

# **The S.O.D. Quad**

**Kay Santillo**

## Foreword

Here we go, more strange, semi-autobiographical fiction coming your way if you so desire. Desire? What's that, then? From 2003 until 2007, the desires of Sandra and Osborn seem to be completely submerged in the vast ocean of life – or their own particular swirling whirlpool, anyway.

Offspring move on and so do parents, in a completely different way. There's laughter and crying; ordinary days and extraordinary days; health blips, mood flips and mind trips; not to mention drips, slips, chips, rips, sips and pips. Life is challenging and sometimes a bit silly.

As to the meaning of life, there's simply not a lot to say, although according to Word Count, I've used over 92,500 words in the attempt. This is either a feat in itself, or a complete waste of time. I hope it's the former, I really, really hope it's the former!

With lots of the good stuff,

Kay Santillo, June 2012.

## CHAPTER 1

It was early September 2003 and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle seemed to be having a 51<sup>st</sup> birthday. She was sitting in *The Far Out Inn* on Dartmoor with her immediate family, which pleased her very much. Although a foursome get-together was sadly now a rare occasion, it felt so natural that she almost kept forgetting it was her birthday. However, the silver faced, stone set, rectangular ladies' *Inaccurist* watch that her husband Osborn had given her was a pleasant reminder on her left wrist, while the pretty multi-coloured bracelet that her 22-year-old daughter Madeleine had given her dangled deliciously on her right wrist.

The flashing badge that her 27-year-old son Gulliver had given her that morning also kept catching her eye every time she looked down at her chest, but usually for the wrong reason. She kept wondering if her new padded plunge push-up balcony bra was plunging and pushing beyond reasonable limits, so that the resulting balcony effect was both overwhelming and dangerous. Also, she was trying hard to come to terms with the fact that the flashing badge said '*Fabulous at 50 - Not!*' However, Gulliver's other present to her had been the desired CD album *A Rush of Blood to the Foot* by *Tepidplay*, which she had already played three times.

"It's no good, Gulliver," she said at last. "I have to know. Why did you give me that flashing badge? For one thing I'm not 50 anymore and for another thing, does it mean you don't think I'm fabulous?"

"Pass," replied Gulliver, frowning.

"No really, why did you give it to me?" asked Sandra, also frowning.

"Because you may or may not be fabulous at not 50, although I didn't actually say that. Also, it was half-price. I think our food's coming."

Conversation slowed down a little for the next ten minutes while they ate, but it soon resumed its inanity.

"How was your chicken and aniseed pie, Maddy?" asked Sandra, glancing up as Madeleine put down her knife and fork with a sigh.

"Unusual. It was lovely, but I can't eat another morsel," replied Madeleine, patting her stomach.

"You had morsels?" asked Gulliver, looking askance. "I didn't have any morsels, but this steak and tarragon pie was really interesting."

"Yes, this trout and cumin bake was quite uniquely flavoured. It was excellent, but I can't clear my plate," remarked Osborn regretfully.

"It's OK, they'll come and do that for you," said Gulliver. "What did you have again, Mother?"

"Red snapper and green pepper grill," replied Sandra, giving up the battle. "I forgot I don't like green peppers, but never mind, it was – far out."

"It's lovely to have some normal food again," said Madeleine. "German food didn't seem to agree with me all the time. Do you remember that furtive Frankfurt frankfurter you had when you visited me, Gulliver?"

"Do I just, Mad! Well I do, just. We'd had a bit to drink at the night club..."

"Why was it a furtive Frankfurt frankfurter?" asked Osborn curiously.

"We went to Frankfurt's renowned *Gute Scheisse* night club and it has quite a cool reputation," Madeleine started to explain.

"Yep, it's so cool it's hot," added Gulliver. "I was sweating like mad."

"I wasn't sweating!" protested Madeleine. "Oh. Well, anyway, Gulliver was starving when we all left the night club, but he didn't want to lower his reputation by having a frankfurter, so he lagged behind and bought one from a street trader on the quiet."

"Except the guy kept asking me in German what I wanted on it, but I didn't know what he was saying, so I just answered "Ja" all the time. It didn't really agree with me."

"Still, I was so glad you went to visit Maddy, because we simply couldn't make it for one reason or another," said Sandra sadly. "My dad took quite a while to get over his operation. He still hates his pacemaker and then he had that trouble with his infected leg. Not only that, he had to have a minor jaw operation, poor soul."

"My dad was in and out of hospital so much last year that I lost count of how many times," added Osborn. "My mother's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday fiasco was in amongst all that, as well."

"God yes, I'll never forget how Kirsty took over and made such a fuss," remembered Sandra. "She wanted us to pay for a mini-holiday for your mum and we had no spare money at all because of the roof repair. She got quite shirty when we said we couldn't afford it."

"She got quite shitty, you mean," corrected Osborn.

"Yes. I didn't like to say, because she's your sister," remarked Sandra.

"Hmm. Well in view of the latest contretemps, I sometimes wonder quite what she means to me," muttered Osborn darkly.

"What latest contretemps?" asked Madeleine, raising her eyebrows.

"You know we had that so-called holiday in Hunterdon last month that was nothing but an exhausting exercise in sorting out their problems..." started Osborn, taking a gulp of his ugly fruit and kumquat juice. "Damn, it's all gone."

"I'll get you another one," offered Gulliver. "Mother?"

"I'll have another rum and lime, please."

"Lil Sis?"

"Yes, I'll have another one, too, thanks."

"One or two?"

"What? One!"

"Anyway, Mum wrote an email to Kirsty," continued Osborn, when Gulliver had returned with their drinks.

"With a copy to Karla, seeing she kept complaining of being left out of the loop," added Sandra. "It was an honest but perfectly polite email, outlining the problems that seemed to keep cropping up with her printing my books."

"The next thing we knew was a phone call from them both, with mainly Karla shouting and screaming down the phone at me!" said Osborn distastefully. "It was actually nothing to do with me, but I knew Mum would have had trouble dealing with that onslaught, so I let them rant and rave. I should have just put the phone down, really."

"The extra annoying thing was that while we were in Hunterdon, Kirsty lied to Karla about *The Journey* book I wrote that she was going to print. It put me in rather a bad light, as if I'd been incompetent, but really it was Kirsty's incompetence," explained Sandra ruefully. "I let her get away with it, too."

"Hmm, bad trip," murmured Gulliver. "Shit happens, I suppose."

"Well, I'm sick of people shitting in my direction. What an awful image, let's change the subject. Yes, so I've withdrawn my *S.H.I.T.* book from them, as well as *The Journey*," explained Sandra, "and they won't be publishing any more of my stuff. I won't be doing any more proof reading for them, either, which I'm very glad about, because you'd never believe the shit Kirsty used to send me."

"Poor Mumsie," said Madeleine soothingly. "It makes it difficult because she's family, I suppose."

"Families are so awful sometimes," sighed Osborn.

"Dreadful," agreed Sandra.

"Terrible," added Madeleine, beginning to smile.

"Diabolical," said Gulliver, grinning madly.

"I'm glad you're my family," spluttered Sandra, forgetting she'd just taken a sip. She swallowed properly. "I don't know what I'd do without you, we've been through some peculiar times lately."

"It's been a difficult year all right," mused Osborn. "What with my dad's health, all that trouble selling his car, Mum's eye operation and then to top it all, Bill Bustard opposing my teaching money. I suppose I was stupid to accept that part-payment of £2,000 when I was actually owed almost £7,000, but I was led to believe that more would be coming and we were desperate for some extra cash."

"Still, at least you managed to go flying at long last," said Sandra, attempting to lighten his mood. "Twice."

"Yes, thank you so much for arranging that flying lesson, Gulliver." Osborn beamed in his son's direction, as he remembered the long weekend he'd spent in Fleet at Gulliver's flat the previous November. *Bangia* had generously allowed their employees to partake in an activity of their choice from quite a wide-ranging list and Gulliver had chosen to take a flying lesson for himself and a friend. Osborn had been delighted that Gulliver had asked him along and they'd made a long weekend of it – a long weekend in which Sandra had stayed at home alone and had a tidyfest, which disturbingly had felt a bit like tidying up her life.

"That's OK, you kind of repaid me by asking me along when that student of yours took us up in his plane," said Gulliver airily. "That was cool. I wish I'd worn a warmer jacket."

"We took some really great photos," remembered Osborn. "I'd love to do that particular combination of flying and photography more often, it was exhilarating!"

"Yes, air photography would suit you down to the ground," said Gulliver, grinning.

"It's been quite an interesting year for you really," said Sandra to Gulliver. "Your three-week holiday in Canada sounded great, I was quite envious. Then you went to that Hyde Park Peace Rally to take photos."

"Never again, though," said Gulliver, "it was much too noisy and raucous for my liking. You wonder why they're allowed to call it a Peace Rally in the first place."

"You're still a twit," said Sandra fondly. "You had a long trip by yourself too, Maddy," she said to Madeleine. "I could never have flown to Denver on my own, you're very brave in my eyes."

"I had this strong feeling that I should see Jace again," replied Madeleine, looking rather sombre. "It wasn't very successful, though, and I spent all that money from my student loan on the air fare."

"Sometimes we need to follow a certain direction, even if it's to find out it's not where we should be going," remarked Sandra, hoping Osborn wouldn't pick up on the dodgy financial situation. Thankfully, he seemed to be preoccupied in another direction.

"I was just thinking," he said suddenly. "My father stopped me flying when I was 15 and he wouldn't sign my papers to join the RAF, whereas my son did what he could to help me fly, even if it was just for an hour. I'll never forget that, Gulliver, it's as if a family rift has been healed somehow. My father would never understand, though, he seems even more completely wrapped up in his own small, self-centred world these days. All through my life he's seemed oblivious to how I might feel. You're quiet, Sandra?"

"Mmm. I've certainly found it a hard year, although that could have been fallout from the diabolical year before. I'm so glad you're back from Germany, Maddy, you did really well there and I'm happy you made the most of it. I'll never forget that long stretch you were away from September until Christmas when you tried to come off the antidepressants on your own. It nearly killed me. Not really, of course," she added, smiling at Madeleine. "No, there just seems no respite from our parents and their problems, so it's no wonder I've been having awful dreams and feeling depressed. I do think the St James' Wort helps. There was a time when I thought you should try it, Osborn, *you* were certainly very stressed and depressed. You even forgot to take a day off work for our wedding anniversary."

"I'm fine," replied Osborn somewhat shortly. It was probably just the way he was sitting. "Everything got on top of me at the time, that was all."

Sandra tried not to think that it was always her and Osborn who were overlooked in favour of other people, but the thought was such a recurring one that it failed to disappear. However, she tried to put it behind her and continue to enjoy the day.

"I'm so glad you're all here on my birthday," she said truthfully. "A birthday is such a special time to celebrate an individual, rather than Christmas, which is a commercial, hedonistic free-for-all."

"Still not too keen on the festive season, then," remarked Gulliver casually.

"No, except for when it brings your daughter home from Germany like it did last year," replied Sandra, smiling once more at Madeleine. "Actually, talking of birthdays, it was good to celebrate my dad's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday with him in May. I must confess, there

were times when I never thought he'd make it to 80. Mum was weird that day, though, she seemed to be in a very bad mood because she hadn't slept well the night before. I was quite upset with her, because she couldn't seem to make an effort for him on his special day."

"She seems to have changed a bit," said Madeleine, finishing her rum and lime. "She's not as smiley as she used to be – but neither are you, Dad – or you, Mum."

"I'm sorry darling," replied Sandra, grimacing as she finished her rum and lime. "Gosh, that lime was a bit strong. Let's hope this next year will be more of a smiley one! What are you smiling about, Gulliver?"

"What? Oh, nothing. I was thinking of something Bryony said yesterday at her house."

"What did she say?" asked Madeleine, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, her mother was saying how she's afraid that their roving cat might find its way into their new next-door neighbour's aviary and Bryony said that would put the shit amongst the pigeons."

"Yes, very amusing," said Sandra politely. "You're getting on well with Bryony, then?"

"Yes, thank you," replied Gulliver enigmatically, draining his *Bishop's Digit* beer.

"Are you an item?" asked Madeleine forthrightly.

"Yes, I guess we are," replied Gulliver somewhat coyly. "Does anyone fancy going for a walk around the reservoir? I'll buy us all an ice cream for dessert..."

"Well, did you have a good day?" asked Caroline a little tersely, as she stood in her kitchen, pouring boiling water into a flowery teapot. Luckily, she had previously added some tea.

"Yes, we went for a walk after lunch," replied Sandra, wondering why her mother's question put her on edge so much. She shifted position, but still felt uncomfortable, as if she was a child again being interrogated after returning home late.

"Your dad went out for a pub lunch with the *Old Ramblers*, but I had things to see to at home." Caroline seemed to sniff with meaning, as she stirred the tea in the teapot.

"Oh. I didn't think you liked that group, because they talk about such mundane things and you find it boring?"

"Yes, but that's not the point. I wasn't going to tell you, but I walked into Five Street this morning to look for your birthday card and I tripped over a step in the shop and fell over. The serving woman made such a fuss of me, I felt so silly. I hurt my knee, but said I was fine so I could get away, then I sat on a bench outside for a while until I felt able to catch the bus back. So I'm sorry about your card, but I just wanted to get home."

"That's OK, don't worry." Sandra wondered how her mother was able to make an apology with an underlying accusatory tone. "How's your knee? Should you see about it?"

"No, you know I hate to bother the doctor." Caroline was pouring the tea with a hint of aggression.

"What about Sister, or a practice nurse? If you rang the Health Centre, I'm sure they'd fit you in with someone, just to check it over."

"No, I'm fine. It really hurts when I twist it a bit, though. I'm mainly annoyed about that silly shop with its step."

"Didn't you see the step?" Sandra suddenly realised what must have happened. "Did you have your glasses on?"

"What? No, I was on my way into the shop and hadn't yet put them on to look at the cards. I can see perfectly well without my glasses, I've got good eyesight. Well, tea's ready."

"I'll carry the tray," offered Sandra, wondering why her mother steadfastly refused to admit that she could no longer see as well as she once had.

As they all sat drinking tea several minutes later, Sandra was aware of an almost tangible sense of constraint, although her father seemed oblivious as he told them about his latest plumbing experience.

"...so I had to call out a plumber, but he seemed a bit uncommunicative when I asked him about the blockage. I was polite to begin with, but in the end I was pumping him to get an answer. The trouble was, he then started to spout all this stuff about gland nuts and something about a shroud and headgear. I thought he must have a screw loose, but then he talked about a fixed spout or a swivel spout. I used to know a fair bit about plumbing, but to be honest, it was all water off a duck's back."

As she lay in bed that night, listening to Osborn gradually sinking into sleep, Sandra pondered over her 51<sup>st</sup> birthday.

'I enjoyed it,' she thought with a suffused glow of satisfaction. 'It was much better than my 50<sup>th</sup>, although it's a bit silly to build up birthdays in your mind into occasions that should be special, because that's asking for a fall. I'm getting quite old, but there's not much I can do about that, except enjoy life as much as possible – in between all the work and responsibilities, of course.'

'There's certainly been a lot of work and responsibilities this past year, but we've had some good times too. Let me see, there was – well, there was that lovely day in Charmouth with Madeleine, looking for fossils and actually finding some. She was very happy that day, I'm glad she can enjoy herself in relatively simple pursuits. It's great that she doesn't mind being seen out with us now, like she did once, although that was a long time ago. She has this lovely childlike quality that takes pleasure in ordinary things, like the way she was so delighted to buy herself that sheepskin rug and the pentagram pendant last week. I'll miss her so much again when she goes back to Cardiff for her final year at university.' Sandra sighed at the transitory nature of life.

'I have a strange feeling that Gulliver and Bryony are going to make a go of it,' she thought with a warm glow of anticipation. 'Imagine Gulliver settled down at last, although he seems quite ready. I wonder if they'll have children together? God, I'm jumping the gun a bit. What a strange saying. Heaven knows where they'll settle, though, because Gulliver seems quite happy in Fleet and Bryony seems quite happy in Swansea. I wish they would move back nearer to Cornwall, seeing they both come from these parts, but – oh well, they'll work it out somehow, if it's meant to be. I just want him to be happy, regardless of where he ends up living.' Sandra sighed at the dynamic nature of life.

'I wish Osborn could be happier, but it seems impossible with his work situation and that diabolical Bill Bustard playing his nasty tricks,' she thought with a heated rush of exasperation. 'How can a man like that become a manager? They really should call female managers womanagers, I suppose, but that sounds silly. Still, Osborn's doing more photography these days. His photos of that firework display are really good, they kind of sparkle off the page at you. I should say off the computer monitor, since he's into digital photography now. I can't see why people are so interested in taking pictures of fingers and toes myself, but it takes all sorts – and who's being silly now!

'On a more serious note, he's really pleased that he's a fully-qualified healer, although going before the board at Rainbow House yesterday sounded really scary. It does seem stupid that we did the healing course together and he went ahead and completed, while I dithered for Britain and put off going before the board. I honestly don't know if I want to be a certified healer or not. Maybe I should just be certified? Oh, sod it, life is too full of questions.' Sandra sighed at the uncertain nature of life.

'I have to do something with the rest of my life, because one thing I know for certain is that I can't fritter it away looking after the house and garden, not to mention looking after Mum and Dad's garden and spending countless hours being verbally abused while Mum lets off steam in my direction playing *Scribble*,' she thought with a rising tide of hot agitation. 'Even my writing seems to have no publishing outlet, so there seems very little point to it – except that I need to write, because it's an outlet for me and vital for my sanity.'

'So exactly where *am* I going? It almost feels as if I'm back at square one, or rather square 39 when I felt life crashing in on me. No, it doesn't, it feels more like I'm crashing around looking for my bit of road, my special piece of pathway, which I have to say feels very much hidden by other people's weeds and brambles. Talking of brambles,

I can't believe we're living next door to someone who lets her garden get in such a state. That sodding bramble just won't stop growing through our fence.' Sandra sighed at the unfair nature of life, while a hot flush began to rampage throughout her entire body.

## CHAPTER 2

"Mumsie!" Madeleine stood directly opposite Sandra in the kitchen a few days later and looked at her mother with an intense gaze that seemed to reach right into Sandra's soul.

"OK, you're right, I'll go before the board," said Sandra, smiling at Madeleine uncertainly.

"You know you're meant to do this," continued Madeleine, still gazing, but not quite as intensely. "You'd regret it so much if you didn't finish the course."

"I finished the course," muttered Sandra, looking away before looking back again. "I couldn't face the board, that's all. I'm afraid I won't appeal to them."

"You know what I mean," said Madeleine, smiling now. "I know you'll be fine and I enjoyed the healing you practised on me." She suddenly hugged Sandra, who sighed with the pleasure of being deeply connected to someone at soul level. After they disengaged, Sandra found herself gazing into Madeleine's eyes.

"How are you feeling about going back to Cardiff for your final year, Mad?"

"A part of me doesn't want to go and a part of me knows it's what I have to do," replied Madeleine, sighing now. "I know it won't be easy, but if I can get through a year at Goethe University in Frankfurt, then I can get through Cardiff University in Wales."

"I guess it's about finishing the course for both of us then," said Sandra, looking around the kitchen. "Do you fancy a glass of wine while we think about what to eat tonight?"

"Yes! I wonder what Dad and Gulliver are doing right now? Do you mind them camping in Penzance for a couple of nights?"

"Not at all, I'm sure they'll both benefit and take loads of photos. It's good they have a shared hobby and Dad certainly needs to have a couple of days off work. I'm positive that the ear infection he had was brought on by stress. That Bill Bustard sounds like a right old..."

"I know. Life doesn't seem fair, but I suppose it changes all the time."

"You're right, I still can't get over our dentist retiring and selling out to a private practice. All those years on the NHS and then wham!"

"Good idea, let's put on some music. It was funny Dad turning up for an appointment that was actually the date of his appointment last year! He really should have thrown that old appointment card away. I would have been so embarrassed."

"I think Dad's base level of embarrassment is much higher than ours. Well, we have a day to ourselves tomorrow, so what would you like to do?"

"I'd like to do the exercise video once more before I go to Cardiff and then perhaps shopping in Plymouth?"

"Not the exercise video again," groaned Sandra and then saw Madeleine's face. "I'm only joking, it sounds a great way to spend the day."

"I know it's not very exciting, but I'm going to miss days like this."

"So am I, darling, so am I."

Sandra sat in reception at Rainbow House beside Osborn, waiting for her interview before the board. To her surprise, Jan from the old healing class suddenly opened the door and came in looking surprised.

"There's quite a wind out there," she said breezily, shutting the door and sitting down the other side of Sandra. "Hello, how are *you*?"

"Nervous," replied Sandra truthfully. "Were you nervous when you went before the board?"

"Ever so," said Jan, "but Fran and Stan were here as well, so we boosted each other's morale. I heard it was only you before the board this afternoon, so I popped in to boost *your* morale."

"Thank you, Jan." Sandra didn't know what else to say. "Thank you."

"You'll be fine," continued Jan. "Fran and Stan were both very nervous, but come to think of it, so was Ann, because she rang me up before her board in a bit of a state – and did you hear about Dan?"

"Sandra, you can come in now," said a voice emanating from the inside corridor.

"Ah!" said Sandra, jumping up in alarm and managing to drop her bag into Jan's lap and to elbow Osborn by mistake. "Sorry," she said, as she followed the voice into the corridor. "I'm sorry!"

A few minutes later, Sandra sat at the other side of a table in front of two people from Rainbow House, Andrea and Cynthia. They were both in their sixties, guessed Sandra (without realising she was guessing) and they were regarding her with assessing eyes.

'Oh shit, they're looking at my aura, or reading my psychic vibrations, or something,' thought Sandra in a panic. 'I must be calm and breathe and smile and not think words like shit...' She broke into a fit of coughing, as her attempt to breathe calmly had resulted in her swallowing the wrong way.

"Would you like a tissue?" asked Andrea kindly, her silver-haired head leaning to one side.

"I'm fine," choked Sandra, as her eyes and nose began to run freely, which was what she felt she would like to do right at that moment, straight out of the room and the entire building. "Tissue – yes – please!" she gasped, realising she didn't have one. After wiping her eyes and blowing her nose, she breathed and smiled, looking up at them apologetically.

"It's OK Sandra," said Andrea kindly. "Are you ready now? Would you like to start by answering some random questions from the Code of Conduct?"

Sandra suppressed her negative reply and tried to assume a pose of deep spiritual concentration. She paradoxically began to relax as her mind searched wildly for the correct response to each question that came her way. Andrea was very supportive and had a tendency to help her out when she faltered, but Cynthia remained silent, gazing at her unremittently. Sandra was thus a little surprised and perversely disappointed when the questioning ended and she was asked to give a quick healing demonstration on Cynthia.

As Cynthia sat on a chair and Sandra prepared to talk her way through the healing demonstration, she found she was wishing it was Andrea sitting in the chair. She felt strangely uneasy with Cynthia, but presumed it was just the close scrutinisation she'd felt Cynthia had been giving her. At some deep level, it seemed to be reminding her of past scenarios with her mother. She breathed deeply, coughing a little as she felt the still dodgy place in her throat tickling slightly again.

"I usually start by placing my hands on the client's shoulders – oh! I'm sorry, Cynthia!" Sandra had forgotten that she was still holding the scrunched-up tissue she'd used, so that as she opened her hands to place them on Cynthia's shoulders, the damp tissue had fallen ignominiously into Cynthia's lap.

The rest of the healing demonstration passed in a dazed haze, as Sandra tried not to let her self (her very embarrassed self) interfere with her spiritual self. Something must have worked because when she finished and sat down again with some relief, Andrea looked at Cynthia, who briefly nodded.

"I'm very pleased to tell you that you've passed the board and we can now certify you as a healer," said Andrea, smiling broadly. "Well done!"

"Are you sure?" asked Sandra doubtfully. "I dropped that damp tissue and I didn't know everything in the Code of Conduct..."

"You have a lovely aura Sandra," continued Andrea thoughtfully. "I can see that you might be lacking a little in confidence, but that will come with practice. We'll send you your certificate and ID card in due course, but I'm afraid you'll have to pay for insurance. Would you like to purchase a Rainbow Healers badge as well?"

Sandra replied in the affirmative without really thinking, as the truth began to infiltrate her consciousness. 'It's actually happened,' she thought happily as she reached for her cheque book. 'I've been certified at last!'

'Here we go again,' thought Sandra sadly as she sat in the front seat of the car while Osborn drove her and Madeleine (in the back seat, naturally) to Cardiff. 'At least it's Maddy's final year and I think she's done absolutely brilliantly to get this far with all that she's been through. It can't be half as bad as last year in Germany and it can't be half as bad as the year she came home battling with anorexia. We're on the home run now, although the home run is often a very hard run and I should know, because my final year nearly killed me.'

"What are you thinking about?" asked Osborn suddenly. "I'm feeling tired, I need to keep awake."

"I was thinking we're on the home run," replied Sandra, wondering if they should stop for coffee.

"We're on the outward run, not the home run," said Osborn, wondering if they should stop for coffee.

"Shall we stop for coffee?" asked Madeleine. "I'm not quite ready to arrive at Cardiff yet."

Three hours later, they'd finally arrived in Cardiff, had helped Madeleine to unpack, had been to *Safeway's* to buy her a supply of food and other essentials and were once more standing on a doorstep having to say goodbye to her.

"I'll be fine," said Madeleine perceptively. "That new flatmate we met, Alana, seems very friendly and I'm sure the others will be too."

"We're at the end of a phone," said Osborn, giving Madeleine a prolonged hug. "Ring us any time."

"Except possibly between midnight and five in the morning," joked Sandra. "Actually no, I wouldn't say this to anyone except you and Gulliver, but ring any time, honestly." She also gave Madeleine a prolonged hug, before making the move she hated most, which was turning and walking away from Madeleine. She only found it marginally easier walking away from Gulliver since he'd moved away, as he gave every impression of being more self-sufficient and happier with his life.

As they drove away through the hectic streets of Cardiff, filled with people hurrying along intent on themselves, Sandra's eyes involuntarily filled with tears at the thought of Madeleine lying in yet another strange bed that night in a strange house, having to deal with strangers all around her.

'I must get a grip,' she thought a little later, as they made it to the now familiar Newport tunnel that led to the motorway. 'It really isn't as bad as when she went alone to Germany last year. I mean, it's only three hours up the motorway, not halfway around the world in somewhere like Australia or New Zealand.'

"I'm seriously thinking of going to live in New Zealand," said Gulliver two weeks later during a weekend at home, after having returned from a three-day walking break in Snowdonia with some friends from work. "I love being out there in the mountains, it's fantastic!"

"New Zealand?" gasped Sandra, trying not to shriek out loud or fall on her knees in supplication, begging him not to go. "Well, Dad and I would miss you so much, but it's your life and you need to live it your way." She smiled and felt pale inside. 'What are these words coming out of my mouth?' she asked herself silently. 'How can I be thinking and feeling one thing and actually saying something completely different?'

"I so loved climbing Snowdonia," continued Gulliver, unsuspecting her inward discomposure. "I know I was scared on that Crib Goch walk, but I did it and the feeling was tremendous!"

"Adrenaline," muttered Sandra. 'New Zealand! New Zealand! Why New Zealand, for sodding hell's sake?' she was thinking.

"New Zealand seems like my kind of place, kind of wild and dramatic. I could go on so many wonderful walks there and climb mountains..." He broke off wistfully, gazing into the middle distance, with just a hint of veering left.

"Yes, you'd love it there, I know you would," said Osborn, sounding far too enthusiastic for Sandra's liking. "Mum's right, you know, it's your life and you need to follow your own heart."

"Yes," said Sandra. 'Even though it would break mine,' she was thinking. "We wouldn't see you very often," she continued, trying not to fall into the chasm of despair that had suddenly opened up in front of her.

"There are planes," replied Gulliver happily.

"Planes – yes, planes," muttered Sandra.

"I know you don't like flying, but I would come back here to visit you." A hint of doubt seemed to be appearing in the tone of Gulliver's voice.

"No, it's OK, I'd fly to see *you*," said Sandra, trying to smile brightly at Gulliver. "Actually, New Zealand does sound like a wonderful place and I'd love to visit. Did Dad or I ever tell you that not long after we were married, we applied to emigrate there?"

"Yes, but they wouldn't take you," replied Gulliver. "I hope they take me."

"They should do, with your IT skills," said Osborn, making a bit of a resigned face at the thought of his own past rejection.

"If we'd been accepted, life certainly would have been different," mused Sandra aloud. "Our parents would have had to rely on themselves a whole lot more, that's for sure. Oh! Did I tell you that my dad had a liver alert from a recent blood test?"

"No. What does that mean? They think they've found a liver?"

"Don't be daft. I'm not sure what it means, to be honest, except that he now has to have a liver scan."

"I hope he's OK. I was wondering if you fancied going to the pub for lunch?" Gulliver looked hopeful.

"Oh. It's difficult. It's the end of the month. We had to go to the bank just before you arrived because we realised we were overdrawn." Sandra felt dreadful quashing Gulliver's enthusiasm again, but she knew Osborn was currently extremely worried about finances.

"Mother, some people spend most of their lives being overdrawn."

"Especially art models – oh sod it, this is *our* life and we don't see you very often." Sandra darted a pleading look at Osborn, who was looking uncomfortable.

"Don't worry," said Gulliver nonchalantly. "I was going to pay anyway, I had an unexpected bonus from *Bangia*."

It was a Tuesday evening in mid-October and as Osborn drove himself and Sandra to Terry and Kerry's old cottage in north Cornwall, Sandra began to panic about what exactly she'd let herself in for.

'What *is* spiritual rescue work?' she wondered nervously. 'I know it's about lost souls, or those who have died and for some reason can't find their way Home (or into the light, or whatever you care to call it) but what are we supposed to *do*? It feels a bit scary, but I'm not frightened at all, which is odd...'

"I know I feel led to do this rescue work," said Osborn suddenly, echoing Sandra's thoughts, "but I wonder what it actually entails?"

An hour later, Sandra and Osborn were about to find out, as Terry lit a candle in the subdued light of the sitting room and smiled around at them all. The only other person to have joined Terry and Kerry was Wanda from the Awareness Circle that met every two weeks, so it was a very small gathering of five, which led Sandra to feel quite privileged. She found she was actually looking forward to contributing to this very worthwhile exercise, although she couldn't imagine how, as she believed herself not to be very psychic at all. She also couldn't believe that her life path had somehow led her into such a strange place – and she wasn't thinking about Terry and Kerry's sitting room. Why were sitting rooms called sitting rooms anyway, when people assumed all sorts of other positions in them? It was too passé to say lounge, so perhaps the only other option was living room, as the people in such rooms were usually living – unless of course there were actually some dead people in the room who needed to move on...

"...so now we're safely protected with the white light of eternal love," Terry was saying, "we'll all tune in and see where this leads us."

"I have a feeling..." began Wanda hesitantly.

"So do I," said Osborn in a low voice. Sandra was thinking that she had a feeling too, but she was sure that shivery legs didn't really count, so said nothing.

"I have shivery legs," continued Wanda, "and I feel – this is so difficult, but I feel that there are some babies from aborted pregnancies that need rescuing."

A tangible hush fell over the room, as the candle softly flickered. Sandra felt that she simply wanted to send love to any such lost souls and soon felt a wonderful energy of love and compassion flowing through her.

"They're approaching," said Wanda softly.

"Come forward," said Terry encouragingly, in a kind, gentle voice. "Come forward and be guided into the light, where you belong. There's no need to be afraid."

"They're holding back," said Wanda, "although one of them seems to be inching forward. Hello, what's your name?" The name of Sarah suddenly flashed into Sandra's mind, but she said nothing as she reasoned that aborted fetuses wouldn't have a name.

"It's Sarah," said Osborn quietly. "Her name would have been Sarah."

"Come on Sarah, don't be afraid," continued Terry in his kind, gentle voice. Just walk towards the light and you'll be met by those who love you. If you walk forward into the light, Sarah, the others will follow you and you can all have a lovely big welcoming party when you get there."

"That's right," breathed Wanda rapturously. "They're slowly walking, with Sarah in front." Sandra looked across at Wanda and saw tears streaming down her face. "They're OK," said Wanda in a very choked up voice. "They're OK – they've gone." Wanda opened her eyes and looked around at the others.

"Are *you* OK, Wanda?" asked Terry softly, as Kerry handed Wanda a box of tissues, after taking a tissue and wiping her own eyes.

"Oh yes," replied Wanda, wiping her eyes. "I've never experienced anything quite so spiritually beautiful." She blew her nose into another tissue. "That was amazing!"

"It really was something else," said Osborn. "I was a little hesitant about all this, but it's so utterly worthwhile. Could I have a tissue, Wanda?"

"Me too," said Terry, smiling. "I have the feeling that there will be more souls to be rescued in the future. Do you need a tissue, Sandra?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm absolutely, wonderfully fine. I've been sitting here with the love flowing through me and I actually feel quite high!"

"Good stuff," chuckled Terry, as they all laughed in varying degrees with relief. "Now, we need to close ourselves down and then we can have a mug of something hot."

Two hours later, after they had all drunk a mug of something hot and had returned home, Sandra lay in bed beside Osborn, pondering on the strange happenings in her life.

'You never know where life is going to lead you,' she thought reverently, gazing up at the light of the moon through the bedroom curtain. 'Who would have thought Osborn and I would ever be doing rescue work? I didn't even know it existed, especially when I went searching for the meaning of life via religion. God, Osborn's parents would have a fit if they knew! My parents too, I suppose, since my mother's reaction when I showed her that transcript of my psychic reading was rather extreme.

'I was quite surprised at that, to be honest. I was only trying to share something that felt important to me, but she didn't want to know. Well, that's how people learn not to reveal themselves to others when the others reject them, or something that's important to them.' The moon went behind a cloud, muting the silvery light.

'I hope I've never rejected Gulliver or Madeleine, I really hope not. I've always tried to listen and encourage, as far as I can remember, but it's pretty hard to remember everything that's happened. We all need to remember we're human and make mistakes, which can be quite difficult. Why is life so difficult?' The moon reappeared from behind the cloud.

'That's better, I love to see the moonlight. I can remember there was a half moon the evening we drove back from Cardiff when we realised Maddy was going down the anorexia road again. That was so painful, but somehow the moonlight was a strange connection.

'Also, there was a half moon when we drove back from visiting Mum in Grimsford in 1972, after she suddenly left Plymouth and went to stay with Auntie Lily, because of Mum's messy affair. I can remember holding a jumper of hers that she'd passed on to

me next to my cheek for comfort and gazing up at the half moon for most of the journey, which was about six hours. I felt as if the moon was a reflection of my heart, which was half missing. I don't think Mum's ever understood how much I missed her, because she was so caught up in her own world. I was only 19 when she and Dad split up and Osborn and I were left to pick up the pieces. Still, they got back together again, what more can I say?' The moon disappeared behind another cloud.

'Fickle moon! No, not really, it's only the clouds obscuring the light. Different clouds, same light. I would never leave home to go and live hundreds of miles away without telling Gulliver and Madeleine I was going, though. How could Mum have done that to me? How strange that I'm thinking of that old stuff now. Maybe the light illuminates different clouds – so is that memory still a cloud? Judging from the way it's still slightly painful, I would imagine it is. How can we get rid of all our clouds? How many more clouds will Osborn and I have to deal with?' The moonlight suddenly departed altogether, leaving Sandra staring at the dark curtain.

### CHAPTER 3

October was not going well. Basil was in hospital yet again, this time with suspected pneumonia. Meanwhile, Osborn had been to have a tricky tooth out as a day case at the same hospital, as he was allergic to local anaesthetic. He was now resting at home, taking painkillers and looking very pale.

When the phone rang early in the evening, Sandra thought it would be someone to ask how Osborn was, but to her surprise she heard Basil's voice.

"Hello," she said trying to sound pleased, although her heart had sunk.

"They let me come home, they decided they just needed to sort out my drugs. Is Osborn there? I need to speak to him."

"He's finding it very difficult to speak at the moment, I'm afraid. He had a tooth out at hospital today and now his jaw's very sore and swollen."

"What? I won't keep him long." Osborn had obviously heard his father's voice and held out his hand for the receiver with a resigned look on his tired, drawn face. Sandra gave in and walked away as Osborn spoke with some difficulty to his father. Thankfully, it appeared his father was doing most of the talking.

However, a few minutes later when Sandra returned to Osborn, she was amazed to see Osborn dialling somebody. During the phone call with his father, his voice had become gradually huskier. She wondered exactly who he felt it was necessary to ring.

"Hi Kirsty," began Osborn, clearing his throat to create more sound. "Dad just rang and asked me to let you know he's out of hospital."

Sandra stood there agape. It wasn't very attractive, but she couldn't help it. Her ire on Osborn's behalf had shot up through her body and was threatening to explode out of her mouth in rather strong language. She attempted to calm herself as Osborn spoke with increasing difficulty, knowing it would be detrimental to add to his load. He finally rang off and sighed deeply.

"You look exhausted," began Sandra reasonably. "Don't speak, I'll make you another hot drink." She turned to go to the kitchen, but found herself spinning around on her heels, facing him again. "Why? Why did your mad, selfish, self-centred father still want to speak to you, even though I told him about your jaw? And why in the name of – of something – did he ask you to ring Kirsty to tell her when he was quite capable of doing so himself? And why did you actually *do* it?" Her voice had risen and increased in volume.

"I was too tired to argue," croaked Osborn.

"I'm sorry," said Sandra, compassion flooding her and flushing away the ire as she looked at him. "I don't understand, that's all. Tea?"

As Osborn nodded in assent, Sandra made her way to the kitchen, muttering to herself despite her best intentions. "Selfish bastard of a father, horrible thoughtless manipulative git." As she uttered the words under her breath, however, she wondered for the umpteenth time why Osborn had allowed himself to be manipulated.

The following morning, Osborn's jaw was slightly better, although still sore and difficult to open. Sandra was glad he'd taken a week off work and only wished she could have a week off from visiting her parents, but knew that her mother would complain. She was preparing to leave and go to face the impending doom of a verbally abusive *Scribble* game with her mother after a morning's work in her parents' unruly garden, when the phone rang. It was next to where Osborn was sitting, so he picked up the receiver.

"Slow down Mum," Sandra heard him say with a sinking heart. She really wished her heart was able to maintain a balanced position more easily. "Dad's what? You think he's had a heart attack? A stroke? You called for an ambulance? Well, he's in the right place. Have you rung Lawrence? I'm not feeling too good, so he - OK then, I'll call around and take you to the hospital."

Two and a half hours later, Sandra was eating a sandwich for lunch at her parents' home, having vented her anger on the ivy, convolvulus and brambles that were growing through their garden from the adjoining garden.

"What have you done to your cheek, love?" asked Leonard, looking up from his chair and noticing a rather bad scratch that had resulted from an aggressive bramble.

"I had a fight with a bramble," explained Sandra, realising that it was beginning to sting. "You really need some strong weed killer there."

"Oh, right. Could you buy some, do you think? I'm not sure what you need, I can't get out much in the garden these days."

"OK. How are you feeling, Dad?"

"I still don't like this pacemaker, I thought I would be feeling a lot better after the op by now, but I seem to have slowed down so much."

"You *are* 80 now..." responded Sandra, not really knowing what to say.

"You seem rather tense today," said Caroline, chewing slowly on her sandwich and staring somewhat at Sandra.

"I'm annoyed at the way Sybil and Basil treat Osborn," replied Sandra. "They make no consideration of how he's feeling whatsoever and he's been feeling quite rough with his jaw. I don't understand why one of them couldn't have rung Kirsty last night to tell her, instead of asking Osborn to do it, when it was perfectly obvious by the way he was speaking."

"You're very hard on them, I expect they were exhausted," said Caroline. "It's no joke being old, you know. I've been feeling very tired lately. Still, not too tired for a game of *Scribble* in a minute."

Three days later, Sandra and Osborn walked along underneath a beautiful blue sky on a path that slowly wound down to the Eden Project, looking ahead in anticipation as they approached the biomes nestling like gigantic mounds of heavy-duty blown-up bubble wrap in the once disused china clay pit.

"This feels like freedom," said Sandra happily. "Just you and me, doing something we've both wanted to do for ages. I don't care about the cost, because visiting somewhere as magical as this is necessary for our health."

"Absolutely," agreed Osborn. "This is *our* day and we deserve it. So, shall we visit the Tropical Biome first, or the Mediterranean Biome?"

"How about the café?" suggested Sandra hopefully. "I could really do with a *Fairdeal* coffee. Oh, I love the ethos of this place..."

Two hours later, they emerged from the Mediterranean Biome, feeling more relaxed than they could remember for some considerable time. As they slowly began to wander up one of the paths that led back to the top, with the gentle breeze ruffling the numerous decorative flags along the way, Sandra tried to identify the unfamiliar feeling that was soothing her soul.

"I think it's peace I'm feeling here," she said aloud finally, looking back down across the site. "No, it's hope. I feel there's hope here for the future of the world, as well as hope for us, maybe."

"Have you been feeling we're hopeless?" asked Osborn, frowning slightly.

"Oh no! It's just that life has felt like a raging sea that's kept battering itself almost relentlessly against the two of us over the last couple of years - the last couple of

decades really – and I've felt like a lighthouse that's losing its paint and its capacity to actually beam light out into the world because I'm being obscured by so many storms."

"Hmm. Your foundations are strong, though. Yours and mine?"

"They've felt very crumbly at times over the years, but you're right, you and I are built on solid bedrock. You and I collectively and separately, I mean."

"Bedrock sounds interesting..." began Osborn.

"What? Oh, shut up!" said Sandra benignly. "Wow, what are those purple flowers over there?"

In early November, Madeleine arrived home for a five-day visit during Reading Week, but it was apparent that she was experiencing difficulty coping. All Sandra had to do to empathise was to remember her own final year at university with its adrenaline-producing focus on increasingly difficult course work and forthcoming crucial exams. Considering what they'd both endured during their university years, it was no surprise at all that the final year itself was almost a push too far.

"I feel such a failure asking for a doctor's note to say I'm depressed," she said glumly, as she and Sandra walked to the surgery the morning after she'd arrived.

"You're so not a failure, darling!" replied Sandra. "I don't like the word anyway, but how can you possibly be a failure when you're standing there in the firing line and facing everything that comes your way? I wouldn't even think you were a failure if you'd opted out, because your degree has been about so much else other than the academic side of it. It's such a cliché to say it's a degree in life, but it is! Still, it'll be great to have some letters after your name."

"I hate taking the antidepressants, though," said Madeleine a little tearfully. "I sometimes wonder if I'll ever be able to come off them completely."

"I'm absolutely positive you will," said Sandra truthfully. "I'd stake my loaf on it!"

"A Hovis loaf?" asked Madeleine, as they turned into the surgery's entrance. "Oh well, here goes nothing."

It was late afternoon after Osborn had returned from work and the three of them stood companionably in the kitchen, each engaged in a separate task to prepare a vegetable stew. As Osborn poured a glass of wine each, the phone rang and they all collectively groaned. Osborn answered it and returned looking tense.

"It was my father," he said resignedly. "He's home again and wants me to collect a prescription for him. I'll have to go now to catch the pharmacy while it's open, I think. Sorry to leave you, but I hope I won't be too long."

"Poor Varti," said Madeleine, using her special name for him, which was an adaptation of the German 'Vati'. "Tell Grandad I'll come and visit him tomorrow. I was going to anyway, but at least I don't have to go to the hospital now, I hate the smell and the sick people."

"I love your forthrightness," said Sandra to Madeleine. "It feels so – right. Try not to be too long, Osborn, you need to relax."

"Tell that to my parents," muttered Osborn morosely as he left. "I swear they see me as a convenient slave. I know for a fact that pharmacies do deliveries to people who can't make it there. Oh well, I suppose it might be urgent. See you soon."

When Osborn returned an hour later, he came and stood once again in the kitchen where Sandra and Maddy were ready and waiting to dish up the stew.

"I got there and he immediately started to tell me how he's decided he wants me to buy him a combination TV and video set for the bedroom," recounted Osborn heatedly, taking a gulp of wine. "God, this oven's hot. Anyway, when I asked him about the prescription, do you know what it was for?"

"Different drugs he's been prescribed?" asked Madeleine tentatively.

"Heart medication?" asked Sandra, guessing it wasn't.

"Constipation!" exclaimed Osborn, putting his glass down on the kitchen top with too much force. "Damn, I've spilled it. He had me running around after him because he's flaming well constipated. How totally shit is that?"

It was nearing the end of November. Sandra and Osborn were once again in Terry and Kerry's familiarly comfortable sitting room, awaiting the start of an evening's introduction to numerology.

"It's about time we made a start," said Terry, looking around the room. "How many of us are here? Are we an odd or an even number?"

"I'm an odd number," said Derek Vinn, grinning. "I always have been, really."

"I was odd when I was at secondary school," said Rodney Pointer, "but then I went to evening classes."

"What?" asked Wanda White, just before she snorted with laughter. "Ha! I was being obtuse, but I see it now!"

"I'm beginning to feel spaced out already with all this," said Leo Capricorn, smiling uncertainly. "Kind of non-plussed."

"I was never any good with numbers at school," said Claire Sight smiling benignly. "I probably haven't got a fraction of your mathematical know-how."

"A large percentage of numerology isn't really about maths," explained Kerry, frowning slightly at her own words, "although I suppose it's a factor."

"I think a slight fear of numbers is the common denominator here, mixed with a slight amount of self-deprecation," put in Osborn cheekily, joining in the fun.

"The sum of all our humour is lifting the vibrations," said Angelica Lux ethereally, gazing into the corner of the room. "This is good because angels are always using numbers to communicate with us. Let's start."

"Take it away, Terry!" called out Rodney, putting on his glasses expectantly.

"Thank you chaps," said Terry, smiling around at everyone. "I was asking if we were an odd or an even number to see if we could work in pairs, but before we divide, I'll recount a short history of numerology. It's been around for thousands of years and basically involves a belief in a mystical relationship between numbers and living entities. It's used to divine all sorts of information about ourselves, our life path and our soul's purpose."

As Terry continued to speak, Sandra's mind began to wander. 'Our life path and our soul's purpose,' she mused wonderingly. 'I've often thought about my life path, but I would so love to know my soul's purpose. I've thought in the past that my life's purpose is to be there for other people, but I suspect that a soul purpose is subtly different, or perhaps blatantly different if it spans many lifetimes. Or does it? So many questions...'

"So, any questions?" asked Terry, almost echoing Sandra's thoughts with a completely different meaning. "No? OK then, light warriors, let's get number crunching. We actually work out as an odd number this evening, so we needn't bother to split into pairs, we can all have fun together. I'll pass around these pieces of paper and we can work out what our names tell us about our selves."

The next hour seemed to pass very quickly and with much spontaneous enjoyment, as Terry talked them through the workings out of their life path number, personality, expression and soul urge. Sandra was interested to see that her life path number turned out to be 8, the same as her soul urge. According to Terry's notes, a life path number 8 signified 'the goal setter'. Number 8 represented the blend of material and spiritual and was the number of infinity and human justice. Personality traits, however, were meant to include ambition, practicality and self-confidence.

"I'm not sure about any of this," confided Sandra to Osborn, after they'd finished their numerical tasks and were awaiting a hot drink to round off the evening. "I'd like it to resonate, but I feel it was just a bit of fun, really. Pity, I would have loved it to work out and be meaningful. What's your life path number?"

"It's 5, which signifies 'the communicator', concerned with communication and intellect – also supposed to lift, exalt and inspire to greater heights. I'm supposed to be versatile, enthusiastic and impatient."

"You are."

"Come on, where's the tea? I'm so thirsty! Only joking – hey Wanda, what life path number were you?"

As Osborn moved across to sit beside Wanda, Sandra looked around at all the others talking happily and felt her old sense of oddness. 'Maybe that's why the even

number of 8 doesn't feel right for me,' she wondered musingly. 'I really must stop wondering and musing. I wonder if musing is intrinsically different from wondering? Actually, it's great to have time to wonder musefully, or muse wonderfully, because sometimes at home it feels like I don't have time to call my soul my own.'

"How's life with you, Sandra?" asked Kerry, who had finished making hot drinks for everyone and came to sit beside Sandra on the sofa.

"Oh, bearable!" replied Sandra brightly. She caught Kerry's questioning gaze and felt she should elucidate. "Well, it's bearable sometimes, but Osborn's parents seem to think he's their personal run-around slave. My parents are looking to us both to do more and more for them, because my father isn't exactly well after his second bypass op. Maddy's finding her final year at uni very hard and I miss Gulliver. I suppose all of that doesn't sound much at all, but somehow in the everyday living of it, there are times when it feels overwhelming – when we don't seem to have time to breathe our own air or think our own thoughts. That's why it feels so wonderful to come here and simply be ourselves."

"I don't think I've heard you express so much in practically one breath before," said Kerry, smiling and putting her hand on Sandra's arm for a moment. "I'm so glad you feel relaxed here. Do you meditate at home?"

"Oh yes, I do. Well, not much lately. Actually, no." Sandra looked down at her mug of tea.

"I'm sure it would be helpful," suggested Kerry kindly. "Even if it's for a few minutes at a time, it's something that helps you to focus on your inner self, or higher self, however you term it."

"I know you're right, I should make it a habit every day, like coffee time."

"Yes! Sit down for coffee time, but perhaps meditate before you actually drink. Just remember to ground yourself before you carry on with everyday life."

"Oh, I normally just make instant coffee for myself."

## CHAPTER 4

November was drawing to a close and Sandra had ventured into the city to attack the Christmas shopping. Attack appeared to be the right word, as the madness had set in and hordes of people seemed to be hell-bent on buying silly stuff and mowing down anyone who dared to be walking in their direct path.

However, she had arranged to meet Osborn for lunch, so was looking forward to that as she hurried along to squeeze in one more shop before the allotted time. 'I hope they sell fluffy pink penguin socks,' she was thinking, checking the time on her watch. 'You lunatic, you're right in my way! Wow, there's Osborn, he's early.'

"Hello. You don't look too good. Are you OK?" Sandra gazed with concern at his grey, tired face.

"Bill Bustard just lost it and tried to physically attack me," he said, obviously still shocked. "He asked me to have a meeting with him in his office because he wanted me to sign my new job spec, which he'd written without even consulting me. I read it and it was pure misrepresentation of what I actually do, so I refused to sign it. He reached across the desk in a rage and tried to haul me up by my shirt collar."

"He did?" Sandra and Osborn stood still, looking at each other, as the hordes streamed past them in all directions. "What – why? Let's go somewhere for lunch and you can tell me all about it."

"I can't eat, but a coffee would be good."

Half an hour later, after Osborn had comforted himself with a cappuccino and forced down half a monkfish mayo sandwich, he explained to Sandra how ever since Bill Bustard had been promoted to line manager of the technical staff, he had systematically tried to push Osborn out of his job.

"But why?" Sandra was trying her best to understand Bill's motives and failing completely.

"It must be because I'm much better qualified than he is, I can't think of any other reason."

"So why is he the manager and you're not?"

"He belongs to the dodgy handshake brigade? I used to think he had a vendetta against technicians with qualifications to do lecturing, because he's systematically tried to stop me from lecturing. I heard that he recently promoted a technician to a part-time lecturing post, though, so it must be personal and he's just got it in for me. When he first became manager, he took me aside and told me I should leave."

"That's horrible! Surely it's malpractice?"

"Yes, but he tells the dean one thing to put himself in a good light and then it's a completely different story with me, so that it's all very underhanded and it looks like I'm the troublemaker."

"That sounds suspiciously like bullying tactics to me."

"Oh, he's a bully all right. I've been giving him enough rope to hang himself and it looks like this time he actually might. I shall go to Human Resources and show them all the emails and the written accounts I've kept of all that he's tried to sink me with."

"What about your job spec?"

"He wrote me a job spec that doesn't include the lecturing I do. He wrote it in as teaching, which means I won't be recognised or paid as a part-time lecturer. I've always tried to stand up for my rights, but I didn't realise how upsetting it would be, I feel really rough."

"You look a bit better now, but you looked terrible when I met you, I was quite worried. What with the stress of your parents and now this, it seems so unfair."

"I'm not going back to work this afternoon, I feel too awful. Just walking back inside that place today would make me feel ill again. After all I've done for them, all the extra hours I've worked without recompense, all the money I've saved them on equipment and all for what? To be stabbed in the back, that's what."

"Poor you. I know there's nothing I can say or do to help you feel better, but is there anything I can say or do to help you feel better?"

"Just being with you and talking it over with you helps me feel better. Have you got any more shopping to do, or shall we go home?"

"How are you?" asked Sandra, as she carried two mugs of tea into the sitting room and sat down opposite her old school friend Gina, who was on one of her usual flying visits. Sandra was trying her hardest to appear normal, although for the last few days she had felt depressed, as if she was sinking into a quagmire of worry and responsibilities that she'd been spending huge amounts of energy trying to avoid for quite some time.

"I'm too busy as ever, I had an argument with Andy, our freezer's playing up, Kate's boyfriend dumped her and she's in a mess, but I feel better than you look. I recognise that look, Sandra, it reminds me of myself when I had post-natal depression after having Kate. Speak to me!"

"What?" Sandra gazed at her friend of almost forty years in mild horror, realising how much she hated both talking about herself and also being the centre of attention. Normally she could laugh her way through and listen while others talked, but she was currently feeling far too raw and vulnerable. "Oh no, I'm OK really, it's just life."

"What particular part of life?" Gina sipped her tea, her familiar, kind blue eyes trying to break through Sandra's barrier of self-protection, although why she felt she needed to protect herself from her friend, she hadn't a clue.

"Well, Osborn and I are both at the edge. Osborn's having awful trouble at work with a nasty, bullying manager. He's had to take it to the union and he's understandably very stressed about it."

"How dreadful."

"One of our storage heaters has gone wrong and it's Osborn's father's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday soon, but we can't afford to replace the heater *and* buy him a decent present. His father seems to be failing, but it feels as if he's trying to take Osborn down with him. His mother rings him so often in a panic these days and she seems to ring 999 with gay abandon too. Osborn's dad fainted yesterday evening and she dialled 999 and then rang Osborn. He went around there and the paramedics said it was more like a panic attack. It's just chaos and stress from them."

"How ghastly."

"Meanwhile, my dad had to have a liver scan last week, so I'm wondering what all that's about. Maddy's hanging on, but she hates taking the antidepressants. Her finances are a worry and because we try to keep her afloat, *our* finances are a worry."

"How awful."

"It's more than just the current stuff, though, it's like so much has been piling up in the past and now for some reason I can't cope with it all anymore. I feel as if life has sold me down the river and left me to stagnate in a muddy pool, where some people just add more and more shit."

