

The S.O.D. Sixth

Kay Santillo

Foreword

The S.O.D. Sixth attempts to make sense of two life changing years for the whole family, with a lot of soul searching, mind lurching and body perching. Not the last one, to be honest, unless bathroom activities are taken into account – and bathroom activities are certainly an inevitable part of life as Sandra knows it now and again. Oh, for some *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls!*

There's a whole lot going on, that's for sure – drugs, therapy, death, a wedding, a birth and heartache on rather a grand scale. It's not a great deal of fun to be fair (and no funfairs on the scene either), but there *are* a quite a few holidays.

What is this life if full of care, we have no time to try making sense of it all? This is a rhetorical question. All things considered, maybe Sandra should view the question of life as rhetorical? Goodness, another rhetorical question! Life, it seems, may simply be a load of rhetorical.

Anyway, this is my sixth offering and what can I say? Jolly good luck!

Kay Santillo, May 2016.

CHAPTER 1

It was September 2012 in the south-east of Cornwall and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was trying her hardest to survive a reflective 60th birthday. She had found the 59th year of her life to be an assault course over some very rough emotional terrain, mostly involving her 87-year-old mother Caroline, who had become increasingly passive-aggressive, complaining and dependent as the year had progressed.

Her husband Osborn, recently turned 62, was mostly supportive but understandably feeling the need to live his own life in some semblance of how he wanted to live it since retirement in 2009. As Sandra had found her health and wellbeing gradually deteriorating over the year, she had felt increased levels of guilt at how it was affecting Osborn. She found she alternated quite dramatically between supporting him in his efforts to further his interest in natural healing, while fighting a desperate insecurity that resulted in wanting him to be with her and to help her.

Their 36-year-old son Gulliver, his wife Bryony and their children Juniper and Petroc were very much ensconced in Aberpontyfan, South Wales, where Gulliver's photography business was growing in success. Sandra and Osborn both missed their son and his family, but enjoyed some fairly regular, if rather chaotic and exhausting visits, both with them and from them. Sandra had lately begun to wonder exactly how much Gulliver was happy with his lot of being the main carer for the children while Bryony went out to work, but he had chosen that role and she knew he needed to live his own life.

Their 31-year-old daughter Madeleine was living comfortably in Bristol in the house she owned with her fiancé Henri, who had been born in Angers, France. Madeleine's happiness had been challenged severely the previous November, when she had suffered a miscarriage, but Sandra and Osborn also enjoyed fairly regular visits with and from Madeleine and Henri. The couple's forthcoming wedding in France the following May naturally tended to be uppermost in both Madeleine's and Henri's minds, along with the continuing refurbishment of their house.

Osborn had always been close to his 64-year-old single brother Lawrence and since they had both retired, Lawrence spent more time with the family in general and Osborn in particular. Although Sandra and Osborn had spent three holidays with Lawrence in the past three years, there had been no holiday with him this last year.

It had been an unusually unsatisfactory and unfulfilling year, Sandra considered over her pea and mint soup with buttered roll, as she sat in *The Ploughperson* pub with Osborn, Caroline and Lawrence at lunchtime on her 60th birthday, while time seemed to be suspended in a miasma of disconnection from reality.

'I could go mad,' she thought with sudden clarity, as the others chatted about their food. 'I feel so lost and low, I could just put my head on the table and cry, cry, cry.'

Instead, she replayed the months of 2012 in its escalating disintegration to herself, remembering how in January she had been feeling significantly unsettled in an existential sense. She had begun to feel like a pincushion that was receiving so many pinpricks, the tiny holes of pain were outnumbering the substance of her own self.

The first pinprick of the year had been the ridiculous complaint from her mother that she'd had no Christmas cake, because it had been taken away from the table before she'd had chance to have any. When Sandra said she could have asked for some, Caroline had sniffed and said she didn't like to be a nuisance. Sandra had begun to believe that her mother wanted everything literally handed to her on a plate, without even asking for what she wanted.

The highlight of the month had been a visit from Madeleine and Henri in mid-January, but even then, when they'd gone out to lunch with Caroline and Lawrence to tell them about their wedding plans, Caroline had waved her umbrella in front of Sandra's face to get Sandra's attention in what Sandra felt to be an aggressive invasion of space.

February had passed slowly for Sandra, with an overwhelming feeling that she was wasting too much precious time of her life, especially when she visited her mother

for up to five hours every Tuesday and Thursday – hours when she tried hard to be compassionate, wise and understanding, but felt more like shouting wildly at her mother with colourful profanities.

The activity that she felt was saving her from descending into a seething pit of despair, was investigating the family tree, an activity Gulliver had unwittingly sparked her interest with during his last Christmas visit. She spent hours at the computer, lost in a wonderful past world of censuses, births, deaths and marriages. She also learned a surprising amount of history, personal and otherwise, including the discovery of her paternal great-grandfather in a London workhouse in 1851. Having been born in 1843 at County Tipperary in Ireland, he had no doubt fled the potato famine, but had ended up marrying someone from one of the most significant families in Cornwall in bygone years.

The high point of March had been a long weekend at Bristol with Madeleine and Henri, which had involved quite a lot of après-winter gardening. It was clear that Madeleine was still grieving for her miscarried baby, but she was no stranger to emotional distress and had learned a great deal in the past about how to carry on and eventually heal from pain.

Therefore, they were all able to enjoy visits to *Ukea* and *SS Great Britain*, where Sandra and Osborn felt able to wander around like tourists, instead of trying to fit into a single day as many tasks that needed doing at both their own house and Caroline's house.

Caroline herself had seemed slow and lethargic on some occasions when Sandra saw her and yet snappy and caustic on others. Sandra had felt wounded one day when during a conversation about the theatre, Sandra had mentioned a visit she'd enjoyed to The Drum, a flexible mini-theatre area within Plymouth's large Theatre Royal. Caroline's reaction had been swift and cutting: "You've been in *The Drum*?" Sandra felt as if her mother was addressing her like an old-fashioned mistress would address a servant, or someone from a lower class.

At the end of March, Sandra and Osborn had travelled to Aberpontyfan, where they stayed for one night with Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc before travelling to the Lake District for a week's holiday. In 1971, Sandra and Osborn had chosen the Lake District for their honeymoon and in a kind of lifespan reality-check way, found themselves returning 41 years later with their son, his wife and their two children. From newlyweds to grandparents, just like that!

Juniper had spent a great deal of the travelling that holiday in Sandra and Osborn's car, sitting in the back with Sandra, who occupied her with various tasks and did her best to answer the hundreds of questions that Juniper asked. One of her most interesting questions had been when she'd noticed specks of dust dancing in a shaft of sunlight and had asked first of all what the dust was and then why it didn't fall on the ground.

Their self-catering holiday accommodation at Burton in Kendal had been a 200-year-old detached cottage, with a canal running along the bottom of the garden that was home to some swans and other wildfowl, with a glorious view looking out to the Lakeland mountains beyond.

Trains travelled frequently on a railway line beyond the canal, but rather than being at all bothersome, Sandra found it quite interesting to watch the different types and colours of trains as they speedily passed by. Gulliver, on the other hand, preferred to watch the wood-burning stove, which he took great delight in lighting every evening.

The weather was changeable throughout the week, but they enjoyed some beautifully scenic walks, scenic drives and a scenic drink or two when conditions allowed. One of Sandra's favourite walks had been at Blea Tarn, where she'd spent the outward walk with Juniper as her companion and a fair bit of the return walk with Petroc in between her and Osborn, holding both their hands. She had also enjoyed visiting Grasmere, mainly for the poetic association of Wordsworth, although there had been no fluttering and dancing daffodils to be seen through the drizzling rain.

One day they went a little further afield to Bolton Abbey, where Gulliver had once successfully made his way across the river via the 57 stepping stones. Disappointingly,

he declined to repeat his previous success, ostensibly due to the strengthening wind. That evening, the temperature dropped alarmingly, the wind blew fiercely and they heard distant thunder.

They woke next morning to see snow had fallen on the faraway, picturesque fells. Although the wind was still high and the temperature wasn't much above freezing, it was a dry day with sunny intervals and so they ventured forth with hats, scarves, gloves and cameras.

There were stories of trees down and the Kirkstone Pass was closed, but a trip to the shores of Coniston Water was an inspiring sight. From the relative shelter of some trees, Sandra watched the wind making waves upon the water and thought how The Old Man of Coniston looked very dignified and handsome with his snowy coat.

As she continued to reminisce about the Lake District holiday, Sandra remembered one of the main highlights had been the walk she'd undertaken with Gulliver and Osborn the day after Coniston. Although Gulliver had termed it "a nice little walk", she'd noticed the suspicious twinkle in his eye and was prepared to be challenged.

She wasn't wrong, as they set out on a calm, bright, fresh morning, which felt wonderful after the meteorological shenanigans of the past two days. It had been another cold night and the car roofs were heavily frosted again, as well as areas of grass on roadside verges. Osborn drove them to the Kirkstone Pass, which had been reopened later the day before, where on the higher stretches they saw mounds of snow banked against the edge of the road and bands of snow still on the fell peaks. Descending again into Patterdale at still only 09:15, they had their choice of parking spaces.

The walk commenced as they first followed a path that wound around the side of Ullswater. It was such a tranquil scene, with a bright blue sky, frosted grass and a boat awaiting passengers on the still lake that reflected the snowy peaks rising behind the water. The air was very cold at first, but as they walked, it became increasingly warm in the sun.

After a while, they reached an open area of moorland and sat on a rock to snack on a banana and gaze at the lakeside beauty below. Gulliver had warned them that if they didn't keep eating and drinking, they would feel ghastly, which was basically more evidence of what the "nice little walk" would be. Sandra had asked how long they'd be walking and the answer had been very vague, so she prepared herself mentally for the challenge.

It was a pity she hadn't prepared herself physically, she decided, as the climbing started soon afterwards. They'd seen a couple of other walkers and a few more appeared as the walk progressed. They then met another party coming from the other direction at the top of a climb, who politely stood and waited for them to ascend.

Sandra wondered why it always seemed to happen that way, as she put on a spurt as best she could and felt she was nearly killing herself in the process. She was glad she was out of view as the after-effects took hold and she stood rooted to the spot with a red face for a few moments, intermittently gasping and sipping some life-saving water.

The upward direction continued and it became so warm that they stopped to take off clothing. They also applied sunscreen and ate a small chocolate biscuit (but not at the same time). Gulliver consulted his map and they veered away from the path around Ullswater to climb steeply up the hillside as a short-cut. The ground was grassy and soft, but Sandra found it very steep and had to stop several times to stand and stare ostentatiously at the vista below. However, it was a fantastic sight and well worth the compromised calf muscles.

There was a lot more upward walking to contend with and as it gradually became rockier, they began to come across patches of ice and small traces of snow. It was a real slog for Sandra as they carried on up, up, up, until they arrived at a small, disused slate quarry, where they thankfully sat in the sun to eat sandwiches and crisps for lunch. It crossed Sandra's mind that the slate quarry employees of old must have been exceptionally fit.

It hadn't been over even then, as after that brief respite, they soon had to gird their proverbial loins and continue upwards. Sandra's thigh muscles decided to join in

the protest and her legs started to feel as if they no longer wanted to belong to her. She frankly couldn't say she blamed them.

Several more patches of snow began to appear here and there and in places it had obviously been quite deep. Osborn seemed to have found a good rhythm and was striding way ahead, while Gulliver was loitering faithfully behind to encourage the maternal straggler. Rather than feel ashamed of her physical limitations, Sandra felt grateful for Gulliver's subtle consideration.

They met several other small groups of walkers, all of whom seemed to be striding it out far better than Sandra. Every time she stopped, though, she turned around to gaze back down at the amazing view, as it was quite surprising, not to mention extremely gratifying, to realise how far up they'd actually climbed.

"Just one more big push," Gulliver had said to her encouragingly at one point, as the top came into view. Sandra brushed aside the sudden sense of déjà vu and focused on the trig point ahead, which looked rather unprepossessingly practical against the natural beauty all around. Then suddenly they'd made it to their destination of Hart Crag, at a slightly disappointing altitude of 822m (2,697ft).

They sat for a while and ate some chocolate as a celebration, before wandering around to look at the scenery. It was very beautiful and utterly silent, except now and again for some birdsong and the intermittent sound of their own cameras. A partly icy tarn added to the atmosphere of other-worldly peace, looking out towards a ridge of distant peaks. Sandra was reluctant for those precious moments in that wonderful place to end, but knew there was a steep descent coming and her rebelling legs needed to keep going for a while yet.

As it was a circular walk, the views on the way down were different, including a bird's-eye view of Patterdale way below. Sandra found it necessary to concentrate on her feet, because after negotiating some steps fashioned from large pieces of rock, they had to manage a slightly tortuous steep shale path. Her knees joined forces with her calf and thigh muscles, with the result that her legs began to tremble over the difficult bits. Not only that, but her back was beginning to ache and the sun seemed to be beating down mercilessly. It was actually a glorious day, but by then she knew she'd reached her limits.

Gradually the view of Patterdale became closer and closer until finally they were at valley level, but she was so tired that even walking on level ground was an act of dogged concentration. It felt such a relief to arrive back at the car, although she could hardly bend over to change her shoes.

They'd finally left the car park at 16:00, six and three-quarter hours after setting out. Osborn had driven them back to the cottage in just less than an hour, whereupon Sandra had tried not to fall inside the front door in a gibbering heap. Despite the exhaustion, however, she'd felt a deep sense of peace and achievement.

After such an exceptional week, Sandra had found it even harder to slot back into her usual existence of fending off Caroline's jibes and tangible undercurrents. She couldn't understand why her mother spoke to her the way she did and couldn't help feeling that Caroline was out of touch with how fortunate she was compared to so many others.

On the other hand, Sandra considered that perhaps the same applied to her, as she tried hard to see both sides of the existential coin. Generally though, she would come away from visiting her mother feeling drained, frustrated and angry, as Caroline continued to be negative about her own life, while continuously comparing it to Sandra's.

All throughout April, Sandra was aware of feeling unsettled and basically somewhat unhappy. More often than not, she didn't sleep well and felt the world seemed to be going mad. All of it, all over. She wasn't sure whether this feeling emanated from the current social and political situation, or from her own personal world. She noticed there were times when her mother seemed disconnected and weird, when they were both clearly out of sync, which Sandra found distressing.

At the end of April, one visit distressed her deeply. She and her mother had been talking of Caroline's father, the only grandparent that Sandra remembered. He had died when she was 14 and had spent his last weeks in a care home.

"I can remember going on the bus with you to visit him," recounted Sandra, "but at the last minute I was too scared to go in and I waited for you outside for about an hour. I still feel a bit bad about that..."

"Were *you* there?" asked Caroline, as if from a vast distance. "I don't remember that. Where were you living?"

"I was 14," retorted Sandra, "I was living at home with *you*!" She was looking at her mother and semi-smiling, but inside she was reeling at how little her mother appeared to remember her own daughter in her life at all, while the wounding words reverberated around Sandra's head for days: 'Were *you* there?' Sandra began to wonder how important she actually was to her mother and her gut conclusion was not at all comforting.

The following day, Sandra's gut conclusion appeared to manifest in appropriate physical symptoms, although she wondered at first if she had a virus. When the same thing happened several times throughout May and June, she began to realise it was probably psychosomatic. She did her best to remain calm and to see the positive side of life, but felt she was losing the battle against too many factors that were feeling too negative.

The once flourishing email situation with both Gulliver and Madeleine had to a large extent become one-way. Sandra continued to write to them both about happenings in her own life, but whereas before they had usually reciprocated quite naturally and freely, now there was precious little. Sandra knew they were grown-up and had always believed in letting them go to live their own lives, but a large part of her maternal heart simply missed the communication that had once been such a comfort.

Osborn had continued to keep in close touch with their mutual friend Leona, who they had first met in 2008, when Sandra had been helping Osborn to teach a natural healing course. Sandra liked Leona very much, but their friendship had more or less become one of exchanging emails, being friends on *Facebook* and the occasional coffee meeting with Osborn.

Osborn had moved on with Leona into a newly formed group of like-minded others who were interested in health, wellbeing and healing. The group had recently found a venue at which they'd presented a therapy taster day, with Osborn presenting a section on natural healing. The venture had proved successful and Osborn was spending more time with Leona and the group as they considered future options. One outcome of this was Osborn spending less time visiting Caroline with Sandra, so that he often didn't see Caroline for weeks – which in turn caused Sandra to feel she was more or less on her own with her mother.

Sandra and Osborn had continued to spend time as a threesome with Osborn's brother Lawrence, often lunching in Plymouth and once spending a day at Paignton Zoo. As usual they'd arranged to go out to lunch on Lawrence's birthday with Caroline, but that morning, Sandra was afflicted 'in the gut department', as she started euphemistically to call it. The other three went to *The Ploughperson*, while she stayed at home and wondered exactly what was going on in her mind and body – but without drawing any useful conclusions, except that it was beginning to feel a bit like failure.

Life continued its inexorable course, as it became apparent to Sandra that Osborn was also sometimes feeling low. When Sandra was feeling physically OK, they made every effort to go out visiting gardens, or go on walks in the countryside. This normally uplifted them both, but it seemed as if Osborn had lost the fire. Whatever the fire had been, or however brightly it had been burning, on some days it now seemed reduced to embers.

Sandra tried not to feel guilty about how her own compromised state of mind was affecting Osborn, but she found it impossible not to come home from visiting Caroline feeling bowed under by a weight of responsibility that was becoming unendurable. She was aware of a deep aversion to the growing fake quality of her relationship with her mother.

A few visits from Gulliver and Madeleine on separate occasions over the summer months helped her to forget her burden, although she realised Madeleine was becoming increasingly perturbed that Caroline was failing to mention Madeleine and Henri's

wedding the following year. This was despite Madeleine having told her grandmother how much she would like her to be at the wedding and how it wouldn't be the same without her. Madeleine had tried to put Caroline's mind at rest about every area she may have worried about, assuring her she would be looked after at every turn. However, Caroline had remained mute on the subject.

As Sandra continued to battle with her tenuous hold on health, the devastating news came in early July that Leona had died suddenly from an unsuspected heart condition. Sandra felt the world was almost completely out of kilter. She had already decided to try explaining to her mother how unwell she felt and to her surprise, a heart-to-heart conversation with Caroline the next day seemed to go reasonably well.

However, when she woke the following morning with the now familiar feeling of anxiety and trouble in the gut department, she made an appointment to see a GP that day. She was unsure if being recommended *Kwalms* or beta-blockers if it didn't improve was very helpful, although she was booked in for a blood test and given a leaflet for self-referral to therapy.

The blood test revealed a raised blood sugar level, although Sandra had been so incredibly anxious when her blood had been taken that she was pretty sure her cortisol levels must have contributed to the result. A subsequent fasting blood test confirmed that there was no problem and no further action required. However, her anxiety remained high.

On the day of Leona's funeral, she felt totally unable to accompany Osborn, mainly for fear that her treacherous guts would fail her at completely the wrong time and her anxiety would manifest in other ways that she had known in the past. By the time Osborn returned from the funeral and the ensuing social gathering, she knew she had given in to fear of her own self and fear of her own body. That evening, she felt so sad, miserable, useless and hopeless that she wept despairingly and at her very lowest ebb, admitted she was lost.

By the time of her mother's birthday in August, she had struggled through many ordinary daily situations and even known some success, but had awoken that morning with the dreaded anxiety and what she was now referring to as her irritable bowel. She was determined not to stay at home as she'd done on Lawrence's birthday, but although she accompanied Osborn, Caroline and Lawrence into Plymouth, she couldn't face any food at all.

Therefore, when she managed to consume pea and mint soup with buttered roll at her own birthday lunch three weeks later, it felt like semi-success. However, all things considered, to have sunk to such a low was not the way she wanted her life to be. The feeling that she could quite easily give in, put her head down on the table in *The Ploughperson* and cry inconsolably was frightening. She knew she needed to spend some time looking after herself and healing her wounded depths – it was just a question of how.

CHAPTER 2

"How are you feeling, Mumsie?" asked Madeleine five days later, after Sandra and Osborn had arrived at Bristol for Sandra's 60th birthday celebrations with her children. The main celebration was to be in two days' time, when Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc would join them for the day. Sandra was in the strange position of alternating between happy anticipation and trying unsuccessfully to ignore undercurrents of shameful and quite inappropriate fear.

"I'm OK, darling," replied Sandra, realising she couldn't say anything but the truth to her beloved daughter. "I'm managing, although right now I don't much understand life, or myself. It's worse some days than others, but I'm managing. It's genuinely lovely and uplifting to be standing here with you, it really is."

"I'm glad about that," said Madeleine, as they both stood in the small kitchen while Madeleine was washing dishes after their evening meal. "You can always ask the doctor for help if it gets too bad, don't forget that. I know I didn't want those drugs the

last time I was prescribed them, but when I look back, they did help me over the worst of it – and I didn't actually stay on them for all that long."

"I know," replied Sandra, grateful for Madeleine's candour. "I will go to see Dr Effingham if it gets no better soon. I have a feeling counselling might help, to be honest, but it feels so weird now you're supposed to refer yourself. Somehow I just can't bring myself to ring the number I've been given."

"You should if you feel it would help, there's no shame in it at all," said Madeleine sagely. "You're worth it, Mumsie, you always used to tell me that."

"Thank you, darling," said Sandra helplessly. "I tried to talk to Grandma about it and I thought she understood at first, but she tends to talk over me or shout me down quite a lot these days. She isn't going to change. It's not that I expected her to really, I just wanted to give her the opportunity of actually knowing how I feel. It felt fairer to tell her the truth – or at least, a version of the truth that wouldn't hurt her, because she'd be devastated if she knew the absolute truth. No, the only difference that's come from me telling her is that now she knows I'm not OK. As well as other people, of course."

"Don't forget she's old," said Madeleine, turning to look directly at Sandra. "I don't mean that in a derogatory way, but I've noticed she seems so much slower these days and so much kind of lost within herself. She still hasn't said if she's coming to my wedding, has she?"

"No, she hasn't." Sandra gazed sadly at Madeleine. "I know how much it means to you, although I'll personally find it difficult having to deal with her. I'll ask her outright when I go back, I'll say you need to know."

"I could ring her myself," considered Madeleine, "although I think she tends to say what she thinks I want to hear, rather than the truth."

"I don't mind asking her for you," confirmed Sandra. "I'm a bit more forthright with her these days, mainly because I don't have the energy to keep playing it her way anymore. I can't keep putting her needs before my own, it's killing me. When I told her about my doctor's visit back in July, she came right back at me with intricate details of a television programme she'd seen about old people and how hard life is for them. She said it was like her own life and that my generation will live until we're 100. I told her *that* wouldn't happen because of all the stress my generation has to deal with. Mind you, I didn't say that was partly because our parents are living for much longer and needing more care."

"She's not going to change, Mumsie, it's just the way it is," replied Madeleine, letting the dish water drain away. "It feels a bit weird sometimes with you feeling so – however it is you feel about your mum. It feels weird because she's my grandma and I actually have happy memories of her. Don't get me wrong, I can remember her being quite harsh and peculiar now and again, so I know how she can be, but mostly she was there for me in my childhood."

"I know Maddy, she genuinely loved being your grandma – I always felt good about that."

"During those years when you and Gulliver were both going to university and Dad was working there as well, I couldn't help feeling the odd one out. Grandma and Grandad were a lifeline when they used to have me at their house for tea, or when I went there after school if you weren't home early enough."

"Oh Maddy, I don't mean to upset you by saying things about Grandma and I *never* want to take away your happy memories! I have some happy memories of my childhood, I really do." Sandra felt tears perilously close to the surface, but she breathed deeply. "I'm so pleased that you have good memories. I know what a terribly hard time it was for you when I was going to university and I'm still sorry for that. You hold on to those memories, darling, with my blessing. No, I'm just in a bit of a mess and I think I *will* ask for some help."

"I know you'll do it when you're ready," said Madeleine, wiping her hands on the tea towel. "You and I seem to have had quite a lot of experience with life's challenges and weirdnesses, if that's a word. It doesn't make it easier, though, does it – I still struggle so much with not becoming pregnant again. I keep wondering if it's my lot never to have a baby."

"Oh Maddy," replied Sandra, her own troubles instantly put in the background. "I just have this feeling – and you must know I'd never say it only to give you some shallow comfort – but I really have this feeling that you *will* have a baby when the time's right. It's almost like a knowing. God, I feel as if I'm putting myself on the line by saying that, but it's important."

"Thank you, Mumsie," whispered Madeleine, sighing and smiling briefly as she brought herself back to the present. "Will you be OK if the four of us go out tomorrow? I thought it might do you good to go out somewhere a bit special, like Avebury perhaps?"

"Well, I never really know what I'm going to be like, I tend to take each day as it comes," replied Sandra, immediately feeling the fear insinuating its way into her guts. "No, you're right and it'll do us all good, I think! I'll be OK. Avebury's a great choice."

It was indeed a good choice, although probably not Henri's choice of what to do on one of his precious weekend days. Sandra knew Madeleine was enjoying the day, though, as they all paid a visit to the early 16th century Avebury Manor and garden (although the entrance fee was quite reasonable). After eating sandwiches and crisps in the car, they then walked around the intriguing and magnificent stones that had always fascinated Sandra on each of the several previous visits she and Osborn had made to the world-famous site.

Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc arrived well in time for mid-morning coffee the following day. Although it was lovely to see them all again, Sandra felt ridiculously nervous of the forthcoming pub lunch that was taking place for her benefit. It was impossible to concentrate on herself for long, though, as Juniper was her usual demanding but endearing self and Petroc surprisingly became her loyal and trusting follower. Sandra managed to forget her troubles for minutes at a time, while she repeatedly did jigsaws and helped with colouring, until it was time to head to the pub Madeleine had booked.

"We haven't been here before, so I don't know if it's any good," said Madeleine to Sandra with slight trepidation, as they entered a noisy pub filled with Sunday lunchers. Their booked table was in the conservatory, which was rather too warm, although Sandra was demeaningly pleased to see that it was also within easy reach of the toilets. She was glad that Juniper wanted to sit next to her, so that she could concentrate on her dynamic granddaughter, rather than her currently disastrous self.

The food itself was fine, although Sandra chose a small meal and even then, she was unable to finish it. Since there was birthday cake back at Madeleine and Henri's, they declined dessert and were fairly soon outside again, walking alongside a working canal that felt like a wonderfully normal activity. She knew she was pretending to be better than she felt, as she walked along chatting with Bryony and then Gulliver, but mainly she was relieved that her day of enforced celebration was nearly over.

She was deeply grateful to them all for making the efforts they had so willingly made and she forced down some birthday cake, but as they all said goodbye, she was acutely aware that she was feeling quite depressed.

"Try not to care so much about everything," said Madeleine, as she hugged her mother closely. "Everything seems to be mattering to you more than it needs to. Take care, Mumsie."

"I hope you enjoyed today," said Gulliver, smiling uncertainly as he and Sandra clashed a little in a tight but slightly awkward hug. "I hope you feel better soon."

September continued its way into autumn proper, as Caroline decided she would go to Madeleine's wedding and Sandra procrastinated about seeing a doctor. Every time she felt she'd made a little progress, she would find herself plunging back downwards, as Caroline made yet another careless remark. One day when Caroline was talking about the past, she recounted how Sandra's father, Leonard, would sometimes follow her around the house and how on one occasion, he'd followed her to the local shop.

"He was like a leech," said Caroline, shuddering dramatically. She then appeared to notice Sandra's horrified expression. "He meant well, I suppose, but he was basically uxorious and I felt suffocated and unfulfilled. Still, he did his best, poor man."

Sandra had spent a mostly sleepless night after that remark, as she found herself thinking over her past life with her mother. As ever, she then found her mind going over more recent scenarios, such as a conversation about *Scribble*, when Sandra had felt bold enough to tell her mother she didn't feel the way Caroline did about the game. Caroline had asked if Sandra played to keep her happy and Sandra had replied simply: "Yes." However, it felt significant that they still continued to play.

Even Osborn sometimes added to the tumult in a well-intentioned but misguided effort to help Sandra. It was a habit of Caroline's to refer to Sandra as "she", which she did one day when Sandra and Osborn had finished working in her garden.

"Here she is, she's come in from the garden at last," said Caroline, as Sandra followed Osborn into the house. Osborn had taken exception to what he considered a disrespectful way of speaking to Sandra and had said as much, but the only result had been an altercation in which Sandra perceived Osborn and Caroline as two lions snarling at each other.

She had taken to listening to a relaxation CD that she found beautifully and deeply calming. She also found, though, that even after listening to the CD before visiting Caroline, the feeling would last for all of five minutes before she would feel worn down by her mother's 'poor me' attitude – or her mother's utter, exclusive sympathy for elderly people like herself – or her belief that she was prone to bad luck and had a hard life – and the way that she would subtly but surely turn it all somehow onto Sandra.

As September ended, Sandra came to the reluctant conclusion that the undercurrents from Caroline were eroding away her psychological foundations. As October began, she was able to take the further step of realising she was allowing that to happen and needed to take back the control that she must have once so easily and thoughtlessly given away, possibly back in the dark recesses of her childhood. As much as she tried to figure out her life, though, it felt as if she was getting nowhere – and then one day she felt that she was actually going backwards.

She'd started the day feeling anxious about a hair appointment, because she was afraid of her treacherous body and its irritable bowel that sometimes escalated to a positively angry bowel. If it was a really bad day, it was even capable of behaving like a furious bowel.

She made herself go for the hair appointment, but was already exhausted when she carried on from there to Caroline's house. She confessed her anxiety about the hair appointment to her mother and a discussion followed about how Caroline's uppermost reaction was usually depression, while Sandra's was usually anxiety.

"Of course, depression is worse than anxiety," said Caroline decisively, while Sandra's insides had seethed with a thousand snakes of hurt, rage and disbelief. She went out to the garage and used her angry energy to sweep and tidy lots of horrible dirty stuff, with dust getting up her nose and cobwebs clinging to her in surprising places. When she went back inside, though, Caroline was still on the offensive.

"What did you find to do out there for so long?"

"I was cleaning up. It was in a mess and somebody has to do it."

"Well, you young things have the energy – not like me at my age."

Caroline then seemed to use the afternoon game of *Scribble* as an opportunity to whine in Sandra's direction about both the game and her life in general. Sandra went home feeling an incredible weight of heaviness, as if she had spent the last few hours sitting in a morgue. She felt depressed enough finally to make an appointment to see Dr Effingham.

Ten days later, she sat in the waiting room at mid-morning with her mind flipping between the imagined forthcoming conversation with Dr Effingham and the diverse events of the past week. Madeleine's wedding dress that she'd eventually decided to order online had arrived at Sandra and Osborn's house, while Sandra had received a normal result for the 60+ bowel cancer screening test that she'd sent away with a certain amount of dread.

Dr Dai Effingham was his usual considered and amenable self, which helped Sandra not to mind that she could hear herself uttering garbled sentences that must

have been hard to decipher. To her immense surprise, he seemed to understand at once what she had been gibbering on about for the past few minutes and recounted it to her succinctly and accurately.

"It sounds as if your mother is wanting you to live her life for her and to make decisions for her that she's quite capable of making for herself. She's looking to you to solve all her life problems and even to take the blame for what she feels has gone wrong in her life. This burden of responsibility over a number of years has caused low mood in you that sounds as if it's deepened into depression. You mentioned three things when you came in – anxiety, depression and IBS – which one of these do you think is uppermost right now?"

"I think depression right now, as I can still function and I'm almost sure the IBS is linked to anxiety and depression anyway." Sandra was a little surprised at her own answer.

"In that case, I'd like you to complete a small questionnaire..."

After the flashback from her psychology days at university had faded into the background, Sandra answered the questions that Dr Effingham read out to her as honestly as she could, although an analytical part of her brain was considering the questionnaire too broad and ambiguous in places. The result put her just inside the category of moderate depression and as if in a dream, she heard Dr Effingham suggest antidepressants.

"These will take the edge off the depression," he explained carefully, "so that you can work your way through your feelings and your mood will gradually rise. I strongly suggest that you self-refer for counselling, to help you regain a sense of balance in the relationship with your mother."

"OK," replied Sandra, hardly daring to believe she was going to have some real help at last. "I will go for counselling, I know you're right."

"Good!" Dr Effingham almost smiled at her. "I'm going to prescribe Sertraline, which will help with the anxiety as well, one pill a day. You may feel a little nauseous in the first week or two, but if you really can't get on with them, do ring up and we can talk about it. Otherwise, persevere and I'll see you in a month's time, to find out how you're getting on."

"Thank you," replied Sandra, suddenly feeling drained of energy, with an overwhelming desire to leave the room and escape to the sanctuary of home (after calling in at the pharmacy to collect her drugs). "Thank you. Bye!"

She took the first little white pill at around lunchtime with a strange sense that her life was about to change subtly and then spent the rest of the day feeling inordinately tired for no apparent reason. There was a good reason why she felt tired the following day, however, as she had spent the night reacting somewhat violently to the drug invading her system.

At around midnight, she had woken feeling very sick and faint, but had managed to drag herself to the toilet, where she dry-heaved for a miserable, frightening fifteen minutes or so. As the spasm passed and she felt safe to go back to bed, she was aware of her heart thumping in her chest and a strange sensation at the back of her head, just above her neck. She spent the rest of the night dozing while sitting up, feeling sick every time she woke.

She felt generally unwell and had a banging head for the whole of the next day and that night she hardly slept for feeling sick. There was no question of leaving the house the day after, as the sickness and persistent headache prevailed, along with a distressing feeling of not really being present in the world as she knew it.

The third night was no different from the previous two nights, but as she survived into the fourth day, she felt even worse. She was suffering from nausea so much that she could hardly eat anything, the back of her head felt as if it was on fire with a cold heat, her whole head was aching and she began to notice visual disturbances.

On the fourth night, she slept for two hours and then woke with a racing, pounding heart, sweating and feeling profoundly sick. She went to sleep on the sofa in the sitting room, sitting up and feeling as if she was in a living nightmare. She managed another hour's sleep, then woke again still feeling sick. In the early hours of the

morning, as the light gradually filtered into the room, she made a decision to stop taking the drugs, as her whole being was crying out that they were poisoning her.

For the next few days, she was prone to bouts of nausea, with some diarrhoea thrown in for good measure, plus an intermittent sense of derealisation. Mostly, though, she was glad that she was no longer taking the diabolical little white toxic discs. She rang Dr Effingham, as directed, who agreed she should stop taking them. Together they decided that bananas, exercise and counselling would probably suit her much better.

The day after she'd made her decision to stop taking the drugs, which had been a Tuesday, Sandra had rung Caroline to explain why she wouldn't be visiting her that day. To her surprise, her mother had been very sympathetic and had even said she mustn't feel she had to visit her every Tuesday and Thursday – that Sandra needed to think about her own life. Caroline had even said she wanted her to feel free.

They were exactly the words Sandra wanted to hear – which somehow made it all the more distressing two days later, when Osborn walked over to Caroline's house with her because she was still feeling a little unreal and shaky. It had been as if Tuesday's phone call had never taken place. There were so many weighted comments and undercurrents from Caroline that Sandra decided her mother had reverted to her default setting and Tuesday had simply teased her with some words from an alternate reality.

That weekend, Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc were staying with Anne and Stan Stanpool for a few nights, as there was a special Stanpool family birthday. On the Saturday, however, they were free to visit Sandra and Osborn. Sandra was still struggling a little physically, but after all she'd been through in the last ten days, she was mainly glad to spend what was essentially a very ordinary day with them. As well as just chatting, they ate pasties for lunch and went for a short local walk afterwards. Sandra even felt she was bonding more with Petroc, who had always seemed far more attached to Bryony than Juniper had.

She'd been delighted when Gulliver had given her a box of chocolates as they'd arrived and then when they were leaving, Bryony had spontaneously hugged her. Bryony and her family weren't huggers and therefore Sandra felt as if both Gulliver and Bryony had made a real effort to be kind to her. It meant a great deal in her current still rather fragile state.

That Monday, feeling buoyed from the weekend's visit, she rang the number she'd been given to self-refer for counselling. What actually happened was that after answering quite a few necessarily relevant questions, she was given an appointment for an initial assessment to see the best way forward. She went to bed that night feeling a little more positive about life.

It lasted for one morning. When she and Osborn came back from a cappuccino and brief shopping outing, they both found an email from Gulliver about Christmas that knocked them for eight. Six didn't cut it and seven really wasn't quite there. It appeared that Gulliver and Bryony were up in arms (not to mention legs, heads and torsos) that Madeleine and Henri were planning to come home for Christmas.

The previous year, Madeleine and Henri had found themselves caught up in French arrangements which had resulted in them staying with Henri's parents and other family members in France, instead of taking their allotted alternate year with Sandra and Osborn.

Sandra had truly believed that Gulliver would understand how Madeleine and Henri had been involved in some Christmas craziness of the French kind, but the email was all about how it was Gulliver and Bryony's turn to stay with Sandra and Osborn the coming Christmas and how they would be doing so regardless. Gulliver stated that the four of them would sleep in the back room and although it would be challenging, it would be fun for them all.

"Are they completely insane?" asked Sandra incredulously, re-reading the email to make sure she'd understood exactly what had been written. "Fun for six adults and two children to share the one and only toilet and bathroom in our small house? That would be bad enough under normal circumstances, but right now it would completely and utterly tip me over the edge! I'm having trouble in the toilet department as it is, for

heaven's sake, which tends to rear its ugly head – bottom – when the stress steps up for whatever reason, however small. Gulliver *knows* this, he's confessed to having similar troubles himself sometimes!"

"Do you think it's Bryony?" asked Osborn, voicing what Sandra had privately been wondering.

"She was asking me at the weekend what Madeleine and Henri would be doing this Christmas," replied Sandra sadly, "and I told her, quite openly and honestly. I thought we'd really connected and made good progress when she hugged me, too."

"I suppose we mustn't jump to conclusions," said Osborn slowly, "but the tone of the email doesn't much sound like Gulliver – or Bryony, to be honest, as she's normally so controlled."

"What's all this rubbish about there not being enough room in Anne and Stan's house?" said Sandra, checking the email again. "They've got a four-bedroom house, for pity's sake, it just doesn't stack up!"

"I'll give Anne and Stan a ring," suggested Osborn, re-reading the email himself.

"It's not fair on Madeleine and Henri, either. In fact, I'm sure Henri wouldn't even come here if there was going to be such utter chaos with so many people living on top of one another," said Sandra, sighing.

"I could pay for the two of them to stay at the local *Journey Lodge*," said Osborn doubtfully. "They could still come here for breakfast."

"I suppose so," replied Sandra, frowning. "No, that still doesn't seem right – waking up on Christmas morning in a *Journey Lodge*, knowing we're all here in the house? Sod it, I think *I'd* rather stay in the *Journey Lodge* and leave them all to it!"

"Me too," replied Osborn, laughing ruefully. "I don't even like Christmas! I really don't understand where all this is coming from, he sounds so angry in the email."

"This is so awful," said Sandra, her mood dipping swiftly. "This morning I felt the faintest glimmer of starting back on the road to OK-ness, but it's all been shot to pieces by this email. Not only that, but if it *is* coming from Bryony, I feel sorry for Gulliver being caught in the middle, because it's a hateful position."

"I must admit, I didn't think Gulliver was as rigid as this email suggests," mused Osborn, "but I suppose people's priorities change over the years."

"God, right now I feel as if there's not a single area in my life where I feel completely OK at the moment," said Sandra dejectedly. "I'll have to reply to Gulliver, but I'm not sure what I'm going to say."

There was a significant amount of emailing between the three of them over the next few days. Osborn rang the Stanpool house and spoke to Anne, who confirmed there was enough space at their house – which resulted (according to Gulliver) in Bryony being cross that Osborn had spoken with her mother – as well as solving the alleged problem. Although this upheaval had most definitely rocked relations between them, status quo seemed to be regained relatively quickly between Sandra, Osborn and Gulliver.

A few days later, Sandra received a bouquet of flowers from Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc. Sandra knew in her heart that it was Gulliver's doing, mainly because he found it impossible to keep to himself that it was the first time he'd ever sent anyone flowers and had chosen bright ones to lift Sandra's spirits. It did a little more than that, as in some deep part of her being, Sandra was aware of a small but significant area of healing.

CHAPTER 3

Apart from the unexpected flowers, November was a precariously difficult month, as Sandra suffered with an irritable bowel that veered between uneasy, petulant, sulky, querulous and just plain bad-tempered. It escalated to include nausea and then jelly legs. Sandra, however, knew that the only way to deal with it all was to face it head on. Remembering Dr Effingham's advice about bananas and exercise, she attempted to have plenty of both, although not necessarily at the same time.

On many mornings, she would leave the house feeling unsettled, anxious, sick, with jelly legs, or sometimes with all four symptoms, walking through the fear and all its

manifestations. She felt humbly and totally grateful to Osborn, who would accompany her willingly and often talk with her as they walked, discussing whatever was uppermost in her mind – which tended mostly to involve Caroline or other family members.

She recognised now the familiar feeling of dread that she awoke with every morning, or sometimes in the middle of the night. When it was severe, she would take herself through the calm breathing of the relaxation CD that she and Osborn often listened to together. It nearly always helped to some degree and some nights she managed to drift into sleep again.

Finally, the morning of her assessment appointment arrived. As usual, she awoke with dread and also a certain amount of nervous agitation. Fortunately, she didn't have to sit for too long in the waiting room and when she saw that her assessor was around Madeleine's age with not dissimilar looks, she relaxed enough to be coherent and responsive.

She was rather taken aback that cognitive behavioural therapy was being pushed, but she held out for counselling, knowing that both were on offer. After a session lasting 50 minutes or so, she came away feeling pleased that she had not only been put on the waiting list for counselling, but had also been given an online link for self-help CBT.

December started quite successfully with a visit to her friend Alison, who she hadn't seen nearly as much as usual since she'd slowly started to fall apart. She knew that Alison was able to understand her current problems, as Alison herself had not only suffered with depression in the past, but also a very irritable bowel – frankly a bowel that surpassed Sandra's in its ire and downright wrath. Alison had even been for a colonoscopy and had described the experience to Sandra in her usual refreshingly uninhibited way. However, she was currently recovering from a chest and kidney infection and was still prone to coughing.

"I won't stay long today," said Sandra with concern, as Alison coughed impressively.

"Oh no, it sounds worse than it is, I feel so much better than I did," replied Alison, sipping her tea. "I've missed you and before we know it, it'll be Christmas and our wonderful families will be expecting us to be there for them." She paused. "Not that I mind, because I can't imagine life without my family. Even Dirk!" She laughed and coughed a little. "Oops, mustn't laugh too much."

"It's really good to see you again," said Sandra, smiling. "It's lovely sitting here and feeling almost normal for an hour or so – not that you're normal, of course – no, don't laugh. Mind you, I thought I was behaving normally when I finally got up the courage to go to an overdue optician's appointment last week. I don't much like sitting there in the dark, in front of a stranger who's in your up close and personal space, while they peer into your eyes and ask you questions you have trouble answering."

"Me neither," agreed Alison amenably.

"Anyway, I thought I was being so sodding normal, when she suddenly asked me if I was anxious about my eyes. She actually used the word 'anxious', when I thought I'd conquered anxiety, for a day or two at least. Of course, I started to wonder then what made her think I was anxious, which made me feel anxious. On the whole, I'm really quite sick of feeling anxious about being anxious."

"You don't seem anxious to me, if that's any consolation," said Alison comfortingly. "I get screwed up about the most minor things, I really do. Of course, they don't seem minor at the time. For instance, I can feel myself getting really worked up because I don't know if Sam and Karen will be coming here for Christmas. They can't seem to make up their minds, but I know Tamsin and Peony want to see us – or at least, see what presents we've got them."

"Oh, I'm sure they want to see their lovely grandparents!" Sandra sipped her tea and smiled, which caused minor dribbling. "I'm sure they miss you as much as you miss them. Well, maybe not quite as much, because they've become immersed in their new Welsh world, while you're still here in your old world."

"Tell me about it. I looked at Dirk the other day and he suddenly seemed so old. Then I looked in the mirror and realised I looked almost as old. I think the hair dye helps

a bit, but even so, it was still rather a shock." Alison put her fingers through her short, reddish-tinged brown hair.

"I *feel* old," contributed Sandra mournfully.

"I've at least got one of my children living nearby, whereas both of yours have flown away up the M5," continued Alison, regarding Sandra thoughtfully, "or in Gulliver's case, whatever the motorway is to Wales – the M4, I think. I was wondering the other day when I found myself hopelessly wishing Tamsin and Peony still lived here, if you wish your two offspring lived much nearer? A couple of my other friends say it's a mixed blessing."

"God, I so wish they lived nearer! I wish it so much sometimes that I have to force myself not to think about it. What helps is genuinely being happy – well, as happy as I can be – that they have the freedom of living their own lives, knowing how trapped I feel with Mum."

"How is she?" Alison had asked the one question that Sandra found most difficult to answer truthfully.

"I don't know," she replied, sighing. "She doesn't really speak directly with me about how she feels, she lets it go inward and then it comes out all warped and weighted in my direction. I do know I don't want to feel the way I do about her now and I also know I used to feel so differently. I actually used to adore her, can you believe that? I can remember using that word to myself. It used to feel so much easier that way."

"I think I've mentioned before how my mum changed quite dramatically when my dad died," said Alison, looking serious. "She seemed to give in and give up. She wanted people to come to her and look after her every need. Since my two brothers had their various excuses, it was usually me..."

"It seems really unfair that it so often falls on one person, whether there are others in the picture or not," agreed Sandra, thinking how much worse it felt to be the only one. "It's like being the first-call fallout person, living constantly in the danger zone and having to protect yourself. I thought Mum might have been a little kinder to me lately, but there are still so many digs and undercurrents from her all the time. In other words, I'm always her fallout person, even when I'm my own fall-apart person. Now I sound as if I'm really going mad."

"Not to me," replied Alison generously. "If you're mad, I'm mad, because it makes sense to me. *I* don't make sense to me sometimes, but that's a different story..."

"It's tricky," said Sandra enigmatically, not really wanting to delve further into feelings that threatened to overwhelm her. "Anyway, I'm on the counselling waiting list."

"I thought you said you were on the council waiting list for a minute – I wondered why you'd be moving into a council house!" said Alison, laughing and coughing. "I don't know why I laughed, my mother lived in a council house. I think it's good you're going to have counselling. I never really got on with it myself, my counsellor was a young dark-haired man with longish hair and a beard, I couldn't look at him without being reminded of Jesus."

"Jesus!" Sandra couldn't help laughing too. "Oh dear, I shouldn't laugh, I'm sorry it didn't work out for you. There's so much we don't know about each other, it never ceases to amaze me."

"I'm glad I still amaze somebody," replied Alison wryly. "I know that's not what you actually said. No, it reminded me of Sam telling me last time we were in Wales that I amazed him with my ability to be so non-politically correct. All I said was something about obesity being such a widespread problem these days, but he coughed, kind of screwed up his face and looked daggers at me. It wasn't my fault I hadn't seen Karen come into the room. Mind you, the size of her thighs really does amaze me, but I shouldn't say that, of course."

"There's such a lot we shouldn't do or shouldn't say nowadays, I'm wondering if we should just say, you know..."

"Fuck it?" asked Alison matter-of-factly. "Chance would be a fine thing."

The following week, Sandra's cousin Belinda was making a pre-Christmas visit to Caroline. As soon as Belinda had asked if it was convenient, Caroline had told Sandra

she needed her to be there too, because she couldn't cope with providing lunch. Once in the summer when she hadn't been feeling well, Sandra herself had postponed a visit from Belinda, so she felt almost duty-bound to agree. She loved to see her cousin, but preferred to meet her in cafés, where they were free to discuss whatever was uppermost in their minds with liberated abandon.

"You look well, Auntie," Belinda said to Caroline, as Sandra placed a cup of coffee in front of her mother. "How have you been keeping?"

"Oh, you know, quite a few aches and pains at my age," replied Caroline, regarding Belinda solemnly. "Sandra looks after me, though, I don't know what I'd do without her."

"Or Osborn," added Sandra determinedly. "He takes you to the surgery when you need to go and he drives me to the supermarket so we can buy your shopping."

"Yes," said Caroline shortly. "I still get out and about on my own, though, I like to be independent. How are Trudie and Peter?"

"Trudie and David have just moved into a new flat," replied Belinda, taking a biscuit from several on a plate that Sandra was offering her. "Thank you, Sandra. The new flat's closer to us, but it's not in a very good condition, I'm worried it'll depress Trudie. They can't afford anything else, though, because Trudie's not getting as much work at the hairdressing shop. David works hard, but they're struggling financially."

"Oh well, at least they're both working," said Caroline, taking a biscuit from the plate. "What about Peter, where does he work again?"

"At a garage," replied Belinda patiently. "Ian and I don't see him all that often and when he does visit, he stays for about five minutes."

"I suppose he's got his own life," said Caroline, dropping crumbs on her skirt. "At least he visits. How are *you*, dear?"

"I'm OK, thank you Auntie, although my balance is still a problem and I can't walk without a stick at all now."

"How's your blood pressure these days?" asked Caroline offhandedly, as she picked up her cup of coffee. "Oh dear, I've spilt some. Could you fetch me a cloth from the kitchen, Sandra?"

"My doctor keeps changing my pills," Sandra heard Belinda replying, as she picked up a dishcloth and went back into the fray. "He says my BP's too low at the moment."

"At least it's not too high like mine," commented Caroline, sniffing. "It's been the bane of my life ever since my mother died in 1951."

"Mine's OK," said Sandra quickly, for the sheer hell of it. Belinda looked at her, but Caroline was already speaking.

"I never really got over being the one with her when she died," said Caroline reflectively. "You seem better, though," she continued loudly to Sandra. "You did go a bit peculiar this year, I'm glad you've come through it now."

"I'm comparatively better, but I'm still dealing with inner turmoil," replied Sandra honestly. "I should start being able to have counselling soon after Christmas. I just want to feel normal again."

"Really? You look normal. Oh well, we have to get over Christmas first." Caroline smiled at Belinda, her face beginning to look flushed. "Sandra sees to it all for me now, I can't get out and about as much at my age."

"I can't get out and about as much now because of my orthostatic tremor," said Belinda, smiling at Sandra. "I hope the counselling goes well."

"Thank you," replied Sandra, grateful that the lines of communication between her and Belinda were untrammelled by whatever interference was almost constantly distorting any true communication between herself and her mother.

There had been a cancellation and five days before Christmas, Sandra found herself sitting in a room at her doctor's surgery with her proposed counsellor, Seraphina Delver. It seemed a good omen that the diminutive Seraphina, with her dark curly hair and expressive hazel eyes was wearing a top exactly the same as Sandra had bought herself from *Marks and Spender* a few months previously, to cheer herself up.

"How do you hope counselling will help you?" asked Seraphina, as Sandra attempted to quell the rising nervousness within her.

"Well..." she gulped and took a leap into the unknown. "I know it can't actually change anything about my situation, except the way I perceive that situation."

"Very good," replied Seraphina encouragingly. "You seem to have a realistic understanding of how it works."

"I suppose the psychology degree I did when I was in my early forties may have contributed a little," said Sandra doubtfully, "although we didn't really cover counselling."

They were off to a good start, as Seraphina asked about Sandra's degree and then about what she would like to explore. Sandra had written an A4 page of notes about herself and her mother, which Seraphina then discussed briefly with her. Seraphina disclosed an interest in attachment theory, which fitted in well with Sandra's underlying issues.

"I think we can do some really beneficial work together," said Seraphina, after they'd been talking for about 45 minutes. "If you agree to take me on, I'm very willing to take you on. It's important that we both feel we can gel, as some people simply don't get along with each other and that's never going to work as well as it could. How do you feel about it?"

"I'm happy to do it with you," said Sandra, tiring rapidly.

"You seemed incredibly anxious when you first came in," commented Seraphina kindly, "but my instinct is that we can connect meaningfully. The allotted number of NHS sessions is six, I need to point that out. Now, I'd like to give you something to consider before we next meet and that's abandonment. Don't try to intellectualise, or force any meaning from it, just see how it sits with you and how you feel about it. Is that OK?"

"OK," replied Sandra. "Sorry, I'm a bit tired."

"No worries, that shows how much you've put into this session and that's promising. Try to relax and trust in the process," said Seraphina, smiling as she consulted her diary. "Right, let's make a date. How about in two weeks, at the same time?"

"Yes." Sandra felt her ability to speak real words waning with every moment, but Seraphina said goodbye warmly in her unique way.

"Remember abandonment – and Happy Christmas!"

Christmas turned out to be happy enough, although Gulliver and Bryony had arrived on the 22nd, to stay for two nights before transferring to Anne and Stan's house. Sandra felt they were making a point in the wake of the October fracas – and involving her in some extra washing of bedding and towels in the process. However, she was too tired to do anything much except complete all necessary tasks and hope she and Osborn didn't catch Petroc's cold.

As it happened, Madeleine also had a similar virus when she and Henri arrived on Christmas Eve, so there was little chance they would escape the coughing and sneezing. Petroc had coughed all the time he'd been staying with them and Juniper had also started to cough. By Christmas Day, Sandra and Osborn both felt they were incubating the virus, but everyone seemed to throw themselves into the spirit of the family occasion – everyone minus Lawrence, who had opted out again.

Despite saying he wasn't doing Christmas and insisting he didn't want any presents, he'd loaded Osborn with cards and bags full of gifts for all the family when Osborn had met him for lunch a week or so previously. Sandra had initially been perturbed about this, but she decided it was up to Lawrence to do what he felt he needed to do and he had actually acted very generously with no wish for any returns.

Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc were joining the others, including Caroline, for Christmas lunch. When Sandra opened the front door to them, however, she immediately noticed that Gulliver was looking pale and tired.

"Not feeling too good?" she asked, as he came in with various bags of presents.

"No, something didn't agree with me from last night," he replied a little wanly.

"Were you and Bryony arguing again?" asked Sandra, trying to cheer him up.

"We don't argue," he replied, looking sharply at Sandra for a moment. "The Stanpools don't do that, because Stan apparently grew up in an atmosphere of arguments and he point-blank refuses to argue with Anne."

"Wow," said Sandra, "I can't imagine never arguing with Dad..."

"I can remember how it was," said Gulliver, looking askance.

"How do they resolve their differences?" asked Sandra, intrigued. "Sometimes you need confrontations to sort things out."

"You and Dad put me off all that years ago when I was growing up," replied Gulliver openly. "I was disturbed as a child. No, not really, but I don't do confrontations."

"We-ell, are you doing coffee today?" asked Sandra hopefully, trying to lighten the atmosphere that felt slightly discordant.

"A weak one," replied Gulliver, "but please don't overdo the food for me today."

"I've never forced you to eat anything you don't want," reminded Sandra, feeling sorry for Gulliver if he was experiencing anything like she'd been suffering from in the gut department, on and off for the past seven months or so.

"Only peas," replied Gulliver, with a glimmer of a smile. "I'll never get over the peas."

"That was your dad," corrected Sandra, smiling fully. "Anyway, you told me yourself that Madeleine used to eat any vegetables you didn't want."

"Ye-es, unless I managed to nip out to the compost heap and get rid of them there while you and Dad were in the kitchen," said Gulliver, grinning. "Happy days..."

"I miss them," said Sandra nostalgically, "but you have a lovely daughter and son of your own now. I can hear they still have their coughs. Anyway – Happy Christmas!"

By lunchtime, Gulliver had just about regained his normal energy levels and everything went relatively smoothly. This made particular sense considering there were four generations of relatives all cooped up together for a day. The warm inner glow of seeing both Gulliver and Madeleine home for Christmas with their special people overrode the hot flush-type glow of having to serve food for nine people with various dietary capabilities from a small kitchen.

After the necessary dish washing marathon, they all played *Ono* at the table, with Juniper changing laps to hold the cards for several different people. Petroc seemed content to sit on Bryony's lap, while also playing with his new fire engine.

"Blue five – put down the blue five," prompted Osborn, while Juniper was sitting on his lap. "Ouch! You're such a wriggler – where are you going?"

"Whose turn is it now?" asked Caroline to anyone who might be listening. "I've lost the plot."

"There's no answer to that," replied Gulliver cheekily. "It's Henri's turn."

"Ah – *Ono!*" said Henri, smiling at Madeleine.

"Already?" asked Madeleine, checking his hand. "I've got loads left – and now two more. Thanks Mumsie!"

"You're welcome," murmured Sandra, as Juniper crawled onto her lap. "Ouch! Miss Bony Elbows, mind your grandma's chest!"

"Grandma's breasts," said Juniper wickedly, still wriggling. "My breasts will grow one day."

"Juniper! She's very knowing, isn't she," said Caroline, addressing Bryony.

"She asks a lot of questions," replied Bryony, trying to look out from where Petroc was obscuring her view, "so she gets a lot of answers. It's better to tell her the truth, it's easier that way."

"Plus-4, Mum," said Osborn, speaking to Caroline. "It's your turn and you have to pick up four."

"No! Are you sure?" asked Caroline, "I thought we were going the other way."

"We were, but now we're not," said Sandra, glancing away for a moment. "Oh! We've changed direction again. Juniper, where are you going? Ouch!"

"Miss a go, Mum!" said Osborn, as Caroline played a card. "You had to miss a go."

"Oh, I do hate those miss-a-go cards," said Caroline, "I don't like to be ignored."

"Henri, it's your go," prompted Madeleine. "Oh no..."

"Out!" said Henri triumphantly. "I've won again. Madeleine, do not 'it me!"

"I want to do colouring," said Juniper, wriggling herself down onto the floor. "Grandma Sandra, do colouring with me!"

"In a minute," said Sandra, distractedly, "I need to add up the scores."

"Mum, poo," said Petroc clearly, as the others were adding up their scores. "Poo!"

After a snack lunch the following afternoon, Madeleine and Henri left to visit Lawrence on their way home. Madeleine was still suffering from her virus, but said she wouldn't feel OK without seeing her uncle, which Sandra thought was a typically family-inclusive Madeleine-type sentiment that warmed her heart. She knew Madeleine was still keenly feeling her apparent inability to become pregnant and hoped with all her heart that the miracle would happen in its own time – preferably soon after the wedding.

The day after Madeleine and Henri's departure, Lawrence had agreed to visit Sandra and Osborn's house to spend the afternoon with Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc and as usual, Caroline joined them. Although Lawrence seemed vaguely subdued, Juniper was unwell with her virus and Petroc was in a funny mood (but not of the humorous variety), the time passed pleasantly enough, if not somewhat chaotically.

"I've got a weird chest," said Sandra, as they all helped themselves to various items from a buffet tea.

"You said it, Mother," replied Gulliver, having consumed a beer or two during the afternoon.

"No, I mean it's all tight," explained Sandra, feeling the effects of the virus.

"As long as you're not tight," said Gulliver, taking a close-up photograph of a malformed mince pie with Sandra's camera. "How many sherries did you have?"

"One!" replied Sandra, holding out her hand for her camera.

"Try loosening your bra," said Lawrence, who had also partaken of a beer or two. "That's if you're wearing one."

"Lawrence! Wash out your mouth!" exclaimed Sandra, as Gulliver took a photo of her outstretched hand.

"Petroc's got some new toothpaste," said Juniper suddenly. "It's for young children, but I've got some toothpaste that's for older children."

"That's nice, dear," replied Caroline. "It's important to brush your teeth."

"Do you still have to brush your teeth?" asked Juniper innocently. "Even though you're so old?"

"Oh. Well..." Caroline picked up a crisp. "Petroc's enjoying his tea."

"I don't want this," said Petroc in halting speech, holding out a chewed *Infantbel* cheese. Sandra had begun to worry about Petroc's delayed talking ability.

"Ah! OK," said Sandra, taking the gooey mess and wrapping it in a serviette, while considering the moral correctness of explaining to her granddaughter that her great-grandmother had false teeth.

"Petroc, please put your hand in front of your mouth when you cough," said Osborn, as Petroc coughed in his direction.

"When do you go back, Gulliver?" asked Lawrence, brushing some crumbs from his beard and putting them in his mouth. "Ooh, seconds."

"Tomorrow," replied Gulliver, as Petroc coughed again. "Petroc! Hand! Yes, I've started to do photography tuition and some guy has booked an astrophotography session with me."

"That sounds painful," replied Lawrence. "You mean photographs of stars? Stars at night?"

"It would be difficult during the day," said Bryony, as Juniper started to cough. "Have a drink, Juniper."

"I haven't got any left," whined Juniper, draining her beaker.

"I'll get you some more," said Bryony, heading into the kitchen.

"Did you make me a cup of tea, Sandra?" asked Caroline, attempting to catch Sandra's eye.

"Yes, I told you when I put it down beside you," replied Sandra, keeping her eyes to herself. "Here it is, but it must be cold by now. I'll make you another one."

"Oh, I don't want to be a nuisance. Still, if you're making some more..."

"I'd love to do astrophotography," said Osborn longingly, as he walked towards the door to go to the kitchen. Unfortunately, Bryony was on her way in and opened the door at precisely the wrong time, banging it into Osborn. She apologised, as he rubbed his forehead.

"It's OK, it was my fault. The edge of the door caught me right in the wrong place, that's all. For a moment, I saw stars."

CHAPTER 4

"Well then Sandra, how did your Christmas go?" asked Seraphina Delver, as Sandra tried to present a relaxed demeanour by deliberately not crossing her legs and keeping her arms unfolded. She unfortunately forgot about her hands, the fingers of which seemed to have a mind of their own and were engaged in a mindless digital jig (which made no actual sense).

"It was hectic – it was good to see the family – it went quite well," replied Sandra carefully, "although I had a virus. I brought some water with me in case I have a coughing fit."

"No worries, just go with how you feel," replied Seraphina, smiling. "Did you manage to consider abandonment?"

"Yes, I did and I made some notes," said Sandra shyly, "but I don't think I got very far, to be honest. I tried to apply it to my life and all the main players in it, but it didn't seem to fit at all, so I abandoned it and went where my mind took me."

"So where was that?" asked Seraphina quietly.

"I found myself remembering just after I was married, when I was 19. Mum had been having a secret affair, but it was discovered and all hell broke loose. She went to live with her sister in Durham, but she left Plymouth early one morning without telling me her plans. Years later, I realised I needed to forgive her for that, which I found quite difficult. After about two years in Durham, she realised she missed having her own family life. Dad took her back, although she later complained that he did what he wanted, which was golf for a while and then walking with a friend. She said he didn't look after her like other men looked after their wives."

"You said you forgave her for not telling you she was leaving?"

"Eventually. It hurt for ages though, because I couldn't believe she left without telling me."

"That sounds suspiciously like abandonment?"

"Er – yes, I suppose it does. Oh."

The session continued in its rather laid-back intense way, as they discussed more aspects of Sandra's relationship with Caroline. Sandra found she was partly enjoying the sensation of being free to speak her truth, although the main subject matter remained like an unexplored dark mass within her that needed to be investigated before being excised. She had no idea why she was using a medical analogy, but as the investigation was underway, she began to be aware of a few nerves that were sometimes brushed against.

Her allotted time passed quickly, so that she was surprised when Seraphina gently brought the session to a halt. Sandra left the room with flushed cheeks, a further appointment and so many liberated thoughts and emotions that she arrived home before she realised. From that moment on, she felt exhausted, but in a post-operative kind of way. The medical analogies were insistent.

The following morning, after a restless night, her troubles in the gut department were insistently manifesting and there was no need for any medical analogy. She took her mind off her reacting body with the wonderful distraction of some in-depth ancestry research, although she often caught herself over the next two days mulling over some of the issues that had been discussed in counselling. She was able to talk over a few with Osborn.

Although still suffering somewhat down below on the third day, she came to what she felt was an important realisation. Sitting in front of her computer while perusing a 1901 census, her thoughts suddenly seemed to form themselves into a cohesive form.

'I don't *have* to love my mother!' she thought with some astonishment, before qualifying this awareness. 'That is, I don't have to love her as my own mother, although I still love her as the soul she is. I *did* love her as my mother, but it's changed. She's changed and I've changed, but she won't allow for *my* change. Wow, I must tell Osborn.'

Another few days passed and she was once again sitting in front of Seraphina, who was looking at her expectantly (but not in the pregnant sense).

"You look as if you have something to say?" prompted Seraphina, after they had finished with the opening pleasantries and the obligatory session questionnaire.

"Yes, I have," replied Sandra, deciding to plunge right in. "I love my mother on a soul level – I think it's always been that way and it always will be. The issue is about the more human level, in that I used to love her as my mother unconditionally. That was right up until Dad died. As Mum's 'behaviour' stepped up and I became the sole focus of her insecurity, I seemed to begin a rather painful process of deconstructing the past 50 years or more, in an effort to understand my childhood in a more realistic light."

"That's an important realisation," said Seraphina, smiling. "How do you see things evolving now in this more realistic light?"

