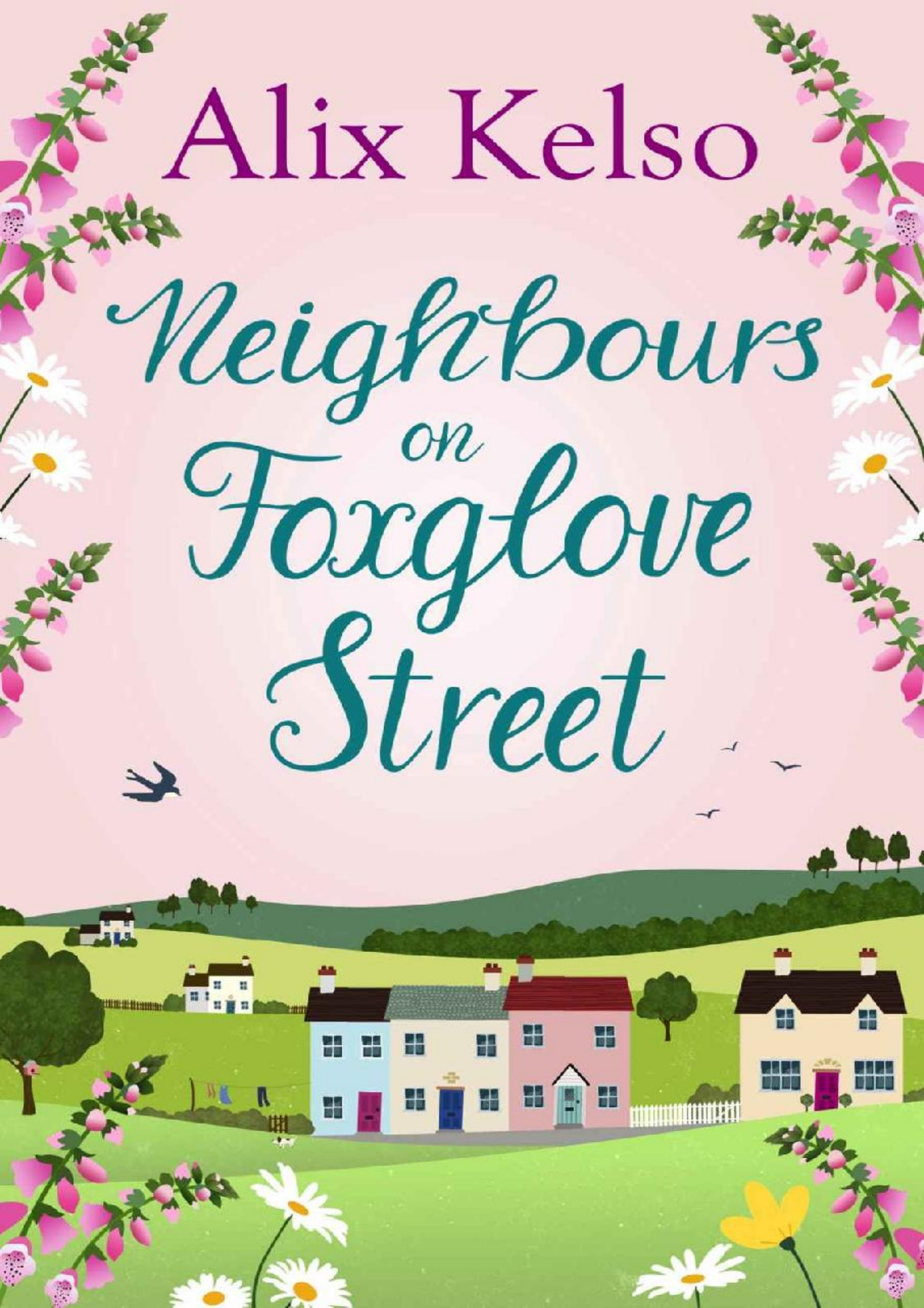


Alix Kelso

Neighbours
on
Foxglove
Street



NEIGHBOURS ON FOXGLOVE STREET

A FOXGLOVE STREET NOVEL

BOOK ONE

ALIX KELSO

LAKE FALLS PUBLISHING

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For my husband, David.

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OLIVE NIMMO LET OUT a long sigh as she rose from her chair beside the living room window. There wasn't much happening out on Foxglove Street this afternoon, which was a pity. She usually enjoyed watching the comings and goings as people made their way along the long residential road to the shops over on Hamblehurst high street, and seeing the children hurrying home from school.

But today it was rainy, reducing the footfall, and school wasn't over yet for the afternoon. The only activity Olive had observed during her time at the window were a few hardy people hunched inside their raincoats as they walked their dogs, and a delivery van which had pulled up outside a house across the street. The driver had sprinted to the door with a package, which he'd tossed onto the doormat before returning to his van and racing off at breakneck speed back along the road.

And that was the extent of today's afternoon entertainment, except for the cheeky robin that hopped around on Olive's front lawn for a few minutes before flying off.

Olive peered at the front garden, searching for new signs of spring. The cherry tree was already in bloom, but the daffodils had long since passed. The foxgloves were still many weeks away. Many residents of Foxglove Street planted the flowers in their front gardens, in celebration of their lovely street name, and Olive always looked forward to the tall, whimsical blooms appearing each summer. She liked how last year's flowers scattered seeds that would grow the following

year, sowing lovely little surprises around the small front garden for her to look forward to.

But those surprises were not yet in evidence. With her window-seat inspection of the front garden concluded, Olive found herself sighing once more.

It wasn't easy filling the endless hours of an elderly life spent alone. For many years after her husband, Malcolm, had died, Olive had managed just fine. There'd been the weekly lunch club she attended in the Hamblehurst church hall, the library book club she'd joined, and the company of the other old-aged neighbours on Foxglove Street who'd visited one another regularly to share cups of tea and chitchat.

But those things had all run their course during the long winter just past. Several of the friends she'd made at the lunch club had sadly died or stopped attending, and the new clutch of old timers who'd taken their place just hadn't been to Olive's liking. Despite persevering with the lunches, the final straw had come thanks to a noisy and horribly gossipy woman who'd joined Olive's table and dominated the conversation by loudly interrupting anyone who dared to contribute.

Olive's membership of the library book club had also petered out as the book selections grew increasingly serious and worthy, featuring titles that appeared on highbrow book award lists, and which Olive could make neither head nor tail of.

And as for the elderly neighbours she'd once been friends with, one had sold up to go and live with her daughter, another had suffered a gruesome fall on the icy winter pavements and had passed away in hospital, and the third had moved into a sheltered housing facility several miles away and slipped out of contact.

And, just like that, her little social circle had unexpectedly collapsed. Olive missed the many friends she'd had and the friendly conversation. Most of all, she missed feeling connected to the world beyond her little terraced house, and connected to the people in it.

Olive had hobbies, still, which she enjoyed. Most weeks, she visited the library to borrow books, although she avoided going there when the dull book club was holding its meetings. She suspected the participants might sneer at her selections of historical romances and family sagas and pacy thrillers, all of which were guaranteed to pass the time pleasantly, unlike the dry-as-dust books the reading group now favoured. Olive also enjoyed listening to the radio, and watching game shows and nature documentaries on television, and knitting little hats and mittens to donate to the neonatal unit at the local hospital.

But these were all solitary pursuits, and Olive couldn't help but feel that, lately, her days were just too empty. Worse, she wasn't sure what to do about it. At seventy-five, she feared she was a bit too long in the tooth to start again and make new friends. In fact, sometimes just the idea of it left her feeling exhausted.

During Olive's last video chat with her daughter, Gillian, who lived in Canada, the question of how she was spending her free time had come up. Olive didn't want to worry her daughter, so she insisted she was doing just fine. Gillian's arched eyebrows suggested she was sceptical of this response, but Olive wasn't prepared to worry her by mentioning anything about loneliness.

Gillian had emigrated twenty-five years ago to Toronto and built a new life for herself with her Canadian husband and their son. Last November, Gillian had become a grandmother for the first time, and the arrival of the beautiful baby girl meant Gillian had enough going on in her life without worrying about her elderly mother. If Gillian was worried, she'd insist on inviting Olive to visit them in Toronto for a few weeks, and Olive had already reluctantly turned down the offer several times over the last couple of years. Although she'd visited many times in the past, Olive knew the plane journey would be just too long to cope with these days.

If Gillian knew Olive was feeling lonely, she'd invite her to fly over to visit, and Olive would have to refuse the invitation, which would make Gillian feel bad, and she'd end up offering to fly over to see her instead.

Gillian had a busy job, a full social life, a son who'd just got engaged, and a new granddaughter to dote on. That was the life Olive dreamt of for her daughter, and the last thing she wanted was for Gillian to feel obliged to get on a plane to visit her ageing mother just because Olive was feeling a little down in the mouth at the moment.

She loved knowing her daughter and son-in-law, and her grandson and, now, her great-granddaughter, were all well and thriving on the other side of the Atlantic. She'd hate for them to worry about her living all by herself here in Hamblehurst and losing contact with those around her, which meant she had to keep these lonely feelings to herself.

Those feeling would pass in time, anyway, Olive knew. If she'd learned anything in her long life, it was that nothing stayed the same forever.

Olive shuffled to the kitchen, where a tea cup and plate waited to be washed in the sink. That would while away a few minutes. Perhaps she'd give the microwave a good clean, too, just to pass a few minutes more. By then, it might be time to turn on the television and settle down in front of an afternoon game show until dinner time arrived.

As she filled the sink with hot water and rinsed her dirty dishes, the rain stopped outside, and from the kitchen window Olive watched the clouds part and a bright burst of blue sky appear. After such a dreary day, it was nice to see the sun peeking out and feel its warmth through the window. Soon, the days of endless April showers would pass and the sunny days of May would come, and the thought cheered Olive immensely.

In this part of Hampshire, May was always a wonderful month. The sleepy town of Hamblehurst, nestled in the heart of the rolling chalk hills and green valleys of the South Downs, always looked lovely as the leaves unfurled on the trees and the spring flowers bloomed into life. After the harshest winter anyone could remember for years, Olive couldn't wait for the brighter and warmer weeks of late spring to work their magic.

Eager to soak up the spring sunshine now lifting the afternoon sky, Olive finished her dishes and opened the back door to let fresh air into the house. She stood on the step as the sun beamed down and the wind scattered what remained of the rain clouds, revealing the bright blue skyscape above. She thought she should take advantage of the fair weather and go out for a walk. Daily exercise was crucial at her age, if she didn't want her creaking joints to seize up.

There'd been many winter days when the weather had been too atrocious for her to venture outside, and February and March had been especially awful, keeping her indoors for days on end. Although Olive had lived in Hamblehurst all her life, and was used to the unpredictable British weather, she had to cast her mind back a long time to recall a colder and more brutal winter than the one just past. The short, dark days had been filled with howling gales and thrashing rain one week, followed by plunging temperatures and bitter frosts the next. The wintry cycle had repeated over and over ever since the turn of the year, making it hard to get out and about without being soaked, blasted by the wind, or frozen to the marrow.

Olive had stayed inside far too much. If she wanted to avoid ending up like so many of her contemporaries—frail and house-bound—then she should take every chance she got to walk and stay strong, especially now that the weather was taking a turn for the better.

A leg stretch to the mini-market on the high street to buy a few essentials was a far better use of her time than slumping in front of a television game show, Olive knew only too well. The walk along Foxglove Street to the town centre was always pleasant when the weather was fair, and the mix of houses and dwellings on the street provided plenty of interest for passers-by. From her own little two-bed Edwardian terrace, to the detached and semi-detached Victorian villas, to the much older cottages dotted at the far end of the street near the community garden, Foxglove Street was one of the prettiest streets in Hamblehurst. Stretching from the high street at one end to Riverview Lane at the other, the street was dotted with lovely front gardens and handsome old trees and oodles of character.

Hamblehurst, too, was a wonderful little town in which to live, with its winding high street and mix of independent shops, old churches and well-kept parks, little cafes and pubs, not to mention the small festival hall off the market square which was still going strong, and the quirky volunteer-run museum that was dedicated to all things Hamblehurst. Olive thought it might be nice to pop over and see the spring hanging baskets outside the festival hall and the museum, which always looked splendid at this time of year and never failed to bring a burst of colour to the place.

Cheered by the thought of a pleasant stroll along Foxglove Street and around Hamblehurst in the unexpected afternoon sunshine, Olive turned to fetch her coat. She was just about to close the kitchen back door when an odd sound drifted over from the other side of the garden fence.

Olive paused with the door open a crack, listening. Except for the birdsong in the trees and the occasional whoosh of the wind, the rows of back gardens that ran behind the terraced houses were quiet. In the afternoon stillness, Olive easily heard the sound over the fence from her neighbour on the left.

It was the sound of someone crying.

Opening the back door again, Olive popped her head out and cocked her ear. There was no mistaking the heartfelt female sobbing noise.

She thought of her neighbour on that side of the fence, Angela something-or-other, a young woman in her early thirties who'd moved in about a year ago with her husband, Ryan, their eight-year-old daughter, Lindsey, and a little scrap of a mongrel dog whose name she hadn't caught.

Was it Angela she heard crying? It had to be. It pained Olive to hear the hitched sobbing sounds. She wondered what might have caused them.

When the new family had first arrived on Foxglove Street they'd been pleasant enough, saying hello as they'd moved boxes and furniture from a self-drive van into their new property, but Olive hadn't talked much to them after that, although this wasn't surprising. Both Angela and Ryan had

jobs to keep them busy, and Olive had often seen them coming and going, him wearing a smart suit and her wearing a supermarket uniform. And of course there was the little girl to be taken to school and to activities and all the other things that children got up to, as well as the little dog to be walked. Although the new neighbours waved and said hello if they saw Olive in her front garden while they were rushing to their cars or hurrying back to the house, they were always too busy to stop and chat, which meant she didn't know much about them at all.

But she did know one thing.

One weekend afternoon in January, Olive had been hanging fresh curtains at the window in her living room, when Ryan had come storming out of his house with a suitcase in his hand, which he'd thrown into the back of his car. Angela had hurried along the garden path after him, shouting something that Olive hadn't quite caught, although from the young woman's body language, it was clear she wasn't sorry to see her husband depart.

Ryan had driven off and, as far as Olive knew, never returned.

At least, she hadn't seen his car parked on the street again. Ever since, she'd seen only Angela and her daughter and their little dog coming and going. Clearly, the couple had separated, and the split had been acrimonious, judging by the scene of their parting. Although Olive had hoped for a moment in which she might catch Angela and ask if everything was all right, the long dark months of winter had put paid to that plan. It wasn't easy to peg a neighbour for a quick word when they only came and went outside the hours of daylight.

Marriages ended all the time, Olive knew that only too well. She could only guess how hard it must be for the young woman, now living alone with her daughter and no doubt mourning the end of her relationship, no matter how awful the final split had turned out to be.

Olive wondered if that was what now caused Angela's tears on the other side of the fence. She wanted to pop her

head over and ask if she was okay, but feared this breach of privacy might not be appreciated. Her neighbour was, after all, in her own garden, and was entitled to do whatever she pleased there, without interfering busy-bodies sticking their noses in.

But it was also true that the poor woman was still sobbing, and Olive couldn't just ignore that. As she listened, she heard another sound too, that of the little dog running around in the back garden. Soon, she heard the squeak of the dog's toys, accompanied by an occasional excited bark.

How strange, Olive thought. Why was Angela sobbing while the dog ran around in the garden with its toys? What on earth was going on?

Eager to make sure she wasn't mishearing anything, or misinterpreting what might be going on next door, Olive ducked back inside her house and climbed the stairs to the first floor, where she hurried to the small back bedroom that overlooked the rear of the property. When she peered out the window, tilting her head to maximise the angle of view, she quickly saw that she wasn't mistaken at all.

There, on a wooden garden chair on her neighbour's paved patio, sat Angela, clearly upset and dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. And there, too, was the little dog, dashing around on the lawn in pursuit of a squeaky toy that Angela was throwing for it. Whenever the little dog returned to its mistress with the toy in its mouth, it would nudge against her, as if sensing she was upset. But she'd just pat the dog on the head, throw the toy once more, and then continue sobbing quietly.

Olive had no idea what had caused her neighbour such distress, but she couldn't ignore it. The gesture might be unwelcome, and might even be rebuffed, but Olive knew she had to ask what was wrong. Her conscience wouldn't let her do anything else.

Returning to the back garden, Olive shuffled towards the wooden fence, carefully stepped up onto the edge of a low raised bed to give her some height, peered over into her neighbour's property and cleared her throat.

“Hello, dear,” Olive said when Angela looked up in surprise. “I don’t mean to be nosy, but I couldn’t help hearing you cry. Are you all right?”

The young woman hitched a sob and frowned, and Olive saw her cheeks flush.

“I’m fine,” Angela said, waving a hand as if to dismiss Olive’s observation. “I was just...”

The little dog hurried over and nudged its squeaky toy against Angela’s legs. The young woman immediately burst into a fresh sob that tore at Olive’s heart.

“Goodness me,” Olive said, clutching the top of the fence for balance. “Oh, you poor thing. Whatever is the matter?”

After throwing the toy for the little dog, Angela rose from the garden chair and blew her nose noisily into a tissue before shaking her head. “Please, ignore me. I’ve just got things on my mind.”

“I certainly won’t ignore you. Is there something I can do to help?”

“That’s very kind,” Angela replied, offering a slight smile. “But this is a problem that I need to sort out on my own.”

Olive saw how Angela’s gaze shifted to the dog as she said this. The animal was now lying on the lawn, chomping on its toy, and fresh tears sprang to Angela’s eyes as she watched it playing.