"But you're keeping afloat, you're not drowning?"

"No, I can still function. Kind of."

"I know. I got in the bath with my socks on the other day and squirted hairspray under my arms. Well, that's the shit in your stagnant pool that you've told me about, but what about the water, the good stuff?"

"Umm – Gulliver's fine, he and Bryony Stanpool seem happy, even though she currently lives in Swansea and he's in Fleet. They went to meet up with Maddy last weekend in Cardiff, so that was good."

"Yes, that *is* good. Remember how worried about him you were when he and Almond split up and then he lost his job?"

"I know, there's definitely a lot about my life to be thankful for, but I'm tired. We're both tired, mainly because it feels so relentless, just one thing to deal with after another. I'm sorry, Gina, I hate to moan like this. I know your life is chaotic too. How are Adam and Sarah getting on with Reece?"

"Reece is three now, he's like a whirlwind. It's a good job I don't mind our home looking like a bomb's hit it after they visit, which is nearly every day now, but Andy's not very keen on that. Mind you, Andy should play more of a part when Reece is here, I sometimes think he expects me to do everything."

Half an hour later, after Sandra had mainly listened to Gina talking about her own chaotic world, Sandra felt a little better, having been transported outside the boundaries of her own world for a while.

"I must go Sandra, but why don't we try to arrange another get-together with Em, Kay and Dee? I'm sure it would do us all good to moan our heads off and then laugh our socks off about it all?"

"Yes, it's about time we got a little bit headless and sockless, seeing we're past our legless days!" Sandra was attempting a rather feeble joke to prove she was actually OK.

"Oh, I was never legless, I hate that feeling when your head starts to go. I don't understand why everyone seems to think they need to drink themselves to oblivion these days, it's ridiculous."

"God, don't get me started, I loathe the drinking culture. I'd go teetotal myself in an instant if I thought it would do any good."

"Yes, I prefer tea as well. OK, I'm really going. Give me a hug!"

There was only one short week to go before Christmas Day and Sandra was feeling comparatively happier. She had managed to claw her way up out of the quagmire by sheer hard work and grim determination not to give in to her demons – and it had definitely felt grim for a few weeks. The fact that Madeleine was now at home for the Christmas holiday was also helping to a notable extent. She found that she was looking forward so much to a family Christmas with the four of them together again for a whole week or so.

"I didn't realise how much I took for granted all those years when the four of us were living together cramped up in our rather small house," she confided to her friend Alison, as they sat in Alison's festively decorated sitting room, drinking tea and musing nostalgically over the past. "Sometimes I used to long for the time when they would leave home, simply so I could have some peace and order in my life instead of mountains of clothes to wash amid the general chaos, but I totally underestimated how much I would miss them."

"I guess it's harder for you because they're not living locally," replied Alison fairly, although her short hair was looking very colourful with red highlights. "At least Sam and Karen are in Plymouth and now Helen's got it together with Mark, they're looking for a house here."

"That's good," said Sandra, genuinely pleased for Alison. "I'm glad Helen enjoys teaching, it sounds as if she gives it all she's got and I know it's hard work, despite what people say about teachers. It really annoys me when people start ranting about things they don't actually understand. My mother annoyed me last week when she was moaning mightily about how computers are taking over the world and how she and Dad are compromised because they haven't got one. Oh – you haven't got one either, have you? Sorry, now I'm going off about things *I* don't understand!"

"That's OK," replied Alison genially. "I have a choice about whether I could join in with the computerised masses. To be honest, I don't know that I could cope and right now I can't be bothered, especially when Dirk doesn't seem at all interested. If he did, maybe I would too. I don't know, though, life seems far too complicated sometimes."

"Tell me about it. Maybe I'm simple, but a simple life seems far too simple for most people. Isn't simple a funny word? How are Sam and Karen getting on with Tamsin?"

"They seem fine, although Dirk and I look after her quite a bit. She's so funny now she's three and a quarter. I love looking after her, but I've noticed that my mother seems to be a bit jealous of her sometimes, it's quite odd. I wonder if my mother thinks I'm giving Tamsin too much of my time, when I should be giving more time to my mother? Family dynamics are a minefield sometimes."

"All we can do is our best," said Sandra sagely, looking down to wipe away a small splosh of tea from her jumper. "I don't like this colour green, it's too dark and depressing. My mother gave it to me, but I don't actually like it."

"Why are you wearing it, then?"

"I don't know!" Sandra looked at Alison and they both shrieked delicately with laughter. "I sometimes wonder Ally, whose sodding life is it anyway?"

"Exactly. I like you calling me Ally. You wouldn't like it if I called you..."

"No, don't call me Sandy." Sandra and Alison shrieked again, a little less delicately. "We each need to take a bit more control of our own life if you ask me," continued Sandra. "Oh well, I'd better go. I have to ring Osborn and find out what time he's leaving work, so that I know whether he'll be able to collect his father's prescription, because if he can't, I'll have to do it and if I do have to do it, I'll have to let Maddy know, because she wanted me to go to Five Street with her to help her choose a bottle of wine for my dad for Christmas..."

"Control, Sandra?" Alison asked, smiling sympathetically.

"Hmph! If I ever had control, I've certainly lost it."

"Losing control sounds like quite a good idea to me!" The shrieking this time was anything but delicate.

It was Christmas Eve evening and Gulliver had arrived from Fleet, although it had apparently been a slow, tedious journey. Sandra had really enjoyed spending the last twelve days with Madeleine in the house, largely going at their own pace, although Sandra was determined to lose weight and Madeleine looked absolutely fine and healthy. They'd exercised several times in front of the television to an exercise video, using tins of baked beans instead of weights and often collapsing with laughter when Sandra made a mistake.

It felt really good, however, now all four of them were at home and preparing for the following day. The Christmas CD was playing, Osborn was reading a book and Sandra, Gulliver and Madeleine were wondering what to do.

"I'm going to do some wrapping," said Madeleine. "I'm not very good at it, can you help me, Mumsie?"

"I didn't know you were into that sort of music," said Gulliver amiably. "Actually, I'm glad you reminded me, I've got some finishing off to do too."

"I'll help finish you off if you like," offered Madeleine.

"Ho ho ho," responded Gulliver, deliberately mirthlessly.

"Oh, let's just get stuck in," suggested Sandra. "I'll get the Sellotape."

"Scissors? Paper? Labels?" asked Madeleine, smiling prettily.

"Beer? Wine? Rum?" asked Gulliver, smiling not quite as prettily.

"Good idea!" responded Osborn, putting down his book. "I'll get them, tell me what you want."

A merry evening ensued, as once the wrapping had been accomplished, they all played some old board games that Sandra had turned out from the loft.

"*Bread*," said Madeleine wonderingly. "Wow, that was such a dry, uninteresting game, it was so hard to win it. Oh, the lid's started to crumble..."

"*The Weather Game!*" exclaimed Gulliver delightedly, opening the box and lifting out the contents. "I was telling Bryony about this. Can we play it? I used to love trying to get the right wind, temperature and pressure for the Cairngorms."

"Speaking of gorms, I always thought it was a gormless game," said Osborn conversationally. "I always used to get bad forecasts."

"I still don't know what gorms are," said Sandra. "We could play one game of it, though, couldn't we?"

Three exhausting games later, they decided to give in and watch some festive comedy on television.

"*Only Idiots and Donkeys?*" asked Osborn, flicking through channels. "Or *The Orifice? My Insane Family?*"

"Are you calling us insane?" asked Sandra, sipping her sherry. "What time are you seeing Bryony tomorrow, Gulliver?"

"I'm going to go to her house for an hour or so before lunch," replied Gulliver. "It's good that her parents live within walking distance of here. It's also quite good that I get two present-opening sessions."

"Three if you count my mum and dad," added Sandra.

"Four if you count my parents," added Osborn to Sandra's addition. "No, best not count my parents..."

"There are only two of them," said Gulliver. "Boxing Day was so awful there last year, I'm not sure I can stand it."

"Me too," echoed three voices.

"Let's forget about Boxing Day," suggested Sandra. "Isn't there any *Absolutely Fabulously Fabulous* on?"

"I don't know, honey," replied Gulliver sweetly. "I'll have a look."

It was Boxing Day afternoon and the Dullkettle family, along with Sandra's parents, were trying to kill time as painlessly as possible in Basil and Sybil's sitting room. It wasn't going well, the atmosphere was dull, stilted and less Christmassy than a melting ice cream on a sun-kissed beach in the northern hemisphere.

"How was Christmas Day, then?" asked Sybil, sitting down with a grimace. "Ooh, my hip!"

"Christmas Day was relatively quiet," replied Sandra politely.

"We're only a relatively small family," added Gulliver, before he lapsed into resigned apathy once again.

"Not as small as we were yesterday," complained Basil, sitting in his chair and looking sourly at the others. "You'd think one of our children could at least have been to see us on Christmas Day."

"My parents only have one child, that's why we go to their house on Christmas Day," explained Sandra hotly, as a flush erupted in sync with her ire. She was also thinking that there was no way on Earth that she or the rest of her family could survive a Christmas Day with Basil and Sybil.

"I can understand how Kirsty and Karla didn't want to come all the way down from Hunterdon again, after they were here for my 80<sup>th</sup> birthday," continued Basil, "but Lawrence has no excuse, he could have come and stayed over. We bought a three-bedroomed house so putting people up wouldn't be a problem."

"It's people putting up with you that's the problem," muttered Osborn.

"What's that, Osborn?" asked Basil sharply. "We – ouch! My heart..."

"Use your spray," said Sybil, looking at Basil worriedly. "The ambulance service is probably overrun today, but Osborn can always give you a lift into Casualty if your heart's playing up."

"I'm not going into Casualty, woman!" thundered Basil. "Ring for the ambulance once more over my dead body!"

"Er – shall we play a game?" asked Caroline, looking very uncomfortable alongside Leonard on the two-seater sofa. It had seen better days and was beginning to sag horribly either side of the middle.

"Yes, let's!" said Madeleine quickly.

"I haven't heard of that one, dear," said Sybil absent-mindedly, still looking at Basil, who had made a great show of using his spray and was now glowering at everyone. "I've got ordinary cards and *Scribble*..."

"Not *Scribble*!" responded Sandra immediately, before realising Caroline was looking at her oddly. "Only four can play *Scribble*."

"It should be called *Shriek* from the sounds that come from the sitting room when these two are playing," said Leonard, attempting to elevate the mood.

"*Frustration*, more like," said Caroline.

"*Hell on Earth* from what Sandra says about it," joined in Osborn.

"Oh, bugger it," muttered Sandra to herself, knowing that her mother would question her about Osborn's remark the next time they were alone.

"*Obuggerit*," mused Osborn, blissfully unaware of his faux pas. "Now I haven't played that for years."

"Well, I'm not playing," said Basil petulantly. "I don't subscribe to swearing, using the devil's own language."

"Hell no, it's diabolical," said Gulliver suddenly, looking as if he was losing the fight to survive.

'What a total farce Christmas is,' thought Sandra tiredly as she lay in bed that night. 'I just can't find a place where it seems to feel OK. We really should buy a new mattress. It's great that the four of us are together again for a few days, but we could actually arrange that without it having to be Christmas. It's the relentless expectations of others that seem to drag me down. When the children were young, it was always a constant battle trying to buy them what they wanted within a very limited budget.

'On the one hand, we had Osborn's parents telling us it was immoral to overindulge our children and on the other hand, my parents – well, my mother – used to insinuate that we should do all we could to make sure they didn't feel left out and hard done by. I'm pretty sure that emanated from her own poverty-stricken childhood. I never thought of that before, it's amazing how you can look back and see old things with new eyes.' She rubbed her left eye that was feeling very dry and itchy.

'Somehow over the last 27 years, it's gradually turned from Osborn and me being responsible for our children's Christmas satisfaction and happiness into us being responsible for our parents' satisfaction and wellbeing. When exactly will the two of us be taken into consideration? Actually, that's not fair, Gulliver and Madeleine have been very thoughtful lately. Madeleine baked us that wonderful Christmas cake – unusual and slightly misshapen, but it tasted really good and Gulliver even washed the dishes the other evening.

'No, it feels fine with those two, because it's our choice to do what we do for them, but with our parents, it's turned into something else. Expectations again, I suppose, unspoken and otherwise. They seem to believe that because we're younger than they are, we have all the energy in the world to help them. That is so untrue and so unfair! If only they had an inkling of all the stress that Osborn and I have had to deal with over the years...

'They don't have a clue and when we try to tell them, they don't want to listen. Well, my dad does, but he still expects us to help with the gardening and other jobs. There have been times lately when Osborn and I are so exhausted that we feel dead on our feet.' She reached down and rubbed her right foot that was tense and restless.

'Oh well, I suppose I should count my blessings instead of raving on like a crabby old woman – a cow – ha! I'm glad I still love acronyms. I have so many good things in my life, I do. It's just a pity about all the do-do that seems to float our way. Yuck, bad mental imagery. I'm glad I can still amuse myself, though, it's a blessing. Actually, it's a real survival skill, it kept me from drowning in a sea of utter misery when my heart was broken.' She placed her hand protectively over the centre of her chest and left it there as she slowly sank into sleep.

## CHAPTER 5

"Welcome to 2004," said Sandra tiredly, as she brought Osborn a mug of tea in bed. "It's a bit of an early start, but you said you were probably going into town with Gulliver this morning, so I thought..."

"That's fine," mumbled Osborn sleepily. "Thank you."

"Gulliver's up already, reading one of his Christmas books," said Sandra, getting back into bed. "He's seemed a bit quiet this Christmas, but I suppose his mind is elsewhere with Bryony, which is only right and natural. I do miss him, though."

"I had a really good time with him yesterday, going to Bodmin Moor for that sunrise," said Osborn. "It was as if we were the only two people awake at the beginning of a brand-new day and we took some great photos too."

"I'm glad you enjoyed some special time with him," replied Sandra, unable to keep a tincture of sadness from her voice. "I really am pleased that you two have photography in common, but I'm beginning to wonder what Gulliver and I have in common right now."

"You have your sense of humour," replied Osborn, sipping tea rather noisily. "This is hot, it's warming me up, I felt quite cold last night. Yes, I used to feel excluded when you two would laugh insanely about something or other, at the same time as I was glad that you were happy with him."

"I wasn't always happy with him," reminisced Sandra fondly. "He used to drive me to absolute distraction with his awful untidiness and his friends coming back to the house from the pub with him, waking me up when I'd just managed to drop off to sleep. I wonder why people drop off to sleep, it sounds like they're going over the edge, or something."

"I felt as if I was," remembered Osborn. "He almost trashed his degree in the final year, but I fought for him."

"He was lucky that you work at the uni and were friends with his tutors."

"That sounds dodgy, but it was all above board. I intervened slightly with the course work situation and then when Gulliver's case was discussed because it was borderline, I explained the situation to Franklin and he put in a good word. They all liked him and couldn't understand why he almost lost it in the final year. Come to think of it, neither could I."

"Me neither, except that Gulliver seems to like the excitement of new things and new situations. He'd done his work placement year at *Fischer & Chipmann* and I suspect that going back to uni was too unbearably retrograde for him. I'm not making excuses, I'm merely trying to understand."

"Hello? Mumsie? Varti?" Madeleine's voice preceded her up the stairs, before she reached the top and peered around their open bedroom door. "I heard voices, I knew you were awake. I made myself some tea. Can I come in?"

"Of course you can," replied Sandra and Osborn in unison, as Madeleine came in and perched herself on the end of the bed.

"I know I'm a bit old to do this still, but I really enjoy it," confessed Madeleine, sipping her tea.

"So do I!" responded Sandra and Osborn in unison, causing Madeleine to smile and raise her eyebrows.

"Are you OK, Mad?" asked Osborn suddenly. "You've seemed a bit quiet lately."

"I'm OK. The final year at uni is a bit stress, that's all - plus I don't know what I'll be doing afterwards."

"I wouldn't worry too much about what the future holds, I would concentrate on the job at hand, which is finishing your final year," said Osborn, as if concerned that Madeleine would almost trash her degree as Gulliver had.

"Don't worry, I feel as if I've been through such a lot that it would be awful to let it go to waste."

"Oh, I'm sure that none of it goes to waste," replied Sandra, tuning into the wider perspective and not wanting to heap any more pressure onto Madeleine's shoulders. "You've learned such a lot, you really have."

"I think we all have," said Osborn reflectively. Sandra had given him the black shiny mug. "I also think we've got a whole lot more to learn."

"Thanks," groaned Sandra. "What happened to fun and nice things happening?"

"Come on, Mumsie, there must have been some recently," said Madeleine, frowning. "I'm trying to think of some of mine – like it was nice that Drew came to see me just before Christmas, I hadn't heard from him for ages."

"Yes, I'm glad he did," mused Sandra. "I was a bit concerned that his visit would upset you, but it didn't, did it?"

"No, I'm fine," replied Madeleine a little too quickly. "What nice things have happened for you?"

"Let's see – it was nice that we all went to the pub with Gulliver and Bryony the other evening," offered Osborn. "Bryony was very friendly, we all seemed to get along together well."

"Yes, that was good. Mumsie?" Madeleine was insistent.

"Well, I know Dad really enjoyed the sunrise photo shoot with Gulliver and my dad won that £50 Christmas hamper..." Sandra paused.

"But *you*, Mumsie, what nice things have happened for you?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do! I really enjoyed buying the DVD of *Taken* and then the three of us watching it – especially last night, right up until past midnight. If I'm not mistaken Mad, you're as much taken with *Taken* as I am."

While Osborn and Gulliver were in town later that morning, Sandra and Madeleine started to enjoy themselves going through Madeleine's chest of drawers, deciding what was to be kept, recycled, given to charity or thrown away. However, their enjoyment was interrupted and spoiled by four consecutive phone calls.

"God almighty!" yelled Sandra as she put the phone down in the porch after the fourth call, just as Osborn and Gulliver came in the front door. "Hello. That was your mother, Osborn. Your father rang earlier, after your sister and your brother."

"What did they all want?" asked Osborn, his face clouding over.

"Your brother rang to wish us a happy New Year and to say he had a really bad cold. Your sister rang ostensibly to wish us a happy New Year, but also to tell us how miserable and depressed she's feeling and how she's having such a terrible time at work with people persecuting her. Then your father rang to say he wasn't feeling well and wasn't sure he would make it to my parents' house this afternoon," replied Sandra, her voice having risen steadily without her consent. "I don't know what he expected me to say, but whatever it was I couldn't have said it, because then your mother rang!"

"Don't shout at me," said Osborn, frowning. "It's not my fault."

"I didn't say it was."

"What did my mother say?"

"She said your father had asked her to let us know that he was constipated, the buses aren't running today and did we know the telephone number of a good taxi firm. Your sodding family just won't leave us alone!" Sandra's voice ended in a shout of pent-up rage and frustration that sounded much louder than she'd anticipated.

"There's no need for that," said Gulliver coldly from the porch. He still hadn't shut the door properly. "Bryony's family are really well-mannered and polite with each other, not like this family."

"Go and stay with Bryony's family then, if they're so wonderful!" shouted Sandra tearfully, feeling she would sob uncontrollably for hours, if only she could let herself go.

"I wonder what the council tax charges will be like this year," said Leonard a few hours later, when the Dullkettles were paying their prearranged visit to Caroline and Leonard's. Osborn had dutifully gone to fetch his parents in the car, knowing that this was what the morning's phone calls had been all about.

"Do they tax the council?" asked Sybil conversationally. "I like your nuts, Leonard."

"Oh? Caroline bought them." Leonard sighed rather heavily, despite having begun to lose weight. "I haven't been feeling very well lately, I don't seem to have any energy."

"Me neither," replied Basil. "I don't know how much longer I've got."

"You'll stay for a cup of tea and a sandwich, though, won't you?" asked Caroline confrontationally.

"Oh yes dear, Basil meant he doesn't know how long the good Lord will spare him," explained Sybil.

"Good Lord," echoed Osborn.

"Indeed," responded Basil dourly, glaring at Osborn. "My body seems to be giving up the ghost on me."

"What about the Holy Ghost, dear?" asked Sybil, chewing a pistachio. "He might be able to help."

"I had some trouble with my liver," interjected Leonard a little desperately.

"I bought some liver from *Setco* last week, but it was very tough," said Sybil distractedly. "Like this pistachio with my dentures."

"Oh?" Leonard looked bemused. "I heard a rumour that the water charges are going up yet again this year," he continued, strategically changing the subject again.

"I know, it's completely unfair that our charges in the south-west are higher than the rest of the country," said Basil, taking the bait. "They all come down here to enjoy our beaches and then we're left with the bill to clean them up."

"Yes, what with that and the sewerage costs, it just stinks. We have a bit of a dry spell and they say there's going to be a drought and a hosepipe ban. Then you go out and find the road is flooded because there's been a leak in the system." Leonard was in full swing. "They say they have to put the charges up because of the high cost of maintenance, but if you ask me, it simply doesn't hold water."

"Oh, let's have a game of cards," broke in Osborn. "What shall we play? *Scat? Chase the Ass? Hunt the Bitch? Screw the Queen?*"

"That was *really* awful over there this afternoon," said Sandra, as she walked home with Gulliver and Madeleine. Osborn was giving his parents a lift home. "It's so painful to sit there and hear all the silly comments and the moaning."

"I know, you must get a grip, Mumsie," replied Madeleine. "Seriously though, I know I'm fortunate to have all four grandparents alive still, but they seem so old and miserable a lot of the time. They compare lists of the drugs they have to take as if it's a competition."

"All we can do is hope it's better next time, I suppose," said Sandra optimistically. "At Easter, probably."

"I don't know when I'll be down again," said Gulliver solemnly, without a trace of characteristic humour in his voice.

"Was it that bad?" asked Sandra, her heart dropping alarmingly.

"Yes."

The following morning, Sandra had woken with her metaphoric heart still in its dropped position, remembering Gulliver's remark and knowing he would be leaving later that day with Madeleine, giving her a lift to Cardiff. She felt as though life was veering off yet again in uncomfortable directions.

After their departure, she had therefore spent the ensuing days cleaning and tidying the house in an effort to feel in control of her life – as well as the fact that the house needed a really good clean and tidy. Fortunately, Gulliver seemed happy to continue their easy-going email exchanges and she gradually managed to feel lighter-hearted about her situation with him after the Christmas blip.

Four days after they'd seen Basil, he was in hospital again, this time with bowel problems. When Osborn visited him, however, he came home saying that his father seemed OK. Basil was sent home ten days after going into hospital, but went back in two days afterwards. Sandra began to wonder whether Sybil was calling for the ambulance simply to get Basil off her hands, but as the days went on and Osborn visited his father, he began to report that Basil seemed very unwell and was refusing to eat much.

Meanwhile, Sandra's father delivered his own bombshell when he went for a cardiac appointment and came home saying the consultant had told him that while his liver was currently stable, his heart was pumping at 17% instead of the normal 60-70%. Caroline was naturally upset with this news and Sandra seemed to expend a lot of her own energy trying to keep Caroline's spirits up, as well as helping to give Caroline's kitchen a spring-clean.

"I can't get down on my knees like I used to," said Caroline, as Sandra knelt on the floor with her head inside the cupboard under the sink, wiping away years of undealt with grime. "It's all right for you, you're young."

"I'm *not* young! Ouch!" exclaimed Sandra, banging her head on the cupboard as she came out too quickly, her mother's remark having inflamed her.

"Well, you're younger than I am," muttered Caroline. "You still have a fully functioning husband."

"He's stressed and exhausted, both with his parents and the trouble at work," explained Sandra, knowing from past experience that her mother wouldn't want to hear any of it.

"I think people use the word 'stress' far too conveniently," said Caroline sniffing. "Anyway, Osborn's young, he..."

Sandra stuck her head in the cupboard again, in an effort not to listen to her mother's voice, but her ploy failed to work.

"Before I forget Sandra," came the clear tones of her mother's voice, "can Osborn pop over at the weekend and fix Dad's video recorder?" Sandra heard Caroline's words with a newly sinking heart, knowing that Osborn was already booked to take his mother into hospital to visit his father. She suddenly felt she was once again stuck deep in the middle of a very sticky, messy spider's web.

"Ohhh," she groaned from somewhere deep inside herself.

"What is it?" asked Caroline somewhat petulantly.

"Nothing. Spider's web," muttered Sandra.

"Eeugh!" said Caroline, shuddering. "I hate spiders. Still, you don't mind them, do you? Here's another cloth. After you've finished that, we can relax and have a game of *Scribble*."

"I hope you don't think I'm wasting money on train fares," said Madeleine, as she and Sandra walked up from the train station and on into Plymouth to meet Osborn for lunch. "I feel safe here – and I can do uni work in peace and quiet – and I prefer to see the doctor here."

"You don't have to justify anything, darling," reassured Sandra. "It does me as much good as it does you, believe me. Dad and I are spending half our time crushed with worry and exhaustion about our parents and you're like a breath of lovely spring air that revitalises us, you really are."

"Even with all I've put you through?"

"Absolutely. Anyway, we've been on this part of the pathway together. I'm positive it's been part of my life journey to walk alongside you during your darkest, dodgiest bits." Sandra felt tears pricking her eyes.

"Thank you, Mumsie." Madeleine glanced at Sandra. "I don't want to make life any harder for you, that's all."

"There's one huge and significant difference to the way you are with Dad and me compared to how our parents treat us and that's the fact that you actually consider how we might be feeling. In other words, the caring is reciprocal and that makes all the difference in the world. Thank *you*, Maddy!"

"What about Gulliver?"

"I don't know, to be honest. I used to feel I knew the real Gulliver, at least partly. He's reserved by nature, which is absolutely fine, because it's who he is and I love him. I'll never forget how when he was living at home, he would be uncommunicative for weeks and then suddenly he'd open up and would talk for hours. He hasn't done that for a while now, so I guess he's transferred his inner self to Bryony, which is good and natural and the way it should be. I still miss him, though. It felt as if he was further away than usual at Christmas, which was quite painful. I was hoping he'd understand how difficult it is for us, but he hated me losing it on New Year's Day."

"He doesn't really do emotion."

"No. Well, he does, but he tries his utmost not to. From what he says, Bryony's family don't do emotion, either."

"I expect that's why he feels comfortable there."

"Mmm." Sandra felt her heart sinking again at that thought and tried to think of something positive. "He still expresses himself in emails sometimes. Anyway, where would you like to go for lunch? I hope Dad's had a good morning."

"I've had a terrible morning," reported Osborn as soon as they met him. "Bill Bustard is refusing to change my job description, even though the dean has told him to do so. It's all very draining. I think he knows my father's dying."

"Grandad's dying?" asked Madeleine in a small voice.

"I thought you realised," said Osborn, looking at Madeleine with concern.

"I think I did from all that you've been saying about him, but I didn't want to acknowledge it." Madeleine sighed. "Life is hard. Shall we go to *Caffè Caesar* for a snack?"

"We need to do something that's fun while you're here Maddy, or at least something more light-hearted than visiting grandparents," suggested Sandra later, as they sat in *Caffè Caesar* with their hot drinks and stuffed tomato and olive paninis. "God, I forgot I hate olives."

"I'll have them," said Madeleine. "Didn't Uncle Lawrence ask if we would go to the cinema with him to see *The Return of the Monarch*? God, I forgot I hate tomatoes."

"I'll have them," said Osborn, opening his panini. "It would be good to finish seeing the *Lord of the Wrongs* trilogy. I enjoyed *The Fellowship of the Wrong*. What was the second film called? What's this? God, I hate raw onion."

"I'll have it," said Sandra. "The second film was *The Three Towers*. I think we should just go, sod the price."

"Lawrence said it was his treat," replied Osborn. "I'll ring him when we get back. He could do with some light entertainment as well, he's been running back and forth visiting Mum and Dad like a mad thing and he likes the cinema."

"I like the cinema too," said Madeleine.

"Sorted!" said Sandra, smiling. "Everybody needs something they like in their life. What's this? God, I hate green peppers."

## CHAPTER 6

February seemed to take off in a whirlwind of difficult challenges that lasted throughout the whole month, despite an attempt by Sandra and Osborn to make life a bit brighter by going to see the film *Actually Love*. Even small happenings appeared to be against them, such as extreme weather causing the front door to stick shut with ice; another storage heater refusing to work; Sandra having to endure three ordinary fillings and then some root canal work; plus intense meetings for Osborn with Bill Bustard, the dean, the union rep and a member of the personnel department.

Osborn's father remained in hospital and the family were warned that if he didn't start to eat properly, he had only months to live. Sybil rang Kirsty and said she had better visit, which resulted in an upset of another kind for Osborn. Kirsty arrived with Karla to stay with Sybil for a few days and proceeded to ask Lawrence to the house for a meal, but not Osborn. On top of everything else that was happening in his life, it felt like one insult too many for Osborn. He became very low indeed, saying he felt excluded just like he always had been in his childhood.

Over the next two weeks, phone calls from Gulliver and Madeleine (who had returned to uni) were a particular source of comfort. Sandra did her best to help Osborn, although she had her own parents to contend with. For several days, she was moving furniture in their second bedroom and cutting up the old carpet piecemeal, on her hands and knees. She then had to wash the floor ready for the new carpet. It was exhausting. During one of these sessions, Osborn rang to tell her he'd been called to his mother's house from work, as Sybil had been diagnosed with shingles.

Although Kirsty and Karla had returned to Hunterdon, Kirsty arrived again on her own on a Thursday evening to look after her mother, as both Osborn and Lawrence were unable to take any more complete days off work. This was mostly due to all the time off they'd taken in the past to visit Basil in hospital.

It appeared that Sybil's shingles weren't as bad as the doctor had said, because Sybil rang Osborn three days later to say that Kirsty had gone home. However, on the following morning Sybil was sent by her doctor to a nursing home for a week, which resulted in great recriminations from Lawrence and Osborn towards Kirsty for running out on their mother without even telling them she was leaving.

Before Sybil was allowed home again, Sandra went to her house with Osborn and Lawrence for a comprehensive cleaning session, as Osborn had told Sandra that he'd noticed dust, dirt, mould and a smell emanating from the fridge.

"It looks as if Kirsty never bothered to lift a finger while she was here," reported Osborn tiredly. "I don't know why she bothered to come."

The following week, Sandra began to feel slightly more upbeat, because February had passed and it was now a bright, sunny day in early March. She was cleaning the kitchen window, singing along to the radio, when the phone rang.

"Hi Alison, how are you? Isn't it a lovely day!"

"Actually Sandra, I'm ringing to say my mother died. She had a heart attack a while ago, as you know. She seemed to recover quite well from it, but my brother took her out at the weekend and she keeled over in the street."

"Oh Alison, I'm so sorry. How are you feeling?"

"A bit numb, to be honest. I'm kind of glad my brother was with her, rather than me, which seems very selfish of me."

"I don't think it's selfish, I think it's human. I'm sure I'd feel exactly the same."

"I keep getting caught out by little things happening that I think I'll have to tell Mum, but then it dawns..."

"It must be so difficult." Sandra began searching for words of comfort, but they seemed very elusive. Fortunately, Alison appeared to be feeling some relief in talking to Sandra about all sorts of issues relating to her mother, including a number of memories. Sandra therefore listened sympathetically, making what she hoped were the right responses in relevant places.

"Anyway, I'd better go. Thank you for listening, Sandra. Are you OK?"

"Yes, I'm OK. You take care, Ally. I'll see you soon."

"I look forward to it, when all this death business is over. Bye!"

The death business wasn't over. Ten days later, Basil fell in hospital and on the following day, the family were called to his bedside. Kirsty and Karla travelled from Hunterdon again to stay with Sybil and thus the immediate family spent the evening by Basil's bedside. Sandra felt quite peculiar at home alone while Osborn was with his dying father, but managed to sleep for a few hours during the night.

Osborn reappeared at around 10:00 the following morning to say that his father was hanging on. He and Lawrence had been at his bedside all night, while Kirsty and Sybil had gone home to get some sleep. The two of them had then gone to the hospital in the morning to relieve Lawrence and Osborn.

"We can still go shopping as normal, seeing it's Saturday morning," said Osborn determinedly, "and then I'll get some sleep before going in again this evening."

"Are you sure? I don't mind shopping for food on my own." Sandra was trying her hardest to imagine how Osborn might be feeling, but was more or less failing.

"No, I'd like to do something normal. We can have coffee first."

It felt exceptionally odd to walk around *Safebury's* looking at so many ordinary, everyday items, knowing that a few miles away, Osborn's father was in the process of dying. It seemed completely incongruous and a little morally wrong to be working out the price difference between a 350g box and a 500g box of *Krispie Raisin Apple Pieces*, or deciding whether to buy chocolate éclairs for a weekend treat. However, Osborn seemed to be clinging on to the essentially normal, as well as the inessentially normal – so they did buy the éclairs.

At around 18:00 that evening, after a few hours' sleep, Osborn returned to the hospital, having arranged to meet Lawrence there for the night watch. Sandra thus spent another evening and night alone, wondering how much longer Basil would hold on. She failed to fall asleep for hours and woke with a start on hearing Osborn return in the early morning. He seemed to be creeping around so as not to make noise, so she groggily went downstairs to let him know she was awake.

"He's gone, Sandra," he said simply, looking at her tiredly, before holding out his arms for a hug.

"Where?"

"What? Dad died. He's gone."

"Oh no, I'm so sorry! When did he die?"

"At about 02:40 this morning. I was with him on my own."

"I thought Lawrence was with you?"

"It's a bit of a story. Shall we sit down with some coffee?"

Sandra gazed at Osborn with sad, sympathetic eyes, as he told her of his father's final struggle to stay alive and how he had given his father healing, telling him that it was OK to go on into the light. It had been a relief when his father seemed to accept this, was given more morphine and peacefully slipped away.

The lead up to this had been anything but peaceful, however, as there had been a bad communication mishap between Kirsty and Lawrence the previous day. The two of them had arranged that Kirsty should ring Lawrence when she and Sybil left the hospital after their watch. Lawrence had been awake all day after having spent the previous night at Basil's bedside with Osborn, waiting for Kirsty's call, which never came. As Lawrence had arranged to meet Osborn at the hospital that evening, he had ended up with no sleep for 36 hours.

"He looked like death warmed up when he arrived at the hospital," recounted Osborn, frowning slightly at his own words. "He looked absolutely dreadful and he was fuming about Kirsty. He'd walked all the way to the hospital because he said he was so angry with her that he wanted to walk some of it out of his system. He looked so bad that I was afraid for his health and sent him home again to get some sleep."

"How awful! Poor Lawrence and poor you for being on your own with your dad when he died."

"It was meant to be that way, I'm sure of it. The nurse on duty came in when I was giving Dad healing and she just let me carry on."

"That's really good, I'm glad."

"After I left the hospital, I went to tell Lawrence and spent a while with him. He was quite upset."

"The mess with Kirsty couldn't have helped. What about your mother?"

"Lawrence rang her from his place. She was very distressed, of course, even though she'd been expecting it."

"It must always be such a shock when it finally happens. It seems such a final transition between life and death." Sandra tried to imagine how Osborn had felt and couldn't help feeling very sorry that he had gone through a life passage of which she as yet had no experience.

"Well, we have to move on now and there's a lot to be done. I need to ring Gulliver and Madeleine."

Five days later, Lawrence and Osborn had succeeded in sorting out a great deal of what needed to be done following a death. They had both been given the week off work as compassionate leave and necessarily had to spend a great deal of time at Sybil's house.

Although Kirsty was there also, it seemed unclear to Sandra whether she was being a help or a hindrance, since Osborn was understandably tired and uncommunicative when he returned home. However, the position became clear when Osborn returned from Sybil's house on the evening of the fifth day, looking exhausted and distraught.

"Are you OK?" asked Sandra worriedly, as he took off his coat and rubbed his forehead.

"No, I've got a stinking headache and I can hardly believe what just happened. Lawrence had already gone home to do some food shopping when I asked Mum if she wanted me to change the multi-channel cable television account Dad had installed to a much simpler one, with just the main channels. She isn't half as interested in television as Dad was and I'm not sure she could work the set-up Dad had anyway."

"That was a good idea," agreed Sandra.

"Yes, I was thinking of Mum and saving her money, because I think her income is going to change quite drastically. Anyway, I made the phone call and then Karla found out about it. She threw a wobbly, saying she'd leave if I didn't ring up again and change the account back to what it was, because she couldn't do without her television. I was so speechless, I failed to point out that it was *Mum's* television. Karla was quite adamant and nasty about it with me and then Kirsty stepped in, all weeping and wailing and told me to change the account back because she couldn't cope if Karla went home."

"That's diabolical! How could Karla be so utterly selfish at a time like this?"

"Easily. Mind you, at least she's been doing the cooking, while Kirsty wanders about the place, doing nothing much except causing more problems."

"What about your mum, how did she take all this?"

"She's been a bit out of it, really. She knew what was going on and she was obviously upset by it all, but she didn't get involved. I had the distinct impression that she wished Kirsty and Karla weren't there at all."

"Oh Osborn, this is dreadful. What a pity Lawrence wasn't there."

"It probably would have become even uglier, to be honest."

"Yes, but why should it be you who's caught in the middle and takes the brunt of it like this?"

"It's my position in life, it seems." Osborn shrugged and Sandra found she could think of no reply to his words.

It was the morning of Basil's funeral, cloudy and threatening to rain. Madeleine had arrived from Cardiff the previous morning and Gulliver had arrived from Fleet the previous evening. Whereas Madeleine had been upset at the news of her grandfather's death, Gulliver had been more impassive, but as they filed into the anteroom of the crematorium, Sandra felt proud of the way they were conducting themselves. She was surprised at how few people had turned up at the funeral, although a few of Basil's acquaintances were there, from the groups to which he had once belonged.

Very soon, Basil's coffin arrived and Sandra found herself gazing at it with guilty fascination, imagining Basil lying there inside it and wondering if she was being irreverent to harbour such thoughts.

"It's so strange to imagine Grandad lying there inside the coffin," said Madeleine quietly to her, allaying Sandra's fears. "It all feels quite surreal."

The funeral service was mercifully short, as Basil had surprisingly left instructions that he wanted no fuss, just a basic despatch. Sandra had been expecting a full-blown extravaganza from Basil and Sybil's church friends, but it seemed that over the last few years, the two of them had gradually lost touch with their old church – not least because lots of them were dying off. The other surprise was that during the service, Kirsty went to the front and spoke lovingly and emotionally about her father. Before they all knew it, though, the service was over and they were being herded outside to where the next funeral attendees were already arriving.

Sybil had asked everyone back to the house for a small buffet lunch, but only a few people who weren't part of the family arrived, staying for a short while. Soon only the family were there, as well as Caroline. Leonard had gone to the funeral, but Gulliver had taken him straight home afterwards, as Leonard wasn't feeling up to socialising.

"Is Dad OK?" Sandra asked her mother, as soon as she managed to find a quiet moment with her.

"Not really," replied Caroline. "I look at him sometimes and he looks so much like an old man."

"He *is* 80," replied Sandra gently.

"I know, but he seems quite out of it sometimes. I can tell when he's not having a good day, because he talks in this frail, pathetic voice."

"It's difficult." Sandra found that words were failing her again. She was quite astounded at Caroline's seeming intolerance of Leonard's condition. However, she had to admit to herself that she had sat through the funeral service, conscious of her father sitting behind her and wondering if he was thinking that he might be the next body in the coffin – albeit a different coffin, of course. It was a highly uncomfortable thought.

"How's Gulliver?" asked Caroline brightly, as Gulliver came and sat beside her.

"Fine, thank you," replied Gulliver.

"How's work?" It seemed that Caroline was determined to lift the atmosphere in the rather sombre sitting room.

"Fine."

"Did I tell you he's a senior software engineer now?" asked Sandra, frowning slightly as she tried to remember if she'd mentioned it to her mother.

"No, you didn't, you naughty girl!" scolded Caroline, sipping her sherry. "That's really good, Gulliver. What else have you been up to?"

"I went to Yorkshire, walking in the snow," replied Gulliver, obviously trying to be conversational against his will. "It was great."

"Oh dear, that sounds dangerous. You shouldn't let him do that, Sandra."

"He's left home, he's his own person." Sandra was frowning again, but this time at her mother's words.

"Yes well – I was hoping you could have another go at pruning that forsythia of ours, Sandra, it's growing again and one of the branches nearly hit me in the eye when I walked up the drive this morning."

"Yes." Sandra sighed, then decided to take courage. "I won't be over tomorrow until the afternoon, because Maddy and I need to go into town."

"Shopping again? More clothes? How is Madeleine these days?"

"Busy with her final year, she has lots of course work."

"Yes, I remember my final year, I was up against it with all the males in those days, you know. Oh, thank you, Lawrence dear, these nibbles look nice."

Sandra got up from beside her mother and went to stand beside Madeleine, who had been cornered by Kirsty.

"...so although Dad's gone, he's still in here," Kirsty was saying, placing her fist on her chest, "but I feel as if I've been abandoned."

"He was ill for a long time, though," said Sandra, deciding to join in to ease the awkwardness away from Madeleine. "Sometimes it really is a release to pass on."

"Hmm." Kirsty regarded Sandra somewhat coldly. "You've still got your father alive, though, haven't you."

'Well, that was a day I wouldn't like to relive,' thought Sandra as she lay in bed that night, with Osborn already asleep beside her. 'He's exhausted, poor man, I hope life calms down for him a bit, although he still has his mother to look after. Plus, the nastiness at work with Bill Bustard is continuing relentlessly.'

'Is life meant to be this difficult? I know other people have all manner of dire problems far worse than ours, but it's the way the problems seem to pile up in other people's lives and then suddenly the other people are throwing them at us, fully expecting us to clear up the mess, which has somehow landed right smack in our faces.' She wonderingly put her hand up to her face.

'At least Osborn has Lawrence to help him with his mother, although Kirsty and Karla seem to make matters worse. Still, it's not the same as being on your own, like I am with my parents. I know I have Osborn, but he spends so much of his energy on others that there really seems hardly anything left for me half the time. That sounds

selfish, but when we got married, I honestly thought it was to spend our lives together, however sentimentally yucky that sounds.

'Mind you, I spent years of my life trying to extricate myself from what had turned into an unhealthy symbiotic relationship, so that I could remember who I was – am – and try to live an authentic life. I went to university to study psychology and then life really whacked me in the guts.' She gently put her hand on her abdomen.

'Exactly where is life leading us, that's what I'd like to know. Or would I? It might be too shocking to know, which is a scary thought – so I won't think of it. Gulliver seems fine now, we've got over our Christmas blip and I'm glad he's got it together with Bryony, because I used to worry that he was lonely. Madeleine's coping as well as she can, she's got more determination and staying power than she gives herself credit for.

'I do kind of enjoy going to see Terry and Kerry now and again and exploring the spiritual side of life with the others. Actually, that *is* a comfort and I might go really bananas if we didn't have it at all. I do believe in spiritual healing, but somehow I could never really get into it like Osborn has. So I don't really feel as if I have any direction at the moment, but that's not a new feeling. In fact, every direction I do try to take seems to end by going tits up.' She cautiously put her hand on her breasts.

## CHAPTER 7

The beginning of April had arrived after a week of strange days and restless nights. It had started well, as Gulliver had rung to let them know he and Bryony were engaged.

"You are?" squeaked Sandra happily, feeling a warm glow suffusing her upper body. The hot flushes were still being a nuisance. "Where did you do it?"

"Mother, that's personal." Gulliver's happiness was evident in his voice.

"You know what I mean, where did you propose?"

"At a waterfall in the Brecon Beacons."

"Oh, that's so *you*! I'm so pleased – but what about the ring?"

"I'll send you an email, I've already taken a photo of it."

"Did you get down on one knee?" Sandra was smiling involuntarily.

"Yes." Gulliver's voice sounded embarrassed now. "Bryony laughed at me."

"Well I'm proud of you! Can you speak to Dad now? He's hovering near the phone very impatiently."

The delight of Gulliver's news unfortunately didn't have long to uplift Sandra, because a few days later, Caroline rang to say that Leonard had passed out on the kitchen floor the previous evening and was in hospital. Sandra spent that day with her mother, catching the bus to the hospital and sitting by Leonard's bed in the Medical Assessment Unit. This was upsetting in itself, as the old lady in the next bed appeared to have suffered a stroke and was extremely distressed.

The reason for Leonard's mishap was unclear, although Caroline thought it was because he'd been drinking a glass of wine and cooking sausages for tea when it had happened. However, after numerous tests, Leonard was told he would be allowed to leave hospital once the doctor had seen him and signed the relevant papers for Leonard to give to his GP. The long, uncomfortable afternoon passed while waiting for the elusive doctor and in the end, Caroline and Sandra had caught the bus home, after assuring Leonard that Osborn had promised to collect him when the doctor had been.

Both Sandra and Osborn had not long arrived home when Caroline rang to tell them she'd had a phone message to say Leonard was ready to be collected. The one brightness in that exhausting day was that Madeleine had arrived for the Easter break the day before and said she would cook tea for them.

"Thank you, my darling," said Sandra, giving Madeleine a heartfelt hug. "Dad understandably wants me to go to collect Grandad with him, so I hope we won't be too long. I think we need to do our utmost to have a good Easter after all this."

"Don't forget I've got course work to finish, Mumsie."

"I know. I hope everything calms down, that's all, so we can just enjoy having you here. This hasn't been a great start to your visit on the whole."

On the whole, the Easter holiday turned out to be mixed. Gulliver had decided not to come home, as he wanted to spend time with Bryony. Sandra missed him, but knew he would be happier with his new fiancée and wished him well.

Caroline seemed angry with Leonard for passing out and spending 24 hours in hospital. Consequently, when Sandra went to visit one day, Caroline vented all sorts of uncomfortable emotions in her direction. Sandra became so overwhelmed that she escaped into the garden to pull up some weeds, but there were so many weeds that she became overwhelmed and went inside again, trying not to feel hopeless.

Meanwhile, Osborn was still coping with his mother and the fallout from his father's death, as well as the Bill Bustard situation at work. Sandra had been hoping that when Osborn took a couple of days off for Easter, he would be able to relax. However, the very act of being able to relax seemed to allow Osborn to release some of his own pent-up emotions that he'd been forced to suppress while dealing with the considerable amount of recent events.

"I'm sorry Dad isn't really comfortable to be with," said Sandra to Madeleine one day, as they sat at the table while Madeleine was having a coffee break from course work. Osborn had just come in from the garage, shouted at Sandra for having tampered with his screws and gone back out to the garage.

"Dad is definitely very vulnerable and volatile at the moment," declared Madeleine, looking up with a thoughtful and somewhat pained expression from her essay in macroeconomics.

"Yes," sighed Sandra. "That's succinctly put, Maddy. I'm doing my best to understand, but it's difficult when he vents in my direction all the time. What with him and my mother, I feel very vented at. I mean to say, life is still somewhat shitty for *me*, so who the hell am *I* mean to vent at, hmm?" Her voice had risen alarmingly.

"Vent at me any time you like, Mumsie." Madeleine smiled and then frowned. "I must get this essay finished, though, then I'll have to start my German one."

Easter Sunday had been markedly different from previous years, as there were no comprehensive family get-bored-togethers, or even any incomprehensive ones. Instead, Osborn and Madeleine went to visit Sybil (where Kirsty was visiting) in the morning and after lunch, Caroline and Leonard arrived to play *Ono* and stay for a light tea. It all seemed rather tame and strained.

Easter Monday was very enjoyable, however, as Madeleine had expressed a wish to visit the famous *Barbados Inn* on Bodmin Moor. They invited Lawrence to accompany them and even though the weather was cold and rainy, they all sat inside the crowded pub and laughed rather a lot.

"I think it's relief at being free for a few hours," suggested Osborn, in between sipping his *Almost Alcohol-Free Alcohol-Free Lager*, "even though I'm forced to drink this stuff."

"Sorry," said Sandra and Lawrence in unison.

"I'll learn to drive once I've finished uni, Dad," said Madeleine.

"Dad wanted me to learn to drive a few years ago," remembered Lawrence, "when he started to be ill. He even offered to pay for everything. I knew it meant he wanted me to be a chauffeur for him, so there was no way I was ever going to agree to that."

"He was a weird person," remembered Osborn. "He used to give Kirsty money for petrol expenses, but he never offered a penny to me, even though I've had to make hundreds of trips to the hospital over the last few years."

"I know he didn't like the way we brought up our children," remembered Sandra. "Still, we're here to have a break from all that, we don't want to drag it along with us all the time."

"To be fair, he seemed quite kind to me sometimes," remembered Madeleine. "He used to take me shopping for my birthday."

"Yes, but I'll bet you had to choose something he liked," said Lawrence darkly. He was taking longer to go grey than Osborn, whose hair had been greying for some years.

"Well, yes..." Madeleine was clearly trying to be honest, but gave up and sipped her *Smuggler's Rum Special* instead. "Wow, this drink is quite strong!"

"You're right," replied Sandra, who was drinking the same.

"You're not wrong," replied Lawrence, who was drinking the same.

"You're lucky," replied Osborn wryly.

The following day, Osborn had taken the day off work to drive Leonard to hospital for a cardiac appointment. Leonard had suggested that since his appointment was early in the morning, he would like to make a day of it and go out for a pub lunch that would be his treat. It was a bit of a squash fitting Caroline, Sandra and Madeleine in the rear seat of the car, but they managed. At the back of Sandra's mind, she kept wondering if this would be the last time they ever went out with Leonard in that way. He'd been uncommunicative after his cardiac appointment, but seemed determined to enjoy the rest of the day.

Osborn drove them to *The Square Cheese Hotel*, which was the highest pub on Bodmin Moor and close to the place where Leonard had enjoyed many boyhood summers. It was a fine day and after an enjoyable lunch, Leonard suggested they go for a short walk on the moorland, to the three Bronze Age stone circles known as The Flingers. They walked slowly up the track, with Leonard looking around and almost sniffing the bracing, peaty air in clear appreciation. Sandra had brought her camera and they stopped for a photo shoot, posing arm in arm and smiling with authentic smiles.

On the drive home, Leonard was exceptionally chatty, talking about his boyhood and his love of the countryside with its birds, trees and hedgerow flowers.

"I'll never forget when I told my teacher I'd found some bastard balm," he mused mischievously. "He was always suspicious of me after that, especially when I wrote an essay about a ruddy duck."

Later that evening, when Osborn, Sandra and Madeleine were preparing a snack tea in the kitchen with a glass of red wine each, they seemed to fall into one of their easy three-way conversations about life, the universe and how to cook with pesto.

"It's really versatile, I use it a lot in Cardiff," said Madeleine, sipping wine. "Oh, I don't want to go back! Well I do, but I don't. I feel so safe here."

"You've only got a couple of months to go until you've finished your degree," said Sandra, sipping wine, "so you could say it's just a matter of weeks."

"Yes, but it's weeks that matter, what with the finals," said Osborn, sipping his wine. "Sorry, I just know what it's like with our students at this time of year."

"You can do it, darling," encouraged Sandra. "You really can – you just need to focus and do it all."

"That sounds like a DIY advert," laughed Madeleine. "You're right, though, I need to remember that when I'm feeling down." Her mood seemed to lift suddenly, before a strange little cloud passed over her face. "Then it'll be no more trips to Cardiff, across the Tamar Bridge and the Severn Bridge."

"Life changes so quickly sometimes," mused Sandra, her mood lifting at this thought. "My dad really enjoyed himself today, I could tell. It's such a relief when our parents are OK."

"Tell me about it," said Madeleine, smiling. "Do you think Grandma's OK, Dad?"

"I'm not sure," replied Osborn thoughtfully. "She tries her best, I'm certain of that, but it must be difficult on her own. At least Lawrence helps out as much as he can now."

"It was good at *Barbados Inn*, wasn't it," remembered Sandra, sipping more wine.

"A pity it wasn't in Barbados," replied Osborn, sipping more wine.

"It's also a pity Gulliver wasn't with us, but he's moved on, hasn't he?" said Madeleine, sipping more wine.

"Yes," agreed Sandra, smiling a little sadly at Madeleine. "It's the way things should be, I do know that. I'm absolutely glad on one level, but on another level, I miss him. I miss the everyday laughing." She noticed Madeleine and Osborn gazing at her. "I love our get-togethers like this, though, they mean so much! It's like we're three souls having an update about our life journeys. I wish that Gulliver could or would join in, but

he's on his own life journey and I don't mean that missing him detracts in any way from having you here with us, Maddy." Sandra sipped more wine.

"I know, Mumsie." Madeleine regarded her parents as she sipped more wine. "It does feel like you've been with me along some very rough parts. Some of the dodgiest places that I didn't even know I would ever get through and some experiences that people who know us wouldn't even imagine."

"Experiences I wouldn't even write in my book," mused Sandra sombrely. "You know, my semi-autobiographical book, with semi-fictional characters. I wouldn't, you know, I wouldn't ever knowingly write anything that would upset anyone."

"It's what you write unknowingly that bothers me more," said Osborn, sipping more wine.

"I don't think anyone would ever read my book considering all the gloomy and depressing happenings lately," considered Sandra. "You also need to have sex in books."

"I'd have..." began Osborn.

"No!" cried Madeleine at the speed of light, or possibly sound.

"Anyway, I'm so happy that you feel we've been with you," continued Sandra, smiling at Madeleine. "I wish you didn't have to go back to Cardiff so soon, because everything always feels like a bit of a rush."

"We should have put the mushrooms and onions in by now," said Osborn suddenly. "Quick, let me get to the cooker!"

"Today was a good day," remarked Sandra later, as she and Osborn snuggled up in bed.

"Yes, it was," agreed Osborn. "You're feeling unusually snuggly."

"Am I? Snuggly? That's a funny word. It's comforting somehow. Maybe I feel in need of comfort. You've been pretty unapproachable lately."

"Oh, I'd never call myself pretty. Suave and debonair, maybe. You've been very unapproachable too."

"I have? I haven't felt it."

"No, you haven't."

"Shut up." Sandra was considering Osborn's statement. "It seems we've both been giving off unapproachable vibes at the very time when we need to be approachable and to comfort each other."

"Mmm. Sex is comfort. Well, sort of exciting comfort."

"Not comforting excitement?"

"Yes, that as well. I feel a bit more hopeful after today that maybe things are beginning to look up."

"Are they?" asked Sandra hopefully. "Ye-es, I feel it too, things are definitely beginning to look up."

Things unfortunately took a downward turn a few days later, after Madeleine had returned to Cardiff. Osborn came home from work one evening looking haggard and slipped once again into his stressed persona. His mother had rung him at work three times that day, saying she was feeling funny and was going to call the paramedics, but she wanted Osborn to be with her when she did.

