

The S.O.D. Cinq

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Foreword

The S.O.D. Cinq is rather a silly title, but that suits me fine. The story continues from the birth of Sandra's first granddaughter and covers the years from 2008 to 2011. Well, maybe 'covers' isn't such a good word, because the feeling is more one of skimming over the ocean of life like a stone that somebody has carelessly thrown, to see how far it can go before it sinks. This is somewhat disturbing if the rather silly title is anything to go by (as pronounced the French way, which is only right and proper since there is now a lasting French connection in the story).

Family dynamics are key in The S.O.D. Cinq, as ever. The question is, what exactly is the key attempting to unlock? Will it work? Does it fit? Is the lock too rusty? Questions, questions. Nothing really changes, but I hope you can find some answers as you read.

Peace and love and much turning of your own keys, pardon the expression.

Kay Santillo, March 2014.

CHAPTER 1

It was late January 2008 and Juniper Maple Dullkettle was literally having a birth day. She would have to wait a few years until she could read, but for now her only focus was on being born. This was also true for her mother Bryony and her father Gulliver, although Gulliver tried not to look too often and Bryony was at the wrong end to see anyway.

Finally, the miracle happened and Juniper was squeezed out into the world that awaited her with not a little impatience. She was eight days overdue and her expectant family were delighted that she had made it at last. Bryony was especially delighted that her daughter had made it at last, although she felt the effort had been largely her own. Fortunately, Juniper's birth weight had been just a little over 7lbs.

"You're a grandmother," said an exhausted Gulliver a short while later to his mother Sandra on the phone, "and my life has changed forever."

"I know, but it's wonderful to have a new little human in your life," said Sandra excitedly. "It's such a privilege to be able to nurture her and watch her grow into a unique person – is that her?" Sandra had caught the faint sound of a tiny wail in the background.

"Yes," replied Gulliver, "she won't settle. Has Dad gone to work yet?"

"No, he's still here," said Sandra, turning around to see her husband Osborn making frantic gestures that he wanted to speak to his son. "I'll hand you over. Don't worry that your life has changed forever, you won't have time to think of that much for a while, your focus will be on changing nappies and changing your outlook. It's so worth it, though, so utterly and fundamentally worth it. I'm 55, I know these things. Here's Dad!"

A week later, on the first day of February, Sandra and Osborn stood outside Gulliver and Bryony's front door in Swansea (or Aberpontyfan, to be precise), awaiting with extreme anticipation the first sight of their granddaughter.

"Did you ring the doorbell?" asked Sandra impatiently.

"Oh God no, I forgot," replied Osborn, his finger colliding with Sandra's as they both frantically attempted to press the doorbell.

"Ouch," said Sandra, sucking her finger. "Did it ring? Should we do it again to make sure?"

"Someone's coming!" said Osborn, as the door opened to reveal Gulliver holding a small bundle of baby.

"Here she is," said Gulliver, managing to sound proud, tired, happy and resigned to decades of future stress in three short words.

"She's lovely!" exclaimed Osborn, gazing into a pair of enquiring eyes that were threatening to become cross eyes, but fortunately not in the strabismus sense.

"She's beautiful," breathed Sandra, as the eyes screwed up and the tiny mouth opened to create a most pitiful wail. "Is she hungry?"

"She shouldn't be, Bryony's just fed her," replied Gulliver. "She's probably got wind, I suppose, she doesn't seem to like sleeping very much for a new baby. You'd better come in."

"Hello Bryony," greeted Osborn, as they stepped into the sitting room. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," replied Bryony brightly, suppressing a yawn. "Well, a bit tired."

"I'm not surprised," said Sandra sympathetically. "I can remember the first few weeks." She had been going to say months, but thought that might be disconcerting in the circumstances. "You had rather a long labour and then that problem with your chest."

"It looks OK to me," said Gulliver with a trace of his old humour. "I'll make some tea, who wants to hold her? Juniper, I mean, not Bryony."

"I will!" replied Osborn instantly, reaching out his arms to take the wriggling and clearly uncomfortable Juniper. "Have you got wind, little one?" he said gently, holding her upright against his chest and rubbing her back. "Shall I sing to you like I used to sing to your daddy?"

"No!" said Gulliver and Sandra loudly together, much to Bryony's amusement.

"Yes, it was unfortunate having to be moved to the bigger hospital for tests," said Bryony, "although it turned out I'd just kind of strained my chest with all the effort."

"A drug free labour, I'm very impressed," said Sandra, smiling. "Stitches?"

"No, I didn't feel much like laughing," replied Bryony, grimacing. "Yes, I had stitches, but I'm told they'll heal well."

"They will," replied Sandra, not liking to say that she had only had one stitch with Gulliver and none with Madeleine. "I must say, your mum was over the proverbial moon and possibly Venus as well the morning Juniper was born. She rang me up for the first time ever."

"I hope you didn't mind Mum and Dad visiting us first," said Bryony, yawning again.

"Not at all," replied Sandra, remembering her sadness at the distance between them and the fact that they had to wait a week to see their grandchild. "You're their daughter and you'd given birth, I'd feel the same with Madeleine. Actually, it was brilliant that Maddy and Henri got to visit you all at the hospital that first night, Maddy was absolutely delighted to hold her new little niece just hours after she'd been born. It's lucky they're living in Cardiff – but I must stop prattling on, you really look tired. Ah, here's Gulliver with the tea. God, I can't stop talking, I must be really excited."

"Has she gone to sleep yet?" Gulliver asked Osborn, as he handed out the mugs of tea.

"Yes," replied Osborn proudly. "I've still got the knack."

"I wish you'd pass it on to me," said Gulliver ruefully. "I haven't slept properly since Juniper was born. I don't know if I'm cut out for this."

"It takes a while for everything to settle down," said Sandra comfortingly, wondering if life had ever settled down for her and Osborn. "It's bound to be a stressful time, just think what work you did in this house over the last few months to get things ready. No wonder you did your back in and you had laryngitis. Don't be too hard on yourself. How is your back, by the way?"

"Much better," replied Gulliver, sipping his tea. "That traction I had twice a week worked well. Do you want to sit down with Juniper, Dad?"

"Thanks," said Osborn, carefully arranging himself in the chair Bryony had vacated. "Is Bryony OK?"

"I think she's gone upstairs for a rest," explained Gulliver. "How's Grandma?"

"Oh, sort of OK, I think," replied Sandra, gazing at the sight of Osborn in the chair, gently holding the sleeping Juniper. "They never found out the cause of the jaundice she had, but they're following up her small ovarian cyst. It seems to be OK, although she has to have scans every now and then to monitor it."

"It was a bit strange on the morning of her last scan when I had to go over to her house and knock on her bedroom window to rouse her, because she didn't hear our wake-up phone call," mused Osborn. "She asked us to ring her, too. It's a good job we live so close."

"It was a good job she lives in a bungalow," added Gulliver.

"She's becoming much more dependent," said Sandra morosely. "She had a letter last week about Council Tax, saying they were taking £1,200 back that had been their fault in the first place and she didn't even read it properly, she just handed it to me to deal with."

"We had to take her out to buy a washing machine and we had to collect her prescription because she wasn't feeling well," said Osborn, "but never mind! Now we have a new little person in the family." He gazed down at the sleeping form of his granddaughter. "I can't get over how small she is."

"I can't wait to cuddle her," said Sandra, smiling. "It feels much more hopeful to have a birth in the family. It's been tough these last few years with three of our parents dying and having to look after Grandma, not to mention the situation at work for Dad. That latest sinusitis episode was quite severe."

"How did the dermatology appointment go?" asked Gulliver, finishing his tea. "Do you want me to take her so you can drink your tea?"

"No, I'm fine," replied Osborn, clearly not wanting to relinquish his cuddle. "The dermatologist was quite helpful in diagnosing industrial eczema, but the university doesn't want to accept responsibility for buying in cheap solder. I had such a fight to have extractor fans installed and I'm not the only one it affects, apparently, because one of this year's students is also suffering."

"Hopefully you'll be able to take early retirement soon," said Sandra, gazing at Juniper and wondering when she would finally be able to hold her.

"She's waking up," whispered Osborn suddenly, as Juniper began to squirm and open her eyes. "She didn't sleep very long."

"Tell me about it," said Gulliver tiredly. "Shall I take her?"

"I'll have her!" squeaked Sandra, standing up and holding out her arms, suddenly feeling somewhat apprehensive about taking hold of a week-old baby. "She's so lovely! She's quite wriggly!" She sank down carefully on the chair again, feeling at last the warm, solid reality of her new granddaughter, who seemed to be drifting back into sleep. "She's so small and perfectly formed. I do like being a grandma," she said contentedly, gently stroking Juniper's tiny hand.

"Grandma Dullkettle," said Gulliver wickedly, grinning with a sudden trace of his pre-paternal self. "It's a pity you don't live closer. Wales is a good place to live."

"Home is home," replied Sandra simply. "Besides, I still have my mother to consider. She's been making comments already about when she'll get to see Juniper."

"We'll visit at some point," said Gulliver, "because Bryony's grandparents have to meet their great-granddaughter too."

"Ah, these family considerations," said Sandra with a sigh. "I don't think my mother likes the fact that Uncle Lawrence will get to see Juniper before she will, but it's pure coincidence that he's at Cardiff this weekend for a stamp fair. Is it still OK to visit Maddy and Henri, by the way?"

"I think so," replied Gulliver, yawning. "I'll have to ask Bryony, of course, she's the one who's demand feeding."

"Yes, I can remember being really hungry in the days after giving birth," said Sandra distractedly, as Bryony snuffled a little. "Oh, that's not what you meant."

"No, but don't worry about it. How does it feel being grandparents, then?"

"Brilliant!" replied Osborn, grinning.

"Abso-sodding-lutely wonderful," breathed Sandra happily.

They had arrived in the early afternoon at Madeleine and Henri's comfortable, modern flat in Cardiff, with its interesting view across to the Millennium Stadium. French Henri was coping very well with being outnumbered by the English Dullkettle family, except of course that Juniper was actually Welsh. She was lying fast asleep on a blanket on the floor, while her parents sat on one of the two leather sofas, looking dazed and utterly exhausted.

Lawrence had arrived from the train station and was being his usual voluble self as they all sipped from mugs filled with various beverages. Sandra thought that he was looking slightly older as he sat on the other sofa next to Henri, mostly on account of his thinning hair and his greying beard. There was a definite similarity between him and Osborn, but although Lawrence was the older brother by two years, his life as a bachelor was far more carefree than Osborn's.

"Osborn was telling me you recently had a job interview in Bristol?" Lawrence was asking Henri a bit too loudly and over-enunciated for Sandra's liking. She, Osborn and Madeleine were sitting at the table and Sandra looked across at Madeleine, wondering if she was uncomfortable too. Madeleine, however, was gazing with prolonged fascination at Juniper, playing dreamily with a strand of her own long, dark blonde hair. It would have been a little disturbing on several levels if she'd been playing with Juniper's long, dark blonde hair.

"Uh – yes, I 'ad some promising feedback, I 'ope it might be inside the bag."

"What's that? Oh, you mean in the bag. Well, that's good news, especially since Madeleine's found a job in Bristol. When do you start, Mad?" Lawrence had diverted his attention to his niece.

"Sorry? Oh, on the 18th, but I'll have to commute by train for two weeks until we can move into the Bristol flat. I'll miss Cardiff, but it'll be good to be a bit closer to Mum and Dad." Madeleine smiled at her parents, causing Sandra to feel sudden, unexpected warmth. "Mumsie, you've spilt your green tea with pomegranate and whortleberry. I'll get a cloth."

"Oh! Sorry darling, I wasn't concentrating. I was thinking how life is changing all the time, which is good of course. Yes, it will be lovely to think you're only a couple of hours up the motorway, instead of – well, three hours. I think the bridge tends to be a psychological barrier in some ways."

"Not to mention a financial one," contributed Osborn, draining the last of his orange tea with star fruit and seedless raisins. "I used to think the Tamar Bridge was bad enough, but £5.30 to get into Wales! At least you get into Cornwall free, you just have to pay to leave again. Not that I mind paying to come and see you all," he added, having caught Gulliver's raised eyebrows over on the sofa. What Gulliver's eyebrows were doing on the sofa was anybody's guess.

"I'll be able to pop home more often," said Madeleine, finishing her purple tea with mint and liquorice. She sometimes had unusual tastes. "Of course, I'll be further away from Aberpontyfan, which is rather bad timing now my lovely little niece has been born, but it'll still be within visiting distance."

"It's a bit of a long way to come and babysit, though," said Gulliver slightly dolefully. Sandra wondered if he might be suffering from the baby blues, even though Juniper was a girl.

As if at the mention of her name, a small wail, though not of the marine kind, emanated from the blanket on the floor. As the wails grew in frequency and volume, Bryony sighed a little and went to pick up Juniper, who had quickly become agitated.

"Come on then," said Bryony, sitting back on the sofa beside Gulliver, preparing to commence breast feeding. "Chocolate or strawberry?"

"Chocolate or strawberry?" asked Lawrence, finishing his brown tea with milk and sugar and looking across at Bryony. "Oh..." He looked away quickly, as Bryony liberated one of her milk-producing outlets and commenced feeding her daughter.

"Shall we play a game?" asked Madeleine suddenly. "I miss all the family games we used to play. Henri, do you mind playing?"

"No no, I'm fine," replied Henri as he jumped up after Lawrence and moved to the table, also slightly distracted at the breastfeeding taking place on the other sofa.

"I'll play," said Gulliver, joining the gathering at the table. "What are we playing?"

"I bought this new card game called *Lush* at a Welsh craft fair," said Madeleine. "I've no idea what it's like, I just liked the title."

"We used to say things were lush in the early Sixties," remarked Sandra. "Or people. Well, boys mainly. How times are changing."

"Juniper will probably need changing after her feed," said Gulliver rather tiredly. "I didn't realise babies could shit so much."

"Thanks for that," said Lawrence, smiling. "By the way, I'll have to leave here to catch the 18:55 train."

"We can give you a lift to the station," offered Osborn, looking at the cards that Madeleine had dealt him.

"Have you got a spare seat?" asked Lawrence, also investigating his cards.

"No, just the one," replied Osborn, grinning, "but it's served me well."

"I'm glad Juniper's only got one seat," said Gulliver. "We go through more than enough nappies as it is."

"Don't worry, Henri, they've always been like this," said Madeleine. "I expect you'll get used to them in the end and your apprehension will gradually grow smaller."

"Ow can anything grow smaller?" asked Henri a little uncertainly. "I was afraid that 'oliday in Spain that we 'ad last year with my family would make your app'rension grow larger, but I think it's the same size."

"You're funny," said Madeleine, laughing lightly. "This game looks funny too. *Give me a cwtch – You're a mega-lushpig – Your mother was a bauper bint – You speak a load of tunky – Huck up!* Sorry, I had no idea it was so weird."

"That's OK, I don't mind partaking in a spot of weirdness," replied Lawrence equably.

"Is that the same as taking part?" asked Henri. "What is a crink? I 'ave a card that says *Your uncle is a crink*."

"A crank maybe," said Osborn, smiling.

"It takes one to know one," retorted Lawrence.

"Maybe I should have bought *Ecstatic Families* instead?" said Madeleine wryly.

"How did your holiday go? How's the baby?" asked Caroline, almost as soon as Sandra set foot inside her mother's back door two days later.

"It wasn't a holiday, we had to travel all the way to Aberpontyfan to meet our granddaughter," replied Sandra guardedly, her heart dropping instantly as she sensed undercurrents. "Juniper's lovely, I'd forgotten how small newborn babies are."

"At least you've seen her," said Caroline, sniffing. "I was saying on the phone to Lily that I didn't know when I would get to see my great-granddaughter."

"They're planning to visit at Easter," said Sandra, suddenly feeling defensive. "Don't forget that you saw both your grandchildren the day they were born, while Osborn and I had to wait a week to see our granddaughter."

"It's awful when you're old and you get left behind," continued Caroline in a whiny voice that Sandra couldn't bear. "I had some bad news while you were away, too. Myrna rang me up and told me she has ovarian cancer."

"Oh no, I'm so sorry." Sandra's reaction was genuine. "Poor Myrna, I always liked her, she has a lovely sense of humour."

"I feel as if all my friends die and leave me behind," said Caroline dolefully. "It's very hard, you know."

"Yes, it must be," replied Sandra, trying her best to tune into her compassion and somehow managing to achieve some. "How is Myrna?"

"Well, she had to go into hospital to have fluid drained, so her daughter came down from up the country somewhere to look after her for a while. Her daughter has a family to look after, though, so it sounds as if she'll be taking Myrna to live with them. I feel sorry for her daughter, I met her once. I can remember what it was like when my mother had ovarian cancer and we had to look after her."

"I know it must have been awful, but at least you weren't on your own."

"I was on my own with my mother when she died."

"Yes, that must have been distressing." Sandra found she didn't know what to say.

"I was only 26, you've been lucky to have your parents for so long."

"I..." Sandra's words dried up completely. 'God in Heaven, Mother, please don't keep comparing your life to mine,' she was thinking heavily, beginning to wonder how much weight she'd actually put on over the winter. 'Please, please don't go down that road, because you've been free to live your own life for over four decades now, whereas I'm beginning to wonder when I'll ever be free.'

"I suppose I should expect sad news at my age," said Caroline gloomily, although it wasn't exceptionally cloudy. "Oh well, now you're back at least I can play *Scribble* today to take my mind off my troubles, even if I am 82."

"Fantastic," replied Sandra, with more than a soupçon of irony.

"I suppose you're feeling very happy about your granddaughter," mused Caroline, as Sandra actually got around to taking off her jacket and stood wondering what the slightly unpleasant smell was in the kitchen.

"Yes, I suppose I am..." began Sandra, attempting to assess her own feelings.

"I can remember feeling so excited and euphoric on hearing I'd become a grandmother when Gulliver was born. I wanted to tell everybody I knew! Did you feel like that?"

"I – no, not really. I do feel very happy deep down inside, but it's something to do with them living away, I think. It's as if I can't be as connected as much as I would like to be if they lived closer to us and I'd see Juniper growing up and have more day to day contact with her, like you did with both our children."

"Oh, nonsense! By the way, my vacuum cleaner stopped working while you were away, it's always such bad timing. I wonder if Osborn could have a look at it?"

"I'm sure he could look at it," replied Sandra, aware that she vehemently disliked her position of go-between.

"I hate being dependent on anyone," said Caroline, sighing. "Anyway, I'm glad you're back, I feel quite vulnerable when you're away. Can you smell anything? Do you think my sink needs cleaning?"

'How do I feel?' Sandra asked herself as she lay awake that night, while gusts of wind gusted gustily around the roof. 'I'm not sure I know, which feels a little disconcerting, although Osborn and I are not especially concert people. I should know how I feel, surely?' She prodded her own thigh, just to remind herself that she actually felt things.

'I was excited when Gulliver told me that he and Bryony were expecting, although it was overshadowed to a small extent by those heart tests I had to have last year. I think I'm beginning to believe my heart's probably not in imminent danger of suddenly giving out, but it really shook me if I'm honest to myself, which is the whole point of this exercise. It seems funny to be exercising in bed. Oh, I don't know, we used to do quite a lot.' She looked across at Osborn and sighed.

'I used to know how I felt,' she considered, while a sudden squall of squally rain squallied alarmingly against the window panes. 'I used to feel such a lot, especially when Osborn and I had our very troubled times – as well as when Gulliver and Madeleine were having very troubled times too – and not to mention when our parents were having very troubled times. Does that mean I recognise unhappy feelings more than happy feelings?' She smiled experimentally into the darkness in an attempt to connect with the feeling of happiness.

'No, that just feels as if I'm mad, although I suppose at least it's a feeling. Let's see, I feel mainly happy about Osborn and me after all our years together, but sad that it seemed we had to hurt each other in order to learn what we needed to learn. I feel happy that Gulliver and Madeleine are settled now they're 31 and 26 respectively, but sad that they live away. I feel sad that Dad died, but happy that he's free and absolutely fine now.

'I feel – I feel – oh sod it, I feel very unhappy about Mum. Very trapped, very burdened, very frightened. Frightened? God yes, I *am* frightened of what the future might bring, which is really ridiculous, because the future hasn't happened yet. I didn't do cognitive behavioural therapy 12 years ago for nothing! Actually, it was brilliant that it was on the National Health.' She reminisced about Ian Probe and negative automatic thoughts for a while, before sighing.

'It seems to me that I need to concentrate on the good things about my life and not dwell on the not so good things,' she pondered, as a crack of lightning suddenly cracked crackily in the not too distant distance. 'Wow, that was a cracker! I wish it had been, I don't like lightning. I suppose it's best to acknowledge feelings, so they don't fester? I know for a fact that squashing feelings causes faster festering, which is a rather unusual thing to think. Am I wrong to think so much? Probably.' She placed a hand on her brow, to see if it was fevered at all. 'No, it's probably just me cracking up. No, it's not! I'm not going there again! No, no, no, no no!'

CHAPTER 2

"Are you cracking up, Sandra?" asked her friend Alison as they sat down together (but in different seats) in Alison's now familiar sitting room, one afternoon in February. As she considered the question, Sandra noticed Alison's short hair had been dyed recently and was looking especially good.

"Yes, I think I am," she replied somewhat flatly, although she had recently found that size 38C was a more comfortable size. "Why do you ask?"

"You said 'Excuse me' when I gave you your mug of tea," said Alison, trying to raise an eyebrow, but elevating them both. "Are you distracted? I know I was when I took communion the other day. Inappropriate responses can be so embarrassing."

"Why? What did you say?" asked Sandra, smiling warmly at her friend of almost two decades, although Alison was actually five years older than 55-year-old Sandra.

"Cheers, thanks a lot," replied Alison with a wry smile. "The vicar gave me such a strange look, but that's nothing new, to be honest. Sandra, I think *I'm* cracking up, because Sam and Karen told me last week they're going to move to Wales." Sandra did indeed detect a small crack of barely disguised extreme emotion in Alison's voice and immediately felt sad for her.

"Oh no, I'm so sorry. You must feel – how *do* you feel?"

"All sorts of things I probably shouldn't. I feel angry with Sam and Karen that they're taking my two granddaughters away from me, after Dirk and I have helped so much to bring up the two of them. We did that at Sam and Karen's request I might add, in order to help them out – although we wouldn't have had it otherwise."

"You've done a lot," agreed Sandra quietly.

"Tamsin and I are so close, although I keep thinking she's older than she is because she's tall like I am. I was telling everyone she was seven last year when she was only six. Dirk's had more to do with Peony really, mainly because he was retired when she was a baby and we've been looking after her three days a week. He's quietly devastated that now Peony's two and starting to talk to him, she'll be going away. We can hardly believe it. We find ourselves sitting and staring into space sometimes, as if they've already gone."

"Why are they going to Wales?" asked Sandra, thinking how Alison might develop a love-hate relationship with everything Welsh like she already had. "What part of Wales?"

"Karen was going on about them seeking a better lifestyle, although I hardly see why it's better. They're going to let their house in Plymouth and rent a house in Usk," replied Alison grimly. "Karen says she's landed a really good job, while Sam's managed to find a job that means he'll have to do loads of travelling. Karen doesn't drive, so how does she imagine in her wildest dreams that it's going to work? I'm sorry, I'm going off on one again."

"Don't worry, go off on as many as you like. I can understand it must feel like a huge let-down in your life, because I know how much Tamsin and Peony mean to you."

"It feels like a huge, gaping void that's about to open. Karen was saying that we can still see them a lot, because it's only an hour and a half up the motorway. What speed does she think we can travel, that's what I'd like to know?"

"There's the bridge toll as well," considered Sandra, before realising she needed to be encouraging to Alison. "I'm sure that won't put you off seeing them, though, because there's no way it would put Osborn and me off visiting Juniper."

"I thought of you when they said they were moving to Wales," said Alison, regarding Sandra. "I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but I think it's probably a bit easier for you because you've never had that closeness with Juniper from the very beginning? We saw Tamsin the day she was born and we saw Peony when she was just a couple of hours old."

"It's difficult," replied Sandra noncommittally, trying to assess how she felt. "Yes, I think it's true that it's more difficult for you because you're having something taken away, whereas I never had it in the first place. Of course, not having something that you really want in the first place can bring its own brand of unhappiness." She gazed into her mug of tea, remembering the visceral longing to see Juniper as soon as she'd been born and then the week of almost painful impatience before they could actually set eyes on her.

"I'm beginning to wonder what life's all about," continued Alison dejectedly. "I thought people at church would have been supportive, but I've noticed that when I'm not all bright and cheery and leading the Wives' Group for them, or serving coffee, or reading the intercessions, they don't want to know. The vicar asked how I was and when I started to tell him, he literally sidestepped me."

"That's not good," agreed Sandra, "especially if you carried on talking. I couldn't get on with church, as you know, although I consider myself a spiritual person."

"How do you manage with that if you don't belong to a church?"

"We-ell, I can't remember if I ever told you about Rainbow Healers? No? Well, it's a natural health and healing centre in Plymouth, but it's quite spiritual too. Osborn and I did a healing course there a few years ago and then Osborn was asked if he'd like to teach the course, because there was going to be a vacancy. He shadowed the retiring teacher for a year before taking it over himself. Osborn then asked me last September if I'd help him out, so I've been going there with him two evenings every month." Sandra stopped and sipped tea, feeling unused to such prolonged speech.

"Wow, you're a dark horse!" Alison looked at Sandra with raised eyebrows, although her eyes joined in. "Actually, I like your hair that lighter shade. No, good on you with the healing thing. You probably couldn't get a word in edgeways anyway, with me prattling on about Dirk and everybody, I know I talk the hind legs off a pony."

"Er..."

"I was seriously thinking about becoming a lay preacher, to be honest, but then I had that sarcoidosis diagnosis, which isn't easy to say. Sam pointed out that I'd be used to laying around if I was going to be ill rather a lot, but I pointed out that he meant I'd be lying around, which doesn't fit. God, I'm doing it again, although I'm really not quite sure these days where God fits into it. I don't actually feel like going to church anymore, so that sort of puts the kybosh on the lay preacher idea, whatever a kybosh is. I thought I'd had a calling..." Alison tapered off rather sadly.

"You sound a bit mixed up?" Sandra wasn't sure which part of Alison's outpouring to respond to first. "How's the sarcoidosis?"

"It seems to flare up now and again with chestiness or various lumps and bumps on my skin. I have check-ups at the hospital every so often, which is a bit ridiculous, as I can be OK for ages and then when it's flared up, I can't get an appointment. Even the consultant advised me to ring straight through to his secretary when I start to have lung problems or strange lumps. Talking of strange lumps, Karen's a size 22 now."

"She must be unhappy somewhere deep inside, surely?" Sandra always felt uncertain how to reply to Alison's deprecations about her own daughter-in-law.

"Aren't we all? Helen asked to meet me in *Costalot Coffee* and told me that she and Mark are having problems – and for Helen to admit that to me means they must be quite advanced."

"Oh dear, it's so hard when our children are suffering."

"Did our parents feel like that about us?" Alison had voiced what was floating uncomfortably through Sandra's mind. "I mean, I don't remember my mother or father being especially emotionally involved with me once I'd married and left home."

"No, my mother was always deeply involved in her own affairs," reminisced Sandra, "although she only had the one affair, to be fair." She laughed a little nervously. "Isn't language lovely."

"Your mother had an affair?" Alison made a decent attempt at choking on her tea. "Your mother? Caroline? The sweet little old lady that slips in quietly at the back of the church on Sunday mornings and then slips out again before anybody can talk to her?"

"Yes!" It was Sandra's turn to try her best not to choke. "A sweet little old lady, though? My mother? You should hear how she talks to me sometimes – and to Osborn."

"Really? It just shows you never actually know someone until you really know them. Oh no, I'm talking shite again. Mind you, my mother went quite peculiar after my dad died and wanted other people to look after her more and more. Especially me, to be honest, which was probably because my two brothers weren't girls. See, more shite! It seemed as if after Dad died, she gradually decided to give up. I hope I never get like that. I've told Helen and Sam that if I ever become like my mother did, please shoot me, because I never want them to be saddled with an old bag."

"What did they say to that?" asked Sandra, smiling.

"Helen said she never wants to become like *her* mother and Sam said he's not into horse riding," replied Alison distractedly, "but honestly Sandra, I know it can be a real worry. I'm sad to say that in my experience, some old people can be the living end."

"Literally," said Sandra, before they both exchanged a startled, guilty glance and convulsed simultaneously into laughter.

Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper arrived a week later for a visit at the end of February, first of all staying at the 4-bedroomed house of Bryony's parents, Anne and Stan Stanpool. That was probably fortunate, as Osborn had caught a cold that was producing massive sneezes – his sneezes were usually massive, to be fair. Fortunately, he had already promised to drive to Cardiff to help Henri move the contents of Madeleine and Henri's flat to Bristol and by the time he returned, the sneezing had abated.

The visit meant that Caroline finally had the opportunity to meet her great-granddaughter and soon sat smiling a little uncertainly with Juniper in her arms for the statutory photo.

"She's so small," said Caroline, shifting a little gingerly in her chair, although her hair was normally dyed light brown. "I'd forgotten what it feels like. Do you remember what it feels like, Sandra?"

"What?" asked Sandra, jolted out of her reverie at the sight. "Oh – yes, it feels funny at first when you're not used to holding a baby. Actually, she looks longer and more fully-cheeked than when I last saw her."

"I wouldn't have thought you could tell with a nappy on," remarked Bryony with her usual expressionless expression, if such a look existed.

"I don't think my mother wears nappies," mused Gulliver, looking sideways at Sandra.

"Wow, you two are your usual witty selves," said Sandra with a smile. "You must be getting a bit more sleep these days – nights?"

"Hardly," replied Gulliver, "I think we're just getting more used to it."

"I didn't sleep much last night now Dad's back, because he was snoring with his cold," said Sandra ruefully. "I went downstairs and slept on the sofa in the end, but it was quite difficult. I did manage to drop off about two o'clock, though."

"Oh dear, did you bruise yourself?" asked Bryony pseudo-innocently.

"Oh poo!" retorted Sandra, smiling at Bryony.

"What? Can you smell it?" asked Caroline, looking somewhat alarmed. "I can't smell anything."

"No! I was answering Bryony," explained Sandra, raising a single eyebrow and frowning slightly at the same time, which was a little unusual.

"Sandra, you naughty girl!" exclaimed Caroline, sniffing. "Can someone take Juniper? She's a bit heavy and squirmy."

Sandra looked askance at her mother, feeling a wave of pure irritation that she should be talked to as a child when she was now a grandmother. She looked across at Osborn and he grimaced sympathetically. She looked across at Gulliver and he grimaced unsympathetically, but that was because he had gone to pick up Juniper from Caroline's lap and discovered that Juniper had indeed produced a pooey nappy with overspill.

"Another one!" exclaimed Gulliver, holding his daughter aloft. "Why is her poo so liquidy still?" he asked, frowning.

"It's the breast milk," replied Bryony calmly. "Is the overspill over the top?"

"Poo overspill is always over the top if you ask me," sighed Gulliver as he headed to the bathroom with Juniper.

"Life changes so much with a baby," remarked Osborn to nobody in particular. "How are your parents, Bryony?"

"Oh, the same as ever," replied Bryony. "Mum definitely likes being a grandma, but I'm not so sure about Dad – although he's a granddad, of course."

"How are Madeleine and Henri, Osborn?" asked Caroline, sniffing. "It was a pity Henri didn't get that job after all. I hear you helped them move their things into the Bristol flat?"

"Yes, although it's a good job there wasn't a huge amount to move, because the Bristol flat is much smaller than the Cardiff one," replied Osborn. "The two sofas were the most problematical, but we managed them between us. I may be 57, but I can still shift sofas. I've only got about three bruises."

"We hardly had anything when Len and I were first married," reminisced Caroline, "although I keep forgetting they're not married, of course. It's all changed so much since I was young. Young people have such high expectations these days."

Sandra glanced at Bryony before looking at her mother. 'Does she realise Bryony's a young person?' she asked herself. 'Does she realise that she's becoming quite ageist in her old age? Ha! No really, it's true. God, I'm answering myself now.'

"I'm glad you and Gulliver did it in the right order," Caroline said to Bryony, "because I'm sure it helps a child's life to start off on the right foot."

"Not the left one?" asked Bryony a little warily, as Gulliver returned to the room.

"Sorry dear?" asked Caroline vaguely. "Oh! Talking of feet, Sandra, I had my appointment with the podiatrist, but it seemed like a waste of time. She had a look at my feet and told me I had a corn and a bunion, which I knew anyway. She talked about corn pads, insoles and bunion pads, but if they don't work, to go back and ask about a bunion operation."

"A bunion operation?" repeated Sandra, trying to look interested and not let her mother know how she feared the part she would inevitably have to play if her mother had any sort of surgery.

"Yes dear, an operation. I'm not sure I want to go ahead with that, though. What do you think?"

"Me? We-ell, I think it's your decision."

"That's not much help! Anyway, I suppose I'll try what she says and then take it step by step. Gulliver, why are you laughing at me?"

"Step by step?" said Gulliver, grinning. "Podiatry?"

"Oh, you're a very naughty boy!" retorted Caroline as the light dawned. "Isn't he a very naughty boy, Sandra!"

'Oh, leave me alone, Mother,' thought Sandra tiredly, as she smiled at Gulliver. "So, you're lovely and clean now, Juniperus Squamata, can Grandma have a cuddle?"

"Mother?"

"It's a shrub from the juniper family," she explained defensively, "and that's one of your special names from Grandma," she said to her granddaughter, who even at one-month old seemed to be looking at Sandra questioningly.

Early that evening, Sandra was thinking about Madeleine when the phone rang. As she heard Madeleine's voice sounding small and tired, Sandra wondered if it were possible to have a premonition and déjà vu at the same time.

"You sound a bit defeated darling, like you did – you know – a few years ago," said Sandra gently, after Madeleine had finished explaining how the travelling involved in Henri's job at Newport was wearing him out and why she was feeling like an outsider at her new job in a solicitor's office.

"Do I?" Sandra was disturbed to hear Madeleine's voice sounding tearful. "It's not only Henri's job and my job, Mumsie, it's the flat! It's so small, we hadn't realised our things would fill it up so much. There are two bedrooms, but we can't use the second one because it's filled up with our clothes and my books and Henri's bits and pieces. The kitchen section of the lounge-diner fills the whole room with steam when we cook and although we open the windows, it's already getting mouldy."

"Oh Mad, I'm so sorry." Sandra tried to think on her feet, which was a bit tricky, since she was sitting down on the sofa with her feet up, after the hectic day. "It's a new build, of course, and I know that new houses take quite a while to dry out properly with all the plaster and things. Dad would know a lot more, but he's having a gargle in the bathroom."

"A what?"

"A gargle."

"Oh! I thought you said something about a gargoyle!" Madeleine's voice sounded faintly hysterical.

"Well, the sounds coming from the bathroom have been more gargoyle-like than gargle-like! His throat is still giving him trouble after that cold he had. Ah, I can hear him emerging."

"It's OK, I'll talk to him in a minute. I just want a little bit more Mumsie time. What's upsetting me as well is how can you and Dad come to visit us if we haven't got a spare bedroom?" A suspicious sniff was audible.

"We'll still come and see you! You're only about two hours away now, we could make it a day trip. Or maybe we could find a cheap place to stay for a night or two?"

"Could you? I don't know how much it would cost. Would Dad be OK with that?" The longing in Madeleine's voice brought a lump to Sandra's throat.

"I'm sure he'd be OK, darling. He loves you as much as I do."

"Oh Mumsie..."

"Oh Maddy-poo..."

"Maddy-poo?"

"Sorry, I don't know where that came from."

"That's OK, Mummy-poo. No, I can't call you that, it doesn't sound right. Are you OK Mumsie?"

"Yes, I'm OK. Well, I'm pretty much OK – just a bit tired – but generally OK." As she was saying the words, Sandra really couldn't tell whether she was being entirely truthful or not.

Another Wednesday evening had materialised – another Wednesday evening in which Sandra forced herself to go along with Osborn to Rainbow House, where Osborn seemed to derive much pleasure from teaching natural/spiritual healing to a small group of people who had continued in the current course since September. The group had slowly dwindled over the months, so that now there were only five takers who would be continuing until the course's end in July.

'Why do I feel so odd in groups?' Sandra was asking herself for the hundred and fifty-ninth time, as the opening meditation stopped and everyone sitting in the circle was asked in turn how it had been for them. 'I know these people now and I like every one of them, so why do I never actually want to come here? It's not as if I don't contribute, or if they point-blank ignore me, or anything. Why isn't Osborn asking me about my meditation? He's ignoring me!'

"So, let's talk about ethics and insurance. Sandra, I believe you covered ethics in psychology, didn't you?" said Osborn's voice, breaking into her reverie.

"What? Ethics? But you didn't ask me about my medication!" blurted out Sandra, caught completely off balance, although the Rainbow House chairs were quite sturdy.

"Er...Osborn hesitated.

"Oh!" Sandra suddenly realised her mistake, as six pairs of eyes studied her with kindly amusement.

"I'm sorry," said Osborn, grinning from ear to ear. "Would you like to tell us about your medication now?"

Sandra suddenly saw the funny side of the situation and joined in with the others as they openly laughed.

Later, as they drove home after the evening had finally drawn to a close, Sandra and Osborn drifted into their usual debriefing session. This, of course, was not in the underwear sense, which would have been way too questionable.

"You were quiet tonight," commented Osborn, "although it was good when we all laughed. They're a good group and they definitely respond well to you being there, because you pick up on little nuances that I miss. It wasn't quite the same last year."

"Really?" Sandra felt genuinely amazed. "I make a difference? I make a good difference?"

"Yes, I just told you so! I'm positive there's something we have to do together in this life and Rainbow Healers may very well be that something."

"Oh. I wish I liked it more. That is, I feel it's doing me good to go there and help you and meet people, but I can't in all honesty say that I enjoy it. I never really look forward to it."

"You don't have to do it, although I'd be sad if you didn't."

"Oh, don't take any notice of me, I'm being weird. I liked that thing you did with the candle and the apophyllite."

"Do you think it added to the course?"

"Of course!"

CHAPTER 3

It was early April and Sandra was hosting another get-together with her old school friends Gina String, Emily Barrister, Kay Cole and Delia Flower. It was true that they were all getting on a bit, but as usual it felt comforting to be catching up with all the latest happenings.

"It really should be called a get-old-together," ventured curly-haired Delia, sipping her coffee. Sandra had earlier offered her a melon mocha, but Delia had politely declined. "I was so sorry I missed the last one, but Dad ended up in hospital that day, as I recall."

"How is your dad, Dee?" asked Kay with her usual kindly concern.

"Oh, I don't call him Daddy," replied Delia quickly. "I don't know if I ever called him Daddy, to be honest."

"Er..." began Kay, smiling a bit uncertainly and pushing back a strayed strand of her straight honey-coloured hair, "...do your brothers still live with him?"

"Yes, unfortunately for them," said Delia with a sigh. "He's so stubborn and so miserable that he makes their lives a misery too. They're so uncomplaining, bless them."

"You'd think with their Down's Syndrome, your dad would show a bit more understanding," said Kay. "Does he have any help from Social Services or anywhere?"

"He has help from me!" replied Delia quickly. "Don't get me wrong, I love my brothers, but they deserve a better life and I can only do so much. Sorry, I must be depressing you, I'm depressing myself. Let's talk of something more uplifting. Let me think. Oh yes, I was pleased when I found some really good deals with summer bedding the other day, I had a bit of a spending spree."

"It's a bit too early for us," replied Gina thoughtfully, her long fair hair showing more evidence of grey. "I have such cold feet and to be honest, we sleep in the nuddy, so it has to be a lot warmer."

"What?" asked Delia, frowning and opening her eyes wide at the same time, which was impressive. "Am I missing something? What has sleeping with no clothes on got to do with planting flowers?"

"Ah," replied Gina in a small voice. "Ah."

"Oh Gee, that's priceless!" said Sandra, smiling at Gina. "I must confess, I thought Dee meant flowers, but that must be because I do a lot of gardening. You like gardening, don't you Em? Are you OK? You seem a bit quiet and that's usually my job."

"I'm OK," replied Emily, putting down her mulberry mocha. "That drink is unusual. I have got something to share with you all, though." There was a discernible gulp from Emily, who started to fiddle with her fair shoulder-length wavy hair. "I finally asked Ivan to leave because I found out for sure that he's been having an affair and he left last week."

"Oh Em!" exclaimed four concerned voices in unison, gazing at their friend in consternation. "Are you OK?" they asked, although not nearly as much in unison.

"Yes, I'm trying to get used to the situation, that's all," replied Emily, smiling ruefully and twisting a strand of hair around her finger. "We haven't been living much as a couple for ages, but this kind of makes it final."

"Tell me if I'm being nosey," said Kay, wrinkling her nose as she put down her mug with its dregs of mango mocha, "but has Ivan moved in with the other woman? It is a woman, is it?"

"Yes, it's a woman," replied Emily, smiling for the first time that morning and letting go of her hair, "and he's moved in with her. I'm relieved in a way, but there's so much to see to and I haven't been sleeping all that well."

"I'm not surprised, you'll need a lot of time to get used to such a big change in your life," said Sandra, feeling incredibly sorry for her friend, as she remembered the pain of finding out about Osborn's affair. "You'll get through it Em, you never know what good things are lying in wait for you."

"That's what I couldn't stand, the lying," said Emily dolefully, "although I know I wasn't very good at standing up to him sometimes. Still, onwards and upwards as they say, whoever they are."

"I think it's really good you came here today and told us in person," said Gina thoughtfully, "because I'm pretty sure I'd be in bits and hiding myself away from the world in general."

"Oh, you lot are quite specific at times," said Emily with a glimmer of another smile, "which is why I knew I'd feel better here than staying at home and brooding."

"Have you been given any time off work?" asked Gina, looking into her mug and deciding whether or not she could finish her mandarin mocha.

"No, I'd rather carry on as normal, but I'd already taken the day off for this get-together. I'll probably have a week off soon to do some practical bits and pieces, though. I may even buy some summer bedding."

"Oh Em, you always did make me laugh," said Sandra fondly. "I'll never forget that time in the art room with Miss Plott and the easel."

"Or that incident in the domestic science room with Miss Take and the ginger nuts," piped up Gina.

"Or in the biology lab with Miss Treat and the locusts," broke in Delia.

"Or on the tennis court with Miss Chance and the bent racquets," chimed in Kay.

"Ah, but what about in the chemistry lab with Mr Leggett and the dodgy Bunsen burner," chipped in Emily, as the others chortled, sniggered and tittered. It wasn't an attractive scene, but it was an uplifting one. "Oh, I do feel so much better now I've told you lot. Thank you."

"Thank *you* Em, for being you," said Sandra, once the strange noises had died down. "Actually, it might help if you do some activities that you enjoy, especially out of the house. You used to like walking, didn't you?"

"I may join a walking group," mused Emily. "Ivan never really liked the great outdoors. Or the small outdoors, except his garden shed. I was always suspicious..."

"Andy and I went for a lovely walk in a forest the other day," said Gina suddenly. "It was all full of green leaves and late primroses. I normally feel a bit scared in forests, but this was a small one."

"Talking of forests," said Kay, "It said on the packet of toilet rolls I bought the other day that buying their product helped to care for the world's forests, which seemed very odd to me. To be honest, lots of things seem very odd to me these days. Why forests and toilet rolls, though?"

"Something vague about logs is occurring in my mind, but I'm trying to flush it away," said Emily with a trace of her usual humour.

"I just thought about *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls* then," reminisced Sandra with a melancholy tone, but nobody seemed to notice.

"I'm getting a bit tired of all the vouchers and the cards I'm given in shops for collecting points," said Gina, finally giving up the mandarin mocha. "I'd forgotten I had a Honey Card, I keep forgetting to use it."

"Osborn got into a sticky situation with his cards the other day," said Sandra, remembering how her own embarrassment had been much higher than Osborn's. "He tried to pay for our drinks at *Caffè Caesar* with his Honey Card. Some of the cards look so similar and he didn't actually have the right card. Fortunately, I had some cash."

"You have to collect so many points with some cards, it seems pointless," said Delia, before realising why the others were smiling. "Oh, you lot! How's Andy coping with retirement, Gina?"

"How am *I* coping, do you mean?" chortled Gina. "He seems happy enough and it's not too bad all around, I suppose, but some of the things I was hoping for haven't materialised. He hasn't started to do his own ironing, for instance."

"Does he do yours?" asked Delia somewhat distractedly. "Sorry, I think my phone just went off, but I'm not going to look at it in case somebody wants me."

"If your phone went off, it wouldn't work anyway," mentioned Emily, disregarding the stares. "Wow, I really am feeling better now. Annabel will be pleased, I think she was actually a bit worried about me for a day or two. It's not that I want my daughter to be worried about me, don't get me wrong, but she's so caught up in her own world. I think she takes after her father. Oh no, I didn't want to talk about him again! Gina, how's *your* daughter?"

"Kate? We-ell, she's been a bit moody since the personal trainer job didn't work out. Why are you laughing, Em? Sandra? Delia? Kay?"

"I'm so glad we're doing this," said Sandra happily, as she and Osborn sat on the *Vestal Upcountry* train to Bristol. "I'm also glad we booked a seat, it's quite busy for a Saturday morning like we thought it might be."

"I know it's a bit expensive for a day trip, but I'm sure Maddy will feel better for our visit. It's awful how she dips down quite easily into feeling low sometimes. Mind you, I know how she feels," said Osborn, sighing. "I was perfectly OK when Lawrence met me at work for lunch, but he went quite peculiar over the churlish serving guy and slapped down the money when he paid the bill."

"Oh dear, he seems a bit prone to outbursts of aggression sometimes, maybe it's because of his childhood. I've noticed he likes a bit of hardcore fighting in films and war stories. Do you think he's into violence?"

"Sometimes it smacks of it. I know Dad used to hit him."

"What, hit? Not smack? I used to smack Gulliver, because sometimes he was so outright naughty."

"No, this was different, more like a beating. Like my mother went for me with her leather camera strap once."

"Honestly, your family," said Sandra, sighing. "Let's talk about something else. At least my parents never hit me. Did I tell you Mum said her new *Hover* vacuum cleaner was heavy to push around?"

"Well, she chose it," replied Osborn in exasperation. "I told her she'd probably get along better with that *Byson* upright."

"What the *Animal* model?"

"Yes, the one that's actually lighter than the one she insisted on."

"She said she didn't like the colour, the name, or the look of it, remember?"

"I do. She acted as if I was trying to make her life even harder than she makes it for herself. As if I enjoyed using up some of my valuable weekend time to go and buy her a vacuum cleaner!"

"I really don't know how to deal with her sometimes," said Sandra, furrowing her brow. "I try to filter out her loaded comments from the ordinary ones, but sometimes she simply seems like a miserable old bag. And now I feel like a mean old bag for saying that."

"No, you're quite bagless. Did you bring anything to eat? I'm starving. It must be getting up so early, although Maddy's totally worth it."

"I don't think it was the right move here after all," said Madeleine tearfully, as she walked with Sandra and Osborn out of the train station and to the car where Henri was waiting. "The flat is awful and I don't fit in at my new job at all. Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to greet you like this after you've come all this way just for me, but seeing you seems to have brought it all to the surface." She blew her nose quickly, as Osborn put his arm around her.

"We didn't exactly come all this way only for you, my darling," said Sandra with concern. "We feel better when we see you too, it's reciprocal."

"We'll talk about it all when we get to the flat," Osborn said soothingly, as they approached the car. "Does Henri know how you feel?"

"Oh yes, he even suggested I go home for the weekend, but we're broke at the moment and then you offered to come here."

"Absolutely," said Osborn, taking his arm from Madeleine. "Ah, Henri!"

Half an hour later, Sandra and Osborn sat in a room that was indisputably too small for purpose, while Madeleine and Henri prepared coffee and then presented it to them with a choice of muffins.

"This is cosy, but I do see what you mean about the proportions," said Osborn, while he chose a chocolate and broccoli muffin. "How unusual. Yes, I can see you have a problem with condensation, too, which is adding to the mould situation."

"It's all mouldy as far as I'm concerned," said Madeleine disconsolately, fingering a cherry and sauerkraut muffin. "Even our clothes are beginning to smell. I'm sorry, I'm off again. It's truly lovely to see you, I thought we could go to *Wetherfork's* for lunch and then see the Egyptian display at the museum?"

"Fabulous," replied Sandra with feeling, attempting not to screw up her nose at the strawberry and red onion muffin that was assaulting her senses. "I loved our visit to the Egyptian museum in Turin when Grandma sat down looking so bored amongst all those amazing artefacts."

"Why did they 'ave so many arty facts in an Egyptian museum?" asked Henri, frowning a little at his gooseberry and celery muffin. "When my parents took my brother and me to the museum in Cairo, they mainly 'ad 'undreds and 'undreds of statues and other old objects. They 'ad an art section with lots of the blue and gold painting, but they didn't seem to bother with many facts."

"You've been to Cairo Museum?" breathed Sandra, before she started to choke on her muffin.

"You've been to Cairo Museum?" asked Osborn, as he finally finished the battle with his muffin.

"You've been to Cairo Museum?" asked Madeleine with wide open eyes, as she surrendered the remains of her muffin on a plate. "Wow, I didn't know that! Talking of Grandma though, Mumsie, how is she?"

"She was quite moany on Easter Sunday, to be honest," recalled Sandra unhappily. "Osborn and I went to all the trouble of making some *granite di limone* for dessert because she liked it so much in Italy, but she didn't really make anything of it at all. She's down about her friend Myrna having cancer at the moment."

"Poor Grandma," said Madeleine sympathetically. "It must be hard for her."

"Ye-es," replied Sandra, realising that an insurmountable gap existed between her own experience of her mother and Madeleine's experience of her grandmother. She also realised that she didn't want to add to Madeleine's already low mood, even though it meant she was denying herself the comfort of sharing her own feelings with Madeleine.

"Our hall storage heater started to smell really horrible last week, so I had to replace it," said Osborn suddenly into the slight hiatus.

"Er, that's good – or bad?" said Madeleine uncertainly.

"We all 'ave our downs and ups," added Henri conversationally.

"I'll just wash these mugs and plates and then we can think about going out for lunch," said Sandra, smiling despite herself. "Oops! Your floor's a bit slippery there – or else it's me and these tights. I normally wear trousers these days, but I wanted to wear something special for today."

"That skirt suits you," said Madeleine, appraising her mother. "Those non-slippery slippers you gave me for Christmas are great, I wear them all the time in the flat."

"That's good," said Sandra, putting mugs and plates on the drainer. "Oh! There appears to be a leak in your kitchen sink."

"What? We 'ave a leak?" asked Henri in alarm, as he jumped up to investigate. "I'll 'ave to phone the landlord again and give him for what!"

"It's OK, it's a leek, not a leak!" exclaimed Madeleine, beginning to laugh heartily. "You're so funny! I was going to experiment with peach and leek muffins, but I ran out of time."

"And you think *I'm* funny?" retorted Henri, smiling at Madeleine with amusement in his dark brown eyes.

"I think you're both funny," said Osborn from the sofa, "and it's really good to see you both laughing again."

Wetherfork's was a little crowded, but it still felt good to Sandra to be seated opposite Madeleine and to see how her once blonde hair appeared to be growing darker and how she was still gracious and considerate in the way she carried herself. 'What a strange saying,' thought Sandra reflectively, as she fingered the dog-eared menu. 'How can we actually carry ourselves? And why not a cat-eared menu? What a good-looking couple they are and how will I survive if Maddy ever goes to live in France?'

"Do you ever want to live in France again, Henri?" asked Osborn conversationally, almost causing Sandra to choke on her rum and elderflower.

"Oh – yeh yeh," replied Henri, confirming the painful question that Osborn had opened up.

"Not for a long time, though," said Madeleine, looking at Sandra concernedly. "Are you OK, Mumsie?"

"Ye-es," croaked Sandra, trying desperately to restrain herself from any further coughing.

"We've talked about it as a future possibility, that's all," continued Madeleine, "so you needn't worry, you won't be getting rid of us any time soon."

"You have your own lives," replied Osborn matter-of-factly, considering his rum and nasturtium. "I wondered what the employment situation is in France and whether the standard of living is better?"

"The job market is much the same as over 'ere," replied Henri, putting down his rum and calendula, "but the living standards are better in some respects."

"The food is probably better," suggested Osborn after the waiter had finished bringing their food. "I think this should be called garden leaf salad with crayfish rather than the other way around."

"Mine is fine," said Sandra loyally, having regained her voice. "I only wanted a few chips with the scampi anyway and they're nice and thick, not like those silly thin chips."

"You mean French fries," said Madeleine, picking up her skinny chicken burger and smiling at her mother.

"Oh no, I didn't mean any offence!" replied Sandra quickly, her voice rising in alarm. "It's just that my dad always liked thick chips and to be honest I do as well, but I like the thin ones too, they're nice and crispy rather than nice and – thick."

"It's OK," replied Henri agreeably, scrutinising his American burger. "We don't call them French fries in France anyway. This burger is very plump, I'm glad I 'ave some thin French chips!"

An hour and a half later, they were wandering among the Egyptian artefacts in the museum, although Sandra found herself gazing at Madeleine and Henri as much as the amulets, the scarabs and the canopic jars.

'The two of them look so happy together,' she was thinking, 'so comfortable. I'm glad about that, I really am, but if I'm honest with myself – and there's really no point whatsoever being dishonest with myself – I miss the way Maddy used to walk along chatting with Osborn and me. I miss the closeness we used to have, the way it was so effortless and natural. I was kind of hoping she'd walk around the museum a little bit with me, since we've made such an effort to come here to see her and since she sees Henri so much more now than she sees us. I know I'm being unreasonable, because they're a couple and they want to spend all the time they can together – but oh God, I miss her so much.'

"I think you've missed that funerary section over there," said Osborn, almost bumping into Sandra. "Are you OK?"

"Yes and no," replied Sandra sadly. "I never thought being a mummy would be so hard. You think you have it all wrapped up and then you realise your life as you thought it was going to be is unravelling in front of your eyes."

"Are you being serious, Sandra?" asked Osborn uncertainly, as Madeleine and Henri appeared around the corner.

"Ah, there you are," said Madeleine, smiling. "I'm really enjoying this, thank you so much for coming here today." She came up close to Sandra and whispered into her mother's surprised ear. "Thank you for being my mummy."

"I'll always be your mummy," replied Sandra, feeling a preternatural tug at her heartstrings, whatever they were. "One day you'll be a mummy yourself and some precious person will be saying those words to you."

"I hope so," said Madeleine, smiling with a wistful look in her eyes. "I can't really imagine my life without being a mummy."

"You'll be a mummy, Mad," said Sandra, putting a hand on Madeleine's back, "or even a mad mummy, I feel it in my water. Crumbs, listen to us, what's all this Egyptian stuff done to us? Looks like we've come to the end, though."

"This takes the cookie," said Henri, reading a notice as they found themselves at the exit. "Why would we want to fill in a questionnaire at a toilet?"

"What's that about a toilet?" asked Osborn quizzically. It would have been hard to be quizzical without asking questions. "Why a toilet?"

"This notice 'ere says that feedback about the exhibition will be welcome, but we 'ave to leave questionnaires in the box at our convenience," explained Henri, frowning at Madeleine.

"Convenience doesn't mean toilet," spluttered Madeleine, grinning delightedly at Henri. "You say the loveliest things!"

"What?" Henri looked perplexed.

"Public convenience means toilet," explained Sandra, as Madeleine blew her nose, "but at your convenience means when it's most suitable for you."

"Although convenience on its own *can* mean toilet," offered Osborn thoughtfully. "Or lavatory."

"I don't like the word 'lavatory'," said Sandra, "although I don't really know why. Gulliver hates the word 'loo', but I don't really know why."

"It is so 'ard sometimes to understand English," sighed Henri. "So many words, so many meanings."

"You speak English brilliantly," said Madeleine kindly. "Well, is everyone ready to head back to the flat now to look at houses on the internet? Henri and I have seen a few that seem worth investigating."

Four hours later, Sandra and Osborn were heading homeward on the train, having enjoyed a few more hours with Madeleine and Henri, sussing out the local house market and then eating home-made pizza, courtesy of Madeleine and Henri.

"I'm still feeling full," remarked Osborn as they steamed past Tiverton Parkway (though not on a steam train, of course). "That was a great pizza. I thought Maddy seemed more relaxed by the time we left, although the mould situation in that flat is a real problem."

"I do feel sorry for them and I also feel a bit guilty, because I know Mad wanted to move to Bristol to be a bit closer to us," said Sandra pensively. "They had a lovely flat in Cardiff and she liked her job there much better than she likes this new job. I really hope it all works out and they don't regret moving. I'm glad they're that bit closer, but not if Maddy's unhappy. Gott in Himmel, why is it always such a dreadful pull between this person's wellbeing and that person's wellbeing? Why can't we all just be happy? What the sodding hell *is* happiness, anyway? I'm not sure I can remember."

"It's been a good day, though, hasn't it?" asked Osborn, his voice rising as if he needed confirmation.

"It's always good seeing Madeleine and Gulliver," answered Sandra, smiling, "as well as Juniper and Bryony – and not forgetting Henri. Our family's changed over the last few years, but I suppose that's how families evolve and how life itself evolves."

"No change, no growth," replied Osborn, sighing. "It's a bit of a bugger, really."

CHAPTER 4

"Are you happier now Madeleine's living closer?" asked Caroline, as she and Sandra sat down to another interminable game of *Scribble* on the following Tuesday afternoon.

"I'd be happier if I knew *she* was happier, but I think if they manage to move out of that small flat and into their own house, things will settle down," replied Sandra, gazing at her initial seven letter tiles that spelled a rude word and wondering if she had the nerve to put them all on the board.

"Your dad and I lived in a flat for so many years before we could afford to buy our own house," said Caroline, frowning at her tiles. "We had to make do and go without, but young people these days seem to want everything right away."

"Maddy and Henri both work very hard," retorted Sandra, her ire having instantly risen. "Madeleine's lived in a number of dodgy flats since she left home and she deserves to feel OK about where she's living. You know how important it is to feel comfortable with your surroundings. You told me many times how you refused the council house you and Dad were offered, because you couldn't stand to live there."

"Yes, I walked away in tears," reminisced Caroline. "Len would have accepted it, but I knew I would have hated it there. I'm too sensitive, you know."

"Well, Maddy hates it where she is now," said Sandra, picking up the *Scribble* dictionary and riffling through the pages to hide her growing anger. "They took a chance by moving to Bristol and it's turned out a bit wrong, but they'll make it right for themselves as soon as they can. I trust them both to sort out their own lives and to find their own happiness wherever they are, even though I miss Madeleine so much."

"Oh well, at least they're not in Australia," said Caroline lightly. "Come on, it's your turn first."

"I know it is," replied Sandra, as she felt a fire of cold fury igniting inside at her mother's hurtful, throwaway remark. She removed all seven tiles from her rack and placed them on the board in an act of futile rebellion, although she was aware of a small nugget of satisfaction deep inside at her mother's inevitable outburst.

"You little devil, starting with a 7-letter word!" said Caroline heatedly, before registering the word itself. "Sandra! Is that allowed?"

"It is indeed, I checked it in the book," stated Sandra calmly, gazing happily at her triumphant offering of 'bollock'. "Have you got an s?"

It was the third week in April, as Sandra and Osborn found themselves once again gazing at Juniper, while she lay in her play gym, gazing in turn at the bizarrely colourful objects dangling above her.

"How was your journey?" asked Gulliver, as he appeared with two mugs of tea for his parents. "I could offer you a biscuit, except we haven't got any."

"I've had worse journeys," replied Osborn, yawning. "Thanks for the tea, it's fine. You precious little person, you!"

"It's good to be appreciated," murmured Gulliver coyly.

"I meant Juniper," responded Osborn, making a puzzled face.

"I know," said Gulliver, grinning. "She actually slept reasonably well last night, I feel almost human again."

"You're human at last, after all those years of being GOD?" asked Sandra, raising a maternal eyebrow. She could never make out if her other eyebrow was paternal or not.

"Oh, not the acronyms again," groaned Gulliver. "Who has the middle name Orville anyway, for God's sake?"

"You," replied Sandra evenly. It made a change from replying oddly. "Ah, hello Bryony, I didn't see you come in. How are you?"

"Hello," said Bryony as she put the clothes basket on the floor. "More clothes to dry. What did I do with the ailer? Oh, I know, I left it outside. I think a better night's sleep has made me feel dopier. Don't answer that."

"Don't worry," said Sandra consolingly. "I stood for ages in front of the airing cupboard the other day, until I actually remembered I wanted bedding."

"Too much information, I think," said Bryony drily, frowning at the wet clothes.

"What?" Sandra looked confused. "Ah, sorry! Why am I apologising? I think we're all a bit challenged today."

"Juniper's definitely challenging," said Gulliver, looking across at where his daughter was becoming restive and vocal. "OK, Little Miss Tree, I'm coming to get you."

Sandra looked fondly at the sight of Gulliver picking up Juniper and playing with her on his knee, while Juniper somehow managed to gurgle, smile and blow bubbles at the same time. However, it didn't last long, as it quickly turned into grizzling and crying – fortunately from the daughter, rather than the father.

"Is she hungry?" asked Bryony, giving up with the clothes basket and scrutinising Juniper. "Oh, come on then, what side do you want first, chocolate or strawberry?"

Two days later, Sandra and Osborn were once more sitting on a train, but this time on their way to the Cardiff Flower Show. Sandra was gazing in amazement at a group of four mature and indisputably Welsh women, as they settled into their seats and produced bottles of alcohol from their bags.

"It's only 09:34 in the morning!" whispered Sandra to Osborn, as the women started to sip from their bottles of vodka and orange and Pimm's.

"It looks like they've got some funny nibbles," whispered Osborn back.

"What?" asked Sandra, looking askance at Osborn.

"Nibbles!" said Osborn much more loudly, causing the four women concerned to look in his direction.

"Sorry, I thought you said something else," said Sandra, trying not to giggle. "I see what you mean, it looks like pretzels or deformed sausages, or something. Anyway, never mind them, this feels so good."

"We've escaped and we're doing our own thing," said Osborn, sitting back and sighing deeply. "Not that I don't love seeing everybody, but it feels so wonderful just to be ourselves for a few hours."

"It is," agreed Sandra happily. "It was good of Gulliver to drive us to the station and Bryony seems to be quite relaxed with us this time. I must confess, though, I never really know what she's thinking, she has quite an inscrutable face."