“There isn’t something wrong with your little dog, I hope?” Olive said.

“Not exactly.” Angela hung her head again, clearly trying to hide her upset. “I’d better get back inside. Sorry again for disturbing you.”

“Please don’t go yet. I hate the idea that something is wrong and that you feel you have to deal with it alone.”

She’d chosen her words carefully, not wanting to sound like the nosy neighbour who knew everyone’s business, but she was also desperate to impress upon the young woman that,

whatever trouble had caused her to cry, she needn't deal with it entirely by herself.

"It's an old saying, but a true one," Olive said. "A problem shared is a problem halved."

Angela laughed sadly and wiped her tears. "This problem can't be halved, I'm afraid. It just has to be dealt with." She glanced up and squinted. "It's Olive, isn't it?"

"That's right. And you're Angela." Olive paused for a moment, then said, "Would you like to pop round for a cup of tea?"

But Angela shook her head. "Thank you, but my daughter, Lindsey, will be back from school soon."

"Of course she will."

The little dog trotted over and dropped its toy in front of Angela and wagged its tail. Once more, Olive saw how the young woman's tears reappeared as she looked at the animal. When the dog, still waiting for its toy to be thrown, sat down very neatly and held a paw up in the air, Angela's final resolve crumbled.

"Oh, Elsa, you little rascal," Angela said, hunkering down and petting the dog on the head. "I hate myself for this."

Olive waited, sensing that the poor woman was about to share the root of the problem that plagued her. After cuddling the dog, Angela stood up again, threw the chew toy, and turned to Olive.

"See, the thing is, I'm going to have to give Elsa up for rehoming," Angela said, her voice almost a whisper. "I feel sick about it, but there's no choice. And when I tell my daughter once she gets home from school, she'll be heartbroken."

Her voice trembled as she spoke, and Olive saw the pain in her neighbour's face as she revealed her dilemma.

"I'm very sorry to hear this," Olive said. "It's certainly not easy looking after a dog."

“It was a never a problem before, but my husband and I separated recently and things have been very hard.”

Angela’s gaze once more strayed to the dog. The animal was rolling around in delight on the lawn and tossing the squeaky toy into the air to amuse itself.

“Money’s been tight ever since Ryan left,” Angela continued. “I don’t want us to lose this house, and I’m taking on more hours at work to make ends meet. I’m going to have to send Lindsey to an after-school club and, on other days, to a child minder, so I can work longer. I’ll be out of the house for most of the day now, whereas I only worked part time before, and it’s much too long to leave Elsa on her own. I looked into hiring a dog walker, but with the added costs of childcare, I just can’t afford it.”

Elsa chomped on her toy, making it squeak and causing Angela to let out a half-sob, half-laugh.

“I know it’s the right thing to do for the dog,” Angela said. “But I feel sick knowing I have to give her up. Lindsey adores her, and she’ll never forgive me for this.”

“Oh dear, I feel terribly for you,” Olive said. “Is there any way—”

But before Olive could continue, Angela’s phone rang. Pulling it from the pocket of her jeans, she glanced at the screen.

“Sorry, I need to take this call,” she said. “It’s my boss at work. She promised to phone back to confirm my new shift times. I’ll speak to you later, Olive. And, um, thanks for asking after me. It was kind of you.”

Angela answered the phone and turned back into her house, giving Olive a quick wave as she disappeared inside. The dog ran after her, and by the time Olive was climbing down from the edge of the raised bed, the back door of Angela’s house was already swinging closed.

She couldn’t help but feel deep sympathy for the young woman and the horrible decision she’d had to make. It was clear that little Elsa was a much loved family pet. Olive had

seen the girl, Lindsey, playing with the animal in the garden often enough whenever she happened to glance out the bedroom window. She also saw the three of them coming and going from time to time, out on walks around the neighbourhood to exercise the dog. She could only imagine the torment that lay ahead when Angela had to surrender the creature at the rehoming centre, and how terrible that would be for the little girl.

First her father leaves. Then her mother has to send her to a childminder so she can work longer shifts. And then she's forced to say goodbye to her beloved dog.

It brought tears to Olive's eyes just thinking about it. For a long moment, she stood in the kitchen beside the sink, drumming her fingers on the counter, thinking.

An idea was forming, an idea that caught her off guard with its spontaneity.

Could *she* somehow help with Elsa?

If the only obstacle to her neighbour keeping the little dog was that there was no one to walk the animal while she was out of the house, then surely that was easily remedied? After all, Olive had precious little else to occupy her time. Surely offering to take the tiny scrap of a dog out for a walk once a day at lunchtime would be just the solution her neighbour needed?

Olive shook her head at the notion. She shouldn't interfere, not when Angela had already considered her options and made a decision.

But the poor little dog would be sent to the animal rescue centre otherwise, where it would have to wait for new owners to adopt it. And all the while, Angela's daughter would be suffering a broken heart.

Of course, she should do something to help. It would be wrong *not* to help. Olive tapped the kitchen counter with her fingers as these thoughts spun in her head.

But if she made this offer, and then was unable to walk the dog as she'd promised, that would be even worse for the

family. What if she fell ill one day, leaving Angela in the lurch? What if she couldn't get out because of the weather?

What if? What if? Olive scolded herself for focusing on scenarios that might never even happen.

But that didn't mean she shouldn't tread carefully. Olive barely knew her neighbour. The conversation they'd just had over the fence was the most they'd talked to one another since the woman moved in a year ago. It was ridiculous to launch herself into this family's troubles and try to solve them, when they were, to all intents and purposes, complete strangers.

Agitated, Olive walked through to the front room. Looking out of the window at the street beyond always helped to get her thoughts in order when they'd become a little muddled. As she watched cars drive by on the road, and people making their way up and down the street in the sunshine, she focused on what she was suggesting to herself—that she offer to walk her neighbour's dog.

Every day.

For who knew how long into the future?

If she made that offer, it would be impossible to just turn around and change her mind if she didn't want to do it anymore. That would be unforgivably cruel.

Still, Olive had owned dogs before and knew what was involved. She and Malcolm had kept a succession of lovely little terriers and Labradors over the years, and so she wasn't entirely clueless about canine matters. But it had been ten years since their last dog died, which meant ten more years on Olive's old bones and joints.

Was she even up to daily walks with an excitable dog? Of course she was. Well, she hoped she was, at least. She wasn't quite decrepit yet. And fifteen minutes ago she'd been admonishing herself for not getting out of the house enough for exercise. Walking a dog every day would certainly take care of that problem.

But what if it caused more problems she hadn't anticipated?

Olive sighed, hating to feel so conflicted. She wanted to help, but feared making a mistake in the process, a mistake that would affect the family next door far more than it would affect her.

Gazing out the window, Olive came to a decision. She would mind her own business, and let her unfortunate neighbour deal with her own problems, upsetting though they might be. It was the sensible thing to do.

Just then, a little girl came skipping down the street and past Olive's window. It was Lindsey, she realised, followed a second later by another little girl and a woman. Lindsey had a huge smile on her face as she hurried towards her front gate, her ponytail askew after a busy day at school. The child waved to her little friend, who then hurried off along the street with—Olive guessed—her mother. Angela must have made an arrangement with one of the local mothers to ensure that Lindsey got home safely on school days when she wasn't there to collect her. It was no doubt common practice for schools to insist that children were collected by a responsible adult, which was very different from how it had been in Olive's day, when children just wandered off home by themselves.

Lindsey stood for a moment, shouting something up the street to her departing friend and waving. The girl had a sweet way about her as she hopped from foot to foot and exchanged a final word with her friend, the straps of her backpack falling off her shoulders and the laces on her shoes lying half-untied on the pavement.

Just as Lindsey pushed open the gate, Olive saw Elsa the dog come tearing down the garden path towards her, barking in excitement. Lindsey dumped her backpack and squealed in delight, getting down on her knees to greet the dog. Angela appeared outside the house a second later with a smile on her face that Olive suspected wasn't easy to maintain following her bout of tears just a few moments earlier.

Olive watched the family walk back inside their house. With a soft sigh, she realised there was only one thing she could do.

Picking up her keys from the hallway table, she hurried out of the house and round to her neighbour's front door. She pressed the bell and waited for an answer, her stomach fairly somersaulting with anticipation.

"Oh, hello Olive," Angela said with a surprised half-smile when she opened the door.

"I have a proposition for you, dear," Olive said, taking a deep breath. "I can't stand the thought of you having to give up your little dog. So, I'll walk the cheeky scamp for you."

The moment the words were out of her mouth, Olive knew she'd done the right thing.

But the look on her neighbour's face told another story entirely.

ANGELA BARTON STARED at the old woman standing on her doorstep for a long moment while her brain tried to process what she'd just heard.

“What?” Angela said.

“I’ll walk your dog for you,” Olive smiled. “I’d be glad to help.”

Angela glanced over her shoulder to check that Lindsey was out of earshot. “Look, um, that’s very kind, but I don’t think that would work.”

“Oh, why not?” Olive said.

Pinching the bridge of her nose to ward off the headache building behind her eyeballs thanks to all the crying she’d done earlier, Angela sighed. “I shouldn’t have troubled you with any of this. I’m sorry I said anything. But, like I said, I can’t afford to pay someone to walk the dog.”

Olive seemed to bristle at this. “I’m certainly not expecting to be paid.”

“Well, I can’t ask you to do something like that for free.”

“You’re not asking. I’m offering.”

“Mum, who’s at the door?”

Angela turned to see Lindsey running from the kitchen with an apple in her hand, eager to see what was going on.

“It’s our neighbour, Mrs... um.”

Angela felt her face flush. She couldn't remember the old woman's second name.

"Mrs Nimmo," Olive smiled, peering around to where Lindsey stood inside the hallway. "But you can call me Olive."

"Hello, Olive," Lindsey said, and took a bite of her apple. "Do you want to see the painting I did at school today?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Angela checked her daughter.

"Sorry, Olive," Lindsey said, swallowing the chunk of fruit. "Come in and see my painting."

"Well, I don't think Mrs Nimmo has time—"

"I'd be glad to see your painting, Lindsey," Olive said, stepping inside with a smile and giving Angela no choice but to move out of the way and welcome her, or risk looking extremely rude.

Elsa chose that moment to bound into the hallway, too, her tail wagging and tongue lolling in excitement at the newcomer.

"Have you met Elsa before?" Lindsey asked.

"No, I haven't had that pleasure." Olive grinned, leaning down to the little dog and ruffling her ears. "Hello, Elsa."

"I named her Elsa after Elsa in *Frozen*," Lindsey said. "Have you seen *Frozen*?"

"I can't say I have."

"Do you want to watch it after we look at my painting?"

"Okay, Lindsey," Angela interrupted, eager to halt this train in its tracks. "I think you ought to see what homework your teachers have given you to do."

"But I want to show Olive my painting!"

"Olive will look at it in a minute," Angela said, shepherding her daughter towards the living room. "But she needs to speak to me about something and we don't want to be interrupted, okay?"

“Okay,” Lindsey agreed reluctantly, and ran for the living room. “But I don’t think I have any homework, Mum.”

Angela couldn’t help but laugh at this. “We both know that’s not true.”

By way of response, Angela heard the television being turned on. Rolling her eyes, she turned back to her neighbour and gestured for her to come through to the kitchen at the back.

“She’s a handful,” Angela said as she pushed the door over to avoid any eavesdropping.

“I can see that,” Olive laughed.

“Would you like tea or coffee?”

“Neither. I won’t keep you for long, because I’m sure you must be very busy.”

The old lady clasped her hands together, and a business-like expression crossed her face. “Now, this matter with little Elsa, here,” she said, nodding at the dog sniffing her shoes. “Obviously, it’s entirely your decision to make. But I’d be very happy to help, and to take the dog for daily walks if that means you wouldn’t have to give her up. I’m retired, as I’m sure you can guess, and my days are my own to do with as I please, which, at the moment, isn’t very much at all, for one reason or another. The truth is, it would be good for me to know I have a daily walk lined up. It would be something I’d look forward to. What’s more, I’ve owned many dogs in the past, and certainly know what has to be done while taking them for a walk. And Elsa here is a small dog, too, and one I know I’m more than capable of handling on the lead. So, what do you think?”

Angela stood in astonishment, letting this wave of information roll over her. With her case made, Olive nodded and clasped her hands together again, apparently awaiting questions.

“Olive, it’s incredibly kind of you to offer to do this,” Angela said. “But we don’t really know one another, and—”

“That occurred to me, too,” Olive interrupted. “And the more I think about it, the more I realise what a shame it is. We’ve been neighbours for a year and yet hardly know each other’s names. That’s not right. Well, now you’re in a bind where Elsa is concerned, and I can help with that, and maybe that will mean we get to know one another better. We certainly don’t have to become best friends, but we ought to be neighbourly, or at least that’s what I think. And this little dog provides us with the perfect opportunity to do just that.”

“But, you see—”

“Now, I know what you’re probably thinking,” Olive continued, waving a hand to cut off the interruption. “You’d have to give me a key to your house if I was to start walking Elsa, and you might not feel comfortable with that. Well, let me put your mind at ease, dear. I am completely trustworthy and, despite my advanced age, I’m not addled in the slightest. Your key will be safe with me. Before you moved into this house, the Davidsons lived here for fifteen years, and I had a key to their house the entire time, in case of emergencies. They also asked me to water their plants when they went away on holiday, which they did rather a lot, I must say, and I was very happy to help with that task, and there was never any kind of problem. As it happens, the Davidsons also had a key to my house, again, in case of emergencies, which they returned to me once they moved out, and now I’d like to give it to you to pop somewhere safe, for the same reason.”

Olive dug a set of house keys from the pocket of her cardigan, worked a key from the ring, and laid it down on the counter.

“And finally,” Olive said, “you should know that, before I retired, I worked as an office administrator at the local health centre, which requires honesty, integrity, and a sensible head on one’s shoulders, which I have in abundance, and which should put your mind at ease when it comes to knowing whether I can be trusted with this job.”

At last, Olive stopped talking and smiled at Angela. It was quite a whirlwind of information to absorb out of the blue.

Anytime she'd noticed her neighbour sitting at her front window, or pottering around feeding the birds in her front garden, Angela had thought she just looked like a quiet little old lady. She'd had no idea this forthright and determined person lay behind the grey hair and soft wrinkles, and she felt ashamed for having dismissed the woman as just the old lady next door.

And Olive made it all sound so easy. Having someone available to walk Elsa once a day was the answer to Angela's prayers. But that didn't mean it wasn't without its problems.

"Olive," Angela said, "I don't doubt that you're more than able to walk Elsa. And even the fact that you've offered to do this means a lot to me. But are you sure it's something you'd be able to do all the time? I'll be working Monday to Friday, and would need Elsa walked every day. What if you wanted to go away somewhere for a day trip? Or for a last minute holiday? I couldn't risk being left in the lurch suddenly, and you'd be tying yourself up in a big commitment that you might end up regretting."

Olive nodded, as if all this made perfect sense. "You're right, of course. But all I know is that I saw your daughter come home from school a few minutes ago and almost burst with happiness when that little dog came running out of the house to greet her. I can't in all good conscience know that you're preparing to give up that little dog because of the tough times you're going through, something that you said yourself would upset your daughter terribly, while I sit idle in my house. I can help you."

Angela sighed. "I don't know, Olive."

The old lady nodded again. "All this is quite sudden and out of the blue. Why don't you think about it tonight? Mull it over. Don't mention anything to your daughter yet about having to give up your little dog. Just take a night to think about what I've suggested. Then, if you want, we could give it a two week trial and see how it all goes. If you're not happy, you're still free to make whatever decision is best for you and your family. And if things work out all right, and you feel comfortable, we can keep going. And in terms of my wanting

to have a day away somewhere, or a holiday... well, goodness me, why don't we wait and cross that bridge if we get to it?"

The woman wasn't easily put off, that was for sure. And a trial period made a lot of sense. If nothing else, Angela reasoned, it gave her some breathing space before she'd have to tell Lindsey they had to give up Elsa. And if, in the long run, it turned out that there was some way to avoid doing that awful thing altogether, then all the better. The last thing she wanted was to cause any more upset in her daughter's life.

Her idiot, soon-to-be ex-husband had caused more than enough upset already.

Angela sighed and smiled. "Okay, Olive. Let's give it two weeks and see how it goes."

"Wonderful!" Olive grinned.

"And, thank you. Whatever happens, it means a lot that you offered to help."

Olive reached out and patted her hand. "You're welcome, dear."

Lindsey appeared in the kitchen just then.

"What are you talking about, Mum?" she asked.

"Well," Angela said, "Olive has offered to take Elsa for her walks during the day once I start my new shifts. Isn't that nice?"

"Uh-huh," Lindsey agreed, turning to the old lady with a bright smile on her face. "Where are you going to take her?"

"Well, I should think we'll go to the park most days," Olive replied.

"Good. Elsa likes the park." Angela nodded in approval. "Come and I'll show you where we keep Elsa's lead and poop bags."

Before Angela could say anything, Lindsey was tugging the old lady off on a tour of where Elsa's bits and bobs were kept—the hook in the hall where her lead was hung, the plastic box where her supply of poop bags were stored, the cupboard

in the kitchen where her jar of biscuits and treats belonged. Olive nodded along as Lindsey explained everything, Elsa trotting along behind the two of them before politely sitting down the moment the treat cupboard was opened, in expectation of a snack. When Olive handed the dog a gravy bone, and then gently but authoritatively dismissed the animal when it lifted its paw to beg for another, Angela wondered if this mad plan might just work after all.