"I think I felt an increasing threat from her increasing desire to depend on me. At the moment her dependence is primarily emotionally, although as she becomes older, the physical dependence is slowly increasing. At some deep level with all this going on, it gradually became a survival issue for me. Fight or flight kicked in and the adrenaline began to run riot."

"That's quite clearly explained. So where are you right now?"

"Well, I still thought I loved my mother when I started with counselling, but last week I suddenly questioned that. Right now, I'm really not sure if I do love my mother, but instead of it being an either/or question, it feels more like a continuum and changes from day to day."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I think there's a freedom that comes with the realisation that I don't *have* to love my mother. It is as it is, at any given moment."

"That's quite an empowering step, I would imagine. I must say, you've made excellent progress in a short space of time."

"Oh, it's costing me! I had a really furious – I mean irritable – bowel after the session last week, it wasn't at all pleasant."

"Oh dear! In counselling, though, it generally gets worse before it gets better. You've progressed quickly already, so hopefully that reaction might lessen soon."

"I'd be very happy if it did. Another small piece of progress is that I told Mum I'd go to see her an hour later every Tuesday and Thursday and she just accepted it."

"Progress all around," commented Seraphina, smiling again. "What I'd like to bring to your attention now is that I've noticed you have a tendency to say what you're thinking, rather than what you're feeling. You come across as a bit closed off from your feelings. This isn't a criticism, by the way. I wonder if you need to feel your feelings more and not think about them quite as much. How do you feel about that?"

"I think you could be right."

Seraphina may have been right, but Sandra found it surprisingly difficult to feel her feelings throughout the following week. She was mainly aware of feeling tiredness and even a kind of numbness, described best as being becalmed in a boat that was floating around on a river. It was a river that had been tossing her boat around for years on lots of white water, over big, hidden boulders with sudden rapids and strong undercurrents. She wondered if she simply needed a respite from feeling.

A memory surfaced of when she'd been 17, looking in a mirror and deciding that what she was feeling was far too painful and therefore she would stop feeling like that. As she considered earlier childhood feelings, she remembered how she seemed to have an affinity with sadness and aloneness and realised she'd been fundamentally sad about being an only child. She was also aware how in the last few years she'd never wished she wasn't an only child as much as she had since her beloved dad had died.

As the week progressed, she had a dream early one morning when she was in the spare bed downstairs. In the dream, she was lying down sunbathing near the edge of a sandy cliff, overlooking a beach way below, where people were swimming and enjoying themselves. There were two unknown people lying next to her, while Osborn was safe, quite a way back.

After trying unsuccessfully to move herself away, she told the people next to her that she was too close to the edge. They shuffled themselves away from her, but she still felt in danger of falling onto the beach below, where she probably wouldn't die, but would be really hurt. She was afraid the cliff might crumble and was feeling the sandy ground underneath her with her fingers, trying to gauge how secure it was.

She then suddenly felt a hand in hers and realised it was Osborn's hand. Still within the dream, she 'woke up' and explained the dream to Osborn, who she perceived was lying in the bed beside her. However, in reality he wasn't beside her, as she realised when she actually woke up. She felt hopeful on awaking, as if maybe she was beginning to accept the reality that she wasn't existentially alone after all.

She did feel a little alone during the week when she visited Caroline, who unsurprisingly attempted to probe about the counselling. Sandra had successfully avoided disclosing anything significant, by remaining steadfastly general, but Caroline had then taken a different offensive.

"Oh, I must show you this photo I came across of you a couple of years ago. I don't know if it's the way you're standing, but you look quite a lot bigger than you do now. Have you lost weight?" Caroline showed Sandra the photo that was on the table beside her chair.

"Yes, I *have* lost a bit of weight as a matter of fact. I haven't been able to eat much some days since I've been struggling with the anxiety and the IBS." As she spoke, Sandra was astounded at her mother's lack of sensitivity.

"Well, you're much better than you were, so you should eat normally now."

"I can't always, it's not that easy."

"You shouldn't try to lose weight for Madeleine's wedding, you know."

"I'm not!" Sandra was annoyed with herself for being on the defensive. "I'm going out to do some gardening now." She got out of the house as quickly as possible and headed for the garage, to indulge in some unattractive, but highly therapeutic swearing.

Osborn hadn't joined her at Caroline's house that day, as he'd met Lawrence for lunch in Plymouth. Afterwards, they'd gone to see about a second-hand video recorder for Lawrence, who seemed to have a deep aversion for any technical advancement made after the 1960s. Osborn returned home looking unsettled, saying that Lawrence had been so slow that he was actually worried about him.

"He seemed like an old man," he said, frowning. "He was even walking a bit bent over."

"I suppose he *is* 64," said Sandra doubtfully. "That's not old enough to walk bent over, though, unless there's something wrong. He's healthy enough, isn't he?"

"As far as I know, although he keeps away from doctors if he can help it."

"He hasn't seemed as happy as he normally is these last couple of years," admitted Sandra, "although he seems to cheer up when he sees us or the family. Maybe he's lonely – but he's got quite a few friends, hasn't he?"

"Yes, he has. I don't know, it was just a bit of a shock today, that's all."

The third counselling session was productive, as Seraphina explored with Sandra her childhood emotions of sadness and aloneness. Sandra also described her edge of the cliff dream, which Seraphina agreed was hopeful in its essence. The issue of boundaries was then discussed, as Sandra realised that when she perceived her boundaries were being encroached upon by her mother, emotions of fear, anger and distaste were evoked. She further realised that with others, it was only fear and to a much lesser extent.

Sandra felt quite pleased to have responded with her feelings, although she was also able to talk about her thoughts on the subject. She explained how she saw

boundaries between a very young child and a mother as being quite blurred and indistinct, with those boundaries gradually being established into older childhood and eventually adulthood.

At that point, she remembered an incident when she'd been 12 and had asked her mother not to cuddle her any more, because she was more grown-up. She wondered if that might have been a reaction to an instinct that her mother didn't always recognise or respect her adolescent boundaries. It had possibly encroached beyond into adulthood, as the way Caroline talked to her at times could be an unconscious attempt to reclaim that childhood level of Sandra's boundaries. Or else she was just pushing for a reaction from Sandra.

As usual, Sandra felt exhausted after the session and was relieved that the next appointment was for two weeks' time. She felt able to relax a little from the arduous inner work of counselling and to live life on a more ordinary level. However, it seemed that the process Seraphina had referred to was well underway, as Sandra endured several disturbed nights, either thrashing around a lot, or awake for hours with clamorous thoughts. It was just as well, she considered gratefully, that some of the thoughts were profoundly productive.

One morning towards the end of January, she visited her old school friend Gina, although Gina was actually only seven months older than Sandra. It had been a while since they'd met, but after knowing each other for 48 years, they were comfortable enough to pick up where they'd left off – if only they could have remembered where that had been.

"Did I tell you that Andy had that nasty place on his nose removed?" asked Gina, rubbing her knee.

"No!" replied Sandra, shocked for a moment until she realised she'd misheard. "God, I'm sorry Gina, I thought for a moment you said he had his nose removed. No, I knew he'd finally realised he should have it checked, but I didn't know it had been done. Is it OK now?"

"Yes it is, thankfully," replied Gina, looking slightly askance at Sandra. "It wasn't a pleasant experience and he had to sleep upright on the sofa that night, because it kept bleeding. I stayed with him, because he was supposed to have somebody there for 24 hours. Neither of us got much sleep and his face looked horribly bruised afterwards, but they said they'd managed to take it all away and he was given the all-clear."

"Oh, I'm so pleased, Gina," replied Sandra, thinking how tenuous life was. "I really am."

"Did I tell you Kate's split up from her boyfriend?" asked Gina, frowning. "I don't think I've seen you since it happened."

"No, they were living together for over two years, weren't they? Is she OK?" asked Sandra, remembering how her own heart had felt squeezed tightly when both Gulliver and Madeleine had broken up from their significant others. "Are *you* OK?"

"She was a bit of a mess for a few weeks, but she's got her head screwed on OK and she knew it was the right way to go." Gina pushed some of her thick fringe away from her face and scratched her long fair-to-grey hair. "I felt dreadful for her, but Andy and I helped her to find a flat of her own and she's feeling a bit more positive about her future. I'm OK, I keep busy to ward off all the slings and arrows of outrageous – whatever it was Shakespeare said."

"Fortune, I think," said Sandra, knowing it was. "It does feel a bit outrageous sometimes."

"Did I tell you Adam and Sarah are both looking for another job because they hate their current jobs? Did I tell you that I look after Reece and Owen after school for them?"

"No, I see what you mean by keeping busy! How old are Reece and Owen now?"

"Reece is twelve and Owen's just turned nine. They can be a right handful, not to mention a left one."

"I can imagine, I know what Juniper and Petroc are like and they're five and two."

"Did I tell you – no, that's enough about me. Tell me what's been happening in *your* life?" Gina put herself into listening mode.

"Oh. Well, did I tell you I've started counselling? I've had three sessions so far." Sandra shifted uncomfortably, neither enjoying the spotlight being turned on her, nor the personal subject matter.

"No! I knew you were on a waiting list. Is it helping?"

"Yes, it is," replied Sandra, realising she really didn't want to explain further. "I'm still not quite sure how counselling works exactly, but I'm beginning to feel differently about Mum and myself."

"That's brilliant," said Gina, smiling. "I went to see a counsellor once, but I didn't get on with him at all and I never went again. We really need to see each other more often, we've got quite behind. I don't usually put it on there, though, it seems to go straight to my front. The Christmas food did it and we've still got naughty things left over."

"You don't look as if you've put on any weight at all," said Sandra honestly, regarding Gina's slight frame. "I've lost some weight since last year and I feel much better for it. I feel more like *me*. I didn't enjoy the way it happened and still does happen sometimes, but I suppose every cloud has a silver lining."

"I'm really glad you're on the up," said Gina warmly. "We haven't had a get-together with Kay, Emily and Delia for ages. Maybe we can do that in the spring?"

"Yes," replied Sandra quietly. Her inner reaction of instant trepidation at the thought of seeing their other old school friends was telling her she wasn't quite as up as Gina thought.

"I think I've got a cold coming," said Osborn two days later, as they sat with a cappuccino each in the café at *Setco*, before commencing the weekly shopping for themselves and Caroline. "Graeme thought he was fighting something when I had coffee with him on Monday."

"Oh no, we only had a virus a month ago," said Sandra, assuming she would catch any cold virus that Osborn had, due to the usual explosive sneezing. "Mind you, there's a lot of it going around, Gulliver was coughing last Sunday when he rang."

"He sounded a bit flat to me," said Osborn, stirring the froth on his cappuccino into the liquid. "He seems to be throwing himself into decorating Juniper's room and he's talking about doing Petroc's room afterwards, but I just got the feeling he's not entirely happy."

"I know the feeling," said Sandra ironically. "I didn't tell you what Mum said yesterday, apart from calling me a little devil and a naughty girl during *Scribble*, which is quite normal for her these days. Anyway, almost as soon as I got inside the door, she told me how she'd been thinking over her life and her achievements. She said I should publish the story of her life and call it *Goodnight Caroline*. Can you imagine? I felt like asking her why. Why should I do that when I have my own life that I'm trying to live?"

"Maybe you should have actually said that?"

"It would only have made things ten times more difficult, she probably would have ended up going all sulky like she still does sometimes. I can't face that at the moment, it's taking loads of energy to feel my way through this counselling process."

"I can understand how your mother takes your energy, she can be such heavy weather." Osborn sipped his drink. "Like last week when I had to go over because she said the light on her cooker had stopped working – except there was no light for the cooker, she'd got completely confused with the light for the grill."

"She needn't have been so belligerent with you," agreed Sandra, remembering the feeling of walking on eggshells the whole time they'd been with Caroline. "It was as if she didn't really want you there at all, she wanted *me* to sort it out for her. It almost felt as if she didn't trust you, it was awful."

"Oh well, I know where I stand, but I was quite disturbed at how she was behaving," admitted Osborn, finishing his cappuccino way before Sandra would finish hers. "Still, the counselling's going well, isn't it? You've seemed a bit calmer this last week or so."

"God, I must have been in a right old state then," replied Sandra, giving a short laugh. "Actually, I know I was. I think what's happening a bit more now is that I'm not

as afraid to say what I mean. I actually said, "Oh, I give up!" the other day when she was needling me about doing some sewing for her. I simply don't have the energy to care as much about protecting her feelings the way I've been doing all my life. I can feel the balance shifting. I'm accepting that I have to protect myself a bit more and care about myself and my own wellbeing more than I have been."

"Sounds good, I can remember coming to that place with my parents, although it took most of my life up until they died. The balance changed for me then as well, because from that time, I've had more energy to focus on Gulliver and Madeleine, if and when they need me."

"And me?" asked Sandra hopefully. "You didn't say me."

"Of course you," replied Osborn, looking directly at her. "It feels as if we're on this life path together. We have a separate journey, but we're very much on the same life path, walking side by side a lot of the time."

"But with some detours and trips by ourselves," considered Sandra. "Talking of trips, I'm still very anxious about going to France for Maddy's wedding."

"I'll be with you," replied Osborn comfortingly. "Oh! I forgot to tell you, I bumped into Alison and Dirk in Plymouth when I was with Graeme on Monday and Alison said they were coming to the wedding. She said they were really touched that Maddy asked them."

"Alison always had a soft spot for Madeleine," said Sandra, thinking back to when their children had been pupils at the same school. "Part of the reason Maddy's asked our friends is because Henri's family is so big and ours is so small. Gina and Andy can't come, or Belinda or any of that family, so we're still going to be very small in number. Maddy's asked Bryony's parents and brother too, I think she's a bit desperate to have some English people there."

"Welsh people too," added Osborn, "don't forget Juniper and Petroc are Welsh."

"How could I forget when Juniper says Welsh words to me?" asked Sandra, smiling. "She's going to love being all dressed up as a bridesmaid, although I'm not sure about Petroc."

"I don't blame him not wanting to be all dressed up as a bridesmaid," replied Osborn, as Sandra finished her drink. "Are you ready? Let's go and hit the fruit and veg."

CHAPTER 5

Counselling session four was underway on the very last day of what had seemed mostly a long, cold, mind-altering and bodily-enduring month. The petite Seraphina's dark curly hair had been cut, but her intense hazel eyes were looking keenly at Sandra, who was explaining how she thought her mother unwittingly or otherwise seemed to foist a sense of aloneness on her by focusing solely and intently on Sandra, even when Osborn or anybody else was there. It even felt as if Caroline attempted to shut Osborn out on occasion, although Sandra had come to the awareness that she didn't have to accept it, because it wasn't reality.

"So you're questioning your own perception of reality?" asked Seraphina gently.

"Er – yes, I suppose I am," replied Sandra slowly, not having quite put it that way to herself before. "My past perception."

"How about this thought, or feeling, that your mother foists a sense of aloneness on you?" said Seraphina with delicate persistence.

"It's my perception," replied Sandra, suddenly understanding. "It's how I receive or perceive what my mother says and does."

"Is it possible it hooks into the aloneness you felt as a young child?" asked Seraphina with definite warmth in her eyes.

"Yes, it is," replied Sandra, smiling, "It feels good to have these shifts of understanding. It feels enlightening."

"You said shifts?" asked Seraphina perceptively.

"Ye-es, I was mulling things over these last two weeks and it almost feels as if there's a dawning realisation that Mum's never loved me for who I am."

"Do you know what brought this realisation to you?"

"Well, Mum's been niggly about my weight for ages, comparing it to hers. When I refuse biscuits she offers, she's affronted and annoyed, as if I'm rejecting her. Last week she accused me of trying to lose weight for my daughter's wedding. After that, it was as if it all slipped into place, with hundreds of memories flooding into my mind, of things she's said and how she's behaved. I could see that she places herself in continual comparison or competition with me and doesn't want me to outshine her or do better than her in any way."

"Mm-hm?"

"So the dawning of a new awareness was suddenly clear, of how she's never actually loved me unconditionally. She's used me to measure herself against and to boost her own ego. I think I may have known this at some level for many years, but now it's at the conscious level and I'm relieved. It feels as if I've loosened the cord that that's been binding me to her."

"How does this feel?"

"It feels liberating, as if I'm glad to see the truth at last of how things have been in the past. After finally acknowledging it – and it took a while – I just want to let it go and get on with *my* life." Sandra smiled a little diffidently.

"That's really good," said Seraphina encouragingly. "You said when you first arrived today that you'd had a memory, so I'm just wondering how that fits in?"

"Well, it came when I was wondering why I generally still feel afraid of people," replied Sandra, wringing her hands for a moment. "I was three and standing with my hands behind my back, clutching the handles of a kitchen cabinet I was leaning against. Mum was in front of me, sitting in a chair sobbing loudly with her head in her hands. I'm pretty sure she'd returned from having teeth out in hospital. Standing opposite her was my father's mother, who must have been looking after me while Dad was at work. As I stood observing my mother in the throes of strong emotion, I felt frightened and helpless and also a bit shocked."

"That's quite a powerful memory," responded Seraphina, her hands under her chin. "Any feelings or connections from it?"

"Yes, I realised that back then, I felt a fear of my own mother and also of her strongly expressed emotion. That was probably strengthened by her emotional outbursts in the following years – and compounded by the messages I received that it wasn't OK to upset her. I think this memory could also explain my reluctance to express my own emotion."

"I think you could be right," replied Seraphina seriously. "Anything else?"

"Ye-es, I think it's connected to a sense of guilt that's intertwined with the responsibility I unwittingly took on as a child – or that was thrust upon me – for not upsetting Mum. I can distinctly remember being afraid of her emotions and feeling guilty when I thought I'd upset her by being naughty."

"Rather a lot of mixed-up emotions you're describing in there," said Seraphina, her hands under her chin again.

"I know," replied Sandra a little excitedly. "I think it connects with my current anger towards her when she calls me a "naughty little girl" even now, because apart from thinking how utterly ridiculous she's being, it hooks into something very meaningful to me. Now I've identified its origin, I hope it'll lose its power."

"I'm sure it will, now it's been named and shamed," replied Seraphina, looking intently at Sandra. "It sounds to me as if you've been able to distinguish some of those tangled emotions that have been pulling at you for so long."

"Yes!" said Sandra eagerly. "I realised something else, too. About a year ago, in desperation to be free of what I felt was my mother's deep and invisible hold on me, I tried a visualisation I'd read about, to cut the psychic bonds between people. It didn't actually happen, but I became more clearly aware of what felt like a kind of psychic umbilical cord made up of twisted strands, going right into the core of my being."

"You mentioned earlier about loosening the cord that's been binding you to her," prompted Seraphina, leaning forwards a little in her chair.

"Yes – and my sudden recent realisation is that this psychic cord consists of strands of guilt and responsibility emanating from my early childhood that have

persisted into the present. Instead of being able to cut the cord, though, it feels as if the strands are unravelling. I'd love them to slide out at last, to be free of something I've been allowing to suck energy and life-force from me for decades."

"Wow, you've had a busy fortnight!" Seraphina's eyes widened appreciatively. "I'm sure the unravelling strands of the cord will slide out when they're ready. I think our time's up for today, but is next week OK? Maybe we can do a visualisation, or the empty chair exercise."

"Next week's fine," replied Sandra, hoping she wouldn't be subjected to the empty chair exercise. "Thank you!"

Two days later, Sandra and Osborn paid a visit to The Eden Project for therapeutic purposes. Although there was nothing like an abundance of flowers at that time of year, the ethos of the entire place never failed to uplift them both. Sometimes when she was restless or agitated at night, Sandra would imagine herself walking around the Mediterranean Biome, breathing in the subtle scents of the flowers, shrubs and trees, feeling a sense of contentment and peace.

The following day, though, Osborn's peace was compromised when he rang Lawrence and discovered that his brother had been suffering for days with what sounded like a nasty urinary tract infection. Lawrence admitted he'd been in such pain the previous night that he'd almost rung for an ambulance. As it was currently Sunday, Osborn urged Lawrence to ring his doctor the following morning, or to ring him and ring for an ambulance if the pain and discomfort became unbearable in the meantime.

The next day, Osborn rang Lawrence again and was relieved to find out that he'd been prescribed antibiotics over the phone, which had been delivered to his door. Osborn also rang the day afterwards to ask if Lawrence needed anything when he and Sandra went shopping the following day. Lawrence asked for milk and blackcurrant juice, which Osborn delivered to him at his first-floor flat on the Wednesday. Sandra waited for Osborn in the car while he spoke with his brother for several minutes, but she was concerned when Osborn returned with a worried frown creasing his brow.

"I've never seen him looking so ill or so old," said Osborn, switching on the ignition. "He took ages to come downstairs to answer the door and when I followed him up again, he was like an old man, trying to catch his breath."

"I hope the antibiotics are working," replied Sandra, wondering why Lawrence was suffering so badly. "He needs to ring his doctor again if there's no improvement soon."

"I told him that," said Osborn, sighing. "He assured me he was OK, but I told him I'd ring him again tomorrow, to make sure."

That afternoon, as Sandra was sitting at her computer replying to an email from Belinda, she suddenly and inexplicably began to feel very emotionally unstable and also quite nauseous. She was unable to eat anything at teatime, except to nibble unwillingly at half a slice of toast that she was unable to finish.

From then until early the next morning, she felt what she could only describe as a sense of quite extreme unrest or unbalance. Although it was manifesting itself physically, she perceived that it was actually emanating from a psychic level.

In the early hours of the morning, she awoke feeling intensely distressed. She tried some relaxation breathing, which normally had a very calming effect, but remained agitated. In desperation, she attempted a meditative state and after asking for help, the words that came into her mind were, 'You are you – she is she – and it is love.'

As she started to calm a little, the words 'self-love' reverberated in her mind. She realised she didn't feel entirely comfortable with the concept of self-love, considering it a little too self-centred. As if in reply, the words 'OK then, love self!' came into her mind and almost made her laugh. She felt that although the words were taking place in her mind, something good was happening in the area of the psychic umbilical cord between herself and her mother. She was almost afraid to hope it had finally slid out, but tentatively felt that it might be heading that way.

Later that morning, Sandra accompanied Osborn to see his dentist, mainly because Osborn was allergic to local anaesthetics and needed a dental crown fitted. After her rocky night, she wondered if she was actually feeling more anxious than Osborn, but he survived quite well and they returned home with him both praising the dentist and saying he must ring Lawrence again, as when he'd tried to ring him earlier, there had been no reply.

However, there was still no reply to a second phone call and Sandra went to visit her mother with alarm bells beginning to ring in her head. Caroline was fortunately in a reasonable mood and sympathetic about Lawrence's illness. After two hours or so, Sandra left straight from Caroline's house to walk to her fifth counselling session, with no option other than to put the ringing alarm bells to the back of her mind.

"I think we'll try the empty chair exercise now," said Seraphina, after they had spent some time investigating the hooks and triggers that Sandra considered Caroline used in various unconscious psychological games.

"OK," replied Sandra amenably, while thinking what she wouldn't give to do a visualisation instead.

"When you're ready, imagine that Mum is sitting here," said Seraphina, placing an empty chair in front of Sandra. "You have *carte blanche* to say anything at all to her, anything that springs to mind. This is your chance to express exactly how you feel, so try not to think too much about the words, just let them come. Start when you're ready."

Sandra immediately felt her mind go blank and was aware of a growing silence. She considered telling Seraphina she couldn't do it, but after a deep breath she managed to say a few halting words, before launching into saying whatever entered her head. Afterwards, she could hardly remember what she'd said at all, except something mentioned in previous sessions, that Caroline needed to trust her, because Sandra felt she didn't.

"Well, you managed to pack a lot into not very many words," said Seraphina, after Sandra had disengaged from the chair and looked enquiringly at Seraphina. "You actually *said* quite a lot! Now, I'd like you to take the chair and leave it in the corridor outside this room. Can you do that?"

"Yes," replied Sandra, enjoying the sudden fun aspect of the exercise. "This is symbolic, isn't it – I like symbolics."

"I'm not sure if you mean symbolism, but symbolics sounds far more interesting," said Seraphina, giving a small laugh. "Off you go then, say goodbye symbolically to all you've expressed to Mum."

When Sandra returned to the room, she felt a sense of relief, but wondered if that was because she'd actually been able to speak any words at all to her mother in Seraphina's presence, symbolically or otherwise.

"Righty-ho, we have one final session to come," said Seraphina, consulting her diary. "I was going to suggest in two weeks' time, but I'm away at a course then. Would you prefer next week, or three weeks' time?"

"Three weeks' time is fine," replied Sandra, as the remembrance of Lawrence's illness came crashing suddenly into the front of her mind.

"He's not replying," said Osborn, as soon as Sandra stepped inside the front door. "I'm really worried, I'm going to have a sandwich and then go to his flat."

"I'll come with you," said Sandra, knowing that not letting Osborn go on his own took precedence over her usual post-counselling fatigue. "I'll make some tea."

An hour later, they arrived where Lawrence lived, but although they were able to let themselves in the main front door, there was no answer first of all to ringing the bell and then to Osborn's more frantic knocking on the door to Lawrence's first-floor flat.

As Osborn was knocking and calling Lawrence's name for the third time, the neighbours from both the flat below and the flat above came out to tell Osborn that they had also begun to be worried, as there had been no word over the last few days from the normally gregarious Lawrence.

"He's been ill," explained Osborn. "Oh God, I'll have to ring the police."

Sandra stood in the dimness of the stairwell outside Lawrence's flat, listening as Osborn answered questions to someone at the emergency call-centre, who eventually said a policeman would come as soon as possible. Sandra and Osborn both went down the dingy stairs to wait outside the front door for the arrival of the police car, which arrived after about five minutes.

The next hour took on a sense of unreality, as Sandra waited at the bottom of the stairs leading to the flat above, while Osborn answered questions asked by the tall, young, efficient but considerate policeman. Then, after failing to rouse a reply himself, the policeman told Osborn he would have to break down the door.

Osborn nodded assent, but both he and Sandra stood hardly breathing as the muscular policeman used his shoulder to break the door lock. He succeeded after two attempts, but was still unable to open the door. Finally, after pushing very hard, he managed to squeeze his way around the door to peer into the flat.

After a moment, he came to stand back in the hallway. "I'm very sorry to have to tell you that your brother has died," he said, looking at Osborn with a serious expression.

"Oh God," said Osborn brokenly. "Oh Lawrence."

"Are you OK, sir?" asked the policeman, as Sandra stood up and put her hand on Osborn's arm in shock and horror, knowing that Osborn's world had changed forever.

"Yes," replied Osborn mechanically.

"I need to ask you if you want to see him," said the policeman gently, "but I wouldn't advise it. He's fallen behind the door, which is why I had trouble budging it."

"I want to see him," said Osborn emphatically, as the policeman stood aside to let him look into the flat.

"Oh God, oh bloody hell Lawrence!" cried Osborn in despair, stepping back from the door and sinking onto the floor with his head in his hands, while sobs racked his body.

"I'm here," said Sandra, for want of something comforting to say, although her own head was reeling in horror. She knelt down beside Osborn and put her arms around him as best she could.

"I'm sorry," said Osborn a few moments later to the policeman, as he disengaged from Sandra and stood up, blowing his nose. "It was such a shock."

"That's OK, sir," replied the policeman kindly. "My sincere condolences. I'm afraid, though, there are certain procedures I have to follow now."

Sandra and Osborn sat together on the stairs in the dim lighting, while Osborn alternately answered questions about Lawrence and spoke to Sandra about what he would need to do. A paramedic arrived and although Sandra tried to distract Osborn, she overheard the words "rigor mortis" and "life extinct" with chilling clarity.

"We'll need to transport Lawrence to the hospital," said the policeman after a while. "Since this is a sudden and unexpected death, a post-mortem has to be carried out, but I would strongly advise that you go home now, sir. I'll finish here and then I'll come to your home to see to the paperwork. Are you OK to go home?"

"Yes," replied Osborn, getting to his feet. "I'm OK."

They arrived back at their house twenty minutes later, where the remains of their earlier sandwich tea seemed to belong to a different reality that had become completely inaccessible. Sandra made some fresh tea to drink and they sat disbelievingly together in the sitting room, waiting for the policeman. Sandra was almost incoherent with exhaustion, while Osborn's mind seemed filled with random thoughts.

"Go to bed," he said half an hour later, "you're more asleep than awake. I'll stay here for the policeman, he's a good guy. I'll be OK."

"Thank you," mumbled Sandra. "I love you," she said sincerely but inadequately.

Neither of them slept much that night and whenever Sandra managed to doze off, she came to consciousness again feeling nauseous. It was a relief when morning arrived and they could distract themselves with the inevitable tasks resulting from a death – and especially, it turned out, from a sudden and unexpected one.

That morning, Osborn had to repair the door of Lawrence's flat, although the policeman had been able to make it secure the previous night. To Sandra's intense relief, Osborn's friend Graeme went with him to the flat, after Osborn had rung him to see if he could borrow a necessary tool that he knew Graeme possessed.

However, after lunch, Sandra went to the flat with Osborn, as they started the massive task of cleaning, clearing and making coherence of all the items stacked tightly on shelves and in cupboards. Sandra found it hard to go inside the flat at all at first, remembering that only a matter of hours before, Lawrence had been dead behind the door in a state of rigor mortis.

She breathed deeply and stepped inside for Osborn's sake, then went straight to the kitchen and started to prioritise what needed to be done with all the food. It soon became clear that Lawrence had been keen on taking advantage of offers, as she came across whole shelves of soup tins and drawers full of chocolate. The saddest sight in the kitchen, though, was the hardly touched milk and the unopened bottle of blackcurrant juice that Osborn had bought for his brother only two incredibly long days ago.

When they returned home from the flat, Sandra's heart went out to Osborn as he set about ringing people to let them know the shocking news. Although Osborn said Gulliver had seemed sad but calm, Sandra felt sure that in reality Gulliver was as shocked as they had both been. He'd offered to come home to help, but Osborn had replied that they were currently OK and would probably need his help later on.

Sandra was glad that Henri was there with Madeleine when he rang her, knowing that she would react more emotionally. Madeleine also asked if Osborn wanted her to come home, but Sandra heard Osborn giving her the same reply as he had to Gulliver.

The most difficult person Osborn had to ring was his sister Kirsty, as their history had become complex, warped and sour. This was not for want of trying to heal the differences on Osborn's part, as he had consistently tried to help out Kirsty over the years in all her life's dramas. It had become apparent over more recent years, however, that Kirsty believed her two brothers were there as a source of financial aid and to help fix her mistakes.

She had been caught out in the past having left her mother alone and ill with shingles when supposed to be caring for her, without letting anybody know; had taken a ring from her mother that her mother had promised to Madeleine; had taken their father's Omega watch; had taken precious Bermuda photos that Lawrence had specifically asked her to leave for him to look at first after their Bermuda-born mother had died (then accused Osborn of taking them); and all evidence pointed to her having stolen two of their grandfather's war medals. There had been so many other minor but selfish acts, that Lawrence had cut her out of his will and expressly asked Osborn not to let her inside his flat in the event of his death.

Osborn had tried to remain in contact with her, but she had changed her phone number without letting him know and had closed her *Facebook* account, where they had been in minimal contact. At one point, she had emailed Osborn out of the blue (having changed her own email account without telling Osborn) and said he could have digital access to some family photos she had. When Osborn looked at the photos, he realised they were from the missing Bermuda ones she'd taken, that by birthright had belonged to Lawrence, the only one of the three siblings to have been born in Bermuda.

Osborn managed to track down her phone number from an online business she had and made the necessary phone call. After that, he started on the list of Lawrence's friends that he'd brought home with him from the flat. In mid-evening, he sat on the sofa beside Sandra looking totally exhausted.

"It's horrible having to tell people bad news," he said wearily. "Just horrible."

"You're doing so well and tomorrow's another day," said Sandra ineffectually. "Go to bed early, you're so tired that you're almost certain to sleep better than last night."

"The way I feel now, I'll sleep like the dead," said Osborn, as a look of horror and despair ravaged his face.

"It's OK," said Sandra, putting her hand on his knee. "It's not the wrong thing to say, I'm sure Lawrence would have laughed."

CHAPTER 6

"It's OK to cry, Dad," said Madeleine comfortingly, hugging Osborn as tears escaped from her own eyes. "I just had to come and be with you and Mum."

"Thank you, darling," said Sandra, looking at them both while her heart seemed to be feeling emotions her mind was unable to name. Madeleine had rung early the morning after she'd heard the news about her one and only beloved uncle, asking if she could come home for the weekend.

Sandra and Osborn had met her at the train station at midday, after spending the morning clearing a little more of Lawrence's flat. They'd returned home with her for some lunch, before all three were going to go and break the news to Caroline.

"I can't believe it," sobbed Osborn, as Madeleine's own face crumpled.

"Neither can I," she whispered sorrowfully, gently disengaging to blow her nose.

"I'm OK," said Osborn, blowing his own nose. "I really am, it just comes over me from time to time and seeing you set me off again."

"I didn't come here to make you cry," replied Madeleine sadly, "but I know what you mean. At least I can be with you when you tell Grandma."

"How lovely to see you!" cried Caroline an hour later, as she saw Madeleine standing at her door. "Sandra didn't tell me you were coming, the naughty girl. Come on in!"

"We've got some bad news, I'm afraid," said Sandra quickly, seeing Osborn looking lost and her mother about to ply Madeleine with questions in her loud voice.

"What? What bad news?" asked Caroline sharply, looking at Sandra.

"Let's go inside," replied Sandra, hating what they'd come to say.

The act of taking off their jackets and going to sit down appropriately in the sitting room seemed to give Osborn the time he needed to be able to explain to Caroline what had happened. She immediately flushed and looked taken aback, but reacted sympathetically to Osborn. Sandra went to the kitchen to make some tea, while the shock of Lawrence's sudden death sank in a little more and took them all one step closer to accepting the loss.

They left Caroline's house an hour later and spent the rest of the day quietly at home, talking over whatever came into their heads. Sandra knew Madeleine's visit was doing Osborn a lot of good, as he expressed more of his own shock and pain.

That night, however, Sandra awoke at 02:00 and hardly slept afterwards. She found herself acknowledging a certain amount of anger that Lawrence had died, but quickly realised with a great deal of relief that her anger was directed at the situation, not Lawrence himself.

The anger was centred mainly on how Lawrence's death was certain to affect the way Osborn had so far been there for Sandra throughout her counselling. Despite the fact that she was fully committed to being there for Osborn in his grief and distress, the timing seemed especially unfavourable and even a little cruel.

As the early morning hours slowly elapsed, she was able to make some connections relevant to her counselling journey, mulling over the fact that she found clearing and tidying things in Lawrence's flat relatively easy, but dealing with people a lot harder. She recalled the memory of her three-year-old self watching her mother in a distraught state and realised it was because she didn't feel safe with people – because back in that memory, she hadn't felt safe with her own mother.

She felt sad for her three-year-old self, because she *should* have felt safe with her own mother, but it actually felt good to make the connection. She felt that she could now understand something that had been eluding her all her life, as she'd always wondered why she was fundamentally afraid of people. As she lay there beside Osborn, she was able to acknowledge that particular part of the past and simply let it go, knowing she didn't want to hold on to it any more.

She had to get up at 05:00, however, as all the extreme upheaval of the past few days manifested itself in a bereaved, distraught and very irritable bowel. With another bout at 07:00, she greeted Osborn and then Madeleine as they later wandered into the sitting room, where she sat feeling drained of energy, but resolved.

Instead of feeling ashamed of her own bodily reaction and uncomfortable at being the centre of attention, she opened up about exactly how she was feeling, including her thoughts during the early hours. She felt tentatively safe with them both as she allowed them into her inner, vulnerable, fearful self. Later, she also realised she felt tentatively safe with Gulliver, with whom she'd always tried to be herself. Sadly, she thought that her mother sometimes didn't have a clue who she actually was.

The three of them had planned to go to Lawrence's flat that morning, but before they left, the phone rang and a slightly nauseous and unsettled Sandra realised from Osborn's words that it was Kirsty on the other end. It was obvious from Osborn's raised, anguished voice that the phone call wasn't going well and Madeleine came to join Sandra as they looked at each other with worried frowns. The conversation seemed to be coming to an abrupt end.

"OK, if that's what you want. I'll let you know when the funeral is ... God, she's rung off!" Osborn looked at Sandra and Madeleine with sorrowful incredulity as he replaced the receiver. "She said the family's damaged her and she's cutting herself off!"

"What?" Sandra and Madeleine both reacted at the same time.

"She rang to ask about the will, about what was in it, so I had to tell her Lawrence hasn't left her anything. She then said she'd come to the flat to help clear it, so I had to tell her that Lawrence had expressly asked that she doesn't. What could I do? I have to honour his wishes." Osborn put his head in his hands.

"Yes, you have to, you did the right thing," replied Madeleine, reaching Osborn first to put an arm around him.

"That is so crass and low," said Sandra angrily, standing at his other side and putting her hand on his back. "All she cares about is sodding money, she doesn't care about what effect all this has had on *you* after finding Lawrence and everything. And how has the family damaged her exactly?"

"I don't know, she said that just before she rang off," replied Osborn tiredly. "So, I've lost a brother and a sister within a few days."

"Good riddance," said Sandra, as a feeling of exhaustion washed over her.

"Will she come to the funeral?" asked Madeleine doubtfully.

"No idea," replied Osborn, seeming to find some inner strength. "Come on, let's go to the flat like we planned, because at least in a weird way I feel as if I'm doing something for Lawrence there."

After Madeleine had helped them to sort through a mound of paperwork that Lawrence had amassed at the flat, they took her to the train station. It felt very odd to know that the next time they saw her would be for Lawrence's funeral.

However, almost as soon as they arrived home again, Gulliver rang to ask how they were. Not only did they both speak with him, but they both spoke with Juniper and it was clear that Osborn was finding a lot of comfort in talking with his granddaughter.

"She's such a feeling little girl," said Osborn, as the call finished, "and so beyond her years. She was describing a dream she'd had about Lawrence and she was sad because he couldn't see what she looked like any more."

"She asked me how Lawrence knew that he'd died," said Sandra, remembering how she'd found it hard to know how to reply. "She must really be trying to think all around the situation in order to understand it. You wouldn't think she was only five."

"She asked me about why he'd fallen behind the door," said Osborn, his voice beginning to break. "Sorry. A part of me wishes I'd never seen him like that, but another part of me knows I had to see."

"It'll get better slowly," said Sandra, remembering the other-worldly feel to that evening, as they'd stood in the dimly lit hallway with Lawrence dead behind the door. "It was traumatic for you, it's bound to take a while."

"I know," replied Osborn quietly. "I'm so glad you were with me."

"I knew I had to be there," replied Sandra simply. "Something in me just knew."

"Well, I'm going to need you with me more this next week or two with all that needs doing," said Osborn, sighing. "That's if you're up to it."

"Of course," replied Sandra, hoping she could find the strength to be up to it.

Two days later, Lawrence's post-mortem examination was being carried out. Osborn very wisely took his mind off the situation by paying a visit firstly to the local charity shop and then the bank, to ask about notarised wills and an executor account. Sandra was due to visit Caroline and found herself walking to her mother's house feeling undeniably disturbed at the thought of what would be happening to Lawrence's body. She began to wish she hadn't seen numerous episodes of *Quiet Witness* on television.

"How are you?" asked Caroline, as Sandra stepped inside the kitchen.

"I'm feeling weird because it's Lawrence's post-mortem today," answered Sandra, glad that her mother appeared to be in a non-confrontational mood. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm jogging along," replied Caroline sombrely, which was a phrase that always created incongruous images in Sandra's mind. "I'm glad I'm well enough to have my hair done tomorrow, I didn't feel like it last week, so I cancelled. Your hair's looking alright, much better than mine."

"What?" asked Sandra in disbelief that her mother wanted a conversation about hair, when Lawrence was possibly being sliced open as they were speaking.

"I expect you've got lots to do," said Caroline heedlessly. "Never mind, we can have a game of *Scribble* this afternoon, *Scribble* always takes my mind off my worries."

"I can't concentrate on *Scribble* today," replied Sandra immediately. She could almost have cried at the thought of sitting down with Caroline for over an hour, amid the sense of oppression she so often felt at her mother's house, while being the butt of Caroline's usual *Scribble*-liberated sniping remarks. "I'll file away some of your paperwork instead, or go out and tidy the garage for a while."

She went home early, feeling depleted and shaky with reaction and exhaustion, knowing there would be a phone call about the post-mortem. It came not long after she'd returned and she listened sadly as Osborn took the call.

"He had deep vein thrombosis in his leg and some blood clots travelled to his lungs," recounted Osborn after he put down the receiver. "They were aggravated by the kidney infection he had. The deep vein thrombosis was like a time-bomb and it could have happened at any time. Oh, Lawrence! I'm just thankful he wouldn't have known much about it."

For nine days, Sandra and Osborn ploughed through all the jobs that had to be undertaken, including visits to the register office, the bank, the funeral director, the building society, the florist, the charity shop, the funeral parlour to view Lawrence's body and many times to Lawrence's flat, where there was still a massive amount of clearing to be done.

There had also been a visit from a minister who would be taking Lawrence's non-religious funeral. Everything seemed to be happening in a dream, amid a comforting influx of sympathy cards. Sandra took on the task of writing Lawrence's service sheet, which she found both harrowing and rewarding.

Madeleine and Henri arrived the evening before the funeral, while Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc had arrived at Bryony's parents' house a little earlier. That night, Sandra and Osborn were both restless and unsettled, so Sandra felt little surprise when she had to make an early morning bathroom visit, due to the usual dreaded troubles in the gut department. She managed to breathe herself into a calmer state of mind by the time Madeleine and Henri surfaced and they all prepared for the coming funereal ordeal.

It was bitterly cold as they got into their cars, although when they drove through the entrance of the crematorium, Osborn found it heartening to see that a good number of Lawrence's friends were already there. Kirsty, however, was heartlessly absent. As always, the arrival of the coffin was a sombre reminder of why they were there, breaking up conversations as people were greeting each other and chatting desultorily.

The service itself was very meaningful, but mercifully short. Sandra was transfixed not only by the sight of the willow coffin and the knowledge that Lawrence's body was inside, but also by the way Juniper was apprehensively but avidly watching it all, sitting on Gulliver's lap with his arms around her. Petroc was happily cuddling into Bryony and Sandra was simply thankful that he was being quiet.

There was no singing, but two of Lawrence's favourite songs on a CD were played in full, both sung in the clear, ethereal tones of Enya. Three flower sprays placed on top of the coffin looked bright and hopeful on an otherwise bleak and melancholy day, as the curtains closed and the coffin was taken away forever.

Before they knew it, they were once again standing outside in the biting wintry air, while Osborn went around to the groups of people he recognised. Sandra started to worry that such intense cold would be harmful to her mother, but Caroline was still alive when they got back into the cars. As they prepared to drive to Sandra and Osborn's house, she wondered if she was the only one with a mind morbid enough to wonder how many people had ever dropped dead at crematoriums.

After coffee, the time came for their booked lunch at *The Ploughperson*, the pub where Lawrence had enjoyed many a meal and drink with them all.

Sandra found it strange indeed, after they'd arranged themselves around the table, to see there was an empty chair in between her and Osborn. It appeared for all the world, or even the next world, to be an extra place where Lawrence would have sat.

"I heard Osborn asking for seven adults and two children when he rang up to book," she exclaimed with a certain amount of delight. "We worked out together how many places we'd need. How lovely, it's as if he's still here with us!"

"He wouldn't have wanted to miss out," said Gulliver, grinning.

"He would have laughed," said Madeleine, smiling at Henri.

"Why is there an extra chair?" asked Juniper innocently. "Is it for Uncle Lawrence?"

"Yes my darling, in a strange way, I think it is," said Osborn, looking tenderly at his granddaughter. "Now, what would you all like to eat?"

Once they were back at the house again, it seemed easier to relax and sit around in various combinations. As ever, Juniper and Petroc kept different people occupied with playing in various forms, depending on who was available and willing at the time.

"What was it like when you went to view Uncle Lawrence's body?" asked Gulliver, fiddling with a coaster as he and Sandra found themselves sitting beside each other at the table. "I've never seen a dead body."

"It was OK," replied Sandra, wondering whether she should say how she hadn't liked it. "He looked peaceful and it was very important for Dad to see him like that after he'd seen him behind the door."

"It must have been odd knowing how they'd cut him open and all the other things they had to do to him for the post-mortem?" asked Gulliver, turning the coaster around.

"Yes, that was something I found difficult," agreed Sandra, remembering how she'd stayed close to the door when Osborn had gone to stand beside Lawrence's coffin. "I kept telling myself it wasn't Lawrence, it was just his body that he'd left behind. I can remember having to remember that when Grandma wanted us to go and see my dad's body."

"I can't imagine seeing yours or Dad's body when you die," said Gulliver, turning the coaster over and over. "I'm kind of interested in death and what happens, but I don't want to die and death brings it all closer."

"That's either a very simplistic or a profound saying," said Sandra, smiling at her son. "You'll be OK when the time comes, you really will – and do stop playing with that coaster!"

"Are you OK, Mumsie?" asked Madeleine later, as they stood in the kitchen making hot drinks for everyone. "I'm glad you managed to eat some lunch, because I know you weren't feeling very well this morning."

"I wasn't surprised I reacted that way, but I've become so used to it now that I know it usually passes as the day wears on," explained Sandra truthfully. "I'm sure it'll settle down when we can settle down a bit more, but there's still so much to do. Apart from work at the flat, I've been washing all Lawrence's clothes to pass on to charity, because they all smell horribly musty. It feels a bit intrusive with all his more personal things, but then I remember there's nobody else to do it, so I do it gladly for him."

"I wish I could help," said Madeleine, putting a hand on Sandra's back. "Actually, Henri was saying we could help out at the flat tomorrow. He's so practical and into the whole property scene that he'd probably love to help out while we're here."

"I'm sure Dad would be really glad of his help," replied Sandra warmly, as Madeleine took her hand away. "He's been wondering how to deal with Lawrence's store room. Gulliver said they could help out at the flat tomorrow too, although that might be tricky with Juniper and Petroc – and there's no heating."

"I should let them come if they want to," said Madeleine after a moment. "Maybe Bryony could take the children out somewhere for a while. Would Juniper be OK seeing the flat, though? She was asking me earlier about Uncle Lawrence's leg, because Gulliver's tried to explain to her how he died. Apparently, she kept on and on asking him."

"Ah, the DVT blood clots," said Sandra, wondering how Juniper would be processing that information in her exceptionally enquiring mind. "She does seem to talk a lot about how Lawrence died, but she talks about everything a lot! I think it's probably her way of trying to understand it, so hopefully it'll do her good to spend some time with us all at the flat tomorrow. It might normalise it a bit for her – and for us all, really, to be there together."

"I suppose at the end of the day, it's up to Gulliver and Bryony anyway," said Madeleine shrewdly. "Dad seems to be coping quite well today?"

"Yes, I think he's getting strength from the feeling he's doing it for Lawrence," replied Sandra, considering. "He confessed he was feeling angry at Lawrence for dying and leaving him alone to deal with all of this. I told him he's not alone, but I think he means his birth family. I can't believe how Kirsty could be so cold and selfish to her living brother, knowing how he found Lawrence and what a shock it was."

"It sounds as if she's lost her way," said Madeleine astutely, "although I don't think she realises what two good brothers she's lost – and all her own doing, in Dad's case."

"I'd give so much to have a brother right now," said Sandra, sighing deeply. "I still find it really difficult with Grandma sometimes, the way she's totally fixated on me. It feels as if it's all taking energy I haven't got. There have been several times over the last couple of weeks when Dad and I have felt almost completely overwhelmed, although we always somehow manage to get past it. We were both quite tired and depleted before all this started, to be honest, but we're coping somehow – because we have to, really."

"You're both doing marvellously," said Madeleine encouragingly. "Henri and I will help any way we can. I was feeling sad at how small my family is before this happened, when we were sorting out invitations for the wedding, so this has been a bit of a blow."

"Lawrence would have been there for you at your wedding if he could have," said Sandra quietly, putting her arm around Madeleine. "I'm sure he'll be there in spirit."

"I hope so," replied Madeleine, sighing. "I'm glad Grandma's going to be there, anyway. We'd better take these drinks in, they'll go cold."

"Thanks," said Bryony, as Sandra set down her black coffee on a coaster. "We'll buy some sandwiches for lunch tomorrow and I'll take some things for the kids to do at the flat, while Gulliver helps to clear stuff."

"Ah – thank you, that's great," replied Sandra, wondering why she still so immutably disapproved of the word for a baby goat being used for a human child. "There's no heating there, though, so I hope it's not as cold tomorrow as it was at the crematorium today."

"We'll bring warm clothes," replied Bryony, "and the kids don't feel the cold anyway."

"You were wearing a nice warm coat today, Sandra," said Caroline, having overheard Sandra's brief conversation with Bryony. "I haven't seen that one before."

"I've never worn it before," replied Sandra, turning to look at her mother. "Osborn gave it to me for Christmas, but I hadn't taken it out of the wardrobe since."

"Are you going to wear it more often now, then?" asked Caroline, sniffing. "You really should do, you silly thing."

"Hmhh." An indistinct sound escaped Sandra as she attempted to step back from the verbal poke from Caroline. She realised with surprise that she was definitely feeling a bit more of a distance from her mother, which in turn felt a little more peaceful.

"Have you eaten much today, Sandra?" continued Caroline, obviously reluctant to be ignored. "You need to eat." Her voice had changed into a needling tone that Sandra remembered so well from childhood. "Don't forget you need to be strong for Osborn." Sandra smiled inwardly, as she almost heard the words her mother had left unspoken: "And for me."

"I always felt that you got along with Lawrence," said Osborn to Henri, as they sat side by side for a moment on one of the sofas. "I know Lawrence had a few strange opinions, but he always enjoyed a chat about the state of the world."

"Yeh yeh, we 'ad quite a few discussions," replied Henri, bending down to hand a crayon to Juniper. "We got along like a burning 'ouse."

"Why would your house be burning?" asked Juniper sharply, looking up from the page of the colouring book she was fighting over with Petroc.

"It's just a saying about getting along like a house on fire," explained Osborn patiently.

"Why? Why would you want to be like a house on fire?" persisted Juniper, wide-eyed.

"She's got a thing about fire," said Gulliver, as Juniper rose from the floor and went over to her father. "She had a nightmare about fire once – didn't you, Juniper Maple? Do you remember I explained to you how it was just like a made-up picture story in your head and it wasn't real?"

"I had a dream about Uncle Lawrence," said Juniper, now safe on Gulliver's lap. "He was giving me some chocolate and asking me to make sure I gave Petroc some."

"Chocolate?" asked Petroc hopefully.

"I'll give you both some chocolate," said Osborn, smiling and heading towards the kitchen. "If Uncle Lawrence gave you some in a dream, he'd be very happy for me to give you chocolate now."

The following day, they all converged at Lawrence's flat. Sandra couldn't help noticing a palpable strangeness in the atmosphere as people filed in through the narrow doorway, either trying not to look at where Lawrence had fallen, or as in Juniper's case, gazing at it with frightened fascination. It struck Sandra as the elephant in the room, although Juniper quickly addressed the elephant and thereby cleared away the mammoth-type air pressure.

"Did he fall down here?" she asked Osborn directly, pointing at the floor.

"Yes," replied Osborn simply.

"Did you see him?"

"Yes."

"Did Grandma Sandra see him?"

"No."

"Did the policeman see him?"

"Yes."

"Was he a kind policeman?"

"Yes."

"Good. Grandma Sandra said Uncle Lawrence left lots of biscuits?"

"Yes, he left lots of food. We'll have a drink and a biscuit in a little while, but I've got to go and do some clearing up now with the others. Mummy said she's brought some things for you to do with her."

"Can I help you clear up?"

"You can help me do some clearing up if you like," said Sandra, stepping in to help. "Uncle Lawrence had loads of paper and pens, we can sort out some of that."

The morning passed quickly, with Sandra and Madeleine working in the bedroom (after Juniper decided to join Bryony and Petroc for an art and craft session at the table), while Osborn, Gulliver and Henri worked in the store room.

At lunchtime, there was almost a picnic atmosphere as they ate sandwiches and crisps while discussing what to do with Lawrence's impressive model collection and stamp collection. Then there were all the books, vinyl records, postcards, photo albums and so much more...

By mid-afternoon, everyone had gradually succumbed to coldness, tiredness, or both, while it was plain to see that Bryony, Juniper and Petroc had simply had enough.

"Let's call it a day," said Osborn, shutting and locking the store room door. "We'll have to make several trips to the tip, but I feel so much better for you being here. It's been lovely to see everyone and to all be together at an incredibly difficult time. Thank you so much for all your help everybody, it means such a lot."

"That's alright, Grandad Osborn," said Juniper brightly. "You're welcome!"

CHAPTER 7

On the last day of February, Sandra went to her sixth and final counselling session feeling mildly anxious that she would need to explain about Lawrence's sudden death and how it had affected her. She decided to tell Seraphina straight away and to her relief found the words flowing quite easily. When she finished her sad tale, Seraphina regarded her appraisingly.

"I'm so sorry you've had to contend with all you've described," she said sincerely, "but I'm aware of something that feels inherently positive. When you first saw me, you were awash with anxiety. It was seeping out of you all over the place and to me it felt a little difficult to push past all that. Today, though, it's as if you have a much calmer core, even despite recent traumatic events. I'm surprised at how you've weathered it all, I have to be honest. I *shouldn't* be surprised, though, when I think of how you came here determined to help yourself, armed with your carefully written and well-thought-out notes. I hope you don't mind me being forthright, but I think I know you well enough now to feel safe in what I'm saying."

"I feel a bit embarrassed, but I'm glad you're being honest," replied Sandra self-consciously. "I must be honest too and say that it's all been incredibly hard and exhausting. I feel as if I'm in an accelerated learning class this lifetime!"

"You plan other lives?" asked Seraphina, smiling. "Well, you've made valuable headway in this one. Now, you've always been clear in coming to realisations and conclusions about you and your mother after our sessions, so is there any new awareness you could say you've arrived at overall?"

"We-ell, it came to me the other day that I don't actually need Mum for anything, including her love," replied Sandra with a vestige of sorrow.

"You sound a little sad about that?"

"A little – but the wonderful outcome is that it feels like a newly-found freedom," said Sandra, beaming, "and freedom was what I was longing for."

"That's brilliant," said Seraphina, smiling. "I would say, though, that in view of how this course of six sessions was to all intents and purposes interrupted by your brother-in-law's death, I would recommend that you self-refer for another six sessions somewhere along the line. Give it three months at least and then see how you feel."

"OK," replied Sandra, feeling surprised and suddenly a little sad that the current sessions were about to end. "Thank you for being the right person for me."

"I'm happy you feel that way," replied Seraphina, her hazel eyes twinkling. "Don't think you can escape just like that, though, we have the usual questionnaire to complete together. There's another one I must give you to fill out privately later as well, to review your time together with me."

Five minutes later, it was time to go and Sandra stood up a little reluctantly to put on her coat. Seraphina also stood up and looked warmly at Sandra.

"To hug or not to hug?" she asked, inclining her head of dark curly hair.

"To hug!" replied Sandra happily, knowing that counselling had been a success.

As the days progressed, Sandra and Osborn continued to use up a lot of energy at Lawrence's flat, as fewer contents revealed the need for some serious cleaning. As

Sandra spent hours on her knees scrubbing away at filthy skirting boards, or standing on a chair to reach places that hadn't seen a cleaning cloth since Lawrence had moved into the flat many years before, her physical exhaustion seemed to reach new levels.

Osborn was caught up in finding out what to do with the myriad models of tanks and ships that Lawrence had spent so much of his life making, contacting stamp dealers and looking into options for decorating or renovating parts of the flat. In the end, he decided to decorate the bedroom and the main sitting/dining room area, but to leave the bathroom alone for the new owners to sort out.

Madeleine and Henri planned to visit at Easter specifically to help decorate, while Gulliver arrived in early March for a long weekend of clearing shelves, transporting innumerable boxes of items to various destinations (but all involving the flight of steep stairs to the flat's front door) and general help in work of all types.

They all worked for three days solid, walking to a local *Wetherfork's* for lunch each time. Gulliver proved invaluable as the only one with any enthusiasm to push ahead, particularly on the third day, when Sandra and Osborn were beyond tired.

Possibly due to stress and exhaustion, Sandra's troubles in the gut department had flared up on the third day, with the strange result that she sat nursing a rum and Coke with no food in *Wetherfork's*, while Osborn and Gulliver hungrily ate a *Sunday All-Day Munchy Brunch* with occasional sips of real ale.

"Liquid lunch, Mother?" asked Gulliver, as she sat wondering about life, the universe and if a baby goat was called a kid, why was the kid's mother called a nanny?

"The usual trouble," explained Sandra, sipping her liquid lunch. "How's your real ale?"

"I'd say it's authentic," replied Gulliver approvingly. "Yep, I'd genuinely say it's absolutely real ale."

"Would you recognise false ale, though?" asked Osborn dubiously.

"Without doubt I'd flush out the fraudulent," replied Gulliver, sipping the stuff. "Let's not carry on the word games, though, it's doing my head in."

"Lawrence's models are doing my head in," admitted Osborn. "All the made-up ones, the boxes of unmade ones, untouched ones, parts, spare parts, parts of spare parts..."

"I could put them on eBay," suggested Gulliver helpfully. "I've sold a fair bit on eBay lately and bought a few things too."

"Could you? That would be a real help," said Osborn gratefully. "I still feel as if I'm in a nightmare, but there are glimmers of light when people take even a small bit of it from me."

"I'll fill up the car after lunch," replied Gulliver pragmatically. "I'm not sure where I'll put them in the house, but Bryony won't mind. Probably."

"It was good of her to let you come and help," said Sandra, sipping her drink. "I can see what a handful it must be to look after Juniper and Petroc on your own. Just the thought of it wears me out at the moment."

"Tell me about it," replied Gulliver darkly. His hair had become almost black in recent years. "I've enjoyed getting away for three days on my own."

"We can go home after you've packed your car," said Osborn hopefully. "You must be knackered and you've got to drive back tomorrow morning."

"No, I'm fine," replied Gulliver briskly. "We can carry on for an hour or two, we need to stack all that cardboard and paper in the hallway for recycling and you said you wanted me to help you move those two cabinets away from the wall."

"Give me strength," said Osborn, groaning. "No, I really mean it, I wasn't being funny. I wish something or someone would give me strength."

"Strength?" asked Sandra weakly, feeling her legs a little trembly from the morning's exertions on an empty stomach (not to mention gut). "What's strength?"

After Gulliver had returned to Aberpontyfan, Sandra and Osborn slowed down their work at Lawrence's flat, as they realised their own house had become way too messy for their liking. As March progressed, Sandra panicked when she realised Madeleine's wedding was a matter of weeks away and so she girded her mother-of-the-bride loins and

managed to sort herself out after two trips into Plymouth. Osborn's outfit was more straightforward to accomplish, with a new suit from *Marks and Spender*, plus a new shirt, new tie and new cufflinks.

Caroline was another question, although with more incoming tasks for Sandra and Osborn to achieve before Easter, the answer was to put her on hold for a while. The temporary fix to Lawrence's door and its surround needed to be fixed properly, the remaining furniture needed to be disposed of, the bedroom wallpaper needed removing and the kitchen needed a deep clean. As probate took its necessary course, Sandra and Osborn had to swear an oath in a solicitor's presence.

"I'll have to leave a bit early today, because Osborn and I have an appointment with a solicitor, to swear an oath for probate," explained Sandra to Caroline, as she took off her coat. "Gosh, it's a bit cold out there today."

"Oh well, you don't have to go out and do any gardening," replied Caroline, sniffing. "That means we've got time for a game of *Scribble* instead. I've been missing my games since you've been so busy."

"I'd rather not have had to see to all the things we've had to see to!" replied Sandra, irately and ungrammatically, knowing immediately that her mother was in a provocative mood.

Later, as the inevitable game progressed, Sandra tried very hard not to react to Caroline's sighing, expostulating and whining, but it was the latter that drove her to react.

"I was going to go there, you little devil," whined Caroline, as Sandra put down her tiles in the first place that presented itself to her. She ignored her mother's comment.

"Nineteen," she said neutrally, writing down her score.

"You little devil," repeated Caroline clearly, as if to make sure that Sandra had heard. "I was going to go there."

"I'm not a little devil," replied Sandra evenly and resolutely. She managed to maintain a calm exterior, although her interior was experiencing a far different story. 'She just will not *let me be*,' she raged to herself. 'It's like Chinese torture – drip, drip, drip – or poke, poke, poke, more like. She *knows* what Osborn and I have been through lately and *still* she treats me like something to vent her frustration, anger and whatever on. Talk about swearing an oath later on, I could swear for sodding, bloody, fucking Britain!'

Sandra managed to contain herself for the rest of the *Scribble* game and swore appropriately in front of the solicitor. It was only when she was driving home with Osborn that she realised she was still letting her mother's words touch her in the place where they had historically (and sometimes hysterically) wreaked such havoc – but only as if by habit. Knowing the psychic umbilical cord was no longer attached, it was time to remember how that place was now healed and that her mother's words were simply her mother's words.

As March progressed, Osborn's stress levels seemed to be rising unhealthily, while Sandra felt she was running just to survive. They both tried to unwind by a local walk or two and several coffee outings, but it seemed impossible to relax to any beneficial degree. There was simply too much to do, especially as the Easter weekend was approaching and the flat needed to be ready for Madeleine and Henri to work their decorating magic.

For three days solid, Osborn fixed and cleaned around the flat, while Sandra scraped away what seemed to be decades of smelly, mouldy wallpaper in the bedroom. She spent hours balancing precariously up a rickety steel stepladder with bowls of unsavoury water and grimily glutinous rags, developing repetitive wallpaper-scraping injury, while filling up countless black bags with stiff, sticky, ripped-off wallpaper.

It wasn't a job she enjoyed in the slightest, but it was a job that needed doing. Fortunately, she managed to finish it in time to have a day off from being at the flat – a day off in which she and Osborn bought food and cleaned their own house, before the arrival of Madeleine and Henri on the evening of Maundy Thursday.

On Good Friday morning, Madeleine and Henri left the house at 08:30 and spent the next nine hours at the flat. Sandra and Osborn first of all bought sandwiches from *Waitpoppy* and then joined them for most of the day, although they left in a state of near exhaustion two hours before Madeleine and Henri. Henri had closeted himself in the bedroom to skim the walls, while Sandra, Osborn and Madeleine stationed themselves in the main sitting/dining room with various painting paraphernalia. It was a perfect time for some catching up.

"I miss Uncle," said Madeleine suddenly. "Sometimes I still can't believe it, I expect him to show up with his dodgy haircuts, his loud voice and his bad taste jokes."

"I miss Monday lunchtimes with him, his moaning about the weather and his wild eyebrows," said Osborn, sighing deeply.

"I miss his sense of humour," said Sandra, wiping a spot of paint from her nose and remembering their mutual flights of madness. "I still think he's going to ring the doorbell and come in complaining about the buses and I'll go and make him coffee and he'll say I know the way to a man's heart."

"Oh Lawrence," sighed Osborn. "It shouldn't have happened that way."

"How are you, Varti?" asked Madeleine, finding a rag to clean away some paint. "How are you really?"

"I have my moments," confessed Osborn, taking the paintbrush away from the wall for a while to consider. "When there's so much to be done, I can distract myself, but I've noticed that when I relax only a little bit, it can overwhelm me in a second."

"It's early days," replied Madeleine, scrunching up the rag. "You've been under so much stress that it's bound to feel overwhelming still."

"I knew it was becoming a real problem when I woke up with chest pains," admitted Osborn, painting again. "It was just muscular, but it wasn't pleasant."

"Chest pains can be a definite anxiety symptom," said Sandra, dripping paint on her shoe and deciding not to say how Osborn had been so stressed recently that it had been painful. "I think Dad will feel a whole lot better when the flat's sold."

"I hope you'll feel OK for the wedding," said Madeleine with concern. "I hope you'll enjoy it, even though Lawrence won't be there." Her voice broke a little. "Our family is so small now and I can't seem to add to it myself. I love Henri, but I get swamped by the Frenchness sometimes. Uncle Lawrence was so English!"

"I'm glad he went to Bermuda when he did, to connect with where he was born," said Osborn, smiling wistfully. "I think I'd like to go to Bermuda before I die. I was the only one in my family who never went and I'd feel I was honouring Lawrence, because he loved it there."

"You should go," said Madeleine encouragingly. "I hope I can get there one day. I always remember Grandma Dullkettle talking about the places and the flowers and the shop where her mother worked..."

"What if we all go together?" suggested Osborn excitedly. "In a few years' time we'll be better off and I can pay for you. I'd love for us all to go together."