"Oh well, as much as we love them, let's forget about them all now," said Osborn, settling into his seat.

"Agreed," replied Sandra agreeably, "but I hope Maddy's still not too down about the flat. Sorry, it's hard to stop thinking about people, because I care about them."

"I know, but maybe it's time to start thinking about us as much as about other people," said Osborn, looking quite inscrutable himself. "It's not all that far to Cardiff, I'm really looking forward to this."

The Cardiff Flower Show at Cardiff Castle lived up to their expectations, despite the undeniably cold but dry day. It wasn't only the flowers, but the whole uplifting atmosphere that was so enjoyable. They were even daring enough to leave the event in search of lunch in Cardiff itself, grateful to find somewhere comfortably warm, before returning to the show where the al fresco seating area remained sadly empty.

After another hour of wandering around and purchasing three plants, they decided it was time to leave the show gardens and the marquees, to take themselves and their plants back to Swansea. The return train was a lot more crowded than the morning train, but it did nothing to dampen their spirits and they somehow managed to manoeuvre the journey without any fatal damage to themselves or the plants.

"Here you are, have a plant from Cardiff," said Sandra to Bryony, after they'd arrived back at the house. "It's a little olive tree, because you said you liked ours."

"Thank you," replied Bryony, taking the small plant and showing it to a fretful Juniper. "Look, it's a little tree, just like you are. OK, you're not impressed. You can't be hungry again, surely?"

"Maybe she's having a growth spurt," said Gulliver, taking the olive tree from Bryony. "She's been a bit of a pain all day. Was I ever like that, Mother?"

"You still are," replied Sandra coolly, although the temperature had slowly risen as they'd travelled from Cardiff to Swansea. "I had to say that."

"I'm going to make a hot drink," interjected Osborn, although nobody appeared especially bothered. "Does anybody else want one?"

"Yes please," replied Sandra, still gazing at Juniper. "We haven't had a hot drink since this morning when we arrived in cold Cardiff. I drank that hot chocolate with a great deal of relish, I can tell you."

"How unusual," murmured Gulliver, "I don't think I'd fancy that."

"You tit," remarked Osborn genially. "Hot drink, though?"

"Yes please," replied Gulliver, before standing up from the sofa and stretching. "I must finish preparing for the craft fair tomorrow, I'll have to leave at about 06:00 am."

"You'll have to be an early bird like Juniper," said Sandra conversationally.

"Good job I'm a tit then," retorted Gulliver, making a tit-like face.

It was the end of May and Sandra was sitting in *The Aluminium Kettle* with her cousin Belinda, sipping a cappuccino and talking over the last nine months since they'd met. Although Belinda was nine years older than Sandra, they always felt like good friends who easily pick up where they left off, entirely comfortable with one another.

"I'm glad your knee operation went well last year," said Sandra, smiling. "Mum and I were a bit worried how you'd cope afterwards with all the steps up to your house, but from what you say, you healed quickly."

"I found it very tedious for a while when I couldn't go out," replied Belinda. "I did all the physio exercises, though, so they must have helped. The scar's healing OK too." Belinda pulled up her skirt and exposed her knee to Sandra, who made herself gaze at the vertical scar as if she felt no internal discomfort at the sight.

"Yes, that's good," murmured Sandra, smiling a little vaguely. "I must admit that when Mum started to talk about having a bunion op the other day, I wondered how she'd cope with recovery."

"Will she have the operation?" asked Belinda, stirring her cappuccino. "I've heard mixed reports, to be honest. One of my friends even said she wished she'd never had it done."

"I've heard the same," replied Sandra, looking a little worriedly at Belinda. "I don't think Mum's made a decision yet. She knows someone who said it was quite painful afterwards, so she's aware that if she has it done, it won't exactly be a walk in the park."

"Not for a good few weeks, anyway," said Belinda, smiling. "Since we're on medical issues, did you know I had a brain scan because of this orthostatic tremor I've developed?"

"No! Well, I knew about the tremor, but not the scan. Have you had the results?"

"Yes, it was a while ago, but there was nothing conclusive. The neurologist I saw doesn't seem to know what to do with me! He asked me if I'd go to London for a consultation with a specialised unit, but I told him I couldn't. Apart from the cost, Ian wouldn't go with me because of his anxiety."

"Gosh Belinda, I had no idea." Sandra gazed at her cousin and sighed. "We must keep in touch more, because I really love knowing how you are and yet I haven't been much good at contacting you. I must confess I don't especially love the phone, but I've got no excuse about emailing."

"You can email me any time," replied Belinda, finishing her drink. "I don't get many emails. Trudie and Peter don't even have a computer and most of my friends don't either."

"You're a bit of a goer on the quiet, if you have a computer and your children don't," said Sandra, smiling again. "How are they both?"

"Trudie's had a couple of panic attacks again lately, so I can't help worrying about her," said Belinda, sighing. "I suspect she might be getting a bit stressed about her wedding already, but David's very good with her, he's such a lovely, considerate man."

"When's the wedding?" asked Sandra, frowning as she tried to remember.

"The day after your birthday next year," replied Belinda with a small laugh. "I've come to terms with the fact that I won't be at my own daughter's wedding, but I can understand why she wants to go to Florida with David on their own. She'd never cope with other people there and even if we could afford to go, Ian would never cope with the social aspect of it all. Anxiety can be a real pain in the proverbial."

"I know only too well," replied Sandra soberly, remembering her university years and the excruciating struggles that had culminated in therapy. "I know you said Trudie takes medication, but has she ever been referred for anything else? The cognitive behavioural therapy I had was brilliant."

"It's funny you should mention that, because she's recently been referred for some group therapy. She's not sure how she'll cope, but she's going to give it a try."

"Good for her, that takes real courage," said Sandra appreciatively. "I honestly don't think I could have coped with group therapy. I hope it does her a load of good, I really do."

"Thank you," replied Belinda, smiling. "How's Madeleine?"

"I'm not sure, really," replied Sandra truthfully. "She feels isolated in her job and she still can't settle in the new flat because it's cramped and it's really quite mouldy. I have to say I wonder why she and Henri went for that flat in the first place, but I guess it's hard to make decisions when you move to a new city. They're going to look for a house as soon as they possibly can."

"That's good," said Belinda, playing with her teaspoon. "I don't think Trudie and David will ever have their own place – or Peter and Rosie, come to that."

"How's Peter these days?" asked Sandra. "You two were having a bit of a hard time with that sister of yours?"

"Oh, my wonderful sister Hetty still won't speak to Peter," said Belinda, sighing. "Would you like another drink?"

"Why not, I'll get it," said Sandra quickly, knowing that Belinda found it difficult to hold a tray steadily with her tremor. "I think I'll have a hot chocolate this time."

"Oh, me too, but I'll pay," said Belinda quickly, as Sandra stood up. "Let's have a doughnut as well!"

"I certainly enjoyed that sugar fix," said Sandra somewhat stickily after a while. "I haven't had a doughnut for ages, I'd forgotten how decadent they felt."

"You and your big words," remarked Belinda contentedly, licking sugar from her fingers. "That was lovely, where were we? Oh yes, Hetty still not speaking to Peter. You wouldn't think he was her nephew and he was only helping her out when he had that accident with the decorating at her house. She wouldn't accept his apology at all."

"I can't believe she still won't speak to you as well," said Sandra sadly. "If you were my sister, I'd be so happy."

"I'd be happy too," replied Belinda, smiling. "I keep sending Hetty birthday cards and Christmas cards, even though she sent me a letter to tell me not to bother, because she just puts them in the bin."

"She could at least recycle them," said Sandra, before realising what she'd said. "Oh, I didn't mean it like that, it sounded a bit of a throwaway comment."

"No, a recycling comment," replied Belinda, smiling again.

"I send her cards because she's my cousin, but we don't really have anything to do with each other and if she ever did say anything to me about you, I'd make it clear how I feel," said Sandra, feeling decidedly defiant. "I feel the same about Osborn's sister Kirsty and all her stupidity towards Osborn. Does she really think it's OK for her to take out her issues on him when all he's tried to do is help her? Sorry, I went off on one a bit there."

"Feel free – you should hear me sometimes," chortled Belinda. "How's Gulliver coping with fatherhood?"

"He's tired, but on our last visit he seemed to be more relaxed, like his old self," said Sandra, considering. "I felt very awkward with Bryony though, because just before we left, she was having trouble feeding Juniper. It looked for all the world to me as though Juniper was still hungry when Bryony was breast feeding her, because I could remember Gulliver and Madeleine being like that when they were about four months old, which Juniper is now. The poor little soul looked straight at me a couple of times when she was crying with what I was so sure was hunger and I felt dreadful. I mentioned it to Gulliver on the quiet, that it might be time to start mixed feeding, but he went and told Bryony later, while I was there. Bryony obviously didn't like it and I can understand that, because I'm her mother-in-law after all. Sorry, I'm talking a lot."

"Carry on, I don't mind."

"Well, that was about a month ago and Bryony still won't started mixed feeding, so I'm trying not to think about it – except I can still see Juniper's desperate little eyes looking at me. Gulliver says that NHS advice says wait until six months, which seems a bit mad to me, but what do I know, I'm just a mother. Goodness, now I'm sounding a bit bitter."

"I can't remember much about the feeding, except I found it all so hard and felt I was a terrible mother," said Belinda sadly. "It's very upsetting, I know."

"Osborn and I had rather a nasty virus just after we came back," continued Sandra, "although we could have caught it from anywhere. Osborn had an awful throat,

he actually took two days off sick from work and I missed a colour therapy evening at Rainbow Healers. I'm really rambling, I'm not normally like this at all..."

"I'm honoured," said Belinda, smiling. "Is Osborn still teaching the healing course at Rainbow Healers?"

"Yes, he loves doing it, but I'm still not sure if I really like helping him or not," replied Sandra honestly. "I know I benefit from it, but I always have to talk myself into going, to some degree or other."

"I'm sure Osborn and the people on the course benefit from you being there," said Belinda, smiling gently. "How about Auntie Caroline – I mean your mum? I know she benefits from you being with her."

"Oh, it's much of a muchness, which is a really vague saying. Her gardening takes up a lot of my time and energy and we do a lot more shopping for her now. It's odd, because although I only normally see her three times a week, it feels as if she's always in my head."

"Do you still see her on Tuesdays and Thursdays?"

"Yes, as well as taking over her food shopping at the weekend. It's always the unexpected or extra jobs too, like Osborn having to fix her water butt, or me going to the optician with her to help her choose new frames. Plus, I still have to play *Scribble* with her, which drives me insane. She said the other day that playing it does us good, but I sit there feeling my life ebbing away. As much as I try to look upon it as a gift to her, I'd rather spend the time gardening, or some other job that would be so much more useful than playing a game in which she calls me names. Oh no, I'm off again, I had no idea I had so much inside me waiting to escape!"

"It's OK, truly. What do you and Osborn do to have some time off from it all?"

"Time off? Well, we did go and visit a garden last weekend. It felt so peaceful walking around looking at the plants and flowers. Osborn really loves taking close-up photos of flowers. What about you and Ian?"

"Ian's not really into flowers, but I am! No, we go out for a drive and an ice cream now and again. I'm not as good at walking anymore..." Belinda's voice trailed off sadly.

"Do you still go to the theatre?" asked Sandra, trying to be positive, while thinking how she would hate to have her walking ability curtailed.

"Whenever I can. I try to look after myself by doing things that make me feel good, since it's supposed to be important for wellbeing. Sometimes I feel as if I'm being a bit self-centred, but not as much as one of my friends, who goes to this beauty place to have her nails done and her legs waxed. Still, each to their own, I suppose."

"We're all different, that's for sure. I have to say, though, that since we bought a Vax vacuum cleaner, I'm definitely into Vaxing rather than waxing!"

The two of them dissolved into slightly insane laughter, which gave Sandra a distinctly warm feeling that was nothing to do with the hot chocolate. The warm feeling remained with her until bedtime, when she lay beside Osborn contemplating her life. It was too dark to contemplate her navel with any success.

'It's a lovely feeling when certain people like Belinda allow you to be who you are,' she thought dreamily. 'Does that mean other people don't allow you to be who you are? Surely you don't need permission to be who you are, though, which implies that you allow overriding people to – override you.' She moved her legs restlessly.

'How come certain people like Belinda seem to exude this sense of welcome and expansion, while others seem to exude a sense of defensiveness and combativeness? All I've got to do is step into my mother's house sometimes and it feels as if I'm being hit with a wave of almost aggressive energy.'

'Yet I'm still me, whether I'm with someone like Belinda or my mother. That's unless I put up a defence barrier with my mother, which of course I probably do. I know that very often, though, I'll go to her house feeling quite fine and positive, but then she's straight in with some inflammatory comment and up goes the barrier.' Sandra sighed resignedly into the darkness. 'It's all about psychology and energy, but it doesn't half do your head in and wear you out. So how come I'm finding it so sodding hard to sleep?'

CHAPTER 5

"It's all about psychology and energy," said Osborn to the small group of would-be healers seated in a circle, as the remains of the early June evening sunshine lightened the yellow-walled room in Rainbow House. "We're complex beings and yet very simple in some ways."

Sandra wondered a little tiredly what he was actually on about, before wondering vaguely if the others were wondering what he was on about. She then began to wonder loosely if any of the others were wondering wonderingly what she was wondering about, but she suddenly realised her mind was off on one of its trips again and made an effort to concentrate.

"Anyway, we're almost at the end of the course now, so our best use of time is more healing practice," continued Osborn, "unless anybody has any questions first?"

"I was wondering when we'd have our date for going before the board?" asked one voice, while another one wondered if perhaps she could count giving healing to her neighbour's dog as valid practice, followed by another one wondering if she needed her log book completed before the next session. Sandra sat listening to it all from a distance, as Osborn threw himself into his usual overfull explanations of everything they wanted and maybe didn't want to know.

'I have no idea why I continue to feel so much an outsider,' she considered, as she smiled encouragingly whenever anyone glanced at her. 'I like these people, I really do, but I don't feel involved with them like Osborn clearly is. It's simply not who I am. Who am I, then? Oh, sod it, I'm not back at that question after all these years, am I?'

Two weeks later, during which Sandra hadn't had much time to consider who she was, she and Osborn were on their way to Hawes in Yorkshire for a week's holiday with Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper. Madeleine was also able to join them for most of that time, so Sandra was looking forward to some family time together.

"When I think of family time now, I mean time with our two children and their people," explained Sandra to Osborn for no apparent reason, since he was concentrating on driving. "I used to include our parents and your brother and sister, but to be honest, the people that really matter to me so deeply that I can't even contemplate it ever being otherwise, are Gulliver and Madeleine."

"And me?" asked Osborn, although as Sandra turned to look at him, she caught the ghost of a smile.

"You go without saying," replied Sandra thoughtfully, "although you're not by any means a silent person. My parents used to matter to me at that deep level, but since Dad left us, Mum's changed so much that I don't feel as if I know her anymore. I know life's hard for her and I'm truly sorry that her friend Myrna has died, but Mum seems to be turning inward on herself and becoming bitter about life. It feels as if she keeps trying to take it out on me. At least her latest ovarian cyst scan was OK, although I feel so much on my own with her. I still really miss Dad." Sandra gulped, as a sudden image of her father lying newly dead in his hospital bed came into her mind. "What about you and your parents?"

"I don't really miss my parents at all," admitted Osborn, "but of course I still have Lawrence. He says he can't wait until I retire, so that we can do some more brotherly things together. He always includes you, he thinks a lot of you. I'm not sure about my sister, though, she seems to have lost interest now we don't play life her way."

"Kirsty was always so troublesome, I actually feel better with her not in the picture," confessed Sandra, "although she shows no interest in Juniper. That is, apart from when she had the audacity to ask you to arrange a meeting at our place!"

"Total madness," replied Osborn shortly. "At least we've been able to see a fair bit of the family recently, including Lawrence. I don't think your mother thought very much of Sunday lunch in *Wetherfork's* with him, though, followed by afternoon tea and cake in his flat."

"I've come to realise that my mother's an inveterate snob," said Sandra sadly. "She went on and on about how dreadful Lawrence's flat is, as if it was some reflection

on who *he* is. I mean, *I* think his flat's dreadful, but that doesn't affect who he is as a person in my eyes, which is someone I really enjoy a silly laughing session with – and some of his jokes are really silly!"

"Oh well, we're on holiday now, away from it all," said Osborn happily. "I'm really looking forward to a bit of a rest."

"God, that was exhausting," said Sandra the following evening, flopping into a faded armchair as Bryony took Juniper upstairs to bed. She looked around the large sitting room of the holiday house, where the paraphernalia of life with Juniper still lay where it had been left. "Should I clear away the baby bath, Gulliver? What about the dirty clothes and the nappy?"

"I suppose I should do that," replied Gulliver, looking up from the map he was scrutinising. "There's a famous viaduct near here and lots of walks. Is it tomorrow you're collecting Madeleine from Lancaster?"

"Yes, I hope her train's on time. We'll probably be away for a few hours, I should think, so I'm glad we had our first Yorkshire walk with you today – and experienced the weather falling on Weatherfell!" Sandra chuckled at her own joke.

"Are there any prehistoric sites around here?" asked Osborn, picking up another map. "I remembered how interested I used to be in so-called sites of antiquity the other day when I was looking at my old prehistory photos on the computer."

"I'd have thought most prehistory photos are old," mused Gulliver, "but I can't say I've come across any significant sites yet. There are castles and fells and things, though."

"What do you have in mind for this evening?" asked Osborn, putting down the map. "I'll look at that tomorrow, my eyes are too tired. Did we bring any playing cards? Or do you and Bryony just want to chill with some television?"

"Bryony's gone to bed," replied Gulliver, also putting down his map. "I can play cards with you for a while, if you like. Ouch! Who left that purple giraffe there?"

"I was thinking about a beer," said Osborn nonchalantly.

"That's nice," replied Gulliver. "I often think of things."

"I'm going to boil the kettle if anyone's interested," said Sandra suddenly, standing up and walking towards the kitchen. "Ouch! Who left that orange elephant there?"

"I might come and see what I can find to nibble," said Osborn, also heading towards the kitchen. "Ouch! Who left that red and yellow striped armadillo there?"

It was midweek and a fine, low drizzle was obscuring the distant misty peaks, as five adults and a baby drove along narrow, undulating roads towards Bolton Castle. The previous day had been mostly dry and breezy, so they had gone for one of Gulliver's very short walks (that was in reality a medium walk) alongside meandering rivers, up and down Yorkshire-style stiles, through fields of bright yellow buttercups and once through a field of cows.

"Oh, I do love a good castle," said Madeleine excitedly, as they arrived at the large, impressive building. They were soon climbing some stone steps to a big door that allowed them entry into the castle, which had started life as a 14th century crenellated manor house. "Something must have sunk in when you took us to all those places when we were young, although I don't remember especially liking castles back then."

"I preferred walks on Dartmoor," commented Gulliver a bit later, as they started to walk around the courtyard, trying to escape the drips. It had stopped trying to rain, but was still cold and grey. "I much, much preferred walks on Dartmoor."

"Aren't you having fun?" asked Sandra, as they reached a more ruinous part of the castle, climbing up and down more steps and peering into dank, mossy corners.

"Let's say I preferred yesterday's walk," said Gulliver graciously, "but Bryony likes castles."

"Juniper looks intrigued," said Madeleine, laughing at Juniper's expression as she was being carried around by Bryony. "She'd be happy if she had a head like an owl and could look all around her."

"With less feathers," remarked Sandra, as they continued their exploration that culminated after half an hour or so at the tea room, for coffee and home-made cake.

"Juniper looks as if she'd like to have a go at this banana maple cake," said Osborn, gazing fondly at his granddaughter. "I'm glad she enjoyed her first taste of actual food."

"Are you saying my milk's not actual food?" asked Bryony with her customary inscrutable expression, although Sandra wondered if perhaps she hadn't appreciated the fact that she and Osborn had bought a few tins of baby food for Juniper from the local shop in Hawes, mainly because they were convinced that five-month-old Juniper's crankiness could so easily be ascribed to simple hunger.

"Not at all," said Sandra quickly. "This orange marble slice is lovely."

"Isn't it a bit hard?" asked Gulliver innocently, although Sandra had caught his quick glance at Bryony after her last remark.

That afternoon, Sandra sat with Osborn and Madeleine, plus two other sets of guests, in a stranger's front room in a tiny village that seemed to consist of only a handful of houses, a shop and a pub. They had ended up in the stranger's front room in their quest for a real Yorkshire cream tea. It had gradually turned into a rainy afternoon and despite Gulliver earlier sounding enthusiastic about his map discovery of the tea room in the tiny village amid the dales, he had opted to stay behind with Bryony, who was tired.

"I'm surprised Gulliver and Bryony didn't come with us," mused Sandra, trying to ascertain why she felt slightly hurt. "He would have loved the road here with all its rises, falls and undulations. What a lovely word – undulations. Oh well, it shows loyalty to stay behind with Bryony and maybe he's tired too."

"I hope they walked to the shop in Hawes like Bryony said they would," voiced Osborn, "because we need some more milk and bread, not to mention more baby food for Juniper."

"I know I don't know much about babies and being a mother," said Madeleine a bit stickily, regarding the scone half sitting on her plate, "but it seems to me that Bryony's not too keen on the mixed food thing, because it's Gulliver that actually feeds it to Juniper. I don't think I can finish this second scone."

"I'm really glad you said that," replied Sandra quickly. "Not the scone, the fact that you think Bryony's reluctant too. I'm stuffed, I can't eat any more."

"It was a really good cream tea and that's praise indeed from someone born in Devon and living in Cornwall," said Osborn, licking his finger. "Anyway, the fact is that Juniper obviously loves the baby food, so I'm sure they'll have bought some more."

"Oh dear, more people are waiting outside," said Sandra anxiously. "It feels awkward, are we ready to go soon?"

"It's fine, there's no need to rush," said Osborn calmly. "Well, I feel as if I need to walk this lot this down, but I see it's raining again, so I'm not going to get wet!"

"This is beyond a joke," muttered Osborn savagely, as he, Sandra and Madeleine sloshed their way back from the village shop along a narrow road with puddles at the kerb's edge and spray from cars adding to the rain falling down in sheets from the leaden sky.

"The rain's come in much worse," said Sandra unnecessarily. "I can't believe they didn't walk to the shop like they said they would. I've got a blister on my heel and it's really hurting."

"Bryony didn't seem bothered about the baby food, or anything," remarked Madeleine wonderingly from her position in the rear, as a car drove past them a little closer than the rest. "Nooo! That splashed me all up my back!"

"At least it's not raining today," said Madeleine from the comfort of a slightly upmarket pub in Richmond. "I've definitely got rather a sore throat, though, and my head feels a bit muzzy. I hope this soup helps."

"I hope so too," said Sandra, sipping from her own soup bowl. It would have been silly to sip from Madeleine's, especially if she was viral. "It feels weird that once again Bryony didn't seem bothered about going out today, the way she deliberated for ages."

"I don't know if she didn't want to come out with us specifically or not," wondered Osborn over his own soup. Wondering over anyone else's soup certainly wouldn't have been appreciated. "Anyway, it's our last day, both here and with you Mad, so I'm glad we cut loose and did our own thing."

"I really do wonder if Bryony's peed off about the baby food," said Sandra, "and I still wonder if Gulliver feels OK staying behind with her."

"I still don't understand why Bryony won't take Juniper out to a pub for lunch," said Madeleine, placing her spoon in the empty soup bowl. "It's not as if we were going to force-feed her scampi and chips, or anything."

"I suppose they've got next week here with Bryony's parents, but I can't help wondering if there are any undercurrents," said Sandra a little sadly. "I'm not sure about overcurrents, either, to be honest."

"They'd better not go to the pub with Anne and Stan," said Osborn suddenly, ignoring Sandra's remark, "because that wouldn't be OK. Oh well, at least we had a good day yesterday at Goathland."

"I still think it should be called Sheephland, with all those sheep wandering around," said Sandra laughingly. "We had fun giving Juniper her bath yesterday evening too, didn't we Mad."

"We did, although I'm not sure Juniper was impressed, judging by the way she grabbed my nose when I bent over her!" Madeleine grinned, before attempting to suppress a sneeze. "Damn, I hope I'm not going to get a humdinger, I have work on Monday."

"Shall we look over the castle here?" asked Sandra, privately hoping Madeleine didn't pass on her potential humdinger. "I know how you like castles and old relics."

"That's why I'm happy to be with you both today," said Madeleine, smiling.

The end of June had somehow turned into the end of July and Osborn had finally made the decision to apply for early retirement with voluntary redundancy, when the university made its next round of financial cuts in October. Sandra felt remarkably happy about this decision, as life had felt too full-on for too long for both of them.

Osborn was succumbing more and more to stress in various ways and the situation at the university was becoming increasingly more pressured and toxic. Early retirement suddenly seemed to offer a chance to live their own lives a bit more – a chance to step back from being so busy all the time, as well as from the stifling sense of feeling responsible for other people.

However, Sandra wasn't looking forward to telling Caroline the news and decided to broach the subject when they were both in the garden, simply because Sandra always felt less claustrophobic out there. It was thankfully a warm, dry day as she proceeded to weed the summer border, while Caroline wandered around making comments.

"Osborn's going to apply for early retirement in October," she said nonchalantly, jabbing the trowel into her hand. "Ouch!"

"What?" Caroline stopped in her tracks. "What do you mean? Is he going to retire?" Caroline had a gift of turning her questions into seeming accusations.

"It's becoming worse and worse working at the university," explained Sandra patiently. "Lots of staff members are suffering from long-term stress problems and Osborn's workload has become untenable. He's had enough, he feels as if it's slowly killing him in there."

"What do you mean? It won't affect our Tuesdays and Thursdays Sandra, will it?" Caroline's voice came across as a strange mixture of fear and harshness.

"No, I'm sure it won't," replied Sandra, caught completely off her guard. 'I don't believe this,' she was thinking. 'All you're concerned about is how this affects you and your life. What about Osborn's life and mine? I've given you so *many* of my Tuesdays and Thursdays, year in and year out, but all you can think about is how I might not be here to do things with you and for you in the future. Do you care about Osborn's wellbeing at all? What about mine? What about trusting us – the fact that we're not going to drop you suddenly like a hotcake, to concentrate on our own lives for once – heaven forbid!'

"...and you know how much I look forward to playing *Scribble*," Caroline was saying, as Sandra focused on her mother's voice again. "Have you nearly finished out here? We won't have time for a game if you carry on much longer."

Half an hour later, Sandra sat dazed at the *Scribble* board, wondering why she had felt so outraged at her mother's reaction to the early retirement news. It was her turn and she was finding it hard to concentrate, but she finally managed to think of a word and put it down.

"Sandra, I was going there! I hate you!" Caroline suddenly seemed to realise what she'd actually said. "Oh, I know you don't take any notice of what I say."

Sandra almost froze with incredulity at her mother's words. The verbal onslaught felt too much to take in. She tried to ignore what Caroline had said, but the words kept ringing around her head throughout the remainder of the game and when she finally went home and entered the house, her pent-up feelings erupted in a scream. After that, came the tears.

The following weekend, Sandra and Osborn took Lawrence with them for a pre-arranged day out that involved a pub lunch and a ride on a steam train, although not at the same time. Lawrence had reacted to Osborn's news about early retirement with such genuine enthusiasm that Sandra felt a real warmth towards him, as if she understood for the first time that he truly cared deeply about his brother's welfare.

As they sat in *The Caterpillar and Cabbage*, sipping drinks and talking about the family, the atmosphere felt very relaxed.

"I'm glad Gulliver's taken to fatherhood," said Lawrence cordially, although he was drinking a *Cornish Knicker* from the local brewery. "It sounds as if he was a bit tired on holiday with you, though. How about Madeleine, is she feeling happier now they're in Bristol?"

"A bit, I think, because she and Henri have been looking at houses for sale in various districts and they've more or less decided where they'd like to live," explained Osborn, sipping his *Cornish Tosser*. "There seem to be quite a few possible houses on the market, so they're going to start looking seriously very soon."

"That's good, I hope they can find a place they really like," replied Lawrence, scratching his black and white beard. "I must say, Henri's got his head screwed on for a Frenchman. I didn't say that, by the way!"

"Yes, you did," responded Sandra glibly, sipping her *Cornish Brunette*. "I know you didn't mean it, though."

"How's Caroline these days?" asked Lawrence, finishing his beer. "I'd better not have another one, or I'll be peeing all afternoon."

"I don't seem to be in a very good place with Mum at the moment," said Sandra sadly, "and I don't exactly know why."

"I know she can be difficult. Osborn's been telling me when we meet for lunch about some of her shenanigans," replied Lawrence, his brown eyes showing concern. "I feel for you, I really do, because I had trouble with my father, as you know."

"I do know," agreed Sandra sympathetically. "Basil was certainly very unyielding, to put it mildly. He was more like a mix between a prickly ash and an old woody bay bush, although that's rather unkind of me."

"Don't worry, he was very unkind to *me*," retorted Lawrence somewhat bitterly, although his *Cornish Knicker* had technically been called a beer.

"And me," added Osborn, finishing his *Cornish Tosser*. "He stopped me from doing so much as a child."

"At least he's dead now," said Sandra without thinking, "unlike my mother. God, did I really say that? How absolutely awful of me!"

"No honestly, let it all out," said Lawrence, smiling kindly, "because I really do understand."

"Thank you so much," replied Sandra in a low voice, feeling for a moment as if she might cry. "The other day when we were playing *Scribble*, she said she hated me. I know she only said it in a game, but I've still been having trouble letting that hate declaration go."

"I'm not surprised!" expostulated Lawrence. "I wouldn't have thought Caroline was like that, but then, I suppose a lot of people wouldn't have thought my father would tell me to my face that I was a misogynist, simply because I've never been married."

"I think I may have heard him," said Sandra slowly, trying to remember. "It was at a family get-together, when I was behind you in a doorway as we were on our way out and Basil was on his way in. He didn't see me there and I heard him say it – but I thought I'd misheard. Obviously not."

"Well, at least Mum never hit you with a leather belt, like she did to me," said Osborn. "That was as well as Dad knocking me to the floor several times on two occasions."

"This is getting a bit heavy," said Lawrence, sighing, "and it's meant to be a happy day out, because the three of us don't get together like this very often. Let's forget all the parent stuff and – I know! Let's go on holiday next year to celebrate your retirement! How about it? Only if you want to, of course, don't feel obliged in any way, I honestly won't mind."

"I think it's a most excellent idea!" replied Osborn, grinning happily before looking questioningly at Sandra.

"Hell yes," replied Sandra, finishing her *Cornish Brunette*. "I think that was quite strong for me, I feel a bit squiffy. Any ideas about where?"

"I've been fancying Malta for a while," suggested Lawrence.

"Malta!" squealed Sandra excitedly. "Osborn promised to take me to Malta before we were married, to see the Blue Grotto!"

"Wow, I remember that," said Osborn, smiling. "It was this boat trip and it was so blue and beautiful. Of course, it might be too touristy nowadays..."

"You're not backing out now," said Sandra immediately. "How many years ago was it?"

"It must have been in 1969," replied Osborn thoughtfully, "which is ... 39 years ago."

"Well, that's it, we're going," said Sandra, smiling in turn at them both. "Osborn and I most definitely, absolutely and categorically need to start living our own lives and sod the entire world!"

"I think you can live your own lives without sodding the entire world," said Lawrence, smiling back. "I'm really pleased we're having this day out."

"I feel so much more relaxed," agreed Sandra, flushed with *Cornish Brunette* and the thought of freedom. "I'm not uptight about Mum at all, I hadn't realised exactly how much she was getting to me."

"We need to think of getting to the train station if we want to catch that steam train," warned Osborn, having consulted his watch. "Excuse me, that Partisan cheese is having a particular effect."

An hour later, the three of them were still feeling at ease, as they sat at a table for four in the steam train. They were watching the hedgerow greenery and the bizarre objects in some people's back gardens with interest, as the journey progressed in a leisurely fashion.

"From the buffet car today, we are now offering tea, coffee, wine, beer and light snacks," came a sudden announcement over the intercom, in a rather elderly, refined gentleman's voice.

"What did he say?" asked Osborn, jolted out of his reverie. "I couldn't hear him properly, what was that last thing he said?"

"Light snacks," replied Sandra and Lawrence together, at which Osborn's face creased into a huge grin as he fought a paroxysm of mirth.

"I thought – he said – light sex!" he managed to gasp, before keeling over onto the table, helpless with laughter.

"Well, in that case I'd better go and leave you two alone and you can join the 25 miles an hour club," quipped Lawrence with a roguish grin, as all three of them became overcome with dubious mirth.

CHAPTER 6

Early August had arrived and another get-old-together was taking place at Sandra's house. She had kept in minimal touch with Emily and Delia by email, although Kay and Gina weren't computer fans – or any part of a computer, come to that. Sandra and Gina often walked to each other's houses for a quick visit on Monday mornings, but Gina was usually busy and rushing off somewhere, so it was good to catch up with her for a few hours too.

"How's your dad, Dee – I mean your father, how is he?" asked Sandra, as she handed Delia a mug of coffee.

"Thanks. He's much the same," replied curly-haired Delia, taking the coffee and sighing a little. "He's a miserable old git and he won't admit that he can't cope with the house and my two brothers. They're so good too, they always try to make the best of everything. I know their level of learning disability isn't too bad for Down's Syndrome, but they still need some special care. I do what I can for them and I'm happy to do it, but my dad is so self-centred, it's unbelievable."

"Oh, I can believe it," said Sandra, passing around mugs of hot drinks to the others. "I have a mother like that and what's worse is that the older she becomes, the more she regresses into childish behaviour. The outlook isn't great, really."

"I know," agreed Delia sombrely. "The way my father reacts to me spending time with my own children sometimes almost smacks of jealousy. It's as if he thinks I should be giving him all my attention. He seems to think he has first call on me, because he's 80 and they're much younger."

"Snap!" said Sandra, startling Gina. "Sorry, Gee. Yes, my mother disclosed to me yesterday that she'd had what was basically an anxiety dream. I'd told her I was going to visit Madeleine for 10 days and she couldn't work her mobile phone to let me know that she was ill."

"Does she have a mobile phone?" asked Delia incredulously. "My father won't have anything to do with them."

"Well, she's got Osborn's old one, but she openly admitted the other day that she can't be bothered to learn how to keep it charged, let alone use it," said Sandra, smiling wryly. "So that's a no-no."

"To be honest, I don't know how to use mine properly yet," said Kay, pushing back a strand of her straight, honey-coloured hair, "so you could call that a no-know!"

"I've still got a slightly dodgy old one," offered Emily, producing a phone from her bag. "It suits me well enough."

"Mine's like that!" said Gina excitedly, searching in her bag. "Oh, I've left it home."

"Changing the subject, how are things with you, Em?" asked Kay kindly. "Have you adjusted to living on your own a bit better yet?"

"Yes, I have, thanks," replied Emily, replacing her phone. "I had my hair cut, did you notice?" She touched her attractive looking semi-curly fair hair. "I'm sleeping a bit more now, which helps. It's nice to have a double bed to myself, to be honest."

"I wish I could have that sometimes," said Kay, sighing. "I love your hair, by the way. Yes, Rob gets really twitchy some nights, I'm sick of his knees in my gluteus maximus."

"That sounds interesting," said Gina, raising her eyebrows so they disappeared up underneath the fringe of her long, greying fair hair. "Andy just snores. I don't have any trouble with my gluteus maximus, but I ache in strange places if I overdo things."

"Lots of changes seem to happen quite suddenly these days," mused Kay. "Not only big changes like you living on your own Em, but small changes, like..."

"Like when did good old bed settees turn into sofa beds?" speculated Dee, as Kay struggled for an example.

"Like me realising I don't actually want any more fridge magnets," considered Sandra, remembering too late that Gina had given her several in the past.

"Like all the ordering I did over the internet last Christmas," brooded Emily. "This is turning into the age of the Jiffy bag."

"Like the letters I keep getting reminding me I'm over the hill," ruminated Gina, although thankfully not in the biological sense. "I had one the other day for what they called life-screening, including something about aneurysms. It really scared me to death, until I shredded it."

"Oh, I had one of those today, that's quite a coincidence," said Sandra, putting down her mug and going to a small pile of paperwork on the cabinet. "Here it is, screening for stroke, abdominal aortic aneurysms and other vascular diseases, heart rhythm, osteoporosis risk assessment... God, I didn't read it properly, I feel quite unwell now. Four painless screenings for £139 at a local church hall. A church hall!"

"Are you going?" asked Emily impishly. "I've had those letters as well, but there's no way I could afford £139 for that right now."

"I know," put in Kay more seriously, "although it puts it in your mind and you have this dilemma about whether you should go and find out you're going to die, or something."

"We're all going to die," said Dee sombrely, "but I'd like to live my own life a bit more without having to wait for my father to die. Oh dear, that sounds awful! Where did that come from? I think we need to concentrate more on life and there's going to be another little life in our family, because Fleur's expecting a baby in February!"

"Oh, that's wonderful," smiled Kay, although the words were audible as well.

Congratulations were voiced in various other words from Emily, Gina and Sandra, while Kay asked if she was right in thinking that Delia had three children.

"Yes, Fleur's the oldest, then Florian and then Flora," replied Delia, grimacing slightly. "I do wish I hadn't been swayed by Paolo's mother in the choice of names, but she was quite persuasive in a sweet old lady kind of way."

"I'm happy with the name Madeleine," reminisced Sandra aloud, "but I kind of wish I'd been in a better frame of mind when I chose Gulliver's name."

"Maybe you thought he'd go far with an unusual name like, that," suggested Emily with a twinkle in her eye, "although I had no idea why the name Annabel appealed to me. All I know is that we've had many a right old ding-dong over the years."

"What about your son, Em?" asked Gina, while the others tittered politely. "I can't think what you called him?"

"I still call him Jack," replied Emily, "but I also call him an ass quite a lot, which he objects to now and again. Still, I've always loved the name Fleur, Dee, it reminds me of the *The Far Sight Saga*."

"Fleurdy? Oh, I get you. Well, that's as maybe, but the name Flora reminds me of margarine," said Delia, "and I don't think Florian will ever forgive me. I don't think I'll ever forgive me!"

"Names can be quite emotive," agreed Sandra benignly, "but they're only names and when it comes down to it, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. I wonder what Fleur will call her baby, that's always quite exciting."

"Probably Poppy, or Daisy, or Marigold, or Petunia," replied Delia with a delicate chuckle.

"Yes, but what if it's a girl," asked Emily innocently.

"Oh, Em!" said Delia, grinning. "You're making me titter, like you used to do at school. Seriously, though, are you really OK? It's a big life change to find yourself single again."

"I'm OK, honestly," replied Emily, sipping from her mug. "Oh, it's all gone. Jack's actually become very helpful and Annabel lets Louisa sleep over most weekends. She's 8 now, so we have some lovely times together."

"I bet you do, I can remember Hayley when she was 8," said Kay fondly, before stopping for a second or two. "Actually, she was a proper handful and I remember being exhausted half the time. It's funny how you hold on to the good memories."

"Maybe it's a survival technique," suggested Gina, raising her eyebrow and her mug. "Oh, mine's all gone, too. Adam used to drive me to utter distraction, I was always at the school having discussions with his class teacher – and sometimes the headmaster. We're so much closer since he's had children, though, and I don't just mean that he lives fairly close to us."

"I think it's probably a lot different with our grandchildren, rather than our own children," said Sandra, thinking of Juniper. "I remember finding the day in and day out responsibility of Gulliver and Madeleine overwhelming at times, not to mention the nights. I know that Juniper lives in Wales, but when we do see her, this adorable little developing human being, it's an absolute joy."

"I know what you mean," replied Emily, "I was feeling down the other day, but then Lou arrived for the weekend and we made chocolate buns. We were both so messy at the end of it, with flour and chocolate in very strange places, but I felt really happy and kind of connected to what's real and what matters in life."

"I find that with my grandchildren," said Gina. "I'm sure you'll feel the same when the time comes, Dee. What about you, Kay, do you think Hayley will become a mum one day?"

"I don't think so, she seems to love her job too much," replied Kay. "I don't mind, though, I just want her to be happy and I'm pretty sure she is."

"That's really good," said Sandra, smiling at Kay. "Being happy is worth its weight in gold. Well no, actually it's priceless. Gosh, listen to us with all our vast experience, but I suppose we have a lot of life history between us by now."

"Oh, I never liked history," said Emily suddenly. "Miss Yore never let me forget when I wrote that Queen Victoria was the longest queen."

"No, don't remind me of Miss Yore! I felt such an idiot for saying *Homer's Oddity*," said Delia heatedly. "Oh dear, my coffee's gone cold."

"I was taken to task for calling the First World War's Triple Entente the Triple Entendre," said Gina gloomily, "although I usually have enough trouble understanding double entendres, to be honest."

"Well, think yourselves lucky you never wrote about the anal of history," said Kay with a grin. "No, I never actually liked history, or Miss Yore, I'm glad all that's in the past now."

"History's taught a lot differently these days, I think the way we were taught was really outdated," remarked Sandra. "Although thinking about it, there were far too many dates involved for my liking. Anyway, more tea or coffee, anyone?"

Two weeks later, it was Caroline's 83rd birthday, which was being celebrated with a pub lunch at *The Boatman's Ass*. Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper had arrived to stay at Sandra and Osborn's house three days earlier, mainly for Gulliver to help Osborn mend a fence at the bottom of the garden. Lawrence had joined them for the birthday lunch and they sat together companionably at an old wooden table that looked as if it may have been an original piece of furniture.

"Why is there a picture of a donkey on the pub sign?" asked Caroline suddenly, gazing out of the window.

"Ass?" responded Lawrence roguishly, taking a sip from his *Old Speckled Cock*.

"What?" asked Caroline, looking startled for a moment. "Who are you calling an ass, you diabolical rascal?"

"The donkey is actually an ass," replied Lawrence, straight-faced. "The boatman's ass, no less."

"Oh, I don't know, the boatman's ass looks quite substantial to me," remarked Bryony, with some minimal facial leaning.

"Are you being funny, Bryony?" asked Caroline, looking confused again.

"She's always funny," said Gulliver, looking across to where Sandra was helping Juniper turn the pages of a cloth book. "Sometimes she's humorous, too."

"Why would the boatman have an ass, though?" asked Caroline, not giving up. "Is it his beast of burden?"

"Grandma!" exclaimed Gulliver, looking surprised. "Oh. Yes, it probably was a bit like a canal horse." He decided to take refuge in his *Doom Juice*.

"I don't know if canal boats used asses, though," said Osborn, contemplating his *Feck's Fake Beer*. "What's the difference between an ass, a donkey and a mule?"

"Well now you're just confusing things," retorted Lawrence with a snort. "Sorry, I didn't mean to retort with a snort. Juniper, you've been born into a strange family."

"A donkey is actually a descendant of an African wild ass," contributed Bryony, "but let's not split hairs."

"Or rabbits," said Sandra distractedly. "Juniper's getting rather restless here, shall we go for a walk after we've finished eating?"

"Yes, the sky's really good today, I've been wanting to walk underneath the bridges for some unusual camera shots for a while," said Gulliver eagerly.

"Not underneath the arches?" asked Lawrence, finishing his *Old Speckled Cock*. "Or underneath the larches? Or even underneath the larches underneath the arches?"

"You're being a rascal again," remarked Caroline coquettishly. It was a vaguely disturbing sight.

"As long as nobody marches underneath the larches underneath the arches," commented Bryony, as Juniper made an impressive lunge towards her mother.

"I didn't bring my camera," said Osborn sadly, "but never mind, it's been a good meal."

"How is Madeleine, Sandra?" asked Caroline, as they began preparing to leave. "Is she going to come home for your birthday?"

"Ah, no she's not," replied Sandra, realising she had some news to impart to her mother. "Actually, Osborn and I are probably going to spend a week that includes my birthday at Aberpontyfan with Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper." She looked at her mother, who appeared taken aback. "We *have* been asked," she finished with a short laugh. It matched her height beautifully.

"What do you mean, you won't be here for your birthday as usual?" asked Caroline tartly, although she'd decided to have an ice cream dessert in the end. "When will I see you?"

"Yes – no, I won't be here," replied Sandra, beginning to feel uncomfortable. "You'll see me before and after and don't forget you have phone numbers, so you can always ring if anything's wrong, or just for a chat."

"I don't like to bother people," said Caroline with a sniff. "So Madeleine won't see you either?"

"She and Henri might pop in to see us from Cardiff," explained Osborn, having realised that Sandra was being semi-interrogated. "It's not a great distance away."

"What, on your actual birthday, Sandra?" asked Caroline, as if it were a crime.

"No, at the weekend when they're not at work," replied Sandra tiredly.

"Oh well, I suppose I'll just have to give you your present to take with you," said Caroline reluctantly. "What would you like for your birthday, or will you buy yourself something as usual?"

"I'll sort it out later," replied Sandra with a small sigh. "Anyway, it's Osborn's birthday first."

"Yes, you old timer," said Lawrence, having regarded the recent interchange with interest. "How will you be celebrating?"

"If he's an old timer, what does that make me!" chortled Caroline, not entirely successfully.

"We'd best not go there," replied Lawrence with a wicked smile, as Caroline reached across and hit his arm.

"We'll probably spend tomorrow quietly, like we usually do," replied Osborn, as Juniper's growing discontent escalated into full-blown enraged crying.

"Not if Juniper has anything to do with it," said Bryony, standing up with Juniper and heading towards the exit. "I'll have to take her outside, she seems to calm down in the open air."

"Did you bring her pushchair?" asked Lawrence, rubbing his arm and standing up beside Bryony. "Hey Juniper, I'd like to push you if I'm allowed, I always used to like pushing your daddy and your auntie around in their pushchairs."

"We didn't bring it," replied Gulliver, finishing his *Doom Juice* and also standing up to go. "There was too much in the boot."

"That's a shame," replied Lawrence, looking genuinely disappointed. "Oh well, let me help the old lady up. Are you ready, Caroline? Don't hit me again, I'll have bruises!"

It was the first Wednesday in September and the initial evening of the new healing course was underway at Rainbow Healers. Sandra was sitting beside Osborn, smiling excessively to cover up her usual discordant feelings of not really belonging, hope for fresh beginnings, and the persistent remnants of group anxiety.

It was an unusually large group of 14, unlike the previous year's group of only five remaining stalwarts who saw it through until the end. It appeared that word had spread of Osborn's successful teaching abilities, as one by one when people were introducing themselves, while sitting around a decidedly oval and slightly messy circle, they mentioned how the course had been recommended by friends and acquaintances.

"Hello, I'm Pascal Smith," said one man who Sandra assessed to be in his late forties, with sandy-coloured hair and a lean physique. "I'm not French or anything, my mother just liked the name. I have my own business in the building and decorating trade, but lately I've been drawn to the more spiritual side of life and I heard how good this course was last year."

Sandra found her mind wandering firstly to why Pascal's mother had liked the name and whether it was a good enough reason to foist it upon her child. She then remembered that she had called her own son Gulliver and hastily changed her mind-wandering direction to whether or not she would have to take part in the initial sensing energy session with a partner.

She realised it was very unlikely she would get away with it, as Osborn liked to take part himself and there was an even number. In due course, her attention was taken by an attractive, confident looking woman with softly curled blonde hair and a warm, pleasant voice.

"I'm Leona Papadakis and after a difficult year, when I more or less hit rock bottom with depression after my divorce, I approached Rainbow Healers for help. I benefitted so much that I felt led to become a healer myself." Leona then went on to explain how she felt meditation had saved her, which sparked off a rather lively group discussion.

'They seem a genuinely nice bunch of people,' thought Sandra with relief, as her initial nervousness began to dissipate. 'It's good that there are five men here, instead of mostly all women. I wish I wasn't so afraid of people, it's very silly of me. For all I know, they could be nervous of *me*, since I'm Osborn's wife and helping him with the course. Little do they know me and my inadequacies!

'That's a stupid thing to think really, how can they get to know me if I'm always trying to slide out of taking part? Do I mean social inadequacies, or do I mean healing inadequacies? Or both, perhaps? I suppose it's the latter, but I'm a certified healer and I'm sitting here presumably looking capable, even if I don't feel it. I can do this thing! Yes, they're all fine, I'll be happy to partner anybody for the sensing energy exercise. We-ell, maybe not Pascal, because he looks quite fit and maybe not Leona, because she looks so self-assured.'

"Sandra, if you could partner Leona, that will sort us all out," said Osborn, his voice breaking into Sandra's reverie, as she looked up and realised that the group was splitting up into pairs. "Don't worry if you have any trouble with what you sense or don't sense, guys. Sandra and I can come around and help you near the end of the session."

Six days later, Sandra was enjoying a pre-birthday celebration at Gulliver and Bryony's house in Aberpontyfan. Juniper seemed to be revelling in the company of her Auntie Madeleine and Uncle Henri, who had arrived at around midday to join them for a buffet lunch, plus wine.

Gulliver and Bryony had abandoned their attempt at keeping Juniper safely in her playpen and the petite but dynamic golden-haired Juniper was crawling around to everyone in turn, plying them with soggy toys, while sometimes successfully being given a piece of food in return for a beseeching look. More often than not, the food was abandoned in strange places, after being sampled and rejected.

"No, no – don't put that piece of 'am in Auntie Madeleine's 'andbag," said Henri to Juniper, who looked up at him with enquiring eyes, before crawling quickly across to her dad and depositing the ham in his hand.

"Thank you, Juniper Maple," said Gulliver, mindlessly putting the chewed piece of ham on his plate. "What's the position with the house hunting, Lil Sis, did you like any of those three houses you went to look at?"

"Yes, we did!" replied Madeleine, scarcely able to contain her excitement. "Oops! No, don't pick up that olive, Junie-flower, it's too – oh – is she alright with that?"

"She'll let us know," said Bryony unconcernedly. "She tried a slice of lemon the other day by mistake and didn't seem to mind."

"Gosh! Yes, one of the houses was way too dilapidated, but the other two are distinct possibilities," continued Madeleine. "To be honest, we'd love a second opinion, but I think we'll have to make an offer fairly quickly if we're serious – which we are."

"I'll look at them for you," offered Osborn almost instantaneously. "I've had a lot of experience with property over the years, mainly due to our first house being in such a state when we bought it."

"The only way we could afford to get onto the property ladder was to buy a ruinous heap," reminisced Sandra fondly. "I guess you'd need us to see the houses next weekend, though?"

"Yes, if it's at all possible," said Madeleine hopefully. "I don't want to tire you out with driving up and back in one day though, Varti."

"It's only up the motorway," said Osborn, absent-mindedly picking up a sausage roll and taking a bite. "I know how much you want to move into your own house and the quicker you get onto the property ladder the better."

"Er – Dad, you're eating a..." Gulliver was unable to finish the sentence before convulsing into silent laughter.

"We'll definitely need a proper ladder if we 'ave our own 'ouse," pondered Henri thoughtfully, "as well as some proper tools."

"I've got some tools I can give you," said Osborn enthusiastically, taking another bite of the sausage roll. "I gave Gulliver a load, but I still seem to have ended up with more than I actually need. I've still got my grandfather's fine tooth tenon saw."

"That's nice," said Gulliver, still trying to alert his father to the sausage situation, "but do you realise you're eating..." he was again unable to finish the sentence.

"I know I'm eating, this – shit! Is this a sausage roll? With a real sausage?"

"We don't normally buy fake sausages," replied Bryony, as Gulliver openly guffawed, "but they shouldn't be shit, they're meant to be premium pork with rosemary and garlic."

"Premium pork?" repeated Osborn with horror. "Why didn't you tell me?" He held the remaining sausage roll out with distaste, as the sausage parted company from the roll and dropped in front of Juniper, who picked it up and popped it into her mouth.

"Have some wine," said Sandra soothingly, knowing that Osborn might be feeling genuinely distressed. "It's a really good wine, thank you for bringing it, Henri. We'd love to look at your houses next Saturday if you can arrange viewings. My mother will just have to live with it."

"Do you still take over her food shopping on Saturdays?" asked Madeleine, putting a handful of crispy kale crisps on her plate. "These look unusual. You said you were going to try to cut out the weekend visit, so you and Dad could feel a bit freer."

"I did try for a couple of weeks, but now I seem to have got into painting her fence again and you know how long that flaming fence is! Also, her garden's grown a bit wild since I started the fence painting, because I can't do both. I'm determined to make the garden easier to look after – but that means I have to do some extra work to get it to be easier. Dad said he'd help me, but we always seem to have other things to do at the weekends."

"Mumsie, you really don't have to come up to view those houses." The almost imperceptible catch in Madeleine's voice betrayed her actual feelings.

"Oh no, Mad, I positively want to come up and view your houses, *that* feels like freedom! I can't remember if I ever voiced this aloud to you, but when I'm with you and Gulliver and Henri and Bryony – but not necessarily in that combination – I feel as if I'm living, whereas when I'm with Grandma, I feel as if I'm dying." As she finished the sentence and was aware of an unusual silence, Sandra wondered if she'd gone too far.

"It's OK, I know it must be difficult," said Madeleine, looking as if she was struggling to understand. "You told me how she rang in a right old fret about her video player and TV the other day and because Dad was out, you had to go and see if you could fix the problem."

"*You*, Mother? *You* fix a video player and TV problem?" asked Gulliver curiously. "You never told me about that. What was the problem?"

"The problem was her remote control and the fact that she hadn't put on her glasses," replied Sandra ruefully.

"Your mother has a remote control?" asked Bryony with her usual unfathomable expression. "Imagine!"

"If only," replied Sandra, smiling. "I don't mean to be mean about her, honestly I don't. Hello Juniperus Squamata, what have you got there?"

"Bryony, where did you buy the ham?" asked Gulliver, frowning a little. "That last piece I had tasted all watery and weird."

"Was it that piece of 'am that Juniper 'ad?" asked Henri, with a Gallic glimmer in his eye, whatever that meant.

"Oh, forking hell!" exclaimed Gulliver loudly. "Where's the wine? I need some more."

"This is fun," remarked Madeleine suddenly. "Mumsie's birthday, my family together and house viewing next weekend. I'm so excited! We'll be able to have a bread maker! There's even birthday cake later too – yay!" She gave a small clap of her hands that was very reminiscent of her younger days.

"It's lovely to see you so happy, Mad," said Sandra fondly. "Talking of birthday cake, did I tell you how delighted Dad was that Henri joined in when you sang to him over the phone on his birthday?"

"Oh, she made me," said Henri with a shrug. "She 'as me under her thumbs."

Two days later it was Sandra's actual 56th birthday and she was sitting in a pub in Way-on-Hye with Osborn and Gulliver. Bryony was at work and Juniper was at nursery, so the three of them had taken to the hills, or in this case, the Brecon Beacons. Unfortunately, it was pouring with rain and so they had first sat inside the Mountain Centre over coffee, gazing out at where the mountains would have been if they hadn't been totally obscured by an impenetrable blanket of mist and rain.

After that it had only been about a half-hour journey to Way-on-Hye, where the rain had stopped, but the river was doing exceptionally well at resembling a raging torrent. A subsequent walk around the famed bookshops had been very enjoyable, although Sandra's passion for owning books had subsided a little over the years. Mainly, the day was remarkable because the three of them were simply enjoying being able to spend it together, as well as the little nugget of warmth still glowing inside Sandra's heart that it had been Gulliver's idea.

They decided to have lunch in a pub called *The Wild Blue Porker*, which had some available seating by a window. They sat comfortably and sipped their drinks, waiting for their food to arrive.

"Thank you for driving us here," said Sandra, smiling at Gulliver. "I'm sorry it means you can't have any alcohol, but I really do appreciate this today. It feels special."

"That's OK," replied Gulliver, looking slightly embarrassed. "Anyway, Dad's paying for the meal, so it's working to my advantage too."

"This is a really good drop of rum," remarked Osborn appreciatively. "I do have a bit of a weakness for rum. I'm a bit of a rum person really."

"You can say that again," said Sandra, glancing at Gulliver and then laughing in reminiscence. "Do you remember how you used to deliberately take that phrase literally and actually say something again?"

"It was an easy way to raise a laugh," explained Gulliver. "I used to like making people laugh. I still do, really. I love making Juniper laugh, especially when it stops her from crying."

"She's a dear," remarked Osborn fondly, sipping his rum.

"She's a wildcat," said Gulliver with a paternal chuckle.

"She's an adorable little monkey," added Sandra tenderly. "Actually, talking of wild animals, why does the image of a wild blue porker feel so wrong?"

"Yikes," said Gulliver, grimacing. "It's a peculiar name for a pub, although a porker sounds better than an oinker – but does it, though? I'm really not sure."

"Maybe it was originally a wild blue boar," suggested Osborn, sipping more rum. "Like Marguerite Thatcher, or whatever her name was. I think I need to eat something, this rum is moreish."

"No, it was from Jamaica," replied Gulliver "I've had it before, it's good."

"I never knew how incredibly special it would feel to be a grandfather," said Osborn randomly. "So, Gulliver, have you any concrete plans for the rest of this year?"

"Well, I did I consider repairing that wall at the bottom of the garden," replied Gulliver thoughtfully. "Ah, the food's on its way."

"I do love this," murmured Sandra quietly as the food approached. "If Madeleine could have been here too, it would almost be like old times with the four of us."

CHAPTER 7

Four days later, Sandra and Osborn were sitting in Madeleine and Henri's cramped flat, having earlier viewed two houses, one of which had distinct possibilities for Madeleine and Henri's future home. As they all enjoyed some delicious pizza, made mostly by Madeleine, their conversation was cautiously upbeat.

"We'd really like to be in by Christmas," said Madeleine hopefully, "so if we make an offer and it's accepted, we'll be able to get cracking with surveys and things."

"Make an offer below the asking price," said Osborn, retrieving an olive from his lap. "You'll never know what you can get away with unless you start well below, because then there's room for manoeuvre."

"Yeh yeh," said Henri in excited Anglo-French mode. "It might make a difference if there's a chain, although we don't 'ave a property to sell."

"The kitchen's a bit on the small side, but I can still have a bread maker," said Madeleine dreamily, as a cherry tomato escaped from its slice.

"Try not to build up your hopes *too* much, darling," said Sandra to Madeleine, as she fought with a piece of cheese that was masquerading as elastic. "There's every chance it'll be OK, though – and if it's meant to be, it's meant to be. Gosh, this cheese is unusual, what sort is it?"

"Sweet-Style Swiss," replied Madeleine, chewing thoughtfully. "I know it might fall through at any time, Mumsie. I know I mustn't want it too much – but it's even got a greenhouse in the garden! We could grow strawberries and potatoes and lavender..."

"We'd need some new windows," said Henri, putting down his empty plate on the table as if he hadn't noticed what he'd been eating. "We'd 'ave to factor that into our budget. The fence is pretty rope-like, too."

"I'm sure we could help you with the fence and the garden, our experience in that area has become extensive. Just like my mother's fence, in fact," remarked Sandra a little bitterly, still battling with the Sweet-Style Swiss cheese.

"You could make a conditional offer," suggested Osborn. "You could say you want to move in before Christmas and that might galvanise them into action."

"I 'aven't seen anything that needs any galvanising action," said Henri, looking puzzled. "If there's a problem with rust, maybe we should think again?"

"It's a saying!" burst out Madeleine, almost choking on a piece of red pepper and losing the immediate ability to speak.

"What does galvanising involve?" asked Sandra, giving up on the cheese.

"Zinc," replied Osborn, bending down to retrieve an olive from the floor.

"I 'ad noticed the sink in the bathroom is old, but we can replace both the bathroom and the kitchen in time," explained Henri seriously, as Madeleine, Osborn and Sandra grinned at him alarmingly. "What 'ave I said now?"

"Nothing," replied Madeleine, putting her hand on his thigh for a moment and smiling into his brown eyes. "Carry on being you - and let's make an offer on Monday!"

It was a Monday afternoon in mid-October and Sandra's friend Alison was visiting. Over the years, since their children had attended the same school, the two of them had slowly but gradually become very comfortable in each other's company. Sandra therefore felt very relaxed as she drifted into her own thoughts while Alison replied to a text message from her daughter-in-law, after apologising profusely for the interruption.

'We're unlikely friends in a strange way,' thought Sandra, sipping her tea. 'She tends to be outgoing, while I'm a natural introvert – and it *is* natural to be an introvert, despite popular opinion – or to have introvert tendencies, anyway. Mind you, she's mentioned several instances where she avoided social occasions and even when she was too scared to enter a room full of people. Maybe we have more in common after all. We're very different to look at, though, with her being tall and me being short – not that size matters in the slightest – or differentness of any kind. There's a lot we *do* have in common, like being wives, mothers, grandmothers, oversensitive sometimes, pretending we're OK when we're not, prone to lack of self-esteem and trying to please other people to the detriment of our own selves...'

"Sorry about that," said Alison, "but Karen was asking if we could go to Usk for a couple of days to look after Tamsin and Peony while she and Sam go to a friend's 30th birthday in Exeter. It's a bit awkward because Dirk and I have been asked to his cousin's anniversary meal on the same date. I don't like to let Karen down, though, because she can be really peculiar when things don't go her way and Sam tends to get the brunt of it. Also, I still really miss seeing Tamsin and Peony."

"Yes, I know how awful it is to be caught in the middle of family dynamics and mixed feelings," sympathised Sandra. "Last month Osborn and I ended up feeling really tired and lacking in energy after visiting Gulliver and Bryony and then Madeleine and Henri, whilst contending with my mother's vagaries."

"My mother became very vague after my dad died," said Alison, putting her mobile phone in her bag. "We didn't know what she really meant half the time."

"Er – anyway, it wasn't as if we didn't want to see them all, because we most definitely did," continued Sandra, while loving Alison's verbal misunderstanding. "I loved my birthday this year, both the get-together with all four of them and then the Way-on-Hye trip with Gulliver. Also, it felt kind of special to be included with Madeleine and Henri's house viewing, as if our opinion was really appreciated."

"How's the house sale going?" asked Alison, sighing as her phone beeped again. "I'm leaving that."

"The survey was fine and the house contract should be through in a couple of weeks," replied Sandra, aware of her inner fear that it would all fall through and Madeleine would be devastated. "I'm a bit worried, though, that she seems to have set her mind on a change of career and is now talking about investing money in a course to be a personal trainer. She's just passed an assessment to be a gym instructor. I'm glad she's going for something she feels she really wants to do with her life, but..."

"It does seem to be tricky timing with the house move and mortgage payments for years to come," agreed Alison. "Is she doing it with a company she'll work for?"

"No, it's a freelance thing and I worry – well, I worry about all sorts, to be honest."