As her new shift pattern didn't start for a few more days, Angela suggested they all go for a walk together the following afternoon, explaining that it would help Elsa get used to a new person walking her, but really she just wanted to be sure that Olive was up to the job. Handing Elsa a biscuit was one thing. Taking her on a walk to the park was another, and Angela wanted reassurance that her neighbour was firm on her feet and not unnerved by the other dogs in the park, especially if Elsa took it into her head to have a good noisy bark at any of them.

The old lady readily agreed to the plan, which was a relief.

“Right, now that's all sorted, I'll be off,” Olive said, turning for the door.

“You haven't looked at my painting yet!” Lindsey said, steering her into the living room before running to the coffee table where the painting had been deposited.

“Well, that's quite something,” Olive said, taking the sheet of thick card from Lindsey and examining it carefully. “I very much like the colours you've used. They're wonderful.”

“The teacher told us to be creative.” Lindsey grinned as she twisted on the spot. “That's why I made the trees pink.”

“They're magnificent.”

Angela stepped closer and looked for herself at the vibrant pink and orange painting, shot through with bold streaks of petrol blue. Olive was right, the colours were wonderful.

“Well done, Lindsey,” Angela smiled. “How about we add this one to the wall in the kitchen? Maybe we should even frame it?”

But Lindsey shook her head. “I painted this one for Daddy. I’ll give it to him the next time I see him.” She turned and looked up at Angela with an uncertain expression on her lovely little face. “Do you know when he’s coming to visit me?”

A cold, hard ache clutched at Angela’s heart as she looked at her little girl. “I’m not sure, sweetie. But I’m sure it’ll be soon.”

“Can we phone and ask him?” Lindsey said.

It broke her heart to hear her sweet daughter have to ask these questions. Angela forced a bright smile. “I’ll ring him tonight, okay?”

“Okay.”

Olive was glancing between mother and daughter as this exchange proceeded, and Angela saw the sympathy in the old woman’s eyes. Her defences flew up against it, not because she was a defensive sort of person, but because the mess into which her marriage had been plunged, and the awful impact it was having on Lindsey, were both just too raw.

“So, Olive,” she said with a cheerfulness she didn’t feel. “Shall we say four o’clock tomorrow for our walk together with Elsa?”

“That suits me fine,” Olive replied and turned for the door. “See you then.”

Once they’d said their goodbyes, Angela settled Lindsey in the living room with her homework—of which there was, of course, plenty—and returned to the kitchen to start preparing dinner. As she peeled potatoes and carrots, she thought of her neighbour’s kindness and how the gesture had touched her.

She’d felt so alone for so long, and it was almost overwhelming to have someone offer to help. Although she had no idea whether Olive taking Elsa for walks would work out in the long run, for now it gave Angela what she needed most—some breathing space, while she tried to deal with the mess she was in.

By the time the vegetables were peeled and she'd begun slicing them, her thoughts had turned to Ryan, and how much she hated him for dumping her into this whole disaster in the first place, and for what he'd done to their family. Soon, her emotions were whipping into a dark storm, and the vegetable knife was flying so fast that it was a wonder she didn't cleave the cutting board clean in two.

She stopped, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. In the last few months, she'd learned this was the only thing that stopped the upset and anger from turning into churning anxiety and blind panic. The tears came so often these days, that it was a trick she'd got used to deploying, and quickly.

Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.

At last, the anger dissolved. She'd never imagined becoming this person, this woman who felt that at any moment her life would just spin out of control. She'd thought she was set for a happy life. Married to a man she adored. Mother to a beautiful daughter. They'd built a comfortable little world together, she and Ryan.

And then he'd gone and ripped it all apart.

From the living room, Lindsey's voice drifted through to the kitchen, and as Angela focused on the air moving in and out of her lungs, she listened as her daughter chatted to the dog about the homework she was doing. Elsa was no doubt lying at Lindsey's feet, lapping up every word.

How could she ever have thought it was possible to give away that little dog? What was wrong with her? What kind of mother was she?

They'd got Elsa as a puppy when Lindsey was just three years old, and her daughter could no longer remember a time when the dog hadn't been part of the family. Angela still remembered the excitement and joy on Lindsey's face when she and Ryan had brought the dog home and surprised her with it. It had been one of the best days they'd all had together, filled with happiness and laughter. Lindsey had fallen head over heels in love with the puppy that day, and losing Elsa

now would crush her. Angela knew that, and yet she'd been ready to tell her they'd have to give Elsa away.

If it hadn't been for Olive hearing her crying through the fence, she might at this very moment be telling Lindsey that they'd have to take Elsa to the animal sanctuary and leave her there. The coldness of it sent a chill over her skin.

How had it come to this?

It had come to this because of Ryan.

Ryan, the father of her child, who Lindsey adored and desperately wanted to see.

Angela had promised Lindsey she'd call him tonight to arrange a visit, but there was no point putting off until later what could be done right now. Setting aside the vegetables, she picked up her phone and sent Ryan a text message. *Lindsey is asking to see you. Can you phone me to set something up?*

She pressed *Send*, then tossed the phone aside, wondering if he'd bother responding.

And now she was thinking of him again and feeling the anger build once more. It wasn't healthy. It had to stop.

Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.

Angela picked up the knife and finished preparing the vegetables. One thing at a time, she told herself. For the next fifteen minutes, she'd think only about making dinner. Chopping, stirring, roasting, mashing. And then, after that, there'd be serving, eating, clearing, washing. Lindsey liked to help with the washing up, and it was their little ritual to take care of the kitchen together after their evening meal, tidying everything back to where it belonged.

Then it was bath time, pyjamas, television, and story time in bed.

All good things.

Angela's phone rang and when she glanced at the screen, she saw it was Ryan.

“I got your message and thought I’d give you a quick phone,” Ryan said when she answered.

From the background noise, it sounded like he was driving. He spent a lot of time in his car on account of his job as a sales rep. In their last months as a married couple, he’d barely been at home at all.

“Sorry, I’d love to see Lindsey,” Ryan continued, “but I’m a bit busy at the moment. Can it wait a few weeks?”

He said it so casually, as if he was delaying an inconvenient dental appointment, and Angela felt the familiar anger flash once more.

“Ryan, she’s your daughter,” she said, determined to keep her voice level. “She misses you. She’s asking to see you.”

“I know, I know, I get it,” he said in that impatient tone she’d heard so often in the year before they’d separated. “But Cleo’s got antenatal appointments coming up this week, and we’re still decorating the nursery and moving Cleo’s stuff into the new flat. Just give me a couple of weeks, okay?”

Angela closed her eyes, pushing back the wave of hurt. Ryan reeled off these things that were happening in his life as if it was all perfectly normal for him to be having a baby with another woman. The way he spoke, she knew he expected her to make allowances for all this, and that he probably thought she was being unreasonable in asking him to spend time with his daughter in the first place. He had this knack of making his deplorable behaviour sound completely normal, and making her feel like the one causing all the trouble.

But for Lindsey’s sake, she had to persevere, no matter how much the man made her want to scream.

“Ryan, she hasn’t seen you for weeks,” Angela said. “Surely you can find a couple of hours for her? She’s your daughter, for God’s sake.”

“Look, I’m doing my best, okay?” he snapped. “But all you’re interested in is putting me on a guilt trip, and you’re using Lindsey to do it.”

Angela pulled the phone from her ear and actually stared at it. Had she really been married to this man for nine years? Had she really once fallen in love with him? And had he always been this same selfish idiot and she just hadn't realised it?

"Don't start with me, Ryan," she said. "All I'm trying to do is help my daughter stay in contact with her father, even although he doesn't deserve her."

"Oh, here we go. Everything's my fault."

"Yes, Ryan, it is your fault," she said, her voice almost a hiss as she fought against raising it and alerting Lindsey to the fight now taking place on the phone. "You're the one who had the affair. You're the one who got some other woman pregnant. You're the one who betrayed us and walked out."

"Well, excuse me for falling in love!" he shouted.

She couldn't help but bark out a bitter laugh. "Oh, grow up, Ryan."

"I don't have time for this. I said I'd let you know when I was free to see Lindsey, and I will."

"Great, I'm sure she'll be touched to know you're trying so hard to work her into your busy schedule."

She hung up before he could respond, stabbing her finger against the phone screen to end the call as her blood boiled. It was no more than she'd expected from him, but it still hurt. Ryan walking away from their marriage was one thing. But Ryan walking away from his daughter was gut-wrenching.

And even more gut-wrenching was the knowledge that while Lindsey was begging to see her father, he was setting up home with another woman and preparing to start a new family. Lindsey knew nothing yet of the baby that was coming. She didn't even know her father was living with someone else. Ryan had only seen Lindsey twice since the separation, and had told Angela he wanted to 'keep things simple for now' by not mentioning anything about the new direction his life was taking, so as 'not to confuse her'.

But that wasn't the reason. Ryan was just a coward, plain and simple. Angela had a sneaking suspicion that if she wasn't

constantly badgering him to see Lindsey, he wouldn't bother with her at all. He'd just walk away and start again with a clean slate, with this Cleo woman and the baby they were having together. He'd turn his back on his daughter and not think twice about it.

She had no idea how a parent could do such a thing. But Ryan could do it. Ryan *was* doing it.

"Mum!" Lindsey said, suddenly appearing in the kitchen. "I finished my homework. Can I set the table?"

Angela tucked her phone in her jeans pocket and turned to her daughter with a bright smile. "Of course, sweetie."

She watched as Lindsey gathered cutlery from the drawer and carried it to the table.

"Add a couple of spoons to our place settings," Angela said. "Maybe we ought to have ice cream and chocolate sprinkles for pudding."

"Yay!" Lindsey cheered, causing Elsa to run into the kitchen and bark in excitement.

Laughing, Angela felt the anger and darkness caused by her phone call with Ryan ebbing away. She set the potatoes to boil and turned on the oven to bake the chicken she'd marinated. Later, she'd have to think up some excuse to tell Lindsey why her dad couldn't see her.

But not right now. Right now, she wouldn't think about Ryan anymore. Instead, she'd think about dinner, and ice cream for dessert, and an evening spent at home with her sweet daughter and their silly little dog.

All good things.

Breathe in, breathe out, Angela reminded herself. Breathe in, breathe out.

“So, am I right in saying you work at the supermarket over on Stratton Road?” Olive asked Angela.

As agreed, they’d come to Peartree Park to test drive Olive’s capabilities with the little dog, Elsa, and Olive was keen to make a good impression. The late afternoon was sunny, with hints of spring warmth floating on the breeze. Lindsey had brought her bike, which she was now riding up and down the paths, while Angela walked and chatted with Olive.

Although the young woman was pretending to keep an eye on her daughter, Olive could see that her attention was on how she herself was handling Elsa. She was being scrutinised and judged carefully, and she had no complaints about that. It stood to reason that Angela wouldn’t agree long-term to this dog-walking arrangement if she had any doubts about Olive’s abilities, and so it was important that she put the young woman’s mind at ease.

While Angela was rating her dog handling skills, Olive thought it only made good sense for them to use the time to get to know one another a little better.

“I think I might have noticed you coming and going in your supermarket uniform, you see,” Olive said. “I don’t shop there myself, but I recognise the brand colours.”

Angela smiled. “You’re very observant, Olive.”

“That’s what comes from spending far too much time looking out my front window.”

“It’s your window, you can look out of it as much as you want. But you’re right, I work at the supermarket. I’m a supervisor there.”

“Good for you. Do you enjoy it?”

“Actually, I do. Nice colleagues, nice customers, well, most of them anyway. And I’m lucky the manager let me increase my hours. Another supervisor had just handed in her notice, and if it hadn’t been for that, I might not have been able to get the extra time.”

“I’m glad it worked out that way for you, even if it means more juggling with your daughter and other responsibilities.”

“Lindsey and I will get into the swing of things soon enough. Once we have a new routine, we’ll be fine.”

Elsa tugged on the lead just then, straining to reach a soggy piece of cheeseburger abandoned on the grass verge beside the path. Feeling Angela’s gaze on her, Olive shortened the lead before the dog could get closer to the food.

“Elsa, leave it!” Olive said firmly, and clicked her fingers.

She wasn’t sure how the dog would respond to this command, and was pleased when the tone of her voice caught the animal’s attention, causing Elsa to turn away from the cheeseburger and look up at her with interest. As a reward, Olive pulled a small treat from her pocket and gave it to the dog, then resumed walking before Elsa could remember that she still hadn’t taken a chomp out of the abandoned cheeseburger.

“Wow, I’m impressed,” Angela said. “Usually, I never see these bits of food on the ground until it’s too late and Elsa’s already munching on them.”

“I’m afraid I know from bitter experience that nothing good ever comes of allowing dogs to eat rancid food off the ground,” Olive laughed. “My last dog, Alfie, was a terror for that sort of behaviour, which only ever resulted in me mopping disgusting dog vomit up off the floor several hours later. Not that he ever learned anything from these experiences, I must say.”

“How long ago did you have Alfie?” Angela asked.

“Oh, ten years ago now. He was a good dog, his eating habits notwithstanding. A sweet soul. I still miss having him around the house.”

“Do you ever think of getting another dog?”

“For a while, I did. My husband, Malcolm, was very keen to get another. He loved to get out of the house and walk, and having a dog gave him a good reason to be out pacing about the streets. I’m sure we would’ve adopted another one eventually, but Malcolm became ill not long after we lost Alfie, and a dog would have been out of the question.”

“I’m sorry, Olive. What happened? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“Not in the slightest, dear. He suffered a terrible stroke and required a great deal of care afterwards. He never fully recovered, and his health deteriorated. After Malcolm died, I thought briefly about getting a dog for company around the house. But I worried too much about what would become of the poor thing if something happened to me. I’m no spring chicken.”

“Judging by the pace you’re setting on this walk, I’d say you have nothing to worry about on that score, Olive.”

“I rather think Elsa is setting the pace,” Olive laughed. “But I shall keep up with the little creature, you mark my words.”

They turned off the main path and set off along the edge of the duck pond, which Lindsey was already circling on her bike. A woman appeared on the path further along, pushing a young boy in a wheelchair, and Olive watched as Lindsey slowed down and veered to the side so as not to startle them. As she passed by, she gave the boy in the wheelchair a cheerful wave, which he returned.

“She’s a good girl, that daughter of yours,” Olive said to Angela. “Very considerate for someone so young.”

“Thank you, Olive,” Angela replied, her gaze on her daughter and with a misty look in her eyes. “She really is one

in a million. Sometimes I can't believe she's mine."

"Oh, nonsense, I'm sure she takes after you in every way." Olive thought for a moment about whether she should ask the next question that sprang so naturally into her mind, wondering if she might be stepping over a line. She decided to risk it.

"Has Lindsey adjusted to her father not living at home anymore?" she asked quietly.

Angela's eyes swung from her daughter to Olive. A flinty expression sparked there for a moment, then seemed to melt away as she gave a resigned sigh.

"I think it's too early to tell," Angela said. "She was upset when he left, of course she was, but I'm not sure it's really sunk in for her that he's gone. When he moved out, I arranged for Lindsey to spend the day at one of her friend's houses, so she wouldn't be around to see him packing up his things and leaving. I didn't want to put her through that, which is just as well, because the two of us fought like cat and dog while he was loading all his stuff into suitcases and boxes."

Olive thought back to the January afternoon when she'd seen Ryan toss the suitcase into his car, Angela hot on his heels, the two of them quite obviously sniping at one another. "I'm sure you did the right thing, protecting Lindsey from that."

"I hope so. Although, things got complicated after that."

"How so?"

Angela shrugged. "I'm sure no marriage breakdown is ever easy. And no one's ever completely blameless. But there's a lot Lindsey doesn't know about what happened. Unfortunately, I can't protect her from it forever."

She blew out a long breath, and Olive watched the young woman as they slowed their pace so that Elsa could sniff at the edge of the duck pond.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to get all morose," Angela said with a quick laugh.

“You didn’t. I’m happy to listen.”

She gave another shrug. “I haven’t had anyone to talk to about any of this.”

“Well, talk away, my dear. Whatever you tell me will go no further.”

Angela smiled and looked out at the ducks splashing across the pond. “Before we moved to Hamblehurst, we lived in Guildford, and I had friends there I could chat to about something as serious as this. We moved here because Ryan got a new job near Portsmouth, and we liked the look of Hamblehurst as a nice base for him to commute from, and with a good school for Lindsey. After the chaos of relocating, and starting a new job myself, and getting Lindsey settled into a new school, I didn’t realise I’d slipped out of contact with so many people until it was too late. And then, when I really needed a friend, I was too embarrassed to get back in touch with people because I’d left it so long.”

Olive nodded. “That’s life. People are busy and lose track of time. No need to beat yourself up about it.”

They strolled in silence for a minute. Olive thought the young woman had decided against talking more about the end of her marriage and the apparently crucial information that had so far been kept from Lindsey. And if she chose to say nothing further about it, Olive wouldn’t press things. It was clear from her neighbour’s face that this was a difficult issue for her, and they were only supposed to be having a quick walk around the park with the dog, not engaging in an in-depth heart-to-heart.

Still, Olive couldn’t help but feel that Angela probably needed to share her misery with someone. Finally, the young woman took a deep breath and started talking again.