Osborn happened to have unavoidable teaching commitments and also a meeting with the union rep and a senior academic, so was forced to tell his mother he couldn't leave work. Fortunately, Sybil's next-door neighbour happened to call by to ask if she wanted any shopping and calmed Sybil down simply by staying with her for half an hour.

However, two days later, Sybil was in hospital, after having suffered a minor heart attack. Her borderline diabetes was also worse. She was given insulin injections and referred to a heart consultant and the seemingly endless round of hospital visiting began once again.

Sandra was glad that Lawrence was fully on the scene, helping out in any way he could. However, Lawrence rang Osborn one day and called him to the hospital because Sybil was reacting badly against a proposed angiogram. In the end, she refused to go ahead with it. Her diabetes was able to be controlled by drugs and she finally returned home two weeks after being admitted.

In the meantime, in between wondering when all the drama was going to end, Sandra was helping out her own parents as usual. Caroline kept complaining about a painful arm, so Sandra accompanied her to the doctor, where Caroline was told she'd pulled a tendon.

This resulted in Sandra taking on more jobs than usual, including cutting her parents' grass, which was a job she detested. She tried to make the lawn more manageable by digging up some of it, but discovered in doing so what a tough job that was in itself. She also spent hours working on the borders, trying to tame the weeds that seemed to grow through from everywhere, including the neighbours' gardens.

May seemed to hurtle along at breakneck speed. The only respite was one long weekend when Osborn drove himself to Gulliver's flat in Fleet. From there, they both went to Snowdonia and camped for a few nights, in order to go on some mountain walks. Left on her own for four nights, Sandra worked a lot during the day, catching up on lots of outstanding jobs. During the night, she lay awake for many sleepless hours.

'I really don't know what I'm here for,' she wondered, as she lay in Madeleine's single bed. For some reason, she found it cosier than her own half-empty double bed. 'Well, I know I'm here because I don't feel as alone in Maddy's room when I'm on my own, but why am I *me*? It's all very well helping people out for so much of the time, but why am I exactly who I am? Why am I good at writing and rubbish at speaking on the phone? Why do I like gardening and hate cooking? Why have I got a high forehead and a nose slightly on the large side? Why am I good at listening and crap at talking? Why am I – oh, this is boring.

'I'd just like to know why my own particular life has been, for many years now, one of constantly considering other people and doing everything in my power to make life better for them. I don't mind doing it for Maddy and Gulliver, because I feel that they actually understand what Osborn and I do for them and respect us for it, but the others...' She sighed and turned over.

'Mind you, I mean me, Osborn has been so abrasive lately that I'm even tired of trying to understand *him* all the time. Why do I take it – usually – when he speaks so rudely to me? I know he's been going through a hellish time, but life hasn't been a bed of winter flowering cyclamen for me, either. I can look back over all our years together and recognise that I've consistently made excuses for him and his angry behaviour, which has so often been focused on me.

'He can be such a drama queen sometimes. I loved it that time when Maddy remonstrated with him for being one, before she realised what she was saying! Why does he still revert to that sort of behaviour after all we've been through together? Doesn't he realise I'm basically on his side? Or doesn't he care what I think and feel now, since he knows I took him back after his affair? Holy potholes, I'm not going down that road, it's far too slippery and destructive. Besides, I'm sure that's not the reason...' She sighed and turned over.

'There must be a reason why I was born as me, although everybody could say that, of course. We *must* make choices when we get here on this beautiful planet amongst all these mad people, according to what happens and according to how other people behave. Life is certainly very dynamic on so many different levels, how could anyone ever imagine that it was all ordained, except for church ministers?

'I suppose I feel that other people are drowning out my feeble attempts to say who I am and by doing so are draining my resources, although that must mean I'm allowing it to happen? I still don't understand the balance between being yourself and being kind to others. When the others start to use and abuse you and take you for granted, you have to learn how to protect yourself, or they'll ultimately kill who you are – won't they? Therefore, you have to stop being who you really are in order to survive? God, this is too painful, there are too many questions and not enough answers. Why am I torturing myself like this? I'll think instead about some amusing things to write in my book in order to lighten it a little and stop this insidious feeling of being slowly suffocated.' She turned over, but found she was on her front and couldn't breathe with her nose in the pillow.

## CHAPTER 8

Sandra generally liked June, as it seemed a bright, hopeful month when days were long and even sometimes sunny. Madeleine was about to finish her degree and Sandra was still feeling warm inside from a most unusual occurrence at the end of May, when Caroline had been away on a day trip to Stratford.

Leonard had asked if he could take Sandra out to lunch – just the two of them, which had felt special no matter how she looked at it. It was true that Leonard loved eating out and may have wanted a companion, but during the lunch he'd spoken so directly and intimately to her about his life and even *her* life, acknowledging that she'd had a bit of a bad deal with no siblings and hardly any grandparents to remember. Sandra had been touched at the depth and sensitivity of his thinking and the pub grub hadn't been half bad, either.

Also, by the end of May it seemed that Osborn's fight with Bill Bustard had reached a tenuous resolution, thanks to the senior academic for whom Osborn normally taught, Rich Mann. Rich had stepped in and attended a further meeting with Bill Bustard, the dean and the union rep, in which he single-handedly manoeuvred Bill and the dean into a corner of their own making. They thus acknowledged how much Osborn was needed to lecture, without even realising they'd done so. Osborn reported that it had been easy because Rich knew the system. He knew exactly how much vital lecturing and technical support Osborn contributed and understood the politics of the department.

It was now Tuesday morning after a restful Spring Bank Holiday (although a two-hour walk on Bodmin Moor had been a little outside the restful category). Sandra was preparing to go to her parents' house for another session of gardening and *Scribble*. However, Osborn had decided that morning to see a doctor about a bite on his stomach, which he said was becoming bigger and sorer. He thought he'd been bitten at the Snowdonia campsite, but it didn't seem to be a normal insect bite. He returned from the surgery just as Sandra was about to leave.

"Hello, you didn't take too long," she said, looking at his worried face and wondering what was wrong.

"I've got cellulitis streptococcus," Osborn said wanly. "Dr Effingham's prescribed a hefty dose of antibiotics and given me a week off work. I've got to rest and go back to see him, or ring him if I'm at all worried that it's worse."

"Shit!" Sandra failed to articulate further.

"Exactly. I feel like shit and that's what the antibiotics will probably make me do," groaned Osborn. "I think I'll go and lie down."

The following two weeks were quietly worrying, as Osborn continued to fight the cellulitis that was invading his body. Two days after seeing the doctor, the infected bite was still becoming worse, so he was prescribed further antibiotics that literally laid him low as he spent most of his time lying on the bed reading, watching television, or sleeping.

Sandra and Osborn thus celebrated their 33<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary with a pasty lunch and an evening spent watching Gulliver's DVD of *American Ugly*. Sandra tried not to feel a little hard done by, as Gulliver had visited particularly (and very unusually) that weekend to celebrate their anniversary with them. However, it was good to see him anyway and Madeleine also rang to wish them well.

As June progressed and became hotter, Osborn was given a third week off work and told that he'd narrowly missed being in hospital on an intravenous drip, as cellulitis was a potentially fatal infection. It felt like a close call and was rather sobering, although alcohol wasn't recommended anyway with the antibiotics.

Just before he was due to go back to work, Madeleine finally came home from Cardiff University, having taken five years to complete her BA (Joint Honours) in German and Economics. Considering what it had taken and all that she'd been through, Sandra felt immensely proud of her daughter's staying power. However, this staying power sadly didn't extend to home, because one morning, when the three of them were sitting in the garden with mugs of coffee, Madeleine told them that she'd made a decision to go back to Cardiff to search for a job there.

"I'm sorry," she said, gazing at them both as if to assess their individual reactions. "I know I said I was coming home after my degree, but I've thought a lot about it and it feels too comfortable here. It's as if I could live a safe life in this town and not ever push myself into the person I know I should be – the person I really am."

"That's OK," replied Osborn, "I understand. You need to live your own life the way you feel you should."

"Mumsie?" Madeleine looked a little apprehensively at Sandra.

"Dad's right," answered Sandra slowly. "You're right, Maddy. You're both right." Sandra was finding it hard to speak.

"But?" asked Madeleine, looking straight into Sandra's eyes, as if willing her mother to be honest with her.

"I'll miss you so much," said Sandra almost in a whisper, as she tried desperately not to cry. "I guess I was looking forward to having you home again." She gulped and managed to compose herself. "When I think of you and your life, though, I know without a single doubt that you're absolutely right to go with your own instincts. You're a very capable, intelligent, sensitive being and yet you seem to find life a little too challenging sometimes, so that it's as if you want to curl up in a safe corner and hide for a while."

"I could happily take the easy option," said Madeleine earnestly. "In fact, there's a part of me that wants to do that so much that sometimes I waver horribly. I know it would be wrong, though, no matter how much I want to give in and be here."

"We'll still be here for you wherever you are," said Osborn, seemingly much more comfortable with Madeleine's bombshell than Sandra felt she ever could be.

"I know," replied Madeleine, smiling gratefully. "That feels very comforting. I know how lucky I am to have you both. Some people at university were taken aback that I tell you so much. Especially you, Dad, they said they don't really talk that much to their fathers and they seemed quite envious."

"I know I've been a bit gruesome lately," said Osborn, frowning. "I didn't realise quite how much everything had got on top of me, but this cellulitis scare has certainly made me think about my own life."

"You've been frankly diabolical at times," said Sandra honestly, "but I could see what pressure people were piling on top of you and that helped me to put up with the fallout."

"I'm sorry." Osborn sipped his coffee thoughtfully. "It's still a bit full-on with my mother and your parents, of course, but we really must live a bit more for ourselves."

"I'm not sure how," mused Sandra. "Anyway, this isn't all about us, it's about Maddy."

"No, it's about all of us," exclaimed Madeleine quickly. "You see, you're doing it again, Mumsie, putting other people in front of you. I really like it when we three talk like this, it helps to put it all in perspective somehow."

"So, I guess the next step is to look for a job," said the ever-pragmatic Osborn.

"Well yes," replied Madeleine, looking at her father seriously, "but I thought that if I could stay here for a few weeks before I begin looking, I'd like to start to come off the antidepressants. I'm so sick of taking them. I guess it means a half-strength dose first of all, so in view of withdrawal symptoms, I'd like to be home?"

"Absolutely," replied Sandra before Osborn had chance to reply. "I'm sure you'll be fine anyway, but it's probably best to be home. Don't forget Dad and I are going to the Isles of Scilly in July, though."

"That's OK," said Madeleine, smiling. "You both deserve a holiday and I'll be fine, I really will. I'm just a bit gutted that you won't be able to come to my graduation ceremony." A shadow flitted across Madeleine's face.

"I can't believe that it's right bang in the middle of our two weeks away," said Sandra, a shadow flitting across her face too. "It feels dreadful that we saw you through so much during your whole degree and then when it comes to the best bit, the icing on the cake, we can't be with you." To her surprise, tears sprang easily to her eyes.

"Don't worry, Mumsie," said Madeleine softly, "I know it would never have been your choice not to be there, it's just life - but I'm still not sure who *will* be there on the day. I asked Gulliver, but he seemed a bit vague, as if he didn't really want to bother."

"Are you sure?" asked Osborn, frowning. "That surprises me. Perhaps he can't get time off work very easily?"

"I don't know," considered Madeleine. "I also wondered about Uncle Lawrence, or even Drew."

"Drew?" asked Sandra and Osborn simultaneously, with considerable surprise.

"Yes. I know you probably think I should let him go and leave him in the past, but he was always special." Madeleine looked down.

"It's OK, I know he was very special to you," said Osborn carefully. "If he's who you want there, then that's fine."

"It doesn't seem easy, does it, darling?" said Sandra, aware of Madeleine's confusion.

"Nothing seems easy sometimes." Madeleine sighed and then smiled ruefully. "We're all assuming I actually passed my degree! Oh well, it's nearly lunchtime, shall I make us a brie and cranberry roll?"

"I passed!" Madeleine's delight at the news of her 2:2 was infectious and Sandra had caught it, telling everyone she saw within the next few days of her daughter's success. Thankfully, she managed to restrict this to people she knew.

A few days later, Sandra and Osborn asked their parents to a pre-birthday celebration tea for Madeleine, as the following day the two of them would be sailing to the Isles of Scilly for two weeks. Sandra hated to go and leave Madeleine alone, but Madeleine's initial symptoms from changing to a half-dosage of antidepressants had abated and Madeleine insisted that she would be fine having some time alone and going to visit friends she hadn't seen for a while.

"I don't like to think of you here on your own, Madeleine," said Caroline, looking up from the piece of birthday cake she was eating and gazing at her granddaughter. "You'll have to come and see Grandad and me," she added, "since Sandra is leaving me high and dry."

"What?" asked Sandra sharply. "We're going on holiday like lots of normal people do – like you and Dad used to do when you were our age."

"Actually, Gulliver said he's coming home for a few days," said Madeleine to Caroline. "He talked about us all going out to lunch, with Bryony as well."

"That'll be nice for you," replied Caroline somewhat glumly, licking her fingers.

"No, he meant you and Grandad too," explained Madeleine patiently. "And you too, Grandma," she said to Sybil.

"What, me too? How will we all fit in the car?" asked Sybil, dropping cake crumbs down her chest.

"With difficulty, I should think," said Leonard somewhat wheezily, before he succumbed to a fit of coughing. "Drat, I can't seem to shake off this virus."

"I think Bryony's going to borrow her mother's car," said Madeleine, sounding as if she was tiring a little. "Anyway, Gulliver's going to let you know."

"Well, I'll look forward to that," said Sybil, smiling with her mouth but not her eyes. "I don't get out much since Basil went. Still, I've had my life. Not like you, Madeleine, you've got all yours ahead of you. When will you be 20?"

"I'll be 23 tomorrow, Grandma." Madeleine darted a look of distress at Sandra.

"Maddy's decided to take Lawrence along to her graduation ceremony," said Sandra to nobody in particular, in an effort to save Madeleine from terminal boredom.

"What a shame you and Osborn won't be there," said Caroline to Sandra, despite the fact that Osborn was sitting beside Sandra. "It's such an important time in her life. I can remember feeling so proud at my graduation ceremony."

"Well, I didn't even go to mine," muttered Sandra, wondering why her mother was annoying her so much.

"Didn't you?" asked Caroline as if it was news to her. "Why ever not?"

"I was suffering from acute anxiety if you remember," replied Sandra, amazed that her mother appeared to have forgotten such a difficult period in Sandra's life. "Being in a formal ceremony in a huge hall and having to go to the front to accept my certificate was simply too much for me to cope with at that time."

"How is your anxiety, Madeleine dear?" asked Sybil suddenly. "Your dad said you were coming off the drugs?"

"I thought you were suffering with depression, like I used to," said Caroline, cutting in.

"Any more cake anyone?" asked Osborn suddenly. "More tea?" He stood up and headed towards the kitchen, without waiting to hear any replies.

"Yes, more tea?" asked Sandra brightly, standing up. "Dad? Mum? Sybil? Can you help me, Maddy?"

Sandra, Osborn and Madeleine converged in the kitchen to whisper frantically about how awful the afternoon was turning out.

"This is dreadful," whispered Osborn loudly, which was essentially a non-whisper. "What a miserable celebration tea for you, Mad."

"I'm so sorry," whispered Sandra. "They all seem so..."

"Old," whispered Madeleine. "I can notice a difference from the last time we were all together, it's quite alarming. We'd better cut some more cake and go back in."

"I can't find the best knife," said Osborn, no longer bothering to whisper. "Oh, sod it, I'll use this old wobbly one. Do you think I'll manage not to cut my finger?"

"I don't know, why don't you have a stab at it?" asked Madeleine, smiling at her tense, bemused father.

Sandra and Osborn wandered across the most exposed, most south-westerly island of the Scilly archipelago, St Agnes. The weather seemed perfect, sunny with a light breeze that lowered the temperature just enough for comfort. The combined smell of the surrounding sea and the warmth of the vegetation over which they walked, combined with their current state of freedom, brought about a heady, almost forgotten mix of pleasure. As they came in sight of the Troy Town maze, however, Sandra looked at her watch and her spirits sank a little.

"Madeleine's graduation ceremony will be starting soon," she said sadly. "I still can't believe we're not there with her, it seems so wrong."

"It couldn't be helped," replied Osborn matter-of-factly. "She knows we would have been there if we could and she also knows how much we need this holiday. I still don't feel quite right, I haven't got all my energy back yet."

"Do you want to have a rest?" asked Sandra, looking at him with concern, her mind already anxiously considering the procedure for an emergency return journey to the mainland if the cellulitis should return.

"I'm fine," said Osborn gruffly. "You worry too much, it's annoying. I feel like I've had the stuffing taken out of me, that's all."

"Well, stuff you, then!" exclaimed Sandra, hurt at his careless remark. "We're here, anyway. What a peculiar little maze, I wonder who made it? It's rather lovely."

There was no reply. Sandra decided to ignore Osborn, seeing he was preparing to bond with his camera once again. After slowly circumnavigating the maze, she walked a short distance to sit down on some dry grass. Osborn had taken out his camera, but two people had walked into his shot and he was waiting for them to move.

Sandra remembered how the day after they'd arrived on St Mary's, she had felt exceedingly bored and lonely as Osborn walked around the Garrison with his camera, completely ignoring her. She had felt at that point that there were three of them on the holiday – her, Osborn and his camera. He'd laughed when she'd told him, but she had stuck to her guns (or to be precise the cannon against which she'd been leaning) and he had promised to be more thoughtful.

'I suppose he's been trying,' she mused, the sun soporific on her upturned face, sensibly applied with Factor-50 sun screen. 'Very trying at times, but I didn't think that out loud. It's so peaceful here, I could almost drift off.'

She closed her eyes, listening to the restless but comforting sound of the sea in the distance as its waves broke upon the shore, the haunting cry of some seabirds as they circled above something fascinating them down on the beach and the rhythm of her own breathing. She wasn't sure whether she actually opened her eyes, or whether she imagined the scene that seemed to pass before her as she looked again at the maze.

The light was very bright and she was forced to squint a little, as she noticed several people moving around the maze. Some were walking thoughtfully and some were dancing, but all of them seemed very happy. She became aware that one of them had approached her and had sat down quietly beside her on the grass. Normally this would have alarmed Sandra, but she felt at peace and began to speak conversationally about the maze.

"It's good to see people so happy," she said beneficently. "I know that Isles of Scilly inhabitants have had a great deal of hardship in the past, but they all must have benefited from the lovely energy of this place. I feel so much at home here and so wonderfully peaceful."

"You must draw on the energy of this place to sustain you for the future," replied her female companion, who had a very low, gentle voice.

"Yes," agreed Sandra. "I even dream about the islands sometimes, as if they hold some significance for me."

"Everything holds significance," replied the female, "if you choose to perceive it."

"What is significant about this maze?" enquired Sandra. "It seems to be drawing my attention and causing me to wonder."

"What are you wondering?" asked the female.

"Oh, the usual. What is my life all about, where is it leading, why am I me? In fact, when I look at my life sometimes, I feel as if I'm walking in a perpetual maze, feeling trapped because I don't know where I'm headed, or even where I am."

"What do you see of the maze before you from a distance, even a short distance such as this?"

"I see it's actually a free, happy place and everyone can choose where to make their next step. They aren't trapped at all, they've chosen to be there."

"Yes. A different perspective changes perception. What is a maze but different pathways, different directions, different boundaries? If a human life feels like a maze from which there is no escape, it is only because a soul is trapped inside its own perception. While you are alive, there is still air to breathe, beauty to behold and life in all its forms to nourish your spirit. It is true that while you are within your own life, it is harder to perceive the whole of which you are a part, but remember there is always a wider picture, a choice of pathway and a reason for your existence."

"My existence seems to be inexorably caught up with the needs of others, so that I forget myself. This happens until the point when I suddenly realise that I feel as if the essence of myself is suffocating."

"Then choose to breathe!"

"But others need me. Madeleine needed me today and I let her down."

"Madeleine is her own person and despite her human misgivings, she understands the wider picture and is happy for you to be here. Allow her to act from her own wisdom and her own soul. All is well."

"Sandra?" Osborn's voice broke into her consciousness, as she reluctantly opened her eyes, blinking against the sunlight. "I've finished taking photos, shall we move on? Are you OK? You look a bit dazed."

"Did you see some people here, walking around the maze?" asked Sandra slowly, unsure of what she had just experienced.

"Yes, but they didn't hang around too long, thank goodness. The woman was wearing a bright red top and the man a bright yellow shirt, it would have looked far too distracting if they'd been in my picture."

"Oh." Sandra stood up and regarded Osborn wonderingly. "I'm not sure if I was dreaming, but I just had the strangest experience. It was amazing!"

## CHAPTER 9

The end of July had arrived, bringing with it some good weather and also Gulliver for a weekend visit. Sandra was very glad not only to see him in his own right (as well as his left), but also because there seemed to be a certain amount of residue tension in the house after Osborn had recently flipped about Madeleine's situation.

She had visited Cardiff to find accommodation for the coming year, having decided to move in with Alana, the girl she'd become friendly with during her final year at university. The problem was that she hadn't yet found a job and had needed to ask Osborn for bond money in order to rent the house that she and Alana would be sharing with some others.

As in previous years, Osborn had also had to sign as guarantor. Although he'd done so, it had resulted in him totally losing his cool, before erupting in an explosion of hot words that had then given way to a frigid silence that lasted for days.

Sandra felt caught in the middle, seeing the situation from both Osborn's and Madeleine's viewpoint. Osborn felt there was no guarantee that Madeleine would find a job by September when she would be moving to Cardiff, which would put him in a tenuous financial situation.

However, Madeleine was calmly resolute that all would work out well. She told them she felt absolutely certain she was doing the right thing, while understanding that it must seem like a risk. She assured Osborn that she would do everything to put his mind at rest and had already begun to look in earnest for a job. It was really a case of implicitly trusting her, which Osborn was obviously finding very difficult.

Surprisingly, Sandra found that she was inexplicably connected to the sense of calm assurance that Madeleine was emanating and wondered if her experience at the Troy Town maze had helped. Regardless of this, though, the weekend with Gulliver was a welcome diversion from the underlying tension.

It had certainly started off well on the Saturday, with a fairly long walk on Dartmoor at Gulliver's instigation, followed by a relaxed evening together, eating pizza, drinking wine and watching a DVD of *American Tart 3 – The Wedding*.

Thankfully, Osborn had stayed calmed on the following day, when they decided to go further afield to Trevoze Head in north Cornwall. Gulliver drove and after a picnic lunch, they enjoyed a walk along the coast path, underneath a sky of deep blue, in which puffy white clouds were coquettishly changing shape. The air felt perfect for a summer walk, with a gentle breeze lowering the heat enough to be comfortable and the intoxicatingly healthy tang of the briny nearby sea. The evocative cry of seabirds and the many different varieties of wild flowers added to a general sense of wellbeing as they all walked along.

"Look at the lighthouse over there!" called out Osborn, who had been slightly ahead of the others at that point. "It's brilliant white, it really stands out."

"It's not that tall," replied Gulliver, already taking out his camera. "No, it *does* look pretty good against the blue of the sea. I wonder which is the best angle?"

"They're off again," remarked Sandra, just before she and Madeleine caught up with them. "Still, I'm glad we're having a good weekend, it's been quite dire these last few days."

"Thank you for trusting me," said Madeleine suddenly. "I know it must feel like a risk, but I somehow know deep down that I'm on the right path."

"This is the only path around here," joked Gulliver, before he became caught up in some serious photography.

"I've never known you to be so sure about anything before, Maddy," responded Sandra thoughtfully, "so that on its own helps me to realise you're truly listening to yourself."

"You listen to me too," said Madeleine, as they both stood gazing out to sea at the lighthouse. "Well, most of the time."

"Did you say something?" asked Sandra, before laughing at her own remark. "Sorry, I couldn't resist. I try to listen to you as much as I can, darling, because I don't suppose there's anyone alive who can listen to anyone else all the time."

"What about anyone dead?" asked Gulliver, still busy with his camera.

"Stop eavesdropping!" exclaimed Madeleine in Gulliver's direction.

"I haven't got any eaves to drop," retorted Gulliver, before he smiled somewhat sheepishly. "Sorry, I'm going over there now with Dad, anyway."

"I don't really mind," replied Madeleine. "It almost felt like old times."

"Ah, I remember old times..." said Sandra fondly.

"Well, you would if you're an old timer," replied Gulliver. "Bye!"

"It *is* a pretty lighthouse," mused Madeleine, sighing slightly. "I wonder what this new house I'm going to live in will be like. At least it doesn't feel all dark and old like the house I was in when I was struggling to survive. I do know that I'm not cured of anorexia as such, but I don't feel as if I'll ever allow myself to go back there." Her voice shook a little, causing Sandra's heart to lurch as she looked at Madeleine standing so pensively looking out to sea.

"You can never go back there," said Sandra softly, putting her hand on Madeleine's back. "It's impossible to go back in time, because so much has changed. You're stronger now, you're not the person you were back then."

"I know," replied Madeleine. "I wish I could talk with other people the way I talk with you and Dad. That is, when Dad's in a listening mood. To be honest, I *have* talked to others – friends when I was in Frankfurt – and Alana – and it does help, up to a point. I wish I could talk with Gulliver, but half of the time he doesn't really seem to *get* me. I suppose I don't really get him, either, we seem to be opposite in so many ways."

"I'm sorry," said Sandra sadly. "I wish you could be closer. It's a deep, fundamental wish of mine, but I've noticed that it's difficult for you both. I feel as if I understand both of you in your very different ways and I long for you to understand each other, but there does seem a distance between you a lot of the time."

"I'm sorry," replied Madeleine, looking at Sandra and then smiling. "Listen to us, we're so polite! I'm actually feeling very hopeful about the future right now, so I hope you do too?"

"Yes," responded Sandra without thinking. "Yes, perhaps I do."

"I must confess I don't feel very hopeful about the future," said Sandra to Terry a week later, as she sat on a sofa sipping tea with a small group of others in Terry and Kerry's familiar sitting room, awaiting the start of a regression workshop.

"Now come along, Sandra," said Terry, smiling. "You know it's futile to waste energy worrying about what the future may or may not bring. We need to be present in the present."

"So why are we all here for a regression workshop that's about the past?" asked Sandra, grinning.

"Touché!" responded Terry. "It's all connected, of course, the past, the present and the future. In fact, time is an illusion, as your Osborn would say. Why aren't you hopeful about the future, anyway?"

"A combination of all sorts, as usual," replied Sandra. "Our parents feel like a big responsibility that doesn't seem to let up in the slightest. Osborn has to take his mother for her second eye operation next week, which he's concerned about because she's seemed quite frail and not exactly well lately. My father still hasn't properly recovered from a virus he caught ages ago and my mother seems to be quite weird these days, almost as if she blames me for being younger than she is. Osborn and I have worked so hard on their garden recently, making the front lawn a bit smaller and creating a rockery to make it easier to look after, but they seem to take it for granted and it's begun to feel that the more we do, the more we're expected to do – and it's only going to get worse the older they become."

"Yes, it does get tricky with our parents sometimes," agreed Terry. "You can only do your best, though and it's not a problem that's going to last forever now, is it? It probably comes down to trusting that everything is actually working out spiritually the way it should, for the highest good of everyone. What about your children, they're doing well, aren't they? Look at Madeleine over there, talking with her dad and Kerry. You must be delighted she's here?"

"Yes, I am," replied Sandra, glancing over at Madeleine, who was looking a little nervous. "I was so surprised she asked to come along, to be honest, but she confessed to being very interested in the idea of past lives."

"There's probably something she'd benefit from learning there, then," said Terry, smiling. "We must make sure she gets to have a go on the couch with Del – which sounds decidedly dodgy, sorry about that. You must have a go too, Sandra!"

"Now I'm afraid," said Sandra, laughing. "Extremely afraid! Oh, I meant to tell you that I had a very odd dream recently. I was leaning over with my neck all bare, knowing that my head was about to be chopped off. The strange thing was that I didn't feel any fear and then as the blade came down, I knew I would be going forward into peace – which I did."

"Well," said Terry, his eyes twinkling, "we'll have to see if Del makes anything of that. We'd better stop chatting, he looks as if he wants to start."

"Are we ready please, people?" called out Del, moving to his position by the couch. As everyone took their chosen seat around the couch, Madeleine slid in on the sofa beside Sandra, who smiled at her reassuringly.

After a short talk about past lives (and about Del's current life) he led them on a short meditation. Sandra kept wondering how Madeleine was feeling and therefore hardly meditated at all, but when they went around the group afterwards to share their meditative experiences, Madeleine talked quite confidently of being aware of a young woman with dark hair who was holding out her hand. Sandra, on the other hand, had to confess to seeing nothing, while Osborn seemed particularly uneasy and talked of his spirit guide who was trying to calm him.

The interesting part then started, with Wanda as the first regressee. She lay flat on her back on the couch, looking very serene, with her hands crossed gently over her abdomen and a blanket on top of her to prevent her from becoming cold. This seemed a little incongruous on a warm summer's day, but Wanda said she was comfortable and Del started by taking her through a brief relaxation. He then asked her to imagine herself sitting on the roof of her house in the day-time and prompted her to describe the surrounding scenery. After that, he asked her to change to night-time and describe the sky around her.

Everyone in the room became very quiet as Del then asked Wanda to start travelling through the sky until she found a place in time where she wanted to land. She soon came to rest on some sand and through Del's gentle questioning, firstly described how she looked and what she was wearing. It was then ascertained that she was a young woman of royalty in Egypt who was interested in the art of healing.

At that point, Wanda began to show signs of distress, explaining how she wasn't supposed to help the workers and servants, but they were hungry and she couldn't bear to have such a surplus of food in her household, while others sometimes starved. She described how she would take food from her house and distribute it to poor families, but her father found out and was very displeased. As Wanda was actually crying, Del told her she could leave that life and either come back or travel on to find another life she would like to visit.

Wanda decided to come back to the present, whereupon Claire took her place upon the couch. Claire found herself as a young girl in a Native American settlement, describing in much detail how she was very hungry and waiting for the men to return from hunting the buffalo.

Terry then decided to have a go and found himself in the English countryside, experiencing the hard life of someone who farmed the land. Rod followed him, finding himself in an unknown country in an army of warriors who were sometimes more brutal than Rod felt comfortable with. At that point it was decided to break for lunch and normality was resumed for an hour or so.

Sandra's curiosity had been greatly aroused during the morning and when nobody immediately volunteered as a regressee after lunch, she found herself on the couch with a blanket resting lightly across her legs, gazing up expectantly at Del, trying not to look at either the big mole on his cheek or his hairy ears.

As Del took her through the short relaxation and mind-expanding exercises, she wondered if she would be able to experience anything other than knowing she was on a couch in a room with other people looking at her, two of them being Osborn and Madeleine, who she didn't want to let down in any way.

However, she knew she had to allow herself to go with the flow if it was going to be at all worthwhile, so she did her best to relax. She was extremely surprised to find it was easy under Del's clear direction, to travel back in time in her mind and land where

her assumed higher self seemed to take her. At first, she was only dimly aware of who or where she was, but then she began to experience an emotion that seemed not to come from her present life, but rose to the surface without her consciousness and spilled out in tears that trickled down her face.

As she let herself remember who she had been, prompted by Del's questions, she knew she was a girl of six in Egypt or somewhere nearby. In her mind some words kept reverberating: 'I don't know where to go, I'm lost.' Thus, when Del asked her what clothes she was wearing, she couldn't be bothered to explain and replied: "Just clothes." As a girl of six, clothes didn't really interest her. When Del asked her name, she couldn't bring it properly to mind, but felt it was something like Alisha.

As she focused more clearly on her emotions, the scene in which she found herself opened out a little more. Looking back, she knew she had been happy with her mother, father and eight-year-old brother. She had liked their simple home and the settlement in which they'd lived. However, some people had come to chase them out of their homes and kill them – the language in which she wanted to describe her life was very simple.

They had been forced to flee quickly from their home with all the others from the settlement, but it had been total mayhem and everyone had been very frightened. She remembered a donkey with panniers as it had walked away from her. She'd been told to catch hold of her brother's hand tightly, as her mother and father were busy seeing to other things and other people. To her surprise, she realised her brother felt very much like Gulliver.

She remembered that she'd let go of her brother's hand to look at some sort of creature in the sand – a lizard-type creature that appeared to hop as it changed from one foot to the other. Before she realised it, she'd been left behind. She could see nothing but sand that was shimmering in the heat. She walked and walked until she became so tired that she could no longer stand up and everything seemed very far away and unreal.

She lay down and prepared to sleep. As she drifted away, she had an awareness that she was going Home and that she wasn't frightened. She was simply sad to be leaving her current family, because she felt she'd let them down and they would be so upset. She couldn't stop the tears from rolling down her face.

As she left that lifetime, Del handed her a tissue and asked if she wanted to come back to this life or travel on.

"Travel on," came Sandra's voice as if from a great distance, much to her own surprise and probably to everyone else's in the room.

This time when Sandra landed and looked down at her feet, she found she was wearing some very worn leather sandals. She could see she was dressed in a rough skirt made of a sort of sacking material with a similar kind of top. It was somewhere around 1012 AD and she was in a forest settlement with huts and the smell of wood smoke. She was about seventeen. When Del asked her what she did in that life, she felt that herbs were significant, although she was unsure how. When asked her name, she felt she was called something like Ayla.

Del asked if she could recognise anyone around her. After a while she saw Madeleine, who was a little girl of about five, wearing a sort of bonnet and a similar skirt and top to what she was wearing. She looked into Madeleine's eyes and felt the clarity and peace of the love that currently existed between them, which she described aloud as "a sort of feeling of light between us and a lovely, strong connection." She was unable to ascertain if they were related in that life, or whether there were any other souls she recognised.

Del then led her on to the time of her death in that life and she realised she was in the forest. She was crawling along on her hands and knees and was very weak. She felt as though she'd been ostracised by the people in the settlement and cast out to die. She could feel that death was imminent. She had the image of berries in her head, but was unsure whether she was looking for some in order to survive, or whether she'd eaten some that had poisoned her. She felt no sense of anger or betrayal, just sadness that she hadn't been understood.

Del asked her what her purpose in that life had been. After a while, words seemed to reverberate in her head once again, which she found herself speaking aloud: "If you would be the light, you must endure the burning." She knew this was connected with the feeling of light and love that had passed between Madeleine and herself when they had looked at each other.

A deep silence ensued, whereupon Del decided it was time to bring Sandra back. She found it easy, having continuously known at some level where she was in the room at Terry and Kerry's house. That awareness of current reality always happened when she meditated, but she'd long ago decided to discount it, in order not to miss the interesting experiences that sometimes occurred in her mind, or her higher self, or wherever.

As Sandra returned somewhat dazed to her place, Madeleine squeezed her hand in a gesture of acknowledgement.

"OK?" whispered Sandra quietly to Madeleine, who nodded and smiled.

"Who would like to go next?" asked Del, scanning the room. "Osborn?"

"No, maybe later on," replied Osborn, frowning slightly.

"I'll go," said Madeleine suddenly, much to Sandra's surprise and delight.

As Madeleine settled herself on the couch underneath the blanket, Sandra felt tears rushing to her eyes at Madeleine's trust and vulnerability. She hoped fervently that it would be a good experience for Madeleine.

Madeleine's voice was quiet but steady as she was led to find a past life of significance for herself. Sandra was unsure whether Del had specified a significant life to the others, but let it pass, straining to hear every word Madeleine said.

"I'm wearing sandals," said Madeleine slowly. "I have dark hair."

"Do you know where you are?" asked Del gently.

"Egypt," replied Madeleine without hesitation.

"What is your name?" prompted Del.

"I – no!" Madeleine's voice rose in disbelief and anguish, as she began to breathe unevenly and clutched her hands to her chest.

"Are you alright?" asked Del concernedly. "Tell me what's happening?"

"I have a pain!" gasped Madeleine, as her breathing became more laboured. Sandra and Osborn had both moved forward agitatedly in their seats.

"Come back from Egypt," said Del, his hand on Madeleine's forehead. "Return to your present life, in this room with us. You are perfectly safe here. Open your eyes when you're ready. Are you with us?"

"Yes," came Madeleine's small voice in reply.

"Has the pain gone?" asked Del gently.

"Yes."

"Do you want to tell us what happened?" asked Del, his hand now on Madeleine's arm. "You don't have to, but it may help."

"I was with someone," recounted Madeleine slowly. "I think it was my lover – but another woman was very jealous of us and she stabbed me in the heart."

"That's quite an experience," said Terry, standing up and approaching Madeleine. "Your first time with us, too! Are you ready to get up now? I'll fetch you some water, it'll help."

"Thank you," replied Madeleine, returning to her place on the sofa beside Sandra. "I'm fine, honestly." Sandra put her hand on Madeleine's back, not convinced that she was fine, but reassured that she seemed OK.

"So," said Del after a few moments of settling down again. "There's time for one last brave soul. Anyone? No? How about you, Osborn?"

"OK, I'll give it a go if nobody else wants to," said Osborn, looking hopefully around the room for someone else to volunteer.

"Up you go then, mate," said Terry kindly.

As Del took Osborn through the initial exercises, Osborn described in great detail the view from the roof of their house. However, when he was guided to travel back in time until he found himself landing somewhere significant, he began to breathe quickly.

"Where are you?" asked Del.

"I'm in China. I'm running," gasped Osborn, "I'm running away from them."

"Who are you running away from?" asked Del, frowning slightly.

"They're chasing me," said Osborn, before lapsing into a silence broken only by his very audible breathing.

"What sort of ground are you walking – er, running on?" asked Del, a little desperately Sandra felt.

"It's rough, with earth and stones and dust," replied Osborn. "They have horses, they're faster than I am."

"Do you know who it is chasing you on their horses?" asked Del, trying a slightly different tack.

"They work for the man who owns me," responded Osborn, his breathing still ragged. "I've run away, I can't bear to work for him anymore, doing the bad things he asks me to do."

"What bad things?" asked Del somewhat tentatively.

"Killing people," replied Osborn, tears beginning to roll down his cheeks. "Making me cut off their heads."

"You can return from that life now," said Del anxiously. "That life is over and there's no need to feel now what you felt then. Come back to this room where you're safe amongst your friends..."

As Osborn gradually opened his eyes and looked fearfully around him, Sandra sat completely still in shock. She watched as if from a distance, as Wanda went over to the couch where Osborn was trying to regain normality and put her hands on Osborn's arm to give him healing. There was one overriding image in her head, which was the dream she had recounted to Terry that morning, of leaning over with her neck bared to the man who was about to cut off her head.

Sandra lay in bed that night, unable to sleep. It had been such a strange day, followed by an interesting evening with the three of them talking about their day's experiences. Madeleine had been quite accepting, in a wondering sort of way, about being stabbed in the heart. She was even partly sorry that it had been such a short foray into the past.

Osborn on the other hand was still disturbed about his violent past. Sandra also felt quite disturbed about his violent past, particularly since her decapitation dream seemed to be sinisterly connected. As for her own experiences on the couch with Del, she found herself intrigued about her death as a child in Egypt and her death in the forest near the settlement.

'It really should have been called a past death workshop,' she mused fancifully, 'although I suspect that would have put people off. It would have put me off! I'm glad Madeleine's OK about her stabbing, I was afraid it would unbalance her and put her off this sort of thing for life, but she's quite anxious to go back to Cardiff and tell her friend Alana all about it.' She felt her neck.

'No scars there. I wonder if Osborn really did slice off my neck in a past life? Part of me absolutely believes in past lives, but how much of that is me *wanting* to believe it? There's another part of me that doesn't believe it at all, because it seems so mad. I couldn't stop those tears from rolling down my face when I was in Egypt, though, but maybe that was just the emotion of the strange situation? No, I'd never let myself cry in front of a group of people if I could help it. I don't know, on the face of it, it all seems highly improbable.'

As her mind wandered over different aspects of the day, she gradually sank into sleep and then into a dream. She was gazing at a mirror and looking at a young, round Chinese face, framed with short black hair. She reached out for a comb and it was then that she remembered her name was Su Lin.

## CHAPTER 10

September was almost halfway through. August had passed in a haze of reasonably warm, very wet days in which Sandra felt that she and Osborn had been jolted around once again by family crises. Sybil had been the main cause of worry, as her second eye operation had not been straightforward, resulting in Osborn having to make several trips

to the Eye Infirmary with her. Not long after this, she had been taken into hospital one evening with severe angina and the hospital visiting had begun once more.

Leonard had caught another cold that seemed to have stayed on his chest and both Sandra and Caroline were worried about him. Madeleine, on the other hand, had been busily job hunting and after a train trip to Cardiff and back for what must have been a bogus interview, she was plagued by inappropriate text messages from her so-called interviewer. Fortunately, the unnerving situation stopped when she ceased to respond, but her trust had taken a knock, not to mention her bank balance.

As well as being consistently worried about her father, Sandra was consistently worried about her and Osborn's lack of money. However, there was an upturn in their collective fortunes when Madeleine went for another interview in Cardiff for a job at *Sewall*, a large firm of solicitors, and was given the job the same day. This meant that Madeleine could be completely financially independent – but it also meant that she was settled in Cardiff for the foreseeable future.

"I feel as if my heart will always be pulled in different directions," said Sandra dolefully to her cousin Belinda, as they sipped cappuccinos in *The Rusty Kettle* the following day. "I don't mean to moan, I really don't, but I'm realising that I'll never have what my heart actually yearns for, which is Gulliver and Madeleine living closer. I don't mean in the next road, like I do with Mum and Dad, but somewhere more accessible. Still, I'm glad they're happy, that really is the main thing." She smiled at Belinda uncertainly.

"It must be difficult," considered Belinda, her cheeks a little flushed. "I used to long for Trudie and Peter to leave home, I thought they were never going to go! Trudie is happy to live close to us and it works well both ways, but Peter is a bit of a problem."

"Why?" asked Sandra sympathetically, her own cheeks beginning to be flushed. The seats were a bit on the hard side in *The Rusty Kettle*.

"He seems to feel the world is against him," replied Belinda, "and he's quite a stressy person, really. He tends to call in on us and expect us to help him out all the time. He really annoyed me last week, I could have hit him with gay abandon, except that I'm straight, of course." She looked at Sandra as if checking her remark was acceptable, but Sandra was already laughing.

"It's so good to laugh," she chuckled, now flushed all over. "It's been so difficult to laugh with Osborn lately, which is understandable. His mother's not at all well now and I really think that Dad is heading towards the end of his life."

"Do you?" Belinda looked sad. "He was always kind to me and so was your mum. If I can help at all, please let me know."

"Thank you. Actually, there's something that does bother me. When Mum dies, Auntie Lily will obviously have to be told, but there's no way I want to ring her in case Sindy's there. I never want to speak to Sindy again and I certainly wouldn't want Osborn to speak to her."

"I'll ring," replied Belinda instantly. "There's no need to worry about that at all. Did you know Auntie Lily's got to have a kidney removed?"

"Yes, I've been sending her distant healing," said Sandra, before she realised what she was saying. "I mean – I'm not sure I ever tell you that Osborn and I did a healing course at Rainbow Healers in Plymouth?"

"You mentioned it," replied Belinda, quieting Sandra's fears that she had strayed into sensitive territory. "It sounds wonderful. I miss going to church, they used to have a lovely healing service there once in a while. I can't kneel down now I have a dodgy knee and my feet have been hurting me a great deal too. Besides that, I've got nobody to go with."

"What a shame," replied Sandra, unwilling to correct Belinda in her assumption that the healing was part of a religion. "Have you seen a doctor about your knee and your feet?"

"Oh yes, I'm on waiting lists to see specialists," explained Belinda. "Do you still go to Rainbow Healers?"

"I don't, but they've recently asked Osborn to help teach the healing course and he's agreed. He's going to shadow the current teacher for a year and then take over."

"How wonderful, he'll make such a good teacher. He can always give me some healing!"

"I'm sure he'd be delighted. It does seem a shame that we both did the course and now I'm not doing anything with it – except the distant healing, that is. I hope Auntie Lily will be OK, it's not going to be easy recuperating from a major operation at her age."

"She's got Sindy to look after her when she comes out of hospital."

"Yes. I have to say that I dread being in that position, I'm quite frightened of medical situations. I don't know, it always strikes me how Sindy and I have so much in common, each of us being the only daughter of two sisters." Sandra sighed and gazed into her empty cup.

"I know, it's a crying shame what happened, just like my sister and me."

"How is Hetty? I haven't seen her for ages."

"Oh, the same as ever. I've been more upset about Ian lately, though. "

"Why?" Sandra was aware of Belinda's agitation as she mentioned her husband's name, noticing how Belinda was playing unthinkingly with her teaspoon while looking down at the table.

"There's this woman he likes at Ballroom Dancing – he told me so! He said we had hardly anything in common anymore and the awful thing is that he won't go out anywhere much with me, but he goes out every flaming Saturday and splashes on the aftershave."

"Oh Belinda, I'm so sorry, that must be really hurtful."

"It is. I'd go to Ballroom Dancing myself, except for my dodgy knee and feet. I feel so betrayed, it's as bad as if he'd actually *slept* with her."

"I – I'm not sure, to be honest, Belinda. In my experience, one of the worst things about Osborn and Sindy was knowing that they *had* slept together. It was torture imagining it, absolute torture and I'd have given almost anything for them not to have done it." Sandra couldn't help her voice wavering as she recalled once again the agony of those dark days.

"I'm sorry," said Belinda, looking up forlornly into Sandra's eyes.

"No, don't be sorry! I was just saying how it was for *me*, I'm not belittling how *you* feel at all. I'm so very sorry for you, Belinda, that you have to go through this. What about the other woman, does she feel the same?"

"No, that's the really ironic thing, she's younger than he is and I don't think she's even aware of how he feels. He's like a sad puppy mooning over someone he can't have."

"God, that's awful. Do Trudie and Peter know?"

"Trudie does, because she came around to the house when Ian and I were having an argument. She's incensed. Peter doesn't know yet. It's so horrible, I feel like our life together is a farce."

"Try to look after yourself and remember to do some things that *you* like doing. It's so important for your wellbeing. I know only too well how devastating this sort of thing can be."

"I know you know. I feel as if I've burdened you by telling you and I have to go in a minute. I said I'd call round at my friend's house on the way home."

"That's OK, you mustn't worry so much about other people, you must think of your lovely self a bit more. I'm fine, I've enjoyed seeing you. I always do! I'm so glad you've told me, honestly I am."

"Thank you, Sandra, I do feel better now I've told you."

"It's good to get things off your chest."

"It's funny you should say that. This friend I'm going to see has just had a boob reduction. She inherited some money and decided to do something for herself that she'd always wanted for years."

"Good for her! It must have cost rather a lot of money, though."

"Thousands, I should imagine. I did ask her how much it cost, but she wouldn't say, she was keeping that one really close to her chest."

A month had passed and it was mid-October. Sandra and Osborn had taken a day out for themselves and had headed towards the Eden Project. They had even arrived there and had wandered a little uncomfortably around the tropical biome, before wandering rather more happily around the temperate biome. They were now sitting outside in the warm afternoon air, sipping water from a bottle as they sat and gazed at the colourful, calming and uplifting sights around them.

"You don't see miserable people here," remarked Osborn. "I reckon loads of people come here to feel better about life, like we do."

"And if they just came to visit, they feel better about life by the time they leave anyway," contributed Sandra, sighing contentedly.

"We should do more of this," said Osborn, turning to look at Sandra. "Much, much more."

"Absolutely," replied Sandra vehemently. "I can't believe how time is passing so quickly and it's taking our lives with it. Gulliver is 28 now, for heaven's sake and Madeleine 23. It doesn't seem long ago that they were young and we were – younger than we are now."

"Still, they seem more settled now they're older," considered Osborn.

"Yes, Gulliver in particular seems to be enjoying life, what with his trips to the Lake District and – where else was it?"

"The Peak District."

"Oh yes – and the red light district in Frankfurt," laughed Sandra. "No, I know you meant recently. Don't forget Ireland with Bryony and Snowdonia with you. Yes, he's doing OK and living his life. I'm happy he's happy."

"I'm happy that Maddy's settling down too," continued Osborn. "It was a bit worrying for a while."

"I'm not exactly happy that she's settling down in Cardiff," sighed Sandra, "but I do trust her to know what's best for her life and in that sense, I'm happy. It feels as if she's already travelled a million miles along her life path. I do miss her, though, as well as Gulliver. Still, life moves on. Do you think you *will* take on the teaching at Rainbow Healers?"

"I expect so," considered Osborn. "To be honest, I find the current teaching there rather lacking in some areas, so it would be a challenge to bring it up to date."

"As long as it doesn't take up too much of your time," said Sandra, "because it feels as if we have precious little time to ourselves as it is."

"Don't worry," replied Osborn, rummaging around in his camera bag. "I know exactly what I'm doing. I don't suppose you know where I put my little blue notebook? I can't seem to find it..."

"What, the one you write plant and flower names in?"

"Yes. Oh! I think I left it in the temperate biome by the citrus trees."

It was mid-November and Sandra was dreaming. She was in her parents' house and her mother had found her father dead in bed. Her mother said, "We've lost him, Sandra," and then asked her to ring for help. Sandra tried very hard to ring for the doctor on her mobile phone, but couldn't get a signal.

When she gave up the attempt, she saw her mother had somehow brought her father into the sitting room and had placed him on the sofa. Sandra gazed at the white, waxy body of her dead father and woke up, with her heart hammering wildly inside her chest. It would have been catastrophic outside.

'Why didn't I use their home phone?' Sandra asked herself perplexedly. 'And why did Mum bring him out to sit on the sofa? She would never have carried him like that. Why are dreams so disturbingly weird? Have I really just had a premonition that my dad is going to die soon?'

The next day was a dull, wet, life-diminishing Tuesday. Sandra knocked on the kitchen door of her parents' house and entered fearfully, the echo of her dream still floating around like a spectre in her head. To her vast relief, she saw her mother standing in the kitchen, pouring water into the kettle.

"Hello!" she said brightly, but soon realised Caroline was far from bright herself.

"Hello," replied Caroline, placing the kettle down on the kitchen top with a thump. "Ouch, that's heavy. You're lucky I'm up and about, I've been in bed with sciatica for the last three days. Dad's been looking after me, but now *he's* ill."

"Oh no! Why didn't you ring? What's wrong with Dad?" Sandra's heart began to beat very quickly.

"I didn't ring because I knew you'd be coming over today. Dad's got some sort of stomach bug, he started being sick last night."

"Oh." Sandra resisted her impulse to run shrieking from the house. "I'm sorry to hear you're both suffering. Is there anything I can do?" She gazed around the kitchen, wondering what germs were lurking on the surfaces, in the cracks, on the door knobs...

"Not really. I'm just glad to have some different company, it's been such a long, dreary weekend. I can hardly walk with this pain shooting down my leg, but what can I do about it?"

"Go to see the doctor?"

"He'd only give me painkillers and they don't really do any good. Besides, how would I get there? It hasn't been easy since Dad gave up the car, you know."

"Taxi? Dad said the money he'd save on the car could be spent on taxis when it was necessary."

"I'm not wasting money on a taxi just to be given painkillers I don't want. It's Dad I'm worried about now, he hasn't been able to take his drugs today."

"What about ringing the surgery for advice? Osborn's done that before."

"That won't do much good, I want someone to look at him. Why can't you ring up and ask for a doctor's visit like you could in the past?"

"They only visit if it's an emergency now. Resources are stretched. If you were really worried about Dad, I'd ring up and speak to a receptionist for advice."

"The receptionists aren't medically trained."

"No, I mean they'd advise you about who to speak to, maybe a practice nurse, or a doctor after surgery."

"Oh, I'll see how he gets on during the day. I won't be able to go to the hairdresser tomorrow, I was wondering if you could wash my hair for me on Thursday."

By the end of the day, Sandra was at screaming point and walked home with red-hot energy coursing through her veins. She had spent almost the entire day feeling trapped in a sick atmosphere, with a mother who was using her as a convenient receptacle on which to vent her negative feelings. Having to sit there playing *Scribble* had been the final straw and it had taken all Sandra's reserves not to tell Caroline what she was thinking and feeling.

"Why didn't she ring and tell me Dad had a stomach bug?" she muttered angrily as she walked along the wet pavement under her umbrella. "If Osborn had been ill and she'd been coming over, I would have rung to let her know, so she had the choice whether to risk it or not. I had *no* choice and Madeleine's coming home for a long weekend in two days. She *knew* that. We haven't seen Maddy since she started her job in September, for heaven's sake and now I feel at risk of a vomiting virus. At least I managed not to go to the toilet all day. God, I really need a pee, I hope I can make it home. I just can't *believe* the way she's so wrapped up in herself these days and I can't believe the way she treats me!" Her voice had risen indignantly.

"All right?" A voice emanated from somewhere outside Sandra's umbrella and Sandra lifted it up to see the curious face of a neighbour peering at her.

"Hello!" she said brightly and walked on to her house, realising that her neighbour must have heard some of her remonstrations.

"I don't care," she said as she walked down the drive. "I'm human and I'm not OK." She unlocked the door, stood inside it to shake her umbrella outside, locked the door again and gave vent to a day's worth of pent-up emotion.

"I'm *not* OK!" she screamed. "She didn't consider me at all, she's a selfish bitch and I'm *not* OK!" She stalked through the sitting room and into the back of the house.

"Shit!" she exclaimed, as she walked into the back room and saw Osborn sitting at his computer. "You're home early?" Her voice petered out into a squeak.

"I met Lawrence at lunchtime and he wants me to value this box of stuff from Mum's house," replied Osborn distractedly. "I had a class cancelled, so I thought I'd come home early and get started. What was all the shouting about?"

"I've had an awful day at Mum and Dad's," began Sandra, her anger departing by the second, only to be replaced by an overwhelming feeling of sadness, laced by a significant measure of loneliness and despair. "Mum's been ill and Dad was looking after her, but now Dad's ill and I'm really worried about him. Not only that, but – are you listening to me?"

"What? Yes. I'm trying to find out what these coins are worth."

"Coins? I'm dealing with sickness and impending death and you're bothered about coins?"

"Impending death? What are you talking about?" Osborn's voice was cold.

"I had a dream last night that Dad was dead, then I went to see him today and he's quite ill." Sandra felt tears gathering.

"I can't deal with another death," said Osborn sighing heavily. "I'm still coping with *my* parents' death."