"Me too, it feels relentless. I've decided I need to disengage a bit emotionally, it costs too much otherwise, in all senses of the word. I really don't remember my parents being remotely as involved with me. It felt as if I just had to get on with my own life and be OK all the time. My mother never seemed to remember anything about when I was growing up, either. Dirk asked me once if I was sure I was my mother's daughter."

"That must have been hurtful. I've noticed lately that my mother has gaping voids in her memory about my childhood – about lots of my life, now I come to think about it – and how it was for me."

Sandra sighed as she remembered a conversation only the previous day, when Caroline had talked about her own past and how she'd felt depressed going home each day from work. Sandra had been in her early- to mid-teens and it had struck her quite forcibly that she'd been living at home then and had genuinely believed she contributed some love and happiness to her mother's wellbeing.

"How are things with your mother now?" asked Alison, as if on cue. "I know she's different with you than how she portrays herself to others."

"It's felt a bit harder than usual lately," confessed Sandra with a certain amount of relief. "One day when it was sunny and I was stuck indoors with her playing *Scribble*, it nearly killed me looking out at the blue sky and feeling utterly trapped inside my own life. She drove me mad that day with things she was saying. It's difficult to explain, but it was simply too much and I came home and cried."

"It must have been a really bad game," said Alison, smiling. "No, I understand about that level of desperation. Some days I feel metaphoric nutcrackers squeezing my head and I want to stay in bed and shut myself off from the world. I even found it a bit hard with Tamsin and Peony last time they visited and I've always loved seeing them, because children so often seem able to cut right through the crap. I've actually started to take antidepressants again."

"You have? Oh Alison – and there's me, moaning about my mother. Are they beginning to help at all? I know they take a while to kick in." Sandra remembered Madeleine's experiences and felt her heart constrict. Sandra knew Alison had suffered with depression in the past, but Alison had never gone into much detail.

"I'm not sure, I still feel a bit nauseous sometimes and generally a bit numb, but I can function OK." She gave a little laugh. "I haven't been to church for months and nobody's asked how I am, not even the vicar or anybody from the Wives' Group. I don't know whether I'm secretly relieved or incensed about it, to be honest. I was never into incense, though, because apart from growing up as a Protestant in Scotland, incense always makes me cough."

"Ha! I think we seriously need to think about what we like doing in our lives and what helps us to feel better, never mind other people," said Sandra thoughtfully. "If you really miss going to church, maybe you could look for another church that you feel comfortable with? Or you could say no if you don't feel like going to Usk to babysit, despite how Karen reacts? Your health and wellbeing are obviously suffering and that's not good."

"I know you're right," replied Alison, sighing. "The trouble is, I'm not sure what I really like to do anymore. It feels as if I've been thinking of others for so long that I've lost the knack of knowing what pleases me. I've lost something, anyway."

"As long as it's not your sense of humour," said Sandra, feeling her heart warm in recognition of Alison's plight. "Osborn and I were trying to think of somewhere we really wanted to go last weekend because the weather was fine and we had a free day, but we could only think of where we always tend to go, which is the Eden Project. We absolutely love it there, don't get me wrong, but we were both aware of a nagging off-centre feeling of having almost completely lost contact with our own selves."

"Silly, isn't it. I don't know if I'm being unrealistic or expecting too much, but I'd so love it if Dirk would arrange for us to go somewhere different for a weekend, or book a theatre trip, or a meal, or something. He always seems to look to me to suggest everything and sort out everything, so that I find myself becoming waspish and bitter and saying mean things to him."

"Oh dear, we're all human," responded Sandra, not really knowing what to say. "How is Helen, have you told her how you feel?"

"I started to, but when I found myself ranting on a bit about Dirk, she said she didn't want to know because he's her father," explained Alison. "I know it's often easier to talk with daughters, but Helen is quite a lot like Dirk in some respects. I understand what she means, but it did hurt a little bit when she said that. I love her so much and she's been really kind otherwise, but she's still struggling with Mark, so she's got her own problems. I wouldn't be surprised if they separated eventually."

"At least she's honest with you," considered Sandra, "and that in my book means a great deal. I'm always happy that Madeleine's straight with me, because I know where I am with her, which is totally opposite to my mother most of the time."

"Wow, we're covering the family circuit today – mothers, daughters, sons, husbands," said Alison, laughing and looking at her watch. "I must go. I can't see you next week, by the way, because we're going to Wiltshire to see to my mother's grave

flowers. They were looking really sad last time we visited, which is in keeping I suppose, but – well, anyway, thank you for listening, I've really enjoyed our chat."

"Me too," replied Sandra truthfully. "Take care."

On Friday the following week, Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper arrived for a long weekend. The reason was a local craft fair that had gained a large following over recent years, which Bryony's mother Anne considered would be an excellent way for Gulliver to make money. She had even booked a table for him, on which to sell his work in its various forms. Since Anne was involved with the craft fair and Bryony was helping Gulliver, Sandra and Osborn had Juniper to look after for most of the day.

All three of them enjoyed themselves a great deal, mainly by keeping Juniper occupied. In the morning after she'd succumbed to an hour's sleep, they all went to the craft fair, where Juniper was clearly delighted to see her mum and dad. To Sandra and Osborn's delight, their much-admired granddaughter then seemed perfectly happy to leave again with her grandparents.

They called in to see Caroline on the way home and after lunch, went for a local walk. Juniper again fell asleep for an hour, followed by some more active play time. Gulliver and Bryony thus returned to a happy child and her two exhausted grandparents.

"It was well worth it if that stash of cash is anything to go by," said Sandra, as Gulliver set about counting all the notes and coins he had emptied in Gulliver-fashion all over the table top.

"Definitely," replied Gulliver, grinning. "I even talked to quite a lot of people. You know, conversationally."

"Good for you," said Osborn, keeping Juniper's hands away from the coins. "This one's been rubbing her eyes and her voice is a bit husky, I think she might be in for a virus."

"Her nose has been quite runny, too," added Sandra, as Juniper launched herself into her grandmother's arms. She privately hoped that she and Osborn wouldn't catch any lurking bugs.

"Another virus," sighed Bryony, who was semi-prostrate on the sofa with obvious weariness. "She's had so many since she started at nursery."

"She's building up her immune system," said Osborn wryly. "Mine should be built up well enough by now, but I still seem prone to catching things."

"Here, catch this," said Gulliver suddenly, as he threw one of his plastic coasters to Osborn. "Do you remember when I took that photo with you and Mum at Trevoze? It's one of my most popular ones at the moment."

"Maddy was with us, too," commented Sandra, remembering a hot, happy day in what felt like a very distant summer. "What did you mostly sell today, then?"

"The cards, coasters and fridge magnets did really well and I also sold quite a few pictures. I might stop doing keyrings, though."

"Fair enough, you need to move with the market," encouraged Sandra, as Juniper sneezed in her face.

"Funnily enough, I've been thinking of a stall or a shop situation," replied Gulliver seriously, as Juniper sneezed again.

Both Sandra and Osborn played host to Juniper's virus for over a week, but whereas Sandra managed to recover, Osborn's throat became so sore and swollen that he saw a doctor and was diagnosed with quinsy. The abscess in his throat was bad enough for the locum doctor to tell him he needed someone with him the first night or two before the antibiotics took effect, in case his throat closed over. This filled Sandra with so much dread that she hardly slept for two nights running. It also meant that the healing course evening at Rainbow Healers had to be cancelled, as Osborn had been advised to speak as little as possible.

However, some good news arrived while Osborn was recovering, which cheered him up immensely. His application for both voluntary redundancy and early retirement had been approved, with the happy result that in August the following year, he would be free from both the university and Bill Bustard.

Sandra felt rather apprehensive about telling her mother, but Caroline had gone to Falmouth on a five-day holiday with some friends, much to Sandra's relief. The day she was due to return, though, she arrived on Sandra and Osborn's doorstep in a great panic, with a woeful story of how she seemed to have lost her door keys.

After a prolonged discussion about when she'd last seen them, Osborn had the presence of mind to look in her handbag and sure enough, there they were. It seemed a good time for Osborn to break the news of his retirement to Caroline, who was distracted enough to receive the news dismissively. A weary Sandra and an even wearier Osborn shook their heads in disbelief, as Caroline sniffed and said goodbye a little hurriedly.

By the beginning of November, Osborn was more or less well enough to run the healing course evening, although Sandra viewed it with her usual apprehension. To her surprise, the confidently extraverted Leona Papadakis seemed to latch on to her during healing practice and as they smiled and exchanged a few quiet words before proceeding to sense each other's energy, it was obvious to Sandra that she had misjudged Leona's air of self-assurance.

After the session, Leona lingered to talk with Sandra, while Osborn was waylaid by a few course members, including Pascal.

"I really enjoyed practising with you, if that doesn't sound too dodgy," said Leona, smiling and pushing a strand of her softly curled blonde hair away from her eyes. "There's a safe sort of feel to your energy and I find I'm drawn to that after my run-in with depression last year."

"I'm drawn to people I feel safe with," replied Sandra, smiling in return. "I guess lots of people are. It sounds as if you really went through a rough time."

"Yes, my husband left me and since my three daughters are grown up and living independently, I found myself on my own," explained Leona. "I had to leave our house and move into a flat. It was a very dark time. My eldest, who lives nearby, has a boy of her own, so I'm a grandma. That helped me such a lot, as well as coming to Rainbow Healers for healing."

"You so don't look old enough to be a grandmother!" said Sandra incredulously. "I'm sorry it was a dark time for you, it must have knocked the bottom out of your whole world. I'm glad you found Rainbow Healers and also that being a grandma helped – and still helps, I'm sure. It's lovely having a grandchild – it tends to bring you out of yourself, I find. Osborn and I have a granddaughter."

"My grandson is almost three," replied Leona, her eyes visibly brightening. "Oh look, Osborn's finished talking with Pascal, do you mind if I have a quick word with him?"

As Leona's quick word with Osborn turned into many long words, Sandra tidied up the room and found herself half-listening to their conversation. It seemed to span many different areas with ease and Sandra wished yet again that she could talk with such fluidity. She had almost finished putting the chairs back against the walls, when the end of their conversation was signalled by Osborn giving Leona a hug.

"Bye Sandra," said Leona, as they disengaged. "Can I hug you too?"

"Yes," replied Sandra, as her sudden fleeting discomfort at Osborn's eagerness to hug people was appeased by Leona's genuine request.

A month had elapsed, in which Madeleine and Henri finally became home owners and moved in as soon as possible, after an almost unbearable time of waiting around in limbo at the end of a chain. Meanwhile, Sandra had endured what felt like an increasing amount of agitation from her mother, thinly disguised in pointed opinions and even sharper comments during *Scribble*.

She was therefore glad when Belinda was visiting one Tuesday and *Scribble à deux* was out of the question. The day before, Sandra had accompanied Caroline to hospital in Plymouth for another ovarian cyst scan, the verdict of which had been no change.

"I'm glad you're keeping well, Auntie," said Belinda, sipping the cappuccino that Sandra had made for her from a packet. "I do like cappuccinos, I always make sure we have some in the house now. I probably have too many, they're my guilty secret."

"Oh, I don't have any guilty secrets at my age, dear," said Caroline, who had declined a cappuccino in favour of her usual black coffee with *Coffeepartner*. "I have what I like these days. If I fancy some bacon or clotted cream, I go to the corner shop and buy some."

"I think a low-fat diet is usually recommended for gallstones," said Sandra, knowing that her mother also had a fondness for sweets, chocolate, crisps and biscuits.

"Gallstones? What's that got to do with me?" asked Caroline, looking sharply at Sandra.

"Er – when you had jaundice, your first scan showed up some gallstones, don't you remember?" replied Sandra, frowning slightly.

"It was an ovarian cyst," retorted Caroline, frowning back at Sandra. "Come on Sandra, you shouldn't be losing your memory, you're young."

"An ovarian cyst *and* gallstones," persisted Sandra quietly. "And I'm hardly young. But never mind, how are *you*, Belinda?"

"Oh, I'm OK," replied Belinda, putting down her mug on a coaster. "That was lovely, thank you. Well to be honest, I'm really sad, because our dog died two weeks ago. Ian's still inconsolable, he was the one who always used to take him out for walks, especially since I developed my orthostatic tremor. He's been prescribed pills again for depression and anxiety."

"Ian's on pills for depression and anxiety?" echoed Caroline. "I know what that's like, I suffered in my time. Can't he buy another dog?"

"I think in his heart Ian would like to, but even he admits he was having trouble some days having to go out for walks in all weathers," explained Belinda. "He's 70 now and Trudie's told him he'd be mad to take on another dog. He knows she's right, but he's still grieving."

"Ian's 70?" asked Caroline, her coffee mug halfway to her mouth. "I always think of him as much younger than that. Goodness, he's catching me up!"

"I hope Ian feels better soon and you too," said Sandra gently, trying not to over-gaze at Belinda's pallor underneath her flushed cheeks. "How's Trudie?"

"She seems OK at the moment," replied Belinda, "although I know she keeps things from me now so I won't worry. The trouble is, I worry then about what she's not telling me!"

"Well I know what it's like to worry about your daughter, but you need to look after yourself and Trudie's obviously trying to help you do that," said Sandra, smiling at her cousin.

"I know you're right," replied Belinda, smiling back.

"I know what it's like to worry about a daughter too," added Caroline, looking at Belinda. "That's why the doctor advised me against having any more children because of my nerves. I felt much better when I went back to work, I needed that fulfilment."

Sandra sat and quietly listened while Belinda and Caroline reminisced. She was inwardly fuming and aware of feeling hurt and angry deep down about her mother's apparently thoughtless words.

'She talks of me more and more as if I'm a commodity in her life,' she thought sadly. 'She praises me when I'm useful to her, like telling me how well I painted that sodding, interminable, body-aching fence and yet she takes every opportunity to call me a little devil or a naughty little girl. I don't know how she could justify saying that last week, after I'd done about a year's worth of household filing for her, because she can't be bothered. It's true that she was quite kind to me when I had that ghastly virus in October, but as soon I was no longer obviously unwell, it all took off again. When did it all begin to go so wrong?'

"Have you started Christmas shopping yet, Sandra?" asked Belinda, literally bringing her back to the present situation. "Auntie and I were saying how it's become so horribly commercialised now."

"It has," agreed Sandra vehemently, although not sure to what the vehemence was attached. "Yes, I've done a fair bit of Christmas shopping, mainly because I hate the crowds in December and try to get as much done as I can in November."

"It's a good job you like shopping," said Caroline, "since you do most of mine."

"Osborn and I do most of yours," clarified Sandra, "since he drives the car. He also genuinely seems to like shopping. More than I do, actually."

"Well, you don't need to buy anything else for Juniper," said Caroline into the vaguely tense atmosphere. "You've already bought a lot for her."

"What?" The atmosphere became decidedly tense. "She's my granddaughter..." began Sandra, but stopped in an effort not to cause Belinda any more discomfort. 'She's my granddaughter and I'll sodding well buy her whatever I sodding well want, it's NOTHING to do with YOU,' she raged in her mind.

"I used to enjoy buying my grandchildren presents," reminisced Caroline. "We had some great Christmas Days here, didn't we Sandra."

"Mmm," was all Sandra could manage in reply. A vivid image had arisen of her father sitting in his chair, while they all opened presents. It was threatening to overwhelm her with a sense of irredeemable loss. Since she was sitting in her father's old chair, it was most unnerving.

"Lovely," said Belinda a bit desperately. "I don't think I'll ever be a grandma, but never mind. We still have a daughter and a son who come to us for their dinner on Christmas Day, even though their partners go to eat with their own parents!"

"Trudie and Peter must really like your Christmas dinners," said Sandra, glad to be on neutral ground once more.

"Ian does the cooking," explained Belinda. "Trudie feels more comfortable eating with us and David feels more comfortable eating with his own family. It's a strange set-up, but it works. I'm not sure about Peter and Rosie, I suppose they're the same."

"Sandra and Osborn always used to come to us on Christmas Day and go to Osborn's parents on Boxing Day," said Caroline, appearing to ponder. "I suppose we were lucky, really."

"Dad cooked the best roast potatoes," said Sandra more happily now, comforted with warm memories of her father. 'I miss you, Dad, I really miss you,' she said to him in her mind. 'I don't know how it's become so weird and uncomfortable with Mum, but I miss you and I'll always try to do my best with her.'

CHAPTER 8

Four days before Christmas, Madeleine stood with Sandra and Osborn in their kitchen, gazing in puzzlement at a partly-constructed gingerbread house that Madeleine had brought with her for a pre-Christmas celebration with her family. Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper, who were due to arrive at Bryony's parents that day, would be joining them the following day for a buffet.

"Is it supposed to look like that, Varti?" Madeleine asked her father doubtfully. "I think the roof is slipping, I'm not sure the icing worked very well."

"We should have used superglue," replied Osborn, grinning. "No, it should be OK, it probably just needs to be held in place for a few minutes."

"The chimney's a bit of a disaster area," commented Sandra, peering around behind Osborn. "I think it's moving with the roof."

"More icing," said Osborn firmly. "Have you got some there?"

"Yes, but we need to keep some for the snow," replied Madeleine, scrutinising the instructions. "It looks like we have to be creative with the icing to make a snowy roof."

"Not an icy roof?" asked Osborn flippantly. "Right, Varti to the rescue."

"Would you like a sherry?" asked Sandra, knowing for certain that gingerbread houses weren't exactly her forté.

"Yes please," replied Madeleine promptly. "It feels like Christmas has arrived when the sherry comes out."

"Osborn? Sherry?" prompted Sandra.

"Yes, darling?" Osborn looked up distractedly from the dodgy roof and its bendy chimney. "Oh sorry, I thought you were calling me chéri, like you used to do."

"Did you, Mumsie?" asked Madeleine incredulously. "How sweet!"

"Yes, I used to," replied Sandra, pouring three generous sherries. "I used to do a whole lot of things back then."

"I don't think I want to know," said Madeleine, laughing. "What time are Gulliver and Bryony coming tomorrow? I can't wait to see Juniper, so I can have lots of cuddles."

"About 10:00 probably," said Sandra, passing Madeleine and Osborn their sherry. "Down the hatch! Wow, that's what my dad used to say, I seem to be thinking of him lately."

"He liked Christmas," said Madeleine fondly. "I'm sad he never met Henri and he won't see any babies I might have."

"Maddy, you're not...?" Osborn looked up from his sherry glass.

"No Varti, you're not going to be a second time around grandfather yet, don't worry."

"I hope Juniper's OK after her nasty virus and chronic diarrhoea," said Sandra worriedly. "Gulliver was so stressed about taking her to hospital for blood tests."

"The results were normal, though, weren't they?" asked Madeleine with concern. "I sent Gulliver a text to ask what was happening and that's all he said."

"Yes, but the paediatric assessment unit referred them to a dietician, because Juniper was the same weight as she was three months ago," explained Osborn. "They were advised to give her more carbohydrates and fat, so I hope that helps."

"At least she hasn't got anything seriously wrong with her," added Sandra reassuringly, "although both Gulliver and Bryony caught her virus. I really hope we don't catch it, because we frankly had enough trouble with the last one, especially Dad."

"Oh well, fingers crossed," said Madeleine, sipping her sherry. "I hope I don't catch it either, I really wouldn't like to take it home to Henri's parents."

"When are they arriving?" asked Osborn, fiddling with the gingerbread roof.

"Tomorrow," replied Madeleine, fiddling with the gingerbread chimney. "Henri's dad has offered to help him with the troublesome doors and his mum is apparently bringing a shedload of food with her to give us a French Christmas. I'm a bit scared, but at least I won't have to do much cooking."

"Your first Christmas in your new home," said Sandra fondly, fiddling with the icing. "That's special."

"I'm sorry it won't be with you two." Madeleine frowned and sighed deeply.

"Don't worry, darling, we'll visit as soon as we can in January," said Sandra, picking up the instructions.

"No, it's not that, I think we've actually put the roof on back to front." Madeleine laughed and hugged Sandra's back. "I love this, all three of us in the kitchen like it used to be, having a chat and making silly mistakes and not caring in the slightest!"

"It's priceless," agreed Sandra, "like my memory of your face when you told me you could juggle those eggs, so I let you and then you realised you couldn't!"

"I can remember your face too," replied Madeleine, "when you saw the mess on the floor – but then you laughed and everything was all right."

"Well, I can remember all those times when you came home for a visit from university and we stood stirring things in a saucepan on the cooker and had a chat about life, the universe and everything, whilst sipping a glass of wine," reminisced Osborn with feeling.

"Hey ho, so many happy memories to balance the not so happy ones," remarked Madeleine enigmatically. "I suppose that's what life is all about, though, a kind of mystical balancing act."

"This chimney seems to be performing its own mystical balancing act," said Osborn, peering at the gingerbread house again. "How it's managing to stay attached is a real mystical balancing act as far as I'm concerned."

"Oh well, shall we decorate it anyway?" asked Sandra, holding up the packet of chocolate beans. "Somebody needs to set-to with the icing to make lots of snow and then we can creatively stick lots of these in the icing to make it look pretty."

"I don't think it's capable of looking pretty, I'd use another adjective entirely," said Osborn, looking doubtful.

"Oh, here goes nothing, pass me the icing," said Madeleine with sherry-fuelled confidence, as she gingerly coaxed the house into holding itself together.

The Dullkettle pre-Christmas family buffet day dawned at its usual time for the third week of December and saw the eager arrival of Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper at 09:30 precisely.

"Gosh, you're dead on time," commented Sandra to Gulliver, as she opened the front door to let them in. "I only meant any time after 09:30 when you asked what time to arrive, but it's lovely to see you!"

"We're all alive too, rather than dead," replied Gulliver, "for which I'm extremely thankful, after the time we've had lately because of Juniper."

"Poor little precious, it wasn't your fault," said Sandra, bending down to Juniper, who regarded her grandmother seriously with wide-open dark green eyes and then went running off into the sitting room. "She's walking so well now. How are you two, though, you both look rather tired."

"I feel rather tired," replied Bryony, "I've been waiting for Christmas so I can have a rest."

"I'm knackered," replied Gulliver forthrightly, depositing more bags into the porch. "I've been really stressed, I wish family lived closer."

"Family? You mean us?" asked Sandra, trying to ascertain exactly how serious Gulliver was being.

"Hello!" Osborn's resounding voice seemed to precede him as he came bursting through the door from the sitting room. "It's so good to see you! Juniper's found Auntie Maddy already. How was the journey yesterday? You both look a bit tired, have you got over the virus? Would you like a coffee, a beer, a sherry, a biscuit, a mince pie...?"

"I'd like a lie-down," replied Bryony, helping Gulliver with the bags, "but a coffee would be great, please."

"I'd like a full-time nanny for Juniper," replied Gulliver, setting down the last bag and blowing his nose. "Failing that, a biological grandmother would do, with a matching grandfather, of course. Hello Dad, a coffee would be wonderful, thanks."

An hour later, both Lawrence and Caroline had arrived, coffee had been served and a certain amount of present opening was underway. Even Lawrence, who had been protesting his deep loathing of Christmas for years, seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Hello Juniper," he said gently, as Juniper forgot herself and lunged at his leg. "What is it you want, my biscuit?"

"It's OK, we've brought some chocolate blobs for her," said Bryony, "since we have to fatten her up a bit. I'll get them, they're in my bag."

"Can I give them to her?" asked Madeleine eagerly, as Juniper followed her mother.

"You'll get messy, even with a bib," warned Gulliver, "but go ahead."

"I didn't think Madeleine usually wore a bib," said Lawrence, looking innocent. "Caroline, I don't know if I should say this, but you might benefit from a bib too."

"What?" asked Caroline, looking startled. "What do you mean?"

"You keep dropping biscuit crumbs on your chest," replied Lawrence matter-of-factly. "I'm sitting over here on the other sofa, though, so you can't hit me."

"You cheeky article!" retorted Caroline, brushing the crumbs carelessly away and not seeming to notice that most of them went on the floor.

"I am, but you like me really," replied Lawrence. "Juniper likes those chocolate blobs too, by the look of it. You're doing a great job, Madeleine."

"Thanks, but she's mostly doing it herself," said Madeleine, almost involuntarily kissing Juniper on the head. "I'm having a lovely long cuddle by doing this."

"I'll never forget when you were about Juniper's age and you insisted on wiping some crumbs away from Lawrence's mouth, Madeleine," said Caroline, watching her granddaughter feed her great-granddaughter. "There are four generations of females here and I'm the matriarch. It's a strange feeling. You'll be the matriarch one day, Sandra."

"I don't know how to answer that," answered Sandra, wishing vehemently that her mother wouldn't bring the focus onto her so frequently. "I just want to be me."

"Me too," said Gulliver, looking up from his phone. "Me-me, not you-me."

"That's more like you being you," said Sandra, grinning. "Or you being me-me, according to you. Do I mean that? I think I do."

"What are you two on?" asked Lawrence, raising his eyebrows. "I say Madeleine, Juniper's dribbling chocolate quite impressively there."

"Where? Oh, on my dress, she seems to have bypassed the bib," said Madeleine, reaching for the wet-wipes that Gulliver passed her. "Not to worry, it's easy to wash."

"I can put the washing machine on, if you like," offered Sandra, "it's no trouble."

"It wouldn't suit you," remarked Osborn. "It would be too heavy, as well."

"I've got a load of washing I need to do, actually," continued Sandra, ignoring one of Osborn's favourite jokes. "It was a bit of a rush this morning, I didn't even think about washing."

"Mother, too much information!" exclaimed Gulliver, suppressing a sneeze in his handkerchief. "Bugger, I thought I'd shaken off this virus."

"My nose won't stop dripping either," said Bryony, taking another tissue from the box Sandra had provided. "Oh! Juniper's sneezed chocolate, Madeleine..."

Later that evening, when the visitors had gone and the débris had been cleared away, Sandra, Osborn and Madeleine sat down in front of the low-volume television with a mug of tea each and chatted about the day.

Despite the day's chaos and viral undertones, Sandra felt happy that the family had been together in virtual harmony. She also felt a warm glow about a beautiful long purple scarf with silvery threads that Madeleine had given her, a surprise bottle of rum from Henri and a wooden box with a delicately carved Celtic design on its lid that she had once greatly admired on a previous visit to the Brecon craft fair, where Gulliver had a table every month.

"That box cost a lot of money," she said wonderingly. "I remember saying at the time how I'd love one, but we couldn't afford it. Fancy Gulliver actually buying me one! It's not the money at all, it's the fact that he remembered and then did it as a surprise. He couldn't contain himself, either, he kept dropping so many hints that he'd bought me a special present. Still, I must stop going on about it. I love your scarf and the other things, Mad, I really do!"

"Ye-es, you can actually take the scarf off you know, Mumsie, you look rather hot." Madeleine grinned at Sandra. "I love my presents too, especially the earrings, I'll wear them on Christmas Day and be with you both in spirit."

"You'll always be with us in spirit, Mad," said Osborn happily. "I'm so glad you were with us today and we were all together – apart from Henri, of course. I hope you have a lovely Christmas with his parents, I'm sure you will. Juniper certainly loved being with you today. I think she sussed that you like cuddling her, the way she kept launching herself at you!"

"I know, I only hope I don't catch her cold, I had to wipe her nose rather a lot," said Madeleine, shrugging.

"I think Bryony was quietly suffering with that virus," said Sandra, looking askance. "She certainly went through some tissues, I had to dispose of a few that she left on the sofa myself..."

"Gulliver was blowing his nose on and off all day, too," said Osborn, making a face. "It was good to see him gradually relax and be more like himself as the day went on, though, I was concerned how tense he was when he first arrived."

"Uncle Lawrence definitely enjoyed himself, if his awful jokes are anything to go by," said Madeleine, "and I really think they are. The worse the better, as far as his happiness scale goes. He's very gentle with Juniper, it's a real shame he never had children of his own."

"He always says our parents screwed him up good and proper, including about Christmas, but you can't go through life blaming other people all the time," said Osborn, blowing his nose. "God, if I've caught that virus, it'll be their damn fault."

"Grandma was fine," ventured Madeleine, knowing that Sandra sometimes found it difficult with Caroline. "It was good to see her laugh. I know you have a few issues with her, Mumsie, but I have some really happy memories of her in my childhood."

"I know, darling, I know it's different for you with her than it is for me," said Sandra, suddenly feeling her mood dip right down. "I don't ever mean to take anything away from your good memories of her – I couldn't, anyway."

"No, it feels like she and I are on a very tricky patch of our life journey together right now, but I do wish she'd cut me some slack. She actually told me not to spoil you by wrapping up those presents you asked me to order for Gulliver and Bryony. I wish I'd never told her anything about it. I'm always doing that, chatting away quite happily and openly, until she shoots me down in flames one way or another. Still, this *has* been a lovely day and I'm going to remember it for ages and ages. I'll have to take the scarf off now, though, I'm having a mega-hot flush!"

Nine days later, Christmas was categorically over. Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper had returned to Aberpontyfan two days before, feeling rested. Madeleine on the other hand, had spent a lot of time in bed since returning to Bristol, recovering from the virus that had hit her quite badly. She had rung twice, saying she'd enjoyed Christmas, but it was good to hear English voices, as Henri was naturally speaking French with his parents.

Caroline, Osborn and Sandra had also succumbed to the virus, in varying combinations of sore throats, aching bodies, feverishness, blocked sinuses, blocked ears and a great deal of nose-blowing and coughing. On New Year's Eve, Osborn's sinuses were so painful that he made a doctor's appointment and came back saying that Dr Effingham was also virally afflicted.

"Sorry, what did you say? Dr Effingham's vilely affected?" croaked Sandra tiredly.

"No, I said he's got it too. Your ears are really giving you trouble, aren't they – but at least you don't feel like you're drowning with your sinuses." Osborn made another disturbing noise of the nasally gurgling kind. "Sorry, I can't help it. At least you can't hear it properly if your ears are that bunged up."

"Don't you believe it," replied Sandra wanly. "I can hear the noise of your sniffing right through the noise of my own right ear. It's jangling and buzzing quite weirdly, I suppose it's tinnitus."

"Probably. At least your mother didn't seem quite as bad as we are when we took over her food shopping yesterday."

"She had rather a chesty cough and she did look pale."

"True. She still asked us if we were doing anything for New Year's Eve, though, despite my constant nose-blowing and that awful coughing fit you had!"

"The only thing I'm doing for New Year's Eve is going to bed early and waking up feeling a whole lot better," said Sandra positively – and as it happened, wrongly.

As she opened her eyes on the first day of 2009, Sandra felt the world spinning. Her eyes seemed to be involved in a crazy side to side dance, over which she had no control. She also realised her right ear was completely blocked up and deaf to the outside world, while inside it sounded like an alien's workshop – if only she knew what an alien's workshop sounded like.

She managed to make her unbalanced way to the bathroom very carefully and very slowly, able only to carry out the minimum requirements, before tottering dangerously back to bed and staying there in one position for as long as possible, so that her eyes had a chance of focusing properly.

Osborn brought her drinks and food, although she couldn't face eating much. Her left ear was also blocked up, but not as completely as her right ear. This made watching television to pass the time quite frustrating, but at least the images and the muted sound took her mind off her plight. Late in the evening and then early the next morning, she vomited helplessly as her vertigo became worse, just making it to the bathroom on hands and knees both times.

The second day of 2009 was more or less a repeat of the first day, except that Osborn rang the surgery to ask for advice and Dr Effingham rang Sandra back later for a phone consultation. His verdict was that "gunge from the virus" was causing the problem with her ears and prescribed some medication to counteract the vertigo, which Osborn thankfully collected for her.

Although she was sick again that night, she felt marginally better the following morning and even managed to dress for the day. Osborn made a vegetable stew and she gradually began to feel more human again, although her left ear was still intermittently blocked and her right ear remained completely blocked. It had been an inauspicious start to the year.

Two days later, with his sinuses gradually clearing, Osborn was able to return to work. Sandra pottered around the house, slowly clearing away the detritus of Christmas. She found herself cursing whenever she found another piece of tinsel in an unexpected place, as bending down still caused her to feel woozy.

Eight full days after Sandra had first been knocked off her feet, she made her first short outing to Caroline's house and the following day, she and Osborn drove to Bristol as planned, to make their first visit to Madeleine and Henri's house. Apart from a slight sway and a small stumble as she got out of the car and carefully made her way up the garden path and the few steps to the front door, Sandra felt the most normal she'd been since the new year had started.

"I can't tell you how good it feels to be here at last," she said to Madeleine, as she sat beside Osborn on one of the two dark brown leather sofas and looked around the room appreciatively.

"Yes you can," replied Madeleine, sitting beside Henri on the other dark brown leather sofa, "because I like to know you feel good here. It needs rather a lot doing to it, especially in this room and the dining room."

"We need to knock down the wall between 'ere and the dining room to make one big room," said Henri eagerly, pointing to the wall. "That will make it much lighter, especially with the patio doors in the dining room leading out to the back garden."

"It'll be best to have two or three estimates and I think you'll need permission," said Osborn a little doubtfully, turning around to look at the wall.

"Yeh yeh," replied Henri earnestly, "we 'ave to make a Building Regulations application and maybe consult a structural engineer, but my father 'ad a good look at it and 'e thinks it'll be OK."

"Henri's parents have renovated a few houses over the years," explained Madeleine, caught between her cautious father and her enthusiastic partner. "It'll make such a difference and hopefully I'll be at work when the work's actually being done." She gave a small clap of her hands. "It's so exciting!"

"Would you like some mould wine?" asked Henri, getting to his feet. "We were given it for Christmas, but my parents 'ad never 'eard of it and didn't fancy it."

"Mould wine?" repeated Osborn doubtfully. "Well, I suppose mould is used to make blue cheese. Yes, why not!"

"What's tickled you, Mad?" asked Sandra, looking at her daughter almost doubled over in silent laughter.

"Mould wine..." gasped Madeleine, groping for a tissue from a box on the coffee table. "It's not mould wine, it's mulled wine!"

The following day, the morning light revealed a world covered in heavy frost. Madeleine and Henri's garden looked very pretty with its widespread decoration of fragile ice crystals and early camellia flowers rimmed with tiny ice spikes. Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper arrived for their first visit to the house in time for morning coffee, after which they all drove to a garden centre for lunch. Juniper seemed to have grown up a little in the few weeks since Christmas, even looking as if she had more hair.

After returning to Madeleine and Henri's house, it was soon time for Juniper's pre-first birthday celebration. She looked slightly bemused when the adults suddenly began singing to her after putting a burning stick on top of a cake, but she clearly enjoyed the present unwrapping and kept them all occupied and amused for hours until she finally gave in to sleep.

"Thank the almighty whatever for that," said Gulliver most fervently, as Bryony returned downstairs with the sleep monitor showing a zonked-out Juniper, whose travel cot was in the room she'd be sharing with her parents for that night. "We can at last play the wine game now, I've been looking forward to this!"

The wine game that Gulliver and Bryony had given Madeleine and Henri for Christmas lasted for a couple of hours, but was really only a laid-back attempt at naming a few different wines and was interspersed with plenty of pizza. Bryony then disappeared upstairs for an early night, while Gulliver stayed downstairs for a game of *Intense Ono*, which eventually ended up more like *Mild Ono*.

"I'm beat," said Osborn, yawning.

"I thought you won the last game," remarked Henri, his dark brown eyes showing slight confusion.

"I did, but I meant I'm tired now," explained Osborn, searching for words. "It's an expression. I'm beat – dead beat."

"I thought a deadbeat was someone who's a sponger," commented Gulliver, packing away the cards.

"Yes, it does as one word, but as two words it means really tired," said Sandra, realising the mix-up.

"In that case, you could have a dead beat deadbeat," said Madeleine, stacking up the plates.

"But what 'as that to do with someone who uses sponges?" persisted Henri, not wanting to be beaten.

"No, a sponger is a slacker, a shirker, a bum..." Osborn ran out of words.

"Madeleine, 'elp me," said Henri desperately.

As Sandra lay beside Osborn in a sofa bed on the floor of the spare room that night, while Gulliver and Bryony were with Juniper in the bigger second bedroom, she became aware of strange aches and pains darting around her body and her throat started to be sore again.

'I don't believe it,' she thought tiredly, as her ears joined in the renewed viral attack. 'What's going on with me? My immune system must be totally down the pan, or up the creek, or down the Swanee, or somewhere that's really not doing me any good whatsoever.' She heard Osborn start to cough uncontrollably. 'Or him, either.'

It was referred to as boomerang flu that winter and it was rife. Sandra and Osborn both boomeranged, but Caroline mercifully didn't. By the end of January, when the virus had finally departed, Sandra realised there had been no improvement whatsoever in her right ear and consulted a doctor. After the prescribed corticosteroid nasal spray failed to help, followed by ear syringing that also failed to help, she decided she would have to make an appointment with Dr Effingham. Meanwhile, life carried on in its own unrelenting way, while Sandra's right ear carried on in its own unhearing way.

CHAPTER 9

A few months later, Sandra lay in an MRI scanner, while images of her brain were being taken to ensure a tumour wasn't the cause of her right ear's deafness. She was trying very hard to remain calm and keep her eyes closed, whilst knowing that the top part of her body was encased in a metal tube with a cage-like structure directly over her face. She was wearing headphones that enabled her to listen to a radio station, currently playing *Greatest Day* by Take This, while her finger was hovering over an alarm button that had been placed on her abdomen.

'I'm going to associate this song with this MRI scanner for ever,' thought Sandra, as a noise reminiscent of a pneumatic drill kept banging and thumping relentlessly all around her head. 'Keep your eyes closed, Sandra, keep your eyes closed, keep breathing slowly – ah, it's stopped again.'

"How are you doing in there, Sandra?" came a disembodied voice belonging to the radiographer through the intercom, from where he sat looking at a screen in the adjoining room.

"I'm OK," she heard herself answer in a higher than normal voice.

"That's good, you're doing great. There's just one more burst of four minutes to come and then you're done. Are we OK to go?"

"OK to go," replied Sandra as bravely as she could, having endured an initial burst of two minutes, followed by two more bursts of three minutes. 'Please no more,' she pleaded silently. 'I hate this! I want to open my eyes so badly, but if I do, I'll see that cage thing over my face and I'll go mad. I'm going to count the minutes, so it doesn't seem endless. One, two, three...'

It was finally over and she was free. Her legs felt a little shaky as she left the room and walked to where Osborn was waiting for her. She was so glad to see him that she blinked back the start of sudden tears from her eyes.

"I did it," she said, smiling. "I didn't freak out like I was afraid I would. It wasn't too bad, really."

"What do you feel like doing now?" asked Osborn, smiling in return. "How about going for a coffee somewhere?"

"I'd really like to go for a walk," replied Sandra, realising she felt a little strange after all. "I feel as if I'd like some fresh air to clear my head. How about a walk along the Hoe?"

The air on Plymouth Hoe was undeniably fresh with a vigorous onshore breeze, as Sandra walked away her tension, stopping with Osborn now and again to look at shipping out near the Breakwater and further in, Drake's Island with its volcanic and limestone rock rising familiarly from the water of Plymouth Sound.

"Mum, Dad and I used to come to the Hoe on Sunday afternoons and have a pot of tea down in one of the foreshore cafés," remembered Sandra fondly. "Sometimes we used to have a game of putt or an ice cream and sometimes Mum would be in one of her depressions and would hardly be speaking to Dad or me. I didn't much care, though, because I was used to her moods and I was glad to be out in the open air."

"Sounds fun," remarked Osborn distractedly. "How about a cappuccino in *The Cliff Terrace Café* over there? Franklin from work took me there for coffee once or twice when Bill Bustard was trying to make me redundant."

"Yes, a cappuccino would probably hit the spot now," replied Sandra, realising her head still felt a little strange. "I didn't know Franklin took you out for coffee – but just think, you'll soon be free of work forever."

"I might still go in and see a couple of people now and again," ventured Osborn, leading Sandra in the right direction. "Franklin and I have become quite good friends over the years, it's good to have someone you can be open and honest with."

"You mean you can be frank with Franklin," said Sandra, smiling as they arrived at the café. "What a lovely view from here. I'll grab a seat while you order, if you like."

Five minutes later, they sat with their drinks while gazing out to sea, with the occasional sound of seagulls, the odd barking dog and the rise and fall of conversation all around them.

"Are you concerned about the MRI scan?" asked Osborn conversationally. "You've seemed a bit on edge recently."

"I'm not concerned about it now it's over," replied Sandra honestly. "I'm pretty sure it's only a necessary test the hospital doctor I saw felt he had to request, just in case I was the one in a million with an acoustic neuroma. Actually, I think he said 13 in a million, but that doesn't sound as good. Dr Effingham said it was most likely the awful virus we had that attacked my inner ear and did the damage, remember?"

"Yes, I wondered if there was anything particular bothering you, that's all. We've lived together so long now that we pick up on each other's vibes very easily, you know how it is."

"I certainly do. One of your main stressors has been work for quite a long time now, I really can't wait for you to leave. No, I know that one of my main stressors is my mother. It's really beginning to bother me how inconsequential things can upset me so much, like her mentioning in winter that the summer border in her garden looked empty and messy – and assuming I'm going to paint her fence every two to three years. Well, never again with that sodding fence, I've absolutely made up my mind!"

"Good for you." Osborn gave a small sigh. "I hope we can live more for ourselves when I'm retired, or else I'll begin to wonder what it's all about."

"I thought you felt that teaching the healing course was what it's all about?"

"Part of it, but there's our life together too." Osborn gave Sandra a meaningful look that she found difficult to interpret. "We're not spontaneous anymore, we don't do anything out of the ordinary."

"I know." Sandra gulped slightly, suddenly feeling strangely unsettled. "We went to see *Streamdance* with Lawrence last month and we've booked to go to Malta with him in June." She heard her own voice rising in uncertainty at the end of the sentence, while simultaneously wondering why she felt she was justifying herself.

"True," said Osborn, seeming to relax again. "I'm really looking forward to that, it'll be great to see how much it's changed since 1969 when I was there."

"A mini-lifetime ago. By the way, I'm holding you to your promise back then of taking me to see the Blue Grotto. Talking of Malta, I don't think I told you what Mum said on Thursday, when she told me she had sciatica again and called me a devil twice. She said that she wanted to go on holiday with her friends while we were away, so she wouldn't miss me."

"God, that's pressure."

"Tell me about it. No, don't. It wasn't only what she said, the whole atmosphere felt so oppressive with her. I felt suffocated, like I need to breathe and live my own life, not hers."

"You do need to live your own life."

"I do. We all do."

It was the end of April and Sandra was visiting Alison. Easter had passed in a chocolate-oriented flurry of family visits and get-togethers. This time, despite Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper having been afflicted with yet another virus, plus conjunctivitis for Juniper and Bryony, Sandra and Osborn had managed to remain virally unscathed.

"How we escaped, I don't know," said Sandra, feeling a little warm in Alison's bright and cosy sitting room. "Juniper was unwell when they visited us, then Bryony and Gulliver were unwell when we visited them – and that's without the conjunctivitis."

"I expect Juniper's picking up everything from nursery," said Alison sympathetically. "I'll never forget how Tamsin and Peony had one thing after another when they were younger and we kept catching it. That's the down side of being on-hand grandparents, I suppose. I'd rather that any day, though, than have them disappear into distant Wales – although Usk isn't too far off the motorway."

"You still miss them terribly?" asked Sandra quietly.

"Yes, but my mind's been on Helen a lot this last month or so. It's something I didn't tell you about at the time because Helen wanted to keep it private. She and Mark had IVF treatment and she became pregnant, but then she lost the two embryos." Alison's normally direct gaze wandered off into the middle distance, slightly to the left.

"Oh Alison, I'm so sorry." Sandra's voice wandered off into silence for a moment or two, before it managed to return. "How is she?"

"She says she's coping fine, but she also told me she'll never put herself through that again and she's become very distant. To make matters worse, Mark seems to be uninterested and is distancing himself from her. They're not even sleeping in the same bed anymore and he spends a lot of time going out drinking with his mates. I thought that they were a bit rocky a while ago, but now I'm certain. It's awkward, because I've become quite friendly with his mother."

"Oh dear, why is life never simple? I don't think there's an answer to that, not one I want to contemplate right now, anyway," said Sandra contemplatively. "How are you feeling about it, because you lost two potential grandchildren?"

"It felt like having to let go of all sorts of possibilities for a while, but I've come to terms with the fact that I'm grandma to two and that's it." Alison smiled ruefully. "I just wish we didn't have to keep on trundling up the motorway to see them and endure a really rather uncomfortable stay. Sam and Karen don't exactly welcome us with tea and freshly baked scones! In fact, last time they said they'd been so busy that they hadn't been able to do any food shopping at all, so we had to unpack our bags and go out again to do it ourselves. I always end up cleaning the kitchen and the bathroom too, I can't stand living in such a mess."

"Well I feel disloyal saying it, but it's very much like that when we visit Gulliver and Bryony. Osborn's cleaned the shower several times and I normally attack the kitchen. Bryony does cook for us though, she's good at that. I wash most of the dishes – and there are often so many it's unbelievable – but it's always felt fair to me that one of us does the cooking and another one does the washing up. I wish it was the same at home, but Osborn comes home really tired from work most days, so I normally do both like I always have done. I'm hoping things will change when he retires."

"Not long now – it's August, isn't it?"

"It'll be the end of July with this year's leave taken into consideration."

"Watch out then, he'll be following you around, like Dirk does to me. I'll never forget one day not long after Dirk retired, when I said I was going to pop into town and he put on his coat because he assumed I meant with him too. I used to love the freedom of going into town on my own and wandering around for a while, but it seems to be a thing of the past now. I don't know why I give in to him so much, but I suppose it was just the done thing for women in our generation and now it's an ingrained habit." Alison sighed deeply and then chuckled. "Sorry Sandra, I don't mean to put you off about Osborn's retirement!"

"It's OK, I think I'm quite realistic about it," replied Sandra, chuckling in return. "It's my mother who seems to be holding some sort of grudge about it, as if she doesn't like the idea of Osborn having more of a call on my time. I've felt such a lot of indirect aggression from her lately. I'm pretty sure she provokes me for a reaction half the time, which I absolutely hate. She can be very strident and talks over me a lot too."

"My mother became very inward-looking and really didn't want to help herself in her last years." Alison sighed again. "I'm sure she wanted me to move in with her, which was totally out of the question, especially since it would have meant moving 150 miles away. Social Services even suggested it! I replied with a most categorical no, but I do know how difficult it can feel on the one hand to have your mother's welfare as your responsibility and on the other hand to have your own life with your own husband to consider."

"Definitely. Family dynamics can be a real – something or other. I was taken aback that my mother was only going to give Gulliver, Bryony, Madeleine and Henri a small *Crème Egg* each for Easter, which seemed like an insult after they usually take a lot of care to buy her a proper Easter-Egg-size milk chocolate Easter Egg, for heaven's sake. God, I think I'm going a bit mad..."

"It's OK, you're in good company." Alison laughed out loud, then became serious again. "Do you think she might be jealous of them, or is punishing them for living away, or something?"

"It's very possible. She's like two different people sometimes. She was absolutely fine on Mothering Sunday, when we gave her a new skirt, took her out for a drive and a walk in a garden and bought her tea and cake. It was like it used to be when she smiled and laughed a lot more. The following Tuesday, though, she was back to calling me a naughty little girl and moaning about her bad luck. She actually said I'm luckier than she is! I ignored it, but it made my blood boil, which is quite an uncomfortable feeling on the whole." Sandra took off her cardigan. "Phew, hot flush. She even went on about the younger generation being awful in various ways. I hate her snide, insidious comments and her loaded questions so much – but even more than that, I hate myself for feeling the way I do about her now."

"That's not good. I think we need to cheer ourselves up somehow. Would you like a biscuit?" Alison laughed at her own inadequate idea of being cheered up.

"Thank you, but no!" Sandra smiled wryly. "I know I've been moaning mightily, just like I've accused my mother of doing, but I feel better for it. I can remember I used to express all the painful stuff by writing poetry, but the muse seems to have left me. That may or may not be a good thing."

"I remember reading your poetry, I thought it was good. It was sometimes a bit on the dark side, to be honest, but quite powerful. I remember I used to enjoy writing doggerel many years ago, so I'm not exactly averse to a bit of poetry myself."

May had arrived and a Rainbow Healers' evening taster of Emotional Freedom Technique. Throughout the year so far, Sandra had alternated between feeling useful and accepted in the group, to feeling useless and alienated. Most of the time, however, she fluctuated somewhere along the middle of the scale, which was currently the case as an earnest, middle aged man with an engaging smile explained about tapping.

'I used to like tap dancing,' she thought irrelevantly, as her mind wandered off on its own accord. 'I used to like the controlled but expressive way the feet and body responded to music. I'm not sure about this kind of tapping, though. That is, I absolutely love the idea of emotional freedom, but I can't seem to get past the weirdness of the technique.'

'I understand EFT is a psychological acupuncture approach, but all that tapping yourself in various specified places seems – well, it seems something I simply couldn't be bothered to do. What that says about me, I don't know, but I don't have the head-space for it right now. On the other hand, I'd definitely give it a go if someone was going to do it with me, because how can I evaluate it fairly without trying?'

"Who's going to be a guinea pig for me then?" suddenly asked the earnest, middle aged man with the engaging smile, scanning the group. "How about you?" he continued, looking at Sandra hopefully.

"Oh no, I'm fine. No thank you, no!" replied Sandra, feeling herself blush almost instantly and looking away, so the focus of attention would shift to someone else. 'Why me?' she thought heatedly, as a more willing guinea pig was enticed to be emotionally freed via tapping. 'Why do people pick on me so much in groups? Do I give out strange, beckoning vibes, or something? Single me out so that I can squirm with anxiety and become unbearably embarrassed by being the centre of sodding attention vibes? I can't stand it!'

By the end of the evening, Sandra had managed to regain her self-composure, although only as much as she considered she had self-composure. After the others had gone, Leona and Pascal stayed behind to have a chat, which had happened several times over the past few months.

Once, Leona had met Sandra and Osborn in a supermarket café and they had talked for over an hour, beginning to feel very comfortable in each other's presence. It had become obvious that Leona was also friendly with Pascal, although Sandra remained unsure if they were anything more than friends.

"I had this brilliant meditation I must tell you about," began Leona excitedly, her blonde hair bouncing around a little. "I've run it past Pascal and he thinks it's worth sharing with you."

"Bring it on," said Osborn encouragingly in his very Osborn-encouraging way. "Let's all sit down over here."

"In the meditation, I had a wonderful conversation with my spirit guide," began Leona, even before they were all seated. "Well, it wasn't exactly a conversation, but it was such a clear communication about a retreat. It felt like it would be the way forward, as if all that I've been through in my life has been leading towards this. I had this vision of lots of us being involved, because healing would be such an important part of it. What do you think?"

"I know I want to do something with my life after I retire," said Osborn spiritedly, "and I've always felt it involved both Sandra and me – haven't I, Sandra."

"Mm-hm," replied Sandra vaguely, disliking it when Osborn essentially made her speak.

"How do you feel about this, Pascal?" asked Osborn, sensing that Sandra would rather remain quiet.

"I think it's a great idea, but I can't help wondering about the practical side," replied Pascal, running his fingers through his cropped, sandy-coloured hair. "I mean first of all, you have to have a building and that means an enormous amount of money."

"We'll have to win the lottery," said Leona, laughing.

"Do you mean to involve Rainbow Healers?" asked Osborn a little guardedly.

"Oh yes, it would be silly not to take advantage of their experience if they're willing to give it," replied Leona, yawning. "Sorry, I'm quite tired."

"See what Gloria has to say about it, since she's the founder of Rainbow House and Rainbow Healers," suggested Pascal, yawning too. "I must be tired as well, it's catching."

"Maybe you could arrange a proper meeting for anyone interested," said Osborn, also yawning. "I must go before I fall asleep on my feet, but count me in, definitely. You too, Sandra?"

"Mm-hm," replied Sandra, her noncommittal response covering all options.

In the middle of May, Sandra and Osborn drove to Bristol to spend a long weekend at Madeleine and Henri's house. It was an ordinary weekend, but Sandra had come to value the ordinary in life greatly. They drank numerous mugs of tea, while admiring the large and light sitting room, as the wall to the dining room had been removed. They went shopping, did some gardening, had lunch out, watched television, talked endlessly and for once in her current phase of life, Sandra slept exceptionally well.

A Bank Holiday visit at the end of May from Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper concluded with a family buffet tea that included Caroline and Lawrence. Caroline had seemed slow and tired when Sandra had seen her two days previously, complaining that her ankles had been swollen the day before. However, a remarkable recovery seemed to have taken place, as she stood at the table and cut herself a slice of cake.

"This cake looks lovely, Sandra, did you make it yourself?" she asked brightly, as she nearly fell over Juniper on her way back to the sofa.

"Careful!" exclaimed Osborn, leaping up to avert potential disaster. "Are you all right, Juniper? Here, I'll sit at the table with you and help you with your food."

"You know baking cakes isn't my *forté*," replied Sandra somewhat curtly to her mother, trying desperately not to feel irritated.

"Is it your *forté*, though, that is the question," asked Lawrence, as he also cut himself a slice of mint chocolate cake. "More to the point, decimal or otherwise, are numbers your *forté*?"

"You're an idiot," said Osborn warmly to his brother. "I made the damn cake, I felt in the mood for a bit of baking therapy yesterday."

"I've never had any damn cake before," continued Lawrence, "although I had a lovely piece of Victorian sandwich the other day."

"Wasn't the bread a bit mouldy?" asked Bryony from where she sat on the sofa, beside Gulliver.

"What are you talking about?" asked Caroline tartly. "It's not a sandwich, it's a cake!"

"Isn't it called a Victoria sandwich?" threw Sandra into the cakey fray.

"No, a Victorian sandwich, like an Edwardian *vol-au-vent*," said Gulliver from his comfortable position on the sofa.

"Or an Elizabethan trifle," said Sandra from her less comfortable position on the floor, leaning against the other sofa where Lawrence and Caroline were sitting. "Mum, I think you just dropped a piece of cake on my head." She got up and sat on a dining chair in the corner of the room, for safety and solitude.

"Oh, I'd never trifle with an Elizabethan," commented Lawrence, brushing cake crumbs from his beard. "Or a Juniper, come to that, the way she's attacking that banana. What a pity Madeleine and Henri aren't here too. How are they getting on?"

"They're doing a lot of decorating," replied Osborn, moving Juniper's plate in front of her. "That's what they're doing this Bank Holiday, starting on the main bedroom. Here Juniper, let me peel that banana a bit more."

"Nana," said Juniper clearly.

"Does she call you Nana, Sandra?" asked Caroline, putting her plate precariously on the small table beside the sofa. "I always preferred Grandma myself."

"No, she means banana," explained Sandra, removing Caroline's plate to a safer place. "Madeleine's just completed a day course outdoors that'll count towards her personal trainer qualification – or is it a fitness instructor she's going to be? I get slightly confused, but I know she's doing very well, anyway."

"I'm glad she's pursuing what she wants," replied Lawrence, rubbing his ear vigorously. "Freaking earholes, this wax is making my ear itch something wicked, I'll have to have them syringed again, I suppose."

"I had mine done the other day," said Caroline airily. "I'm not sure it was very successful, was it Sandra. I'm glad you came with me."

"I was traumatised because you insisted on walking in the road both ways," retorted Sandra, becoming more and more exasperated with her mother's apparent ploy of drawing her relentlessly into Caroline's own life story.

"You get trouble with your feet at my age," replied Caroline obliviously. "You'll be the same one day. That's why so many old people stay indoors."

"Never in a million years and no they don't!" expostulated Sandra, losing the fight to keep calm.

"That reminds me, I'd like a quick visit to *Come Outdoors* tomorrow if we've got time," said Gulliver to Bryony, whether trying to take the spotlight off Sandra, she neither knew nor cared at that point.

"I'd like to come outdoors tomorrow," she muttered to herself, starting to gather up dirty plates. 'I don't care whether it's *Come Outdoors* or come walking outdoors as far away as possible from this sodding place and this sodding life,' she thought, as she continued clearing the table. 'Oh, sodding hell, I don't really mean that, do I?'

CHAPTER 10

Sandra had survived a three-hour flight to Malta and was currently standing with Osborn and Lawrence in unaccustomed heat, looking out from Sliema harbour front towards the ancient city of Valletta.

'I'm looking at Valletta,' she said silently to herself in complete wondrous awe. 'I'm standing on Malta soil – well, concrete – and I'm looking out at Valletta, the Fortress City, with its wonderful buildings and its amazing history dating back to the times of the Knights of St John and then later the ravages of World War II...'

"Stand beside Osborn for a photo, Sandra?" asked Lawrence, his trusty old straw sunhat tilted jauntily and his camera raised for action. "Then maybe we can go and look for a drink and somewhere to eat, I need sustenance."

"Sliema has changed a lot since I was here in 1969, but I remember so clearly how Valletta looked," said Osborn, smiling. "I'll never forget Valletta."

"I don't see how anybody can forget Valletta once they've set eyes upon it," breathed Sandra, smiling for the camera. "It looks awesome – and I know I hate that completely overused and consequently meaningless word, but Valletta looks absolutely awesome!"

Two days later, Sandra was actually on her way to Valletta, on the completely and haphazardly overcrowded number 62 bus. After paying the minimal fare, Osborn and Lawrence managed to weave their way through sitting and standing people of all shapes and sizes to find a seat further inside the bus. However, as it started to move and people accordingly moved themselves, Sandra found herself cut off from Osborn and Lawrence and completely wedged in at the front by the luggage section.

She decided to make the best of it, clinging on for all she was worth while trying to look cool and relaxed, up close and personal to some young people, including the driver. She noticed there was a small bottle of what she took to be holy oil swinging around by the wheel, as well as what looked like some sort of bull talisman. The radio was playing music quite loudly, but she nearly jumped out of her skin at one point when a hideous noise suddenly blasted out. It turned out to be the bus's horn – a raucous and unearthly sound with which she later became familiar.

After they'd travelled a few stops and some people had extricated themselves from the bus, a woman tapped her on the shoulder and offered her a seat. However, she was so wedged in and even enjoying the experience in a masochistic way, that she politely declined and continued to sway along with the bright young things. She couldn't see Osborn and Lawrence, but in due course they all alighted at Valletta bus station.

"I'm at Valletta bus station," she breathed, as they all stood looking at the Triton Fountain in the middle of a circular system for buses of various vintages, painted brightly in yellow with an orange band. There were people everywhere, including bus drivers larking around with one other quite vigorously.

"This is a bustling place," remarked Osborn bemusedly. "I'm sure Valletta wasn't nearly as crowded in 1969."

"Just one Valletta, give it to me!" sang Lawrence loudly and happily. "Anyone for an ice cream?"

That afternoon, they discovered the Upper Barrakka Gardens, the Lower Barrakka Gardens and *The Malta Experience* inside a building that had formerly been the hospital of the Knights of St John. Sandra had already nearly swooned at her first sighting of a Maltese Cross embedded in the wall of a church and was finding the proximity of so much history in such a beautiful place almost overwhelming – but in a good way.

Further trips to Valletta bus station took place on other days – once en route to the Maritime Museum at Vittoriosa and again for a more in-depth visit to Valletta itself. Sandra tried to prepare herself psychologically for the ordeal by bus both times and the second time it was just as well she did, as the bus was once again full, with standing room only.

The three of them were the last passengers to get on, which resulted in Lawrence almost protruding out of the door, while Sandra and Osborn ended up hanging on to the bar running along the top of the bus with grim determination, as it bumped and jolted its way along. Fortunately, some people got off after a couple of stops and although it was very awkward for Lawrence, it meant that Sandra had a seat.

It was such a relief not to have to inhale the aroma from other people's armpits any longer. Even sitting down was an experience, however, as more people got on at further stops and they couldn't help but press very close and squashing personal as other people got off. This time they stopped at the bus station to take photos of the impressive Triton Fountain, before walking further along to the Statue of Independence.

"It's such an unusual pleasure to be able to take photos with a backdrop of blue sky all the time," remarked Sandra, squinting into the sunlight. "I wish I could see what I'm taking a photo of properly, though. Hopefully it'll be easier in the museum."

It was a lot better in the National Museum of Archaeology for both coolness and photographic ease. They discovered the museum building itself had been the Grand Hostel of the Knights of Provence, built in 1571.

"This is what a first visit to Malta is like, really," considered Sandra aloud, as they emerged into the heat once again, after their fill of old temple stones and fertility goddesses known as 'fat ladies', with their massive bottoms and interchangeable heads. "You're surrounded by so much history, you're not even aware of it half the time. I love it so much!"

Another memorable trip was a bus tour to Mdina, once the capital of Malta. After a short stop at Mosta and Ta' Qali, they climbed back onto the bus, acclimatised their buttocks to the burning seats and continued the journey. It was a picturesque drive along roads lined with prickly pears, oleanders, fennel and other typically Mediterranean flowers and vegetation.

Vineyards slumbered in the glaring midday sun, as their tour guide related many interesting facts, including how Malta had been forced by EU regulations to grow its own grapes for producing wine, rather than having them imported from Italy, as it had always done in the past.

Soon in the distance, a town on top of a hill appeared enigmatically in the heat haze. As it shimmered ever closer, it was obviously the walled and fortified town of Mdina, along with Rabat. Sandra had read that Mdina's settlements dated back to over 4,000 BC and had first been fortified by the Phoenicians around 700 BC. Unfortunately, it proved practically impossible to take a decent photo from the top of the bumpy bus, especially when the view kept disappearing behind trees, but Sandra treasured the sight in her memory, hopefully for a long time to come.

They approached Rabat, meaning 'suburb' in Arabic and archaic Maltese and could see it was indeed an obvious suburb of Mdina. Entering Rabat brought back memories for Osborn, who revealed he had frequented a bar there in 1969, but Sandra wasn't bothered with his dubious past as she gazed awestruck at the surroundings. On leaving the bus, they found a table underneath a parasol at a nearby eating place and drank iced lemon tea, while waiting for a toasted cheese and mushroom sandwich. It was delicious when it came, accompanied with some excellent chips and salad.

"I can't get over these buildings," said Sandra, as she offered her remaining chips to Lawrence. "I don't know what any of them are, but they just ooze history. The whole place does, it's steeped in it – you feel it's in the air you breathe."

"It probably is, with all this dust everywhere," replied Lawrence. "My hat is full of it. Are we finished? I'll pay."

"I don't remember it being as dusty in 1969," mused Osborn, finishing his iced tea. "Mind you, it was in winter, so we spent a lot of time in bars to keep warm. Shall we have a wander up to the gate of Mdina until we meet up with the others again?"

"Oh look," said Lawrence, gazing in the distance. "I spy an ice cream kiosk over there, anybody fancy one?"