“The day after Ryan moved out,” Angela said, “he spoke to Lindsey on the phone and told her he’d just gone to stay with his mother for a few weeks over in Godalming. He’d already told me he wasn’t ready to tell Lindsey that we’d separated, and that it would be better to say his mother wasn’t well and he was looking after her for a while. I hated the idea and fought him over it. I hated knowing we were lying to our

daughter. But I went along with it, thinking it would just be for a little while until Ryan got himself sorted and found a new place to stay. I thought it might even be good to wait until we could show Lindsey where her dad was living now, so she knew that although he'd moved out of our house, he had somewhere nice to stay. After the anger and emotion of our actual separation, I thought maybe it was best to wait until we were both calmer before we told Lindsey we had separated. So, I went along with the story that Ryan was staying with his mother."

Olive nodded, thinking this through. "I suppose the actual truth is rather different?"

Angela shook her head, her expression dark, and she waited until Lindsey was pedalling around the far side of the duck pond before she spoke again.

"Ryan had been having an affair with another woman," she finally said. "They're living together now, at her flat in Bognor Regis. And in a couple of months, they'll be welcoming their new baby into the world."

Olive gasped. "Oh, Angela. Good grief, I hardly know what to say."

"It's been almost four months since Ryan moved out, but he's only seen Lindsey twice in all that time. And he refused to sit down, the three of us together, so we could tell Lindsey we'd separated." She let out a sour laugh. "I had to be the one to explain what was going on. I had to be the bad guy and tell Lindsey her dad had left."

"How unfair. And how has she taken the news about her father having a new baby on the way?"

Angela once more shook her head. "I haven't told her. I can't. Lindsey thinks Ryan's still staying at his mother's house. She has no idea. And Ryan keeps putting off seeing Lindsey, saying he's too busy, which just makes it worse. She's such a sweet kid, and I know it's breaking her heart not seeing him. I can't imagine how much worse it's going to be when I finally have to tell Lindsey that her dad's got a new girlfriend and that she's also got a new half-brother or half-

sister on the way that Ryan's kept secret from her all this time."

"Goodness, Angela," Olive said. "That really is a great deal of upset and misery. I feel terribly for you."

Lindsey cycled past them, ringing the bell on the handlebars and laughing when Elsa barked in excitement. When she was once more out of earshot, Angela turned to Olive.

"We'll say no more about it," Angela said. "The truth is, I try not to think about it at all. Even now, I can hardly get my head around it. And all that matters to me is making sure Lindsey is okay. Ryan walked out of her life with barely a backward glance, and now I need to do whatever it takes to make my little girl as happy as possible. Which means not dwelling on things I can't control, and that only make me upset."

Reaching out, Olive laid a hand on the young woman's arm and squeezed. "I admire your courage and your strength a great deal."

"Ha-ha, if only I had either of those things," Angela shrugged.

"But of course you do. You're facing life head-on, even if it isn't the life you thought you'd be living, and that takes tremendous courage and strength. Good grief, you were even willing to make the very hard decision to give up your much loved family dog in order to work longer hours and make sure that you could provide for your daughter. That takes steel. And you have it in abundance, young lady."

"If I have to give up Elsa, it's because I'm not able to find a way to keep her while also juggling my job. And not finding a way means breaking my daughter's heart, which would make me just as bad as her father."

Olive frowned. "It most certainly would not. We might not know each other very well yet, but I won't stand for hearing you say something so foolish."

Angela straightened her shoulders and a wry smile crept to her lips. “You’re a little scary when you’re giving someone a telling off.”

“I’m pleased to hear it. After a long career spent wrangling confused and over-worked GPs and nurses at the health centre, it’s nice to know I still have the ability to bring someone to their senses when they need it.”

Angela laughed, and Olive was pleased to see her expression lighten. She decided she’d ask no more about the sad business concerning the young woman’s husband and his departure from the family home. The last thing she wanted was to upset her new friend, when there were already so many things on the young woman’s mind.

“Well,” Olive said, looking around the park. “I see a few dog walkers coming our way and Elsa here is fairly perking up at the sight of them. Perhaps you can give me an idea about who is friend and who is foe.”

For the next fifteen minutes, they strolled the path beyond the duck pond in the direction of the play park at the far end, while Angela greeted passing dog walkers she recognised and introduced Olive to them. Elsa helped matters by wagging her tail at the dogs she liked and simply turning her back on the ones she disliked, which Olive thought was an extremely wise way to proceed. By the time they turned for the park exit, she was feeling pleased with how things had gone on their test outing together.

However, Olive soon realised she may have congratulated herself too soon. As they reached the gates, a sudden tension sprang along the length of Elsa’s lead, and when Olive looked up, she saw a large yellow Labrador pulling its owner into the park so fast that the animal’s claws could be heard scrabbling along the hard path.

“Oh, watch out,” Angela said, her tone tight. “That’s Mac the Labrador, and he’s a bit of a nuisance. If there’s any dog likely to cause Elsa to react, it’s Mac.”

Mac’s owner, a woman who appeared to be in her sixties or thereabouts, was barely staying upright as the dog hurtled

into the park, dragging her along like someone who'd found themselves strapped to a set of water-skis and lashed to the back of a fast-moving motorboat. As soon as the crazed Mac spied the other dogs in the park, Elsa amongst them, he began barking and yanking all the harder on his lead, and the previous peace and quiet of the park was soon shattered as the other dogs responded by barking in answer, while Mac's owner yelled fruitlessly at the creature to calm down.

Elsa let out a volley of barks as Mac lumbered towards them, and Olive felt the lead tighten all the more.

"It's all right, Elsa," Lindsey called out to the little dog as she cycled ahead of them. "Just ignore that silly dog!"

"Yap! Yap!" Elsa responded, and pulled even harder on the lead as Mac hurtled along the path.

"Do you want me to take Elsa?" Angela asked, turning to Olive with a worried expression on her face as she glanced at the tension in the lead and the yapping Elsa and the way Olive's arm was being pulled ever harder.

Olive sensed that a key moment of judgement had arrived. In any park, there were always any number of boisterous dogs, triggering discord amongst the other canines. Mac was clearly one of those dogs. If Olive couldn't keep Elsa under control, and keep her safe, in this moment of mayhem, Angela would almost certainly think twice about whether it was a good idea to allow her to walk the dog at all.

Decisive action was required. As Mac galloped closer, its owner unable to get the beast under control, Olive turned and tugged Elsa off the path and on to the grass verge, removing them both from the path of the marauding yellow Lab. Elsa resisted at first, clearly keen to stand her ground, but the small dog was no match for Olive, and as soon as they left the path and ducked into the trees not far beyond, she distracted the little animal with a treat from her pocket. After a final yap towards Mac, by now hurtling past them on its way deeper into the park, Elsa's full attention swung to Olive, and the dog planted herself on the ground, paw in the air, to receive the snack being held out.

“Well done,” Angela said, stepping on to the grass verge towards them. “You moved so fast just then, I wasn’t sure what was even happening.”

“That’s the trick,” Olive replied, rewarding Elsa with a second treat. “Be fast and don’t give the dog time to realise that you’re turning them in another direction. Once they begin barking like that, they’re beyond verbal instruction. The key is to turn swiftly, so long as you make sure not to pull them too hard, and to surprise them into focusing on yourself rather than on whatever has got them so riled up.”

Angela looked impressed. “I’ll have to remember that one. Whenever we bump into Mac, all I ever end up doing is hauling Elsa along behind me like a sack of potatoes. It’s a wonder I don’t yank her poor head off.”

“Well, there you go. Next time, you can try this trick for yourself and see if it works.”

“Olive is the dog wizard!” Lindsey announced, as she circled them again on her bike.

“Why, thank you, dear.”

With the path now clear of Mac the Menace, they resumed their walk towards the park exit. Olive could feel Angela’s gaze on her, and turned to her new friend with a grin.

“So,” Olive said. “Did I pass the test? Am I now authorised to walk Elsa on your behalf?”

“Of course you are,” Angela laughed. “I never doubted you knew what you were doing, but...”

“But you have a responsibility to be sure. Well, all I can say is that I’m glad I’ll be able to help.”

“I still want to see how we get on for the first couple of weeks before you commit to anything beyond that. I don’t like the idea of you feeling obligated and later wishing you hadn’t offered because there are other things you’d rather do with your time.”

“Let me worry about what I do and don’t do with my time,” Olive said. “It’s not like I’m giving up an extensive set

of daily social commitments in order to walk your dog, Angela. If anything, you're doing me a favour, giving me a reason to get out and about every day."

"Did you need a reason?"

Olive laughed. "That's a good question. Strictly speaking, of course not. I can come and go as I please. But the truth is that this last winter has been a tough one for me, and I'm sorry to say I've rather slipped out of contact with a great many people for one reason or another. Many of the reasons I had for getting out and about have sadly disappeared. And while it's perfectly true that I could come here to the park anytime I wanted and have a nice stroll around, for some reason I like the idea of having Elsa here as a reason to come. That might sound rather odd."

Angela watched her for a moment as they stepped through the park gates. "No, it doesn't sound odd."

"A dog is a little like a shield, in some respects, for a person out walking by themselves. My late husband, Malcolm, always felt that way, and used to say that when he was out walking our own dogs through the years, he always felt he had a legitimate reason to be strolling the streets or the country lanes or whatever. When we were between dogs, and he went out walking alone, he said he felt strange sometimes, especially late at night, out strolling the streets. Now that I'm an old lady, I like the idea of a dog as company while I get some exercise. So, rest assured I'm looking forward to this new arrangement with Elsa."

"Well, I still want to wait and see how the next couple of weeks go, and how you feel about things." As they crossed the road and began walking towards home, Angela frowned. "Although I still don't like the idea of you doing all this for free."

"Good grief, young lady," Olive said, waving an arm. "You are determined to look a gift horse in the mouth, aren't you? Do you want me to rescind my offer altogether?"

"No, of course not, but..." Angela's anxious expression turned to a smile. "You really are terrifying when you're

scolding someone, Olive.”

“Then I suggest you don’t give me a reason to scold you.”

Angela laughed. “Noted.”

Olive smirked and batted her neighbour on the arm. “You start your new longer shift the day after tomorrow, is that right?”

Angela nodded. “Nine until five.”

“Shall I pop in to collect Elsa for her walk just after lunch time?”

“Sounds good.”

“That’s settled then.”

Above them, clouds had swept in from the west, blotting out the blue skies, and Olive felt raindrops falling. Lindsey had already whizzed away on her bike further along the pavement, and the hood was up on her yellow anorak as she waited for them both to catch up before turning onto Foxglove Street.

“Let’s get home before we all get a soaking,” Olive said as Elsa blinked up at the rain.

“I second that,” Angela agreed.

As they hurried home to Foxglove Street, Olive felt excitement at the prospect of the new dog-walking days that lay ahead, and a deep happiness at having taken the chance to knock on her neighbour’s door and offer to lend a hand.

She only hoped that the next few walks with Elsa would go as well as this one had.

THE SUPERMARKET where Angela worked was busier than usual on the day she began her new longer shifts, and she was rushed off her feet from the moment she clocked in.

First, she had to deal with a major milk spillage in the chilled aisle, then sort out a malfunctioning till, then scramble around to find someone to cover an unexpected staff absence. Add in the higher customer footfall thanks to a special offer that the store was running in the bakery department, and the morning flew by in the blink of an eye.

But even as she worked, thoughts crowded her mind about whether everything would go okay with Olive's first solo walk with Elsa. Would the old lady cope on her own? Would she remember to lock the door behind her after collecting Elsa from the house? What if she forgot what Angela had told her about the door sometimes sticking in the frame, and Olive couldn't even get into the house in the first place?

Just after noon, she was hurrying to the staff room to get her phone from her locker in order to send Olive a quick message to make sure everything was still all right with her Elsa-walking schedule, when an elderly customer nabbed her in the tinned goods aisle and asked for help to reach something on a high shelf, before inquiring about the location of another item that turned out to be out of stock, causing Angela to spend time helping the customer find an alternative replacement.

Then a sudden queue of customers appeared, waiting to get through the tills, and Angela had to jump on a free till to help

deal with the backlog.

And then one of the staff members who worked in the supermarket café had an accident with the hot drinks machine, prompting Angela to rush to the scene to deliver first aid. The young café worker hadn't burned himself too badly while manhandling the machine in contravention of the clear instructions printed on the thing, but he still needed attention and then to be sent home, leaving Angela to fill in countless forms about the incident. She also had to step in to cover the missing member of staff in the café, and, as it was lunchtime, that meant a busy hour-long stint dealing with customer food orders and running the till until the shift change-over at one o'clock.

Reluctantly, Angela realised that checking up on Olive and Elsa would just have to wait.

Having got the café's hot drinks machine back up and running again, and restocked the sandwich cabinet, Angela positioned herself on the café till while the other two café workers bustled around dealing with the hot food orders and delivering trays to customers waiting at tables. She tried not to think too much about whether or not Olive had made it into the house, or whether she and Elsa were okay on their walk together.

"Hi, how are you doing?" said a customer as he rolled his tray along the shelf that ran the length of the café counter.

Angela glanced up and smiled. "I'm good, thanks. Are you ordering hot food?"

The man shook his head. "Just a tea and this sticky bun," he said, waving the cellophane-wrapped item in the air. "Second thoughts, I'll take a sandwich too, while I've got the chance."

Angela rang up the order while the man inspected the sandwich selection and added a chicken salad roll to his tray.

"Did Lindsey have fun at the school Easter concert the other week?" he asked.

Confused, Angela looked again at the man. Noticing her expression, he laughed.

“Sorry, I thought you recognised me,” he said. “We spoke for a few seconds at the Easter concert, but there was a lot going on. My daughter, Shannon, is in the same class as Lindsey. They were both in Easter egg costumes for the concert.”

A faint memory stirred. The Easter concert had only been a few weeks ago, although with everything going on in her life these days, it felt like far longer. She’d chatted to several parents after the concert, Angela now remembered, but hadn’t been able to hang around for long as she’d gone there straight after a morning shift, and had to hurry home to let poor Elsa out.

As she looked more closely at the man now, she vaguely remembered exchanging some kind of chit-chat about the work involved in making the Easter egg costumes their daughters were wearing, and joking about how the school seemed to think that parents had nothing else to do with their time but design and create elaborate get-ups for their children to wear.

“Sorry,” Angela now said. “I do recognise you. It’s Mike, right?”

“Mark,” he grinned.

“Mark, sorry.” Blushing, she glanced over his shoulder, hoping for a queue of people waiting to be served, but of course now that she’d been embarrassed into demonstrating that she couldn’t remember his name, there was no queue she could use as an excuse to hurry him along. “I’m terrible with names.”

He gave an easy shrug. “Don’t worry about it.”

There was a smooth lilt in his voice, and his relaxed response made Angela feel better about forgetting his name. It was almost as if calm gentle waves were rippling off the man, and their effect was soothing.

“So, what did Lindsey do with the Easter egg costume you made her?” he asked.

“Well, she said she wanted to keep it, but that idea lasted for about two days and then she got fed up tripping over it in her room,” Angela laughed. “So, it ended up in the bin last week.”

Mark nodded knowingly. “Same here. I wish the school would stop putting us parents through this torture. It took me three nights to make that costume of Shannon’s, sticking bits of tin foil and coloured paper onto that huge egg-shaped cardboard thing they sent the kids home with. Shannon was supposed to do most of the work, but they lose interest pretty quickly in my experience.”

“Lindsey’s the same. But at least we’re all finished on the costume front for a while.”

He gave her a puzzled look. “Is Lindsey not taking part in the spring musical?”

“What spring musical?” Angela said, frowning as she counted Mark’s change from the till.

“The school’s putting on a spring musical at the end of May to raise money,” Mark said. “Didn’t you get the letter the other day?”

Angela sighed. “Lindsey must have forgotten to give it to me. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

She made a mental note to go through her daughter’s school bag that night and check for missing communications from the school. Lindsey had almost missed signing up for a school trip last autumn because Angela hadn’t got the letter until the very last moment, and ever since she’d made a point of inspecting her school bag a couple of times a week. But things had been so busy these last few days, that particular chore had slipped her mind.

“They’re doing some kind of garden theme for the musical,” Mark explained. “Shannon says she wants to dress up as a tulip, so that’s another job to be dealt with. My guess is Lindsey will do something similar.”

Angela sighed. “Thanks for the heads-up. I think.”

Mark laughed and shoved his change in his pocket. “Sorry to be the bearer of bad news. Maybe us parents should get together and form a union, and fight back against this tyranny of endless school concerts.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

He picked up his tray and smiled. “Right, I better get this tea and roll and sticky bun down me before I have to get to work. Bye, Angela.”

“Bye, Mark.”

He took a table by the window and opened a newspaper to read while he ate his snack and drank his tea. As Angela served a new customer who appeared at the counter, she thought about what Mark had said about sorting out his daughter’s Easter concert costume.

Not many fathers would get involved in that kind of thing. Ryan certainly never had when he’d been living at home. At least his complete lack of interest in Lindsey’s school activities meant that things weren’t much different for Angela these days, because she’d always handled all that kind of stuff by herself, anyway.

But as she worked the café till and dealt with customer orders, she couldn’t help but steal a glance in Mark’s direction, as he finished his tea and bun. She thought about how much his wife must love having a man around the house who actually took an interest in those things and who was happy and willing to carry some of the load.

A few minutes later, the one o’clock shift change happened in the café, and Angela was able to leave the staff to get on with things. Before catching up on her own tasks, she decided to take her break and phone Olive to see if she’d been out yet with Elsa for her walk.

But she hadn’t even made it halfway to the staff room at the back of the store when one of the supermarket tills started acting up again. Detouring to work out what was wrong with

the blasted thing, she figured she'd be lucky to phone Olive at all today at this rate.

And lucky to survive this first long shift, judging by the way things were going so far.