"Me too," replied Madeleine happily. "I'll work on Henri. Where's my rag? I've lost my rag."

"Not you as well, Mad," said Sandra, grinning. "You should have heard me in Grandma's garage the other day!"

The next morning, after Madeleine and Henri had left to put in a full day's work at the flat, Sandra and Osborn went into Plymouth with Gulliver. He had arrived for Easter the previous day with Bryony, Juniper and Petroc, staying at Anne and Stan's house. Their objective was to buy Gulliver a suit for Madeleine's wedding.

"I suppose it's better than a birthday suit," said Gulliver doubtfully, as they walked into *Marks and Spender*. "I really don't like shopping, I'm not looking forward to this at all."

"We thought you wouldn't want to spend money on a new suit," explained Sandra patiently. "Madeleine hasn't said anything, but I know she'd love to see you all spruced up for her special day. Anyway, we bought her outfit for your wedding, because she was still a student, so we're just treating you equally."

"At least you're not buying me a dress, I suppose," said Gulliver grudgingly. "I do appreciate it really. Oh bollocks, they're not going to measure my inside leg, are they?"

The following day was Easter Sunday, when a family gathering took place involving coffee and a pasty lunch, before Madeleine and Henri were due to leave around mid-afternoon. Gulliver had been pleasantly surprised at how easy it had been to buy a suit, but had refused the offer of a new tie. Petroc had a cold and was sniffing as only a young boy can sniff, but otherwise the time together was peaceful enough.

"Next time I see you all, it'll be for the wedding," said Madeleine wonderingly, as they all gathered in the porch to say au revoir. "That's a peculiar thought."

"I can't *wait* for the wedding!" said Juniper excitedly, jumping up and down. "I've got pink sparkly shoes!"

"You're going to look lovely," said Madeleine, as Juniper almost jumped into her arms for a hug. "So is Petroc, he looks really cute in that little suit we bought him."

"I don't suppose 'e wants to look cute," said Henri, bending down to hug Petroc, "but 'e won't mind looking 'andsome."

"He'll look like your little man," said Caroline to Gulliver, "just the image of you. Oh dear, have you got a cough? I hope you're not getting Petroc's cold."

"See you in five weeks," called out Madeleine, as she stepped through the front door. "In France!"

"In the Motherland," said Henri, grinning. "Au revoir!"

At the beginning of April, Sandra and Osborn felt strong enough to take Caroline into Plymouth to shop for her wedding outfit. In the event, it could hardly have been easier, as they walked to the *Classic Oldies* section in *Marks and Spender* and showed Caroline what was more or less the only viable option. She said yes – they found her size – they paid – they left.

"I just need shoes now," she said to Sandra, as they arrived back at her house. "Are you coming in? I'll make some tea."

"We could have looked at shoes in *Marks and Spender*," said Osborn, raising his eyebrows at Sandra.

"Oh no, Sandra can order me some from that *Hottest* place on the internet," said Caroline. "She's had lots of nice shoes and sandals herself from there."

"I showed you the catalogue a while ago and you said they were too expensive," said Sandra, raising her eyebrows at Osborn.

"Oh well, that was a while ago, you were too busy with Lawrence dying," said Caroline, wandering into the kitchen to boil some water in the kettle. "Still, you've finished now that Madeleine and Henri helped you at Easter, haven't you?"

"Gulliver helped with a load of clearing when he came for that weekend too," replied Osborn fairly. "We're nearly there, but we've got a final bit of clearing up to do and then it'll have to go on the market, with all *that* entails."

"I hope it doesn't take as long to sell as your parents' house," remarked Sandra to Osborn, remembering the long, worrying year before it had been off their hands.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," said Caroline dismissively. "You've done it before, so you know what to do this time. It was good to see everyone at Easter, that must have cheered you up."

"Mmm," responded Sandra, wondering if her mother was either minimising their troubles or trying to be positive.

"I wish we'd been able to enjoy seeing them properly," said Osborn wistfully, "without all that was going on. Still, at least we can look forward to the wedding."

By mid-April, the flat was finally on the market and probate had come through without any problems. Sandra had successfully ordered her mother's wedding shoes and managed catch-up visits with both Alison (who was excited about going to the wedding) and Gina (who was upset that she wasn't able to go to the wedding). As another week began, however, Sandra felt extremely weary and postponed a further visit with both Alison and Gina. As it happened, it was just as well.

A little before midday, Osborn answered the phone to Caroline, who asked if someone could take her some plasters because she'd cut herself and couldn't stop the bleeding. Sandra's heart quailed at the news, but Osborn had been trained in first aid and went to her house straight away. He returned five minutes later to collect the car, to take her to St Benedict, the local cottage hospital with a minor injuries unit.

After an hour or so, after Sandra had tried to force down a sandwich for lunch while trembling inside and pacing around the house rather a lot, Osborn sent a text to say that he was taking Caroline to Derrickford Hospital, the main hospital in Plymouth. The staff at St Benedict had been unable to treat the wound because it was more than two hours old and had referred her to A & E, where they were qualified to treat wounds at risk of infection.

For the next four hours and more, Sandra received intermittent texts from Osborn mentioning stitches, wounds and injuries, but she had entered a state of near-detachment in order to cope and failed to ask him to elucidate. She sat at the computer and involved a safe part of her brain in some ancestry detective work, to stop another part of her brain from sending her straight into panic.

At last Sandra heard Osborn's car returning and backing down the drive into the garage. She switched off the computer and prepared to hear the news from Osborn, but as she opened the front door, she was shocked semi-rigidly to see her mother standing there. Her face was bruised and swollen, with a line of stitches stretching across her forehead to above her eye. In fact, Caroline looked all of her 87 years and more. Sandra managed not to yelp in distress and guided her mother in over the doorstep.

"I'm a bit of a sight," said Caroline dully. "I'm sorry to shock you."

"It's OK," replied Sandra, lying. "Come in and sit down. Would you like a cup of tea?" A detached part of Sandra was noticing with amusement how she had reacted once again with the conventional British tea-making response.

"Yes please," replied Caroline, allowing Sandra to help her off with her coat and then shepherdess her into the sitting room. Sandra next went into the kitchen and tried her very hardest not to fall apart while making her mother some tea.

"What happened?" she asked Osborn quietly, as he came in from putting the car in the garage.

"She fell over and hit her head on the handle of her front door at around 08:00 this morning," replied Osborn grimly. "Why she left it so long to ring us, I'll never know. St Benedict wanted her to go to Derrickford Hospital in an ambulance, but I said I'd take responsibility and drive her myself."

"You took a risk, then?"

"I knew we'd get there more quickly. When she was finally seen, she had loads of tests, but they were all OK – except her blood pressure. It was so high, the nurse couldn't get a reading for ages and then they were really concerned. They didn't follow it up purely because she told them she had a check-up appointment about her BP tomorrow."

"It's only a six-monthly blood test, as far as I know, but I suppose it's something and they can check her BP," said Sandra doubtfully.

"Anyway, we had to wait ages for someone to stitch her up, because they had to call in a specialist. He was a Royal Navy commander surgeon and he told the junior doctor that they saw injuries like hers in the field. She ended up with seven stitches in her forehead and two above her right eye, where it was deepest. I don't want to frighten you, but when I looked at it first of all, I could see her skull."

"Oh! Sodding hell, Osborn! She's lucky she didn't lose her eye." Sandra felt nauseous.

"Exactly. The doctor wanted to keep her in overnight for observation, but I said I'd stay with her tonight to make sure she's OK. I want to make sure she takes the antibiotics she's been prescribed too, because she seemed rather vague about them."

"You said you'd stay with her? Why?" Sandra was astounded, then racked with guilt. "It should be me, not you, I'm her daughter..."

"It's OK, I know how you feel and it's my choice." Osborn rubbed his hand over his head. "Are you making tea? They brought Mum a drink, but I haven't had anything."

"What? You haven't had anything to drink since coffee this morning? Or anything to eat?" Sandra was truly aghast.

"No. There wasn't a chair in the cubicle either, I had to sit on the floor."

"God, that's truly terrible, I feel so sorry for you."

"Just pour me some tea and cook us some food and then I'll have to take her home."

"OK. God, what a nightmare. How on the blessed planet Earth are we supposed to recover and be all right when things like this happen? Oh no!"

"What?"

"The wedding's in two and a half weeks! Is she going to make it? Maddy will be devastated if she doesn't."

"Well if she does, she'll have an interesting scar."

CHAPTER 8

It remained touch and go whether Caroline was going to the wedding. Although the bruising and swelling on her face and the wound itself were taking the expected amount of time to heal, Caroline had lost confidence. For ten days she stayed in her house without even venturing to the garage and then she went out only because Osborn drove her to the surgery to have her stitches removed. After that, she had an appointment with her doctor.

Osborn had taken it upon himself to go in with her to see the doctor, with Caroline's consent. This was mainly because Sandra was quietly fumbling her way through one of her worst nightmares, which was her mother being ill and dependent. Osborn later reported to Sandra that despite Caroline telling her doctor she wasn't old, her doctor had gently but firmly refuted that and explained about muscle weakness and wobbliness due to ageing. He had told her there was no reason why she couldn't go to the wedding, but Caroline refused to commit.

It was clear from telephone conversations with Madeleine exactly how much she wanted her grandmother to be at the wedding. Sandra found herself torn apart between two sets of completely opposing feelings. She could hardly bear the thought of her mother going to the wedding while needing to be looked after and essentially spoiling Sandra's experience of her own daughter's wedding.

However, Sandra was well aware how much Madeleine desperately wanted her grandmother to be there and Sandra equally desperately wanted Madeleine to have what she wanted. It seemed impossible. Sandra became so exhausted that she felt ill.

She sometimes woke early in the morning feeling anxious and sick, but was determined to face everything as it presented itself. On the downside, a shocker of an electricity bill caused a surge of worry for them both, but on the upside they received a reasonable offer for Lawrence's flat. However, as the final week before the wedding arrived, Sandra knew that Madeleine's wedding in France was currently massively outside her comfort zone.

The emotional pull between herself, her mother and her daughter was uppermost in her psyche, as Caroline prevaricated about her decision whether to attend the wedding or not. Five days before the wedding, Sandra was still trying to tell herself that it wasn't her fault Madeleine had chosen to get married in France and it wasn't her fault that her mother had fallen and cut open her forehead. The situation was nobody's fault, but the fact remained that Sandra and Osborn were caught in the middle of a family drama yet again.

Four days before the wedding, Caroline still hadn't been outside on her own, but started to talk as if she *would* be going to the wedding. She also talked about having a hair appointment the next day, but failed to ask for a lift.

At that point, Sandra felt herself caught yet again in a recurring moral dilemma between her mother and Osborn, due to an ongoing impasse between them both. Caroline had such a strong aversion to asking for help outright, particularly from Osborn – a fact that irritated Osborn immensely, as his father had used the same hinting techniques to manoeuvre Osborn into offering help.

Osborn had explained this to Caroline several times and had told her many times that all she had to do was ask him for a lift and he would always help if at all possible. He had even elicited a promise from her that she would simply ask him outright – but it never came to any fruition.

After tussling with her own conscience and the situation as it stood, Sandra felt too tired to become involved and left it to Caroline to ask Osborn for a lift if she needed one. That evening, though, she felt her sanity slipping away, as the responsibility of always having to think of another person's life, as well as not being drawn into the game-playing, took its toll. To top it all, Gulliver seemed to be somewhat fretful and anxious about the wedding, but Sandra knew she was already on overload to be able to help him at all.

Three days before the wedding, the shoes that Sandra had been unable to order online for herself from *Hottest* because they were out of stock, were suddenly in stock again now it was too late. She had been able to order shoes for Caroline with ease – although Caroline had insisted on shoes with a heel, which Sandra thought was inadvisable considering her mother's bunion situation. It all felt too much and Sandra felt herself at the edge of a cliff on and off throughout the day. She kept telling herself she was holding on for Madeleine.

Two days before the wedding, Sandra woke feeling panicky and sick, as well as utterly tired of herself. Somehow, she managed to calm down as the day progressed and prepared for the arrival of Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc. They were due to arrive in the early evening for an overnight stay, before catching the ferry to France the following morning. A phone call from Gulliver in the late afternoon to say his car brakes had failed on the way to their house did nothing to help matters, but thanks to the RAC, a further crisis was averted and they arrived a mere two hours later than expected.

The day before the wedding, the alarm went off at 05:00 on a clear morning and by the time they called for Caroline at 06:30, it had become a lovely, sunny day. Despite the sheer angst of the previous weeks, Sandra found that once the day to travel had arrived, she was able to throw herself into the magic of the experience as a whole. She also thanked Thor-gut, the thunder-god of bowels, for a peaceful morning.

Boarding the *Armorique* was straightforward and Sandra's spirits were cautiously high as she stood with the others and watched Plymouth's historic shoreline recede. Osborn had parked Caroline safely on a nearby seat, but once past the Breakwater, it seemed a good idea to buy breakfast, or *petit déjeuner*. The ferry wasn't at all crowded and they occupied some comfortable seats by the window, where it was such a fine, calm day that the horizon was staying remarkably level.

During the following five hours or so, Sandra and Gulliver helped Osborn to prepare his wedding speech, as the preceding days hadn't been at all conducive to this. Caroline was fully engaged for ages with Juniper's colouring book (sometimes with Juniper too) and Bryony went to the play area (with Juniper and Petroc for company).

Osborn had booked a cabin on embarkation and so at lunchtime they were able to eat tuna rolls and crisps in private, while availing themselves of the small kettle and drink sachets provided, as well as the small but perfectly formed toilet, sink and shower cubicle. Half an hour before arrival at Roscoff, they had to vacate the cabin, so went outside to watch the ferry arriving under a still mostly blue sky.

Before they knew it, they were on real French soil and Sandra had to speak her first real French words to a real French person – but they were only "*Bonjour*" and "*Merci*" at the passport control booth, through the car window. Small steps! The drive to Angers in the Loire region of France then began, while Osborn and Gulliver became accustomed to driving on the right and they all became accustomed to the road signs.

The French roads were good and the speed limits reasonable, so apart from one comfort stop and a longer stop in the early evening to eat cheese sandwiches and cake bars, they enjoyed a smooth journey of about four and a half hours to the *Hotel du Cavier* in Avrillé near Angers, where Madeleine and Henri met them.

It was hello and goodbye, as an evening meal had been arranged for Madeleine by her friends who'd arrived for the wedding. However, there was plenty to sort out at the hotel and they arranged to meet at Henri's parents' house the next morning.

After they'd settled in their rooms, Sandra and Osborn decided to locate the hotel bar, but Caroline was *très fatiguée* and decided to stay in her room. Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc joined them at the bar, where they sat outside on a fine evening, sipping some rather pleasant beer called *Affligem*, while Juniper and Petroc played on a climbing frame. Finally though, they headed to their rooms and the oblivion of sleep.

Sleep was a little unsettled as such, but it was Wedding Day and the sunshine was still with them. After a pleasant *petit déjeuner* of freshly squeezed orange juice, a bowl of fruit, a croissant and some tea, they whiled away the morning in the hotel until it was time to drive to Henri's parents' house for a pre-wedding lunch – and to meet Henri's family for the first time.

Although this was an anxiety-provoking situation for an out-and-out introvert like Sandra, she felt comforted to be met with the utmost friendliness in a lovely house with a beautiful garden. Henri's father Jacques spoke really good English and his mother Françoise was endearing because she was clearly both excited and a little nervous at meeting them. It seemed she was on a par with Sandra and Gulliver for understanding the foreign language, but not having enough confidence to speak it.

As they were ushered through the house and into the garden where the lunch table was laid, they walked past a somewhat lonely Madeleine, who was sitting in a room having her make-up and hair done. Everything in Sandra wanted to rush into the room and ask Madeleine how she was, but she was afraid of doing the wrong thing and contented herself with smiling and giving Madeleine a small wave. She felt slightly bereft that Madeleine was unable to join them for lunch and scary conversation with strange French people, but knew it had to be so.

They also met Henri's brother Jules, his wife Tara and their baby son Jérard, plus a few other family members. Sandra had the feeling she was in an alternative reality as they all sat at two long tables on the patio under a sun shade amid plates of food, bottles of water and bottles of wine, while the Anglo-French conversation flowed – albeit a little falteringly at times. She even managed to volunteer three French words ("*un petit jardin*") when Osborn was talking to Henri's parents about their small garden. It felt like a mini-triumph, considering the state she'd been in only two days previously.

The weather was perfect and despite the forthcoming nuptials, the atmosphere was very conducive to relaxation. Henri seemed exceptionally laid-back for a bridegroom only a few hours before his wedding and after they'd finished their lunch, Juniper and Petroc played happily on the lawn in the tranquil garden.

Eventually, it was time to leave and this time Madeleine joined them as they returned to the hotel for her to change into her wedding dress in Sandra and Osborn's room. There was an interesting incident on the way when Osborn obeyed the Sat Nav's desire to head towards Le Mans and Paris, but it only took about ten minutes of non-stop panic before Osborn was able to turn the car around and head back to the hotel.

They'd unfortunately lost a little time and after depositing Caroline in her bedroom next to theirs, the three of them burst into the not exactly large hotel room and set about preparing for one of the biggest occasions of their lives. There was the usual hectic losing of small items, sudden doubt about clothing and helping each other out with decisions such as whether to wear a petticoat (Madeleine, not Osborn) and whether to try to do anything about a strand of Madeleine's hair that had decided to uncurl itself. It didn't matter – Madeleine looked so lovely that Sandra almost had a maternal moment, right there in the hotel room.

There was no time for that, though, as they left the room, called for Caroline and walked down the stairs and along the corridor in their wedding finery. Caroline was a little tottery on her heeled shoes, but Madeleine rescued her with a helping arm.

When they arrived at the foyer, Sandra noticed some of the staff looking at Madeleine and smiling. Madeleine herself was smiling, Osborn was smiling, Sandra was smiling – lots of people were smiling on a hopelessly smiley occasion. However, it was time to stop smiling and drive to the *Hôtel de Ville*. As the bride's father, Osborn rode with Madeleine in Jules' car, while Gulliver drove Sandra and Caroline in Osborn's car and Bryony drove Juniper and Petroc in Gulliver's car.

On arrival, there was uncertainty where to park, but Gulliver successfully found a nearby place. There was also uncertainty why there was a crowd of people wearing black and all gazing in the same direction, as if waiting for something. For a moment Sandra wondered if it might be traditional to wear black for French weddings, but it turned out to be a funeral at the church opposite. They then thankfully spotted some of their UK compatriots and joined them outside the actual *Hôtel de Ville*.

Sandra felt inordinately pleased to see Alison and Dirk, as well as Anne and Stan Stanpool with their son Irwin. It was clear the French guests greatly outnumbered the UK guests, but everyone was so happy and friendly that nothing seemed to matter, except smiling. The smiling was definitely in full swing again.

However, it was soon superseded by more uncertainty about why everyone was still milling around outside the *Hôtel de Ville* when the bride must soon be due to arrive. The uncertainty continued when Jules' white car drew up and Osborn got out to open Madeleine's door, but then got back in the car. It turned out that Henri's friend had realised the guests should all have been inside waiting for the bride.

The car doors therefore remained firmly shut, while there was a refined rush into the *Hôtel de Ville*, up the stairs to the *Salle des Mariages* and finally to the comfortable seats that awaited them. Already seated in front of the large official table were Henri with his two witnesses (brother and friend) and next to the place where Madeleine would soon be sitting, her two witnesses (brother and friend).

The English-speaking people were given a translated copy of the proceedings, which was a thoughtful touch. It was also sensible, as otherwise they wouldn't have understood much of either the legal content of the marriage or the *History of Madeleine and Henri*, comprising a short account of Madeleine and Henri and their forebears. Sandra was perusing the history when there was an expectant hush and she saw Osborn leading their beautiful daughter into the room where she would be married. It was a heart-moving moment.

The ceremony commenced and although the key players were sitting with their backs to the guests, the atmosphere throughout was light, friendly and relaxed. There were three main speakers, the leading one being the Deputy Mayor, who had taught Henri at school. There was another lady who read out some of the legal-sounding material and then another lady from among the 'congregation' who came forward and read out the family histories. They were all lovely people, with the ladies endearingly uncertain about reading out the English names. There was yet more smiling in the *Salle des Mariages*.

Unlike English wedding ceremonies, Madeleine only had to say one word in response to the question: "Madeleine Annabelle Dullkettle, do you consent to take Henri Bernard Guillaume Dior present here for your husband?" The answer was "*Oui*." Sandra clearly heard Madeleine say "*Oui*" but whether for humorous effect or not, the Deputy Mayor asked her to repeat it a bit louder (more smiling). Next, Henri answered his corresponding question with a firm "*Oui!*" The Deputy Mayor then announced: "In the name of the law I declare Henri Bernard Guillaume Dior and Madeleine Anabelle Dullkettle to be united in marriage." The deed was done!

Sandra found herself smiling not only because she was happy for Madeleine and Henri, but also because Madeleine had given her bouquet to Gulliver in order to have her hands free. Sandra had enjoyed a good view of him throughout the ceremony, looking very fetching as he nonchalantly sat there, dutifully holding his sister's bouquet.

She also smiled when it was time for Juniper and Petroc to walk up to the table with a small posy of flowers that contained the wedding rings. Juniper led the way clutching the posy in one hand, while Petroc held firmly and resolutely onto Juniper's other hand. They both stood there very patiently while Madeleine untied the rings from the posy.

The smiling continued when part of Sandra's family history was read out: "It is also of note that the maternal great-grandfather of Madeleine, William Frederick Dent, served in the army during the First World War and was wounded in France." At that point, the Deputy Mayor stood to one side and indicated (smiling) that behind him was a memorial plaque to the fallen.

Sandra also smiled when after the ceremony, the Deputy Mayor came forward to shake Osborn's hand and then Sandra's, but when he came to Caroline, he asked if she was Madeleine's grandmother. Sandra understood and said "Oui", whereupon (probably to Caroline's secret delight), he kissed her soundly on both cheeks. Sandra had been prepared for the cheek kissing in France, but was unsure as to the protocol of who should kiss who, who should initiate and whether it should be just two alternate cheeks, an extra third kiss, or even an overkill fourth. She remained unsure.

However, it was time to leave the *Salle des Mariages* and congregate outside the *Hôtel de Ville*. In due course, a lady in a pink trouser suit and the lady who'd read out some of the legal words in the ceremony appeared, each carrying a basket containing rose petals. They walked around the gathered guests, politely asking people to take some of the petals. Sandra was interested to see how the UK people were very conservative in the few petals they took, while the French people delved a hand into the basket and took a fistful.

The smiling took off in full flood again when Petroc became fascinated with the glass doors of the *Hôtel de Ville* and looked really quite adorable in his grown-up suit, tie and buttonhole flower, while behaving exactly like the small boy he was. Sandra was fishing out her camera from her bag to take his photo, when Madeleine and Henri appeared and the rose petals flew around like confetti. The smiling stepped up a notch.

There was more post-marital milling around until the Deputy Mayor shut the glass doors (fortunately not with Petroc still attached) as if to drop a gentle hint. It worked and the crowd melted away to drive to the reception at the evocatively named *Château de la Perrière*. It may have been evocatively named, but there was a bit of bother getting there.

Osborn had asked Gulliver to drive his car and they set off following Jules' car, which seemed a safe bet. However, there was confusion about which lane to take at a junction. It happened to be the same junction that had caused Osborn earlier to drive towards Le Mans and Paris. Gulliver was in the right lane but Jules took the other lane, whereupon (to put it kindly), Osborn became highly agitated and Gulliver obeyed his father's agitation.

At this juncture, or junction as it happened, Jules must have realised his mistake and changed lanes, but it was too late for Gulliver and they were heading once again towards Le Mans and Paris. The only consolation was that they now knew they could turn around fairly soon to head in the right direction. After that, it was a smooth ride to the *château*, where they joined the merry throng to wander around the grounds until it was time for photos.

As Sandra stood there, gratuitously smiling with the immediate members of both families while the official photographer clicked away, she succumbed to a moment or two of unease about the dress she'd chosen to wear. It was an upbeat little number with a background of pale jade, sporting a pattern of many large butterflies in various sizes and colours. She seriously wondered if she should have opted for the more traditional mother-of-bride look, rather than run the risk of appearing to be a closet lepidopterist. However, it really was a bit too late for such qualms.

She noted with some comfort that the *château* seemed to lend itself to the somewhat unusual anyway, dating from the 17th century and built on the original site of a 13th century edifice. It was certainly in a beautiful setting and the early evening weather remained warm and serene as they were shown into the courtyard and plied with champagne and canapés.

Henri's father continued to be as friendly as he'd been at lunchtime, with the halting but excellent Franco-English on his part, the clearly enunciated English on Osborn's part and the nodding and smiling on both parts.

Sandra was normally no fan of champagne, but it was perfect for such an uplifting occasion in such a lovely place. Besides, they were in champagne country. She even lived dangerously for a few seconds and accepted a canapé of unknown ingredients. However, as she took one infinitesimal nibble before secretly abandoning it on a secluded place on the unattended table, she realised she was probably still one of the most cowardly food consumers in the entire Western Hemisphere.

She knew there would be several courses when the food consumption began in earnest – or inside the actual *château*, to be precise. It seemed quite a long time before they were ushered inside and up the stairs into the *Orangerie* with its atmospheric but cosy wooden vaulted ceiling, but the evening was still young. By the door, Madeleine and Henri had gathered some old family photos of them both in a heart-shaped frame, which lent a familiar touch to a day that had otherwise been full of the unfamiliar.

There were several round tables with predestined place settings and Sandra was unashamedly relieved to be among familiar people – Osborn, Gulliver, Bryony, Caroline, Alison and Dirk. Juniper and Petroc had been assigned a nearby small table to themselves, while Madeleine and Henri were at a table with friends. On the tables were glasses, bottles of water and tempting bread rolls, as well as named wedding favours – a strange new custom to the ancient uninformed of Sandra and Osborn's generation, imported like so many other strange customs from the USA.

Juniper and Petroc were happy to discover that their favours consisted of sweets and bubbles, while the adults' intriguing little box of delights contained sugared almonds and some other sweet local delicacy. Sandra knew that Henri had fashioned the table number holders with his own bare hands and that they had afterwards been painted to within an inch of their lives by Madeleine. It all somehow helped to make it an exceptionally special day.

Around the table, they amused themselves with witty conversation and water until the culinary experience began, the wine flowed and the first course was served. The waiter came along to enquire who were the two vegetarians at their table – namely, Sandra and Osborn. He then placed before them a large langoustine complete with all body parts, including eyes, reclining on a bed of curried semolina cooked in coconut milk. To Sandra, it could have been reclining on a designer bed with a memory-foam mattress for all she could eat the poor creature that for its sins had apparently been poached in vanilla.

The next course was poached bass with champagne sauce, accompanied by fondue of fennel, salicornia and fried leek. Sandra was dubious about the salicornia, but ate the bass. She found herself toying like the culinary philistine she knew herself to be with the fondue of fennel and fried leek. She also wasn't sure about the champagne sauce...

However, the wine was very good, both the *Anjou blanc* and the *Bordeaux rouge*. Osborn was certainly enjoying the wine, presumably because of his forthcoming fatherly speech. Sadly, it never happened, as Madeleine came to tell them how Jules had been feeling unwell all day and had decided he wasn't up to making his brotherly speech.

In order not to cause awkwardness for Jules, Osborn backed out of making public the masterpiece he'd concocted on the ferry, aided and abetted by Sandra and Gulliver. While it may not actually have been a masterpiece, it had been short, sincere and hopefully humorous.

The carnivore course was next, consisting of tournedos of beef and potato fondant with *périgueux* sauce. Sandra and Osborn wondered with anticipation what the French cuisine would conjure up for the two tricky vegetarians. The answer was vegetables! Sandra knew the French appeared to have a little trouble understanding that some people weren't happy eating meat, but somehow, she hadn't been expecting merely a plate of various fried vegetables.

It didn't matter, as the whole atmosphere was so relaxed and happy that the smiling had never really stopped – except when eating, of course. It was true that Sandra may have looked over a little enviously for a second or two at firstly the melon balls and secondly the *pommes frites* with which Juniper and Petroc were served, but it passed. Besides, the tabletop party poppers were being popped, the wine was still being poured and the bubbles were being blown. Bryony's brother Irwin in particular seemed to enjoy bubble blowing, as did Dirk at their table.

In fact, both Irwin and Dirk did an admirable job at entertaining the children, but in their turn, Juniper and Petroc did an admirable job of entertaining themselves. Sandra couldn't help thinking that Gulliver and Bryony must have been both massively relieved and secretly proud of their often quite rumbustious offspring.

As the evening progressed, Juniper spent quite a while at Madeleine and Henri's table, chatting away to various people as if at least twice her age. Petroc, on the other hand, seemed fascinated by the structural wooden posts of the room amongst other things and although he must have been rather warm, steadfastly refused to remove either his jacket or tie.

The next course was a plate each of various French cheeses that Gulliver, who was a bit of a *fromage* freak, fell upon with the gusto that the cheeses themselves fully deserved. For Sandra, however, the hour was a bit too late and she was afraid to risk it. She was also holding out for the *pièce de résistance*, in the form of the long-awaited *profiterole* tower. She was a little sad that Madeleine hadn't ended up with the *macaron* tower she'd originally desired, but a tower was a tower and to Sandra's mind it was far preferable and much more palatable than the traditional English fruit wedding cake.

The lights dimmed and a sense of anticipation descended – and suddenly there was the profiterole tower, resplendent amid some fireworks that literally sent sparks and also a frisson of excitement into the darkened room.

Sandra became a little unclear about the sequence of events around then, which was absolutely nothing to do with the wine. Absolutely nothing. *Mais non*. She recalled there was champagne and she recalled Henri taking hold of a microphone and saying French words that sounded really great, if not impossible for her addled English brain to understand. At various times during the evening, Madeleine and Henri had been doing the customary social round of visiting tables. They also spoke to the people sitting at the tables, which was friendly.

Soon there was an announcement in English that coffee would be served upstairs, which caused puzzled glances at the vaulted ceiling. Since the previous announcement in French had been that coffee would be served downstairs, there was obviously no cause for alarm or unadvisable athletics. Sandra didn't fancy coffee so close before midnight, so took some refreshing water instead.

In view of the time and the fact that Juniper and Petroc were incredibly still on their feet, it was decided to take them back to the hotel before they keeled over like zombies. They had been absolutely brilliant and must have been exhausted. Sandra knew that her mother was also exhausted, but Caroline womanfully stayed with them when Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper, Petroc, Anne, Stan, Irwin, Alison and Dirk returned to the hotel where they were all staying.

Sandra missed them. The English presence had suddenly been reduced by over 50% and she'd secretly wanted to see if Gulliver would actually dance.

She totally understood, however, and was simply happy to be there as the disco lights began to do their discoey thing, Madeleine and Henri moved to the middle of the floor and their song began: "Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You". Unfortunately, that title had always caused Sandra extreme grammatical distress, but she overlooked even that to revel in the loveliness of the moment. Despite Madeleine and Henri not having practised at all, they looked natural and confident. People, in fact, couldn't take their eyes off of them. The dance seemed to last for a long time, but they managed to keep up the pace and the grace all the way through.

The song eventually ended, whereupon Madeleine resolutely approached Osborn and claimed him for the next dance. Osborn was a confirmed non-dancer, ever since some dim and distant dancing days of his youth, but for Madeleine he danced and Sandra thought how fine they both looked. She couldn't actually remember afterwards the song to which they'd danced (and neither could Osborn), but she'd been absolutely entranced at the touching sight.

She was also interested at the sight of Henri dancing with his mother and Françine was certainly throwing herself into the spirit of the moment. Sandra looked across the room and caught the glance of Henri's father Jacques looking a trifle speculatively at her before they each looked away in embarrassment. However, she did dance with Osborn after his success with Madeleine, before they needed to stop and refresh their ageing parts with a glass of cool water.

Sandra had just finished her water when Madeleine came up to her and led her to the dance floor. "It's your turn, Mumsie," she said, smiling. "I chose this song for you."

"*Dancing Queen?*" asked Sandra in astonishment, as many years had passed – many, many years – since she'd strutted her funky stuff on a dance floor. It didn't actually matter what the song was, though, because as she moved to the groove, she was aware of Madeleine looking at her and smiling almost continuously. For those few precious, happy moments, everything in the world was right.

Abba finished their song and as Sandra looked at Caroline, she saw that her mother was almost finished too, after an extremely long day. At around 01:00 in the morning, they finally left the *château* to ride back in the taxi that had been called.

There was a spot of Anglo-French confusion on arrival at the hotel when the taxi driver asked Osborn a question, as they didn't have a clue what the poor man was asking. After a lot of puzzled frowns and failed attempts at different words that resulted in Osborn putting his head in his hands, the light dawned – but not literally, it wasn't that late. The question turned out to be simply whether Osborn wanted a receipt or not. He said yes for the sheer hell of it after all that work and they fled gratefully into the hotel and flopped into bed after an incredibly special day.

CHAPTER 9

There was more to come the day after the wedding, in the form of a noontime brunch back at the *Château de la Perrière* for both immediate families. It was unlikely that anybody actually felt immediate as they surfaced after a short night and prepared for more socialising, although Sandra and Osborn did feel immediate alarm when they had difficulty raising a reply from Caroline at the pre-arranged time of 09:00. Thankfully, she was simply still asleep.

Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc were finishing their *petit déjeuner* in the dining area when Sandra, Osborn and Caroline arrived for a bowl of fresh fruit, a croissant with jam and a most welcome cup of tea. Later, they all whiled away the time in the grounds of the hotel until Madeleine and Henri arrived to collect Sandra, Osborn and Caroline, as Osborn's car was still at the *château*. They were a little late due to a GPS malfunction concerning Henri's confused Sat Nav and the notorious junction to Le Mans and Paris.

It felt strange in a vaguely overkill sense to greet the French family members all over again at the same venue as the previous day. Sandra couldn't help feeling it was a step too far, but she was fully aware that she was a very reserved specimen of an English woman and conceded that somebody more extravert would really appreciate the fact that French people obviously knew how to make the most of a celebration.

The brunch was an excellent buffet, offering a wide range of salad, cheeses, meat for carnivores, quiches and many other delights. There was a choice of wine, fruit juice or water at each table, although not many people took advantage of the wine.

The atmosphere was again relaxed, with laughter and smiling amid the comestibles. Sandra was particularly happy that Madeleine came to sit with them at their table while they were sampling the desserts. She was also gratified to achieve an ambition of many years by eating *gâteau* in the *château*, in honour of the brilliant *Bonjour Bonjour* television series.

After brunch had persisted for around three hours, people were clearly flagging and Madeleine herself confessed to being tired, so it was time to take their leave. Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc had already left, on their way to meet up with Anne, Stan and Irwin to drive on somewhere else and stay for a few days in a *gîte*.

Sandra had never really liked saying goodbye, although of course in this case it was *au revoir*. She perceived that like herself, Henri's father Jacques was a little uncertain how to proceed and so she aimed her right cheek at his right cheek and they managed a decent two-cheeked farewell. She felt disproportionately glad to have practised several times with Henri.

Meanwhile, Henri's mother Françoise kindly attempted to thrust a flower bouquet from the wedding into her hands, but it would have been too awkward to take it on the journey back. She seemed intent on giving the flowers to either one of them, however, so Sandra was driven to explain in French that it was too difficult.

"*Trop difficile*," were the words that shot to the fore from her schoolgirl French.

"*Oui!*" replied Françoise, smiling encouragingly and nodding her head to indicate Sandra had done well.

'*Pas mal pour moi*,' thought Sandra, smiling with relief as they took their leave.

Madeleine and Henri accompanied them outside to the car to see them off and so they left the new *Monsieur et Madame Dior* on a beautifully sunny Sunday afternoon in France and headed towards the city of Angers. The plan was to park somewhere and go for a slow stroll with Caroline, perhaps by the river or simply somewhere pleasant. Sandra was excited to drive past the huge castle that Madeleine had mentioned, as she was beginning to realise the fascinating and important history of Angers as the cradle of the Plantagenet dynasty.

The centre was busy, but Osborn eventually managed to locate a parking spot along the roadside. Sandra's schoolgirl French triumphed again, as she noticed the parking meter said *sauf dimanche* – except Sunday. Sandra and Osborn thus set off in high spirits, but it was soon obvious that Caroline was struggling. She'd worn her heeled wedding shoes to the brunch and hadn't thought to put her more comfortable flat shoes in the boot of the car. It was impossible to walk anywhere with her limping painfully, so they had no recourse but to go back to the car and return to the comfort of the hotel.

After supplying her with plasters, they stayed in their rooms and wasted the beautiful afternoon and early evening. Sandra consoled herself with reading brochures she'd picked up from the hotel foyer and vowed they'd return to Angers by themselves one day to investigate fully the wonderful castle and other significant places in such a historically important city. She tried not to feel too much frustration towards her mother, but it was a difficult call.

To stave off any hunger, they ate some leftover rolls and other food from Friday, before walking (in flat shoes) to the bar, where they sat outside while Sandra and Osborn had an *Affligem* beer and Caroline had a coffee. Soon afterwards, Alison and Dirk appeared and sat with them to chat before going inside to eat a meal.

As the evening air slowly cooled, Alison and Dirk told them how they'd spent the day in Angers walking around and visiting various places of interest, including the wonderful Plantagenet castle. Sandra tried her utmost not to be envious and in fact was genuinely pleased for Alison, who she knew loved history. It did, however, make Sandra even more determined to visit Angers properly themselves at some time.

As they finished their drinks, Alison and Dirk disappeared inside the bar and so it was time to call it a day. The sky remained a tranquil shade of blue as they meandered back to the main hotel building and up the stairs to their rooms. Before they'd left home, Sandra had known the long weekend would soon pass, but she was still surprised at exactly how quickly it had managed to do so.

After a few hours of exhausted sleep, they arose at 07:00 on another sunny morning. The drive back to Roscoff was tedious but quite smooth – if Sandra discounted the fact that her sleeping angry bowel monster had awoken from the wedding dream. The next few hours were uncomfortable and worrying for her, as they stopped at several dodgy toilet facilities, until she decided she'd have to resort to a *Squit-ease* pill.

After that it wasn't all that far to Roscoff, where they stopped to buy some wine at a recommended store, where Sandra and Osborn wandered slightly dazed amid the racks and boxes. In the end they settled for four boxes of wine and felt undeniably pleased with themselves as Osborn set about packing them into the car boot.

"How long will all that last you?" asked Caroline, who'd stayed in the car.

"Ages," replied Sandra vaguely, fastening her seatbelt. She longed to reply, "About a week," but sadly bottled out.

They were in good time, but rather than park somewhere pleasant for a while, Osborn drove straight to the ferry terminal. They had to sit in a queue in the glaring heat, with not much to gaze at except a recurring message sign wishing them a pleasant voyage in English and French. There was slight excitement when three uniformed people approached and proceeded to open the boot, Sandra's door to look inside the glove compartment and all the other doors to look inside the car. Since they were silent, Sandra thought it was just as well they were recognisable as customs officials.

Not long afterwards, they were allowed to drive onto the *Armorique*, where Osborn again booked a cabin. They stood outside to watch the ferry leave, but soon went inside and bought a hot drink. The weather was fine and dry, but there was a bit of a breeze and Caroline seemed tired and tottery as they later walked along to the shop. Once inside, she grabbed hold of Sandra's arm at an opportune moment when Sandra stood next to her.

"The ship's rolling more this time," complained Caroline nervously. "It's making me unsteady."

"It's quite calm out there," replied Sandra in surprise. "It's hardly rolling at all."

"Well, I need to hold on to you," said Caroline dourly, gripping her fingers into Sandra's arm. "If I go down, you go down."

"What?" responded Sandra, while familiar anger surged up inside her. "Hold on to this," she said emphatically, removing Caroline's hand and placing it on the side of a display stand, "because I want to look around the shop." She had no real desire to look around the shop, but needed to get away from her mother, who obviously didn't care if she sank or swam. It was an unfortunate metaphor, considering they were on a roll-on roll-off passenger cargo ship.

They retired to the cabin for the rest of the voyage, where Caroline had quite clearly sunk (metaphorically) into a 'poor me' position.

"I'm sorry I'm just a nuisance to everybody," she said dolefully, as she accepted a cup of tea from Sandra.

"What do you mean?" asked Sandra guardedly, having not long ago managed to get over the shop incident.

"I slow you down. I stopped you walking around yesterday. I can't help it!" An edge of truculence was creeping into Caroline's voice.

"You could have put your comfortable shoes in the boot yesterday," replied Sandra, remembering her massive disappointment at not being able to explore Angers at all. "We told you how we'd go for a stroll after the brunch."

"I didn't think," said Caroline morosely. "I wanted to look smart."

"Well, it's a good job we keep a small first-aid kit in the car, so we could give you some plasters," said Sandra abruptly, with her own tiredness, uncomfortable digestive system and sense of anti-climax threatening to overwhelm her.

"I'm sorry I spoiled it for you," replied Caroline defiantly. "I know I did."

"Look Mum, you're making something out of nothing," said Osborn impassively. "This isn't doing you or us any good. It's done and we did the best we could."

"I can't help my age," continued Caroline plaintively. "I'm sorry I've been such a nuisance."

"You're conjuring this up in your own mind," replied Osborn tiredly. "We did this for Madeleine. She wanted us all there and we went and gave it our all. That's an end to it! Let's drink our tea and then I'm going to have a lie-down for a while. These bunks are quite comfortable really."

In the end, they all spent the next few hours reclining on a bunk – fortunately one each. Sandra found it quite soporific reading her book with the gentle rhythmic swaying of the ferry, although she didn't succumb. It was a personal taboo of hers never to succumb in public. They used the small kettle for another hot drink as the coastline appeared and they could gradually make out familiar landmarks.

The rest of the time until docking passed quickly enough and they were soon driving off the *Armorique* and on to Plymouth concrete. After a mere perfunctory checking of passports, they left the ferry port and were free to return home after what had been a unique few days. First of all, they saw Caroline safely into her house.

"I did it!" she said, as Osborn carried her small case in through the front door.

"You did indeed," replied Osborn inscrutably.

"Yes," replied Sandra noncommittally, not knowing what to feel.

An hour or so later, Sandra and Osborn were sitting together on the sofa, while their married daughter was still at the home of her in-laws in France. For their honeymoon, Madeleine and Henri were soon going to spend a week in Santorini, followed in September by a two-week trip to America.

"I honestly can't say I ever imagined Madeleine would be married to a French man in a French *Hôtel de Ville*, followed by a reception in a French *château*," remarked Sandra wonderingly. "I suppose that only goes to show how life can be full of unexpected surprises. It was wonderful to see her so serene – so happy and looking so beautiful. We were given such a warm welcome by the Dior family too."

"I wish Lawrence had been there," said Osborn simply. "I miss him so much."

The following week, Alison came to visit Sandra and they spent an indulgent hour talking about the wedding. Alison had brought some photos and Sandra was able to show her the few that Osborn had so far printed. They pored over them with a certain amount of hilarity, sharing tales of the wedding and the trip in general.

"I should *so* have worn sandals and not shoes," said Alison, scrutinising herself in one of Sandra's photos. "For one thing, those shoes look a bit too heavy for the outfit and for another thing, they really hurt my feet after a while."

"Don't talk to me about shoes hurting feet," said Sandra, snorting accidentally. "I mean, do talk to me about *your* shoes. No, I was just remembering how we didn't get to see Angers at all because of my mother and her heeled shoes. It looked a really interesting place and that castle was something else."

"It was," confirmed Alison, "I've got a few photos of it here. Those stones were telling such a story, I had to keep touching the walls. Dirk was embarrassed, but I didn't care. You really need to visit if you go there again. Maybe you could stay with Henri's parents?"

"Oh, I'm not sure about that," replied Sandra, as the anxiety and trepidation of living in another person's house while they were there too, formed an immediate negative response. "I loved your outfit, by the way, it was a wonderful shade of jade. I should have persevered looking for a jacket and not settled for a silly little shrug. It looks like a shrunk cardigan in some of the photos."

"No!" responded Alison, laughing. "You looked lovely, that dress suited you perfectly. I must say, though, Madeleine looked absolutely beautiful. I can still remember her as a schoolgirl and then the day I looked at her and saw she'd become a young woman. She looked radiant all day long at the wedding, full of poise. She came over and had a long conversation with us. Henri scrubs up well, too!"

"Doesn't he just," agreed Sandra, smiling. "It was a shame he wasn't actually feeling great that day, because Madeleine told us some of them in the house seemed to be suffering from mild food poisoning. That was why Henri's brother Jules never made a speech."

"What a shame," said Alison sympathetically. "Dirk and I were waiting for Osborn's speech! Never mind, I don't suppose there are many weddings that go without a hitch."

"I'm not sure what the percentage is for being jilted," replied Sandra, ignoring Alison's perplexed look. "Madeleine told me there was also trouble at the pre-wedding lunch, when Henri's mother Françoise took a dish of tuna out of the cooker and it shattered in her hands. One of the broken bits scratched her glasses, so she could have had a nasty eye accident."

"Oh dear," replied Alison, "that must have been a close call."

"Not only that, the hotel that some of Jules' wife's family were staying at had a fire and they had to move to another hotel," said Sandra, glad it hadn't been their hotel. "Did *you* enjoy the wedding, though? I know you said Dirk was anxious about navigating in France."

"We-ell, to be honest, I've never seen him so uptight," said Alison, shrugging slightly. "He was so nervous he had to go to the toilet quite a few times on the way to the hotel. I thought it would have been me, but I was fine all the time we were away."

"Lucky you," said Sandra, grimacing, "although I only suffered on the very last day. I'm sorry Dirk found it so hard."

"He said never again. *I* really enjoyed it, though, I'm so glad I made it. I thanked Madeleine for inviting us, because she needn't have. Anne Stanpool said the same. She wasn't expecting to be invited, since they're just the family of Madeleine's sister-in-law."

"Maddy was glad about those who did come," replied Sandra, remembering Madeleine's distress that so many people had been unable to make it. "Anyway, Juniper and Petroc were glad to see their other grandparents and also their Uncle Irwin."

"Juniper looked really pretty in her dress and Petroc was so cute in his suit!" exclaimed Alison, smiling. "I've got some photos of them both here. You must have felt very proud when they took part in the ceremony."

"It did bring a lump to the old grand-maternal throat," confessed Sandra, "although the sight of Gulliver holding Madeleine's bouquet was enough to nearly make me laugh. Gulliver seemed to enjoy it all, after fretting about it beforehand. I think he's sorry he's a bit like me socially, as in not very confident. He did well, though, he made a good attempt to talk with Henri's father."

"He looked quite dashing in a suit," said Alison encouragingly. "Bryony made an effort too. God, I don't mean to sound condescending, but they're both normally so – casual? Bryony was talking to me quite a bit at the table, she was very friendly. I couldn't help noticing your mum was a bit quiet?"

"She's just not the same as she was, but I'm glad for Madeleine's sake that she made it," replied Sandra carefully. "Osborn was so good with Mum when she went all weird and moody on the ferry home. Despite all our past troubles and the way he drives me insane sometimes, I'm so utterly grateful that he helps me out with Mum the way he does. I couldn't manage otherwise. I'd go under, I'm sure I would."

"I know what you mean," considered Alison. "Even after everything that Dirk and I fall out over and even when I get screaming mad with him, I still can't imagine life without him."

"Anyway, I'm glad Dirk agreed to go to the wedding despite his misgivings," replied Sandra diplomatically, "because it was good to have you there. I've got a nice photo of you, Mum and Anne sitting on a wall, sipping champagne at the *château*. Doesn't that have a nice ring to it?"

"Yes! Madeleine showed me her ring," said Alison conversationally. "Isn't life funny – marriage, divorce, birth, death. I wonder what it's all about sometimes. Maybe now the wedding's over, Madeleine will have a baby. It's amazing how things turn out. Talking about life and death, what about those langoustines at the reception? I know they were dead, but the way they were presented, I was sure the damn thing was going to crawl off my plate!"

Another week in May passed. Sandra and Osborn took advantage of the better weather to visit the Eden Project, as well as spending many hours working in both their own garden and Caroline's garden. In fact, it seemed that combined with visits to different garden centres to search for plants and enjoy a decent cappuccino, all the activity helped to create an upswing in Sandra's mood. One afternoon, as she was planting a tulbaghia in their own garden, she even felt a touch of her old enthusiasm for life.

Unfortunately, it was negated by a couple of depressing visits to Caroline, in which Sandra realised for the first time in her life that she was finding it difficult to know what to talk about with her mother. It suddenly struck her how Caroline would sit there looking doleful, or otherwise stare at her, while Sandra would search desperately for topics of conversation. Very often, she found herself resorting to inane comments about television and the weather.

In later May, the day came when it would have been Lawrence's birthday. It seemed appropriate for Sandra and Osborn finally to scatter his ashes, although original plans had involved the presence of both Gulliver and Madeleine. The location had proved tricky, since Lawrence had requested his ashes to be scattered at sea. After much deliberation and vague but abortive enquiries into hiring a boat, they picked out a place on the Plymouth coastline, where Lawrence had once been stationed in his RAF days.

It was quite breezy as they left the car to walk to the breakwater that Osborn thought would be a good spot. As they walked along the breakwater itself, it soon became obvious to Sandra that it was far more exposed there than the car park. It would clearly be either a dangerously foolhardy or inadvisably messy attempt from

anywhere along its length – and especially from the end of the breakwater, where Osborn was all set to climb over the protective railings and on to the rocks below.

"No!" she screeched into the wind. "You can't! You'll be blown into the sea!" She could already envisage the newspaper headlines: 'Man drowns while scattering brother's ashes.'

"I'm doing it for Lawrence!" roared Osborn, looking for a place to climb.

"Don't! You'll kill yourself!" she cried desperately, grabbing his jacket. "Lawrence wouldn't want you to put yourself in danger like this!"

"So where do you suggest we scatter his ashes?" asked Osborn angrily, turning around.

"There must be safer places somewhere here," replied Sandra, hurt that he was speaking so roughly to her, but relieved that he was seeing sense. "Look, there's a beach over there, it's not too far away."

"OK then!" said Osborn fiercely, striding away while still carrying the sturdy bag that held the container of his brother's mortal remains. However, by the time they'd reached the beginning of the breakwater, Osborn had relented and had reached out to hold Sandra's hand.

Once they'd walked around enough of the rocky outcrop to bring them to the small beach, they had to clamber over rocks to where the waves were rhythmically flowing in gently and breaking over smaller rocks that were scattered around areas of gritty sand, rock pools and seaweed. The wind was still gusting a little, although not nearly as badly as on the breakwater. Sandra was finding it difficult to clamber, so called out to Osborn that he didn't have to wait for her. She had the feeling that Osborn wanted to be on his own anyway.

He gave her a thumbs-up sign as he carefully picked his way to a sheltered spot, took the container from the bag and opened it. Sandra continued forward for a little way and then stopped a discreet distance behind Osborn, as he began to scatter Lawrence's ashes on the incoming waves. In her mind, she said another farewell to her much missed brother-in-law, thanking him for being a part of her life and telling him she would always be there for Osborn.

As Osborn continued to scatter, a contrary gust of wind blew some of the ashes straight back towards her. She tried to step out of the way, but one of her feet was balanced a little precariously on a small rock and she watched in a mixture of horror and amusement as a small airstream of ashes settled on the leg of her corduroy jeans.

"Lawrence!" she called out softly. "Is this your idea of a joke?" She chuckled as another gust had the same effect, but felt things were going a bit too far when she thought she might be in danger of inhaling some of the fine grit. "Bless you, you mad old sod," she said fondly, as she retreated to a place of safety, while Osborn finished emptying the container. When the air was absolutely clear, she went to stand beside Osborn.

"Are you OK?" she asked, reaching out to hold his hand.

"Yes, I think I am," he replied reassuringly. "I do feel rather a sense of closure."

CHAPTER 10

As May progressed into June, life continued with its usual array of ups and downs. One bright early morning, Sandra and Osborn were delighted to find an extensive array of buttercups when walking in the local nature reserve. However, the atmosphere was spoilt when Osborn took it upon himself to approach a young man who was strolling along some way ahead of them, engrossed in his mobile phone, to point out that he'd failed to bag the poo his dog had deposited in the grass. Sandra had been forced to engage her disowning Osborn tactics, while simultaneously agreeing with him and wishing she had the guts to do the same.

"I can't face the altercation," she tried to explain, as they were walking home. "I find myself longing for peace and quiet and I simply can't deal with the aggro."

"I can't bear the irresponsibility and thoughtless disrespect of the owners and I can't bear the shit itself," he replied with feeling. "Mind you, I think I know where you're

coming from. I know I said I felt closure with Lawrence, but I still feel kind of unbalanced. I feel as if I need the familiar around me, which is rather unusual for me."

"It is," agreed Sandra, "but it's early days as far as Lawrence goes. I still feel rather unbalanced too, but for me as ever it's more about my mother. I know I progressed a lot with counselling, but I still have to deal with all her incoming strangeness and the mad, weighted, pointed things she says. I never know what fresh shit is going to assail me, just like that fresh shit you couldn't cope with earlier."

"I'll be glad when Lawrence's flat is sold as well," admitted Osborn, "because that fire risk assessment I had to sort out was a pain in the ass."

"Maybe we should go away for a week, just the two of us," suggested Sandra slowly. "I know you talked about needing the familiar around you, but if it's self-catering somewhere not too far away, I'll be able to cope with that and surely it'll do us both good?"

"Definitely," replied Osborn right away. "Let's just do it."

"We-ell, we're going to Wales in a few weeks and you need to finalise the flat sale and we don't want to go in the school summer holidays," said Sandra, feeling she was pouring cold water on an idea she'd floated herself. "What about my birthday? Yes! Let's book something so we're away for my birthday and then I won't even have to think about seeing Mum..."

After what seemed like an age since they'd last managed to meet, a get-together of old school friends took place at Emily's house on one fine, bright early evening in mid-June. Emily, the only divorcee of the five, had prepared the table in her conservatory and they'd all contributed some food, which was slowly being eaten in between a plentiful supply of tea.

"I don't know what it is about tea," said Kay, accepting her second cup, "but it's comforting."

"Caffeine, that's what it's about," said Emily as she handed another cup to Gina. "Unless you buy decaffeinated, which I don't."

"Oh dear, I usually do buy decaffeinated," said Gina, as she took the cup. "Still, this won't hurt and besides, tonight I just don't care."

"I'm confused by the tea situation nowadays," remarked Delia, already sipping from her cup. "Black tea, green tea, white tea, organic tea, Earl Grey, Roy Boss, Lapdance Sashay..."

"I've never heard of Lapdance Sashay tea," said Kay enquiringly. "Oh – sorry, I'm a bit slow on the uptake today. Why don't you care tonight, Gina?"

"What? Oh, it's been a bit of a day, that's all. Nothing new there, then! Holy teabags, I'm responding to myself now and laughing at my own response!" Gina shook her head of long silvery blonde hair in disbelief.

"Are you perchance a bit hyper, Gee?" asked Sandra, smiling at her friend. "I drink green tea with pomegranate or cranberry sometimes and when I'm not feeling too good, I drink mint tea. Generally speaking though, nothing hits the spot like a cup of bog-standard tea."

"Yuck, perish the thought," replied Delia, grimacing. "Are you feeling better these days, Sandra? I don't think I replied to your last email. I did that thing where I thought about what I was going to say in reply and then because of that, it felt as if I'd already replied. Anyway, how are you doing?"

"I'm OK, thanks," replied Sandra somewhat evasively. "I'm glad that Madeleine's wedding went well in France. It was touch and go for a while whether my mother would be there, because she fell and needed nine stitches in her forehead. Also, Osborn's brother died. Still, we made it in the end and it was lovely."

"Osborn's brother died?" asked Kay incredulously. "Lawrence? Rob used to be friends with him years ago. I'm so sorry – poor Osborn. I must tell Rob. I'm really glad you enjoyed the wedding, though, it must have been good to have something special and positive to go to after all you've been through. Have you got photos?"

"I have indeed," replied Sandra, bending down to delve in her bag. "I asked Osborn to print some in time for this evening, so there's a motley selection here."

"Thank you," said Kay, taking the small album and turning the first page. "I like your dress, Sandra. I hope you don't mind me saying, but you've lost some weight, haven't you? What's your secret? I'd love to lose some, but it just doesn't want to go."

"I think my irritable veering to indignant and occasionally furious bowel was my secret," replied Sandra, laughing. "It wasn't pleasant. There were some times when I couldn't eat much at all."

"How is it now?" asked Emily, releasing her naturally wavy hair from a ponytail. "I used to suffer a bit, but it's more heartburn and taking *Gaviscoff* now."

"It's tentatively better, thank you," replied Sandra, "mostly just a bit petulant sometimes. My mother seems to take *Gaviscoff* quite a lot."

"Your mum looks really young for her age," commented Kay, passing the album to Delia. "Is she all right after her fall?"

"She's lost confidence, which is understandable," replied Sandra carefully, "but she's hard to deal with much more often now. I don't ever mean to moan about my mother, because I know I'm the only one here who has a living parent and I know you must miss yours."

"I feel free since my dad died," said Delia, looking up at Sandra. "Don't ever feel guilty about saying exactly how you feel to me, because I know what it's like."

"Thanks, Dee," said Sandra gratefully. "I'm glad you feel free now."

"You'll feel free one day," replied Delia, smiling. "I like this photo of Madeleine dancing with Osborn, she looks really happy."

"She was," said Sandra, remembering her own precious moments when Madeleine had been dancing with her. "It was a good disco, actually, not one of those where the music's so loud you can't hear yourself speak or even think."

"Oh, I hate those," said Kay with feeling. "Not that I frequent many discos these days."

"Me neither, I can't stand the music," said Emily, wrinkling her nose. "I could never understand you lot at school preferring Beatles music to a decent piece of classical class."

"You were a bit of a one-off," said Gina, smiling. "Sandra and I used to go dancing with Andrea Bonkworthy, who was a bit of a one-off in a completely different sense!"

"I must confess, I loved the music back then," said Sandra reminiscently. "It was more kind of musical. They used to sing the songs, rather than belt them out at full volume so hard that you can't hear what they're shouting about these days."

"I totally agree," replied Gina, finishing her tea. "I hate rap, too. I heard a car go past the other day that was blaring out some crappy rap so loudly that I swear you could hear it streets away. Even Andy thought it was far too loud and he's just about deaf."

"I suppose they think they're rebelling," said Kay, putting down her cup. "Do they have any idea what we had to rebel about in the Sixties? Being in by 10 at night and then only if we'd done our homework, for starters? I know there was a whole lot more."

"We weren't given driving lessons for our 17th birthdays and our boyfriends only had cars when they were earning enough to pay for it themselves," said Delia wryly.

"Our weddings were nothing like they have nowadays," said Emily, closing Sandra's photo album. "These look lovely, it must have been a wonderful day. No, I mean all the hype of the wedding fairs promoting their must-have dream weddings with cars and doves and wedding favours – and not forgetting the hen and stag nights."

"Weekends abroad, more like," said Gina heatedly, before suddenly chuckling. "Listen to us, we sound as if we're in our sixties, or something."

"I suppose the pace of life is a lot quicker these days," said Kay, considering. "Young people have a lot to contend with now, because nothing is certain like it used to be. We were far more certain of finding a decent enough job at 16, especially with 5 O-levels or more."

"Yes, that's true," agreed Emily, gathering the empty cups on a tray. "Keeping up to date with the latest electronic devices in itself is absolutely ridiculous. It's enough to give you a nervous breakdown having a new mobile phone, I kept making embarrassing mistakes with my new one for at least six weeks. Actually, I still make mistakes..."

"I find superstore shopping an onslaught sometimes," confessed Delia, making a face. "On several fronts really – from all the different choices, all the single-minded shoppers who need a course in other-customer awareness and all the staff pushing those massive online order trollies around so obliviously that they nearly mow you down where you stand. I came home from *Setco Mega-Extra* the other day and felt I needed counselling!"

"I know exactly what you mean," replied Sandra, grinning. "I think that's why our get-old-togethers feel so beneficial, because it's almost like group counselling."

"Group counselling and tea," said Emily decisively. "More tea, anyone?"

A visit to Aberpontyfan had been planned for the third week of June, but on the Tuesday two days before they were due to leave, Sandra was worried about Caroline. She had arrived at her mother's house to find a very woebegone mother.

"I've been feeling sick since the weekend," said Caroline morosely. "I've felt like I need to carry something around with me to be sick in."

"Have you actually been sick?" asked Sandra, feeling a little nauseous herself as her heart plummeted dramatically.

"No, but I haven't eaten much and I've been all hot," continued Caroline wanly.

"You've eaten small amounts, though. Have you been drinking enough?" asked Sandra, knowing her mother's fluid intake was always minimal.

"Yes, but I just don't feel right," said Caroline dolefully.

"Mm-hm," replied Sandra anxiously, remembering the consultant Caroline had seen in 2009 for her ovarian cyst, who had told her to report any digestive problems to her GP. Sandra knew that these were a sign of ovarian cancer, but she didn't want to alarm her already fretful mother, who had experienced psychosomatic digestive problems throughout her life.

"It would be just before you're going away on holiday," said Caroline disconsolately.

"It's not a holiday," said Sandra wearily. "Have you taken your temperature?"

"No, but I don't feel as hot as I did at the weekend," replied Caroline. "It's probably one of those bugs. Maybe it's clearing up."

"If you don't feel better soon, you should probably see a doctor," said Sandra worriedly. "I'll ring you tomorrow to see how you are."

Sandra woke at 03:00 the next morning, worrying about her mother, followed by an early morning raging bowel call that felt as if she'd regressed back into the dark days of pre-counselling. Consequently, she felt rough for the rest of the morning and well into the early afternoon, when she rang Caroline.

"How are you?" she asked, fearing the worst.

"Oh, I'm much better today, I've just come back from the hairdresser's," replied Caroline brightly. "I realised I was due for a tint, so I thought I'd better go. I hope you weren't worried yesterday."

"You went to have your hair dyed?" asked Sandra incredulously. "Of course I was worried, it's impossible not to be worried!"

"I'm fine," confirmed Caroline. "Give my love to everyone when you see them."

Sandra put down the receiver in disbelief. 'How can she do this to me?' she thought angrily, her thoughts raging one after the other. 'I thought she had sodding cancer! One day so sick and the next day fine. I feel as if she's trying to engage me in some awful dance unto death with her. Well, she's only managed to distance me even further – and I certainly shan't believe her now when she tells me she's feeling so ill.'

The following day, Sandra and Osborn travelled to Aberpontyfan as planned. Sandra had been looking forward to seeing Gulliver and everyone again, but to her dismay, she woke on the first morning there feeling sick. It happened to be Gulliver's 37th birthday and a walk had been planned during the day for Gulliver, Sandra and Osborn, while Bryony was at work and the children were at school and nursery. She felt like some sort of miserable dropout as she told Gulliver she didn't feel well enough to go out.

"I'm so sorry," she said dejectedly. "I don't know if it's something I caught from Grandma, or if it's stress related. I certainly felt very anxious about her recent shenanigans. I absolutely hate to let you down, I'm so incredibly pissed off with myself."

"It's OK," replied Gulliver pragmatically. "Dad and I can go to a place you might find a little tricky to walk to anyway. I was going to take you to the Worm today, because you said you wanted to go there once. We can go there another time, though, don't worry. I hope you feel better soon."

"Thank you," said Sandra, feeling her heart resting heavily on her currently delicate stomach. "Happy birthday."

As it turned out, the birthday went quite well in a low-key way, with present opening and a birthday tea when everyone was home again. Gulliver said he'd enjoyed a vigorous and photo-productive walk with Osborn and was looking forward to the following day, when Madeleine and Henri would be joining them for a four-way birthday celebration.

"There are four birthdays close together," announced Juniper importantly the following day, confirming what had been explained to her earlier. Madeleine and Henri had arrived at the house and they were all having coffee before heading out for lunch. "Daddy's was yesterday, but whose birthday is next?"

"Mine!" said Petroc, jumping up excitedly from Bryony's lap.

"You had your birthday in France with Grandma Anne, Grandad Stan and Uncle Irwin, do you remember?" said Bryony, moving her coffee away from Petroc just in time.

"No," replied Petroc disappointedly, as Juniper laughed at him.

"It's Uncle Henri's birthday next," said Sandra, standing up so she could drink her coffee safely. "He'll be..."

"Thirty-four," supplied Madeleine, putting down her coffee quickly as Juniper approached her with intent. "Two years older than I am."

"Whose birthday is it after Uncle Henri's?" asked Juniper, plonking herself on Madeleine's lap.

"Mine," replied Bryony from behind Petroc's head. "The day after and I'll be thirty-six."

"Whose birthday is it after Mummy's?" persisted Juniper, her arms wrapped around Madeleine's neck.