It was soon time to convene with the rest of the group and they all walked up to the gate of Mdina, known as the Silent City. Once inside the entrance, the guide started one of his frequent talks along the way, pointing out places or features of interest. The streets looked deliciously ancient, with some magnificent houses and also a beautiful cathedral church.

They were invited into one gift shop to sample prickly pear liqueur and obligingly bought some after tasting a sample. They were then led to a place with a wonderful panoramic view of Malta, where they rested in the shade of some trees for a while.

After that, they left Mdina by retracing their steps via a different route and found themselves again in Rabat. More sampling of local confectionary occurred, followed by a visit to St Paul's Catacombs, which was more in line with Sandra's hopes of the tour.

It was dark and humid inside the catacombs, but intensely fascinating. Sandra was glad to have a guide, who told them many intriguing historical facts and pointed out holes that grave robbers had made, as well as tiny niches in the rock for babies. He explained how the high humidity helped to decay the bodies quickly. With Malta being a small island, the bodies would stay in the catacombs for two years, by which time they were just bones and would then be transferred to a proper burial site.

After that subterranean exploration, it was a straight but picturesque ride back to the hotel, through the central parts of Malta and out along the coast. It was very windy on the open-air top deck of the bus, but not at all cold. Most of the people on the tour had chosen to sit inside on the deck below, but Sandra was enjoying the vigorous flow of air. She felt sad to see so much building taking place – half-finished apartments were a common sight.

It was as they were bowling along the Maltese roads that she suddenly realised Lawrence was missing.

"Osborn!" she cried with great alarm. "Lawrence is missing!"

"What?" exclaimed Osborn, who had been lost in a comfortable reverie. "He was here just now, I saw him!"

"Where can he be?" asked Sandra fearfully, not wanting to voice the dreadful possibility that he had somehow fallen out over the top of the bus and lay injured and alone somewhere along the road they had just travelled.

"I'll look behind us and you look in front," said Osborn urgently, clearly worried.

"Hey," said Lawrence a minute or so later, materialising from down behind one of the seats at the back of the bus. "What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing?" asked Osborn with indignant relief.

"My hat blew off in a sudden gust," replied Lawrence sadly. "I can't find it, it must have blown over the side. I've had that hat for almost 30 years."

"Looking for this?" asked Sandra, emerging from behind one of the forward seats and holding out a very bedraggled and forlorn looking straw hat.

The day at last arrived when Osborn could fulfil his 40-year-old promise to Sandra and take her to see the Blue Grotto at Wied iz Zurrieq. They had booked a trip on a minibus, which wound its way along high coastal roads, while an informative tour guide kept their interest with Maltese anecdotes. As they began their descent to the sea, she told them that when they turned the next corner, they would see whether the fishermen were running the boats or not – a nugget of information that assumed gigantic proportions within Sandra's mind.

"What?" she hissed to Osborn, who was sitting beside her. "See whether they're running the boats or not? We've come all this way after having waited 40 years and the fishermen may not be running the sodding boats?"

Fortunately for them both, when they turned the corner they could see that the fishermen were running the boats. The minibus duly arrived at a small fishing village, where the guide led them firstly to a kiosk to pay €7 each and then down a rather slippery road to the water's edge, where the fishermen were waiting. Sandra, Osborn and Lawrence were the last three to make it on to the first boat, a 9-seater. They had to put on a lifejacket, but the fisherman was obviously a fast worker, as they started off straight away.

Sandra spent the first few minutes of the long-awaited Blue Grotto boat trip fiddling around with an unfamiliar lifejacket and enlisting Osborn's aid in this niggling, troublesome task. The boat seemed very low in the water as the fisherman took them in and out of a few caves, pointing out a stalactite here and there, some purple coral along the edge and places where the water was a stunning azure blue. Dappled sunlight was reflected by the water onto the roof of some parts of the caves, whereas in other parts it was really dark.

Several boats were coming along behind in convoy and before they knew it, they were back at the water's edge, taking off their lifejackets and being ushered out of the boat to make way for the next incoming boat. The fishermen were no doubt glad they were running the boats after all! The worst aspect seemed that it felt rather rushed, but it was a magical place and the thrill of actually having made it at last to the Blue Grotto far outweighed anything else.

"Did you enjoy it?" asked Osborn contentedly, as they walked back up the rather slippery road to the small village. "It wasn't nearly as commercialised in 1969."

"I loved it and I wouldn't have missed it for a whole lifetime's supply of Maltese ice cream," replied Sandra happily, slipping her hand into Osborn's with a sense of fulfilment.

"Ah, ice cream," said Lawrence, as they approached a small shop. "Fancy one?"

Later that day, after they had enjoyed another meal in the restaurant they'd frequented most evenings, Lawrence suggested a stroll by the waterfront. There was a balmy serenity to the still very warm air and they were reluctant to return to the hotel, so sat on a bench overlooking the harbour for an hour or so. It was a lovely, emotive sight that Sandra knew she'd never forget.

"Look at that sky," she said admiringly, having watched it become tinged with bands of pink and purple. "This is such a beautiful view of Valletta over there, looking so golden with the sun shining on its walls."

"I like the way the lights of Valletta are gradually switching on in succession," said Lawrence, stroking his beard. "It looks really good against the ever-deepening blue beyond."

"That's very poetical, Lawrence," said Osborn pensively. "It *is* beautiful, though. It wasn't really like this in the winter of 1969..."

"It must be better watching night fall over Valletta from Sliema rather than the other way around," considered Sandra, as more lights came twinkling into existence. "Valletta is a thousand times more picturesque than Sliema."

"Sliema wasn't much bigger than a fishing village in 1969," reminisced Osborn, stretching out his legs. "I'm sad that Malta is being spoiled by the relentless advance of money-making modernity – wow, I'm impressing myself, that was a good drop of wine we had – but I suppose the people here have to do whatever they can to make a living."

"Island people in particular," added Lawrence thoughtfully. "The smaller the island the higher the necessity, I suppose. Definitely a good drop of wine."

"Still, knowing what they went through in World War Two, how must the local people feel about this onslaught and rape of Sliema?" asked Sandra soberly. "Maybe I should have had more wine, I'm waxing morbid."

"You're what?" asked Lawrence, looking playfully askance. Thankfully, Sandra was still gazing at Valletta. "Well, there I was thinking you were waxing lyrical."

"It sounds to me as if you're waxing hysterical," said Osborn, grinning at his brother.

"As the light's waning, that sky's becoming even more beautiful," said Sandra dreamily. "This is special – it feels like pure peace. These are moments I'll never forget."

Sandra forgot the Valletta sunset for a while, when halfway into their flight home, a hideous bump seemed to rock the foundations of the plane (if a plane actually had any foundations) and caused a general sharp intake of breath from many passengers throughout the cabin. A short while later, the pilot explained how they had been caught in the turbulence of another aircraft's trail and everything was fine.

'Yes, fine if you don't have a phobia about flying, or rather of dropping out of the sky like a stone trapped inside a metal coffin,' thought Sandra wryly. 'Perhaps in my next life I'll have mastered the art of personal translocation. Imagine! Still, that sunset over Valletta was really something else...'

"Well, did you have a good holiday?" asked Caroline, as soon as Sandra stepped inside the door to see her mother on the afternoon they returned.

"Yes, thank you," replied Sandra dutifully. Inside, she could feel herself already reacting negatively, as all the past niggles, jibes, undercurrents and irritations came flooding back. 'I still don't understand how she can make a simple question sound like a reprimand,' thought Sandra uneasily. 'Is it her, or is it me? I really wish I knew.'

"Thank you for your postcard," continued Caroline blithely. "It really uplifted me when I saw it lying on the mat. I tried to get on as normal with you being away, but I feel so alone when you're not here, you know. You're the only one I really talk to about everything, so it was a long week. I can't seem to open the washing machine door, could you have a look and see if you can do it? Have you got time for a game of *Scribble*? I suppose Osborn's looking forward to his retirement now, after a taste of the good life. Listen to me babbling away, I seem to save it all up for you."

"I haven't got time for *Scribble*," replied Sandra immediately, thinking she might lose the will to live if she was subjected to her mother's usual extreme moaning about her bad luck. "I'm tired and I just came over to make sure you were OK." She went over to the washing machine and pulled the door open. "There you go, it was just a bit stiff."

"Ah, you've got more strength than I have, I'm always afraid of using force. Well, I'm glad I've got you back now. Don't forget I have an appointment for another scan at the hospital on Friday."

At the end of June, Sandra met her cousin Belinda in *The Rusty Kettle* for a cappuccino catch-up session. After their last meeting at Caroline's house, Sandra had been surprised but pleased when Belinda said she liked seeing Sandra on her own.

"You seemed a bit down last time at your mum's," said Belinda candidly. "I know it must be a burden for you looking after her. I know how mothers can get to you, I had to stay at my mum's house for a while when her dad died and I had to go home in the end, she was driving me mad."

"Really?" Sandra looked at Belinda with genuine surprise. "It's awful, isn't it, because as much as you love your mother, they seem to have this direct line into you and it all affects you so much, despite your best efforts to not let it get to you. I came back from Malta with the highest of intentions, but then we played *Scribble* and it was the most atrociously horrible game, straight back to the verbal abuse."

"That's awful," said Belinda sympathetically. "You shouldn't have to take that. How is she getting on physically? How's her ovarian cyst?"

"It was still the same size when she had her last scan recently," said Sandra, remembering the huge rush she'd had to get to the hospital for the appointment and then back home in time to pack, ready for travelling to Madeleine and Henri's for the weekend as soon as Osborn had come home from work. "They don't seem to be worried about it, they just keep checking it."

"Oh well, that's good. They keep checking me too for my orthostatic tremor and blood pressure. I actually fainted the other day when I was waiting at the bus stop and somebody called for an ambulance. It was really embarrassing. I didn't tell Ian, he would have been worried."

"Oh no! What happened, did they take you to A & E?" asked Sandra, secretly harbouring a small concern that Belinda would faint beside her at *The Rusty Kettle* and she would have to call for an ambulance.

"No, I came around quite quickly, but they took me into the ambulance to check my vitals and said I was fine. They thought it was probably low blood pressure and advised me to see my doctor. Then they took me home in the ambulance! Luckily, I knew that Ian was out at the library. I don't think the neighbours saw anything because they're usually at work and nobody's said anything."

"Oh Belinda, you're a case! Did you tell Trudie?"

"No, she'd only worry too. I think she's becoming anxious about her wedding in Florida, because she's lost a lot of weight. I suppose it's only natural, though, when you're getting married. David's very good for her, but I can't help wishing I could go and see my only daughter getting married. Still, as long as she's happy..." Belinda's voice wavered slightly.

"It's so hard, this pull between parents and children, I do feel for you so much. I know how I feel when Madeleine's not OK – and Gulliver too, although he keeps it more to himself. How does Peter feel about not going to his sister's wedding?"

"I'm not sure, he doesn't say much about it," replied Belinda slowly. I think he takes after Ian, keeping things close to his chest. I do know that he feels hurt that Hetty still won't speak to him. Or me, of course."

"That sister of yours has a lot to answer for, I think she's off her trolley. Does she really think she's always right and others who don't agree with her are always wrong?" Sandra frowned sympathetically at Belinda, who smiled back wistfully.

"Yes, she does. I wish she was more like you."

"Thank you – and if I had a sister at all, I wish she was just like you."

"Ah, you're too kind, you don't know all my foibles," chuckled Belinda daintily.

"That's nothing, you should see some of my quirks," chortled Sandra inelegantly.

CHAPTER 11

Osborn's voluntary redundancy and early retirement was gathering speed. He had been given a camera as a personal thank you from his apprentice, which had clearly been good for his self-esteem. For Sandra's part, she had successfully managed to cope with a barrage of emails from one of his work colleagues, who kept requesting information about a suitable retirement present from the university.

However, she and Osborn were revelling in the fact that Caroline had gone away to Torquay on a five-day break with a group of three other ladies of around her own age, who had managed to coerce her into joining them. Osborn had taken a day off on the Tuesday, when Sandra would normally be visiting Caroline, and they had headed to their favourite feel-good destination, the Eden Project.

They had already walked their way slowly around the Tropical Biome and were sitting in the café enjoying a *Fairdeal* coffee.

"I do find the humidity in there slightly uncomfortable," remarked Sandra, gradually feeling cooler. "I wish I didn't, I love the Rainforest atmosphere, it feels like a different world."

"We should be able to do this more often soon," said Osborn contentedly, as he sipped his coffee. "I can't wait to be retired, so we can go out a lot more and do our own thing. I'll feel we've started to live our own lives again then."

"I'll still have to see Mum," warned Sandra, feeling a gnawing, indefinable sense of foreboding threatening Osborn's idyll. "You'll be able to meet Lawrence in Plymouth more often though, as well as maybe Franklin from work."

"Oh yes, I meant to say that Annette from work asked if we could have coffee sometimes," said Osborn casually. "She said I'd helped her a lot in the past by our talks and she didn't want to lose touch."

"Annette?" Sandra tried to say the name as if it hadn't evoked strong feelings of insecurity, originating from the past. "I know you've mentioned her on and off, but I didn't realise you talked with her especially."

"We've become quite friendly," said Osborn easily, before seeming to catch on to Sandra's unease. "There's nothing to worry about, we just talk."

"I'm sure you do," replied Sandra, unable to keep the edge of something sharp from her voice. She suddenly felt an urgent need to change the subject entirely. "My tinnitus is bad today, although I'm getting better at blocking it out."

"You're doing really well with your hearing," said Osborn encouragingly. "The results of that in-depth hearing test you had at the hospital were amazing. I can't believe the way your other ear is compensating and I don't blame you for saying no to a hearing aid."

"I must admit, it was a bit of a shock when the consultant told me that because the virus permanently damaged my cochlea in one ear, the chances of it happening in the other ear are raised significantly," said Sandra, remembering the recent appointment when future deafness had become a closer possibility. "At least he gave me advice about seeking medical help immediately – although what are the chances of being treated as urgent in A & E for basically a bunged-up ear?"

"You have the letter he wrote about that," replied Osborn quietly, "and you have me to fight for you. I'll make sure you get treated as urgent."

"I don't doubt you," said Sandra with a small laugh, "it's our poor compromised National Health Service I doubt, with all the many ways it's becoming so sick itself. Oh, I don't want to think about that either, can we go into the Mediterranean Biome soon? It soothes my soul in there."

Sandra's soul was far from soothed one Sunday in mid-July, when her mother rang at around 15:30 to say she wasn't well and had run out of milk and paracetamol. Apart from a quick sprint to the corner shop, which Sandra refused to undertake on principle, the only other practical option was to donate some of their own milk and paracetamol. Sandra tried not to fume too obviously as she arrived at Caroline's house, but when her mother greeted her with a completely doom-laden air, Sandra couldn't hold back.

"Why did you wait until this time on a Sunday afternoon to ring us?" she fumed restrainedly.

"I didn't want to bother you," replied Caroline dolefully, "I don't like to be a nuisance."

"Well, it would have been so much easier if you'd rung earlier. What if we hadn't had any paracetamol or spare milk in the house?" she fumed mutedly.

"I didn't realise my throat was going to get so sore," replied Caroline mournfully. "I don't normally take paracetamol."

"Well, you normally drink milk, you must have realised you were running out," fumed Sandra frustratedly.

"I thought I could make do until you came over on Tuesday," said Caroline woefully. "I think I've got a temperature."

"Everybody's got a temperature," fumed Sandra defeatedly. "I presume you mean a high temperature. Have you taken it?"

"No, I don't know how to use that new digital thermometer you gave me," said Caroline plaintively. "It doesn't matter, I've got the paracetamol now."

"I can show you how to take your temperature again," fumed Sandra resignedly.

"No, it's alright, go home. Thank you for coming," said Caroline ruefully. "I don't want to bother you, I'll manage. I'll see you on Tuesday, anyway."

At the end of the following week, Osborn finally walked away from the university as an ex-employee. There had been a leaving 'do' at a local hotel, which had apparently gone very well. Sandra had been afraid that Osborn would come home in a state of drunken incapacity. He had never done this all the time they'd been together, but she was still afraid. However, he turned up just a little merry and wobbly, but otherwise pleased with the weather station he had been given as a leaving present.

Sandra experienced an inner wobble herself when she looked at his leaving card and saw Annette's exhortations of what a good friend Osborn was, complete with three big kisses, but she reasoned that as time went by and he gradually became assimilated into his life as a retiree, there would be a natural lessening of a work-related friendship. Apart from that, she contented herself with thinking that Annette's handwriting looked really rather silly for a grown-up.

As July came to a decidedly fretful close for Sandra, another school friend get-together was underway, taking the form of an extended buffet lunch. Osborn had taken himself off to Plymouth to "meet people for coffee" and then Lawrence for lunch, while Sandra tried her best to forget her many niggles of unease and enjoy the moments of togetherness with her old friends, as they all sat around comfortably in the aptly named sitting room.

"How's your mum, Sandra?" asked Kay kindly, brushing away a strand of her short honey-coloured hair, as she picked up a ham and radish sandwich from her plate. "This is unusual."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Sandra a trifle edgily, although they had only had savoury food so far. "Sorry, I'm finding it a bit tricky with her at the moment. It's little things really. We took her to *Waitpoppy* the other day to have a look around and do a bit of food shopping, but she just wandered around saying there was too much choice. Osborn asked her if she wanted any baked beans and she said no, because I always take them over to her."

"I can empathise with that," said curly-haired Delia heatedly, fingering a sausage plait. "This looks different. My dad is so hard to please. He complains about something, so we put right what he's complained about and then he complains about that! There's no pleasing him, so I've given up trying. I can honestly say I really don't give a fig anymore, I just do what needs to be done for him and turn a deaf ear to all the rest."

"I've got a head start on that one now," said Sandra, smiling. "I think it's simply sour grapes with my mother sometimes. She's not happy with her life and she takes it out on me, because she thinks I have a much better life than she does. Still, I don't want to talk about her anymore. How are you getting on, Em?"

"I'm alright!" replied Emily in a singsong voice, swinging her shoulder-length fair wavy hair around. "This Irish egg is peculiar, though. Yes, work's alright, son Jack's alright, daughter Annabel's alright, granddaughter Louisa's alright, my car's alright, my house is alright, my bodily parts are alright – so I'm doing alright!"

"I'm very glad to hear it, petal," said long-haired Gina, smiling. "Does Louisa still spend weekends with you? I love seeing my grandsons, even though they're like chalk and cheese. Talking of cheese, this smoked Cornish green cheese is unexpected."

"Yes, I love having Lou at weekends," replied Emily, picking up her Irish egg and putting it down again. "She enjoys word jokes – we were in the garden and she laughed her head off when I mentioned how the rocket I'd planted was rocketing off. Then when I talked about my anemones, she said I shouldn't have any enemies!"

"Bless her," said Sandra, picking up a piece of quiche from her plate. "Children say such wonderful things, they're priceless."

"Grandchildren are price-full, though," said Emily wryly. "Annabel was hinting that Lou had grown out of her shoes and the next thing I know, I'm in *Clarksons* with Lou, buying her a pair of school shoes *and* some trainers."

"I think it's important to have good shoes," said Kay genially, chasing an infant beetroot around her plate. "I always used to take Hayley to *Clarksons* for school shoes. I'm sure Lou appreciates what you do for her more than words can say, Em. She'll have fond memories of it all when she's older. How's your new granddaughter, Dee?"

"Oh, she's brilliant, thanks!" replied Delia, glowing. The chilli chutney had been a little on the hot side. "She's five months old now and butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. I've got photos if anyone wants to see them."

"Yes please," said four different voices in slightly different forms (but all vocal).

"We can look at them after we've eaten, so we don't get them dirty, Dee," said Kay, gingerly sampling some sour butter and seaweed crisps. "Goodness, these are – something else."

"I hope you don't feel left out when we're all talking about our grandchildren, Kay," said Gina thoughtfully. "I think I'll pass on those crisps, I've got rather a sensitive digestive system. How's Hayley doing?"

"She's doing fine, thank you for asking," replied Kay, wiping her fingers in a serviette. "She still loves her job at the television studio and she's got her finger in so many pies that I don't think she's got time to settle down. I don't mind as long as she's happy. She lives fairly close by, so we see her quite a lot."

"That's good," replied Sandra, relishing her slice of quiche. "I'm glad you see her quite often, I'm sure that's a comfort. I miss Gulliver and Madeleine so much sometimes, but I guess we all have different situations to contend with. Dee, thank you for bringing another of your gorgeous quiches, it's lovely. I'm always in awe of your cooking skills, you certainly know your onions," said Sandra, licking her fingers.

"Oh, it's a piece of cake," replied Delia airily. "You just make some pastry, beat up some egg and stick in some cheese and whatever ingredients you might have. This morning I threw in some leek and leftover lamb."

"You don't eat meat Sandra, do you?" asked Gina concernedly, putting down her plate and looking at Sandra enquiringly.

"Don't worry," replied Sandra, worrying immediately about what she'd just eaten. "I'm not ultra-fussy about it, I just never used to like meat much, that's all."

"Well, what's everybody been up to lately then, or shouldn't I ask?" asked Emily saucily.

"I've got something you'll probably laugh at," said Kay, grinning, "but I'm not sure I should say, because I made a proper fool of myself."

"Oh, do spill the beans!" exhorted Emily persuasively. "I'm always making a fool of myself, I can assure you."

"Well, Hayley took me along to this dental charity evening as her guest, because Rob was away on business," Kay started to explain hesitantly, "and we were sitting at this round table with some pretty posh people – although some of them weren't what I'd call pretty to be honest. Anyway, it was quite late and some of them had been drinking lots of wine, although I'd only had a glass or two myself. I heard someone mentioning oral sex and I thought they were talking about some sort of new toothpaste, or floss, or something. I said I hadn't tried it, but I was definitely a believer in oral hygiene. Hayley sat there as cool as a cucumber ignoring me, but she kicked me under the table, so I knew I'd got it wrong..."

"Oh Kay," gasped Gina, trying very hard to breathe at the same time as laughing helplessly with the rest of them. "Toothpaste! Floss!"

"Ah, talking of toothpaste," said Sandra after they'd calmed down, "does anybody want to sample some of my flan?"

"What's in it for heaven's sake, fluoride?" asked Emily, grinning.

"No, it's raspberry and mint," replied Sandra, heading for the kitchen. "I thought it would be a bit different, kind of refreshing."

"This is definitely different," remarked Gina a short while later, tasting Sandra's flan. "Oops, I've dropped a bit on your carpet."

"Don't worry, this carpet gets all sorts dropped on it," said Sandra, bending down to pick it up with a serviette. "I didn't cut the slices very evenly either, I was a bit ham-fisted."

"Do you know what I really like about being with you lot?" asked Emily suddenly. "Oops, there goes a raspberry, I'm sorry Sandra. We're all as slightly deranged as each other and that feels so comforting and so good!"

A meeting was taking place at Rainbow House for those interested in starting a retreat. Six people had shown up, including founder and chairperson, Gloria, which meant that only one other person besides Sandra, Osborn, Leona and Pascal had shown up. She was a member of the committee of Rainbow Healers and one of two people who had passed Sandra as a certified healer back in 2003. Cynthia was of small stature and thin features, with curly silver hair and a way of looking at Sandra that made her feel slightly uneasy.

"Gloria and I have already been down this road," said Cynthia coolly, after Leona had explained her vision. "It wasn't feasible, it's too big an undertaking."

"That was a good while ago," said Gloria, her blue eyes regarding Leona far more genially. "I don't think we should just dismiss it without having a further exploration. I haven't got the time or energy anymore, though, I'm trying to slow down now I'm in my seventies. That reminds me, I need to speak to you, Osborn dear, before you go." Gloria smiled at Osborn.

"Oh no, Gloria, it's your experience and blessing that count for far more than anything in my eyes," responded Leona warmly, sensing a positive opening. "I'm happy to do much of the ground work and investigate all the options. Pascal has a lot of experience with actual buildings, he's offered to come and look at any potential sites. Right, Pascal?"

"Right!" Pascal looked as if he had more to say, but no words were forthcoming.

"Osborn and Sandra have given the project their blessing too," continued Leona, looking at them both for support.

"Yes, I'm very interested in this, I've had a feeling for quite a while that Sandra and I have some special work to do together," confirmed Osborn, looking earnestly at Sandra. She smiled but remained silent, aware of Gloria's gaze upon her.

"I'm a bit disappointed that nobody else has turned up today, but I suppose it's a case of small beginnings," said Leona hopefully. "At least you haven't dismissed it out of hand, Gloria."

"Of course not, dear," replied Gloria benignly, the sunlight shining through the window and creating a halo effect with her white, coiffured hair. "I had to believe in what I felt was right when I started out at Rainbow House, believe me. I must admit, I reached a point where I thought I must have made a mistake, as setback after setback happened. Then quite out of the blue, this building more or less fell straight into my lap as some really unexpected events took place."

Gloria proceeded to relate the story of the unexpected events, while Sandra found her thoughts racing away in confusion.

'I don't know what I'm doing here,' she thought dejectedly. 'I don't know exactly what's involved in all this and I don't know how much Leona expects Osborn and me to contribute. I'm scared that Osborn will become carried away with his own enthusiasm and deep need to be liked and needed yet again – which will take too much of his energy, so that he remains used up and snappy with me, just like he's been these last few decades with work and family.'

'As for myself, I'm not who these people (well, Leona in particular) seem to think I am. Being with others for too long takes way too much energy from me and I'd never be able to sustain being in close contact with people like they're talking about here. I need significant amounts of time either on my own or in my safe place, the sanctuary that is my home – mine and Osborn's.'

'Is Leona talking about us all living in this retreat? Hell, that would kill me, it's like my idea of – well, hell. What's wrong with just coming to Rainbow Healers like we do already? No, I don't want to be involved in this retreat business, but I don't want Osborn to be caught up in it without me either, if it's really what he wants to do...'

"How about you, Sandra, any special area you'd be interested in?" came Leona's voice expectantly into Sandra's inner dispute.

"The garden," replied Sandra without her own consent. "I've always been very interested in a healing garden."

Half an hour later, after the small meeting had eventually dispersed and Leona had rushed off to look after her grandson with Pascal in tow, Gloria took Osborn to one side and began to address him in a confidential tone.

"As I was saying Osborn dear, I want to start cutting down on my commitments and I'd like you to join the committee of Rainbow Healers, with a view to taking over as chairperson in a couple of years," said Gloria enthusiastically. "Sandra dear, you can join the committee too," she said, turning to smile benignly at Sandra. "What do you say?"

"Yes, it would be an honour," replied Osborn after a few moments.

"Mm-hm," replied Sandra, feeling absolutely and irrevocably uncomfortable.

The following week, Osborn began the onerous task of digging up their sloping front lawn, as both of them found mowing the grass to be a thankless, boring task. However, as August unfolded, Sandra became aware of feeling odd and unsettled, contrary to what she'd imagined she would feel once Osborn had retired. They were making various small attempts to change their life together into something that focused more on themselves, which involved visiting places such as gardens or garden centres, but Osborn's closer involvement in Caroline's life was clearly not being appreciated.

"I never see you on your own anymore," she complained suddenly to Sandra one day, when Osborn was staying home to work on their front garden.

"Er – I'm on my own now," replied Sandra, sensing a confrontation.

"You know what I mean, Sandra. Osborn comes over to play *Scribble* with us and he's always asking Lawrence along to go out somewhere for lunch with us."

"Actually, it was me who thought it would be a really nice idea if we all had lunch together now Osborn's retired," said Sandra, her ire rising in an unstoppable surge, as she remembered the recent lunchtime when her mother had been confrontational and scratchy, to the point where she'd hit out at Lawrence and then Sandra too. "Osborn said he was happy to drive us all somewhere different now and again – and don't forget he's trying to adjust to his new situation too. He took you to Belinda's house last week after you said you hadn't been there for about 20 years."

"Yes, well I haven't been feeling on top, as you know," said Caroline, sniffing. "I've had a virus for ages on and off, it gets me down. I want to be well like everyone else."

"I've told you so many times to go and see a doctor if you're worried," said Sandra tiredly, remembering the day when Caroline had been gloomily convinced she had pharyngitis and had wanted Sandra to ring the surgery and ask for a doctor's visit. "Your temperature was normal, you were eating fine and when I reminded you that taking painkillers would help your sore throat, you said it wasn't all that sore!" Sandra sighed as she felt her ire beginning to morph into despondency.

"It's alright for you, you've got a man to look after you and you're young," said Caroline bleakly, as Sandra could feel herself screaming inside.

CHAPTER 12

"I'm so glad to see you, I'm so utterly glad to see you," said Sandra with feeling, as she stood at the open front door one Friday evening, while Madeleine and Henri unloaded their bags from the car. They had arrived for a long weekend to celebrate Caroline's and Osborn's birthdays. They would be leaving again before the actual birthdays, but there would be a family get-together on the Sunday, which included Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper, who were having a long weekend with Bryony's parents.

The next day, the four of them had the day to themselves and decided to take a meandering trip a little further into Cornwall, culminating in lunch at *The Scary Skewer* in Derrydown. Sandra had become much more relaxed with Henri since first meeting him in 2006, but she was aware there was still an invisible barrier that kept communication a little less than relaxed. A visible barrier would have been even more worrying.

"I'm so glad you're here," said Osborn suddenly, eyeing his *Goat's Cheese Mêlée*. "I mean you and Henri, not the goat's cheese," he added, having looked up at them with a chuckle.

"I did wonder for a second," replied Madeleine, having eyed her *Chicken Mango Medley* as it was brought to their table. "Are you and Mumsie OK? You both seem a little bit strained, or something. Are you enjoying retirement?"

"Yes I am, I like having the project of redesigning the front garden," replied Osborn, smiling brightly. "Of course, I'm still digging up the lawn at this stage. It feels really good meeting Lawrence for lunch in Plymouth on Mondays – and Franklin took me out for lunch recently too, to say thank you for all my help at the university, which was really good of him."

"It's not ladies who lunch, it's gentlemen who lunch," said Sandra impassively, looking suspiciously at the *Goat's Cheese Mêlée* she had also chosen. "I'm not entirely sure about this. I'm so glad you came here for Dad's and Grandma's birthday get-together tomorrow. I really missed you when it was your birthday. That is, when it was yours, Henri's, Gulliver's and Bryony's, since they're all within ten days of each other."

"I know Mumsie, I missed you too – you two too. I was glad that Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper came to see us at Bristol to celebrate the four birthdays, I miss my family connections. Henri has such a big family compared to me, with loads of cousins. Gulliver said we should make it a monthly thing and take turns going to each other's houses like ordinary families."

"Are you saying we're not an ordinary family, Maddy?" asked Osborn grinning. "Wow, this goat's cheese is something else."

"What is it, sheep's cheese?" asked Henri, nonchalantly, attacking his *Chicken Mango Medley*. "Buffalo?"

"Are you being funny, Henri?" asked Madeleine affectionately. "Yes, Juniper's growing up quickly, she was running all over the place. I was glad I'd bought crayons and a colouring book, because she sat between Henri and me for ages, handing us crayons while we coloured in for her, love her."

"I do love her," said Osborn warmly, "she brightens up my day no end."

"What about you and Mumsie, though," persevered Madeleine, both with her parents' emotional health and the chicken mango medley. "You're doing things you want to do with your retirement, aren't you?"

"Ye-es," replied Sandra, a little too hesitantly to stop Madeleine's eyebrow from rising questioningly. "That is, *I'm* not retired from all the housework and gardening and looking after Grandma, but we're trying. It feels a whole lot better than it was in June, when we forgot our own wedding anniversary, until Belinda sent me a text to wish us a happy day. At least we went to *The Ploughperson* in the evening to eat, so all was not lost."

"You really need to think of yourselves more, especially at this stage in the lifespan," said Madeleine candidly. "Henri and I hadn't realised how tired and stressed we were with all the work and house decorating until we went to France for two weeks."

"I'm glad you enjoyed your time there," said Sandra truthfully, deciding there was way too much goat's cheese on her plate, while also trying very hard not to wonder when she and Osborn would get to spend a whole week with their daughter, let alone two weeks. "How's it going with the personal trainer training – er, whatever it's actually called?"

"Oh! I wanted to ask you something," said Madeleine, her fork idly meddling with her medley. "I wondered if you'd be a case study for me and write down what you eat for a week?"

"Your mother's definitely a case," put in Osborn quickly. "Can I be a case study too?"

"If you like," replied Madeleine, smiling. "I'll have finished the next module then. I managed to pass the other assignments OK, so I'm nearly there and I've even got an interview lined up with a person from a local gym. It's a bit scary, though, because I have to present a business plan and be assessed at a half-hour gym session."

"I'm sure you'll pass muster," said Osborn encouragingly, admitting defeat with his *mêlée*. "Right, Henri?"

"I don't think we 'ave any mustard 'ere," replied Henri, scanning the condiments on the table and looking confused.

"No, not pass the mustard, pass muster," explained Sandra, wishing she hadn't started. "Pass muster is rather an old-fashioned English saying about passing a test or something and coming through with flying colours. Don't worry about the flying colours."

It's a misunderstanding with two similar sounding words, that's all – like bustard and bastard – I don't know why I thought of that. Osborn's boss was called Bill Bustard and he was a right – help me, Osborn!"

"Don't worry, Mumsie, Henri knows the English language is full of quirks and foibles," said Madeleine comfortingly, while smiling at Henri.

"It certainly 'as a load of vagrants, many more than the French language," agreed Henri, regarding Sandra with serious brown eyes.

"Vagaries," whispered Madeleine surreptitiously to Henri. "Oh, it's lovely having lunch together like an ordinary family," she said happily to them all. "I'm looking forward to tomorrow, too."

Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper arrived in good time the following morning for Madeleine to enjoy a happy time playing with Juniper, while indulging herself in some uncomplicated cuddling. Caroline arrived on her way home from church and Lawrence arrived later after oversleeping.

"I'm not even going to ask you why you overslept and what you were doing last night," joked Osborn, as Sandra handed Lawrence a mug of coffee.

"Best not to," agreed Lawrence, taking the mug. "Thank you, Sandra, you're a life saver. Well hello, little Juniper, you've grown! Oh – she's run away, have I scared her? Hello Gulliver, I don't think your daughter likes me anymore."

"She generally likes to run away from people, it's one of her favourite pastimes," replied Gulliver pragmatically. "Or on the other hand, it could be your beard."

"Beware the bearded uncle," said Lawrence, walking into the sitting room. "Hello all! Where's Madeleine?"

"Juniper 'as been pulling 'er 'air around good and properly, so she's just gone into the bedroom to titillate herself," explained Henri cordially, although he was also drinking coffee.

"Heavens to Murgatroyd," said Lawrence, not noticing Henri's puzzled expression as he sat down beside Caroline.

"Titivate," enunciated Caroline clearly.

"What? Titivate to you too!" said Lawrence, feigning alarm. "I think I need this coffee, I hope it's a strong one. How are you doing, Henri?"

"Oh, I'm fine," replied Henri, as Madeleine returned from the bedroom. "'Ow are you?"

"Not so bad," replied Lawrence, sipping his coffee, "although I had to wait ages for the bus this morning. Hello Juniper, I won't hurt you. Shall we play with some of the toys on the floor here?" Lawrence put his coffee on the nearest available safe surface and eased himself on to the floor, where Juniper was gazing at him appraisingly. "Ouch, my poor old knees!"

"My knees are playing up these days," mentioned Caroline, as Juniper accepted Lawrence by handing him a piece of jigsaw puzzle, "but it's only to be expected at my age, of course."

"My knees are decidedly dodgy sometimes and I'm a quarter of a century behind you in age," said Osborn to Caroline. "I find that turning awkwardly is the worst."

"I did a twisty turn in the garden the other day and it hurt my back," joined in Sandra, determined to prove to her mother that she was no longer young either.

"My back hurts mostly when I'm on my feet for a long time doing the ironing," continued Caroline, sniffing.

"Don't do any ironing then, Grandma," said Gulliver, from where he was sitting at the table. "I haven't done any for years."

"Oh, you naughty boy," said Caroline, looking fondly at her grandson. "Mind you, you're a man. How do you stand on ironing, Bryony?"

"We-ell, I'd probably stand with a normal stance if I did any ironing," replied Bryony with a deadpan expression. "But I don't."

"I don't exactly mind ironing, but Henri refuses to let me iron his shirts anymore, after the incident..." said Madeleine, stopping herself from explaining any further with a small chuckle. "My mother couldn't have taught me very well, if you see what I mean."

"You may titter," said Sandra fondly, enjoying the communal conversation, "but it's obviously paid off! Mind you, I can't really remember *my* mother teaching me very well, although I do remember watching her ironing tea towels and knickers."

"You may titter indeed," rejoined Caroline, "but at least my knickers don't have any creases."

"Titter?" asked Henri with raised eyebrows. "What is titter?"

The following day was Caroline's actual 84th birthday. Madeleine and Henri had left for Bristol the previous evening, while Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper were otherwise engaged. However, Lawrence was free and they all went out to lunch at *The Pig's Nipples*, a large pub near the coast at the border of Devon. After a short walk, they then returned to Lawrence's flat for tea, cake and *Ono*. Sandra, who had enjoyed the general camaraderie of the day before, felt very disappointed when Caroline hit her on the arm, ostensibly for playing a card she didn't like.

The day after that was Osborn's actual 59th birthday. Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper were free and after a pleasant morning together, they called for Caroline and went to *The Ploughperson* for another pub lunch. On the way there, Caroline had mentioned dismally to Sandra how she'd had to open her presents on her own the day before, but although Sandra had commiserated, she was trying to put her energy into Osborn's day.

"This is becoming a habit," said Osborn happily enough. "It's more like I thought retirement would be. Mind you, next week will be different, with all the work to be done at Gulliver and Bryony's house."

"You won't be working all the time, surely," said Caroline, sniffing. "You'll go out and enjoy yourself as well."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," said Osborn wryly, "going by all that Gulliver says needs doing. We're putting up a divider wall with a door in the sitting room and then there's all the decorating and finishing off bits and pieces in the new conservatory."

"Everyone seems to have conservatories built these days," said Caroline, pursing her lips, "but I've never wanted one."

"We haven't got one," pointed out Sandra calmly, wishing her mother would be a little less free with her opinions.

"I expect you'll be playing with Juniper a lot of the time, Sandra," continued Caroline regardless. "You're lucky to see your grandchild so much, some of my friends have grandchildren in Australia. Well, one of them does and another one has them in Ipswich."

"What?" expostulated Sandra as mildly as she could manage. "We see Juniper so little compared to how much you saw your grandchildren! You saw them at least twice a week and often at weekends too – plus you had them for a week at a time when they were a bit older, in the summer holidays!"

"Oh, get away with you, you're being dramatic," said Caroline, hitting Sandra on the thigh. Sandra shot up out of her seat, hitting her other thigh on the table, then deliberately addressed her granddaughter, who was attempting to tear a menu in half. Fortunately, it was laminated. "There's a play area over there, Juniper, would you like to come and play with Grandma, while we wait for our food?"

As she walked over to the play area with Juniper, the thoughts raging through her mind resembled a combat zone.

'I've always done my absolute best for her and it's *still* not good enough,' she raged inwardly, as she showed Juniper the colourful play house with its door and some windows. 'I'm sorry she had to open her presents alone yesterday, but that's simply the way it turned out this year – and we've seen her for three days solid celebrating these birthdays.'

'I can't believe she said we're lucky to see Juniper so much. She's raving mad, we live nearly 200 miles away for pity's sake! She needs to stop hitting me too, it actually stings when she does it. It's obvious she has a lot of suppressed anger, but she needs to stop taking it out on me. I must make sure I never sit next to her again, ever! Just when did she turn into this nasty, self-centred old woman?'

As the rage slowly began to subside, the gloom began to rise, but then Sandra noticed Juniper looking out from inside the play house through one of its windows and realised what she was saying.

"Amma! Amma!" came the insistent voice of her golden-haired granddaughter.

"Oh, Juniper!" responded Sandra joyfully. "You're actually saying my name!"

Sandra and Osborn had been at Aberpontyfan for six days of mayhem, as Gulliver and Bryony's large sitting room was transformed into two rooms. On the days that Juniper had been at nursery, Sandra had spent hours removing gluey, stubborn wallpaper that insinuated itself under her fingernails and generally tried to remain stickily attached in places that frankly surprised her.

In between times, Sandra had bonded even more with Juniper, who had become very vocal and communicative. For two days of their stay, to give Osborn a rest and Gulliver a chance to prepare for a forthcoming photo exhibition, Sandra and Osborn had taken Juniper out to a garden centre, a supermarket and to Swansea Bay. After a memorable walk along the beach, where Sandra had written Juniper's name in the sand and laughed as she'd jumped all over it, Juniper had worn them out by running around madly on a grassy area.

"I don't know about giving me a rest, I feel as tired as the day we put up the wall partition," said Osborn exhaustedly, as they all sat that evening at the table in the new conservatory, eating a fish pie made by Bryony. "I'm glad to have helped, though. This is a great fish pie too, thank you Bryony. What is it, Juniper?"

"Rain, she can see the rain on the conservatory roof," explained Gulliver proudly. "I like being able to look up at the sky."

"Cat!" said Juniper loudly, pointing excitedly towards the garden.

"She's seen a cat," explained Bryony, collecting the plates. "What would you like for dessert?"

"Dot-dot," said Juniper emphatically. "Dot-dot."

"She's too young for dot-to-dot, surely," said Sandra, perplexed.

"Dog?" asked Osborn, baffled. "Can't be."

"Yoghurt," replied Gulliver and Bryony together, as Juniper banged her spoon up and down expectantly, smiling around at them all.

It was September 2009 and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was having her first and only 57th birthday. She had deliberately gone out to lunch at *The Boatman's Ass* with Caroline and Lawrence the day before, so that on her actual (first and only 57th) birthday, she was free to spend the day with Osborn.

They had visited two gardens and enjoyed some special food from *Marks and Spender* for their evening meal. Madeleine and Gulliver had both phoned, which always warmed Sandra's heart – and she had been particularly delighted that Juniper had also spoken some Juniper-type words to her, including her current name of "Amma". Sandra had gone to bed feeling happily contented with her day.

'It hasn't just been my day, though,' she reasoned to herself, 'because a day belongs to everybody who's alive. That's if time can belong to anybody, of course, which it can't. That's a thing about birthdays, it's like a measurement of time, a tally of your years spent on planet Earth. Maybe that's why I'm feeling so unsettled and a bit angry about the way my life is turning out, because I feel time is slipping away – *my* time, if time belonged to me, or to anyone. Sod it, I can't seem to get my head around the time question. I wonder what time it is? I feel as if I've been awake for ages.

'Is there a purpose for my life, or is this life I'm living right now my purpose? My head tries to feel OK when Osborn says that we have a purpose in life together and it's pointing towards the retreat that Leona's always banging on about, but my heart and my instincts really seem to be telling me otherwise. I'm torn about being on the Rainbow Healers committee too, because I know I can do the job and it means Osborn and I have got a shared interest in it, but I don't feel anywhere near as enthusiastic as he seems to be. I'm quite confused about all that, although I can't help thinking I should be doing more with my time. Or do I mean more for me with my time?

'I can remember Mum spending such a lot of her time following her own pursuits when she was my age and living life for herself – and way before that, to be honest. I can also remember how it seemed she was expecting me to be interested in everything *she* was interested in, like that awful Literary Luncheon she asked me to once. It's the same with *Scribble* now. In fact, I'm beginning to wonder if she thinks of me as her own personal mini-me.

'Half the time now, I'm split into two ways of thinking and feeling about her, but I'm realising it's more as if I'm spending a lot of energy *trying* to like her. I'm trying to hold on to the ideal of a loving, caring, compassionate mother. Is it this pull towards that ideal that results in the strength of the swing to the other side? The other side feels as though I really don't like her, or who she is now. It feels as if she's too selfish for me to like her – too manipulative, heavy, demanding – all couched in a pseudo-caring way.

'I would never dream of binding Gulliver and Madeleine to me. In fact, it's quite the opposite, as I remember always thinking with a lot of warmth about the day when they would have their own offspring, like Gulliver does now. I genuinely want them to love and to live for their own families – their own future, so I can live out the rest of my life knowing they have a future focus. I really don't want to drag them backwards in any way into my departing life.

'Of course, this situation with Mum won't last forever, but does that mean I'm wishing her life away? That feels so wrong, I can't live with that. I don't know how much longer I can put up with the way she is now, though, because I can actually feel my own time running out. I wish Dad could still be here to balance things. I wish I'd appreciated him more and talked with him more while I still had time. Maybe I should try more with Mum? We used to talk more honestly than we do now – or did we? Oh, sod it, I'm doing my own head in, I'll just have to leave things as they are for the time being. We have a holiday to look forward to with Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper soon and I'm sure we'll have a good time together.

'Mind you – or me, in this case – I found it quite hard last month at their house when we were helping with the work, because everything was such a terrible mess, it was truly chaotic. Actually, it's always a bit shambolic there, to be honest. It's always mayhem when they come and stay with us, too. It's such a pity, because it would be so much easier and more enjoyable for us if they were tidier. Gulliver's always been untidy, though, I do remember that. God, I'm tiring myself out – which is definitely handy, since I really need to sleep now...'

CHAPTER 13

Sandra and Osborn were in Aberpontyfan again, where Gulliver and Bryony were busily packing for their self-catering holiday in Snowdonia. Sandra and Osborn would be spending the first week with them, while Bryony's parents, Anne and Stan Stanpool, would be with them for the second week. In the meantime, Juniper seemed intent on helping, by unpacking the bags of food Bryony had already prepared and lined up in the hallway. She seemed to have a particular penchant for fruit and ran away with two nectarines, one plum and many grapes – and that was only what Sandra knew about.

A while later, as they were zig zagging up and down steep roads amid dramatic, picturesque hills, following Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper in their car, Sandra pondered on the exciting news that Bryony was expecting another baby in May. As the scenery slowly became more ordinary countryside in between lots of mid-Wales villages, she began to wonder not only when a village became a town, but also whether she and Osborn would have a grandson or another granddaughter.

They enjoyed a lunch stop at Elan Valley Reservoirs, a delightful and very popular setting, before continuing their journey northwards. The hills grew in number and height and the scenery became more dramatic, with swathes of dark green fir trees and pretty rowans with clusters of hanging red berries dotted here and there. Further along, they came across industrial landscapes, slate caverns, miners' cottages and familiar names, such as Blaenau Ffestiniog and Betws-y-coed. At just after 15:00, they finally arrived at Nant Cottage in Llanrwst, on the edge of the Snowdonia National Park.

Set amid some attractive rural scenery, the cottage seemed very old and full of character. Finding out about its past from the owners, who called by to introduce themselves, was like a history lesson in itself – one dating back to the 14th century when the land had belonged to the Knights Templar. Sandra revelled in this knowledge, but Juniper was less impressed and simply sat herself down at the table to eat some grapes.

Sandra found that she didn't revel quite as much in the ancient atmosphere of the house when it was time to go up the creaky, wooden staircase to bed. There were no street lights and the darkness of the bedroom when the bedside lights were out was dense. It almost felt palpable and she felt quite uneasy, as if all the centuries of bygone inhabitants had left some sort of energy imprint. She lay there for a very long time the first night, wishing she could turn on the bedside light again without seeming like a complete and utter wimp.

However, the daylight hours were full of interest and activity. Unfortunately, Bryony had started a cold and together with the early pregnancy, she clearly wasn't feeling her best. They decided to have a gentle first day and went out en masse to visit Betws-y-coed, followed by a woodland walk within the Snowdonia National Park.

A far more strenuous day that Sandra thought she would always remember was a walk part-way up the famous Glyders (or Glyderau in Welsh), a range of mountains in Snowdonia. Bryony opted to rest in the car with food, drink, a book and some tissues, while the others took to the rocky heights. Juniper was safely ensconced in a specially designed rucksack for babies and toddlers that was strapped to Gulliver's back, as they walked alongside Llyn Idwal tarn and then started clambering upwards over large stones and boulders towards Devil's Kitchen.

According to Gulliver, Devil's Kitchen was so named because the dark, deep cleft of its rock formation resembled a chimney. Some of the ascent was more like scrambling up scree and they were all very warm by the time they reached the diabolical cooking area. Since it was mid-morning, Juniper was allowed out of the rucksack for good behaviour and they all ate a banana for energy food, sitting on rocks amid the grassy uplands and gazing around them at the magnificent rock formations, the sheep, the misty peaks and the distant tarn below.

The next part of the ascent was even more difficult and a cold wind blew in some places, but Juniper had sensibly decided the best option was to sleep. Sandra's legs began to tire as the clambering intensified and she found she had to hold onto rocks with her hands. Further on, the boulders were less in number, but the climb still seemed very hard and required a great deal of concentration.

They stopped again at Llyn y Cwn tarn, where Gulliver decided that the conditions weren't favourable to continue up to the peaks of Glyder Fawr and Glyder Fach, since it was really quite cold, they had Juniper to consider and Sandra's legs were beginning to lose strength. As they sat down to eat their packed lunch, in a place that was out of the wind as much as possible, Sandra looked up to where the mist was covering the top of the Glyderau and slowly descending, feeling a mixture of relief and regret. The food and hot coffee were very welcome, but although Juniper went on two little excursions down to the nearby tarn and back, she seemed cold once out of the rucksack.

She gradually became decidedly fretful, so they soon started their descent, firstly on scree that caused Sandra to perform unusual antics in order to walk carefully. The big rocks felt safer to go down, but Sandra's legs began to tremble whenever they had to manoeuvre a large boulder, which was frequently. Suddenly, Osborn fell over. Sandra was quite close behind him and saw him fall slowly towards his right, seem to regain balance, then fall towards his left, putting out his left hand to save himself from crashing into a rock.

"Are you OK?" asked Sandra and Gulliver simultaneously, as Osborn stood up again immediately.

"I'm fine," replied Osborn curtly, which indicated to Sandra at once that Osborn was most probably not fine. However, after a few minutes of Osborn insisting he was ready to continue, they carried on downwards. As they finally approached Llyn Idwal tarn, Sandra's legs felt as if they didn't want to carry on walking at all and Gulliver admitted to feeling tired with the weight of Juniper on his back. Osborn was very quiet

and admitted his hand hurt a little, but as they returned to Bryony in the car park, there was no doubt that they'd all benefitted from the experience.

Once back at Nant Cottage, Sandra tried hard to overcome her tiredness and she managed to keep a rather fretful Juniper amused, while everyone sat around the coffee table with tea and biscuits.

"Hey Juniper, where's my pen?" she asked, as Juniper ran away from her, hiding something behind her back.

"Mama!" replied Juniper, heading towards Bryony with a cheeky smile.

"Leave me out of it," replied Bryony, blowing her nose and looking pale.

"Dan-da!" said Juniper, changing course and careering towards Osborn.

"No, I haven't got Grandma's pen," replied Osborn, putting his empty mug back down on the table. "Ouch! Be careful, my darling, Grandad's hurt his hand."

"You did hurt yourself then, Dad," said Gulliver astutely, raising his eyebrows in a strangely paternal way at his father.

"Yes, I dislocated the little finger on my left hand and bent the middle finger back," confessed Osborn, holding up the offending digits. "I don't know how I managed not to scream aloud, to be honest. It was only because I'd dislocated the little finger on my right hand when I was 18 or so that I knew how to push it straight back where it belongs."

"You should go to A & E, surely?" asked Gulliver, looking alarmed. "I'll drive you."

"Yes, you should go and have it checked out," confirmed Sandra, knowing full well how stubborn Osborn could be.

"I'm fine, my fingers just feel a bit swollen, that's all," replied Osborn resolutely. "They'll heal in due course."

"Amma!" said Juniper, giving up the game and holding out Sandra's pen from behind her back.

"Oh, you little teaser," cried Sandra affectionately, holding out her hand for the pen. "Give me the pen, please – and a cuddle!"

Juniper launched herself at Sandra for a cuddle, during which she started to play with Sandra's hair, mussing it up and laughing. "Amma!"

"Don't do that Juniper, Grandma doesn't like anybody touching her hair," said Bryony from deep in her armchair.

"No, I don't mind," replied Sandra quickly, wondering what Bryony might mean. Try as she might, she couldn't remember any instance that could have caused such a statement. It caused her to feel pinpricks of unease, intermingled with a few aggrieved question marks about what she'd done to upset Bryony.

The day after the Glyders expedition, Sandra and Osborn decided to have a day for themselves in order to fulfil their one request for the holiday, which was a visit to Bodnant Garden. They spent five hours of pure pleasure there, wandering around the extensive garden that was obviously tended with a great deal of hard work and loving care, controlled in a very natural and sometimes even wild way.

The formal gardens, various shrub borders, a round garden, bridges, waterfalls, terraces, streams, ponds, an old mill and even a mausoleum soothed Sandra's soul with simple garden lover's ease. Her legs felt quite stiff all day, as well as her shoulders that she'd used to hoist herself up the previous day's boulders, but she felt tranquil inside. Osborn's little finger began to bother him during the evening and was very swollen, but he too said he felt at peace.

Near the end of the week, they all visited a copper mine located at the limestone headland of Great Orme. This was Sandra and Osborn's second visit to Great Orme, as on the previous day Bryony had seemed particularly out of sorts and after some indecision and confusion, Sandra and Osborn had eventually gone out by themselves. They had walked for six miles around the headland, the first mile or two feeling rather agitated and perturbed about Bryony's seeming reluctance to spend time with them.

However, Bryony appeared to have regained her interest in life again as they all arrived at the copper mine and proceeded to put on hard hats as requested. Juniper also was quite happy as they followed a self-guided tour through the narrow passageways of what was a very small part of a large Bronze Age copper mine that had been uncovered

in 1987. On leaving the copper mine, they drove to the top of Great Orme for lunch and a small exploration of the Visitor Centre, before Bryony admitted to feeling delicate.

The next day, which was the day before Sandra and Osborn were due to leave, they took Juniper out with them, so Bryony could take it easy. Sandra was beginning to feel rather sorry for Gulliver, who she knew loved to go out as much as possible and explore new places – and who she was pretty sure must have been feeling frustrated. They enjoyed a very memorable visit to Penrhyn Castle with their lovely granddaughter, despite having to carry her around for a significant amount of the time, as Gulliver and Bryony hadn't brought her pushchair on the holiday.

When they went back to the house that afternoon, there seemed to be a faintly uncomfortable edge to the atmosphere again. That day, Sandra had dressed Juniper in a pretty, purple corduroy dress she'd bought for her, but when Bryony took Juniper upstairs to change her nappy upon their return, Juniper reappeared wearing clothes from the day before. There had been no thank you for the dress and Sandra had the distinct impression that Bryony disliked it. Bryony had already begun cooking tea for her and Gulliver, but since there was nothing for Sandra and Osborn to eat, they had to go out to the local shop to buy vegetarian sausages.

It was on the last morning, when Sandra and Osborn were preparing to leave and Sandra was sprucing the place up to make it welcoming for Anne and Stan Stanpool, that Sandra felt Bryony finally went too far. Bryony was sitting in her favoured armchair, as Sandra came downstairs after cleaning the en suite and was taking away some wilting flowers from the vase the owners had left for them on their arrival.

"Have you washed the dishes, put out fresh flowers and cleaned the toilet?" asked Bryony from the corner, in a voice that contained no discernible humour. Sandra froze for a second, before she was consumed with a sudden mixture of anger and hurt. She walked across the room speechlessly and shut the door hard – but not before she'd heard Gulliver say Bryony's name in an admonishing tone.

A short time later, she found the leave-taking itself difficult. After saying a quick goodbye to Bryony, who remained inside, she joined Gulliver and Juniper outside. While Osborn put the final touches to packing the car, she hugged Gulliver and Juniper and waited in the car for Osborn to say his goodbyes.

As they drove away from Nant Cottage, waving to Gulliver and Juniper, she watched Gulliver prancing around in a comic manner, presumably for Juniper's benefit, and felt her heart constrict in pain. She knew Gulliver wanted everything to be OK with them all, but Bryony's snide remarks had injured her in a way that she felt she couldn't endure. Tears started to fall before they'd even driven around the first bend in the road.

"You're not OK," said Osborn, darting a quick glance at her.

"No, I'm not," she replied with difficulty. "I don't know what I've done to upset or offend Bryony, but she's been really sarcastic to me on and off this whole week. I don't deserve it, I've only ever done my best with her and it hurts." She dissolved into fresh tears, rummaging in her bag for some tissues.

"Do you think it's because she's pregnant?" asked Osborn cautiously.

"I thought it must be that at first, plus her cold, but nothing I ever said or did warranted such coolness and pointed comments. It's knocked me back quite a lot as far as she goes. I'll have to put it partly down to pregnancy, but it hurts." After succumbing to more tears, Sandra decided she needed to pull herself together, if only for the sake of Osborn, who had a long drive ahead of him.

Five days later, Sandra was at Caroline's house, feeling like tearing her hair out. Osborn had joined them in the afternoon for a game of *Scribble*, but it hadn't gone well. Caroline had become cranky with Osborn when he'd glanced at Sandra's tiles and had accused him of cheating. Osborn had retaliated – Caroline had retaliated back – and Caroline had first of all retaliated back again, before sinking into a sulky silence that reminded Sandra of lonely childhood times, when her mother would disappear into a depression for days on end. Sandra had wanted to knock their heads together, before becoming incredibly tired and disheartened with Caroline, Osborn and her life as she knew it.

However, the next day, she and Osborn travelled to Bristol for a long weekend with Madeleine and Henri. It turned into a bit of a long weeding weekend, but Sandra loved it. The late September air was warm and uplifting, as she and Madeleine knelt on garden kneeling mats alongside each other in the front garden, weeding the main border, while Osborn was helping Henri with a troublesome tree in the back garden.

"I hope Dad doesn't hurt his hand again, because it's still causing him trouble," said Sandra uneasily. "I'm a bit vexed too, because he said he wouldn't be able to continue renovating our front garden for a month at least and it currently resembles an archaeological dig." She plunged her trowel into the ground and dug a little furiously around a medium-sized dandelion, pulling it up intact with ease. "I must say, Mad, your soil is wonderful – and I wouldn't say that to just anybody!"

"I think that's a compliment," replied Madeleine, chuckling. "I'm not sure if I'm pulling up other things as well as weeds, but we eventually want to replant this bed with lavender anyway, so it doesn't really matter."

"It's funny hearing you talk about plants and weeds and gardens," commented Sandra appraisingly. "It's lovely actually, because I often felt you were a person who would fully appreciate your own home. You were always drawing houses with gardens and front paths when you were a little girl. These grape hyacinths are everywhere!"

"I need to sort out my career properly now," said Madeleine, pulling up another handful of muscari. "I know I've been accepted at the gym, but I've still got to get my act together creating my own business. I've worked out that I'll resign from my job in mid-November. It'll be so good to walk out of that solicitor's office, I really don't fit in there at all."

"Gulliver could help you with having your own business, I'm sure," said Sandra, shaking the earth from some groundsel. "He kept texting me the other day about all sorts of things, I had the idea he wasn't feeling great. He certainly feels the weight of looking after Juniper so much, even though she's at nursery three days a week."

"It's what he agreed to, though, so he could see to his photography business while Bryony goes out to work," said Madeleine, sitting back on her heels. "Is he happy about Bryony being pregnant?"

"You may have hit the nail on the head there," replied Sandra, shading her eyes from the sun to look at Madeleine. "I'm really not sure, but it's done now."

"I can't wait to have a baby," said Madeleine dreamily, "but it won't be for a few years yet. Henri says we need to have financial stability, which means I have to make a success of my business. He's so practical."

"It's not a bad thing, Mad," said Sandra, smiling. "He doesn't seem to talk about emotions, but I have the feeling he'll always look out for you."

"Madeleine, where are you?" came Henri's voice, as he appeared from the back garden. "Ah, there you are. Do we 'ave any plasters in the 'ouse? Your father 'as cut 'is 'and."

"I hope it's not the same one he hurt at Snowdonia," said Sandra, sighing. "It's never been right since, even though it was his left hand."

The rest of the weekend passed enjoyably but quickly, finished with a relaxing stroll along the waterfront on Sunday morning and a lunch of brie rolls and coffee. Sandra found herself smiling as she waved goodbye to Madeleine, unlike the last time she had waved goodbye to Gulliver. As she considered the difference between those last two leave-takings, she wondered if she would ever become used to the fact that her two beloved children had chosen to live elsewhere.

Two days later, Osborn finally decided to see a doctor about the hand he had injured while descending the Glyders. He was sent to A & E and returned a little sheepishly with his little finger in a splint and an appointment for the fracture clinic, although the finger was apparently healing much better than expected.

He related the whole story to Leona and Pascal one blustery Saturday afternoon in October, when they were visiting Sandra and Osborn's house. They had ostensibly arranged the visit for a meeting about the retreat, but after a relaxing meditation, had progressed easily into chatting about their own lives.

"It just shows what a bit of self-healing can do," said Osborn, offering around a plate of flapjack. "I made these myself. They're slightly dry, but I've had worse."

"Healing *and* flapjack," said Leona appreciatively, taking a piece. "I'm glad I met you two!"

"Me too," said Pascal, also taking a piece. "Thank you for asking us here, I'm really glad we're keeping in touch, even though the healing course has finished. I still do some repair work at Rainbow House, but I don't always feel comfortable there, to be honest. I definitely feel comfortable here, though."

"That's good," said Sandra, trying very hard to get a word in edgewise.

"I'm glad you both went before the board," continued Osborn, picking flapjack crumbs from his trousers. "Lots of people finish the course but don't go on to become certified healers. I must admit, it sounds as if there's a bit of unrest in certain circles at Rainbow House itself. That's one good thing about only being connected with Rainbow Healers. I'm not sure what the committee meeting next week will bring."

"I'm not sure why I've been asked to join," said Sandra, picking up flapjack crumbs from her top. "Maybe a few people are leaving and they can't fill the places."

"You've been asked too?" said Leona enquiringly, picking up flapjack crumbs from her skirt. "So have Pascal and I, so it looks as if Gloria wants some new blood, because heaven knows Rainbow House needs to be dragged into the 21st century."

"I sensed some definite coolness from one of the members about Sandra and me being asked to join when I popped into Rainbow House to do some photocopying for the new course the other evening," explained Osborn, picking up flapjack crumbs from the sofa.

"That sounds familiar," said Pascal, picking up crumbs from his jeans. "I felt the same when I popped in yesterday to finish a small job I was doing in the waiting room. The stupid thing is, I wouldn't have considered being on the committee if Gloria hadn't asked me. I think she's grateful for the maintenance jobs I do now and again, for free."

"Oh well, we'll just have to wait and see," said Sandra cheerfully, picking up flapjack crumbs from the floor.