"Well, thanks a sodding bunch," retorted Sandra, as the pain of his remark finally released her tears. "Where does that leave *me*? On my own again, that's where!" She stormed from the back of the house through to the front of the house, only to realise she needed to storm back into the back of the house again in order to pee for Britain.

Madeleine had spent a successful long weekend at home, with both Sandra and Osborn enjoying her company a great deal. Madeleine seemed to be quite well, although she talked about her new job with some anxiety. Sandra began to wonder if Madeleine was attempting to cover up some subterranean issue that was threatening to surface. However, the weekend was so enjoyable that it actually felt healing for all three of them.

Two weeks later, Gulliver also came home for a successful long weekend that turned out to be energetic, as one day they went for a long walk to Bleak House on Dartmoor and another day they walked along the scenic coastline at Derrydown, which happened to culminate in a pub lunch at *The Scary Skewer*. It was so unseasonably warm for late November that they sat outside to eat, gazing at the sea and hardly believing their luck.

'I *am* blessed,' thought Sandra as she lay in bed that night. 'I miss Gulliver and Madeleine so much because they live away, but it's so good between us that I think I'd actually rather have it this way than live closer together and have familiarity breed contempt, like it is with our parents.'

'Oh no, is it? How did that happen? I mean, I've always found it hard to respect Osborn's parents other than as people who have a right to be treated as people, but my own parents? God, life is too hard. I love my parents, but there seems to be a gulf between us that's growing bigger the older they become. Yet Osborn and I are older too, so if we're not careful, one day Gulliver and Madeleine might feel there's a huge age-related gulf between *us*. How awful! I wish they lived closer, so we could make more of our time together now!'

## CHAPTER 11

Christmas had arrived, but this year Leonard and Caroline had booked Christmas Day lunch for themselves, Sandra, Osborn, Gulliver and Madeleine in *The Knife Edge*. Meanwhile, Sybil had booked Christmas Day lunch for herself, Lawrence, Kirsty and Karla in *The Holey Spoon*. She had also, for some strange and slightly annoying reason, booked Boxing Day lunch in *The Knife Edge* for the whole immediate family. However, the six of them at *The Knife Edge* for the second day running could hardly complain, as Sybil was paying for them all, including Bryony.

"I'm so glad I could do this for you all," said Sybil happily, as she sat at the quite long table, sipping a white wine spritzer and gazing at everybody with flushed cheeks. It was unusual for everybody's cheeks to be flushed, but they had just eaten and the heating seemed to be turned up. "Basil would never let me have Christmas lunch out,

because it cost too much, but this has been such fun, yesterday *and* today. He never let me have a spritzer either and I always fancied one."

"We're glad you're enjoying yourself now, Mum," said Lawrence, sipping from his pint of *Doom Juice*. "Begad, this is a good pint of ale."

"Begad?" questioned Kirsty. "You sound ancient, old man."

"Less of the old," retorted Lawrence. "I'm only 56."

"That's nothing," responded Caroline, "wait till you get to 79. Len's 82 in May."

"That's if I make it," replied Leonard slowly, seeming to look out at everyone around the quite long table from behind old, tired eyes.

"How are you, Len?" asked Lawrence kindly. "Osborn said you haven't been too well?"

"I had this nasty virus that I can't seem to recover from properly," replied Leonard, "and I'm so tired all the time. Enough about me, though, how did you get on with that unexpected snow yesterday? *The Holey Spoon's* out in the sticks a bit."

"Yes, but it wasn't laying by the time we had to leave," explained Lawrence, "and it all melted overnight, thank heavens."

"More's the pity," said Gulliver morosely. "Bryony and I drove to Dartmoor yesterday afternoon, but it hadn't snowed as much as I'd hoped."

"You young things!" exclaimed Sybil. "You don't seem to feel the cold."

"Back to age again," remarked Osborn, sipping from his own *Doom Juice*. "Sandra accused me of losing my marbles the other day when I completely forgot to tell her I was going out straight after work to meet Lawrence and spend the evening with him and his friends."

"Well, *I* got the wrong evening last time," confessed Lawrence. "I was looking forward to going into town with them for a few beers. I was bitterly disappointed."

"You drink too much, Lawrence," said Sybil conversationally. "I'm really enjoying this spritzer. How are you, Madeleine? Dad said you're enjoying your job and you're going to learn to drive?"

"Yes," replied Madeleine, "I've been meaning to learn ever since I was 17, I really must get myself in gear."

"It would help," said Bryony, smiling slightly as she looked up from underneath her long brown fringe.

"Do you drive, Bryony?" asked Caroline conversationally.

"Er – yes. I drove you to the pub for lunch that time when Sandra and Osborn were at the Isles of Scilly," replied Bryony uncertainly.

"Don't you remember, Caroline?" asked Sybil, her eyes bright. "We had that *chocolate bombe* and we were so full up we thought we would explode! My skirt did split a bit, actually, I had to do a bit of nifty needlework. I've gone off sewing now, I tried to sew something the other day, but I kept losing the thread."

"That happens to me all the time," said Sandra, smiling.

"Oh, that reminds me, Sandra," said Caroline suddenly. "I was wondering if you could have a look at my long multicoloured scarf, because I had a little accident with it the other day when I was doing the housework. I bent down and the scarf got caught in the vacuum cleaner. It was quite frightening, you know! I think it's only a small sewing job, but you know how I hate sewing – and I love that scarf."

"What about the vacuum cleaner?" asked Osborn, his eyebrows raised.

"Well, I was wondering if *you* could look at that when you've got time, dear," replied Caroline, looking even more flushed. "It made a bit of an odd noise and started to smell, so I haven't been able to use it since."

"I can't smell things as well as I used to," said Sybil, draining the last of her spritzer. "I lit a candle the other evening to brighten the place, but I had a bit of trouble with the wick and I didn't notice that my hair had caught on fire a little bit."

"Mother!" expostulated Lawrence, looking horrified. "You must be careful, candles are dangerous."

"Don't worry, I got rid of it," replied Sybil, "although I had to pay a visit to the hairdresser. Your hair always looks nice Caroline, do you go to a hairdresser?"

"Yes dear, I go every week. I can't stand washing my hair and I don't really

spend a lot of money on myself. I've been going for decades. I have it permed every six months, trimmed and tinted every six weeks and I usually have a blow dry every week."

"Oh, I had one of those. I always used to have a shampoo and set, but this time I thought I'd plump for a wash and blow job."

"Mother!" This time it was Kirsty expostulating. Karla, however, had sat through the whole mealtime looking dour and unapproachable.

"What?" asked Sybil, startled. "Why are you laughing? Anyway, we've all finished, so would everyone like to come back to my house for some naughty nibbles?"

"Well, we managed to survive," said Sandra with relief, as she sat down that evening with Osborn and Madeleine for some mindless escapism, courtesy of the television. "Your mother really enjoyed herself today, Osborn."

"She enjoyed herself a lot more than I did," replied Osborn somewhat morosely. "I didn't like to say, but I've been fighting a virus for the last two days and it's getting worse."

"Oh Dad, you're not ill again," said Madeleine, scrutinising her father's pale face. "You've been ill so much lately, I'm becoming quite worried about you."

"Don't worry about me," replied Osborn, smiling bravely. "I'll be fine. I'm worried about my mother, to be honest. I saw her taking her GTN spray several times during the day and she's completely ignoring her diabetes with what she ate and drank."

"Kirsty and Karla are there, though," reasoned Sandra, frowning slightly. "I've been worried about *you* lately, Maddy, I know you're struggling sometimes."

"Well, *I've* been worried about *you!*" exclaimed Madeleine, gazing frankly at her mother. "You sound so tired on the phone sometimes and your emails sound as if you're quite unhappy with life."

"Oh no, I'm happy. Well, I suppose I *am* unhappy with a few things. Lots of things right now, I suppose – but it'll change. What shall we see, *Top of the Flops Christmas Special* or *The Worst Boyfriend of My Life*? That reminds me, Mad, how's that boyfriend you mentioned?"

"Jay? Better if you don't mention him, really. It's problematical, it seems as if his ex doesn't realise she's his ex, she keeps texting him and he keeps replying."

"Oh dear, that's hard on you, but surely it's up to him to tell her it's really over?" Sandra felt tendrils of unease coiling around her heart.

"I know and he says he knows, but somehow it doesn't seem to happen." Madeleine's face had clouded over, but she seemed to force herself to smile. "Still, this is Christmas and I'm here and maybe 2005 will be a much easier year for us all."

It didn't start out that way. Sandra and Caroline succumbed to Osborn's virus, while Osborn's virus graduated to an ear, throat and sinus infection. Thankfully, Gulliver and Madeleine escaped the virus by returning to Fleet and Cardiff respectively. They had been brought up well, reflected Sandra, as she coughed her way through New Year's Eve.

By some miracle, Leonard remained virus free, although Sandra was still concerned that he was in no fit state to look after himself or Caroline. Kirsty and Karla had returned to Hunterdon soon after Boxing Day and Lawrence had also managed to escape the viral vileness.

When Lawrence rang on the first morning of 2005, therefore, Sandra thought it was with wishes for the New Year. However, it was to tell them that Sybil had been taken into hospital in the early hours of the morning, with severe angina and a suspected heart attack.

January proceeded the way it had begun, with a complete lack of good news. Sandra's virus developed into a chest infection, Sybil caught a vomiting virus at hospital and Lawrence became exhausted and upset with Sybil, whose confirmed heart attack had been brought on by diabetes and irresponsible eating.

As Osborn gradually improved, he was able to make it to *Safeway's* to buy necessary supplies for the virally afflicted. While he was out, Sandra received a rather perturbing phone call from Leonard, who rarely rang unless it was an emergency. He had

forgotten to put water in the kettle before switching it on to make Caroline a hot drink and had boiled the kettle dry. It was terminal, so they no longer had a kettle.

Thanks to Osborn's good eye for a bargain, Sandra knew they had a spare one in the house, so she was able to send Osborn over with it later. However, it was the sound of Leonard's voice on the phone that had worried the life out of her, as he was speaking with such obvious difficulty that she could tell breathing itself had become difficult.

When January was halfway over and the terrible coughing was slowly improving into quite good coughing, Sybil was advised by the cardiac consultant to have angioplasty. She seemed unsure, while Osborn confessed that he intuitively felt it was a bad move. Lawrence seemed uncertain and so they left the ultimate decision to Sybil, who was allowed to spend a few days thinking about it.

Meanwhile, Leonard had begun to spend whole days in bed, as Caroline slowly recovered. He was eating less and less and when he did get out of bed, he sat in his chair complaining that he was cold. Sandra found it painful to watch him, but she was forced to visit her parents frequently, as there was basically nobody else. The doctor visited and said there wasn't much he could do for Leonard, except to ask a dietician to call and discuss nutrition. Caroline related to Sandra that when Leonard had asked the doctor what was wrong with him, the doctor had replied very kindly that Leonard had heart failure.

The only brightness on the horizon was that Gulliver and Bryony had provisionally set their wedding date for November and Madeleine had enrolled on a counselling course, as she had felt drawn towards this as a future career for some time. It was only a foundation course, but it would count towards further qualifications.

As the third week of January came to a close, Sybil suffered another heart attack and went for an emergency angiogram. It was a Friday, but Osborn left work early and joined Lawrence at the hospital. However, the angiogram proved too much for her weakened heart and she passed away early in the evening.

When Osborn returned from the hospital, after going back to Lawrence's flat for a while, he told Sandra that the doctor who had carried out the angiogram thought it had been a miracle that Sybil had been walking around and carrying on with her life as well as she had been right up until the end.

Another energy-sapping weekend followed, in which there were many difficult phone calls to be made, most of them between Osborn, Lawrence and Kirsty. Osborn rang Gulliver on Saturday morning, but Madeleine was spending a weekend in Frankfurt with her old university friends and so it was pointless to tell her until she returned to Cardiff.

On the Sunday, Sandra and Osborn walked over to see Caroline and Leonard to tell them the news, with a certain amount of trepidation. It almost felt as if death was in the air, as Leonard sat in his chair and took in the news stoically, saying he'd better hang on for a while. Caroline told them that she had someone else's funeral to go to the following week and that their next-door neighbour had just gone into a hospice.

On Monday morning, Osborn rang Madeleine, who was naturally very upset – so much so that she was sent home from *Sewall* the following day and straightaway caught the train home. On Wednesday, Sandra and Madeleine joined Osborn and Lawrence at Sybil's house to start clearing up the house. They started in the kitchen, spending the whole day going through cupboards full of crockery, cutlery, pots, pans, utensils, containers and a great deal of food that Sybil shouldn't have been eating anyway.

"Maybe she bought it for Kirsty and Karla staying there at Christmas," suggested Madeleine, as she sifted through a drawer full of corks, stoppers, elastic bands, holey tea towels, serviettes, old keys, matches and a container of old swizzle sticks.

"She used to buy clotted cream for when I visited, but I don't even like the stuff," replied Lawrence, as he sorted through a huge pile of crockery, taking out anything that was chipped or cracked, "so I know she used to eat it herself."

"When Sandra and I cleaned the fridge a couple of weeks ago, we found all sorts of sugary things that were definitely no-go for a diabetic," said Osborn, opening the door of the cupboard above the sink. "Bloody hell, look at all these drugs! I think half of them used to be Dad's, she must have just kept them."

"We should get a good price for them on the street," said Lawrence, before he looked thoughtful. "I think that's the first time I've joked about anything, since..."

"She didn't suffer, did she?" asked Madeleine in a rush. "She always tried to be kind to me, even though she said weird things sometimes."

"No, she literally slipped away very peacefully at the end," said Lawrence consolingly. "What the...?" He held up a lethal looking implement that he'd retrieved from the back of a dusty cupboard that seemed to have several years' worth of cobwebs attached to it.

"I have no idea what it is," considered Osborn thoughtfully, "but it looks dangerous. I'll take it to the tip. We'll have to clean out all these cupboards, I don't think they've been cleaned since Mum and Dad moved in."

"I cleaned all the worktops when we were here last time," said Sandra, wrinkling her nose as she sniffed the inside of a tin. "I hate to say it, but I don't think Kirsty and Karla did much to help when they were here."

"You're dead right," answered Lawrence, glowering slightly from underneath his eyebrows as he looked up from a large, dubiously-patterned casserole dish. "When I was here with them over Christmas, it was me helping Mum, while Kirsty kept wandering out to the car to have a quick smoke and Karla sat on the sofa with her head in a puzzle book."

"You'll have to sort all this stuff out with Kirsty," said Sandra. "There's so much of it everywhere, not just in the kitchen. It's going to take loads of work. Will Kirsty help?"

"You *are* joking, aren't you?" answered Lawrence darkly, despite his greying hair. "I'd rather she didn't help, to be honest, I'd rather do it all myself."

"We'll have to be fair about everything," replied Osborn. "It's only fair. God, I'm shattered, shall we stop for lunch? Does anybody want to risk cooking those *Peanut and Parsnip Party Pasties* we found in the freezer?"

The next day, Madeleine accompanied Sandra on her normal Tuesday visit to see Caroline and Leonard. The atmosphere was subdued, although Caroline was clearly doing her best to retain some semblance of normality. Leonard was sitting in his chair, but his straight grey hair was a little unkempt and his rheumy grey eyes looked out on the world as if from a growing distance.

He did his best to welcome Madeleine, however, who flew to his side as soon as he started to speak to her. She knelt on the floor beside him, while they enjoyed a small private conversation together. Madeleine was holding Leonard's hand as he asked her about her job, her life in Cardiff and even her new counselling course.

As Sandra sat on the sofa opposite and watched them together, she began to feel overwhelmingly sad. 'This is probably the last time Madeleine will see her grandad alive,' she thought suddenly and clearly. 'She's saying goodbye to him in her own warm and lovely way.'

It was the final day of January and the day of Sybil's funeral. Gulliver had arrived from Fleet the evening before and as the funeral wasn't until mid-afternoon, the four of them decided to go out for a short drive to have lunch at *The Scary Skewer* on the coast. It seemed odd, but somehow right to be making the most of a rare day together.

During lunch, Gulliver told them that he and Bryony had arrived at a couple of decisions. In March, he was going to resign from *Bangia* and follow his life's yearning to be a freelance photographer, while Bryony would continue her chosen career as a dendroclimatologist. It was a difficult word to say. They would definitely be married later that year, in November. In view of recent events, their news felt very positive.

After lunch, they all walked along the cold, breezy beach, sometimes walking on sand and sometimes having to pick their way over pebbles and larger deposits of rock, taking care not to slip on seaweed or fall into a rock pool. It was during this walk, as the time of the funeral drew closer, that Osborn appeared to start picking on Sandra, thus betraying his outward pretence of calm by showing his underlying agitation.

"Are you OK?" asked Madeleine, as she and Sandra dropped back to let Osborn and Gulliver go ahead over a particularly large, wet, slippery rock.

"If you mean Dad being shitty to me, no I'm not," replied Sandra frankly. "I'm making allowances because it's the day of his mother's funeral, but it still doesn't make it right for him to say what he sodding well thinks he can say to me as if I'm not a thinking, feeling human being. I'm at the edge as it is trying to cope with my parents, for heaven's sake, but he gives me no freeway for that."

"Freeway?"

"I meant leeway."

"I suddenly realised back there as we were walking along that he was being quite mean to you," continued Madeleine, frowning as she pulled away some strands of hair that a gust of wind had blown across her face. "He was putting you down. I recognised it because people have talked to me like that in the past."

"It's not OK, is it, darling."

"No, it's not. I love you both exactly the same – well, sort of differently, but exactly the same. I would never choose between you both, but I just wanted to let you know that I understand."

"Thank you!" Sandra reached out and hugged Madeleine, partly so that Madeleine wouldn't see the hot tears that were suddenly cascading down Sandra's cold face.

"Hey, you two!" yelled Osborn, turning around to look back at them. "You're holding us up, you're too slow!"

"Isn't it time to start heading back?" shouted Sandra, disengaging from Madeleine and pointing at her watch.

"Why didn't you say?" shouted Osborn crossly. "You should have let me know!"

"Are you crying, Mumsie?" asked Madeleine, as they turned around and started to walk back, while Osborn and Gulliver caught them up from behind.

"I'm fine, angel of my heart," replied Sandra, wiping away tears from her cheeks as Madeleine slipped her arm companionably and most comfortingly through Sandra's.

The crematorium was almost empty, after the family had followed Sybil's bamboo coffin inside. Sandra felt a strong sense of *déjà vu*, although nobody seemed to notice. She felt sorry for the fact that hardly anyone was there to say goodbye to Sybil. This time even Leonard was unable to be there and Kirsty didn't go up to the front to say anything.

The hymns were dirges and the whole experience was sombre and depressing. Therefore, it was a complete culture shock when the meagre congregation rose to leave the building to the strains of Elvis Presley's *Heartbreak Motel*, which Kirsty later informed them had been Sybil's favourite song.

However, there was one thought superseding all others in Sandra's mind. It was the fact that the next funeral she attended was almost certainly going to be her father's.

## CHAPTER 12

The first half of February felt like a cold place in which Sandra failed to find any warmth. Saying goodbye to Gulliver and Madeleine after Sybil's funeral had been such a sad experience, as if from that moment Sandra had started to mourn for the impending loss of her father. Every visit to him seemed to confirm that he was slowly disappearing from the world as he knew it. He was consistently cold and began to stay in bed most of the time. A dietician visited and left cartons of liquid food supplements, which Leonard disliked from the start.

One day Caroline had an assessment visit from Social Services to determine whether she was entitled to a carer's allowance. She seemed very put out about this, relating it to Sandra with extreme distaste. However, there was nothing Sandra could do except listen as sympathetically as she could.

Belinda visited, as well as a few other family members, which Sandra also found a sad process, knowing they'd come to see Leonard for the last time. She was haunted by a memory of her father sitting up in bed with mussed hair, while Caroline remonstrated with him that he hadn't combed it. Leonard looked at Sandra with exhausted eyes, as Caroline went to get his comb and proceeded to tidy his hair. It was then Sandra knew for sure that her father was never going to recover miraculously.

Osborn was locked inside his own stress-filled world of work and dealing with his mother's affairs. Sandra went to his mother's house with him a few times to help clear things out and clean everywhere. She had never seen so many possessions in her whole life, including the glass cabinet that seemed to hold all the knickknacks that anyone had ever given Sybil and Basil in their entire lifetime. However, she was feeling very much alone and wishing Osborn would join her on this particular part of her own life journey, in spirit at least, as her father became weaker and frailer before her eyes.

One evening, she felt so incensed with Osborn when he wouldn't stop ranting about some papers of his that he was convinced she'd secreted away somewhere unknown, that she found herself yelling at him to shut up, before walking away and slamming the door. She knew she must be very stressed herself and turned on the radio to calm down.

She became transfixed by a beautiful song, the words of which seemed to describe both what her father must be feeling and also what she was feeling herself. When the lyrics described someone who would soon be gone, fading into beautiful light, tears rolled unheeded down her face. She felt unbearably sorrowful, but also strangely uplifted and comforted, so listened avidly for the song's details after it had finished. She then straightaway turned on the computer and ordered the CD from *Nile*, a most useful website she'd recently discovered. The song was *Everyone's Changing* by a group called Eager and she couldn't wait to hear it again.

The following day was a sunny but very cold Tuesday and she walked over to her parents' house at 11:00 as usual. She found Caroline visibly distressed and waiting for a doctor to visit Leonard, whose back was causing him great pain. The doctor soon arrived and after examining Leonard, told them he would arrange for Leonard to spend some time in St Benedict, the local cottage hospital.

About half an hour later, an ambulance arrived and Sandra stood forlornly in the kitchen doorway as her father was taken away on a stretcher. What really wrenched her heart was when, as he was carried out of the front door, Leonard raised his arm weakly from the stretcher and said, "Goodbye house."

That afternoon, Sandra and Caroline visited him in St Benedict, where he was comfortable in a small, four-bed ward, but looking rather lost. However, the Sister who came along to write down Leonard's details was competently kind and the hospital itself felt quite caring and cosy, so there was nothing to do except make the best of it and pretend that everything was going to be all right.

Sandra walked home from the hospital feeling that life had moved on inexorably into uncharted waters, where she was uncertain she could actually keep afloat. However, she tried to count her blessings, realising that Leonard being in hospital was probably a relief to Caroline. It was also a godsend (or in this case a doctorsend, since the doctor had arranged it) that St Benedict was only a 15- to 20-minute walk away.

Ten days passed, in which survival felt like the most that could be hoped for. One afternoon, when Sandra and Caroline were visiting Leonard and late winter sunshine was streaming into the ward, Sandra cut her father's fingernails. Nobody else seemed inclined to do so and it was such a small ministration. Sandra knew Leonard's back had been itching a great deal and she was afraid he would try to scratch his back with his rather long nails and make it bleed.

As she carried out this small act of service, the three of them joked a little, but Sandra's feelings were strange and mixed. She was afraid she would hurt him with the nail clippers – he seemed so helpless and it was as if a final role reversal had taken place. When she'd finished, Leonard appeared grateful and thanked her weakly, but it struck Sandra that her father was now merely a shadow of the man she had known all her life.

Some days, when one of the nurses had managed to sit him in the chair by his bedside, he looked uncertain and afraid, as if he might fall over. Sandra found it painful to look at his wrists and forearms that were mainly skin and bone. One day, Leonard said he couldn't wait to go home, which caused Sandra to ponder interminably whether he meant home to his physical house, or Home with a capital H.

He continued to deteriorate in hospital, although he tried to please the nurses by eating a mouthful or two. The doctor told Caroline how Leonard always liked a joke, which somehow meant a lot to Sandra. It was clear that the medical staff liked Leonard and Sandra felt he was in a good place to die, where he was really cared for as a person. However, it was still very difficult to visit him and walk away, knowing he would only ever become physically worse.

At the end of February, Gulliver came home for the weekend and although he confessed to hating hospitals, he wanted to visit Leonard for the last time. Sandra walked into the hospital with Osborn, Gulliver and Caroline, hoping for the sake of her son that Leonard was having a reasonable day.

He was and he wasn't. He was in bed, but greeted Gulliver as warmly as he could and spent a lot of energy asking questions and listening to Gulliver's plans for the future. This included Gulliver's momentous decision to quit work at *Bangia* and set himself up as a freelance photographer when he moved in with Bryony at Swansea in mid-March.

As only two people were supposed to visit a patient at a time, they took turns to wait outside the ward. Sandra was outside with Gulliver when a nurse started to chat to them about how Leonard was reluctant to have a bath and seemed uninterested in getting dressed each day. The nurse said somewhat unfeelingly that she didn't know why this was the case.

"He's got heart failure!" exclaimed Sandra without thinking, as if completely at a loss why the nurse didn't understand that her father was dying. It was a poignantly uncomfortable scenario and Sandra's own words echoed inside her head for days.

Meanwhile, Caroline came out of the ward, saying that Leonard wanted to speak with Osborn privately. After a while, Osborn went to find the kind Sister and the two of them went back to stand by Leonard's bed, talking earnestly. Then Osborn summoned Sandra to Leonard's bedside, where the kind Sister explained that she needed a witness to what Leonard had asked via Osborn, that he no longer wanted to take any drugs that might prolong his life.

He hadn't wanted to let on to Caroline or Sandra that he knew he was dying, but now Sandra had to know. She felt as if her emotional heart was being opened up for investigative surgery, but verified to the kind Sister that Osborn was indeed stating her father's wishes, before trying to smile at her father reassuringly. Spoken words had never been a strong point between them and now they were relying on unspoken communication again.

Leonard was clearly very tired indeed, so they all said goodbye and turned to leave the ward. Sandra was both sorry to leave him and glad that another painful visit was over.

"Good luck for March, Gulliver," came Leonard's laboured voice, as Sandra turned around to see her father with great deliberation giving a thumbs-up sign to her son.

At the beginning of March, Osborn took the day off work to deal with some probate business for his mother's estate. He then went for lunch with Sandra and Caroline to the local pub, *The King's Buttock*, before their afternoon visit to Leonard. The pub was situated next to the parish church and as they finished their toasted sandwiches with various fillings, Sandra made an attempt to chat normally.

"How are your various fillings?" she asked conversationally. "I'm finding them a bit of a mish mash – mix match – mishmash – oh, whatever it is I mean. Fancy putting all of these ingredients in a sandwich together."

"I wonder if we could hold the get-together after Leonard's funeral here," said Caroline, voicing what they'd all been thinking.

"I'll go and ask the barman," replied Osborn immediately. Sandra sat there, feeling both relieved and slightly guilty that they were trying to sort out the after-funeral arrangements before Leonard had actually died.

Two days later when Sandra and Caroline arrived at the hospital, they found that Leonard had been transferred to a large, airy, single room on the first floor, rumoured to be the room with the finest view. It did indeed have a good view, overlooking part of the town that gradually meandered down to the river. The walls were painted sky-blue, his

favourite colour, but Sandra wondered if he even noticed the view, or the colour of the walls. He seemed more distant than ever before and she had the distinct feeling that he was quickly fading away before their eyes. He was becoming skin and bone and looking incredibly old.

Sandra and Caroline couldn't help feeling that Leonard had been moved to that room to pass away without disturbing the other patients. Sandra felt sad the whole time she sat by Leonard's bed, alternately looking at him and gazing out of the window, knowing they were in the room in which her father would die. All throughout his illness, Sandra had been asking for healing energy (in the all-encompassing sense of soul healing) for Leonard, but that afternoon she felt it needed to be stepped up.

Another week passed painfully slowly. Sandra listened to *Everyone's Changing* by Eager a great deal, often with tears silently flowing down her face and always alone. When Leonard had first been admitted to hospital, she'd missed Osborn intensely, wishing he could be far more present with her and far more communicative. She tried to tell him how she was feeling several times, but something inside her had changed when one afternoon she came home from the hospital and opened the front door to a tirade of complaints from Osborn about the car having gone wrong.

'I've just been with my dying father and all you can think about is your sodding car!' she fumed silently, disappointed to the core of her being. 'I asked how your mum and dad were *every time* you used to come home from visiting them, because I was concerned about *you*, but are you concerned about *me*? You give me *no* indication that you are! Well, sod it, I don't need you. I can do this on my own and I shall sodding well end up stronger because of it!' She had then gone into the back room and listened to *Everyone's Changing*, several times, one after the other.

During the weekend that followed, Sandra went to Sybil's house with Osborn, in an effort to finish clearing it. However, there was far too much to see to and in the end, Sandra worked in the back garden while Osborn finished cleaning the kitchen. She could hardly believe that Kirsty and Lawrence were getting on with their lives, while she found herself in the position of feeling more or less duty-bound to help Osborn deal with the dirt. She chose to work in the garden because she felt it would be far more therapeutic – until she found a filthy plastic container of Kirsty's old cigarette ends, swimming toxically around in rain water.

The middle of March approached and Leonard looked worse every time Sandra saw him. His breathing became more laboured and he was given oxygen. Sandra cut his fingernails for him once more, but he was like a limp doll. They didn't speak and it was as if he hardly knew what was going on. A couple of days later, he was noticeably sleepier. After asking a nurse, Caroline found out that he'd been having morphine for pain relief.

He was visibly shrinking, conspicuously in the face. One afternoon, Caroline was no longer able to bear the sight of him having trouble keeping his dentures in, so she went to find a nurse, who came and kindly spoke to Leonard while attempting to remove the dentures. To their surprise, Leonard objected to this as strongly as he was physically able, so the dentures remained. On the way home that day, Sandra was hardly surprised when Caroline voiced her distress, by saying that for everybody's sake, she wished it would end.

Two days later, Leonard seemed to be hallucinating. He wasn't as sleepy as the previous few days, but seemed agitated, even at times quite excited. At one point, he appeared to become very distressed. He lifted his crossed arms to his head and put them over his eyes, looking as if he wanted to cry, but didn't have the strength. That picture of him seared its way into Sandra's mind and she knew she would never forget it. Caroline said soothing words to him and he quietened down a little.

However, it was an excruciatingly long afternoon. Leonard looked towards the end of his bed several times and on one occasion he pointed and croaked, "Look!" By then, he was hardly able to speak more than a word or two, but he did manage to force out the words, "I've got to tell them..." However, what it was he wanted to tell them (whoever they were) Sandra and Caroline frustratingly never found out, because he was unable to continue speaking. All Sandra wanted was for him to be at peace.

The afternoon dragged on, with Caroline sitting beside him, holding his hand as he dozed and Sandra sitting further away by the end of the bed, surreptitiously sending him healing energy. To Sandra's great surprise, he suddenly opened his eyes and looked straight at her, holding the gaze for at least a full minute. She was unsure whether he was actually seeing her, but she smiled at him anyway, just in case he knew it was her he was gazing at. She began to fancy she heard Native American drumming, almost as if his spirit friends were preparing for his Homecoming – but then she wondered if maybe *she* was hallucinating.

Sandra and Caroline left the hospital that afternoon feeling so sorry for leaving Leonard there in such a distressed and distressing state, but not knowing what else to do. Sandra had half expected to be told that they should stay with him, as he would be dying very soon. However, Caroline seemed to want to go home as normal.

Despite anticipating a phone call from the hospital that night, no phone call came, so Sandra and Caroline walked to the hospital as usual the following afternoon, which was a Friday. When they arrived in Leonard's room, though, he was moaning in pain. It was a rhythmic, relentless sound that Sandra found terrible to hear. At once, Caroline talked soothingly to him and sat down by his bedside with her hand on his arm. She mentioned that he was much warmer than usual.

Sandra took her position near the end of his bed. A nurse (the nice nurse as Caroline called her) came in, went right up to Leonard and said, "Len, you're in pain." She asked him if he would have some morphine, as it later surprisingly transpired that he had refused it that morning. He nodded almost imperceptibly and she gave him some morphine orally, as Sandra and Caroline had seen her do before. She and another nurse then moved him into a more comfortable position, before leaving the room.

He gradually quietened down, but his breathing was sporadically catching in his throat, like someone who has been sobbing for a long time. The sound hurt Sandra's heart, just as the sound of his previous moaning/crying had done. She knew they were sounds that would haunt her for years to come. Silently, she found herself calling upon her father's father, mother, sister and significant others to be there to welcome him Home. It seemed slightly incongruous as she sat there with her living mother, but she felt as if she was necessarily functioning on different levels.

As they sat there, he seemed quietly to drift into sleep. The strange thing was that he had his eyes a little less than half open. Caroline still had her hand on his arm, as she and Sandra talked desultorily about some everyday things. Suddenly, Sandra experienced an uncanny feeling of lightness.

It was as if a burden she had become completely used to because it had been with her for so long, had suddenly lifted, so that she was noticing it only by its absence. As she sat there, it became much more than that – it became a feeling of peace, almost of happiness. She looked out of the window in surprise, wondering why on Earth she was experiencing such a good feeling when her father was dying.

As Sandra and Caroline sat there, talking softly and looking at Leonard, Sandra tried to see either the pulse in his neck, or his chest moving as he breathed. His neck pulse had been very visible the day before, but now the collar of his pyjama top was obscuring the view. It was beginning to cross her mind that he might have stopped breathing, but he seemed so peaceful that she stayed sitting there – for a little while longer and for the last time, just the three of them. She felt she didn't yet want to say anything to Caroline.

As it happened, she had no need to say anything to her, as Caroline gradually realised for herself that he had become very still and quiet. Caroline got up and walked around to the other side of his bed, to see if she could find a neck pulse on that side. She asked Sandra to come and look. There was no movement whatsoever. Leonard still had his eyes half open and he seemed very calm, as if looking at something that was interesting him.

Caroline went to the door, where she saw the nice nurse and said, "I think he might have gone." The nice nurse politely ushered them out of the room and drew the curtains around Leonard's bed. Another nurse came rushing along with a stethoscope. It felt bizarre, standing outside the room, wondering what was happening inside.

The nice nurse came out and quietly said to Caroline and Sandra, "He *has* gone." She seemed a little shocked and upset herself, so Sandra supposed it was never easy to tell people their loved one had died. Caroline immediately started to cry and kept saying, "Poor Len" over and over again.

The nurse showed them to an annex further down the corridor and someone brought them both a cup of tea. Sandra felt she had to be there for Caroline, although she was aware of a feeling of great inner calmness that seemed to be out of keeping in the circumstances. It was as if a necessary strength had come from somewhere.

After five minutes or so, they were shown into Leonard's room once again. He was lying flat on his back, with his arms across his chest and his eyes closed. What was surprising was that his mouth was open, forming an o shape. Caroline seemed a little upset by that and cried again, with the same words, "Poor Len!"

Sandra was struck at her mother's compassion, as her initial feelings were obviously for Leonard and not for herself. She hugged her mother and comforted her, aware that she was experiencing one of the strangest few moments in her life, standing there hugging her crying mother, with her newly dead father alongside her.

The hospital Sister came in and talked with them both. She said Leonard had been a lovely man and had never been any trouble. She told them the next step would be for them to ring the funeral director when they arrived home. It became apparent that Caroline wanted to leave as soon as possible and so they simply said goodbye, left the hospital and walked home.

They walked back to Caroline's house in a daze, each quietly trying to come to terms with Leonard's death. Sandra thought she would always remember the view from the hospital window. She knew her father was at peace, that he was absolutely fine. She could trace it back for certain to the strange happy feeling she'd experienced at his bedside. It felt as if Leonard had given her the briefest touch as he'd left his body – a touch of love that would give her all the strength she would need to survive the next few weeks. She wasn't overcome with grief, because she felt there was no way she possibly could be, when he had suffered so much and had been essentially trapped in his body. She felt truly glad for him, knowing that he had found freedom and peace.

## CHAPTER 13

As soon as they reached Caroline's home, Sandra fell back on the age-old tradition of making tea, for Caroline and herself. She had sent a text message to Osborn before they'd left the hospital and when he arrived at the house, she made him some tea also. As she was pouring it, she experienced a brief moment of wishing Osborn had insisted on making *her* some tea – but she already had a mug, so that would have been silly.

Osborn did ring the funeral director for them, though, which was a great help. They then took it in turns to ring people with the news of Leonard's death, which was exhausting. Caroline sat in her chair, still looking rather dazed, but rousing herself every now and again when things came into her head, to mention something that would need to be done.

Sandra decided to stay with Caroline that night, although she didn't relish the thought of sleeping in the bed that she'd last seen her father sitting up in with mussed hair, as he looked out with exhausted eyes at the world he would soon be leaving. She went into the bedroom to accustom herself to being in there and also to allay her slight forebodings.

It was fine. She breathed a sigh of relief, looking out of the window at the setting sun. She suddenly realised it was the last time the sun would set on a day when her father had been alive and a beautiful sadness welled up inside her. Her heart was full of love as she simply said, "Bless you, Dad."

The following days were unsurprisingly difficult. Sandra stayed with her mother for two nights, although she was longing to be home, so that she could deal with her own grief. She experienced small but precious pockets of time in which she was communicating with her father in her head, but mostly she had to deal with external situations.

Osborn had gone into work on the Monday, requesting compassionate leave that Bill Bustard refused. However, Osborn knew he was entitled and simply told Bill Bustard that he was taking the leave anyway and Bill could take it up with the personnel department if he so desired.

He was then home for the rest of the week, as they made necessary visits to the funeral director, the registrar, the bank, the florist, *The King's Buttock*, Plymouth to buy clothes for the funeral and in Osborn's case, the dentist for a root canal filling. They also had to endure a home visit from the local rector, who would be conducting the funeral service.

Sandra felt dismayed when Caroline expressed a wish to view Leonard's body, as she knew that Caroline would want Sandra and Osborn to accompany her. As the time of the appointment drew closer, Sandra felt most strongly that for her it was like going backwards, as Leonard had already gone forward into freedom and happiness. However, she understood that it was something Caroline needed to do to say goodbye and so she went along.

She stood near the door of the room in which her father's open coffin lay, unable to go in any further. Leonard looked very old and tired, dressed in his *Marks and Spender* suit with his favourite blue tie. Osborn went further into the room and after a few moments, Caroline went up to the coffin, put her hand on Leonard and said, "Goodbye, love."

It was over in a few minutes, but Sandra felt undeniably upset at seeing her father's body in his coffin. However, every time she found herself reliving the sight, she could immediately hear Leonard's kind voice in her head, saying very calmly but resolutely, "I wasn't there." Sandra knew he hadn't been there, but she still found it incredibly comforting to be aware of those words.

The funeral had been arranged for right after Easter, so Madeleine came home on Good Friday. Gulliver, however, was preparing to make his big life-change, from being an employee of a leading international company to being a self-employed professional photographer, as well as moving from his own flat in Fleet to sharing a flat with Bryony in Swansea.

It was a quiet Easter, but it felt good to see Madeleine and hear all about her life, as Sandra had felt rather out of touch with her since Leonard had been in hospital. In fact, although Sandra was glad Madeleine was taking the loss of her third grandparent within just over twelve months very well, a small part of her couldn't help wondering why Madeleine had seemed more upset at the loss of Osborn's parents. She decided Madeleine was either becoming accustomed to grandparents dying, or she'd always felt everything was fine between her and Leonard.

They decided to make what was becoming an annual pilgrimage to *Barbados Inn* on Bodmin Moor. Lawrence joined them and they also asked Caroline along, although she confessed to being extremely tired and not feeling particularly well. However, it felt good to be out in the general world that was populated with people enjoying themselves, rather than being amid the business of burying one's dead – except that Leonard was to be cremated.

After the long Easter weekend was over, the forthcoming funeral was naturally uppermost in Sandra's mind, as she helped Caroline with lots of necessary small jobs, including seeing to the funeral service sheets. She also spent quite a bit of time working in Caroline's garden, as well as her own. Osborn, on the other hand, went to stay with Gulliver for four days and three nights, while he helped Gulliver to move from Fleet to Swansea.

It felt like a surreal time, still dealing with the aftermath of death in what was turning into a beautiful spring, but Sandra was pleased at how well she was coping. She was convinced that it was because of the blessing of love that Leonard had bestowed on her as he had left his body.

For as long as she could remember, she had always dreaded the thought of going to either of her parent's funerals, which felt like her ultimate anxious situation. However, as the day of Leonard's funeral dawned, she still felt completely connected with the feeling of underlying love from her father that seemed to be carrying her along.

The funeral service was held in the early afternoon and although it seemed sad that the family were all together for a funeral, it was still good to be with them, as the immediate family gathered at Caroline's house. Sandra felt a jolt when she saw the hearse arriving with her father's coffin, but she knew it was only his body and for the last time she was aware of her father reminding her that he wasn't there.

The service went smoothly, although for some reason she found herself next to Leonard's coffin, rather than Caroline. There was a strange moment when the rector, who was in love with the sound of his own voice, started the address by loudly saying her name at the beginning of his first sentence. She almost jumped physically and then found herself smiling at the thought that if she'd been mega-nervous, she might have jumped in the direction of Leonard's coffin and ended up sprawling all over it.

They were soon filing out of the church into the sunny spring afternoon, with daffodils brightly gracing the edges of the churchyard. As Sandra walked back to the hearse with her immediate family for the journey to the crematorium, she looked at her father's coffin with the bouquet of red roses from her mother on the top, along with four differently-coloured single roses from herself, Osborn, Gulliver and Madeleine.

Suddenly the words of a poem by Richard Middleton came into her head: "Man proposes, God in his time disposes, And so I wander'd up to where you lay, A little rose among the little roses, And no more dead than they." She felt sure that her beloved dad was no more dead than she was and that he never would be.

A month or so passed, in which Sandra began to feel almost normal in her normal non-normal way. It was sadly strange to visit Caroline without seeing Leonard in his chair, but the two of them set about clearing a lot of things in the house and particularly the garage, which had accrued 30 years' worth of Leonard's strange bits and pieces, including several demijohns from his winemaking period and a host of defunct tools.

Things had rusted, gone mouldy, warped and become covered in a thick layer of old dusty cobwebs, so it was a therapeutic process to create space and clean the floor and walls. Sandra found that dealing with the large, live spiders was her job, however, as Caroline said Leonard had always dealt with them for her.

It was good to catch up with Gina and Alison again, although they hadn't run away. It was true that Alison had spent two weeks in Canada with her daughter Helen and son-in-law Mark, but Sandra was sad to learn that Gina had been helping to look after Andy's mother, who was dying of ovarian cancer. Gina and Sandra talked about the possibility of another get-together with Emily, Delia and Kay, but decided to leave it until Andy's mother had passed away.

The beginning of May was somewhat cold, but Sandra was looking forward to a visit from both Gulliver and Madeleine. Caroline had requested they all go to scatter Leonard's ashes at the Bronze Age stone circles on Bodmin Moor, which they'd visited with Leonard the previous year, followed by lunch afterwards in the nearby pub (one of Leonard's favourites). Caroline had also asked Lawrence to join them, as she thought he would like being included as one of the family, seeing he had recently lost his parents.

Therefore, on what would have been Leonard's 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday, they arrived in two cars at The Flingers' car park and started to walk up the slight incline, along the peaty, stony path to the stone circles. Sandra was carrying Leonard's ashes in a plastic container in a tasteful and quite strong small carrier bag from the funeral director, as they were too heavy for Caroline and presumably nobody else wanted to interfere.

Sandra was ambivalent about the ashes. Although she was proud to be carrying her father's physical remains to their final resting place, she had felt uneasy having Leonard's ashes in the house after they'd collected them the previous afternoon. It seemed ridiculously macabre and she couldn't get over the fact that they were what was left of her father's body. She was annoyed with herself for being pathetic, but she was nevertheless happy at the thought of scattering them.

They noticed a couple walking away from the stone circles as they approached and when they were walking around to choose Leonard's special stone, they saw tell-tale evidence that some ashes had recently been scattered. This was a relief, as they were uncertain if it was illegal to scatter ashes without permission.

Sandra gratefully passed over the container to Caroline, who passed it back to Osborn because she couldn't open it. Osborn managed to open it and passed it back to Caroline. It was grittier than Sandra had imagined, but even so, the wind tried to blow some of it away. The container of ashes was passed around for everyone to take a turn, but there was more than they had all bargained for and it was passed back to Caroline to scatter the last of it. There was so much of it around Leonard's stone that Caroline walked into the centre of the circle, scattering away until Leonard's mortal remains had finally been dispersed.

Before they left, Sandra quietly laid a small stone and a flower from Caroline and Leonard's garden at the base of his borrowed stone, still suffused with a warm feeling that all was well with him. As she rested her hand upon his memorial stone for a few moments while the others started to walk away, she smiled at the knowledge that she had been carried along through one of the most difficult times of her life by the strength of her father's love, that special fleeting touch he had given her as he'd departed. She walked away from his stone knowing that love overcomes fear and that in the end, when all else has faded away, it is love that remains in all its purity.

Lunch at *The Square Cheese Hotel* was a noisy but happy affair, as the six of them sat around a rather small table in the middle of a roomful of people. The food was excellent, which was probably why the pub was packed. They soon warmed up after their cold but successful mission at The Flingers and drove back to Sandra and Osborn's house afterwards feeling a sense of completion.

"I think they call it closure," remarked Osborn, as he shuffled the *Dos* cards in preparation to play.

"But it seemed so popular today," remarked Caroline, putting on her glasses. "Maybe it's because it's on the moor."

"What?" Osborn looked up at Caroline with genuine astonishment.

"The pub's not closing, Mum," clarified Sandra, looking up from the score sheet she was preparing. "Osborn meant that scattering Dad's ashes was a sort of final act and now we can all move on."

"It might be easy for you to move on because you're young," sniffed Caroline, "but it's not easy for me."

"Have I played *Dos* before?" asked Lawrence, scrutinising the cards that Osborn had dealt him.

"Probably not," replied Gulliver, putting down his mobile phone. "It's a new game that Bryony and I bought. It's a step up from *Ono*, really."

"I was thinking of using steps for exercising," commented Madeleine, as she played the first card. "Or else maybe I'll take up running."

"I'm impressed," replied Gulliver, "but I'll get over it."

"You're weird," said Lawrence, grinning for two seconds. "Gadzooks, a Plus Four, Caroline? Already?"

"Sorry dear, I had no choice," said Caroline. "Red."

"What colour is it again?" asked Osborn, after Madeleine, Gulliver and Sandra had picked from the pack.

"Red," replied five voices simultaneously, which was quite a feat.

"I haven't got a red," said Osborn glumly. "This is a frustrating game. Gulliver, did you mention you were going out for sunset this evening?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure exactly where," replied Gulliver. "Probably somewhere on Dartmoor, though."

"Not Kit Hill then," said Osborn, grinning suddenly before addressing the table in general. Luckily the people sitting around it were in earshot. "Gulliver and I went to Kit Hill for sunset last night because we wanted to improve the photos we'd taken one winter of that old mine chimney, but neither of us realised that that the sun would be setting in a different place in May. It was disappointing, I could tell Gulliver was shaken."

"Shaken?" repeated Madeleine, before lapsing into a fit of helpless giggling.

"Are you sure he wasn't stirred?" spluttered Sandra, having immediately caught Madeleine's hysteria.

"It just sounded so funny!" gasped Madeleine. "You were so serious!"

"I can't imagine Gulliver being shaken by anything," laughed Sandra, trying to catch her breath properly, "let alone where the sun was setting..."

"Oh rats," responded Osborn. "Blue."

"I haven't *got* a blue," said Caroline pseudo-petulantly. "I'm sorry, Lawrence, I'm being forced to play this."

"Not again, it's infamy!" exclaimed Lawrence. "Infamy, infamy, they've all got it in for me!"

"How are the wedding plans, Gulliver?" asked Caroline, looking across the table at her grandson.

"We've got a meeting with the Shanghai Fleet Club next week," replied Gulliver. "Bryony's a bit annoyed because her mother's interfering too much, but her parents *are* paying for the reception."

"It's difficult in that case," agreed Sandra, "although if it was me paying for the reception, I would see it as a gift and in that case, I would let Bryony call the shots."

"We've changed direction, Mother," interjected Gulliver.

"What? You're not calling it off, are you?" asked Sandra, shocked.

"No, the game," giggled Madeleine, still humorously afflicted.

"Pay attention, Sandra," scolded Caroline. "What, me again? Oh dear. You're never going to believe this, Lawrence..."

"I do believe it," groaned Lawrence, as Caroline played her third Plus Four. "You're a very wicked woman Caroline, I'm going to rename you the Phantom Four Player." He looked askance at the ensuing snorts, guffaws and sniggers as the light eventually dawned. "No! I didn't mean it like that!"

It was the evening of the same day. Sandra and Madeleine were sitting on one of the big rocks at Hinge Tor, Dartmoor, while Osborn and Gulliver stood in front of their cameras set on tripods, taking numerous photos as the sun began to set.

Madeleine's mobile phone rang and she wandered off to answer it. Sandra could tell from the way Madeleine was speaking that it was her boyfriend Jay, the one whose ex-girlfriend was still failing to believe that she was his ex.

As much as Sandra wanted to believe Madeleine when she assured Sandra that Jay had truly moved on and had definitely made a commitment to her, Sandra was now almost fully convinced that he was using Madeleine. She knew she couldn't interfere and hadn't had the energy over the last two months to say anything anyway, but she wished with all her heart that Madeleine would find a partner who would treat her with the love and respect she so deserved.

"It was Jay," confirmed Madeleine, as she put her phone in her pocket and returned to the rock beside Sandra. "He was only at the cinema with his ex! He rang me from the toilet so she wouldn't know. He says his ex just wants to stay good friends, but I'm beginning to have my doubts, Mumsie."

"Good," said Sandra before she could stop herself. "Goodness me, Maddy, I can't help thinking you deserve someone who isn't carrying around any excess baggage like Jay obviously is?" She turned to look at Madeleine in the gradually fading light.

"Yes, I know. I'll deal with it when I get back, I promise. Today's been good, though, hasn't it? I do miss being at home so much and I really miss you and Varti." Madeleine laughed and looked across at where Osborn and Gulliver were still bonding with their equipment. "Look at them, they're oblivious."

"I know. I'm getting quite cold just sitting here waiting for them. Shall we go back down to the car?"

"Yes, I think I can remember where it is."

"I'll ask Gulliver for his key."

A few minutes later, Sandra and Madeleine were walking quickly down the tor, taking care not to trip over rocks or tussocks, or fall into holes or peat gullies.

"Gulliver said he had cereal bars in the car that we could eat if we were hungry," said Madeleine. "He apparently keeps emergency food on hand. He really loves walking in wild places, doesn't he? Are we going in the right direction?"

"I think so. Yes, he's spent a fortune on getting all the right gear, but why not if he loves doing it, which he does."

"Absolutely! He certainly loves buying new things too, I realised that when he and Bryony took me shopping with them one day. It was very good of them. Have you seen the size of Gulliver's boot?"

"Oops, nearly tripped! What? His boot? Well, he takes a size 9, I think, like my dad did. What have I said?" Sandra looked at Madeleine with amused bewilderment, as Madeleine started to laugh helplessly.

"I meant – have you seen the size of his – car boot!" gasped Madeleine, as they carried on striding downhill in the near-dark. "When they took me shopping, I could hardly believe all the stuff that they managed to pack into his *car* boot!"

"Ah!" responded Sandra, before she too, was overcome with hilarity. They careered down the tor haphazardly, almost drunk with laughter, which made them laugh even more.

"Not far now," said Madeleine after a few minutes, beginning to calm down at last.

"This has been so lovely," said Sandra, wiping her eyes. "So simple and so lovely. It's wonderful to laugh again and it's wonderful that it's with you – thank you, Maddy."

"Thank you too, Mumsie," replied Madeleine politely, stopping suddenly to scan the near vicinity. "Mumsie? Where *is* the freaking car?"

As she lay in bed that night beside a peacefully sleeping Osborn, Sandra reflected on the day's events. 'It was such a happy day, even though we scattered Dad's ashes,' she thought, smiling gently to herself. 'I'm glad we did it on Dad's birthday. I'm sure he would have enjoyed every minute if he'd been with us – and it may be fanciful, but it *did* feel as if he was with us. I do love you, Dad.' She smiled beneficently into the night.

'Everyone seemed OK today, even Mum and Osborn. Mum was slightly off once, but she was mostly fine. It *must* be difficult for her. It was such a relief that Osborn was quite relaxed, because he's been so volatile lately. Gulliver was happy too, although his life is changing radically. I hope he and Bryony sort it out with Bryony's parents. Just imagine, in six months time, Osborn and I will be going to our son's wedding!' She smiled broadly at the thought.

'I really must try to lose some weight. I think Maddy's still struggling with herself, even though she's coping quite well. I know the signs, like when she mentioned taking up running. I wish she'd move on from that two-timing git Jay. Still, she really enjoyed herself today, we both laughed such a lot. What was it? Gulliver was shaken – the Phantom Four Player – and had I seen the size of Gulliver's boot?' Sandra snorted into the night, as she relived the day's amusement.

'Oh dear, I really must go to sleep. I'm just so thankful for today and the fact that it feels at last as though we can start to live our lives again.'

## CHAPTER 14

"This is a really good idea," said Bryony's quite small, quite vivacious mother, Anne Stanpool, as she sat around a table at *The Scary Skewer* at Derrydown with Sandra, Osborn, Caroline, Gulliver, Bryony and Bryony's father, Stan. They were sitting in the conservatory, which looked out onto the sea. It was a beautiful view, although Sandra was finding the glass conservatory a little too much on the warm side.

"I wish we'd chosen to sit on the cool side," she muttered to Osborn, as she tried surreptitiously to undo another button on her top.

"Bryony and I thought this was the best way of doing it," said Gulliver, as the food began to arrive, "because you all had to meet properly in the end."

"I don't think I've been to *The End*," said Caroline, sniffing nervously as she gazed at a huge amount of ham on her plate beside a hefty portion of chips.

"*The End*?" asked Anne, with a confused expression crossing her blue eyes. She managed to straighten them before the penny dropped. "Ah, you thought Gulliver was talking about another pub. I must say, this fish looks good."

"I've been to the end and back several times," quipped Bryony's father, Stan, with an inscrutably straight face. It was marginally crooked on the left side, but not noticeably so.

"Oh, I don't know much about pubs," said Caroline, sprinkling salt liberally onto her food. "I don't get out much these days."

"That's why we asked you along today," replied Osborn, gazing at the amount of salt on Caroline's chips. "Too much salt's not good for you, Mum."

"I'm fine," retorted Caroline. "I'm nearly 80 after all! Here comes your scampi, Sandra. You always have scampi, you should try something different."

"I don't always have scampi. Anyway, that's Osborn's *Seafood Splatter*. It was on the Special Board."

"I didn't see what was so special about the board myself," muttered Bryony, as she attacked her *Halibut d'Orange*. "This doesn't look like a very orange halibut to me."

"What about you, Gulliver?" asked Caroline, looking at Gulliver's plate as she still attempted to open a sachet of tomato sauce. "Have you got crabs?"

