, but that was 20 years ago. I think we have to trust that he's in the best possible place and to be honest, I thought he was amazing today." Sandra heard Caroline's habitual sniff of disquiet at her words, but she was too tired to take any more notice. All she longed to do was to go home and rest in the comfort of her own space.

However, when she arrived home from the crowded, noisy bus ride, Osborn was already in from work and his first words were stress-filled ones about the car, which had something wrong with it.

"I can't believe it! After all the expense of the roof, which we still haven't paid for and now another expense, it's just too much!" He watched as Sandra sighed and walked wearily to the bathroom. "Aren't you even going to acknowledge that I've spoken?" His tone was belligerent and accusatory.

"Aren't you even going to acknowledge that I might just be a little fragile after the last few days of wondering if my father was going to survive?" Sandra had turned around and shouted with pent-up energy she'd had no idea had been accumulating. "Have you forgotten that I've come straight from the hospital, where I saw Dad wired up and weak after major heart surgery? I really, *really* thought you'd ask how he was when I came in just now, but no! The car has your attention and you're worried about our finances, not Dad – or me! I find that unbelievable!"

She stormed out of the house through the patio doors of the back room and sat on the garden seat with hurt, angry tears running down her face. She then remembered that she'd been on her way to the bathroom, which added to her discomfort. However, the garden was soothing and her tears gradually stopped as she looked around at the pink flowering sedum, the purple asters and the cerise dahlias that were brightening her field of vision.

After ten minutes or so, she heard the patio door open and Osborn appeared with two mugs of tea. He walked down the gravel path and proffered one of the mugs, before sitting down beside her.

"I'm sorry, I was distracted. Bill Bustard's been on my back all day. I've been overwhelmed with all the pressures going on all around me."

"Well, I'm overwhelmed too. In fact, if any more whelming comes my way, I'll go completely and utterly insane."

The whelming unfortunately continued. Osborn's main sources of whelms were the roof repair (which was physically exhausting) and the bullying tactics of Bill Bustard (which were psychologically exhausting). Other contributory whelms were familial in origin, as Sybil's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday became closer and Kirsty fell out with Lawrence.

For Sandra, the whelming was emanating from her parents, along with concerns over Madeleine, who had rung to ask about the operation, but also talked of how upset she'd been to hear that Drew's father had been killed in a car crash. To top it all, an email arrived from Dolores that basically said she thought Sandra had social problems and obviously liked to stay within her comfort zone – which presumably meant that the visit had not gone the way Dolores had imagined. Furthermore, they were obviously two very different people and Dolores felt no further need to write to Sandra.

"Well, she's right that we're two very different people," said Sandra aloud, reading the email through once more.

"What did you say?" asked Osborn, coming in through the patio doors after having finished working on the roof for the evening.

"I said Dolores is right that we're two very different people," explained Sandra miserably. "She's finally emailed me, but I kind of wish she hadn't. How can she *possibly* say I like to stay in my comfort zone when I flew all the way to Denver to see her? I *told* her I hate flying. I left my father in hospital, not actually knowing if I'd ever see him again. It was a million miles away from my sodding comfort zone!" As Sandra's initial anger began to subside, the need to cry began to gain momentum.

"I think it was all about that Pot Luck Supper when her church friends came around and you freaked out. I'm pretty sure she invited them so they could meet you and say how wonderful it was that you'd been penfriends for almost four decades." Osborn stood on the mat, taking off his work clothes.

"I think there was a lot more to it than that. Come and read this." Sandra wiped her tears away impatiently as Osborn stood beside her and read the whole email.

"She seems to be indicating that she's been ill since you left because of the way you behaved, which is actually all about her," muttered Osborn.

"She just didn't like who I am in the flesh," cried Sandra, unable to stop her tears flowing. "She built me up in her mind over all the years we'd been writing into this wonderful person she wanted me to be and the reality was obviously a terrific disappointment to her. I tried to tell her over and over again who I really am." Anger and sadness were still battling for predominance.