Two days later, Sandra sat at the committee meeting of Rainbow Healers, not at all cheerfully. She was glad her allotted task was to take minutes, although the meeting seemed to go on for hours. She watched almost as if from a distance as the other seven members seemed to be talking an alien language about constitutions, insurance, safety protocols and amendments. She noticed that Leona seemed able to hold her own, but Pascal looked as if he would much prefer to hold Leona's than his own. She also noticed that the previous taker of minutes had been less than adequate, which helped her to feel vaguely competent, if not completely out of her element.

"Elementary, my dear Osborn," said Lawrence, as he sat opposite Sandra and Osborn on a Monday lunchtime in November at *Ye Cheape and Cheerfulle Café* in Plymouth. "If our selfish, self-centred sister Kirsty can only be bothered to get in touch when she wants something, then she can kiss my aspidistra. How many times has she contacted you in the last few years?"

"Hardly ever," agreed Osborn, having to raise his voice above the sudden raucous background conversation in the small café with its closely packed tables. "She seemed to take offence when I asked her point-blank about those photographs she obviously took from the house when Mum died, despite you asking her to leave them behind."

"She accused Osborn of having them," said Sandra hotly, removing her jacket. "I know it's very petty, but I've stopped sending her birthday cards and Christmas cards, because she never reciprocates. I've had enough, I've got far too much to contend with on the maternal front with my own mother and me as a mother myself."

"Quite right, I wouldn't worry about it," said Lawrence, gazing at Sandra from underneath his bushy eyebrows, which were becoming significantly grey. "I still send her cards to keep the moral high ground, but I absolutely draw the line at putting her up at my flat again, just because she wants to visit an old friend in the city. I'm glad she lives in Cambridgeshire and no closer."

"She's never met Juniper," said Osborn, sipping from his large mug of cheap and cheerful tea. "Gulliver doesn't say much about it, but I think he wonders."

"Did Osborn tell you that Kirsty asked him to arrange a place and time where Gulliver could take Juniper to meet her?" asked Sandra, sipping from her large mug of cheap and cheerful hot chocolate. "I think she must have been angling to visit our place when Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper were visiting, but that's never going to happen."

"Remind me," said Lawrence, sipping from his large mug of coffee. "I think my memory's going."

"I told her to arrange it with Gulliver, because I'm not getting involved in the middle of what will inevitably be a mess," said Osborn gloomily. "I can't get over the fact that she's my sister, though, I mean she's my sister regardless of everything."

"You wouldn't learn for ages with our dad," replied Lawrence darkly, "even though I kept saying he was using you."

"Well, this is fun," said Sandra, looking from one brother to the next. "I came here today with you two to cheer myself up from the relentless routine of my everyday existence!"

"Sorry," replied Lawrence and Osborn in unison, as the waitress appeared with their food.

"Wow, I'm glad I ordered from your *Butties and Bits* special board," said Osborn hungrily. "I think..."

"I know what we can talk about!" interrupted Lawrence enthusiastically, as their food was set on the table. "Where shall we go on holiday next year?"

CHAPTER 14

"This feels a bit like a holiday," said Madeleine guiltily, as she opened the door of her newly acquired Vauxhall Corsa car at *Clarksons Consumer Park* one Monday morning in the middle of December. "I feel as if I should be at work on a Monday."

"It's a brilliant thing to be doing on a Monday morning," said Osborn happily, hugging Madeleine. "You might as well take advantage of this time between leaving work and starting up at the gym after Christmas."

"It's lovely to see you, it was a great idea to meet somewhere halfway for the day," said Sandra gladly, taking her turn at hugging Madeleine. "It's a bit nippy out here, though, shall we find somewhere for coffee before we hit the shops?"

A while later, they were warmly ensconced in an outlet of *Costalot Coffee*, sitting comfortably with hot drinks and talking over the previous few weeks.

"How's Grandma?" asked Madeleine, warming her hands around her mug. "She had that hospital appointment, didn't she?"

"Yes, she did. I went in with her to hear exactly what the consultant told her," replied Sandra, finally taking off her gloves. "He said there was no point in six-monthly scans when the ovarian cyst was remaining the same size, so he discharged her on the understanding that she'll go and see her GP if there are any problems, especially digestive problems."

"That must be a relief for her and also for you, Mumsie, not having to go to the hospital with her every time." Madeleine smiled. "How about you, Varti, how did that problem with her replacement windows go?"

"Oh, it turned out fine in the end," replied Osborn nonchalantly, although Sandra remembered his stress levels at the time as telling a somewhat different story. "It's a good job I was there, though, they would have done a bit of a botched job otherwise."

"I'm sure she must be grateful," said Madeleine, "although from Mum's emails, she seems to have slowed down a lot. I suppose she's very good for 84, but I know it must be hard work sometimes."

"It certainly is," replied Sandra with feeling. "We took her to *Waitpoppy* again, but it was hopeless. She just wandered around without her glasses on, saying how expensive everything was and that it was OK for young people with money! There's no way I could let her get away with that one. It got me down though, because it feels as if her world has shrunk so much that she no longer has any perspective on it, except from

her own narrow field of vision. It's as if she doesn't want to see – figuratively and literally – the way she resists wearing those glasses of hers. It wears me out. Let's talk about you and your plans, Mad."

"Well, I'm excited, but a bit nervous as well. It's the pushing and selling myself that bothers me, touting for clients. I know the gym will give me a good place to do this, but I still have to make it on my own. Henri was saying I could do a leaflet drop around local houses."

"That's a good idea," encouraged Osborn, nodding his head. "It's a good time of year to start, too, after Christmas when everyone wants to get fit and lose weight."

"I know," replied Madeleine seriously. "When I feel a bit uncertain or down about what I'm going to do, I remember that I ran the Cardiff half marathon and that thought really cheers me up."

"And so it should," said Sandra, smiling. "It was a real achievement in my book, it cheered me up to know you'd done it, because I knew how much it meant. Meeting you today is really cheering me up, too."

"And me," said Osborn, looking at his daughter. "I do miss you."

"I miss you too, Mad," echoed Sandra.

"Ah, but I miss you madly, Mad," said Osborn, smiling.

An exceptionally cold weather system was enveloping most of the country as Christmas approached, which was unusually including Cornwall. While escaping most of the snow, the temperatures were so low that the ground became very slippery with heavy frost and ice, as well as the icy remnants of snow that had fallen in some places. Sandra hated it very much, but there was nothing to be done except to grin and bear it, preferably with well gripping soles.

Another surprising event was hearing how Alison had been taken to hospital with a suspected heart attack. Happily, that turned out not to be the case, but it had clearly upset her equilibrium and she had been referred for a barrage of cardiac tests.

Six days before Christmas, Osborn went to the university to meet Franklin for coffee and returned with a Christmas card from Annette. Sandra wondered briefly if Osborn had also had coffee with Annette, decided that he probably had and realised she really didn't care that much. It felt liberating. She did, however, snort at Annette's really rather silly handwriting and hid the card behind some others, intending to dispose of it in the near future.

Five days before Christmas, she and Osborn succumbed to the stress of the frantic festive season and had a most ridiculous argument over what food they should buy, where they should buy it from and what time they should leave home to get to *Marks and Spender* before it was heaving with people. They left in plenty of time, but within five minutes after opening, *Marks and Spender* was indeed heaving with people.

Four days before Christmas, Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper all had a sickness bug, which Sandra hoped with all her might would have left them completely by the time they arrived for Christmas – although they would actually be staying with Bryony's parents.

Three days before Christmas, Sandra and Osborn had to take Caroline to buy a new television, as hers had stopped working. This was followed by Osborn setting it up and enduring the inevitable frustration of explaining to Caroline how to use it.

Two days before Christmas, Bryony had recovered from her stomach bug enough to go to her ultrasound scan appointment and be told she had "a fine wriggly boy".

The day before Christmas, Madeleine and Henri arrived safely from Bristol and a Christmas Eve visit from Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper, who had arrived safely (and no longer sick) at Bryony's parents' house, resulted in a happy, hectic afternoon.

Christmas Day itself was also happy and hectic. Sandra felt warm inside because Gulliver insisted that he, Bryony and Juniper should visit them in the morning to open presents. Despite it being their turn to be with Bryony's parents that year, he still wanted to see his own family on Christmas Day. Sandra felt warm outside because they turned the heating up for Caroline, who often complained of feeling cold. Sandra felt warm both inside and outside on a regular basis, as it happened, because she was still irritatingly prone to hot flushes.

Boxing Day was also happy and hectic. Osborn, Madeleine and Henri drove to Lawrence's flat in Plymouth to collect him, calling for Caroline on their way back. Sandra was a little alarmed that Caroline had still been in bed, but her mother insisted she was merely tired.

"When you get to my age, you can't cope with as much and you tire more easily," she explained, taking a cup of coffee from Sandra. "Thank you, it feels nice to be looked after."

"Ah, that must be Gulliver," said Sandra, hearing the sound of a car door shut outside, happy to be diverted from her mother. "Did you want some *Coffeepartner* in your coffee, Lawrence? Mum brought some over for herself."

"Oh no, thanks," replied Lawrence convivially. "I like my coffee inviolate."

"Who's Violet?" asked Gulliver, as he entered the sitting room carrying Juniper, with Bryony following behind.

"I don't know, who *is* Violet?" asked Lawrence with a straight face, although it had become noticeably more wrinkled and saggy the last couple of years. "Hello Juniper! Are you going to run away from me like you usually do?"

"Why do you think I'm carrying her?" asked Gulliver, grinning. "She'll be fine, she soon gets used to you."

"I don't think I'll ever get used to you, Lawrence," said Sandra, laughing. "Hello Bryony, how are you feeling?" she asked, trying not to scrutinise Bryony too closely for signs of a visible bump.

"Possibly not as dodgy as last time," considered Bryony, "because I distinctly remember feeling impossibly dodgy quite often then. Here Juniper, give this card to Auntie Madeleine and Uncle Henri." Juniper, who had been set down on the carpet, took the card from her mother and dutifully handed it to Madeleine.

"Thank you, my little Junie-flower," said Madeleine, taking the card and leaning over to kiss Juniper on her head. "You're looking so pretty in your purple dress and your hair's growing too! Have you got a cuddle for your auntie?"

"That's the dress you gave her, it fits her a bit better now," remarked Bryony to Sandra, as Juniper sat on the sofa in between Madeleine and Henri, having a side cuddle from both of them and looking pleased. "She likes it anyway, she keeps picking it out to wear every day."

"Well, we won't be buying the new baby any dresses," said Caroline, looking at Bryony. "I expect you're pleased to be having a boy, so you'll have one of each. I was advised not to have any more children, but I was quite glad Sandra was a girl."

"I was quite glad Sandra was a girl too," said Osborn, looking a little stressed. "Sandra, did you remember the stuffing?"

"I'm sure I did," replied Sandra, raising her eyebrows at Gulliver, who laughed aloud, reminding Sandra of earlier years when the two of them had shared a great deal of laughter.

"Just think what you'll be letting yourselves in for if you and Madeleine have children, Henri," said Lawrence, looking across to where Madeleine and Henri were both helping Juniper to do some colouring. "Osborn and I were always fighting when we were children."

"Sibling rivalry," said Sandra, "I remember it well with Gulliver and Madeleine."

"I 'ad sibling rivalry with my brother, but my parents used to nip it in the butt," commented Henri, picking up a red crayon.

"Your parents nipped your butt?" asked Lawrence innocently. "I thought mine were bad enough! Don't worry, I'm only being provocative. Why are you sniggering, Gulliver?"

"I think you mean nip it in the bud," said Caroline, sniffing. "The heavy frost has damaged some of the buds on my camellias, Sandra, it's such a shame."

"I hate this weather," said Lawrence dolefully. "It's been so cold some evenings sitting in my flat that my hands and feet have felt quite frozen. Oh! Talking of frozen, have you heard that the water bills are going to be frozen for two years?"

"Isn't that a waste of paper?" asked Gulliver, his face creasing into a grin. "Sorry, I'm just being silly, I feel better today than I have for quite a while."

"I'm glad about that," said Sandra, looking at her son and wondering what he meant exactly. "Time's going on a bit, though – Osborn, should we repair to the kitchen to see to the lunch?"

"Why does your mother talk of repairing the kitchen now?" Sandra heard Henri whispering to Madeleine.

"Yes, I think we should see to the lunch, or it could well be a train crack," said Osborn, looking at Juniper as she upset the entire box of crayons and leaping to his feet distractedly.

"He means a train crash or a train wreck," explained Madeleine to Henri quickly, before he had time to ask. "He got a bit mixed up."

"He's always been a bit mixed up," said Lawrence wickedly. "I didn't say that!"

As 2010 emerged from the unknown into existence, the temperatures plummeted even further. A predominantly easterly or north-easterly airstream was the culprit, bringing bitterly cold air from the Arctic, which wasn't helped by snowfalls from weather systems in the North Sea. There was such a continuous hard frost, that night-time temperatures fell well below zero Centigrade, with daytime temperatures not much above.

By mid-January, the freezing conditions at last abated enough for Sandra and Osborn to plan a week's visit to Aberpontyfan, since much to Gulliver's disappointment, they had been forced to postpone their post-Christmas visit. They had also been afflicted with a virus, although thankfully nowhere near as lethal as the one that had rendered Sandra half-deaf the previous January.

On Sandra's last visit to Caroline before they left, the atmosphere felt so fraught with undercurrents that Sandra felt trapped in a spider's web of neediness and game playing. It was becoming a familiar feeling. Her sense of unease was deepened further with Madeleine's growing conviction that she'd made a big mistake with her change of career. Sandra and Osborn were both so perturbed by Madeleine's sudden slump into what Sandra recognised as the start of depression and anxiety, that they decided to call in to see Madeleine on their way to Wales.

"It's OK darling, Bristol is on the way to Wales," said Sandra comfortingly, as Madeleine dissolved into tears as soon as they were inside her front door.

"We love to see you anyway," said Osborn, as he gave Madeleine a long hug. "Truly we do. I'm so sorry you're not OK, but we can talk about it."

They all talked over a brie roll lunch, when Sandra tried not to let her heart drop too much at Madeleine's desolation about her inability to cope with the uncertainty of working at the gym in a self-employed capacity. The financial situation hadn't been helped when someone had crashed into Henri's car during the freezing weather. Sandra was relieved when Osborn suggested they come back and stay overnight with Madeleine and Henri on their return from Aberpontyfan, so they could have a proper talk. Sandra sensed that when Madeleine heard this, she grabbed hold of it like a drowning person who has been thrown a rope.

For two days, Osborn helped Gulliver with laying some hall flooring, while Sandra spent a lot of time with Juniper, who had become exceptionally talkative as her second birthday approached. The house itself was cold, but Sandra was so often either leaping around with Juniper, or with her hands in hot water as she washed dishes, that it wasn't really a problem. She loved her golden-haired, dynamic little granddaughter and delighted in the time spent with her.

When the hall flooring had been completed, they were able to go out. Because of work, Bryony could only spend Sunday with them, but Gulliver took them for a walk alongside a local canal one day and on another day, Sandra and Osborn took Juniper out into Swansea by themselves for lunch and a walk around. In between, there were some more small jobs that Osborn and Gulliver worked on, while Sandra decided to have a go at tidying the garden shed.

It was a task she failed to complete – not from want of trying, but from want of being able to catch the two mice that she saw darting away out of an old box that she'd picked up to investigate. She didn't shriek aloud, but she was unnerved and decided it

was time to saunter back into the house and report on the unexpected wildlife she'd come across. Gulliver said he would deal with the situation and Sandra asked no more.

The last evening there, they all sat around the table in the conservatory, eating food, drinking wine, chatting and generally chilling out. They had a head start on the latter, as the conservatory was the coldest room in the house, despite the heater.

"Are you warm enough?" asked Gulliver, shivering slightly.

"Yes, thank you," replied Sandra and Osborn together, exchanging a swift glance of disbelief at what they had each said.

"It's been so cold lately, I don't remember as cold a winter as this for ages," said Sandra, sitting on one of her hands to warm it up. It was so cold last week, there were icicles on Rosemary from next door's bush."

"Mother!" said Gulliver, in mock horror, as Osborn snorted with laughter and nearly choked. "Dad, are you OK? Thank you for helping with all the jobs, by the way," he continued, swigging some wine from his glass. "It's nice to have someone to drink wine with, as well."

"Glad to help out," said Osborn, swigging companionably.

"Never mind, Bryony, only a few months to go," said Sandra to Bryony, swigging daintily, which was a little difficult. "Your due date's the fifth of May, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied Bryony, swigging nothing. "Actually, we were going to ask you something, weren't we Gulliver."

"What? Oh yes, would you be able to come and stay when the baby's due? We thought we could cover it by having you two here for a week or so before the due date and then Bryony's parents here for a week or so following?" Gulliver poured himself some more wine. "More wine, Dad? Mother?"

"I don't mind if I do," replied Osborn, as Sandra shook her head. "Yes, of course we'll help out, we might get to see the little chap when he's born."

"I don't think so," said Bryony, grimacing. "I think that would be a step too far."

"Yes, I agree," said Sandra, smiling. "No – I mean yes, we'd love to come and do Birth Watch. I guess that's what grandparents are for."

"Juniper, what are you doing?" asked Gulliver suddenly. "You're very quiet, you're never this quiet..."

"Ha! She's taken your wallet that you left on the table," said Sandra, peering into Juniper's lap, where she was taking out credit cards and putting them into the pocket of her pinafore dress. "Where's the money that was there as well? Juniper?"

"Gamma!" said Juniper, using her recently updated version of 'Grandma' and her best toddler diversion tactics.

"Ah – you've put it in your nappy, haven't you," said Sandra, grinning as a pound coin rolled out onto the floor. "You clever – I mean you naughty little girl!"

The next day they drove back to Bristol in very low temperatures and sleety conditions. Madeleine told them that since their talk, she'd discussed it all with Henri and had made a decision to quit the gym and look for another job. Because of this, she was feeling somewhat lighter in spirit and so the three of them caught the bus into town and had lunch in a crowded but not too noisy *Wetherfork's*.

"I feel a bit of a failure," admitted Madeleine, putting her half-eaten sandwich down. "Henri's been kind, but I know he thinks I've wasted money on the training."

"I don't think it's wasted, I think you've learned a lot from the experience," said Sandra positively. "I think it's harder to make it work as a personal trainer than it seems on the surface. Gina's daughter Kate tried it and she found it didn't work out for her either."

"So all the working out didn't work out," replied Madeleine with a sudden burst of her old humour. "Is she OK, did she find another job?"

"Yes, she did and she's very doing well," replied Sandra, smiling. "You'll be able to move on from this, Maddy, you really will. You've got so much going for you."

"Henri says I'll still be able to do personal trainer work and run classes in my spare time," continued Madeleine a little uncertainly, "but I'm not sure. I feel really set back by all this. You're quiet, Varti?"

"Sorry," said Osborn, as he finished his half-baguette and wiped his fingers on a serviette. "Yes, this definitely hasn't been a wasted experience for you, I agree with Mum. I think you've learned a great deal that's positive and also gained confidence in another area, although you may not feel that way right at this minute. You gave it your best and it didn't work as you'd hoped, but that truly isn't failure, because failure would be never giving it a go at all."

"Thank you," said Madeleine with tears glistening in her eyes. "It feels as if I didn't really stick at it long enough. It all seemed to go wrong so quickly."

"Don't forget that it was proving detrimental to your health and wellbeing," said Sandra, trying to decide whether she should or could finish her remaining chips. "I think you've actually made a very wise decision to step away from the gym – and don't forget too that it was also detrimental to Henri, in the sense that he lives with you and how you both are affects one another."

"I know you're right, I just have to feel that way for myself," said Madeleine with a wan smile. "Oh, it's good to be able to talk it over with you, I'm so grateful you called by again on your way back from Wales. I suppose Gulliver's been enjoying the freezing weather?"

"In his element by the sound of it," replied Osborn, "although it was warmer when we were there – which was good, since I was working there again. I've got some work to do for Grandma when we get back too, she said her bedroom window's letting in a draught."

"Get someone in to sort it out," said Madeleine immediately. "You can't keep fixing things for everybody. God, I'm such a hypocrite! Henri wanted me to ask you about our garden fence, because you were talking to him about it?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Osborn, taking one of Sandra's abandoned chips. "I'd be very happy to come and show him how to build a new fence, I love working with wood. Uncle Lawrence could come and help too, if that's OK?"

"Absolutely," replied Madeleine happily. "I'd have to check with Henri, but I'm sure it'll be fine. I'm looking forward to it already, I wish it was summer and I'd found a good job."

"Don't wish your time away, Mad," said Sandra quietly. "Talking about fences, Grandma hinted about me painting her fence again and I just ignored her. I really don't know who she thinks I am sometimes..."

"How has she been lately?" asked Madeleine with a small frown. "You said she didn't want you to go to Wales?"

"It was awful the last time I saw her," replied Sandra wearily, feeling again the weight of her mother's projected resentment. "It was such heavy weather, it honestly seemed as if she felt we were abandoning her, which is ridiculous!"

"She certainly struggles with you going away," agreed Madeleine sombrely. "I guess she won't be happy that you're staying an extra night here?"

"She can lump it," replied Osborn firmly, "because you're our daughter and she's had her life. I can tell you here and now that if it comes to it and I'm supposed to choose between her and you, it'll be you."

"Oh dear," said Madeleine uncertainly. "I don't know whether to feel happy or sad about that."

"Let's finish our drinks and head to the shops," said Sandra resolutely, feeling jumpy because the atmosphere was becoming too disturbing – and also feeling totally unable to contend with the family dynamics that seemed to be pulling at her from every angle.

The next day, Sandra and Osborn said goodbye to a shaky but determined Madeleine. She had rung the Job Centre first thing in the morning and was on her way to tell the gym manager she was quitting. On arrival home after an unremarkable journey, they walked the short distance to Caroline's house, since they'd been away longer than expected. Sandra found her mother extremely woebegone, complaining of pain in her shoulder ever since they'd been away and saying, for some obscure reason, that she hadn't known they'd gone to Aberporthyfan to work.

"I don't know *what* she imagines," said Sandra angrily to Osborn as they walked home. "She truly appears to believe we go away to enjoy ourselves, leaving her to fend for her poor old self. Doesn't she realise how much of my life I've given her all these years, while it's slowly ebbing away? How one day I'll wake up and realise how little of my own life I've lived for *my* poor old self?!"

CHAPTER 15

Sandra was having a sociable Monday in late February. In the morning, she visited Gina, whose life appeared to be as frenetic as ever. They had decided to leave the next get-old-together until the weather was warmer, but Sandra suspected it was largely because they were all stupidly busy.

"I do think I'm stupid to allow life to become so busy," concluded Sandra, although she hadn't long arrived at Gina's. "I get caught up in other people's lives and now I'm on this committee at Rainbow Healers."

"I know what you mean, I'm on the pre-school committee," replied Gina, pulling one of her long, silvery blonde hairs away from her face, "and there are always so many new rules that are becoming more and more impossible to achieve. I sometimes wonder why I put myself through so much stress, but I'm there for the children. Also, I'd go raving mad if I had to stay at home and do nothing."

"Stay at home and do nothing?" echoed Sandra, wondering briefly if she and her old school friend lived on different planets.

"Oh, I didn't mean you do nothing, honestly! I mean, you've got your mother to consider and your husband doesn't go off every day he possibly can to play golf and leave you to do everything. No, I mean I need to be with other people. I don't like being alone, it means I have to face myself." Gina looked somewhat taken aback at her own unexpected admission.

"I like to spend time on my own sometimes, but I know what you mean about having to face yourself," replied Sandra carefully. "I'm having to face the fact that these days I'm quite often angry with my mother and it scares me, because it doesn't fit into my ideal of who I thought she and I were together."

"I suppose we all change over the years," considered Gina. "Adam's changed incredibly since he's been with Sarah and had two children. He was such a naughty child, I'm sure you remember I was always at both of his schools, seeing teachers and head teachers. It's a miracle I didn't tear all my hair out! Now though, he takes responsibility for Reece and Owen in a way I never thought he would. It's as if all that hard work on my part paid off in the end."

"That's brilliant," agreed Sandra, smiling. "It's amazing how as humans we can be so different and yet find so much in common with each other. Like you and me, I mean. It's also amazing how people can change. Like Adam and my mother, I mean. Or maybe we all change, but we do it so gradually that it's not noticeable. Have I changed over the years?"

"I can't say I've noticed. That is, you've matured in many ways – don't take that wrongly – but you're still you and I'm still me and we're still friends. That's got to mean something, hasn't it?"

"It means a lot," replied Sandra honestly. "When it feels like your own mother is unknowingly or otherwise sucking the you-ness from you, it means a huge, massive lot."

In the afternoon she visited Alison for the first time in two months. This was mainly due to the weather, family commitments for both of them and Alison's health. However, Sandra felt as comfortable as ever sitting opposite Alison with a mug of tea, listening to all the accounts of the cardiac tests Alison had recently had to undergo.

"...so now I've had to add statins to the list of drugs I take every day, because of my cholesterol levels," Alison was saying, while Sandra made a moral decision not to say anything about the growing number of reports she'd read on the internet, concerning not only the adverse side-effects of statins, but also the whole questionable subject area of cholesterol itself.

"Are you feeling OK, though," she asked in genuine concern, "in yourself?"

"No, not really," replied Alison truthfully, sipping her tea. "Helen and Mark are still not OK, I'm sure they're going to separate. I would have thought that because Helen's my daughter, she'd talk to me more, but she seems quite closed off. I think she talks to her friends more than to me. Am I being unrealistic?"

"I don't think so, but maybe she doesn't want to upset you, because of your recent heart scare and everything? I can remember that when Maddy first started her battle with anorexia, she didn't talk to me because Osborn had told her not to worry me with anything while I was at university." Sandra decided not to say anything further about how this was really because she'd been falling apart after discovering Osborn's affair with her cousin.

"It seems such a shame we're not all honest with one another. I'm so glad I can be honest with you, because isn't that what friends are for? Or what they do best at if they're real friends, like you are?" Alison gave a small, embarrassed laugh.

"I'm so glad we're friends, Ally," responded Sandra, smiling, as a thought struck her. "I don't know if I've said this before, but I'm glad you're an ally, Ally."

Sandra, Osborn and Lawrence had met for lunch at *Ye Cheape and Cheerfulle Café* and were celebrating with a cheap and cheerful dessert. They had earlier booked a holiday in Sorrento and were feeling undeniably pleased with themselves.

"I'm so glad we've done it," said Lawrence brightly, scratching the back of his head. "Ouch, I mustn't do that, but it's itching so much now it's healing properly."

"It'll heal quickly now the stitches are out," said Osborn, referring to the cut that Lawrence had sustained two weeks before on the base of his skull, when he'd slipped on the icy doorstep of his flat. "I'm glad I was around that day to take you to A & E."

"I was glad too," confirmed Lawrence. "Apart from anything else, taxis to the hospital charge way over the odds. Lunch today is on me, by the way. How's Madeleine getting on with the job search?"

"Yes! Sorry Lawrence, I forgot to tell you in all the excitement of Sorrento. She's found a position with the insurance company EXA and she starts in early March." Osborn smiled at his brother, feeling relieved that life was beginning to lighten up again.

"What sort of a position?" asked Lawrence, surreptitiously rubbing the back of his neck.

"A sitting position mainly, I should think," replied Sandra with a chuckle. "In front of a computer, like so many millions of jobs these days. She's happy to have found a job so quickly, considering what the job market's like."

"Brilliant," said Lawrence with genuine satisfaction. "She deserves to be OK. What about Gulliver?"

"Well, he enjoyed the snow, but he's been struggling a bit because Juniper's been sick again, literally," replied Sandra. "She caught yet another virus from nursery, but I don't think Gulliver and Bryony succumbed this time. Gulliver still hates Juniper being ill, he does find it difficult being solely responsible for her during the week when Bryony's at work. I can empathise with that, but really you just have to get on and do it."

"How's he going to feel with two children?" asked Lawrence baldly. The slow departure of his head hair was becoming ever more noticeable. "Did he have a say?"

"Well, he definite had a hand – or something – in it," replied Osborn, "although whether he had a say, I'm not sure."

"We don't delve into such areas," said Sandra, making a face of indeterminate intent.

"Oh well, let's think about Sorrento," said Lawrence happily. "I hope we can visit Pompeii and Mount Vesuvius."

"Pompeii? Mount Vesuvius?" repeated Sandra incredulously. "You mean, Pompeii – the ancient Roman city? Mount Vesuvius – the volcano? Holy sodding eruptions, I think I've died and gone to heaven!"

In mid-March, Sandra was a little perturbed to see Belinda was having more trouble with her balance than the last time she'd seen her. Belinda had asked if Sandra, Osborn and

Caroline would like to go to her house to have a snack lunch and to watch Trudie's wedding video. When Osborn had driven them there, though, Belinda had whispered to Sandra that she was having a wobbly day and asked if Sandra would pour the tea and carry the tray, since her husband Ian was out for the day.

Sandra was glad to help and after having some sandwiches that Ian had made earlier, they'd all settled down with a cup of tea to watch the video. Ian had also left a chocolate orange sponge he'd baked the day before.

"This is lovely, I used to make good cakes," said Caroline, as they watched Trudie and David holding hands on some rather haphazard video footage, both looking nervous but happy. "Where did they get married again?"

"It was Florida, Auntie," replied Belinda, looking sadly happy. "It was too far for us to travel and Ian would never have gone anyway with his anxiety. I lit a candle on the day they were married and played some music that I know Trudie loves, but I think I got the time difference wrong."

"I'm sure it didn't matter, you were with each other in spirit," said Sandra comfortingly, thinking how her heart would have been squeezed into a pulpy mess inside her chest cavity if she'd been unable to go to Madeleine's wedding. "She really does look lovely."

"They didn't get married in a church, then," said Caroline, sniffing. "What's that thing they're standing underneath?"

"It's a flower bower," replied Osborn, brushing crumbs from his fingers. "Give my compliments to Ian please, Belinda, the cake is delicious."

"Trudie said she felt calm once the ceremony had started and she was standing under the flowers," said Belinda, looking happily sad.

"Flower bower power," said Sandra dreamily. "I hope Madeleine and Henri get married one day and I hope it's somewhere as special as underneath that flower bower."

"Will they get married in France?" asked Caroline a little abruptly.

"I've no idea," replied Sandra a little more abruptly.

"Madeleine will look beautiful wherever she is," said Belinda reassuringly, as she replaced her empty cup on the tray with a clatter. "I asked Trudie to dress up again in everything when they came back, just so I could see it all in the flesh. She said I was being sentimental, but she still did it for me."

"Beautiful," said Sandra simply, giving Belinda a prolonged smile.

The following day, Madeleine was arriving by train for a three-night stay on her own, before starting work at EXA. After an afternoon visit to Caroline that passed comfortably enough, the three of them spent the rest of the time more or less pleasing themselves. They enjoyed a few local outings to places Madeleine had liked visiting as a child and spent one lunchtime at *The Ploughperson* with Lawrence.

On two of the evenings, they relaxed by watching a film while idly popping popcorn, but the third evening was an unusual one. It was a healing practice evening at Rainbow Healers and while Sandra was prepared (and actually quite eager) to stay at home to keep Madeleine company, Madeleine offered to go and be a body for trainee healers to practise upon. Sandra felt a deep pleasure to see Madeleine taking part very naturally throughout the evening, especially when Madeleine said she was glad she went.

"I'm so glad I took advantage of this time before I start work to come and see you," said Madeleine reflectively the next morning, as Osborn was driving them all to Bristol. "I sometimes wonder if it's a bit lame at my age, but I feel calmer about things when I talk them over with you both."

"I'm happy you came to see us," said Sandra, closing her eyes for a moment in alarm as Osborn speeded up suddenly to overtake a slow-moving car. "I feel calmer about things when I talk them over with you – and I don't care at all if it's lame at my age! I think Dad and I have been more stressed lately than we'd like to admit. I even shouted at someone on the phone last week – someone from the bank who was treating me like somebody who didn't know what she was talking about. Actually, I didn't know what she was talking about, but that's beside the point."

"You shouted at someone on the phone?" asked Madeleine in surprise. "Wow."

"I know, it's a scary thought. When we changed our service provider from *Lemon* to *Chat Chat*, Dad shouted at somebody on the phone too. Oh, it's been wonderful to spend a few days with you, I love the way we talk easily about anything and everything. I don't know if I've said it before, but it's almost like having a three-way life review."

"You stupid plonker!" yelled Osborn suddenly, as an overtaking white van cut in too closely. "Yes, I feel much more relaxed since seeing you, Maddy, I only wish it could be for longer. Oh, beep your horn and flash your lights at me, you moron!"

After an overnight stay at Bristol, Sandra and Osborn travelled on to Aberpontyfan for a five-night stay. One reason for this visit was Gulliver's request for Osborn to accompany him to *Focus on Focusing*, the renowned photographic exhibition at Birmingham.

Apart from this day trip, both Sandra and Osborn enjoyed some time focusing on Juniper, while Bryony was at work and Gulliver was preparing for a craft fair. The morning before they left for home, Bryony was at work, but Gulliver drove them to the Brecon Beacons Mountain Centre, in the hope that they would actually be able to see the mountains, unlike their previous visit.

It was a cold day and therefore it seemed only sensible to have a hot drink before they ventured anywhere. While standing at the counter in the tea room, they deliberated whether to supplement their order with cake.

"Flabjack!" said Juniper excitedly, after Osborn had given in to her insistent request to be lifted up to see what they were all looking at. "Flabjack!"

"Do you know, I really love doing these ordinary things with you," said Sandra, looking at a vaguely embarrassed Gulliver, after they'd sat down. "I understand your choice to live in Wales, but I do miss you and I do miss the ordinary times."

"Yes, I like coming to tea rooms and ordering coffee with you too," joked Gulliver, giving Juniper her drink. "I wish family was closer, I'm not looking forward to the birth."

"You won't have to give birth," said Sandra pseudo-comfortingly, but realising that Gulliver was opening up. "Why aren't you looking forward to the birth?"

"If something goes wrong, I'll be on my own and I hate hospitals anyway."

"There's no indication anything will go wrong and we're only a few hours away," said Sandra, real-comfortingly this time. "I'm sure Bryony's parents feel the same."

"I know," replied Gulliver, "but I still wish you lived in Wales."

"Mum's right, we can drive up to you in a matter of hours," said Osborn, finishing his coffee. "Well, that was pretty decent flapjack, I'll give it that," he remarked, having shared a piece with Sandra.

"It's not as good as the flapjack you make, Dad," said Gulliver loyally, sharing his piece with Juniper.

"It seems richer than yours," commented Sandra, sighing. "It was lovely, but I think Juniper was right to call it flapjack, I'll need to go for a walk after this."

"Play Gamma!" said Juniper, who had just been released from her seat and was pulling at Sandra's hand to lead her to the play area.

"Just for a little while and then we're going for a walk," agreed Sandra, allowing herself to be led away. "You'll be OK," she said to Gulliver, looking back at him and smiling. "We'll always do our best for you and Maddy, as long as we're alive."

"My foot's been really hurting," said Caroline, sitting in the upright green chair that had originally been bought for Sandra's father Leonard, with her feet outstretched on a footstool. "It's the bunion, it's pushing my other toes out of alignment, look at it! I can't walk properly on it, it's been so painful."

"Have you thought about making a doctor's appointment, if it's giving you that much trouble?" asked Sandra, noticing her mother's downturned mouth.

"I wanted to wait until you came back and see what you thought," replied Caroline, sniffing. "My back's been really aching too."

"I think you should see a doctor," said Sandra tiredly, wishing she hadn't decided to visit her mother as soon as they'd returned from Wales.

"I didn't like the turn that last committee meeting was taking," said Leona, sipping hot chocolate, as she sat with Sandra, Osborn and Pascal at a local *Safebury's* café the following Saturday afternoon. "There seem to be a lot of undercurrents going on there and I have to say that a lot of them appear to be emanating from Cynthia."

"I'm glad you noticed it too," said Osborn, spooning the creamy froth from his cappuccino. "I'm beginning to suspect that Cynthia didn't like the way Gloria asked me to be the chairperson of Rainbow Healers, because I have a sneaking suspicion that Cynthia wants to be chairperson herself."

"Cynthia's definitely got it in for Leona," said Pascal, his hands around his latte, "because when we were at Rainbow House the other evening for reflexology, Cynthia came into the waiting room when we were on our way out and she really went for her."

"Why?" asked Sandra, managing to get a word in edgewise, in between sipping her mocha. "What did she say?"

"She said I had no business changing the furniture around in the waiting room because I had no authority," replied Leona, fiddling with a strand of her softly curled blonde hair. "The thing was, I'd donated a comfy chair that I thought would give the room a less regimented look and it meant I had to move the row of hard-backed chairs around."

"That seems petty," commented Osborn, frowning. "Did you notice she didn't like it much when I said I'd contact the insurers about the new regulations?"

"Yes, I noticed because she was sitting opposite me and she pursed her lips when she looked at you," said Pascal, giving a small laugh.

"Listen to us," said Leona, looking slightly pained. "We're supposed to be caring people and here we are falling out with the main guys in a natural health and healing centre!"

"I think they're falling out with us," said Pascal sadly.

"Well, we'll have to stay true to ourselves and..." Osborn seemed lost for words for once in his life.

"...and watch our backs," Sandra finished for him with a wry smile.

"And put our energy into the retreat," said Leona, finishing her hot chocolate. "I keep playing the lottery and asking for guidance."

"I'd like some guidance about a rather troublesome person on the current healing course, to be honest," said Osborn, finishing his cappuccino.

"I'd like some guidance about my entire future," said Pascal, finishing his latte.

"I'd like some guidance," said Sandra, finishing her mocha. "Any guidance at all."

"Hello Mum, do you need us to get you any shopping?" asked Sandra kindly a week later, having rung Caroline to check if she'd recovered from being sick the previous two days. Caroline was insisting that the painkillers the doctor had prescribed for her foot were causing her to be sick and so she'd stopped taking them. When they'd spoken on the phone the day before, Caroline had told Sandra she'd drunk some tea and eaten a biscuit, so Sandra hadn't been too concerned.

"I can't really think, don't worry. Just the usual milk, I suppose. I'm still in bed, because yesterday after you rang, I got out of bed to make a cup of tea and I passed out in the kitchen. When I came around, I discovered I'd cut my head on a door handle, or something."

"What? Why didn't you ring us? Did you ring the surgery?" Sandra felt shocked.

"No, I just went back to bed. I didn't want to worry you. I've eaten two yoghurts and some toast since then, so I must be all right."

"You could have had concussion! I'll come over to you after we come back from shopping."

"I don't want to cause a fuss."

Later that day when Sandra called at her mother's, Caroline was sitting up in bed and looking pale, but otherwise she seemed normal. However, despite this being a good sign, Sandra couldn't help feeling concerned.

The following day when she visited, she found her mother still looking pale and still reclining in bed, but saying that she was fancying some fish.

"Well, that's good, is there any in the freezer?" Sandra wondered briefly if she should cross an invisible line and cook some fish for her mother.

"No, I don't think so, I'll put it on the list for next week."

"I'm sure we can get you some tomorrow, you need to build yourself up again."

"Well, if you say so. I was thinking earlier how you're like the family's mummy, looking after us all."

"No!" Sandra had responded without thinking. "No, I'm not, no way! I'll always be Gulliver's and Madeleine's mother, but I'm me. I just want to be me!"

Sandra was dusting the sitting room and picked up the frame containing an old black and white photo of her father, lying on the grass and smiling as he cradled baby Sandra in front of him. She gazed at the image and felt her heart lurch with emotion.

'Oh Dad,' she thought sadly, 'I miss you so much. It's over five years now since I last saw you. It seems so strange, but I still feel the connection. Dad, I'm finding it really hard with Mum, I hope you understand. I'm trying to be a good daughter to her, but she overwhelms me now you're not here. I wish you were still here, but I'm so glad you're at peace now. Bless you, my darling Dad.' As she put down the photo, a few healing tears trickled slowly down her face.

CHAPTER 16

It was late April and gardening season. Not long before Easter, Sandra and Osborn had visited Madeleine and Henri for a few days to help with their garden, which was well on its way to looking a lot tidier. During the Easter break, Gulliver, Bryony and Juniper had come to stay for four nights and had left behind a mess, some chocolate and a virus. As so often happened, Osborn's virus developed into sinusitis and more unusually, Sandra's into tonsillitis.

As they both recovered, they worked on their redesigned front garden whenever possible, as well as maintaining their back garden. Sandra also attempted, sometimes unsuccessfully, to keep her mother's front and back garden in check.

Trouble was definitely brewing at Rainbow Healers and it began to escalate very quickly, with Leona an obvious scapegoat. Sandra had sat at the last committee meeting knowing that she didn't belong there and that it certainly wasn't what she wanted to do with her life. However, she was incensed at the unfairness which was unfolding and knew that Leona needed some allies, as her self-esteem was clearly suffering.

Gloria seemed to be confused about what was happening and because Cynthia was her longstanding friend, Sandra and Osborn were both convinced that Gloria was being misled by Cynthia, who was wrongly accusing Leona of wanting to take over as chairperson.

"I'm beginning to think Cynthia's got some real issues eating away inside her," said Leona on the phone one day. She'd rung in a distressed state, after two therapists at Rainbow House had cold-shouldered her. They happened to be two therapists who were friendly with Cynthia.

"I'd gone in to show the fire officer around for the fire safety risk assessment I'd arranged," continued Leona shakily, "and neither of them acknowledged me when I said hello. I said hello twice, just to make sure. Then Cynthia turned up and she took over, showing the fire officer around. She said I could go."

"That's awful," said Sandra, wishing Osborn was available to speak with Leona, but pleased that Leona was trusting her with her emotions. "I honestly can't understand how they can work for a place like that and behave the way they're behaving."

"Me neither," agreed Leona, beginning to sound a little calmer. "Gloria was so lovely to me when I wasn't well, she helped me through my really dark time. Surely she knows deep inside that I would never try to take over, or do anything at all to harm her or Rainbow Healers in any way? I feel a bit betrayed by her, to be honest."

"I'm so sorry," said Sandra, her own heart sinking at the injustice of what was taking place. "You haven't done anything wrong, Leona, I've only ever seen you try to help. In fact, you've given a lot of your time and energy to Rainbow Healers, they should

be welcoming you with open arms. Sadly, Cynthia seems to be the diseased apple in the Rainbow House fruit bowl. She was one of the healers who certified me as a healer when I went before the board, too."

"Well, *she* needs certifying now!" exclaimed Leona. "Sorry, I didn't mean to say that out loud!"

"It's OK, I think you're entitled to say it," replied Sandra with a small laugh. "It can be very therapeutic to let it all out and say exactly what you're feeling. I do it when my mother really gets to me sometimes."

"You do? Oh, thank you for being so understanding, I was beginning to think I'd got it all wrong." Leona sighed. "It must be difficult for you and Osborn running the healing course with all this taking off. I honestly don't want to make it any more difficult for you, *please* do whatever you feel is right for you both."

"We will. I've become quite good over the years at trusting my own instincts. I don't know what will happen at this special meeting that Cynthia's arranged tomorrow, though, I'm not looking forward to it at all."

"What meeting's that?" Leona's voice had lowered in uncertainty.

"You don't know about it?" Sandra wondered for a second or two whether she should say anything and quickly decided she wasn't going to lie by omission. "We-ell, Cynthia rang Osborn yesterday and said we both had to go to an emergency committee meeting tomorrow. She was so imperious with him that he started to speak back to her the way she was speaking to him. I know that for a fact, because I was sitting right beside him! I don't think she liked him giving as good as he got, because I could hear her voice rising and rising until she was almost screeching. In the end, he said goodbye and put the phone down."

"Great galloping crystal balls, what in the name of all that's sacred is going on?" Leona sounded somewhat distressed again.

"I really don't know," replied Sandra unhappily, wishing that people would simply be nicer to each other. "I wonder if Cynthia told Pascal about the meeting?"

"I doubt it," said Leona, sighing. "He's blown it by being my friend."

"I'm your friend, Leona," said Sandra quietly but firmly, "and so is Osborn. We'll just have to see what this meeting tomorrow brings."

The emergency committee meeting brought Sandra a sense of disbelief and outrage, as Gloria joined ranks with Cynthia and continued to use Leona as a scapegoat for their own shortcomings. As Sandra kept her head down to take minutes, she was able to listen carefully to the actual words and phrases people were using. It became apparent that Leona possessed the impetus and enthusiasm Rainbow Healers needed to take them into the modern world, but the senior members (three of whom were in their eighth decade, including Gloria and Cynthia) found this threatening.

"I can't be part of this," said Osborn sadly as they were driving home from the meeting. "They're manipulating the situation similarly to the way that Bill Bustard tried to manipulate me at the university. This is even worse in a way, because they're meant to be genuinely caring people, whose main aim is to help others."

"What shall we do?" asked Sandra worriedly.

"I'll finish teaching this year's healing course and then leave," said Osborn firmly. "I thought Rainbow Healers was my future, but apparently not. Maybe the retreat is?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know if I can be part of that," said Sandra honestly, her heart having sunk at Osborn's words.

"I don't know if I can either, but I'll see what happens," said Osborn resolutely. "I'd love you to be part of it, if it does come into existence, but it's your choice."

"Yes," replied Sandra dully. "I wish I knew what I want to do with the rest of my life. I wish I knew what the future's going to bring."

"It's going to bring us a new grandchild very soon," said Osborn warmly. "I'd say it's a fact that grandchildren are definitely part of our future."

"You're right," said Sandra, immediately feeling happier at the impending journey to Aberporthyfan the following morning. "Birth Watch, here we come!"

Birth Watch was feeling every bit the same as a normal visit, apart from the fact that Bryony was waddling around with an impressive baby bump. For three days they all enjoyed visits to various places, including the Mountain Centre, Defynnog and Craig-y-nos, in between sitting around at home, doing various chores, or playing with a bright, talkative, exhausting Juniper.

On the fourth day, while Juniper was at nursery, Sandra and Osborn visited the much-acclaimed National Botanic Garden of Wales. It felt like a walk around heaven after all the hype and stress of the recent weeks, months and years and they returned to Aberpontyfan feeling more or less human again.

The fifth day was the baby's due date, but all that actually happened was a visit to Pontarddulais Garden Centre and more of the aforementioned sitting around and/or amusing Juniper. The sixth day, however, was both the day of a general election and changeover day with Bryony's parents. It also turned out to be the birth day of Petroc Osborn Dullkettle, which was a name and a half to contend with.

That morning, on coming down to breakfast, Gulliver had broken the news to his parents that Bryony was experiencing labour pains. He took Juniper to nursery, advising them there that grandparents were likely to be collecting her in the afternoon.

Sandra and Osborn excitedly deliberated what to do, as Anne and Stan Stanpool probably wouldn't be arriving until mid-afternoon. In the end, they decided to stay and meet their new grandson, as Gulliver said he would like them to be there – and sleeping arrangements could be rearranged.

They went out to give Bryony the freedom to moan, groan and generally suffer in peace, while they wandered aimlessly around some shops in Swansea until lunchtime. Everything had started to feel rather surreal, as Sandra sat eating fish and chips with Osborn in a disconnected daze, wishing Juniper was with them, to anchor her to reality. After lingering over a mug of much too strong tea, they decided it was probably wise to head back closer to Aberpontyfan. While they were on the road, however, Gulliver sent Sandra a text message to say he'd taken Bryony to hospital.

Back at the house, they tidied and cleaned for an hour, until the arrival of Anne and Stan. As soon as they came in the front door, Anne looked at them questioningly.

"She's in labour, isn't she? As soon as I saw your car still here outside, I knew. Oh, I feel all funny, I hope she's alright." As Anne spoke those words, Sandra recognised the barely disguised anxiety of a mother's deep concern for her daughter in labour. She wondered if she would one day experience the same feelings about Madeleine.

An hour later, Sandra and Osborn went to the nursery to collect Juniper. To their delight, she seemed pleased to see them, judging by the way she tried to launch herself forward from the nursery worker's arms into Sandra's arms. When Juniper saw her other grandparents at the house too, she seemed delighted to have all four of them to herself and went around to them all in turn, engaging them in all sorts of antics with her toys.

When Sandra's phone beeped with an incoming text message, she had a feeling it was the news they'd been waiting for. It was! Bryony had given birth to a healthy baby boy, weighing 7lbs 12oz, at 16:35. It had been a water birth and he'd arrived so quickly that the midwife had been forced to dive into the water to take him out.

Anne seemed very excited and immediately started to ring people to share the good news. Sandra rang Caroline, while Osborn rang Madeleine and Lawrence. Juniper seemed overwhelmed at that point and sought cuddles from anyone who was free.

Gulliver returned home for tea and straight afterwards, they all drove to the hospital to see their new family member. Bryony was in a large, light and airy room of her own, reclining in a double bed, while Petroc lay asleep in a crib beside the bed. Everyone seemed a little unsure of social protocol, as partner, parents, in-laws and daughter all piled into the room at the same time and greeted Bryony a little diffidently. However, Anne picked up Juniper to show her the sleeping form of her brother, snugly wrapped in a white blanket and the delight on Juniper's face was plain to see.

Sandra was somewhat amazed when Bryony and her father started to talk about the general election, but it somehow seemed to fit in with the day's overriding sense of strangeness and excitement. For Sandra, it resulted in a sudden wave of fatigue, so she sat down on a handy window sill and waited until the others decided it was time to leave.

Gulliver was given the option to stay with Bryony and Petroc for the night, but chose to return home and sleep on the floor of Juniper's room.

The strangeness wasn't over, as the sleeping arrangements had to be sorted out, dishes washed and Juniper put to bed. There then followed an uncomfortable hour for Sandra (that had nothing to do with the bean bag she was somewhat ungainly sprawled upon) when they all sat together in front of the television and pretended it was a normal evening, amid desultory conversation and small snatches of repartee.

Finally, she was able to escape to bed, but the thought that Anne and Stan were sleeping in the next room caused a complete inability to sleep. Long after snoring was emanating from various places, including beside her, she lay worrying about getting up to go to the toilet. What if she made a noise and woke people? What if she bumped into another nocturnal toilet seeker, namely Anne or Stan? In the end, she had to get up and go anyway, but she was so unrelaxed that she then began to worry about the morning. Would they all have to sit down together to breakfast? How would they all cope with one bathroom? What if she began to feel unwell? It was a long night...

However, she survived until the morning and even sat beside Anne at breakfast time, agreeing with her about how the birth had turned out well and how it would be a good idea to see each other more for the sake of their mutual grandchildren. Gulliver took Juniper to nursery before returning to the hospital, where Sandra and Osborn were to visit before finally heading home. Sandra felt so tired and overwrought by then that she couldn't wait to say goodbye and leave Aberpontyfan, although she managed not to run out of the door in excessive haste.

When they arrived at Bryony's hospital room, they were greeted with the heart-warming sight of Gulliver holding his son, who was quiet and awake. After a short while, Gulliver handed Petroc to Osborn for a cuddle and then a while later, Osborn handed him to Sandra. As she held the small grandson-type bundle, she was amazed at how alert he seemed, his eyes looking directly at her when she spoke to him. She sighed with relief and pleasure, while wondering what the future held for him – and for them all.

Finally, they were able to leave Wales and return to Cornwall, but as Sandra relaxed, she assumed the stress of the whole visit was released in a way that resulted in a very tense journey – a touch and go journey of whether she would make it to the next motorway services toilet or not. Fortunately, she did on each of the three occasions, but she felt beyond exhausted for at least the next two days.

To make matters worse, another sudden emergency committee meeting was called the day after their return, in which there was a proposal to send letters to Leona and Pascal, advising them that their services were no longer required at Rainbow House. When Sandra and Osborn voted against, they were outnumbered and regarded with thinly-veiled suspicion.

The next day, as soon as Sandra entered her mother's house, she was greeted with an accusation from Caroline that she hadn't rung as soon as she'd returned from Wales to tell her all the news. Sandra's heart sank on the spot, which was just inside the kitchen door, beside the food cupboard and opposite the fridge-freezer.

"I've told you so many times that you can ring whenever you want," she replied as calmly as was humanly possible at that moment. "I rang you as soon as we knew Petroc was born and there's no news as such, anyway. Anne and Stan have been with them, so I expect it's been hectic and Gulliver will ring when it's all settled down a bit."

"Well, have you got any photos? He's my great-grandson, you know."

"Yes," sighed Sandra wearily. "Let me come inside properly and I'll show you the photos I have on my camera."

"You do sound tired, darling," said Sandra to Madeleine on the phone. "I know you have a lot of work to do on the house in your spare time, but you need some time for yourself as well."

"I know Mumsie, but work is stupidly busy right now. I seem to end up being given all the jobs other people can't do and now they know I can work quickly, they ask for help when there are deadlines. I didn't get home until 19:30 the other evening and then Henri wanted me to hold the ladder for him."

"Oh, Mad – that's mad! You can say no sometimes, surely?"

"I don't feel as if I can at the moment. I think my line manager has it in for me a bit, she can be quite sarky. Some of the others have noticed it too."

"Oh no, not another one like Bill Bustard with Dad."

"I hope it doesn't get that bad! Any news from Gulliver?"

"Yes, he rang and said it's all going OK, but he sounded quiet and tired. Even a bit down, reading between the lines. Still, it's usually exhausting and overwhelming with a newborn baby, so he probably just needs a rest like we all do. I don't know why I feel so tired half the time myself, but I do." Sandra suppressed a yawn and wondered if an early night would help.

"You need to take some of your own advice, Mumsie. This is meant to be the time of your life when you take it easier and do things you want to do."

"What a lovely idea! No, you're right. We're planning a visit to a garden in Devon soon, on our anniversary. We've also got Sorrento to look forward to in July. What about you and Henri? Don't forget we'd love to go somewhere with you on holiday for a week, just let us know if Henri would agree."

"I will, but we've got that big family wedding in France in August, so Henri said it makes sense to go there for two weeks. Unfortunately, that takes up most of my leave allocation this year, because I'm new in my job. Next year should be much better, I'll work on Henri then."

"OK darling, at least we'll see you in a couple of months for Dad's 60th birthday," replied Sandra, feeling unaccountably deflated.

"I'm sorry we'll be in France on his actual birthday. Have you decided what you're going to do yet?"

"Yes, we've booked lunch at *The Netherlands Inn*. We thought we couldn't really go anywhere more upmarket because of Juniper and Petroc."

"That's a shame. Henri was asking if you'd booked a hotel or restaurant, I think his family always go to restaurants."

"I suppose eating in pubs is more of a British thing..."

"Oh, I didn't mean anything." Madeleine yawned. "Well, I suppose I'd better go, I told Henri I'd sand the skirting board in the spare bedroom this evening."

"It's Sunday, Mad!"

"I shouldn't take too long. I'll speak to you soon, Mumsie. I love you – bye!"

"I love you, Maddy – bye!" Sandra finished the call reluctantly, wondering why she felt suddenly disquieted.

She felt even more disquieted the next day when the news came that Leona and Pascal had received their letters from Rainbow Healers, notifying them that their services were no longer required. Osborn had immediately rung Gloria to tell her he would be resigning with much sadness from Rainbow Healers in July, when that year's healing course had finished. Sandra wasn't sure she felt quite as much sadness as Osborn when she wrote an official letter of resignation for them both, but she did feel extremely disillusioned and downhearted about human nature itself.

The following week, she felt alienated and unsure about Osborn's enthusiasm towards Leona's vision of a retreat, alongside her own intuitive misgivings. Leona had rung them both excitedly to tell them about a visit she'd arranged to a likely looking old country house and Osborn had at once agreed to go with her and Pascal. Since it was a Tuesday and Caroline would be expecting her, Sandra declined to go. However, when she arrived at her mother's house, she felt caught between two places where she didn't want to be.

"The podiatrist has offered me a bunion operation," announced Caroline, holding out a sheet of paper to Sandra. "Here, read it. It's called Keller's arthroplasty."

"OK." Sandra took the proffered sheet. "Are you going to accept?"

"Do you think I should? What do you think?"

"I think it's important you make up your own mind," replied Sandra carefully. "I see it's done with local anaesthetic, but it'll still take a few weeks to walk on your foot properly. You're supposed to have someone to stay with you the first night, too."

"Well, you'll be able to do that," said Caroline quickly, "and Osborn will take me to the hospital and collect me, won't he?"

"Ye-es," replied Sandra guardedly, knowing her mother expected her to ask Osborn and knowing how Osborn had an aversion to not being asked directly. "Do you think you'll have it done, then?"

"Yes, I just wanted to ask you what you thought and make sure you agreed," said Caroline, taking back the sheet of paper. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

CHAPTER 17

The first half of June was blessedly quiet enough for Sandra and Osborn to enjoy some short local walks, visit a few gardens and go out for lunch with Lawrence and Caroline. The second half of the month was a little more eventful, starting with Juniper contracting chicken pox from nursery and six-week-old Petroc catching it from Juniper.

One Monday morning when Sandra returned from seeing Gina, Caroline rang in a state of agitation. Osborn had gone to meet Lawrence for lunch as usual on a Monday.

"I had a phone call offering me the 5th of July for my bunion operation," she said querulously, "but I had to turn it down because you'll be away on holiday then."

"Did they offer you another date?" asked Sandra with some trepidation, noticing her heart was beating faster.

"No, so I hope I don't have to wait too long," replied Caroline tersely. "Anyway, I'm going to call over to see you in a minute, to show you my eye, because I want your opinion about what to do. I woke up this morning and it was all bloodshot – it was black underneath."

"What?" Sandra's heart stepped up the beating even more. "No, I'm not a doctor, I won't know what I'm looking at. Ring up the surgery and see what they say."

"Oh. I only wanted you to look at it." Caroline was obviously displeased.

"I'm not a medical person, you know that. The surgery will tell you what to do."

"Well, if you say so. I'll see you tomorrow, then." Caroline rang off, while Sandra was aware that she was feeling shaky inside.

The next day, Osborn drove Sandra and Caroline to a doctor's appointment Caroline had made the previous day. The verdict was a burst capillary, at which news both Caroline and Sandra were relieved. However, Caroline was in such an argumentative frame of mind that afternoon, that Sandra went home feeling like crying and sat in the garden for a while to calm down.

"Are you OK?" asked Osborn, when he discovered her sitting on the garden seat and gazing at the gazanias.

"No, she got to me good and proper this afternoon," replied Sandra dejectedly, shading her eyes from the full sun to look at him. "I can't believe she actually said we should stop using the car and ride bicycles instead – after we'd given her a sodding lift to the surgery this morning, for heaven's sake! Is she really losing the plot, or what? I feel as if *I'm* losing the plot and it doesn't feel good at all. Oh well, I suppose I should dead-head those gazanias..."

Fortunately, a long weekend at Bristol did Sandra a power of good. The weather was showery, but they were able to work with Madeleine and Henri in their garden (with the wonderful soil), plus visit a few shops and enjoy a relaxing walk around the grounds and museum of Blaise Castle. Madeleine seemed as happy to spend the weekend with her parents as they were happy to spend it with her and Henri, as she confessed to feeling stressed at work and tired at home with the continuous round of decorating.

Not long before they were due to leave on Sunday, a text message from Gulliver announced that he, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc had arrived at Anne and Stan's house for their two-week Cornish holiday. They would be transferring to Sandra and Osborn's house for the second week, but wanted to spend Gulliver's birthday the following day with Sandra and Osborn. Sandra was pleased that Gulliver wanted to spend his 34th birthday with them, but she felt unprepared and tired before the next day even started.

It was lovely to see them all again, especially Juniper and the nearly seven-week-old Petroc. They were both still rather chicken-poxy, but looking good apart from that. However, Sandra and Osborn were on their feet all day seeing to lunch and looking after everybody, while Gulliver enjoyed a birthday respite from full-on fatherhood and Bryony spent most of the day on the sofa, seeing to Petroc in one way or another. Caroline walked over to join them after lunch, to meet her new great-grandson for the first time and it was generally a successful, but exhausting day.

Two days later, Gulliver freed himself from a family outing with Anne and Stan to visit Bryony's grandparents in mid-Cornwall. Sandra and Osborn called for him at 09:15 and they drove further down into Cornwall on a sunny morning to reunite with some prehistoric monuments they had visited and loved years before, when Gulliver had been about seven.

Their first stop was for mid-morning coffee, followed by driving along a minor Cornish road until they arrived at the Neolithic Lanyon Quoit, located in a field by the roadside. The expansive view was uplifting, across grassy paths, moorland and bracken, with a disused mine in the distance. Gulliver was clearly enjoying his day of freedom and the conversation was relaxed and upbeat.

After a rather inevitable photography session, they next drove on to the nearby Men-an-Tol granite stones, the middle one of which had a very large circular hole. The temperature had risen considerably and the air smelt of childhood summers and hope. Sandra could remember their first visit to the stones, when Osborn had made a small Gulliver and an even smaller Madeleine pose by the unusual middle stone.

Driving on to a car park by a disused engine house, they ate their packed lunch and lazily discussed the rest of the day. Unfortunately, only the wild wee option was available, but they were soon on their way to Mulfra Quoit, which involved a slight climb up Mulfra Hill. The three support stones and a capstone that had slipped down were just as Sandra remembered them. Once again, the happy memories of an earlier time added to the heart-warming quality of the whole day.

Their final prehistoric monument was Zennor Quoit, a ruined megalithic burial chamber situated on the West Penwith moors, which involved an interesting trek through gorse and brambles. Once there, they took their time taking photos and looking around at the view, with St Michael's Mount visible in the distance. Sandra was beginning to tire and so they drove on to Godrevy, to suss out the place where Gulliver could take sunset photos of the white lighthouse situated a short way out at sea on Godrevy Island.

After a life-saving ice cream, they unhurriedly sought out an early evening meal in a local pub restaurant. It was obviously experiencing a good holiday trade and they were able to linger enjoyably in still very warm weather, over unremarkable, but most welcome food and drink.

"I've actually felt as if I've been on holiday today," said Gulliver, smiling over his *Doom Juice*. "I haven't felt this good for a while."

"Do you mean you haven't felt this free for a while?" asked Sandra, smiling over her *Cornish Rattlesnake*. "Wow, this cider's got a bit of a bite."

"Yes – free," replied Gulliver simply. "I wish family was closer."

"You keep saying that," said Sandra sadly. "I wish things were different too, so that we were closer."

"I do miss you," said Osborn, semi-smiling over his *Cornish Crapstone Ale*. "This isn't too bad for non-alcoholic ale. I wish we could do this more often."

"Me too," said Gulliver and Sandra in unison.