"Certainly not," replied Gulliver, grinning, as several pairs of eyes looked up in astonishment. "Actually yes, I've got *Elegant Crabmeat Balls*."

"There's no answer to that," said Stan, as he gazed at the approaching bowl piled high with mussels. "Good heavens, this lot will certainly keep me out of mischief."

"I wondered if you'd all like to come back to our place afterwards," offered Anne, "although it would be nice to go for a short walk here first. I've heard there's a good nature trail just over the road."

"I wouldn't like to walk along an angry trail," muttered Bryony, still battling with her halibut.

"I'm not sure I'll even be able to manage the good-natured trail," said Caroline doubtfully, "because you're all younger than I am. Just leave me sitting down on a bench somewhere while you go off, I'll be fine."

"We can't leave you on your own!" exclaimed Anne. "Can you manage a little way with us? It's only so we can have a little stroll after the meal, that's all, then you can have a sit in our conservatory."

"Steady Anne," warned Stan, looking up from his dish. "These mussels are delicious."

"I don't think I've ever had mussels," said Osborn conversationally.

"Oh, I don't know, you're still quite muscular for your age," said Sandra, ignoring Osborn's askance expression.

"Cockles?" enquired Caroline. "Gulliver, why are you sniggering again?"

"I think it went quite well today," said Sandra, as she switched on the television for the start of *Midwinter Murders*. "Anne and Stan have certainly got a lovely conservatory. It doesn't look thirty years old, it's lasted very well. I did notice a little bit of tension between Bryony and her mother, but I'm sure they can sort it out."

"It's good of Bryony's parents to pay for the wedding reception, but what can we give them for a wedding present?" Osborn sank thankfully down onto the sofa.

"We don't have to give Bryony's parents a present. Sorry, there's been too much quipping today." Sandra sank down onto the sofa beside Osborn. "We really need new seating in here. Well, we certainly can't compete with Anne and Stan, but what about giving Gulliver and Bryony money for their honeymoon?"

"Ye-es. The air fair to New Zealand must be quite a lot, we could say it's for that."

"I suppose so. I must say, their honeymoon is completely different to ours. You can't really compare a three weeks' action holiday in New Zealand to a week in the Lake District in a Sprite Alpine caravan."

"It was *our* caravan – I liked it."

"It was our home for five months! Well, that's the first body in Midwinter tonight."

"I'd hate to live there. Sandra, has Gulliver said anything to you about me going to Scotland with him in September for two weeks to take photos?"

"Scotland? Two weeks? Gulliver? You? Just you?" Sandra heard her own voice squeaking in barely disguised hurt and horror.

"I knew you wouldn't like it. He thought it would be a good opportunity before he got married and also for me because of the last couple of years."

"What about me? Doesn't he understand I've had a sodding awful couple of years too? It *is* a good idea for you two, but I'd be left alone to deal with my mother." Sandra felt ridiculously close to tears, but was damned if she was going to cry.

"She's OK now, isn't she? It's all right, though, I won't go if you really don't want me to go."

"That puts me in an awful position! How can I deny you an opportunity like that with your son and your camera? On the other hand, how can I bear being left behind on my own with the responsibility of my mother?"

"I won't go." Osborn put a placatory hand on Sandra's knee. It was his hand, but Sandra felt aggrieved and wished he would take it away. "Look, body number two."

"Gulliver will be so disappointed if you don't go."

"I'm sure he'll understand."

"He wouldn't even have asked you if he understood how my life has been – and still is in some respects. You're free now, but I'm not. I thought life would be easier when Dad died and we could move on again, but Mum's changed in a very short space of time. We've tried to include her in our life by taking her to garden centres and supermarkets, but she told me she finds both types of places boring. When I suggested we went to *The Lusty Ladle* for lunch with Lawrence next week, she said she doesn't like it there."

"Well, we won't ask her to come with us to garden centres and supermarkets and *The Lusty Ladle* then, it's easy."

"It may be for you, but I have to face her at least three times a week and she moans at me. She saves everything up to tell me – just me. I do feel sorry for her, because she's lost Dad, she's on her own and she's nearly 80 and it can't be easy..." Sandra felt she was talking herself around in circles. At least she wasn't trying to talk herself around in rectangles and perish the thought that she would ever try to talk herself around in dodecahedrons.

"Well, I know that you have to feel OK with yourself about looking after her. At the end of the day you have to live with yourself knowing that all things considered, you did your best. At least, I felt like that with my mum."

"Yes, you're right. You weren't on your own, though, you had Lawrence and Kirsty."

"Kirsty complicated everything horribly. Lawrence did help, but with him not being able to drive, it was usually down to me for the emergency stuff. Anyway, you're not alone because you've got *me*." It was Osborn's turn to look aggrieved.

"Yes, I know, but it's a kind of blood thing, I suppose. I'm her only child, her next of kin and the responsibility is all mine. Besides, you've been so remote and on edge lately. I thought you'd be better once your mum's funeral was over." Sandra's voice was wavering dangerously close to tears again.

"I've still got the wretched house to deal with, it's not selling and there have hardly been any viewings. Plus, I have work and Bill Bustard to contend with. Still, we've got Gulliver's wedding to look forward to. Aha! Body number three!"

Sandra and Osborn spent much of the first half of June taking up Caroline's back lawn. This was not entirely selfless, as they both hated cutting grass and knew it was highly likely in the future that Caroline would find it increasingly hard to keep up with cutting both a front and back lawn. Removing her back lawn was hot, hard work, but it felt therapeutic to create something new – in this case, a tranquil garden containing a water-feature and three circular beds, edged with pavements and covered with plum slate.

Since her father's death, her mother had fallen into a mild depression that Sandra considered understandable. She and Osborn did their best to drag her out of her grief-induced melancholy, but it was hard work. However, they discovered that going out to lunch with Lawrence (as long as it wasn't to *The Lusty Ladle*) and then returning to their house to play *Ono*, seemed to work reasonably well for all four of them and they therefore decided to do this once or twice a month.

As well as feeling concerned about her mother, Sandra realised she was also feeling concerned about Osborn, Gulliver and Madeleine. Osborn seemed to be suffering from mood swings, veering between bouts of borderline depression and uncomfortable excitement that often resulted in extreme irritability. Sandra felt she was consistently making excuses for his behaviour, as she was for her mother's behaviour. Half of the time, though, she felt so tired that she allowed a lot of it to go over her head.

Gulliver was experiencing troubles concerned with Bryony and her parents as the November wedding crept closer. At first, he never really said outright what the exact cause of the trouble was, but Sandra noticed small hints written between the lines in his daily emails. She felt she'd become adept over the years at reading between Gulliver's lines, although his face was actually very youthful for his age.

She became really concerned when the small hints turned into larger references and in the end, a long, bewildered, painful essay of an email describing how Bryony had nearly called off the wedding. Thankfully, though, Gulliver had managed to pour oil over troubled waters, although probably not extra-virgin olive oil.

Madeleine on the other hand, was still trying to cope with Jay and his bunny boiler ex-girlfriend. Sandra still hoped Madeleine would see the light and realise that she was worth so much more than being saddled with a boyfriend who still allowed himself to be manipulated by an insecure emotional energy sucker – but not in those words to Madeleine herself, of course.

The other cloud on Madeleine's horizon was that she was having trouble finding different accommodation, as the letting agency had informed the current tenants they must leave the house by the beginning of July. The exact date happened to be Madeleine's birthday. When she and her friend Alana managed to find somewhere else and signed up accordingly, the letting agency later told them they were unable to move in until the beginning of September. It seemed as if a conspiracy of adversity was taking place. Sandra tried to remain calm and helpful whenever Madeleine rang sounding suspiciously depressed about her future, but it was soul-destroying to be unable to help her in any practical way.

It was little surprise, therefore, that Sandra herself went careering into the depths. At least, she had no intention of making a career out of it, but while she was floundering around in a sea of currents that were trying to drag her under, she expended large amounts of energy simply trying to stay emotionally afloat. It therefore didn't help when Osborn noticed a strange swollen place on the side of his face, which Dr Effingham diagnosed as cellulitis.

A week's course of antibiotics and a week off work failed to do the trick. A second visit to Dr Effingham revealed that instead of the cellulitis streptococcus of the previous year, this time it was cellulitis staphylococcus. Unfortunately, because Osborn was still feeling so ill and weak, Sandra and Osborn were forced to cancel their proposed visit to Cardiff and Swansea to visit Madeleine and Gulliver. They thus missed spending both birthdays with their son and daughter respectively, which felt as if salt was being rubbed into an already gaping, persistently aggravated wound.

July arrived and brought with it a severe ear infection for Osborn. Sandra tried to cheer herself up by working in the garden, both at home and at her mother's house, but realised that she was dangerously low. However, a forthcoming visit from Gulliver and Bryony for a few days promised to be uplifting.

Therefore, on one fine day in mid-July, Lawrence joined Sandra and Osborn on a day trip to End Point in Devon with Gulliver and Bryony. They enjoyed lunch at a lovely spot in a pub never visited before, the *Prince's Pimple*, before embarking on a summery, slightly sweaty, but ultimately enjoyable walk around the steep, rocky headland of End Point.

As Gulliver and Bryony went striding up a hill to find a better view and Osborn stood with Lawrence taking photos, Sandra remembered a previous visit to End Point when Gulliver must have been about nine and Madeleine four. Madeleine had astounded Sandra as they'd walked back to the car hand in hand by suddenly announcing, "Back there on the cliff, I wondered why I was alive." Sandra wished she could remember what she'd said in reply to her self-reflective, philosophical little daughter.

As if by some cosmic link, a text from Madeleine arrived on Sandra's mobile phone. Sandra's heart sank as she read it, as Madeleine was clearly experiencing some sort of crisis. She'd been sent home from work because she had basically been falling apart. Sandra wished with all her being that she could fly to Madeleine's side and miraculously help to put her back together again. Instead, she could do nothing except exchange a few text messages with Madeleine and then pretend that everything was OK when everyone converged to carry on walking.

The rest of the day passed pleasantly, although Sandra felt she was existing on two levels, the deeper one being a psychic connection with Madeleine. That evening when Gulliver and Bryony had gone out to see some friends, Madeleine rang and asked if she could come home for a long weekend when Gulliver and Bryony had gone back to Swansea.

The following day, Caroline joined them for a day's visit that included a walk around the Combe Edge country park. Sandra listened to her mother chattering away with Gulliver and Bryony, not having any idea of the turmoil that was flying around in Sandra's head. She looked at her mother walking among the beds of roses in the formal garden and felt a mixture of uncomfortable emotions, including compassion, resentment and a great underlying sadness that over the last decade, or even more, Caroline had systematically ceased to listen to her in a way that Sandra never wanted to cease listening to Madeleine or Gulliver.

However, the day passed well enough on a superficial level and the following day, Gulliver and Bryony left, saying they would next be visiting in August. Sandra had to clean the bedroom quickly and change the bedding for Madeleine's arrival, with a strange premonition that this visit would be momentous.

It was. The following morning, Madeleine sat at the end of Sandra and Osborn's bed and with painful, tearful, soul-wrenching honesty, told her parents about something that distressed Sandra and Osborn more than they would have ever believed possible.

Madeleine had requested confidentiality and was aware of the burden this would place on her parents. She was struggling with self-recrimination, until Sandra and Osborn assured her that it wasn't her fault in the slightest – that *she* had been wronged and had done the right thing to confide in them. The fact that Madeleine obviously trusted them both implicitly was like a beautiful diamond shining among the darkness of her disclosure.

The two days that followed were full of love and difficulty. After talking and crying together, Sandra and Osborn took Madeleine to the railway station to say goodbye, happy that Madeleine had voluntarily said she would find a counsellor. As Sandra watched Madeleine's train pull away, she felt immensely proud of her daughter, who had faced her demons head on by naming and shaming them. She felt what seemed to be a primitive emotion, that she would stand by Madeleine no matter what, to the end of her days on planet Earth.

Two days later, Caroline rang to say she was ill with a stomach bug and Sandra began to wonder wearily if she would ever be free from worrying responsibilities. She spent the greater part of the week popping over to Caroline's house to make sure she was recovering. She bought and took over items Caroline said she might fancy to eat and eventually accompanied Caroline to see a doctor, before collecting a prescription for her mother from the pharmacy.

She also spent a few hours one morning at the Ear, Nose and Throat Department of the hospital in Plymouth, waiting for Osborn to have his ears vacuumed.

The following week, as she tried to come to terms with Madeleine's disclosure and the exhaustion that followed the previous fraught week with her mother, she decided to escape into Plymouth for the day, to walk amongst normal, carefree people (within reason) and pretend that she was one of them.

However, as she walked along, looking apathetically at clothes in *Marks and Spender* that failed to excite her as they normally would, she was overcome with a great feeling of alienation, as if she were a fish that was swimming in an entirely wrong ocean. She curtailed her day out and went home to cry.

As July ended, Sandra felt as if she'd hit the bottom of a huge pit and was lying there dazed, looking up at the sky and wondering what life was all about. When she overheard Osborn on the phone to Gulliver, explaining that he wouldn't be able to go to Scotland with him in September because he couldn't leave Sandra alone at the moment, she felt even worse. It was as if dusk was falling and there was no way that she was currently able to catch it.

## CHAPTER 15

During the first week of August, Sandra was still able to find a certain amount of consolation from working in the garden. This small positive feeling gradually gained the upper hand over the swirling grey negativity that had been engulfing her, until one morning when she visited her old friend Gina, she realised she actually felt like smiling again. Kay was also at Gina's house and even though Emily and Delia had been unable to make it a proper old school friend get-together, the threesome was working well.

"It's good to have this improper old school friend get-together," said Sandra, sipping tea and wondering where Kay had bought her summery top. "I feel a bit guilty enjoying myself here this morning because Osborn's gone to the dentist to have a crown filling, but he told me to come here, even though he's allergic to local anaesthetic."

"Has he tried going further afield?" asked Kay, sipping tea and wondering where Sandra had bought her summery top.

"Ha!" exclaimed Gina, sipping her tea and wondering where Kay and Sandra had bought their awful summery tops. "Actually, our local dentist is going private soon, so we're not sure what to do."

"There's getting to be a real gap in the market for affordable dentists," agreed Sandra.

"I haven't been in the market for years," mused Kay. "Actually, I don't like markets very much."

"I didn't mean a gap in the market, I meant a gap in the economy – did I?" said Sandra, frowning as she tried to ponder the vagaries of current dentistry deficits. "No, I think I just meant a gap for more NHS dentists."

"There'll be gaps in people's mouths where their teeth have been," said Gina darkly. She had been out in the sun a lot recently.

"Society's really changing from what it used to be," said Sandra, taking another sip and wondering what shade Kay had dyed her hair. "I can't get over all the bottles, paper and cardboard we used to throw out before recycling came in."

"I nearly had a row with Rob the other day because he put some old boxes out for the dustbin men – I mean refuse collectors," said Kay, taking another sip and wondering what shade Sandra had dyed her hair.

"Well, our next-door neighbours can't even be bothered to recycle anything," retorted Gina, taking another sip and wondering why Kay and Sandra dyed their hair. "It's rubbish!"

"I get annoyed by all the dog mess we find on the pavements near where we live," volunteered Kay, wrinkling her nose.

"Oh, don't talk to me about dogs," said Gina, grimacing. "Actually, do. Dog doo-doo!"

"Of course, it's not the dogs, it's the dog owners," said Sandra, after the shrieking had died down.

"I know, I wrote to the council once," revealed Kay, bending over to scratch her foot, "but all they said when they wrote back was how well they're doing by providing bins and dog wardens."

"We have loads of dog walkers up and down our road," said Sandra, "especially since they made the nearby fields into a nature reserve – or dog reserve, more like. The number of times we've gone for a walk there and ended up with shit on our shoes, pardon the expression."

"What gets me," said Gina, "is when you see plastic bags of dog shit all tied up and left behind on the pavement."

"Or hanging off the branches of a tree," added Kay. "I mean, why go to all the bother of scooping it up, putting it in a bag, tying the bag up and then just leaving it somewhere for someone else to dispose of?"

"Who knows, some dog walkers are a breed apart," said Sandra, looking startled as Gina and Kay dissolved into laughter. "Well, laughter is good for us," she added, smiling.

"Don't you get tired of the way we're told what's good for us all the time now, like low-fat food and bran and lentils and seeds and all horrible things that I don't like?" asked Kay, wondering if she had as many wrinkles as Sandra and Gina.

"Yes, as well as all the things we shouldn't eat, like cheese and chocolate and crisps and peanut butter and all the lovely things that I like," groaned Sandra, wondering if she had as many wrinkles as Gina and Kay.

"What about not being supposed to drink too much tea and coffee?" put in Gina, wondering if she had as many wrinkles as Kay and Sandra. "I can't drink two litres of water a day, no matter how hard I try."

"I know, I find it a bit hard," agreed Sandra, "even though we live in a soft-water area. I'm not nearly as bad as my mother, though, she's never drunk enough."

"You want your mother to get more drunk?" chortled Gina wickedly. "I'm sorry, Sandra, that sounded so funny. Wow, I think I'm becoming hysterical!"

"It's lovely, though, isn't it," said Kay, smiling at Gina, "to have a laugh about nothing in particular with old school friends, who don't give a fig about acting our age."

"Oh, I don't like figs," chuckled Sandra, grinning at them both.

"Are you calling us old?" shrieked Gina happily. "I never liked acting, anyway! Oh, this is such fun, we really must make sure Dee and Em join us next time."

"Are you insinuating that we're falling apart?" asked Kay, her eyes twinkling.

"I was," replied Sandra quietly, "but I don't think I am anymore."

It was the second week of August and Gulliver was staying for a few days, as he had an appointment with Bryony's parents at the Shanghai Fleet Club about his forthcoming wedding reception, which was now four months away. Fortunately, it coincided with his wedding. He was on his own, as Bryony was unable to spare the time off work.

"Do you get on quite well with Anne and Stan, then?" enquired Sandra casually, as she sat around their small garden table with Gulliver and Osborn on a warm early evening, sipping a glass of wine.

"Yes," replied Gulliver quickly. "Well, it's OK," he added more slowly. "Actually, I have to, because Bryony gets so mad at her mother and Stan just lets them get on with it, so it's kind of up to me to be diplomatic."

"Now there's a word I'm not entirely sure would have applied to you in the past," smiled Sandra, "but I can see it does now. I hope it all goes smoothly for you, I'm looking forward to being the mother of the bridegroom."

"I'm quite glad you're getting married somewhere unusual," mused Osborn, sipping his wine. "This is a good grape."

"I'm getting fruity undertones, winey overtones and a small drowning insect," said Gulliver, sniffing his glass and then looking into it.

"We haven't been to Carnglass Caverns since we took you and Maddy years ago in the school summer holidays," remembered Sandra. "I think it's a great place to be married, very atmospheric, although possibly a bit drippy."

"Did I tell you I was wearing a kilt?" asked Gulliver, looking slightly embarrassed.

"You are? I hadn't noticed," said Osborn, laughing delightedly at himself for a few seconds. "Yes, definitely a good grape!"

"Your father's a lightweight when it comes to good grapes," said Sandra, smiling. "You mean a Cornish kilt, I take it? With a sporran?"

"Oh yes, the full works, complete with a small ceremonial dagger."

"Wow!" Sandra and Osborn looked at their son wonderingly.

"I had to insist on the dagger," confided Gulliver, looking at them seriously as he drained his wine glass. "Bryony wasn't very keen, she said she couldn't see the point."

Two days later, Gulliver drove Sandra and Osborn to meet Lawrence from work, as they'd all arranged to have an evening meal together at *The Far Out Inn* on Dartmoor. As soon as Lawrence entered the car, he announced happily that he had resigned and was looking forward to an early retirement.

"How old are you, Uncle?" asked Gulliver politely, as they later sat around the pub table, finishing their drinks after having consumed what felt like a vast amount of food.

"I'm 58 next birthday," replied Lawrence, pulling a long white hair from his eyebrow. "Ouch! Retirement comes not a moment too soon, I can tell you."

"I'm really pleased for you," said Osborn warmly. "I just wish I could retire too. Oh well, shall we move?"

"I'm not sure I can," said Sandra, pulling a face (sensibly her own). "I need to go for a walk around the block."

"It's a lovely evening, why don't we?" asked Gulliver hopefully. "Around the reservoir? That's if you're not feeling too old, Uncle?"

"That does it, let's go!" exclaimed Lawrence, feigning outrage.

"Good idea," said Osborn, already getting up. "OK, Sandra?"

"Absolutely," confirmed Sandra. "I'm the second youngest here, after all. God, I'm really stiff after all that gardening yesterday."

It was indeed a lovely evening, as they embarked on the three-and-a-half-mile circular walk, first of all along the country road and then down into the wooded area along the edge of the water, with Cowstor an imposing sight above them. They met a few other people along the way, but as the evening drew on and they could see they'd traversed around the other side of the reservoir, Sandra began to look forward to finishing the walk.

"Did you watch that new programme *Found* last night?" asked Lawrence, as he and Sandra carefully picked their way across some tree roots, a little way behind the rather more nimble Osborn and Gulliver.

"Yes, I really enjoyed it," replied Sandra enthusiastically. "I'm not at all sure I understood it, but it feels like it's going to be compelling viewing."

"I'm not sure I'll carry on with it," said Lawrence, having a spot of bother with his not-quite-right footwear. "I can't stand all those flashbacks. If they've got a story to tell, they should go ahead and tell it."

"Mmm. I like the characters, though," said Sandra lamely, although thankfully she was wearing decent walking shoes.

"I can't stand that moronic *Big Sibling* show either," continued Lawrence, as Sandra prepared herself for a Lawrence-type rant. "It's a way of making cheap shows out of stupid people who want to be on television. We pay good money for our TV licences and I expect something more interesting than a load of idiots sitting around on a sofa bitching about each other, or making a sandwich, or having to do a ridiculous task."

"I was interested in it at first because it was a good psychological opportunity to observe people's behaviour in a confined environment," explained Sandra weakly. They were over three-quarters of the way around the reservoir and she was tiring.

"Oh. What I really miss, though, are the old comedy programmes, like *It Ain't Half Warm, Mum* or *On the Autobuses*. Now they were really funny!"

"Yes, that's true – like *'Ello 'Ello* and *Fritillaries*."

"What about *Some Fathers Do 'Ave 'Em* and *Mum's Army*?"

"Oh yes! *Up Yours Pompeii* and *One Foot in the Sepulchre*."

"*The Old Piece of Cloth Trade* and *All Wind and Waiters*."

"I do like a bit of alternative comedy, though," said Sandra, as they emerged out on to the road again.

"Oh no, for me there's no alternative to comedy."

"Er – I really liked *Indigoadder* and *Vermilion Dwarf*."

"Yes, fair enough, but of course, the brilliant forerunners of alternative comedy were *It's a Spheroid World* and *The Loons*."

"*Monty Viper's Airborne Circus* was great, Gulliver used to love them."

"It's good to see him settling down with Bryony, he seems very happy."

"He is, I think." Sandra watched Gulliver walking along in front with Osborn and felt strangely, but happily maternal.

"How's Madeleine?"

"She's OK. Look, I can see our car!" Sandra realised she didn't want to talk to Lawrence about Madeleine, in case she gave away some of her current misgivings about Madeleine's state of mind. She had spoken to her only the previous evening, when Madeleine had rung for a morale boost before going in for her first appointment with her counsellor, Louisa Hope.

"It went well, Mumsie," came Madeleine's voice over the phone to a very relieved Sandra. "She's nice and I trust her."

"That's brilliant, my darling," replied Sandra, smiling. "I think you're very brave. I'm sure things will gradually start to feel better. When do you see her again?"

"Next week. She asked me about my parents, like they all seem to. Remember that counsellor Jane I saw when I came home from university in 2001? She asked me about you and Dad too. I told them both quite clearly that I had no real problems with either of you, that it's actually you and Dad who help me through it all."

"I'm so glad you feel that way. I feel similarly about you, that you're this lovely bright soul who lifts my spirits just by being herself – yourself. I do miss you so much, though, it physically hurts sometimes."

"I know what you mean, I have waves of homesickness sometimes – and waves of Mumsiesickness, too. You'll be pleased to know, though, that I've finished with Jay completely."

"Really? Well, I *am* pleased, but I hope you're OK?"

"Yes, I don't feel as if I need or want a boyfriend at all at the moment, they can be such hard work."

"Oh Maddy, you do sound a bit disillusioned. I'm sure you'll meet the right person when the time is right."

"I thought Drew was the right person, but hey ho. How are Gulliver and Bryony?"

"They seem fine, they're buying their wedding rings next weekend, apparently."

"I don't know what I'm going to wear to the wedding. How about you?"

"Not a clue, darling, but I must apply myself and start looking for an outfit soon. I wish you could help me, I could do with your input." A wave of Maddysickness washed over Sandra with sudden force.

"I think maybe I'll come home next month for a long weekend and we can shop together?" The excitement apparent in Madeleine's voice was very touching.

"That would be fab!" The excitement was reciprocal. "Oh, it's so lovely to have something to look forward to."

"I'm sorry I won't be home for Dad's and Grandma's birthdays, or yours. We haven't done very well for birthdays together this year, have we?"

"No, it's been a difficult year, but we'll just have to do better next year."

"Yes, definitely! I must go, Alana wants me to go to the supermarket with her. I love you, Mumsie."

"I love you too, Maddy."

August passed in a flurry of garden activity, as Sandra and Osborn worked hard on Caroline's back garden, which was proving to be a bigger undertaking than they'd first thought. Caroline seemed reasonably interested in the process, but mainly let them get on with it. On her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, she was very pleased with the flowers that Belinda and her other nieces and nephews had sent her, as well as all the cards she'd received from family and friends.

She also seemed to enjoy lunch at the *Who'd Have Dreamt It?* which was a pub that had been one of Leonard's favourites – one of his many favourites. Sandra was noticing how Caroline had begun to talk of Leonard very fondly, which was completely different from the way she'd sometimes talked about him when he'd still been alive. Although this tended to jar with Sandra, she was mainly relieved that Caroline seemed to enjoy her birthday, her first one as a widow.

Osborn's 55<sup>th</sup> birthday the following day passed quietly but enjoyably, with Sandra and Osborn able to please themselves. They had coffee at a garden centre, bought sandwiches for lunch and then drove to Derrydown, where they walked along the beach, gazing out at sea. Once they were home, there were phone calls from Gulliver and Madeleine, before they ate a late tea and settled in for a quiet evening.

"This is a very middle aged birthday for you," said Sandra, as she brought Osborn a mug of tea and sat down on the sofa beside him.

"I know, but it suits me fine," he replied, sipping his tea.

"Actually, how do you define middle age?" wondered Sandra aloud. "If it was your actual middle age, it would mean you'd live till you were 110, which is slightly ridiculous. How would you define middle age?"

"It's not so much an actual age, perhaps, but noticing changes about how you view life? Noticing what becomes more important over other things that become slightly less important?"

"Ye-es. Such as?"

"Oh, I don't know. It definitely involves having less energy than when you're younger."

"True." Sandra tried to think of other changes. "You seem to suffer from the cold a bit more than you used to?"

"Yes, my feet get cold."

"So you could say perhaps that being middle aged is going upstairs for socks instead of sex?"

"Ha!" Osborn spluttered slightly, then put down his mug. "Actually..."

"Socks or sex?"

"Both?"

"Oh well, I suppose it's your birthday."

## CHAPTER 16

It was a Saturday at the end of August and a Native American workshop was taking place at Rainbow House. Sandra had hardly been there since she'd been certified almost two years before, but Osborn had enjoyed shadowing the teacher of the healing course for the previous year and was about to start teaching a class by himself in September. Hopefully, there would be some people to teach.

It was a bright, sunny afternoon as twelve people sat around in a circle in the long room with its yellow painted walls and colourful pictures. Sandra recognised a couple of people from her old healing course, plus some new people. Everyone seemed to know Osborn, as well as each other, which left her feeling somewhat out on a limb.

"Bring your chair in a bit closer, dear," said Gloria, gazing at Sandra in recognition. "I know you're Osborn's wife, but I'm afraid I can't remember your name?"

"It's Sandra."

"Oh yes, that's right. I know you did our healing course with Osborn. He's lovely, he's going to be a real asset here teaching the course." Gloria gazed fondly at Osborn, adjusting her purple scarf to fall more evenly over her lilac top.

"I remember you from our course too," came a quiet voice to her left, as a slim dark-haired woman in her forties entered the room and prepared to sit down next to Sandra.

"Ann?" enquired Sandra, as she remembered Ann's apparent affinity with Osborn throughout the second year of the healing course.

"That's right. Jan from our old course should be along later too."

"Oh yes, wasn't she the..." Sandra's voice trailed away into nothing, as Osborn approached Ann and hugged her warmly.

"I haven't seen you for a while, it's so good to see you!" Osborn was exuding his own particular brand of charm towards Ann, who was clearly basking in its warmth.

"You've got a lovely man there, Sandra," she said somewhat breathily, as Osborn returned to his seat next to Fran, a well-endowed, talkative lady in her fifties, who obviously intended to enjoy talking with Osborn during the course of the workshop.

"Let's begin now!" came a deep-set voice with a charming Irish accent, that emanated from a slight, dark-haired man in perhaps his late thirties, sporting a jaunty little pony tail. "I'm Diarmuid Doyle and this is my partner, Dominique Didier. A woman of about the same age, with long fair hair in plaits smiled quickly around the circle. Sandra appraised her suede skirt, boots and cornflower-blue top with a darker blue decorative fringe. Long beaded earrings with small silver feathers dangled from her ears, creating a very Native American impression.

"I don't know how familiar you all are with the Native American culture," continued Diarmuid, holding a short stick that was decorated with beads and feathers, "but seeing it's such a large subject area to cover in one afternoon, I thought we would talk about the importance of the four directions to Native Americans. Dominique?" He passed the decorated stick to Dominique.

"Before we do that, I want to tell you about the talking stick," said Dominique in a clear voice with a pleasing French accent, holding the stick up for everyone to see. "The talking stick was very important at Native American councils, or wisdom circles, when only the person holding the talking stick was allowed to speak. This person would speak their sacred truth to the circle and everyone would listen. We are going to do this today. We'll go around the circle to introduce ourselves. When you are passed the talking stick, say your name clearly, before speaking your truth. The whole circle will acknowledge you by saying "Ho!" When you have finished speaking, say your name again and the circle will acknowledge you in the same way, before you pass the talking stick to the next person in the group. Don't look scared! I'll start - I'm Dominique."

"Ho!" A chorus of slightly embarrassed sounding voices resounded around the room, before Dominique started to introduce herself. "I finished the healing course here last month, with Osborn helping to teach me. He was a great encouragement at a difficult time in my life and I'd like to thank him for that." Dominique smiled warmly at Osborn, who smiled warmly back. "Thank you." She held the stick aloft. "Dominique."

"Ho!"

The afternoon began to feel slightly surreal as people around the circle introduced themselves. Sandra liked the idea of the talking stick very much indeed and the Native American culture in general, but she was undeniably unsettled by the way that so many women seemed to like Osborn to a slightly excessive degree. She had been especially annoyed by Ann's declaration that Sandra had a lovely man in Osborn, which seemed to imply that he was some sort of perfect male, or that the imperfect Sandra should be grateful to have him in her life.

'If only she knew!' Sandra raged quietly to herself. 'If only anyone here knew the truth! He may have some really good qualities, which I *do* recognise and am extremely thankful for, but he can also be a real pain in the ass. In fact, what would all these adoring women think of him if they knew he'd screwed my cousin? Oh, sod it all to the highest heights, why am I thinking of *that*? Why here? Why now?'

"Sandra?" Ann's voice infiltrated Sandra's self-induced growing misery as Ann handed her the talking stick.

"Oh! I'm Sandra."

"Ho!"

Sandra had no recollection afterwards of how she'd introduced herself, but it didn't seem to matter as Diarmuid's gentle Irish inflections described what different points of the compass meant to Native Americans. She began to feel more at home, as if what she was hearing made intuitive sense. It seemed so neat and yet almost lyrical that the totem animal for the west was the grizzly bear, the element of the east was fire, the colour of the south was red, the quality of the north was knowledge and wisdom and so on. There was a great deal of fascinating information and Sandra was pleased, when after Diarmuid had finished speaking, he asked Dominique if she would kindly hand out the handouts.

"That was really enjoyable, wasn't it," said Fran to Sandra, as the circle became a messy oblong and then more of a random entity. "I haven't seen you since we finished our course. I come here once or twice a week to do some healing with Jan. She was supposed to come in later this afternoon, but she never did, I hope she's OK. Oh dear,

I'm rambling again and I don't have the talking stick. It's been lovely to see you. Ah, here's your husband. Give me a big hug, you lovely man!"

Sandra tried to slope out of the door unobtrusively, as Osborn seemed to hug everyone in the entire room, including Diarmuid. She was unsure what she was feeling, but she knew it wasn't comfortable.

"Did you enjoy it?" asked Osborn later, as he manoeuvred the car out of the rather small, awkward car park and into the road.

"I like the Native American stuff," replied Sandra pensively. "I always have done, especially after we visited Colorado."

"I thought Dominique did very well with Diarmuid, she was much more self-confident than she was in classes," said Osborn conversationally.

"Yes. I can't help feeling a bit weird that you are obviously quite close with so many women," said Sandra in a rush, finding herself unable to hold back her words.

"So many women?" echoed Osborn defensively. "You knew I was shadowing the healing course this last year, it's natural that we talk about personal issues."

"I don't remember us doing that when we were on the course," replied Sandra, hearing herself sound ridiculously petty. "Anyway, it wasn't only Dominique, because Ann obviously thinks the sun shines out of your aura – not to mention Gloria and Fran and probably the entire female population at Rainbow House."

"I'm sorry you feel so insecure," said Osborn slowly, "but I haven't done anything wrong. I like people, I always have done."

"Yes, I know. I remember you telling me how women at work used to somehow end up crying on your shoulder," said Sandra, completely unable to staunch the flow. "I don't know if they still do, because you don't mention it anymore. I used to listen to you and accept it all because I trusted you completely, even though something inside me felt a bit unhappy about it."

"Don't you trust me now?" asked Osborn quietly.

"Not 100%, not after – what you did. I've tried so hard and I trust you as much as I possibly can, but it'll never come back completely and be like it was, I know that for a fact. I simply don't understand why so many women are drawn to you so much and tell you so much about themselves."

"I don't know, it just seems to happen. Anyway, it's not only women."

"It must be something in you," said Sandra, suddenly feeling incredibly tired and wishing she hadn't mentioned anything. "You love hugging people," she finished lamely, "and I find it so hard."

"I'm sorry you don't like the way I am," said Osborn rather coldly, "but I'm me, as much as you're you and I'm committed to teaching this healing course now."

"I know, I don't mean anything," replied Sandra, beginning to hate the conflict she'd started. "I don't know why I'm me, that's all. Same old story, really. Shall we go out somewhere away from people tomorrow, so we can be ourselves?"

"I can't, I promised Lawrence I'd finish clearing the downstairs rooms at Mum's house ready for the decorator on Monday."

"I'd forgotten. You've got a decorator sorted, then?"

"Yes, I'm sure I told you."

"No, you didn't. You told me that you and Lawrence had decided to spruce up the house because it hasn't sold yet, but that's all. Oh well, maybe we could go for a walk on Bank Holiday Monday?"

"Ah. I was going to ask if you could help me get your mother's back garden ready for the pavours?"

"When are you going to do them?"

"I thought I might have Wednesday off, but I've got an ENT appointment."

"Oh well, maybe in my next life I'll know what it's all about."

Sandra was sitting at her mother's table, eating lunch with Caroline and Belinda, who'd come to visit for the day. It was early September and Sandra was looking out of the window at the front garden, noticing the weeds that had sprouted up because she'd been spending all her time in her mother's back garden.

"What are you looking at, Sandra?" asked Caroline bluntly, during a hiatus in the proceedings.

"I was looking at the weeds," replied Sandra honestly, watching in horror as her mother sprinkled even more salt over her food. Thankfully it was her own food, not Sandra's.

"I think she's obsessed by weeds," said Caroline to Belinda, laughing. "She's always out there, pulling them up."

"I don't want them to seed themselves," explained Sandra, feeling aggrieved at her mother's throwaway remark, but deciding to dismiss it as rubbish.

"I wish we had someone to help us with our garden," said Belinda, smiling at Sandra. "It's so steep, Ian has trouble cutting the grass. He's getting on a bit now."

"Oh, you all seem young to me," retorted Caroline. "Would you like some more quiche, dear?"

"No thank you, Auntie, it was lovely, though."

"How's that sister of yours?" asked Caroline conversationally.

"Oh, don't speak to me about Hetty," groaned Belinda. "She rings Auntie Lily and says all sorts about me."

"I know dear, because Lily and I ring each other. Lily doesn't take any notice of what she says and neither do I, though, so don't worry. Now, anyone for a yoghurt?"

"How's Gulliver?" Belinda asked Sandra while Caroline was fetching the yoghurts. "Is he looking forward to his wedding?"

"I think so," replied Sandra, "although he's at Snowdonia for a few days at the moment. He was a bit down in his last email because his photography business isn't making much money yet, but I told him it'll take a while to get off the ground."

"I'm sure it will," said Belinda comfortingly. "I mean get off the ground, not take a while. How's Madeleine?"

"She's OK," replied Sandra, not wishing to speak further, as Caroline had entered the room with a tray of yoghurts that she placed on the table.

"Didn't Gulliver and Bryony want her to be a bridesmaid?" asked Belinda, taking a pomegranate and mandarin yoghurt.

"No, they're not having any bridesmaids," replied Sandra, taking a gooseberry and pineapple yoghurt. "Maddy doesn't mind, though, in fact I suspect she's quite glad."

"I know what I wanted to say, Sandra," said Caroline suddenly. "Sorry to interrupt, but I have to say things while I remember. I had a letter from British Gas and I'm not sure if I have to do anything."

"I'll have a look," said Sandra, sighing inwardly.

"Sandra likes seeing to my mail," said Caroline brightly to Belinda, as she went to fetch the letter.

"No, I don't!" said Sandra, looking at her mother with astonishment. "I have to because you show me, that's all."

"We get a load of junk mail these days," said Belinda soothingly.

"Oh, so do I!" exclaimed Caroline. "I'm sure the postman offloads a pile of junk mail in my letterbox because I'm on the corner."

"We get loads of it too," replied Sandra, thinking that her mother was beginning to have some rather outlandish ideas.

"How's Osborn, Sandra?" asked Belinda, wincing a little as the pomegranate and mandarin yoghurt reached her taste buds.

"His mother's house still hasn't sold, so he and Lawrence have decided to empty the house of furniture and have some of the rooms painted," explained Sandra, deciding gooseberry and pineapple perhaps wasn't the best combination. "He's a bit stressed about that and he's a bit stressed about the start of the healing course he's teaching at Rainbow House..."

"He's always a bit stressed about something or other," said Caroline, before noticing Sandra's raised eyebrows. "He's doing a good job on my back garden, though," she added quickly. "He's a good worker and Sandra's a good little worker too. I really don't know what I'd do without her."

It was a Friday in early September and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was having a 53<sup>rd</sup> birthday. She was reasonably happy in some ways, but unreasonably unhappy in other ways. Therefore, it turned out to be a bit of an up and down day, which wasn't unusual. She was happy that Osborn had taken the day off and reasonably happy that he'd driven Lawrence, Caroline and her out to lunch at *The Priest's Navel*, followed by *Ono* and birthday cake back at the house.

However, she was unhappy that she was unable to see Gulliver and Madeleine, which turned into unreasonable unhappiness as the day wore on. She tried to tone it down to reasonable unhappiness, but the fact remained that she was irrevocably missing their presence – although they'd both sent a card, saying they would give her their presents when they next saw her.

When the phone rang and she heard Gulliver's voice, followed by a phone call from Madeleine a while later, she felt unreasonably happy. However, as soon as she put the phone down, she felt unreasonably unhappy again. It was a relief to go to bed, in order to put a stop to the strange emotional see-sawing she'd experienced all day, for as much as she tried to understand it, she failed to fathom a reason.

"Sandra! I'm glad I've caught you in," came Caroline's panicky voice as Sandra opened the front door to her mother the following week. "I've just been to the post office to collect my pension and I think I've lost it. Can I come in?"

"Yes. What?" Sandra's voice was tired, croaky and full of a cold as her mother stepped through the door with a tale of woe about her mishap. She'd been given her money at the post office counter, had put it in her bag and then realised she had to put on her glasses, which was when she may or may not have noticed a shifty-looking character hanging around.

She'd thought nothing of it, but when she went to buy something at the shop later, she realised her pension money was missing. She'd gone back to the post office and reported it, but there was nothing they could do except take her telephone number, in the highly unlikely case that someone handed in her money.

"Should you let the police know?" asked Sandra somewhat groggily.

"No, I couldn't stand all the fuss. I just wanted to let you know and make sure it's not got lost in my bag somewhere. Have a look?"

"OK, although I'm sure you know your own bag." Sandra patiently looked in every nook and cranny of her mother's bag to no avail. "No, there's nothing there. Are you alright for money? Do you need to borrow some?"

"No, I'm fine as it happens, but I had to tell someone and you're all I've got."

In the third week of September, Madeleine came home for her promised long weekend. The wedding clothes for herself, Sandra and Osborn were purchased during a long but highly enjoyable day, interspersed with coffee, lunch and afternoon tea.

"I'm really shattered," said Sandra, as the three of them sat at a table for four in *Marks and Spender* amid a myriad of bags. "It's been such an exciting day, though."

"Thank you for the dress," said Madeleine, looking lovingly at the designer bag on top of the pile on the spare seat. "Are you sure I look OK in it?"

"You look great," replied Osborn, "and I shall be proud of you."

"I'm not the one getting married," replied Madeleine, a little pink-cheeked.

"You look wonderful in the dress," said Sandra, smiling. "I only wish I looked about 10% as good as you look."

"Oh Mumsie, don't put yourself down."

"Why not, I don't know where I've been," joked Sandra, before she realised Madeleine was giving her an admonishing look. "I'm just not sure about the long skirt – and the jacket – and the shoes – and the earrings – and as for what to do with my hair! On the other hand, your father looks really good in his new suit."

"It feels very comfortable," admitted Osborn. "Good old *Marks and Spender*. I'm really looking forward to the wedding."

"I'm really looking forward to visiting Prague with my old Frankfurt friends," said Madeleine happily. "It's only a long weekend, but it'll still be good to see them."

"I'm glad you're feeling better, darling," said Sandra pensively. "I'm glad you found a good counsellor, too. I always liked the sound of her, I think it was her name."

"Louisa Hope. Yes, she did give me hope. Doesn't that fit in with Grandma's old name hypothesis thing?"

"Yes, I suppose it does," replied Sandra, not knowing whether to smile or to grimace.

"I was almost sorry to finish the counselling," reflected Madeleine, looking in the bottom of her cup, "but she was quite costly. Maybe I can afford to buy myself some new underwear now."

"Did I tell you I saw an occupational health doctor because I seem to be allergic to solder?" asked Osborn suddenly.

"What in heaven's name has that got to do with Maddy's underwear?" asked Sandra, looking perplexed.

"Nothing, it just crossed my mind," replied Osborn. "My face was itching a bit, that's probably why."

"You're a little bit unusual, Varti," said Madeleine, "but I wouldn't have you any other way. What was the outcome?"

"I'm being referred to a consultant," replied Osborn. "Bill Bustard doesn't want to take any responsibility for the cheap solder that's in use now, he thinks I'm deliberately creating a fuss. Why are you laughing, Sandra?"

"I'm sorry," said Sandra, giggling helplessly. "I was remembering that mistake when you typed out our new wills on the computer the other day – that you wish your body to be created!"

"You're both a little bit unusual," said Madeleine, raising one eyebrow quizzically. "What hope do I have? Actually, that's the whole point, I have a lot of hope. I was going to wait for another week to make sure I've truly done it, but I feel fine. I'm finally off the antidepressants and I'm feeling absolutely fine!"

## CHAPTER 17

It was a little on the chilly side, as Sandra and Osborn sat down in their front row seats inside Carnglass Caverns on a mid-November late afternoon, having said hello to all and sundry on the way. What all and sundry were doing at the wedding, Sandra was unsure, but she was aware that Anne and Stan Stanpool knew a great number of people and besides, they were paying for the reception.

'I shouldn't be thinking financially at a time like this,' she mused, putting on her maroon suede gloves again. 'I think it's almost as cold inside here as it is outside. I wonder how much it cost to hire this cavern for the wedding? I must say, I mean think, I wish I'd spent more money on my wedding outfit, because I'm the mother of the groom, after all. I'm not at all sure about this sequined skirt and I think the jacket should be a bit longer, to stop me looking like a somewhat mad, little old fat woman. I'm glad the lighting in here is quite subdued.'

'Maddy looks lovely today, the black velvet jacket goes well with her fair hair, although she's covering herself up a bit with that pashmina, which is a pity. Oh well, maybe she'll show herself off a bit more when we're back at the Shanghai Fleet Club. I'm so proud of her! It's a shame in a way that she brought her friend Alana as her partner and not a real partner – not that Alana's a fake partner, of course.'

"Sandra!" exclaimed Lawrence suddenly and rather loudly from the row behind, where he was sitting beside Caroline. "I see they've printed your poem on the order of ceremony sheet. Did you write it especially for the wedding?"

"What?" squeaked Sandra, fumbling to open her order of ceremony sheet with gloved hands. "Yes, I did. I wrote it when I couldn't sleep one night because I had a cold and it was something to do."

"What's that? Sandra's poem?" asked Caroline in her clear, strident voice. "You never told me about this, Sandra."

"I didn't know they were going to print it," hissed Sandra back to her mother, aware that several people were looking at them.

"Look Belinda, Sandra's poem!" said Caroline loudly to Belinda, who was sitting in the row behind with the rest of her family.

Sandra began to cringe horrifically as she heard the repeated words "Sandra's poem" filtering back among the seated guests. Thankfully, she was saved from further embarrassment when Gulliver appeared from the back of the cavern, approached Osborn and spoke rapidly into his ear. For an extra chilling moment Sandra wondered if the wedding had been called off, but it turned out that the photographer had put the wrong date in his diary and was unable to attend.

"I've got my own camera here," Sandra heard Gulliver say to Osborn, "so could you please take some photos? We'll have to rely on ourselves and any other people who've got cameras, there's nothing else to do. I must go!"

Sandra was trying to come to terms with the irony of a lack of photographer at the wedding of a professional photographer, when the strains of *Impure Shores* by No Saints began to emanate from the loudspeakers and the procession from the back of the cavern to the front raised stage area began. It seemed a long time before Sandra could see anyone, but eventually Bryony appeared, holding on to the arm of Stan. She was wearing a long, ivory coloured satin coat over a wine-coloured satin dress and was carrying some greenery, rather than a bouquet of flowers.

Following behind came Gulliver and his best man, Damien, both sporting their Cornish kilts of gold, black, white, red and blue. Not only that, they were wearing them and the whole ensemble complete with black jacket, sporran and knee-length white socks looked quite dashing. However, they did their best to walk at a slow pace, so that their kilts didn't swish around too much. As the foursome reached the front, Stan slipped back into his seat, while Gulliver and Bryony joined the registrar on the stage.

Sandra began to feel a little emotional, but on the whole, she simply felt happy that Gulliver was starting the next phase of his life with his chosen partner. The marriage ceremony began in an informally formal way, which seemed a perfect balance for the occasion. To her surprise, she heard Caroline sniffing in the row behind, as the ceremony moved along.

She was beginning to relax, when Damien took centre stage and began to read out her poem. It was impossible to hide in any shape or form, especially as her form had changed shape with a little weight gain recently. She tried to smile serenely, as Damien stumbled slightly over the words, but on the whole read them out very well.

Gulliver and Bryony exchanged their vows and their wedding rings, although there was really nothing wrong with them at all. Then Osborn and Stan were called up to the stage, as the signing of the register took place amid some amateur photography. The guests had rallied to Gulliver's plea for photographic help and one of the main photographers was Kirsty, who had come to the wedding alone.

'It's good of her to get out there and take photos,' thought Sandra, as she gazed at Kirsty's sheepskin coat. 'It's such a pity we don't have a real photographer, though, as all this does seem slightly unreal. I'm still uncertain how I feel about Kirsty after all the trouble we've experienced with her, but Gulliver asked his auntie to his wedding, so I shall have to make the best of it. Ah, the signing's finished.'

"It gives me great pleasure," announced the registrar, when Osborn and Stan had returned to their seats, "to wish the very best of health and happiness to the new Mr and Mrs Dullkettle!" This was followed by happy applause, as Sandra came to terms with the fact that there was now a younger version of Mrs Dullkettle than herself. She wondered briefly how Lawrence, Osborn and Kirsty felt on hearing the name of their fairly recently dead mother being broadcast as now belonging to someone else, but decided she was being supersensitive.

The ceremony was over and the amateur photographers were flashing away. It was fortunately dark in the cavern, which added to the difficulty of finding the right exposure. However, most people kept on their coats as they were called up to the stage to have their photos taken alongside Gulliver and Bryony. Sandra began to notice that without one main professional photographer, the people who were being photographed didn't know which camera to look towards. She comforted herself with the knowledge that a great number of photos were being taken by a large number of people.

She was pleased that Gulliver asked for a photo of just himself and Madeleine and to her surprise, tears came to her eyes at the sight of them standing together in their finery, with Gulliver's arm around Madeleine's shoulders. However, the growing tedium and coldness of hanging around in the cold cavern began to take hold and so it was with relief that they all left the stage when the photography had finally finished.

Anne and Stan had arranged to serve a hot drink and a saffron bun to each guest before they left the cavern, for which everyone seemed thankful. Anne was obviously in her element, which was a social ethos where she could float around like a colourful butterfly, resplendent in her bright blue ensemble. Sandra felt very dull beside her, dressed in more seasonal tones of maroon, similar to the colour of Madeleine's dress and not a million miles from the purple of Caroline's skirt. It kept irking her against what she had believed to be her giving nature, that Caroline had borrowed Sandra's best and well-loved purple jacket, because it matched her skirt.

"Bryony, give your mother-in-law a saffron bun," came Anne's clear tones, as she passed Bryony a bun on a paper plate.

"Here you are mother-in-law," grinned Bryony, her normally long fringe having been cut shorter for the wedding. As Sandra stood closer to Bryony, she noticed that Bryony was unusually wearing a small amount of make-up. It wasn't that Bryony had applied the make up in a strange way, rather that she normally wore no make-up at all.

Eventually, it was time to leave the cavern and head to the Shanghai Fleet Club. Sandra found herself next to Kirsty as they walked to the car park.

"Do you remember how I cried at your wedding?" asked Kirsty suddenly. "I can't remember why, I was only twelve."

"Er – you were a bridesmaid and you were standing behind me most of the time," replied Sandra cautiously, thinking that she really didn't want to be thinking of Kirsty at her own long-ago wedding, when today was her son's wedding and she wanted to enjoy every moment of it. "Do you remember, Mum?" she asked Caroline, who was walking along on the other side of her.

"Me? Do I remember your wedding? Oh yes. Well, not very much actually, it was a very difficult time in my life."

Sandra felt relieved to get back to the car, where Madeleine and Alana were already waiting. Although Sandra was pleased that Madeleine had asked her friend along, she realised she was slightly aggrieved that this meant Madeleine's attention was mostly focused on Alana, who didn't know a soul except Madeleine. However, they all chatted amicably in the car on the way to the Shanghai Fleet Club and were soon inside, where it was finally warm.

Gulliver and Bryony were standing with Damien, greeting the incoming guests. Sandra experienced an unsettling flashback to Damien in the Acid Freaks Rave 666 days when he and Gulliver were in their rebellious phase, but Damien was a father now and she was happy he had read out her poem with feeling.

"Hello Mrs Dullkettle," said Bryony as Sandra approached her, smiling.

"Hello Mrs Dullkettle," replied Sandra, as Bryony smiled back. Sandra's natural reticence rendered her unable to carry out the hug that had formed in her intentions, so instead she rather formally shook Bryony's hand.

"Hello married Gulliver," she said wonderingly. As he stood there in his kilt, a dubious wondering accosted her mind. It clashed with her desire to hug her son and along with his natural reticence, she found herself shaking hands with him as well.

She wandered into the bar, knowing that behind her, Osborn would be hugging everyone in sight. 'Oh well,' she thought, eyeing up the rum situation in the optics, 'I am who I am, but I wish I was someone else sometimes. It's unnatural, all this natural reticence. Ah yes, *Admiral Morgan*, just the man.'

An hour later, the family was seated around a large circular table, one of many in the room. Sandra was happy to be sitting with Madeleine on her left and Osborn on her right, as the wine flowed and the food was served. Gulliver and Bryony were sitting at another table with their friends and although Sandra understood the desire for an informal seating arrangement, she realised she was missing the proximity of Gulliver that a more traditional set-up would have allowed.

"It's nice for Gulliver to have his family together for once," announced Kirsty suddenly, looking rather red in the face. Sandra looked up sharply. She hadn't meant to stick the fork in her hand, but she wondered with a certain amount of suspicion, exactly what Kirsty meant by her remark.

'Doesn't she realise that we are Gulliver's family?' she thought, rubbing her hand. 'The four of us have been together all the time. Well, until Gulliver moved away to Fleet and Maddy to Cardiff, obviously – so where's she coming from? She moved to Hunterdon to get away from her father, so that's how family oriented she is! Oh dear, I mustn't get riled at Gulliver's wedding.' She took a gulp of wine. 'Perhaps she meant his wider family and it's true, that jumper and skirt do make her look a bit on the wide side.'

Everyone sat back with interest as the speeches began. Gulliver's speech was small but perfectly formed, as he had no bridesmaids to toast. Stan's speech was informal and humorous, with references to the colour coordination of those seated at Sandra's and Osborn's table, as compared to the standing-out quality of Anne's bright blue outfit at the Stanpool family table. He was obviously very relaxed at talking to groups, which reflected in the amount of warm applause he received. The food and wine appeared to have raised everyone's temperature a little.

Damien then took the floor, much to Sandra's slight trepidation, but his speech was comfortably enjoyable as he recounted some of his times with Gulliver, who he had known since they'd started secondary school. He even made reference to Gulliver's obvious bent towards photography, although they were both actually straight. They had gone camping together and one morning, Damien had emerged from his tent bleary-eyed "to go for a waz" (the sole instance for minimal cringing), only to find himself staring down the end of Gulliver's camera lens.