"Who's left," asked Madeleine, "apart from Grandma and Grandad?"

"You!" replied Juniper, squeezing her auntie with loving abandon.

"When should we be leaving, Gulliver?" asked Osborn, looking at his watch. "We don't want to leave it too late."

"Don't worry, I've got my eye on the ball," replied Gulliver, putting down his mug. "We should be leaving fairly soon, actually."

"Ball!" said Petroc, leaping up from Bryony. "My ball!"

"No – oh, we'll put it in the boot in case we go for a walk somewhere afterwards," said Gulliver, standing up. "I'm hungry." He glanced across at Sandra. "OK, Mother?"

"Yes, I'm fine," replied Sandra, smiling. She was determined that nobody was going to know how she felt apprehensive and uneasy about eating in an unknown public place, very uncertain how her unreliable digestive system would respond after a dodgy previous day.

An hour later, they were all sitting around a large table at *Marecastella*, a restaurant and café bar specialising in Italian food. The atmosphere was one of busy competence and when their order arrived, the portions were generous.

Sandra relaxed as they all started their food and she managed to eat three-quarters of her standard but delicious margherita pizza. She found it a little difficult to watch the antics of Juniper and Petroc, who were verging on the noisy, messy and undisciplined, but as Osborn was closer to them than she was, he therefore bore the brunt of dropped cutlery on the floor, food carelessly spilled over the table and a great deal of argumentativeness.

Once outside, they all strolled along the sea front underneath a partly cloudy sky, but with plenty of sunshine piercing its way through. Juniper took turns walking with

everyone, although Petroc was happy to run along the safe path in front of Bryony. For quite a long while, Sandra walked with Madeleine and Henri, while Osborn walked alongside Gulliver.

"The lunchtime behaviour wasn't wonderful, but I suppose it could have been worse," commented Sandra, glad to be walking her lunch down a little.

"I tried to be good," said Henri straight-faced, "but I was 'aving a little trouble with Madeleine, she was being naughty."

"Henri!" exclaimed Madeleine, as Sandra laughed at them both. "I saw Juniper and Petroc were being boisterous," continued Madeleine. "I was glad we were sitting opposite them, to be honest."

"I know," said Sandra, caught between being disloyal to Gulliver and being honest herself. She decided on a change of topic. "Have you got plans for your birthdays?"

"Jules and Tara are coming to stay with us next weekend," replied Madeleine, "and a couple of other friends are coming to us for a barbecue if the weather holds up."

"That's nice," said Sandra, wondering when she and Osborn would next be able to visit them. "I know Chester's rather a long way from you, but at least Jules and Tara are living in England, so you can see them from time to time." She privately wondered how Henri's parents could cope with both their sons living in another country.

"Yes," replied Madeleine simply. "Our second honeymoon is getting a bit closer too and there's still a lot to be arranged. I'm sorry we'll be away for your birthday, but I'll be thinking of you in America."

"Just enjoy the two special weeks you'll have," said Sandra comfortingly. "It sounds funny, your second honeymoon! I'm glad you enjoyed Santorini, though, despite the heat."

"2013 is turning out to be a bit of a full-on year," said Madeleine reflectively. "Still, life never stands still. Oops! It looks like Petroc's fallen over."

"He seems to be OK," said Sandra, as she saw Bryony picking him up for a cuddle. "Do you know where we're going?"

"Gulliver mentioned an ice cream parlour," replied Henri, "so we could 'ave our dessert there, 'e said."

"I think he's making the most of today," said Sandra, smiling. "I don't mind, it's a birthday outing after all. Is it *Vivaldi's*? I hope so, I've heard great things about *Vivaldi's*."

Half an hour later, they were all enjoying ice cream of various flavours in various combinations and with various toppings. Sandra had deliberately chosen mint, just in case, but she was feeling fine and hugely enjoying the day with both her children together with their chosen people. She was definitely feeling a little huger than usual, but didn't care.

"It's not often we're all together like this," said Osborn expansively, also affected by more food than usual. "I wish it could happen more often."

"So do I," said Juniper emphatically. "I like being with my family. If Auntie Maddy and Uncle Henri have a baby, I'll have a cousin."

"That's true, Junie-flower," replied Madeleine, smiling wistfully.

"Out of the mouths of babes..." quoted Sandra, hoping Madeleine was OK.

"I'm not a baby, Grandma Sandra!" said Juniper indignantly.

"No, you're not," said Sandra soothingly. "You're very grown-up for your age."

"I'm five," replied Juniper, suddenly losing interest. "Mum, I need a wee."

"OK," said Bryony, standing up to take Juniper to the toilet and looking outside. "I think it's going to rain soon. We haven't got their raincoats, have we, Gulliver?"

"I don't know," replied Gulliver, also looking outside. "I'll walk to the car and get them."

"I want to go with you, Dad," said Juniper emphatically.

"You need to go for a wee with Mummy," replied Gulliver, putting on his jacket.

"I'll walk to the car with you two," said Bryony, leading Juniper away as Gulliver strode towards the exit.

"Well, it looks like we'll be going back to the house now," said Osborn bemusedly.

"Er – they've left Petroc here," said Sandra wonderingly.

"I was thinking that too," said Madeleine, looking at Sandra. "Did they mean to?"

"Maybe they 'ave gone and done a runner?" asked Henri mischievously, putting his hand on Madeleine's thigh.

"I need a wee," said Petroc plaintively.

"OK, come with Granddad," said Osborn, holding out his hand. "Then I think we're all going back to your house for birthday cake."

The next day was Sunday and they decided to visit Danny Bogof Caves, not all that far up the road from Aberpontyfan. There they spent a few hours exploring the show caves, the cathedral cave and the bone cave, as well as wandering outside in the dinosaur park, where over 200 life-size dinosaurs were depicted in natural settings.

It was while the others were engrossed in spotting eggs and baby dinosaurs in a scene that was densely packed with ferns, trees and other vegetation, that Gulliver started to confide in Sandra.

"Bryony's being awkward about the French holiday we were planning with you next year," he said a little cautiously. "She's saying she can't commit to it because it's her mother's 60th birthday and they're planning something special."

"Oh? Is it about her taking leave? Surely she can manage a week off for France with us, as well as helping her mother to celebrate?" Sandra was making an attempt to be diplomatic, but her maternal radar was giving her clear signals that all was not well with Gulliver.

"She won't budge, she just won't *give*. She expects me to accommodate what she wants, but she won't accommodate what *I* want. I'm tired of being the nice guy all the time, it's not doing me any good. I'm not OK, I have stomach upsets and I know it's all stress-related. I can't cope with certain food now, like filled pasta, baked beans, or milk."

"Really?" Sandra was genuinely perturbed. "I knew you had a bit of trouble now and again, but I thought you were generally OK. You need to think about yourself if it's affecting you physically like that. Believe me, I know."

"I've had enough," said Gulliver despondently. "I can't go on like this. I'm not going to be Mr Nice Guy anymore."

"Daddy!" called out Juniper from nearby. "Come and look at this dinosaur egg!" The moment had passed, but Sandra was disturbed about Gulliver and made up her mind to talk more later with him about how he was feeling.

The next day, however, was taken up with the excitement of Petroc's first day at school. As he was only three, it seemed early for the poor little lad to go to school for even just the afternoons, but it was the set-up of the nursery he attended and Petroc himself seemed happy. Sandra had concerns that Petroc experienced speech difficulty, so hoped the school could help.

When it was time to meet him after his first afternoon as a schoolboy, Sandra and Osborn walked to the school with Gulliver, as Bryony was at work. When Petroc emerged shyly from the classroom in his new uniform, Sandra felt a surge of grandmotherly love, just as she remembered feeling when meeting Juniper from school for the first time.

After meeting Juniper from her class, they walked home through a wooded area to the house. Sandra was delighted when Petroc left Gulliver and came to hold her hand, while Juniper skipped along chatting happily to her dad and granddad.

'I've been accepted,' she thought happily, as she felt his firm little hand in hers. 'He's been a lot harder to get to know than Juniper, but it's OK, I'm winning through.'

CHAPTER 11

July passed with the usual eclectic mix of events and thankfully, some comfortable normality to balance it all out. Lawrence's flat was finally sold, Sandra bought herself a self-hypnosis CD for IBS and Caroline described a dream she'd had in great detail to Sandra, in which she apparently told her doctor that she was bored.

As a mini-heatwave descended, Sandra and Osborn took a few trips out underneath the sunny skies to gardens, to some parish churches to take photos for their ever-growing family tree and to garden centres for relaxing cappuccino chats. Sandra felt that such a lifestyle was more like she'd envisaged retirement to be.

The only real downer on the summer was a lack of communication from Madeleine. Since the four-birthday meet, there had been two quick phone calls. Sandra continued to write emails several times a week, but Madeleine was mainly missing from the scene and it was beginning to cause Sandra distress. One night at the end of July, she spent a miserable few hours awake, feeling the perceived disappearance of her beloved daughter.

However, as if connected on some psychic level, Sandra switched on her computer that morning to find a long, newsy email from Madeleine. After fervent apologies for her silence, she'd explained how she and Henri were spending countless exhausting hours sorting out their September mini-road trip in America and how to top it all, work had been insanely busy. Sandra's heart was healed, simply by knowing she hadn't been forgotten.

The same day continued to go well when Sandra finally took the courage to tell Caroline that she and Osborn would be spending a week in Hampshire, which would incorporate Sandra's birthday. She admitted later to Osborn how she'd been surprised her mother had not only been quite accepting, but even mildly encouraging.

At the beginning of August, a new plan was underway. Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc would be spending a few nights at Anne and Stan's house, before Gulliver and Bryony would travel back to Wales, leaving Juniper and Petroc with Bryony's parents for four nights. Sandra and Osborn would then collect them from Anne and Stan's house and drive them back to Aberporthyfan, where Sandra and Osborn would stay for five nights.

It all seemed to work very well and the morning soon came when Sandra and Osborn collected a bright, happy pair of children from Anne and Stan (Juniper and Petroc as it happened). Although the journey to Aberporthyfan took almost four hours, it was far from tedious, thanks to Juniper's wide-ranging conversation about life, her family in general and stories about her own birth and Petroc's birth in specific.

Whether the time away from her parents had disturbed her or not, Juniper seemed unsettled to be back at home and when they went out that afternoon for a walk in a park, it was anything but a walk in the park. Juniper fretted, whined, moaned and finally shouted and cried her way through a mega-tantrum, throwing herself on the ground and causing casual bystanders to look at her with concern.

In the end, it was Petroc who cajoled her out of her outburst, by offering to carry her bag, which she'd been complaining was heavy. They all sighed with relief as Juniper hauled herself to her feet and carried on walking sulkily, dragging her feet.

The next day was a little calmer, but by the time the following three days were over, Gulliver was exhausted after spending long hours at his own photographic exhibition. For the others, it had been quite pleasant, with various outings to stave off Juniper's favourite battle cry that she was bored. Sandra couldn't help noticing that Petroc's speech was still no better, but she didn't like to say anything.

On their last full day, though, she found some courage. Bryony was at work and after parking at Mumbles, the rest of them set out on a carefree summer walk to Rotherslade Bay. Juniper and Petroc spent their time either walking along holding someone's hand, or running ahead on the cliff path to investigate anything of interest. Petroc seemed interested in insects of any kind, while Juniper suffered pangs of adult-like guilt when she accidentally stepped on a black beetle in the middle of the path.

"Is it dead?" she asked tearfully, staring down at the unmoving creature.

"I expect it'll crawl away in a minute," replied Sandra comfortingly, thinking it was most probably dead.

"I didn't mean to step on it!" wailed Juniper, about to escalate into full flood.

"I know," said Gulliver, as he bent down to Juniper's level. "Creatures die all the time in nature, it's the way it is. You did nothing wrong, it was just an accident. If you'd meant to kill it, that would have been different, but you didn't. Do you want a cuddle?"

"Yes," whispered Juniper, as Petroc peered down at the probably dead beetle with intense curiosity.

"You handled that very well," said Osborn to Gulliver a few moments later, as Juniper and Petroc ran ahead again. "Petroc seems so interested in insects, maybe he'll be an enty – endo – whatever the word is. What's Petroc doing?" Osborn ran on to catch up with Petroc.

"Is it entomologist?" asked Sandra uncertainly. "I think it is. I wasn't going to say anything, but I wonder if Petroc needs any help with his speech? He seems to have trouble saying quite a few consonants."

"It's quite common," replied Gulliver a little defensively. "He's not the only one, there are other boys of around his age who aren't speaking properly yet."

"I just wondered, that's all," said Sandra agreeably, not wanting to make waves. "I'm enjoying this walk. How are you? I didn't ask before because you were so taken up with the exhibition. Have you stopped being Mr Nice Guy?"

"Kind of," replied Gulliver enigmatically. "I'm just getting on with my own stuff a bit more, without trying to please. I ordered a new printer without telling Bryony and she hasn't even noticed." He gave a small rebellious laugh.

"Really? I mean, are you sure she hasn't noticed?" Sandra felt a little shocked.

"I'm not sure I care. It's my business, anyway. I mean that literally, it's actually my business."

"Ah!" Sandra laughed uncertainly. "Any progress about the French holiday?"

"I think we'll be going for just a week. I'm pissed off about that, because I wanted to go for two weeks."

"Oh. We'll just have to make the most of it, then." Sandra's maternal radar was jarring her uncomfortably.

"Actually, I was talking to Dad earlier about a photographic trip to Iceland in February," said Gulliver, sounding slightly hesitant. "There's a group of photographers who've been before and I'm friends with their leader on *Farcebook*. She asked me if I was interested in helping out with some photography tuition and I wondered if Dad would like to come along with me. I know he's always wanted to see the Northern Lights."

"Oh!" Sandra was unaccountably taken aback. "What did Dad say?"

"He said he'd love to come, but he needed to speak with you."

"Daddy!" Juniper's voice interrupted the slightly uncomfortable conversation. "Petroc's stepped on a beetle and I think it's dead!"

The rest of the stay went smoothly, followed by an unremarkable journey home. Osborn confirmed that he would like to go to Iceland with Gulliver, but since it would be six months in the future, Sandra decided to put it out of her mind.

Although she didn't always do so on principle, mainly to avoid unnecessary dependence (since bad news would travel fast anyway), she decided to ring Caroline to say they were back.

"Oh, it's so good to hear your voice, it really is!" gushed Caroline as soon as she knew it was Sandra. "It's seemed a long time. Did you enjoy your holiday?"

Sandra felt the spider's web closing in around her again.

Four days later, it was Caroline's 88th birthday and she'd opted for lunch at the *Who'd Have Dreamt It?* pub with Sandra and Osborn. It went well, except for the fact that Sandra found herself gradually becoming intensely irritated by the way Caroline said Sandra's name at least 20 times in the space of an hour – at least 95% of those times being totally unnecessary.

After lunch, Caroline requested they stop off at *Waitpoppy* on the way home, which was where the rot truly set in. As the three of them trailed around the store, Caroline slowly descended into truculence.

"There's a lot more choice here than the *Bicker* shop at the end of my road," she said, as they stood waiting for her to choose some yoghurts. "My friends come here every week on the free bus, they say it's like an outing."

"You could come here on the free bus," said Osborn, trying to be patient.

"Why would I need to when I've got two people to do my shopping for me?" replied Caroline shortly. "Oh, there's too much to choose from. I've got ice cream at home, that'll do."

"We don't have to do your shopping for you," persisted Osborn lightly.

"Yes, you do!" replied Caroline tersely. "You know I don't like shopping."

Osborn's 63rd birthday the following day passed quietly and pleasantly. Osborn decided he would like to go for a walk on Plymouth Hoe, incorporating cappuccino with a view at *The Cliff Terrace Café* overlooking the sea. On the way home, Sandra bought him a reduced bottle of *Gay Mount* rum from *Waitpoppy* – it had its full amount of liquid, but the price was lower than usual. Both Gulliver and Madeleine rang in the evening and all was well in Osborn's world.

The rest of August passed with reasonable weather and a few ancestry trips involving churches and graveyards, where various branches of the ever-extensive family tree had been baptised (photos of fonts), buried (photos of headstones), or both. On one bright morning, they decided to walk in the nearby nature reserve and were delighted to find a field full of sunflowers. It was a deep pleasure to Sandra that they both loved flowers so passionately.

As September came into existence, Gulliver and Bryony took Juniper and Petroc camping, Madeleine and Henri prepared to fly to America for their second honeymoon and Sandra caught a virus just before their week's self-catering holiday in Hampshire. The virus was a throaty, chesty little number that seemed to have appeared from nowhere, which Osborn decided to catch a few days later.

However, they left home undeterred on a dry morning that soon gave way to a sunny day and enjoyed the drive through Wiltshire, especially the sudden sighting of magnificent Stonehenge. Their first and only visit had been on a grey November morning in 1974 when they'd been able to wander in amongst the massive Sarsen stones and the smaller but no less impressive bluestones. Sandra had a sudden hankering to visit there again, but it wasn't the right time to succumb to sudden hankerings.

After stopping for a fish and chip lunch, they encountered some heavy traffic heading towards Winchester and became stuck in a minor traffic jam, but then progressed to a more rural road to Petersfield. It had been a distinctly rural journey altogether, past countless hayrolls, hayricks, haystacks, hayracks, haysticks – generally speaking, a whole lot of hay. The countryside itself appeared quite bleached in the sun, which was either the result of a dry summer, or a post-reap field look.

The cabin style self-catering accommodation had been converted from stables and was very clean, promising a comfortable stay. As soon as the owner left them to their own devices, they drank tea and saw to the usual holiday necessities of unpacking and buying food.

At almost 19:00, the temperature was still a very warm 25° Centigrade as they drove back from *Setco* on the rural roads underneath leafy tree tunnels. Out in the open, a hot air balloon was slowly sailing through the hazy blue sky on a truly beautiful evening.

It was so beautiful that after they'd returned and unpacked the food, they sat outside on the small area of decking with a glass of wine and looked out over the fields.

"Peace and tranquillity," said Sandra appreciatively, ignoring the sound of a distant siren, some raucous birds, clamouring sheep and the noise of a tractor's engine.

They managed to sleep well enough in a strange bed in a strange place with a strange cough, with their own posh pillows that were a recent purchase from *Bedsons For Beds*. However, Osborn's throat was giving him trouble and when Sandra pulled up the blinds, she gazed out upon rain, rain and more rain. Over a morning cup of tea, they decided that a visit to Winchester was a good idea, as it offered a cathedral and a museum (each with a roof).

After dealing with a run-down battery and no tea towels, they were ready to leave at 09:30. The rain had eased considerably and it was still quite warm, so they

enjoyed another drive through the leafy tree tunnels. They used the Park & Ride system to enter Winchester, by which time the rain had conveniently stopped. A short walk brought them fortuitously to *Costalot Coffee*, where they sat in a cosy window alcove seat for two and watched the world go by. Sandra began to realise that Winchester reminded her a little of York.

"The streets aren't quite as narrow as they are in York, but there are lots of old buildings with shops underneath that have those Regency and Elizabethan bow-fronted windows," she commented thoughtfully, sipping her cappuccino.

"Mmm," replied Osborn peaceably, content to sip his cappuccino.

"Quite a few of the shops themselves are independent ones, like enticing little bakeries and bookshops that promise first editions amongst the sought-after and the esoteric," said Sandra poetically, carried away by a sense of intoxicating freedom.

"Strewth Sandra, you're waxing romantically historical, or something," said Osborn with obvious amusement.

"No, it's just a very good cappuccino!" replied Sandra, insanely happy for an isolated moment to remember what it felt like to be herself.

After the cappuccino, the cathedral beckoned insistently and they made their way the short distance to the wonderful Gothic building that was impossible to miss.

"I'm sure I've been here before," said Sandra wonderingly, after they'd paid the entrance fee and were gazing around the immense hallowed space. "I had a holiday in Portsmouth with Mum and Dad in the late 1960s and I can remember being amused to walk past it at the very least – because there was a song called *Winchester Cathedral* out at the time by *The New Vaudeville Band*. Actually, the reredos looks familiar..."

"That's not a phrase you tend to say very often," muttered Osborn, preparing his camera. "Right, I'm heading this way."

They wandered around peaceably for at least two hours, gazing at the amazing architecture, fixtures and fittings. There seemed to be a great number of memorials to those who had died in many conflicts over the centuries, as well as memorials and tombs of well-known local people, including past bishops.

They were gazing in awe at an ancient mural in a niche in the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, when a guide approached and asked if they'd like him to explain. They politely assented, since he looked to be about 70 and had mentioned he'd been a guide for many years (although Sandra personally thought he would actually have been a scout). He related with pride that they were looking at the finest example of 12th century murals in the country and proceeded to explain about the images. In the end, he seemed to run out of steam, so they thanked him and moved on.

There was slight disappointment because some mortuary chests thought to contain the bones of Anglo-Saxon royal family members (including King Cnut who died in 1035) were currently not on view because they were being conserved and restored. However, there was plenty more to see, including some beautifully painted icons and a lovely painted ceiling in a somewhat dark but very serene Guardian Angels' Chapel.

They walked up some stairs in the south transept and there right in front of them was a wonderful 17th century library of numerous rare books resting on their original carved shelves. In an adjoining room was one of the treasures of the cathedral, the Winchester Bible, written by hand by a single monk (although Sandra had always understood monks didn't marry).

They had no sooner stood gazing at the first open-page exhibit under its glass case for a few seconds, when a guide approached and asked if they'd like him to talk about it. Apart from politeness, Sandra happily said yes, as she was already imagining herself scribing away at such a task in a previous life as a monk. Single, of course.

The illumination on the vellum page they were studying was amazing, especially for something over eight centuries old. The colours were still vivid, crafted using gold leaf, copper, lead and lapis lazuli and the guide even offered them a magnifying glass so they could see the detail more closely. Osborn accidentally replaced the magnifying glass back on the glass case a little less than gently, whereupon the guide very graciously advised them to be careful, because it was possible to set off the alarm system (as he had done himself in the past).

After escaping from the danger of the alarmed bible, they indulged themselves in more photography, including Jane Austen's grave. It was rather a sombre and understated gravestone on the floor, but nearby was a much brighter brass memorial tablet with fresh flowers underneath. High above, but too far up to study properly, was a stained-glass memorial window.

Sandra knew she was tiring and had been aware from time to time of still waging war with the virus, so they left the cathedral a little regretfully to eat a sandwich lunch outside. While sitting on the wall facing the cathedral, they decided to make an afternoon visit to the relatively close Wolvesey Castle, or Winchester's Old Bishop's Palace.

"I suppose bishops are usually a bit on the old side, so calling it the Old Bishop's Palace isn't exactly ageist," she reasoned, as they walked along past Winchester College and some ancient looking buildings, but Osborn failed to reply.

They continued to the flinty ruins of Wolvesey Castle, where they wandered around taking photos and reading the information boards, until Sandra seriously began to wane historical in mid-afternoon. The rest of the day passed peacefully enough back at the converted stables, with some noisy bleating sheep for company (but thankfully outside).

The next morning, Osborn's voice was incredibly deep and croaky, with tones that seemed to emanate from a frog with Barry White aspirations. Thankfully, drinking tea and eating breakfast helped both him and Sandra, who was tired enough to apply hair conditioner mindlessly to one leg, before realising it felt a different consistency to the moisturiser she should have been using. She couldn't be bothered to wash it off and start again, so spent the day with one moisturised leg and one conditioned leg.

They decided to have a more restful day, by visiting All Saints Church in Crondall, the scene of several ancestral baptisms, marriages and burials in Osborn's family. The large church had been built on the site of an earlier Saxon building and its interior seemed a little on the dark side, although there were some very interesting stained-glass windows.

While Osborn did his photographic thing with an improvised tripod borrowed from the church furniture, Sandra investigated some medieval graffiti. This was in the form of crosses carved in the door jamb by knights who would traditionally carry out a vigil in their local church before a ceremony of knighthood, or before heading off for a crusade. That, of course, would have made it a knight night vigil.

She almost physically jumped when a figure appeared in the doorway, but it wasn't the ghost of a knight, merely a lady who'd arrived to do something purposeful. Sandra took her cue to murmur hello and escape outside, while Osborn put back his improvised tripod. They both then wandered around the churchyard, but sadly found no family gravestones.

After another sandwich lunch, the afternoon was gently whiled away at a garden (open to the public), where there were some expansive rural views and some pretty hibiscus shrubs, as well as a walled garden in which they strolled around happily for quite a while, until the viral fatigue and Osborn's coughing hit again.

Fortunately, there was a spacious tea-room, where they gladly sat to enjoy a hot drink. Although it was only about 14:30 and the afternoon was relatively young, they both felt relatively old and decided to mosey along the rural roads back to the old stables, where the rest of the day was spent pleasantly enough with a book and a baked potato – but naturally not at the same time.

The following morning, they were still somewhat virally compromised, but the weather was encouragingly sunny. However, as they were getting ready, they received some very sad news that was a huge shock. As soon as Osborn answered his mobile phone, Sandra knew by the tone of his voice that something dreadful had happened. For a moment she thought it might be her mother, but soon ascertained that it was something to do with her cousin Belinda.

"What is it?" she asked fearfully, as Osborn ended the call sombrely.

"It's Belinda's Trudie," replied Osborn sadly. "She took her own life."

"What? Oh my God," replied Sandra, as the shock seemed to hit her legs and she sat down unthinkingly. "Belinda will never get over this."

After a very distressing hour, while talking it over as they finished dressing, they came to the conclusion that there was nothing they could actually do, except to send a card. The best option in the circumstances was simply to carry on with the day as planned.

Their choice of destination was Chichester, although Sandra was so distracted with wondering how Belinda and everyone concerned was feeling and coping, that her memory of the morning was rather fragmented. She did enjoy coming across the Bishop's Palace Garden behind the cathedral, while they were exploring the walls of Chichester, but by the time they sat on a wooden bench to eat sandwiches for lunch, she realised she'd been in a daze.

After finding somewhere for a hot drink, they decided to drive on to Fishbourne Roman Palace, for some soothing Roman history. Thankfully, the drink seemed to have revived Sandra by the time they arrived at what seemed to be a modern housing estate, where the Roman Palace remains had been found. They spent over two hours there, listening to informative talks while gazing at the excavated mosaic flooring site, looking at exhibits, taking photos and investigating the garden area while dodging the volatile rainclouds.

For Sandra, the drive back to the old stables was punctuated by some textual repartee with Gulliver, who had apparently been imbibing a Sunday afternoon gin and tonic and was amusing himself with witty comments in her direction. Sandra found it genuinely uplifting, as the day's sad news was still sinking in.

A quiet evening with a glass of red wine, a fishfinger sandwich, a crunchy toffee yoghurt, some chocolate and an hour or two of mindless television certainly hit the spot, wherever the spot may have been. Sandra had the feeling there were many spots of various shapes, sizes and levels, some of them in depths currently unreachable.

CHAPTER 12

At some time around dawn the following day, Sandra Olivia Dullkettle achieved the vast age of 61, although she could still remember being 16 fairly well. The aftermath of the previous day's news was still sending shock ripples throughout her system, especially every time she thought of Belinda. She could hardly imagine how Belinda must be feeling and was absolutely astounded when her cousin sent her a text message to wish her a happy birthday.

A short series of forlorn and melancholy text messages then passed between them both, as Sandra tried desperately to think of something positive to say. In the end, Belinda herself wrote that she was glad Trudie was now at peace and Sandra could do no more but assure Belinda that she was thinking of her constantly.

Meanwhile, there were birthday cards and presents to open on a rainy, overcast morning. Although this was heart-warming in itself, Sandra felt as if she couldn't enjoy the day until she'd carried out an act that was burning insistently in her psyche. It was an appropriate description, as the act was to return to Winchester Cathedral and light a candle for Trudie.

Fortunately, the rain had eased by the time they arrived via the Park & Ride bus at Winchester's centre and so they walked along to *Costalot Coffee* as before and sat in the same seats by the window as before. They didn't actually drink the same coffee as before, because that would have been stupidly impossible.

Suitably caffeinated, they made a quick detour to *Marks and Spender* to buy sandwiches and crisps for an early lunch, which they then transported the short distance to the cathedral and consumed while sitting on the wall and indulging in a spot of good old-fashioned people watching. However, most people were reasonably modern, as would be expected.

Once inside the cathedral, they thought they might as well visit the crypt, which they'd overlooked the first time. Unfortunately, it fell underneath their expectations, but

it didn't really matter, as all Sandra really wanted to do was to light a candle. She didn't know whether it was a symbolic act or an instinctive human reaction to light the candle and ask for Trudie's soul to be at peace, but once this had been achieved, she felt a sense of peace herself.

On a wave of pure impulse afterwards, she knew she couldn't leave the small area where the candles that were still burning shone like an oasis of light and hope, without lighting another candle. For some reason, the thought of Madeleine had flashed into her mind like a radiant beacon – except it wasn't quite Madeleine.

Feeling slightly surreal, she lit another candle for the baby that she felt Madeleine and Henri would soon be having. As she did so, it seemed as if the whole candle-lighting scenario was a symbolic way of saying goodbye to one soul on its way out of the world and saying welcome to another soul on its way into the world.

Whatever had taken place at whatever level, she left the most inspiring, historical building that was Winchester Cathedral a short time later, feeling as if she was smiling in a part of her being at the unimaginable magnificence that was life and death and all in between.

After managing to return completely to the here and now, their next destination was the Hospital of St Cross, the oldest and largest almshouse in England, which had been founded in the 1130s. According to their leaflet, they could walk there for less than a mile from the city centre alongside the River Itchen.

"I'm sure there's a dubious joke waiting to be made about itching," said Sandra, as they set off along the most interesting streets with their old houses, "but I don't even want to scratch the surface."

"You're feeling better, aren't you," said Osborn perceptively. "I'm glad, because we came on this holiday to get away from it all and to recuperate."

"Comparatively better," qualified Sandra honestly. "I keep thinking about Maddy for some reason, I hope she and Henri are making the most of their time."

"If I know Henri, he'll have planned it all carefully and she'll be fine," said Osborn soothingly. "I hope you're enjoying your birthday, it seems a bit of an odd one."

"Life is odd," replied Sandra, laughing wryly, "no matter what age you are."

When they arrived at the Hospital of St Cross (although not from alongside the River Itchen, due to building works rendering the path closed), it was easy to imagine it in bygone years, its purpose to provide accommodation for a number of poor men fallen on hard times.

They took photos of the inner quadrangle, the Tudor cloister and the church, before Sandra realised that the hospital continued to provide accommodation for about 25 elderly gents, still known as Brothers. Suddenly the modern mobility scooters parked in front of the wonderful ancient buildings, posing time-warp problems for their photos, made sense.

Before leaving, they went for a stroll around the garden to ease their somewhat vexed souls. To their surprise, it was a delightful and well-tended garden, with several mature, unusual trees, a large rectangular pond complete with lily pads and wide, innovatively planted borders. It was decidedly tranquil, especially as they were the only ones there apart from one gentleman (presumably a visitor rather than the elderly Brother variety).

It started to rain heavily at one point as they walked back along the streets to the city centre, but they were able to shelter underneath some overhanging trees, with the added benefit of Osborn's umbrella. It was while they were thus waiting that a text arrived from Madeleine to wish Sandra a happy birthday. She and Henri were waiting to go on a helicopter flight over the Grand Canyon – which on the whole, was slightly more exciting than waiting underneath a dripping tree in the streets of Winchester for the rain to stop – but it lifted Sandra's vaguely dampened spirits immensely and the rain soon began to ease.

As it was just gone 14:00 by the time they returned to the city centre, they went inside the nearby museum for a fascinating perusal of ancient artefacts, mostly Roman, with some Anglo-Saxon ones for good measure. In a different area, they came across reconstructed 19th and 20th century shops, where some items looked worryingly familiar.

They were both wilting spectacularly by the time they left the museum, so dragged themselves along to the Park & Ride bus stop, where a bus obligingly arrived after a few minutes and transported them back to the car park.

The usual drive along the leafy tree tunnel roads back to the old stables followed and a pizza fuelled the flagging life-force. Raspberries and ice cream were the icing on the cake – at which point it occurred to Sandra there had been no birthday cake. She smiled at how Madeleine would have been distressed at that knowledge!

The next morning, Sandra told Osborn she'd managed to sleep despite the trauma of the missing birthday cake, although she was only speaking in jest. Osborn had woken up after a night of intermittent coughing and could only speak in very deep tones that might have put Barry White himself to shame. Fortunately, the magic cup of tea worked wonders and since it was sunny, they decided there and then to visit an acclaimed garden in Surrey.

A journey of about 45 minutes along an increasingly busy road took them to the extensive garden and after a coffee and a cookie, it was time to hit the flower scene. Since they were map-less, they followed their noses through many areas planted according to the habitat. A diverse collection of sculptures kept popping up in various places, in all sorts of sizes and made from different materials. Sandra decided that some of them were quite evocative and meaningful, while others were far too obscure and arty for her.

They soon made their way to the massive Glass House, where they spent well over an hour wandering happily through the tropical zone, the moist temperate zone and the dry temperate zone. The range of flowers in the tropical zone was impressive, as were all of the specimens in general, ranging from the bizarre to the beautiful. Sandra could tell that Osborn was in seventh heaven – even possibly eighth – as he took a great many photos. The display of cacti was also amazing, although Sandra began to feel slightly headachey with the atmosphere and went outside in the cooler, fresher air to await the emergence of Osborn and his camera.

They were surprised to realise it was already time for lunch, so made their way to a fortuitously empty bench overlooking the Glass House and its surrounding lake. The sky began to look increasingly cloudy as they ate their cheese sandwiches and crisps, but there were still several resilient patches of blue and everywhere remained thankfully dry.

Their afternoon mission was to continue perusing the areas they so far hadn't reached, hoping the clouds would fail to release their contents. They particularly enjoyed the Rock Garden with its huge rocks, as well as the beautiful specimens in the Alpine Houses and the Bonsai Walk. The inspirational planting of the mixed borders created a colourful vibrancy and as they walked along, there was always the wonderful feeling that they never knew what delight they would come across next. The clouds obligingly held on to their rain.

However, tiredness was setting in fast and with the best will in the world, their still virally compromised bodies were complaining and occasionally coughing. Osborn's voice had begun to sound gravelly, although more like decorative garden gravel than the heavy-duty industrial variety. They kept going for as long as was humanly possible, before passing through the gift shop in a slight daze and buying nothing because it all seemed a little pricey.

It had been a really enjoyable day, but as she later sank into sleep, Sandra found herself wondering how Madeleine had enjoyed her flight over the Grand Canyon and how Belinda was managing to survive.

When they surfaced on the last day of their holiday, there was a pale blue sky streaked with rather a lot of white cloud. Since the day they'd arrived, the temperature had gradually dropped quite considerably, although for the time of year it could have been a whole lot worse.

They opted for a quiet day at another garden in West Sussex. It took them a little over an hour to drive there along several of the now familiar leafy tree tunnel roads that

Sandra considered must be a nightmare in autumn. As they got out of the car, the air felt end-of-summer cool, but there were still plenty of sunny intervals.

After a cappuccino, they headed outdoors towards the beckoning delights of the garden. Originally a late 19th century estate of around 600 acres, the house had been partially destroyed by fire in 1947, the ruins of which served only to enhance the overall romantic atmosphere by looking like an authentic Gothic garden feature. There was so much vibrant colour still in the summer borders that people were stopping and staring appreciatively.

They particularly enjoyed the South African garden, which wasn't large and quite a few of its flowers were past their best, but the overall feel of it was so good that they sat near it to eat their sandwich lunch. There was hardly anyone around, the sun shone for a while and it was enchanting. Sandra decided she would quite like to die in a garden.

After some more meandering, they drove back to the old stables and enjoyed yet another very relaxed late afternoon and evening.

"Despite the virus and the news about Trudie, I'm glad we had this holiday," said Sandra reflectively, as she stood waiting for the kettle to boil, which was more or less a physical impossibility.

"Mm-hm," replied Osborn distractedly, looking up from his crossword. "We needed to get away, it's just a pity it wasn't a particularly healthy or carefree week. Belligerence, that's the word! Ah, no it isn't..."

"We have to go back, though," said Sandra pensively. "After the awful sadness about Lawrence, I thought Maddy's wedding was a fundamental positive in our lives to get us back on track, but it seems life had other ideas. I honestly can't imagine how Belinda's feeling, as well as Ian. With his social anxiety, he's going to find the funeral extra hard. It must feel terrible for Peter too, losing his sister."

"Tell me about it," muttered Osborn, "although my sister's still alive. I feel exceptionally sorry for her husband David, finding her like that." Osborn's voice wavered for an instant. "Ah, exasperation!"

"What?" Sandra gave Osborn a penetrating glance, but it didn't work. "I don't know how Mum's reacted to the news about Trudie, either, but she's always been a bit remote towards that generation of the family – except her own grandchildren, of course – so I don't suppose she's been *that* much affected. I still don't look forward to going back, though."

"Quite so," replied Osborn, reverting completely to distraction mode. "Antagonism?"

"Very possibly," said Sandra, knowing she was talking to herself. "At least Maddy's enjoying herself at the moment in Los Angeles and all seems quiet on the Aberpontyfan front. Ho hum. Come on kettle! Ah, it might have helped if I'd actually turned the sodding thing on."

Four days later, Sandra visited Alison, but could sense right away that her friend was on edge. After asking about the Hampshire holiday and Sandra's consequent reply about her cousin's daughter's suicide, Alison heaved a sigh and plunged into her own story.

"I'm sorry to add to your bad news, but Dirk has bowel cancer," she said in a rush, her face flushing slightly. "He's booked in for a colonoscopy, but he'll almost certainly need an operation and a colostomy bag. Afterwards, chemotherapy..." Alison's voice tailed off.

"Oh Ally! I'm so, so sorry..." Sandra's own voice tailed off for a second. "Dirk must be feeling really scared, but how are *you* feeling?"

"Scared," replied Alison with a small laugh. "Actually, terrified. I keep thinking of all sorts – hundreds of small things in amongst the big ones. I feel as if I'm being quite selfish, because I keep thinking how it's going to affect *me*."

"I think that's perfectly natural," replied Sandra carefully, hoping she was saying the right thing, "because it *will* affect you and you need to look after yourself too. You have some problems with your own health after all, so you need to consider yourself, or else you won't be able to help Dirk after his op." She stopped uncertainly.

"I know, I just feel so afraid and useless, because what I'd really like to do is run away from everything and everyone. Sam and Karen seem to be overreacting, as if Dirk's been given a death sentence, whereas Helen is carrying on as if everything's normal. My son is reacting emotionally and my daughter's reacting impassively."

"I suppose they're both dealing with it in their own way," considered Sandra, gazing at Alison with compassion. "I suppose Helen will be able to help you practically because she lives locally, but will Sam be able to visit?"

"If Karen lets him," replied Alison wryly. "I know Wales isn't a million miles away – I'll never forget them saying it was only an hour and a half up the motorway when they moved – but to be honest, I'm not sure if it would be him looking after me, or me looking after him."

"It's difficult when looking after our children seems like second nature, even when we don't necessarily have anything left to give," agreed Sandra, trying to assess how she would feel in the same position, but failing. "I think perhaps all you can really do right now is take it day by day. When is the colonoscopy?"

"Next week," replied Alison dully. "I'm even lying awake at night worrying about driving him to the hospital and parking and everything. I even thought how I wish I was a non-driver like you, so I wouldn't have to worry about driving at all!"

"Ah, if you were a non-driver like me, you'd lie awake at night fretting your head off about how to get to the damn hospital by bus or taxi," replied Sandra, smiling. "I think the trick for us both here is how to get the worry levels themselves down, which is far easier said than done. Actually, on a practical level, I'm sure Osborn would help with a lift to the hospital. He keeps telling Mum all she needs to do is ask for a lift."

"How is your mum?" asked Alison, sounding as if she needed a distraction.

"I don't know, I haven't seen her since before we went to Hampshire," admitted Sandra, "although I rang her when we got back. I'm seeing her tomorrow, I'm sure I'll get a bit of an earful in one way or another."

"Good luck with that one, then," said Alison, smiling. "I'm glad I didn't put you off coming here today, I feel as if I've got things off my chest."

"I'm sorry, I just had to get it off my chest," said Caroline the following day, as Sandra sat listening to her mother's account of her trialsome week, while Sandra had been on holiday enjoying herself. "It was such a shock to hear about Trudie and I had nobody here to talk to about it."

"You could have rung us to talk," said Sandra patiently. "You have both our mobile phone numbers and I'm always saying you can ring us."

"I don't like to bother you," came one of Caroline's standard replies. "I've been feeling so tired all week, really exhausted. It's worrying."

"Have you been sleeping OK?" asked Sandra, worried about her mother's health.

"It's funny you should mention that," replied Caroline glumly, "because I've been lying awake for hours most nights. I was worrying about whether I should ring Belinda and what to do about flowers for Trudie's funeral, but now you're back we can see to it together. I take it you've rung Belinda?"

"Well no, I haven't, but I emailed her this morning. She rang yesterday to give us the funeral details when I was at Alison's house, so Osborn spoke with her. I was feeling a bit weird yesterday when I got back, because Alison told me Dirk has bowel cancer."

"Oh dear. He's young for that, isn't he?"

"No, he's five years older than Alison and she's five years older than me, so that makes him 71."

"Oh well, he's not in his late 80s like I am, so he's got a better chance of getting over it. I suppose you want to do some gardening this afternoon, I see there are some dandelions on the lawn. I was thinking that the big bush in the rockery out the front is looking very straggly. I wonder if it should be taken out?"

"You want me to take it out?" Sandra felt her ire rising despite her very best intentions. "You need to ask me outright, it's your garden after all."

"Oh no, I always think of it as our garden, because you do so much work in it. I'm always telling people you look after my garden for me. You're the boss."

"No, I'm not," said Sandra abruptly. "Anyway, I won't be gardening today, because it's actually pouring with rain."

"Is it? I hadn't noticed. Oh goodie, that means we can play *Scribble!*"

As the afternoon progressed, along with the tedious, interminable, excruciating game of *Scribble*, Sandra felt her energy compressing at her temples, as if invisible nutcrackers were squeezing her head relentlessly.

"Hello Mumsie," said Madeleine's clear, familiar, comforting voice at the end of the phone line. "How are you?"

"Hello darling," replied Sandra gladly. "Well, it's been a bit sad because of Trudie, although Belinda's being so strong. I don't know how she's managing it. The funeral's soon, I'm not looking forward to that. Grandma's been very woebegone since we've been back, but we did enjoy Hampshire – so I'm OK, but how are *you*? How was the second honeymoon?"

"It was good," replied Madeleine, although for some reason Sandra detected a minuscule amount of hesitation in the familiar voice of her daughter. "Yes, it was good! I have to say Las Vegas was much more Henri's thing than mine, but the Grand Canyon was quite spectacular. I liked Los Angeles, but I loved San Francisco. In fact, if there was one place I'd revisit, it would be San Francisco."

"Wow," said Sandra, "I nearly went there once, but then I didn't. Tell me more about it, Mad, I'm so glad you loved it there."

As Madeleine continued to talk, Sandra felt more at peace than she'd been for a while, simply listening to Madeleine's voice as if it were attuned to her own heart. When the call eventually ended, she realised she was smiling.

"I wonder what the point is sometimes," said Gulliver over the phone, unusually pessimistic. "Life feels flat and dull, as if I'm not really living it. I'm always having to stay at home or do something for the children while Bryony's at work, instead of going out in the wild places, taking photos. I have stomach troubles too, I'm going to try soya milk."

"Oh dear," said Sandra worriedly, unsure of where the conversation was heading. "I hope it helps, I know how a dodgy digestive system makes you feel quite shit."

"Exactly," replied Gulliver grimly. "That's what milk seems to do to me."

"Do you feel better when you're out?" asked Sandra, trying to ascertain what was really wrong. "I mean out walking, or taking photos?"

"Nearly always," replied Gulliver immediately, "but it's getting up the enthusiasm to go and do it. I seem to have lost my oomph."

"Oh no, not your oomph," said Sandra semi-humorously, trying anything that sprang to mind to lift his spirits. "When we go to Ireland next month, there'll be plenty of photo opportunities there, surely?"

"Yes," replied Gulliver, brightening just a little. "Actually, it should be a good place for star photos where we'll be. Dad said he wanted to try star photos."

"It'll do him good too," said Sandra hopefully. "It's coming around quickly, it only seems weeks ago we decided to go to Ireland in the first place. I'm a bit worried about crossing the Irish Sea near the end of October, though."

"You'll be fine," said Gulliver quickly. "Actually, we'll be coming back in November. Juniper asked if we were going anywhere at half-term, but she gets so excited that I haven't told her yet. I don't think I said, but I was quite pleased the other day because she apologised to me when she did something naughty – a spontaneous sorry, so it felt really good."

"There you are," said Sandra, smiling. "You never know when something positive is going to happen, however seemingly small."

"I can't help wishing something positive and big would happen soon," replied Gulliver sombrely, "because the thought of another samey week like the last one fills me with a kind of empty dread."

"Everything changes after a while," said Sandra ineffectually. "Nothing lasts forever." When the call ended soon afterwards, she realised she was frowning.

CHAPTER 13

Sandra was sitting near the back of a packed church, in between Osborn and her mother, gazing in sorrowful disbelief at the coffin she could just about see if she craned her neck a little to the left. The smell of incense was heavy in the air, as her eyes kept seeking the back of Belinda many rows of pews in front. She felt an almost overwhelming feeling of compassion as she glimpsed her cousin sitting bravely and faithfully close by the coffin containing the mortal remains of her daughter Trudie.

Belinda had told Sandra how she'd put a small carved figure of an angel inside Trudie's coffin with her, which was an image that touched Sandra deeply. For a moment she'd tried to think how she would feel putting a small carved angel into a coffin containing Madeleine, but the thought was so terrifyingly painful that she'd veered away from it instantly.

The service was thankfully very sincere and meaningful, which Sandra knew would be comforting Belinda in some deep part of her being. Several people were either crying openly or holding back tears, but as far as she could tell, Belinda was sitting upright and dry-eyed. She wondered if this was because Belinda was feeling a sorrow too deep for tears – the devastating feeling she had instinctively veered away from when she'd allowed herself briefly to imagine Madeleine in Trudie's place.

Six days later, as the October mornings were becoming darker and often colder, Alison visited Sandra's house. Sandra thought that her friend appeared somehow smaller than she normally did, sitting a little huddled in the corner of the sofa, while she cradled her mug of tea.

"The colonoscopy showed two lumps," said Alison matter-of-factly, "but they're saying he can have keyhole surgery, which is the better option. The operation's booked for four weeks today. It seems ages away, the waiting is going to be painful. We're already like bears with sore heads, snarling at each other. I know I should be sympathetic and loving, but I feel completely overwhelmed."

"I would too in your shoes," said Sandra gently. "I think you're being wonderful, the way you're getting on with life. I would be a wailing agoraphobic mess by now."

"You wouldn't," responded Alison warmly. "That's how I feel inside, every morning when I wake up and it hits me. After a while of sheer terror, though, I know that I have to get out of bed, or else I'll lie there and rot. Then once I'm up, it's that tiny bit easier to go through the motions and get on with everything. The times when I can disengage my brain are best, but I can't always do that."

"I still think you're wonderful," said Sandra truthfully. "That's what bravery is, feeling the fear and doing it anyway. Believe me, I know about fear – it's incredibly, mind-bendingly, gut-wrenchingly frightening."

Five days later as mid-October approached, Sandra heard Osborn answering the home phone one Saturday afternoon while she was changing the bedding upstairs. Osborn came to find her after the call had ended, looking troubled.

"That was Anne Stanpool," he said with a worried frown. "She asked me to let you know that Alison's had a stroke."

"A stroke? Alison?" Sandra could hardly believe what she was hearing. "A *stroke*?" She sat on the bed, as shock rendered her legs unreliable.

"It happened this morning when she was on her way home from having a flu jab," explained Osborn. "Fortunately, she was with Dirk, who recognised what was happening and rang for an ambulance straight away. Anne said she doesn't know any more details, except that because Alison got to hospital quickly, it's looking good. Well, as good as a stroke can be, I suppose."

"That's something at least," replied Sandra, sighing deeply. "God, what's going to happen with Dirk's bowel cancer operation now Alison's had a stroke? They're in such a mess, I feel terrible for them. What with Lawrence, Trudie and now Alison and Dirk – what exactly in the name of sodding sanity is going on this year?"

Another five days later (since the same five days would have been a time malfunction), Sandra was visiting Caroline on a fine Thursday afternoon. As ever, she found that being outside and working in a garden was therapeutic and went back into the house feeling better than when she'd gone out from the house. A few minutes later, Osborn arrived to join them both for a mug of tea.

"Gulliver sent me an email," he said to Sandra while Caroline was in the kitchen.

"How's he doing?" asked Sandra equably. "He hasn't emailed me for ages."

"He's got the itinerary for that trip to Iceland in February – the one he mentioned in the summer, do you remember?" asked Osborn, a little uncomfortably.

"Yes, I remember," said Sandra, as little shivers of a future trial to be endured chilled her being, which had so recently been warmed from gardening.

"He said Bryony's OK about him going, because Anne and Stan have agreed to go and stay with her while he's away," continued Osborn, now he'd broached the subject.

"How long is it for?" asked Sandra, trying not to convey her anxiety.

"The whole trip is ten days, but there's a five-day option," replied Osborn, as Sandra heard Caroline making noises with mugs and spoons in the kitchen. "I don't know how you feel about it?"

"I think you probably have a good idea of how I feel," replied Sandra quietly. "I want you to go, I really do, but it's the idea of being left alone to cope with Mum that's the killer."

"I won't go, then," said Osborn, testing the Icelandic water.

"No, you should go," said Sandra, sighing. "I couldn't live with myself if I stopped you fulfilling your dream of seeing the Northern Lights."

"I may not see them," said Osborn, tentatively smiling.

"I hope you do," replied Sandra with a brief smile. "I have to say, though, that ten days is a long time."

"I'll go for the five-day option," replied Osborn. "I've already made up my mind."

"Made up your mind about what?" asked Caroline, as she came into the room carrying three mugs on a small tray.

"Gulliver's asked me to go to Iceland with him in February to see the Northern Lights," replied Osborn quickly.

"What about you, Sandra, don't you want to go?" asked Caroline, standing still to look at Sandra.

"I'd love to see the aurora borealis," replied Sandra, loving the sound of the proper name, "but I'd hate the ice and snow."

"Oh well, I expect it'll do Osborn good to go with Gulliver," replied Caroline, teetering a little. "He needs to live his life."

"We all do," said Sandra, standing up to help Caroline with the mugs. "I do."

"I *am* here in the room," said Osborn, looking askance. "I do miss Gulliver and Madeleine, it's true. As does Sandra."

"How's Madeleine after her trip to America?" asked Caroline, clearly changing the subject as Sandra took the tray.

"We haven't heard much from her, although they both enjoyed the places they visited," replied Osborn, taking his mug. "Thank you. I don't know when we'll be seeing her again."

"She's had a busy time, what with the wedding and everything," said Sandra, remembering Madeleine's Lawrence-related visits earlier in the year. "I don't think she has any leave left."

"I suppose you'll be going to Bristol soon, then," said Caroline, sitting down to take her mug from Sandra. "At least it's not very far away. Now that I've been across to France on the ferry, I was thinking the other night that if she and Henri move to France, it'll still be easy for you to go and see them."

"It won't be easy," replied Sandra hotly, as she held on to her own mug for too long. "Ouch. It's across the Channel and it would be *awful* if Maddy moved to France!" She sat down, as disturbing thoughts and feelings from various angles assailed her. She was angry with Caroline for so carelessly bringing up a subject that Sandra knew her mother was perfectly aware upset her deeply.

'How can she do this to me?' she thought tiredly, as her anger subsided. 'She must realise I'm struggling somewhat right now, what with poor Belinda, Alison, Dirk and now Osborn going to Iceland and leaving me alone with her. It feels like just another shock after too many shocks lately. Still, I suppose it's not as bad as what Belinda, Alison and Dirk are having to cope with at the moment.'

Alison was home from hospital and had asked Sandra to visit if she could. Since it was only nine days after Alison's stroke, Sandra felt apprehensive as she arrived at the house, where Dirk opened the front door looking weary. He showed Sandra in to the sitting room, where Alison was sitting in her usual chair, looking tired but determined.

"Hello you!" said Sandra warmly, surprised at how delighted she was to see her friend looking so normal.

"It's good to see you," replied Alison, smiling slightly lopsidedly. "I hope you didn't mind me more or less asking you to come, but I want to get back to normal. I have to really, for Dirk." She wiped the side of her mouth with a tissue. "Sorry. I keep dribbling a bit, but it's getting better."

"It's not noticeable," replied Sandra truthfully. "Do you want to talk about it all?"

For the next hour or so, Alison talked about her experiences of the last nine days with her usual mix of forthright honesty, lurid description and wry humour. At times she stopped to search for words and wiped her mouth frequently, but Sandra was amazed at her recovery.

"I have a bit of trouble with the leg still," explained Alison, after Sandra said she should really go. "I have to use a stick and I drag my foot, but it's early days."

"I'll say," agreed Sandra fervently. "I think you're amazing, I really do!"

"Thank you," responded Alison, smiling. "Are you around next week?"

"Oh! No, I forgot to say, we'll be in Ireland with Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc," replied Sandra, putting on her jacket. "It's Dirk's operation the week after that, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied Alison, making a face. "I should be careful what I wish for. Do you remember me saying I wished I was a non-driver like you? Well, I can't drive now."

"I'm sure that's not the way you wanted it to happen," replied Sandra kindly. "I can remember telling you Osborn would be only too happy to give you a lift to hospital and here we are going away..."

"Don't worry about that," said Alison, holding on to the wall. "I've managed to get quite a list of lift volunteers together. Helen's going to take us in on the day and Sam's going to come and stay after the op, so I'm well covered. Not quite as well covered as I was, though, because eating's a bit of a palaver. I'm having to relearn how to use a fork, of all things. Anyway, have a great time in Ireland!"

"I'm not sure it's a good idea crossing the Irish Sea at the end of October," said Sandra nervously, as they left Pembroke Dock on the *Isle of Inishmore*. The Irish captain had just announced in rather a lilting, delectable Irish accent that the crossing would probably be a little rough and in the event of motion sickness, the advice was to stay seated.

For two days before their departure, Gulliver had talked about the shipping forecast, sea state, wave height and red warnings, as moderate to strong gales were expected. To be fair, he did try to put Sandra's mind at rest by saying it looked as if they might be sailing in a lull between the bad weather, so Sandra had kept her hopes up for a good, long lull. However, the weather had been skittish as they'd sat in a car park an hour or so earlier to eat a sandwich lunch, culminating in a huge cloudburst with accompanying strong winds.

Once aboard the ferry, they'd found some comfortable seats with a small table in between and settled down for the next four hours. There were some white-crested waves and the wave action resulted in people veering from side to side as they walked along, but the movement was really quite gentle to what Sandra had been envisaging. She was able to relax a little, by helping to keep Juniper and Petroc occupied with comics, colouring and trips to the play area.

As the late afternoon progressed into early evening, they ate more sandwiches and had a hot drink, until eventually some twinkling lights of Ireland came into view. Sandra felt quite a surge of excitement as she looked out at Ireland, after all her hours of slaving at the computer over a hot family tree with some strong Irish roots.

It wasn't long before they were ready to drive off the *Isle of Inishmore* into the intoxicating Irish evening, although no alcohol had as yet been consumed. Gulliver had booked a one-night stay at Rosslare, before they would be travelling across Ireland to County Galway the following day. After driving for only five minutes, they arrived at Cedars Hotel and checked in with the help of a delightfully accented Irish lady.

Their rooms were large and inviting, but since it was approaching 20:00 and Gulliver wanted to avail himself of a Guinness, they convened at a corner table in a spacious bar that was far from crowded. After one drink, Bryony took Juniper and Petroc up to bed, at which point, Gulliver looked enquiringly at Osborn to see if he was going to have another Guinness. Osborn needed no deliberation and Sandra decided to keep them both company with a second drink. It wasn't a particular hardship.

"Sláinte!" said Gulliver, grinning happily.

"Your good health!" said Osborn politely.

"Bottoms up!" said Sandra with tired excitement. "Imagine! I'm in *Ireland!*"

She was still in Ireland the following morning, as they breakfasted early while the sky was still gradually lightening. It was overcast by the time they checked out at 08:15, heading north towards Dublin to visit Newgrange, a Neolithic passage tomb in the Boyne Valley. The roads were reminiscent of what English roads had been like several decades ago, with much less volume of traffic and therefore fewer frustrated, angry drivers. Sandra found the place names to die for, with so many Bally-somethings that she was in Bally-heaven (not on the map).

On arrival at Newgrange Visitor Centre, they paid their entrance fee and were allocated a scheduled tour. A shuttle bus then took them on a short drive to the passage tomb, where they were assigned a guide and walked a short distance up to the actual site. It was most impressive with its massive grass covered mound – and positively mind-blowing to think it had been built around 3,200 BC, before Stonehenge and the Great Pyramid of Giza. Around the base was a retaining wall of 97 kerbstones, some of them decorated with megalithic art.

They first had a short talk outside in bracing autumn air about the history and the stones, while the previous tour group was still inside. Sandra was so entranced by their guide's Irish-accented words that she realised she was listening to the accent more than the meaning. The entrance stone was obviously very significant, though, with wonderful carvings of circles, concentric semicircles, spirals, lozenges and a triple spiral. Above the entrance passage was a 'roof box', the purpose of which came to light when it was their turn to go inside.

The passageway led to a central chamber with three alcoves and was therefore in a cruciform design. It was a bit of a crush as they all gathered in the central chamber, but the talk was quick, entertaining and informative, culminating in a display that started off in total darkness to mimic the effect of the sun's rays entering through the roof box at winter solstice.

It was soon over and they were shepherded out in time for the next group to enter. The weather was fortunately still dry as they walked around the outside of the monument, looking more closely at the intricate carvings on some of the kerbstones.

However, it was also very cold and windy, so they made their way down to the shuttle bus and back to the Visitor Centre. There was a spacious but quite crowded café there, where they enjoyed a snack lunch and Sandra was ridiculously pleased to see that the chocolate sprinkles on her cappuccino were in the shape of a shamrock.

The next few hours were undeniably tedious as they drove west, except for some amazing Irish place names such as Drogheda, Ballybrit, Ballinaboy, Gort, Oughterard and Muckanagherdauhaulia. Back to reality, though, they stopped once at a town on the River Shannon to buy supplies, to use the facilities and to fill up with petrol. Some roads had been toll roads, but were very reasonably priced at around €3 or less.

The final leg of the journey took them to the region of Connemara, as they approached the west coast proper and eventually their destination of Roundstone, situated on the western arm of Bertraghboy Bay, County Galway.

Sandra was surprised it was such a mountainous area, as they took a short recess at Recess, a small village nestling in an area of bogland, forest and lakes, dominated somewhat by the brooding Twelve Bens, a range of impressive quartzite sharp-peaked mountains. They got out of the cars for a short time in an extremely cold wind and gazed at the view opposite. On the lower slopes of the mountains were the famous Connemara green marble quarries.

Impossible to miss in the parking area was a monumental sculpture of the Connemara Giant, although it was hard to take a photo of it in the lighting conditions. Juniper and Petroc, on being released from their car, ran around the Giant's base to expend some energy. While watching out for them, Sandra noticed that behind the giant there was a strange geometric monument bearing a plaque that stated: "ON THIS SITE IN 1897 NOTHING HAPPENED." She decided there and then that she absolutely loved Irish humour.

The light was failing as they finally drove along a very scenic coastal road to the fishing village of Roundstone, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. It had an 'end of the land' feel, due to the many rocks, small islands and inlets, with seaweed scattered thickly along the shore. After turning up a hill and through some fairly scattered houses, they drove along a short rural road to where their holiday home awaited them amongst gorse and moorland, against the backdrop of the friendly looking Errisbeg Mountain.

A rather frenetic session of room allocation and unpacking followed, after which Bryony kindly made them a tuna pasta bake. The usual early evening activities followed, before Juniper and Petroc went off happily enough into their shared bedroom and peace finally reigned. A lot of peace, as it happened, since it appeared that Gulliver and Bryony had an aversion to watching television.

"Do you really dislike watching television that much?" Sandra asked Gulliver, knowing that at home they used a computer to watch a few programmes.

"I can't stand that reality television shite that's on these days," replied Gulliver, looking up from his phone.

"I can remember you watching *Big Sibling* when you were working at *Bangia*," said Sandra, peeved at herself for letting Gulliver's wishes (or possibly Bryony's, or both) override hers and Osborn's.

"Different place, different time, different life," replied Gulliver distractedly. "Any idea of what you want to do tomorrow? The weather's a bit on the windy side, so maybe we could go to a nearby beach and see what's around?"

"That sounds fine," said Osborn, looking up from his novel. "There's only one thing I really want to do on this trip, which is to go to Achill Island. I can remember my grandfather telling me how he went there on holiday with his family."

"Fair enough," replied Gulliver, looking over at where the wood burner remained in a cold and unburning condition. "Are you cold?" he asked hopefully.

"Not at all, the underfloor heating here is brilliant," said Osborn appreciatively.

"Shame," said Gulliver disconsolately. "Maybe it'll be a lot colder tomorrow."

"Achill Island is quite a distance away in County Mayo," said Bryony, looking up from her tablet. "We can go there, though, it looks interesting."

"Anything you especially want to do, Mother?" asked Gulliver, looking expectantly at Sandra. "You have family connections in Ireland, you said?"

"Yes, but nowhere near here unfortunately," replied Sandra, thinking fondly of the paternal great-grandfather she'd never known about until almost two years previously. "County Tipperary. My great-grandfather was born in Carrick-on-Suir, however you actually say it. Carrick-on-See-yewer..."

"And so the dreaded Irish accents begin," said Gulliver, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I can't help it, it's in my genes," replied Sandra, itching to try it again. "Syure..."

"Please keep it in your jeans," said Gulliver, grinning. "It's better there."

"Anywhere you want to go especially, Bryony?" asked Osborn, looking across at where she was engrossed in her tablet.

"Me? Oh – no, not really," replied Bryony, taken by surprise. "I'm just having a look at what's around here, seeing if there's anything for the children."

"There are bound to be some things," replied Sandra uncertainly. "Surely?"

"I've come here mainly for the scenery," said Gulliver openly. "Stars, mountains, seascapes..."

"Peat bogs," added Osborn, yawning. "That wind's blowing up a bit. What did you say the forecast was for tomorrow?"

"Wind," replied Gulliver simply. "A bit of wind."

CHAPTER 14

It wasn't the howling wind and driving rain that kept Sandra awake as much as her mind's inability to sink down into sleep. It was past 01:00 before she managed a few fitful hours, until hearing voices at 05:45 – thankfully in the living room and not inside her head. The hour had been put back, so it wasn't as bad as it seemed, although Juniper and Petroc were repeatedly running up and down the corridor outside their room.

As it became full daylight, the wind was still blowing fiercely, but the house was very snug with its underfloor heating and triple glazed windows. By 09:15, they were all dressed up and ready to go for the short drive along a small rural road with a wide strip of grass growing in the middle to the deliciously named Gurteen Beach.

As soon as they stepped outside the car, they discovered the wind was extremely forceful. Sandra was even a bit concerned that Juniper and Petroc could be blown away on a sudden freak gust. However, they started their walk on a path above a long stretch of silvery sanded beach, with many 'white horses' racing madly out at sea. As there were quite a lot of big rocks in places, there were some spectacular waves crashing into them amid plumes of wild, white spray. In the exposed rough spots, Bryony kept hold of Petroc and Sandra kept hold of Juniper, while Osborn and Gulliver took lots of photos.

There had been a short, sharp shower not long after they'd arrived and about half an hour later, a sudden squally shower caught them right out in the open. The wind was so strong that Sandra stood still and held on to Juniper, being constantly buffeted around and having to fight to stand up at all. Hailstones stung their faces and because they were turned away from it, the hail was driving into their backs and the backs of their legs.

Gulliver was wearing winter trousers, while Osborn and Bryony were wearing waterproof overtrousers, but the children and Sandra weren't nearly as well equipped. Sandra could feel the backs of her legs becoming soaking wet, but the wind was so strong that when the hail stopped and the sun came out again, they fortunately dried fairly quickly.

They walked further along, noticing more people had arrived to watch the waves, or to walk their dogs. Sandra was actually glad the dogs were on leads, so they couldn't take sudden flight. Osborn and Gulliver were still ensconced in photographic activities, but when another squally shower arrived and they became wet all over again, both Sandra and Juniper were reaching the end of their good humour. Juniper complained to Gulliver and to Sandra's relief, he agreed it was probably time to walk back to the car.