Two hours later, they were back at Godrevy and in position for the arrival of sunset. It was such a splendid evening that although the crowds of visitors at Godrevy Point had diminished significantly, a number of people were still strolling along the cliff paths, or sitting to watch the sun sink down in the sky.

As Sandra listened to the evocative sound of seabirds in the distance and ran her hand lazily over the springy turf where she was sitting on her jacket, she sat gazing out to where the sun still sparkled on the sea. Down on the shore, Gulliver and Osborn were busily setting up their tripods, with Gulliver picking his way carefully over rock pools.

'This is pure peace again,' she thought with a sense of spiritual serenity, 'like the sun setting over Valletta. It's like the evening Madeleine, Osborn and I took an evening boat trip to Samson on the Isles of Scilly and watched the sun setting there. I always wished I could share a special sunset with Gulliver and I very much think that this is it.'

She stood up a moment later as she realised Gulliver had clambered onto some slippery looking rocks that were dangerously close to some deeper water, looking for a better place for his tripod. Her mother's instinct wanted to call down to him to be careful, but she knew she had to let him be free to live his own version of life and to fulfil his own vision of a very special evening together.

The air cooled quite suddenly as the sun slowly moved downwards behind the lighthouse and the sky darkened into dusk and then night. By the time they'd packed up all their gear and were walking back to the car park, there was hardly anyone around.

They were all mostly quiet on the drive home, listening to the car radio in a companionable silence. When they said goodbye at just gone 23:00, Sandra felt a deep sense of contentment, knowing that for one day at least, they had connected on a very meaningful level with Gulliver again. She hadn't quite realised that this had been missing from her life for some time.

The next day, Madeleine rang before going to Paris for a three-day visit for her birthday, which was the fulfilment of a longstanding dream. Sandra wondered briefly if Madeleine had been attracted to a French man as an unconscious way of achieving a decent trip to Paris, but admonished herself for being flippant. She was more worried that Madeleine seemed still to be struggling to cope with her ridiculously busy life. To make matters worse, she had a wisdom tooth infection that required antibiotics.

"Maddy, my darling, try to forget all about work and enjoy the moment," she said in a rush of emotion to her beloved daughter. "You'll be in Paris and you've dreamed about going to Paris for so long. I agree it's a bummer about your wisdom tooth, but the antibiotics should sort it out. I'll be thinking of you and sending you so much love. I hope you feel the connection between us, because I do! Not in a possessive way – never in a possessive way, because that's killing. I love you, Maddy."

"I love you too, Mumsie." To Sandra's relief, Madeleine's voice sounded slightly more positive. "I can go up the Eiffel Tower!"

Three days later, Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc transferred from Anne and Stan's house to Sandra and Osborn's house for their week's stay. The first day proceeded well enough, although Juniper seemed a little unruly and unsettled.

The afternoon of the second day unfortunately turned out to be trialsome for Sandra, as Gulliver wanted to go for a local walk involving fields, tracks and paths that were overgrown with bramble and nettles, with stony slipways down to muddy shingle riverside strips of beach – and up again, naturally. Bryony had opted to stay home with Petroc, but Juniper had wanted to come along too. The increasingly ubiquitous dollops of dog poo had to be avoided and the air was humid and uncomfortable.

Gulliver was no doubt retracing some fond adolescent memories as he strode and clambered ahead. Osborn was doing his best to keep up with him, while Sandra was left behind to struggle with herself and Juniper over some tricky bits, having to carry Juniper at times. To top it all, it was horsefly season and Sandra was concerned about Juniper being bitten. As it happened, it was Sandra who was bitten several times, resulting in nasty, itching swollen places that bothered her for days. She returned home in a weary, sweaty, disgruntled mess, wanting to hide away in the house somewhere for a rest, but Juniper insisted on following her around everywhere.

On the third day, Caroline and Lawrence visited, but Sandra realised she was very stressed when she shouted at both her mother and Gulliver on separate occasions. She was aware of feeling overwhelmed with the total disruption that Gulliver and his family's visit seemed to have brought with them, plus the assumption that she and Osborn would look after Juniper and see to all cooking, dish washing and any other necessary chores.

Despite Bryony's initial reluctance, they all went to *The Ploughperson* for lunch, which seemed the easiest option. However, Juniper was tired and truculent, eventually

working herself up into so much of a frenzy, that in the end Gulliver took her out of the pub screaming. No doubt Gulliver felt like screaming himself, but it was Juniper who actually let rip. It felt to Sandra that what should have been a good day had turned into a ridiculously irksome day.

On the fourth day, Sandra was vexed from a different cause. For some obscure reason, Osborn had agreed to take delivery of a music system for Lawrence in the morning, which meant Sandra stayed home too and looked after a full-on, demanding Juniper, while Gulliver and Bryony took Petroc out for a walk.

After lunch, Gulliver wanted them all to visit Dartmoor, but Osborn was already committed to running an evening at Rainbow Healers and said he was far too tired to drive. Once again, Sandra stayed home and found herself becoming more exhausted while she made an apple crumble, washed all the dishes and looked after Juniper until her bedtime.

On the fifth day, Sandra was chagrined when they all went out to a large garden centre and she shouted at a rebellious Juniper, who was deliberately running away from her around the large wooden plant displays. Sandra was afraid that Juniper would either hurt herself, or run right into unsuspecting people. To make it worse, every time Sandra almost caught up with Juniper, she would run further away, laughing.

By the time Sandra eventually managed to grab hold of her, she had reached the end of her tether and launched into her petite, dynamic, unrepentant granddaughter, who stood and cried alarmingly in such an outraged manner that passers-by stared at the scene with undisguised total disapproval towards Sandra.

"You *will* do what Grandma says when she tells you!" she heard herself shouting, while Gulliver approached from the alpine flower section to see what the fuss was about.

"What's up?" he asked Juniper, picking up his distressed daughter to cuddle her. "Poor little Juniper Maple, come over to see Mummy." He walked away, leaving his distressed mother to calm down and verbally express her anguish to Osborn, who had approached from the compost and fertiliser section. Sandra felt out of sorts for the rest of the day.

On the sixth day, Sandra and Osborn were left on their own, while Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc spent a day with the Stanpools. However, they were both suffering from chronic weariness and Sandra felt so far down the wellbeing scale that she started to take St James' Wort to chase away the shadowy, grasping fingers of depression that were insinuating themselves around her mind and heart. The wonderful day with Gulliver and Osborn that had ended with sunset at Godrevy felt as distant as the sun itself.

On the seventh and final full day, it was Osborn who felt aggrieved and hurt when Gulliver left the house early to take sunrise photos in the nearby nature reserve.

"I don't understand why he didn't ask me to go with him," said Osborn sadly, as he and Sandra sat drinking morning coffee at a small café in the town, while the others were preparing to go out later to an 80th birthday celebration for Bryony's grandmother.

"He's become uncommunicative again," said Sandra, sighing. "He always goes like that when he's not OK. He used to go for weeks without communicating much when he was growing up, but then he'd suddenly open up and would go on talking and talking so much that I'd get really tired." She smiled at the memory, but only briefly. "I don't know why he's not OK, he was fine with us that day last week."

"He loved feeling free again," said Osborn, frowning. "Since Petroc's been born, I'm beginning to suspect he feels trapped by more responsibilities."

"I know the feeling," remarked Sandra acerbically, "and I know you do, too."

When they arrived home after coffee, Osborn's feelings of sadness about Gulliver turned into feelings of outrage, as he regarded the mess of grass and a few small lumps of dried mud that were strewn over the porch carpet.

"They must have gone for a walk in the fields before they left for the birthday," he said through gritted teeth. "I can't stand this mess, I've got to clear it up, or it'll get walked into the rest of the house."

"I suppose at least it's already become so hot today that it's mostly dried out," said Sandra, trying to ease the turbulence.

Her own personal turbulence escalated alarmingly, however, when she went into the bathroom and inhaled the aroma of a few days' worth of Petroc's nappies (both varieties) left in the corner of the room in an open plastic bag. The heat of the day was intensifying the smell and she stormed around for a while finding a heavy-duty bag in which to carry them outside to the dustbin. Osborn meanwhile was storming around in the porch with cleaning equipment. They tried to calm down for the rest of the day, but when the others returned and Juniper fell out of the French windows that Bryony had left open, it proved rather difficult.

The next morning when their visitors were leaving, Juniper endeared herself to Sandra once again by trying to sneak away parts of the toy tea set that Sandra kept at the house. It had proved a good buy, resulting in hours of being served pretend tea by Juniper (with milk and sugar, whether they wanted any or not).

"Juniper's tea set," said Juniper hopefully, walking towards the door.

"No darling, it stays at the house, so you can play with it next time you're here," replied Sandra, gently taking the cup from Juniper's hand and removing the milk jug from her bag. "Grandma will look after it for you."

"Remember that Grandad has tea with no milk or sugar," said Osborn, bending down to kiss her. "Can I have a cuddle?"

As they all said their goodbyes, Sandra and Gulliver hugged as normal, having finally managed to break through their mutual reticence. However, Sandra sensed an indiscernible sense of unease from Gulliver and throughout the rest of the day, she kept wondering how to avoid a repeat of the past week's upheaval, chaos and exhaustion the next time they visited.

July continued with quite a lot of heat, apparent toilet training for Juniper and a three-day fence-making visit for Sandra, Osborn and Lawrence at Madeleine and Henri's. Sandra enjoyed the stay, as not only was she able to spend some time alone with Madeleine while they walked to the shop, made drinks and sandwiches, or stood around holding pieces of fence wood while waiting for someone to nail it together, but it was incredibly satisfying to watch a well-made fence grow in length, vertical plank by vertical plank. Before the visit was over, she and Madeleine had added a few planks of wood themselves to the fence. They had also become inured to Lawrence's bad jokes involving the word 'plank'.

Despite the positive feel to those few days together, Sandra was disquieted at Madeleine's persisting dips of low mood and her general elevated level of tension. Madeleine professed to be worn out with work, but Sandra felt she knew her daughter well enough to sense there was a bit more to it. She suspected that the unsuccessful personal trainer experience hadn't helped Madeleine's self-esteem.

Although Lawrence seemed happy to do his fair share of work, it was obvious by the time they all drove to Bath for lunch on the final day that he'd had enough. He was complaining that his legs ached and he could hardly keep his eyes open, although he still insisted on paying for lunch, which was typical of his generous nature.

Sandra's next visit to Caroline following the fence-making expedition was unfortunately one of the most exasperating kind, which started off badly when Caroline asked Sandra how her holiday had gone.

"For the umpteenth time, it's *not* a holiday when we visit our children," explained Sandra, somewhat less than patiently. "We simply do not have the easy option of our children living in the same place as we do, like you do with me and Osborn's parents did with him. It couldn't have been less of a holiday this time anyway, because we were working all the time building a *fence*!" Sandra stopped herself, realising she had said the dreaded word and in no way wanted to invoke a conversation about Caroline's fence.

"Oh well, at least you got away from home," said Caroline, sniffing. Sandra could only agree.

However, when Osborn joined them later, he was also asked how his holiday had gone. When the three of them played *Scribble*, Sandra was once again called a "little devil" by her mother, which was a put-down she was growing to hate with a vengeance,

along with the game of *Scribble* itself. Caroline questioned the words Osborn played several times, even taking out her dictionary to prove her point and almost shouting Osborn down in her desire to be right.

There then followed an altercation about how she didn't want Osborn to buy her ready meals from *Marks and Spender*, despite the fact that he went into Plymouth almost every week. Sandra went home feeling that what her mother actually wanted was to have Sandra as her own personal slave, while Osborn was an outsider until necessity required. The ridiculous thing was that necessity required Osborn to help out more and more as Caroline became older, if only because he could drive and Sandra couldn't. Sandra alternated between hopeless guilt about that fact and incredible relief.

July also saw the final evening at Rainbow Healers since Sandra and Osborn had both resigned from the committee. It felt very strange, but essentially liberating. They were still in touch with Leona on a friendly basis, but Pascal seemed to be gradually retreating from the scene. Leona was still talking enthusiastically about a retreat, but Pascal appeared to be retreating from the retreat also. In the end, Leona confided that Pascal had wanted his relationship with Leona to be a closer one than just friends, but she had declined his hopeful offer.

Madeleine finally went to see a doctor and was told the choices on offer were cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), time off work, or medication. Her gut instinct was that time off work would help the most, but since her two-week holiday in France with Henri was reasonably close, she told the doctor she would wait to see how the holiday helped.

CHAPTER 18

As Sandra gazed into the gaping caldera of Mount Vesuvius, she knew that the holiday in Sorrento was helping her. She could scarcely believe she was actually standing on the ground of an active volcano, after Mount Vesuvius had been merely an interesting name for all her life. She had begun to feel a wonderful sense of heightened adventure, almost as if breathing the air of a different world, the moment their coach had arrived at the Vesuvio National Park.

It seemed stupidly dangerous and yet weirdly understandable that three million people lived in the exceptionally fertile Red Zone, in the immediate danger area when Monte Vesuvio would erupt again – which it was due to do within the next 20 years.

As they had started to climb up a rather winding road, there was a surprising amount of vegetation, wild flowers and highly scented yellow broom. Mysterious paths could be seen leading through wooded areas, as they had slowly driven precariously along the narrow, winding road weaving around the volcano, offering shimmering views of the Bay of Naples.

The car park was situated at an altitude of 1,000 metres, which was where their adventure had really begun – after they had queued up to pay 50c each for the privilege of using a very smelly toilet with no toilet seat, used by both genders and without any running water in the grimy hand basin. However, they were then free to ascend the final 200 metres to the top of the volcano in the unrelenting heat.

As they had begun to ascend the fairly wide path consisting of small pebbles of pumice, with water bottles and cameras at the ready, people had been selling bamboo canes to stop people slipping on the almost scree-like surface. Sandra was wearing her trusty Merrell sandals, so had declined. Meanwhile, Lawrence had already forged doggedly on ahead, while Osborn had kept Sandra company whenever she stopped at frequent intervals to gulp water and breathe properly again in the mind-bogglingly, suffocating hot air.

Osborn hadn't minded at all, as the views were stunning, with the Bay of Naples far below, the picturesque matchbox houses, the surrounding peaks and the vegetation, all highlighted by the prolific broom. The scent of the aromatic yellow flowers mixed with pumice dust and the heat created a unique smell that Sandra found not at all unpleasant and even a little exhilarating.

A surprising amount of people were both ascending and descending the pumice scree path, the crunching sound of their footsteps a constant background noise. The last part of the climb had seemed steeper and hotter, but Sandra didn't mind the toil and the sweat at all, as she finally arrived at the summit. She stood next to Osborn, gazing headily around and noticing with surprise that a few hardy flowers were growing inside the great, ashtray-like crater.

"I can't take it in that I'm really here at this awesome place, where a whole mountain erupted so cataclysmically in the past – and that at some point in the future, it's going to erupt again," she said ecstatically, wiping sweat from her forehead.

"It's apparently only 1,200 metres high now, whereas it was originally one intact mountain standing at 3,000 metres high," mused Osborn, wiping sweat from his chin.

"Monte Somma," said Lawrence, walking up to them from where he had been exploring further around the rim. "Such power to blast half a mountain into the sky. Photo time you two, stand together and smile with the caldera from hell behind you!"

Sandra continued to feel a heady sense of near disbelief at her good fortune the next day, as they headed off from Sorrento towards Naples on a coach tour to Herculaneum and Pompeii. This was partly because their guide was a knowledgeable English lady in her sixties, who had a lovely voice and who seemed to be an archaeologist/historian/ex-teacher, or maybe even all three. Sandra harboured absolutely nothing against the younger Italian guide to Mount Vesuvius the previous day, as she had added her own enjoyment to the trip by pointing out "wine-yards" and praising the "hair conditioning".

During the coach drive, their guide imparted the rather surprising information that Herculaneum was considered a better archaeological site than Pompeii, due to the better-preserved buildings. Herculaneum had been discovered in 1709 by an Austrian prince mainly interested in looting, but with the arrival of King Charles of Naples, the plundering had stopped and planned excavation had begun in 1738.

It was later posited that the population of Herculaneum may have attempted to escape by boat, with 150 skeletons having been found at the nearby port. Their bones and bone marrow were black and their bones had splintered, which indicated the bodies had actually exploded in the heat.

With this compelling information in her head, Sandra wandered happily in the morning heat with Osborn and Lawrence, their cameras at the ready for every corner they turned and every doorway they looked through. Sandra kept glancing down at the ground, incredulous to be walking on the stones of a Roman road that so many Roman feet had walked upon many centuries before. The frescos were wonderful, still looking alive and continuing to tell their story, despite being faded and cracked in places.

At one point when they were being led to some playing fields, the three of them lingered too long while taking photos and managed to lose their guide altogether. This was a little alarming for several minutes, as they scanned the buildings surrounding them and listened to the silence where her voice had been. Thankfully, Osborn managed to spot her in the distance and they hurriedly rejoined the group rather chastened (and from the wrong direction) as they emerged from the playing fields.

After two hours, the site that had been almost empty when they'd arrived was rapidly filling with people and it was time for food. This consisted of sitting outside at a table beneath a sun umbrella to enjoy a panini lunch. The coach then delivered them to Pompeii, a much larger site that the guide informed them had been three-quarters excavated, whereas Herculaneum had been only a quarter excavated. Another significant difference was that Pompeii had been completely buried in ash, while Herculaneum had been covered in boiling mud.

Amazingly, Pompeii had remained undiscovered until the late 16th century, when some inscriptions were found when a tunnel was being dug to divert the river Sarno. As Sandra entered and walked along to the vast amphitheatre, she felt incredulous that she was actually *in* Pompeii, breathing Pompeian air and walking on ground that was still incredibly ashy. As they walked along the avenues behind their guide, it was very easy to imagine Romans going about their daily life amid the houses, vineyards, temples and gardens, completely unaware of their fate.

As the afternoon wore on, the huge site filled up with hundreds of people, many of them in groups following a guide holding aloft an umbrella, parasol, or another visible item of choice. What stuck in Sandra's mind most, after that long, sweltering, incredible afternoon had ended, was walking along the network of paved Roman roads that seemed to stretch for miles, never knowing what amazing sight was around the corner.

The bodies in particular evoked a feeling of horrified fascination. Human bodies that had been covered by volcanic ash during the eruption had left a hole when they had putrefied. During 19th century excavation, a method had been devised of using plaster casts that recreated the exact form of the bodies as they had instantly died where they fell, looking as if in eternal sleep.

Other memorable sights were remains of villas, huge columns, private altars, a gym, a brothel, an Egyptian temple, the Forum, a mosaic entrance to a house that said 'HAVE' meaning 'hail to you' as a welcome in Latin, statues, amphorae, paintings – it was all rather overwhelming, which was how Sandra felt by the time they reached the Forum (although it was the heat that was threatening to overcome her at that point). Everyone she set eyes upon all the time they were there was sweating profusely and drinking copious amounts of water. Some people were even pouring it over themselves in a somewhat vain attempt to cool down a little.

People had begun to wilt hopelessly after two hours, so the guide led them to a couple of final sights, before heading slowly towards the exit. On the way, still seeing wondrous buildings and remains of great temples, they passed a fantastic looking altar, but both Sandra and Osborn walked on by in a completely exhausted daze.

Nothing like that had ever happened before. In normal circumstances it would have been unthinkable not to stop, but the desperate need for coolness had resulted in survival over photography. Sandra could have been walking across the Elysian Fields themselves and would still have carried on to the exit. Luckily, heat-resistant Lawrence stopped to take a photo of the altar at the temple of Vespasian, so all was not lost.

As soon as they were outside the ruins, mingling with more hordes of tourists, they bought an ice cream that fittingly tasted like nectar of the gods. Shortly after that, the group climbed into the air-conditioned coach and were driven back to their various hotels with tired smiles, very dusty feet and sweaty clothes. Sandra happened to notice that Lawrence even had salt-crusted patches on his t-shirt from all the sweat.

After showering, they reconvened by the hotel swimming pool for a pre-dinner beer, which was wonderfully refreshing in such heat. Dinner itself also hit the spot, consisting of asparagus soup (and Sandra didn't even like asparagus), followed by fish with French fries and salad, followed by lemon profiteroles, all washed down with ice-cold water. It seemed in keeping to sit outside at the pool-bar again afterwards, people-watching and gazing at the sky as it turned from daylight blue to evening dark blue, with one or two stars twinkling high up above Sorrento.

"This is heavenly," said Sandra, sighing with pleasure. "I think it might even be another of my moments."

"I'm with you in one of your moments?" asked Lawrence roguishly. "Well, this is momentous."

"Shut up, you idiot," remarked Sandra comfortably. "You were with me in one of my moments at Malta, if you must know."

"And I never knew," said Lawrence in mock sadness, sipping his post-dinner beer.

"I have moments," announced Osborn benignly. "Many, many moments."

"Magic moments?" asked Sandra, pulling a strange face. Fortunately, it was dark.

"What is a moment?" asked Lawrence philosophically.

"A life is composed of moments," answered Osborn enigmatically.

"But how do you know when one moment ends and another moment begins?" asked Sandra, wrinkling her nose.

"I – don't know at the moment," replied Osborn, frowning.

"Quiet!" exclaimed Lawrence, startling them both. "I think I'm having a moment."

"*Buonanotte*," said the waiter, regarding them a little uncertainly, as he collected a few empty glasses from their table.

Another memorable day was a coach drive along the Amalfi coast road with its 1,108 bends, listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. It had become an exceptionally hot day as they looked out over the Bay of Salerno, but the coach was air-conditioned and the coastal scenery was beautiful, with bougainvillea still in flower.

Perhaps the most picturesque part of the trip was when they drove slowly past Positano, the vertical town on the cliff. Sandra thought that despite its beautiful location, it must be a trial to live there, due to the impossibility of getting anywhere at all without ascending or descending hundreds of steps. They were told that even the cemetery was an arduous climb up the cliff face with a coffin.

The journey continued along the narrow, bendy roads, stopping often at traffic lights, where the road was only wide enough for one vehicle. Their pretty, vivacious guide told them there were cameras along the Amalfi coast road and if a car failed to stop for the red light, the driver automatically would have points added to his/her driving licence.

They reached Amalfi at around 10:00 and the three of them went in search of a cooling drink, which materialised in the form of beautiful iced teas, with plenty of ice. They then wandered along the sea front, noticing colourful modern murals on the street walls, contrasting with old towers and fortifications that were visible from between buildings, high up on the cliff behind. Amalfi was obviously a very popular seaside resort and the whole place was humming in a very vibrant and somewhat chaotic way, with *carabinieri* very much in evidence, on motorbikes and in cars.

Ambling slowly up the road leading to the town centre past a number of colourful, fascinating shops, Sandra saw that the speciality of the area appeared to be very bright, colourful ceramics, as well as the local lemon drink of *limoncello*. She could understand why Amalfi was so popular, with its caffès, souvenir shops, strange fountains, intriguing alleyways, a striking cathedral and an overall atmosphere of simple exuberance. It was a town of contrasts in true Italian style, with a shop close by the cathedral displaying red chillies outside with a notice proclaiming: "Natural Viagra!"

Back on the coach, there was more spectacular scenery, as they made their way slowly up into the mountains. At the top, grapevines grew on trellises, while lower down the hillside there was an abundance of olive trees, on which they were told the olives would ripen by September. Their lunchtime stop was at a place called Ravello, where they opted for a drink and a tuna roll at the bar of a 4-star hotel.

The three of them ventured out into the blasting heat once more and made their way down through the hot Ravello streets, passing an ancient archway and a colourful ceramics factory. They continued into the Piazza del Vescovado, which was filled with people enjoying themselves, either leisurely eating at an outdoor caffè, or wandering around the cathedral and the gift shops.

When their tour party reconvened, the guide gave them a short, interesting talk about Ravello, before saying they had a further hour in which they could choose to visit the cathedral, look around the piazza, or visit a nearby garden at The Villa Rufolo.

The garden option was no contest for Sandra and Osborn, although Lawrence opted to further investigate the piazza. Stepping into the garden was like stepping into another world, with a thousand years of Arab influence very evident in the building and the decorative cloisters. To their surprise, the garden had a large open-air theatre that overlooked the sea, with a stunning range of mountains in the distance.

Sandra could hardly believe the sheer breathtaking beauty of the garden and its situation. The flowers, shrubs and trees were heavenly, with intensely pink bougainvillea cascading from an overhead trellis and palm trees looking simply magnificent, growing up above under-planting of many brightly coloured flowers.

It was mind-bogglingly and body-drenchingly hot, but Sandra and Osborn stood there sweating for England and drinking in the beauty along with the life-saving bottled water. There was no way they could see everything on offer in such a short time, but what they did manage to see was utterly worth it.

They emerged from the garden in a blissful daze, just in time for Lawrence to thrust money into Osborn's hand and direct him to a nearby ice cream shop. Italian ice cream had become a favourite treat of the holiday and this one was no less enjoyed for

its haste, before they all piled back onto the coach and returned to Sorrento along the mountain road. As well as the scenery, Sandra found she was enjoying the feeling that they were making the most of their time, as well as being continuously surprised at how much the holiday was offering them in beauty, history and the best ice cream ever.

They also enjoyed some forays around Sorrento itself and spent a few happy hours at the Foreigners' Club, either for a drink, an afternoon dessert, or in the case of their final visit, an evening meal to round off the holiday. Each time they had managed to sit at a table on the veranda that looked directly over the Bay of Naples, gazing at the boat and ship activity in the harbour, with Mount Vesuvius brooding all the while in the distance. Their final evening meal was no exception.

"This is a proper Italian job," said Lawrence bemusedly, scanning the evening menu. "It's significantly different from the daytime menu."

"I'm glad there's an English translation in brackets," said Osborn uncertainly. "It's obviously the Italian way to have four or five courses."

"Help," said Sandra, having fallen into a quandary of confusion for a few minutes, before managing to pull herself together.

After some impressive British deliberation, they all chose grilled swordfish with side dishes of potato croquettes, rocket and tomato, French fries and two strange plates of food. One was a salad and the other filled breadcrumb/pastry items that arose from a mix-up when Osborn was ordering and Lawrence said something that the waiter wrote down. A bottle of rosé (or *rosata*) complemented the swordfish very pleasantly.

"Well, I'm no foodie, but I know really decent food when I eat it," said Sandra appreciatively when they had finished the savoury courses, "and that was exceptionally decent, even the food we ordered by mistake."

"Dessert anyone?" asked Lawrence hopefully, as more people kept arriving and sitting in the body of the restaurant.

After some further British deliberation, they decided to push the Italian boat out and ordered more food. Osborn chose rum baba, Lawrence chose a cheesecake that was unlike any cheesecake any of them had ever seen before and Sandra chose a Sorrento special lemon sorbet made with vodka.

The pace was unhurried as the sun gradually started to set, casting an ethereal pinky red glow in the clouds and over the water. They could see the sun to their extreme left, as it turned into a fiery red ball, before finally sinking beneath the horizon. To finish their special evening, coffee was ordered, so they could legitimately stay at their table as the inspiring scene changed minute by minute, until the last remaining light of the sun had completely gone and night was falling.

"This has been a glorious experience," said Osborn with obvious contentment, as live music began to play with a very mellow sound.

"I can hardly believe I've been sitting here in the Foreigners' Club at a coveted sea-view table in Sorrento," said Sandra rapturously, "watching the sun set over the Bay of Naples, with Mount Vesuvius in the distance and the island of Capri visible too. What an incredibly good feeling!"

"Are you having another moment?" asked Lawrence merrily, finishing his coffee.

"No, you prune. Well, maybe. No, I'm just feeling all warm and expansive."

"Never mind, there's always a diet when you get home," said Lawrence, grinning.

"I'd throw something at you, but I'm not sure if I can move," retorted Sandra, smiling.

"It takes you out of yourself, that's what it does," declared Osborn reflectively. "It feels so good being here, because we're just being us, in beautiful surroundings and with no particular responsibilities, except looking after ourselves."

"I'm so glad you're here to look after me again," said Caroline plaintively, as Sandra and Osborn took her home after a doctor's visit. "I felt terrible this morning, I was sure I had a temperature. My cheeks were red and flushed all day yesterday and I couldn't eat."

"You really need to use that digital thermometer we bought for you," said Osborn, sighing. "It's easy to use, I'll show you again."

"Sandra showed me," replied Caroline swiftly. "I'm not a very practical person."

"Anyway, the doctor couldn't find anything wrong with you," said Sandra tersely. "I expect you weren't happy with us being away and you're also getting nervous about the forthcoming bunion op next week."

"Well, you know me," said Caroline enigmatically. "Would you like some lunch now you're here? I've got some fishfingers, we could have chips and peas with them."

Osborn's 60th birthday was being celebrated early, in mid-August. Madeleine and Henri were staying with them for two nights, while Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc were staying at Anne and Stan's for the weekend. On the Saturday, they convened at Sandra and Osborn's house with Caroline and Lawrence, for a day of family togetherness that began with coffee and biscuits.

At lunchtime, the taxi Osborn had ordered arrived and drove them on the short journey to *The Netherlands Inn*, taking all of ten minutes. Sandra was relieved that Juniper and Petroc were both well-behaved and also that there were no problems with Juniper's toilet training. In fact, it was a blessedly ordinary lunchtime that was special in the way Osborn wanted most of all, which was the fact that they were all together for once, in reasonable harmony.

A couple of post-lunch drinks and some desultory conversation followed, before they all returned to the house for the afternoon. After the golden-haired dynamo that was Juniper had worn most of them out with her antics and Petroc had worn Bryony out with his feeding, it was time for Pimm's and birthday cake. Gulliver and Bryony had ordered a special chocolate brownie cake that had been handmade in Wales and Gulliver presented it to his father with a slightly bashful grin, while the others gaily murdered the traditional birthday song.

"I've really enjoyed today," said Osborn to Sandra, as they lay beside each other in bed that night. "Our family is so important to me."

"And to me," said Sandra, trying hard to ignore the twisty little strands of distress unsettling her mind about how much that included her mother.

"Are you OK?" he asked suddenly.

"I think so," she replied slowly. "Are you OK?"

"I think so," he replied seriously. "Are we OK?"

"I think so," she replied honestly.

"Shouldn't we *know* we're OK, though?" he persisted. "Shouldn't we feel that everything's absolutely deep down OK, with you, with me and with us?"

"Yes," she replied in a small voice, "but I don't think I feel able to reach that far down inside myself to know how it is there, because I so often feel overwhelmed with how other people are feeling and I feel somehow responsible for that."

"You're not responsible for how other people are feeling."

"No," she replied doubtfully. "Then why does it feel as if I am?"

"I don't know," Osborn replied truthfully. "I really want us to be OK, individually and together, but I know that our family is so important to me and sometimes I don't know how that all fits together."

"Neither do I," agreed Sandra. "I'm so glad you had a good birthday, though. Well, a good pre-birthday. It's a sodding shame that your real 60th birthday will be two days after my mother's bunion op and we'll still be looking after her. Mind you, it won't be a very good 85th birthday for her either, the day after she'll have been operated on."

"It'll be OK," said Osborn resignedly. "At least I enjoyed today."

For four long days after Caroline's bunion operation, which was euphemistically called a procedure, Sandra and Osborn spent a great many hours with her, as she struggled to cope with the pain medication, the crutch and life in general. Caroline's own birthday was a washout and Osborn's real 60th was little more. However, they managed to survive the week and were finally able to relax and enjoy an ordinary weekend together.

"Ordinary is good," said Sandra with a huge sigh. "Ordinary is very, very good."

CHAPTER 19

It was September 2010 and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was experiencing an ordinary 58th birthday, as far as 58th birthdays went – which generally speaking was a whole 24 hours. Sandra had chosen a visit to the Eden Project, to soothe her soul. They had spent the morning walking around the Mediterranean Biome and then strolling around outside in fine warm air, enjoying the many colourful late summer flowers.

"Those dahlias are so vibrant," said Osborn, as they sat eating their packed lunch in one of the many available picnic areas. "I must have taken hundreds of photos, but I don't care, because they're so beautiful."

"I'm glad we share a love of flowers and gardening," said Sandra, smiling. "It's so special here, I really feel as if I can breathe more easily. Only in a metaphorical sense, though, I'm beginning to feel a bit bunged up and itchy eyed! I've been feeling so stifled recently with all Mum's stuff and you've done a lot too, taking her to appointments and cooking her omelettes now and then. Thank you for helping, I really do appreciate it. I don't think I could cope with her on my own at all."

"She relies on you too much," said Osborn, brushing an insect away. "She seems a bit fixated, to be honest, because when Belinda visited, your mother kept looking at you, even when Belinda was speaking. God, that was a wasp!"

"It's gone away," said Sandra, watching the wasp flying haphazardly nearby. "I've been worried about Madeleine too and even Henri. That food poisoning they had from the wedding in France sounded absolutely awful. Imagine being ill in a stranger's house, even though it was Henri's auntie." Sandra shuddered in sympathy.

"They're both better now, though," replied Osborn, brushing away another wasp.

"Just stay still and it'll fly away," said Sandra encouragingly. "I'm glad Gulliver's exhibition went very well, his business seems to be going from strength to strength. I think things are settling down somewhat now Petroc's four months old, although Bryony still seems to be breast feeding him so often that it seems slightly weird."

"I must admit, it feels quite different with Petroc than it did with Juniper," mused Osborn, eyeing the wasp with suspicion. "We had so much more to do with Juniper than it seems we do with Petroc. Another one!"

"I'd really like to bond with Petroc more, I expect it'll become easier as he gets older," said Sandra wistfully. "He's got lovely brown eyes, just like his dad."

"Did they say when we'd see them next?" asked Osborn, becoming wasp hyper-vigilant.

"Next month, I think," replied Sandra, finishing her sandwich and delving into her bag. "Would you like an apple?"

"Yes – no! Another flaming wasp, I'm going!" exclaimed Osborn, leaping up and scattering the remains of his lunch.

Two days later, Sandra was pushing the vacuum cleaner around at Caroline's house, as her mother was still finding it difficult to walk with confidence. Sandra was aware that Caroline was watching her, as she straightened chairs around the table.

"You do it all so well," said Caroline suddenly. "How would you like to be a carer?"

"I'd rather die," responded Sandra immediately, before the possible significance of her mother's words hit her. "It's not me at all, I'd suffocate inside," she managed to articulate, while wondering with extreme horror if her mother might be voicing an actual request – one that needed quashing on the spot.

"You could make money," persisted Caroline relentlessly. "Some of my friends pay for someone to come and clean."

"I wouldn't want the money," replied Sandra firmly, "I'd rather have my own life."

As an added irritant, Osborn was being forced to spend several hours and a lot of energy clearing away brambles, ivy, rampant bushes and other wild vegetation in their next-door neighbour's back garden. This extremely troublesome border backed onto their own back garden and it had been a contentious issue for years. Even though a fence existed that was their neighbour's responsibility, it was gradually disintegrating beyond repair.

Their neighbour was a nice enough woman of about their age living on her own, but over the years she had made no effort to keep her own garden from intruding quite aggressively into theirs, which had resulted in Sandra continuously waging war with her weeds and swearing rather a lot.

She had also sworn at Osborn when he'd had the temerity to say that perhaps gardening wasn't their neighbour's thing. Sandra had retorted that cleaning the toilet wasn't her thing, but she still did it because it was the decent thing to do.

It was a sore subject, since Sandra had been struggling to look after her mother's garden for a great portion of time on her own. Consequently, all the time that Osborn was wearing himself out in their neighbour's garden (with her permission) in order to save their own border from being overrun, she felt enraged that once again they'd ended up sorting out somebody else's mess. It was in no way conducive to inner peace.

What did help her inner peace, though, was a three-night stay with Madeleine and Henri near the end of September. They all worked amiably in the garden, shopped, visited a National Treasure property and generally relaxed. As usual, while sitting down together with a pre-leaving drink on the final day, Sandra and Osborn felt reluctant to leave.

"I so love being here, I feel as if I'm myself again. I don't want to go back to life in the mad lane," said Sandra sadly.

"It can be pretty mad here at times in this Mad lane," responded Madeleine wryly.

"There's Mad and then there's mad," said Osborn with a small chuckle.

"Is this a mad English joke," asked Henri, looking askance.

"Kind of," responded Osborn, smiling at Henri. "I really love being here too and I don't want to go back."

"Why not?" asked Madeleine, looking at her father.

"It feels – well, I'm not sure. I think I'd probably say it feels heavier," replied Osborn, searching for words, which was most unusual for him.

"I don't want to go on about it, but it's Grandma who gets to me," explained Sandra carefully, "although I never forget she's your grandma and you have different, happy memories of her. I never want to change that for you, Mad – but she's so tricky these days and so weird with Dad. We were all at her house playing *Scribble* last week and she actually said to him that he doesn't exist for her when we're playing *Scribble*."

"She *what*? What did she mean?" asked Madeleine, frowning.

"I don't think she wants me there, she'd much rather play *Scribble* with Mum on her own," replied Osborn matter-of-factly.

"I'm sorry it's like that," said Madeleine, sighing. "I wish life wasn't so hard."

"I wish it wasn't so hard to leave," said Osborn, standing up, "but we really have to go."

"Well, I hope you can have a more peaceful time for a while," said Madeleine, as all three walked to the front door for the vaguely uncomfortable departure ceremony of hugging, hand shaking and two-cheek French-style air kissing.

Sandra had been hoping for a peaceful Monday the following day, having decided to go with Osborn to meet Lawrence in Plymouth for lunch – but it wasn't to be. Five minutes before leaving, Caroline rang to say she was having a bad nosebleed that wouldn't stop. Sandra felt herself disintegrating inside at the news, but Osborn raced over to Caroline's house, which was in the next street. He returned fairly soon, having managed to stop it after a while.

"Thank absolute sodding heavens that you have first aid knowledge," said Sandra to Osborn an hour or so later, as they sat with Lawrence in *The Cod Plaise*, after Osborn had related the nosebleed incident to him.

"I had to use it a few times at work for bleeding incidents," recalled Osborn wryly, beginning to battle with his batter.

"I nearly had a bleeding incident with the bus driver on my way here today, when he refused to give me my change," said Lawrence darkly, although his beard was looking proportionally whiter than ever. "It's a stupid rule about giving them the correct change, but it's a way of keeping your money. Anyway, I'm glad Caroline's OK after the scare."

"Yes, it scared me good and proper," admitted Sandra, toying with her mushy peas. "I can't tell you how glad I was that Osborn answered the phone to her."

"I think you just did," said Lawrence, ploughing through his fish. "Great steaming cod balls, I've really got a massive portion."

"Don't brag," said Osborn casually. "Mine's just as big as yours."

"Oh please," retorted Sandra cheerfully, "put a sock in it, you two!"

"Er..." started Lawrence.

"Be quiet," said Sandra, looking at her brother-in-law. "No, please don't, it's such a sodding relief to be here joking with you both. I feel as if I can be myself, instead of a very small colourless, conventional, constricted version of who I actually am."

"Who are you, actually?" asked Lawrence, the corner of his mouth twitching with amusement.

"Now that's a very good question," replied Sandra, suddenly more serious. "I'll tell you when I've remembered."

"Well, I'm glad a day that started out badly is beginning to feel better for you," said Lawrence kindly.

When they returned home, Osborn decided he'd better ring Caroline to check up on her. She replied that she was OK and they relaxed – but only for two minutes or so, as Caroline rang back in a panic to say her nose was bleeding again. Although this seemed odd, Osborn once again went to her house straight away and this time he decided to take her to A & E.

Over three hours later, Osborn finally returned home, saying that her nose had been packed and was OK, but her blood pressure at A & E had been extremely high. She'd only been allowed home when she told the doctor that she coincidentally had an appointment at her GP's surgery the following day, when her blood pressure would be checked.

Both Sandra and Osborn found it hard to sleep that night, but they went to the surgery with Caroline the following morning. However, neither of them could believe it when Caroline reappeared after her appointment and unconcernedly said that she'd had blood taken, but no blood pressure check.

To make matters worse, they accompanied her that afternoon to an optician's appointment and were incensed that despite knowing her sight was dodgy at best, the optician told her that her eyesight was good for her age and therefore she didn't need to wear glasses all the time.

"She clearly can't see properly, if the way she washes the dishes and the state of her kitchen sink is anything to go by!" expostulated Sandra, as soon as they left her house after taking her home. "She's got breakfast spilt all down the front of her dressing gown that she hangs up on the bathroom door, but I'm afraid to tell her it badly needs washing."

"She always asks what price labels say whenever we take her shopping," added Osborn, "and she refuses to wear her glasses in shops."

"She doesn't wear her glasses anywhere, because people might see her," said Sandra, sighing. "She's inherently vain and is afraid she'll look ordinary. God, it's been another troublesome, disturbing, wearying day because of her. Oh, this is awful! She's my mother and I really don't want to feel this way about her *at all*."

Sandra was hosting a get-old-together with Gina, Emily, Delia and Kay, while Osborn was spending the day in Plymouth. They had finished eating lunch and were comfortably chatting over mugs of tea. Sometimes they even drank from the mugs.

"We really shouldn't leave it so long next time," said Delia suddenly. "I'm sure this is beneficial for us all. I mean, I know it is for me, because it's been so hard sorting everything out after Dad died. I haven't felt as if I've had time to be me, I've had to be the responsible one for so long."

"Does that mean you can be irresponsible with us?" asked Emily, smiling at Delia.

"Why does that sound scary coming from you?" asked Delia in reply. "No, it's a relief just to be here and listen to all your troubles!"

"I don't really have many troubles," considered Kay, "except perhaps Rob being turned down for early retirement – and our inconsiderate neighbours with their leylandii trees – and a troublemaker colleague at work – and an ongoing problem with our roof – and my hip hurting..."

"That's enough troubles, surely?" asked Gina, smiling at Kay. "Does your hip hurt a lot? I mostly have trouble with my knees these days."

"Oh, it's not that bad," replied Kay, shifting uncomfortably on the sofa. "Funnily enough, it seems to affect my knee that side when it *is* bad – but it's not *too* bad."

"I think you might be minimising, petal," said Emily sympathetically.

"I know we all lose some bone density as we age, but I was always short in the first place," said Kay level-headedly, looking at Gina beside her. "I'm roughly the same height as you, I think. You as well, Sandra?"

"Too true," agreed Sandra, "I used to get sick and tired of people saying good things come in small packages and being called Titch or Tiddles."

"Or Short-ass," said Emily, smiling at Sandra. "Of course, we all know that size doesn't matter."

"Let's not go there," said Gina, laughing.

"Tell us about your knees then, Gina," said Delia, "you mentioned they give you trouble?"

"Only when I bend them or kneel on them," replied Gina, "so I try not to make any sudden or harsh movements."

"Or knee-jerk reactions," added Sandra evenly.

"What did the femur say to the patella?" asked Emily suddenly.

"Er – hello?" tried Delia, after a few moments' puzzled silence.

"I kneed you," replied Emily, looking pleased with herself. "The old ones are the best."

"Not the old knees, though," replied Delia, smiling. "I did need this, though. Thank you so much for having us here, Sandra. To be honest, when I first arrived, it looked as if you needed this too?"

"Ye-es, I guess I did," admitted Sandra reluctantly. "It's been quite heavy lately with Mum, although to be fair she's lost a bit of weight since she had her bunion op. Actually, it's such a relief just to be a bit silly!"

Alison wasn't in a silly mood at all when Sandra next visited her, even apologising for being somewhat gloomy.

"Dirk and I really aren't getting on at the moment," she admitted with a heavy sigh. "We bumble on from day to day, but we only talk about surface things. If I try to talk about our marriage, he either gets defensive and angry, or he shuts off altogether. Sometimes I wonder what's the point of it all."

"Oh Ally, I'm so sorry," replied Sandra, wondering what she could possibly say that would be helpful. "I'm guessing missing your grandchildren being in Wales isn't helping – and your own health problems too? How are you physically?"

"Not the best. Maybe I should have rung you today to put you off after all. Some days I feel like staying in bed and sleeping the day away, but then I wouldn't be able to sleep at night – not that I can sleep much at night, anyway."

"I can empathise there, I'm having a phase of not sleeping properly myself. Still, it's a lot different feeling really tired to feeling really down, although the one affects the other."

"I know. I think Helen and Mark are practically leading separate lives, although she says she's OK. She's my daughter, though, I recognise the signs and I'm pretty sure she's *not* OK. If they do break up, I suppose it's a good thing they don't have children." Alison sighed. "How's Madeleine?"

"I'm not sure, really. I think she's struggling, because like you said, I recognise the signs. Actually, it's more of a gut feeling I have."

"Oh, don't talk to me about gut feelings," said Alison ruefully. "That's another troublesome area. My doctor talked about referring me for a colonoscopy, but I told him I couldn't face it. To be honest, I felt like telling him he could bog off."

"What did he say to that?" asked Sandra, taken aback at Alison's audacity.

"He said he understood how I felt, but if it didn't improve with the medication he prescribed, he really would need to get to the bottom of it."

"Er..." Sandra tried unsuccessfully to suppress a snigger.

"What?" Alison looked across at Sandra in surprise, before the light dawned. "Ah! It's OK, I don't mind being the butt of a good, old fashioned joke."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to belittle your troubles, I'd never do that," said Sandra contritely. "How are Sam and Karen?"

"Much the same, although Sam sounded a bit down on the phone when he rang to ask if we could babysit for half-term," said Alison, shrugging slightly. "He seems to be working his ass off, whereas Karen complains she's worn out from work and sits around on her backside all the time we're there. God, we're back on that base subject again." Alison smiled briefly.

"I'm glad you cracked a smile then," said Sandra, grinning at her friend.

"Are you being cheeky?" asked Alison, smiling again. "No seriously, that's what I like about you and me, we can both make fun of ourselves in amongst the shitty stuff."

Sandra was finding it hard to find any fun in amongst the shitty stuff the next day, as she swiped at and swept away cobwebs in Caroline's garage, to work away some of the negative fallout from the conversation she'd just endured with her mother. Caroline was clearly feeling very sorry for herself and despite Sandra initially trying to be sympathetic at Caroline's plight, she found herself swearing out her rage and frustration.

"I can understand she's lost her confidence," she said under her breath, hoping the man next door wasn't in his garage adjacent to Caroline's, "but to project all that suppressed f***** anger on to me is NOT OK! She's so 'poor me', it's almost f***** tangible!" Sandra waved her broom vigorously above her head at a thick cobweb that was stubbornly attached to the garage roof.

"Come here, you nasty, clinging cobweb, you don't belong there anymore! Oh, f***, there's a spider attached. Oh well, I haven't killed it, it's scuttled away somewhere. No really, as for her saying it's alright for me because I've got a young man to take me around everywhere, that is just absolutely f***** crazy! Osborn is 60, for f***'s sake!" Sandra jumped as the cobweb fell on her head.

"F***! After ALL the times we've offered to take her shopping and she's said she hates shopping, what the f*** does she want? God, that was a huge spider. She wants me to be her slave, that's what she wants, but she also wants me to feel guilty for what she sees as her bad luck and my good luck. My good luck! Let her try living my life, for f***'s sake and see how she gets on with all I have to deal with!" Sandra sneezed.

"I've had enough, what am I *doing* here? I AM sorry for her, I truly am, but she's got to stop treating me as some sort of scapegoat for all that she doesn't like in her own life. Not only that, she reconstructs and belittles MY f***** life! I get sucked in, I think we're having a nice, normal conversation and she's suddenly in there, putting in the knife in SO many little ways. Like when I said my hair needed dyeing, she said I could keep it going for another month, but then she said I should never have started dyeing it in the first place – when she's been dyeing her f***** hair since she was 40!

"Or when she told me my blood pressure is fine compared to hers – so tell me why I'm prescribed diuretics and have to do an annual BP review! Or that time she said depression is worse than anxiety, when we had that conversation about *her* dominant emotional reaction being depression and mine being anxiety! I thought we were having a f***** heart to heart, but there she was, belittling my experience in order to make hers more important!" Sandra swiped at an elusive cobweb and nearly overbalanced.

"F***! Then she had the f***** nerve to say the younger generation relies too much on my generation, BUT look how much her generation relies on us! It's double standards all the way and I've HAD ENOUGH! God, I'm quite tired now and it's time I went in anyway. Well, it's been therapeutic swearing my head off, because I'm F***** HUMAN!" She put away the broom and went outside to shut the garage door.

"Hello," said Caroline's next-door neighbour. "I heard you were busy in there."

CHAPTER 20

As mid-October arrived with noticeably colder mornings, Sandra continued to struggle with a general sense of fatigue and the threatening edges of depression. Since Bryony was still on maternity leave, they all came to stay at Sandra and Osborn's house for a week, one of the main reasons being for Gulliver to sell his photographic goods at the local autumn craft fair that was always well attended.

"I think I'm losing the plot," said Osborn conversationally, as they sat down for lunch on the first day. "Last week I made a blackberry pie from fruit in the freezer that we picked in September, only it turned out to be a sloe pie. I don't know if you've ever tasted sloes, but I can assure you they're quite bitter."

"I suppose you quickly decided to bin it then," replied Bryony, as Juniper played with the food on her plate. "Juniper, do you want that or not?"

"I don't like it," replied Juniper fretfully, pushing her plate away.

"Don't have it, then," said Gulliver, sighing. "She's been moany all week."

"Oh dear. Should I offer her some grapes, perhaps?" asked Sandra uncertainly.

"Offer her what you like," replied Gulliver tiredly. "She'll say she doesn't like it."

"I don't like it," said Juniper cooperatively.

"Grandma hasn't given you the grapes yet," said Osborn, taking a small bowl of grapes from Sandra and placing it in front of Juniper. "Here you are, you'll like these."

"I don't like them," said Juniper, eyeing the grapes suspiciously before reaching out and steadily munching her way through the lot.

The following day, Gulliver came down with a cold and went back to bed, while the rest of them went out for a local walk. He managed to rally for the craft fair the next day, which was just as well because it turned out to be lucrative. However, a few days later, Osborn had caught the cold and was racked with shivering for a whole evening.

Sandra was trying to enjoy the visit, but was aware of undercurrents emanating from Gulliver and Bryony that seemed to be affecting Juniper, who was decidedly miserable on several occasions. On other occasions, she was fretful and unhappy, so Sandra could only assume she was fighting a cold virus too. Petroc, on the other hand, seemed fine. However, Sandra and Osborn couldn't help but feel relieved whenever the four of them visited Anne and Stan, as she and Osborn were becoming exhausted.

The day before they were due to leave, the plan was for them all to go out for a pub lunch with Lawrence and Caroline. While everyone was still getting ready, Sandra was idly checking the latest posts on *Farcebook* (which she'd joined at Gulliver's suggestion) and discovered a post written by Gulliver himself. He had made quite a derogatory comment about an incident the previous evening, when Osborn had shouted out to Gulliver to shut the door as he'd come in from outside, because the open door had been causing a draught.

Sandra felt shocked that Gulliver would say what he had on a public forum and deliberately kept it to herself in order not to upset Osborn, who was still struggling to fight the virus. It felt like a stewing inner discomfort by the time Caroline and Lawrence arrived and after she'd made everyone coffee, she realised that she was still trying to come to terms with a small but significant sense of betrayal.

"Here we are," she said to nobody in particular as she passed around the mugs, but nobody seemed to be paying her any attention. The conversation appeared to be about refuse disposal and council tax.

"I keep on putting out my rubbish in a plastic bag like I've always done in the past," complained Lawrence, "because the bins they've given us are rubbish. We're supposed to wheel them in and out every week, but everyone keeps them out the front all the time, like a public hazard."

"At least they're fit for purpose if they're rubbish bins," commented Bryony, shifting Petroc to a more comfortable position on her lap.

"The council tax will no doubt go up yet again next year in order to pay for the bins," continued Lawrence, sighing dramatically. "Oh well, I mustn't complain and spoil the day for everyone. What about you, Caroline, how do you get on with your bin?"

"Oh, Sandra does everything for me," replied Caroline in a throwaway manner.

"I do NOT do everything!" retaliated Sandra, standing frozen in disbelief, both at her mother's comment and her own sudden rage. "I have my own life to see to and there's no way I could do EVERYTHING, because it's your house and your life and I help out of the goodness of my heart!" She realised she was in imminent danger of crying angry tears and therefore took the easiest option of storming through the room to the back of the house, where she let herself out into the garden.

It felt much cooler and calmer outside, as she walked around, looking at the plants she loved to spend her time and energy tending. However, as she paced and tried her hardest to put things in a better perspective, she realised the worst aspect of making a stormy exit from anywhere was that at some point, you had to make an ignominious entrance back into the battle zone.

She was intensely relieved, therefore, when she slipped back inside the house and came across Juniper, who had found her handbag and was taking full advantage of Sandra's absence to investigate it in detail.

"Hey Juniperus Squamata, what have you got there?" she asked quietly, as her golden-haired, inquisitive granddaughter looked up guiltily and regarded her disturbed grandmother with clear, dark-green eyes, holding out a lipstick that she fortunately hadn't been able to open.

"Stipstick," said Juniper seriously, "in my bag."

"It's Grandma's bag, you know it is," she said, smiling. "I can't give you any, but I've got some lip salve – some lipstick for you in my other bag. Put down my purse, Juniper, I might need it. Oh, you want to comb my hair? Go on then, do your worst."

The morning took its course, as they all drove the half-hour journey to *The Lord Privy's Pisspot* in two cars. Sandra had never been there before and felt sad that the day had somehow turned into an uneasy version of what should have been a relaxed time together. Apart from Gulliver, who was more withdrawn than usual and seemed to be using Juniper and Petroc to avoid communicating, everybody else was behaving as they normally would and the lunchtime passed without any further problems.

Once they'd all arrived back at the house for the afternoon, though, Juniper was in an unruly mood. As usual, Bryony and Gulliver were taking the opportunity to relax on the sofa, while leaving Sandra and Osborn to look after everything and everyone. At one point, when Sandra was on her way to the kitchen, Osborn shouted at Juniper several times, in order to stop her drawing on the table by mistake. Gulliver took exception and remonstrated by shouting at Osborn that Juniper was fine, before storming out of the room and slamming the door shut.

There was a stunned silence, at such completely out of character behaviour from Gulliver. Sandra felt like giving up the pretence of a normal, family day as she went back into the room from her position by the doorway, but she managed to pull together some remnants of sociability to ask who would like a drink. Normal conversation resumed and she went to the kitchen feeling vaguely sympathetic that Gulliver had made his stormy exit and now had to manoeuvre his ignominious comeback. Mostly, though, she felt exhausted and unwell.

Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc returned to Wales the following day, but Sandra felt awful on many levels. She had caught the virus and was suffering from both body-ache and heartache, wondering why everything she and Osborn did for Juniper seemed to be wrong. As she thought about the past, she could remember being told on one occasion that they were too lenient and on another occasion that they were too strict.

When she remembered the summer day they'd spent with Gulliver photographing ancient monuments, followed by the sunset at Godrevy lighthouse, she couldn't reconcile the person he'd been that day with the person he seemed to have become recently, which was a person who appeared to be losing respect for them. She wrote him a long email, explaining how she was feeling confused, but he wrote back with an equally long one about their treatment of Juniper.

As she painfully pondered the whole situation, including the part that she and Osborn played, she began to wonder if it was a case of action and reaction, or cause and

effect. Were Sandra and Osborn behaving in reaction to the way Bryony and Gulliver were behaving towards Juniper?

For instance, Sandra found it hard when Juniper was truculent, messy and demanding at the table, knowing that Bryony's approach to teaching table manners was spasmodic, while Gulliver's answer was to read a magazine or do a crossword during meals. It was even likely that Bryony and Gulliver considered Sandra and Osborn to be over-fussy and overbearing by trying to insist on "please" and "thank you".

The whole childcare issue seemed fraught with pitfalls. Being a grandparent was wonderful in many ways, but it also seemed to put them in a no-win position. When they were left in charge, the way they took charge was often considered wrong in some way. They had always been careful to ask what was acceptable or not for Bryony and Gulliver as parents, but something appeared to be corrupting communication.

For the next few days, Sandra felt quite dire, with swollen tonsils, lack of sleep and distress about the whole situation. She even began to wonder if the tonsillitis was a manifestation of the way she felt Bryony and Gulliver were metaphorically jumping down her throat.

A few more emails were exchanged between Sandra and Gulliver and then also between Osborn and Gulliver, but when Gulliver wrote to them both that he was tired of getting nowhere and wanted to forget about it and get on with his life, Sandra was too weary to wonder how it had gone so wrong, when all they had tried to do was help. She felt as if she'd lost something precious with Gulliver that she'd never dreamed she'd ever lose. Somewhere in her psyche, she sensed sadly that a process of disintegration was beginning to take place.

When she felt more or less able to visit her mother again after the worst of the virus had abated, she wished she hadn't bothered. A discussion about recent events somehow turned quite ridiculous and she returned home feeling even more maligned, misunderstood, scapegoated and at the end of her tether – which ironically fitted in with the scapegoat scenario.

She felt like giving up, but knew it wasn't in her nature to do that, even though there seemed to be no place to go inside her own head that felt OK. Physically, her tonsils were better, but psychologically she felt as if she'd been punched in the back and had bruised ribs. She felt that she was actually going beyond caring and being forced to shut down emotions that were part of her essential self, in order to survive.

By the beginning of November, there was a further source of unrest, as Madeleine admitted she was feeling life had completely got on top of her and she badly needed a rest. When she gave in and went to see her GP, instead of being given a week off work to recuperate, she was given a prescription for antidepressants. Despite initially railing against this, she was desperate enough to recognise she needed help and also applied for a course of cognitive behavioural therapy, which Sandra always considered she'd benefitted from so much back in 1996.

The next day, when Sandra told Caroline about Madeleine's depression, she was taken aback that her mother more or less dismissed it by saying it would all come out in the wash. Caroline then proceeded to talk about such trivial things in her own life that Sandra went to the bathroom and swore mightily under her breath, enraged at the way her mother had so easily belittled her daughter's depression.

As her rage subsided, she realised she was quite worried about the way she was so frequently feeling such extreme angst and anger about her mother. It seemed that despite continuously trying her hardest, it was becoming no better. She also realised that she was feeling powerless to help Madeleine and she began to feel tearful, with a desolate sorrow about a life that was feeling too difficult, too tiring and too disillusioning.

A visit to the Eden Project helped, along with daily St James' Wort. However, a faulty electric heater in the sitting room certainly didn't help, as it coincided with some early snow and freezing weather at the end of November.

Sandra began to wonder if Osborn was distancing himself from her, by spending hours each day on the computer and gradually becoming involved with a small group of

like-minded people Leona had brought together. Since the retreat idea was failing to materialise, there was now a move towards starting a charity. Sandra had been invited to join the group, but she instinctively knew she had neither enough energy, nor the inclination to become involved.

Therefore, it felt quite comforting when Leona asked if she could meet Sandra and Osborn at a café for a general chat, as she'd been missing Sandra's presence.

"We could always meet in Plymouth for a walk around the shops or a bit of lunch, just us two," said Leona to Sandra, while Osborn went to fetch some teaspoons and serviettes. "I don't know what it is, but I connect with you. I always have done, I think, since that time you were my partner on the first course evening I went to at Rainbow Healers. Don't get me wrong, I love Osborn to bits, but there's something special about you too."

"Thank you, Leona," replied Sandra a little shyly, hoping she wouldn't blush. "I always felt there was something special about you as well – although to be honest, at first I was a bit overawed at your sense of poise and confidence."

"It was an act, believe me," said Leona with a wry smile. "It's how I learned to cope, by covering up. I guess that's what I like about you and Osborn, a feeling that it's safe for me to be myself. I know I talk a lot, but believe it or not, I'm a quiet, sensitive person inside."

"So am I," said Osborn, rejoining them and sitting alongside Sandra at the table. "I never used to like being alone, but now I value time on my own very much."

"I'm a quiet, sensitive person on the outside as well as the inside," said Sandra ruefully, "although I spent years of my life trying to be more outgoing."

"Oh no, you're perfectly fine as you are," responded Leona immediately. "You added a sense of calm and balance to the healing classes and when you spoke, which granted wasn't all that often, you had something to say."

"God, I find that a bit scary," said Sandra honestly, "but thank you for the lovely compliment. I must admit, I find it much easier to open up by writing than by talking."

"Then email me," said Leona, sipping her drink. "You know my email address and I've joined *Farcebook*, too. Thank you for this hot chocolate, Osborn, it's beautifully hot and chocolatey. I hope we don't have too much of a snowy winter, the cold gets into my bones these days. I must be getting old."

"Not as old as I felt when I collected my first free prescription," said Osborn, grinning. "I have to confess, there was something that felt good about it too, though."

The conversation continued quite naturally and easily, as Sandra decided that Leona was definitely a person she could open up to – although Leona's mother had died quite young and she was more or less estranged from her father. 'Sometimes it's not only about what you've got in common,' considered Sandra thoughtfully, as Leona and Osborn started to talk about a forthcoming charity meeting. 'It's about something deeper. Maybe Leona and I were connected in a past life or something. Maybe she was my sister. I would so love to have had a sister...'

"I bumped into my sister the other day when I went to West Bogg," said Leona, looking sad. "I haven't seen her for quite a few years and after the way she's always looked down on me and sided against me with our father, I almost had a panic attack on the spot. I nearly did, believe me! I knew it was a make or break moment, though – a chance to heal something of the past in me, so I went up to her and said hello."

"Good for you!" exclaimed Osborn warmly. "How did she react?"

"Coldly," replied Leona, sighing. "We were polite at least, so I felt as if I'd faced an old fear. I'm not sure I've resolved anything, but I do feel changed."

"That's brilliant," said Osborn encouragingly. "It's as if an opportunity came your way and you accepted the challenge. I must confess, I find my sister challenging. She hardly has anything to do with my brother and me since our parents died, but she's still my sister and it feels odd. I must admit, I hardly feel a connection with her at all."

"Maybe we were siblings in a past life," said Leona, smiling at them both. "Don't look startled, Sandra, it must have been a good life together, or else we wouldn't feel so comfortable with each other now. Can I buy you both another drink?"

The warm feeling of the meeting with Leona soon disappeared, as another chilling week of icy conditions, heavy frosts and a few light snowfalls followed. Sandra became mostly occupied with the usual pre-Christmas frenzy of shopping, present wrapping and card writing. Caroline had stopped making any attempt at Christmas shopping for herself, so Sandra's list was doubled. It therefore felt like an unexpected freedom when Caroline suggested one Thursday morning in early December that Sandra could shop in Plymouth, instead of spending the day with her as usual.