The speeches were soon over, the cake was cut and distributed and the music started. Madeleine and Alana drifted on to the dance floor to join the first of the groovers. Sandra reminisced fondly for a while about the days when she was young and slight enough to drift. She would have liked to join Madeleine and Alana, but looked forward to joining Osborn on the dance floor later on. He was currently sitting next to Kirsty, deep in conversation.

"Are you going to dance, Lawrence?" asked Caroline, as Lawrence sat back observing the scene around him with a pint glass in his hand. Surprisingly, it still had some *Doom Juice* in it.

"No thanks, I'm happy sitting here nursing this drink," he replied contentedly.

"How interesting," mused Sandra in Lawrence's direction. He didn't seem to mind. "You can be quite medical with drinks, you can nurse them and doctor them."

"Ye-es," pondered Lawrence slowly. It was conceptually difficult to ponder rapidly. "I've had a lot of practice with how you treat drinks. It's a bit costly, but they rarely seem to cut their prices. I don't know exactly how they operate, but they seem to have got the market sewn up."

"Ha!" exclaimed Sandra. "There's no answer to that. I'm going to take a walk to the bathroom." She wondered briefly why she had chosen an American euphemism, but put it down to the fact that Gulliver had programmed her to stop using the word 'loo'.

"You won't find a bath," replied Lawrence, as she left the table, grinning.

She returned to the table five minutes later, not grinning. "Where are Osborn and Kirsty?" she asked somewhat suspiciously.

"They've gone outside to talk," he replied. "Kirsty was upset. She asked me to go outside with her, but I refused."

"I wish Osborn had refused," said Sandra, her heart sinking. "It's our son's wedding and I *really* wanted him to dance with me." She peered at her watch. "There's not a huge amount of time left if our taxi's coming at half-past eleven." Caroline had requested that they leave the reception then, as she didn't like late nights. "Oh, sod it, I'll just have to dance by myself."

As it happened, she managed to attach herself easily in between a group of dancers that included Belinda (who had also ventured to the dance floor on her own), as well as Madeleine and Alana. She felt a frisson of pride as she noticed what a good dancer Madeleine was, although this seemed to heighten her awareness that she herself

had lost it a bit over the many years of not dancing. To her chagrin, she found she was dancing a bit jerkily at times. However, the hypnotising music performed its usual magic and she enjoyed herself as much as possible.

At one point she noticed Anne dragging Gulliver out onto the dance floor, so she jerked groovily over to Anne and Gulliver, who was already looking more than slightly embarrassed. As soon as the song was over, he fled from the floor, so Sandra detached herself smilingly from Anne and grooved jerkily back to attach herself to Belinda's group once again.

Madeleine and Alana had gone. Sandra kept looking around hopefully for Osborn, but knew the time was running out. She eventually sighed, mouthed goodbye to Belinda and walked back to the family table, where Caroline, Lawrence, Madeleine and Alana were preparing to leave.

They went to say goodbye to a somewhat high Gulliver and a somewhat tired Bryony, before leaving the room, just as Osborn came hurrying in. Kirsty was nowhere to be seen.

"Where have you been?" asked Sandra, the words tumbling out of her mouth before she had chance to stop them.

"Sorry, Kirsty was upset and I was caught talking to her in the car park."

"Well, I was upset that you didn't dance with me at our son's wedding," said Sandra in a controlled voice, not wishing to cause any discord, but feeling as if she would quite happily like to explode. "It's time to go, the taxi will be here any minute."

As Alana was staying at their house, Sandra had to continue to contain herself. She suddenly realised she was exhausted, so it was a relief simply to go to bed, with the echo of the music still reverberating in her ears. Osborn began to snore slightly almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. Sandra briefly wished the pillow had hit his head after she'd thwacked it in his direction, but there was a lot to think about as she inevitably found herself reliving the day.

'I think it was a success on the whole,' she reasoned, feeling her stomach to see how less than flat it had become. 'It was a pity about the missing photographer and a pity that I never got to dance with Osborn, but Gulliver and Bryony seemed really happy, which was the main thing. It was a pity Dad never saw Gulliver being married, he would have loved the idea of the Cornish kilt. It was a pity that Osborn's parents never made it, too.' She put her hands over her ears to check that it made no difference to the dull thumping sound.

'I'm glad Bryony made an effort to be herself, rather than a traditional bride with a veil and everything. She wouldn't have looked like Bryony carrying a bouquet of flowers. I'm also glad she didn't have bridesmaids, because she didn't want them. Maddy didn't mind at all not being a bridesmaid, although it's kind of lucky she got to be one when she was younger.

'Maddy looked lovely today, even though she kept her pashmina on most of the time, so that people didn't see her dress. Of course, it was a pity she forgot to bring home that matching handbag I asked her to buy me from *Welsh Home Stores*. Never mind, I couldn't let on how disappointed I was, because she was already mortified.' She put her hands on her face to see if she was still flushed.

'Well, we've got a married son now. I wonder if they'll have babies soon? They've got their fantastic honeymoon to experience yet, though. Three weeks in New Zealand, amazing! Gulliver and Damien did look good in their kilts, with their hairy legs and their knobbly knees – not that we got to see them much, until Damien showed a leg at photo time. They must have been cold with a draught up their... Oh no! Great balls of fire, I bet they both sodding well did it! In fact, I'd stake my sodding life on the fact that they both went commando!'

## CHAPTER 18

A month had passed, in which Gulliver and Bryony had been to New Zealand and back for their honeymoon. They had trekked through rainforests, climbed volcanoes and a glacier, swum in hot rivers, been glow-worm caving and had even remembered to send

postcards back home. While they'd been away, there had been an early and unusually heavy snowfall in Cornwall, at which Gulliver remarked that it seemed he had to leave the continent before there was any serious snow in southern England or Wales.

There had been a panic one Saturday, because Caroline's carbon monoxide detector had kept going off when Sandra and Osborn had been out for several hours. They returned home to find a note pushed through their front door. An obviously frantic Caroline was asking where they had been, as there was no answer when she kept ringing them.

Rising above the feeling that their position in life was to stay home and be available to Caroline whenever she needed them, Osborn resolved the problem, which eventually involved purchasing a new detector.

Caroline then became ill again with what she said was another vomiting virus. Osborn maintained that her kitchen hygiene was becoming dodgy, since she refused to wear her glasses all the time. Regardless of the cause, Sandra spent another week or so feeling extremely anxious about her mother, wishing as she'd never wished before that she had a sibling or two to share the load.

It was therefore hardly surprising, after the turmoil of losing three out of their four parents almost within twelve months and dealing with the ensuing fallout, that when Sandra idly took her own blood pressure one day on the monitor that Caroline had borrowed from the surgery, it was very high. She took it again several days later and it was still very high, so she reluctantly went to see Dr Effingham. After many questions, more blood pressure taking, a blood test and an ECG, he diagnosed hypertension. She began to take a daily diuretic, which Caroline pooh-poohed as nothing much at all compared to the beta-blockers that she took as well as diuretics.

After a final mammoth clearing and cleaning session by Osborn, Lawrence and Sandra (although no mammoths were actually located) Sybil's house had finally been sold. Happily, the sale was rushed through because the new owners wanted to move in before Christmas. It felt like a new chapter in all their lives, although Sandra hadn't been writing much at all and it was unclear if Lawrence believed in reincarnation. It also felt like a bit of a financial windfall, as the house proceeds were fairly shared out according to Sybil's revised will. She had been a surprisingly determined woman at the end.

The financial fillip proved timely, as Osborn and Sandra's television died not long before Christmas. It felt very strange, but undeniably wonderful, to stroll into the local *Meteor* store, walk around a bit and then buy a flat screen television, like people who were no longer chronically strapped for cash. The first programme they watched on it was *The Y Factor*, which was a form of pleasant escapism on a Saturday night. However, there was no escape from wondering why many of the aspiring singers auditioned in the first place.

One Saturday afternoon not long before Christmas, Sandra and Osborn were enjoying a bracing stroll along Plymouth Hoe to blow away the emotional cobwebs, when Sandra's mobile phone beeped. It was a text message from Madeleine, saying she had enjoyed her office party the previous evening and had kissed the French man she had fancied for a while, Henri Dior. Sandra smiled as she sent Madeleine a reply, thinking how lovely it was that Madeleine felt happy telling her such things – such things she would never have been at all happy telling her own mother.

Two days before Christmas Day, Gulliver, Bryony and Madeleine arrived to stay for a while. The house was rather cramped, but it managed. On Christmas Eve, Gulliver suggested they all go out for a walk on Dartmoor, so they wrapped up warmly in gloves and scarves, though sensibly only around their hands and necks respectively.

"This feels good," said Osborn, striding along happily on the roughly hewn path between Sandra and Madeleine, while Gulliver and Bryony walked slightly ahead. "I must confess I've felt quite stressed lately. I had a tight chest, I was a bit worried."

"You never said anything to me," reproached Sandra, frowning. "Tight?"

"What's that?" asked Gulliver, turning around enquiringly. It might have been something to do with his all-terrain breathable extreme cold weather walking attire. "Dad's tight? Did you know you shouldn't actually drink alcohol in very cold weather, because it can lead to hypothermia?"

"No, my chest was tight," explained Osborn, almost tripping over a granite rock. "It was all the stress of selling my mother's house, I think."

"Are you loose now?" asked Sandra, taking care not to step in a large puddle.

"Don't be personal," replied Osborn. "Yes, I feel loose – I'm hanging loose, man."

"Varti!" admonished Madeleine from deep within her purple scarf, as Gulliver turned back to Bryony.

"Talking of tights, which we weren't, I'm glad I'm wearing some under my trousers," commented Sandra, "although it would have been a bit mad over them. No, I mean I'm quite warm, even to the point of becoming hot. Don't say anything!" she called out to Gulliver, who had turned around suspiciously. It was definitely his all-terrain breathable extreme weather walking attire.

"That reminds me, I forgot to bring deodorant with me, so I borrowed yours this morning," said Madeleine to Sandra, extricating her mouth from her scarf in order to speak clearly. "I hope you don't mind."

"It's OK, you needn't give it back," replied Sandra, smiling at her own non-humorous humour. "I think I rather like the new range of *Unsure*, apart perhaps from the *Hint of Fetid Breeze* one."

"Are you being personal again?" asked Bryony, as she and Gulliver stopped to let the others catch up with them. "It can't be me, I'm wearing my new Windblock jacket."

"Sorry?" asked Sandra with a puzzled expression.

"Ah, it was you!" exclaimed Gulliver. "Don't worry, Mother, Bryony's just being Bryony. You'll get used to it."

"OK," said Sandra uncertainly. "I like your – that thing you've got around your head, Bryony."

"Ah, my buff," replied Bryony, touching her hippy-looking multifunctional, multicoloured headwear. "I thought it was a bit too colourful at first, but I didn't fancy any of the other colours. Gulliver said I should buy a buff buff just for the sake of it, but they didn't have any."

"Well, I'm glad you let me have my Christmas present early," said Madeleine to her parents warmly. "I love this Microfleece jacket."

"It's awful the way they shrink in the wash, though," remarked Bryony, as they all sauntered along a wide part of the path. "It's a good job you're quite thin."

"Sorry?" asked Madeleine, looking bewildered.

"Microfleece," explained Gulliver patiently. "How interesting, my ears are cold and my feet are hot."

"My cheeks are really cold," said Sandra. "Feel my cheeks."

"La la la," sang Gulliver, putting his fingers over his cold ears.

"My feet are hot too," remarked Osborn. "It's the walking socks."

"Are they that bad?" asked Sandra. "Never mind, they'll be fine when they're washed, a bit of *Valiant* works wonders. This is fun, but it doesn't really feel like Christmas Eve."

"It doesn't really feel like Christmas Day," said Madeleine, as she and Sandra waited for their turn in the bathroom. "Thank you for all the presents, I know it's mostly you who buys them."

"Well, Dad is always so busy and he really has been extremely stressed lately," replied Sandra. "It's worrying because it's almost as if it's who he is now, this tense, uptight, rather unhappy person. Still, he did unwind yesterday, so let's hope today goes smoothly and he enjoys himself. Thank you for my present too, darling! I love the earrings, I shall wear them all day today."

"It's all yours!" roared Osborn as he finished in the bathroom and made a good impression of stomping up the stairs.

"Do you mind awfully if I go in next?" asked Madeleine hopefully. "I really need to pee and I also need to wash my hair."

"No, you go," replied Sandra, inwardly wishing for the eight hundred and thirty-second time that they possessed a second bathroom. "I'll have to go in the kitchen and start peeling carrots and potatoes."

Sandra was still in the kitchen in her pyjamas and dressing gown when Caroline and Lawrence arrived for the day's festivities.

"You're all behind," said Caroline brightly. She was already wearing the red cardigan that was her Christmas present from Sandra and Osborn.

"Steady on, Caroline," said Lawrence, wiping his feet on the mat. He'd already taken off his shoes, but why he'd removed his socks was a mystery. "Your daughter will withhold her vegetables if you're rude about her behind."

"Ha," responded Sandra feebly, her head pounding from the chaos that was already prevalent. "Would you like coffee?"

"Ah, you know the way to my heart," replied Lawrence. "Thanks, Sandra. Are the others in the sitting room?"

"Go on in," said Sandra to her mother and Lawrence, before searching for some drugs to ease the pain in her head.

She had just finished chopping the last of the carrots and was carefully cutting a too-large potato in half when Osborn came into the kitchen, dressed in his new Christmas jumper.

"What are you doing? Don't use that knife on the kitchen top, it'll ruin it!" He glowered alarmingly at her and she saw red – which was actually quite a feat, as his jumper was blue.

"I was being very careful," she retaliated hotly. The kettle had boiled quickly. "I'm always careful, do you think I'd ruin our kitchen tops as if I'm stupid?"

"Those knives are very sharp, I always use a cutting board," he replied, still managing to glower.

"Well, excuse me for being less than perfect, but I'm working against the odds here," said Sandra, trying very hard to speak evenly, but failing. "I'm not even dressed yet, there are seven of us for lunch, I need to make coffee, I have a headache and it's Christmas Day!"

"I'll make coffee if you like," offered Gulliver, appearing around the doorway. "I'm a married man, you know."

"Thank you, Gulliver," said Sandra, grateful to him for instantly lifting the atmosphere. "While I think of it – not that I was thinking of it especially – but what were you and Damien wearing under your kilts?"

"Nothing, of course," replied Gulliver, grinning widely. He had a pleasantly large mouth in proportion to the rest of his head. "It had to be done."

"I thought so," said Sandra weakly. "I had to know, but now I wish I didn't know! Ah, Maddy's out..."

"Madeleine's gay?" asked Gulliver pseudo-innocently.

"Don't be so insane, mad boy," said Sandra, smiling. "I mean mad man. Actually, always be insane, it helps to keep *me* sane – I mean insane."

The day proceeded relatively smoothly for a day with seven relatives forced to inhabit the same house for at least eight consecutive hours in close proximity. Sandra's headache stayed with her for most of the day and Osborn was decidedly tense, but everyone else seemed to be having fun. Sandra had been worried that Caroline would find her first Christmas without Leonard very hard, but it didn't seem to be the case.

After tea, the subject of a summer holiday abroad was discussed, as a way of spending some happy time together, after what had been a most difficult couple of years. After a lot of deliberation and trying to take everyone's wishes into account, they decided on Lake Como in Italy. Osborn volunteered to research it on the internet and try to find a villa that would accommodate them all comfortably. It made sense that nobody would want to be accommodated uncomfortably on a holiday.

The following day, Gulliver and Bryony transferred to Anne and Stan's house. Caroline had asked Sandra, Osborn and Madeleine to her house for tea, but when they were there, Osborn was still undeniably moody. He spoke to Sandra so demeaningly at one point that she felt great anger building up inside and barely managed to contain it until they returned home.

She felt extremely sorry that Madeleine, who had looked forward to coming home for Christmas so much, was being subjected to such an atmosphere. However, almost as

soon as they stepped inside the front door, she found herself unable to hold back from telling Osborn how disappointed she was that the first Christmas without her father had been such a trial. She knew it was also the first Christmas without his mother, but she'd been under the delusion that the two of them could have joined together and helped each other through it. Osborn reacted badly and withdrew into himself for the rest of the evening, so Sandra went to apologise to Madeleine, who had understandably sought the sanctuary of her bedroom.

"It's OK, Mumsie," said Madeleine rather tiredly. "I know what Dad can be like. I love him dearly, but sometimes he goes into self-destruct mode. The trouble is, you seem to get caught in the fallout."

"What about you, darling?" asked Sandra, perching on the edge of the bed. "You got caught in the fallout of the fallout today."

"I'm fine, honestly. I'm not exactly happy to be going back to Cardiff tomorrow, but I *am* happy because I'll see Henri again."

"It's going well with the two of you, by the sound of it?"

"I guess so, although it's early days."

"Still, you seem sort of quietly contented, or something?"

"Yes. I think I'll always feel torn in two, because my life is in Cardiff now, but there's a part of me that yearns to be here with you and Dad. I know it's my choice and I still think it's the right choice, but I miss you so much sometimes."

"I miss you too," said Sandra, sad tears threatening to replace her earlier angry ones. "I don't know why life has turned out this way, it feels so hard sometimes. Do you remember what you used to write on notes to Dad and me when you were very young?"

"Love is it," replied Madeleine, smiling.

"Yes, love is it – and that's what keeps me going," said Sandra truthfully. "I'm so happy for the love between us, because it feels so strong and somehow pure. When life starts to get really shitty, all I have to do is remember the love."

"I know," said Madeleine dreamily. "We're here to love each other and learn vital lessons, we've just got to enjoy the best bits and learn from the shit."

It proved a little hard to remember the love, enjoy the best bits and learn from the shit when Madeleine returned to Cardiff. Gulliver and Bryony returned to Swansea on New Year's Eve, leaving Sandra and Osborn with a certain amount of post-Christmas débris to clear up, although many of the cards had been hand-delivered. As Sandra tidied and cleaned, she realised she was reminiscing about the recent holiday with some bitter-sweet memories, which were nothing to do with the atrocious candied lemon sweets that Caroline had given Sandra.

They were both too tired to welcome in the coming year and went to bed about an hour before midnight. As often happened, Sandra found herself lying awake and pondering upon the meaning of her life as she knew it.

'I wonder how Osborn can sometimes seem so much like two different people in the same body?' she thought, gazing at his recumbent form on his side of the shadowy bed in the shadowy room. 'I understand that it's been incredibly difficult for him these last couple of years because of his parents' illness and death, complicated by the nasty shenanigans from Kirsty and Karla, as well as the responsibility of selling the house. I understand that, I really do, but I've had a very hard year too.' She sighed and gazed at the ceiling.

'I think I've coped very well with my Dad dying. I miss him so much, but I'm happy that he's free. I know he's absolutely fine, deep down in my soul and that actually feels good. I think I did most of my crying and mourning when he was fading away in hospital. Fading away into beautiful light, like the Eager song. I still love that song.'

'I wish I found it easier with Mum, but it must be very hard for her too. I don't know what it's like to be 80, newly widowed and living on your own, so I must be compassionate, even when she says weird, provocative things to me.' She sighed and looked at the window.

'I'm happy that Gulliver's living the life he wants, even though I don't get to see him very often. I miss Madeleine too, but I have a strange feeling that she's going to be

OK with Henri and she might even settle down, which will be great. I can't help wishing she lived a bit closer than Cardiff, but it could be so much worse. It really could be so much worse and I know I have so many blessings.' She sighed and stared at the wall opposite the bed.

'Why then do I feel this niggling hollowness, this chronic sense of feeling as if I'm not living my life exactly as I should be? I don't know where I am spiritually, because we're gradually losing contact with Terry and Kerry, which is a shame. Some of those workshops were mad, but fun! Osborn seems to be enjoying the teaching at Rainbow Healers, although I don't know where I fit in. I don't feel as if I fit in anywhere. I'm not even writing anymore because life has been so tiring.

'Is that an excuse? No, I don't think so, because I seem to have needed all my energy these last few months to survive. I'm so tired, existentially and physically. I suppose I should go to sleep.' She closed her eyes and began to drift off, but only in the somnolent sense.

'Sod it!' She was jolted back to reality by the loud banging of fireworks from a neighbour's garden, combined with church bells ringing in the New Year. 'Ah, so it's now 2006,' she thought fuzzily. 'Well, thank you 2005 and good sodding riddance.'

## CHAPTER 19

The first quarter of 2006 was far less painful than the first quarter of the previous year, although it did start a little abrasively. Sandra decided to pay a special visit to Caroline with Osborn on New Year's Day, because she felt her mother might be missing Leonard at the start of a year without him.

However, Caroline seemed fractious and was quite rude to Osborn when he attempted to show her how to video a programme that she said she wanted to video. Sandra walked home feeling emotionally bruised. She'd given up her time and Osborn's in an act of compassion, only to be more or less rejected.

She was determined to rise above it, though, knowing the bruise would heal as bruises do. She started to put her energy into dealing with her mother's front garden, attempting to cut back severely the forsythia that was growing out once again over the path. One day she became so sick of battling with the old bush (the forsythia, not her mother) that she told Caroline it would have to go.

After initially saying how much she liked the forsythia in flower, Caroline grudgingly agreed that Sandra could cut it down. Sandra choked back her aggrieved words that it was far too big and tall for her to deal with and instead feverishly hacked away at the bush wherever she could reach, even though she ended up scratched and aching from the effort. She knew she would eventually have to rely on Osborn to dig it up when he was able.

She was aware that deep down she was feeling hurt by her mother's attitude towards her and found herself wondering if their relationship was becoming fractured by an insidious imbalance, now that Leonard was no longer there to play his part in the original threesome.

On the more positive side, Madeleine was promoted within *Sewall* and one of Gulliver's photos appeared on the front cover of a national photography magazine. After searching diligently on the internet, Osborn had found a pleasant looking villa at the shore of Lake Como to rent for two weeks in July and on receiving everyone's approval, had paid the deposit.

Two exciting purchases made early in the year were a new computer for Sandra and a new car for Osborn. Sandra became somewhat annoyed that both Caroline and Lawrence made comments about them spending so much money, when they had been struggling financially for most of their married life. It wasn't as if they were spending for the sake of it, as both the computer and the car had been on their last legs anyway – not that they actually possessed any such limbs.

During the cold, wet, windy and occasionally sunny short days of winter, Sandra occupied herself by helping Osborn to rewrite all the very outdated literature belonging to Rainbow Healers (with the committee's approval), as well as helping him to write a

completely new set of course notes for the healing course. She then laboriously proof read it all. After having becoming incensed, disappointed and eventually sad at the amount of hours Osborn had seemed happy to sit typing away on his computer keyboard most evenings, she had decided to give in and join him in his task. Besides, the written word was her thing. She also proof read Gulliver's honeymoon travelogue for his website, which was much more fun.

In February, Madeleine came home for a long weekend and went along to a pre-arranged reading with Claire Sight, the medium who Sandra and Osborn knew from the meetings they had once enjoyed at Terry and Kerry's house.

Madeleine seemed a little bemused by the reading, the main message of which seemed to be that her life plan was currently ticking over, while she waited for other people to move into the right configuration for plan B. She had apparently been forced to abandon plan A when her first serious and steady boyfriend Drew had failed to make a life commitment to her.

Although Madeleine, Osborn and Sandra engaged in normal pursuits that they often enjoyed during Madeleine's visits home, including drinking coffee at a garden centre, shopping, walking and watching a film or two – on this occasion *Slightly Chilled Comfort Farm* and *The Daddy* – Sandra began to feel that Madeleine was unusually distant. It was true she normally sat on the other sofa by herself anyway, but she didn't come in and perch on the end of their bed in the morning while they all chatted and drank tea and she tended not to follow Sandra around the house any longer, as she once would have done.

Sandra began to feel strangely and irrevocably bereft, as if a vital part of her life-force was being withdrawn. She lay awake one night reasoning that it was only natural and good for Madeleine to move on into her adult life and start to behave slightly differently. She was genuinely pleased that Madeleine was happy with Henri and doing well in her job, but she simply wasn't prepared for the overwhelming sense of loss she was experiencing from Maddy's sudden lessening of closeness.

She managed to enjoy the family day they all spent together with Caroline and Lawrence, but on the morning when it was time to go to the railway station with Madeleine, Sandra ignominiously fell apart. She stood in the sitting room with tears streaming down her face, while Madeleine looked upon her with great concern and asked her what was wrong.

"I'm so sorry," gulped Sandra, feeling as if she was the child and Madeleine the adult. "I'm being silly."

"But what's *wrong*?"

"I miss you! You seem to have grown away a bit and even though I know that's absolutely the way it should be and part of me is glad, it's so hard not seeing you very often and this time you seem a bit distant. I felt so close to you at Christmas, but – I know you're emotionally involved with Henri now and I'm so pleased for you, I really am, because he sounds lovely, but I just miss you!"

"Oh Mumsie." Madeleine wrapped her arms around Sandra in a long, healing hug, before gently disengaging and looking at her mother. "I'm still me and you're still you! I don't know why I seem more distant to you this time. I'm sorry, it's not intentional. I seem to have a lot to think about, that reading was a bit of a surprise."

"I feel such an idiot, as if I'm making something out of nothing," said Sandra, blowing her nose and gradually feeling calmer. "I don't mean to upset you, I'm quite surprised at the strength of my own emotions. I'm fine really, honestly I am."

"Like I believe you. Will you be OK?" Madeleine frowned a little as she gazed at Sandra. "I'll email you tomorrow from work. I love you, Mumsie!"

"I love you too, Maddy, more than I sometimes even realise myself."

Three days later, Gulliver arrived to stay for five days on his own, while Bryony attended a conference in Majorca in her capacity as dendroclimatologist – which was a word that Sandra found truly fascinating, if not a little barking mad. She was still feeling somewhat unsettled by Madeleine's visit, but found that she was able to allow her mother-of-Gulliver persona to be in ascendance.

Gulliver and Madeleine remained two wildly different people in personality, appearance and outlook, although they weren't angry all that often. Sandra presumed it was because of their extreme differences that she was completely able to switch from interacting closely with one to the other, understanding where each of them was coming from and accepting them for who they were.

It remained an underlying sadness that they didn't always seem to understand one another and had never been particularly close as brother and sister, but she knew it could be a whole lot worse.

Sandra, Osborn and Gulliver enjoyed walking on Dartmoor one day, where they found a stone row they'd never visited before. The weather was cold, although pleasant in the sun when it appeared. They took sandwiches for lunch, which they ate by the stone row, perched on granite boulders amid the moor grasses growing over shallow peat, looking out over the wide expanses in every direction to the horizon, feeling free and connected to nature in the raw (despite being suitably attired against the cold).

Caroline and Lawrence joined them for a family day, during which they laughed hysterically when Lawrence asked Caroline if she could remember when groats had been legal tender. After tea, they all took turns to look at the *Rough Lonely Planet Guide* that Gulliver had bought about Italy, feeling a sense of mounting excitement about the forthcoming holiday. It was true that it wouldn't come forth for another five months, but it seemed a long time since Sandra and Osborn had enjoyed a shared sense of happy anticipation.

One day Gulliver dug up the remains of the fated forsythia, which pleased Sandra no end, though not in an infinite sense. That evening, Gulliver drove Sandra and Osborn to *The Far Out Inn* where they appeared to be incredibly lucky to find an empty table.

After wondering why there were red roses decorating the bar and a few plastic Cupids placed menacingly around the room, they realised it was Valentine's Day. Gulliver laughed out loud to think he'd ended up going out for a romantic pub meal with his parents, which Sandra thought was a conclusive indicator of how much he had matured from the embarrassed youth who once would have been mortified by such a faux pas.

On one evening of his visit, however, Gulliver and Osborn sat together companionably and aptly in the sitting room watching the film *Kill Phil*, while Sandra (who violently hated violence) wandered around the house feeling alone and sorry for herself, aware that she was probably still emotionally unsettled.

This was confirmed the following evening when Gulliver and Osborn both watched the sequel, *Kill Jill*. Sandra knew she was being oversensitive, but felt even more like a spare part when they began to talk about going together to the *Focus on Focusing* exhibition, soon to be held in Birmingham. However, she said goodbye to Gulliver with a smile, determined he would have no inkling, not even the minutest blot or tiniest splodge, about how she felt.

Over the next few weeks, Caroline was tenaciously intent on having some of her house decorated, which required significant amounts of help from Sandra and Osborn. They spent a couple of Saturdays taking her to buy wallpaper, paint and new doors, followed by shifting furniture from the relevant rooms, ready for the local decorator she had hired. It would, after all, have been counterproductive to shift furniture from irrelevant rooms.

The local decorator, Matt White, was a taciturn man with white hair (though not matt, or even matted) and a painfully slow way of speaking. He was somewhere in his seventh decade, but Caroline seemed to get along well with him, which put Sandra's mind at rest. She was mainly relieved that Caroline hadn't expected Osborn to do any decorating. Matt White didn't fit Caroline's new doors perfectly and he made a ghastly sawdusty mess in the garage, but on the whole it seemed to go well.

At the end of February, Sandra and Osborn travelled to Swansea and stayed at Gulliver and Bryony's flat for a long weekend. Gulliver and Bryony were there, which was a bonus. It was a pleasantly proportioned flat that overlooked Swansea Bay and on the Saturday, Gulliver took them on a walk to Whiteford Sands, the most northerly beach on the Gower Peninsula. They walked along country lanes, over sand dunes, through pine woods and along the long beach until they arrived at the lighthouse.

"You like lighthouses, don't you, Gulliver," remarked Sandra as they stood and stared for a while.

"Yes, they're OK," replied Gulliver with a trace of his old nonchalance, although he was still 29. "I like old wrecks too. I like you, Mother."

"Thank you! We've been walking for ages, I thought you said this was a short walk?"

"Well, it's not exactly long. Not long long. Ah, Dad's got his camera out. You'll be OK with Bryony tomorrow while Dad and I are at *Focus on Focusing*, won't you?"

"I'm sure we'll be fine," replied Sandra, inwardly feeling trepidation at spending the day with someone she didn't yet know very well. "Madeleine's going to catch the train to Swansea at about midday, so Bryony will only have to put up with her mother-in-law for the morning."

"Oh, Bryony doesn't mind," said Gulliver airily. The wind had sprung up suddenly. "She's not afflicted with shyness like we are."

"You feel you're shy?" asked Sandra with some surprise.

"Did I say that?" replied Gulliver, grinning. "We'd better head back to the car, the wind's up and I don't like the way it's blowing the sand everywhere."

"It's unlike you to have the wind up about the wind being up," mused Sandra, as they started to walk briskly, but her words were blown away in the wind.

The following day, Osborn and Gulliver left for Birmingham early in the morning, leaving Sandra and Bryony to their own devices. Bryony had obviously thought of how she could occupy her mother-in-law, as she suggested a drive to the Worm's Head area, where they walked companionably along grassy, undulating cliff-tops in a bitterly cold wind. They talked of various random topics, but generally speaking – and they did speak generally – it seemed to go well.

However, plans were not going as well for Madeleine, who was delayed at Cardiff train station because there was a football match taking place (albeit not in the train station itself). However, she finally arrived in Swansea during mid-afternoon and back at the flat, the three of them attempted to bond with a hot drink and a biscuit. Sandra was rather tired by this time and became a little lost for words, but Bryony suggested a game of *Scribble*, so they sat for an hour or so with their eyes glued to the *Scribble* board.

"I'm stuck," said Sandra near the end of the game. "I've got vowel problems."

"Me too," said Madeleine, "but I think I can go."

"Have you tried *Crapease*?" asked Bryony with her inscrutable grey-blue eyes. "Ah, is that them back already?"

Osborn and Gulliver had returned earlier than expected, bringing takeaway pizzas with them. Osborn had apparently been so tired in the pizza shop that he'd almost left his pizza behind, but fortunately Gulliver had prompted him to take away his takeaway.

They whiled away the evening with a quiet glass of wine and a noisy game of *Dos*, before disappearing to their various beds. Sandra and Osborn's bed was actually a futon and Madeleine's bed was a sofa, but they all slept well.

After saying goodbye the next morning, Osborn drove himself, Sandra and Madeleine to Cardiff, where the three of them enjoyed a spot of clothes shopping and some lunch in *Welsh Home Stores*.

"Thanks for this," said Madeleine indicating her aubergine, grape and feta cheese panini. "It's odd, but I'm hungry today. I haven't been eating all that well, to be honest."

"What?" Sandra looked up fearfully.

"Oh no, I'm OK, honestly. I just meant that Alana spends most of her time with her boyfriend now, so we don't cook our evening meal together anymore. I'm so tired when I get home from work that I can't be bothered to cook properly. I end up having things like filled pasta and beans on toast, although Henri and I do go out to eat now and again." A smile crept across Madeleine's face, before it clouded over again. "I hate living in that flat, though, it's falling to bits. The floor in the bathroom sags so much that I sit on the toilet afraid I'm going to disappear down into the floor below."

"You've lived in some pretty dire places in Cardiff," said Osborn baldly. It was no surprise, since he'd started to lose his hair in his third decade. "I hope you get the bond money back when the time comes."

"So do I," sighed Madeleine, unscrewing the lid from her bottle of sparkling grapefruit and strawberry water. "I don't know where I'm going to live next, but it won't be with Alana. I lie awake at night and worry about it sometimes, but I have to trust that it'll turn out all right."

"I'm sure it will," soothed Sandra, privately wondering if Madeleine and Henri would end up living together.

"I know." Madeleine sighed again. "I would really like to feel my life is sorted out a bit more, though."

"I'm not sure that's in the life plan," said Sandra, smiling sagely. Green didn't really suit her. "I mean everyone's life plan – well, Dad's and mine and yours, anyway."

The life plan threw up another unsettling event, when Osborn was unexpectedly driven home from work one Monday morning by a colleague and entered the house looking grey and shaken.

"I think I've given myself another hernia," he said, lurching uncharacteristically into the kitchen. "I need a drink of water, I feel rather sick."

"How did you do it?" asked Sandra, pouring water into a glass for him.

"Lifting a piece of equipment," he replied, sipping the water gratefully, his normal colour gradually returning. "I've lifted this particular piece of equipment loads of times in the past, but I must have been feeling tired and I sort of heaved it awkwardly. I'll have to go and see about it."

"Shall I come with you?" asked Sandra immediately. "Oh, I'm due to see Belinda today, but I can put her off."

"No, I feel much better now," said Osborn, his energy resuming a more normal level. "I can't believe I've been so stupid. Mind you, I did ask for someone to help me shift stuff in the lab I was preparing, but Bill Bustard said there was nobody to spare and I had to do it myself. I should have refused. What an idiot! I feel like going back into work and hurling the whole bloody lot into his office."

"The GP's referred Osborn to a consultant," said Sandra to Belinda, reading aloud from a text message she had just received from Osborn. "He's going to need an operation." They were sitting companionably in *Caffè Caesar*, sipping cappuccinos and talking about all sorts. Sandra had always been partial to a bit of liquorice.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry to hear that," said Belinda sympathetically. "Has he had an operation before?"

"Yes, quite a few when he was a child. Two eye operations, an appendectomy, a tonsillectomy and a broken wrist repair. He also had a hernia repair in 1990, which is probably why he feels so upset about this one."

"That's quite a score," mused Belinda, stirring the froth around in her cup. "I've never had an operation."

"Nor has Mum."

"How is she?"

"It's difficult to say, really." Sandra stirred her own cappuccino froth around, wondering whether to be brutally honest, knowing that Belinda had happy memories of her auntie. She decided on the brutal honesty. "She's taking more of our energy than usual because she wants lots of decorating done in her house. I understand that and I think it's healthy that she's moving on after Dad died, but she seems to be turning to me for more and more and she frets so much about so many ridiculously small things, like what biscuits to offer the decorator and what furniture to move. Oh no, Osborn won't be able to move her furniture back!"

"Oh dear. Is there anybody else?"

"Just Osborn's brother, Lawrence. I suppose we'll have to ask him, I'm sure he won't mind. Anyway, enough about me and my problems, how are you and your problems?" Sandra and Belinda both laughed comfortably. *Caffè Caesar* had recently been refurbished.

"Oh, the same as usual. My sister's been saying awful things about me again and now she's fallen out with her own two sons, would you believe?"

"I think Hetty has a screw loose if you don't mind me saying, the way she's always falling out with people and getting her knickers in a twist. I suppose her name's applicable, though."

"Ian still goes out dancing on Saturday evenings, but won't go out to the theatre or a meal with me."

"Poor Belinda, it's not fair, is it!"

"It's absolutely dark sometimes. Speaking of that, I don't suppose you'd fancy a dark chocolate mocha with orange undertones and smooth milky overtones?"

"Oh yes."

## CHAPTER 20

"She's lovely!" Sandra gazed at Alison's new granddaughter Peony, as she lay sleeping on a blanket on the floor. "You must be so happy. Will you be helping to look after her like you do with Tamsin?"

"Yes, we've already been asked," replied Alison, also gazing at Peony. "I'm caught between feeling really happy to look after them and feeling used and taken for granted. Even though Tamsin's at school now, we'd still have to meet her from school on the days we're on duty, so to speak."

"How many days a week?"

"Three. Sam and Karen say they can only afford to send Peony to nursery two days a week."

"It must be difficult for you," said Sandra thoughtfully. "It does seem as if our generation are being used as child minders at a time when it would be really lovely to enjoy a bit of well-earned freedom – and yet who would willingly choose for strangers to look after their own grandchildren? It's a dilemma and I'm pretty sure I'd feel exactly the same as you."

"Anne Stanpool was saying she doesn't think Bryony's the motherly type," said Alison. "I'd better be careful what I'm saying here, I'm caught in the middle knowing both you and the mother of your daughter-in-law!"

"I don't mind what you say to Anne about me," replied Sandra honestly. "How long have you known her?"

"Let me think, Helen and Sam were at junior school," calculated Alison, "so it must be about 22 years now."

"Wow, we're getting so old."

"I know. It felt odd when my mum died, knowing I'm the next generation in line to kick the old mortal bucket. I still miss telling her things, but she wasn't happy living on her own."

"I don't think my mum's happy living on her own," said Sandra, voicing an idea that had entered her mind some time ago. "I find it difficult when she treats me as young, strong and carefree, just because to her generation, my generation *does* seem young. It's all relative, of course. I don't know – families!"

"Yes, in our mothers' generation it was taken for granted that daughters would look after their ageing parents, but not necessarily sons."

"Such blatant inequality, but I must say that with Osborn's parents it was the two sons who looked after them, while the daughter didn't pull her weight at all."

"I don't think our children's generation is prey to the same underlying expectation to look after us when we're ageing – which sometimes feels like right now," said Sandra, laughing ruefully. "Not that I would ever want to burden them with that," she added truthfully.

"Me neither," said Alison, as Peony squirmed and opened her eyes. "Hello little one," she said gently to her granddaughter. "You seem to have generated quite a lot of multi-generational talk."

It was the beginning of April. Osborn was sitting up in a hospital bed having his blood pressure taken, while Sandra and Gulliver waited with him for his hernia operation to proceed. Sandra was immensely grateful for Gulliver's offer to come home for a few days

and help out with transport to and from hospital, amongst other things. It was an offer that Sandra knew was costing him, as apart from fuel prices, he hated hospitals and was standing by the wall in Osborn's single room, looking tense and apprehensive.

"That's fine, very good," said the nurse, taking the cuff off Osborn's arm. "You must be quite relaxed."

"You're more relaxed than I am," muttered Gulliver after the nurse had gone.

"Sit down," offered Sandra from the one comfy chair in the room. "I don't mind standing for a while."

"You'd think I could have two chairs in the room for what I paid," said Osborn, referring to the fact that he'd opted to pay for a private operation to repair his large and painful hernia. He'd chosen to do so because he would have had to wait at least a year on the National Health and happened to have the money from his mother's will. As it was, the small hospital seemed bustling, with lots of people audible from other rooms along and across the corridor. Osborn had also been asked if students could watch his operation for learning purposes.

"How much was it?" asked Gulliver conversationally as he sat in the vacated chair, obviously trying to take his mind off himself.

"All but two grand," replied Osborn, raising his eyebrows.

"Money well spent in the circumstances," said Sandra, looking out of the window and wishing the waiting was over. "I meant to ask what your end figure was for that craft fair you did last week, Gulliver?"

"A bit heavier than usual," replied Gulliver, ignoring Sandra's puzzled look. "I think it's all Bryony's home cooking."

The following day, Gulliver and Sandra went to collect Osborn a mere 20 hours after his operation. He was very sore, but quite bright. This was reflected in the *Scribble* game he played in the afternoon with them, beating both their scores by 100.

Gulliver returned to Swansea after a few days, as all was going well. Osborn thankfully experienced a textbook recovery, although when he became tired of reading, he would sit in the garden or at his computer, planning the redecoration of the bathroom and sitting room. He also spent copious hours rewriting the course notes for *Rainbow Healers*, although most of his work was original. He soon started to go on short walks as the spring weather blossomed into a pre-summer heatwave, first of all going partway with Sandra as she walked to the shops in Five Street and finally, all the way.

Madeleine had rung frequently since the day of his operation, clearly torn between wanting to be there and being caught up with life in Cardiff, as she was forced to look for somewhere new to live by the end of June. One evening she rang sounding very excited.

"I'm glad you're OK," she said, after asking how they both were. "I've got some news. Henri and I are going to find a flat together."

"It's very nice of him to go along with you, it must be quite daunting on your own," said Sandra, somewhat distracted by the sight of Osborn inspecting his scar on the sofa. What it was doing on the sofa, she had no idea.

"We're going to live together," explained Madeleine patiently. "Are you sure you're OK?"

"What? Yes! That's really good news, darling! It somehow puts my mind at rest," replied Sandra, smiling. "It's not that I don't trust you on your own – in fact, you know that I trust you implicitly in so many ways, but it's so much nicer for *you* to live with someone you care about. I'm so pleased for you! I think you need to speak with Dad for a minute, he's almost grabbing the phone from me."

"OK, bye Mumsie!"

April became May, which seemed illogical. Lawrence had visited several times since Osborn's operation, enjoying the fine weather by sitting out in the garden. Sometimes Sandra and Osborn joined him in the sunshine.

Caroline had been perturbed by what she thought was a drip from somewhere up in the loft where the water tank was, but a visit from a local plumber proved negative.

Early in May, when Osborn walked over to her house with Sandra, he discovered that Caroline's drip was actually a ticking clock. This led to a certain amount of mirth, amid commiserations about the plumber's bill.

"Oh well, at least he didn't charge me that much," said Caroline philosophically. "He did look at me rather strangely, but I don't really mind what people think of me these days. You don't when you get older, you know."

"I've never really minded what people think of me," said Osborn, as Sandra's mobile phone beeped at her.

"It's from Gulliver," she said, as she read it.

"He hasn't sent me a text," said Osborn, sounding peeved. "He always sends you texts and not me, why is that?"

"It's just because in the past you used to forget to look at your phone and he was more likely to get a reply from me," explained Sandra kindly. "Wow! He and Bryony are buying a house, he's sent us the details in an email."

"Is it in Swansea?" asked Caroline, sniffing.

"Yes, of course," replied Sandra, "that's where Bryony's job is."

"I thought they might move back here to settle down," said Caroline. "Swansea's a long way away."

"You don't have to tell me," replied Sandra sadly. "It takes us about four hours to drive there, although that's with a stop for coffee. I don't think I'll ever have the comfort of my son or daughter living close by."

"At least you can go and visit them," pursued Caroline. "I wish I had someone to go and visit."

Sandra managed to keep her cool, although she could almost feel Osborn bristling beside her. She was unsure whether Caroline's remark was simply inconsiderate or plain provocative, but she couldn't face a three-way altercation, so the moment passed.

The following week, Sandra, Osborn and Caroline paid a visit to Leonard's special stone at The Flingers on Bodmin Moor. As Sandra watched Caroline trailing along the stony uphill path to the stone circle on the windy moor, looking smaller and slightly bent over, she felt sorry for her mother, who had already survived a year of widowhood at the start of her ninth decade. As they reached the stone circle and Caroline put her hand lovingly on Leonard's stone, Sandra resolved to make more allowances for her mother – even during the weekly word torture of *Scribble* – if she possibly could.

The week after, three windows were replaced in Sandra and Osborn's house, followed by a great deal of shopping for the spate of decorating that took place, as Osborn gradually regained his strength. However, he decided not to attempt the decorating himself, especially as the sitting room ceiling needed to be re-plastered. Lawrence turned out to be very helpful in any necessary furniture moving and only managed to move furniture unnecessarily once or twice.

At the end of May, Osborn went back to work and life resumed a more normal pattern. Sandra began to attack the heathers that were threatening to take over her mother's front garden, after having agreed with Caroline that it was best to take them out in their entirety. This involved a huge amount of work on Sandra's part, but her aim was to make the whole garden more manageable, since it was clear that Sandra was the main gardener, as well as most often the only one.

At the beginning of June, Caroline went to the Isle of Wight for a five-day holiday with a few friends, which felt like a week of freedom for Sandra. However, as she drank tea in Gina's sitting room one morning, she was aware of being reluctant to tell Gina how she was beginning to feel about Caroline. Gina's mother had died when Gina had not long given birth to her son Adam and Sandra knew that Gina had missed her mother terribly at that time.

It was proving a little difficult to talk anyway, as Gina's second bright, blond-haired grandson, Owen, was with them. Despite the unusual complication, they managed a conversation of sorts, in between observations from Owen concerning whales, sharks, dolphins, killer sharks and killer dolphins (but not really).

"Our life experiences are a bit different at the moment, as far as parents and grandchildren go," mused Sandra aloud. "They always were with siblings, of course, with you being one of six and me being one of one."

"What's brought this on, then?" asked Gina, tucking away a strand of long, fair but visibly greying hair out of her eyes.

"Oh, I don't know. Well, I do – it's Mum and this feeling that she's trying to pull me into her life to fill the gaping void that Dad left, to save her from what I assume is her aching loneliness. She wants me to solve all her problems. It's too much. I do my best for her, I always have done, but my best is getting very tired."

"That's pretty heavy stuff. Owen, don't do that!"

"I know. I'm sorry, I know I should be grateful that my mother's still alive."

"It's OK Sandra, you don't need to apologise. It's true that our lives are different, but that doesn't make your life any less hard than you're finding it. I do still miss my mum and I've wondered so often over the years what she'd think of Adam and Kate as they grew up. Now I wonder what she'd think of Reece and Owen and me as their grandmother. I'm not so deluded as to think she'd be some sort of saint if she were still alive. She could be driving me insane, just like it sounds your mother is right now, but I'm free of that particular reality you're currently going through. Owen, put those shoes down, please!"

"You're so wise, Gina – and I'm glad you say how you honestly feel."

"I got sick of being the baby of the family, with my parents and all my older brothers and sisters trying to shield me from life, when all I ever wanted was to know the truth. Owen, you mustn't stick that up your nose!"

"That sounds like me, except it was my mother who wouldn't tell me about things. I can remember when a friend of hers died during an operation and she tried to pretend to me that it hadn't happened. I wanted to know the truth and it actually felt far more frightening because she wouldn't talk to me about it."

"I can understand that. I don't know, all these family issues, just wait till you're a grandmother and – Owen! Take them out of your mouth, now! Sorry Sandra."

"Don't worry, I can see you have your hands full. I must go, but I think I'm free next week, if you are. I'm glad you're you, Gee."

"Thank you, Sandra, I'm glad you're you too."

"Ah, U2. I used to really like them."

"Ah, Them. Yes, they were nice."

"Ah, The Nice. They had lots of hair and small faces."

"Ah, Small Faces. They made me move!"

"Ah, The Move. They were animals."

"Ah, The Animals. They used to wear deep purple."

"Ah, Deep Purple. They cheered me up when I had a bad finger."

"Ah, Badfinger. Who?"

"Ah, The Who. Shall we stop this while we have status quo?"

"Ah, Status Quo. Yes!"

"Ah, Yes. Yes, let's stop."

"Owen! Not up your bottom!"

Almost unbelievably, Sandra and Osborn celebrated their 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in early June. They did actually believe it as they walked happily around the Eden Project, because apart from remembering the years – the long years – the maths worked out.

In the evening, they went to *The Ploughperson* for a meal, determined to make the most of their special day for once. However, as the two of them sat at a table with empty seats, Sandra wished with all her heart that the seats could be filled with Gulliver and Madeleine, as well as their respective partners, of course – and Sandra did respect the fact that Gulliver and Madeleine came with partners now.

"Oh well, at least Mum was occupied today with her trip to *Barometer World*," mused Sandra, over her rum and orange. "I'm so glad about that. It took the pressure off, because otherwise I might have felt we had to invite her along with us, seeing she and Dad had the same anniversary date."

"I was never quite sure why you chose the same date as your parents for our wedding," ruminated Osborn, sipping thoughtfully from his pint of *Old Speckled Cock*. "I just went along with it, to keep you happy."

"It was a mistake," admitted Sandra, remembering all the years they had spent feeling duty-bound to celebrate their anniversary with Caroline and Leonard. "Oh well, things change – and Mum's certainly changed. She says such loaded things now, I feel my hackles rising and my self-confidence falling. Still, I must be kind to her, she's 80."

"I've noticed your energy level drops if she's not happy," considered Osborn. "The atmosphere becomes quite heavy sometimes, like it does with Kirsty."

"Yes, that was weird, the way Kirsty suddenly wanted to visit Lawrence on his birthday," said Sandra, remembering the very awkward day they had recently spent in her company. "I'm surprised Lawrence went along with it, considering the way he talks about her sometimes."

"He wanted to keep the moral high ground," replied Osborn, "but the last time I saw him, he said he wouldn't let her stay at his place again, because she reeked of stale smoke and wanted to take control all the time."

"Families can be such a pain. Oh, I do miss Gulliver and Madeleine!"

"Happy birthday, Gulliver!" Sandra had refrained from ringing him until 13:30, when he was precisely 30 years old.

"Thank you. Don't sing."

"OK. Are you doing anything special this evening?"

"Don't be personal, Mother."

"You know what I mean."

"I'm not sure, Bryony and I may go out to *The Wonky Woodcutter* but we haven't planned anything."

"Have you got a birthday cake?"

"I made a carrot cake, but I ran out of carrots, so it's a sort of carrot, parsnip and squash cake."

"Did you use self-raising flour? That may have helped."

"I think so. Are you joking?"

"Just enjoy it all. I do miss you."

"No Mother, you hit me right here." Sandra heard a thwacking noise as Gulliver presumably hit his chest. She realised she was smiling throughout the whole ensuing telephone conversation, despite the fact that she wished with all her heart, liver and large intestine that she could see him on his birthday.

"Happy birthday, Maddy!" Ten days later, Sandra felt a sense of *déjà vu*, except that Maddy wasn't Gulliver and she had attained 25 years rather than 30. The telephone call had also had to wait until the evening, when Madeleine and Henri had finished moving into their new flat.

"Thank you! Is Dad there? Can you both sing happy birthday like you used to?"

"OK. Here we go..."

"Very tuneful, kind of," said Madeleine, chuckling happily after they'd finished.

"Henri didn't believe you'd do it. I do miss you two!"

"We miss you too. Well, just you really, because we haven't met Henri yet – but how was your day?" Sandra had taken the receiver while Osborn waited impatiently for his turn.

"Tiring." Madeleine groaned. "I'm not sure I like this flat, either, I can see all its faults now we've actually moved in. The floors are uneven and the walls are all bumpy."

"Not really a flat, then? Oh dear, but at least you're not on your own and later on you can look around for somewhere better?"

"Oh yes, I'm happy really. You must meet Henri somehow, I'll work on it."

"I hope you enjoy your evening, darling." Sandra realised she had been smiling throughout the whole telephone call with Madeleine, despite the fact that she wished with all her heart, lungs and pancreas that she could see her on her birthday.

## CHAPTER 21

Very little smiling took place the next day, after Osborn realised all was not well when it was time to pay the balance of their Lake Como holiday. Fortunately, he'd had the sense to try to contact the owner of the villa they'd booked before paying, but there was no reply. He emailed several times and rang both telephone numbers given on the website, but all to no avail.

After practically tearing out his hair, which wouldn't have been incredibly difficult, he decided he had probably been the victim of an online scam. The next day, he and Lawrence visited travel agents in an attempt to find a late deal, as their flight was still booked. However, the only option Lawrence would countenance was Tuscany, where Caroline had been before and where Sandra felt would be far too hot in July for both her mother and herself.

Meanwhile, Gulliver had been searching on the internet for alternative accommodation and came up with a likely looking old farmhouse in Aosta, northern Italy, near the Italian end of the Mont Blanc tunnel. Osborn rang the owners and spoke for some time, sorting out as many details as he could think of, in an effort to make the option foolproof.

It seemed as if the potential catastrophe had been averted and Aosta was looking good. It therefore came as a complete shock when Lawrence said that if they went to Aosta, he would pull out of the holiday. He objected to the fact that in winter Aosta was a ski resort and the old farmhouse was halfway up the mountain, because he loathed snow and wanted to go somewhere hot for a holiday. What was far worse, however, was the fact that he called Osborn a mug for being caught out by an internet scam and losing their deposit.

Time was running out and they had to make a decision. Sandra and Osborn paid a visit to Caroline to explain the situation and she agreed that Aosta was the best solution. As Lawrence was in a minority of one, they apprehensively went ahead and booked the old farmhouse. The full cost worked out cheaper than the balance of the Lake Como villa would have been, so Osborn gave Lawrence back his deposit. It was a sorry situation, but Osborn could do nothing more for Lawrence, other than apologise.

Apologising must have been on Osborn's mind, because a weekend of altercations between Sandra and Osborn followed, in which Osborn accused Sandra of never saying she was sorry. She tried not to feel hurt, realising there was simply too much going on for any current calmness.

Osborn was sorting out arrangements with their neighbour's son, who was going to fit a new bathroom while they were in Italy. Meanwhile, their new sitting room carpet was laid in between all the packing. Even the pavement outside their house was being dug up and replaced by the council, which led to a significant amount of noise, dust and awkward access.

They had no sympathy from Gulliver and Bryony, however, as they were due to move into their new house the week after the holiday and had become prey to all the frustrations, upheavals and paperwork of imminent home-moving. Even Madeleine was a little uptight about an impending interview for a new position with a different team within *Sewall*. The one good aspect of the chaos, as far as Sandra was concerned, was that there was no time to become anxious about the impending flight.

Sandra sat beside Madeleine in the smaller than expected plane, quaking in her trusty all-terrain sandals, but grateful that the flight to Milan Malpensa airport was shorter than expected, at one-and three-quarter hours. As Madeleine chatted to her therapeutically, Sandra could hear Osborn in the seat behind, talking occasionally to Caroline. Finally, they flew over the Alps and as Sandra looked out over the snowy mountain tops, her wonder at planet Earth's beauty almost overcame her terror.