"She didn't want to listen to that," said Osborn, putting his arms around her so that she came into contact with his warm chest. "She had a psychological need to construct her own picture of you."

"Basically, she's rejecting me for who I really am," said Sandra sadly, a fresh flood of tears escaping and mingling with the dust from the roof on Osborn's t-shirt. She sighed and coughed a little. "Well, I can't be someone I'm not. I'm so utterly and devastatingly tired of people thinking they can use me for their own ends."

"I know," replied Osborn soothingly. "Well, I must have a shower. Could you possibly run upstairs and get my hair clippers for me? I noticed a few straggly ends in the mirror this morning."

## CHAPTER 26

It was the first evening of the second year of the healing course and a new teacher was addressing the group. Seven trainee healers sat in a circle in the long room with its bright, yellow painted walls and pictures of rainbows, angels and stone circles, while Gloria lit a candle and proceeded with a short guided meditation. Gloria seemed to be the founder of Rainbow Healers and was a delightful, well-rounded, colourfully dressed, but perfectly coiffured white-haired lady in her early seventies. She seemed to exude wellbeing, confidence and kindness.

"You're standing in front of the pyramid..." said Gloria's warm, understanding voice. Sandra wondered how she had got there without hearing the words, as her mind had wandered distractedly as soon as she'd closed her eyes. "You are aware of your own destiny in this ancient place of wisdom and healing. Breathe in the amazing energy and let it permeate throughout your body and mind. It is giving you strength, insight and anything you currently need at this moment in your life..."

Sandra immediately felt a sense of peace stilling her distracted self, so that she sighed involuntarily and her breathing slowed with a sense of relief akin to stepping into a warm bath on a winter's day when the heating had been playing up. "Bring the energy back with you and allow it to heal you throughout this evening and beyond – and now come back to this room and open your eyes." Gloria was smiling beatifically as Sandra opened her eyes.

For the rest of the evening she felt a welcome sense of calmness amid the emotional mayhem of the past months – years – her life as she knew it. The others in the group seemed quite normal and approachable. Ann was in her forties, slim and dark-haired; Dan was also in his forties, dark-eyed and somewhat rugged; Fran was in her fifties, well-endowed and talkative; Jan was possibly in her sixties, white-haired and sensitive; and Stan was curly-haired and cuddly, possibly in his fifties. She wondered what had brought each of them to the healing course, although not in the transport sense.

"There's some course work you'll need to complete for the second year," said Gloria, "but it's nothing onerous. If you could write a few words about your personal definition of healing to hand in next month, that would be wonderful for starters. Now, let's get down to some healing practice to see how you're all getting on. Ah, there's an odd number. No matter, I'll work with you, dear – Sandra, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied Sandra weakly, wondering why she had to be the one picked out for such special treatment and failing to come up with any creative excuse whatsoever why she needed to opt out of the healing practice.

However, as the others paired off and arranged themselves at various places in the room, Gloria sat Sandra down on a chair, told her to relax and began to channel the healing energy. Sandra decided to close her eyes and go with the flow. Throughout the healing session, she was aware of some intense heat, followed by coolness and tingling.

She was aware of movement and small sounds in the room – a lot of creaking of floorboards, chairs and possibly knees, but she seemed to be floating on another plane.

It was a peaceful plane that was soothing and felt beneficial on every level. Amazingly, she seemed to lose all track of time, because when the session came to an end and Gloria touched her on the shoulders, she opened her eyes to see the others in the room had swapped from giving healing to receiving healing within their pairs at some stage during the session.

"Should I have practised giving healing?" she asked Gloria, who was smiling kindly at her, while the others were replacing the chairs in a circle, talking quietly amongst themselves.

"No dear, that's fine, you needed the healing energy this evening," replied Gloria benignly. "Plenty of time for you to practise giving. Now then, we'll have a round robin to share any experiences we noticed. Let's start with you, Ann."

"Well, first of all Stan gave me healing and I found it really comforting, like I was being cuddled." Ann gave an embarrassed laugh. "Then, when I was giving Stan healing, I felt as if our energy was quite compatible, because it seemed to flow very smoothly."