* * *

As Olive approached the duck pond in Peartree Park, she was feeling very pleased with herself. So far, her first dog walk alone with Elsa had gone perfectly.

She'd successfully navigated the barrage of locks on Angela's front door, which included a rather stiff mortice lock and a latch, and had remembered her neighbour's advice to give the door a good shove when she opened it, on account of it tending towards stickiness on damp and rainy days. Elsa had emitted a little *woof!* of surprise when Olive had appeared in the house, before eagerly accepting a gravy bone and then whirling in excited circles as she attached the lead to the dog's collar.

The walk to the park was simple enough, and a few other dog walkers had nodded hello as she'd passed and glanced at Elsa in apparent confusion, which Olive assumed was because they recognised the little dog but not the person in charge of walking it. The dog walking set, Olive knew from her long-ago days of dog ownership, were familiar with which dog belonged to whom, and seeing Elsa in the company of a stranger would no doubt have them all scratching their heads at the mystery.

The park was quiet, this being early afternoon, and Olive enjoyed ambling along the paths, admiring the cherry blossom on the trees as Elsa sniffed here and there and did her business. It had rained earlier in the day, but the showers had passed by the time Olive set out, leaving behind the fresh scent of wet spring leaves and newly growing grass. Blackbirds were hopping around and feasting on worms brought to the surface by the rain, and the air was filled with the sounds of cheerful birdsong and the ducks quacking at one another in the pond.

Olive took in a deep lungful of the sweet spring air, feeling pleased to be out with the little scrappy Elsa on such a fine afternoon. She nodded to dog walkers, and smiled at a couple of young mothers who were drinking coffee together while their toddlers romped around the play park, and admired the beds of yellow and pink pansies that lined the route to the park fountain on the other side of the pond, which was gushing and frothing as if celebrating the arrival of spring after the long winter.

“Yoo-hoo! Olive, is that you?”

Olive turned from the fountain at the sound of her name and saw a woman on the other side of the flower beds. She was hard to miss in a vibrant green rain jacket and with a sunshine yellow scarf whipping at her neck, and with astonishing magenta coloured hair which was obviously out of a bottle. The woman was waving madly in Olive’s direction and bouncing on the soles of her shoes, and as Olive peered in her direction, she realised that the woman’s face, if nothing else, was familiar.

“Glenda?” Olive called out in surprise.

The woman’s grin widened and she clapped her hands together. “Olive, it *is* you!” She hurried around the fountain and when she reached Olive, pulled her into a fierce hug. “It’s *so* nice to see you! But for goodness’ sake, where have you been all these months? We’ve missed you at the lunch club.”

Of course, Olive realised, that’s where she knew Glenda from—the lunch club she used to attend in the church hall. She’d recognised the face, and located the name, and was relieved not to have had to quiz the woman about exactly how they were acquainted. Back when Olive had attended the lunch club, Glenda had looked nothing like she did now, which was no doubt why she’d struggled to place her.

“I stopped going to the lunch club,” Olive informed her. “The company changed at my table, and I didn’t much care for it any longer, so I gave it up. It wasn’t worth the trip to the church hall when I didn’t enjoy myself.”

Glenda swept a lock of garishly dyed hair from her face and frowned. “The church hall? Oh, but we haven’t been at the church hall for a while now.”

Now Olive was confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, a few of us felt the same way about the direction the lunch club was going in, and formed a break-away group of our own,” Glenda said cheerfully. “Didn’t you know?”

“I hadn’t a clue,” Olive said.

“Perhaps you stopped attending before we had a chance to tell you. But some of the ladies felt, like you, that we weren’t having as much fun as we used to have at the lunch club and so we set up our own. I’m sure we would’ve told you about it, you being a long-standing member, but you must not have been around. Didn’t anyone send you a text message?”

“I’m not sure that any of the folks at the lunch club ever had my mobile number, truth be told.”

“Well, there you go then,” Glenda said. “It’s a good job I bumped into you in that case. You’re missing out on a grand time.”

“Oh?”

Glenda nodded enthusiastically. “There are usually about eight of us ladies, and we get together every two weeks. Instead of getting together in a draughty church hall, we meet in the pub! And, let me tell you, we certainly enjoy sipping a glass of wine or two while we eat. No more of that hideous orange squash they served us at the church hall.”

Glenda chuckled, then noticed Elsa for the first time and leaned down to pat her on the head. “Oh, is this your little dog? How adorable!”

“Actually, it’s my neighbour’s dog. Her name is Elsa, and I take her for a walk during the day while my neighbour’s at work.”

“Well, isn’t that kind of you, Olive.” Glenda gave Elsa a final pat on the head. “You always were a lovely woman, and that’s why we miss you at our lunch club. I was just saying to

the other women at our last lunch that it was a shame we didn't see you anymore. They'll be thrilled to have you back amongst us! So, shall I give you the details of where and when we meet these days? We moved our lunch from Mondays to Thursdays, because Thursdays are more fun, and after trying out a few different places over the last few weeks, we've settled on The White Hart. It's the pub just past the pound shop on the high street. Do you know it?"

Olive was about to say yes, she did know The White Hart, and that, yes, it would be very nice indeed to come along, but then a thought occurred to her.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to come along, Glenda. You see, I agreed to walk Elsa around lunch time every weekday for my neighbour. We only just agreed on the arrangement, and I can't let her down."

Glenda looked crestfallen. "Well, there must be some work around, surely?"

"My neighbour really is relying on me. Maybe I could get back to you?"

"Of course. In the meantime, take my number, and I'll take yours, so we don't fall out of touch again. And we'd just love to see you at our lunches, Olive. We have tremendous fun together. It's all so much more enjoyable when the company is fine and there are a few bottles of house wine doing the rounds. And The White Hart does an OAP special at lunchtime, so it's all very reasonable."

Glenda's enthusiasm was contagious. Olive could already imagine herself back amongst the ladies she'd known from the old lunch club, enjoying their company over a meal and some wine. It sounded very pleasant indeed.

But after convincing Angela not to send poor Elsa away for rehoming, and insisting that she was free at lunchtime to walk the animal, Olive couldn't help but feel it would be a poor show to turn around after her first day and announce that she might have to change their arrangements after all. That was what Angela had been most concerned about.

Olive wondered whether she could give Elsa two short walks instead of one long one on the days when the lunch club met. That might be a decent compromise. She'd have to consider how to bring it up with Angela, to avoid her assuming the arrangement was already onerous.

"Let me think it over and see what's possible," Olive said as she and Glenda swapped numbers.

"Fine," Glenda said with a smile. "And in case it's helpful, dogs are welcome in The White Hart, you know."

"They are?"

"Absolutely, if they're well-behaved. Perhaps little Elsa here would like to come along to our ladies' luncheon?"

Olive couldn't help but laugh at this idea. Still, it had an attractive simplicity to it, and was certainly far easier than having to take the dog for two separate walks.

"I'll chat with my neighbour and see if she approves," Olive said.

"Oh, I can't wait to tell the other ladies we bumped into each other!" Glenda said. "They'll be thrilled. And they'll want to know how you're doing. Have you been well?"

"I've been fine," Olive said as they fell into step beside one another and took the path that led around the decorative flower beds. "Although I must say it's been a long winter."

"All the more reason for you to get out and about now, my dear," Glenda said. "If you don't mind my saying so, you look a little pasty."

"Well, thanks very much."

Glenda hooted with laughter and linked her arm into Olive's. "You know I don't say that to be mean. I was feeling very down in the dumps late last year, and someone told me I looked a little pasty, and after reacting exactly the same way you just did, I realised they were absolutely right, and that I had to do something about it straight away."

"Oh? And so what did you do?" Olive asked, thinking she already knew the answer.

“To begin with, I got my hair dyed,” Glenda said, swishing her hair around her shoulders. “I was sick and tired of all that grey hair, Olive, and glad to see the back of it. I marched into the hair salon and told the girl I wanted to look ten years younger, and she worked a perfect miracle on me. Don’t you think?”

Olive glanced again at her friend’s remarkable magenta hair colour. She looked quite spectacular, possibly even borderline alarming, depending on one’s perspective. Still, if the new hair colour pleased the woman and made her feel good about herself, Olive decided that was all that mattered.

“I think it looks splendid,” Olive said, and meant it. “But if you’re suggesting I should rush out and dye my hair bright purple, then I must say, I don’t think it’s quite the thing for me.”

“Of course not. But it’s important for us old fogies to stay young at heart, and that means keeping ourselves on our toes.”

“Well, Elsa here will keep me on my toes for the time being, I’m sure.”

They walked through the big wrought iron park gates and past the cascading planters that decorated the entrance. Glenda still had her arm hooked through Olive’s, and Olive thought it was rather a nice companionable feeling. She couldn’t remember the last time someone had actually done such a thing. Realising how long it had been since she’d been hugged or kissed or even had someone touch her hand, Olive felt a little stab of longing in her heart.

“Right,” Glenda said, “I’m popping off to catch my bus. It was lovely bumping into you, Olive, and I hope we’ll see you soon at our lunches.”

“I’ll give you a ring and let you know if I can make it.”

“Wonderful.” Glenda gave Olive a quick squeeze on the arm before hurrying in the other direction towards the bus stop just along from the park gates, where a bus was already slowing to a stop.

Olive watched her go, observing the woman's bright jacket and scarf, and her astonishing hair colour, but thinking most of all about Glenda's bubbling energy. She seemed positively bursting with life.

As she walked Elsa back home towards Foxglove Street, Olive thought about how it wasn't that long ago that she, too, had been bright and bubbly, and always out and about and on the go. The dark, lonely winter really had done a number on her.

But at least she was now doing something about it. She was out walking her neighbour's dog and getting back into the swing of things. And already, on her first trip to the park, she'd bumped into an old friend with whom she'd lost contact. That was a good thing, certainly. It was just what she needed.

Olive was lingering at a street corner while Elsa conducted an extensive sniffing investigation of a hedge, when her phone rang. Glancing at the screen, she saw it was Angela calling.

"Hello, Olive, I just wanted to check everything went all right with your first walk with Elsa," Angela said when she answered the call.

"It went perfectly fine, dear," Olive answered. "Nothing to worry about at all. We're just on our way home now."

"That's a relief to hear. I was hoping there'd be no trouble."

"None whatsoever."

"Thanks again for your help, Olive. It really is a lifesaver."

"You're quite welcome."

Olive wondered if this was a good moment to ask Angela about the lunch club matter, and how she'd feel about making a slight change to their arrangement. But in the background, she could hear the noise of a supermarket announcement being made over the speaker system, as well as someone calling out Angela's name, followed by a muffled exchange that Olive couldn't quite make out.

“It’s hectic here today, Olive,” Angela said when she came back on the line. “I’ll have to go.”

“Of course, dear.” Olive decided the matter could wait. There was no hurry.

Then a thought occurred to her, one that jumped into her mind and quite surprised her. She was about to dismiss it, but found herself opening her mouth to talk again.

“Angela, before you go, tell me this,” Olive said. “Do you and young Lindsey have plans for dinner tonight?”

“Oh,” Angela said, sounding surprised. “Well, Lindsey goes to Brownies tonight, so we just grab something quick.”

“I see.”

Elsa stopped sniffing at the hedge and looked up with a curious expression on her little face. If Olive didn’t know better, she’d think the dog understood every word.

“How about Saturday, in that case?” Olive asked. “Perhaps you and Lindsey would like to pop round to my house for a bite of dinner? I’d be glad to cook, and maybe you’d like a night off from the responsibility of preparing a meal for the both of you.”

“Well...”

The pause lasted until another supermarket announcement rippled down the phone line.

“That’s a lovely invitation, Olive,” Angela finally said. “Thank you. We’d love that.”

“Splendid. Let’s say six o’clock. And bring Elsa, too. She’s very welcome.”

They said their goodbyes and hung up. As Olive walked back along Foxglove Street, allowing Elsa a good sniff along all the fence posts, she wondered at herself. First, she’d offered to walk her neighbour’s dog, and now she’d invited her neighbour and her daughter to dinner.

It must be the fresh, spring air, bringing her back to life after the dark winter, Olive decided. She welcomed it. And a

pleasant dinner served at home would be the perfect opportunity to raise the matter of the lunch club she'd like to attend. She wanted Angela to remain relaxed about their dog walking arrangement, and to make it clear that Elsa's walks were perfectly manageable with some minor tweaking.

And probably she was making a mountain out of a molehill, anyway. It's not like she was announcing she was setting off for a month-long holiday just a few days after offering to take on the responsibility of Elsa's lunchtime walks.

But she sensed that Angela Barton was a skittish one, no doubt on account of all she'd been through these last months. Angela was someone who liked to have all her ducks in a row and feel in control of things, so it made sense to bear that in mind moving forward.

Olive hadn't had company at home for many months, and by the time she'd returned Elsa home and locked the door behind her, she was already planning the menu she'd serve for her guests.

ANGELA KNOCKED on Olive's front door just before six o'clock the following Saturday. Elsa wagged her tail expectantly, while Lindsey clutched the bunch of flowers they'd brought by way of thanks for the dinner invitation.

When Olive had extended the invitation, Angela's first instinct had been to decline it. She usually spent Saturday afternoons catching up on laundry and household chores, and after a tough week at work in her new longer shifts, she'd suspected that by the time evening came, she'd want nothing more than to collapse on the sofa with her daughter and vegetate in front of whatever animated movie was currently Lindsey's favourite.

But now that she was here at her neighbour's door, she was glad she'd said yes to Olive's dinner offer. It was nice to get out of the house on a Saturday night, even if it was just to see the old lady next door. And Olive was right—it was also nice not to be in charge of meal times for a change.

“Well, hello there,” Olive said when she opened the door, wiping her hand on a tea towel. “It's lovely to see you all.”

“Thanks for inviting us, Olive,” Angela said. “It's all Lindsey's talked about all day.”

“We brought you these flowers,” Lindsey said, thrusting the bunch in Olive's direction.

“Why, thank you, dear.” Olive took the flowers and made a show of smelling them. “Tulips are my favourite at this time of

year, and I have the perfect vase to show these off. Come on in.”

They trooped inside, Olive waving away their attempt to take off their shoes, before showing them into the living room at the front of the house while she carried the tulips to the kitchen. The living room was warm and welcoming, with an electric fire glowing, large lamps throwing out soft light, and a floral patterned sofa and two armchairs gathered around a wooden coffee table. On a sideboard along the wall, Angela noticed books and old-fashioned ornaments and framed photographs.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” Olive said when she returned from the kitchen and pointed towards the electric fire. “And to make sure Elsa feels at home during her visit, I took the liberty of purchasing this little bed for her to enjoy while she’s here.”

Elsa, who’d already spotted the cosy bed in front of the fire, hurried towards it, sniffed it over, turned three times, and settled down in the middle of the fleecy bundle, panting happily.

“You didn’t need to go to that sort of trouble, Olive,” Angela said. “You’re spoiling her. She would’ve been happy enough lying on the carpet.”

“Nonsense, dogs enjoy having a nice bed to snuggle into,” Olive replied, and Angela couldn’t help but notice the satisfied look on the old lady’s face as she watched the dog stretching out on the new bed, enjoying the warmth from the fire.

“Look at these books, Mum!” Lindsey said, examining a stack of small hardback books on the coffee table. “These are fairy tale stories. Can I look at them?”

“Absolutely,” Olive said. “I brought them out especially for you, Lindsey. They’re quite old, but in good condition. They used to belong to my daughter. She loved reading those books when she was young.”

Angela turned in Olive’s direction. “You’re spoiling all of us, Olive.”

“Not at all. Those books have been stuck on the shelf for the longest time. My daughter emigrated to Canada almost twenty-five years ago, you see, and forgot to take most of the childhood things she’d left behind here when she moved out, those books amongst them. I should have donated them to the charity shop long ago, but Lindsey can enjoy them while she’s here, and take them away with her if she wants to keep reading.”

“Thank you, Olive,” Lindsey said, already diving into one of the books. Glancing over her shoulder, Angela admired the gorgeous illustrations that accompanied the stories, and sensed that Lindsey would be very happy leafing through the books for a while.

“I didn’t know you had a daughter living in Canada,” Angela said. “In fact, I realise I haven’t asked about your family at all.”

“Well, goodness me, why would you?” Olive said. “You have enough on your own plate as it is.”

“You must miss her, living on the other side of the world,” Angela said. “Does she come back to visit?”

“As much as she can, but it’s a long journey, and we do the whole video chat thing these days, which makes it a little easier. And Gillian, that’s my daughter, is in her fifties now herself, and has long had a family of her own to keep her busy. In fact, I became a great grandmother last year for the first time, which is quite something.”

Angela saw the soft look on Olive’s face. “Congratulations, Olive. Do you have any pictures of the baby?”

Olive grinned. “I have plenty.” She turned to the sideboard and picked up a framed photograph, which she showed to Angela, pointing out the people featured in the image. “That’s Gillian at the back with her husband, Ed. Their son, Blake, is the one holding the new baby, Lucy. And that’s Kylie, Blake’s fiancé. Isn’t Lucy just adorable?”

“She’s beautiful. You must be very proud of them all.”

“I couldn’t be prouder. Blake and Kylie got engaged not long after Lucy was born, which is a wonderful thing, and Gillian is now very excited about being the mother of the groom and helping with all the wedding arrangements.”

“That’s lovely to have a family wedding to look forward to, Olive. Have they set a date yet?”

“They’re still searching for the right reception venue. I think the earliest date they’re looking at is sometime next spring.”

“Well, whenever it happens, I’m sure you must be excited about going over there for the big day.”