Although Sandra's gloves were wet and useless, the backs of her legs were drying out once again as they retraced their steps. However, just before they reached the car park, the inevitable happened and another violent, squally shower rendered Sandra soaked again. She felt so uncomfortable as they drove back to the house that she was aware of being extremely disgruntled. It was a relief to take off all rain-soaked clothes (including knickers) and replace them with dry ones. Even the contents of her bag were soggy and had to be dried.

"Grandma wet her knickers," said Gulliver mischievously, as Sandra later joined the others in the kitchen area.

"You told them!" Sandra accused Osborn, who was the only one who'd known. She was still feeling disgruntled and afraid she might be losing her sense of humour. "I'm sorry, my gruntles seem to be dissed," she said a little desperately, as she gratefully sat down at the table with a hot coffee.

"I did tell you it was going to be a bit windy," said Gulliver, offering her a biscuit.

"It's blowing a flaming hoolie out there!" she exclaimed, taking a bourbon.

"Did you know that in Ireland a hoolie means a get-together, or a party in a small place?" asked Bryony, looking at her tablet.

"Er – no," replied Osborn, crunching a gingernut. "What about going for a drive around the coast this afternoon? There seem to be quite a few viewpoints on this map."

"How strange, they're usually on the land itself," replied Gulliver, raising his eyebrows. "Well, I enjoyed it out there this morning, I love a bit of a hoolie."

The views of the coast were worth the drive, although when they all got out of the car at a monument to Alcock and Brown's trans-Atlantic flight in 1919, Sandra found it impossible to hold her camera steady. The mountains behind were misty as they drove back to the house for the rest of the day – until the evening slowly descended, along with the sudden quietude as Juniper and Petroc went to bed.

The next morning, they were awoken at 06:15 by a Petroc-type protestation, but delayed entry into the child zone until 07:10. Sandra had made a Grandma Sandra ruling that a mug of tea must be drunk by the grandma in question before she would take part in any reading stories, colouring, playing or talking. Some things were necessary for survival.

The weather seemed to be similar to the day before, although with a lessening of the wind. Bryony had planned a visit to a place called Cong, a village straddling the borders of County Galway and County Mayo. After leaving the house, they drove along a scenic moorland route that could easily have been the Lake District in England, with a range of mountains of varying heights and shapes rising above picturesque lakes below. The views were so inspiring that they stopped several times to take photos. It was fairly cold and they had to dodge some significant showers, but the wind was minimal compared to the previous day's savagery.

On arrival at Cong, their destination was the ruins of an Augustinian abbey, built on the site of a 16th century church. A rain shower greeted them just after they arrived, but they were able to shelter until it passed. Surprisingly, there were quite a few people wandering around as they first investigated the remaining architecture that included Gothic windows, Romanesque arches, pillars, columns and some outstanding sculpture.

Juniper and Petroc seemed happy enough to run around in the abbey grounds, where one of the most interesting features was a ruinous monk's fishing house, probably built in the 15th or 16th century, on an island in the River Cong. It had been constructed on a platform of stones over a small arch that allowed the river to flow underneath. A trapdoor in the floor allowed the monks to drop a net to catch fish and thereby ensure a fresh supply whenever needed. Moving on to a bridge spanning the river, they stood for a while watching fish leap out of the water to catch flies.

"What is this life if full of care..." started Osborn poetically.

"We have no time to stand and stare..." continued Sandra in the same vein.

"And watch fish leaping out of water to catch flies?" asked Bryony drily.

"Actually, it's strangely compulsive watching the fish swim away in an unknown direction before popping up somewhere else," reflected Gulliver, although the water was a little murky. "Look Petroc, that fish is over there now!"

"Fish!" cried Juniper loudly. "Another fish!"

"Simple pleasures," muttered Sandra happily. "I really love them."

After leaving the abbey, they walked back through the town to the car park, where Sandra couldn't help admiring a perfect Irish green *Telefón* box and a blue *Garda* sign outside a police station that looked just like somebody's house.

"It's not that I want to ring the police, of course, it's more that the 1/8 Irish part of me is strangely happy," explained Sandra defensively.

"Maybe you were an informant in a previous Irish life," replied Gulliver jocularly. "Or else you're just strange."

Their packed lunch was consumed mainly in the cars, due to another rain shower that came from an increasingly cloudy sky. Gulliver suggested driving on a road up a moody mountain, where the clouds over the lake below were dark and dramatic. They

were able to nip out with cameras in between the showers, as the sky changed from one moment to the next with a dynamic mix of blue sky and rain-laden storm cloud.

"The weather is like this year has been on many fronts, meteorological and otherwise," said Sandra pensively to Osborn, as she gazed across the lake.

"Great views, though," replied Gulliver, having overheard.

After that, it wasn't too far to Clifden, the largest town in Connemara, where it was easy enough to find a supermarket. Everyone seemed a little tired, although Sandra enjoyed the understated but very present Irishness of the atmosphere. Not only were some excellent Irish products on sale, but Irish-type music floated out over the loudspeaker, interrupted occasionally by announcements about the week's special offers at so many Euro, all spoken in a delightful male Irish accent. By a man, as it happened.

Thanks to the supermarket, some very tasty sea bass was on the menu for the evening, after which Gulliver finally gave in to temptation and set about lighting the wood burner.

"I'm surprised it's taken you so long, to be honest," commented Sandra, as Gulliver sat on the floor with an impressed Petroc beside him, gazing at the growing flames. "You've been looking at that basket of logs since we arrived."

"Ah, but you'll be nice and warm, Mother," replied Gulliver, rolling up his sleeves.

"Warm isn't quite the word I'd use," said Osborn, wiping a hankie across his sweating brow.

"It's so hot!" said Sandra, taking off her cardigan as quickly as she could.

Sandra took a while to get to sleep and then heard Juniper up early at 5-something. When Sandra and Osborn later presented themselves in the living room area, though, they found Juniper busily practising her writing and doing very well indeed. Remembering quite clearly the thrill of learning how to write herself, Sandra forgave Juniper on the spot for the early call, even if Juniper might be contributing a little to the bags under her eyes.

It was a calmer, sunnier day that was perfect for their two-hour pilgrimage to Achill Island in County Mayo. Osborn's great-grandfather had been a coastguard in Ireland and his son (Osborn's paternal grandfather) had been born in County Clare. Osborn had inherited an old postcard of Achill Island showing a cluster of houses that were part of a small village at the foot of Mount Slievemore and he'd been fascinated ever since. This village had been deserted in the 1940s and the ruins of the houses left to slumber on in peaceful decline.

Some of the scenery was beautiful as they drove along through the mountain areas, with ground-level moorland and what looked like evidence of peat digging. Nearer their destination, they travelled along the Atlantic Drive, with spectacular views where the sea was very much in evidence. The west coast of Ireland seemed to consist of hundreds of inlets and islands of various shapes and sizes, the effect of which was simply stunning.

Eventually they arrived at Achill Island, the largest island off Ireland's west coast and joined to the mainland by a short road bridge. There was lots of blue sky with cotton wool clouds and as they drove along, Sandra realised it was more populated than she'd imagined, but still with a very spacious feel.

When they arrived at the deserted village near Dugort, Osborn was clearly transfixed and delighted to be at the actual place at last. The wind was punishingly cold, but the sight of the derelict, ruinous houses sprawling below the mountain, open to the elements and opposite the sea with its pretty inlets and islands, was strangely emotive. Osborn soon left the path they were on to head upwards on the somewhat boggy moorland to the 80 or so houses, with his camera purposefully in hand.

Sandra stayed on the path for a while, but couldn't resist the lure of history for long and eventually they all ended up on the hillside, wandering around slightly aimlessly and trying to keep warm, while Osborn bonded with the past. The sun kept disappearing behind clouds, but Juniper and Petroc seemed happy pretending that one house was Juniper's, while another was Petroc's. Sandra was impressed with their ability to play in that remote place, along with their apparent resilience to cold.

Once Osborn had seen enough, they returned to the cars for a packed lunch, where it was a relief to sit in the comparative warmth. Gulliver then led them on to the top of Mount Minaun, where there was the most glorious view and the most vicious wind. The ground was very peaty with significant bogginess, but well worth any discomfort to look out over peat bogs to the west coast Irish landscape of islands and inlets culminating in a mountainous horizon.

After succumbing to a freezing nose, cheeks and fingers, Sandra was simultaneously glad to get back in the car and sorry to be leaving such a wonderful place. The drive back was compensation enough, however, with the sky above the Connemara Mountains looking incredibly dramatic at one point, as dark grey rainclouds were pierced by an intense rainbow.

Pizza hit the spot for tea and after the children went to bed, Osborn disappeared outside with Gulliver to take star photos. Gulliver came in again to say that the Milky Way was visible with the naked eye, so Sandra and Bryony took their naked eyes outside to gaze upwards in suitable awe – and get in the way of Osborn's photos, since he couldn't see them in the darkness. It was a beautiful sight and a fitting end to a day full of beautiful sights.

Sandra slept quite well and joined the others at around 07:00 in the living room area, where Juniper was practising writing again. It was raining rather hard, so Gulliver and Bryony set about making a cooked breakfast as a holiday treat. As a non-meat eater, Sandra only had to open the front door once and sniff the fresh air, in an attempt to clear the smell of sizzling sausage-type dead flesh from her nostrils.

The rain persisted, so they stayed in for morning coffee, while Sandra mainly occupied herself with Juniper and her holiday scrapbook, plus other pen/paper/sticker activities with Petroc. The sky gradually cleared and after an early lunch at the house, they all prepared to walk up the mountain they could see nearby.

"There's no more rain forecast, is there?" Sandra asked Gulliver, remembering Gurteen Beach. "I've got no leggings."

"Neither have the children," replied Gulliver, packing his rucksack.

"Your mother's a child," said Bryony with what Sandra perceived as a provocative edge to her voice. She deliberately ignored Bryony and walked away.

"You haven't answered," called out Bryony, to Sandra's astonishment.

"No! I haven't answered," called Sandra back, reeling at the sudden, strange dialogue that seemed to have come from nowhere and was basically disrespectful.

She put the disturbing altercation from her mind, determined to enjoy the walk up Errisbeg Mountain. It seemed slightly far-reaching – or in this case, not far reaching enough – to call it a mountain, but since its actual name was Errisbeg Mountain, Sandra accepted that it could quite well be described as a small mountain.

From the house, they quickly reached the bottom of the mountain slope and began to climb upwards. The air was surprisingly warm and items of clothing were soon removed as they manoeuvred over rocks, boggy bits, streams and boulders. Some of the boulders were quite large and at one point, Sandra had to be hauled up rather ignominiously by Gulliver, but she decided she'd had worse experiences.

It had become evident that although there were faint tracks, there were no clear paths, but it seemed easy enough to carry on in an upward direction. They stopped every now and again for a breather and to look at the view below. This really put into context where the house was situated, not far from the sea and fairly isolated from other houses. The wider view was superb, with the typical islands and inlets against a mountainous horizon.

As they climbed, it became colder with the wind much more in evidence, so discarded clothing was put on once again. Sandra found that she was gradually tiring and when they reached a summit, only to see there was still a final one to go, she was happy to stay put with Bryony, Juniper and Petroc, while Osborn and Gulliver carried on to the top. Bryony sat with Petroc to shelter him from the cold, while Sandra spent her time with Juniper, who for some strange Juniper-type reason was pretending that one big bowl-shaped rock was a dinghy and they were serving each other food.

Above them, they could make out Osborn and Gulliver at the top, where Sandra could see Gulliver posing on a rock (presumably for photographic purposes rather than a strange rock fetish). Thankfully, the two of them descended far more quickly than they'd ascended, as staying still in the cold was becoming uncomfortable.

As they gradually made their way carefully down, the temperature improved but failed to achieve warmth. Sandra felt glad that once more they'd experienced close-up contact with the essential Ireland, as Ireland was beginning to feel more and more essential in her psyche.

A tuna pasta bake was enjoyed for tea and then Gulliver the firestarter sprang into action. The wood burner blazed away for a while until the flames settled down and the children went to bed, but for a change, Sandra asked if anyone wanted to play cards. Bryony declined, although Gulliver seemed happy to join in, as they started off fairly sedately with ordinary Rummy. It somehow progressed to Rummy 500, which eventually evolved into Rummy 1000.

"I'm enjoying this, it makes a change to have some adult fun," said Gulliver, grinning.

"That sounds vaguely dodgy," remarked Sandra, smiling at her son. "Mind you, it hasn't been a fun year for us either. No, we all need some more fun. Fun, fun, fun!"

"Sandra! It's your turn," prompted Osborn brusquely.

"OK," replied Sandra, wondering why Osborn and Bryony both seemed somewhat cheerless. "God, I can't concentrate properly, I think my mind's going."

"Your mind went years ago, Mother," said Gulliver agreeably.

"Thank you," replied Sandra, gazing at Gulliver for a moment. "You were always rude to me in a sort of inoffensive way. Do you remember all those names you used to call me?"

"Psycho bitch from hell, perchance?" asked Gulliver, sipping his beer.

"Yes! God, the psychology days seem so long ago, I can hardly remember much at all," mused Sandra, sipping her wine.

"Does Pavlov ring a bell?" asked Gulliver, beginning to snigger.

"Sandra!" exclaimed Osborn crossly. "It's your turn again."

"I'm going," replied Sandra, equally crossly. "It's a pity the sky wasn't clear enough for any star pictures tonight," she said, deciding to be conciliatory.

"It might be OK tomorrow or the night after," said Gulliver hopefully. "I thought we might go to Gurteen Beach to give it a try there, Dad, if you're interested?"

"Yes," replied Osborn distractedly. "Your turn, Gulliver."

"Astral photography is one of the many positives about digital photography, I suppose," pondered Sandra, wondering why Osborn seemed unable to relax.

"Oh, there are no negatives to digital photography," said Gulliver, grinning helplessly.

"You tit," said Sandra fondly, feeling an invigorating sense of freedom to be connecting with Gulliver again, despite Osborn's perceived distance.

"I can hear Petroc coughing again," said Bryony suddenly, looking up from her tablet. "I hope it doesn't keep him awake."

"I thought he was a little hoarse today," said Osborn seriously.

"A colt?" asked Sandra, feeling mirth threatening to rise.

"Not for me, it seems wrong to drink American malt when in Ireland," commented Gulliver, grinning again. "This is good stuff."

"So it appears," replied Sandra, chuckling. "I'm glad you're feeling happy. I hope Petroc's going to be OK, though, because I seem to have a bit of a tickle too, as if something might be brewing."

"I didn't think you were into beer, Mother," said Gulliver, unable to stop laughing at his own joke. "Oh, it's so good to laugh freely again!" he suddenly exclaimed. "I've just realised that I haven't laughed like this for ages."

"Nothing to do with the O'Hara's Irish Stout then," said Sandra, laughing at Gulliver as he released what seemed to be a build-up of emotion, by laughing until he was crying. Sandra recognised it as a long-lost phenomenon from his youth.

During the night, Sandra could hear that Petroc's cough had worsened slightly, although most of them didn't finally emerge until daylight came filtering through the blinds. When Sandra and Osborn walked the few steps to the living room area, Juniper was concentrating hard as she once again sat busily practising her new-found writing skills.

The weather was dry but considerably windy, so after the usual leisurely breakfasting and getting ready, they set off for the Sky Road, which sounded charmingly romantic. It involved heading north to Clifden, which didn't sound nearly as charmingly romantic, but led them on to a very scenic route that rose high above sea level, with spectacular views of the Atlantic Ocean.

At a very high point, they stopped in a fairly large parking area overlooking a spectacular panoramic view. Sandra grabbed her camera and got out of the car, before nearly getting right back in again because the wind was so extreme. She struggled along to the end of the parking area for the best view, with the raging wind literally taking her breath away. She had to hold her gloved hand up to her nose so she could breathe, which felt a bit scary and meant that when she went to take a photo, she had to cease breathing for a few seconds. It gave a whole new meaning to what constituted a breathtaking view.

The landscape was mostly heathland, grassland and a patchwork of traditional fields, while the panoramic view extended in an arc that looked out over the islands of Inishbofin, Inishshark, Omey, High Island, Inishturk and Inishturbot – which were names to die for, but not necessarily by being unable to breathe.

They drove on from the Sky Road Loop to the more northern Cleggan Loop that offered exhilarating views of the rocky Connemara coast around Cleggan, stopping several times as the scenery changed. At one place the waves were breaking hard over rocks and small islands, creating what must have been huge plumes of spray quite far out at sea.

It had been a loopy morning, but by about 11:30, they left the Cleggan Loop and drove on to Letterfrack – another delightful name. They headed to the Visitor Centre for Connemara National Park, but unfortunately it had closed for the winter season only the day before. There were, however, several walks from the Visitor Centre that looked interestingly Irish, with scenic mountain views, expanses of bogs, heaths, grasslands and woodlands.

After they'd eaten a sandwich lunch in their cars, they set off on the short Yellow Trail, but had only just started up the hill through some woodland, when Gulliver looked around and exclaimed at the rainclouds coming their way. After some deliberation, the general consensus was that they didn't especially want to get wet, so they turned around and retraced their steps – getting wet because they hadn't been quick enough.

An amicable split then followed, when Sandra (with wet knees) and Osborn (knee state unknown) drove to Clifden to buy food supplies and investigate gift shops that might sell unpolished pieces of Connemara marble, while the others drove to Kylemore Abbey. The quest for Connemara marble wasn't an entire success, but Sandra was able to hear some positively knee-melting Irish accents in the process, which possibly helped to dispel the dampness.

Their evening meal consisted of fried salmon, carrot and broccoli, followed by ice cream. Gulliver lit the wood burner and nearly smoked them all out, but managed to rectify matters before they all coughed themselves to death. Osborn and Juniper proceeded to laugh their way through a board game, the children had a bath and went to bed and then the playing cards came out. Rummy 500 was a little less raucous than the previous evening, but still a little on the rebelliously noisy side.

The weather looked similar to previous days when they arose at around 07:30, with several clear breaks amongst rather a lot of cloud cover. Since the clouds were moving along quickly, the wind was obviously quite high. Petroc seemed to be coping well with his cough and so the morning's plan was to return to Gurteen Beach and fly the kites that Gulliver and Bryony had bought the children at Kylemore Abbey the day before.

This time when they stepped out of the cars at the car park, they weren't nearly blown off their feet, which was a good start. The beach itself was reasonably empty for

most of the time they were there, especially the further along they walked. Also this time, the sea wasn't being frenziedly whipped up high on the beach, which meant there was a lot more fine white sand to walk on, topped with a significant amount of storm-fresh seaweed.

After a while, they came to an open and deserted expanse of sand that seemed idyllic for flying a kite. To begin with, Gulliver flew Petroc's kite and Bryony flew Juniper's kite, while both Sandra and Osborn attempted (with some difficulty) to take kite-flying photos. After a while, Osborn gave Juniper a helping hand and seemed even more pleased than Juniper when she nonchalantly began to fly the kite on her own.

Everyone was eventually kited out, so they drove the short distance back to the house for lunch. As they hadn't really investigated Roundstone itself, they took an afternoon stroll down the hill, along the prettily named Fuchsia Lane and into the village with its main street opposite the harbour. Although a small Irish village in November wasn't exactly the most vibrant of places, it was very pleasant weather. Some shops were still open and quite a few people were out and about, as they walked along to one section of the shore and then to the remains of a Franciscan monastery.

A reviving mug of tea followed their final Galway outing, followed later by baked potatoes with various accompaniments and a yoghurt dessert. Sandra was pretty sure she'd succumbed to Petroc's cold, as exhaustion hit her like a steam train – an Irish one, on its way to Ballyflamingvirus. While Osborn and Gulliver made an early evening visit to Gurteen Beach to take star photos, Sandra roused herself to play a board game with Juniper.

The stargazers returned with some astrally excellent photos, especially of the Milky Way and its billions of stars. They then settled in front of the wood burner for their final Irish evening, which involved a drink and another enjoyable session of Rummy 500.

"Did I mention the storm warning, Mother?" asked Gulliver, as Sandra was thinking of going to bed.

"What?" Sandra failed to shriek because of her increasingly dodgy larynx.

"Ye-es," continued Gulliver, winning the round. "There's a possibility our ferry might be cancelled tomorrow, I've got to check in the morning."

"No words," Sandra managed to say, which seemed to be an oxymoron.

The predicted stormy weather arrived overnight, erupting at 05:30 with thunder and lightning. Fortunately, it wasn't horrifically close, so Sandra and Osborn managed to doze until 07:15, when they presented themselves in the living room area to find out from Gulliver that while yesterday's ferry had been cancelled, their booked one at 21:00 would still be running. Sandra was glad and apprehensive at the same time, as well as feeling undeniably viral.

The usual organised chaos of having breakfast, getting ready, packing everything and leaving the holiday home was achieved in two hours, complicated by the understandably excitable Juniper and Petroc. There was much rain and wind around as they left, as well as an amazing rainbow that Sandra and Osborn managed to miss completely.

As they drove along, the mountains looked dark and brooding, swathed in misty grey cloud. On the moorland alongside the road, where rectangles of surface peat had been cut, they had turned overnight into huge, sodden peat bogs that somehow exuded an atmosphere of stoic desolation. Throughout the week on their travels, Sandra had often noticed deserted stone buildings that brought to mind the horrors of the Great Famine in the mid-19th century.

Since her Tipperary-born Irish great-grandfather had ended up in a London workhouse in 1851 at the age of eight, after fleeing Ireland with other family members, Sandra had been fascinated by the horrors of the famine. To her delight, their planned route back to Rosslare was going to take them through Carrick-on-Suir, something she was looking forward to with great anticipation, despite the inclement weather.

The journey was overcast and tedious as they entered the town of Tipperary, where it started to rain again. To Sandra's surprise, Gulliver and Bryony's car in front of them pulled up at St John's Famine Graveyard, which Sandra hadn't even known

existed. Her heart leapt in a mixture of ancestral delight and sorrow at the sight of the graveyard stretching upwards into the distance on the Tipperary hills and no amount of rain and cold wind would have kept her from getting out of the car to take a few photos.

From a sign on the wall, she ascertained that the famine graveyard had been established in 1847 close to the fever hospital, in order to accommodate the volume of deaths in Tipperary Workhouse. During October 1849 to May 1850, following years of deprivation and disease, around 1,400 people were buried there in mass graves. She could only stand for a few moments and vow to visit there again, but she was unutterably glad to have made even that quick connection with the past – her voice was still giving her trouble.

It was back to mundane reality after that and because it was approaching lunchtime, their next stop was at a small shopping mall with an eating place. It was pouring with rain by then and cold with it, so they were really glad to sit inside and enjoy a hot snack involving soup, bread rolls and chips.

Their next scheduled stop was at Carrick-on-Suir (rather than Carrick-sur-mer, as Gulliver said in an inadvertent moment). It had once been a thriving market town at the south-eastern corner of County Tipperary, straddling both banks of the River Suir. Sandra could hardly believe she was physically there as they arrived at the seemingly inconsequential Irish town that for so many months had merely been the fascinating but distant name of where her father's father's father had been born, totally unknown for six decades of her life.

It was bigger than she'd imagined, but the biting cold wind whipped around them relentlessly. The rain had stopped, but the temperature felt more like midwinter on a cold, grey afternoon. A cold, grey afternoon in Carrick-on-Suir, though! Sandra felt sorry for the others as they determinedly walked down the main street in less than amenable conditions, thinking how good of them it was to humour her, especially since there was nothing remotely funny about the wind.

They walked as far as a large and very sturdy looking stone bridge that had been built in 1447 across the river Suir and Sandra tried to hold her camera as still as possible while the wind buffeted her around persistently. The general feel of the place seemed a little run-down, but there were some historical buildings that definitely told a story, particularly the murals. Sandra was very glad she'd visited even briefly and promised herself she'd return.

Having completed a small circuit of the centre and feeling that the only sensible option was to seek shelter from the inhospitable weather, they decided a hot drink was needed. Nearby Blarney Woollen Mills turned out to be cosy and warm, selling some lovely hot chocolate that really hit the by then very chilled spot.

They wandered around the shopping area afterwards and even bought a couple of items. Sandra and Osborn had been having a brief look around the clothing section, when Sandra found herself standing in front of some cute Irish baby clothes.

"I don't know why, but I'm going to buy this bib for Madeleine's baby," she said dreamily. "I just have this feeling..."

"You do?" Osborn looked at her quizzically and then smiled. "So do I!"

As the light faded, however, it was time to leave Tipperary and head for Rosslare. Sandra was sad to go, but still interested in the places they passed by. At New Ross she was intrigued to see signs to a Famine Ship, which she ascertained to be an authentic replica of an 1840s' emigrant vessel to America. It was interesting, but Sandra would have loved to know where her great-grandfather had sailed from and where he'd landed.

With such thoughts still chasing themselves around in her head, they finally arrived at Rosslare just before 19:00. There was plenty of time to sit in their cars, eat the sandwiches made earlier that morning and worry about what the weather had in store. To Sandra's surprise, when Osborn went in search of a toilet, Gulliver left his car and came to sit beside Sandra in Osborn's vacant seat.

"How have you enjoyed the holiday then, Mother?" he asked in a diffidently endearing way.

"I've totally loved it," replied Sandra hoarsely. "Dad and I would never have come here on our own, so thank you for giving us the impetus. Thank you for Carrick-on-Suir

too. I felt as if I was looking at remains of Ireland's past with a secret pride in being one-eighth Irish. Yes, Ireland has been wonderful for me, even in the stormy weather. It was all part of the experience."

"Really?" Gulliver seemed surprised, but pleased. "Bryony wasn't all that keen, she said it was a bit too wild and boring for the children at this time of year."

"We-ell, she's right really, but I hoped they would enjoy the wildness." Sandra was trying to be diplomatic. "For myself, I can honestly say it's been so good to connect with the Irish elements. I felt at home breathing in the peaty, moorland air while gazing up at the mountains and stepping carefully on the springy turf to avoid the peat bogs – and failing very squelchily! Have *you* enjoyed it?"

"Yes, I love the wild side, as you know," replied Gulliver, smiling. "I loved standing by the sea with the spray in my face and the wind howling all around me. I discovered something else, too. I discovered I can still laugh like a lunatic and enjoy simple things."

"Are you talking about me again?" asked Sandra huskily, smiling in return. "You mean the Rummy 500 and the silly joking, I take it?"

"Yes. Bryony doesn't do silly joking like that," said Gulliver, looking out into the descending night. "Well, she used to, but not anymore. Dad's coming back. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I most definitely did," said Sandra, as Gulliver opened the car door, "and I miss the silly joking too."

She wasn't quite so sure there would be any silly joking when they were allowed on board the ferry and she saw the sick bags strewn around liberally on tables. Thankfully they were empty, but the captain later announced the sea state would be rough to moderate. Despite the addition of passengers from the previous cancelled ferry, there was still plenty of room and they found comfortable seating that was a mixture of easy chairs and longer seats.

There was noticeable movement as they started to plough their way across the Irish Sea, enough to make the toilet doors bang and cause car alarms to go off down below. Rather than becoming worse, though, the sea gradually became calmer as the hours went by. They all spent most of the time resting and dozing, while Juniper went to sleep for quite a while.

Although Sandra's throat was bothering her, sipping water helped a lot and she was surprised when she realised they were already approaching the twinkling lights of Pembroke. Juniper and Petroc were awake at that point and stood beside her, avidly watching proceedings as they docked. There were no problems leaving the ferry and they were soon driving on empty, freakishly-early morning Welsh roads, with their Irish experience over.

CHAPTER 15

Sandra's virus worsened on her return home and she was forced to ring her mother to say she couldn't see her. It occurred to Sandra how Caroline was always far more sympathetic and polite on the phone than when she actually saw her, although the way Sandra was croaking pitifully was by then quite extreme.

Madeleine had planned a visit home that weekend, but decided to postpone it for two weeks. Two days after they'd returned, she rang ostensibly to ask about their holiday. She spoke first to Osborn, as Sandra's voice was still compromised, but Sandra could tell from his voice that something significant was being discussed.

"I'm so pleased for you!" he exclaimed happily. "How are you feeling?"

Sandra managed to contain herself for a decent amount of time so Osborn could content himself that Madeleine was doing well, but she found it very hard not to snatch the receiver from Osborn's hand when it was finally her turn.

"Hello darling," she said breathlessly and almost voicelessly, before clearing her throat. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," replied Madeleine, before giving in to her excitement. "I'm pregnant! I was going to tell you in person at the weekend, but I can't wait any longer!"

"Oh Maddy, I'm so absolutely pleased for you," said Sandra, tears coming to her eyes, despite the feeling that it wasn't a surprise. "When's the baby due?"

"May the seventh," replied Madeleine happily. "Henri's wondering if it'll be on our first anniversary. He's calling it Baby D."

"Oh wow, I feel so happy for you," said Sandra croakily. "I'm really sorry about not seeing you this weekend, but obviously it makes complete sense."

"Mumsie, I've already said this to Dad, but can you not tell Grandma? I'd like to tell her in person when I come down. That way, at least I can tell one person in person, so to speak."

"Of course, darling!" replied Sandra, knowing it would be hard to keep quiet for just over two weeks. "What about Gulliver?"

"I'll probably ring him, although he seems a bit awkward on the phone sometimes. I might text him. No, I should ring. I'll tell him soon, anyway."

"That's OK, it's up to you." Sandra wanted to tell Madeleine something before her voice gave out completely. "We brought you something from Ireland. Well, not for you exactly."

"Thank you, Mumsie ... I think?"

"A bib! A cute little Irish baby's bib! I had this feeling ever since I lit a candle in Winchester Cathedral and buying the bib – well, that's how sure I was that a new little soul was coming into our lives."

Over the next few days when she was still sleeping at night on the sofa and struggling with a horrible cough, Sandra felt happy every time she thought of Madeleine's news. Osborn unfortunately caught the virus from Sandra, although mercifully not quite as badly, since they now had Madeleine's baby to consider on Madeleine's forthcoming visit.

Before that, though, the news from Alison was rather worrying, as Dirk had reacted badly to his keyhole operation and had experienced problems keeping any food down. To top it all, Alison had caught a nasty virus that sounded suspiciously like Sandra's and now Osborn's. Despite Dirk having suffered what Alison described as a grim week, he was likely to be sent home soon. Sandra couldn't help wondering if that was a dodgy situation with Alison's virus and her post-stroke difficulties. Sometimes the world seemed a very challenging place.

It was therefore pleasing to have an evening of light relief in the form of a get-together with Gina, Emily, Delia and Kay. Sandra's virus had more or less disappeared, but she realised from unmistakable flutterings of anxiety during the day in question, that she was far from relaxed. However, once the evening was underway at Emily's house, she felt better.

"Oh, we're in the proper dining room tonight, sitting at the table. I should have worn my posh frock," said Delia impishly, which suited her curly greying mid-brown hair in a minimally weird sort of way.

"I haven't got a posh frock," said Kay, taking out some envelopes from her bag. "I'm the wrong shape, I have to do cleverly concealing things with longer tops on trousers. Now, is anyone else cheap like I am and saving stamps by bringing their Christmas cards?"

"Yes!" replied Delia and Sandra, while Emily and Gina shook their heads.

"Crackers!" exclaimed Gina, as she went to sit down at the table.

"Speak for yourself, dearie," said Emily, as she sat down too. "I thought we could be a bit festive. Plus, they were half-price."

"I thought you were going to say they were last year's," remarked Delia, picking up hers to look down the end.

"That too," replied Emily, grinning. "Shall we pull?"

"I didn't think it was going to be that sort of evening," said Kay, raising her eyebrows provocatively. "It's been a while since I've pulled."

"Really? I've pulled a muscle in my shoulder," said Gina, managing to grimace and smile at the same time.

"I pulled a sickie the other day," confessed Emily, "but I was really sickie – I mean sick – so I don't know if it technically counts as pulling a sickie."

"I pulled my finger out and finally got a new phone," admitted Delia, "although I haven't actually used it yet."

"I pulled myself together and went Christmas shopping yesterday," offered Sandra, "but I got fed up with all the crowds and it's still only November. It's a beginning, though."

"It's the third week of November and the madness is well underway," said Emily. "Speaking of beginning, do begin – oh, after we've pulled, of course!"

The conversation was as random and relaxed as ever, as they pulled and then ate a simple meal together, followed by a cheeky dessert and some tea. Time seemed to slip by, as they all caught up with each other's news.

"It's hard to remember what I last told you," said Sandra, feeling warm and rather tired. "I know I haven't told you that Maddy's expecting a baby in May, so fingers crossed it'll all go well this time." She smiled at the congratulations that followed.

"That's wonderful news," said Gina, "I'm sure she'll make a lovely mum."

"She's admitted to being extra-anxious after her miscarriage, though," said Sandra, "so I hope she'll pull through OK."

"I'm sure she will, she's bound to feel worried," replied Gina, "and you'll pull your weight as a grandma as well!"

"Don't talk about weight," said Emily, "because I found out recently that I can't get into the dress I was going to wear to the Christmas party at work. Well, I can actually get *into* it, but whether or not I can get *out* of it again afterwards without dislocating something, is open to conjecture. Like my integrity would be, if the dress actually split at the party."

"How posh is the party? Couldn't you wear a snazzy top over some black trousers?" asked Delia, sizing up her friend. "It's a look that I'm sure you could pull off?"

"Unlike the aforementioned dress," replied Emily, giggling. "Sorry Sandra, I took over a bit there. I'm sure Madeleine will be fine, but I expect you'll worry because it'll be *her* giving birth, unlike when Gulliver made you a grandma. I know what I was like when Annabel was giving birth to Louisa, despite trying to be calm and level-headed. I was incredibly relieved when Louisa finally came out."

"You weren't there, were you?" asked Delia, pulling a face as Emily shook her head, smiling. "I know what you mean about daughters giving birth, though. Did Madeleine tell you she was pregnant as soon as she knew?"

"No, she was three months pregnant when she told us," replied Sandra. "I don't think she was necessarily trying to pull the wool over our eyes, I think she was just waiting to be more certain it was going to be OK this time."

"There's every chance it will be," said Gina comfortingly. "May is a good month to have a baby, the weather's warmer and the nights are shorter."

"What's everyone doing at Christmas?" asked Kay, after a slight lull. "I'm not doing anything special, but that suits me, I like the quiet life these days."

"My Christmas isn't going to be quiet," said Delia gaily. "We've booked the local hall for a family do, otherwise we wouldn't all fit in the house together. The grandchildren will love it, being able to run around. Also, it means it won't just be me responsible for the food, there'll be more people to pitch in."

"What a brilliant idea," said Gina, playing with the large plastic paperclip from her cracker. "It's a real challenge trying to fit everyone into our house. Isn't it hard to book your local hall at Christmas with so many events going on?"

"Ah, we pulled a few strings," replied Delia enigmatically, "and we were owed a favour, which helped."

"Fair enough," said Emily. "I pulled a fast one, I got myself invited to Jack's place with his new girlfriend, so I don't have to cook Christmas dinner."

"How did you get Jack's girlfriend to agree with that?" asked Kay, investigating the miniature photo frame from her cracker.

"I pulled rank," replied Emily smugly. "His girlfriend's from South Africa and they seem to have more respect for mothers there."

"That sounds good," said Sandra, admiring the small biro from her cracker. "I like Gulliver's Bryony, but she doesn't always seem to show me respect."

"Tricky," agreed Delia, playing with the miniature sticky tape dispenser from her cracker. "Hey, what did you have in your cracker, Em?"

"A handy little set of screwdrivers," replied Emily appreciatively. "These crackers weren't bad, better than the last ones I bought with golf tees and stupid metal puzzles."

"We haven't finished reading out the jokes," said Gina, searching for her motto. "At least, I haven't read out mine."

"Come on, pull your socks up," said Delia, smiling. "Shall we do the motto charades?"

"No," came an emphatic chorus of replies.

Two days later came the day that Sandra had been waiting for impatiently – Madeleine's visit. She had been planning to travel on the Friday evening, but rang to say she was feeling unwell, so would catch an early train on Saturday morning. Sandra could vividly remember the feeling of pregnancy unwellness (which was a strange sentence), so she completely understood.

Sandra and Osborn met Madeleine at the train station in Plymouth with almost a sense of psychic fulfilment, as if they were taking part in something that had always been meant to happen – not so much the train journey, but the pregnancy of their beautiful daughter.

"How are you feeling?" asked Sandra, when it was her turn to hug Madeleine.

"A bit unsettled," replied Madeleine ruefully, "but I'll probably feel better after some food. I haven't felt sick a lot, but enough to feel dicey. It's improving, though. I never told you, but when I sent you that text on your birthday, when Henri and I were waiting to go on the helicopter ride over the Grand Canyon, I was feeling quite dodgy."

"Poor you!" exclaimed Sandra. "What a shame, were you OK?"

"Yes, it was quite an experience and Henri absolutely loved it. I was sorry I spent a lot of our second honeymoon worrying about being pregnant, but I couldn't help it."

"Never mind," said Osborn, as they walked out of the train station. "Let's go and find some lunch and then Mum said something about buying you a dress for Christmas?"

"Yes, if that's OK," replied Madeleine with a chuckle. "I'm not getting away with non-maternity clothes anymore and I'd really like a decent dress to wear for Christmas in France."

"Sorted," said Osborn happily, as they all walked into the city centre.

After a not particularly successful lunch involving partly burnt panini, but successful shopping involving the purchase of a maternity dress, they went home to relax for a short while before visiting Caroline. Madeleine was looking forward to breaking the happy news to at least one member of her family face to face, since she'd been forced to ring the rest.

"Hello!" said Caroline, greeting Madeleine warmly. "It's really good to see you, it's been a while. I haven't seen you since the wedding – have I, Sandra?"

"No, not since the wedding," confirmed Sandra, as they all moved into the sitting room.

"It's been a full-on time," said Madeleine, sitting down. "I have some news, Grandma."

"News?" asked Caroline, not waiting for an answer. "Shall I make us some tea?"

"In a minute, Mum," said Osborn meaningfully, as he sat down. "Madeleine has something she wants to tell you."

"What's that, dear?" asked Caroline, also sitting down. "I'll make tea in a minute."

"I'm expecting a baby in May," said Madeleine, completely unable to stop smiling.

"A baby! How lovely! When did you say? May?" Caroline was clearly excited.

"Yes, the seventh of May," replied Madeleine proudly.

"The day before Len's birthday," said Caroline wonderingly. "Wouldn't it be something if you gave birth on your grandad's birthday?"

"Or Madeleine and Henri's first wedding anniversary on the fourth," said Sandra, unable to stop smiling too.

"I'm really pleased for you both," said Caroline, looking a little flushed and then pointing her finger at Sandra. "She didn't tell me!"

"I..." Sandra felt her voice disappearing in a mixture of anger, hurt and disbelief that her mother could turn on her in what could have been a shared happy moment for them all. It almost brought tears to her eyes when Madeleine leapt to her defence.

"Mum was doing what I asked," explained Madeleine in clear tones. "I specifically asked her not to tell you, so I could tell you myself. In fact, you're the only one in the family that I *have* been able to tell myself."

"She can keep a secret," muttered Caroline. "I'll make some tea."

Sandra knew she was being somewhat subdued for the rest of the visit, but was consoled by the fact that pre-counselling, she would almost certainly have felt much worse about her mother's thoughtless remark. After leaving Caroline's house, she concentrated instead on enjoying the rest of the time she and Osborn had with Madeleine, in the form of a simple tea and a relaxed evening together watching television. When Madeleine fell asleep on the sofa, Sandra gazed at her tenderly, remembering doing the same herself when she'd been expecting Madeleine.

The following morning, they continued the simple theme and went to a local garden centre for a hot drink and a walk around. A pasty lunch at home followed and then they all played *Ono* while waiting until it was time to take Madeleine to the train station.

"I don't want to go now," said Madeleine dolefully, as she put down a Plus-4. "It always goes too quickly. Blue."

"Thank you," said Sandra, picking up four cards. "I know what you mean, it seems no sooner do you arrive than it's time for you to leave again."

"As long as you're OK, Maddy," said Osborn, picking up a card. "No blues."

"I feel a little bit low sometimes," admitted Madeleine, "but I think it's hormones."

"I can remember hormones," said Sandra, making a face.

"So can I," said Osborn drily.

"At least when I'm on maternity leave there'll be a lot more time to see you," said Madeleine, brightening. "That's if you can manage it."

"Try stopping me," said Sandra, smiling.

"Wild horses and all that," said Osborn, putting down a Plus-4. "Green."

"Varti! I was about to call *Ono*!" said Madeleine, picking up four cards.

"You haven't called me Varti for a while," said Osborn fondly.

"Ah, no greens," said Sandra, picking up a card. "Actually, you need to eat well now, lots of fruit and vegetables and all that. Do you have any cravings?"

"Not really," replied Madeleine, considering. "Except I really wanted some *Brownston Pickle* the other day, but I don't think I've had any in the house since I've been with Henri. He didn't even know what I was talking about."

"I've got some *Brownston Pickle* you can have," said Sandra eagerly. "Would you like some to take back with you? Oh, change direction."

"It's OK, thank you Mumsie," said Madeleine, smiling. "I bought a few jars last week when they were on special offer."

"A daughter after my own heart," said Sandra, frowning. "Whose go is it again?"

"Mine, I was thinking strategically," said Osborn, putting down a Plus-4. "Red."

"No!" said Sandra, picking up four cards. "When did you say your scan was again?"

"In three and a half weeks," replied Madeleine. "I meant to ask, do you want to know if it's a boy or a girl? Yellow."

"Yes, I like to start welcoming the little soul in my mind," replied Sandra thoughtfully, "and it kind of helps to know whether it's him or her. What about you, Osborn?"

"Absolutely, I'm happy to know," replied Osborn. "*Ono*!"

"You're going to win again, aren't you," muttered Madeleine. "I'm looking at the time, I'll have to go soon, anyway."

"I don't want you to go," said Sandra sadly. "This visit has been too short."

"Out!" said Osborn predictably, before gathering up the cards.

"We'll come and see you in early January," said Madeleine, looking at Sandra.

"Think about maternity leave. I'll probably need some help with the baby, I don't know anybody much in Bristol apart from people at work."

"Join the National Babybirth Trust," suggested Sandra, looking at Madeleine. "I mean it, you'll get to know pregnant women in your area then. I joined when I was expecting you and it really helped."

"I wondered about joining," said Madeleine wonderingly. "Oh Mumsie, I wish we were closer, I would feel ... better."

"I would feel better too," said Sandra wistfully.

"And me," said Osborn, standing up. "Come on then, we'd better get going."

As November ended, Osborn seemed agitated by life in general, but also in particular about whether or not he should change the car. As the second week of December began, he travelled 150 miles to test-drive a car that seemed exactly what he wanted. Coincidentally, Gulliver travelled around 230 miles on the same day for the same purpose (but not to the same destination and not for the same car). They both returned to their separate homes having bought the cars in question.

Meanwhile, Madeleine had joined her local National Babybirth Trust, but was suffering from a virus. Gina had pleurisy and was being sent for a chest x-ray, while Alison had made her first short daylight drive to visit Sandra. She had told Sandra that Dirk would start chemotherapy in January by taking pills over a period of six months, which would turn his 50% chance of the cancer not returning into a 60% chance.

As December elapsed, Caroline seemed to be on a mission to push Sandra to her limits again. A week before Christmas, she portrayed a hard done by stance from the moment Sandra entered the house.

"I thought you might be going into Plymouth to meet Belinda today," she said, her mouth down at the corners. "You're a bit late."

"Hello," said Sandra pointedly, since Caroline had failed to greet her in any way. "Why would you think I'd be meeting Belinda today?"

"I thought you said something about her Christmas cards and I remembered you've met her before in Plymouth to give them to her. I thought you must have forgotten to ring me to let me know."

"Well, you thought wrongly," replied Sandra with barely disguised exasperation. "I'm only ten minutes later than usual and you know I would have rung you if today was going to be anything different. Besides, I posted Belinda's cards from us over a week ago."

"Oh well, I haven't been outside for days because the weather's been so wet and windy," said Caroline. "It's awful at my age, sometimes you don't see a soul for days on end. Did you go out yesterday? The weather was terrible, it was so cold."

"I had to see Dr Effingham to discuss the blood pressure readings I'd handed in."

"Why did you do that?"

"For the six-monthly review. I take readings with my own machine, remember?"

"Oh. Your blood pressure's alright, isn't it?"

"Yes, it was OK, although I've got to have a blood test. I had the feeling he wanted to check up on me after the depression and the counselling, because he asked me about it. I mentioned how the counsellor had suggested I go back for a second course of counselling when I felt the time was right and he said I should do it. I haven't, though, there always seems to be so much going on."

"You're better now, aren't you?" Caroline sniffed.

"I'm comparatively better, but I still struggle sometimes and I'm certainly not sleeping very well at the moment."

"Oh, funny you should say that, I've been having *awful* trouble sleeping," said Caroline morosely. "I was awake for hours last night and I noticed there are dark shadows under my eyes. Still, I suppose I must expect trouble sleeping at my age, along with all the other problems."

"At least you don't have trouble with your teeth any more. Osborn and I both have to have a filling tomorrow."

"You don't mind having fillings, do you?"

"I don't exactly like them! I hate all the water in your mouth and the suction thing, because no matter how hard I try to relax, it seems to make me panic about swallowing. Osborn's allergic to local anaesthetic, so he has his own problems. Also, it costs money."

"Does it? Oh well, you don't have a problem with money." Caroline seemed determined to belittle Sandra's tribulations, in order to magnify her own. Sandra gave up and attempted to switch off as she set about the tasks Caroline had stored up for her.

However, the visit continued to be energy sapping, as Sandra found her mother was being objectionable on so many levels that it was impossible to switch off. Caroline actually followed her around the house on two occasions to find out where she was and what she was doing. The second time, Sandra had gone to the toilet – although thankfully, her mother hadn't actually trailed after her into the bathroom.

The following evening there was a quick phone call from Madeleine, before she and Henri were due to travel to France the next morning.

"The scan was fine," reported Madeleine, managing to sound excited, tired and distracted at the same time. "The baby was moving around a lot – so much so that they could only tell us they *think* it's a girl! I have to have another scan at 34 weeks because the placenta's a bit low, but it may move. Anyway, I can relax now. Well, once I get to France, that is. We haven't finished packing yet. I'll ring on Christmas Day – I love you!"

CHAPTER 16

Christmas seemed to pass in a rather stressful blur of normal mayhem, presents, excited grandchildren, a difficult Sandra-fixated mother, too much food and drink, never-ending dishwashing and finally, a virus. Sandra had been aware that Gulliver was still struggling with himself, as not long after he, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc had arrived to stay for five nights, he'd driven them all out to Kat Hill in his big new four-wheel drive car and had purposefully sought out Sandra.

"I've got a small lump on my neck," he said in a confidential tone. "I'll probably go to see a doctor when I get back. Look." He showed the part of his neck underneath his chin to Sandra, who failed to notice anything significant.

"Oh? Well, I can't honestly say I can see it properly, but you know yourself best. You know how it feels and if you're worried at all, by far the best thing is to go and see about it." Sandra was alarmed not so much at the lump, but the fact that Gulliver seemed so uptight.

"I knew you'd say that," he replied unhappily. "I haven't even seen our doctor since we moved to Aberpontyfan."

"How are you generally? Do you still have trouble with your guts now and again?"

"Yes," said simply. "I still can't drink milk, it's weird."

"Look Gulliver, this is only my gut reaction, pardon the pun, but I think it could well be stress about your life situation. That doesn't mean anything psychosomatic isn't real, but it means you really need to change what makes you unhappy in your life – if you can – or as much as you can, so it's better for *you*. Go to the doctor to put your mind at rest, but apart from that, do your best to enjoy Christmas and look forward to Iceland in February. I know Dad's looking forward to it greatly."

"So am I." Gulliver looked at Sandra a little sheepishly. "Thanks, Mother."

The old year of 2013 had turned into the new year of 2014, characterised by stormy weather. Not only storms, but spring tides and wave surges were causing flooding and meteorological tribulations in general, so that Sandra began to be concerned about Madeleine and Henri's imminent visit. On the day they were due, the wind was extreme enough to blow off the roof of a farm building near Caroline's house and cause much damage to two of her close neighbours' houses. However, Madeleine and Henri arrived without incident.

The next day, they all went with Caroline to the *Who'd have Dreamt It?* for a quiet pub lunch, since the weather was comparatively better. Only a dozen or so other

people were there and they were able to sit in the window seat that had once been the favourite of Sandra's father, Len. To her surprise, she was suddenly assailed by an enormous wave of missing him.

"I wish Dad was here," she said sadly to nobody in particular. "I miss him."

"I'm sure he's with us in spirit," replied Madeleine quietly. "I miss him too."

"Do you know what you're going to call the baby?" asked Caroline, once they'd finished ordering. "Sandra said she didn't know when I asked her."

"We've probably got the name sorted," said Madeleine diplomatically, "but it was difficult to find names we both like. It's the French and English factor that caused the biggest problem, really."

"So, what have you picked on?" asked Caroline, obviously unwilling to give up.

"Ah, we need to have some secrets," replied Madeleine mischievously. "Nobody knows except us, so everyone will have to wait for a while."

"Fair enough," said Osborn, smiling. "I hope it's not too hardcore French, though, I'd have trouble spelling it for the rest of my life."

"Don't worry, Varti, you'll be able to cope," said Madeleine jokingly, "or you'd have trouble saying it for the rest of your life!"

"Sandra was saying you're not absolutely certain it's a girl?" asked Caroline seriously.

"We're carrying on as if she's a she, but we're aware she might be a he," replied Madeleine, as Henri looked down at Madeleine's bump and smiled to himself.

"Still, you're doing well in yourself, aren't you? I had awful trouble with Sandra, I had very high blood pressure." Caroline seemed to be in talkative mode.

"Yes, everything's OK so far," replied Madeleine a little hesitantly.

"I had high blood pressure when I was expecting Gulliver," mentioned Sandra conversationally. "I had to go into hospital for tests and bed rest."

"Did you?" asked Caroline, looking at Sandra. "I don't remember."

"I was in the ante-natal ward for three weeks," replied Sandra, no longer surprised that her mother failed to remember significant events in her life. "I don't think it's a hereditary thing, Maddy, so don't worry. I was probably stressed because we moved into our new house when I was about eight months pregnant – and my BP was fine with you. Just try to rest as much as you can and look after yourself, you're doing really well so far."

"I've got another appointment next week," said Madeleine, grimacing, "for another blood test. The nurse wrote on my notes that I need to lie down this time, because I felt faint after the last blood test."

"I'm glad I was never pregnant, I hate the very thought of having my blood taken," said Osborn, shuddering, "so good on you Maddy. I personally think you're brave, whether you have to lie down or not."

"I had a fasting blood test last Monday," said Sandra, "which was fine, even though I had a virus. I'm usually more anxious about the results than having the blood taken."

"Oh, you'll be alright, Sandra. You don't have any troubles – do you?" asked Caroline.

"Can we change the subject, Mum?" asked Osborn, grinning at Sandra. "How are you finding the National Babybirth Trust meetings, Maddy?"

"Not far up the road from us, it's great," replied Madeleine impishly. "No, we both went to the last one and Henri can go to another one just for the dads if he wants to, so they can do a bit of bonding and talk about all the things that bother fathers-to-be."

"It should be quite 'andy to 'ear what the others 'ave to say," responded Henri enthusiastically, "although I'm not going to be a dad, I'm going to be a papa!"

Madeleine and Henri left the following lunchtime, before more stormy weather hit the area and added to the widespread flooding that was already a problem. Sandra had a slight problem herself the day after, when she received a phone call to discuss one of her blood test results. Dr Effingham broke the news that she had tested positive for a thyroid antibody that meant she was possibly heading for an underactive thyroid and would

need a further blood test in six months' time. Despite Dr Effingham's relaxed telephone demeanour, Sandra felt disquieted about the change in her health, as if yet another danger was lurking on the horizon.

By mid-January the storms had abated for a while, so Sandra and Osborn took advantage one morning by enjoying a windy but liberating walk along Plymouth Hoe. They also appreciated a soul-enhancing visit to Lilymoor Garden one Tuesday when the weather was calm and bright – and when Sandra hadn't needed to visit Caroline, who'd been out seeing a pantomime.

Unfortunately, the storminess of her mother's energy still seemed to be venting itself in Sandra's direction on the following Thursday. Caroline had first of all complained that she was completely out of routine because she hadn't seen Sandra as usual on Tuesday that week.

"Look what you've done to me," she said, peering at the calendar without her glasses.

"I didn't see you because you went to the pantomime, don't forget," said Sandra coolly, while recognising her mother's inner turbulence.

In order to avoid having the life-force sucked out of her by playing *Scribble*, Sandra had developed a sudden, burning need to clean the inside of Caroline's large sitting room window and her front door, spending a good half hour or so climbing up and down a chair to reach the higher parts. After hovering for a while (though not literally), Caroline had regarded Sandra critically.

"You're quite the busy little bee today," she said condescendingly, looking at Sandra's work.

"Hmmh!" Sandra uttered a non-word that she hoped would convey her displeasure.

"You're doing that very well, much better than I can do at my age. You could earn £10 an hour going around cleaning for old people, you know."

"I'd rather die." Sandra was sure she'd had a similar conversation with her mother once before and was determined not to rise to the bait. "Ah, here comes Osborn."

"Come in!" cried Caroline, as Osborn entered through the kitchen door. "My charlady – no, my home help is here!"

Sandra was unsure whether to be glad or sad that Osborn had failed to hear the remark. She knew he would most likely have reacted in her defence, which in turn would have probably developed into a sudden, sharp squall that would have ultimately resulted in a period of sub-zero temperatures. On the whole, she was glad he hadn't heard, but recognised that she was probably still feeling vulnerable about her thyroid result.

January came to an end with more silence from Madeleine and more worry about Gulliver, as he went to see his GP about the small lump on his neck (and did his best to faint after a blood test). Sandra was glad that he'd taken action, but slightly concerned that the ultrasound scan he was being referred for might show up something.

Apart from that, frustration was added to the mix when Gulliver had at long last taken Petroc for an initial appointment with a speech therapist, who'd failed to turn up. Gulliver had rung the only phone number he had and was passed on to another phone number, who passed him back to the original number. He'd left a message, but was doubtful of a positive outcome.

Sandra had paid a short visit to Alison in January, when Dirk had opened the door to her, looking decidedly pale and tired. Alison herself had seemed a little down and mainly wondering what her post-stroke appointment the following day would bring. It was apparent that both Alison and Dirk were still valiantly coping with the health crises that the previous year had brought them.

At the beginning of February, Caroline was complaining of ear problems. She rang Sandra to stop her visiting one Tuesday, because she said she was in pain and had a high temperature. She'd rung the Health Centre and had been prescribed antibiotics over

the phone, which would be delivered to her. Sandra was sorry her mother wasn't well, but felt guiltily relieved to have a Tuesday free for once.

Two days later, Sandra took some flowers and chocolate éclairs to Caroline, who said she was a bit better, but was obviously feeling sorry for herself.

"It was really hurting," she said almost accusingly to Sandra. "Have you ever had an ear infection?"

"Yes," replied Sandra patiently. "The worst one I ever had was when the children were young. I went to lie down on your bed on Christmas Day after lunch because the pain was so bad. It was awful every time I swallowed and painkillers didn't seem to help much at all."

"I don't remember that," replied Caroline glumly. "I'm sure I had a high temperature, I think I was even hallucinating one night. It was as if I was seeing things I knew weren't really there, it was quite disturbing."

"Oh dear, it's a good job the antibiotics are doing their job," replied Sandra calmly. "I can remember when Dad was hallucinating the day before he died. He must have been seeing something or someone at the end of his bed, because he was pointing and telling us to look." She almost winced involuntarily at the memory.

"Were *you* there then?" asked Caroline baldly, though not in the hair sense.

"Yes, I was there," replied Sandra quietly, feeling the combination of the excruciating memory and the pain of her mother's dismissive words shattering her fragile wellbeing. "I'm going out in the garden now."

"It's cold!" remonstrated Caroline. "It's been raining."

"It's fine, I'll start on that bush you keep saying needs pruning," replied Sandra shortly, already heading towards the door.

"Don't stay out there too long," said Caroline plaintively, as Sandra shut the door behind her.

"I am *so* going out in the fecking garden," she said angrily to herself, as she stormed out of the house and stalked down the drive to the garage, "even if I have to stand there with a wet bush!"

A few minutes later, she stood in front of the bush in question, holding some secateurs. There was misty rain in the air and some of the leaves were still dripping. "I feel so *hurt* that Mum doesn't remember me being there with her when Dad was dying," she whispered to herself. "Of all the meaningful times in a life when I imagined it would help *her* to have me alongside her, she obviously didn't rate my presence at all. Just what is it all sodding well about?"

The following Tuesday, Caroline greeted Sandra with the news that her ear wasn't better despite having finished the antibiotics and she was wondering what to do. Since nobody had looked in her mother's ear, Sandra advised her to ring the Health Centre and explain her problem. This resulted in an appointment with the emergency nurse that afternoon. That in turn involved Sandra ringing Osborn to ask him for a lift. Caroline was told there was no infection, but there was a great deal of wax, which meant a further appointment for ear syringing needed to be made.

The three of them sat drinking tea when they'd returned Caroline home, although Sandra wished they hadn't bothered. She deliberately kept quiet while Osborn talked with Caroline, although she could see with her peripheral vision that Caroline kept looking directly at her, rather than at Osborn.

"When do you leave for Iceland?" asked Caroline, nibbling at a biscuit.

"In just under two weeks," replied Osborn, sipping his tea. "It's come around quickly."

"How are you looking forward to that, Sandra?" asked Caroline, gazing fixedly at Sandra.

"I'm not all that keen, to be honest," replied Sandra honestly, looking anywhere other than at Caroline, "but there are a few pros as well as cons and it's what Osborn and Gulliver really want to do."

"Oh well, it'll come and go," said Caroline, finishing her biscuit and brushing some crumbs from her jumper. "I wondered if Madeleine might come and stay with you."

"She's got work," replied Sandra incredulously. "Besides, I'm perfectly capable of being on my own!"

"When does she give up work?" continued Caroline relentlessly. "It'll be a change for her, staying home to look after the baby."

"Yes, she's looking forward to a change from going to work day in and day out," replied Sandra, "but she'll go back after her maternity leave is up."

"She will? I thought she would stay at home like you did," said Caroline, putting down her mug and looking disdainful.

"She and Henri have a mortgage," said Sandra, sighing. "They have to go to work to earn money to pay the mortgage."

"Oh, it's all so different nowadays," replied Caroline impatiently. "What with Bryony going out to work and Gulliver staying at home to look after the children. That was unheard of in my day. I can't see how it's good for the man not going out to work, because looking after children is naturally the woman's domain."

"It's what Gulliver and Bryony wanted," said Sandra, feeling her ire immediately rising. "They worked it all out. So have Madeleine and Henri."

"Young people want everything these days, they have no idea what hardships my generation went through," said Caroline, sniffing. "They want it all."

"No, they don't. It's just a very different world they have to live in now," replied Sandra, fuming. She was thinking how her mother had somehow turned into a bitter woman set in her blinkered old age – and how she never wanted to be like that, ever.

The following day, a phenomenal storm hit the region, demolishing parts of the coastline, property, trees, and a stretch of railway line. Fortunately, the weather had improved by the time Osborn and Gulliver left for Iceland, although to Sandra's dismay (and no doubt his own), Osborn left with a sore throat. However, there was nothing Sandra could do except make the most of her time alone, which consisted mainly of doing normal things in her own time in the luxury of peace and quiet – or alternatively, playing music rebelliously louder than usual.

Osborn kept in touch by email and posted photos on *Facebook*, so Sandra was delighted when they saw the Northern Lights on their first night there. Gulliver also sent Sandra an email after the first sighting, although that was the first and only communication.

Throughout the six nights and seven days Osborn was away, his virus gradually became worse, although it was clear that he was loving the landscape and the experience. Sandra visited Caroline as usual and went on several local walks by herself, while in the evening she revelled in watching her whole box set of *Gav and Tracey*, which wasn't up Osborn's particular street. It was a pleasure to think only of herself for a while, truth be told.

When Osborn returned, after having viewed a wonderful display of the aurora borealis the night before, he was exhausted and suffering badly with his chest and sinuses. The following morning, he took the first emergency appointment with a doctor that he could and was prescribed antibiotics. The appointment happened to be with his own GP, Dr Dai Effingham, who noticed a mark on Osborn's face and decided to refer him to a skin specialist. Consequently, Osborn was exceptionally irritable with Sandra, who'd deliberately kept the day free so they could do something together. It wasn't the homecoming she'd imagined.

Four days later, Gulliver returned from Iceland to stay with Sandra and Osborn for two nights. This was because Anne and Stan had gone to Aberpontyfan to help Bryony with Juniper and Petroc while Gulliver was away and had brought the children back with them to Cornwall for Gulliver to collect. As soon as Sandra had opened the front door to Gulliver, he'd come into the porch and opened his arms for a most uncharacteristic hug.

"You seem different," said Sandra, smiling as they disengaged. "A good trip?"

"An immense trip," he replied, grinning. "Life changing."

"God," said Sandra, not sure why she suddenly felt minuscule icicles along her spine. "I *think* that's good? I know you've been unhappy, so I guess a change *is* good."

"It could hurt a lot of people," said Gulliver, suddenly looking serious.

"God," said Sandra again, as millions of tiny icicles jingled and clinked together. "Well, it's not OK if your life is making you physically ill. I meant to ask, did you go for that ultrasound scan? You were still waiting for an appointment the last I knew."

"I had a letter from the hospital just before I left for Iceland, saying they'd been inundated and asking if I still wanted the scan," replied Gulliver. "I rang them up and said I didn't, because the doctor had told me my blood test was so normal that she was envious – and the lump's disappeared."

"That's brilliant," said Sandra, smiling as a weight lifted from her heart. "You could have told me, though!"

"Sorry Mother, I've been distracted," said Gulliver, grinning again. "As I said, it's all been immense and life changing."

No matter how much she tried, Sandra couldn't stop feeling icicles at Gulliver's words, but decided there was nothing she could do. Besides, it was his life anyway. All the same, when he collected Juniper and Petroc from Anne and Stan, she couldn't help looking at her two beloved grandchildren and wondering exactly how Gulliver's life changes would affect them.

In the meantime, Sandra was hoping there wouldn't be any distressing life changes for Osborn, when he kept his appointment with the skin specialist. The verdict was hopeful that it was probably OK, but he was referred to a consultant just to be sure.

In mid-March, Sandra and Belinda had arranged to meet in Plymouth for coffee and lunch, as Belinda was having a good spell and felt she was able to manage the bus journey on her own. Sandra felt annoyed with herself, because she'd woken feeling nervous for no apparent reason. She was therefore glad when Osborn said he would join them for lunch later if Belinda didn't mind, after meeting his friend Franklin for coffee.

"Of course I don't mind, Osborn has always been very kind to me," said Belinda warmly, as Sandra brought her a cappuccino. "Gosh, I think I need to take off my jacket."

"Here, I'll hold your stick," said Sandra, as Belinda struggled unsteadily to stand up. "How are you doing these days?"

"Oh, a bit up and down," replied Belinda, sitting down again with relief, while Sandra placed Belinda's jacket on the back of the chair for her. "Maybe a bit more down than up. I find it easier down these days, as you've just seen!"

"Well, I'm glad you haven't lost your sense of humour," said Sandra warmly. "Phew, I think I'll take my jacket off too. I truly think you're marvellous after what you've been through with losing Trudie like you did. Do you mind talking about her?"

"No, I love talking about her," replied Belinda simply. "It helps me – but I still haven't cried. I feel as if all my tears have dried up forever. Maybe there's something wrong with me?"

"I don't think so," said Sandra honestly. "I don't know what happens, but I can't seem to cry these days either. I know it's not in the same league, but I didn't cry over Lawrence. Also, when I was having counselling, I felt I was in a place where I couldn't actually feel much at all. The counsellor was asking me to connect more with my feelings and I couldn't, so I don't know if it's a defence mechanism or what. Anyway, it's good and healthy that you like to talk about Trudie. She was a lovely soul, I always felt that when I saw her."

"Thank you," said Belinda poignantly. "I miss the everyday things, like her telling me I should still dye my hair instead of going grey, because it made me look old! I loved the way she was so open and honest with me – except in the last year or two, when I'm pretty sure she was keeping things from me, so I wouldn't worry."

"I know you probably would rather have known the truth, but that's actually a very thoughtful way for her to act," said Sandra gently. "It's a fine line sometimes, I suppose, between protecting those we love and not being honest with them. It's a choice we probably all make a lot more often than we realise."

"Yes, that's makes sense," agreed Belinda sadly. "I wish I could have been a bit stronger for her, though – a bit more the mother she needed me to be."