"That's wonderful, Ann. How was it for you, Stan?" Gloria laughed delightedly at the mild double entendre.

"It was fantastic, thank you," replied Stan, joining in with the general uplifting mood. "Ann's energy is very gentle, but strong as well, if that doesn't sound too mad."

"Not at all, there can be much strength in gentleness," said Gloria wisely. "How about you, Fran?"

"Well, I felt a little bit unsettled when Dan started to give me healing, but I think that might have been the lasagne I had to eat quickly to get here on time," said Fran, laughing. "No, it was really good, I felt calm and it was very relaxing, I could have fallen asleep."

"Excellent," said Gloria, smiling at Fran and Dan like a mother hen. "Dan?"

"I really enjoyed giving healing to Fran," said Dan a little hesitantly, "although I felt very unsure to begin with. It almost felt as though her energy was different to mine at the start, but as I relaxed, it seemed to kind of merge?"

"Yes, there's often a synchronising of energies," explained Gloria, beaming maternally again at Dan. "How about when Fran gave you healing?"

"Lovely," replied Dan. "Better than a pint of beer any day!"

"Ha!" laughed Gloria. "Yes, it's good stuff we have the privilege of dealing with. How about you, Jan?"

"I gave Osborn healing first and I felt he was a bit sort of jagged around the edges. No offence!" said Jan, laughing at Osborn, who smiled disarmingly back at her. "As I worked on his lower body, though, I started to feel the energy and warmth flowing down and he felt much smoother."

"There's often a lot of balancing to be done," said Gloria kindly. "You spiritual healers often need the energy to flow to your feet. How about when Osborn gave you healing?"

"Wow!" exclaimed Jan, startling Sandra somewhat. "His energy is really strong and I had a bit of trouble at first. It felt a bit full-on, but I tried to keep my breathing calm and I did settle down. My knee has stopped hurting, it's great!"

"Well done, Osborn," laughed Gloria. "How did you find it, dear?"

"Well, Sandra could confirm that I've been feeling very stressed lately," said Osborn, looking at Sandra along with seven other pairs of eyes. She made a strange face that was meant to be a friendly smile, but felt more like a stand-offish grimace, as she willed the seven pairs of eyes to look away from her. "I took a while to feel relaxed when Jan gave me healing, but when it began to hit home, it was lovely – thank you so much! Then when I gave Jan healing, I felt as if our energy had already merged and it seemed to flow very easily. My shoulders have stopped aching, I feel so much better."

"Well, you've all had a good experience of both giving and receiving healing by the sound of it," said Gloria. "You can work with one of the group next time," she said as an aside to Sandra, smiling and winking happily. "You should all sleep well tonight!"

"It's so good to see you home again in your comfy chair," said Sandra to Leonard, as she sat with a mug of coffee in her parents' sitting room. "How are you feeling?"

"I've got an infection in my leg," replied Leonard, gazing at Sandra with what suddenly seemed to her like old eyes. "It'll go away, though. The infection, I mean, not the leg."

"How's the pacemaker?" asked Sandra, finding his gaze slightly unnerving.

"Oh, that thing," said Leonard, grimacing. "I'm finding it hard to get on with, it feels like an alien implant. I know it's for my own good, but I still don't like it. I'm still feeling quite sick a lot of the time, too."

"Oh dear," said Sandra, not knowing what else to say. "I suppose it's early days." She smiled and sipped her coffee, thankful that Caroline had come back into the room and then feeling really annoyed with herself that she still found it incredibly hard to sustain a conversation with her own father.

"Belinda rang earlier this morning," said Caroline, "asking how we all are. She sent a lovely card, too. She said she's sent your birthday card, Sandra. To be honest, I'd almost forgotten about your birthday with all that's been going on. Are you sure you don't mind buying yourself something?"

"I don't mind at all," replied Sandra, thinking that a small part of her seemed to mind very much that her mother had almost forgotten her birthday, but she brushed it aside as being a very selfish, childish reaction in the circumstances.