“Hmm. I’d like to be there for my grandson’s wedding, of course, but the truth is, I’m not sure my old bones are up to the challenge of a long transatlantic flight anymore. Being couped up in a tiny airplane seat for hours on end won’t do my ancient joints much good.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.” Angela saw the pensive look on Olive’s face, her gaze distant as she continued looking at the family faces in the framed photograph. “Anyway, it sounds like you’ve got plenty of time to think about your travel plans and make sure they’re right for you.”

“Yes, well, we’ll see.” Olive returned the photo frame to the sideboard and turned to Angela with a smile. “Now, can I interest you in a glass of wine, dear?”

“Only if you’ll join me.”

“I shall, indeed. Feel free to relax in here if you like, or come through to the kitchen while I finish dinner. It’s entirely your choice.”

“I’ll come and help.”

Angela followed her neighbour through to the kitchen. Olive’s house was the same layout as her own, except the rooms were flipped on the other side of the hallway, and it was strange seeing how differently someone else had decorated and furnished the space. Olive’s kitchen comprised honey-coloured wooden cupboards with a creamy marble counter, soft green walls, and a farmhouse-style dining table and chairs tucked

beside the window. The space was far more homely than the stark white and grey kitchen that Angela had inherited when they'd bought the house. Seeing the difference made her want to hurry up and repaint the walls in her own kitchen to get rid of the grey and bring a little warmth to the place, something she'd pledged to do when they'd first moved in, and which was still on her long, and ever growing, to-do list.

“Would you like white wine or red?” Olive asked.

“White, please.”

“Good, that's what I was hoping you'd say.” She pulled a bottle of white wine from the fridge and poured two glasses. “I rarely open wine these days, because I find it's impossible to finish the bottle, so this will be a treat. Cheers.”

Angela clinked her glass against Olive's. “Cheers to you.”

The wine was pretty good, far better than the awful cheap stuff Angela bought for herself when she had a notion and a few pounds going spare. Olive checked the contents of a pot and nodded.

“What can I do to help?” Angela asked.

“Nothing right now, but once everything's ready, you can help me dish it up. We're having chicken casserole, roast potatoes, and veggies. I hope that's all right.”

“It sounds delicious. Smells delicious, too.”

“The casserole is an old favourite of mine, and I make it with lots of herbs and plenty of garlic. I hope you'll like it.”

While Olive pottered at the hob, Angela enjoyed her wine and felt surprisingly relaxed in the old lady's company.

“How did the rest of your first week go with Elsa?” Angela asked. “Any second thoughts about offering to walk her?”

“Absolutely none,” Olive said, carrying a pot to the sink and draining it. “Elsa is a little darling and a pleasure to walk. I must admit I was nervous on the first day out by myself with her, wondering if we'd have another encounter with Mac the Menace, or worse. But we haven't seen that big lout again, so I'm guessing he only goes to the park later in the day. So far,

Elsa and I have been thoroughly enjoying our afternoon outings. In fact, I think I'm enjoying myself even more than the dog."

"She's a good dog, always has been. I hope this all works out for a while at least, because our little family wouldn't be the same without her."

"I certainly hope you're no longer torturing yourself with ideas of having to give up that sweet dog," Olive whispered, after setting aside the pan and carrying the bowl of vegetables to the table. "In fact, I've been doing some thinking this week, and have a suggestion."

She held up a finger and turned back to the oven, then pulled out the casserole and checked inside. "Almost ready. I'll just let this settle here for a minute while the potatoes finish. Now, what was I saying? Oh, yes, Elsa. I was thinking that it might be nice for the dog to come round to my house for an hour or so in the afternoons after our walks. It would be a little extra company for me, and for Elsa, and would mean she could have another quick potter in my garden before I take her back home to your house. What do you think?"

Angela sipped her wine and watched the old lady's expectant face. "Well, to be honest, that just sounds like more commitment for you, when you're already doing so much for us by walking her."

"I'm not saying it's something we'd do every day. If I have to pop out for some shopping, or run an errand or whatever, I'd simply take Elsa straight home after her walk, as I've done this week. But if I'm just coming home to sit in front of the television, or to cook in the kitchen or whatever, then why not bring Elsa with me? It would be a change of scenery for her, and pleasant for me, too. And after all, she has a little bed of her own here now, so why not get more use out of it?"

"Well..." Angela shrugged. "I don't want you to feel burdened."

"I won't, not in the least. In fact, having more flexibility in our arrangements would be much appreciated. You see, while walking Elsa this week, I bumped into an old friend I haven't

seen since last year. She and some other ladies I know meet every two weeks for lunch, and I've been invited along. Now, I know we agreed that I'd pop round to take Elsa for her walk at about one o'clock each day, and I don't want you to feel I'm reneging on what I offered because I'm not. However, if you were comfortable with me giving Elsa two shorter walks, instead of one long one, on the days when my friends meet for lunch, I'd be grateful."

Angela laughed. "Olive, the last thing I wanted when you offered to walk Elsa was for you to feel constrained. Of course, you can go to lunch with your friends! You don't have to ask my permission."

"I'm not, not exactly. But how do you feel about two walks instead of one?"

"I feel that it's far more than you signed up for, Olive, to be honest. It sounds like a bit of a hassle. I'm sure Elsa will cope with one walk before you set off for lunch."

"Perhaps. But I've also learned that the pub where the ladies meet is dog friendly. Elsa would be welcome there. If you were agreeable, I could take Elsa for a nice walk on my way to lunch, then she could enjoy the company of the other ladies at the pub, assuming she's okay in that sort of environment, and then she'd have another nice walk back to the house."

Angela thought through what the old woman had described. It sounded like Olive had more going on in her life than she'd realised. She hated the idea of Elsa being a burden.

"Maybe I can find some other arrangement on the days you meet your friends for lunch."

"That isn't necessary, I assure you." Olive stood firm before her, her expression implacable. "So, what do you say to the idea of Elsa coming with me to lunch with my friends?"

Finally, Angela laughed. "I'm sure she'll love every minute. She's fine in public places, and Ryan and I took her to a few dog friendly pubs in the past, back when we still did things like that, and she behaved just fine."

“That’s settled then,” Olive said with a grin. “I’m so pleased.”

“You will tell me if things change, though, won’t you, Olive? I already feel anxious about you doing all this dog walking for me. It’s an enormous favour, and I don’t want it to get in the way of your own life.”

“It won’t. So far, it’s been nothing but perfectly enjoyable. Now, I think we’re ready to dish up this meal, so come and give me a hand.”

After Angela called through to Lindsey to wash up for dinner, she helped Olive serve the food and carry plates to the table. The smell of the chicken casserole made her stomach rumble, filling the kitchen with its herby, garlicky fragrance, and it was lovely to have someone prepare such a welcoming, home-cooked meal for her.

She was also amused to see Olive whip a little dog bowl from a cupboard and add a spoonful of casserole to it, along with a sprinkling of kibble. When Elsa appeared in the kitchen, drawn no doubt by the delicious smells, Olive set the bowl on the floor by the radiator and grinned as the little dog tucked into the food.

“You bought kibble for Elsa?” Angela asked, shaking her head.

“Elsa is a guest in my home, just as you are, and so she must be fed,” Olive said with a wink.

Once Lindsey reappeared after washing up, they all got seated at the table and Olive turned to them both with a smile.

“This is a real treat for me to have your company this evening for dinner,” Olive said. “Now, dig in, and don’t forget there’s plenty for second helpings.”

Angela ate a forkful of casserole and looked at Olive in awe. “Wow, this is delicious.”

“Thank you dear,” Olive beamed. “I’ll give you the recipe. Chicken casserole was always one of my late husband’s favourite dinners. Although since he passed away, I’ve taken

to adding just a little more garlic. I do like my food to have a bit of body to it.”

They ate in companionable silence for a moment, and Angela was pleased to see Lindsey wolfing down her food, including the green veggies, which she occasionally decided she hated and refused to eat. After chit-chatting about how Angela’s week at work had gone, and what Lindsey was up to in school, and wagging a finger at Elsa when she finished the food in her bowl and came to the table begging for more, a thoughtful look appeared on Olive’s face.

“Angela, I was hoping to ask your opinion about something,” Olive said, pushing her food around the plate.

“What’s that?” she said and took a sip of wine.

“Well, I mentioned earlier how I’d bumped into an old friend at the park while walking Elsa. I hadn’t seen her in some time, and at first I didn’t recognise her because she’d undergone quite a transformation. Bright new clothes. Quite startling lipstick and eye make-up. And... well, what I can only describe as new hair.”

“New hair?” Lindsey laughed as she chomped on a roast potato. “How does someone get new hair?”

“What have I told you about talking with your mouth full, young lady?” Angela checked her daughter.

“Sorry.”

“Oh, the girl is fine,” Olive said with a wave. “It’s nice to see she’s enjoying the food I prepared. Anyway, in terms of new hair, I don’t mean she has had some kind of transplant. What I mean is that she had a completely new colour applied. She was once grey and dull like me.”

“You’re not grey and dull, Olive,” Angela said.

“I rather think I am,” Olive smiled. “In fact, when I got home from the park after seeing my friend there, I took a long look at myself in the mirror and I can’t say I liked what I saw. I’ve never been a clothes horse or a keen follower of fashion, and I’ve certainly never been overly fussy about my

appearance. But as I looked at my reflection, I realised I have somehow become almost invisible.”

Hearing this oddly personal confession made Angela feel sad for the old lady. Although many decades this woman’s junior, she knew only too well how it felt to feel that way, and to feel unnoticed. In the final months of her marriage to Ryan, Angela had felt invisible all the time.

“That’s a shame,” Angela said. “I’m sorry you feel like that.”

“Me too,” Olive said. “This past winter was a strange and long one for me. Besides losing touch with too many friends, I think I’ve also let myself go a bit. I’m not making enough of an effort. Getting out with Elsa this week has made me feel rather frumpy in my clothes and rather washed out in how I look. I’m planning on taking a little trip to the shops soon, to buy a few new things and cheer up my wardrobe.”

“That’s a great idea.”

“I agree. But I’ve also been doing some thinking, and after seeing my friend this week, looking so bright and filled with life, I’ve decided I want to do something about my hair, too.”

Olive’s hand rose to pat her thin, grey hair, which she wore tied back in a bun, the only way Angela had ever seen it.

“What did you have in mind?” Angela asked.

A frustrated look crossed the older woman’s face before she continued again. “Well, that’s what I need your opinion about. I’d appreciate the thoughts of someone younger, someone who might know about such things as hair styling and colour and whatnot.”

Angela laughed. “In that case, you might be talking to the wrong person. I dye my hair with a packet thingy I buy at the supermarket.”

“I have to help Mum rinse her hair in the sink afterwards,” Lindsey said, beaming. “It’s messy.”

“Well, you chose your colour very well,” Olive said. “I assumed you had it done professionally.”

“I can’t afford to. Depending on the salon, it can cost around a hundred pounds for a cut and colour. Sometimes a lot more.”

“Goodness!” Olive said, and looked thoughtful. “I had no idea. Well, the money itself is no object, but that seems rather a lot.”

“It’s usually worth it if you get the right colourist and stylist, someone who knows what they’re doing.”

“Well, see, that’s just it,” Olive continued. “While I was amazed to see my friend and her make-over, I must say that I thought her hair colour was rather astonishing, to say the least.”

“Did she turn her hair blue?” Lindsey asked, grinning at the notion. “Or pink? Or orange?”

“None of those,” Olive said. “I’d say it was a sort of magenta colour.”

“Oh,” Lindsey said, then turned to Angela. “What’s magenta?”

“Reddish-purplish,” she said, and glanced at Olive. “Was it too much?”

“It was, rather, yes,” Olive grinned and drank some wine. “Clearly, she was thrilled with it, which is all that matters. And it certainly put a bit of a spark into her. She was hard to miss as she hurried through the park, that’s for sure. Although her new look gave me food for thought, I’m not sure I’d want to end up transformed in quite the same dramatic style.”

Angela nodded. “So, you’re wondering what you could do to your own hair to give yourself a nice boost and a change, but without being too brash?”

“Exactly,” Olive said, nodding. “You understand perfectly. So, do you have ideas about what might work for me?”

Angela grinned, surprised at the turn their conversation had taken. She hadn’t imagined the dinner talk would involve dispensing tips to her elderly neighbour about how to give

herself a make-over, not least because she barely had time to consider how she looked herself these days.

“I’m no expert, believe me,” Angela said. “But if I were you, I’d also be keen to stay away from big colours when it comes to hair dye. Have you ever dyed your hair before?”

“Never. I always just let it get on with whatever it wanted to do.”

“In that case, even more reason to keep it subtle, at least to begin with. I made the mistake of going blonde a few years ago, and it was completely wrong for me and too different from my natural dark colour. As soon as I could, I dyed it back to my usual chestnut shade.”

“Which suits you wonderfully, dear,” Olive said.

Angela laughed. What an odd conversation. “Anyway, I think you should consider highlighting your current shades, rather than fighting them.”

“What do you mean?” Olive frowned.

“Well, I know you want a change from the grey, but going brunette or blonde or anything like that will be too much of a shock. If I were you, I’d go silver.”

“Silver?” Olive said in surprise.

“Can you dye someone’s hair silver?” Lindsey asked, her eyes wide. “Cool!”

“I don’t mean metallic silver,” Angela laughed. “I mean a beautiful, lustrous, elegant silvery grey. It’ll cover up the patchiness in your hair, and with the right tints and highlights, maybe some nice soft whites, it will lift your whole look. Add in a good cut, maybe a sharp bob for example, and I think you’d like it.”

Olive seemed to consider the suggestion. “Do you really think so?”

“I do. You have a lovely face, Olive, with those high cheekbones and your bright blue eyes. Emphasising your natural elegance and grace with gentle silvery tones might be just the thing.”

After sipping more wine, Olive smiled. “What a lovely compliment. And you sound like you know what you’re talking about. It’s a wonder you don’t work in a hair salon.”

Angela grunted out a laugh. “It’s hard to see ourselves properly when it comes to things like this. That’s why you asked my advice, right? And what I’m suggesting isn’t exactly radical. White and silvery tones are all the rage right now. And I think they’d be perfect for you.”

Olive appeared to think about it for a moment. Finally, a huge smile creased her lips. “You’ve convinced me. I think it’s a wonderful idea. Just as soon as I find a good salon that knows what they’re doing when it comes to this colouring business, I’ll book an appointment right away.”

“I’ve heard good things about the Topaz Lounge on Church Street,” Angela said. “The lady who runs it is the mother-in-law of one of my colleagues at the supermarket, and a couple of other staff go there to get their hair coloured. They always look pretty good to me.”

“In that case, I shall call them. The Topaz Lounge, you say?”

Angela nodded. “When you phone up, say that Sue’s friend Angela from the supermarket recommended them, and maybe they’ll give you a discount for your first visit.”

“Wonderful,” Olive said, and rose from the table to grab a notepad and pen from one of the kitchen drawers. “Topaz Lounge and Sue from the supermarket,” she said, writing it down then smiling. “Thank you very much.”

“Gosh, I hope it goes all right there if you make an appointment,” Angela said. “If it goes wrong and you don’t like the colour, I’d hate for it to be my fault.”

“Nonsense, I’m sure it will be fine. I’ll make sure I explain to the girl what we discussed and what I want. Now, who’s for pudding?”

“Me!” Lindsey said, shooting her arm into the air. “What are we having?”

“Chocolate cake,” Olive replied.

“My favourite!”

“Well, it’s just as well there’ll be plenty left over for you to take home with you, in that case.”

As Angela helped clear the table, insisting on starting the washing up while Olive dealt with serving the pudding, she thought about how nice it was to be in the company of the old lady, eating and chatting, and how relaxed it all felt. How companionable. Life had become so busy recently, she hadn’t realised how much she missed the company of another adult outside of work. Before coming round to Olive’s, she’d worried about what on earth they’d talk about over a meal, and had been surprised at how easy the conversation turned out to be, and how nice it was to have the old lady seek out her opinion on something as frivolous as hair colour.

As she filled the sink, she watched Olive potter around while Lindsey followed her instructions about where to find clean plates and fresh cutlery. It was oddly comforting seeing the two of them dealing with such simple tasks together.

Lindsey didn’t have much in the way of older people in her life. Angela’s mother had died suddenly after an accidental fall at home when Angela had been pregnant with Lindsey, a shock that had rocked Angela to her core and which she still felt deeply. She missed having an older female to talk to and to be a figure in Lindsey’s life. Ryan’s mother, who lived twenty miles away near Godalming, had been only an occasional visitor lately on account of the convoluted train and bus journey involved since they’d moved to Hamblehurst. When Ryan had still lived in the house, he’d driven Lindsey over there to visit her grandmother every few weeks, but since the separation that had fallen by the wayside. There were no grandfathers for Lindsey on either side, either, as both Angela’s father and Ryan’s father had died before Lindsey was born.

She wasn’t sure why she thought of these things as she rinsed dishes while Olive and Lindsey dished up the chocolate cake. All she knew was that she enjoyed seeing the two of them working around one another, Lindsey following Olive’s

instructions and helping carry the pudding dishes to the table while Elsa hurried around their feet, looking for treats.

She thought back to what Olive had said when she'd first come to the house and offered to walk Elsa for her. She'd said that they didn't have to become best friends but that they ought to become better neighbours.

Already, Angela could see the wisdom in this and the pleasure it was bringing to them all. Leaving the rest of the dishes to steep, she joined Olive and Lindsey at the table and tucked into the chocolate cake waiting for her there.

"Now, I don't want to see a single morsel left on anyone's plate," Olive said with a wink. "We ate all our vegetables with dinner, and now we must eat all our chocolate cake, too."