However, Sandra still went to see her mother in the afternoon to hand over what she'd bought on her behalf. She was unsure whether Caroline was resentful of Sandra's morning out without her, or whether she was just in a plain bad mood, but from the moment she entered her mother's house, the atmosphere was heavily charged in a very negative way towards Sandra. She walked home with tears stinging her eyes, along with a sudden shower of sleet.

'She just WON'T let me be me,' she raged to herself, as she stormed along the road. 'I feel so AWFUL acknowledging thoughts of her that I never dreamed I'd even come close to thinking. I HATE how I feel about her now! I'm in a dark place where she's concerned and it feels as if every time I fight for my life and for me to get out into the light again where I belong, she pushes me right back into the darkness, in one way or another. I wish I could be free of her and that's the sad truth. I can't cope with the way she is towards me, it's killing me.'

Fortunately, a pre-Christmas visit from Madeleine for four nights improved Sandra's spirits considerably, as well as Osborn's. Although Madeleine confessed that her throat had suddenly become sore during the train journey from Bristol to Plymouth, she joined in fully with the following days of shopping, lunches, local walks, evening film watching and sherry drinking.

On her final full day, they went to *The Netherlands Inn* for lunch with Lawrence and Caroline. Madeleine had partially lost her voice and was croaking impressively, but she felt well enough to drink more sherry and eat pigs in duvets with cranberry stuffing and roast potatoes.

"At least they didn't stuff the duvets with feathers," said Lawrence nonsensically. "I'm glad I chose the same as you, Madeleine, it's going down a treat."

"Ye-e-es," croaked Madeleine pitifully. "Hen-ri l-ikes fea-ther pi-illows."

"Don't talk, dear," said Caroline, prodding her fork into a duvet-covered pig. "You do like a drop of sherry, don't you? Does Henri like sherry too?"

"N-n," said Madeleine, nodding her head, then shaking it.

"Maddy associates sherry with family Christmases," replied Sandra in Madeleine's defence. "She only ever drinks it at Christmas, like we do. I don't think they go much for sherry in France, do they?" Madeleine shook her head.

"This roast nut dish is quite surprising," said Osborn, searching hopefully under a mound of honeyed swede. "Oh well, I like swede."

"I thought you'd be more likely to have the nut roast," said Sandra, quite happy with her minimal supply of roasted nuts.

"Personally, I'm surprised they even do roast nut dishes," commented Lawrence absurdly. "I would have thought they'd disintegrate in the oven. Oh no, sorry Madeleine, please don't choke!"

The following morning, they looked out of the window to see there had been a light to moderate snowfall overnight. As Madeleine was due to catch an afternoon train back to Bristol, they decided to take advantage of the fresh snow by going for a short walk in the nearby nature reserve. Madeleine's voice had mostly returned, although Osborn's throat was now sore.

"It's worth having a sore throat to see you, Maddy," said Osborn, as they all crunched along the path that led to a clear view over the train line and the river beyond. "I'm glad you're doing OK now, you were pretty much down in the summer."

"I have my off days," confessed Madeleine, stopping to gaze at Trematon Castle in the near distance. "If I was into taking photos, I'd take one of that. Yes, I'm feeling a

whole lot better than I was, but now I'm not sure how much of that is because of the antidepressants. I hate taking drugs, I'm going to come off them as soon as I possibly can. I was unsure about having the sherry, to be honest, but it seemed to be OK."

"You only ever had a smallish glass at a time," said Sandra consolingly. "I must admit that I felt so diabolical in October, I wondered if I should go to see Dr Effingham. I'm like you, though, I don't like taking drugs and that seems to be the first thing they offer for depression now. The St James' Wort is working for me, anyhow."

"I didn't realise you felt quite that bad, Mumsie," said Madeleine, looking at her mother as Sandra nearly slipped on a hidden stone.

"I didn't want to worry you." Sandra looked at Madeleine as they continued off the path and onto some white, crunchy grass, smiling underneath the scarf she'd pulled up around her mouth. "Just like you always say, you don't want to worry me."

"I don't want to worry you two," said Osborn, looking behind him, "but that sky is looking absolutely leaden. I think we ought to make tracks home and check if the trains are still running."

"I don't want to go," said Madeleine forlornly. "Well I do, but I don't."

"Oh Mad," said Sandra, stopping suddenly to give Madeleine a quick hug. "I'll never be happy that you live away, but I always try to make the very best of it, knowing you're living your life – which is what we all came here to do after all. I hate it when you go, I always want to wail that it's not fair. I look at the dishes you've left behind and I'm reluctant to wash them, because it's like washing away evidence of our time together. *That's* how much I don't want you to go."

"Oh Mumsie," replied Madeleine brokenly. "You know."

"I'm so sorry, but I know we really need to start back," said Osborn, looking at the sky again. "My throat's a bit worse too, I may have to resort to drugs."

Sandra felt like resorting to something strong when four days before Christmas, Caroline told her she'd fallen down in her drive a few weeks previously and although she'd only grazed her leg and cut it a little bit, it had left a place that wasn't healing. Caroline was worried it was an ulcer and although she'd gone to the surgery to have it checked, she'd cancelled two follow-up appointments because of the freezing weather. Furthermore, she'd also cancelled two hair appointments and was now fretting about both her leg and her hair.

"Why didn't you *tell* us?" asked Sandra, feeling tears of frustration pricking her eyes. "This has been going on for weeks!"

"I didn't want to worry you, or cause a fuss," replied Caroline disconsolately.

"But it's much more of a worrying fuss now we only have four days to sort it out!" exclaimed Sandra, before managing to regain some inner fortitude. "Have you remade your appointments?"

"I've got a hair appointment booked on the 23rd and the practice nurse said I could go to see her if she's there whenever I can have a lift," replied Caroline dolefully.

"You know all you need to do is ask Osborn for a lift, because he's told you so many times," said Sandra patiently. "He's *told* you that if he's free, of course he'll help you out. You need to learn to trust him and to ask him directly, that's all."

"Well anyway, could you mention it to him?" asked Caroline doubtfully. "I really don't like to bother him."

Christmas passed without any particular problems, horrible happenings or catastrophic crises, which Sandra took to be a bonus. Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and the now crawling Petroc arrived safely, despite the dubious weather conditions, for a four-night stay. Gulliver was a self-confessed chionophile and he was more or less a walking weather forecast while the wintry conditions prevailed, so happily there was no mention or any repeat of the October clash.

The only real dampener was the viral situation, as Petroc had a chesty cold that kept him and the adults awake at night. Osborn's virus was reluctant to leave his throat and sinuses, while the virus Sandra caught decided to be of the chesty kind. However, it didn't particularly feel kind to her chest as she coughed the end of the old year away.

On New Year's Eve, while she sat more or less upright on the sofa underneath a duvet, so as not to disturb Osborn who'd already gone to bed, she considered the pros and cons of Christmas, while coughing hideously. Without any doubt, the highlight had been when they were sitting around the table one afternoon, playing *Ono*. Juniper had ensconced herself on Sandra's lap, digging her elbows into Sandra's chest and squirming around tortuously on Sandra's thighs, while singing her own version of Christmas songs. Then, quite unexpectedly and for no apparent reason, she had turned to wrap her small, wiry arms around Sandra and had said quite clearly, "I love you!"

CHAPTER 21

Sandra wasn't exactly feeling the love as 2011 began and her mother reverted to calling her "little devil" and proclaiming with an accusatory undertone that Sandra was young. However, escape was imminent, in the form of a six-night stay at Bristol, which involved being there as moral support for Madeleine while nearly all of the house windows were replaced. The plan was then to travel on to Aberpontyfan, for a four-night stay. The weather had turned from ice and snow to torrential rain, intermingled with a few sunny intervals that never lasted for long.

The visit with Madeleine and Henri was enjoyable as always, despite the coldness and awkwardness of the actual window replacement. They managed to fit in visits to *Setco*, *Home Nonsense*, *Ukea*, Bristol Museum, the GP surgery, the dental surgery and *Shabitat*, but not all on the same day. Henri had pleaded being unable to take time off work, but this meant Sandra was able to enjoy spending time alone with Madeleine, on a couple of occasions when Osborn volunteered to stay behind with the workmen.

On the day when they both walked to the GP surgery for Madeleine's prescription renewal and then on to the dental surgery for Madeleine to register, Sandra was aware of feeling incredibly happy to be doing something so ordinary with her daughter.

"I'm loving this so much that I realise now exactly how much I've been missing it", she said, as they strode out together alongside the traffic-frenzied Bristol roads. "It's so ordinary, it's almost beautiful."

"Oh Mumsie," replied Madeleine, glancing at Sandra. "You say the strangest things sometimes, but they always make sense to me somewhere inside. I wish it was different, you know I do. Most of the girls at work have their mothers living close by and they seem to take it for granted so much that I feel like telling them they don't know how lucky they are. I listen to them and I long to be able to pop around, or meet you in town, or..."

"Have me come along with you to the doctor, like I used to?" asked Sandra, smiling sadly. "I know you've become much more independent and confident and that's absolutely brilliant. I wouldn't have it any other way for your growth, which is probably another strange thing to say – but sometimes I just purely and simply miss you."

"I understand," said Madeleine sombrely, "I really do. I'm still finding life a bit hard, so I'm not really sure how confident I am. Sometimes I find myself getting anxious standing in queues, or feeling trapped in certain situations. Anyway, my first cognitive behavioural therapy session is next week, so I'll let you know how I get on."

"I enjoyed the CBT when I did it, mainly because I could feel it was helping me – so I'm sure you'll benefit too," said Sandra encouragingly. "Does Henri understand?" she asked, remembering how Osborn had tried to understand her own anxiety in 1996, but had confessed he could only understand so much.

"I don't think so, although he does try," replied Madeleine. "His way of helping is to be very logical and sometimes I feel he's being harsh, although I know he's right. For instance, he keeps saying how the only way I'll ever stop being anxious about driving is to drive."

"He's absolutely right," confirmed Sandra with a small chuckle. "Sickening, isn't it! Actually, it's tough love and it's wonderful. It's hard to do, too. I remember those mornings when you'd come to me with tears in your eyes and ask me not to make you go to school. It was killing to have to tell you no, you had to go to school, because you'd feel worse if you didn't face it. Henri's really good for you, Mad."

"I know he is. Sometimes I feel as if I need some Mumsie love, though. Do you know the feeling?"

"I think I used to, but not any longer," replied Sandra honestly. "It's more as if Grandma wants some Mumsie love from me, in the sense of me looking after her, but she still wants to be my mother and have control over me, by treating me like her little girl. It's all a bit skewed, really. She even said only the other day that I'll always be her little girl."

"Isn't that rather nice?" asked Madeleine, glancing at Sandra again.

"I don't know that it is," replied Sandra carefully. "I was her little girl once and that was fine when it was real, but it's not real anymore. I am who I am *now* and it feels as if she doesn't want to let me be myself, 58-year-old Sandra – who happens to be a mother and grandmother, as well as a daughter still. To say I'll always be her little girl actually feels to me as if it's a self-centred perception. I hope that doesn't sound too harsh?"

"No, but it does sound rather complicated. So I won't always be your little girl?"

"You'll always be you – Madeleine Annabelle. You were my little girl once and I loved you then just like I love you as you are right now – 29 and such a beautiful soul that I feel utterly blessed. You were my little girl and I loved that, but I never owned you. Dad and I gave you life, but it's *your* life to live freely. I would never, ever seek to bind you to me like I'm very much afraid I feel my mother does to me."

The new windows had been successfully installed and it was time to move onwards to Aberporthyfan. As Osborn was driving through some very misty rain, Sandra received a text message from Gulliver to say their boiler had broken down, which meant no heat and no water, so could they buy some bottled water on their way there. As it was only mid-January, the situation wasn't exactly good news, but the home-made vegetable pasty they were given for lunch on their arrival was warming, if not somewhat filling.

Over the next two days while a new boiler was being fitted, they all went on visits to *Meteor*, *Setco*, the Mountain Centre, the local garden centre and Swansea city centre. On another occasion, Juniper and Petroc were both at nursery for the day, so Gulliver drove them to Brecon for a rather splendid lunch at *The King's Coccyx*.

"This is wonderful, to sit here and not have to think of what Petroc will or won't eat, or whether Juniper will play up, or spend her time scrambling from one of us to the other, or want a wee." Gulliver sighed in undisguised pleasure.

"Do you know where the toilets are?" asked Osborn, still perusing the menu. "I'd better go before we eat."

"That would be a shame, aren't you hungry?" asked Bryony impassively.

"What? Ah!" Osborn smiled at Bryony. "I'll stay then. This is my treat, anyway."

"It's so nice to have time to think straight," said Gulliver, still revelling in being child-free. "I miss having time to sit and ponder, or discuss something other than what's for morning snack or Pesky Popper Pig."

"I can remember that feeling," said Sandra reminiscently, "when you were young and I was at home with you all day. What sort of things do you miss talking about?"

"Oh, life's imponderable questions, like how do you draw a blank? Or is someone who runs in a race a racist? Or why is a building still called a building when it's finished? That sort of thing."

"I thought you might mean things like quantum physics, or what is the reality of reality?" said Osborn, looking at his son quizzically.

"Yes, that too," replied Gulliver, shrugging. "Maybe I just miss being out there taking photographs of sunrises, sunsets and stars."

"You can go and do that," said Bryony quietly. "It might not be as easy when I go back to work."

"It gets a bit lonely, that's all," said Gulliver, slowly sipping his *Feck's Fake Beer*. "Anyway, this is nice. I hope Petroc's OK today, he sounded a bit croaky this morning."

"He's more interactive now he's getting older," commented Sandra, aware that in some part of his psyche, Gulliver seemed to be struggling a little. "He certainly likes to investigate everything and he's got such a winning smile with his big, brown eyes."

"He obviously loves Juniper too," said Osborn, sipping his *Brecon Bogspill Beer*. "I've noticed she can be a bit overpowering at times when she wants to cuddle him, but I have the feeling he'll learn to retaliate if she's not careful."

"He'll learn and she'll learn," replied Gulliver enigmatically, "but the question is, will we ever learn?"

"What do you mean?" asked Bryony, putting down her *Dragon Juice Cider* on the beer mat. There appeared to be no cider mats in the entire pub.

"I honestly don't know," replied Gulliver, looking surprised at himself. Sometimes I have no idea where things come from."

"You want to watch that," said Sandra, smiling. "Oh, this is wonderful, back to being relaxed together. I do so love ordinary times."

"I love extraordinary times," said Osborn, beaming.

"I love contra-ordinary times," said Bryony, sniggering.

"I love super-mega-ultra-extraordinary times," said Gulliver, grinning.

"Did you have a good holiday, then?" asked Caroline, as soon as Sandra stepped inside her mother's kitchen door. "You didn't ring to let me know you were back, you naughty girl. It feels like you've been away for such a long time."

"It wasn't a holiday! First of all, there was a lot of upheaval with Madeleine and Henri's windows being fitted and then Gulliver and Bryony's boiler broke and they had to have a new one installed, so it was often cold and uncomfortable," replied Sandra in a rush, finally remembering to breathe and not be manoeuvred into a defensive mode.

"It's a shame you had to go there if it was like that," said Caroline truculently.

"If we want to see our son and our daughter, then sometimes we have to travel to see them," replied Sandra furiously, "because we're not all blessed with children who live nearby."

"Well, it's been longer than usual," said Caroline, sniffing. "When you're my age, you find yourself wondering what to do to pass the time."

"It's difficult," replied Sandra evasively, taking out her camera from her bag in an effort to calm down by using some distraction. "I've got some photos if you want to see them."

"Lovely," said Caroline, moving closer to Sandra. "Then after lunch we can at long last have a game of *Scribble*. I've missed playing with you."

The year's holiday situation was unusually promising. Gulliver and Bryony had requested their company in Pembrokeshire for a week in May before Bryony started her new job, while Osborn and Lawrence had booked a briefly deliberated week's holiday for the three of them in York in June. Meanwhile, Henri had agreed to a week in Jersey in September with Madeleine, Sandra and Osborn. Sandra felt slightly perturbed that Henri had needed the persuasion factors of Madeleine's 30th birthday, as well as Sandra and Osborn's 40th wedding anniversary, but at least the end result was a positive one.

Nearly four months passed, in which Sandra felt a strong need for clearance in a life that was accumulating increasing amounts of messiness. It hadn't proved straightforward, as after a series of leaks, Osborn had been forced to replace the kitchen sink. They had also undertaken to clear out Caroline's loft, which had remained untouched for a great many years. It had been filled with memories, objects they considered taking to a museum and so much thick, noxious dust that it felt like a health hazard.

They were currently discussing the idiosyncrasies of the previous few months as they sat drinking coffee at a service station on their way to Wales in early May.

"I'm so glad to be getting away from Mum for an actual holiday," said Sandra, taking her piece of the blackcurrant and aniseed muffin she was sharing with Osborn. "It's her comments that get me half the time, like calling me a "lucky little thing" during *Scribble* – or that day when we took her out to *Cornish Mills* and she turned her nose up at everything. I'll never forget the way she said in such a silly pretend posh voice: "I only like the best, I've always been like that." It took me a while afterwards to come to terms with the fact that my mother is a snob and has a skewed, vacuous value system."

"She's become really weird since your dad died," said Osborn, massacring the muffin. "I was taken aback that day when I took her for her final post-bunion foot check and she greeted me with the news that she'd had a kidney infection for three days and needed to see a nurse at the Health Centre. Then, when I took her to see a doctor later that day, she was told it wasn't a kidney infection, but possibly a stomach virus and to keep on drinking."

"I remember! I feel sorry for her living on her own, but it's such hard-going with her. What with that and your new venture with that charity taking up your energy, I've felt quite adrift lately. It's even changed with Maddy. We don't exchange emails like we used to, it's almost always me to her now. I'm so glad the CBT helped her and she came off the antidepressants with remarkable ease and determination – probably because she didn't want to be on them in the first place – but I miss the regularity."

"At least Gulliver rings quite regularly now on Sunday afternoon," said Osborn, looking fixedly at Sandra. "What's this about *Stress-Calm* taking up my energy?"

"I feel a bit strange about you getting involved with something that I'm not, even though it's my choice. When you told me about the commitments you've already made with them, I began to wonder what my life is all about. I began to wonder why I'm me."

"I need to do something with my life, you know I do," said Osborn slowly. "It's true that I've been to a few meetings recently with Leona and some other people, but you were never excluded. Leona always asks how you are."

"That's nice," said Sandra miserably. "I really like her, but I haven't got it in me to become involved with a group of other people I don't feel connected with. It stresses me out just thinking about it and I'm sure that's not the idea of *Stress-Calm*. I find it confusing because you said you were sure we have something to do together and yet I keep seeing you going off with other people."

"What other people?"

"We-ell, when you went out with Franklin and came home earlyish, I thought it was because you wanted to, but you said you'd have liked to stay out if you hadn't been so tired." Sandra had the strange sense of hearing what she must be sounding like. "Oh, sod it, take no notice of me, I'm slowly losing the plot. Actually, I worried myself when I was waiting for the results of that routine mammogram. I worked myself into such a ridiculous state that it made me aware of my current tenuous hold on emotional health."

"I think you really need this holiday," said Osborn, as Sandra's phone beeped.

"I do, I'm so looking forward to Pembrokeshire. I'd better look at this text, it's from Gulliver." Sandra quickly read the text. "Sodding hell! Petroc's had a stomach bug and now Bryony's caught it."

"Shit, we're stuck. We'll just have to carry on to Aberpontyfan and hope to high heaven that we don't catch it too."

It took a few days for them to catch it. They arrived at Aberpontyfan to find Bryony was looking wan, but saying she felt better. However, Gulliver was afflicted all that night and consequently looking wan the next morning. It was the day they were due to leave for their holiday, but since it was only about an hour and a half's drive away, they delayed their departure until the afternoon, when Gulliver insisted he was feeling better.

Almost as soon as they entered Pembrokeshire, the scenery became very green, with eye-catching amounts of wild flowers, particularly gorse and bluebells. The house they were renting for the week was in the village of Dinas Cross and was spacious and comfortable. There was an attractively planted garden, complete with a wooden bridge, some streams and a fishpond, which was unfortunately a danger zone for Petroc, the supercrawler.

The following day, their first visit of the holiday was to Pentre Ifan (homestead of Ivan), known as the best-preserved Neolithic burial chamber, or dolmen, in Wales. There was roadside parking and easy access along a short path, into an open area where the dolmen presided in all its ruinous glory. After a long session of serious photography on the part of both Gulliver and Osborn, Juniper was finally allowed to run wild and free, in and out of the three upright stones, whose narrow tops supported a capstone of over 16 tons. Sandra smiled to see her granddaughter bonding so naturally with her Celtic roots.

After leaving Pentre Ifan, they sat in their cars wondering where to go next. While Gulliver and Bryony consulted a map, Sandra looked across the road and spotted a Cadw Welsh Historic Monuments sign to another burial chamber, Siambr Gladdu. She told Osborn, who looked surprised and then doubled over laughing, as it gradually dawned on Sandra that Siambr Gladdu was Welsh for Burial Chamber.

After that hilarity, they spent the rest of the day conventionally viewing views from a viewing point, eating a cheese and pickle sandwich lunch and investigating a very windy Fishguard, where they enjoyed a short walk along a coast path strewn liberally with bluebells, buttercups, hawthorn, gorse and campions. The late afternoon and early evening passed as usual, with the addition of what was to be a twice-daily visit to the fishpond, for Bryony and Juniper to feed the fish. As it was unfortunately too windy to enjoy the garden, they availed themselves of the comfort inside.

Unfortunately, very little comfort was enjoyed by Osborn from about 01:00 the next morning, when he succumbed to the stomach bug – fortunately in the luxury of the en suite bedroom. He hardly slept and was still feeling very rough by the morning, so Sandra decided to stay at the house with him, while the others carried on with their plans for the day. By the time they returned, however, Sandra had begun to feel unwell herself, so she took herself up to the en suite bedroom to join Osborn, pretty sure that the axe was about to fall.

It did fall, most impressively. After making full use of the very much appreciated en suite, Sandra spent the next day recovering and managing to read almost a whole novel. After a good night's sleep, though, both Sandra and Osborn felt well enough to go forth and continue with what was already the fourth full day of their holiday.

The first visit was to Strumble Head lighthouse, located on the rocky St Michael's Island (Ynys Meicel) on the north-west corner of Pen Caer, five miles west of Fishguard. There was a short, fairly steep walk from the car down to the cliff path below, where it was incredibly windy, but where the flora was breathtaking, with some wild cowslips, bluebells, swathes of gorse and a whole hedge of sea thrift.

The next stop was at Garn Fawr, the site of an Iron Age hill fort on top of a weathered rocky outcrop within the Pen Caer peninsula. Sandra was beginning to find her energy levels waning at that point, so instead of climbing to the top of the hill fort with the others, she perched on a comfortable grass-covered rock in the lee of the wind and gazed at the tranquil view stretching below.

Beyond a patchwork of fields, Strumble Head lighthouse sat on top of its very own island, while the Pembrokeshire coastline swept around to the right as far as St Davids Head. It was warm in the sun among the wild flowers and singing birds and she felt at peace there, even when a shiny black beetle decided to attach itself to the top of her index finger and was very reluctant to disengage.

'I'm having a moment,' she thought suddenly, 'all to myself, on this grassy covered rock in the lee of the wind, looking out at this stunning view. Wow, this is really special. So these special moments can happen anytime, anywhere, even if you've just had a stomach bug in a stranger's en suite bedroom.'

'It's as if an awareness of something amazing outside connects to something inside and creates this wonderful, liberating sensation of peace. It's stillness and calm and it feels as if everything is actually all right with the world, even the left bits, so that you have a sudden appreciation of your life in the grand scheme of things and there is no need whatsoever to strive.'

'I'm with part of my family who I love and I'm alive in this astonishingly beautiful world. A shiny black beetle has attached itself to the top of my index finger and that's absolutely fine, because everything in this entire planet and probably way beyond is all connected anyway.'

'Actually, it's not completely fine. Why won't it go, what's it doing to my finger? Come on, you can get off now, you've been there long enough. Get off – eech – get off!'

The others returned and after a cautious banana and biscuit lunch for Sandra and Osborn, they visited St Brynach's church in Nevern to see an Ogham stone – Ogham being an ancient form of writing made by linear cuts. They also came across a bleeding yew, which didn't sound exactly pleasant, although the dark red resin dripping from old

wounds on its trunk was fascinating. A 10th century Celtic cross in the same churchyard was impressive and many of the headstones were also interesting.

A further trip led them to the remains of another church at Cwm-yr-Eglwys, a hamlet in a small cove at the north side of the Dinas Head peninsula. Here the parking cost £2, so Gulliver and Bryony decided to take Juniper and Petroc to a nearby beach, while Sandra and Osborn preferred to investigate the church. Its remains were starkly visible as they walked towards the sea, but it was cold and very windy, so they decided to drive on in search of another burial chamber.

They found it without much trouble, although it meant parking the car on the roadside and walking a short distance through private housing. Their first impression of Carreg Coetan was that it was small but pleasing, despite being situated more or less in somebody's back garden. After a small amount of loitering in anticipation for the sun to emerge from behind a cloud for photographic purposes, it was still only mid-afternoon, so they decided a further exploration of Fishguard would make best use of the day.

A brief and slightly unedifying walk around the shops yielded little of interest, although Osborn noticed a sign that said *Gorsedd*. Therefore, with distant memories of blue bards in a 1977 Cornish Gorsedd ceremony just down the road from their house, they followed the sign.

The Gorsedd circle was unfortunately right next to a street of houses with an overhead power cable, but it was set upon a large grassy area that overlooked a lovely coastal view, both out into the bay and down on Fishguard Lower Town nestling below. The circle had been built in 1936 for the Eisteddfod, with stones contributed from various parishes.

It was still quite cold and windy by the time they'd finally tired themselves out, so they headed back to the house for some warmth, while Gulliver headed out later into the cold evening air for a sunset photo shoot, as the clouds promised to be interesting. Sandra went to bed feeling exhausted, but happy to have made the most of the day.

The next morning, they visited St Dogmael's Abbey near Cardigan, where they spent a pleasant half-hour or more wandering around in their own time, with hardly any other visitors. Juniper enjoyed walking, climbing and running around outside in freedom, as it was all relatively safe, while Petroc seemed to prefer the toys indoors in the Heritage Centre, where they stopped for coffee and cake.

Their next stop was at Castle Henllys, a reconstructed Iron Age hill fort on the site of an original hill fort dating back 2,400 years. The settlement then had probably housed several families, with a population of 100 plus. Sandra thought the intricate detail inside the houses was outstanding and didn't even mind when a group of schoolchildren showed up and had a great deal of fun mixing daub in a purpose-built pit.

On their way from Castell Henllys to Gors Fawr stone circle, they drove along roads with spectacular hedges. As well as the usual hedge flowers, swathes of dripping laburnum graced the scene for quite a distance and then for a while there were luscious green ferns that fooled Sandra into thinking she was somewhere slightly tropical.

However, the slightly soggy moorland on which the stone circle was situated was anything but tropical in a very cold and windy way, within view of the Preseli Mountains that were well known as being the source of bluestone in the inner circle at Stonehenge. Sandra was slightly underwhelmed by the stone circle itself, as the 16 stones were small compared to some of the Cornish circles she knew and loved. Generally speaking, though, a prehistoric stone circle was a wonder simply by its existence.

The final destination of that day was to view another Ogham stone at Glandwr, situated at the foothills of the Preseli Mountains. Gulliver opted to stay in the car while Bryony joined Sandra and Osborn on their approach to the 19th century Baptist church, where the stone was easily visible in the churchyard.

"I know this one is difficult to photograph because it's standing against a similarly coloured wall and we don't know what the writing says anyway, but just to know it's Ogham writing is enough to blow me away," said Sandra appreciatively.

"Maybe it'll be less windy tomorrow," replied Bryony, reaching out to touch the stone. "I think Gulliver still wants to go out for sunset again tonight, though, to that likely looking place on that craggy moorland above the house."

The next morning, they all paid a quick visit to the craggy moorland above the house, as Gulliver had discovered it gave a superb view. Unfortunately, by the time they arrived, the view was partially obscured by misty rain, but they were all used to the vagaries of moorland weather. It turned out to be a passing shower anyway, as the sun had emerged again by the time they were driving on to St Davids, the smallest city in Britain.

Their destination was the Bishop's Palace, next to the cathedral that was sporting a fine coat of scaffolding. As they walked around in the breezy morning under growing cloud cover, it was easy to see the palace had been built to impress and must have been a status symbol in its time. They all enjoyed strolling around with not many other visitors – which was fortunate, as Juniper was able to water a small area of grassland in a convenient private corner.

"This is quite an attractive ruin on the whole," commented Osborn, while they were wandering around looking at the arcaded parapets, carved stone gargoyles and decorative arches, windows and doorways. "Juniper! Where has she gone?"

"She's running along peeking through all the window apertures," replied Sandra, as she walked quickly along keeping up with Juniper.

"As long as you've got your eye on her," said Osborn, gazing above him. "Look at the state of that guttering, you'd think they'd have had more trouble with leaks."

"Well, this *is* Wales," replied Bryony immediately. "Sorry, that was just an answer waiting to happen."

Their next stop was near the sea at St Davids Head, along the rocky coastline above St Non's Bay, where there was a holy well and St Non's Chapel, standing ruinously secure in its gated wooden enclosure. They made a gentle exploration of the area, which felt both historic and peaceful.

After a final visit for the day at a less peaceful place called Solva, they went for a stroll involving ice cream, before returning to the house. Sandra attempted to keep Juniper amused by demonstrating her drawing skills, but realised her granddaughter was already beginning to look askance at some of her grandmother's more adventurous attempts.

In the meantime, Gulliver enjoyed a bit of rough and tumble with his son, until Petroc accidentally stuck his finger up his father's nose and made it bleed.

"Never mind, that's what fatherhood brings you, among a million other delightful experiences," said Osborn consolingly. "It's been a good week with you, it's not every son who'd ask his father and mother to join him on holiday."

"Not that I'm coming apart at all," muttered Gulliver through the tissue he was holding to his nose. "I'm sorry you lost two days through illness, I feel bad about that."

"Not as bad as I felt all that night," replied Osborn ruefully. "No, that's probably not true, we all suffered. "Oh well, all's fair in vomit and diarrhoea."

"I can't believe you brought that up," said Sandra, shuddering. "Still, I guess it's true that parents and children share such a lot at some gut level."

"Families who vomit and have diarrhoea together stay together?" asked Osborn, shrugging.

"Oh, you wretch!" replied Sandra with a grimace. "Is that your ball, Petroc? Throw it up here to Grandma!"

"Er – Mother?" Gulliver delicately took away the tissue away from his nostril. "Please don't make me laugh."

CHAPTER 22

Alison was moaning mightily about her husband on a cool mid-May afternoon in Sandra's sitting room. Sandra could see that despite trying to inject some humour into her outpouring, Alison was really tired. The hint of jauntiness that her new hairstyle obviously intended to portray, with its short and chic cut, spiced up by red and blonde streaks over her usual chestnut dye, was failing to gel with the dark shadows underneath her eyes. Sandra knew Alison favoured hairspray over gel, but she felt more than a little concerned about her friend.

"How does Dirk feel about Helen and Mark separating?" asked Sandra, making an effort to focus on Alison's words, rather than her appearance.

"If only I knew!" replied Alison vociferously. "Sorry to be bending your ear like this, but I can tell you how I honestly feel. As soon as we start to discuss anything remotely emotional about us or our family, he goes blank and looks at me as if I'm insane. Then I get mad and say things I shouldn't and it escalates and he goes off shouting and banging doors. Then I cry and feel depressed and he ignores me until I can't stand it any longer. Eventually we start to rub along together just for the sake of a quiet life – except I'm dying noisily inside."

"I'm so sorry, I know how it can tear you apart," said Sandra, wishing she could find words to express what she wanted to say. "It's crazy, because I always thought life would naturally become more sorted as we move along the lifespan, but apparently not. I wish it could be easier for you, I really do. Did you say Helen doesn't like you to talk about you and Dirk to her, because he's her father?"

"Yes, it's OK for her to cry on my shoulder about her failed marriage and tell me all sorts of things I'd rather not hear, but I'm not allowed to talk about *my* marriage."

"It's one-sided," said Sandra warily, trying to ascertain whether it was fair for a parent to discuss with a child the relationship difficulties experienced with the child's other parent, even when the child was an adult. It was a cumbersome thought. "I think it's quite complex between parents and children, which doesn't necessarily make it fair, or easy, or anything other than a downright pain in the aspidistra."

"I haven't heard that saying for ages," responded Alison, chuckling. "Oh well, the one good thing now Helen and Mark have officially separated and he's moved out is that Helen's much more available. I think I've seen her more these last few months than in the last few years, even though we went on a couple of foursome holidays."

"Family holidays, now they can be a minefield," said Sandra, also chuckling. "I'm very glad to say that Bryony wasn't nearly as tricky with me in Pembrokeshire as she was in Snowdonia, which was a massive relief. I hope she likes her new job as a lab technician."

"I meant to tell you I bumped into Anne Stanpool the other day," said Alison more brightly. "We were talking about when our children went to the same school. It's a small world, who would have thought that your Gulliver would end up marrying her Bryony and live in Wales and then my Sam would end up bugging off to Wales with my grandchildren too."

"At least Madeleine's in England now," said Sandra, laughing. "I've got nothing against Wales, nothing at all, except that it seems to have drawn my children like a magnet and also one of yours. I must say, Gulliver and Bryony seem to have embraced the Welshness far more than I ever expected. I even have two Welsh grandchildren."

"Strange old life," commented Alison wryly. "How's your mother?"

"It's difficult," replied Sandra, wondering how much to say. "She's currently complaining about fighting another virus and feeling exhausted. I don't think she's happy with her life at all, but *I* can't save her. I realised the other day that I was feeling unwell and it had been quite a long time since I'd actually felt well, as in full of the joys of – I don't know – the early autumn of my life."

"I think I must be late autumn to early winter," considered Alison thoughtfully, "although some days I feel more like midwinter, all dark and heavy."

"Sometimes when I go to see Mum, I can feel the heavy vibes as soon as I step inside the door and those are the days when I feel I'm slowly dying when I'm with her," continued Sandra sadly. "She said the other day that she doesn't like feeling so tired, but when I said there are worse things, she said she wanted to be on the ball like she used to be."

"I haven't been on the ball for years," said Alison mournfully. "I'm not sure I know where it is anymore."

"I think my ball's had a slow puncture over the years and is now totally deflated," said Sandra sombrely.

"If I could find my ball, I think I'd throw it as far as I could and then run after it," said Alison, tittering a little.

"I was never really into ball games anyway," said Sandra, chortling slightly. "At school I used to run away from the hockey ball."

"It's all a load of balls anyway," said Alison pleasantly, looking at her watch. "Well, I'd better be going. Thanks for this chat, it's really cheered me up!"

May continued with a moderately severe throat infection for Osborn, a broken tooth for Sandra and what had become the usual struggle for her to keep a sense of emotional balance concerning her mother. To add to the mix, a surprising amount of discord was emanating from Lawrence, who appeared at their house one morning for his birthday pub lunch, immersed in a dark cloud of his own making. He seemed preoccupied by the current lack of buses and vociferously berated the lack of sunshine.

"I get so down with the weather, but it never used to be this bad," he complained later, sitting beside Caroline and opposite Sandra and Osborn in *The Scary Skewer* at Derrydown. "I've been keeping calendars since I retired, marking the days of total sunshine and there are hardly any to speak of at all. I can remember in our childhood we'd have day after day of sun, you could rely on it. The Met Office is next to useless too, how hard can it be?"

"I think they do really well," replied Caroline, a sentiment Sandra agreed with. "They usually give you a good idea of what might happen."

"Don't forget we spent a good few years of our childhood in Singapore," pointed out Osborn, unsure whether to frown or smile at his brother. "Are you OK, Lawrence?"

"I would be if we were sitting outside in full sun," replied Lawrence bleakly. "Look at it out there, there's a massive raincloud on the horizon. Sometimes I wish I was living a very simple life on a tropical island, catching fish every day for a basic diet."

"Whiskey-cured sea trout on cream cheese and pumpernickel with mango salad?" asked a waiter, who had approached their table unnoticed.

"Yes, here please," responded Lawrence, looking with interest at the platter that was placed before him. "That looks amazing."

"Sea bass with braised fennel and parsley pesto on a bed of lemon and red onion couscous?" asked the waiter, who was now very much noticed.

"Oh yes, that's me," said Osborn eagerly, appraising his own platter, which almost seemed like a euphemism.

"Fishcakes, chips and peas?" came the bored voice of another waiter, as he placed medium-sized plates in front of Sandra and Caroline.

"Thank you," said Sandra politely, waiting until the waiters had gone. "I like fishcakes, OK? I just *like* them!"

"That's fine, you carry on and enjoy your pleb special," said Lawrence, suddenly smiling at Sandra. "I don't mean to be a misery, honestly, I'm just..."

"Sixty-three?" asked Sandra brightly, knowing the dark cloud was dissipating rapidly.

"I don't know what you lot are on about, but this is too much for me," said Caroline doubtfully. "I'll never eat these chips, I always used to pass them to Leonard."

"I wish Dad could be here," said Sandra, before she knew it. "I wish the others could be here too, because we seem such a small family now."

"We are," said Osborn, bonding with his sea bass. "I take it you mean Gulliver and Madeleine, not my parents? No need to answer. I must book here for Madeleine's 30th birthday before we go, it's not all that far away."

"Are they back from Montréal yet?" asked Lawrence, teasing apart his trout. "Who were they going to see again?"

"Henri's friend and his wife," replied Sandra, as Caroline dropped her fork.

"You never told me they were going to Montréal, you naughty girl," said Caroline, playfully slapping Sandra on her arm. "Could you get my fork?"

"Please don't hit me," said Sandra, suddenly exasperated. "I thought I'd told you. Here's your fork."

"No, you didn't," replied Caroline petulantly. "It's awful being the poor relation, the last one to know anything. Still, I suppose you're the matriarch now, although I don't know what that makes me."

"I honestly don't know what you're on about," said Sandra, deciding to ignore her mother's sudden victim role by focusing on her fishcake.

"I'll never be a patriarch, that's for sure," said Lawrence conversationally. "Well I must say, the fish is much better here than at *Ida Pollock's Fish Bar*."

"I didn't know such a place existed," said Osborn, looking askance at Lawrence.

"It doesn't," replied Lawrence mildly. "I just like the name."

"Fishy if you ask me," said Osborn, grinning, "but let's not get started on fish jokes, I know what your fish jokes are like."

"OK, I'll let you off the hook," said Lawrence equitably. "By the way, do you know what sort of lights they used on Noah's Ark?"

"What?" asked Osborn, looking up from the bottom of his lemon and red onion couscous bed. "Arc lamps?"

"Floodlights," replied Lawrence with satisfaction. "I'm feeling much better now."

"I'd been having some breathing discomfort for a couple of weeks, so it was actually a relief to know it was pleurisy," explained Gina, as another get-old-together was taking place one evening at the end of May. This time it was being hostessed by Kay, who had earlier ushered them into her comfortable dining room, where the table was already laid with a welcoming array of crockery, cutlery, glassware, serviettes, wine, fruit juice and plates of food to complement what each of them had contributed.

"Pleurisy's not very pleasant, though," commented Kay sympathetically. "Have you recovered properly?"

"Yes thank you, flower," replied Gina, taking another bread roll. "It was one of those winters where my immune system was struggling, but I love this time of year."

"Me too," said Sandra, taking another potato. "I haven't worked as much as I'd like to on our garden, but this spring I thought I'd keep weeding and see what crops up from last year. Actually, a load of weeds keep cropping up!"

"I love going out in the garden after work now the evenings are longer," said Emily, taking another plum tomato. "I don't like plum tomatoes, what am I doing? Yes, my garden's a real feel-good factor for me, I can remember sitting there some evenings last summer with a cup of tea and it gave me such a buzz seeing so many bees around the lavender bushes."

"That's appropriate," said Delia, taking another slice of cheese and smiling. "I do minimal gardening, to be honest, but I love visiting gardens. I'd love to see the tulip fields in Holland. Do you still do your mum's garden, Sandra?"

"Do I just!" replied Sandra, taking another bread stick. "I love gardening, but it gets on top of me when there's so much to do. She always wants to play *Scribble* and I sit there, looking longingly out at the garden. I think she uses the game as a way of letting off steam, because sometimes I feel so much pent-up anger projected on to me, it's actually a bit scary."

"You need to tell her how you feel," said Gina, helping herself to another spoonful of coleslaw. "I know it's hard, but you need to look after *you*, or else you won't be able to look after *her*. I sound a bit preachy, but when I got so exhausted and down with pleurisy, it made me think about what I was doing to myself."

"You're right," said Sandra, taking another slice of cucumber. "I've been feeling very low about Mum lately and how she affects my life."

"How you let her affect your life," said Emily directly, taking another piece of quiche. "Oops, that slipped out a bit insensitively, I'm sorry. Feel free to throw that slice of cucumber you're still holding at me."

"I've got a whole cucumber in the kitchen you can whack her with, if you like," said Kay, grinning as she took another handful of crisps. "You know I'm only joking, you talk a lot of sense, Em."

"I do? Oh no, I must mend my ways. Sandra understands me, don't you – do you?" asked Emily a little uncertainly, as she took another plum tomato. "No! Go back in the bowl, I don't like you!"

"You're talking to a tomato," said Sandra, raising a friendly eyebrow. The other one was feeling a little out of sorts. "Of course I understand you," she continued warmly,

taking another puff pastry slice. "It's quite normal to talk to a tomato and you're right about what you said. Anyway, enough about me, how are you, Delia?"

"Oh, you know," replied Delia, taking another vol-au-vent. "No, you don't, of course, that's why you asked me. Well, I thought once Dad died our lives would be quieter, but now Florian's marriage has broken up and he's already living with someone else. The trouble is, she seems to have quite a past and yet she's apparently accusing Florian of coming to their relationship with baggage. Honestly, he's so kind of *ordinary* and he's trying to be so helpful and accommodating, I seriously don't know how she can make that baggage claim."

"The bag," said Emily, taking another sandwich. "It sounds as if she's really got her clutches on him."

"I know, she already knows all about his money situation and she keeps talking about how great it is to travel, so I'm seriously worried," said Delia, taking another canapé. "I think if he went travelling with her, he'd end up coming home in a body bag!"

"Heaven forbid," replied Kay, shuddering as she took another mushroom mini-wrap. "I'm not sure I like these, but they were on offer. Seriously, you've got to hand it to that son of yours, if he can shoulder his own responsibilities as well as hers. I think I should bring in dessert now."

"There's more?" asked Gina, taking another midi-sausage roll. "I shouldn't eat this, I really shouldn't. Is she fantastic looking, or something?"

"Well, she's kind of pretty, but in a sort of plastic way," replied Delia, taking another gherkin. "Do I like gherkins? To be honest, she's got a massive bum! Florian suggested they both join a gym, but she won't go anywhere near one."

"He needs to tell her to sling her hook," said Emily, taking another mini-spring roll. "Kay, I'm going to help you remove these dishes and plates to the kitchen, you must have bought literally bags of food!"

"What is it about holidays and viruses this year?" asked Sandra wearily, as she sat with Osborn and Lawrence in *The Caterpillar and Cabbage* on a wet but warm June evening, sipping a post-meal drink. They had arrived in York that afternoon and after settling into their small but comfortable hotel, had walked the mile or so into York centre. They were now leisurely sitting at a table by a window, looking out over the currently rather murky River Ouse.

"It seems to be more or less an ordinary common cold," said Osborn, who had succumbed to a sore throat and all the ensuing symptoms five days previously. "You shouldn't feel too bad."

"Well, I didn't go much on waking up this morning feeling all common in the cold department," said Sandra disgruntledly. "I hope you can manage to escape the viral vileness, Lawrence."

"I'll be fine, I don't do viruses," said Lawrence emphatically. "At least your desire to explore a new place overcame your desire to lie down on a handy bed to sleep this afternoon."

"The drugs helped, too," replied Sandra, "although I think they're wearing off now. The bed does seem comfortable, though, I'll need it with all the walking I think we'll be doing."

"I didn't know *The Caterpillar and Cabbage* was a chain," said Osborn randomly, idly perusing the menu again.

"It's not, it's a bar," replied Lawrence. "I know where lots of them are, but I didn't know there was one in York. Another one to tick on my list!"

One of Sandra's first impressions of York had been the large number of pubs and eating places that were dotted around frequently amid modern-day shops. Further into the heart of the city, the bizarrely but wonderfully named old streets became very narrow and it had been almost impossible to walk along without gazing up at the compelling incongruity of a modern shop within an ancient building.

At the end of one street, they had seen the unmistakeable towers of York Minster looming incredibly large – or possibly the streets were unusually small. Its presence was implacable, inviting further investigation and no doubt a lot of skyward photography.

"Here come the geese again," said Osborn, as raindrops started to plop steadily onto the river. "They're basically just swimming up and down."

"I guess it's what geese do," said Lawrence, placing his empty glass on the table. "By the way, I had a quick look at some leaflets while I was waiting for you in reception and there's quite a lot on offer, so we shouldn't be bored. They've got a quilt museum, Sandra."

"Stuff that!" retorted Sandra, wincing as her throat began to hurt again.

The following day, Sandra felt well enough to walk the walls, which was a whole lot better than climbing the walls. It was a dry and partly sunny morning, as they climbed the steps at Micklegate Bar and started their walk along York's city walls. Sandra had been fascinated to find out that they were the most complete example of medieval walls still standing in England, with the remains of earlier walls dating as far back as Roman times beneath the present-day stonework.

The wall was narrow in some places with a significant drop on one side that wasn't always guarded by railings, but they managed not to fall off onto the grassy depths below. At one point, they laughed delightedly to come across Bitchdaughter Tower on the wall itself. A shadow crossed Sandra's mind for an instant when she wondered if maybe she was becoming a bitch daughter by the things she sometimes thought and said about her mother, but she realised Lawrence was speaking to her.

"Sorry?" she asked, smiling into the sun. "Gosh, it's bright."

"I was only saying that I'd have expected there to be a fair bit of ice cream on sale," repeated Lawrence.

"Why?"

"Walls."

"Ha! Actually, I could murder a coffee."

"Now that's my kind of crime, if we can prise Osborn away from his camera."

They left the wall at Walmgate Bar with its impressive intact barbican and came across the delightfully named Whip-Ma-Whop-Ma-Gate, the shortest street in York. Sandra naturally whipped out her camera and managed not to whop it anywhere, but the street sign was unfortunately a bit worse for wear – as was the once again virally-suffering Sandra, so a hot mocha in the Jorvik Café was a timely lifesaver.

More wall walking ensued until lunchtime and beyond. The wall had conveniently ended at Bootham Bar, where they entered the city to buy a snack that they ate sitting on a low wall, among countless other people enjoying the heat of the now sunny day. There hadn't been a great deal of wall to walk after lunch, so after a refreshing cold drink in *Costalot Coffee*, they embarked on a 45-minute cruise in a red and white boat to enjoy some river relaxation.

That evening, they walked once again from their hotel into York centre, along streets that were rapidly becoming familiar. They ended up in an Italian restaurant and consumed pizza and wine to the accompaniment of typical Italian music, played on a piano by an enthusiastic young man. However, by that time of day all Sandra longed for was coolness, peace and quiet. The day had taken its toll, although entrance to the walls had been free.

After managing to sleep for only around three hours that night, Sandra was totally surprised to enjoy a trip to Whitby the next day. The destination had been chosen partly so they could sit in a car instead of further York pavement pounding, although when they arrived at Whitby, a certain amount of street walking was necessary to find a place for a fish and chip lunch.

It was Whitby Abbey that had immediately drawn Sandra's attention, as soon as it had come into view on top of Whitby's east cliff. To reach it, they had to walk along the harbour to the old town of Whitby, through a shop-lined street teeming with people and up 199 steps. However, the panoramic view at the top of the harbour entrance was worth any protesting calf muscles, as well as the abbey itself, still a small distance away above them. Also of notable interest at the top was the church of St Mary's, with its atmospheric gravestones.

Sandra had no idea why the gravestones fascinated her so much, with their bizarre appearance that had obviously come about from being pitted to extremes over

the years by the vagaries of the weather. Row upon row of them stood defiantly on the clifftop, some of them leaning over at crazy angles and some of them with hardly any writing, legible or otherwise, left on them at all.

"No wonder Bram Stoker found inspiration for *Dracula* here," she breathed to herself on the windswept clifftop, as she picked her way respectfully in amongst the gravestones, feeling shamelessly entranced. The atmosphere was wild, free, emotive and headily Gothic – which was odd, as Sandra had never been remotely aligned with anything Gothic and had never even felt the need to read *Dracula*.

On reluctantly leaving the churchyard to slumber on with its ancient secrets, she joined the others as they headed up to the beckoning abbey ruins. Here she was no less enthralled, stopping to gaze up in awe and take photos of what once must have been a beautiful, decorative, finely-detailed building. Even the stone it was built from looked quite handsome, although Sandra was fairly sure she'd never called building stone handsome before.

"I suppose they lived on a diet of mainly fish in the abbey," she wondered randomly, taking a breather on a wooden seat beside Osborn, who was fiddling with his camera.

"At least they had no problem cooking it," remarked Osborn, cleaning the lens.

"Why?" asked Sandra, gazing up at the monastic ruins.

"Friars."

On another day, they visited the Jorvik Viking Centre, where it felt quite unnerving to walk on a glass-floored gallery whilst looking beneath them at the remains of 1,000+ year old buildings. However, a handy archaeologist nattily dressed in Viking costume was standing by to answer any questions, although the only questions that formed in Sandra's mind weren't particularly archaeology-related.

One day Lawrence visited York's National Railway Museum, while Sandra and Osborn visited RHS Carlow Harr, a garden on their longstanding wish list. The much-anticipated exploration of the garden took several hours, with their cameras in constant use (fortunately by them). It was a much-enjoyed floral interlude, giving them a needed sense of peace.

By far the greatest amount of time, though, was spent exploring the streets of York itself, including its tantalising snickelways. These were intriguing narrow passageways between the main streets, often medieval and often imaginatively named, such as Black Horse Passage and Mad Alice Lane.

"Please don't make any dubious jokes about narrow back passages," Sandra had pleaded to Lawrence in a quiet moment, "especially in public hearing."

"OK, I'll hold it all in," Lawrence had replied nonchalantly. "Come on, crack a smile!"

On another occasion, they'd suddenly stumbled across a film crew shooting a scene involving a couple in period costume walking through a doorway. Osborn had almost become an unwanted extra as he'd walked closer in to take a photograph of the building in question, but when he'd realised what was happening, he had apologised politely to the bemused security man.

While investigating York Minster, they'd been fascinated by some modern-day stonemasons outside the cathedral working at their craft, but one of Sandra's favourite places had turned out to be the 10-acre Museum Gardens, containing some old Roman sarcophagi.

Other places of note had been Clifford's Castle, Dick Turpin's grave and York Castle Museum, housed in prison buildings erected on the site of York Castle in the 18th century, including the Female Prison and the Debtors' Prison, built with stone from the castle ruins. As the week had passed, so to Sandra's relief, had the virus in its severity.

On their final evening, they decided to eschew *The Caterpillar and Cabbage* for the *Pasta Pizza* Italian restaurant they'd often walked past.

"Eschew is a funny word," commented Sandra for no particular reason. "Eschew..."

"What did you have on that pizza of yours that you're having so much trouble chewing?" asked Lawrence, rubbing his ear. "It's a bit noisy in here."

"No, eschew means – never mind," replied Sandra, smiling. "Have you enjoyed York, Lawrence?"

"My pizza? Yes, it's filling, but very good. Ah, thank Gog and Magog, those raucous people are leaving."

"This tagliatelle is lovely, I'd have this again," said Osborn, sighing appreciatively.

"I'd settle for a fresh one if I were you," replied Lawrence, "although I think we made a good choice this evening. I love the way there are so many eating and drinking places to choose from, although I'm surprised we haven't seen a pub with the most obvious name."

"Go on," said Sandra, certain that a Lawrence-type witticism was about to issue forth.

"*The Yorkie Bar*, of course," said Lawrence, grinning. "Anybody fancy sharing a *Godfather Special* with me?"

"OK, I will," replied Osborn expansively, having consumed a generous share of the rosé wine they'd chosen. "Maybe you could have the *Godmother Special*, Sandra?"

"No way, not even if a fairy godmother waved her magic wand," replied Sandra, smiling. "No seriously, what do you think of York?"

"Well, I'll say this about it," replied Lawrence, draining his wine glass. "It minsters well to its visitors."

"Stop!" exclaimed Sandra, laughing despite herself. "Please just stop!"

CHAPTER 23

They had arranged to call in at Bristol for a night on their way back from York, as the following day was Madeleine's 30th birthday. Lawrence had decided to catch a train home, but Sandra and Osborn were delighted to help Madeleine celebrate, especially as Henri hadn't been able to take the day off work. He and Madeleine were going to take advantage of a special hotel deal in Wales on the evening of her birthday, but for the first part of the day, it was only the three of them. Madeleine had chosen to visit the Jane Austen Centre in Bath.

"This is so you, Mad," said Sandra to Madeleine, as they walked along in the heart of Bath towards where the permanent exhibition was situated in an original Georgian town house.

"Thank you both so much for coming here with me," said Madeleine happily, "because it's not Henri's scene at all, I don't think he'd ever understand."

"I understand," replied Osborn. "That is, I don't properly understand the Jane Austen thing, but I understand it means a lot to you."

An hour or so later, after they had sat in an upstairs room with about twelve others and listened to a most enlightening talk, followed by a tour of the house itself, they had wandered briefly around part of Bath, prior to returning home for lunch.

"I do miss you two," said Madeleine suddenly, as they were eating various sandwiches and some decadent crisps. "I know I don't ring or email as much as I used to, but we've been so busy with the house and work takes a lot of energy too. Normally the time goes so quickly that I don't realise I miss you – but doing what we did today, I realise it a lot."

"I'm happy we did something you really wanted to do," said Osborn, "because you need to do that, something for *you*. I always feel better seeing you and that's a fact."

"Me too," added Sandra. "I confess I miss us emailing and talking on the phone like we used to, about the everyday little bits and pieces of your life. I never want to interfere or push, though, because I want you to feel free to live your own life – and you are! I'm glad you and Henri are doing something special tonight. When do we have to take you to the train station?"

"In an hour or so, but I'm all ready, so we've got plenty of time for a piece of that lovely birthday cake you bought me."

"Good old *Marks and Spender*," said Osborn, licking his fingers. "I've bought a few birthday cakes from there in my time."

"I want to take a picture of you on your 30th birthday," said Sandra, looking appraisingly at the lovely, familiar face of her beloved daughter, with her kind green eyes and her long mid-brown hair. "Today is a special day, I have a strange feeling that today will be remembered as a very special day."

A week later, Madeleine and Henri arrived for a two-night stay that was going to be a family celebration, mainly for Madeleine's 30th, but also taking in Gulliver's 35th, Bryony's 34th and Henri's 32nd. As it happened, it also incorporated the engagement of Madeleine and Henri, because almost as soon as they'd arrived, Madeleine had excitedly broken the news that Henri had proposed on the evening of her actual 30th birthday.

The following day, the four of them went with Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper, Petroc, Lawrence and Caroline for their pre-booked lunch at *The Scary Skewer* at Derrydown, where Madeleine broke the news to the others.

"Engaged? To be married?" asked Caroline, while Madeleine nodded her head and smiled at her grandmother. "That's lovely news. Have you got a ring?"

As Madeleine became the centre of attention, extending her hand to those interested (including Juniper), Sandra again found herself revelling in the normality of the scene. 'When did I get to like normal so much?' she thought with a start. 'I used to rail against normality, because it felt so constricting. What is normality anyway? I can remember asking myself that question years ago. It's got to be relative, but seriously, are there any normal relatives?'

Sandra's strange sensation of being slightly detached continued throughout the meal, although she was able to chat and laugh when required. She had deliberately not sat next to her mother, as Caroline had a persistent habit of poking or hitting Sandra, or involving her in any way she could find.

Lawrence and Henri appeared to be deep in a conversation about EU fishing regulations and their impact on the menu at *The Scary Skewer*. Juniper in the meantime was engaging almost totally with Madeleine, while Petroc was commandeering Bryony's attention.

"Am I on your right side?" came Gulliver's voice suddenly from beside Sandra.

"Er – you're on my left side, which is my right side for hearing you, so if you were actually on my right side, you'd be on my wrong side," clarified Sandra to her son.

"OK," replied Gulliver, frowning slightly. "I keep forgetting which is your deaf side, but I thought I must be on it because you didn't hear what I said. I just need to get left from right right, right?"

"Right," replied Sandra, grinning. "What were you saying that I didn't hear, anyway?"

"I was telling you about a walk I did to Paviland Cave, where they discovered the remains of the Red Lady, who was actually a man from 24,000 BC."

"Really? That sounds like a good walk," said Osborn, leaning forward from the other side of Sandra (her actual right side that was her acoustic wrong side). "Maybe we can do it some time when we're with you?"

"Me too," said Sandra eagerly. "That is so old! Why the Red Lady, though?"

"Red ochre sprinkled over the body at the time of burial," replied Gulliver, leaning forward to include Osborn. "There's a nice walk across the causeway to Worm's Head that I did the other day, too, although the causeway is only safe for two and a half hours either side of low tide. In fact, you need to visit again and do some walks with me – us."

"We do," agreed Sandra readily. "We seem to have been a bit busy this year somehow, but we need to visit you again."

"You've had a lot of holidays this year," came Caroline's voice from the other side of Osborn. "When is it you go to Jersey?"

"September," replied Osborn, turning to Caroline. "I had to sort out a mess with that too, because they're about to stop flying from Plymouth Airport, so we had to change our flights to Exeter instead. Then they got that wrong and had Madeleine and Henri leaving from Exeter too, although they're naturally flying from Bristol."

"Oh well, at least you've got plenty of time to sort everything out now you're free at this stage of your lives," said Caroline, sniffing.

"Free?" asked Sandra incredulously, leaning forward in front of Osborn. "Free! We're not free, we have plenty of responsibilities."

"Like what?" persisted Caroline. "Your children have left home."

"I'm not going to say it," muttered Sandra, retreating back into her chair. "This isn't the time or the place, this is a family celebration."

"A toast to Madeleine and Henri!" said Lawrence, as if on cue. "May you be fruitful and multiply, with never any long division."

"Grandma Sandra, can we go on the beach soon?" asked Juniper's voice suddenly from beside Sandra, after the toasting had finished.

"Hello Juniperus Squamata, I didn't see you there, my darling," said Sandra, sitting Juniper on her lap. "You've been having a lovely time with Auntie Maddy, haven't you?"

"Auntie Maddy's gone for a wee," said Juniper clearly. "Grandma Sandra, can you take me for a wee?"

The rest of the weekend had flown by. After their celebratory lunch, they'd all walked the short way down to the beach, where the wind was inciting the dark grey sea into white-edged waves that creamed capriciously onto the wet sand. Juniper hadn't minded at all, dragging Auntie Maddy along to the water's edge to dodge the incoming waves, while laughing with delight.

Lawrence and Caroline had stood back somewhat gloomily by the sea wall, while the others stood a little way back and watched, constantly buffeted by the wind while waiting for Juniper to have her fill. In the end, Madeleine had picked her up bodily and run away with her laughingly and a little wetly from the sea's edge.

The morning after, before Madeleine and Henri left for home, Osborn had driven them to West Bogg for a stroll around the popular fishing village that Madeleine fondly remembered visiting as a child. It was much the same, with its vibrant narrow streets, sandy beach and the heady smell of fish as they strolled along by the fish market.

As usual, it had been a wrench to say *au revoir*, but generally speaking that was better than a claw hammer or a nail gun.

The summer continued with a will of its own. Sandra and Osborn went on a couple of garden visits to save their souls, as well as some walks amid nature for the same reason. There was plenty of nature in the nearby nature reserve, where they took photos, kept an eye on the sloe and blackberry situation and complained to each other about the escalating number of dogs allowed to run, bark, growl, snarl and shit without the seeming concern of their owners.

Sandra also persevered with her struggle to tame Caroline's garden and even attempted to start cutting down two very large conifers that were growing beyond reasonable pruning and had to go, but she soon realised it was hopeless.

"I'm sorry, it's a job for a professional tree feller," she said to Caroline, as she came in from the garden in a sweating mess.

"I don't know any tree fellows," replied Caroline fretfully. "Couldn't Osborn do it?"

"A tree *feller*," emphasised Sandra, feeling even more heated than before. "You need a tree feller with the appropriate equipment and also the means to clear everything away. I'm sure there must be some local fellows who could do it."

"Local fellers?" asked Caroline doubtfully. "Oh well, if you say so, you're the boss. Do you think Osborn could come and look at my bathroom door again, though? I know he did something to it so it would close properly after the new carpet was fitted, but it's scuffing on one place a bit."

"I'll ask him," said Sandra, sighing, knowing that Osborn would react badly to the request. "I'll clean myself up now, it's too hot to work out there anyway. Is that a pile of papers for shredding over there?"

"Yes, I'm afraid to use the shredder. You know I'm not very practical, I'm more of a cerebral person."

"Whatever," muttered Sandra under her breath, as she went to the bathroom to change her clothes.

Half an hour later, she was part-way through the large pile of paper that had originally come from Caroline's loft when Sandra and Osborn had cleared it out. Sandra had left it all for Caroline to look through, but as she steadily shredded papers that were decades old, some of it was catching her eye. She drew in a sharp breath as she recognised the handwriting of the man with whom Caroline had had an affair, when Sandra had still been in her teens.

The affair had eventually been discovered by the man's wife, not long after Sandra had married Osborn. Caroline had subsequently left home for more than three years, to live with her sister and her family in Durham. Her sister's family had consisted of her husband and their daughter, who happened to be Sindy Grossbody, with whom Osborn had had an affair in 1993-4, when Sandra had been studying for her BSC (Honours) Psychology degree at the University of Plymouth.

'Great steaming balls of old shit,' thought Sandra coarsely, as a jarring array of ancient memories assaulted her mind. 'Why was she holding onto all this when Dad was still alive? When they'd got back together to make a fresh start? Why leave it here for me to shred? I know I asked, but she would never have shredded it herself anyway. Did she even look through all this stuff? Why has all this come my way? I really don't want to be seeing this. God, the poor man was besotted, totally besotted. Oh, sod it all to high heaven, Mother, *why?*'

An hour and a half later, Sandra was playing *Scribble* with Caroline, still reeling from what she'd seen. She had quite recently taken to playing *Scribble* so that Caroline had more chance of winning, sometimes discreetly putting back good tiles into the bag in the hope that Caroline would pick them out and stop complaining about her bad luck. However, Caroline would often then complain that the good tiles had come too late in the game, or they were impossible to use and were a liability.