"Oh Belinda, you *were* the mother she needed you to be, because you were *her* mother and you loved her! She knew that, I'm so sure she did," said Sandra earnestly. "You were the best mother you knew how to be and that's all that counts. We're all human and we all can only ever do our best."

"I know you're right," replied Belinda, smiling wistfully. "I'm just so aware of my own shortcomings and it still hurts me so much to know she must have been suffering like that."

"I understand," replied Sandra quietly. "I imagine Maddy and me in Trudie's situation and yours and that's when I think how amazing you are still to be standing. Oh! Even if you have a bit of trouble standing and balancing, you're still doing it the best you can and I have the utmost respect for you, I really do."

"Thank you," replied Belinda pensively. "Do you think life's a metaphor?"

"I think life is all sorts," said Sandra, laughing. "It's a metaphor and it's a load of symbolics – and sometimes it's a pile of you-know-what. It's life, though, and we need to live our own life the best we can. Trudie's life became too much for her and she did the best thing she knew at the time to sort it out."

"You don't know how much that heals me to hear that," said Belinda suddenly, her face brightening. "Hetty told me that Trudie was selfish to do what she did. My own sister told me that! I was Trudie's mother and I know that Trudie didn't have a selfish bone in her body, so you've just confirmed what I know deep inside."

"Hold on to that," said Sandra sincerely. "Hold on to all the love that you and Trudie shared, because at the end of the day, I believe that love is all there is. She's still your daughter and you're still her mother, no matter what anyone else says. What do *they* know?"

"Thank you, Sandra," said Belinda, sighing. "Gulliver and Madeleine must be so happy to have you as their mother."

Sandra had no idea why she felt tiny icicles up and down her spine again at the mention of Gulliver's name. She tried to push them aside as she and Belinda moved on to lighter topics of conversation and when Osborn later joined them for lunch. She was glad it had been a successful meeting, for Belinda in particular.

When she and Osborn returned home, she found Gulliver had sent her some CD copies of music he now totally loved from an Icelandic group, which held meaningful memories for him from his immensely life changing trip. She listened to the music, but all it seemed to do was make the metaphorical icicles a bit bigger and sharper.

CHAPTER 17

The Eden Project was once more acting as a bolt-hole for Sandra and Osborn. It was a place that lifted them free from their cares as soon as they started to walk from the car park down to where the two massive biomes reclined in the old Cornish clay pit. Sandra didn't even mind that the morning mist was reluctant to clear and the air outside was decidedly chilly in places.

Fortunately, the temperature in the Mediterranean biome always felt perfect to Sandra and the cappuccino they were currently enjoying in the café was warming too.

"Thank heavens for the Eden Project," said Osborn appreciatively, sighing with contentment. "I know I've been ratty lately. I must admit I've been feeling quite down. It just seems to come over me sometimes."

"What does?" asked Sandra apprehensively, stirring the froth on her cappuccino.

"Wondering what's the point of anything," said Osborn, looking sombre. "It's not only the ongoing trouble with your mother and her current leaks – not to mention all the unbelievable fretting and the feeling that she doesn't trust me to help her get a better house insurance – or the fact that the vacuum cleaner's gone wrong again – or the weird emails I'm getting from Gulliver. I don't know what it is, but I know I feel as if I've had enough."

"I didn't like the fact that after all you did to make sure Mum's leaks were sorted out properly and her hot water heater fixed, she thanked me by name for everything *I'd* done! It was rude and utterly inconsiderate. I absolutely *hate* the way she's fixated on

me and she seems so dismissive and mistrustful to you." Sandra remembered to draw breath. "Maybe it's a combination of everything that's getting you down," she suggested, "like simple overload – except it's not really that simple. Wait, you have weird emails from Gulliver too?"

"He's asking me all sorts of questions," said Osborn a little evasively. "He's having a right old mid-life crisis."

"Yes, I'm a bit perturbed about the way he said Iceland was life changing and now there's this internet friend he's met for the first time," said Sandra uncertainly. "Did you see his recent post on *Farcebook*, with the photo of them both?"

"No, I haven't look at *Farcebook* for a couple of days," replied Osborn, raising his eyebrows. "I was too busy replying to his email."

"It's a close-up of him and his female friend," said Sandra, careful to sound neutral, despite the instinctive frisson of doubt she'd immediately felt. "They *are* standing close together, too. I know he needs friends, but I just don't know. She's called Anwen Evans."

"An unusual name," replied Osborn, frowning. "Does Bryony know? I suppose she must know if it's on *Farcebook*."

"Yes, he was careful to mention in his post that Bryony knew," said Sandra tiredly. "To be honest, that seemed a bit suspicious in itself. God, I hate thinking this sort of thing about Gulliver and I don't want to add to your troubles, either. I'm probably just being a bit oversensitive, or something. Let's just forget everything and enjoy where we are."

"I'll second that," replied Osborn, smiling a little wearily. "The tulips are meant to be looking spectacular at the moment."

Towards the end of March, Madeleine successfully achieved her first drive home. She planned to stay for two nights, while Henri was going to use the weekend alone to indulge one of his passions, namely some hardcore DIY on the house.

"Does he really love DIY that much?" asked Sandra, as the three of them wandered along the sea front of Plymouth.

"Oh yes, he'll get up early tomorrow and stop when the light goes," replied Madeleine affectionately. "I feel a bit guilty, but I'm glad I've got the excuse of being pregnant. Sanding those stairs seemed to go on forever and there's no way I can help with the ceilings now."

"I don't think you've any need to feel guilty," said Osborn, gazing out to sea. "I think that's an RFA ship by the breakwater."

"How's the National Babybirth Trust going?" asked Sandra, failing to recognise the ship.

"It's going well," replied Madeleine enthusiastically. "A couple of them are actually due to give birth in a few weeks' time, but my due date is the second to last."

"Oh, the unexpected can always happen," said Sandra reminiscently. "You were a week early, if that's anything to go by."

"Well, I've got the next scan on Wednesday," said Madeleine, sighing. "I hope it's OK, I'm a bit worried about the placenta being too low. I don't seem to be very big, either, compared to some of them in the NBT."

"Your scan should show up anything that's not OK, so I wouldn't worry," replied Sandra comfortingly. "Actually, I was small for dates with Gulliver, which was one of the reasons I had to go into hospital before he was born, for tests. That and the high blood pressure."

"I hope I don't have to go into hospital," said Madeleine worriedly. "My BP's been OK so far, though."

"When you think of it, we're quite a small family, as far as height and build go," said Osborn reassuringly. "My granddad was a small man and my father wasn't much taller. Mum's dad was the tallest of the lot of us as far as I know."

"Our birth weights were quite small too," added Sandra, pondering. "You and I were 6 lbs 6 oz, Gulliver was 5 lbs 8 oz and I'm sure your dad was only 4 lbs something. Henri's family aren't tall either, so it all stacks up."

"I'm sure you're right," replied Madeleine doubtfully. "Anyway, not long to wait for the scan, thank goodness. I hate waiting."

"I know what you mean, I've been screwed up waiting for this next skin appointment," said Osborn frankly. "It's the day after your scan, actually, with a consultant this time."

"I hope it'll be OK, Varti," said Madeleine, looking at Osborn. "I don't know, there seems a lot going on lately. It sounds as if Gulliver's going through a really strange time, he's sent me a couple of odd texts lately, most unlike him. I saw on *Farcebook* that he, Bryony and the children went on a day out in the woods with his new friend and her three girls."

"I know," replied Sandra prudently. "I suppose it's good they've got a friend now who shares the same interests – according to Gulliver, anyway – but it seems a bit out of character, that's all."

"Oh well, it's up to them, I suppose," said Madeleine, suddenly ducking and putting a hand up to her head. "No! I've been poed on! By a bird!"

"Really?" Osborn looked at Madeleine's head and made a face. "You're right, you *have* been poed on – by a large bird!"

"Here, I've got tissues in my bag," said Sandra, already pulling them out. "I know it's just a silly saying, but it's meant to be lucky..."

"It's gross," said Madeleine, grimacing. "Is there a bin near here?"

"There should be," said Osborn, looking around. "I know, let's go into that café over there and have a hot drink, so you can wash your hands and see to yourself. I'll buy you a piece of cake as compensation."

"It's not that bad," said Madeleine, laughing. "It was just a bit of a shock!"

The next day the three of them had lunch at the *Who'd have Dreamt It* with Caroline. Madeleine had particularly wanted to see her grandma, but unfortunately Caroline seemed rather less than calm and was complaining about her back, hip and knee.

"Don't get old, Madeleine," she said morosely, as she moved around uncomfortably in the pub chair.

"Do you want to swap seats?" asked Sandra, wondering if her mother actually realised the alternative to her own statement.

"No, that won't help," snapped Caroline, rubbing her knee. "You get so many aches and pains when you're old. Wait till *you* get to my age."

"I probably won't make it that far, the stress will kill me," muttered Sandra crossly.

"Oh rubbish," countered Caroline, turning her gaze from Sandra to Madeleine. "I'm glad to see you looking so well, Madeleine dear. Are you looking forward to leaving work?"

"Yes and no," replied Madeleine honestly. "I'm not sure what I'll do all day rattling around on my own waiting to give birth. It's a little way away yet, though."

"I wish Mum and I were closer, so we could help you out," said Osborn wistfully. "Actually, we'd probably be a lot more useful after you've given birth, remembering what it was like for us."

"You went back to work a week after Gulliver was born!" expostulated Sandra. "I can still remember the feeling of terror that first Monday morning, being left on my own with such a small baby – but I did my best and he turned out OK." Sandra felt a tiny chill of uncertainty as Gulliver's current situation crossed her mind. "I'm sure you'll be fine, Mad. Remember that Dad and I will help you as much as we possibly can."

"Thank you," said Madeleine warmly, as Caroline shifted a little noisily in her seat.

"I didn't have any help when Sandra was born," said Caroline testily. "Having babies was women's work in my day."

"Things have moved on a bit since then, Mum," said Osborn neutrally. "I'm sure Henri will play a full part in looking after the baby."

"He will if I've got anything to do with it!" said Madeleine with a small laugh, attempting valiantly to lift Caroline's mood.

The next morning, the three of them went out to a local garden centre for a chat over a hot drink, followed by a pleasant stroll around. After lunch, however, it was time for Madeleine to leave.

"Well, this is the last time you'll see me this side of childbirth," said Madeleine a little apprehensively, as she prepared to leave the house. "Wish me luck."

"I wish you so much more than luck," said Osborn fervently, as he hugged Madeleine carefully. "In fact, you won't need luck, because this is meant to be."

"Thank you, Varti," replied Madeleine, smiling. "It means a lot. Come here, little Mumsie, it's your turn."

"You haven't called me little Mumsie for a while," said Sandra, smiling to hide her feelings of maternal impotence. "I'll be so much with you in spirit, Maddybelle, you'll think I'm with you in person."

"You haven't called me that since I was really young," said Madeleine nostalgically.

"Ah, it's this motherhood thing, it does strange things to you," replied Sandra, wondering what the next few months would bring.

The next few hours brought their own touch of strangeness, as Gulliver sent texts to both Sandra and Osborn to say he was in the A & E department of the local hospital with Anwen Evans and one of her daughters. It transpired that Anwen and her girls had been spending the day at Gulliver and Bryony's house, to build a fire pit in the garden. Somehow – and Sandra trembled to think exactly how – her daughter had been using an axe with no adult supervision and had almost chopped off a finger.

The next few days brought news of Madeleine's scan, which turned out to be an internal one. The placenta placement for a safe delivery was judged to be borderline, so Madeleine had been referred to a doctor. The verdict from the doctor was that while there was no need to book Madeleine in for a Caesarean section, the birth would need to be in a delivery suite with doctors on hand, rather than in a midwife-led unit.

Osborn's appointment with the skin consultant also yielded a hopeful, but slightly mixed opinion. The patch of skin was thought to be benign, but since there were some small signs of cancerous cells, he would need a biopsy at Derrickford Hospital in Plymouth. As the French holiday was fast approaching, the consultant agreed the biopsy could be after the holiday.

The next week seemed to gather speed towards an emotional nightmare, as Sandra and Osborn dealt with their individual reactions to the news of Osborn's biopsy. Sandra felt overwhelmed with life's events, suffocated by her mother's ongoing self-centred focus, concerned about Madeleine and downright worried about Gulliver, who was deep into a mid-life crisis. When she started to wake in the mornings feeling sick, she knew anxiety was the cause, so determined to perceive what was happening as just a full-on, uncertain time.

Although Gulliver was emailing Sandra about his state of mind and how things were disintegrating between him and Bryony, Sandra was aware that he was texting and emailing Osborn a whole lot more. She didn't really mind, although not being sure who knew what made it a little tricky. As the first week in April came to an end, however, it became apparent that Bryony's parents also knew of the rift between Gulliver and Bryony.

Osborn had met Stan Stanpool one morning when he was catching the bus into Plymouth to have coffee with his friend Graeme. Although it had been a quick conversation, Osborn said it had been clear Bryony had understandably been speaking with her parents. The same evening, Gulliver was texting Osborn a lot and it transpired that he had 'told Bryony'. Exactly what that meant was unclear, uncertain and deeply unsettling.

The following day, Anne Stanpool rang to ask Sandra and Osborn if they would like to meet for coffee, to talk about what was happening. Since it was Tuesday and Sandra would be seeing Caroline before she and Osborn had to take her mother to hospital for x-rays on her hip and knee, Sandra felt too overwrought to go to Anne and

Stan's house. Osborn appeared to be overwrought himself that day, as he confessed to being afflicted with vertigo. Fortunately, the x-ray expedition to the hospital with Caroline was straightforward and an even better end to the day happened when Madeleine rang to say she was doing well.

As the time came for the French holiday, it became apparent that Sandra and Osborn were in survival mode again. Anne and Stan had wanted to discuss Bryony's conflict about whether to go on the holiday at all with them, but Osborn assured them he would look after Bryony and encourage Gulliver and Bryony to talk, in order to reach some sort of resolution.

It felt decidedly odd when Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc arrived at the house on the evening of their overnight ferry trip to France, but there wasn't much time to dwell on feelings, as they very soon had to drive to the ferry port in Plymouth. Everyone was tired and after the process of boarding and finding their cabins, they said goodnight. That is, everyone except Gulliver, who went to the bar for a solitary beer.

The alarm at 05:00 the next morning didn't wake Sandra from a deep sleep, as she'd hardly managed any sleep at all. However, she still groggily carried out morning ablutions and presented herself for a *petit déjeuner* of English Breakfast tea and a fine French croissant with Osborn and the rest of the party – although nobody was in party mood at all.

Juniper seemed entranced by the rising sun shining over the sea and since it promised to be a fine morning, they went out on deck for some fresh air. The pinkish sun above the rocky approaches to Roscoff disobligingly disappeared behind some cloud, but it was soon time to return to the cars anyway and eventually drive on to French land, to make their way to Finistère (derived from Latin for 'end of the land').

They were, in fact, heading for the extreme west coast of Brittany and their first stop en route was to a small, interesting town named Sizun, where they parked by the church of Saint-Cadou. After walking around the grounds of the church, they wandered out into the town and along the streets until they came to a small *boulangerie-pâtisserie*, where they stood outside and gazed at the tempting bread and pastries on display in the window.

Before Sandra knew what was happening, Gulliver had purposefully marched into the shop (closely followed by Osborn) and emerged triumphantly a short while later wielding two baguettes.

"I was so determined to do that," said Gulliver a little weakly, holding out a slightly trembling hand to show Sandra. "I made a pact and I did it, completely in French! I'm so tired of being scared to do things and Anwen's encouraging me."

"Er – good," replied Sandra uncertainly, wondering what else Anwen was encouraging her son to do.

After that mild excitement, they drove on to an area that looked a lot like Dartmoor in Devon, or Bodmin Moor in Cornwall, where they headed to the chapel of Mont Saint-Michel de Brasparts, within the Armorique Regional Nature Park. Not far from the car park, a path consisting of many steps led to the chapel at the top. The weather was dry and reasonably warm, although by the time they reached the summit, there was a very cool wind.

There was nobody else at the small stone chapel when they arrived, so they were able to investigate in peace – and it did indeed feel peaceful up there. Inside, the chapel felt a little cold and austere. Some of the walls consisted of old stone with spreading areas of moss, while near the altar, the walls had been plastered. There was a simple but beautiful stained-glass window comprising vertical strips of different coloured glass within their own lead surrounds, lined up between five horizontal sections of thicker lead.

A large flat slab of rock had been laid upon two squat level stones to form an altar, adorned with offerings of flowers, candles and small pieces of rock. Juniper was so intrigued that Sandra asked her if she wanted to put a rock on the table. Juniper agreed and bounded outside again to choose a special rock. She enjoyed the process so much that she asked to put another rock on the table. Since Sandra felt Saint-Michel would only smile at Juniper's eagerness, they happily repeated the whole process together.

Outside again, they wandered around looking at the 360-degree view. The outlook was pretty barren and craggy in places, with several trails criss-crossing through the bracken and heather. Petroc appeared to be in his own little heaven up on the peak, carefully making a long line of stones on the grass. Others before them had made similar lines and patterns of stones on the grass areas around the chapel, so Petroc was simply adding his own offering.

When they eventually descended the steps, it was a relief to feel the warmth of the sun. Its effect was soporific as they drove on towards another small town or *commune* and unsurprisingly, both Juniper and Petroc fell asleep. On arrival at a place called Huelgoat, they were able to park by a lake and devour sandwiches and crisps brought from home.

It seemed silly not to explore Huelgoat, so they set off along the side of the lake until they came to an old watermill, with steps and slippery paths leading down into a rather secretive green world, strewn with huge mossy boulders and a 'devil's grotto' that over the years seemed to have inspired some rather bizarre Arthurian, Celtic and Christian myths.

This *Chaos de Rochers* (chaos of rocks) would have been a good place to explore on a sunny day when they had more time, but they retraced their steps to the village square and bought postcards for Juniper's and Petroc's scrapbooks – which was apparently Sandra's holiday task. Gulliver asked the shop assistant how the name Huelgoat was pronounced and was told to say every syllable, as in Hu-el-go-at. Sandra was again aware that a sea change seemed to be occurring in Gulliver, even though Huelgoat wasn't a coastal town.

It was time to go to a supermarket to buy food for the *gîte*, which they achieved in Quimper. Sandra went in with Osborn and Gulliver, although her legs felt as if they didn't belong to her and her brain felt as if it was missing believed lost in France. However, Gulliver was more alert, understanding the problem when they caused a slight hold-up at the check-out by having failed to stick their own price label on a bag of grapes. *Des raisins? Oui!*

The weather felt quite hot by the time they arrived at the *gîte* not long after 16:00. The owner was waiting for them, although Sandra avoided him by deliberately allowing herself to be diverted by Juniper and Petroc. She felt far too tired and untidy for human consideration, especially by a French man, whatever that meant.

It was a spacious and comfortable place, although the tiled and wooden floors were cold to bare feet. They consumed cheese, bread, salad, fruit and wine for tea – Gulliver's baguettes were moreish, particularly with a generous helping of French *beurre*. It was quite late, so the children went to bed while Sandra washed dishes. Osborn, Gulliver and Bryony played Long Rummy, but Sandra was too tired and went to bed.

'This feels so unnatural,' she thought, as she tried to become accustomed to the strangeness of the room and ignore the fact that the duvet and pillows were filled with feathers. 'They're all there in the next room playing a game together, while there's every likelihood Gulliver and Bryony's marriage is breaking up. I know that's no real reason not to play Long Rummy, but there's now a massive elephant in the room all the time.'

'What's the French for elephant again? Did I ever know it? Ah, I think it's just *éléphant – il y a un éléphant dans la chambre*. There's not much I can do, I suppose, except try to make sure Juniper and Petroc have a good time, because none of this is their fault. It's going to be so awkward, though, I'm not looking forward to it much – and this is supposed to be a holiday. Well it still is, but it feels more like marriage crisis counselling. Oh well, tomorrow will bring whatever tomorrow brings.'

CHAPTER 18

Tomorrow brought a visit to Pont l'Abbée in cool weather, where Sandra loved how the streets and shops had retained their identity and soul, unlike England that seemed to have followed the USA and sold its soul to the great greedy twin gods of corporate commercialism and consumerism. She realised she was still feeling caught between the pleasure of a holiday in a new place to discover and the still undiscussed *éléphant*.

While wandering up a gently sloping street of delightful, individual shops with Juniper's hand in hers, they came across a *boulangerie-pâtisserie*. Gulliver again purchased two baguettes, but Sandra and Juniper were transfixed by the *pâtisserie* part of the shop that sold fantastic looking cakes and chocolates.

"Grandma Sandra, if I had some chocolates like that," said Juniper wistfully, "I wouldn't want to eat them because it would spoil them."

"I know what you mean," replied Sandra, "so maybe it would be a good idea to buy something special from another shop that you would want to eat!"

"There's a shop over the road," said Juniper quickly. "I saw it on our way here."

"Maybe we can go in there on our way back to the car," suggested Sandra, noticing that Gulliver had left the shop and was walking on up the street. "Oh look, we need to follow your dad or we'll get left behind."

Rather than continue walking around the town, they diverted to a walk along the quayside and then onward and upward slightly, where they eventually came across the Gothic looking remains of what was once a Catholic parish church, built between the 13th and 16th centuries. It was unfortunately shut, but they walked around the exterior, peering into the interior whenever window spaces allowed.

Returning to the *centre ville*, Sandra made sure they investigated the shop that Juniper had pointed out, which turned out to be a *biscuiterie*. It was pleasingly spacious with a wide range of regional products among the more touristy postcards and gifts. Juniper was allowed to taste a couple of the biscuit samples put out to help people choose and ended up with a large packet of orange biscuits for everyone to share.

They drove back to the *gîte* for another baguette, cheese, salad and fruit lunch, deciding to take an afternoon walk from the *gîte*. Bryony stayed behind, which felt like the first indication that the *éléphant* actually existed. However, the warm sunshine and fresh spring flowers were delightful as they walked along country roads, lanes and paths, until they arrived at Chapelle de la Madeleine with its adjoining magnificent holy well. Unsurprisingly, Sandra felt an immediate connection with her own Madeleine.

The walk back was just as enjoyable, noticing the many wild flowers growing in hedges and grass verges along the way. Petroc seemed intrigued by the different insects they came across, although Juniper earnestly assured Sandra that she didn't share his interest. They took a slightly different route back through a wooded area and came across another holy well amongst the trees, before returning to the *gîte*.

Their meal that night took the form of salmon, potatoes and salad, followed by strawberries. Juniper and Petroc went to bed, after which Sandra joined the others in a game of Long Rummy, although she was so tired that she lost quite shamefully.

As she prepared for bed, she was aware that Osborn had gone to sit with Gulliver at the table just outside the *gîte* and assumed they would be discussing the *éléphant*. However, exhaustion prevented her from asking him how it had gone when he eventually crawled into bed beside her, almost shivering with cold.

Sleep turned out to be perversely tricky, not helped by having a cold leg – just the one, for some obscure reason. It was a lovely morning and although the *gîte* was decidedly chilly at first, it warmed up reasonably quickly. When everyone was ready, they all clambered into Gulliver's car and headed to Penmarc'h at the extremity of a small peninsula in Finistère.

Parking the car at Pointe de Penmarc'h at the northern limit of the Bay of Biscay, they walked along what resembled a building site. There was undeniably a lot of building taking place, as well as what seemed like a lot of lighthouses. One in particular named Phare d'Eckmühl looked very imposing and was, in fact, one of the tallest lighthouses in the world. As they walked to the end of the rocky point, there were more lighthouses – and more building work, including an enormous crane (not the bird variety).

While wandering somewhat aimlessly, Osborn took it upon himself to enter the *Boulangerie de Phare* and buy a baguette – just the one, as Gulliver had previously confessed to being baguetted out. They then came across a Tourist Information place with a good selection of postcards, so Sandra and Osborn went inside with Juniper and Petroc for scrapbook postcard purposes.

Unfortunately, Petroc had a mega-tantrum that frankly made Sandra want to baguette him out of the shop and pelt him with stale croissants and croutons, but instead she had to woman-handle him outside, where he threw himself down on the French ground. Osborn stayed behind with Juniper to pay for the postcards and then came out to deal with Petroc, who was refusing to budge. To Sandra's astonishment, Gulliver and Bryony stood a small distance away and simply watched it all take place. She wondered if the elephant had made an appearance.

After that *débâcle*, they walked along the coastline in the opposite direction. Other lighthouses kept springing into view – a surprising number of lighthouses, of various shapes and sizes. The land was quite flat, but out at sea there were many small islands and reefs resulting in white breakers, giving the impression that the whole area consisted of rocky, dangerous coast that could be the scene of frequent savage storms and significant danger to shipping.

As it was nearing midday, they decided to have lunch at a *crêperie* they'd passed earlier and because the day had gradually become much warmer, they sat outside at a table for six. The waiter was very helpful and spoke a small amount of English, although Gulliver did very well, attempting to order everything in French. Sandra couldn't help wondering if Anwen had been encouraging him again. They all chose from the *galettes* menu – a Breton galette being a large thin buckwheat flour pancake with various fillings, which they washed down with local cider and lemonade for the children.

Everyone had chosen simple fillings of egg, cheese or ham, although Osborn had plumped for *fruits de mer*. The waiter had smiled approvingly at Osborn's order and when it arrived, it was obviously a house speciality. The 'sea fruits' of mussels and other fishy items were paddling around in a presumably fishy sauce on top of the galette, lorded over quite dramatically by a langoustine. Sandra immediately had a flashback to Madeleine's French wedding fare of less than a year ago, but managed not to shriek.

Dessert was chosen from the *crêpes* menu, although the children preferred ice cream. There was a misunderstanding when Sandra and Osborn ended up with ice cream in a dish instead of ice cream on a *crêpe*, but it was all delicious and since Osborn had chosen the house speciality cider apple ice cream, he again had the waiter's approval.

After this success, Gulliver drove them to Guilvinec, a fishing port with a beach. They spent the next hour or so on beach-type activities, such as wandering around and looking for small shells, while Juniper and Petroc amused themselves quite easily. When Sandra and Gulliver were still occupied in shell collecting, Osborn took the opportunity to sit on a large rock beside Bryony. It was clear the elephant was being discussed, as Sandra noticed Bryony brushing away a few stray tears. She wondered if Gulliver had even noticed.

Back at the *gîte*, they embarked upon various activities, mostly involving keeping the children amused and then preparing a meal of their favourite baguettes, cheese, salad, fruit and wine. The usual evening tasks followed, including Gulliver taking Juniper outside for a play until bedtime, which she very much enjoyed. Petroc was clearly tired from the beach (and possibly his earlier tantrum) and chose quieter pursuits.

They all played Long Rummy until about 21:30, when Sandra could no longer think straight, or even a little sideways. Gulliver disappeared outside with Osborn again, but this time Osborn reappeared by himself after about half an hour, saying Gulliver had gone for a walk. Osborn told Sandra he'd persuaded Gulliver to tell her what was going on, rather than saying it all to Osborn. The elephant was slowly gathering visibility.

It had been another cold night, but it was another fine morning that quickly warmed up, despite a cool wind. The day's visits started at a monumental calvary, which was a type of public crucifix in the form of a monument dating from around 1450. It lived up to its name, as it was indeed massive, with a huge base.

The wind was still quite keen – unlike Juniper and Petroc, who were quickly losing interest – so they drove on to the ruins of the Chapelle de Languidou, originally built in the 12th century and rebuilt in the 16th. They walked around there for at least half an hour, as it was a pleasant site, with a nearby picnic table that turned out to be very useful for morning snack time, which definitely interested the children.

After that, they ended up at nearby Canté in Plozévet, where a large menhir next to the beach immediately caught Sandra's eye. Closer inspection revealed it to be an engraved granite memorial, for the 600 or so dead of the French 74-gun ship *Les Droits de l'Homme* (*Human Rights*), sunk in a battle in bad weather in 1797 during the French Revolution. Its two adversaries had been *HMS Indefatigable* and *HMS Amazon*.

After trying semi-successfully to translate the French writing, Sandra joined the others on the beach, as they found a sheltered place and ate their lunch of sandwiches and crisps. It was rocky, pebbly and sandy, which was ideal for some creative beach-type activities, though Gulliver distanced himself from the others by walking away and apparently gazing out to sea for quite a while.

Meanwhile, Osborn constructed a rather decent prehistoric stone circle, complete with heel stone and dolmen. At Juniper's request, he improved his new-found skills further down the beach. It was good enough for a passing French man to comment: "Ah, Stonehenge!" and engage with Osborn in a halting but passable Franco-English conversation about stone circles, Cornwall, Brittany and Celtic monuments.

Later, Sandra noticed Osborn was having another conversation with Bryony, but soon afterwards they left the beach and called in at a supermarket for more supplies. Once back at the *gîte*, they sat outside for a while in the still very warm weather. Gulliver played with Juniper and Petroc, while the others cooked baked potatoes with tuna and/or baked beans for tea, followed by a Magnum (uncooked).

While Sandra was washing the dishes, Gulliver came in from where he'd been sitting alone with a glass of wine at the table outside, to ask Sandra to join him for a talk. Her heart leapt in hope and dismay in equal measures, as she followed him outside, taking a glass of wine for herself to ease what she knew was inevitably going to be a difficult conversation.

She was right. It felt excruciatingly difficult as Gulliver started hesitantly at first to tell her how deeply unhappy he'd become over the years and how his marriage with Bryony had turned into a sterile void. He described how he'd felt so alone when the lump in his neck was being investigated and he'd thought he had a life-threatening illness.

He talked of meeting Anwen and how he realised he'd never been in love before, explaining how the two of them had so much in common that they felt they were soul mates. Sandra asked many questions and answered many questions Gulliver asked her.

As the conversation progressed and came to its natural end while the light gradually became dimmer, Sandra knew it was finished between him and Bryony. She felt deeply sad and as much as she didn't want to acknowledge it, she felt that Gulliver was turning away from their so far shared life together and entering into a world that was unknown and alien to her.

She finally went inside as later evening coolness descended and left him to go alone on another evening walk, with his mobile phone that he was clearly using constantly to stay in touch with Anwen. When she went inside, Osborn related to her that Bryony had told him she was going to give Gulliver an ultimatum of letting her know by the end of the week whether they were going to try to mend their marriage, or whether it was over.

The next day was one that Sandra and Osborn had particularly requested, knowing Bryony would also be extremely interested in Carnac, one of the most extensive Neolithic menhir collections in the world. Despite Gulliver's assertion that they were just some old stones, along with his near desperation that they all pile together in one car, they left the *gîte* at 08:50 in two cars. A drive south-east for a little over one and a half hours followed, as the morning progressed and the temperature kept rising steadily.

For many years, Sandra and Osborn had dreamed of visiting the Carnac stones, which were a surprisingly dense collection of megalithic sites around the village of Carnac, consisting of alignments, dolmens, tumuli and single menhirs. They had been hewn from local rock and erected by pre-Celtic people of Brittany in around 3,300 BC – some possibly as early as 4,500 BC. There were three main groups of stone rows, at Méneac, Kermario and Kerlescan, which had once probably formed a single group, but had since been split as stones were removed.

It was therefore somewhat of a surprise to be driving along an ordinary country road one minute and the next minute to find themselves opposite hundreds of mystical, enigmatic menhirs, as they arrived at the alignment of Kerlescan. For a while they were the only ones there, although unfortunately all three sites were open to guided tours only. However, Sandra surprised herself by not really minding that much, because the sight was utterly breathtaking with so *many* stones.

After Sandra and Osborn had enjoyed taking photos in peace on a perfectly calm and beautiful morning, they walked the short distance to a nearby path that led them through an adjoining wooded area. After ten minutes or so, they came across an intriguing arrangement of stones known as the Manio Quadrilateral that formed the perimeter of a large rectangle.

Close by was a tall menhir called the Manio Giant and although it was in shadow and seemed a little menacing, Sandra felt she had to touch it. There was no malevolent energy or any nasty vibrations that sent her shooting backwards through the air. This was just as well, as it may have spoiled their following walk through the woods, while they tried to find another prehistoric feature, but failed. It didn't matter, as the walk was enjoyable anyway.

Returning to the cars, they drove on to Kercado dolmen, a passage grave within private property, but open to the public. It was a very decent dolmen with its entrance facing almost exactly towards winter solstice sunrise. Since there was nobody else there, they investigated inside in peace, finding a single quadrangular chamber. The internal structure was covered by a cairn and surrounded by a wide enclosure of 27 small menhirs, some more well-preserved than others – just like the human race, on the whole. Excavations had revealed arrowheads, flint axes, pottery, beads and charred remains of human bones.

After walking all around the outside, they returned to the cars again and drove to the alignment of Kermario, where over a thousand stones of different shapes and sizes stood in ten long columns, occupying the centre position of the Carnac alignments underneath a very blue sky. The sun was warm verging on hot, as Sandra and Osborn left the others sheltering in the shaded area close to a huge rock and ventured out into the stone zone. Sandra felt invigorated walking along next to where so much energy had clearly been expended by so many people so long ago. Despite being unable to walk amongst the stones, it was actually much better for taking photos free of lingering strangers.

They climbed a small tower at one point that gave an enlightening aerial perspective, which helped them to see the overall amazing layout of the alignment in both directions. It was more or less past lunchtime when they returned to the others, so they headed towards a *crêperie* and ordered some galettes.

It was a relief to sit outdoors in shade under a large awning and sip a cold drink while waiting for food. Although it was almost 14:00 by the time the galettes arrived, they felt quite Continental to be taking their time over lunch. As a bonus, the place was no longer crowded.

While they were finishing, Bryony took Juniper to the tower (an interesting alternative to the toilet) while Sandra and Osborn had a quick walk to a substantial dolmen. They then convened at the car park and drove on to the third and most popular site, the alignment of Ménéac. Again, Sandra and Osborn walked around on their own. It was obvious that Gulliver was stoned out, which fortunately or unfortunately had nothing to do with being stoned.

They started their walk through the village of Ménéac, which had probably been built during the Middle Ages and unfortunately intruded somewhat on the stones, but without detracting too much from the overall wonder.

"This is amazing," said Sandra ecstatically, breathing in a subtle sense of peace.

"I know," agreed Osborn happily, reaching out for her hand. "I defy anyone not to wonder about the sheer effort involved in these Carnac alignments. It blows your mind."

"It does," replied Sandra, stopping to admire a massive stone. "It also blows my mind that Bryony still thinks there's a chance with Gulliver and yet by the way he was speaking last night, there's no chance at all."

"I think she feels she has to try," said Osborn, sighing. "I know I would be the same with you, if we were in the same boat."

"We've been in a very different boat in a very different storm," said Sandra with regret, "but we were different people – we *are* different people and I don't know – it's just different. I know I brought the subject up, but it's too distressing to think of it all right now, so let's just enjoy these precious moments in this mind-expanding place?"

"Absolutely," replied Osborn, shading his eyes from the sun. "I think that may be Bryony over there, with the children. That means Gulliver's on his own again."

"Not quite on his own," said Sandra sadly. "He's got his mobile phone and Anwen at the other end of it."

They finished their stroll around the perimeter of the stones with reluctance, but before leaving that magical place, called in at the *Maison des Mégalithes* to buy a booklet about Carnac written in English – it would have been challenging to buy one written in French, if not a little foolhardy. They bumped into Bryony and the children in the shop, buying a souvenir rubber each for Juniper and Petroc. For a moment, Sandra fondly remembered days long gone of buying souvenir rubbers, badges, book marks, note books, keyrings and other memorabilia for Gulliver and Madeleine. It seemed to create a small aching knot in her heart.

It was time to head back to the *gîte*, calling at the supermarket for a cucumber and some milk, but somehow also leaving with strawberries, Magnums, cheese and wine. Juniper accompanied Sandra into the store and walked around chatting with her all the while.

"Grandma Sandra, do you know that my baby teeth might fall out soon, because my adult teeth will be pushing them through?"

"That's right," said Sandra, as Juniper suddenly stopped abruptly in mid-aisle.

"I hope one of my teeth doesn't fall out in France, because the French tooth fairy would leave me French money and I need English money!" said Juniper with great alarm.

"I wouldn't worry about that, my darling, I'm sure the French fairies would sort it out so you'd be OK," said Sandra comfortingly, wanting at that moment to scoop Juniper up in her arms in a vain attempt to protect her from the certainty that she would be far from OK when her parents finally split up.

They were caught in some heavy traffic back to the *gîte*, so everyone was a little on the tired side and happy to consume bread, cheese, salad and fruit for tea, with the addition of a Magnum for a hint of holiday decadence. A quiet evening followed, although Gulliver once again disappeared into the darkness outside with his mobile phone.

Sandra and Osborn managed to sleep well, both very tired from the day's adventures. It was another sunny morning when they arose at 07:30 and proceeded with the usual morning activities. The consensus was to return to Pont l'Abée for some further purchases from the *biscuiterie*, although they meandered meaningfully towards the *boulangerie-pâtisserie* to feed their baguette habit.

Osborn completed the transaction with the willing help of Juniper, who'd bounded into the shop after him and was unexpectedly rewarded for her enthusiasm when the shopkeeper gave her a slice of baguette with a small stick of chocolate through its centre. She came outside with her prize looking very pleased and immediately broke off a piece of the chocolate to give to Petroc.

After that success, they all did their *biscuiterie* business, some of them slightly more productively than others. Sandra knew she didn't need the kitchen scourer holder gaily painted with images of sardines, but it was so colourful and unusual and somehow inherently French. Since Juniper had begun to talk so frequently about her longingly awaited baby cousin from Auntie Maddy and Uncle Henri, Sandra let her choose a soft sheep baby comforter cloth from the very eclectic shop, as a present for when the baby was born.

Their next port of call was Penmarc'h to appease Gulliver's hankering for a *fruits de mer* galette, but first of all they walked along the coastline path in the heat of the morning sun. It soon became apparent that Gulliver had replied to Bryony's ultimatum. Gulliver and Bryony had been walking along together, when Bryony suddenly stopped

dead for at least two minutes, while Gulliver strode quickly on and was soon way ahead of them all. It seemed to Sandra that he wanted to distance himself as far away as possible from the family scene.

The awkwardness of the situation was lessened a little by Bryony starting to walk along with them again, while Juniper and Petroc continued to chatter regardless. Sandra was almost sure she had just witnessed Bryony's world falling apart. Her heart went out to Bryony, as the small aching knot in her own heart twisted and pulled alarmingly.

Gulliver silently caught up with them later, as they slowly walked towards the *crêperie* at midday and sat at the same table as before. He took charge of the ordering completely in French and managed to achieve his goal. He was also pleased with his galette when it arrived, with its poor dead sea creature gazing accusingly at him.

However, Sandra didn't know how to respond when he asked her to take a photo that she was sure was purely for Anwen's benefit, although she did as he asked. She was painfully aware of not knowing how to feel, especially when Bryony could only manage to eat about a third of her galette.

As it was still early on a sunny afternoon, Gulliver drove onward to find a sandy beach for the children. They soon arrived at a free car park that led through sand dunes interspersed with grass areas on to a lovely, long beach with the most delicious fine white sand, which begged for shoes and socks to be removed immediately. The beach scene was really quite breathtaking, with a wide expanse of sand, sea and surf that seemed to stretch along for miles underneath a completely blue sky.

They parked themselves on a likely looking area of sand, put on sun lotion and despite the undercurrents, applied themselves to the beach experience. It was no hardship, as there was plenty of sand with which to practise making sandcastles and plenty of shells to find. There were also interesting sights, such as a group of ten or so people on horseback riding slowly across the beach along the shoreline. Sandra couldn't help feeling they were caught up in a parallel existence, while the elephant paraded around brazenly in front of them.

At around 16:00, they packed up and headed back to the *gîte* for a reviving mug of tea, after which Sandra was on scrapbook duty, while Gulliver and Osborn took turns playing intermittently with the children outside. Tea was once again of the baguette variety, but then the evening proceeded towards a showdown of distressing intensity.

Gulliver had eaten at the table outside again, this time with Juniper and Petroc, while Sandra, Osborn and Bryony had eaten inside. Osborn had asked Bryony if she was OK, which seemed to prove too much for Bryony, who dissolved into floods of tears as she talked about how she didn't understand why Gulliver was behaving like a teenager.

Juniper and Petroc must have heard their mother in a highly emotional state that was completely out of character for her and they both kept running inside and outside again. Petroc then created a commotion, running in and up the stairs to the bedroom he was sharing with Juniper, where he started to throw things about forcefully. Meanwhile, Juniper came in and asked Bryony what had happened.

"Something awful!" cried Bryony, who was clearly letting out some of the angst and pain of the last few weeks. However, Juniper was alarmed and also ran up the stairs to the bedroom, crying. Sandra took one look at Bryony and motioned to Osborn that she would go upstairs and deal with the children.

It was easier said than done, as Petroc was out of control. When Sandra tried to calm him down so that he would stop throwing things, he crawled under the bed, shouting and crying loudly. There was nothing much Sandra could do, so she decided to concentrate on Juniper. She sat cuddling her, but the noise from Petroc was so loud that Bryony and Osborn came upstairs and after a few minutes, Bryony was finally able to calm Petroc down.

Sandra was wrung out and was sure Osborn felt the same. Gulliver seemed to have disappeared from the *gîte* altogether, presumably on one of his solitary evening walks with his phone. Although it felt as if the whole world was turning upside down, between them they managed to put the children to bed with a semblance of normality. After the noise and emotional upheaval, Sandra and Osborn had an early night.

Their last full day began with another sunny morning, although nobody was certain what to do. In the end, indecision drove them to a town called Plomelin, where their mission was to find some menhirs. They turned out to be easily accessible not far from where the car was parked, in a tranquil wooded glade beside a stream.

They strolled along a path in dappled shade through a wooded area, which was a peaceful way to spend half an hour or so on a Friday morning in Finistère – particularly after the turbulence of the evening before. The leaves were all the fresh, lime green colour of spring and there were many wild flowers growing beneath the trees. Juniper was in a chatty mood as ever, which was comforting.

Back at the *gîte*, it was time for another baguette, cheese, salad and fruit lunch, after which they went for a short drive to Kerugou dolmen, situated in a field beside a small road near Plomeur, not too far away. They were the only visitors and therefore able to take their time. It was another pleasant location, with many wild flowers adding to the general feel of a natural place that had once been of great prehistoric significance. Juniper and Petroc certainly enjoyed a childlike exploration of the T-shaped dolmen with its different sized stones, some almost completely overgrown with grass.

Sandra felt ambiguously sad as their last holiday outing came to an end, although they still had to make a final visit to the supermarket to purchase wine. On returning to the *gîte*, they started the process of clearing up, before a final 'bits and pieces' tea. Sandra took some time out (literally), sitting outside in the evening sun playing a travel game with Juniper, which Juniper was pleased to win legitimately. Finally, though, it was time to call it a day – or to be pedantic, an evening.

They awoke to another quite sunny day with a cool breeze and after a quick breakfast, began the preparing-to-leave procedure. It included washing the tiled floors, which proved a challenge with pieces of grass being blown in and brought in on shoes as the cars were loaded up. However, they managed in the end, as it was a necessity.

The subsequent drive to Roscoff was straightforward, with just one toilet stop at a service area. It unfortunately caused Sandra to panic for a full few minutes, when the heavy automatic metal door failed to open again when she wanted to leave. Despite having read the instruction to push the button and push the door to exit, it took her a few futile attempts until she realised these actions had to be carried out simultaneously.

At Roscoff, they stopped at a wine store and perused the bottles, crates, cases and whatever else was used to hold wine bottles. Sandra and Juniper walked up and down the aisles, failing sometimes to keep out of people's way when Juniper liked the look of a wine label and stopped in her attempt to read it. Meanwhile, her father and grandfather were deciding on how many hundreds of *bouteilles de vin* to buy.

The ferry crossing was once again comfortable and taken up with various activities, including a magic show for children. However, as they sailed closer to home, the elephant was sitting undisguisedly beside them. When Bryony took Juniper and Petroc to the play area, Gulliver mentioned quietly that while he would be staying with Sandra and Osborn as originally planned, Bryony would take the children with her to stay with her parents. The holiday in France had clearly been the setting for the breakup of Gulliver and Bryony's marriage.

CHAPTER 19

The following day was Easter Sunday, although there had been no opportunity for any food shopping. It was raining and the uncomfortable newness of their son's marital situation caused Sandra and Osborn to feel anything but celebratory. Fortunately, Sandra had remembered to buy in the Easter chocolate a few weeks previously.

In the afternoon, after Gulliver had returned from a solitary walk in the rain and Caroline had come for a visit, Bryony arrived with the children to pretend that all was normal. Sandra had no idea if Gulliver planned to tell his grandmother the news, but when Caroline spilt a nearly full mug of tea over the small table next to her that dripped steadily onto the carpet, it seemed the wrong time anyway. Caroline looked as if she was about to cry and not long afterwards, so did Bryony – for obviously different reasons.

It was therefore a relief the next day when Gulliver left for Wales, after being forced to collect Bryony, Juniper and Petroc from Anne and Stan's house. Sandra and Osborn had rarely enjoyed food shopping as much as they did then, almost revelling in the comfort of banal normality, without being caught up in other people's emotional dramas. Madeleine rang later in the day and said she was fine, although sad about Gulliver and Bryony and concerned about Juniper and Petroc.

As the following day was Tuesday, Sandra visited Caroline and broke the news about Gulliver and Bryony. She found it distressing and difficult, but a dreamlike sense of being in a slightly unreal state kept her from feeling the full force of the deed. Meanwhile, Osborn had gone to Anne and Stan's house for a talk with them, after a worried phone call from Anne. Sandra became worried herself when Osborn later confessed that he'd felt dizzy after leaving their house and had even checked himself for signs of a stroke.

The next day, Sandra and Osborn knew they needed to relax as much as possible and went to a garden centre in the morning for coffee and a leisurely walk around afterwards. Some gentle gardening in the afternoon felt both useful and beneficial, but in the early evening, all hell seemed to break loose.

First of all, Stan rang Osborn to tell him about incidents that Bryony had related to her father in an earlier phone call. Stan, renowned for not 'doing' emotion, said he was thinking of going to Aberpontyfan in the morning to collect Bryony and the children and asked if Osborn would go with him. Osborn, forced to think on the spot, replied that he thought it was best not to make any knee-jerk reactions and that he would speak with both Gulliver and Bryony.

Sandra didn't know what to think, let alone feel. With a sinking heart, Osborn rang Gulliver to let him know what was going on and that it would probably help to imagine how Bryony might be feeling right now, since Gulliver was the one who was leaving the marriage. According to Osborn, Gulliver had talked about moving in with Anwen as soon as it could be arranged.

While Osborn had been speaking with Gulliver on the home phone, Bryony had rung him on his mobile phone, so as soon as he'd rung off from Gulliver, he rang Bryony back. Sandra began to feel as if she was in an episode of *Westenders*, as she listened to Osborn expending vast amounts of energy in what was essentially crisis counselling. By the end of the evening, Osborn was exhausted.

For Sandra, the next week passed in a messy haze of trying to keep up with ordinary life, an outpouring of emails from Gulliver that needed answering, guilt about not having enough time or emotional energy to concentrate as much as she wanted on Madeleine (now a week away from her due date) and on the morning of Osborn's skin biopsy, a confused and painful cry of help in an unexpected email from Bryony.

Sandra made time to reply to Bryony as best she could, before the rest of the day took over. She noted with irony that at just about the same time Bryony's email had arrived, so had one from Gulliver, going into detail about how he and Anwen had met.

Despite feeling drained of almost everything as she prepared to go to Derrickford Hospital with Osborn, she managed to feel anxious on his behalf. It was too hot in the waiting room and when Osborn was seen, his blood pressure was high. However, he managed to stay conscious for the biopsy, although nearly fainting in the process. Sandra remained anxious all the time until they arrived home, afraid he would succeed in his quest to pass out.

The following day at her mother's house, Caroline casually mentioned to Sandra that her bathroom carpet had been wet for about a week and Sandra felt obliged to ring Osborn for help. He was fortunately able to come and take a look, but met some fairly hostile opposition from Caroline when he needed to take off the bath panels in order to investigate.

Deciding that he needed to ring the plumbing insurance company, he told Caroline he'd better turn off the hot water to be absolutely safe. Caroline muttered that he was fussing and it probably wasn't necessary, at which Osborn finally lost his patience. Sandra could see that he'd had enough of just about everything, as he accused Caroline of not trusting him.

Caroline reacted in the age-old way Sandra remembered from her childhood and went first of all red and then sulkily silent. When Osborn finally spoke to the local plumber he'd been put in touch with, he was indeed advised to turn off the hot water. The leak was eventually fixed, but Sandra and Osborn both felt very disillusioned about life, the universe, the mess of their son's marriage and Sandra's antagonistic mother.

Sandra had finally made it to Alison's, after weeks of what felt like family madness. Alison herself was looking tired and admitted that she was fighting depression.

"I'm not surprised with what you've had to deal with lately," said Sandra, noticing deep shadows under Alison's eyes. "You're doing so well, I'm sure that what you've been through and are still going through would have floored me ages ago. How's Dirk?"

"I'm not sure," replied Alison with what seemed like a mixture of hurt and anger. "He's in a rest period from the chemo, but even when he's taking the damn pills and I know he's suffering, he won't talk to me about it. I feel as if he's shutting me out. When people ask me how he is, I feel as if they're looking at me like I'm his nurse and they expect me to know exactly how he's feeling. I sound so selfish, but *I* feel as if I haven't had enough time to recover my own health properly after the stroke and yet I'm expected to get on with it."

"I'm so sorry," replied Sandra, her heart going out to her friend. "I do know what you mean about being expected to help other people through their own problems, even though you haven't had chance to deal with your own. It's felt like one huge onslaught for Osborn and me since – since – I don't know, it feels like decades, but it's definitely been very intense over the last couple of years. I'm sorry I haven't been able to help you out, or even been around as much as normal. In fact, normal doesn't seem to exist anymore."

"Sandra, I wasn't including you when I was moaning," replied Alison, smiling ruefully. "No, you've been having enough emotional turmoil recently to slay an ox and I can't imagine what you must be feeling about Gulliver. I know Helen split up with Mark, but there were no children, so it's far more complicated for you. It's a bit tricky, because I know Anne Stanpool and she tells me stuff sometimes, but I never disclose anything you say that's not common knowledge – and the same for her."

"Yes, I've always been aware you're in an awkward middle position with Anne and me, but honestly, I don't mind what you say about me because I've got nothing to hide," said Sandra, a little surprised at her own words. "You just look after you, because heaven knows you don't need to become caught up in any of my shit!"

"Yes, I've had enough shit to last me a lifetime," replied Alison, smiling properly for the first time since Sandra had arrived. "The IBS is playing up lately and what with Dirk's colostomy – but no, I know you were talking metaphorically. How's your mum?"

"Ah! Let's not go there," said Sandra, smiling too. "She's much the same. She had trouble with a leak the other day."

"Ah! Let's not go *there*, Dirk had trouble the other day," said Alison, grimacing. "I do feel so sorry for him, but I can't seem to stop feeling angry. Oh well, let's talk about something more hopeful and happy. How's Madeleine?"

"As far as I know she's doing OK. She seems to be worried about being smaller for dates than the others in her NBT group, although some of them have given birth already. She said the midwife seemed to be double-checking her at her last appointment, but then told her everything was OK."

"Bit of a mixed bag, then."

"Yes. I'll be glad when she has this baby, it feels really unsettling knowing that your daughter is going to have to go through what you went through in order to have *her*! To be honest, I feel really bad that all the shenanigans with Gulliver are eclipsing Madeleine's special time. I feel as if I've been missing out on being the mother of an expectant mother – and consequently both Madeleine and I are losing out. It seems especially unfair to her, even though she lives away from us. God Alison, I didn't realise I was bottling all this up."

"Don't worry, I like hearing about your world, probably because it helps to put my world in perspective," said Alison thoughtfully. "You do look a bit tired."

"I feel tired," replied Sandra with a short laugh. It was appropriate for her stature. "I thought when I saw you that you were looking tired, too."

"You're not wrong," said Alison, her demeanour brightening a little. "I bet I'm more tired than you..."

"Nah, I'm more tired than you," said Sandra, as they both smiled at each other a little self-consciously.

"Hello Mumsie," said Madeleine tiredly over the phone, on the evening of her due date. "She's not like me, she hasn't arrived a week early – or even on time. I hate waiting so much and I feel so alone during the day. I'm sorry, though, I didn't mean to moan. How are you?"

"I'm not entirely sure," replied Sandra honestly, "although I've been thinking of you so much, Maddy. I can't believe all the absolute turmoil that's erupted ever since Gulliver got together with Anwen and I'm so utterly sorry that it's been happening while your lovely little baby has been growing inside you."

"I hope she's growing enough," said Madeleine in a small voice. "Oh well, I have another midwife appointment in six days, so something will have to happen soon. Henri's being kind to me. How are things with Gulliver and Bryony?"

"Messy," replied Sandra, wondering how to explain. "Gulliver says Bryony's refusing to compromise and being childish, but he's failing to comprehend how hurt Bryony is. She feels alone and as though her life has been destroyed. She also feels caught in the middle between him and her father, because she let slip that Stan is trying to get one over on Gulliver through her and he seems to be pressuring her to move to Cornwall. Poor Dad is in the completely unenviable position of speaking to them all, including Anne and Stan."

"He shouldn't be in that position, it's not fair on him," said Madeleine with concern. "Is he worried about his biopsy result?"

"Yes, although he won't hear for a while," replied Sandra, sighing. "We're all OK really, Mad, there's no need to worry about us, honestly. You concentrate all your energy on yourself and that little soul inside you, that's *your* job right now."

"I know, I just wish I could drop in for a chat, or that you could come by for a visit," said Madeleine forlornly. "It would give me courage for popping out your granddaughter."

"An interesting turn of phrase," said Sandra with a sore heart. "I'd give almost anything to be with you, I really would – but sometimes we need to find that strength inside ourselves. *You* have that strength inside you, Maddybelle, you always have. I'm your mother and I know it for sure – so hold on to that, my darling."

Five days later, Sandra wished she could draw upon more inner strength, as she felt herself trembling slightly after reading emails Gulliver had forwarded between himself and Stan Stanpool. Gulliver was going to move out of the marital house at the end of May, but many aspects of the break were far from settled and Stan was veering on aggressive. Osborn was once again caught in the middle by attempting to keep a strategic peace.

Sandra's energy was taken by another phone call from a still pregnant Madeleine, who broke down in tears at the sound of Sandra's voice. She apologised in between sniffs and sobs for what was obviously a result of hormones and waiting, saying with a hint of hysteria that Henri had even bought her a pineapple for its alleged labour-inducing properties. When she had calmed down after a while, she told Sandra she would let her know how the midwife appointment went the next day.

The early evening thankfully brought some good news, when Osborn received a phone call from Dr Effingham to say that his skin biopsy was non-malignant. He was diagnosed with keratosis and would be prescribed some heavy-duty cream to dispatch any dodgy cells that might possibly progress into cancer cells. Sandra felt weak with relief and although Osborn wasn't exactly out of the woods, she at last felt that maybe life wasn't all about challenges, hardship and adversity after all.

On awaking the next morning, Sandra was troubled by vertigo, but carried on with the day as usual and the spinning, tilting sense of being off-balance gradually passed. A mid-morning text from Madeleine said that her waters were leaking, but she was still going to keep the midwife appointment as planned. A mid-afternoon text said she had gone to the hospital for a scan and Henri was with her. A mid-evening text said she'd been connected to a foetal monitor for four hours and her waters had definitely broken, but there were no contractions. She had then been sent home for the night, but would be going back in the morning to be induced.

"They've sent her *home*?" said Sandra incredulously to Osborn, as they sat side by side on the sofa in a state of exhausted disquietude, trying unsuccessfully to relax with their boxed set of *Taupe's Anatomy*.

"Surely if her waters have broken, that means infection can get in?" asked Osborn, frowning. "Even I can remember that from those classes I went to with you."

"That's what I thought," replied Sandra, sighing. "What *is* happening in the world today? God, I haven't got the energy to worry about anything else, I just have to trust that they know what they're doing and that Maddy and the baby will be OK."

The next morning while Sandra and Osborn were shopping at *Setco*, Madeleine sent a text to say she was in hospital and a gel had been applied to induce labour, but nothing was happening. At lunchtime there was another complicated and intense email from Gulliver, although Sandra's brain was having trouble trying to assimilate its implications. It felt as if the meagre amount of energy she possessed needed to be saved for Madeleine – and herself.

Finally, at just gone 22:00 that evening, Madeleine sent Sandra and Osborn a text to say that Léonie Sophie Dior had been born by emergency C-section. She was 1.9 kg (4 lbs 2 oz) and had been put in an incubator for a while, but both Madeleine and Léonie were OK.

"They're OK," said Sandra shakily. "I don't know exactly what OK covers, but right now it's good enough for me. I can deal with the details tomorrow."

"We have another granddaughter," said Osborn, smiling. "She's going to be fine, I know she is. They're both going to be fine."

"I hope Maddy sleeps tonight," mused Sandra, as she replied to Madeleine's text. "She'll need to sleep while she can."

"I bet Henri's elated," said Osborn, as he also replied to Madeleine's text. "He'll probably sleep well after all he's been through today."

"I wish we could see them," said Sandra, as a wave of intense need to be with her daughter swept throughout her entire being.

"We have another granddaughter," repeated Osborn a little tearfully.

"Our daughter's daughter," breathed Sandra with awe. "Maddy will be such a lovely mother."

The next morning, Sandra and Osborn went out to a garden centre for coffee, in order to wind down and relax for an hour. Unfortunately, they missed a phone call from Madeleine, who left a message to say she would be ringing Caroline to let her grandmother know the happy news and that she would ring them both later.

Sandra was enchanted, however, when she switched on her computer at lunchtime, to see a short email from Madeleine containing two photos of Léonie in a special 'hot cot'. There was a feeding tube in one nostril and a small cut just above her left eyebrow, but she looked perfectly serene. In one of the photos, her eyes were open and she appeared to be investigating her hand. Sandra fell in deep grandmotherly love on the spot.

As it was a Thursday, Sandra went to her mother's after lunch, where she was assailed with comments from an excited Caroline, intent on voicing her thoughts.

"I'm so chuffed that Madeleine rang me," announced Caroline proudly. "She said she hadn't been able to speak to you yet when I asked her. She did sound rather tired, but I told her it was only to be expected. Well Sandra, are you pleased to have become a grandmother for the third time?"

"Yes, of course I'm pleased," replied Sandra, feeling her limited supply of energy being leached out of her by her mother. "It wasn't a straightforward birth, though, since Maddy had to have an emergency C-section. Léonie is small, too."

"Yes, but I'm sure she'll be fine, although it must have been worrying when she had to be resuscitated," said Caroline, gazing at Sandra.

"Resuscitated?" asked Sandra anxiously. "I haven't heard many details, because we missed Maddy's phone call this morning. She said she'd ring later."

"Oh dear, I thought you'd know," said Caroline in a concerned tone. "Maybe I got it wrong? I did think Madeleine sounded a bit spaced-out."

"I'm sure we'll hear all about it soon," said Sandra sadly, feeling once again the regret and the longing of wishing her beloved daughter lived closer.

When Sandra went home from Caroline's later, Osborn told her she'd missed a call from Madeleine, who'd confirmed that Léonie had needed to be resuscitated after birth and because of her low birth weight at full term, she was being tested for genetic abnormalities. However, it was most likely a problem with the placenta and all genetic tests so far had come back normal. She was being fed by tube, but all was going in the right direction.

It felt like a mixture of positives and negatives and Sandra was unsure how to feel. She did feel comforted, though, that Madeleine had said she would love them to visit as soon as they could. Since all the clothes bought for Léonie were way too big, she wondered if they could bring some 'early baby' clothes with them and she would ring again the following day.

The following day was bright and sunny, so Sandra and Osborn decided to take their jaded selves off to visit a garden for some flower healing, after going into Plymouth to buy some baby clothes. The clothes were exceptionally cute, the garden was looking wonderful and Sandra eventually got to speak with Madeleine when they arrived home.

"Maddy!" Sandra experienced a moment of inarticulate joy to hear Madeleine's voice. "How are you?"

"I'm OK. Well, I'm a bit sore and tired and I fainted earlier when I got out of bed and they put me on a drip. I'm OK though, Mumsie. When can you come and see us?"

"Tomorrow, darling." Sandra felt tears forming. "Dad and I have already talked about it and we'd love to come and see you tomorrow."

"Really?" Madeleine's voice sounded touchingly hopeful.

"Try stopping us! No, don't – we'll be there."

Sandra and Osborn gazed upon their new granddaughter on her third day of life. They had travelled to Bristol on a hot mid-May day, stopped for lunch, had become lost finding the right car park for the hospital, had walked up a very steep hill and had arrived in a glow of anticipation and overheating at the ward where Madeleine had directed them.

"It's wonderful to see you," said Sandra, as Madeleine smiled up at them both from where she sat on her bed inside the curtains that were pulled around for privacy. Henri was sitting in a chair and the cot was in between them both.

"You're looking OK Maddy, it's put my mind at rest." said Osborn. "Good to see you, Henri."

"You too," replied Henri with a brief but polite smile, before he looked intently at the small, beautiful baby who was moving around and making a mewling noise. "Madeleine, I think she needs feeding."

"Again?" said Madeleine, gazing at her daughter and then her parents. "Oh well, you'll just have to excuse me, but I need to try again with this breast-feeding lark."

Osborn occupied himself sorting out the baby clothes and other offerings they'd brought, while Sandra tried to look discreetly at the amazing and heart-warming sight of her daughter feeding her new baby. For a split second she remembered lighting the candle in Winchester Cathedral to welcome an incoming soul she had no idea yet existed and the preceding desperation of Madeleine to become a mother. Léonie snuffled and did her best to suck, while Madeleine looked earnest and uncomfortable and Henri looked on with undisguised love and pride. A ripple of fulfilment pulsed throughout Sandra's being.

The two and a half hours of their allotted time seemed to pass incredibly quickly, taken up with hearing all about the last few days. It was clear that Henri was carrying out his fatherly role 100%, especially since in the day after the C-section, Madeleine had more or less been out of action and Henri had therefore seen to Léonie's feeding tube, changed her nappies and lifted her in and out of the cot for Madeleine to feed her.

Sandra and Osborn both had a cuddle with their tiny granddaughter when she was awake, which alone felt well worth the overall exertions of the day. As Sandra looked down at the miraculous, diminutive being that fitted snugly along her forearm and felt the warm, vital energy of her, she was amazed at how alert Léonie seemed. Her eyes were open and she appeared very much aware as she turned her head once when somebody in a curtained cubicle across the room made a sudden, loud noise. Sandra knew instinctively that this soul had come into the world with the will and determination to stay.

"I suppose it's time for us to go," said Osborn sadly at last. "I hate to leave, but I've got the drive home to face."

"Can you come and see us when Henri's back at work and after his parents have visited?" asked Madeleine, with uncertainty in her voice. "I'll be on my own."

"Yes," replied Sandra and Osborn together, smiling with love and certainty.

CHAPTER 20

May continued with much mayhem in varying degrees. Sandra and Osborn were finding sleep elusive, as there simply seemed too much to think about and process.

Gulliver confessed to being overwhelmed with things to do and not being in the right mindset to do them. He gave them his new address for the end of the month, which felt discomfiting, no matter how Sandra tried to rationalise it.

Caroline was doleful and complaining constantly about her painful hip and knee. The result of the x-ray she'd had showed moderate osteoarthritis in her hip, although she was stubbornly taking only one paracetamol at a time. She was also waiting impatiently for a GP referral appointment with the bunion specialist regarding the pain in her foot.

Anne Stanpool rang to say she was worried about Juniper and Sandra was feeling submerged in a morass of jobs that needed doing, but for which she had no time or energy.

The one positive and very hopeful part of life was the astonishing rate that Léonie was thriving and putting on weight. After eight nights in hospital, Madeleine and Léonie returned home, much to Madeleine's utter relief. However, Henri's parents were staying with them, which Sandra thought must be hard-going on Madeleine, although she seemed to be coping with equanimity.

At the end of May, Bryony had brought Juniper and Petroc to Cornwall for half-term, naturally staying with Anne and Stan. During the week, Gulliver would be moving his things to Anwen's house and the separation would be complete. Nobody had mentioned divorce and it all felt too sudden and too raw to ask about. From Sandra's viewpoint, life was crashing ahead in its inexorable way like a glacier moving down a mountain and her life's landscape was constantly changing.

The first visit of Bryony, Juniper and Petroc to Sandra and Osborn's house on a cloudy Sunday afternoon felt poignantly strange and it was very noticeable that Juniper was clingy, while Petroc was fractious. Thankfully, the children seemed to find comfort in reacquainting themselves with the familiar box of toys and other items in the house, so they soon settled down to normal activities – despite the absence of Gulliver, which seemed to be hurting like a phantom limb.