It therefore felt wonderful to land on Italian soil, or the tarmac of the runway, to be precise. They collected the two cars they had pre-booked, found some sandwiches in a handy nearby supermarket, decided to pay for them and ate them in the car park. The air was hot, dry and exciting and Sandra could hardly wait to start the holiday proper.

Meanwhile, they had to continue with the holiday improper, on a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Milan to Aosta. For this final part of the journey, Gulliver drove Osborn and Caroline in a blue Passat, while Bryony drove Sandra and Madeleine in a grey Renault Scenic.

After an interestingly missed turning halfway up the mountain, which rose impressively from the valley of Aosta below, they located the farmhouse. It was definitely large enough to accommodate them all, but seemed slightly dark and even dank in the basement, where Sandra, Osborn and Madeleine opted to sleep. Meanwhile, Caroline was allocated the twin bedroom on the ground floor, while Gulliver and Bryony took the sofa bed in the main room. There was another floor with a bedroom up some precariously winding stairs, but they had decided it was easier to be closer to the kitchen area incorporated within the main room.

The first evening, they all stood outside on the balcony amid a cacophony of cicadas, gazing down at the twinkling lights in Aosta valley and aware of the awesome mountains in the distance, even though they couldn't see them clearly. The holiday proper was about to begin!

Rather boringly, they had to sleep first and their first night was a little strange and uncomfortable as first nights often are. However, they spent their first day exploring Aosta, which proved to be a very interesting place, with a large vibrant piazza, many remains of Roman buildings, shops, towers and heavenly glimpses through buildings to the mountains beyond. It was very hot down in the valley and Sandra for one was relieved to return to the relative coolness of halfway up the mountain.

The following morning, they ventured further afield to Gran Paradiso National Park, stopping for a panini lunch in Cogne, a former iron ore mining village and now a pleasant stop for tourists. In the afternoon, they drove to nearby Valnontey, where Osborn and Gulliver headed up the mountain and the others walked up a gentle incline to the mountain alpine garden, for a stroll around the different mini-environments created for research into alpine plants, lichens and insects.

After their exertions in the heat of the afternoon, it felt wonderful to find a caffè in Valnontey, where they could sit down and indulge in their first Italian ice cream. Later, strolling back to the cars, Sandra was fascinated by the milky grey/green appearance of the nearby river, which Gulliver told her was silt washed down from the glaciers above.

The evening was spent playing *Dos*, sipping wine on the balcony and trying to see who could spit watermelon pips furthest into the vegetation below. This resulted in great hilarity, although Caroline didn't seem particularly amused.

The next day was a two-hour train trip to Turin for Sandra, Osborn, Madeleine and Caroline, while Gulliver and Bryony explored the top of the mountain they were halfway up or down, depending on how it was viewed. The train was clean and on time and they sat comfortably gazing at the very scenic scenery, which changed from chalets in various states of repair amid vine terraces growing up the mountainside, to drier, flatter country.

On stepping upon the platform at Torino Puerto Nueva, the hot air immediately engulfed them and stayed with them in varying degrees of intensity throughout the day. Sandra became rather concerned about her mother, who was walking along slowly and looking hot, so they decided to take a relaxing trip on a tour bus after, consuming a deliciously cold and most reviving *granite di limone*.

The tour was air-conditioned and enjoyable and as they were able to get on and off at various stops en route, they alighted at the Egyptian Museum that had the reputation of being second only to the one in Cairo. From the moment they stepped inside, Sandra, Osborn and Madeleine were transported into the wondrous world of the amazing Egyptian civilisation.

They gazed in awe at massive statues, mummies and artefacts, amid an atmosphere that made the hairs on the back of their necks stand up. That didn't actually last long, due to the sweat situation, but it was a truly fascinating place and Sandra for one wished they could have stayed there all day. However, Caroline appeared to be completely unimpressed and spent her time trailing after the others, looking very bored and sitting down in any available place she could find.

The train journey back seemed hotter, longer and far more crowded. As they finally stood up by the door on arrival at Aosta station, pushed forward by a crowd of Italian people, Sandra realised she wasn't sure how to open the door. Unseen to her, Madeleine pushed a large button and the door opened, followed by Osborn.

When Sandra went to pass through the door, however, it attempted to shut itself again with her in the middle. A strange moment of her life ensued, as she stood stuck in the door of an Italian train, with Madeleine and Osborn already on the platform and her mother and a crowd of impatient Italian people behind her. Fortunately, Osborn saw what was happening and rushed forward to push a large button on the outside of the train, so that she was released onto the platform to live another day.

On the fifth day, Madeleine decided to stay at the farmhouse while the others went abroad – except that they were already abroad, of course. Gulliver and Bryony made an early start to explore the neighbouring Val d'Ayas, while Sandra, Osborn and Caroline were to meet up with them at one of the villages along the way, to be confirmed later by text.

It started off well enough, as Osborn drove them along the valley road, stopping en route for coffee. However, as they began to drive up the bendy mountain road to explore the villages nestling among the mountains, Caroline became very quiet. When Osborn stopped the car so he and Sandra could take photos of a stunningly beautiful Gothic castle perched on the hillside, Caroline said she didn't like the road.

"It's not doing my blood pressure any good," she said in a whining voice that immediately irritated Sandra and caused her heart to plummet as far as the valley floor from which they'd just ascended. "I'm suffering from vertigo, you know, along all these horrible high-up bendy roads."

"Oh?" Osborn was obviously unsure how to respond. "Well, we can't go back down from here, it's far too difficult," he explained after a few moments.

"Why didn't you say you didn't like the mountain roads earlier?" asked Sandra, feeling very perplexed. She was remembering her mother's tales of travelling through the Mont Blanc tunnel on a previous holiday in Italy, which she had apparently enjoyed so much with Leonard.

"We were in a coach before," replied Caroline, still in the whining voice. "I don't feel as if this is doing me any good at all, I'm afraid I might have a heart attack, or something."

"We're supposed to be meeting Gulliver and Bryony at Champoluc," said Osborn with a hint of exasperation, having just read a text message from Gulliver. "We're almost there, we'll have to carry on." He resolutely started the engine and set off driving slowly up the narrow road. The silence from Caroline was deafening and the atmosphere rigid with her displeasure.

When they arrived at Champoluc, they easily found Gulliver and Bryony in the small, pretty and very interesting ski village that begged further exploration. However, Sandra and Osborn had to break the news that Caroline was unhappy and they would therefore have to take her back down to the valley floor. Gulliver and Bryony were clearly taken aback and nobody knew quite what to say. In the end, they all ate their packed lunch on a bench by the river, with tantalising views of the beautiful mountain peaks above them.

"We were going to go up in the gondola," said Gulliver tentatively, as they finished eating.

"You can stay behind and go with them, while I take Mum back," offered Osborn dolefully to Sandra.

"No." Sandra was torn between a burning desire to explore what Champoluc had to offer, the feeling that they were disappointing Gulliver and Bryony and the sudden crushing weight of responsibility for her mother. "No, it's not fair on you, I'll come back with you."

The atmosphere remained oppressively heavy on the return journey back to a surprised Madeleine and it was with some relief that Sandra and Osborn escaped to the supermarket in the afternoon for some fresh supplies. Madeleine then joined them on the balcony with a glass of wine for what was rapidly becoming their early evening

mountain-watch ritual, as clouds swirled and obliterated the distant peaks. Sometimes they would catch sight of a lone eagle soaring majestically, which lifted Sandra's spirits – a little curiously, since she was ornithophobic.

That evening, everyone sat companionably around the table to play another game of *Dos*. Gulliver and Bryony had enjoyed another good day in the mountains and Sandra just wanted to regain some of the holiday feeling she felt they'd completely lost that day with her mother's vertigo revelation. However, Caroline seemed to be harbouring some pent-up feelings of her own, as when the game was in full swing and Sandra passed her a Plus Four, she slapped Sandra swiftly on her arm.

"You naughty little girl!" she said with a certain amount of feeling.

"Ouch!" exclaimed Sandra, unsure whether she was more annoyed at Caroline's action or her words.

"That didn't hurt," responded Caroline swiftly.

"Yes, it did!" muttered Sandra, rubbing her arm where she could still feel the impact of Caroline's fingers. She played the rest of the game laughing and joking with the others as they normally did, but she was inwardly seething at her mother's behaviour. Not only had Caroline scuppered their day's outing, had spoken to Sandra like a child and slapped her during a game, but she had also tried to tell Sandra how she was feeling by negating her valid reaction.

Sleep was hard to come by that night, as both Sandra and Osborn lay awake for a long time, wondering how they would spend the rest of the holiday without going up any mountains.

In the morning, Gulliver and Bryony went on another mountain walk on their own, after Osborn had told them it was the best thing for them to do, while the rest of the party (which was a misnomer) spent the morning in Aosta, wandering around in the rising temperature, stopping for a mid-morning drink at a caffè and returning to the farmhouse for lunch.

In the afternoon, Sandra, Osborn and Madeleine took Caroline at her word when she declared she would be fine at the farmhouse on her own, if they wanted to go out. With a sense of heady, hard-won freedom, Osborn drove them along magnificently bendy roads, through a couple of tunnels, past picturesque villages and upwards to an isolated Gothic castle perched on a steep hillside. They had to content themselves with taking photos, as the castle seemed to be completely inaccessible from where they were, but it still felt good to be standing on the hillside among such wild, natural beauty, breathing in the hot, fragrant Italian air.

The next intended destination was a lake further up the mountain, but they suddenly came upon such a lot of police activity, that they wondered if they would ever reach the lake. They lost count of the number of *polizia* bikes that roared past them and once when there was a road block with several *polizia* cars, they had to find another way to the lake, which took them on quite a detour. Apart from the unexpected trouble trying to reach their chosen destination, it was a little frustrating knowing they would never find out what was happening that warranted half the local police force being out on a mission.

As they eventually drove upwards on the narrow road to the mountain lake, the clouds that had been gathering steadily all afternoon finally gave vent in thunder and lightning up in the peaks, followed by the start of some heavy rain. It felt a little unnerving to see quite a number of cars driving carefully downwards on the mountain road, while theirs was the only vehicle driving upwards in the increasing downpour.

After Osborn had to make a tricky manoeuvre to give room to a small van that was aggressively driving downwards despite any vehicles in its way, he wondered aloud if it was dangerous to carry on, even though by then they were so close to the lake.

Sandra and Madeleine immediately replied that safety was of the utmost importance, so after driving a short distance further to where the road seemed to peter out into a slightly wider place near a reservoir, albeit with sheer drops behind them into the forest below, Osborn set about reversing the car for their descent.

The rain was cascading unceasingly down the road and as Osborn started to turn the car around, it seemed to rebel against the manoeuvring. In what seemed like a few

moments frozen in time, Osborn struggled mightily with the car while the car struggled mightily with the conditions.

"Something's not right," said Sandra, as the smell of burning rubber pervaded her nostrils. The other two were silent as the tortuous seconds elapsed, until Osborn gradually won his battle with the reluctant car and they drove back down the road with adrenaline gradually subsiding.

"Are you OK?" asked Osborn somewhat tentatively.

"To be honest, what flashed through my mind back there was that I didn't want to die in a car, plunging backwards down a mountain," said Madeleine succinctly.

"I was calling on our guardian angels to help us," admitted Sandra, sighing with grateful relief.

The drive back to the farmhouse was thankfully uneventful, apart from passing four *polizia* vans heading in the direction from which they had just come.

"Well, did you enjoy your outing?" asked Caroline, looking up quizzically from her puzzle book, as they arrived back at the farmhouse.

"Yes thanks," replied Osborn.

"Yes, lovely," replied Madeleine.

"Yes, fine," replied Sandra.

## CHAPTER 22

The next day was the trip to Lake Como that Sandra and Osborn had almost been forced to promise to Caroline at the beginning of the holiday, even though it was a two-and-a-half-hour drive away. The temperature was a comfortable 20° Centigrade when they left Aosta at 08:00, but gradually climbed up into the uncomfortable mid-30s by the time they arrived at the surprisingly congested and inner-city-like Como, complete with traffic hold-ups and graffiti.

A panini lunch was pleasant enough at a large outdoor caffè, which was crowded but cheery, with bright tablecloths and a smiling man playing an accordion. It was true that after a while the accordion player walked around the tables silently asking for money, but when Osborn gave him some change he said, "*Grazie e buon appetito!*" in a pleasing Italian manner.

Caroline wanted to buy postcards, but after achieving this, they decided to leave the crowded streets for a quiet boat trip around the lake. It was hot and frenetic as they queued for tickets and Sandra commiserated with Madeleine as she began to be bitten by insects.

"I don't think I like it here very much," said Madeleine glumly, as she searched in her bag for some insect repellent.

"Oh, come on you two!" exclaimed Caroline, suddenly slapping Madeleine on her exposed arm.

"Oh!" Madeleine was clearly taken aback at her grandmother's attack, while Sandra stared in amazement and outrage at the sight of her mother slapping her daughter. When they boarded the boat and Caroline made a beeline for the covered seats inside, Sandra walked straight out to the open-air seating, where Osborn and Madeleine had already found some empty places.

The boat began its cruise around the lake, but every time it stopped at various stage points, a hideous grinding noise seemed to emanate from underneath Sandra's seat, which also intermittently became very hot. What with that and the heat of the sun beating down on the top of her head, it wasn't the most serene of boat cruises. At that point, however, it actually felt far preferable to Sandra than sitting beside her mother, who had turned into a person she neither knew nor liked.

After the boat trip, they wandered around taking photos and ate ice cream to cool down, before the long return journey. By the time they arrived back at the farmhouse, Osborn was exhausted, but brightened up considerably during the evening when a brewing thunderstorm caused some spectacular cloud effects over the mountains. When the storm broke later, he and Gulliver spent ages trying to capture a shot of the forked lightning that sporadically illuminated the dark, portentous sky.

The next day was spent locally, after Caroline had complained that she was feeling unwell. However, when Osborn said he would contact a local doctor for her, she demurred and went to sit on the balcony (despite having previously said that it gave her vertigo). Sandra spent much of the day gazing out at the beautiful scenery, in an effort not to succumb to a feeling of despair at the seeming disintegration of the holiday, due to the undercurrents from her mother. She could feel them swirling around dangerously and unpredictably, beneath her own wellbeing.

The following afternoon, Caroline opted to stay behind, while Gulliver suggested driving everyone else up the mountain on which the farmhouse was perched. They all readily agreed. He obviously found the bendy road very exhilarating and as Sandra listened to the upbeat music he was playing in the car, while he drove a little too quickly around some bends, she began to revel in the sense that she was alive once again, breathing in vibrant, free, energising air.

When they reached the ski resort of Pila, they decided to take the chairlift to the top. As Gulliver and Bryony had already experienced the hazards of a safety bar on their first ride to the top, Bryony went on a chair with Osborn, while Gulliver sat on the following chair with Sandra and Madeleine. To her surprise, Sandra realised that Gulliver was out of his comfort zone, as they swung along in mid-air up the mountain, perched on the metal chairs that were open dangerously to the elements.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed when the line of chairs stopped jerkily, swinging over a drop of several hundred feet. "Sorry, Mother! Fuck!"

"I don't like this very much, either!" exclaimed Sandra, laughing with both fear and delight, as she looked way down below, where some people were walking along with their bicycles.

"I'm afraid my flip flops will fall down on their heads!" said Madeleine, peering below.

"You're wearing flip flops?" asked Gulliver incredulously. "Fuck!"

After they had all jumped off the chairs at the top with no mishaps, they took the short walk up to Lac Chamolé and stood among the alpine flowers, gazing at the distant peaks. The view was breathtaking, although the altitude was just 8,891 feet.

"This is so lovely," said Sandra appreciatively, bending down to scrutinise the grass. "Look at this perfect little purple flower."

"Is that an eagle over there?" asked Madeleine, gazing out to the horizon. "It must be quite big."

"Oh, I didn't tell you," said Gulliver animatedly, "that when Bryony and I went up in the gondola that day at Champoluc, we saw three ibex at the top. I tried to get a shot, but they ran away."

"I was glad, they're a protected species," said Bryony drily.

"Ha ha," responded Gulliver half-heartedly. "Did you bring some water with you, Bryony?"

"Yes, I did. Still water this time, not the slightly fizzy water we bought by mistake. Here you are."

"Yes, it's still still water," said Gulliver, peering at the plastic bottle.

"I don't know which one of you is worse – or better," said Sandra, squinting down at the grass. "Oh look, a lovely little yellow flower."

"We were thinking of going to Zermatt tomorrow," said Gulliver suddenly. "It would be great if we could all go, but I don't know about Grandma."

"Neither do I," replied Sandra, sighing. "I take it you'll be visiting the Matterhorn? What a funny name."

"Yes, we'll go up in the cable car."

"She'd hate that," said Osborn. "She won't like the Great Saint Bernard tunnel either, I could sense her getting all edgy about the small tunnels when we went to Gran Paradiso," he reminded Sandra sadly.

"Well, that's it then, Dad and I will have to say no," said Sandra morosely. "I'd love with every fibre of my being to go with you, like I would have loved to go with you in Champoluc, but we don't seem to have a choice."

"You could sneak out with us before she wakes up," said Bryony.

"Ha! More than my life's worth," said Sandra, laughing. "Still, that's tomorrow and this is today. I love it up here, I don't want to go back. When we do, shall we have a drink in the resort at Pila? Oh look, what a divine little blue flower."

The trip to Zermatt the following day was a success, as recounted by Gulliver, Bryony and Madeleine when they returned with tales of the long drive, a train journey, the cable cars, glaciers and Swiss chocolate. Sandra and Osborn had taken Caroline for a drive along the valley road looking for a castle to visit, but this had proved difficult, so they'd returned to Aosta and had lunch in the piazza before wandering around the few souvenir shops and indulging in some more delicious Italian ice cream.

Gulliver and Bryony had kindly agreed to spend the next day with Caroline, thus allowing Sandra, Osborn and Madeleine to have a free day. They decided to visit Mont Blanc, or since they were in Italy, Monte Bianco. After heavy rain and thunder during the previous night, they left the farmhouse on a clear morning, apart from the usual mountain mistiness, with a temperature of 15° Centigrade.

It was more or less a straight road to La Palud, with tantalising views of the mountain in the distance, gradually becoming closer and closer. The car parking was free and they queued for the cable car in high spirits, which rose even further when the man who sold them their tickets spoke English.

The cable car itself was a slight disappointment, as about 15 people crammed into its small space and the windows were scratched, so that the view was less than clear. However, as they travelled upwards, it was still exciting to look out and see the valley floor becoming smaller and the mountain becoming larger. After passing over lots of tree tops, the terrain became noticeably more mountainous.

On arrival at the first station, they decided to carry on to the top. As bare mountain rock and snow appeared underneath them in ever increasing patches on their ascent, Sandra felt a little nervous. The temperature had dropped appreciably by the time they reached the second station, where they transferred to a smaller cable car that held only about eight people.

The delight of arriving at Punta Helbronner soon overrode any nervousness, as they stepped out into the cool, clean air and walked along to the glacier viewing gallery. There were lots of spectacular views of snowy peaks with clouds below clinging to the side of the mountain. A number of small figures could be seen far beneath them, walking across the glacier on marked pathways, while small aircraft flew over the mountain every so often on presumed sightseeing trips.

"Look, there's the cable car we could have taken to Chamonix in France," said Madeleine, pointing across the snowy expanse. "I wonder if Henri's been to Chamonix."

"Are you missing him?" asked Sandra curiously. It was probably something to do with the altitude, which was 11,358 feet.

"Yes," replied Madeleine, "but it's good up here. You would have liked Zermatt, we could walk around there."

"I'm sorry Dad and I missed it. Where *is* Dad?"

"Over there at the edge, taking hundreds of photos."

"I've taken quite a few. Will you pose for me, Mad? I'm glad he's enjoying today, it's been quite stressful and frustrating with Grandma."

"Is here alright? I know what you mean, I haven't enjoyed the atmosphere at times, it's felt quite tense."

"I'm sorry, darling, I never imagined it would turn out this way. Slightly to the left? That's it. Fabulous, thank you!"

"I'll take one of you two," said Osborn, having returned from the edge.

"Then I'll take one of you and Maddy," said Sandra happily.

"And I suppose I'll take one of you two and feel like a sad mad tourist," said Madeleine, grimacing indulgently.

Also at that particular station was a fascinating display of crystals that had been found in the area, with photos of how and where they had been collected – the one slight criticism being that all the writing was only in Italian and French.

Having had their fill of snowy peaks and crystals, they descended by the small cable car and then the larger cable car to the level where there was a beautiful botanical

garden. The combination of the alpine flowers and rocks against the background of the snowy peaks was awe-inspiring and Sandra stood there for a few moments, breathing in the beauty and feeling as if she might be in heaven.

The feeling evaporated a little when she was presented with the sight of Osborn's backside in the air, as he crouched on the ground taking photographs of flowers, as well as the sound of Madeleine fretting because her sunglasses had broken, but nothing could detract from the inherent beauty that surrounded her.

They reluctantly left Monte Bianco, after buying a piece of crystal to remind them of a special day spent together. Not wanting to spoil the magic by returning to the confines of the farmhouse, they drove to Aosta and wandered around the hot streets for a while, stopping to buy a most refreshing ice cream.

The rest of the holiday was spent locally. On one of the remaining days, Bryony stayed behind to take Sandra, Madeleine and Caroline out for a drive along the valley road, while Osborn and Gulliver went for a day's walk up in the mountains. Then, on their last day, they all went out for a lunchtime meal together in Aosta.

"This is lovely," said Sandra, as a waiter led them through the ristorante to a garden at the back, where there were several tables and chairs underneath the shelter of a lovely, spreading tree.

"Look!" said Gulliver, pointing to a small lizard that was ambling lazily along the garden wall, as if looking for a good spot on which to sun itself.

"It's about the same size as the mad grasshopper that dive-bombed me back at the farmhouse," said Bryony, peering at the lizard.

"You mean the same one that flew at me and landed on my chest," said Sandra, "although my language wasn't as colourful as yours, Bryony."

"Come on, let's choose our food," said Osborn, as the waiter handed them some menus. "Oh." He had realised they were in Italian. Fortunately, the waiter spoke good English and helped them to choose from the speciality fish dishes, pasta dishes, pizzas and omelettes.

The food soon arrived, looking very appetising, which was just as well because the idea was to eat it. Osborn and Madeleine had chosen fish dishes and thankfully had some fish to eat too, Madeleine's decorated prettily with star anise. Sandra, Gulliver and Bryony had opted for pizza and Caroline an omelette. It was an unusual but very enjoyable lunchtime, sitting in a back garden in the shaded hot Italian air.

"Thank you, Grandma!" exclaimed Gulliver suddenly.

"What?" Caroline looked up at him, nonplussed.

"A piece of your omelette just shot over here when you cut it and landed on top of my pizza," explained Gulliver, grinning.

Sandra sat quietly eating her pizza, with the exception of the crunchy bits, still trying to process the dynamics of the holiday. 'If only it could have been like this all the time,' she wished somberly. 'This is so pleasant and there have been some really good experiences, but too often they've felt completely overshadowed by difficulties and undercurrents emanating from my mother.'

"Those currants are big," said Caroline, peering at Gulliver's pizza.

"Those currants are black olives," replied Gulliver, with a hint of a smile.

"Oh! What's that insect?" asked Madeleine, looking as if she was fighting an impulse to run from the table.

"Where?" Osborn frowned at her plate.

"There! It flew onto my plate! Oh, it's a small piece of fried mushroom."

"It must be Grandma again, Mad," said Osborn, laughing.

"What? Did you say I was mad?" asked Caroline, looking up startled.

Sandra tuned out again as the lunch progressed, feeling a mix of emotions as the lizard continued to sun itself on the garden wall. 'Is this real OK-ness?' she wondered, as the rest of the family gradually finished their meal. 'It certainly feels comfortable on the surface level, but what are we all feeling underneath? Do I think too much? I think Madeleine thinks a lot and so does Osborn. Gulliver and Bryony give the impression they don't overthink – or do I mean overfeel? I'm sure they do think a lot, though, because it's the human condition to think.'

"What do you think, Sandra?" asked Osborn, looking at her enquiringly.

"Think about what?" asked Sandra, giving a small sigh. It would have been harder to receive one.

"What to do this afternoon," replied Osborn, giving a large sigh.

"I wondered about shopping for some last-minute souvenirs," said Madeleine, giving a huge sigh.

"Before that though, has anyone else got room for dessert?" asked Gulliver, as everyone gave gigantic sighs.

It was the following afternoon and the six of them had been sitting in the plane on the runway at Milan Malpensa airport in the extreme heat for almost two hours. They had missed their original slot for take-off, due to their plane being delayed on its incoming flight. The plane was full of excited, bored Italian schoolchildren on their way to a holiday in England. It was trying, to say the least. To Sandra it felt like torture and when the plane finally took off a little later, she tried hard to feel glad, rather than even more terrified. It lasted for about two minutes.

Madeleine beside her was silent, so Sandra tried to take her own mind off where she was, by thinking about where she'd been.

'I did love our first visit to Italy,' she told herself. 'I have so many different memories – the vineyards stepped up the mountainside – those imaginative roundabouts in the towns with their colourful flowers, well-placed rocks and arty centre-pieces – that father singing to his child in the streets of Aosta – those two old women seeing to their garden, one holding the bottom of a ladder for the other one to precariously reach the high plants up the wall – the water sprinklers spraying water wildly, even when it was raining – the chairlift stopped in mid-air for siesta in the heat of midday – the cicadas and the other insects – the ancient Roman remains amongst the modern buildings – but mostly the mountains! They're ever-present, awesome and beautiful. I can understand why Italian people love their country with a passion.' She sighed and looked at her watch.

'We've only been flying for ten minutes! I wish Madeleine would talk to me again, but she's seemed a bit distant over the last few days, as if she was really struggling with the atmosphere at the farmhouse. Oh dear, it didn't turn out the way I'd hoped at all. It seems so unfair, after all we've been through in the last couple of years.

'I absolutely agree with Osborn that we'll never go on holiday with my mother again. It wasn't what I would call a holiday at all in respect of being carefree. Still, it's over now. Well almost over, we just need to land safely at good old Bristol airport. God, I hope we land safely. Maybe I should try hypnotherapy for my fear of flying? No-o, I think I'd be too scared.'

## CHAPTER 23

The summer continued its inexorable journey to autumn, as Sandra and Osborn tried to come to terms with their changing feelings about Caroline. While on the surface life continued as before, with them both working to improve Caroline's garden and helping her sort out her house decorating, it felt as if a significant emotional shift had occurred, especially for Sandra.

After a rather painful shopping trip to Plymouth with her mother, another day when Sandra felt Caroline wasn't being particularly nice to her at all and yet another day when Caroline drove Sandra mad in her futile attempt to buy curtain hooks that were completely out of date, Sandra sat seething over the *Scribble* board.

'Is this what my life is now, hanging curtains with hard to come by old-fashioned sodding curtain hooks and playing this frustrating game to keep Mum happy?' she thought in a moment of piercing clarity. 'I work my ass off coming over here to keep her garden looking good for her and for what? To be treated alternately like her recalcitrant child, her benevolent carer, or her weed-obsessed gardener and sorter of all tedious problems under the sun? Well, I've had enough. My ass is tired. The way she behaved in Italy was a complete shock, I just can't go on trying to be whoever she wants me to be

for her at any given time. I have to find a way through all this, because it's a situation that's not going to simply disappear, or even disappear simply.'

"Whatever's wrong, Sandra?" Her mother's voice came as a shock. "You look as if you have the weight of the world on your shoulders. It's your turn, by the way."

"I'm tired." Sandra put down a single tile just to keep the game moving.

"Is that the best you can do? Why are you so tired? You've just had a holiday."

"Mmm." Sandra was torn between letting it pass and fighting for her own right to be tired. "All the decorating we've had done lately is an upheaval, as you know. Osborn unearthed a tricky wiring problem in the house the other day. There's been quite a bit of titivating to do in the bathroom. Matt White has been painting our new doors for days on end. The council workmen have finished the pavements in our road, but now they're resurfacing the road itself. Gulliver's asking when we'll go and visit him and Bryony in their new home and Madeleine would like us to meet Henri. Osborn's preparing frantically for the next Rainbow Healers' healing course that he's running all by himself and – and you know that bouquet of flowers you asked me to send Belinda in hospital?"

"Well?"

"I thought it would be quicker to do it on the internet from *Marks and Spender*, but I sent them to myself by mistake."

"How on Earth did you do that?"

"Quite easily. Have you heard how Belinda is?"

"Yes, I meant to tell you that I rang and spoke to Ian. She should be going home in a couple of days."

"Those urinary tract infections can be severe, I remember when Madeleine had a nasty one when she was seven. She was in such pain, Osborn and I were really worried."

"I don't remember that. Of course, they can be fatal to old people, but Belinda's younger than I am."

"She must be about 63?"

"Oh, that's nothing. You get so many aches and pains when you're my age. In fact, I wasn't going to tell you, but I hurt my knee moving the washing machine. It's quite painful at times."

"Why did you move the washing machine?"

"To clean behind it, of course."

"Osborn would have moved it for you if you'd asked him. You really need to take care of yourself."

"It would be nice if someone else could take care of me sometimes."

"Bonjour," said Osborn somewhat embarrassingly to Henri, who had returned from work and entered the sitting room of the small flat in Cardiff that he was sharing with Madeleine. "It's good to meet you at last!"

"You too," replied Henri, his delicious dark-brown eyes looking startled for a moment, especially when Osborn leapt up to shake his hand.

"Hello," said Sandra with a smile. She decided not to leap up and shake Henri's hand, as his whole demeanour was looking somewhat startled.

"Allo," replied Henri, smiling nervously, before retreating to the safety of the small kitchen, where Madeleine was making some tea.

Half an hour later, they all sat at the small table in the window of the sitting room, eating some delicious fish that Henri had prepared with Madeleine's help. Sandra's first impression of Henri was that he was a good-looking, likeable young man with short, slightly wavy dark hair and a pleasingly proportioned, not particularly tall body that darted around quite quickly. The single aspect that had immediately endeared him to her, however, was the fact that he was nervous. It was apparent from his slightly shaking hands and the way his beautiful eyes would glance at her and Osborn before sliding away to gaze at Madeleine.

"Is the fish OK?" asked Madeleine a little anxiously.

"Everything's lovely," replied Sandra, trying to smile reassuringly.

"I've finally booked my first driving lesson," said Madeleine proudly. "Henri encouraged me. Well, he persuaded me really."

"That's great!" exclaimed Osborn, beaming firstly in Madeleine's direction and then Henri's. "You won't know yourself once you can drive."

"Oh, I think I will Varti, I'm quite nervous already just thinking about it."

"That's normal, but it'll give you a lot of confidence," chipped in Sandra. They were actually French fries, which was apt in the circumstances. "If there's one thing I wish I'd done when I was young enough, it's learning to drive."

"Your mother drives me mad well enough," said Osborn conversationally.

"What?!" Sandra spluttered semi-daintily into her fish. "Oh, you're joking. Anyway, this isn't about us, it's about Madeleine and Henri." She smiled shyly into the dark-brown French orbs, whose gaze rested on hers briefly before seeking the safety of Madeleine's.

"So, how long have you been here?" asked Osborn, placing his knife and fork on his plate. "That was delicious, by the way, thank you."

"Uh - 'ow long 'ere? In this flat? In the UK? In the world?" Henri grinned disarmingly, although he was fortunately fully-limbed.

"Ha ha!" Osborn looked at Henri approvingly. "You have a good sense of humour! I suppose I meant in the UK, really."

"I came over 'ere to university and 'ave stayed ever since."

"Henri's been in the world since 1979," added Madeleine as Henri looked at her for guidance, or possibly just plain moral support, "so he's two years older than I am."

"Cool," said Sandra, realising that she was taking much longer than everyone else to finish her food. "I don't mean the fish is cool, because it was piping hot, which was great - but it *is* cool, or rather *was* cool!"

"Don't worry, Mumsie," said Madeleine, beginning to stack up the other plates. "Take your time. When have you got to leave here?"

"Not for a couple of hours, if that's OK?"

"Of course it's OK, I just wanted to know whether you were in a rush. How's Grandma?"

"We-ell," began Sandra, not knowing whether to be completely honest, before realising it would feel utterly wrong to be anything other than completely honest with Madeleine or Gulliver. "Well, it all feels a bit difficult with her, to say the least."

"She ruined the holiday for me," put in Osborn more baldly. The years were still taking their follicle toll. "I couldn't relax at all and we were severely constrained because of her."

"I wasn't happy either," recalled Madeleine sadly. "She slapped me at Lake Como when I hadn't done anything wrong and family tensions seemed to be - tense."

"They were tense, I'm afraid," said Sandra, finishing her food and wondering what Henri was thinking of this strange English family. "I'm sorry it didn't go as well as we'd hoped, because it was meant to be a relaxing, happy time for us all after the last few years. Still, it's all in the past now."

"Never again, though," said Osborn, sighing. "Absolutely and irrevocably never again."

"So you may not take Grandma on holiday with you again, then?" asked Madeleine, smiling as she took away the plates from the table. "Would you like dessert and a drink, or just a drink?"

"Oh, just dessert, I think," replied Osborn, considering. "I'll want to stop for a pee on the journey otherwise."

"Just dessert for me too, darling," said Sandra, noticing an almost imperceptible rising of Henri's eyebrows.

"It's about time you two had your just desserts," remarked Madeleine brightly, as she went into the kitchen to locate them. Henri, Sandra and Osborn gazed after her as she rummaged around in the fridge, before realising what they were doing and reverting their gaze awkwardly around the table to each other again.

"So, how's work?" Osborn asked Henri, who looked as if he would like to take flight straight into the kitchen with Madeleine.

"Uh, it's fine," replied Henri politely.

"What do you do in *Sewall*?" asked Osborn relentlessly.

"I mainly do computer work as part of a team," began Henri, before finally seeming to relax and explain to Osborn about the problems his team was currently encountering.

'That's what Osborn does that I never do,' thought Sandra idly, turning her spoon over and over. 'He perseveres with people, while I just become horribly embarrassed, which leads to uncomfortable silence, which leads to further embarrassment.'

"Here we are!" exclaimed Madeleine, suddenly appearing with their just desserts. "I don't normally buy things in pots like this, but I thought we'd have a treat." She deposited four pots of tempting chocolatey concoctions on the table in front of them. Sandra was startled out of her reverie and somehow managed to flip her spoon over. It skidded across the space between her and Henri before landing precipitately in his lap.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" said Sandra, reaching over automatically to retrieve it. "Oh no, I won't do that." She searched around wildly for something to say, to relieve her self-created embarrassment. "Those desserts look fantastic! I don't care if they're full of calories, my diet's gone to pot!"

"Your mother 'as a pot 'abit?" Henri asked Madeleine, as he returned Sandra's spoon with a twinkle in his eye.

"No, she's just a bit potty," replied Madeleine, smiling happily as the people in her two worlds began almost imperceptibly to accept one another.

Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was having an inevitable 54<sup>th</sup> birthday – inevitable since she'd had a 53<sup>rd</sup> birthday the year before. It had started well, with a phone call and a sung happy birthday refrain from Madeleine and it had ended well with a phone call from Gulliver and no sung happy birthday refrain. In between, however, it had felt a little peculiar.

She'd gone out to lunch with Osborn, Caroline and Lawrence, but the blue snapper fish they'd ordered was underdone. When Osborn sent it back, it returned overdone.

"Shall I send it back again and try to have our order redone?" asked Osborn, clearly unhappy with the way the birthday lunch was turning out.

"No, I'm done with all this fuss," replied Sandra. "At least it's edible. Let's just eat it and get it over and done with."

As far as the rest of the year went, Sandra felt that on the whole she would quite like to get it over and done with as well. There were a couple of enjoyable interludes when Gulliver and Madeleine visited for a few days and on a lesser scale, Gina and Kay for a few hours, but mostly life was rather dull, with the odd excitement of a blocked drain, a weekend of hurricane-force winds and following *The Y Factor* on television. Sandra continued to visit Caroline three times a week, but felt as if she was fighting an ongoing losing battle, simply to be herself.

'Am I slowing down?' she wondered on Christmas Eve, as she trailed along on slightly soggy moorland behind Osborn and Madeleine, who were having a prolonged conversation about office bullies, data protection, pay scales and other employment-related issues. Gulliver and Bryony were striding out in front on a rough path amid the distant hills and strewn, mossy boulders. They were all home for Christmas and walking on Bodmin Moor under racing, cloudy skies that seemed full of threatening rain.

"Are you OK, Mumsie?" called Madeleine's voice, as she looked back at Sandra and stood to wait for her mother to catch up, while Osborn hurried ahead to join Gulliver and Bryony. "You're all alone."

"I am," replied Sandra, thinking how Osborn had been totally immersed in both work during the day and Rainbow Healers during his spare time. He was not only presenting the healing course, but taking phone calls at home, checking written work and generally taking the role of spiritual carer for his current flock.

"No, you're not," replied Madeleine gently, trying to look into Sandra's downcast, watering eyes. "I'm here – and we're all here with you really. Today is Christmas Eve, although it doesn't feel like Christmas Eve."

"We always say that," replied Sandra, with a glimmer of brightness. "It's just been another strange year, that's all, with me worrying neurotically about myself and Dad looking away in other directions, if you know what I mean."

"He'd be lost without you and you know it. We all look in other directions sometimes, don't we, to find out exactly where we are?"

"Ye-es, I suppose so, but he gets so utterly involved with other people and I guess I'm feeling a bit vulnerable, or something. He says he's still getting over his parents dying, but I miss my dad too! Actually, we went for a walk to The Flingers the other week, it was very peaceful there."

"I miss Grandad. I miss them all in different ways, they were all good to me."

"I'm glad you have happy memories of them, darling, and I know it was hard for you losing three grandparents within a year, but I'm so glad you're happy with Henri. I suppose that's what a parent wants, to know their children are fundamentally happy."

"It works the other way around."

"I'm sorry. I seem to be a little inwardly focused right now, but I'll get over it."

"Gulliver's happy too and his photography seems to be going well. He told me how pleased he was that you and Dad went to his exhibition in Swansea last month."

"Dad and I always have the utmost pleasure in supporting and helping you both, I don't think we could behave any other way if we tried."

"There, you see, you're a unit with a common focus."

"I know you're right really. Where are the others? They seem to have headed in a different direction. My eyes are still watering and I can't see clearly at all."

It was early evening on Christmas Day and a buffet tea was taking place. Gulliver and Bryony had been staying with Bryony's parents, but had joined Sandra, Osborn, Madeleine and Caroline for the afternoon.

"It's a pity about Lawrence," said Caroline, dropping crumbs from a bread stick down her front. "You couldn't persuade him to join us, then?"

"It's his decision," replied Osborn, deliberating over the cheese board. "I did ask him several times, but he was determined not to do Christmas this year."

"Was it so awful with us last year?" asked Madeleine. "I must say, I feel a bit hurt that I came all this way from Cardiff and he doesn't even want to see us."

"He says that he can't get over the awful Christmases he had to spend with our parents," explained Osborn, "as well as the fact that taxi fares are double on Christmas Day and Boxing Day. I think I'll have some of this Quadruple Gloucester."

"We would have collected him and taken him home," said Gulliver. "We came all the way from Swansea. This Smoked Cornish Brie is unusual."

"It's a perfect opportunity for him to move on from all the past Christmases and make what he wants to out of current Christmases with the rest of his family," said Madeleine. "I know it's his choice, but I still don't understand him."

"You and me both," replied Osborn shortly, probably because he was still bending over the cheese board. "Look, it's no good getting on to me, he does his own thing."

"We weren't getting on to you, dear," said Caroline, dropping crumbs from a cracker on her skirt. "He *is* cutting off his nose to spite his own face, though."

"It's a bit hurtful to our faces as well," persisted Madeleine, "when our faces haven't seen his for ages."

"Our family is small enough as it is," said Sandra, standing alongside Osborn at the cheese board. "I thought he would have been pleased to join us, because quite frankly, his family is even smaller."

"Oh, I don't know, the last time I saw Kirsty, she'd put on a load of weight," remarked Caroline, dropping mince pie crumbs on the sofa. "What have I said? Anyway, how are you getting on with the photography, Gulliver?"

"Quite well, thanks. I sold a lot at a craft fair just before Christmas and a shop in Swansea that sells my stuff keeps ordering more cards," replied Gulliver. "I sold several pictures and the fridge magnets were flying off the shelves."

"I suppose it must have been something to do with the magnetic field in the shop," said Bryony inscrutably.

"What? Ha!" laughed Sandra. "I like that."

"I like this Magenta Wensleydale cheese, too," said Osborn, helping himself to another slice. "I get cheesed off with the same old cheese."

"I know what you mean," said Caroline, dropping crumbs on her crumbs. "A change is as good as a rest. What day is it today? I'm all out of routine with the Christmas holiday and I do like my routine."

"It's Christmas Day. I saw an interesting recipe on television for a lasagne made with Purple Leicester," said Gulliver, "but I can't think of anything funny to say about it."

"This Off-white Stilton is quite tangy," remarked Osborn, "but I know what you mean, they don't half make a meal about advertising food dishes."

"I think that's the point," said Bryony, laughing. "If you're not careful, you'll be saying they're good enough to eat in a minute."

'Well, that's another year over,' thought Sandra, as she lay in bed listening to the sound of stray fireworks being set off long after midnight. 'God, that was a loud bang! It's all the banging I'm going to get tonight, how can Osborn sleep through all this noise? I wish he was looking towards me more, but he seems to look outwards so much, particularly at work and at Rainbow Healers.'

'I mustn't mind, I mustn't, because that would just make me miserable and him suffocated. Oh no, he's turned towards me and he's snoring! Turn back the other way! God, me prodding his backside worked, but his head is caught up in the duvet now, can he breathe? Can I breathe? Oh, it's too hard to think. On the whole, it's a damn good job breathing is automatic. Goodbye 2006, you were challenging.'

## CHAPTER 24

The first few months of 2007 were challenging for Sandra in a personal way – a very personal way. She decided to seek medical advice for a small problem in the female nether regions, which resulted in lying prone once again for the close attentions of Dr Effingham, who gazed at her kindly, while prodding around delicately.

"In the wars, are we?" he said in his sing-song Welsh tones. "Hmm."

"Is it that bad?" asked Sandra fearfully.

"Oh no, just a turn of phrase. Hmm."

"Hmm?"

"Hmm – no worries, it's definitely a minor problem, but I think a minor op is called for, so I'll refer you to a minor consultant in a minor hospital. I'm only joking, Mrs Dullkettle, don't look so terrified! Still, I expect you were imagining all sorts of terrible things, hmm?"

"Hmm. Can I get dressed now?"

In between the ensuing appointments with a consultant, a nurse who made pre-op assessment tests, an anaesthetist who said her blood pressure was too high, Dr Effingham who said her blood pressure was fine and then the anaesthetist again, who informed her that her ECG was cause for concern, Sandra discovered by accident that Osborn had seen Mélanie, one of his students from the Rainbow Healers course, one lunchtime while at work.

"Were you ever going to mention this to me?" demanded Sandra, wondering exactly how far confidentiality between healing course tutors, their tutees and their partners went. "It was never like this when we did the healing course. You get too close to people and give them all your energy, so that they confide all sorts of personal things in you – and some of it is simply not appropriate. You really need to learn more about boundaries!"

As she heard herself saying the words, she was aware that she was most probably overstepping the mark herself, but all the worry of the past few weeks seemed to have risen to the surface and was spurting out in all directions.

"What about *your* boundaries?" asked Osborn coldly. "What boundaries did you ignore in order to open a stranger's diary that had nothing to do with you?"

"I wondered what it was when I was moving things around to do the vacuuming," explained Sandra hotly. Their storage heaters had been playing up recently. "Anyway, what are you *doing* with another woman's diary?"

"I told the course members that it would help to write their healing experiences in a diary and I offered to read them," replied Osborn, his demeanour glowering. "Mélanie happened to be the only one who did so."

"Well, what she wrote in there was certainly not all about her sodding healing experiences!" shouted Sandra. "I never intended to read the damn thing at all, but it happened to fall open at the page where she wrote about meeting you at lunchtime and wanting to tell you things about her personal life!"

"She's got problems," sighed Osborn.

"Problems? Oh dear, poor woman, not problems? What about *my* problems, *your* problems, *our* problems!"

"I feel I have a responsibility to the people on my course," replied Osborn distantly.

"What about your responsibility to *me* and to *us*?" asked Sandra miserably, floods of tears now threatening to take precedence over her burning anger. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I've had worries of my own lately."

"What do you mean?" Osborn's voice seemed to emanate from a vast distance.

"My heart," said Sandra simply, tears escaping freely. "I tried to take it all calmly, but it was no joke being summoned to that anaesthetist's office and being told my ECG clearly showed signs of ischaemia, which is what was written on yours and my dad's death certificates. I told you about it when it happened. She asked me if I had chest pains and felt my ankles."

"Your ankles are fine, aren't they?" asked Osborn, frowning.

"Yes, my ankles are fine, but I'M NOT!" shouted Sandra, exasperation now joining in the mix of exploding emotions.

"They're going ahead with the procedure, though, aren't they?" Osborn's voice was minimally softer.

"Yes, I gave the anaesthetist the letter from Dr Effingham and she agreed my blood pressure would probably be OK. That doesn't take away what she said about my heart, though. Its amazing what tricks your mind can play."

"Look, why don't you come to one of my healing course evenings," suggested Osborn, clearly still pondering on the diary issue. "It might put your mind at rest. They wouldn't go ahead with the procedure if they thought your heart was a problem, would they now?"

"My heart has always been a problem," replied Sandra, blowing her nose and wondering if she could ever trust Osborn like she so desperately wanted to, if he was anything less than open and honest with her.

"I've been diagnosed with sarcoidosis," said Alison quite calmly, as Sandra looked at her friend uncertainly and wondered how to react.

"Do you feel better now you have a name for all the weird and unwonderful symptoms you've been having?" were the words that came out in the end.

"Yes, mainly because I felt people thought I was a raging hypochondriac half the time."

"Well I can understand you're angry – oh, I see what you mean. I don't know much about sarcoidosis, in fact I don't think I've heard of it before." Sandra smiled, before thinking she might be smiling inappropriately, whereupon she assumed what she hoped was a sympathetic frown.

"It's OK, don't frown. My main worry is that it seems to be hereditary, but I don't want to worry either Helen or Sam. I mean, it's not just them, but their children..."

"Yes, but it's not your fault, Ally. I understand your worry, though. I still can't believe Sam's a dad to two girls who are growing up fast. How old are they now?"

"Tamsin's seven and Peony's almost one. They make life worth living somehow."

"Yes! I look forward to having grandchildren, although I don't like to say that to Gulliver and Bryony in case it freaks them out. How did Dirk react to your diagnosis?"

"In the same way he always does, he talks about completely practical things as if he hasn't heard what I've said. As long as I'm functioning normally enough, he gets on with life and expects me to do the same, as if I haven't got any feelings at all. He loves to be with Peony, though, he talks to her and takes her out for walks all the time."

"Do you feel left out?"

"I suppose I do a bit." Alison looked at Sandra and smiled. "Anyway, how did your trip to the gynae consultant go?"

"Oh, that." Sandra made a wry face. "I have to have a procedure, but the anaesthetist told me the pre-op ECG showed a problem." As Sandra explained her recent worries to Alison, she felt slightly better, although she found herself unable to broach the subject of Osborn and his over-involvement with one of his healing class.

"It doesn't feel good to hear your heart may not be OK," sympathised Alison. "I had that when I had all those tests before I was diagnosed. How did Osborn react?"

"He went a bit quiet, which is unusual, but then he went on about how they wouldn't operate if my heart was that bad. People with heart problems have operations all the time, though, how else would they put the heart problems right?"

"Fair point. Bypass, I suppose. I don't know, with all these health issues, I sometimes feel the best policy is to get on with life and enjoy everything we can. Seize the moment, live every day so to speak."

"You're right, I know I could so easily let this worry consume me. I tend to want to tidy up everything when I'm worried, it feels quite therapeutic."

"Oh, I do baking. We've got a freezer full at the moment."

"I suppose it's a question of control, really, because you feel your life is pretty much beyond your control."

"Well, I don't see anything wrong with that?"

"No, me neither, as long as it's under control."

"You're a bit quiet, Sandra," said Kay, as she sipped tea alongside Gina in Sandra's sitting room. Sandra was occupying the other two-seater sofa alongside Emily. She was quiet because the evening before, she had come across Osborn writing an email to Mélanie and a disquieting argument had followed. Sandra hoped her eyelids didn't look too swollen, or her face too pale, so she attempted to throw herself into the moment.

"Oh, I'm OK!" she replied brightly, lunging forwards and spilling her tea. "Oh, sod it – oh sorry – I'm a bit off balance, that's all."

"No change there, petal," said Emily. "'What's the matter? You can tell us, we're very nice.'"

"Yes," said Gina, smiling. "We're all old and wise and battle scarred and things."

"Speak for yourself," retorted Kay. "No seriously, you do seem quiet?"

"I suppose it must be this comment I had about an ECG from the anaesthetist who's going to knock me out for this forthcoming procedure of mine."

"Lobotomy?" asked Emily. "Only joking, those are history, of course. What procedure? What ECG? What anaesthetist?"

As before, Sandra found that once she had pushed past her natural reluctance to speak about herself in front of more than one person, she felt a sense of relief to share her innermost worries and in turn listen to the worries of the others. She didn't mention her worries about Mélanie, though, as this felt a bit too personal.

"So I'm still here despite my run-in with the cardiology department," Emily was saying, "although I caught the bus. I didn't like the exercise ECG, though, that felt like running! Anyway, I'm here and larger than life, as unfortunately the diet plans have gone to pot."

"Pots of what?" asked Gina. "Pots of toffee flavoured extra-caramel yogurt, or pots of extra-creamy tiramisu, or..."

"Pots of chocolate flavoured double chocolate chocolate dessert," replied Emily tartly, "but no, my message is that you really should try not to worry about what one person says, because all those tests are subject to human interpretation and human error. We never used to have all the tests we have nowadays and I'm inclined to think that ignorance can be bliss."

"Just live your life, because it's yours not theirs, although I know it's worrying," contributed Kay.

"All any of us can do with our life is to be as sensible as we can, while enjoying it as much as we can," said Gina thoughtfully. "It's a pity Delia couldn't make it today, she has a lot to deal with, looking after her father and her two brothers."

"I know," agreed Sandra, "I feel as if I have an easy life compared to Dee's."

"Ah, we shouldn't compare," said Emily, "because all life is relative. God, you should see some of my relatives!"

"I think we may be losing the plot here?" said Kay, putting down her empty mug on the side table.

"Talking of plots, did I say that Andy and I thought we'd literally lost the plot?" asked Gina. "We'd been on the allotment list for so long that they had our old telephone number and couldn't contact us to say that a plot was vacant. Fortunately, a friend of Andy's knew a friend of the allotment committee manager and – anyway, now we've actually got a plot."

"May you be fruitful and multiply," commented Emily. "I managed to grow so many runner beans last year that I got sick of them. There's only so much runner bean meringue and runner bean mousse you can take, really."

"You like cooking, don't you Em," said Kay, looking at Emily and smiling. "I have good intentions and look up recipes, but when I see all the ingredients I give up and fall back on things like pasta."

"Messy," replied Emily. "I just make things up, really, it's fun."

"Cooking is as much fun to me as spring-cleaning the bathroom," commented Sandra, wrinkling her nose.

"Oh, I don't mind cleaning the bathroom," joined in Gina, flushing a little as three pairs of eyes looked at her incredulously. "I found this really great new lemon cleaner," she explained defensively.

"It's OK, I think it's great that you like to clean bathrooms," replied Emily, smiling at Gina. "I'm not quite sure why you want to clean lemons, though."

"What?" asked Gina, a second or two before she realised why Sandra and Emily were laughing. "Oh, I see..."

"I have a lemon-related question," interjected Kay seriously. "Why is it that lemon juice in those plastic lemons is made artificially and yet the lemon dishwashing liquid I bought the other day says it contains real lemons?"

"I'm not sure there's an answer to that," said Emily pensively. "Except maybe when life gives you lemons, it's time to make pancakes and stop worrying."

"Really?" asked Kay, looking at Emily and then smiling. "Ah, you're being you!"

"Thank you all so much for being the plural you," said Sandra, realising she felt a great deal happier than she'd felt for a while. "Thank you for all your moral support."

"It used to be immoral support in the old days," reminisced Gina fondly, before taking her hand away from Kay's knee.

"Oh, talking of support, I found these brilliant support pants," said Kay excitedly. "They really do seem to hold it all in and I'm not sure where it goes, but it doesn't seem to flop out over the top, or anything."

"Are you sure it doesn't get pushed downwards?" asked Emily. "I can't be assed to hold it all in, it seems kinder to let it all hang out."

"I like the way we all hang out together now and again like this," said Sandra. "Oh, sod it, the doorbell. It's probably a cold caller, we've had so many of them lately."

"I had a tepid one the other day," said Gina, attempting to wink.

"I try to be warm to them," said Kay, "they've got a horrible job."

"True," agreed Emily. "Personally, though, I'm still waiting for a hot one."

"It's been really great to see you, Mad," said Sandra, as she and Madeleine set out for a short local walk in the nearby nature reserve one Monday morning at the end of March, before Madeleine was due to catch the train back to Cardiff later in the day.

"It's been really great to see you mad as well," joked Madeleine, smiling at her mother. "Seriously, I was a bit worried after you had that nasty chest virus. You sounded

so down on the phone about the heart stuff and also in your emails you kept mentioning Dad and Rainbow Healers, so I felt I had to come and see you before your thing."

"My procedure, darling," replied Sandra, gazing out over the river and thinking how wonderful it was to be on her own with Madeleine for a short while. She wondered for a second if that was selfish of her, but Osborn had enjoyed a long weekend with them, opting to go back to work on Monday, rather than take another day off.

"Well, I hope it proceeds well," said Madeleine, "and I'll be with you in spirit. Talking of that, what's happening with Dad and Rainbow Healers?"

"Nothing much," replied Sandra, sighing. "He still spends ages at the computer most evenings and he seems so wrapped up in the course. I've tried to react in a positive way by writing a couple of meditations for him to use there. I also went along one evening, because he encouraged me to go, but this woman Mélanie that he's met out of course hours wasn't there."