"What will you do?" asked Caroline. "Will we see you?"

"I'm sorry I'm not up to much this year," said Leonard. "It's bad timing."

"No, honestly!" exclaimed Sandra. "We'll pop over and see you, of course we will, but I don't know what we'll be doing, we don't seem to have had time even to think about it. Still, at least Osborn's taking the day off and the roof is almost finished, so..." Words seemed to fail her, as she realised that it was going to be her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and nobody was going to do anything remotely special about it, let alone in her own vicinity.

It was September 2002 and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was attempting very hard to enjoy her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was true that Gulliver had sent a lovely card with a picture of some colourful flowers and butterflies. He had also written a note inside to say he had a hardly-used mobile phone for her and would bring it down when he next visited. As she looked at his familiar, scrawly handwriting, she felt a sudden enormous wave of missing him – of missing all the ordinary, precious moments in which they'd sniggered, snorted, chuckled and guffawed together – maybe not snorted, but simply laughed. However, he seemed happy enough where he was and the mobile phone was good news.

Madeleine had left a card and present in Osborn's care before she had flown to Germany. As Sandra looked at the pretty, sparkly card and opened it to see Madeleine had drawn some balloons, a birthday cake and lots of smiley faces in her colourful felt tip pens, a huge wave of missing Madeleine assaulted her so badly that she experienced an involuntary intake of breath. She would have given so much to have Madeleine sitting beside her on the sofa at that moment that it scared her a little. However, Madeleine's present of a beautifully crafted lighthouse that held a tealight was a lovely, comforting link between them and she currently had a good supply of tealights.

"What would you like to do today?" asked Osborn, as they sat in bed together, sipping a mug of tea each. "I was thinking of trying to organise something, but then I thought that you'd probably prefer to choose what to do yourself."

"You could have asked me beforehand," replied Sandra tiredly. 'You forgot,' she was thinking. 'You were so caught up in the roof repair that you just forgot.'

"Still, I've taken the day off, so what would you like to do? Actually, I wouldn't mind calling into Q & B on the way out..."

"Oh, I don't know," said Sandra, trying hard to think of a plan for the day. She realised that it had become so unusual for her to think about what she wanted that she was having difficulty. It struck her as being a bit like having a muscle that you hadn't used for so long that it had become very weak and inflexible.

"Are we seeing your parents?" asked Osborn, dashing the last of her hopes that Osborn had colluded with her parents to buy a special 50<sup>th</sup> birthday cake.

"I said we'd pop in," said Sandra. "I don't know what your parents will do, if they remember and frankly, I'm beginning not to care at all. In fact, my capacity for caring is waning horrifically as we speak. Why don't we just go to the garden centre for coffee and take it from there? I'm remembering how weird birthdays can feel."

The birthday seemed to progress in a weirdly unremarkable way, as they had coffee at the local garden centre (after calling in at *Q & B*) and then decided to go on to a different garden centre outside the city for a toasted teacake lunch.

'This is a nice enough day, it truly is,' thought Sandra, as she spread butter on her teacake and tried not to wish that Osborn had insisted they go for a proper pub lunch at a proper pub somewhere. 'I like garden centres and I like toasted teacakes and I should be so lucky that I'm able to do this at all.'

"You're not OK, are you," said Osborn matter-of-factly, as a splodge of butter dripped onto the table.

"I'm OK," replied Sandra, dripping a splodge of butter onto the table. "To be honest, I would have liked to do something a bit special for my 50<sup>th</sup>, but I know it's been a difficult time for everybody. It didn't help somehow that Madeleine and Gulliver were here for your 52<sup>nd</sup> and not for my 50<sup>th</sup>, when they were both here for your 50<sup>th</sup>. I sound so childish and ungrateful saying that, though, so I take it back – except I can't, because it's what I feel. I know it's just life, but maybe a pub lunch would have felt a little bit more special?"

"I don't think they do pub lunches at garden centres," said Osborn in an attempt to be humorous. He realised Sandra wasn't laughing. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I think I wanted *you* to say," replied Sandra quietly. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry on your birthday. We can go to a pub this evening?"