Juniper was delighted when Madeleine deliberately made a Skype call when she was there, knowing how intensely interested Juniper had always been in her cousin. In fact, Juniper was so entranced that for once she hardly said a word, but gazed at Léonie with a smile on her face the whole time. Petroc came to look at Léonie and immediately left again to go and play with his cars. On the whole, it was a successful first visit, one in which they had re-established friendly contact with Bryony.

Two days later, Sandra went to see her mother to sort out some changes to their usual pattern of visits that week. She found it ridiculously excruciating on many levels, simply asking Caroline to walk over to her house that afternoon with her, when Bryony, Juniper and Petroc would once again be visiting.

Madeleine had asked if it would be possible for Sandra and Osborn to bring her grandmother to Bristol to meet her new great-granddaughter for the day, whilst knowing it would be tiring for them all. Sandra had to explain it all to Caroline, who eventually agreed. She also reluctantly accepted that Sandra and Osborn would be visiting Madeleine on their own for two days the following week.

"I can't believe the fussing and fretting my mother is capable of," whispered Sandra to Osborn, as she arrived back at their house with Caroline. Bryony, Juniper and Petroc had already arrived. "I feel as if I've been walking through flaming treacle."

"Sticky," muttered Osborn sympathetically, "and hot."

"Hello Bryony," said Caroline in a syrupy voice, as she walked from the porch into the sitting room. "How are you, dear?"

"Oh, I'm OK thanks," replied Bryony, somewhat surprised. "How are you?"

"I'm struggling on," said Caroline, sitting down heavily on the sofa. "It's very warm out there today, quite humid for the time of year."

"Grandma Sandra?" came Juniper's insistent voice from where she was looking at a scrapbook. "Grandma Sandra, can I stick some pictures in? Have you got glue?"

"In a minute Juniper, when I've made us all a drink," replied Sandra, vaguely hoping Juniper would forget.

"They're looking well," said Caroline to Bryony, as Petroc went to sit on Bryony's lap and attempted to cuddle her so she couldn't talk.

"He's a bit clingy at the moment," explained Bryony in a muffled voice.

"It's only to be expected," said Caroline, sniffing. "I'm glad to see you're coping well, I do think that grandson of mine has treated you in a way that's a bit tacky."

"See," muttered Osborn, as he accompanied Sandra out to the kitchen to make some drinks for everyone. "Sticky."

Three days later, a Friday on the last day of May, Sandra and Osborn called for Caroline early in the morning and drove to Bristol so that four female generations could meet. They arrived at midday, coinciding with a visit from the neonatal nurse, who confirmed that Léonie was doing absolutely fine.

The visit went smoothly enough, as they'd brought pasties with them for lunch and Léonie seemed perfectly happy to be handed around for photo-taking in various combinations. Sandra thought she could see a difference already from nearly two weeks before, as Léonie gazed around her with avid interest, screwed up her little face with wind and waved her small hands around quite freely. Once again, Sandra felt the vibrant energy of her granddaughter, as she lay in Sandra's arms with her blonde hair soft against Sandra's bare arm.

Sandra noticed that Caroline was looking rather flushed as the afternoon wore on. When her mother was given her great-granddaughter to cuddle, Sandra had to take Léonie from her after a while, as Caroline admitted that her arms were giving out. They all had a mug of tea and chocolate éclairs that Sandra had brought with her and then it was time to leave.

"Thank you so much for coming, Grandma," said Madeleine, as they all stood by the front door.

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world," replied Caroline, smiling at Léonie in Madeleine's arms. "You're both looking really well, I'm glad everything's settling down for you. Come and see us soon."

"I will," said Madeleine, as Osborn reached out to hug her carefully. "Thank you so much, Dad. I hope you have a good journey home."

"Thanks Mad, we'll be back in three days," said Osborn, reaching out to stroke Léonie's cheek. "How often can we say that?"

"I still don't want you to go," said Madeleine disconsolately, as Sandra hugged her gently. Sandra recognised the sense of responsibility weighing Madeleine down.

"Henri will be home quite soon," said Sandra comfortingly, remembering clearly how it felt to be alone with a newborn baby. "You're doing just fine, Maddy – and we'll see you on Monday. Have a good weekend, my darling."

Sandra was glad to be home at the weekend in order to catch up on her own life, although life contrarily seemed to have other plans. Caroline rang in the late morning to say she felt sick, faint and thought she had a temperature.

"I don't believe this," said Sandra tiredly to Osborn after the phone call, feeling herself beginning to tremble slightly. "I should hope she *has* got a temperature, otherwise she'd be dead. God, what timing. I've lost count of how many times I've shown her how to use that sodding thermometer. I suppose I'll have to do it again."

"I'll go over," said Osborn quickly. "I'll soon suss out what's wrong."

"Thank you," said Sandra weakly. "Thank you."

When Osborn returned twenty minutes or so later, he said Caroline's temperature had been normal. He'd asked if she wanted a drink and a biscuit and she'd accepted eagerly, so he'd told her he would call again in the afternoon to check how she was.

Sandra tried to put her mother out of her mind, so she could concentrate on what needed doing, but when Osborn came back in the late afternoon from going back to check on Caroline, he was clearly exasperated.

"She was only about to walk to the corner shop for a magazine," he said heatedly, "so I walked there with her and she seemed fine. She was bothered about a rash on her face, but she seemed perfectly OK apart from that."

"I noticed she was looking rather flushed yesterday, but I put that down to being all hyped up about the visit," said Sandra, sighing. "I honestly don't know what to think about her sometimes."

"I think she's just got herself all worked up," replied Osborn matter-of-factly. "I advised her to put some cold cream on her cheeks and under her eyes, where it was most noticeable. Anyway, I've made sure she's OK, so there's no need to worry."

Three hours later, the doorbell rang. Osborn opened the door to a fretful Caroline, who explained in dramatic terms that she was so worried about the rash, she'd never sleep that night. Noticing Sandra in the kitchen, she walked stridently towards her, pointing out the rash. Sandra backed away, although there was nowhere to go. Again, Osborn came to the rescue.

"It's seven o'clock on a Saturday evening," he said calmly to Caroline. "I'll ring the local pharmacy to check it's still open and I'll take you there for advice."

Half an hour later, the long-suffering Osborn returned home alone, relating to Sandra how the pharmacist had looked closely at the rash and thought it was probably an allergic reaction to something.

"He advised anti-histamines and some sort of cream," he said, taking off his shoes. "If it hasn't gone by Monday, he told her to contact her GP. She seemed to accept that, but you never know with your mother."

"I truly can't thank you enough for today," said Sandra sincerely. "Do you know, I think she came over this evening just to make sure *I* saw the damn rash, since you'd already seen it in the late afternoon. God, I give up! No, I don't – but honestly, I really hope we can have a quiet day tomorrow, because I can't take much more of this upheaval. It's been such a mad May. June needs to be a lot calmer."

June indeed started quite calmly, as Sandra and Osborn went out in the morning for coffee at a garden centre, one of their favourite pick-me-up (or calm-me-down) occupations. Osborn decided to make a quick visit to Caroline before they left and reported that her rash was improving.

They'd spent the rest of the day catching up and preparing for their Bristol visit, but just as they were settling down to relax for the evening, Osborn received a text from Gulliver that caused him to exclaim aloud.

"What?" asked Sandra fearfully. "Who is it? What's happened?"

"It's Gulliver," Osborn replied distractedly. "He doesn't know what to do. Anwen's asked him to move out, because she says it's too much too soon."

"But he's only been there two days! He's just moved all his stuff there!"

"I know. He's talking of looking for a flat."

"This is unbelievable! How could she *do* this to him?"

There were no answers that night, only questions and desperate possible solutions, as Sandra and Osborn both struggled to sleep. In the morning, as they started out to Bristol, they heard from Madeleine that Gulliver had asked her if he could visit too. A quite unexpected family reunion was about to take place. Despite her distress about the situation, Sandra felt heartened that the four-way meeting, plus Léonie, would hopefully be a time to consolidate their original family connection.

When they arrived, Madeleine answered the door with Léonie in her arms, a sight that lifted Sandra's spirits immediately. She was suffering a little with her old gut trouble (although her guts were the same age as she was), but knew it was a reaction to stress. When Gulliver arrived, Madeleine was feeding Léonie, so Sandra answered the door.

"Hello Gulliver, how are you?" she said uncertainly to her tired-looking son.

"I'm not sure," he replied just as uncertainly, although after a second's hesitation, they both moved together for a hug.

The next couple of hours passed quickly, as they ate sandwiches Sandra and Osborn had brought with them for lunch, took photos of Gulliver holding Léonie and discussed his future. It felt very odd to Sandra that he didn't seem to know what was going to happen and although he had a few possible flats lined up, he was talking about buying some steak and wine for a special meal for Anwen and himself that evening.

"She wants to come and see the flats with me, to make sure they're OK," he said quite eagerly, as everyone looked at him in astonishment.

"I don't understand," said Osborn warily. "When you said she wants you to move out, exactly what *does* she mean? Are you still together?"

"She's not sure," replied Gulliver, looking away for a moment. "Her parents are on my side, they talked to her last night and told her to think about what she'd be throwing away."

"Right," said Sandra guardedly, "although I think they might be on her side because they can see what a benefit you are to her."

"Maybe," replied Gulliver, reminding Sandra of his favourite teenage response.

"I'm quite prepared to help you out financially if you do decide to move into a flat independently," said Osborn carefully, "but that's only if you're on your own."

"OK," replied Gulliver, as shutters seemed to come down over his eyes. "I must go, I have to go shopping to buy the steak and wine."

After he'd gone, Madeleine looked at her parents with raised eyebrows. Léonie was asleep and Madeleine was taking the opportunity to drink some tea in peace.

"What's it all about?" she asked incredulously. "Do you understand what's going on, because I certainly don't?"

"I can't help wondering if there's game-playing here, unconscious or otherwise," replied Osborn, frowning. "It doesn't feel right."

"A power thing?" asked Sandra guardedly. "Unconscious or otherwise?"

"Well, he's a grown-up," said Madeleine, sipping her tea. "It's his choice what to do, but I can't help feeling he's in a tricky position."

"Anyway, we're here to see *you*," said Osborn, bringing himself back to the moment. "We'll help you out in any way we can while we're here."

"It helps me so much just by you being here," replied Madeleine with a small smile. "Oh, I think she's waking up."

The next morning, Sandra and Osborn got up as soon as Henri left for work, so that Madeleine could go back to bed. Léonie slept for most of the time and then was obligingly happy to be walked around the room looking at different things, so that her exhausted mother managed almost two hours of sleep.

"Thank you so much," said Madeleine groggily when she reappeared. "I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"No need to, my darling," replied Sandra, smiling. "I still remember only too well what sleep deprivation feels like, thanks to you and Gulliver!"

Later in the morning, Madeleine and Osborn took Léonie to have her passport photo taken for her forthcoming trip to France in the summer. Madeleine was still unable to drive as a consequence of the C-section and was also very frustrated at being unable to do quite a few jobs around the house. While they were out, Sandra set to with the duster and the vacuum cleaner, glad to be able to help.

In the afternoon, they all walked slowly to the nearby *Setco*, when Sandra was greatly heartened to hear Madeleine sounding more like her usual self. As they all walked back to the house, with Osborn proudly pushing Léonie's pram ahead of them, Sandra and Madeleine chatted comfortably.

"I'm sure you'll feel better when your C-section scar heals and you can move around much more freely," said Sandra encouragingly. "I had it easy in that sense with both of you, because with Gulliver's birth I only had a couple of small stitches and with yours I didn't have any at all."

"A part of me wishes I could have had a normal delivery, but on the other hand, I missed all those hours of pain and then the pushing," said Madeleine honestly. "I feel bad because I think the emergency operation stopped me from bonding with Léonie. I didn't feel that rush of instant love that people talk about, because I was so out of it and kind of shocked by everything. Henri bonded with her more than I did, especially that first day, I'm sure of it. Don't get me wrong, I love her so much and I can't get over how beautiful she is, but I wonder if there's something missing in me. I feel so tired and so alone during the day that I count the hours until Henri gets home from work."

"Oh Mad, I think what you're describing is perfectly normal," said Sandra, wishing she could find the right words to put Madeleine's mind at rest. "I honestly think you're doing brilliantly and watching you with Léonie is so special. I don't think you have any idea of how the love just pours out of you when you're with her. I think it's possible that her birth traumatised you, which is completely understandable, but it means that the aftermath of that shock tends to be overshadowing your natural feelings for her."

"You think so?" Madeleine's voice sounded doubtful. "I don't actually like breast feeding, though," she admitted in a low voice. "You told me it how it was such a meaningful experience for you, but I don't feel the same. I feel the weight of being the only person responsible for keeping her alive."

"We're all different, my darling," said Sandra, feeling a great amount of compassion for her daughter. "You've already helped Léonie so much by breast feeding her as much as you have. Look at how much weight she's put on!"

"Henri says I have supermilk," said Madeleine, relaxing a little.

"He's right – you're a super mummy and he's a super daddy."

"Papa, it's the French word," corrected Madeleine, smiling. "Oh Mumsie, I love you and Dad being here, I wish you lived closer. I'll miss you when you're on holiday in Guernsey, but hopefully we can make Skype calls. You'll seem closer that way."

"God, I keep forgetting we're going away so soon, I really need to sort things out," said Sandra, sighing. "I hope we can Skype too, because it works both ways. I need to know you're OK as much as you need to know we're not a million miles away."

"It feels like that in the middle of the night sometimes," said Madeleine sadly. "Still, you both really need your holiday, so don't forget to pack when you get home!"

"Nothing lasts forever, Mad," said Sandra, as they came in view of the house, "except love. I know you love Léonie and I love you both and Dad does too. Try not to be so hard on yourself, my darling. You're the best possible mother Léonie could have and I'm positive she loves you already, the way she looks at you and snuggles in. It's adorable, it does my heart a power of good."

"Thank you, Mumsie," said Madeleine warmly. "Tea and cake before you go?"

Back at home the next day, Sandra and Osborn needed to do some food shopping, so Osborn called in at Caroline's for her shopping list while Sandra was still getting ready. He came back looking annoyed and shaking his head.

"She ambushed me," he said angrily. "She told me she'd made an appointment for 10:00 this morning with the practice nurse to check her rash, which looks a lot better to me. Why didn't she ring and ask me for a lift outright? Why has she got to be so

underhanded? She said she knew we'd be shopping this morning because you'd told her we'd call by for her shopping list. We'll have to get a move-on, she's really cut it fine."

The rash was apparently nothing to worry about, but Sandra felt there was plenty to worry about when she received an email from Gulliver that afternoon. After all the distress of the upheaval following Anwen asking Gulliver to move out, he was now stating that they were still on the together forever track.

"I don't like what he says about being desperate to stay at her house with her," said Sandra worriedly to Osborn. "I also feel quite strange about him saying that when he went to her mother's house yesterday, he felt instantly at home, relaxed and part of the family. Does he have any inkling at all how I might feel reading that? I still can't forget that *Farcebook* dialogue between her and Gulliver back in March, when I realised Myfanwy Swayne was the name of Anwen's mother."

"Remind me about the *Farcebook* dialogue?" asked Osborn, looking interested.

"Gulliver said how he'd nearly called her Mam and she replied that Mam was so much better than Mum. She then incited him to call me Mam and see my reaction. That was the first I ever knew of her and it really wasn't a good start at all." Sandra could feel anger rising at the memory, as well as an accompanying sense of hurt.

"Did you tackle him about it?"

"Yes, there are no flies on me. I kept it friendly, but it made my heart sink."

"I must admit it's strange, almost as if you were being baited."

"He says in the email that he's still not clear if he's expected to find his own place or not," continued Sandra, frowning. "He says that after Anwen told him all three places he saw yesterday weren't any good, she asked if they could look at more together. What's going on? Is it possible she's angling for something?"

"I don't know, I suppose it could be possible," said Osborn quietly. "If that really is the case, he needs not to bite."

"He says he doesn't want to rock the boat, so he's leaving it for a few days to see how they get on. He seems incredibly pleased they're still together. I don't like the way he says that he's really behind with work, but life is much more important." Sandra could feel her heart beating quickly.

"We both know only too well how much you need the necessary basics to be able to live life at all." said Osborn thoughtfully. "It sounds as if he's become caught in some uncharted water."

"I know he can swim, but I'm afraid he'll drown," said Sandra worriedly.

The following day, Sandra and Osborn both happened to forget they'd been married for 43 years precisely, until Belinda sent Sandra a text to wish them a happy anniversary. They did nothing remotely special to celebrate. Instead, Sandra spent most of her pitiful supply of energy replying honestly and openly to Gulliver's disconcerting email, explaining exactly how she felt. To her intense relief, he replied quite calmly and reasonably, but she still felt exhausted, anxious and overwhelmed. The holiday in Guernsey was beginning to feel more and more like an absolute necessity.

CHAPTER 21

The temporary escape from their life as they currently knew it was complete and their first sailing in a high-speed catamaran was over. Sandra and Osborn sat at the table in their holiday apartment at Grange Lodge in Guernsey, sipping tea and looking out onto a well-tended garden, with mature palm trees, grassed areas and plants of many kinds. The cares of the recent past were already falling away.

The apartment was spacious and comfortably furnished, but it didn't take long for the urge to explore to send them on a walk to St Peter Port harbour. It reminded Sandra a little of Malta, walking down streets of housing and shops until arriving at a busy front full of people and a busy harbour full of boats. They were hungry and travel weary, so bought a baguette and some local cheese, to go with some random food from home. Osborn made a quick sortie in the car to remedy a wine deficit and they settled down for the evening, relaxing quite mindlessly and happily until bedtime.

They both slept quite well in the large, comfortable bed that was actually two single beds pushed together, waking to a morning that was a little cloudy, but with some sunshine. By 09:45 they were walking along the surprisingly busy Sunday morning road down to the harbour front, where there seemed to be an art and craft fair being set up in the now bright sunlight. There were already large numbers of people wandering around, so they decided to walk beyond the front and out past the side of the marina and the harbour to Castle Cornet (nothing to do with ice cream).

Four and a half hours later, they left the castle feeling a complete sense of tourist satisfaction, having enjoyed several excellent museum displays, enlightening information boards, the firing of the noonday gun, a lovely castle-made lunch, pleasant strolling outside with gardens and wonderful views, an amusing re-enactment of some castle history and finally, a damn decent gift shop.

"I'm going to do it," muttered Sandra, as they prepared to leave the shop.

"Do what?" Osborn looked slightly perturbed.

"I'm going to write something positive and encouraging in the visitors' book over there, I can't seem to stop myself."

Upon emerging again into the 21st century, they immediately heard an unusual engine sound and looking seaward, saw one of the Condor high-speed catamarans making its noisy way into the harbour. It was a perfect photo opportunity, the results of which were added to the many photos they'd already taken.

Back on the harbour front, the art and craft festival was still in full swing, thronging with people – or maybe thronging with swinging people, but Sandra was too tired to care. As they passed by the stage, her attention was suddenly taken by a choir singing *Old Man River*. It was a song she hadn't heard for many years, associated strongly with childhood memories of her father singing it in his soothing tenor voice. It brought happy tears to her eyes.

They stopped to buy a mini-tub each of Guernsey ice cream, to take their minds off the trudge up the hill to Grange Lodge, where the rest of the day was spent in such a relaxing way that Sandra didn't even wash the dishes.

The next morning was rather cloudy and since thundery showers were forecast, they thought it would be best to go somewhere under cover (rather than undercover, which would have been silly). As it happened, it did turn out to be on the surreptitiously concealed side, as Osborn braved the Monday morning traffic to drive to an Underground Military Museum.

It was located in a complex of tunnels built by the Germans during their occupation of Guernsey and housed thousands of exhibits covering Guernsey's military history. They were inside for almost one and a half hours, gazing at cabinet upon cabinet full of medals, weapons, books, maps, letters, posters and so much more.

Sandra found many of the German artefacts macabre, particularly the helmets, daggers, bayonets, guns and all types of weapons (although there were Allied weapons too). The German posters to the Guernsey populace were emotive, including a notice of someone who'd been shot for espionage by being caught releasing a pigeon with a message for England and a feisty local woman who had been imprisoned for saying "Heil Churchill!"

It was warm and sunny when they emerged outside to present-day Guernsey, so they wandered along the road that led them to 50 steps or so leading upwards to Clarence Battery, which had been built during the French Revolution. After some alterations during the German Occupation, it had become the headquarters of the German Luftwaffe radar early warning service. Within the grounds of the battery were many wild flowers and butterflies, plus an amazing sea view that included neighbouring islands in the distance.

They returned to Grange Lodge for lunch, followed by an afternoon excursion to Pleinmont Head, on the west coast. The roads were rather narrow (to be kind) and often seemed hit or miss, which resulted in Osborn expostulating several times. It was therefore a relief to reach a much wider coastal road, with pretty yellow flowers that Sandra thought must be wild mustard dominating the roadside.

The car park they settled in overlooked the sea on a calm high tide with rocky peaks poking through the water and a couple of small moored boats a little way out from the beach. It reminded Sandra very much of the Isles of Scilly and when they left the car and breathed the salty, seaweedy air, that added significantly to the effect.

Their route took them away from the coast and up a one-way narrow road to the headland. It was a very green area awash with pink campions, sea thrift and many other flowers, including wild roses. They soon reached Guernsey's third largest megalithic tomb, Le Creux ès Faïes, or Entrance to Fairyland, built during the Neolithic period. It may not have contained any little people (although Sandra was far from tall) but someone had placed a small clay-type figure on one of the stones inside. It was a very decent passage grave and since they were the only ones there, they were able to investigate in peace.

They continued their walk along the headland within constant sight of Fort Saumarez, which had started life in 1804 as a Martello tower after the Napoleonic wars had begun. During the Occupation, Germans had built a four-storey reinforced concrete observation tower on top of the existing Martello tower, which remained in excellent condition because it was never battle-tested. In all the surrounding beauty, it was a concrete reminder of a terrible time.

Reminders of the German Occupation were also found in notices along the way, advising that the headland was crossed by German field defences, including trenches. It became quite hot as they wandered along, looking out towards Lihou Island, a nature reserve renowned for its seabirds and wild flowers.

After taking a detour on a beach to investigate a large rock resembling a frog, they decided it was time to head to *Waitpoppy*. It was unfortunately school-run time and frenetically busy as Osborn manoeuvred along the narrow roads. This was what possibly unnerved him enough to attempt to drive in via the one-way exit. However, he managed to redeem the situation without any supermarket rage and they took their time wandering around the large, cool and not at all crowded store.

Back at Grange Lodge, they first of all revived with a mug of tea, before another quiet teatime and a relaxing evening – with the possible exception of when Osborn was trying to sort out their next day's destination from a map with very small print.

They awoke on their third Guernsey morning to a clear, sunny sky and by 09:15 were driving towards St Martin's Village in the south-east of Guernsey. About 15 minutes later, Osborn had found a parking space and they'd walked the short distance to the village church, to make the acquaintance of La Gran'mère du Chimquière, or Grandmother of the Cemetery, who was standing outside the church to greet them. This may not have been entirely true, but they did immediately recognise the ancient 4,500-year-old granite statue menhir, with her face and her other attributes.

She was a little taller than Sandra and had been carved in two stages, firstly at around 2,500 BC as a fertility goddess (with her devil's dumpling attributes) and then at around 100 BC to 100 AD, when she'd been given a definite face and a cape. She had originally stood closer to the church, but in 1860 a churchwarden had taken exception to her and she'd been broken in two. However, parishioners had protested vehemently, whereupon she was cemented back together and replaced just outside the church. Parishioner power!

She looked quite benign to Sandra, standing patiently there in dappled sunlight beside a tree – so much so that they both turned touristy and posed beside her for a photograph. After saying goodbye (but not literally), they drove west along some rather narrow roads, until they came to the more wild and natural area of Pleinmont Peninsula.

Osborn parked the car in a secluded space among the grassland, ferns and brambles that had been cleared to make a parking area. Nearby was Pleinmont Observation Tower, a rather prominent five-storey concrete feature pierced by viewing slots that had been built by the Germans and used between 1942 and 1945. From there, German observers had controlled Guernsey's coastal artillery, communicating with them by radio. Sandra was becoming slightly disturbed at so much evidence of the Occupation and was glad when they set off on a scenic, coastal walk that felt much more uplifting.

They were fairly high up, so first headed downwards along one of the many small paths criss-crossing through vegetation. It was significantly windy as they set out, although the wind died down quite quickly. The view out to sea was picturesque, with a lighthouse, rocks, reefs and beaches. The sound of seabirds and inland birds was constant and varied amongst the sound of breaking waves and the intermittent droning of bees and other insects.

At one point on their way towards the lower level, Osborn found some steps down through what seemed an ancient pine copse. There were masses of pine needles covering the ground, which was soft underfoot with many years' worth of decay. The trees looked old and worn, although the area was owned by Guernsey National Trust and it looked as if a lot of clearing had taken place. The heat of the day as the morning wore on, combined with the pine trees and all the pine needles, created a heady and evocative piney smell that reminded Sandra of the Colorado Rocky Mountains.

The wind had mostly dropped as they arrived at Fort Pezeries, where a fort had stood since at least 1680 to protect part of Rocquaine Bay below. During the Occupation, the Germans had built an earthwork machine gun position on the western wall. There was no getting away from the German Occupation, but the blue sky and the expansive sea view helped to dispel the wartime associations.

There were so many wild flowers nearly all the time they'd been walking, that Sandra was sure the area truly must be a botanist's paradise and possibly an entomologist's too – although she jumped when a butterfly landed on her arm, so didn't feel qualified to say. Instead, she fell to wondering whether there was a difference between weeds and wild flowers, but failed to reach a conclusion. Wild flowers and insects abounded at the fort, so while Osborn was busy taking photographs, she wandered around inside the open walls to discover just how many wild flowers she couldn't identify.

Hardly any distance away was a modern (late 18th or 19th century) stone circle. Its construction was linked to the Guernsey tradition of the Chevauchée, a procession that traversed the island every three years, checking the condition of the roads. It consisted of a grassy mound with a circular ditch that was itself surrounded by a circle of individual stones around the outside. They took photos and walked around the circle – but Sandra only because there were no other people nearby at that point.

After that, they walked to Fort Grey at the southern end of Rocquaine Bay. At first there were rural lanes and pleasant places, but then they came to a main road that ran around the bay. There was a fair bit of traffic and no pavement, which Sandra always hated. Whenever trucks or buses passed, they had to stop and keep into the side of the road, so Sandra was very happy to reach Fort Grey. However, it looked decidedly white with a fresh coat of paint.

She confessed to being somewhat 'forted out' at that point, so they found a spot just above the beach in the shade, where they sat and ate their lunchtime sandwiches (with no sand) and some crisps. There were a couple of seagulls flying around, but they were no trouble at all, unlike the aggressive tyrant seagulls of Cornwall.

They had a good view of Fort Grey during lunch, noticing that several people came along and went inside to peruse its shipwreck museum. It was a Martello tower that had been built in 1804 by the British during the Napoleonic wars and legend said that in previous years it had been the site of witches' sabbaths, or sabbats.

"This is more like it," said Sandra, with a sigh. "This is more what life should be like. I don't mean all holidays, but much more of a balance between work and leisure."

"Some people seem able to make the most of their leisure time while they're at home, but we seem to get completely caught up in all sorts of other people's shite, which is why we so badly needed this holiday," said Osborn baldly, although he was wearing a hat to protect his head from the sun.

"Yes," said Sandra idly, considering what he'd said. "If there are holidays, I suppose there should be holidights too."

"What do you mean?" asked Osborn, finishing his lunch.

"I've no idea, I just wanted to say it," replied Sandra happily. "Well, I needed that, I feel fortified enough to carry on back now."

The return walk along the same stretch of pavement-less road seemed oddly shorter and this time when they came to a café, they rewarded themselves with a Guernsey ice cream. It felt very holiday-like strolling along with a strawberry cornet to help them on their way and soon they were climbing up the steps in the pine copse. It was hot and hard-going, but the view looking back down showed it had been quite a significant climb.

Sandra was so tired that she was glad to return to Grange Lodge for a mug of tea to revive her wilting parts. Since it was still earlyish and Osborn's parts were less wilting than hers, he suggested a stroll down to the waterfront, to walk in the direction they hadn't yet taken. Afterwards, they walked back to the harbour and the Liberation Monument, looking at several commemorative plaques relating to the Occupation. They seemed a fitting tribute to what various groups of Guernsey people had suffered.

Wandering back across the road, Osborn suggested they investigate the old town area, but Sandra realised she was becoming way too tired and losing the will to walk. Osborn consulted a map and led them up some steps – about 100 really steep ones – which tested Sandra's legs to the limit. Once back at Grange Lodge, a quiet evening followed. They decided that the next day they would do something less strenuous...

There was no question about doing something less strenuous, when Osborn woke with what he termed a raging sore throat. He dosed himself with paracetamol and they left on a much cooler and overcast morning for a 20-minute walk to Guernsey Museum, where they firstly enjoyed a cappuccino in the comfortable little café overlooking the sea.

After that, they spent just under two hours looking around the exceptionally clean and well-presented museum. Perusing the art section first, Sandra realised she wasn't especially into art. She didn't mind a bit of Romanticism or Realism, but failed to be impressed by Gothicism, Classicism, Impressionism and a few other art-isms.

There was a photography exhibition inspired by Victor Hugo of *Les Misérables* fame, who had finally settled in Guernsey after being exiled from France and then booted out of Jersey. The photographs were black and white, very dark in both senses of the word and quite strange, but Sandra always found it impossible to appreciate black and white images anyway.

Another arty but more interesting exhibition concerned music, although the history and archaeology sections were much more Sandra's scene. There were hardly any other people there, although while gazing at Hitler memorabilia in the Occupation display, some German visitors came along and stood beside them. Sandra was surprised to feel a little awkward, even after so many years and presumed it was because Guernsey had been occupied by Germans.

After viewing more or less everything inside, they went for a wander around the grounds, where there was a large statue of Victor Hugo and Queen Victoria (but not together). There were also some gardens with flower beds that looked to have been newly planted with summer annuals, but since it was 12:00 according to the noonday gun at Castle Cornet, they decided to meander back to Grange Lodge for lunch.

Osborn was tired, but more drugs and a light lunch helped him to perk up somewhat for their afternoon destination. The German Underground Hospital was located down a leafy rural road and was described in their *Guernsey Guide* as more chilling than its Jersey counterpart, due to its dark, dank emptiness. The description was in no way wrong.

The idea was the same and the dark, dank tunnels were the same, but it somehow felt more extreme in its desperate attempt to win the war at the expense of human suffering. There were few exhibits in the individual tunnelled out wards, corridors and rooms, but mostly it was a dark, dripping underground labyrinth of despair. The mortuary conveyed it all with its tangible shadowy gloom of death.

Begun in the winter of 1940, the tunnels had been dug out by hundreds of slave workers from France, Spain, Belgium, Algeria, Morocco, Holland, Poland, Russia and Guernsey (although the Guernsey men refused to work after a rock fall killed six French men and were sent elsewhere). The slave labourers were given a choice, to work or starve, while any too weak to work were sent to a detention camp in Alderney.

The sound of dripping water was constant, with hundreds of straw stalactites forming on the ceiling and stumps of stalagmites forming on the ground. They wandered along the dingy corridors, looking into various rooms, including wards with original metal beds and replica wooden beds. All the wards had been occupied by German soldiers wounded in D-Day battles and transported by ship from France, to be transferred above ground after a few weeks, if they made it. Some original German signs were still visible where they'd been painted on the walls.

Sandra found it utterly chilling and was relieved to finally re-emerge into sunlight, after an hour inside a place of such purgatory. She could hardly imagine what it must have felt like to be in there working as a hunger weakened slave labourer – or after being wounded or operated on – or just to be in there for any length of time at all.

Outside in the real world again, she realised how cold her hands had become, so they sat in the car park for a while to thaw, both physically and emotionally. They then drove to another place that could hardly have been more different. The Little Chapel was a miniature church, possibly the smallest in the world, begun in 1923 and encrusted in shells, coloured pebbles and fragments of china.

It was incredibly ornate, but surprisingly beautiful and an obvious work of dedication. They went inside and climbed the few steps to the higher level, where a handful of other visitors were admiring the small but perfectly formed building. It spoke to Sandra of the positive side of human nature, directly opposite to the negative side conveyed in the German Underground Hospital. She was glad they'd made the afternoon's visits in the order they had, for a more uplifting end to their day's tourism.

In the morning, Osborn said his throat felt different, although still sore, so he reasoned that a gentle walk in the fresh air would do him good. Sandra felt better because *he* felt better rather than worse, his throat hadn't closed over and he hadn't died in the night. Once again, she had fallen prey to catastrophising...

They drove to the north coast and parked at Ladies Bay (men allowed), which looked very picturesque as they set off along a sandy path above the bay, with a golf course the other side of the path. It was such an inspiring morning that quite a few golfers were already out enjoying themselves in the sun. The view was beautiful, with pale golden sands, a very blue sea, blue sky, interestingly fortified headlands in the distance and masses of wild flowers.

They were so taken with the view that they almost forgot they were searching for three prehistoric sites. Suddenly Osborn marched purposefully onto the golf course to ask some golfers if they could give him directions. They could – and not directions to leave the golf course – because the brother of one of them belonged to Guernsey's archaeological group and had helped in excavations.

They were heading in the wrong direction, so had to retrace their steps to the car park. From there they took a different direction along a path on the roadside edge of the golf course, before traversing the actual golf course a little (slightly scary) in order to access the extremely ancient long mound of Les Fouillages.

This complex passage grave had started to be built around 6,500 years ago and was discovered in 1977 when the furze/gorse died back after a very dry summer. It was thought that four separate stone structures would have been used for burial and served as special places in Neolithic rituals concerning death, burial and the afterlife. Sandra was so fascinated that she began to wonder if in a previous life she'd been an archaeologist.

The site unfortunately seemed quite overgrown and it was difficult to find a good angle for photos that would adequately show the whole of it, but they did their best. Golfers were never very far away, but were no doubt used to prehistoric site interlopers on their ground – although to be fair, Sandra and Osborn were only in their sixties.

Literally just around the corner, they almost stumbled on the next site, called La Platte Mare. It was more or less a circular grave consisting of seven upright stones and a displaced capstone. Compared to the long mound, this burial cist dated from a mere 2,500 to 1,800 BC, having been excavated between 1837 and 1840. Again, it was significantly overgrown, mostly by ferns, but interesting nevertheless.

The third site was somewhat harder to find and involved walking across the scrub grassland of the golf course (where no discerning golfer would want to lose his balls). Osborn fearlessly walked across the course, while Sandra skulked nervously around the edges whenever possible. When they did finally come across La Varde tomb, though, it was a cracker. To be pedantic, it was a passage grave hailed as Guernsey's largest and most impressive surviving megalithic structure, built during the Neolithic period circa 4,000 to 2,500 BC.

They had to stoop to pass through a fairly low, narrow entrance that widened out inside to a large chamber with one small side chamber. The site had been discovered in 1811 during some military exercises, when human skulls and bones had been unearthed. It had been excavated in 1837, when evidence suggested that successive burials or cremations had been deposited in the chambers. Fascinating and entirely free!

Nearby was a very tall standing stone of a much later date, called the Millennium Stone, from where they continued walking to Pembroke Bay. The golf course was still very much in evidence, stretching right across the headland. On reaching Pembroke Bay, they continued up a little hill to Fort Pembroke, where they sat down against a large rock in the only bit of shade available, overlooking a small area of sea. *Waitpoppy's* salmon and cucumber sandwiches hit the spot, followed by crisps and water, after which they walked back along Pembroke Bay by the edge of the ubiquitous golf course.

All around the area were fortifications of different shapes, sizes and ages. It was a very peaceful, scenic walk along the bay, with very blue sea and pale golden sand on one side, while the other side looked tranquil with the green of the golf course edged with grassland and wild flowers. They stopped to take a photo of a tower and Osborn also noticed a photogenic wild flower – until realising he was being waved at by a golfer, who wasn't just saying hello.

They continued onwards and upwards to another tower that had a chimney, a green painted door and a flag flying gaily from its roof. Further up another hill was what seemed to be a German bunker system, with gun positions and heaven knew what else. All the German fortifications seemed such a concrete blight on a beautiful landscape, but Osborn thought they had been built so solidly that it would cause too much damage to demolish them.

Sandra realised she was becoming tired at that point and Osborn realised he'd lost his watch. They retraced their steps as much as possible to look for his watch, but to no avail. It was a bit of a setback to an otherwise great day, but it seemed a waste of time to fret.

They consoled themselves on the way back with a mint choc chip Guernsey ice cream that was cold, refreshing and delicious on a hot afternoon, with rapidly tiring legs and other bodily parts in sympathy. Osborn had actually made the cardinal mistake of asking for a Jersey ice cream, but the girl who served him merely corrected him, rather than shoving the ice cream in his face for having the audacity to mention Guernsey's arch rivals.

The last part of the walk felt like a real slog and Sandra was incredibly glad to see the car. Osborn was also clearly tired on the drive back, as he made a wrong turn amid some heavy-duty traffic and became caught up in a one-way system detour. However, they made it back to Grange Lodge and prepared to relax for the evening. After *Waitpoppy* fishcakes and salad, they indulged in some very chocolatey profiteroles – completely justified by having used up a load of calories on the day's walk. Amazingly, it was already their sixth night.

Osborn was restless in the night and they both woke feeling tired, but it seemed their duty to make the most of another sunny day, so they set off at 09:30 for another leisurely coastal walk to find two menhirs/standing stones.

"Maybe today's walk actually *will* be leisurely," said Sandra hopefully, as they left the parked car next to a small rocky and seaweedy beach and proceeded in the wrong direction. The right direction unfortunately involved walking for a short while along a pavement-less stretch of road, but they made it on to what was presumably the right path and found a standing stone just inside some private land.

They weren't completely sure it was the standing stone in question, but it seemed photo-worthy. The second menhir unfortunately remained elusive, so they decided it was probably in somebody's garden and proceeded with the walk along a short lane to look out at the sea. There were great swathes of pretty, yellow wild mustard and also quite a few butterflies, this time small whites instead of common blues. However, there was a pervading aroma of seaweed and because it was also becoming very hot and sticky, they decided to drive on to Saumarez Park.

There they strolled in the dappled shade of a path amongst trees, until visiting the tea-rooms for coffee (rather than the coffee-rooms for tea.) Osborn confessed that his throat was no longer sore, but still "funny" and he felt quite tired. It was approaching midday, so they sat on a wooden bench under a tree in splendid solitude to eat their packed lunch and consult the *Guernsey Guide* to decide how to spend the afternoon.

The German Occupation Museum was the chosen candidate, where there were only a few other people, so they settled down to a couple of hours quietly perusing all manner of items, after firstly watching a short video of actual Occupation scenes. At one point, an invasion of schoolchildren occurred (invasion not just being wartime-speak), but Sandra and Osborn simply stayed put in one area while the children chattered, shouted and exclaimed, until they finally all made their way to the next area and peace reigned again.

There was a general mass of more usual items such as weapons, uniforms and medals, but also many photographs and some very interesting, original signs. A section on the Jewish aspect of World War Two included a harrowing account from a Jewish prisoner of his journey from Angers in France to Auschwitz, which was particularly distressing to read and imagine, knowing the horrors that lay ahead for the poor man at Auschwitz.

On the more domestic front, a reconstruction kitchen showed how little food both the population and the German troops had to live on after the Allied landings in Normandy had cut off vital supply lines and how they survived on innovative items such as bramble leaf tea, acorn coffee and potato bread. There was also a very good reconstruction of a Guernsey street in 1940. For some reason, one of the exhibits Sandra found memorable was a stone taken from a building that had been painted with a red V (for victory) by a defiant Guernsey person, although a green laurel wreath had later been painted underneath it by someone in the occupying troops to represent German victory.

They emerged again at mid-afternoon into the still bright sunlight, but Osborn was flagging, so they simply drove back to Grange Lodge for some tea, rest and relaxation.

"I can't believe we've been here almost a week," said Sandra, as Osborn blew his nose resoundingly. "I expect that virus got you because you finally relaxed after having to deal so long with a barrage of stressful situations."

"You'd better watch out then," said Osborn with a croaky laugh. "I've loved all we've done so far, but perhaps a more restful weekend might be a good idea."

"Absolutely," replied Sandra, consulting the *Guernsey Guide*. "There's an easy walk we could do past a passage grave."

"Well, I'd like to go in rather than walk past," said Osborn drily, although his virus was at the running stage. "Is it me, or is it hot this afternoon? I'm sweating for England."

"Nice," said Sandra, frowning slightly. "I suppose that means you're currently a Guernsey sweater. Pizza for tea?"

Sandra hardly slept that night, not only because Osborn was intermittently snoring, but because Gulliver had risen to the surface of her mind and refused to be submerged again. For hours on end, she pondered upon all that had happened recently – all the hurt, confusion and worry about the path he seemed intent on following. In the end, she managed to doze lightly for a while, but was conscious when the first bird sang the first note of the dawn chorus. However, she felt as though she had worked her way towards a necessary realisation, that she simply had to let go.

It was yet another sunny morning as they set out on their walk inland, up country lanes and past people's dwellings, occasionally coming across enormous greenhouses that had no doubt once been alive and well with Guernsey tomatoes, but were now standing forlornly dilapidated and derelict with broken glass panes and generally falling into complete disuse.

After a minor amount of stopping and starting as Osborn thought they were going the wrong way, they arrived at Le Déhus Neolithic passage grave. It was right by the roadside and gated off, therefore difficult to take an exterior photo, but they were able to go inside aided by a few lights that could be turned on and off as required.

It was in good condition, having been re-excavated in 1932, with large quantities of finds dating from 3,500 BC to 2,000 BC. It had the typical narrow entrance leading into a broad chamber with four side chambers, although one of those had bizarrely been re-created in error.

According to pictures they'd seen, its major claim to fame was a carving on the underside of a capstone of *Le Gardien du Tombeau* – the guardian of Le Déhus – with a clearly defined bearded face, arms, hands and a strung bow with arrows and a series of symbolic designs. Despite trying hard to find the carving, however, Sandra and Osborn eventually gave up the search. Outside, they found they could walk all the way around to view the reconstructed circular mound, which felt quite satisfying, but failed to make up for the missing guardian.

After returning to Grange Lodge for lunch, they weren't feeling at all energetic, so decided a stroll down to the waterfront was an easy option (discounting the uphill slog on the way back). En route, they came across an old sign for the hospital that had once been the House of Charity (a workhouse) before it became Town Hospital until its closure in 1990. The building now housed a police station, complete with an old blue lamp outside on the wall.

Down among the shops in the town, so many people were thronging the streets that they left the madding crowd for the harbour, stopping to take photos of an old *barrière* or boundary stone – one of several that marked out the extent of the medieval town – plus a blue post box and a stone marking the place where the British liberating forces had landed on 9th May 1945.

After walking to the breakwater jutting out into the sea (except the tide was out), they watched a boy on the beach below give a yell of delight as he discovered what looked like a massive crayfish in a rock pool. Sandra wasn't entirely sure what constituted a massive crayfish, but she thought it looked unusually large.

Another Guernsey ice cream was enjoyed on the way back to the town, as incentive for the coming toil up the hill. Once again, the rest of the day was spent relaxing, as Osborn was still sounding croaky and they were both tired. Throughout the afternoon and early evening, several people could be seen arriving with their baggage, so a certain amount of people watching took place.

"It seems strange to think we were new arrivals just a week ago," mused Sandra, sipping some tea.

"It shows how quickly you can feel like an old-timer," replied Osborn, just before a fit of coughing overcame him.

CHAPTER 22

Osborn began to snore on quite a grand scale that night, so sleep was fitful, but they woke on yet another sunny morning. However, when they walked down to the waterfront, it had become breezy and cool, so they strolled into the old part of town and en route spent a pleasant half hour in *Costalot Coffee*, sipping cappuccino and people watching.

It was quieter in the old part of town (otherwise known as The Old Quarter), although some younger people were also wandering around. In between looking in shop windows, they noticed some fine old buildings that seemed as if they could tell quite a story of Guernsey's history. The time passed quickly until midday, when they moseyed along to *Pasty Presto* to buy a jolly fine vegetable pasty.

They'd noticed some sunken gardens not far up the road, so took their pasties there and ate them while they were still deliciously warm. The pasties were quite hot, too. They were the only ones in the garden, but the sun had come out fully and there was hardly any shade at that time of day, so they didn't linger.

Their afternoon plan was to walk out to Fort George and past Clarence Battery, to see where the coastal path took them. There was a refreshing sea breeze again as they approached Clarence Battery, stopping halfway up the steps for a breather and to look out towards the harbour, where two cruise ships were anchored not far outside.

At the battery, the grass had been cut and sadly along with it most of the wild flowers, but they sat at the top for a while, looking seaward towards the other islands and consulting the *Guernsey Guide* for information about the coastal path. The route was slightly uphill and in amongst the dappled shade of some trees, as they headed on towards Soldiers Bay and then continued towards a built-up area and on to a tarmac road, past large balconied houses on the hill above that spoke of conspicuous wealth.

Further on they joined the cliff path again and rested briefly on a wooden bench that gave them an occluded view of Soldiers Bay, its water looking green and clear. The next part of the walk was away from the cliff and up through some woodland said to be a haze of bluebells in spring. They were passing lots of fortification-type walls and concluded that Fort George must have been huge.

After taking some steps leading down to the coastal path again, they carried on for a while until they could look out over Fermain Bay and the 88 Ozanne Steps. These steps had been built by a former governor of Guernsey to give access to a rock platform so he and his wife could bathe in privacy, which seemed quite a step (or 88) to take. Sandra wondered if they'd been closet skinny dippers, which was an exceptionally ridiculous term.

Meanwhile, they both decided they were in danger of going a step too far, so ambled back into the wooded area, where Osborn decided to take a different path upwards that would gain them access to the higher parts of Guernsey and thence to Grange Lodge in its elevated position, rather than a footslog down to the waterfront and back up the hill again.

It was a good plan. It worked well at first, as they came out on top and walked along the road where the rich people lived in their beautiful houses with their wonderful sea views. They then chanced upon Fort George Military Cemetery, where soldiers, sailors and airmen from both World Wars and from both sides lay in a soothingly peaceful place.

They continued to the entrance of Fort George with its still impressive gatehouse proclaiming the date of 1812 and through it to ... Sandra was never really sure where. She was sure, though, that this was where the doubts started, as they stood facing roads leading in several different directions. It was also where Osborn started his map wondering and wandering in earnest, stopping every now and then to say it was first one way and then another, as on and on they tramped (although they were wearing clean, decent clothes).

"At least this is giving us a feet-on experience of Guernsey roads, streets and avenues," said Osborn, as Sandra wondered when they would ever get back to drink tea.

"Not to mention industrial areas, building sites and backyards," continued Sandra drily, "although at least the sky's clouded over, so it's not too full-on hot."

"We're going to have to go down these few steps, I'm afraid though," said Osborn, looking at the map again.

"You mean this considerable number of steep steps that will result in one thing – an inevitable climb upwards again at some point," said Sandra, sighing. "Why does this happen to us? Why does a relaxing day and a gentle walk turn into an endurance test of a slog?"

"It's a gift I have," replied Osborn, suddenly veering across a residential road to ask directions from an unsuspecting woman emerging from her house.

It turned out they were actually quite close, which was a relief to know on the last dragging, leg-weary walk to the apartment, where they opened the door and stopped only to fling off hot shoes and sweaty socks before heading towards the kettle.

Needless to say, they relaxed for the rest of the afternoon and evening, rousing themselves only to eat toast for tea, plus other bits and pieces (edible, of course).

"For pity's sake, let's have a really gentle and purely relaxing day tomorrow," said Sandra tiredly, as Osborn gave an almighty sneeze.

Sandra slept well, although Osborn was coughing and slept semi-successfully on the sofa in the early hours for a while. It was another sunny morning, so Osborn drove to the western coast of the island to find some wild orchid fields. It was clear the orchids were past their best, which was a feeling Sandra could identify with, but at least it was possible to imagine the splendour of fields full of four species of orchids, their hybrids and other wild flowers.

They then drove on towards a dolmen and a defence battery in close proximity to each other, parking in a windy car park by the coast. It was only a short walk to the historical site, but approaching from the other direction was a school outing, heading towards the same place and about to arrive there just ahead of them. The site was up a hill, with the defence battery down below the dolmen. Therefore, when the 25 or so children, plus teachers and class assistants all trooped up to the dolmen, Sandra and Osborn decided to loiter down at the defence battery.

It worked well until one adult with the group came down to tell them they had a guide up at the dolmen, a lady who specialised in the island's history and whose tours and talks were highly acclaimed – and if they wanted to listen in at the edge of the group, they would be welcome. It seemed rude not to accept, so Sandra and Osborn put on sociable faces and joined the school group.

Le Trépied dolmen was a Neolithic passage grave and although the talk was geared to children, the speaker was indeed very good, holding the children's attention all the time. She certainly held Sandra's attention, particularly when she drew Sandra and Osborn into the conversation by asking where they were from. Sandra was really glad Osborn was standing closer to her than she was...

He was then further involved when the talk moved on to folklore and the speaker enquired if ducking stools had been used in Cornwall. Although it wasn't his field of expertise, Osborn gamely answered yes. It was a fascinating talk, but Sandra was unashamedly relieved when the school group eventually left the dolmen and moved on down to the defence battery.

In due course, Sandra and Osborn also made their way down to the delightfully named Mont Chinchon Battery, also known equally delightfully as Druids Altar Battery because of its nearness to Le Trépied. It had the usual history of being built towards the end of the 18th century due to the threat of French invasion and of gradual demise until recent restoration. It wasn't that it was a boring battery, more that Sandra was running out of energy (and possibly should have stayed there for a while to recharge).

Their next stop was Fort Hommet, where they sat eating sandwiches in the car, overlooking the mostly sandy beach of Vazon Bay. Afterwards, they walked to Vazon headland, described as having rich habitats such as stabilised sand dune, wet meadow and heathland. Unsurprisingly, it was an area where rare species of plants, butterflies and birds thrived. They did see an unusual pinkish ground hugging flower they couldn't identify, as well as tree mallow and common mallow, but mainly the headland was awash with the usual wild mustard.

The rock in the area was optimistically called red granite, although it looked more pink than red, including pebbles on the beach – but whatever the actual colour, it was warm and attractive, formed 570 million years ago and named Cobo granite after nearby Cobo Bay. Their walk to the fortification at the top of the headland took them past wonderful, uplifting scenery, until like a sudden hideous blemish there was a concrete German bunker gun emplacement built in the hillside, painted in camouflage colours.

That was bad enough, but further ahead there was worse to come. Although the headland was obviously a defence-strategic place and known to have been fortified as early as 1680, at least the Martello tower built in 1804 had been constructed from local red/pink granite and looked as if care for the landscape had been taken. The later Victorian additions of batteries and barracks seemed to blend in too.

However, attached to the Martello tower like a cancerous carbuncle, was a most hideous concrete construction with which the occupying forces of World War Two had seen fit to desecrate the area. It felt like a sorry indictment of human nature and Sandra felt sad at how much Guernsey had been spoiled by conflict.

After Guernsey's liberation, islanders and the British Army had stripped the fortifications, so that by the late 1940s all metal fittings had been taken away for scrap. Many of the bunkers were buried in an attempt to return the coastal landscape to its pre-war condition, but to Sandra's mind, too much of the concrete horror remained.

Since the afternoon was still warm and inviting as they walked back to the car, they decided to visit one more place around the coast at Cobo Bay. According to the *Guernsey Guide*, a watch-house and battery there would give a great view of three bays.

As they scrambled up a steep slope into a wood, however, it dawned on them that they may have taken a wrong turning, although fallen pine needles made the ground easier and more pleasant. It also dawned on Sandra that a battery seemed a good place for a watch-house, which was no help whatsoever.

Osborn's almost unflinching sense of direction succeeded in the end and they climbed up to the watch-house to investigate the whole area in peace. It was quite windy, especially at the very top, but the view was worth it as they gazed out upon the bays of Vazon, Cobo and Grandes Rocques. What was most noticeable from that height, rather than below at ground level, was the different blues of the sea, including some beautiful bands of turquoise water.

Once back at Grange Lodge, they chilled out for the rest of the day. Osborn's cough was still troublesome, but the simple pleasures of a glass of red wine, relaxing TV, a pizza and a coffee Magnum helped to make a pleasurable end to what had been a good day – maybe not a really relaxing day, but a very enjoyable one nonetheless.

They both managed to sleep reasonably well and left on a semi-cloudy morning for the church of St Marie du Castel, the home of the sister menhir to La Gran'mère de Chimquière, the grandmother of the cemetery (with the boobies).

As ever, it wasn't a very long drive and Osborn was able to park right outside the entrance to the church and graveyard. As soon as they entered through the gate, they could see 'her' and her boobies, mainly because her head and face were quite worn compared to her two-dumpling chest. Sadly, her right dumpling had been knocked away, possibly another Christian act against pagan idols.

She stood there boldly and benignly among the gravestones on a large stone plinth, like some kind of earth grandmother looking over the deceased – battered, but still with a presence (like many grandmothers) and so much so that someone had placed a small bouquet of flowers at her feet. It was an essentially peaceful scene.

As they left her, Osborn decided to look inside the church, where the earliest part dated back to the 11th century. They were amazed to come across some 13th century frescos painted on a wall, discovered in 1839 when lightning had struck the church and brought down some plaster. There was also a hagioscope, which was basically a hole through a pillar thought to be used in medieval times by a priest saying mass at a side altar, looking to see the progress of mass at the high altar. On the whole, it turned out to be quite an unusual church.

Their next destination was Rouse Tower, one of the 15 towers built in the 18th century for defence against possible French invasion. It had been fully restored and was open to the public, entrance free. The yellow wild mustard was prevalent again, creating a pretty foreground for photos of the tower, but the sky was still quite overcast and the wind was on the cold side when they got out of the car. Undeterred, they found a path through the vegetation up to where the tower sat on the highest point in the area and found there were displays and several explanation boards both in the tower and outside in a separate building.

There were quite a few people strolling around the area, but not too many to cause photographic inconvenience. After having a good look inside and a walk around outside, they took themselves on a windy stroll along the coastal path, although there were some more sheltered pockets where the air felt appreciably warmer.

They hadn't progressed far when to Sandra's delight, they suddenly came across an archaeological dig on the beach that had been featured on the Channel Island news the previous evening, concerning a prehistoric burial cist or barrow grave.

As they walked closer, they could see about ten people hard at work scraping away in a fenced-off pit among some large stones, although it was hard to see properly and Sandra couldn't bring herself to peer too inquisitively. However, she could see buckets, gloved people with hand tools, a finds tray and one man wheeling away the spoil in a wheelbarrow. It seemed just like a Guernsey episode of the dear departed *Team Time*.

After that excitement, they continued along the path, noticing the plant life and coming across several other people enjoying a Tuesday morning coastal walk. Below them, they noticed another beach with off-white sand that was surprisingly devoid of people.

It was approaching midday, so they walked back to the car for lunch, rather than have an al fresco windblown sandwich experience. Since they were unsure where to go next, they drove back to Grange Lodge for a mug of tea and then set off on foot for the town, where Osborn looked for a watch as an early birthday present, a little cheaper than on the mainland.

It was still quite cool down among the shops, although the sun was making a decent effort to shine. After some initial walking around and a spot of deliberation, Osborn took the plunge and bought a kinetic Seiko, which sounded impressive if nothing else. They then strolled across the road to *Costalot Coffee* for a cooling drink of green tea, lime and mint that was surprisingly refreshing and prepared them well for the uphill walk to the apartment.

They relaxed for the remainder of the day, even when many wailing sirens in the distance turned out to be because a light aircraft had crashed on take-off at the airport. Happily, there were no injuries, although there had been obvious danger of fire from fuel spillage. Also on the news, there was an item about a small fire in the laundry at Grange Lodge Hotel in the early hours of the morning with fire crew in attendance...

The sunny weather was back the next morning and Osborn declared he was at last beginning to feel normal, if that were at all possible. They set off to Sausmarez Manor in southern Guernsey in high spirits, firstly up a dreadful bendy road reminiscent of a vertical snake, if such a creature existed. More crazy Guernsey roads followed until they arrived at their destination and headed towards a tea room in a once large greenhouse.

They spent a relaxing hour and more wandering through subtropical woodland on a 'sculpture walk', hardly meeting any other people while perusing the many and varied plants and sculptures. Sandra maintained that art was very subjective and while she admired and connected with some of the sculptures, she decided that looking at sculptures felt a bit like looking inside someone else's mind – and to her mind, some people frankly seemed disturbed.

Despite the sunny start to the day, the sky had clouded over and it was a little too cool without a jacket. They therefore returned to the warm car to eat their sandwiches, while consulting the *Guernsey Guide* for help with an afternoon visit.

Moulin Huet Bay seemed a good destination and after only ten minutes or so of driving (partly down an extremely narrow road that seemed unsuitable for cars at all), they arrived at a small but adequate car park right by one of Guernsey's old water lanes. These had traditionally run alongside steep mossy banks, although the Germans had filled in many of the water lanes during the Occupation, presumably to make access for their large vehicles.

There was a short but steep path down to the bay and they soon felt they were either in a warmer place, or the temperature had risen. En route, they passed an information board describing how the artist Pierre-August Renoir (1841-1919) had spent some weeks in Guernsey in 1883 and had painted about 15 pictures of Moulin Huet Bay.

When they arrived, they found it was a picturesque place with clear green water at the beach and further out where the sea was more deeply blue, several rocks and reefs. In the distance, the so-called Pea Stacks rose like bold boulders from the water.

The tide was quite a way in all the time they were there with the place to themselves, while the sky gradually changed from overcast to white with increasing bands of blue. They walked to a nearby waterfall at the edge of the cliff, before deciding to return to the apartment for a mug of tea and some languishing relaxation for the remainder of the day.

"I must say, one of the benefits of a two-week holiday is feeling you have enough time to rest and unwind," said Osborn languorously.

"Absolutely," replied Sandra, looking up from her puzzle book. "As well as doing ridiculous word searches, spot the differences, crosswords, codewords, anagrams..."

"Logic puzzles..."

"Oh, forget them! You know I can't do them."

"You're too illogical."

"Thank you," replied Sandra wryly. "You're right though, it's so nice to have time to think inconsequential thoughts – for instance, the other day I was wondering if a standing stone that's fallen over can still be called a standing stone?"

"Well, I was wondering if fortifications include forts, should bunkers include bunks?" said Osborn idly.

"Or if fresco is Italian for fresh, a 13th century fresco must be a misnomer?" asked Sandra, closing her puzzle book. "See, it's language that's illogical, not me."

"If you say so," replied Osborn, smiling. "Sandra, do you know what feels so utterly good?"

"Eating ice cream sundaes on a Monday?"

"Er – no. It feels so good to remember that you and I are not the frantic, worried screwed up stressballs we've become in recent months – years – whatever. We're actually still us inside and that feels simply wonderful."

Sandra felt less than simply wonderful (or even complicatedly wonderful) the next morning when she woke, with the knowledge that she was fighting a viral invader. Since the sun was shining accommodately, though, she girded her loins and all other relevant parts for a day of Guernsey exploration.

The *Guernsey Guide* was beckoning them to St Apolline's Chapel on the west coast, built in 1392 and the only other place in Guernsey with fragments of frescos (like the church of St Marie du Castel). The roads were challenging as ever, but they soon arrived at the pretty little chapel that looked to have been partly built with Cobo granite.

It turned out they'd chosen the one time in the week when a service was held, so they decided to return later and instead drove to St Saviour's Reservoir. Sandra wasn't sure how her virally compromised body would last out, but they strolled gently through what was more or less a nature reserve circuiting the reservoir. It was a pleasant walk, quite a lot of it through wooded areas that were shaded and cool in the growing morning heat. It was also a haven for birds, with the constant accompaniment of bird song and sightings of ducks and a heron.

There were a few other walkers, but mostly they were on their own to enjoy the trees and flowers, including a lot of foxgloves. At one point they had to walk across the pumping station part, which Sandra never enjoyed. It felt like crossing over deep water rather than walking along the shallow edges, but although it looked quite full, it was fine.

There was a short section along the road, although it helpfully had a pavement. The morning had become quite hot, so it was a relief to reach the wooded area again and take refuge in the shade, even though the heat was rising up through the wood's undergrowth. Sandra was quite astonished to walk past a field partly obscured by trees and bushes and notice two cows lazily chewing the cud – they'd spotted some Guernsey cows at last!

Once they'd arrived back at the car, it was time to return to St Apolline's Chapel. As they entered, they were met with the lingering smell of the candle used in the service and an almost tangible sense of calm pervaded. The interior was clean, simple and beautiful, with bench seating for about 15 and an altar table made of polished stone. There were two small stained-glass windows and although the frescos were rather faded and indistinct in places, they were still remarkable for their pre-Reformation age.

Sandra rather reluctantly left the small haven and joined Osborn outside to take some photos of the exterior – where they were both nearly mown down by a lorry that suddenly turned the corner and drove down the narrow road where they were standing. It was a shock after the chapel's interior tranquillity, but after breathing in hard and attempting to melt into the wall behind, they lived to expostulate about lorry drivers and Guernsey's narrow roads.

A short drive took them to Vazon Bay, where they ate lunch looking out at a near azure sky, a beach of fine white sand and a sea of turquoise merging into deeper blue further out. On a distant headland, another sandy beach was visible, as well as a Guernsey trademark fortification tower and masses of yellow wild mustard. Since a nearby kiosk sold Guernsey ice cream, it was only fitting to take advantage and enjoy the favoured flavour of mint choc chip.

An afternoon attempt to investigate the Talbot Valley was underwhelming, although it passed the time in a leisurely way. They both felt incredibly tired, Osborn in a post-viral way and Sandra in an onset-viral way. It was another quiet evening...

Sandra spent rather a viral night, but it passed as viral nights do, giving way to another beautiful, bright morning. There was a certain amount of uncertainty about how to spend their last day, but a visit to *Costalot Coffee* seemed a good idea, followed by a walk along some streets in an upward direction, including once up 57 steps – and Sandra knew because she counted them – to find where Victor Hugo had once lived.

The house was described as eccentrically decorated and quirky, but they were happy to wander around the garden of the famous French rebel, lingering with relief in the shaded areas from a now hot sun. The garden had been restored to its original design, but although there were some very decent mature plants and flowering shrubs, it only took them the best part of 20 minutes to see it all.

They made their way along the hot streets back to Grange Lodge, where a refreshing cold drink helped to fortify Sandra's wilting self, along with some simple but enjoyable cheese sandwiches and crisps. Over lunch, they decided to return to Le Déhus passage grave for a further attempt to find the carving of Le Gardien du Tombeau.

This time they were successful, gleefully spotting the elusive defender looking down loftily from the underside of a capstone. The face was clearly visible and also the beard, with what looked like some sort of headgear, but lower down was slightly harder to distinguish. It was great to finally meet the old guy as they took their time in the ancient coolness, before bidding him farewell.

Once back by the sea, they parked the car and strolled along a coastal path, where they eventually sat on a wooden bench amid ferns and colourful flowers, looking out at a pretty good view of Herm, Jethou and Sark. There was minor excitement when the Condor high-speed catamaran came motoring along with a massive wake and passed in front of Herm opposite them, perfectly placed for some quick snap photos.

"Do you think residents of Sark are prone to sarcasm, or are they sometimes just plain sarky?" asked Sandra, when the high-speed catamaran had moved on (at high speed).

"I really don't know," replied Osborn, putting away his camera. "I have wondered, though, if you live on Herm, does that make you a Hermit?"

"I can't think of anything silly about Jethou," said Sandra, pondering. "I must confess, I can feel the viralness knocking at the door again, is it OK if we mosey on back to Grange Lodge for some tea and drugs?"

"Fair enough," replied Osborn, stretching. "How depressing, it's our last night here and then we have to – you know, go back home."

"Yes, but we get to see Maddy and Léonie," said Sandra loyally, "and the others."

"It seems funny that it's Gulliver's birthday tomorrow," said Osborn dolefully. "It somehow feels as if he's far away right now."

"I know," replied Sandra sadly. "It's not the way I want it to be at all. Still, we said we'll visit Wales next month and see him then. God knows exactly how, but – yes, the thought of home tomorrow is disturbingly depressing."

Sandra slept fitfully and awoke feeling grim, but there was no option other than to take more drugs, finalise packing, get ready and go. They had a massive ten hours to wait before they could board the ferry home and therefore decided to pay a visit to the so-far unvisited Guernsey Candles. This was an interesting and tasteful gift shop that sold so much more than candles. Sandra was even able to forget her viral self for a while, which was a definite bonus.