"It's delicious, Olive," Lindsey said, already boasting a chocolate moustache around her mouth. "Did you make it?"

"Indeed I did."

"It's wonderful, but you needn't have gone to extra trouble," Angela said. "Shop bought would've been fine for us."

"It was the work of moments, dear," Olive said with a smile and patted her hand. "And a pleasure."

"Guess what?" Lindsey piped up, a forkful of cake poised at her mouth as she grinned at Olive.

"What, dear?" Olive said.

"We're having a spring concert at school at the end of May, and I'm going to be a daisy."

"Well, that sounds rather exciting," Olive smiled. "And how exactly are you going to be a daisy?"

"We're making a costume, aren't we Mum?"

Angela nodded. "And the most important word in that sentence is 'we', isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" Lindsey said, pretending not to understand.

“You left me to finish your Easter egg costume all by myself when you got bored sticking on the coloured shapes, but you’re not doing it again.”

Lindsey pouted. “I’m excited to make the daisy.” She turned to Olive. “The petals will be white, and we’ll stick squashed up white tissue paper onto the cardboard. And then for the bit in the middle, the yellow bit, we’ll use paint. Then we’ll stick the plastic strips on the back so it keeps its shape once it’s on my head and attached to the Alice band.”

“That all sounds like a great deal of work,” Olive said, throwing a glance at Angela.

“The school likes to keep us parents busy,” Angela smiled, then turned back to Lindsey. “You seem to know a lot all of a sudden about how this daisy is to be made.”

“The teacher told us on Friday. She said she’d emailed our parents, explaining everything.”

Angela realised she’d have to check her email for the missed message. Sometimes the school sent letters home about these things, and other times they emailed, and she wished they’d pick one and just stick to it so they all knew where they stood.

“Mrs Gallagher says you’ve to come on Tuesday afternoon after school to collect everything I need,” Lindsey announced. “You know, the cardboard for the daisy and the tissue paper and paint and other stuff.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s me told, isn’t it?”

“Mrs Gallagher says we’ve all to have them ready for the rehearsal, which happens the week before the concert.”

“Goodness, what a lot of activity you have going on at school,” Olive said. “I certainly hope you still have time to learn your reading and arithmetic.”

Lindsey shrugged. “I think we do, although some of it is boring. I like art better.”

“Hmm,” Olive said. “And what exactly will you be doing at this concert? Singing a song, or some such?”

“We’re singing a song about garden flowers,” Lindsey said with a serious nod. “There are twelve of us who are dressing up as flowers, and we’re all singing together. My friend, Shannon, will have a tulip costume, and we’ll be standing together in the choir. Her dad is helping her make her costume, and he’s really good at stuff like that.”

As Angela listened to her daughter chattering away, she thought of the man she’d spoken to in the supermarket café at the start of the week. Mike. No, Mark, that was his name. He’d been the one who’d told her about the spring concert in the first place and had talked about the work involved in the whole at-home costume-making process.

“This friend of yours, Shannon,” Angela said. “Her dad’s name isn’t Mark, is it?”

Lindsey gave her a puzzled look and shrugged. “I can’t remember. Why?”

She didn’t know why she’d asked, if she was being honest. The man’s face had simply popped into her head while Lindsey had been talking, and she assumed he was the same person.

“Anyway,” Lindsey continued, “I’m going to tell my friend Shannon that she should paint her tulip costume pink, the same colour as the tulips we brought for you, Olive.”

“A splendid idea,” Olive smiled. “And it is a lovely shade of pink, too. Now, Angela, how about a cup of tea to finish our meal?”

Soon, the dishes were cleared and they were settled in the living room by the fire, enjoying tea while Lindsey returned to the fairy tale books Olive had looked out for her. It had been a lovely evening, Angela decided, much more enjoyable than she’d expected. Later, as they got ready to leave, and Lindsey had a brainwave and asked Olive if she could take one of the pink tulips back from the bunch she’d given her in order to advise her friend, Shannon, on what colour her concert flower costume should be, Angela appreciated the old lady’s patience with her daughter’s scatty request.

As she bade Olive goodnight at the door, she couldn't help but lean in and hug her kindly neighbour, even although it obviously took Olive by surprise.

“Thank you for a lovely evening, Olive,” she said, feeling emotional.

“You're quite welcome, dear,” Olive smiled. “Hopefully we can do it again sometime soon.”

Walking back round to her own house next door, Angela realised she'd like that very much.

“ALL RIGHT, missus, are you ready for the big reveal?”

Olive sat in the styling chair at the Topaz Lounge hair salon with her eyes closed, her heartbeat clip-clopping in her chest. She'd been here for ages, having her hair cut and coloured, and was astonished at just how long the whole thing had taken. Thank goodness the young stylist, Steph, had kept her plied with coffee and magazines. For the last ten minutes, Steph had been drying Olive's hair and working a brush through it and while this part of the process had proceeded, Steph had recommended she turn away from the mirror so that she'd get the full effect of her transformation once everything was finished.

Now, at last, that moment had come. Although this young Steph had insisted she knew just what kind of colour Olive wanted, and just what to do when it came to cutting her hair, she still worried about whether there might have been a communication breakdown that would leave her alarmed and unhappy with her new appearance. Why she'd booked this hair appointment on the morning of her first lunch club meeting was a mystery to her. At the time, she'd thought some salon pampering followed by a lovely lunch with old friends in the afternoon would make for a quite exciting day. Now, she feared having to ditch the lunch club altogether if her hair turned out to be disastrous.

Well, if that turned out to be the case, then so be it. She could always lay the blame at little Elsa's door, who she planned on walking right before lunch and then bringing along

to the pub. If her new hair was too awful to look at, she'd send a message to the lunch ladies saying that the dog was poorly and couldn't be left alone all afternoon. It would be a terrible lie, but it might do in a pinch.

"So, are you going to open your eyes or not, missus?" Steph laughed.

Olive felt her chair being given a little swivel to rouse her. She should open her eyes and see how she looked. She was excited to see how she looked, after all. And she couldn't keep her eyes squeezed shut forever.

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. In the mirror, she saw an astonishingly attractive woman with an elegant silvery-white halo of hair cut into a neat and stylish bob that fell to just below her ears. The woman looked perfectly amazing.

The woman was *her*.

"Oh, my goodness!" Olive exclaimed, her hand flying to her mouth as tears sprang to her eyes. "I can't believe it!"

"Do you like it?" Steph grinned.

"Like it? Young lady, I love it!"

Olive touched the edges of her hair, marvelling at the shape of the cut and how wonderful it was to see her hair around her face after wearing it pulled back into a bun for so long. And as for the colour, it was nothing short of miraculous, the blend of soft silvery greys and snowy whites somehow giving her the presence and vitality she'd lacked for so long. Angela had been right when she'd recommended these colour options. Instead of battling against her age with brassy colours she couldn't carry off, the tones made Olive feel wise and distinguished and extraordinarily comfortable in her own skin.

"It's a triumph," she told the young stylist, running her fingers through her hair and gazing in wonder at her reflection in the mirror. "You've made me very happy indeed."

"Aw, I'm pleased to hear it," Steph said, unfastening the protective gown draped around Olive's shoulders.

“And you’re certain I’ll be able to deal with styling by myself at home?”

“Absolutely. Just add a little product to the roots and get the brush in there when you’re blow-drying it. And if you can’t be bothered with the brush, it’ll still look good if you point the dryer up into your hair and give it some volume that way. It won’t look salon finished, but I’ve given you a cut that will more than hold its own.”

“I’m glad,” Olive said, although the proof of the pudding would be in the eating when it came to the matter of maintaining the style at home. Still, while she wasn’t one for fiddling around with dryers and brushes, she felt sure she could keep this cut looking reasonable by herself.

And anyway, all that mattered was that she looked rather fabulous right now, and just in time for her reunion with the lunch ladies. Olive was very pleased that she’d scheduled the salon appointment for this morning, after all.

At the counter, she paid for her treatments and left a generous tip for Steph, who smiled in thanks and insisted on booking her in again for a colour top-up and trim. Of course, Olive realised, she’d have to keep this whole colouring thing going now that she’d started. Well, if it meant she could continue feeling as happy as this, then so be it.

Leaving the salon, Olive made her way along the pavement towards the high street. Vain though it made her feel, she wanted to see if her new hair-do caused any heads to turn. After feeling like an invisible old lady for so long, she hoped at least one or two folk might see her wonderful new style and take a second look. It was a foolish notion, but Olive decided she wasn’t averse to a little foolishness when she was feeling as delighted as she was right now.

The high street was busy with morning shoppers going in and out of the various stores. A bright blue sky stretched overhead and the day was warming up nicely. As Olive passed the baker’s shop, enjoying the scent of sugar and warm bread that wafted out from within, she paused to let a woman exit the shop ahead of her on the pavement, and felt a great burst of

satisfaction when the woman nodded her thanks and then let her gaze wander to Olive's hair, which, judging by the look in her eyes, she seemed to admire. Further along the high street outside a coffee shop, another woman similar in age to Olive glanced up as they passed one another, her eyes going straight to her new hair-do before she offered Olive a bright smile.

How nice it was to be back out in the world again, Olive thought as she walked on, and how nice to be noticed.

She was turning towards Foxglove Street when she passed Lily's Boutique at the far end of the high street, and saw a beautiful pale pink jacket in the window display. Pausing, Olive looked at the item worn by the mannequin.

It was the perfect thing for spring time, she decided. The soft pink colour made her think of the pretty tulips little Lindsey had brought as a gift when she and Angela had come to dinner at the weekend. Pink wasn't usually a colour Olive favoured, but there was something fresh about this shade, and the tailoring of the jacket was exquisite.

Olive glanced down at the drab beige anorak she was wearing and remembered the promise she'd made to herself to freshen up her wardrobe. So far, she'd bought a couple of new blouses in spring greens and blues, and some smart new trousers, but she needed a new jacket to complete the look. How nice it would be to turn up at lunch today, not only with her new hairstyle, but wearing new clothes, too.

Excited by this idea, Olive went inside the boutique and got the sales girl to find the pale pink jacket in her size. The moment she took off her tired beige anorak and slipped her arms into the soft new pink blazer, she knew she had to have it. With her new hair now boasting so many gorgeous greys and whites, the pink shade looked wonderful on her.

Noticing a display of scarves beside the rack of jackets, Olive chose one in swirls of cream and sea green, and when she looped it around her neck, she knew that her transformation was complete.

With her new jacket and scarf stowed in a glossy boutique bag, Olive headed home feeling as light as a feather. She

couldn't wait to get changed into all her new clothes, and fetch Elsa for a walk, and then get herself off to the lunch club at The White Hart. The spring sun was shining up above and everything felt too cheerful and wonderful for words.

Olive smiled to herself. This was going to be a good day.

* * *

Elsa was quick about her business when Olive took her to the park for an earlier than usual walk. They scooted around the decorative flower beds and past the fountain, and once Olive was content that the little dog had been given enough time to enjoy a good sniff at things, they left the park and headed towards The White Hart pub on the high street, near to the boutique where Olive had bought her jacket.

When they marched past Foxglove Street and didn't turn along it, Elsa looked up at Olive, her expression questioning.

"We're off out for a treat today, Elsa," she told the dog. "We're having lunch with the ladies. Won't that be fun?"

Elsa snorted and picked up her pace, making Olive laugh. When they reached the pub, Olive gathered the courage to go inside, more pleased than ever that she'd had her hair done, and picked out a new outfit to give her the little boost she needed. After so many months without seeing the other ladies she'd once known rather well, it was strange to be on the cusp of seeing them once more, and no doubt facing a barrage of questions about where she'd been all winter and why she'd fallen out of touch.

She was glad she looked the part for this special reunion.

The pub was bright and friendly inside, with light pouring in through the banks of windows that overlooked the high street. Many tables were already taken with people enjoying lunch, and the bar was busy too, every stool occupied by folk chattering over drinks. Olive glanced around the cavernous space and saw a long table near the back around which sat half a dozen older ladies, Glenda amongst them, her purple hair making her hard to miss.

“Yoo-hoo!” Glenda called out and waved an arm in the air.
“Over here, Olive!”

The assembled ladies turned to watch her approaching, all of them smiling.

“Olive! It’s you!”

“We’re glad you came, Olive!”

“So nice to see you. Welcome back to our lunch club!”

The greetings continued as Olive reached the table and said hello to the other women already gathered there, quickly piecing together what she remembered about them all.

There was Glenda with her magenta hair, of course, and fizzy personality. Liz, who’d lost her husband just last year, poor thing, and still had that slightly shocked look about her. Helen, who enjoyed gardening and also volunteered as a tour guide at a nearby historic castle. Rita, who still worked part time in the local bookshop. Val, who’d been a community nurse and with whom Olive had often crossed paths through the health centre before they’d both retired. And Felicity, a newcomer to the area if Olive’s memory served, and who was always jetting off on foreign holidays to exotic locations.

Seeing the warmth in all their faces, Olive was glad to be back amongst them, these women who were so friendly and kind, asking after her and wanting to know where she’d been hiding all winter. Once Elsa’s presence was noticed, the little dog was cooed over and adored, and the animal lapped up the attention before settling down on the carpet beside Olive’s chair. By the time Olive had a glass of wine in her hand, she’d already explained to the women why she’d stopped attending the church lunch club, and agreed that it was a silly shame she hadn’t kept in touch and that she’d make sure to add everyone’s number into her phone before she left.

Everyone was sweet enough to say how well she looked, and ask whether she’d had her hair done recently because it looked so fantastic. When Olive glanced in Glenda’s direction, fearing the excitable woman would expand on her comments about her allegedly pasty appearance that day they’d met in

the park, Glenda simply threw her a coy wink and gave her a thumbs-up, whispering that she'd done the right thing in spoiling herself a little and that it had paid off in spades.

It was wonderful to be back amongst friends, Olive decided, and slipped Elsa a little treat from her bag, which the dog scoffed in a single bite. But for the little creature, and her need to be walked during the day, Olive almost certainly wouldn't have bumped into Glenda at all, and this lunch club reunion would never have taken place.

They got down to the work of debating the OAP special lunch menu options and ordering their food. As Olive tucked into a plate of scampi and chips, it was Val, the retired community nurse, with whom she fell into conversation.

“Do you remember old Dr Henderson from the surgery?” Val asked as she sliced into her lunch of gammon and pineapple.

“Of course,” Olive replied. “A truly lovely man and always spoken of highly by the patients. He was a trifle deaf in the years before he retired and I spent half the day having to shout at him.”

“Well, he passed away last week.”

“Oh no!” Olive said, caught off-guard by this revelation. “What sad news.”

“He was well into his late nineties and had dementia. What a scourge that dreadful disease is. It just destroys people. I know Dr Henderson's wife struggled to look after him and he was in a care home for a while before the end.”

“How awful. I had no idea. Goodness, he was such a sweet man. I hate to think of him taken down in that way.”

“Me too. The funeral is being held next Tuesday. Ten o'clock at the crematorium. I'll be attending, of course.”

“Well, I'll be there, too, certainly. I'm glad we saw each other here, Val. I would have hated to miss Dr Henderson's funeral and the chance to pay my respects.”

Olive thought for a moment, remembering Dr Henderson in his younger heyday. He'd been a warm, considerate man, and quite handsome, too. Being more than twenty years his junior, Olive remembered often feeling a little flustered on account of his twinkling eyes and wry smile, although what she remembered most of all was his great concern for his patients. He'd long retired from his GP surgery, and Olive hadn't thought of him in many years. It saddened her to hear of his decline, and now his death.

“Are you all right?” Val asked.

“I'm fine, just thinking of poor Dr Henderson, that's all.”

Val popped a wedge of pineapple in her mouth and gave Olive a curious look. “I hope you've been okay over the winter, Olive. I understand why you stopped coming to the lunch club, but I hope you've been keeping busy otherwise all this time.”

“Well,” Olive began, and pushed some chips around her plate for a moment. “It's been an odd winter for me. It's true I've lost contact with some folks, like yourselves. I haven't been keeping as busy as I should have. But now that spring is here, all that will change. Especially as I have little Elsa here to walk.”

“What made you decide to get a dog again?” Val asked. “I think it was about ten years since you last had one, is that right?”

“Actually, Elsa isn't my dog. She belongs to my neighbour, Angela, who's had to switch from part time to full time at work, and this has caused some problems for her in looking after Elsa during the day, as I'm sure you can imagine. So, I'm lending a hand with afternoon dog walking duties.”

“Good for you. I'd love to get another dog, but my grump of a husband is dead set against it. Sometimes I think I might just go out and adopt some poor animal from the dog rescue centre, just to spite him and his moodiness, but I know that's not fair on a dog.” Val glanced at Elsa, sleeping on the floor, her paws twitching, and then turned back to Olive. “You

wouldn't be interested in a bit of company while you walk the little dog, would you?"

Olive turned to her old colleague in surprise. "Of course, that would be lovely. We just take a little saunter around Peartree Park, nothing special. This is only my second full week of walking Elsa, but it's been fabulous getting out into the fresh air and enjoying the spring."

"Good. Once we've swapped numbers, I'll give you a ring on the days I plan to meet up with you, so you aren't hanging around wondering if I'm coming or not."

"That suits me fine."

"Lovely." Val grabbed one of the open bottles of wine from the table. "Now, let's have another small glass of this before we settle up and head home."

"Good grief, I'll be staggering all over the pavement if I have any more."

"Nonsense. Are you still living on Foxglove Street?"

Olive nodded.