"It's OK, I feel silly because I've made a thing of it now. Besides, we're popping in at Mum and Dad's – and Gulliver and Madeleine might ring." Another splodge of butter from Sandra's teacake dropped onto the table.

"Yes, but we could still go out? How about the cinema?"

"The cinema?"

"You know, the place where they show films?" Another splodge of butter from Osborn's teacake dropped onto the table.

"I don't know, it depends what's on. Crumbs!"

"I know, mine was crumbly too."

"No, all these splodges of butter – I'd better get a couple more serviettes."

"Gulliver!" said Sandra delightedly into the phone, after they'd returned home from popping in to see Caroline and Leonard, where Basil and Sybil had also unexpectedly shown up. After a noisy hour, during which the main topics of conversation were hospitals, operations, doctors, drugs and a great many symptoms, ailments and self-diagnoses, Sandra and Osborn had decided to cut loose in order to go home and get ready to see *Silvermember* at the cinema that evening.

"Happy birthday, old mère," said her beloved son. "Had a good day?"

"Ye-es," replied Sandra, trying to be honest and positive. "Thanks for the mobile phone, I look forward to using it after you've given me lessons!"

"OK, if you ply me with wine, I'm sure I'll be able to face the challenge."

"I'm not sure about that, but – oh Gulliver, I just miss you!" The truth came out unbidden.

"I guess it's better than hitting me." Gulliver's response, after a moment's hesitation, belied his discomfort with anything emotional. The conversation continued in a lighter vein, but after Sandra put the phone down, she was aware of feeling much happier about Gulliver.

"Maddy!" she said delightedly into the phone about five minutes later. "How are you?"

"Aha, you can't escape from me singing happy birthday to you!" exclaimed Madeleine and proceeded to sing the familiar refrain in such unique and lovely Maddy-type tones that Sandra felt like sobbing abandonedly for a few minutes. Instead, she

swallowed back her tears and managed to whisper her thanks to Madeleine, who questioned if her mother was all right.

"I'm fine," replied Sandra more normally. "It's wonderful to hear your voice. How are you, darling? I miss you so much!"

"I miss you too, Mumsie," replied Madeleine, "but I'm fine and I've made friends. The university's a bit scary, but Frankfurt's a very interesting city. The public transport's wonderful, it's dead on time! There's an Irish bar we go to and we've found a shop that sells cheap food..."

Sandra listened to her daughter's account of life in Frankfurt and found that her mind was beginning to feel calmer about Madeleine's wellbeing. She wasn't quite as sure about her heart, which still longed to see Madeleine and felt fundamentally unhappy that she was in a foreign country, but generally speaking she felt relieved as the conversation drew to a close. She sighed involuntarily as she handed the receiver to Osborn and went to look at the birthday cards from Gulliver and Madeleine, trying to hang on tangibly to the connection between them all.

*Silvermember* was light-hearted and silly, which seemed a good end to the day. However, as she lay in bed that night, snuggled up to Osborn's back, she found herself reviewing the day, the month, the year, her life as she was beginning to understand it.

'Well, I'm 50 now. How did that happen? Mind you, some days I feel so incredibly old. Today was fine really, I'm lucky to have someone to share it with.' She peered at Osborn in the darkness, as he twitched and scratched his ear. 'It's a good trick, to be grateful for what you have, rather than wishing for something you want. God, the word 'grateful' sounds so dull, like porridge on a warm spring morning.

'No, I'm really happy that we share so much of this mad, treacherous experience called life together, it feels so right – especially after he broke my heart. It feels healing when we work together from the same standpoint, but is that actually my insecurity born from his betrayal? Why am I going back to that? I suppose you revisit big events in your life as you travel along life's pathway, in order to try to see them from a different perspective. I still don't understand how both of them could have done it to me, though – but let it go, Sandra, let it go. There's so much in the present to contend with, after all.' She moved over a few inches, as Osborn turned over and partly ended up on her half of the bed.