"You little devil, you've gone where I was going to go," said Caroline heatedly. "Oh well, I suppose you have to win sometimes. Didn't Osborn want to play *Scribble* today? I don't mind, to be honest, I prefer it when it's just us two. He seems to be very reactive and abrasive with me sometimes."

"Really?" asked Sandra, still feeling unbalanced by the incongruity of the 86-year-old truculent mother of now, to the woman she'd just read about in her mother's old affair letters. "You two definitely seem to rub each other up the wrong way, as the saying goes."

"I think he's jealous of me," continued Caroline, while Sandra wished she could either scream or laugh aloud. "He always has been, really, right back to the early days."

"It's your go," said Sandra, spluttering slightly. 'Projection,' she was thinking with a sense of outraged clarity. 'Pure sodding projection.'

In mid-August, Leona visited Sandra and Osborn with another woman who had a charity proposal that Leona felt was worth investigating. Sandra suspected that Leona was not-so-subtly attempting to involve her, as she had taken trouble to email Sandra with many mentions of how this other woman was a lovely person and how she felt Sandra would get on well with her. The only trouble was that Sandra's first impression had been undeniably negative and as the three others talked, Sandra had felt herself spiralling downwards into a shadowy place of aching isolation.

"What's wrong?" asked Osborn, almost as soon as Leona and her friend had left.

"I just feel so spectacularly awful about me," replied Sandra, knowing tears weren't far away. "Where do I fit in? What is my life about, because right now I feel like an alien in an unfamiliar world. I know you need something worthwhile to do in your life like this proposed charity. You're so capable and you have such a lot to give, which is brilliant – but it's not me. All my life, as much as I've tried to be positive and give it my best, I can't do it. I did Rainbow Healers with you and I learned a lot, but I never felt comfortable or as if I really belonged."

"I don't know what to say," replied Osborn slowly. "I thought you liked Leona, because she obviously likes you and wants you to be involved."

"I *do* like her and I want to do something worthwhile with you, but if I went along with all this, I'd be doing what I've always done in my life, which is try to be who other

people want me to be, or think I should be. As worthwhile as it is, this charity is somebody else's dream. It's not mine."

"You know I've agreed to go along with them to that venue and I've more or less said I'll be involved..."

"Yes, I know and I'm torn, because a part of me knows you need to be you and do what draws you and I'm all for that, but the other part of me is afraid you'll give it too much of your energy, like you've consistently done with other people in the past."

"You need to trust me, Sandra."

"I know I do, but right now I'm feeling so tired and unsure about my life."

"I'm glad you made it here," said Sandra to Belinda two days later, as she sat with her cousin in *The Wonky Spoon Café* in Plymouth. "It's been a while since we could have a good old heart to heart. I know we email, but it's not the same as face to face."

"You're right. Besides, there are quite a few things I wouldn't like to write down anyway, just in case Ian sees them! He's been so moody lately, so closed off and irritable," said Belinda, sipping her cappuccino. "Oh, I do like these, I find them comforting."

"I don't mind a mid-morning cappuccino myself," said Sandra, wiping some froth from her lip. "Or even a late morning second one with you. Is Ian OK, do you think?"

"He's OK every Saturday evening to go out ballroom dancing and leave me on my own," replied Belinda bitterly. "I used to love dancing too, but it's all I can do to keep upright some days with this orthostatic tremor. We don't really have much in common anymore, we just go food shopping together and he takes me to appointments. We used to go out for a short drive and have an ice cream somewhere with a good view if the weather was fine, but he says he finds driving too stressful these days. Mind you, I think he's right, I'm always putting my foot down to brake in the passenger seat, it's ridiculous. Oh dear, listen to me, I'm moaning my head off. He probably goes out dancing to get away from me!"

"Poor Belinda," replied Sandra sympathetically. "I'm sorry it's difficult for you, it must be so hard after you've led an active kind of life. You still see your friends, though, don't you?"

"Yes, I'm thankful for my friends, although most of them have their own health problems – and husband problems – and family problems." Belinda gave a small laugh.

"Talking of family problems, how's that sister of yours?" asked Sandra, raising her eyebrows. "I was quite surprised the other day when Mum said Hetty had rung her for a chat."

"She rings Auntie Lily quite regularly, I think. Did she mention me?"

"Mum didn't say she did. She said Hetty was talking mostly about her own health and how she's fallen out with her son's latest girlfriend. She's still not talking to you, I take it?"

"No, you'd be one of the first to know if she did! Anyway, enough about me and my moans. How's your mum?"

"Much the same. I still veer between feeling sorry for her because she's old, lonely and frightened, but then she can be so sharp and caustic with me that I feel as if I can't stand it any longer. I have to, of course, because I'm her only daughter and the world expects me to look after her." Sandra stopped and looked at Belinda candidly. "I've been feeling quite down, wondering why I'm me if all my life's about is leaping around madly to other people's tunes."

"At least you can leap! No, I know what you mean. We should have stuck more to our own tunes. I used to love a bit of Buddy Holly or Chuck Berry," reminisced Belinda dreamily.

"Ah, a little bit before my time," said Sandra diplomatically. "I loved so many tunes, but now I don't even know what my tune would be. There have been too many other tunes drowning out my tune for too many years." She sighed sadly. "I seem to have lost my musical mojo. Oh well – can you stay for a bit of lunch? I'm really fancying a tuna and cucumber sandwich."

It was Caroline's 86th birthday, to which Lawrence had been invited as usual. While Caroline was having her hair done in Five Street, Sandra and Osborn had walked there to meet Lawrence and were sitting with him in a coffee shop, listening to Lawrence complaining long and loudly about all sorts.

"They don't do nearly as many Berties as they used to and when you do get one, they're not the proper liquorice they used to be. The bobbly ones are smaller too, while the coconut ones are sickly sweet now, so heaven knows what ingredients they've changed. They've definitely stopped putting in as many sandwich ones in a packet and those are my favourite." Lawrence glowered heavily, as his rogue eyebrow hairs were on the rampage again.

"Er – maybe you need to try something else?" asked Osborn tentatively.

However, after Lawrence had grumbled, protested and remonstrated against almost every benign subject that Sandra and Osborn had tried to bring into the conversation, they met Caroline from her hair appointment and proceeded to *The Jolly Sailor's Whore*, where Caroline said she could only manage soup of the day.

For a change, Sandra, Osborn and Lawrence decided to try swordfish steak on a hot volcanic rock. Despite the name of the dish, though, they remained sitting on their seats, where Sandra and Osborn were forced to listen to ongoing complaints from both Caroline and Lawrence about how they were in a draught.

"You chose this seat, Mum," commented Osborn finally, in desperation. "How's your soup?"

"Oh, it's fine," replied Caroline airily, as someone opened the door to come in. "Listen to that wind."

"It's a bit breezy, that's all," said Sandra with growing exasperation. "I thought you didn't like mushroom soup?"

"Well, it's not my favourite." Caroline crumbled her bread roll a bit more. "How's the fish?"

"Well, they've got a nerve calling it a steak," replied Lawrence hotly, glaring at the people who had come in through the door. "It's a cutlet, not a steak! We could have them under the trade description act. It's alright as far as it goes, I suppose, but they really shouldn't call it a steak."

"What did you make of that fiasco today?" Sandra asked Osborn, as they finally settled alone in their own sitting room with a mug of tea and the blessed cessation of moaning.

"It was hard going to say the least," replied Osborn, shrugging. "I don't know what's got into Lawrence lately, he seems really down. Apart from all that stuff he was going on about today, he seems obsessed with the weather. I can't believe he said he wants sunny days that last from morning until evening and not the sad excuses for partly sunny days that we have now if we're lucky. I'm actually beginning to be worried about him."

"It's been building up for a while, I think," considered Sandra, "like most things do. My mother doesn't eat like she used to, I'm beginning to worry about her diet now."

"We've got to stop worrying about other people all the time," said Osborn, sipping his tea. "I'm worried about you sometimes, the way it all gets to you."

"I worry about you too," said Sandra quietly. "I worry that the way I am lately affects you, but I don't really know what's happening to me – and to our life. So much seems to happen in such quick succession that I feel I don't have time to process it. I'm sure we used to have more time to be ourselves when we were younger – which is in direct opposition to what people say about retired people, that they more or less please themselves. That is such utter, monstrous crap, it leaves me seething."

"You do often seem to be simmeringly angry these days," replied Osborn, regarding Sandra. "At first I think you must be angry with me, but then I realise it's something other than a stupid thing I'm doing that you don't like, or a thoughtless thing I've said."

"I think I'm angry with life," said Sandra, sighing. "I feel frighteningly angry with my mother sometimes, but deep down, I think I'm angry with myself for having allowed my life to become the way it is right now."

"Maybe Jersey with Madeleine and Henri will help," said Osborn encouragingly. "I know how important Madeleine and Gulliver are to your wellbeing. Things feel OK with Gulliver now, don't they, after that tricky time last year?"

"Yes, thank heavens. I hated being at odds with him so much, it always affects me very deep down. Our original foursome is where it's at for me, although I feel happy they're both with someone they love and who loves them. It's as if I need them to be OK for me to be OK. That sounds a bit heavy and I'd never want to put that one on them, because they need to be free to be themselves. I think that's where you and I went wrong with our parents. I just want to be free of my mother now and that feels such a terrible thing to say."

"It's a human thing to say," replied Osborn comfortingly, putting his hand on Sandra's thigh. "Come on, let's forget about our troubles for now, I'm knackered. Do you fancy watching a bit of *Bangs*?"

"Yes, let's get lost in DVD boxed-set world," said Sandra, finishing her tea. "It's not a bad place when you're feeling desperate to forget, but I can't wait to escape to Jersey in the real world."

CHAPTER 24

Hurricane Katia was knocking at the door in the UK when they were due to leave. However, although the wind was definitely up, as Sandra still hated flying, it didn't really affect them. The 35-minute flight was smoother than anticipated, as was their meeting with Madeleine and Henri, who appeared as if by magic at Jersey Airport's Luggage Reclaim area a mere five minutes or so after they did.

For the next week, they stayed comfortably enough at a self-catering apartment in St Helier, although there was only one bathroom and no freezer. They had hired a car for the week and there were shops and supermarkets within easy distance, but Sandra was aware that Madeleine seemed a little tense (although camping would never have been an option).

"Are you OK, Mad?" she asked one morning when she and Madeleine happened to be alone in the kitchen area.

"I'm fine," replied Madeleine, which meant that she wasn't. "I'm winding down from work, that's all," she explained, glancing quickly at Sandra. "Also, Henri's finding it a bit difficult with the self-catering, because to him a holiday means staying in a hotel with nothing to worry about."

"Right," replied Sandra, a little taken aback. "I'm sorry. I hope you can relax and enjoy it, because that's what we came here for."

"I know," said Madeleine, looking fully at Sandra. "I don't mind self-catering, I just feel a bit caught in the middle. It'll be fine, though, I've told him we don't have to spend every day together, we can do our own thing some days."

"Yes, of course," replied Sandra quietly, as her hopes of precious togetherness and getting to know Henri better inexorably began to fade.

The following day, they visited Elizabeth Castle across the causeway leading from the sea front, as the tide was safely out. However, as they paid their entrance fee, they were informed that due to high winds, closing time had been brought forward and the last safe ride back in an amphibious ferry over the causeway (that would by then be underwater) would be in one and a half hour's time. Sandra's slight sinking feeling of the previous day deepened a little, although they made the best of their somewhat swift and slightly unsatisfying visit.

The next day was more successful, with a visit to the Jersey War Tunnels. Madeleine was clearly fascinated, although she walked around with Henri all the time. Originally known as the German Underground Hospital, it was renowned for its chilling atmosphere and history. Shivers indeed ran up and down Sandra's spine as they walked inside the partially completed underground complex, which had been intended as a vast network of tunnels that would have allowed German personnel to withstand invasion of wartime German-held Jersey by British and Allied forces.

As well as paid labourers and skilled workers, forced labourers from Organisation Todt had been shipped in to dig out the tunnels – many of them Polish, French, Russian or Republican Spaniards. While the voluntary workers had experienced a better time of it, conditions for the others had been appalling, with malnutrition, death by exhaustion and disease being common. The Russian and Ukrainian prisoners of war were treated worst of all, due to the Nazi ideology of race hierarchy. While the so-called master race of Aryan Germans usually treated other European races with contempt, they referred to the Slav races as '*untermenschen*' – subhuman.

"This is jolly," Sandra heard Henri say to Madeleine, as they walked in front of Sandra and Osborn.

"It's history, though," replied Madeleine, which confirmed Sandra's belief that Madeleine was actually extremely interested in the whole visit.

A drive around the north coast of the island after the chill of the War Tunnels was enjoyable and particularly interesting to see the French names of roads and houses. They also stopped twice to photograph the fortress-type watchtowers known as Martello towers, which stood looking out with granite solidity towards a restless sea. However, the wind proved too uncomfortable to stay out for long, so they returned to the apartment to relax for the rest of the day.

On their third full day, Madeleine suggested they split up, although fortunately only in the holiday sightseeing sense. While Madeleine and Henri were going to explore St Helier on foot, Sandra and Osborn took themselves off to La Mare Wine Estate. The drive along the deliciously French named leafy lanes interspersed with small roads was rendered even more enjoyable by the fact that the speed limit on Jersey was only 40 miles per hour.

"I really like driving on Jersey," said Osborn appreciatively, "it reminds me of what driving used to be like in England decades ago, when drivers were generally polite and respectful towards each other. What's that tractor driver waving his hand at me like that for, do you think?"

The weather was dry and bright as they turned into the large car park at La Mare, where there were already a few visitors. Sandra noticed that wine tasting tours were advertised, but as it was before 10:00 and she was tired from a slightly compromised night's sleep, she didn't especially feel like going on a tour and having to be sociable to strangers while tasting alcohol. She was therefore uncertain how they managed to book themselves on the first wine tasting tour of the day, although it possibly had something to do with the bright, enthusiastic lady at the entrance desk.

As they proceeded to where the tour would be starting, she sincerely hoped they wouldn't be the only people for the mid-morning wine tasting. Her hopes were dashed, however, when a pleasant, well-spoken guide of indeterminate years turned up and they discovered it was just them and two more ladies of about their own age for the tour.

Sandra decided to adopt her fall-back social technique of smiling a lot as the guide started his spiel, pretending to be comfortable with the strange way that Tuesday morning appeared to be turning out.

As it happened, it turned out very well indeed and she enjoyed it a lot, particularly as the tour progressed. After the introduction, they were shown indoors to a seating area and given a wine glass each. So far so good. There was then a short video, probably about wine, although Sandra wasn't concentrating well for wondering how the wine tasting would go.

'Sodding grapes of wrath, do I have to swirl?' she wondered agitatedly, trying to remember the procedure from *Oz and James's Big Soak Wine Adventure*. Or should I sniff? Sip? Spit? Oh no! The guide's coming to me first with that bottle of white!

She instinctively held out her glass, into which the guide poured a few mouthfuls of the liquid pale gold. Osborn asked for a small sample and then swirled, so Sandra followed suit, feeling decidedly decadent to be sipping wine so early in the day. Another short video followed and the same procedure took place with a bottle of rosé. Sandra had noticed that the video had mentioned sniffing, so she duly sniffed before sipping. Happily, no spitting had been involved. A further short video ensued, followed by the guide dispensing the red sample.

'Well, squash my grapes and call me juicy, this little number has a heady blackcurrant undertone – or do I mean undercurrent – ha ha! Oh no, I'm laughing at my own jokes, but I guess there are worse things. Oh hello, where are we off now?'

They were asked to leave their used glasses on a tray as they left the seating area and were led towards a gleaming red still that was used in the process of making apple brandy. It looked very impressive as far as Sandra's knowledge of machines went and had been literally unearthed from Calvados in 1994. The guide explained how it worked and then passed around some 90% apple brandy to sniff. It was heady and strong, to say the least.

"I say, could I take a photo of that sexy red machine?" asked Osborn, grinning, as the guide obligingly switched on some lights for him.

"Only a man would want a photo of that," joked one of the other women to Sandra, as they watched Osborn leaning in and part-bending in order to find his angle.

"Yes," replied Sandra, tittering slightly, "but I suppose still photography is a moving art form for some people."

After that, they were shown a machine that froze the wine fermenting in bottles just enough to remove easily the sediment collecting in the neck of the bottle (stored at a downward angle for that purpose) and also a machine that inserted champagne-type corks. As they wandered through a room containing quite a few tall metal vats, Sandra was pleased that she was almost understanding what the guide was explaining, before he showed them a large machine that was being fed apples and somehow producing pulp and juice and wasps and things...

At some point during the tour, which seemed to have become slightly hazy in her mind, they were each given a small chocolate 'cup' containing some apple brandy cream. If Sandra had liked creamy things, she probably would have loved it, but she didn't like to refuse and downed it anyway. She also took a sample of chocolate that was the final offering, after they'd peered through a window to see a chocolatier at work. It happened to be chilli chocolate and as the tour came to an end, she became prone to a sudden bout of coughing.

"Well, that was something else," she said to Osborn later, as they sat in the tasteful Vineyard Restaurant sipping a cappuccino each. "I wonder what I wrote in the Visitor Book? I can't quite remember. I know it was complimentary, but I hope I didn't overdo it."

"I'm sure it was fine," replied Osborn, sighing happily. "This is more like it, this is what I imagined retirement would be."

"Me too," said Sandra, not really sure if that was true. "I wish Madeleine and Henri had come with us today," she continued wistfully. "I'm so sure they would have enjoyed it."

"I guess they need their own space," Osborn said, finishing his cappuccino. "Shall we walk around those green and pleasant vineyards out there?"

"Yes," agreed Sandra, looking out at the regimented fruity view. "I can see lots of red apples, though."

After eating a sandwich lunch in the car park, their afternoon visit was to La Hougue Bie, a rather unusual site described as a museum. The Sat Nav directed them down lots of green leafy lanes with so many right and left turns that Sandra wondered if it was developing directional dementia. However, they arrived safely at La Hougue Bie and were soon outside the entrance of the Neolithic ritual passage grave that had been in use around 3,500 BC, when there had been an estimated 3,000 people on Jersey.

It was covered by a 12-metre earth mound on which currently sat a chapel and was apparently one of the best-preserved passage graves in Western Europe – a fact which excited Sandra greatly. It was possible to enter the passage grave only by crouching over rather a lot and it was fairly dark inside. They had to walk along in the dim, damp passage for almost 10 metres, still in a crouching position, until it opened out into a main chamber that then opened into three smaller chambers, resulting in a cruciform shape.

They stayed inside for about 15 minutes, allowing their eyes to adjust to the darkness and taking photos, before emerging once again into the bright daylight, where

it was still windy. After investigating the chapel, they descended to ground level again, where an old German command bunker housed an exhibition. Sandra was moved to tears with parts of the exhibition that really hit home with the utter waste of human life resulting from wars.

"This is harrowing," she commented to Osborn at one point, "but I think people *need* to remember past human atrocities and honour the suffering and death of those involved by memorials like these. God, I really do wonder what life is all about sometimes."

She had the impression that Madeleine also wondered what life was all about sometimes, because when they drove back to the apartment, Madeleine suggested visiting a Military Museum at St Ouen, located right next to the beach in a former German bunker that had once formed part of Hitler's Atlantic Wall defences.

The small museum was absolutely packed with British and German artefacts, including uniforms, equipment, newspaper articles and paperwork, as well as memorabilia of purely human interest, such as a board game closely resembling *Monopoly* that was called simply *Occupation* – 'collect double cheese ration' and the like. There were also lots of photographs of German and Channel Island people. It was fascinating and a real insight into what life must have been like during those uncertain, turbulent times.

On the fourth day, they all went to the Durrell Wildlife Preservation Trust, formerly known as Jersey Zoo. It was a sunny but windy morning as they arrived at Les Augrès Manor with its iconic stone dodos on the gateposts. Although Madeleine strolled around with Henri, they all spent quite a while together in the amphibian and reptile house. Madeleine was interested to see a Komodo dragon disinterestedly peering out of a hollow branch.

Outside again, Sandra was intrigued with the Galapagos tortoises that seemed able to move surprisingly quickly, whereas they all enjoyed watching the bizarrely posing meerkats. Then, after walking to the picnic area to eat lunch, they continued their leisurely stroll and spent some time looking at the orang-utans, who did indeed look astonishingly orange. Since the gorillas were due to be fed, they stood and watched the spectacle along with a number of other people, while listening to an informative talk by a keeper.

"Who wouldn't appreciate a young French male?" asked the keeper humorously, referring to a male gorilla that had recently arrived from France and with whom one of the Jersey female gorillas was apparently spending her time trying to be alluring. Sandra refrained from looking at Henri, so as not to embarrass him, but Henri was coolly maintaining Gallic nonchalance.

As well as some Chilean flamingos, spooky fruit bats, shy tamarins, beguiling gentle lemurs and striking red-ruffed and ring-tailed lemurs to name a few, there was a whole section devoted to Madagascar, which to her shame, Sandra hadn't realised was in such a dire state.

By mid-afternoon, though, they were all rather tired, so drove back to the apartment for a rest and a drink. Madeleine and Henri then decided to walk into St Helier to buy cheese, while Sandra and Osborn walked to Howard Davis Park, where the Allied War Cemetery with its rows of war graves of unknown bodies washed ashore and only "Known to God" was very emotive.

The fifth day was another separate day, when Madeleine and Henri had use of the car. As it was a beautiful, dry and sunny morning, Sandra and Osborn decided to walk around the long sweep of St Aubin's Bay, from St Helier to the harbour village of St Aubin. As they started their three-mile trek, the tide was mostly in and they had a good view of one of Elizabeth Castle's amphibious ferries ploughing through the water on to the beach. The sea was very blue and the beach mostly sandy down below them.

They soon found themselves on a promenade that allowed easy progress, walking past raised beds planted with agapanthus, palms, cannas, pampas grass and tamarisk that must have looked very colourful and picturesque in high summer. There was also a cycle path alongside for most of the way and very conveniently, a number of toilets and cafés at suitable intervals.

As the morning progressed, they gradually walked their way around the wide curve of the bay, noticing that the tide had receded quickly and lots of rocks were showing. St Aubin's Fort came into view silhouetted against the shimmering water, standing on its own little island opposite Elizabeth Castle across the sea on the St Helier side of the bay.

After one and a half hours, they actually arrived at St Aubin, apparently preferred by some to St Helier for being smaller and prettier, with lots of quay and seaside walks. Many al fresco eating places were doing a good lunchtime trade with tempting seafood dishes on offer. However, since the plan was to eat out that evening, they made do with a cappuccino and a muffin, before walking around the harbour, with the sun still shining in a clear blue sky.

Instead of taking a little white tourist train (Le Petit Train) back to St Helier, they descended on to the beach below and walked barefoot across the sand. It felt unusually good and far more carefree than on the path, although they did have to jump across some storm water outlets as they traversed the golden grains, with St Aubin's Fort gradually becoming smaller and Elizabeth Castle becoming larger.

The tide had receded an exceedingly long way as Sandra picked up a few shells, began to tread gingerly over some very gritty sand and realised her neck felt a little too warm for comfort. The sun had been shining across the south-facing bay all day and she had foolishly left the sun screen behind, since it was mid-September. The slight late-season sunburn wasn't terrible, but she did feel too hot and it seemed a good move to buy a real Jersey ice cream to cool down – not that they'd ever noticed any fake Jersey ice cream advertised.

Arriving back at St Helier, they walked into the centre, where Sandra also wanted to look for small souvenirs for people, before persuading her weary legs back to the apartment. They had been out for five and a half hours and had walked between 7 to 8 miles. Madeleine and Henri had coincidentally gone to St Aubin too, but they had visited its Steam Museum.

Their last full Jersey day dawned with more cloud than the day before, but it was quite bright and soon cleared away into definite blueness. Sandra made sure she applied sun screen before they all left for a foray into Gorey – or Mont Orgueil Castle, to be precise. It was very warm as Osborn parked the car close to the sea front and they walked along towards the distant castle overlooking the harbour.

Once inside the castle, they listened for a while to a friendly and knowledgeable man dressed in strange historic garb, who was giving a historic spiel to a small audience about historic Jersey happenings. They then started their exploration proper. There were many steps to ascend, which every now and again presented wonderful views of the harbour way down below.

Sandra, not known for her sense of direction, generally became quite lost going up and down further steps and in and out of so many different areas and rooms. There was such a lot on offer that it was impossible to see it all, but although they kept losing one another, they always managed to reconvene at certain points.

"Well, this is a jolly fine fellow," commented Osborn, as they all turned up at the same time in front of a large metal sculpture of an imposing figure in full armour on horseback.

"The Perfect Knight," said Sandra, reading from the information plaque, "depicting Sir Hugh Calverly, considered an ideal knight."

"I'm not familiar with perfect knights," mused Osborn, "not these days, anyway."

"I wouldn't know what's considered an ideal knight either," mused Sandra, noticing Henri was glancing at them strangely.

"Listen to you two," said Madeleine, shaking her head, but smiling. "I don't stand a chance, do I?"

However, they all agreed it was a fascinating visit, never knowing what they would come across next – a carved wooden figure, a wheel of urine, prayer nuts, colourful paintings of Sir Walter Raleigh, the Wheel of Fortune (though not in the game show sense) and so many innovative sculptures. Henri was fascinated that he was even able to glimpse France.

After lunch in a nearby eating place, they whiled away the afternoon with two games of crazy golf, in which Osborn reduced them all, including himself, to helpless laughter over his antics. On one occasion, he was standing by a low wall, moved one foot to avoid Henri's incoming ball and then quickly moved the other foot as the ball veered, without actually putting his other foot down. This resulted in him sitting down abruptly on top of the wall's shrubbery. For some reason, they were all above par for most of the 36 holes they played.

That evening, they set out on the 20-minute or so walk through St Helier centre to the sea front for an evening meal at a previously chosen restaurant, where they were shown to a table for four by the window.

"This plaice is lovely," said Osborn, starting on his fish.

"Yes, it's quite full, but it's not too noisy or hot," replied Sandra, looking around.

"Er – the fish?" said Osborn, smiling.

"Ah yes, I'm glad I chose the same as you," replied Sandra, feeling silly. "The prawn and lemon sauce makes it, I think."

"This is good, too" said Madeleine, as she proceeded appreciatively with her monkfish.

"How's your tagliatelle, Henri?" asked Osborn, spearing a getaway prawn.

"Yeh yeh," replied Henri in his casual French way. "It's fine."

"It's all well cooked and beautifully presented," continued Osborn happily. "My portion's the right size, too."

"Absolutely, I can't stand a massive portion," agreed Sandra, nodding. "Why are you laughing at us, Mad?"

"Nothing!" replied Madeleine, spluttering delicately. "It's just the things you say!"

"I think it's the wine also," said Henri, grinning at Madeleine, "she cannot 'old 'er grape juice!"

They all ordered ice cream for dessert, having discovered that Jersey ice cream was scrumptious, then wandered contentedly back to the apartment for some relaxing television before bedtime.

However, to Sandra's dismay she spent a restless, sleepless night, feeling wretchedly disconsolate that the following day they would fly home and she would instantly lose the comforting proximity of Madeleine in her life. She felt selfishly needy and knew she had to let Madeleine go to live her life with Henri. At the base of it all, though, she simply missed Madeleine – missed the heart and bones of her, as well as all the other parts in between.

The following morning, she felt even worse to see that it was far windier than previous days and probably just as bad as the day they'd flown in to Jersey. As ever, she tried to be rational about it and threw herself into spending the morning hours before their flight looking for souvenir fridge magnets. She eventually found a good selection in a small shop, which the shopkeeper obligingly packed in individual small paper bags to avoid scratching.

This turned out to be more trouble than it was worth, as after they'd returned the rental car, checked in at the airport, passed over their bags to be x-rayed and walked through the metal detector scanner, a weary sigh escaped Sandra as she saw her bag had been detained for further investigation. She stood there feeling tired, anxious and not at all in the mood for any trouble, when a necessarily officious woman placed her bag on the table in front of her.

"Is this your bag, Madam?"

"Yes."

"Have you kept the bag with you all the time at the airport?"

"Yes."

"Has anyone approached you and asked you if you would carry something in your bag for them?"

"Yes – I mean no!"

"Please open the bag, Madam, and start taking out the contents."

Sandra did as she was asked, aware that Osborn, Madeleine and Henri must be waiting somewhere nearby for her and possibly witnessing the whole disconcerting

scene. When she took out her camera, the airport official asked her to switch it on. This was an act that caused Sandra suddenly to feel like a very suspicious character, even though she knew she'd done absolutely nothing wrong. The official then decided it was safe enough to start taking out the contents herself.

Sandra felt really embarrassed when the compartment containing her comb, lipstick, paracetamol and personal paraphernalia was investigated. Next the novel Madeleine had lent her was extricated and its pages checked, before her notebook with its holiday notes had the same treatment. The official glanced at the crazy golf score cards, spare postcards, stamps and other paper memorabilia that were being kept flat within its pages – at which rather than being jumpy about what might be found, Sandra became jumpy that something might be bent. Finally, the official gingerly took out the fridge magnets that had been purchased only a few hours previously.

"What are these?" she asked suspiciously, as if they might have been packets containing illicit drugs or detonators.

"Fridge magnets," replied Sandra with great delight, as the ridiculousness of the whole scenario finally overcame her. The official took them away to put through the x-ray machine, before returning to the table with them and repacking Sandra's bag for her. Sandra was unaware at that point if the official actually apologised, as she was beginning to pass beyond conscious thought. She turned around to leave the wretched place (with her bag) to see Osborn, Madeleine and Henri waiting very patiently and bemusedly.

"I not only hate flying, I now officially hate airports," she muttered to herself and whoever might be listening, as they all walked to the departure lounge. When the time came to say *au revoir* to Madeleine and Henri, Sandra had to mentally remind herself to let go of Madeleine, so as not to cause her alarm.

CHAPTER 25

It was September 2011 and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was having an unremarkable 59th birthday. She felt like an automaton travelling through the day in a dream, enduring a pub lunch with a resigned husband, a morose brother-in-law and a petulant mother.

She did appreciate the cards and presents people had taken the trouble to buy, as well as the phone calls from Gulliver and Madeleine, but the whole rigmarole seemed to have a false undercurrent to it. The main quality of the day felt like one of pretending that everything was great, when in reality she felt as if her birthday was just another task to perform.

"I *am* grateful," she said to Osborn that evening when they were on their own at home. "I really am, because I know life could be many million times worse, but I can't seem to care about things like I used to. Sometimes not caring feels like liberation, but what's happened to it all? What's happened to all the love and compassion I used to feel towards Mum?"

"I can't answer that for you, Sandra," said Osborn, sighing deeply. "I found it hard enough to answer my own questions about my own parents."

"I know," replied Sandra, instantly remembering the overbearing heaviness of being with Osborn's parents. "I feel sad that I've learned to lie to Mum at times, albeit in self-defence and for my own protection. Twenty years ago, I felt as if she was fundamentally on my side, but I no longer feel like that at all. She's basically on her own side and I suspect she always has been. I can remember I used to feel proud of her, but I'm not really sure what that was about, or what's happened to it, except that it no longer exists. It's as if it was part of the ideal I had of her in the past, but now I'm being forced to deal with reality. I *want* to deal with reality, but it's so painful."

"It's better in the long run," agreed Osborn. "I know that much."

"Life isn't fun anymore," continued Sandra sadly. "I used to laugh a lot, but it mostly feels like a struggle now. I'm not sure where my mother's sense of humour has gone, but I know she had one. It's since Dad died and it's all become focused on me, as if Mum tries desperately to use me to validate herself. I'm aware that I used to go along with things to keep her happy, but I can't do that nearly as much now. I can remember

being told to be quiet in my childhood – by Dad as well as Mum – but no more, I have a voice. I can't hold it in any longer."

"What are you holding in?" asked Osborn, a little suspiciously.

"Myself. I'm holding in myself. It includes all the anger I've suppressed for most of my life, which is scary, because I never felt I was an angry person. There's more than anger, though, I know I'm much more than that. I know I fundamentally love people and care about them, but I feel sad about myself, as if I've been neglecting myself. Does that make sense?"

"I think so," replied Osborn honestly, "but you're scaring me a little."

"There's no need," replied Sandra hastily. "This is mostly about me, I can promise you that." She sighed heavily. "This is another birthday life review, isn't it! Birthdays should come with sodding health warnings."

It was mid-October and a long weekend visit from Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc was underway, for Gulliver once again to sell his wares at the local craft fair. As soon as they had arrived on Friday afternoon, Gulliver had been in one of his talkative moods. Sandra had always found them both endearing and enlightening in his childhood and adolescence, coming usually after a period of relative reticence.

There was no reticence on the part of Juniper, either, who had developed into a bright, inquisitive, cheeky, golden-haired little girl of many moods and many words. Petroc, on the other hand, was growing into a handsome, brown-eyed, forbearing little boy, who seemed to adore his older sister, except when she resorted to extreme cuddling of the excessive squeezing kind.

On the day of the craft fair, Sandra and Osborn looked after their two grandchildren for the morning, before depositing them at their other grandparents' house for the afternoon, as arranged. That was one of the bonuses of both sets of grandparents living in the same town.

The following day, the six of them went for an invigorating walk before lunch, after which Caroline was due to join them for the afternoon. However, she rang to say she had a "tummy bug", at which news Sandra's heart plummeted to her boots – which was unexpected, as she was wearing slippers. Since Caroline was booked for a British Gas assessor to call the following day for free loft insulation, Osborn decided to check up on her, by taking his stepladder over to her house to help out with the forthcoming appointment.

"She doesn't seem all that ill to me," he said on his return, as Bryony was holding a semi-screaming Petroc upside down in the air and Juniper was trying volubly to get in on the action.

"My turn!" she was demanding. "My turn, it's my turn, Mummy!"

"God knows how she really is," said Sandra despairingly. "I hate it when she's ill."

"It really seems to affect you," commented Gulliver insightfully. "You deflated like a pricked balloon when Grandma rang to say she wasn't coming over."

"I'm sorry," replied Sandra. "Apart from anything else, it's annoying that she left it so late to tell us, as we could have gone out somewhere for lunch, or something."

"There's always another time," replied Gulliver soothingly. "Come and stay with us again, you haven't visited much at all this year."

"I'm sorry," said Sandra, feeling caught between really wanting to visit and knowing it was always such an exhausting upheaval of a stay that often ended virally.

"And stop saying you're sorry," said Gulliver, grinning.

"Sorry," said Sandra, grimacing. "Sorry!"

"Grandma Sandra," said Juniper, tugging on Sandra's sleeve. "Play teachers with me! I'll be the teacher first."

"It's her latest craze," explained Gulliver, gazing indulgently at his daughter. "She'll wear you out, though."

"It's being worn out positively," replied Sandra thoughtfully, as she allowed herself to be pulled up from her chair by her insistent granddaughter. "It makes all the difference in the world from being worn out negatively."

Sandra felt as if she was being worn out negatively the following day, after spending a restless night worrying about her mother and the arranged free loft insulation assessment. She postponed a visit from Gina and rang her mother, prepared to go and help out.

"Oh, I'm feeling much better today," said Caroline blithely. "The loft assessment man has been and gone already. He said there wouldn't be any problem and it'll be easy because we've already cleared out the loft."

"It's a good job Osborn and I did that for you when we did, then," replied Sandra acerbically, finding it hard to believe what she was hearing.

"Anyway, they're doing it tomorrow," continued Caroline, "so I'll see you as normal, seeing it's a Tuesday."

"I'll come over after lunch," said Sandra boldly, "since you've had a bit of a bug."

"Oh. Alright then." Sandra knew she'd vexed her mother and she didn't care.

The following day, the loft insulation had already been finished by the time she went to Caroline's. After a tedious game of *Scribble*, Osborn appeared to check the insulation and discovered the loft hatch was stuck fast with the insulation itself. He was forced to unstuck it by some rather hefty banging, which clearly unsettled Caroline.

"What's going on?" she asked fretfully, going to check what Osborn was doing.

"They've gone and stuck down the loft hatch," said Osborn, breathing heavily in between banging. "I'm having trouble budging it."

"Should you be doing that?" asked Caroline, looking flushed. "Don't make a mess of what they've done."

"The loft hatch needs to be accessible," explained Osborn impatiently, giving a concentrated bang. "I know what I'm doing."

"Well, they knew what they were doing, they're professionals," persisted Caroline heatedly. "Don't mess it up!"

"Trust me, Mum," said Osborn with a certain amount of exasperation, as the loft hatch finally came unstuck. "It's just a job to them. You need to trust me, because I have your interests at heart."

"Well, *I* trust British Gas!" said Caroline, stalking back into the sitting room.

Two days later, Caroline was complaining of sneezing all over the place, so Sandra paid her mother a short afternoon visit instead of the usual four and a half hours every Thursday. Unfortunately, it became apparent that after much rain the night before, an outside drain was blocked. Osborn had to be called to see if he could fix it, but the problem required assistance from the emergency home insurance he'd taken out for Caroline.

As Sandra sat with her mother while Osborn was outside, Caroline seemed intent on stirring already muddy waters.

"By the way, there's a shirt and jacket of yours in the cupboard," she said abruptly.

"I know, they're the ones I keep here for gardening," replied Sandra warily.

"They're perfectly good, you know, too good for gardening," replied Caroline provocatively. "You should wash them and wear them."

"But I keep them here for gardening," repeated Sandra carefully.

"Well, you've got too many clothes," continued Caroline, intent on her own line of thinking. "I've got plenty in my wardrobe, I'm wearing out my old clothes. We should all use our old clothes, we don't need to buy new ones."

"OK," replied Sandra, with cold anger in her heart. 'So you won't want me to buy you any new clothes for Christmas or birthdays,' she was thinking, 'which I do because you can't be bothered to go into Plymouth and look for clothes yourself. You want it all brought to you on a plate, which really doesn't work as a metaphor in this instance. Well, wear your old clothes – you, who always used to drag me into Plymouth with you to help you choose your new clothes, when I couldn't buy any for myself because I couldn't afford any. Sod it! I'll buy whatever sodding new clothes I want, because this is *my* life and you *don't* get to say what I should or shouldn't sodding well buy!'

Sandra and Osborn decided to take Gulliver at his word and travelled to Aberpontyfan in the second week of November for a five-night stay. The weather was a little wet at times, but they had known wetter summer stays in Wales. Apart from a visit to a waterfall (that by its very nature was extremely wet) and Neath Abbey (that wasn't particularly wet), Gulliver took Sandra and Osborn to Glamorgan's Heritage Coast, where the threatening wetness from the sky sometimes added to the wetness underfoot from the receding tide.

Sandra had taken a mortifyingly long time to clamber down from the car park to the beach below, over huge boulders and large irregular rocks to layered pavements of slippery slabs, amid pools of seawater and plenty of slimy green seaweed, but she finally arrived to join Gulliver and Osborn.

In some places, intermittent erosion had caused strangely-shaped depressions filled with seawater, giving the appearance of hundreds of small rock pools. The impressive limestone cliffs had been formed around 300 million years before, when a continental collision had caused the limestone to be pushed up out of the sea and had resulted in striking contorted formations of stacked rock.

All three of them picked their way carefully across the tricky ground beneath their feet, taking many photographs. Gulliver had perfected a way of keeping a large umbrella open above his tripod, to protect his camera from the capricious elements. As they stood around, though, Sandra and Osborn became uncomfortably cold and were glad to clamber back up the rocks to the car, where Gulliver poured them each a mug of the hot coffee he'd brought.

"Well, that was different, I definitely feel more alive," said Osborn, sipping his drink. "I don't like this time of year normally because we don't go out as much, but it's too easy to slip into apathy and stay indoors."

"We went for an invigorating walk along the beach at Derrydown recently," said Sandra, remembering a day when she had been horribly inclined towards depression, but the walk had helped to blow away the cobwebs of despair.

"You should get out more," said Gulliver, laughing at his own words, "in the nicest possible way."

"I can completely understand why you go out in all weathers to take photos of moody landscapes and in all kinds of lighting," said Osborn, sipping rather noisily. "Wow, this is hot."

"It's who I am," replied Gulliver simply. "Hot. No – I need to be outdoors."

"You certainly express yourself in your photography," said Sandra thoughtfully, "because it's always more than just a landscape, or some well-placed features. Your photos express something far more than that. I know you don't like the word, but your photos have soul, or even a spiritual feel sometimes."

"Thanks," replied Gulliver, smiling uncomfortably. "It's nice to have company, I'm normally out on my own."

"Do you get lonely?" asked Osborn openly, although he had kept his coat done up for warmth.

"Yes and no," replied Gulliver, gazing out at the cliffs. "I sometimes wonder if I feel lonelier at home than I do when I'm out on my own."

"Really?" Sandra suddenly felt worried for her son. "Maybe you and Bryony need some friends." Even as she said the words, Sandra realised that wasn't quite what Gulliver meant.

They drove back to the house in companionable silence, half-listening to the car radio, with no further mention or intimation of loneliness. The rest of the visit passed quickly, with their time and energy taken mostly by Juniper and Petroc. When it was time to leave, they said goodbye with the idea of a spring holiday in the Lake District floating in their minds.

Sandra had been acutely missing contact with Madeleine, who no longer wrote any emails to speak of and who hadn't rung for a few weeks. She kept emailing Madeleine several times a week, knowing it was probably more for her own benefit, as a way of feeling they were still in touch. However, she and Osborn always left the phone calls to

Madeleine, as on past occasions when they'd rung, it had nearly always been an inconvenient or hopeless time. Sandra was delighted, therefore, to finally hear her daughter's voice on the phone.

"Are you OK, Mad?" she asked, noticing Madeleine sounded a little strange.

"Well, I've just cleaned myself up after the Sodbury Slog," replied Madeleine tiredly. "I've had a lovely bath, but now I'm lying on the sofa. I feel a bit sick, actually, it was harder than I thought. To be honest, I got roped into it because it was for charity."

"Well done!" Sandra felt inordinately proud of her daughter, knowing she would never have attempted anything as remotely strenuous herself. "What was it like? How did you get on?"

"It was muddy and hilly and I finished it, but I must have been bringing up the rear. I'd never do it again, I know that for a fact. Way too much mud! By the way, I know I've finished it now and I should have asked earlier, but could you sponsor me?"

"Yes of course! I'll transfer you some money. I'd say you need to have a rest and be a bit pampered for the rest of today. The Sodbury Slog – what a brilliant name!"

Madeleine rang Sandra and Osborn again a week later, but this time it was a very difficult conversation, as Madeleine was almost certain she was having a miscarriage. As she was asking her mother various questions in a small, scared voice, Sandra wished with her entire being that she could be with Madeleine, who estimated she'd been 8½ weeks pregnant.

Furthermore, Sandra was filled with a furious sense of impotent disbelief to learn that Henri had gone to work, despite knowing Madeleine was bleeding. In the end, all she could suggest was that Madeleine ring her doctor's surgery for help, whereas Osborn told her that if she needed them, they could travel to Bristol immediately.

Madeleine kept in touch by text message for the rest of the day, as she went to see a GP and was referred to an early pregnancy assessment clinic, for which she had to wait until the following day for an appointment. Sandra felt her heart was almost breaking, as she learned that Madeleine had not only gone to see the doctor on her own, but had been forced to catch a bus, because Henri had driven the car to work and she hadn't been able to find enough cash in the house for a taxi.

Although Madeleine insisted she was OK, she rang Sandra the next afternoon and told her about the clinic visit, where she'd had a blood test and an internal scan. She was to go back two days later for a further blood test and two weeks later for a further scan. Once again, she had gone to the clinic on her own. At that news, Sandra felt she would have given anything to be with Madeleine, who must have been feeling so alone and vulnerable.

She couldn't help her estimation of Henri plummeting quite drastically, despite her best efforts to understand his actions. Madeleine confessed that although she was now physically OK, she felt emotionally at sea and her own feelings for Henri were currently mixed, as she felt badly let down by him.

Sandra found she was remembering her own miscarriage between Gulliver and Madeleine, although she rarely talked about it any longer. The memory of an acute time of almost piercing sadness and loss could still quite easily be recalled, however, along with an excruciating sense of being isolated within her grief. She could still picture the bunch of red roses her mother had given her and the way that every time she'd looked at them, she had been reminded of the blood and what it had meant.

Surprisingly, Gulliver seemed very upset to hear about Madeleine's miscarriage, which warmed Sandra's heart in a poignantly sad way. Caroline, on the other hand, was sympathetic for about five minutes when Sandra relayed the news and then proceeded with her usual woeful demeanour, interspersed with undercurrents and sniping.

In fact, Sandra found her mother's comments almost unbearable during *Scribble* and felt like walking out. Caroline seemed to be speaking over her so much that Sandra wondered if her mother was actually becoming deaf, but the fact that it was happening selectively caused her to assume her mother was trying to assert her power. Sandra almost had to force herself physically to sit there and listen to her mother describing a dream she'd had the night before.

"I was waiting for you and Osborn to come and give me a lift home," she said dolefully, "but you didn't show up and I didn't know how to get home, so I felt completely lost."

"You know we'd never leave you stranded," said Sandra wearily, wondering what depths of psychic insecurity had manifested in such a dream.

"Well, it felt horrible," continued Caroline, raising her voice dramatically. "You wait until you're my age and you have to depend on people, *you* won't like it."

Sandra walked home with tears escaping from her eyes and hoping she wouldn't meet anybody, as a fiercely whispered conversation seemed to be externalising without her consent.

"I need to go home to recover," she said comfortingly to herself, "but I wish it was different with her. I so, so wish it was different. I want so much to like her and enjoy time with her, but all that has been eroded quite spectacularly since Dad died. It's so sad, sometimes I feel as if I can't bear it – and now Madeleine's miscarriage has added another layer of sadness. I'm glad Maddy wants us to go to Bristol for two nights soon while Henri's at a stag weekend, it'll be special to be just the three of us for that time. It'll be healing for us all, I think."

"Madeleine's had a miscarriage," Sandra heard Osborn saying sadly to Lawrence, as they sat in *Wetherfork's* the following Monday lunchtime.

"Is she OK?" Lawrence's concern was immediate.

"I think she's physically OK, but emotionally a bit all over the place," explained Sandra, wondering how much Lawrence would understand. "We'll be visiting her soon."

"That's good," replied Lawrence seriously. "Are they coming here for Christmas?"

"No, they're going to France this Christmas," replied Sandra. "Maddy's hoping there are no seasonal gales, because they're going on the ferry."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," said Lawrence, something else clearly on his mind. "I won't be doing Christmas this year, I really can't cope with it. I don't want any presents. I know you always want to include me and I'm grateful, but I've had enough. I can't stand Christmas, I'd rather shut myself in my flat and pretend it's not happening."

"Are you absolutely sure, Lawrence?" asked Osborn worriedly. "I know Gulliver and Madeleine always love to see you."

"I know. I'm really sorry, but they'll simply have to understand," continued Lawrence darkly. The lighting was no great shakes in *Wetherfork's*. "No, I tried for their sakes a couple of times, but it's no good. Mum and Dad killed Christmas for me."

"But Mum and Dad are gone," said Osborn, frowning. "You're free of them."

"I don't think I'll ever be free of them," said Lawrence resolutely. "No, I won't change my mind, but I hope you all have a good time."

"OK," said Osborn dejectedly. "If that's what you want."

CHAPTER 26

During the second week of December, Sandra and Osborn travelled to Bristol as arranged and met Madeleine on Friday lunchtime, as she'd taken a half-day off work. They had said hello with a mixture of joyful reunion and tearful sadness, all in an understated way because they were in public. They were walking along the busy streets to the place Madeleine had chosen for lunch, when a strange altercation between Osborn and a young male car driver occurred.

Osborn had attempted to cross a small side street, but a car had been on its way to the main road and looked as if it would mow Osborn down. He jumped backwards to safety, but put out his hand and smacked the car on its bonnet, as if to warn the driver of his presence.

The car stopped, the driver got out irately and became somewhat threatening about the fact that Osborn had "hit" his car. Sandra was standing slightly behind Osborn, rooted to the spot and wondering if she should do anything, so consequently was hardly aware of what the man was actually saying. She did, however, see him push Osborn on his shoulder, as the situation escalated. At that point, Madeleine stepped forward.

"Don't you hit my father!" she said forcefully, at which the man changed his gaze from Osborn to Madeleine and started to apologise, as if suddenly seeing sense. Sandra, Osborn and Madeleine walked away and the man got back in his car and drove away.

A woman who'd witnessed the scene ran after Osborn and told him she'd recorded the incident on her phone if he wanted to use it as evidence, but he declined with profuse thanks. It felt good, though, to know someone else had understood that Osborn had been wronged.

"Well, that was the strangest experience," Osborn commented a short while later, as they sat in a bar restaurant awaiting their food order. "I didn't see that one coming – literally."

"Maddy to the rescue," said Sandra proudly. "Well done, darling, you were braver than I was. You were so calm."

"I was so mad!" replied Madeleine, laughing ruefully. "It was really uncalled for and really stupid of that guy to react like that. It was just so wrong."

"Thank you, it means a lot," said Osborn, putting his hand over Madeleine's for a moment. "We came here to support you and there you were rescuing me!"

"You've got to laugh at life sometimes," said Madeleine, with a lopsided grin. "You've really just got to laugh sometimes and I certainly haven't been doing very much of that lately."

The following day, the weather was reasonable enough for the three of them to drive to Glastonbury, which happened to be somewhere Madeleine had never been. The air was decidedly cold, but the atmosphere in the streets was as vibrant as ever, with its unique array of individual shops catering for all walks of society (but perhaps especially the spiritually minded). Some people were walking around dressed up in costumes, although if there were any particular theme, it wasn't immediately recognisable.

Their main visit, however, was to the atmospheric Glastonbury Abbey, with its towering, inspiring ruins set amid a very green and pleasant landscape. They lingered first of all in the warmth of the museum, before venturing outside in the colder air. Towards the end of their historical strolling, they walked around the large fishpond, where Madeleine began to talk of both her miscarriage and her current sense of lacking any life direction.

"I feel rather lost at the moment, that's all," she said a little brokenly. "I know I'll get over this loss, but right now I feel as if I need something to focus on, like a hobby, but I don't know what I want to do. I'm not sure what I'm interested in anymore."

"You're right, you *will* get over the loss," said Osborn comfortingly, "although I know it took Mum quite a while after her miscarriage – and I discovered I needed to grieve too."

"You used to find a lot of comfort in reading, darling," said Sandra, not wanting to remember how Osborn had actually accused her fairly soon after the miscarriage of shutting herself off from him. "Do you mean a hobby where you meet other people, though?"

"I don't know," replied Madeleine in a small voice. "I really don't know. I just wish the next few months would pass quickly, so I'd have moved on from where I am now."

"It *will* pass and you *will* move on – you know you will, you know how you've done that in the past," said Sandra, almost willing some positivity into Madeleine. "You have to go through this process of grieving, Maddy, but it won't last forever, it really won't. I became pregnant with you very quickly after my miscarriage, so there's every hope the same will happen to you. None of us know what's around the corner." She realised how ambiguous her own statement sounded. "We simply don't know what good things are around the corner."

"You're right," replied Madeleine, sighing. "I know you're right. Thank you both for being here this weekend."

"I'm pretty sure as ever that it's helping us as much as you," said Osborn, shivering slightly. "How about we go in somewhere for a hot drink, I'm getting colder and colder. I noticed a nice little café just around the corner."

The rest of the weekend passed comfortably, as they relaxed and carried out small but enjoyable tasks, such as buying Christmas presents for Madeleine and Henri.

"Are you sure Henri wants a spirit level and some masonry drill bits?" asked Sandra, as she and Madeleine waited in *Screwfix* while Osborn to paid.

"Believe me, I'm sure," replied Madeleine resignedly. "This is one of his favourite shops. *Q & B* is high on the list, too."

"You've done that thing," said Sandra, smiling. "You've picked a man who's a lot like your own father."

"Oh Mumsie, I've loved this weekend," said Madeleine suddenly. "I feel a little bit more anchored now. A bit more able to cope with Christmas away. I'm sorry we won't be seeing you, but we'll come and see you as soon as we can in January. I'll call you from France, too. I do love you, Mumsie."

"I love you too," said Sandra, smiling fondly, "Madeleine don't-you-hit-my-father Dullkettle!"

Christmas Day was a quiet one, with Caroline on her best behaviour at Sandra and Osborn's house for five hours or so. The following day saw the arrival of Gulliver, Bryony, Juniper and Petroc, who were to stay for four nights. Although Caroline joined them for the day, it felt a little strange without Lawrence, who had insisted on staying at home alone.

"He's given us some money," Gulliver had said in surprise that morning, upon opening a Christmas card from Lawrence. "I thought you said he wasn't doing Christmas and didn't want anything?"

"That's right, that's what he said," said Osborn, who was more than a little stressed with the responsibilities of Boxing Day. "He did the same for Madeleine and Henri, apparently."

"I feel quite bad now," said Gulliver morosely. "We took him at his word."

"It's what he wanted," said Sandra shortly, feeling a little overwhelmed with other people's feelings, not to mention her own.

"Where's Uncle Lawrence?" asked Juniper hopefully. "He plays with us."

"He's not coming today," replied Gulliver, "but we'll see him some other time."

"Why don't you put on your Cinderella dress that Grandma Anne gave you and play with your new doll that Grandma Sandra gave you," suggested Bryony, using the well proven, age-old ploy of distraction.

"Come and play with me, Grandma Sandra," demanded Juniper, looking hopefully at her grandmother. "I want you to play with me."

"I'll have to help Grandad Osborn in a minute with the potatoes," said Sandra, trying to pick up pieces of discarded wrapping paper and stuff them in a bag. "You can always do some colouring with Great-Grandma. In fact, she's already doing some on her own, by the look of it."

"I like colouring," said Caroline, sniffing. "Look Juniper, do you like my butterfly? Do you think I've done it well?"

"I want to colour a butterfly," said Juniper, pulling the colouring book away from Caroline. "It's my book!"

"Oh! You've made me go over the line," said Caroline crossly, before regaining her great-grandmotherly persona. "Oh well, there you are, then. Colour in a lovely butterfly for Great-Grandma."

"I'll play with you as soon as I can, Juniper," said Sandra quickly, wondering whether it was wrong of her to feel pleased at her mother's discomfiture.

The rest of the day passed quickly, although the night passed slowly, as Petroc had a cold and was coughing a lot. However, the following morning was a bright one and Gulliver successfully lured them out for a walk on Dartmoor, with promises to Juniper that she could use the new camera that Grandma Anne and Grandad Stan had given her for Christmas.

The moorland was unsurprisingly muddy at times as they strode out from the car alongside the leat, which although shallow, was running quite fast in places. Juniper chatted away to anyone who would listen, as she tended to do for most of her waking

hours. She was wearing a new purple and pink coat that had also been a Christmas present and her new camera in its sturdy pink bag was slung over her shoulder in such a grown-up fashion that Sandra could hardly believe she was not yet four years old.

Petroc, on the other hand, was quiet as he walked along, first of all holding Bryony's hand and then being carried by her. Sandra had been worried at first that he wasn't really well enough for a Dartmoor walk, but Gulliver had pooh-poohed her concern. Osborn was striding happily ahead with Gulliver, so Sandra decided simply to enjoy the moment as they all headed at various speeds towards the leaning granite cross at Windy Post.

As Sandra and Juniper caught up with Osborn and Gulliver, who had already taken many photos of the cross and the surrounding view, Juniper took out her camera and started her own photographic session, taking photos of Gulliver himself. Gulliver turned and looked at his daughter, then grinned and walked over to her, bending down to show her how to take a good photo of the cross.

"That makes such a good picture," said Sandra to herself, as her son and her granddaughter bonded so naturally. "Every picture tells a story and that's one lovely story. I'd like to remember it always, like one of those snapshot memories."

"What a lovely view," said Bryony, as she and Petroc caught them up.

"It is, she's like the daughter of her father," said Sandra, smiling.

"Er – I meant the tors in the distance and the whole rugged feel of it out here," said Bryony, gazing around her. "Yes, I think Juniper wants to be like her dad."

"I guess there are worse aspirations," said Sandra, looking at Petroc. "Is he OK? Poor little soul, he looks a bit cold."

"We should probably be heading back to the car," replied Bryony, as Petroc gave a fountain-like sneeze over his mother's face.

The following day, Petroc's cold had become worse and after three very disturbed nights of little sleep, for everyone except Juniper, Gulliver and Bryony decided to cut their visit short.

"I'm sorry about this," said Gulliver despondently. "Bryony thinks he'll be better off in his own cot tonight."

"She's probably right," said Sandra comfortingly, feeling traitorously pleased that she and Osborn would be spared another disjointed night of very little sleep. "We'll see you again next year, you know we will."

"I just wish family was closer," said Gulliver, "that's all."

"Don't forget we've got that Lake District holiday to look forward to in spring," said Sandra encouragingly. "Come on, hug!"

The slight awkwardness she had always found hugging her son in his adult years was completely overridden by the need to comfort him – about what she was a little unsure, although she was aware of a small but real maternal niggles concerning his unknown depths.

The inevitable happened and Sandra caught Petroc's cold, although it technically became her own. Osborn managed to escape the sneezing, nose-blowing and coughing, but Sandra felt too tired to do much on the final days of 2011. She did, however, find an unusual form of solace. While staying with them, Gulliver had shown Sandra and Osborn an ancestry website that he'd signed up with, purely out of interest to find out about his paternal ancestors.

Although Gulliver had merely made a start creating his family tree at no cost, Sandra was entranced and started to enter all the family people she knew of from the past. She decided to join and pay the fee for a month's subscription to many old records and before she knew it, she was hooked. Osborn's mother had left a book with old family ancestor knowledge from her birth place of Bermuda, so there was plenty to do.

That evening, as the final hours of 2011 slipped inexorably away, so did Sandra's energy. She was sitting on the sofa companionably with Osborn, but kept hopelessly drifting into sleep.

"It's no good," she said finally, after *Uptown Abbey Outtakes – Part 19* had failed to tempt her awake. "I'll have to go to bed, but you don't have to come."

"That sounds strange," said Osborn, still sipping his small snifter of *Mount Gay Old Spice* rum. "You go on, but I won't be long – although just in case, I'll see you next year. Goodnight!"

"Goodnight," said Sandra, totally unable to think of any repartee. She prepared for bed almost with her eyes closed and was soon lying down in the blissful peace and darkness. To her intense annoyance, though, she realised her mind had woken up again.

'Why does this happen?' she thought frustratedly. 'I'm more asleep than awake, so I go to bed and immediately become more awake than asleep. Thinking doesn't help matters, but I really need to think about my life and where it's heading now. It matters to me. Obviously it matters to other people too – their own life, not my life – but everything seems to be coming to some sort of climax for me, although sadly not the best type. I wish I could forget it all and carry on coping, but it won't go away anymore. It's there clamouring at me like an insistent voice inside – and it's my own voice.' She sniffed a little, as a nostril began to block up.

'I seem to be thinking more of the past as well. I'm not sure why I'm doing that, but it feels a bit like an unstoppable train now I've started. I suppose that's better than an unstoppable drain, although you wouldn't exactly want a stopped drain. Anyway, it's probably all to do with perspective now I come to think about it, which I apparently am. The further along you are on the lifespan, the more you can look back with a longer-ranging view.

'I'm not sure what it changes, though, because the past has gone. Or does it keep on living inside your head and in your programmed reactions? So what good does thinking about it and re-assessing it do? God, I'm asking myself too many questions again, that never bodes well.' She plumped and pushed her pillows into more of an upright position, as her nostril blocked up completely.

'I worry about the future, too, especially about being the only one to look after Mum. I know Osborn helps me, but he doesn't have that visceral connection, or the unforgettable knowledge that I'm her only next of kin. Also, he's become pretty much caught up with Leona and her group of like-minded people, as I was afraid he would.

'It's not that I mind that – do I? Do I mind that? No, I really don't think so, I think it's more the feeling that I'm on my own with my mother, who's only going to become more frail, needy, unwell, decrepit and impossible. Stop there! I can't depress myself like this. The future hasn't happened yet, I need to deal with the here and now, it's as simple as that.' She pummelled her pillows so she was almost sitting upright, as her other nostril gradually became blocked up.

'I hate being unable to breathe properly, it feels frightening. Maybe it's a metaphor for my life right now, as I certainly don't feel as if I can breathe. It feels scary, because we all need to breathe in order to stay alive. What's suffocating me so badly in my own life, though? On the face of it, I only normally see Mum two to three days a week, although there certainly doesn't feel anything normal about the way she is with me now.

'It's got to be the way I feel about it, the way I feel the weight of it shrinking my soul, so I can actually feel myself gradually dying when I'm with her. Why do I let it affect me so much? Why can't I shrug off all those silly, pointed things she says to me? Why does she feel so *big* in my psyche right now, although I know she's lost both weight and height these last few years?' She tried to blow her nose, with very little success.

'There are other people who matter in my life even more than she does, because I'd move heaven and earth to help make life better for Gulliver and Madeleine. Actually, I did move a fair bit of earth this year for Madeleine and Henri, although most of it was still clinging to weeds. I hope Madeleine has a baby soon, I hate to know she's in pain because of her loss. There's nothing I can do about that, though, except to trust that what will be will be.

'I'm so glad that things are as comfortable as they always were with Gulliver and us. Bryony hasn't been as weird with me as she was since that Snowdonia holiday, either. It's true that both Osborn and I find it hard to cope with her more *laissez faire* way of bringing up the children, but we have to let her and Gulliver do it their way.' She sat completely upright in bed and considered her options.

'From what I've been saying to myself, I need to let go of rather a lot, but I wish I knew how to do that. I wish I knew how not to care. Or do I? Wouldn't that fundamentally change who I am? Do I even know who I am anymore? Did I ever? Yes, I think I did, but it was a long time ago.

'Maybe I need to make some New Year resolutions as a way of remembering who I am, or at least what I like to do. Let's see, I'd like to go out walking with Osborn more – and I need to keep on with my semi-autobiographical fiction writings for the sake of my soul – and I think I really need to appreciate everything a bit more – and I need not to become so angry and upset with Mum.

'Sod it, I'm back to Mum again! It's not going to go away just like that, is it, all the Mum stuff? I'm actually afraid of the answer. I really can't breathe very well, either. I'm afraid my throat will close over and then I'll really be in trouble. Oh, come on Sandra, don't be so negative! Embrace the positive! There's really no need to worry, we all die in the end...'