"Mumsie, he would hardly have encouraged you to go along if there was anything going on and I'm sure he wouldn't be so stupid, anyway. He has far too much to lose and he seems to love all that spiritual stuff, especially the healing side of it. It seems to be his nature to get intense and a bit over-involved, you know that."

"I do. I suppose I'm a bit tired and it's a bit hard to trust completely after..." Sandra stopped herself in surprise, realising she was about to disclose information that she wasn't sure Madeleine knew.

"It's OK, Dad told me about his affair a while ago. At least, he intimated that he'd been unfaithful. He seemed to want to get it off his chest a bit, although he didn't go into details. If I know one thing, it's that he loves you and sometimes he's – well, he's simply a bit misguided and gets carried away."

"Yes, that's what I'm afraid of and I can't get over this feeling that it's all odd and uncomfortable, because he's currently looking away from us." Sandra sighed and gazed out over the river below them in the distance. "Still, it's been a lovely weekend, especially *Barbados Inn* with Lawrence – and you finally made it to The Eden Project."

"Yay! It felt right to come and see you, although I couldn't live up to my goal that when I passed my driving test, I'd drive to see you instead of catching the train."

"I'm so happy that you passed the test, Mad. I still feel a bit of a loser because I don't drive and you'll never feel that, which makes me happy. I know you're still nervous of driving, but you'll gain confidence as you gain experience."

"I know, Mumsie. You should come here for walks more often, it's really lovely since they've created paths and repaired hedges and things."

"As long as you avoid the dog shit. I don't like to walk here on my own and it doesn't happen with Dad and me. Maybe we will when he's retired. He's taking digital photos for a project of Lawrence's now and he's all caught up in that. God, I do sound down! I *am* trying, honestly, I scraped the wallpaper off in your old room, although it felt a bit sad to scrape away what you chose when you came home in 2001. Life moves on, though, and it's true that the key to survival is to adapt. I'm also working in Grandma's front garden." Sandra searched for more positive things to say.

"How are things with you and Grandma? She seemed quiet when we saw her."

"It's still difficult and I keep having to remind myself that she's an elderly lady living on her own, who probably feels alone and frightened. I really wish she would speak more nicely to me, because it feels sometimes as if she doesn't respect me. When I was feeling all sore about her last week, though, she gave me this little Valentine present, so I don't know how I feel about her half the time! Still darling, enough of me, I'm boring myself. Have you seen Gulliver at all lately, or spoken to him?"

"No, we seem to lead such different lives, although I did email him the other day. I used to mind that he sends a daily family email to all three of us, rather than writing to us each personally – but at least he writes, which to be fair is more than I do! He did well at that last craft fair. Should we turn back now? I'd like to catch the early afternoon train, so it won't be as crowded as the later one."

"Yes, of course. Oh Maddy, I'm so glad you came home this weekend." Sandra smiled at Madeleine and mentally began to prepare herself for yet another goodbye.

## CHAPTER 25

"Hello? Mrs Dullkettle, are you with us?" came an efficient sounding voice, as Sandra woke from what felt like a normal sleep, rather than the anaesthetically induced unconsciousness for the so-called procedure on her female nether regions. It would have been impossible to have had a procedure on her male nether regions, so she felt happy that it was over and all she needed to do from now on was to recover.

However, she underestimated the prolonged recovery time, not to mention the excruciating pain, the side effects of the painkillers, the blood, the infection, the side effects of the antibiotics and the fact that she couldn't sit comfortably or walk properly for weeks.

"I'm fine," she said to her mother tiredly on her first post-op visit to Caroline's house, as Caroline described to her how worried she'd been about her only daughter and how she'd had a sleepless night thinking how bereft and alone she'd be without Sandra if anything had happened.

"It felt really odd not seeing you in our normal routine," said Caroline dolefully. "It reminded me how alone I am and how empty my life is without you."

"You've got some good friends, you go to the theatre and you especially like Myrna's company." Sandra was wavering horribly between compassion and suffocation.

"Yes, but I don't really talk to anybody the way I talk to you," replied Caroline, sniffing as she continued to look at Sandra.

"You should talk to Myrna, she's really nice," said Sandra, trying not to sigh heavily as she looked away from the intensity of her mother's gaze. 'I'm sure you don't talk to anybody the way you talk to me,' she was thinking, 'because then they'd realise that you're not the upbeat, bright, together person you portray, but the lonely, frightened, needy, self-obsessed person you actually are. Oh no, how awful of me to think that! I'm sure it must be normal to become lonely and frightened when you're a widow of 81 living on your own and you've been completely used to being the centre of your husband's world and...'

"Sandra! Did you hear me? I don't know what to do about that Mexican orange blossom bush that's gone mad and is poking through the fence now. Myrna said it needs pruning."

"I'll go and start it now," said Sandra, wincing as she stood up awkwardly and waddled to the door as if she had a space hopper between her legs. 'I'd rather do almost anything than sit in here and listen to you and your woes directed at me like a heat-seeking missile,' she thought sadly, as the freedom of the garden beckoned like an island of refuge in a threatening sea swell.

Two weeks later on a fine May morning, Sandra sat in front of Dr Effingham as he gazed at his computer screen, after her garbled attempt to explain her persistent anxiety resulting from what the anaesthetist had said about her heart. As her body gradually healed from the surgery, anxiety had begun to play strange tricks on her, manifesting in strange chest twinges, palpitations, tingling in her arms and a general certainty that she was about to die imminently from a heart attack.

"Hmm," was his first response, before he looked at Sandra directly. "The anaesthetist was wrong to have said what she did," he continued, "and the fact remains that the procedure went ahead as normal and nothing else was forthcoming. You mention anxiety?"

"But I feel real symptoms," said Sandra with a catch in her voice. "Palpitations."

"Let me listen to your heart," said Dr Effingham kindly, as a smile almost reached his mouth. "It always helps to listen to a heart."

"That's what gets me into trouble," sighed Sandra, as she undid her jacket.

"I'm getting really tired now," gasped Sandra, as she attempted to keep going on the treadmill for as long as possible, as an exercise ECG was taking place. Dr Effingham had decided to refer her to the hospital cardiology department for further tests, although he insisted he was simply playing safe. She desperately wanted to believe him.

"If you can keep going for a little while longer, it'll be better for you," said the attendant nurse encouragingly, taking another reading.

"OK," gasped Sandra, "no worries." She wished fervently that this was the case, as her heart-related anxiety had simply refused to go away. The word 'ischaemia' continually reverberated around her troubled mind, as she kept replaying the scene where the anaesthetist had told her that her ECG clearly showed signs of ischaemia, as well as constantly seeing the word in her mind's eye on her father's and Basil's death certificates.

"Well done, you can slow down and stop now," said the nurse, as Sandra returned to the present moment. "Then have a nice rest on that bed over there."

"Thank you," panted Sandra, wishing she could walk out of the hospital there and then to go for a coffee with Osborn, who was sitting in the waiting room. Since the *Mélanie débâcle*, he had felt a bit closer to her, for which she was extremely thankful. He even spent less time at the computer in the evenings, choosing instead to relax beside her on the sofa, watching either a television programme or a DVD.

"Are you OK, Mrs Dullkettle?" asked the nurse, smiling as Sandra dutifully lay down on the bed.

"Yes," gasped Sandra, but less gaspily now, wondering where they could in fact go for coffee after they'd escaped from the hospital.

'Is that all that life is?' she suddenly wondered sombrely, 'considering where to escape when the going gets rough? What exactly *is* rough about my life right now? OK, I'm worried that I might die prematurely from heart failure and miss out on so much living that's yet to come. I'm not dying while Madeleine still needs me, though, I refuse point-blank.

'It was a bit rough that our water heater almost gave up the ghost just at the time when I needed a bath every day after the op, but we've had a new one fitted now. It was a bit rough when Kirsty suddenly appeared to spend Lawrence's birthday with him and Osborn ended up paying for everything – and it was a bit rough that Mum totally forgot our wedding anniversary, even though hers and Dad's anniversary was the same date – but all this isn't really rough, it's just an accumulation. In fact, life isn't really rough at all.'

"Well Mrs Dullkettle, you can leave us now," came the voice of the nurse through Sandra's musings. "Mind how you go, though, there's a proper summer storm out there, it's turning out quite rough."

Sandra sat in front of the cardiac consultant, who had read through her test results, listened to her chest, asked her a barrage of questions and finally looked at her appraisingly. She had no idea what was coming, but felt reasonably fatalistic about the outcome. She'd lost count of the number of ECGs she'd been subjected to in the last few weeks, not to mention the peculiar sensation and sounds of a recent echocardiogram.

"As far as the exercise ECG and echocardiogram go, your results are good," came the lilting Irish voice of the consultant. "However, it's not possible to say definitively that your arteries are clear unless you have an angiogram. In light of what you've told me, though, you don't seem to have any pressing problems. Would you say that's so?"

"No, I don't like ironing at all, but – sorry. No, I was so surprised when I was first told about that ischaemic ECG and I do feel that anxiety has kicked in." Sandra stopped, not knowing what else to say.

"I'm going to let *you* make the decision, Mrs Dullkettle, about whether you want to go ahead with an angiogram or not?" The consultant raised his eyebrows and smiled at Sandra, which resulted in a slightly alarming expression.

"Oh, I don't know. Yes I do, I don't want any further tests." Sandra had managed to find the courage of her convictions, hidden beneath a bewildering sense of confusion.

"That's fine, I'll send a copy of these results to your GP with a covering letter and *your* job will be to keep in mind your blood pressure and cholesterol."

It was over! The mind-controlling fear of the past few months had been faced and dealt with and she was free to live the rest of her life, however long that might be. She smiled, thanked the consultant and tried not to propel herself into the outside corridor

with indecent haste, walking quickly along with the self-awareness that it would take a little time and positive thinking to put all this behind her, but at least it was over. Her heart seemed to skip a beat with sheer relief, as she emerged from the corridor system and saw the way out, beckoning to her with a bright blue, sunny sky.

'I'm free,' she thought with elation as she stepped through the doors and stood against the wall for a moment, breathing in the early summer air. 'Oh no! I've left Osborn back there in the waiting room!'

Later that same day, Gulliver and Bryony arrived to stay for almost a week and as the four of them sat down with a hot drink, Sandra had the strange feeling that something was different. She looked at Gulliver's hair and Bryony's demeanour, but no clues were forthcoming.

"So, how are you guys?" asked Osborn, who seemed fond of the Americanism that irritated Sandra greatly.

"OK," replied Gulliver nonchalantly, "although we've got some new names we can call you both."

"Oh?" asked Sandra worriedly, wondering if either she or Osborn had somehow inadvertently upset them.

"Grandma and Grandad," said Gulliver proudly, looking at them to gauge their reaction.

"What?" asked Sandra, realising that something was different.

"Grandma and Grandad," repeated Bryony, looking strangely uncomfortable.

"Oh!" yelled and shrieked Osborn and Sandra respectively, although they weren't at all concerned with respectability at that particular point. "Why, what, when where, how?" they both asked in a confusion of happy excitement, although possibly with the exception of how and where.

"The baby's due in January," explained Gulliver as Bryony rushed to the bathroom, "and Bryony's started to feel really sick."

"Oh, that's such good news!" exclaimed Osborn, as the news began to sink in. "I don't mean that Bryony's sick, I mean that you're going to be parents. Wow Gulliver, you're going to be a dad!"

"I know," replied Gulliver, with a proud smile lighting up his face. "Scary, isn't it!"

"It's wonderful," said Sandra, grinning at her son. "Poor Bryony, but the sickness should pass fairly soon."

"By the second trimester." Gulliver glanced in the direction of the bathroom. "I've been researching on the internet," he explained, responding to Sandra's interested gaze. "I've found this really great website where you enter the baby's due date and you have a week by week explanation of what foetal development's taking place."

"That sounds fun." Sandra was intrigued by the sound of her son using pregnancy terms with such natural ease. "Have you got a date for the first scan?"

"Yes, I can send you a copy of the photo if you like."

"That'll be great, I never had a photo of you or Madeleine," remembered Sandra, "and as far as I recall, they didn't show me the screen. Dad wasn't with me, either."

"Why would your father be with you for the scan?" asked Bryony a little wanly as she re-entered the room.

"Er..." began Sandra.

"She means me," continued Osborn. "I can remember I went along with her for Madeleine's scan, but for some reason I didn't go into the room."

"You went to the toilet," said Sandra, "and they called me in while you were away. They seemed really officious and rushed, so I felt afraid to say anything. I was so sorry. I remember buying you a red lambswool jumper that we couldn't afford, to show you how sorry I was."

"As I recall, the jumper was nice but it didn't make up for it," said Osborn sadly.

"I suppose we're going to be subjected to a lot of your baby memories now," said Gulliver, looking bemused.

"No, they're grown-up memories. It's OK, I get your point – so what would you like to talk about instead?" asked Sandra, smiling.

"Did you get much morning sickness? Did you feel incredibly tired? Did you have a midwife? Did you put on much weight?"

"No, not as far as I recall," said Osborn, patting his abdomen.

"I did have high blood pressure with you," said Sandra, "and I spent three weeks in the ante-natal ward, but we were moving house at the time and – oh, this could be a long conversation, would anyone like a glass of wine to celebrate?"

"Not Bryony," replied Osborn proudly. "She's pregnant."

The following day was Gulliver's 31<sup>st</sup> birthday, celebrated with a lunchtime visit to *The Scary Skewer* at Derrydown with Caroline and Lawrence. The view out over the sea from the conservatory was as lovely as ever, except for when there was a Cornish sea mist, of course.

"No sea mist today," murmured Sandra, gazing out at the horizon, where she could just make out a ship. "Goodness, I've missed the sea. We haven't been near the coast for ages."

"You went to the Chelsea Flower Show, though," interjected Caroline. "For two nights." This contribution was followed by her characteristic sniff.

"One night," corrected Sandra. 'Please leave me alone, Mother,' she thought suddenly. 'You always seem to think I have a much better life than you, but little do you know how I lay awake in that hotel room in the dark recesses of the night, worrying myself silly that I might have a heart attack so far away from home, in a strange place, in front of strangers. I know I was being neurotic, but that thoughtless anaesthetist really put the fear of...'

"God Almighty!" exclaimed Lawrence loudly. "Sorry – but me, a great-uncle? Congratulations to both of you! Holey moley, a great uncle!"

"Try being a great-grandmother," said Caroline, sipping her white wine (although it was actually a little yellow).

"Pass," replied Lawrence, gulping his *Doom Juice* somewhat.

"Yes, pass the menu please, Gulliver," said Osborn, grinning. "Well, I for one am absolutely delighted to be a grandfather. It's not all about us anyway, it's about Bryony, Gulliver and the unborn baby. How are you feeling, Bryony?"

"I'm fine," replied Bryony, looking uncomfortable. "Well, I should be OK if I eat something soon and if I don't eat too much and if I swap places with you, Gulliver, so I have a clear run to the toilet."

"What about you, Sandra?" asked Caroline, fixing her gaze on her daughter. "How do you like the thought of being a grandmother?"

"I..." began Sandra.

"I can remember I told Sandra not to make me a grandmother until I was 50," continued Caroline, not noticing Sandra's exasperated sigh, "and I'm pleased to say she did as she was told!"

"I..." began Sandra, before giving up and resorting to rebellious inner talk. 'It was actually nothing to do with you and why for sodding hell's sake should it have been?' Sandra asked her mother furiously via herself. 'I was living *my* life! Not *your* life, but *my* life, mine and Osborn's. God, I didn't wait until she was 50 just to please her, did I? I can remember clocking her age, but surely that had nothing to do with it. Did it?' Sandra managed to suppress a groan as Gulliver handed her a menu.

"Mother?" Gulliver was looking at her enquiringly. "How *do* you like the thought of being a grandmother?"

"It's absolutely wonderful and I feel incredibly proud to be a future grandmother," replied Sandra, smiling at her son. 'He really wants to know how I feel,' she thought with a sudden glow that had nothing to do with the warm conservatory. 'It actually matters to him and even if it's just a little bit, then that matters to *me*. Gulliver and Madeleine matter *so* much. They're still connected to me at such a fundamental level, regardless of the fact that they're adults and living their own life, which I'm so happy for them to be doing – but I'm sad that I'm beginning to wonder how much I actually matter to my own mother. I wish Maddy was here joining in, but I know she's happy now with Henri, so I suppose it doesn't matter.'

"What's the matter?" asked Osborn, raising an eyebrow at Sandra.

"The guy who makes mats," replied Lawrence conversationally.

"You've been staring at the menu for ages and I need to look," persisted Osborn, ignoring his grinning brother.

"Here, have mine," said Lawrence. "It's a pity Madeleine's not here. What does she think about becoming an auntie?"

"She seems happy," replied Gulliver. "We told her before we told Mum and Dad, so she had to keep it a secret."

"We knew we were visiting you and my parents, so we waited to tell you in person," explained Bryony. "Can we order soon? I'm feeling a bit dodgy."

The celebratory meal continued with the usual mix of desultory conversation amid the food and drink.

"How's the business going, Gulliver?" asked Caroline, slightly slurping some soup.

"It's coming along well, actually," replied Gulliver, slightly smiling. "I've had quite a few orders recently."

"It must feel good to receive orders," said Osborn, slightly spilling his drink. "I keep getting orders from..."

"Stop there," interrupted Sandra, slightly flushed as she gazed across the table at Osborn. "Goodness, you looked so much like a comedian then."

"Are you being funny?" asked Osborn, slightly confused. "Oh no, you're saying I'm the funny one – but I thought we had a different sense of humour?"

"We do," replied Sandra, slightly wrinkling her forehead. "No, I mean you facially resembled a comedian, but I can't think of his name."

"Have you bought many baby things yet?" asked Lawrence, slightly clattering his knife on his plate. "Oops. I suppose there's lots of equipment you'll need, like a cot and a pram and a bath and things."

"We haven't really addressed that particular side of it all yet," replied Bryony, slightly suspicious of her carrots, "although I'm not into dresses, so we'll need a bit of help."

"I'll tell you where you might find a bargain," said Lawrence, slightly loudly amid the general hubbub, "because I went to the market the other day and had a good firkle around. I found some toy plastic camels for my model making desert diorama and I've been looking for camels for donkey's years."

"I can't bear markets," said Caroline, slightly looking down her nose. On the whole, it was better than slightly looking down, or even up, someone else's nose. "They seem full of old things and white elephants."

"I love markets, I've squirreled away a lot of useful items in my time," replied Lawrence, slightly miffed. "No, I meant that I saw a stall selling second-hand baby equipment. Some things they had there really foxed me, though, I had no idea what they were for."

"Mum and I will buy you both something for the baby," said Osborn, slightly knocking Bryony's arm as he bent over to retrieve an escaped plum tomato. "I can remember your early days so well Gulliver, not to mention your nights. We used to call you Ratbag, remember?"

"It really used to get my goat, to be honest," replied Gulliver slightly croakily. "I seem to have a frog in my throat, I hope I'm not going to get a cold. I suppose we'll have the usual round of childhood illnesses to contend with, but I'm not very good with sickness."

"Oh, you'll get used to it," said Sandra, slightly tired with trying to spear some cold peas. "You won't bat an eyelid after a while. Do you remember that awful night when the three of us had that sickness bug? Oh, sorry Bryony, are you OK?"

"I'm coping," replied Bryony, looking slightly pale. "I'll be going back to work after my maternity leave, so Gulliver will probably get the lion's share of illnesses."

"Thanks for that," said Gulliver, slightly grimacing. "I really hope your university contract's renewed, it's a dog eat dog world out there and nothing is certain."

"Do you like being a househusband?" asked Caroline, slightly cattily. "There was no such thing in my day, the men went out to work and the women stayed at home."

"How about dessert?" asked Sandra, slightly angry at her mother's old-fashioned intransigence. "I felt like I could eat a horse when I came in, but now I feel stuffed."

"You've always seemed quite real to me," remarked Gulliver, slightly worried about Bryony. "I'd like some fresh air, can we go for a walk to the nature reserve here in a minute?"

"It'll take more than a minute," said Osborn, slightly crazily, "but I'm being silly. Are you OK, Mum? Lawrence?"

"I don't want any dessert," replied Lawrence, slightly knocking his knee as he attempted to get up from the table. "Did anyone see that TV programme last night about submarines? It was actually a German documentary, but luckily there were subtitles."

## CHAPTER 26

"I'm really glad to be over here today," said Sandra to Belinda, as the two cousins sat drinking coffee with Caroline in her sitting room. "I didn't know a replacement porch would be so messy. Still, I think it's almost ready to be plastered. I'm glad Osborn's taken a few days off work to deal with it, he's really good at talking to the workmen and making them cups of tea and whatever."

"As long as he doesn't hinder them," remarked Caroline. "Another biscuit, Belinda?"

"No thank you, Auntie, I must be good," replied Belinda, smiling. She was going to stay overnight with Caroline, a fact that Sandra found strangely comforting, as if someone else was having some input in dealing with her mother, no matter how small. "How's Bryony coping with the pregnancy?" she asked Sandra.

"Gulliver sent us a picture of her first scan," replied Sandra proudly. "I can't make head or tail of it, to be honest, but just knowing it's our grandchild in there is amazing. It was lovely while they were here when Osborn and I went shopping with Gulliver one day. Bryony wasn't feeling up to it and spent the day with her parents, so we went into town to buy Gulliver some sandals for his birthday. We also went into *Parentcare* with him to suss out the pushchair that he and Bryony want and we bought some baby clothes too."

"I haven't been to *Parentcare* for years," said Belinda wistfully. "I'm so pleased for you all, I really am, but it seems that my two aren't likely to have children, so I don't think I'll ever be a grandma."

"I can remember when I became a grandmother," recalled Caroline suddenly. "I was so excited, I was walking down the street almost on air, dying to tell people."

"Oh well, there are lots of other things to look forward to," said Sandra, conscious of Belinda's sad demeanour. "Have you got any outings planned for the summer?"

"Trudie's asked me to go to Exeter with her next week to look for an outfit for her friend's wedding, but I'm worried I can't walk very far now with this osteoarthritis in my knees. Did I tell you I'm on the list for a knee replacement?"

"Are you?" Caroline sounded surprised. "I always think you're so much younger than I am, being my niece. I've been very lucky, I've never needed an operation."

"How will you manage afterwards with the steps and stairs?" asked Sandra, envisaging Belinda and Ian's split-level house.

"I'm not sure, really," replied Belinda. "I'll just have to manage somehow."

"Trudie lives nearby, though, so she'll be able to help you," said Caroline. "I'm always glad that Sandra lives over the road. Mind you, I'm really envious of people in my age group who can go away and stay with their children who don't live near. You should live away, Sandra, so I could come and stay with you on holiday."

"What?" Sandra could hardly believe her own ears. She looked at Belinda and saw that Belinda was also registering surprise. 'You can't have your cake and eat it, for fuck's sake, you selfish old woman!' she found herself thinking hotly. The coffee was hitting base. 'You really do want to use me for your own convenience, don't you? God, I said 'fuck' to myself. But I *cannot* be everyone and everything for you, you sad, self-centred person.' To her chagrin, Sandra felt tears of rage and hurt stinging her eyes and blinked furiously to clear them.

"How's Madeleine?" asked Belinda, obviously aware of Sandra's discomfiture.

"She's fine," gulped Sandra, grateful for the diversion. "We're going to see her and Henri for a weekend next month, on the way back from Gulliver and Bryony's."

"You have a lot of holidays," said Caroline to Sandra, before turning to Belinda. "She's always coming over and telling me she's going away."

"They're *not* holidays, they're the only way I get to see my children except when they visit here and it's not actually that often," replied Sandra, trying desperately not to show her inner fury.

"Yes, I'm lucky to have Trudie living close, although she says it works both ways," said Belinda, smiling at Sandra. "I'm not so sure about Peter, though."

"Do you go on holiday much, Belinda?" asked Caroline conversationally.

"No, I don't know the last time I went away," replied Belinda, putting her cup down on the coffee table. Aptly, it was a coffee cup. "Ian's not keen because of his social anxiety, but Trudie's going to Florida with her boyfriend for a week in September."

"That's good," said Sandra, also putting her coffee cup down on the coffee table. "Madeleine's going to France with Henri next month to stay with his parents and she's a bit apprehensive, to say the least."

"She'll be fine," said Caroline. "I forgot to tell you, Sandra, the optician said yesterday that my sight is very good for my age, so I don't need new glasses."

"Right," replied Sandra noncommittally, thinking that the optician had no idea how her mother couldn't see things clearly because she refused to wear her glasses all the time. "I went to the optician's last week and was scared stiff by her talk of floaters."

"Oh, I have those," said Caroline, sniffing.

"She told me that short-sighted people are more prone to problems," persisted Sandra, before deciding to let it go for the sake of Belinda. "Oh well, I'll just go outside for ten minutes and finish spreading that last bag of gravel if that's OK?"

"You do what you want," replied Caroline. "She works wonders in the garden," she continued to Belinda, who was looking a little bemused.

"Osborn did all the hard landscaping," explained Sandra, before she managed to escape outside for a breather, from what suddenly seemed to have become a session of undercurrent psychological poking at Sandra on the part of her clearly unhappy mother.

On her 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday, Caroline opted to go with Sandra, Osborn and Lawrence to lunch at *The Square Cheese Hotel*, after a walk to The Flingers to visit Leonard's special stone. It was a pleasant summer's day as they trudged up the stony path and along the bumpy moorland grass, before standing for a while at Leonard's stone.

Sandra felt almost at peace when she quietly placed a few small dianthus flowers from her and Osborn's garden at the foot of the stone, just after the others had started to leave. The atmosphere was tranquil within the enigmatic Bronze Age stone circles, for which she now felt a great affinity.

She stood there for a few moments before leaving to catch up with the others, conscious of the summer breeze cooling the hot air, the evocative smell of peaty ground and dried horse manure and the cry of a distant bird of prey. 'I love you, Dad,' she said with her hand on the warm granite. 'I miss you and I love you.' She smiled and walked quickly on to rejoin the others, carrying on with a lighter heart.

The following day, which was Osborn's 57<sup>th</sup> birthday, they drove to Swansea for a week with Gulliver and Bryony. It rained for almost the entire journey, but a warm welcome awaited them with a panini lunch, present opening and a birthday apple pie, complete with candles. In the early evening, they drove along the long Swansea sea-front to *The Wonky Woodcutter*, where they sat by a window in the conservatory and looked out at a sky that had stopped raining and was even showing a few blue patches.

"What is it about us and pub conservatories?" asked Sandra, as their food was brought to the table. "I don't even vote Conservative, but we always seem to veer towards conservatories." She sprinkled vinegar on her fish. "I suppose we'd better not talk politics, though. What kind of hard labour have you in mind for us tomorrow then, Gulliver? The shed? The garden?"

"Actually, we thought you might like a short walk at Carreg Cennen," replied Gulliver, looking somewhat hurt. "There's not much work to do really, I just need some help with the shed roof and whatever you feel like helping with in the garden."

"I was only joking," said Sandra, slightly surprised at Gulliver's uncharacteristic seriousness. "There's a castle at Carreg Cennen, isn't there? I'm sure it featured in a novel I read recently. Alison keeps passing on second-hand books she buys at charity shops, although some of them look about fifteenth-hand, to be honest. Gosh, I seem to be talking a lot, how unusual."

"Yes Mother, eat your fish before it goes cold," said Gulliver with mock severity. Sandra's heart lifted and she smiled at her son in familiar acknowledgement.

"I've always wondered how you could have a second-hand novel," said Bryony nonchalantly, as she started her food.

"Yes, I sometimes find it hard to hold and read a book with one hand," remarked Osborn. "I'll help you with the shed roof."

"I'll help you with the garden," said Sandra. "I know there was something I was going to say to you, but I can't quite grasp it. I'll remember in a minute, bear with me."

"Please don't say that." Gulliver sounded disturbed.

"What?" Sandra looked at Gulliver for two seconds before she realised he was on the edge of a smile. "Ah, you're being you! I love it when people are being themselves."

"I wouldn't mind somebody being me for the next few months," said Bryony ruefully. "I'm tired of throwing up."

"It shouldn't last that much longer," said Sandra kindly. "What are you now, four months?"

"Thirty and two months," replied Bryony, looking innocent. "I may not come to Carreg Cennen with you tomorrow, I feel so tired a lot of the time. It's good there, I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

"I've remembered what it was I'd forgotten," said Sandra suddenly. "Grandma sends her love."

"First class or second class?" asked Gulliver, raising his eyebrows.

"Special sodding delivery," laughed Sandra, somewhat sardonically.

Sandra and Osborn did enjoy their visit to Carreg Cennen, including the drive there through old Welsh towns, consisting of small houses, chapels, a few sturdy pubs and in one particular town, a well-kept Working Men's Club. Sandra couldn't help thinking how buildings like that were far more natural and pleasing than the sight of a large, modern house they drove by with two big front windows sporting a red glass Welsh dragon within the ordinary glass.

After a packed lunch at Carreg Cennen car park, they walked up the side of a very steep field and then proceeded through quite a bit of mud around fields and paths in a great circle. At one point, they seemed to be walking up a running stream, but the views of the castle were picturesque and many photos were taken.

As they eventually neared the end of the walk, Sandra noticed a signpost that was pointing the way they'd just come, indicating the 'Long Walk'. She smiled to herself as she realised once and for all that a short walk to Gulliver meant a long walk to other mere mortals such as herself.

Bryony had to work for the rest of the week, but the others took advantage of the weather and went on some further outings, including a visit to the Mumbles shop where Gulliver's work was sold and a pretty walk along the coast path to Bracelet Bay.

In between times, they worked for a while on the garden and the shed roof. One afternoon, Gulliver seemed intent on giving Sandra a new experience that she had always thought sounded slightly wild and carefree, namely a beach barbecue. They were all tired after a long and rather hot day, but pleased that it was dry as they met Bryony from work and drove to Whiteford Sands.

It was not only hot and dry, but also very windy as they started to walk along the vast sandy expanses of the beach. Sandra's tiredness was in danger of taking over, but the loveliness of the place and the experience of freedom worked its magic, with sand dunes giving way to miles of sand, the sea way out and not a soul in sight.

"This is beautiful," said Sandra, as they finally stopped at a likely looking spot. "Is this an onshore wind or an offshore one?"

"It's onshore, because it's blowing on to the shore," replied Osborn. "I would say it's veering between 5 and 7 on the Beaufort Scale."

"I need to lie down," said Bryony, putting her coat on the sand.

"Are you all right?" asked Sandra anxiously.

"Half left," replied Bryony with her characteristic humour. "I'm exhausted, that's all. I'll be fine after some food."

"Can you help me to collect some driftwood?" Gulliver asked Osborn and Sandra, who both jumped at the task, albeit not quite literally.

"This is fun," said Sandra happily as she walked along, the wind whipping away her words. "I feel like a Boy Scout, like you used to be."

"What?" shouted Gulliver.

"I feel like a Boy Scout!" shouted Sandra back.

"Careful, Mother!" Gulliver seemed to be winking. "Damnation, I've got sand in my eye."

"Face the other way!" yelled Osborn, walking backwards.

"Well, this is some experience," mused Sandra, as she too felt sand flying in her face. "Oh, that's a nice big bit of wood."

After they'd collected a reasonable pile of driftwood, Gulliver quickly started the fire and cooked them potatoes and baked beans, as well as salmon and vegetables on a skewer.

"This is great," said Osborn, as he unwrapped a scorched potato from its tinfoil. "You can tell you've done this many times before, Gulliver."

"Are you being funny? Is it burnt?" asked Gulliver a little anxiously.

"No, it's fine, I love it here. Mum and I would never have done this on our own."

"I'm used to expecting the unexpected with Gulliver by now," said Sandra, gingerly extricating her own hot potato, although Gulliver hadn't added any spices.

"I'm currently expecting the expected," remarked Bryony, licking her fingers. "I won't know if we're having a boy or girl until my 20-week scan."

"That must be quite soon?" asked Sandra, almost burning her fingers. "Do you want to know what you're having?"

"It's hopefully a baby," replied Bryony, "and yes, we're happy to know. What about you, do you want to know?"

"Oh yes, I always want to know," said Sandra, smiling happily.

"In that case, do you want to know where we're walking tomorrow?" asked Gulliver nonchalantly.

"No, because I'm sure it's going to be another one of your short walks that goes on for miles and miles," replied Sandra, smiling.

"Oh, it's no great distance at all, really. It's just this lovely little glacial lake in the Brecon Beacons."

"Glacial lake? Glacial lake! What glacial lake?"

"Just a little lake ... that's glacial." Gulliver's mouth twitched.

"It's an upward walk, obviously?"

"Obviously." Gulliver was grinning unashamedly. "Anyone for a hot banana?"

"It was a really good week with Gulliver and Bryony, although we're both tired," said Osborn to Madeleine, as they sat in Madeleine and Henri's new and upmarket flat, early on Friday evening. "It's lovely to be able to pop in and see you on our way back." Osborn sighed contentedly. "Thank you for inviting us."

"You're welcome," said Madeleine, laughing. "I'm not sure what you'd like to do tomorrow. Henri has to pop out to have a haircut first thing, but after that we can do anything you like. I don't think you've ever walked around Cardiff Bay, have you?"

"No, I haven't learned to walk on water yet," replied Osborn, smiling. He noticed Henri's inquisitive brown eyes appraising him. "It's OK, I was just being funny."

"It's good to see you so relaxed, Varti, there hasn't been too much of that lately," said Madeleine, smiling back. "How are you, Mumsie?"

"I'm OK, darling," replied Sandra, realising she wasn't sure how she actually felt. "It's been a peculiar year so far, but it's true that we had a good week with Gulliver and Bryony and it's so lovely to see you again." She glanced at Henri, wondering what he was thinking. "I love your flat, it's got such a brilliant view."

"We've 'ad a few nit bugging problems since we moved in, but we like it 'ere," said Henri seriously.

"Nit picking problems that have bugged us?" Madeleine asked Henri, failing to suppress a chuckle.

"Don't worry Henri, they have a habit of laughing at *me* when I make mistakes," said Osborn wryly. "What was it you were laughing at the other day?" he asked Sandra.

"Sparodically," replied Sandra, unable to stop grinning. "And Minch Beavy for Maeve Binchy."

"Almost as good as Shanaya Twine!" exploded Madeleine mirthfully.

"Oo?" asked Henri doubtfully.

"Sorry," said Madeleine, putting her hand on Henri's thigh. "Shania Twain. Dad tends to say some words mixed up, like batsumi rice instead of basmati," she explained, before dissolving into helpless laughter.

"Whatever you do, don't mention the foccacia," said Sandra, smiling and putting her hand on Osborn's thigh.

"I like Italian food and French food," said Osborn obliviously. "One of our French students was telling me he went to the Barbican recently and there's a new brass ... brassie ... brassiere..."

"Brasserie!" exploded Madeleine and Sandra together.

"Ah!" said Henri suddenly, looking at Madeleine. "Is it like that time when my mother asked you if you spoke French and you said un petit pois?" He put his hand on Madeleine's thigh.

"Yes," replied Madeleine, grimacing.

"A little pea," explained Sandra to Osborn, "instead of un petit peu for a little bit. I feel left out, I can't think of anything funny I've said."

"Don't worry, little Mumsie," said Madeleine kindly, "you're funny all by yourself." She put her hand on Sandra's thigh, which was not an easy gesture, since she was sitting beside Henri on the sofa opposite. "Would anybody like to try some of our new wine? Henri's parents brought a few bottles over with them when they visited recently and it's really good."

"It's only table wine," said Henri, "but it's better than a lot of the wine you buy 'ere." He looked a little embarrassed. "My father likes to visit the vineyards and 'e does the wine tasting," he explained quickly.

"Wonderful," replied Sandra. "I'm sure it's great. Plonk it sur la table and we'll mull over what to do tomorrow."

"I hope it doesn't rain," said Osborn, gazing out of the window, "but looking at those clouds, I'd say there was a storm brewing."

"The forecast is dodgy tonight, but fine for tomorrow," reassured Madeleine, as Henri went for the wine. "Anyway, this wine will fortify our spirits. How were Gulliver and Bryony?"

"Very well on the whole. Bryony was quite bright and bubbly when she wasn't being sick," replied Osborn. "I suspect that Gulliver still has a tendency to bottle up his feelings, though."

"You never know what cocktail of emotions that will start to ferment, but he's very interested in the pregnancy," said Sandra, as Henri brought in a bottle of red wine. "He keeps checking on a website he's found for what stage of development the baby's reached, as if he has a real thirst for knowledge."

"I should think it helps," considered Madeleine, "because pregnancy must be quite a heady experience, as if you're not in control of your own body. The thought of having a new human life growing inside you must be intoxicating."

"This wine looks intoxicating," said Osborn, picking up the bottle and reading the label. "Oh, it's in French. Well then, how's work, you two?"

The rest of the visit turned out to be as delightful as the first evening, Sandra mused, as she and Osborn travelled home on Sunday afternoon.

"It was so good to see Madeleine happy," said Osborn suddenly, as if reading her thoughts. "Henri is good for her, just like she is for him."

"Madeleine says he's very much like you in some ways," relied Sandra, smiling. "She can't believe she's chosen someone who's like a younger version of you in certain situations."

"He'll look after her," said Osborn thoughtfully, "but I hope he doesn't make the same mistakes I did."

"I'm sure he'll make his own mistakes," replied Sandra diplomatically. "I'm simply happy that she's not on her own anymore. It feels such a relief that both Madeleine and Gulliver are settled now. It does my heart good."

"I'm sure there's nothing wrong with your heart, you know," said Osborn in a sudden moment of insight.

"It's been through quite a lot in its time," said Sandra pensively, "but I do feel better about life in general since we visited Gulliver and Maddy. I also feel quite pleased with myself for agreeing to help you present the healing course at Rainbow Healers, although I know I'll be nervous when the time comes. Even my mother seems to have settled down and is doing very well for her age, so I don't especially need to worry about her at the moment. Yes, life is definitely looking up a bit."

## CHAPTER 27

As soon as Sandra and Osborn visited Caroline the next day, however, they could tell that life was definitely looking down again – and more than a bit, as Caroline related to them in great detail how she'd been ill while they'd been away.

"The day after I was so sick, my friend Myrna came to see me and told me I was looking yellow," said Caroline dolefully. "She told me I ought to ring the surgery, so I did and Dr Buttman called. He looked in my eyes and he said I did look rather jaundiced. He sent a nurse to take blood and now I've got an appointment at the hospital on Friday."

"Oh dear," said Sandra, her heart having dropped like a crashing lift on speed. "Have you been eating and drinking?"

"I've been drinking," replied Caroline, indicating a small glass of fruit juice on the table beside her chair. "I don't feel much like eating, though."

"You must eat, Mum," said Osborn plainly. "You like soup, so what about some chicken soup?"

"I haven't got any left," replied Caroline. "I didn't realise I'd run out. Myrna was very good and asked me if I needed anything, but I didn't like to bother her."

"Why ever not?" asked Osborn, clearly frustrated. "She wouldn't have asked if she didn't mean it, surely?"

"She's a year older than I am," replied Caroline defensively, "and tins are heavy. It's not easy living on your own at our age, you know."

"We can buy you some soup and anything else you might fancy," offered Sandra conciliatorily, which was a difficult word to say. "What about grapes? Crisps? Lucozade? Mints? Some rehydration sachets? Anything?" She realised she was exhibiting her inner sense of helpless desperation.

"I'm more worried about getting to the hospital on Friday," said Caroline, sighing hopefully.

"It's OK, I'm sure I can give you a lift," said Osborn somewhat wearily.

The hospital appointment turned out to be a bed in the Planned Investigation Unit, which freaked Caroline out as soon as she realised it involved a bed and a possible overnight stay. Sandra stayed with her mother for five hours, while Caroline had blood taken and then waited nil by mouth for a scan. However, no scan slot became available, so Caroline was allowed home for the night. Sandra felt beyond exhaustion as she arrived home to find Osborn in the sitting room with a man from *Glazed Expressions*, who had almost sold Osborn some French windows.

"It's a cracking deal," Osborn said to Sandra, as the man filled out a form. "I've looked at several companies, as you know, and this is clearly the best."

"Indeed," said the man, looking up at them both from what he was writing. "It's all see-through, no hidden clauses."

"OK?" asked Osborn. "Do you mind if I go ahead and sign, Sandra?"

"Yes, I mean no. Whatever, it's fine. I really don't care – mind, honestly. Great!" Sandra felt normality slipping away and smiled with her own glazed expression as she left them to it and went to find some drugs to ease her rapidly increasing headache.

The next day, Caroline returned to hospital and eventually managed to have her scan, which showed some gallstones and a small ovarian cyst. Her blood test results showed deranged LFTs, referring to liver function tests, so she was scheduled to have a further blood test in a week's time, followed by an appointment at the hepatology clinic the week after that. Sandra wondered if it was the beginning of the end, but then felt dreadful for thinking such thoughts.

The following week was difficult to say the least, as Caroline appeared to suffer a depressive reaction. Sandra visited her nearly every day and did various jobs, including washing her mother's hair, but although Caroline gradually looked much less yellow and had clearly improved physically, she was wan and very woeful.

It was therefore almost a relief as the first Wednesday evening of the healing course at Rainbow House arrived and Sandra took her place at Osborn's side in the long room with its yellow painted walls and colourful pictures, while they greeted the new course members for the coming months.

To say Sandra was nervous was an understatement, but she realised that Osborn was also apprehensive and simply did her best by helping him with the initial paperwork. After that, there was nothing for it but to sit in a circle with ten strangers, forcing herself to make eye contact and smiling rather a lot (perhaps too much) as everyone introduced themselves.

Osborn then spent the next hour or so talking about healing and interacting with the group he was leading in a very natural way. For a moment Sandra almost took a nosedive into her own inadequacies, but there wasn't much time for that, as they split into pairs to practise sensing energy. To Sandra's surprise, the time passed quickly amid much laughter, so that although they were both very tired when they finally arrived home at the end of the evening, they sat with a hot drink and talked.

"I feel more and more as if this is what I'm meant to be doing," said Osborn, "and less and less that working at the university is my future."

"The university is a dreadful place to work, if you ask me," agreed Sandra, "but how exactly do you see your future? Healing? Teaching?"

"I don't know, but I do know that I feel good teaching healing. I don't know where my life is heading – our life – but I feel we have something to achieve together."

"Don't we achieve things together now?" Sandra felt a few tiny snakes of insecurity slithering around inside her head.

"Ye-es, although we still seem to be expending a lot of energy on other people," replied Osborn, considering his reply carefully.

"You mean you at work and me with my mother?"

"That sounds about right."

"Those two things won't change overnight. Well probably not, anyway."

"I know, but I definitely feel there's something we'll both be doing together in the future," persisted Osborn.

"I'm not sure. The more I think I understand life, the more I realise I don't," said Sandra, sighing. "Anyway, isn't *being* more important than *doing*, as in who we are rather than what we do?"

"Yes, although we're human and we need to do, as well as to be. I still find it very hard to be myself sometimes."

"Isn't there some obscure saying about the fact that by being yourself you're just playing another role? That doesn't sound at all right to me! God, I'm really doing my own head in now!" Sandra laughed and sipped her hot chocolate.

"I can't seem to help wishing I could understand life more, but I have a sneaking suspicion that we come here on a need to know basis," said Osborn, stirring his drink.

"Well, I need to know why life feels so unfair sometimes," said Sandra heatedly, as the hot chocolate took effect. "I mean, at one end of the scale we're supposed to look after old people, even if it's to the detriment of our own needs – and yes, I'm thinking of my mother. Then at the other end of the scale, there's demand breastfeeding and this current ethos all about the child's needs. Shouldn't it be about the whole of society, though, rather than separate factions over others? Inclusive rather than exclusive, which would feed everybody's needs?"

"As it is now, many people feel as if their needs are less important than other people's needs. I'm one of those people, because our middle generation seems expected to help everyone else. There needs to be compromise and a better understanding of the whole picture, on a global scale."

"Quite." Osborn sighed. "Talking of feeding needs, I had this thought about why there's so much obesity – because there *is*, no matter how politically incorrect it's considered, or how much people deny it. I suddenly wondered if it's because so many people are hungry for something they don't consciously acknowledge, like the meaning of life for instance. They then feed themselves with food they don't need instead."

"That idea wouldn't go down well, but it does make sense. I think there are many factors to weight, including a genetic factor. When I look at old photos of my mother's family, there's a definite trend to small and dumpy. I'm so glad my father was quite tall, but I do seem to take after my mother and I don't want to..." Sandra stopped short.

"What's the matter?"

"I've realised how desperately I don't want to take after my mother. I can remember Dad saying that Mum and I were more like sisters and I accepted it, but I hate that thought now. I hated it even more the other day when her window cleaner thought we *were* sisters – but even worse than that was when her neighbour actually mistook me for her! God, I don't look that old, do I?"

"I think it's more that your mother looks younger than her actual age," replied Osborn diplomatically.

"Why does it feel so hard just to be me?" Sandra sighed from her soul, which was rather a long way down. "It's an ongoing theme, this quest to find out who I am and to be that person. For years now, I've felt like I'm trying to fit a whole supermarket's worth of food into one shopping trolley and having to push it along."

"We go shopping together and I usually push the trolley," offered Osborn, putting down his empty mug.

"You take over packing the bags too," said Sandra distractedly. "You're you in your life more than I'm me in my life, aren't you?"

"I'm not sure if anybody knows the real me except you," pondered Osborn. "I feel as if I act differently with so many other people because I can – and I don't mean that in a bigheaded way at all. I feel as if I'm different to other people."

"Same here," replied Sandra. "Everybody's different, of course, but I feel most of the time as if my differentness is different to other people's differentness. That's why it feels so good to meet someone whose differentness is vaguely similar to my own."

"Maybe everyone feels different," reasoned Osborn. "People change, though, life's dynamic. I feel as if I've changed over the years. Quite a lot recently."

"In what way?" Sandra put down her empty mug.

"I value time on my own now, whereas I always used to seek out other people," replied Osborn thoughtfully.

"Oh, come on, you love being with other people," replied Sandra quickly. "I could see tonight exactly how you respond to them kind of personally, so that they feel they're special."

"I'm the same with everybody," said Osborn a little defensively.

"OK," responded Sandra. 'That's not entirely true,' she was thinking, 'considering that Mélanie episode with last year's group and meeting her outside the Rainbow Healers class, not to mention my so-called cousin. Oh, sod it all to the ends of the Earth, why is she popping up again? Don't tell me there are still repercussions after all this time?'

"...and it's difficult to break with behaviour you learned in childhood in order to survive," Osborn was saying, "like responding to people how you perceive they want you to behave, saying what you think they want you to say and being in any given moment someone they want you to be. I feel as if I've changed a lot, but I can't change that completely."

"Change is very difficult," agreed Sandra, "especially copper coins. Really, though, change can be quite insidious, like the books I've been writing over the years. I noticed recently that when I started out, I was using hyphens for quite a few words, but then gradually not bothering with some of them. Words change with the passage of time like so much else."

"Quite." Osborn's mind was obviously wandering slightly. "I notice I keep getting letters these days for insurance plans that include funeral expenses."

"Me too, but change can go full circle really. I remember making a decision to stop wearing jeans years ago because I thought I was too old, but now I'm thinking I'd like to buy a pair for my birthday."

"Oh yes, your birthday. What would you like to do?" asked Osborn, yawning.

"I don't know, it's difficult because of my mother. I have to see her, or she wouldn't like it and I've been worried about her lately with the jaundice episode and now the ovarian cyst. I don't feel free to do what I'd like to do, which is go out for the day somewhere with you. Well, my ideal day out would include Gulliver and Madeleine, but they've moved on and I'm happy for them, truly I am."

"You sound wistful?"

"I suppose if I'm painfully honest, I do miss them horribly and viscerally, but I know the trick to survival is adaptation."

"Now you sound sad. Well, if we have to do something with your mother on your birthday, you and I can go out somewhere the next day. Deal?"

"Deal. I'm too tired to play cards, though. Sorry, I think I must be trying to distract myself, because deep down, I still feel this ongoing unanswered question that won't go away or be ignored."

"Why does the fridge have a light, but not the freezer?"

"No! No, why am I me? The answer to that question seems a positive no-no."

It was September 2007 and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was enduring a 55<sup>th</sup> birthday. The day had started off reasonably well, with some interesting and colourful, not to mention interestingly colourful, birthday presents and cards to uplift what felt like her ageing, compromised, slightly sagging spirits.

"What do people mean when they talk about their spirits being uplifted?" she wondered aloud, as she and Osborn sipped their cappuccinos at a garden centre. "And why do I find it so hard to say cappuccinos when I know the correct Italian plural is cappuccini? And the same goes for panini. And why is this called a garden centre when it's actually a building? And – oh sod it, have you finished already? Let's go and buy that golden flint for Mum's garden then, at least it'll help me a bit in the relentless weed war over there."

Caroline's demeanour was so gloomy when Sandra and Osborn later delivered the golden flint that they decided a pub lunch with her was out of the question.

"I'm sorry," she said plaintively, "but I feel so lifeless and my hair's looking really terrible. I couldn't eat much anyway."

"Well, how about Osborn and I go and buy some sandwiches from *Waitpoppy*?" suggested Sandra with a small sigh. "Then we can do a bit of gardening this afternoon and put down the golden flint."

"The what?" Caroline frowned slightly, as if irritated.

"The golden flint, Mum," said Osborn loudly. "The stones for your garden that we bought today at the garden centre."

"All right, I wasn't sure what Sandra said," responded Caroline, sniffing. "If you're going to *Waitpoppy*, I could probably manage one of their roast chicken sandwiches with mayonnaise and cucumber in malted bread."

"Thank you for the birthday cake," said Sandra to Osborn later in the afternoon, after they had left the heavy, subdued atmosphere of Caroline's house and arrived within the sanctuary of their own home. "At least we got some gardening done."

"We can go out to eat this evening," suggested Osborn, "just the two of us?"

"I don't think so," replied Sandra, suddenly wanting to cry, as the reality of life appeared to hit her in the solar plexus. She swallowed hard and tried to explain. "If I'm honest, I feel too tired, emotional and burdened to go out to eat."

"I'm sorry it's been such a disappointing day," said Osborn worriedly. "It doesn't seem fair when your mother was fine on her birthday and then we were with Gulliver and Bryony for mine."

"It's the way the sodding cookie crumbles," replied Sandra, trying to laugh and failing. "Someone should market sodding cookies. Anyway, at least we don't have your parents to contend with anymore on those awful get-bored-togethers we were forced to put up with. Oh, I'm sorry..."

"No, it's fine, I don't miss them."

"The get-bored-togethers or your parents?"

"Both, which makes me sound like a very hard person."

"Just an honest person. Ah, the phone!"

'What a strange year it's been,' mused Sandra tiredly that night, as she lay beside Osborn, who seemed fast asleep with his hand on her buttock. 'Why would he be fast asleep when he actually took ages to drop off? At least he's still in the bed. I must stop thinking, it's not good for my health. Neither is not sleeping, which I seem quite good at these days. Not even the birthday bonk helped.' She sniggered to herself, causing Osborn's hand to clutch her buttock.

'Oh! Oh no, here comes another sodding hot flush, it's about time they gave up the ghost. What a funny expression, because how can you give up the ghost, meaning to die, if a ghost is already dead? It's give up the spirit, I suppose, release your eternal self from the mortal shackles. Anyway, I don't want to leave my mortal shackles yet, I've got far too much left to do. Besides, Osborn and I deserve some togetherness after recent years.' She carefully shrugged off Osborn's hand, unable to cope with the heat.

'After all, Gulliver and Madeleine are happy and settled – away from us as it happens, which is fine, because it's what they've chosen. God, I still can't believe that our time together as a foursome family passed so quickly, it doesn't seem possible. I never thought they'd live away, that's all.' Sandra wiped some sudden moisture from her eyes. 'Mind you, whoever you are, I never actually thought or assumed that they'd live anywhere near, except perhaps when Gulliver briefly bought his first house. It wasn't meant to be, though. To be or not to be. Actually, to pee or not to pee.' She eased herself out of bed.

'Oh well, I can go to sleep now,' she thought a few minutes later as she eased herself back into bed and waited hopefully for a while. 'How can you sleep when you're conscious of trying to sleep? You need not to be conscious of it, so I'll just let my thoughts drift.

'I'm glad Osborn and I are having a day out tomorrow, because today was hideously uncomfortable with Mum. She's changed so much since Dad died.' She wiped some more sudden moisture from her eyes. 'I'm doing my best with Mum, but it never seems good enough for her. Sod it, I don't want to think of all that, I'll never sleep. I love you, Dad. It just helps me think it, that's all.' She smiled into the darkness.

'Other things seem to have changed these last few years too, like we never see Terry and Kerry anymore and all the shiny, happy people we used to meet at their place. Shiny happy people laughing...' Sandra indulged in a few REM moments.

'That used to be one of Maddy's favourite songs, but I can't remember all the words now. I do like a bit of REM, but I'll never have any tonight if I carry on like this. I suppose I don't really have a particular focus right now. Maybe that's the trouble, I'm unfocused and unparticular.' She squinted in the dark, for no apparent reason.

'No, I can't particularly see that I'm unfocused. Maybe I've lost direction? Have I ever had direction? Actually, I'd love to be given directions, it would be brilliant to know

where you're going. Sometimes I feel as if I'm going nowhere, but I suppose I must have progressed along the road of life a little bit in 55 years.

'The long and winding road – I used to love that song, but I can't remember the words. I suppose we all have to travel our own road, really, whether it's a country lane or a motorway. Give me a country lane any day! Where do they go, though, all those roads? I suppose we simply have to keep going until we get to the end of the road. Does it mean when we reach the end of the road that we're off-roading? What about before we drive onto the road, like Gulliver and Bryony's baby? Oh!' She leapt out of bed, waking Osborn in the process.

"What?" he murmured sleepily.

"I forgot about the email!" she said, turning around in the doorway. "Gulliver said on the phone this afternoon that he'd send an email this evening with a picture of Bryony's scan. Her appointment was later in the day, after work. We'll find out if it's a boy or a girl!"

Sandra and Osborn stood impatiently in front of the computer in their nightclothes, while it seemed to take an interminable time to boot up.

"Come on!" said Osborn, shifting from one foot to the other. "Why is it taking so long?"

"Here we go," said Sandra excitedly. "I hope he sent it."

"I'm sure he remembered," said Osborn hopefully. "Yes, there's his email."

"It's a girl!" they both exclaimed, gazing in awe at the breathtaking sight of a tiny unborn individual, who looked as if she were merely biding her time, before making her entrance into the wonderful, incomprehensible world that awaited her.