'Life has changed quite radically in the last few years, mainly because of Gulliver and Madeleine not living at home any more. I wish I could stop missing them quite so much. Well, I don't miss them pathologically or anything, because I don't think or talk about them all the time, or hanker after the past when they were children, or constantly ring them. I must learn how to text them on my mobile phone, that's going to be great!

'Gulliver seems to be fine, he really does, and Madeleine sounded very much OK today, although I think she was putting on the happy birthday voice a bit. She's come through so much already and shown that she has a great deal of courage and staying power. It's such a long time until she comes home for Christmas, though, how can I survive? I might have to make a *Cross Off Each Day While Waiting for Maddy Calendar*. In fact, I think I will tomorrow.' She looked across at Osborn, as he suddenly coughed and startled her.

'The other change is that our parents are all becoming so much older and our fathers in particular seem unwell. Dad's recovery from his bypass is much slower than the first time around and he *looks* older. As for Basil, he spends weeks of his life in hospital and seems to feel so hard done by. He's not a happy man, by any stretch of the imagination.

'His religion doesn't seem to be a comfort for him at all, which is interesting, although I can quite understand how the God of his religion isn't a wonderful prospect as he nears the end of his life. Serves him right, the pompous old goat. Now that's not very spiritual of me, is it? Well I'm sorry, but he's been really quite awful to Osborn all his life and I've had to deal with the fallout from that.

'God, if Basil dies, we'll have to look after Sybil – and if Dad dies, we'll be left to look after Mum. Or the other way around, of course. What a terrible thought, I can't stand it! Why is it that I feel selfish whenever I think of myself? I'm only really thinking

of my wellbeing, it's not as if I want a life of luxury and hedonism. In fact, I couldn't think of anything more boring, except perhaps televised snooker tournaments.' She flinched as Osborn suddenly flung his arm into her abdomen.

'Ouch! What about me, though? Why am I me? I still haven't found a good answer to that question. I still seem to be pushed and shoved along my life pathway – so much so sometimes that it doesn't even *feel* like my own pathway, but more like me being diverted onto other people's pathways, whether I like it or not. Then, when I think I'm following my own pathway, things have a startling tendency to go tits up. What a very common but rather splendid saying!

'Dolores and I certainly went tits up, although perhaps it doesn't mean failure, it just means discovering something about ourselves. I think perhaps it happened because she couldn't come to terms with the fact that we're such different people. It's interesting, this thing about comparing people and their behaviour. I used to think that comparison between people was wrong. If it's for the wrong motives, then I'm sure it *is* wrong and sometimes quite destructive. On the other hand, if it's used as a measure to gauge growth or change, then perhaps it's illuminating. God, the moon's bright tonight.' She stared out of the window, as Osborn began to snore lightly.

'Oh no, it's that new street light they've put in. How illuminating that life can be such an illusion! Or it's not really life being an illusion, it's how you perceive it and try to make sense of it – which is really a delusion, I suppose. God, I think I'm deluding myself that I can make sense of my life right now!

'It's very odd, because I feel that so many things are right, like writing and healing and all the spiritual stuff Osborn and I are discovering, but where is it all going? Every time I try to see a direction, I realise I can't. I have no idea where I'm going, but maybe that's what my life is meant to be, directionless? No, I think it's rather that there *is* a direction, but I can't see it. My pathway seems obscured by all the jobs that I've got to do, or people to see to, or people to listen to, or people to consider. It would be so good to feel that I have a *choice* about which direction, although I was never any good at orienteering.

'Yes, there's been such a lot to come to terms with on the whole, even the demise of *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*. Actually, they were a bit stupid, I don't miss them at all really. Oh well, another day tomorrow...' She tried to nudge Osborn over onto his side, so he would stop snoring, but he refused to budge.

'We're both getting noticeably older, that's for sure, but it's good to grow old together with someone, we have such a lot of shared history – not to mention geography – economics – biology... Oh sod togetherness, that snoring's getting worse. I'm off into the spare bedroom! Goodnight world, see you in the morning.'