The next place they drove to was Le Friquet Garden Centre, which was spacious and frequented by half as many people as their local garden centres. They had lunch there, although Sandra was only able to force down a plain scone, but Osborn enjoyed a tasty baked potato with cheese and vegetables, while they sat in a secluded and comfortable area.

A small quest for final souvenirs used up some time, as did a visit to *Costalot Coffee* for an iced drink. They also pleasantly whiled away an hour at Banque Imbert Bay, peacefully co-puzzling over a giant crossword while looking out occasionally at the seaside view.

Their tranquillity was disturbed when an old lady came along with a carrier bag full of bread and emptied it on the grass nearby. Immediately a large colony of screeching seagulls, beating their huge flapping wings, descended like a rampant swarm of bread-seeking missiles and caused Sandra's heart to flap around almost as much as the voracious birds themselves.

Sandra knew she had chronic ornithophobia, so didn't deal with birds and even feathers very well at all, but there were young children close by and a kiosk selling food not far away. The old lady went to fetch another bagful of bread to empty and then a third bag, so that for a while Sandra felt she was in an Alfred Hitchcock induced nightmare.

They'd had their car doors open and shut them quickly, but presumably not before the bird feeder had overheard Osborn's less than complimentary comments – either that, or their aghast expressions had been enough to give her the impression they weren't liking what they were seeing. Whatever the case, when she'd finished, she approached the car and spoke to Osborn through the window. Sandra suddenly became mega-engrossed in the puzzle book.

"Guernsey people have been told to feed the seagulls," she said in a purposeful voice. "The birds are starving and eating baby birds as well as the fish from the fisherman's nets."

"They are?" asked Osborn incredulously. "Well, we're told not to feed them where we come from, because they're a menace."

"They're God's beautiful creatures," said the old lady determinedly.

"Yes ... they are indeed," replied Osborn uncertainly. "Oh well, it's a lovely day for it. Bye."

"That was so weird," said Sandra, watching her walk away. "Guernsey has certainly been full of surprises. How many hours have we got left to wait?"

"We could drive back into St Peter Port and park at the harbour," replied Osborn, sighing. "We can eat our sandwiches in the car and at least we'd be in the right place for when the ferry eventually turns up."

After much people watching, puzzle booking and fiddling around with bags, maps and other items, a few cars started to turn up and drive through to the ferry check-in point. After more waiting around in the queue, the high-speed catamaran with its important sounding engine noise and its impressive looking wake arrived from Jersey at just after 20:00.

The journey back home was unremarkable, but very tiring. Sandra's throat was still stupidly troublesome and she was thankful when they arrived home at 01:30 the following morning, which was a Sunday.

She fell into a slightly feverish sleep, thinking how it had been an insightful visit to Guernsey, with its fantastic ice cream, uncrowded sandy beaches, coastal walks, thriving shops and eating places. The narrow roads had been challenging, but it had been a wonderful, life-saving break away from recent cares and heartache.

CHAPTER 23

After a slow day of clearing up, washing clothes and taking it easy because of the virus, the next day was a step back into life as it had been pre-holiday. Osborn drove Caroline to her appointment with the bunion doctor, who confirmed she had moderate osteoarthritis in her hip. As to the bunion foot pain, he offered an amputation of the toe next to her big toe. Sandra quailed inside at the thought of what might happen if Caroline chose to go down that route (albeit with one less toe), but refused to worry about something that hadn't yet happened.

Something that was definitely happening was Osborn starting his three-day application of the cream to zap his keratosis. It was extremely strong and caused him a great deal of soreness, as if he'd been burned. However, a check-up appointment with Dr Effingham on the third day confirmed that the site was healing quickly.

Sandra's first visit to Caroline after the holiday went reasonably well, although Sandra wondered if it was because she was still recovering from the virus. She was relieved that the way her mother was talking about a toe amputation indicated she wouldn't be having it done. However, the next visit to Caroline was a different matter.

"You're feeling better then," said Caroline, as a way of greeting, as Sandra stepped inside the door and put down her bag.

"Yes, thank you," she replied, already feeling the dark, heavy energy emanating from her mother.

"I wish I was like you," said Caroline dolefully. "I was once..."

"What do you mean?" asked Sandra, trying but failing to suppress the response that had arisen instantly in her mind. 'Yes, when you were my age you were free to do whatever the sodding hell you liked, because you had nobody relying on you or dependent on you!' she raged silently to herself.

"...you're still young and mobile, you don't know what it's like to be in pain so much. My hip, knee and foot are all so sore sometimes. It seems to travel from one place to another and sometimes my back aches a lot too, but I suppose you have to expect it at my age."

"Well, you know you have osteoarthritis in your hip," replied Sandra, having managed to regain a measure of compassion, "and you know the score about your bunion foot. If everything is bothering you so much, though, you really need to talk it over with your GP."

"He'll prescribe painkillers and they upset my stomach," said Caroline defeatedly.

"Maybe he can prescribe something to counteract the stomach upset," replied Sandra as patiently as she could. "You won't know until you ask."

"I suppose so," said Caroline, shrugging. "It's just so difficult to do everyday things now, like the housework. Some people my age pay someone to do the cleaning for them, but I don't like the thought of having a stranger in my house."

"Mm-hm," replied Sandra noncommittally, knowing exactly where the conversation was heading and trying to think on her feet. It was just as well she was still standing up. "I look after your garden..."

"Oh, I wasn't meaning you to do the cleaning," said Caroline hastily, "although I must say, I'd rather pay you for a couple of hours a week than a stranger."

"Yes," replied Sandra, trying valiantly to put herself in her mother's position and knowing she would also dislike a stranger doing her own cleaning. "I'll think about it."

"I know I have to accept that I'm getting older all the time, but it's so hard," said Caroline glumly. "I was thinking after all that if I have my toe amputated, it might help me walk better and that might help my hip." A silence ensued, as Caroline waited for Sandra to reply.

"I don't know," she said after a while, beginning to feel cornered.

"They always ask if you've got someone who can look after you, so I can say I've got my daughter," continued Caroline quickly. "Anyway, I think I'll make a doctor's appointment, like you said, it'll help me to feel better." Sandra felt the spider's web closing in around her again, as Guernsey suddenly seemed a million miles away.

The first week of July saw a lot of email activity between Sandra and Gulliver, some of it in response to his *Farcebook* posts about how wonderful his new life was. There were so many posts that also involved Anwen's mother, Myfanwy Sweyne, that it seemed impossible for Sandra to feel anything other than disturbed. She began to dislike Myfanwy, not only because it seemed Gulliver was transferring his feelings to another mother-figure, but also because Myfanwy appeared to be rubbing it in Sandra's face with her insensitive comments.

Quite apart from that, it felt as if Gulliver had gradually become an alien, by apparently liking things he had always vociferously condemned, such as reality television, arcades, nightclubs, tattoos, a drive-through and strangest of all, he was now considering having a dog because Anwen wanted one. Sandra knew that some things were beginning to rankle and for the sake of her own emotional health – and because she felt safe enough to express herself to Gulliver honestly as she always had done in the past – she did.

She was careful to state that nothing had changed between them, it was more the case that she was finding it hard to assimilate and process such sudden changes very easily. She was feeling off-balance because she still worried about him, but was holding on to the fact that he was still Gulliver, she was still his mother and nobody else could take that away from her.

To her surprise, he replied almost straight away and in quite a lot of detail. He admitted that it was very difficult living with three other children who were brought up so differently to his own, but he felt he was living life now and would therefore not reach the end of that life regretting things he'd wanted to do.

He said that when things were more settled, he wanted Sandra and Osborn to be happy for him and to meet Anwen, although he honestly didn't think Sandra would like her. Sandra was a little taken aback by that, although it did confirm her sneaking suspicion that she and Anwen probably had nothing much in common – except ironically, Gulliver himself.

Sandra thanked him for replying in length, taking it a little further by saying she was afraid he was making similar mistakes as he had with Bryony, of giving away his power. She tried to explain that for her it all still felt too uncertain for her to be happy for him, or to meet Anwen next time they saw him – which would be the first time since the breakup. She also mentioned that she and Osborn, in their role as grandparents, were taking the wellbeing of Juniper and Petroc very seriously, knowing they were a source of stability for them.

Gulliver replied that he was learning to hold on to his own power, so Sandra relaxed a little and decided to let go as much as possible and allow him to get on with his own life and his own choices. All the emotional to-ing and fro-ing felt exhausting, but she was happy that she'd had her say and also that she and Gulliver were still able to communicate openly and honestly.

Sandra and Osborn were visiting Madeleine, Henri and Léonie for a two-night stay, having arrived not long after Léonie had been given her first set of five immunisations. It seemed a lot for a little two-month-old body to deal with, although Léonie was now a healthy 4.5 kg (10 lbs) and seemed to deal with the onslaught by sleeping a lot. Her temperature was a little raised in the evening, but by the following morning, she was fine again.

As it was a sunny Friday and Henri was at work, Madeleine wondered if they would like to visit a nearby stately home with extensive grounds and gardens. It seemed an excellent idea, so they bought some sandwiches for lunch and enjoyed a wander around in the fine summer air. They found a secluded wooden seat underneath the spreading branches of a tree, where they ate their sandwiches and Madeleine fed Léonie.

"She seems to like looking up at leaves," said Madeleine, gazing down at her daughter. "She was doing that when we went out with the National Babybirth Trust group last week."

"I'm so glad you're keeping in touch with them," said Sandra, feeling rested and happy in the company of Osborn, Madeleine and Léonie.

"I think I'd go mad without them, to be honest," said Madeleine ruefully. "Sometimes I find myself looking forward to the weekly meetings like a lifeline. It was especially that way when you were in Guernsey – although it was lovely to Skype a couple of times and I'm so glad you had a good time, because you really needed it."

"It's felt a bit like returning to the lion's den," confessed Osborn, "although how can I say that now we have lovely Léonie in our family? She's adorable, she really is."

"I know," said Madeleine simply. "I know how lucky we are, because she sleeps quite well – very well compared to some of the other babies in the group. She normally seems quite happy, too. Henri said she's telling us she is, because she makes this little two syllable sound that he says sounds like *heureux*, the French word for happy."

"Oh, I think I've heard her," said Sandra, smiling. "Well, I think she's got every reason to be happy with you and Henri as her parents."

"So, how's Grandma?" asked Madeleine, changing position underneath a different branch to keep Léonie amused.

"I wish I knew," replied Sandra, sighing. "It's so hard to read her sometimes, mainly because it so rarely feels she's being straight. She went to see the doctor recently about her aches and pains and all he did was prescribe paracetamol. She still only takes one at a time, it's unbelievable. I even have my suspicions that she only takes half a pill sometimes. The doctor also told her that a hip replacement would take at least three months' recovery at her age and I think it's put her off. She hasn't said anything else about the toe amputation."

"Oh dear, it's not going to get any easier, is it?" Madeleine sounded genuinely sympathetic. "I must confess, I've been looking at mother-child relationships a little differently since I've had Léonie. I can't believe you did all that you did for me, Mumsie, all that nappy changing and everything. I took it all for granted, I never realised it must have taken so much from you. You too Varti, although you always said you weren't keen on the nappy changing."

"It was my pleasure," said Sandra, feeling her heart expanding (in a good way). "Yes, it was incredibly hard at times, but so utterly worth it. You'll find that out, I know you will."

"I'm getting there," replied Madeleine honestly. "I still have really bad days, but I also have some comfortable days. I can't imagine life without her now at all."

"Comfortable is good," said Osborn, smiling at Léonie. "I'm always glad of comfortable days. She really is all about, she's definitely interacting a lot more. Léonie! Peek a boo!"

"Do you hear much from Gulliver?" asked Madeleine, shifting her weight to her other foot. "I haven't heard from him since he visited that time when you were here. He doesn't seem very interested in his niece."

"I think he's only interested in himself at the moment," said Sandra sadly, "and Anwen, of course – not to forget her children and her mother."

"He doesn't know what he's missing with Léonie," said Osborn, still playing one-sided peek a boo with his granddaughter. "If he's not careful, he's going to miss out on a whole lot with his own children, too."

"Will you meet Anwen when you go to Wales later?" asked Madeleine, as Léonie began to lose interest in the leaves.

"No, it's too soon," replied Sandra, sighing. "He wants us to, but I feel we need to see him on his own and talk about what's going on with his own children and Bryony. There's so much that still needs sorting out about what's going to happen."

"Good luck with that one, then," said Madeleine, smiling wryly. "I think we'll have to move soon, she's getting restless. Don't forget, I'm happy for you to bring Juniper here for a visit when you're in Wales, but I hope Petroc won't mind. He's so boisterous and noisy, it would feel a bit too much with him as well. He won't mind, will he?"

"I honestly don't think so," replied Sandra, not completely sure of her own conviction. "In any case, it's more to do with Juniper and her absolute desire to meet her cousin. She's always been so interested in her family and now her dad's left, it feels even more important to help her establish contact with her wider family. She also says how much she loves babies!"

"OK," agreed Madeleine, as Léonie began to vocalise her discontent. "I think she's tired, I'll put her in the pram and we can wheel her to sleep. It usually works."

"Can I push her?" asked Osborn eagerly. "I feel it's my duty as her granddad."

"It's his pleasure, more like," remarked Sandra to Madeleine, as they both smiled.

The visit to Wales was underway. Sandra had found it quite an ordeal to make arrangements, especially since Osborn seemed to be retreating from the complexities of life via his Kindle and by processing photos at his computer for hours on end.

However, Sandra managed to establish that they could stay with Bryony and the children, after meeting Gulliver on their arrival in Wales, as well as on another day while they were there. Apart from that, they would spend the rest of the time with Bryony, Gulliver and Petroc.

The day before they left, she had cleaned Caroline's house for the first time and been paid £10 for her hour's work. She felt demeaned, rebellious, used and saddened, although she knew it had ultimately been her choice. It felt as though life had moved on a notch in a direction with which she wasn't happy, but there was a sense of inevitability about it. She therefore tried to detach herself from her feelings and view it from a purely practical angle.

Meanwhile, from a purely practical angle, Sandra and Osborn were having trouble locating where they were to collect Gulliver from outside Anwen's house. After a wrong turning and a little colourful swearing (on Osborn's part), they arrived at what looked like a council estate that had seen better days. Sandra's heart sank despite her best intentions, but then Gulliver approached and let himself into the back seat as if they'd parted on good terms only the day before.

"Hi," he said naturally, doing up his seat belt. "I can give you directions to a nice coastal walk with great views if you like?"

"That sounds promising," replied Osborn, turning around to look at him. "It's good to see you again."

"We've got sandwiches," said Sandra, feeling ridiculously out of sync with her own son.

They drove towards the coast and after parking the car in a small roadside parking bay, went through a gate and walked along a secluded lane until they came to a wilder, natural area with a few different paths leading out towards the more open headland.

"Is there somewhere we can sit and eat?" asked Osborn after a while. "I'm starving, it's been a long morning."

"Plenty of places. I think the grass should be dry enough to sit on," replied Gulliver amiably.

They found a spot overlooking a bay and shared out the sandwiches, crisps and drinks, as if 25 years hadn't passed and Gulliver hadn't recently been involved in an extra-marital affair and left his wife in messy and complex circumstances. The air was sultry and they frequently had to swat away flies, but the view of the sweeping bay below them was amazing.

At first the conversation was general, but then Osborn started to ask a few questions about how Gulliver was managing. Gulliver tentatively began to explain how his and Anwen's financial circumstances were currently quite dire, due to the fact they'd declared he had moved in with her, resulting in her benefits being stopped altogether while they were being reassessed. It was a world unfamiliar to Sandra, but her heart went out to Gulliver.

"At least I've still got Grandma's belated birthday money," said Gulliver, gazing out at the view. "I don't think I ever told you what she wrote on a notelet that she put in with my card. I can almost remember it word for word. She said she felt so sad and sorry at what had happened and she could still hardly believe it. She said we seemed such a happy little family and she hoped that in years to come, it would prove to be the best move."

"Really?" Sandra was astounded. "She wrote that? I remember she told me she'd written you a note, but I had no idea what it actually said."

"She also wrote that as long as Juniper and Petroc are alright, everyone will hopefully adapt to the new situation, but that you all worry about them. Is that right? She suddenly changed from how *she* felt to about how the rest of the family felt." Gulliver sounded perplexed.

"That does sound like her, to be honest," replied Sandra carefully. "I have to say, it sounds a bit like a veiled rebuke to me, that your actions have resulted in upset for the family – although she has no right to speak for anybody else except herself."

"Does she know how unhappy I was?" asked Gulliver with a small timbre of sadness in his voice. "Does she know how much I've changed? I wish I could have been happy as I was, but it just wasn't possible."

"I did my utmost to explain how unhappy you were," replied Sandra honestly. "Several times. All she tends to revert back to is how she doesn't think it ever works for a man to stay at home and look after the children. Nowadays she only ever hears what fits her own view. I thought she might have understood, because she kept comparing your story to her affair and how unhappy *she* was."

"Oh well, time to move on, I suppose," said Gulliver, starting to pack away the remains of their lunch. "We can walk around here some more and then I can take you to a park where Anwen and I will be camping with some Scouts in a few weeks."

"I'd like to see where you'll be camping," replied Osborn, standing up. "It's good you're both interested in Scouts, I know you always really enjoyed that as a boy."

"We have so many interests in common, it's unbelievable," said Gulliver almost proudly. "She loves the outdoor life and she also wants to travel a lot, like I do."

"You'll have to get your photography business up to scratch then, so you'll make lots of money, because travelling costs," said Osborn seriously. "Sorry Gulliver, I'm not getting at you, but I know more than most people how easy it is to become distracted – and you've said recently that you've been distracted from your photography."

"I know," replied Gulliver evasively. "Anwen's got lots of ideas about the business, she wants to be fully involved."

Sandra tried to ignore the doubts she felt for both the present and the future, as they carried on their cliff top walk for a while, before returning to the car and driving on to the park Gulliver had mentioned. It was a green, expansive area with many trees and paths leading off into the distance. Gulliver led them along one of the paths, as their desultory conversation about his future continued.

"How are Juniper and Petroc when you have them to stay at the house?" asked Sandra, feeling comfortable enough at last to ask about one of the most sensitive issues.

"They're settling in a bit more now and getting on with the girls really well," replied Gulliver, flicking away a horsefly. "We're taking them all to an air show in England in a couple of weeks. It seems such a coincidence that I bought a car that'll seat five children last year, when I was still with Bryony. It's like a sign it was meant to be."

"I'm pleased with my car," said Osborn, wiping sweat from his brow. "God, it's humid today. There's obviously a lot you still have to sort out with Bryony and the children, but mainly it feels really good to have connected with you again."

"I've been bitten by another sodding horsefly," said Sandra, inspecting a raised bump on her hand. "I seem to attract horseflies."

"There's no answer to that," replied Gulliver, smiling. "We can leave here and go on to the Mumbles for an ice cream if you like?"

"That's a brilliant idea," replied Sandra gratefully. "We mustn't forget to give you your birthday presents before we leave you, either, they're in the boot."

"Thanks. What time did you say you'd be arriving at the house?" asked Gulliver a little stiltedly.

"I told Bryony we weren't sure and that we'd sort out our own food," said Sandra, aware of the uncomfortable undercurrents again.

"OK," said Gulliver flatly. "It feels odd you staying there without me, that's all."

"Tell me about it," responded Sandra quickly, before trying to steer them into safer waters again. "Can we go to *Vivaldi's* for ice cream? That place is utterly cool."

The rest of their time with Gulliver passed comfortably and they left him outside Anwen's house with an arrangement to collect him at the same place in two days' time.

Their welcome in Aberpontyfan from Juniper and Petroc was quite touching in its intensity, as they both clearly wanted to show their grandparents what was happening in their lives, from a new t-shirt of Juniper's to a bruise on Petroc's leg. Sandra had brought a few small presents for them and while Osborn was talking downstairs with Bryony, Sandra spent a hectic but happy time upstairs with her excited grandchildren.

The next day, which was Saturday, they all went to a garden centre on the outskirts of Swansea, where they had made many visits in the past with Gulliver. Sandra was finding it hard to assimilate Gulliver's absence, especially in his old home, where some of his own photos were still hanging on the walls. She'd noticed a few books and DVDs that she and Osborn had given him still on the shelves and there were basically reminders of him all throughout the house. Sandra had to admit, though, that the place was looking cleaner and tidier.

They drove on to *Marecastella* for lunch, simply because it fitted the bill on several counts – namely a good view, decent pizzas and a children's play area nearby. Unfortunately, Petroc's behaviour was challenging and Bryony seemed to believe the best way of dealing with it was to give in to him. Juniper was also rather petulant and cheeky, so it was hard to enjoy the experience and relaxing was out of the question. However, they spent the rest of the day more or less happily back at the house, where Bryony was doing her best to be amenable.

The following day with Gulliver went well, starting with a walk in a wooded area that also had the advantage of a café. As they sat chatting over coffee, Sandra was aware that the whole current visit to Wales seemed to be a process of adjustment on many levels.

Later, while they were walking through the dappled shade of a woodland path, Gulliver talked about how Anwen was unhappy that Sandra and Osborn hadn't met her. He read out a text he'd just received from her, asking what she was supposed to do all day on her own with three children, hardly any food in the house and no money.

"I'm sorry about that," said Sandra, trying not to frown. "It's too soon, that's all. Dad and I both really needed to have some time with you on our own, because there's been so much upheaval going on in our lives that we're exhausted. I know for myself that meeting Anwen this time, when we're still trying to adjust to you leaving Bryony and the children, would be a step too far. There'll be other times and it'll be far better to let it all happen naturally anyway, when we all feel more ready for it."

"OK," replied Gulliver reasonably, although Sandra could almost feel him shutting off to some degree. "What shall we do about lunch? There's a big *Setco* quite near here and then I could take you to the Stone of Arthur, if you like?"

"I do like," replied Sandra, eager to calm the slightly ruffled atmosphere.

"I do too," said Osborn, as Gulliver turned to look for the right path out of the woods. "I agree with what Mum said, there'll be a right time for meeting Anwen."

An hour or so later, they'd finished eating their sandwiches and crisps on a dry piece of grassy moorland ground in sight of the Stone of Arthur. Sandra and Osborn both took some photos of the stone, before Gulliver astounded them by posing in front of the stone and asking to have a photo of himself taken.

"You? Pose? For me?" asked Sandra in disbelief, as she took photos anyway, while Gulliver changed his pose several times.

"I told you I've changed," replied Gulliver, crouching down with an attitude of careless ease. "I just want you to believe me."

"I believe you," replied Osborn, smiling as he took photographic advantage of his son making an idiot of himself. "This is too good to miss."

Having had their fill of silly photos, they drove on to Llangland Bay and after managing to find a space in the car park, went for a short walk along the cliff path. The feeling that it would soon be time to part seemed to be affecting them all, as they stopped to admire the view stretching out into the distance.

"I've really enjoyed today, Gulliver," said Osborn warmly, although an onshore sea breeze was pleasantly cooling. "I do hope the financial problems are sorted out in the not too distant future, so that you can make a good go of it all."

"Thanks," replied Gulliver politely. "I'm thinking of doing a mountain leadership course, I've always wanted to do that."

"It sounds very much like a 'you' thing," agreed Sandra. "I hope you get to do it in amongst everything else." She deliberately kept from saying that she couldn't see how he could possibly afford to do half of what he wanted in his current complex set of circumstances, but she knew it would be the wrong thing to say.

"I suppose we should be getting back," said Gulliver, having received another text. "Anwen says she's got plans."

"OK," said Sandra, wondering if Anwen simply felt it was time for Gulliver to return home. A part of her understood, although she already felt her heart ache at leaving Gulliver. "It's been such a lovely day, I've missed seeing you so much."

"I hope you can come and visit us later on," said Osborn hopefully, as they began to retrace their steps to the car park. "I miss you so much too."

Later, when they were saying goodbye outside Anwen's house, Sandra slipped Gulliver an envelope containing all the cash she possessed at the time. Inside was a note explaining that since she was now earning £10 a cleaning session from her mother, it was just a small gift to help tide him and Anwen over a rough patch. She then waved goodbye to her son with a slightly lighter heart.

Her heart continued to feel lighter the next day, as Sandra and Osborn were able to fulfil Juniper's fervent desire to see Léonie for the first time. The journey from Aberporthyfan to Bristol was filled with excited chatter from Juniper, who surprisingly became speechless with heart-warming shyness when she finally set eyes on Léonie.

Sandra was touched that Juniper seemed to be turning to her for comfort and a feeling of safety, even though Madeleine had greeted her warmly with a hug. Sandra was sure that it would only be a matter of time before Juniper relaxed and started to talk non-stop with Madeleine – and she was right. However, it took over an hour, including a walk for them all to the local *Setco* for some food and back to the house again.

A moment came when Madeleine, sitting on the sofa beside Juniper, opened a card Juniper had made for her cousin and showed it to Léonie, who was being held by Osborn on his lap. Léonie looked at the card with apparent interest, which delighted Juniper, who was sitting next to Osborn. Sandra made the most of the photo opportunity and the upbeat feeling helped Juniper to release whatever barriers she may have had.

"Auntie Maddy, she's looking at the picture I drew of her," said Juniper happily.

"It's a great picture, you can draw better than I can," replied Madeleine, smiling.

"That's you and Uncle Henri on the other side," explained Juniper, "although I couldn't find a dark brown felt tip pen, so I gave Uncle Henri black hair."

"That's fine, I'm sure he won't mind," said Madeleine encouragingly. "I expect he'll be glad you didn't give him blue hair or green hair, though."

"Or purple hair," said Juniper, giggling. "Auntie Maddy, Grandma Sandra said you used to make friendship bracelets when you were a girl."

"I did," replied Madeleine, having been told about Juniper's interest in friendship bracelets. "I've still got some upstairs, would you like to come with me and find them?"

The rest of their time there was spent comfortably and happily, rounded off by a drink and some cake they'd bought earlier from *Setco*. Everyone seemed reluctant to part company, including Léonie, who was holding on to Juniper's finger.

"We'll see you again, Junie-flower," said Madeleine warmly. "It's been lovely to see you today and I'm sure Léonie loved meeting you for the first time."

"I've got some photos of us all," said Sandra, "so I'm sure Grandad Osborn can print some out for you."

"Lots," said Juniper happily. "I'll put them in an album!"

"Thank you for today," said Osborn to Madeleine, as he hugged her and Léonie gently goodbye. "This will mean so much to Juniper, she won't forget it."

"It's been special," said Sandra, suddenly feeling very emotional when she came to hug Madeleine and Léonie. "Very special. I love you, Mad!"

"I love you too, Mumsie," said Madeleine wistfully. "I wish you didn't have to go."

CHAPTER 24

"This year's been a bit of a stonker one way and another," said Sandra to Alison, as they sipped tea in Alison's comfortable, tidy sitting room on a warm early August afternoon.

"A bit of a stinker, I'd say," said Alison, grimacing. "Dirk and I seem to be vying each day for the 'who feels worse' position. Still, at least we're going to see Tamsin and Peony soon, because Sam and Karen are going to a wedding and they're leaving them here for a week."

"Some wedding," said Sandra questioningly.

"Oh, Sam and Karen are making the most of it," replied Alison, smiling darkly although it was a bright afternoon. "Karen's always on about having some time for themselves – but Dirk and I are quite glad to have the girls to ourselves for a while, to be honest. Mind you, I'm not sure how we'll get on with a crazy 14-year-old and a stropky 8-year-old."

"I'm sure they'll be as glad to spend time with you as much as you with them," said Sandra, knowing how much Alison missed her grandchildren. "They'll lift your spirits, I'm sure. I love the way children just say it as it is ... I think."

"I know what you mean," replied Alison, raising an eyebrow. "I'm glad you said your visit to Wales went well, it was a kind of crucial visit, I should imagine."

"You're right there," said Sandra, grateful that her friend seemed to understand. "It was really good of Bryony to let us stay with her, it must have felt very odd for her as well as for us. She slept on the sofa for four nights and insisted we sleep in her bed."

"I bumped into Anne Stanpool the other day," said Alison, sipping her tea. "I don't think I'm breaking any confidences if I tell you that Anne thinks you and Osborn have been marvellous the way you've stayed friendly with Bryony and are also doing all you can for Juniper and Petroc. Bryony feels the same way too, she apparently said as much to Anne."

"That's good to hear," said Sandra sincerely. "To be honest, if we fell out with Bryony, we'd be in a terrible position, because we'd more or less lose touch with Juniper and Petroc. It's so beneficial for the children to have the stability of four grandparents, especially since they've been through enough already with their dad leaving home. It's not only that, we've been through a lot with Bryony together, including the weird stuff when she was really quite off with me. We'll always be linked in a family sense."

"She'll always be the mother of your grandchildren," said Alison simply.

"Exactly – and the children are the most vulnerable people in all this." Sandra sighed. "It's exhausting, though, with my mother's stuff going on all the time as well."

"How is she?" said Alison, asking the inevitable question. "I haven't seen her around much lately."

"She doesn't do nearly as much walking as she used to," replied Sandra, trying to remember what she'd already told Alison about her mother's arthritis. "She's been having trouble with her knee again, so she told the doctor. He felt it, but was certain it was her hip."

"You'd think he'd recognise a knee when he felt one," said Alison, grinning.

"Ha! No, she's got osteoarthritis in her hip," explained Sandra, smiling. "I haven't seen you for a while! I told you about Osborn's skin biopsy result, didn't I?"

"Osborn had a skin biopsy?"

"God, we *are* behind. The doctor noticed a dodgy place underneath his eye, that's why he had to have a biopsy. It wasn't a good experience for him, he almost passed out. He said that he was feeling very hot and his vision was going, but the person doing the biopsy just carried on. It was the nurse who opened a window, put a cold compress on his forehead and made sure he was OK."

"Thank goodness nurses have got their finger on the pulse," said Alison, rather accurately in that instance.

"Er – yes," said Sandra, not sure if Alison was aware of her own joke. "Anyway, it seems to be OK after it was treated with some pretty powerful cream. It freaked him out a lot at the time, even though it seems very minor compared to what both you and Dirk have experienced over the last few years."

"I must admit, it seemed to be coming from all directions at one point," said Alison ruefully. "At least Helen seems a lot happier now, although I think it might be because she's met someone else. She keeps mentioning this guy Max, but insists he's just a friend."

"It's funny how people always seem to say that," replied Sandra, smiling. "I'm glad she's doing OK now after her marriage breakup, because something like that, especially with your own daughter, must really rock your boat. I'm amazed Bryony seems to be coping so well, although I wonder how much of it was a front for us when we were there with her."

"Anne and Stan are quite concerned that she's in Wales more or less on her own with two children," said Alison a little uncertainly. "I'm sure they wouldn't mind me saying that."

"I'm pretty sure I couldn't cope with those two children on my own like she is," said Sandra sincerely. "Don't get me wrong, I love them both very much, but they're a real handful! I know Bryony and I have our differences and I'm sure there are things about me that she can't understand, just like there are things about her that I can't understand. For instance, the day we took Juniper to meet Léonie, she let Petroc absolutely ransack Juniper's bedroom. To my mind, that's wrong on many levels – but on the other hand, she's good with them both in other ways."

"I know what you mean, it's never straightforward," agreed Alison. "How's Madeleine coping with Léonie now?"

"Quite a bit better, although she said she still has bad days," replied Sandra, finishing her tea. "I think she has borderline post-natal depression at times, but I'm pretty certain she'll be OK. It was a traumatic birth and it feels as if she's had to process all that, as well as recover from the operation and get used to being the mother of a small baby, who incidentally is growing absolutely fine! What worries me, though, is that Henri's been intent on moving to Newport and they've just sold their house."

"They have? God, she's got all that to contend with as well?" Alison seemed astounded.

"Exactly. I completely understand that Henri's exhausted with having to commute from Bristol to Newport for work, but it means that until Madeleine can find a job in Newport herself, she'll have to commute from Newport to Bristol when she goes back to work in November after maternity leave. It all feels stacked against her, largely because of the timing. Still, she's shown a lot of strength lately, so I'm hoping it'll all fall into place for her."

"I do too, I really feel for her. Why is life so hard and why do we worry so much about our children, even when they're grown-ups with children of their own?" Alison gave a crooked smile, although Sandra thought she had recovered miraculously well from her stroke.

"I don't know," Sandra grimaced. "It worries you to death about life sometimes!"

The following week, another get-old-together was taking place at Emily's house, over nine months since the last one. Kay had unfortunately suffered a fall since their last meeting and fractured her hip, so a significant part of the conversation over their light evening meal around the dining table had been taken up with medical experiences.

"I've always said our NHS is brilliant, but I don't think I've had such a hands-on experience of it since I gave birth to Hayley," admitted Kay confidentially. "It was quite nice in that respect, although you can't help losing a bit of your dignity when you can't get out of bed to do – you know – things."

"Are we talking bedpans, sweetie?" asked Emily archly, although her posture was actually quite straight.

"Yes, we are," replied Kay familiarly. "I must admit though, that when I was catheterised, it was quite a relief not having to worry about weeing. I was quite disappointed when it was taken out."

"You're strange," said Delia, smiling. "I like you."

"Did you have any fit male nurses or doctors while you were in hospital?" asked Gina, which was somewhat out of character for her.

"That would have been inappropriate in the circumstances," remarked Emily wickedly. "Sorry, take no notice of me, it's been a long day at work."

"No, no fit ones," replied Kay with a touch of disappointment. "That sort of thing has been a bit of a no-no lately, to be fair. No, a couple of fat ones maybe, but I shouldn't really say that. Still, that's all behind me now and Rob's been really good while I've been recovering. Hayley's been good in a different way, she's always encouraging me to get on my feet and move. Tough love, I guess."

"Love is tough," said Emily with an inscrutable expression.

"You're weird," said Delia, smiling. "I like you."

"I'm glad you're OK now, Kay," said Gina brightly. "Are you OK, Kay? AOK, Kay?"

"You're peculiar," said Delia, smiling. "I like you."

"Yes, I'm OK, thank you Gina," replied Kay with a small laugh. "Well no, I've lost confidence a bit, but Hayley assures me she'll get me back on track."

"What, running?" asked Sandra light-heartedly. "In a track suit and everything?"

"You're funny," said Delia, smiling. "I like you."

"No, definitely not running," replied Kay, grinning. "Dee, you're in a very strange, weird, peculiar, funny mood tonight if I may say so? I like you, though."

"Thank you," replied Delia, laughing. "There's no reason, except I'm finding it much easier these days to be myself. It's made me realise exactly how much I was suppressed and subdued all those years when I let Dad tell me way too much how I should behave. That is, all the ways I should be there for him and help him out. I'm sorry Sandra, I know you're still going through it with your mum. How is she? Or I should say, how are you?"

"Oh, it's much the same, Dee," replied Sandra, flushing a little as the spotlight was suddenly upon her. "She's gradually deteriorating physically and I do housework for her now, as well as shopping and gardening, but Osborn and I had a lovely fortnight in Guernsey, away from everything."

"Everything and everyone?" asked Emily, perceptively.

"Yes," replied Sandra, smiling at Emily. "I was sorry to leave Madeleine in the lurch with little Léonie so young, but a good holiday was just what we needed."

"Have you got photos?" asked Delia suddenly. "Of Léonie? Of Guernsey? Anything? Anyone? Has anybody got photos? I love photos. *I've got some photos!*"

"Shall we go into the other room?" enquired Emily politely. "We can sit around the coffee table and drink tea while we look at photos."

"Or we could sit around the tea table and drink coffee while we look at photos," said Gina mischievously. "Crumbs, it's catching, I'm being strange, weird, peculiar and funny now."

"It suits you, petal," said Delia generously. "It's great saying anything, isn't it – in a not caring if people think we're silly sense. It's almost like going back to school days."

"Perhaps that's why it comes naturally, since we *are* old school friends," said Sandra ponderingly. "Or unnaturally, since we're ladies of a certain age now!"

"Who gives a monkey's about a certain age, I've given up on stereotypes," stated Emily categorically.

"Me too, I wouldn't give you a thank you for sensible shoes and padded jackets," said Gina, making a face.

"You can stuff padded jackets," said Emily with a little chuckle.

"On second thoughts, I have to have sensible shoes now, since I've been told the pain in my foot is bursitis," considered Gina, frowning. "Still, there are loads of other stereotypes, like enjoying Frank Sinatra music or gardening programmes with Alan Titchmarsh..."

"Oh, I like Alan Titchmarsh," said Sandra quickly in his defence, "he's humorous and down to earth."

After a most enjoyable evening with her friends, Sandra came down to earth with rather a thud the next day when she visited her mother. It was the Thursday Sandra cleaned the house for her, Caroline having decided that every other week would be enough. Sandra had just finished, when Caroline entered the room and surveyed the scene.

"I must say, it's nice to have my own little housekeeper," she said with a sniff, sinking down into her armchair. Sandra froze for a moment and said nothing, but her heart had immediately plummeted at her mother's condescending words, knowing she would never be a person in her own right to Caroline, ever.

A few days later, it was Caroline's 89th birthday and since Bryony and the children had arrived to stay with Anne and Stan a few days before, the plan was for them to congregate at Sandra and Osborn's house that afternoon. For the moment, though, Sandra and Osborn were taking some time for themselves at *Waitpoppy*, sipping a cappuccino each amid the Sunday morning hubbub of the popular café.

"It's so nice to do something simple like this," said Sandra, beginning to relax. "We always seem to be working lately – house, garden, Mum's house, Mum's garden."

"I've had no choice about getting some quotes for all the work that needs doing upstairs next year," said Osborn a little defensively, referring to the forthcoming roof repair and their plans to turn the small room that had once been Madeleine's bedroom into an en suite.

"I know," replied Sandra, stirring around the edges of her cappuccino. "I don't look forward to it, because it'll be such a huge upheaval clearing out the whole of upstairs, but I know it needs to be done. It'll be well worth it in the end to live in a two-toilet house."

"I need to get it right," said Osborn, frowning. "I think I've found the right guy and he said that starting it next spring fits in with his schedule. He works with his son-in-law, who's an electrician."

"That's good," replied Sandra, not really wanting to think of two strange men invading the sanctuary of her home, while they created unimaginable amounts of dust and mess. Osborn appeared to be lost in his own thoughts for a while and Sandra knew that he would be distracted with considerations, problems and worry about the renovations until they were over. She decided to divert his attention, but the only thing that came to her mind was her mother.

"It's come over me as I've been sitting here," she began with a sigh, "that things could have been so different with Mum, but *she's* been the one who's systematically disparaged everything over the years. She doesn't like shopping, or garden centres, or so many things that ordinary people quite happily do. According to her, the coffee here was too expensive last time we brought her here."

"I don't remember that?" Osborn's interest was sparked.

"After we took her to that specialist shop when she wanted help sorting out a bath seat, but then she wasn't interested?"

"Ah yes, you mean when she point-blank refused every option available."

"Yes, that time." Sandra sighed again. "So that's why she's not sitting here with us right now, or why she's not coming out for a birthday pub lunch with us. When I asked her what she'd like to do for her birthday, she prevaricated so much and said we didn't have to bother, because she couldn't eat much anyway – and then she told me how her friends had asked her out to lunch and she hadn't liked to say no!"

"I honestly wouldn't worry about it," said Osborn, looking at Sandra resignedly.

"If only," she replied simply.

Later that day, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc arrived after lunch, the children bounding into the sitting room with their usual boundless energy that seemed to know no boundaries. Caroline arrived soon afterwards and an afternoon of mayhem took place.

Petroc in particular seemed to be shouting a lot and behaving very boisterously, so Sandra found it hard to understand why Bryony proceeded to wind him up even more by tickling him, holding him upside down and swinging him around. Juniper naturally wanted to have the same attention from her mother, so Bryony did the same with Juniper, causing noise levels to escalate painfully. Sandra escaped to the kitchen several times on spurious errands.

"They're bound to be excited," said Caroline tolerantly, after Osborn had shouted at Petroc to mind where he was kicking, after he had narrowly missed Caroline.

"Yes, within bounds," replied Sandra, wondering what excuse she could use next to disappear to the kitchen.

"They're both looking fine," said Caroline to Bryony, effectively ignoring Sandra. "Petroc's coming on in leaps and bounds," she continued, as Petroc came up to Caroline and dropped a colouring book in her lap.

"He's definitely more outgoing now," replied Bryony, as Juniper snuggled up to her mother.

"I expect they both miss their dad," said Caroline, failing to see Juniper's woeful expression.

"Yes," replied Bryony, as Petroc dropped the box of crayons in Caroline's lap. "I think you've been assigned a job," she said laughingly, as Petroc climbed up on the sofa alongside his great-grandmother.

"Oh, I'm duty-bound to do some colouring now," said Caroline, peering at the colouring book. "I'll have to get my glasses. Sandra?"

"Where are they?" asked Sandra dutifully.

"In my handbag down by the side of the sofa," replied Caroline, as Petroc leapt off the sofa and began to delve into Caroline's bag. Sandra noticed her mother's face was blotchily red, presumably because she was finding it all rather overwhelming.

"Ah no, out of bounds, I'm afraid," said Sandra, as she wrestled with Petroc for custody of the bag. "Here you are," she said testily, handing Caroline her bag as Petroc finally let go with a howl of rage. "It must be time for birthday cake," she muttered, as she headed towards the kitchen. "The time-honoured ceremony of the birthday cake comes in useful sometimes."

Two days later (after a non-event of a 64th birthday for Osborn), Madeleine arrived with Léonie to stay for two nights, both of them looking well. Osborn had rung Caroline beforehand, asking if she'd like to walk over for a visit that afternoon, rather than the following afternoon when Bryony and the children would be there and it would probably be even noisier and more mayhem than on Caroline's birthday.

Caroline apparently couldn't make up her mind, so Osborn asked her to ring after lunch when she knew what she'd be doing. However, no phone call was forthcoming, so Sandra rang to find out what was wrong.

"I'm not sure what to do," said Caroline fretfully. "What do *you* think is best?"

"It's not what I think is best, it's what *you* think is best," replied Sandra as patiently as she could manage. "We were just thinking of you, that's all!"

"Do you think I should come over now?" asked Caroline plaintively.

"It's up to you," said Sandra, trying to remain calm.

"We-ell, my two friends want me to have lunch with them tomorrow, so I'll come over now, shall I?"

"Yes!" Sandra managed to rein in her frustration with extreme difficulty.

"That sounded a bit tricky," said Madeleine, who'd been in the same room. "Is it still hard-going with Grandma sometimes?"

"That's an understatement," replied Sandra, sighing. "I don't mean to sound so – whatever it is I sound like – but I swear she would try the patience of a saint and I'm certainly no saint."

"You can swear, though," said Madeleine rather ambiguously, turning to look at Léonie asleep in her chair, as she made a cute little baby snuffling sound. "She should have woken up by now, she'll need a feed."

Fifteen minutes later, Caroline had arrived, but Léonie was still asleep. After Caroline had made appropriate great-grandmotherly noises and statements about how lovely Léonie looked, Madeleine decided it was time to wake her daughter gently, since she was at last stirring from sleep.

"Oh Sandra, don't wake her up!" said Caroline in a voice that somehow managed to be whining and strident at the same time.

"She's Madeleine's baby, for heaven's sake!" said Sandra in muted outrage at yet further proof that her mother was totally fixated on her.

The next morning, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc arrived as planned, for more or less an hour and a half of idle chatter amid a lot of watching Léonie. After a pasty lunch (although they actually had one each), they all went out in two cars to a large park in Plymouth for some bubble blowing, general park strolling among the open spaces and a session in the play park for Juniper and Petroc, while Sandra, Madeleine and Léonie sat in some dappled shade underneath the spreading branches of a tree.

"Dad seems a bit strung out," said Madeleine, as Léonie watched the leaves making dancing shadows on the grass. "He spoke to you really roughly in the car when he took the wrong turning. It wasn't OK."

"You noticed," said Sandra wryly. "I'm glad you did, because I sometimes wonder if I'm being oversensitive or something. I'm pretty sure the shenanigans between Gulliver and Bryony about the house settlement are stressing him out – although it doesn't excuse him talking to me like that."

"What's going on?" asked Madeleine, shading Léonie's eyes from the sun. "I'm out of the loop, obviously."

"So am I a bit," replied Sandra with a sigh, "if the amount of texts and emails between Dad and Gulliver are anything to go by. I do know that Bryony's offering a low amount for settlement on their house and it looks as if Gulliver's just going to take it, because he frankly seems desperate for some cash."

"What about maintenance for Juniper and Petroc?" asked Madeleine, frowning. "He could be stung for maintenance, surely?"

"He's said that no maintenance from him is part of his acceptance of the shortfall on what Bryony can give him in cash for the house now. It all seems open to a lot of future problems to me, although I haven't got any real idea of how he stands legally."

"Will they be getting divorced?"

"It looks like it. He's said that he'll put aside whatever money he can each month for the children's university fund, but I don't see how that can happen." Sandra sighed deeply. "It all feels so tenuous and so plain horrible that I can understand how Dad's screwed up about it – but he does seem particularly volatile today."

"Like the weather, Mumsie, look at that cloud in the distance. I think we should make a move back to the cars..."

The rest of the day passed without incident, although in the early evening after the others had gone, Léonie was troublesome at feeding time. Osborn, to Sandra's relief, was a little less troublesome and when Léonie had finally settled down, the three of them were able to unwind for an hour or so before bedtime.

Madeleine and Léonie left the following afternoon, after an enjoyable, easy morning visiting a local garden centre, with a promise to meet again in September.

Bryony, Juniper and Petroc came to Sandra and Osborn's house a few days later for a final afternoon visit before returning to Wales. Unfortunately, Juniper was subdued, Petroc was boisterous and babyish and Bryony seemed strangely withdrawn and remote. It was clear that trouble was afoot ahead, although Caroline was now thankfully quiet about her bunion trouble.

CHAPTER 25

As August drew to a close, Gulliver posted photos on *Farcebook* of himself and Anwen enjoying a few days' break at Snowdonia with Anwen's mother, Myfanwy Sweyne. Sandra gazed at the photo of Myfanwy sitting on some steps with a glass of wine looking relaxed and happy and felt her heart constrict in misery at missing him. The fact that he could so easily enjoy time with someone else's mother, when seeing his own mother was a feat in itself, caused a pain that had stolen up on her completely unawares.

The weather in the first week of September was dry and sunny, so Sandra and Osborn visited the Eden Project and Lilymoor Garden as an act of horticultural rebellion. They then went to Bristol for a two-night stay with Madeleine, Henri and Léonie, which was a pre-birthday visit for Sandra, but also so Madeleine wasn't left to cope on her own with Léonie while Henri was away in Paris for two days.

"I feel such a wimp for having my parents here to stay while my husband's away," admitted Madeleine, as they walked around a local park on a sunny but breezy afternoon. "I think Léonie's having a growth spurt or something, because she's been quite a pain lately. She's started to scream when she's tired and needs to sleep and I've had some bad nights with her. I've discovered I'm not very tolerant with sleep deprivation. I'm better than Henri, though, he normally mutters, rolls over and goes back to sleep."

"Don't worry, we're glad to help you out," replied Osborn, who had taken his usual role of pushing Léonie's pram (with Léonie inside). "It's great to get away from it all for a few days and it's always lovely to see you and Léonie. I'm sorry we won't be seeing much of Henri again, but I understand he's busy."

"He's going to be really busy in Paris," replied Madeleine, pushing back a strand of her long, brown hair that had blown free in the breeze. "He's leaving early this evening and he won't be back until about midnight the following night. His schedule is filled with meetings and presentations and he said they want him to go to work the morning after he's back for de-briefing. He's going to be totally knackered, just like I am at the moment."

"Dad and I will help out any way we can while we're here," said Sandra warmly, "so take full advantage of us!"

"I want to spend time with you myself," replied Madeleine with a small laugh. "I want to make the most of my maternity leave, since it's rapidly disappearing. I thought maybe we could go to *Clarksons Consumer Park*, so I could look for some shoes?"

"Done," replied Osborn immediately. "I'd like to look for some jeans."

As it happened the following day, Madeleine bought a pair of boots, Osborn bought a jacket and Sandra went rogue and bought some kitchenware. The main joy, though, was in the glorious ordinariness of wandering around together – and for Sandra, being able to go and help Madeleine when Léonie needed her nappy changed.

"I've never been in a Baby Changing Room before," said Sandra, as she handed Madeleine a clean nappy. "It always used to amuse me how it sounds as if it's somewhere for people to swap their babies."

"I remember," said Madeleine drily, although Léonie's nappy had been exceptionally wet. "I remember you embarrassing me at one of those *Rest-Your-Weary-Ass* services they used to have when we went on holiday to the Lake District – but I didn't mind really."

"I remember too! Gulliver was so miffed, because we'd told him it was the Lake District, but where we stayed was actually Northumberland." A conflicting mixture of memories caused Sandra to pause for a moment. "I wonder if you'll embarrass Léonie in years to come," she continued wonderingly, as the present moment regained its rightful supremacy.

"I'm sure I will," replied Madeleine with a small laugh. "I keep embarrassing myself enough in all sorts of odd ways."

"It's a family trait," said Sandra proudly. "I love this family time, it's so utterly precious."

"I'm beginning to realise that for myself," said Madeleine, as she handed Sandra the used nappy. "Sorry, I don't mean just to use you, but there's a bin over there. Yes, I'm beginning to realise a whole lot of different things since I've become a mother."

"It doesn't stop," replied Sandra with a twinkle in her eye and a pull at her heart. "I would never have imagined my life as a mother would take me down the roads it has and I have to say that some of them I'd rather not have travelled. The thing is, though, I'd go down them all again if I knew it would help you."

"And Gulliver?" asked Madeleine softly, as she picked up Léonie and cuddled her.

"Yes – although right now Gulliver seems to have disappeared down his own particular road into the Welshness, never to return," said Sandra sadly, articulating what until then had only been a feeling.

The road back to Bristol was busier than it had been in the morning, but when they returned there was still time enough for Sandra and Osborn to push Léonie in her pram to the local *Setco*, leaving Madeleine at home for some very rare time alone.

"I painted my toenails," she said with satisfaction when they returned. "You won't believe how good that feels."

"Oh, I do," said Sandra with feeling, "believe me I do."

"Pass," said Osborn, grinning. "Is Henri still going to be late coming back from Paris?"

"Yes, probably after midnight," replied Madeleine, checking on Léonie in her pram. "Knowing him, he'll go into work in the morning. What time will you be leaving tomorrow?"

"Well, we can stay until after lunch if you like," replied Osborn, sensing that Madeleine would appreciate as much time as possible with their company. "Seeing it's Friday tomorrow, we'd better not leave it too late, or we'll get caught up in the crazy weekend traffic to Cornwall."

"Thank you," said Madeleine gratefully, before a worried expression crossed her face. "God, I'm not being too horrifically needy, am I?"

"No, you're being human, my darling," replied Sandra, smiling. "I could never have done what you're doing so much on your own, truly. I found it incredibly hard and my parents were living in the next road. I used to go walking the streets with Gulliver in the pram when I wasn't seeing anybody and I can remember longing for Dad to come home from work."

"I count the hours until Henri comes home," admitted Madeleine, "and I walk for miles with Léonie in the pram too."

The following morning, Sandra and Osborn were more than happy to accompany Madeleine as they all went for a local walk, calling in at *Setco* for a mid-morning coffee and a walk around some shops. Back at the house as they ate sandwiches for lunch, Léonie was at her best, smiling and blowing bubbles in between playing with her toys. Henri had indeed returned at midnight and gone into work as usual. Also as usual, the wrench of saying goodbye bordered on being painful.

"We'll see you again soon," said Sandra as encouragingly as her aching heart would allow. "Always look forward to the next time, that's what I do."

"Maybe I could come and visit for a few days next month," said Madeleine hopefully. "If Henri agrees and it's OK with you?"

"Of course it's OK," replied Osborn instantly, "you're always welcome, Mad."

"Yes, still Mad after all these years," said Madeleine, kissing Sandra's cheek.

"You'll always be Mad," said Sandra warmly. "I love my Mad!"

It was the second week of September 2014 and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was mildly experiencing a 62nd birthday. The mildness was emanating from the almost totally low-key feel of the day, partly because she'd chosen to spend the day quietly.

"I'm so knackered, I can't face anything that takes much energy," she explained to Osborn, as they sat in one of their favourite garden centres, drinking one of their favourite cappuccinos and embarking on one of their discussions about life, the universal degeneration of standards and everything that was affecting them about Gulliver and the rest of the family.

"I know what you mean," said Osborn, sighing. "I feel as if I can't relax, never knowing what's coming from Gulliver next, or what I'm going to see on *Farcebook* from either him or Anwen, not to mention her mother."

"Anwen seems to include her mother a great deal in what they do," said Sandra, sighing too. "I can't bear the way it feels so up and down with Gulliver now."

"Well, Gulliver and Anwen are off to Prague soon, despite not having much money. I know it's none of my business, but it does worry me the way they seem to spend so much. I'm sure Gulliver must be spending his savings."

"He used to be so careful with money that I never worried about him in that respect at all, but now it's different," said Sandra bleakly. "I don't understand why they both need to post pictures of food on *Farcebook* either, although I know I'm not really into food. This is a lovely piece of raspberry and peanut butter cake."

"It's your birthday," replied Osborn, smiling, before suddenly looking concerned. "You did mean it when you said you didn't want a proper birthday cake, didn't you?"

"Yes, I really meant it," replied Sandra, brushing some crumbs away, "although I didn't say anything about an improper one. No, relax! I'm not one of those people who say one thing and mean something else. Anyway, I hope they both have a fantastic time in Prague."

"You do?" Osborn looked askance.

"I don't know. I hope he enjoys it, but I hope he keeps some of his time and money for his own children, whose lives he's turned upside down. How's your cake?"

"Cakey. I wondered how avocado and ginger would fare together and it's kind of surprising. I must admit, I'm becoming slightly concerned that Anwen's children are beginning to take precedence over Gulliver's, but I'm also afraid of antagonising him by saying anything."

"I think he misses his children horribly, because he seemed genuinely sad at missing Juniper's first tooth coming out." Sandra sighed heavily. "Oh, who knows what he's feeling, but it does seem to me as though the future is so uncertain."

"I should imagine the impact on Gulliver would be overwhelming if he was in touch emotionally with what his children might be feeling all the time," considered Osborn, frowning. "I know I'd be devastated if a couple of weeks went by and I hadn't seen them."

"It's worrying," said Sandra uneasily. "He keeps saying he's inundated with work, but then we see on *Farcebook* that he's gone out somewhere with Anwen and her children and often her mother as well. I just don't get it."

"Neither do I," said Osborn sadly. "I'm sorry. Lawrence's death affected me more than I ever expected."

"What?" Sandra looked at Osborn in surprise. "Ah. It was a terrific shock, the sort you don't get over just like that. Life has taken such a dark turn these last few years, I've come to reappraise where the light shines from and it's from people's souls, including my own soul. I know that's an airy fairy concept, but when you see Léonie smiling at you, or when you hear Juniper talking about what's important to her, or when you see Petroc walking along noticing insects and flowers, doesn't something inside you connect with them and feel kind of whole?"

"I know what you mean," said Osborn carefully, "but are you talking about just a grandchildren thing?"

"No, they were the easiest example," replied Sandra, with a wry smile. "Grown-ups are harder! Actually, Maddy's easy, I've always seen the light shining from her soul and been able to connect with it directly. It used to be similar with Gulliver, although he was more difficult to reach. I love my dad and keep understanding more about him since he died, which feels odd and a bit sad, but also very comforting. My mum is still part of my life's work and I don't feel good about how it is between us."

"And me?" Osborn looked anxious.

"You?" Sandra smiled from her soul. "You and I are travelling this life's path very much together, even when we seemed poles apart." Sandra could still feel a small reverberation of hurt from the memory of Osborn's affair with her cousin Sindy, but it seemed like a pathway long since left behind. "We're in this together and although we sometimes take small detours to explore and learn from different places, we always come back to the main route."

"You know when I kept saying I felt sure there was something we were meant to do together?" Osborn sounded strangely excited.

"Yes?" Sandra felt suddenly afraid at what he might be about to say.

"It's our grandchildren, all three of them! Perhaps especially Juniper and Petroc at the moment, since Gulliver took the path he's intent on travelling now. They need us, because we've always been a steady influence for them. I suspect it's going to become a lot harder for those two children and we're in a very particular position to be there for them."

"What about Gulliver? I can't help fearing for him and his future."

"He's made his own choices and he's an adult, so he'll simply have to deal with the consequences of those choices." Osborn sounded unusually harsh to Sandra's ears, almost as if a significant amount of pain was mixed up in the reasoning.

"I don't think it's as easy as that," replied Sandra wistfully. "I know you're right, but whether we like it or not, we're fundamentally connected with Gulliver and it all affects us deeply. It feels so kind of alien with him at the moment, as if he's turned a full half circle, which doesn't make sense."

"Nothing makes sense sometimes," said Osborn with a small laugh. "Especially this government, but we won't go there. Is life meant to make sense?"

"I'd like to make some sense of that question," replied Sandra laughingly, "but I think my reply would be a load of nonsense. Although..."

"Although?" prompted Osborn.

"Although our life experiences are so vastly different, but the love is the same. I'm talking about universal love that flows through the whole of life and connects us all to everything and everyone. I think it just has to be, I don't think it has to make sense."

That afternoon when they visited Caroline, Sandra found it hard to make sense of why her mother had given her some *Eyeball Spray Mist* for tired and irritated eyes as a present. She unwrapped it wonderingly as she sat on the sofa beside Osborn, while Caroline watched Sandra's every move from her chair.

"You said your eyes were tired once," said her mother by way of explanation. "I thought it was worth a try. I opened it and had a go at spraying my own eyes."

"Did it work?" asked Sandra, wide-eyed.

"I couldn't see what I was doing and I missed," muttered Caroline, sniffing.

"That's appropriate," said Osborn quietly, as Sandra gave him a small kick.

"Anyway," continued Caroline, "I was looking at my garden and there are a few areas that aren't looking their best. I'm not saying I want you to do it, I just wondered what you thought, Sandra. That conifer on the front rockery is looking much too big compared to the other plants there. Would it be easy to come up, do you think?"

"I've no idea," replied Sandra a little tersely. "I wouldn't know until I tried."

"Oh well, there's no rush, but if you're looking for something to do, I thought I'd mention it to you. There's something in the back garden that looks a bit straggly too, it's growing up past the garage window. It could do with a good prune."

"It's your camellia," replied Sandra, wishing she could find something pithy to say about a good prune, but it was really the wrong type of fruit. "You said it was one of your favourite plants when I gave it to you for Mother's Day once."

"You gave it to me?" Caroline looked vague. "I don't remember. The other thing I noticed was the tree out at the front, by the drive. I think it needs to come out."

"I can't take out a tree," said Sandra, fully exasperated by then.

"Oh, I know that," replied Caroline hastily. "Osborn has got bigger muscles than you have and it's not all that big, maybe he could have a go?"

"He *is* in the room," said Sandra testily. "He can't take out a tree, you'll need to get someone in. It's always been difficult for me to keep on top of your garden, because I don't live here! I'm tired and getting older and can't cope with the responsibility of it on my own."

"I can help you," said Osborn, realising Sandra was struggling (not only with the garden, but with her mother).

"It's so frustrating having problems with my foot, knee and hip," said Caroline, ignoring Osborn and resorting to whining. "It gets me down because I can't do what I want to do."

"Join the club," muttered Sandra, as she bent down to tidy up the small pile of presents and discarded paper from earlier.

"I'll make tea," said Caroline, standing up slowly with a groan. "I would have sorted out a birthday cake if I'd known you weren't going to bring one, you silly girl!"

"I'm fine," replied Sandra distantly, refraining from pointing out that Caroline hated shopping, had most of her groceries brought to her by Sandra and seemed to avoid pathologically asking Osborn to do anything for her. Apart from that, the prospect of the birthday cake ceremony with just Osborn and her mother felt like a dying attempt at an old family ritual that had once been flowing with life.

'Is that what I've become now?' pondered Sandra, as she lay in bed that night, 'a dying attempt at something once flowing with life? How can this be? How has it come about? It seems to have happened without my consent, but I must have been complicit in it to some extent. I don't understand those pithy sayings entreating you to walk away from negative situations, or those who no longer serve you, or those who suck the living blood from your veins and leave you in an exsanguinated heap – that sort of thing. How do you apply that to your elderly mother who's dependent on you, her only child, for heaven's sake? Sometimes it feels as if my mother begrudges me my own life!' She wrinkled her nose in rebellion.

'Maybe it's about letting go of what you can't change, because the facts themselves can't change. What do you let go of, though? Your sense of responsibility? Your ideals? Your hope for your own future? Your mind? Ha! I made a decent stab at that two years ago. I know the counselling helped me at a deep level, so why am I still struggling?

'I suppose what I let go of was a distorted perception of my childhood and my mother's attitude towards me, so that in effect I let go of my ideals about the past. I also let go of the past programmed responsibility I carried for my mother's happiness and emotional wellbeing.

'That reaches into the future too and I can see much more clearly now how she's making herself unhappy. It's as if she takes other people's issues and turns them about until she can access them from a point of view of how they impact her. God, it's all so deep!' She screwed up her hands in turmoil.

'Do I have hope for my own future? Yes, I believe I do, although sometimes it feels tenuous. The whole shock of Gulliver leaving Bryony and all its ramifications has really turned a large part of my life upside down and inside out – and everybody else's in his immediate family.

'Not only that, but his immersion into Anwen and her family makes it all so much more painful. If he'd left Bryony to go and rediscover himself on his own again for a while, it would have been easier on everyone, except himself. I know it's probably my perception, but I wish it didn't feel as if he just dived headlong into Anwen's life without a backward glance.' She mangled her knees in agitation.

'Still, it's his choice, like Osborn says and we'll simply have to deal with it as it happens. Hopefully time will gradually allow us to feel our way into a more accepting place of all the great changes. Osborn and I need to help Juniper and Petroc understand we're still their grandparents and we're still here for them, so they're always going to be our priority – at least while they're still children and vulnerable. Gulliver and Bryony are adults after all, so they have the means to look after themselves.

'I'll do my best to accept Anwen for Gulliver's sake, I really will. It has to be in my own time, though, because I know for a fact that if I'm pushed into something I'm not ready for, or able to cope with, I'll start struggling mightily again. What seems to be a sticking point is that Gulliver and Anwen don't seem to realise that we can't take sides, because if we're not OK with Bryony, we won't have direct access to Juniper and Petroc.' She kneaded her chin in distress.

'Thank heavens for Madeleine, Henri and Léonie, although Henri seems to be rather distant lately. Maybe he's struggling a bit with the demands of fatherhood – but anyway, it's so good being able to see Maddy more often. I know she'll be going back to work in a couple of months, but at least we're making the most of the time we have while she's at home.

'She's still coming to terms with Léonie's birth, but I can remember feeling traumatised for about a year after Gulliver's birth and I know Maddy can make her way through. I'm a bit concerned they'll be moving house in the not so distant future, but Henri's very competent in that department and Maddy doesn't seem too fazed by it. I think she might find it difficult when it's time for Léonie to go to nursery, she'll probably feel conflict about that.' She contorted her feet in perturbation.

'I think like me, Osborn's finding life really hard on the Gulliver front, but being consoled and uplifted by life on the Madeleine front. On my mother's front, perish the thought, he doesn't carry the same sense of heavy responsibility and the unhealthy,

deep connection that I battle with, but he's still at the mercy of her unexpected telephone calls about leaks and nosebleeds and what have you. He has to deal with me ranting and raving about her now and again too, which must be a pain and I really should try to curtail it.

'He still annoys me to the outright limit sometimes with his various habits and his incessant talking, but my life would be so empty without him. There's a great deal that we connect with and understand about each other. We have such a past together and although some of it was excruciatingly painful, it somehow makes it more meaningful. He's changed and I've changed.' She mauled her shoulders in disquietude.

'Sod it, I know I've changed – but is it for the good? I don't like the way I look now, especially after a sleepless night and I've had a good few of those lately. I do feel calmer about Mum, despite the occasional surface outrage – but I feel terribly worried and uneasy about Gulliver and his situation, so I need to step back and access the compassion about that.

'Actually, I need to step back and access the compassion about all the people in my life, including myself. Yes, I like the sound of that. Sod the angst and bring in the compassion. I should make it a mantra. You can do this life thing, Sandra Olivia Dullkettle, you really can! I'm glad I'm so much kinder to myself these days...

'Sod it, I've forgotten to put out the recycling! God, I'm such a forgetful, moronic idiot!' She pummelled her thighs in disgust.

"Sod the angst and bring in the compassion," she whispered, as she crept out of bed to see to the recycling. "Sod the angst and bring in the sodding compassion."