"Well, just before Christmas, The Grump and I downsized into a smaller bungalow on Smith Street, which is just ten minutes from where you live, so I'll walk back with you and make sure you stay upright and don't succumb to the alcohol."

Olive laughed, and soon they were all settling the bill and counting out coins to leave for a tip, and making more work for the poor waitress by asking for the juicier leftovers to be wrapped up so that Olive could take them home and feed to Elsa as a treat for being such a good dog while they all ate their lunch. After embracing her rediscovered friends at the door and stepping out into the sunshine, Olive waited while Val finished her conversation with Glenda so they could walk home together.

"I'm stuffed full," Val informed her as they walked along the high street. "I won't eat a thing for the rest of the day."

"Me neither."

“And the wine I drank will send me off into a nice afternoon nap when I get home, which means I won’t have to listen to The Grump complaining about things.”

Olive chuckled. “He can’t be that bad, surely?”

“I’m afraid he is. But I suppose I’m stuck with him now until death do us part.”

Olive laughed again, amused by her friend poking fun at her unfortunate husband. The sun was beaming down from a bright blue sky, her delight with her new hair and new clothes knew no bounds, she’d been fed a wonderful lunch and enjoyed a rather nice glass of wine, become reacquainted with some old friends, and was now happily ambling along with little Elsa trotting beside her as they headed home.

She’d been right to hope that this was going to be a good day. It was more than good. It was positively glorious.

The thought had no sooner formed in her head when Olive heard a mad cacophony of barking coming from the street they were passing on the right. She’d barely turned her head in the direction of the noise when Mac the Menace lunged towards them along the pavement, the muscles along his stocky yellow Labrador body rippling as he hauled his owner behind him and barked his head off, his gaze focused on Elsa.

“Good Lord!” Val exclaimed.

“Mac, stop!” cried the Labrador’s owner, as she tried to yank him under control.

In the split-second it took to assess the situation, Olive knew it would not end well. Elsa, seeing her mortal enemy bearing down, yapped angrily and tugged hard on her lead. Olive tugged back, trying to pull the little dog away.

Mac the Menace leapt closer, his barking now ferocious.

Which was when Mac’s lead slipped free from his owner’s hand and the beefy dog launched itself at Elsa.

Terror froze Olive’s heart and turned her knees to jelly. Still growling and barking, Mac tumbled Elsa to the pavement, easily bowling her over on account of his enormous size. Elsa

yelped as she was tossed around and bared her teeth. As the Labrador jumped again, Elsa's lead, which Olive was still holding, became tangled around Mac's legs, and as he leapt around, Olive was jerked forward and then pulled off her feet altogether.

"Olive!" Val cried.

But it was too late. Olive crashed to the ground even as her feet scrambled to keep her upright. She hit the pavement on her left side with a dull thud and an *oomph!* as the air wheezed out of her lungs.

"Oh my God!" Val shouted. "Olive! Are you all right?"

Blinking at her new ground-level perspective on the world, Olive saw two sets of dog paws leaping around her as the growling and barking continued.

"Elsa!" Olive croaked.

The dog lead was still in her hand, although she was clueless about how she'd held on to it while falling over. The barking and yapping so close to her face was terrible, and she saw the snapping jaws of the Labrador as it darted towards Elsa, who'd regained her feet and was now standing her ground once more, returning every bark and growl with one of her own.

"Elsa!" Olive cried again and tried to get up.

"Stay where you are, Olive," Val commanded. "Don't get up yet."

Things happened quickly after that. Val grabbed hold of Mac's lead and, with what seemed like Herculean strength, dragged the Labrador away from Elsa and Olive. A man appeared from somewhere and took hold of Mac's lead while Val rushed back to Olive and hunched down beside her on the pavement, checking for injuries. Olive felt the former nurse's sure hands taking hold of her and was comforted by her calm manner. A small circle of passers-by assembled, offering help and advice and making sure Elsa was all right.

"Do you think you've broken anything?" Val asked Olive.

“No, but I may have sprained my wrist when I hit the ground.”

Val ran a gentle hand over Olive’s arm and wrist. “There are some scrapes from the pavement that will need cleaning up for sure. Did you hit your head?”

“No, I don’t think so. I don’t feel dizzy, just shaken up.”

The passers-by lent a hand to get Olive back up on her feet, and she was relieved to stand up easily and feel no pain in her legs or ankles. Her wrist felt sore, though. A little too sore. When she glanced at it, she saw bloody scrapes on the soft flesh of her palm where her hand had connected with the pavement. That was going to hurt for a day or two, of that she had no doubt.

By some miracle, two policemen appeared on the scene, jumping out of the marked patrol car in which they’d been driving by and checking on Olive. The owner of the nearby newsagent’s shop hurried out with a folding chair for Olive to sit on and catch her breath, and supplied a bottle of water for her to drink. While one of the policemen spoke to Olive and went through a list of questions about the injuries she might have sustained, Val continued to examine her. The other policeman, Olive noticed, was talking to Mac’s owner, who was crying and nodding as the uniformed officer wrote in a notebook and spoke into his radio. The man who’d grabbed Mac’s lead was still there, and Mac was now sitting on the pavement, panting and looking around him as if nothing had happened.

Olive turned her attention to Elsa, huddled up beside her and pressing against her legs.

“Is Elsa all right?” Olive asked as she reached down to the little dog.

“She’s fine,” Val insisted. “I already gave her a good check over.”

Olive wondered when that had happened, because she hadn’t noticed. Maybe she was a little more discombobulated than she’d realised.

“I don’t think that stupid Labrador did anything more than tumble Elsa around a bit,” Val added. “In fact, as soon as Elsa was on the ground, the Lab seemed to think it was all a big game and started jumping around in play mode.”

It hadn’t felt much like play mode to Olive, nor had it sounded like it, but she’d been frozen with terror at Mac’s vicious barking, and perhaps it was easy to assume things were headed in a worse direction than they had been.

“He didn’t bite her?” Olive asked. “Are you sure she isn’t hurt?”

“She’s okay,” the policeman said, and gave Olive a smile. “I checked her over myself. No broken skin, no cuts or scrapes. Like your friend said, the Lab just got too boisterous and too noisy.”

“The dog was out of control!” Val said, frowning at the policeman.

“He was,” the policeman agreed, chastened. “And my colleague is speaking to the owner about that just now.”

“Hmm,” Val said, eyeing Mac and his owner across the pavement before turning back to Olive. “My main concern is for you, Olive dear. I don’t think your wrist is broken, but I do think you need an X-ray to rule it out.”

“Oh, what a nuisance,” Olive scowled.

“It doesn’t hurt to be sure,” the policeman said. “I’ve already contacted the emergency dispatcher, and an ambulance is on the way.”

“An ambulance!” Olive said, peering at the young officer. “I certainly don’t need an ambulance. There will be plenty of people worse off than me out there who need an ambulance more than I do. I shall catch the bus.”

Val burst into laughter. “You’re not getting the bus, for goodness’ sake. The fact that you’re even suggesting it makes me wonder if you didn’t hit your head after all.”

“I certainly know when I’ve hit my head and when I haven’t,” Olive insisted.

“At any rate, the ambulance is on its way and you’re going in it to the hospital,” the policeman said in a kind, but firm, tone. “No arguments.”

“I’ll come with you,” Val said.

“You most certainly will not,” Olive said. “It’s bad enough that I have to go. There’s no point wasting your afternoon, too, Val.”

Olive looked down at Elsa, who was panting beside her. “But if I’m being sent to the hospital, what shall I do with Elsa?”

“I’ll take the dog,” Val said. “I’ll look after her until you get back from hospital and then pop round with her once you’re home. Depending on how busy they are, I don’t think you’ll be there for more than a couple of hours.

Olive sighed and closed her eyes. “My neighbour is going to be very unhappy with me because of this.”

“Don’t be daft,” Val said. “None of this was your fault.”

“If something had happened to that little dog, and I’d had to tell Angela she’d been harmed, I’d never forgive myself.”

“This isn’t your dog?” the policeman asked.

Olive shook her head. “I walk her for my neighbour, to help while she’s at work. Not that she’ll want me to continue doing so after this.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand,” the policeman said. “There are plenty of people here who say the fault for all of this lies entirely with the owner of the Labrador.”

“But still...” Olive shook her head, feeling wretched. A pain shot along her wrist and as she winced and cradled her sore bloody hand against her, she finally noticed what had happened to her brand new pink jacket.

“Oh no!” she groaned, turning her arm to see the tear along the seam and the horrible dark scuff marks and rips peppered across the soft pink fabric. “Look at my new jacket! I only bought it this morning and now it’s ruined!”

“I’m sure it can be mended,” Val said, peering at the arm of the jacket, but Olive could see by her friend’s expression that she didn’t actually believe this. “Forget about your jacket for now. All that matters is getting your arm checked over.”

An ambulance pulled up at the side of the road just then, its blue lights flashing, which Olive thought was unnecessary. Soon, she’d been assessed by the paramedics and bundled into the back of the vehicle. As the doors were about to be closed, she saw Val standing with Elsa beside her and the young policeman who’d been so kind, who offered an encouraging smile.

“You’ll look after little Elsa, won’t you?” Olive shouted out.

“She’ll be fine,” Val insisted. “You’ve got my number, so when they discharge you from A&E, phone me and I’ll drive over and pick you up.”

“You can’t come and pick me up. You’ve had a glass of wine,” Olive reminded her.

“The hospital will contact a family member to collect you,” the nice policeman told her. “Just ask them to help.”

Olive smiled at the young man’s kindness. “I don’t have any family nearby. But I’m sure the hospital can help me summon a taxi.”

The ambulance doors closed then, just in time to block out the expression of pity on the young policeman’s face and the sad frown on Val’s. The last half hour had been upsetting enough without her having to see people feeling sorry for her because she was alone and had no family on hand to help in an emergency. Their pity just made things worse.

As the ambulance drove off, the paramedic accompanying her in the back chatted away, but Olive wasn’t listening to what she was saying. Instead, she was thinking about how quickly her lovely bright spring day had turned sour on account of Mac the Menace and his idiot owner.

And, as she cradled her aching wrist, which was becoming sorer by the second, she wondered just how bad the

consequences would turn out to be from this nasty bit of bad luck.

TWO HOURS LATER, Olive was still in a bay at A&E, waiting to be discharged.

Despite being seen quickly when the ambulance brought her in, an influx of new patients following what sounded like a horrifying road traffic accident meant the attention of the hospital staff turned to the injured people involved. Olive was grateful she'd already had her X-ray by that point, which revealed no fractures, but the nurse looking after her said a few small stitches were required for the nasty gash on Olive's hand. She was waiting for this last piece of treatment when the nurses and doctors were diverted to deal with the poor victims of the road crash.

Olive would just have to wait.

Val had sent a text message, reassuring her that little Elsa was doing just fine, but as Olive waited for her stitches to be sorted, she realised a bigger problem was brewing.

It was five-thirty already, which meant that Angela would at this very minute be finishing her shift at the supermarket and hurrying to the local primary school to collect Lindsey from the after-hours club there. In the next half hour, they'd be returning home to find Elsa missing.

Olive had hoped to be back home in time for Angela's return, and with Elsa handed over by Val, so that she could tell her neighbour about what had happened, but it was now clear that this was impossible. She had no choice but to contact

Angela and alert her to the fact that Elsa wouldn't be at home when she got there, and to explain the reasons why.

She dreaded to think about how Angela would react to the news of the afternoon's events. Not only would she be upset about Mac the Menace's attack on Elsa, but Olive feared upset might turn to anger when Olive revealed that she'd handed Elsa over to someone who was, as far as Angela was concerned, a perfect stranger.

But there was no getting out of doing what had to be done.

Picking up her phone, grateful that her right hand was still functioning just fine unlike her left, Olive tapped out a quick message to Angela, asking her to give her a ring as soon as possible, and pressed 'Send'.

Beyond the wrap-around curtains in the bed bay, Olive heard hurrying feet and trolleys being wheeled around and phones ringing and medics having conversations with one another. It was still very busy as far as the road traffic accident patients were concerned. Olive hoped they'd all be okay. It put her own sprained wrist into perspective.

As she waited for Angela to get in touch, hoping her young neighbour would see the message she'd sent before she walked through her front door and found her home mysteriously dogless, the curtain around Olive's bay twitched open and a head appeared around the edge.

"How are you feeling, Mrs Nimmo?" said a tall, young man.

Olive peered at the fellow, trying to place his vaguely familiar face.

"I was one of the policeman who was there this afternoon on the high street," he explained, realising her confusion. "I'm out of uniform now."

"Oh, I remember," Olive said, recognising him as the kind fellow who'd made sure she was okay and had insisted on sending her to the hospital.

"Is it all right if I come in?" he asked.

“Yes, of course. What brings you here, constable? I’m not in some kind of trouble after what happened today, I hope?”

The young man stepped into the bay, leaving the curtain open behind him, and sat down in one of the plastic chairs beside Olive’s bed.

“You’re not in trouble,” he grinned. “I was passing the hospital after I finished my shift and thought I’d pop in and see if you were okay.”

“That’s very considerate of you, Mister um...”

“Green, but you can call me Mark.”

“Fair enough, Mark it is. I appreciate all your help this afternoon.” Olive brushed the bedsheet that covered her legs and cleared her throat. “I feel very foolish for allowing myself to be knocked to the ground by that stupid dog.”

“You shouldn’t,” Mark said, giving her a reassuring smile. “He was a big dog and very powerful. You might be glad to hear that we’ll be issuing a written warning to the owner. This isn’t the first time she’s been in trouble and lost control of the animal.”

Olive wasn’t surprised to hear this. “By all accounts, that brute of a dog is a source of regular upheaval and discord at the park.”

The young officer nodded. “That’s what it says in our files. Anyway, the owner was apologetic and upset over what happened and knows she has to deal with the dog’s behaviour. We’ve given her advice on getting professional help with dog training. From what we learned at the scene today, most people who witnessed what happened said that her dog didn’t try to injure your dog once he’d knocked it over, but that doesn’t get away from the fact that harm was done and things could have been much worse, especially for you. The dog’s owner knows this, and knows too that if there are any more incidents, we might have to go further and perhaps even take the dog from her.”

“No one wants to see someone deprived of their pet, least of all me,” Olive said. “But it’s true that on the few occasions

I've seen her, the dog has been walking her rather than the other way around."

Mark smiled again. "For what it's worth, the woman sends her apologies. She seemed sincere."

"Hmm," Olive sniffed. "I appreciate you passing them on."

The bay curtain twitched again and this time a nurse appeared, bearing a tray of equipment.

"Hello, Mrs Nimmo," the nurse said and perched himself on the edge of the bed. "Let's get this cut of yours tidied up."

"I'll wait outside," Mark said, rising from his chair. "And then I'll give you a lift home once you're finished."

"Good grief, there's no need for you to do that," Olive frowned. "I'm perfectly able to book a taxi."

"It's no trouble," Mark said and gave her another broad smile, then disappeared beyond the curtain before Olive could protest any further.

"Well," Olive huffed as the nurse got to work on her injury. "That young constable must have plenty of other things to do with his spare time than ferry me, an anonymous citizen, back home from the hospital."

"Don't knock it," the nurse winked. "Maybe you need a bit of looking after today."

Olive scowled. Being looked after was exactly what she didn't want. It made her feel even older and even more useless than she already did.

* * *

Angela was walking through the primary school gates while Lindsey skipped along at her side and recounted a complicated story involving several other little girls from her class and their plans for the school's spring concert when her phone pinged in her pocket.

After finishing work late on account of a last-minute check-out till malfunction, and racing to the school to collect Lindsey before the six o'clock cut-off, she hadn't had time to look at the phone to check for missed messages. Now, as she glanced at the screen, she saw several of them, including one from Olive.

Usually, the old lady sent her a quick text after dropping Elsa back home in the afternoons, and Angela appreciated Olive putting her mind at ease that all was well on the dog-walking front. However, instead of the usual chirpy, and grammatically correct, message along the lines of *Elsa has been returned home safely, and all is well!*, or words to that effect, she instead found something a bit more alarming.

Angela, please phone me as soon as you get this message, Olive.

A blast of icy anxiety coursed through her stomach. Something was wrong, she was sure of it. Had something happened to Elsa while Olive was walking her?

"Slow down a minute, sweetie," Angela said to Lindsey, who was still chattering beside her. "I need to make a quick phone call."

She dialled Olive's number and listened while it rang on the other end. Olive answered quickly.

"Hi, Olive, I just got your message," Angela said. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine, dear," Olive said. "Although there has been an incident this afternoon that I need you to know about before you get home."

In the background at Olive's end, Angela could hear voices and a lot of coming-and-going type noises, and then someone saying, "Just turn your hand a bit more that way, Mrs Nimmo."

"What's happened?" Angela asked, trying to keep her voice even for Lindsey's benefit.

"Well, unfortunately Elsa and I had a run-in with that stupid dog, Mac, this afternoon," Olive said. "Elsa is

absolutely fine, I assure you. However, I... well, Mac knocked me over and I've ended up in A&E having my wrist checked out and a few small stitches put in to close a cut on my hand."

"Oh!" Angela cried. "My God, are you okay?"

"What's the matter?" Lindsey asked, her eyes now wide.

"It's okay," Angela told her daughter and gave her a reassuring smile, annoyed at herself for letting her tone betray the news she'd heard. "Just give me a minute to find out what's going on."

"I'm fine, I assure you," Olive was saying on the phone. "My wrist is only sprained and I have a nurse beside me at this very moment dealing with my cut hand, and he's decided I only need butterfly stitches after all. There really was no need for me to come to A&E, in my opinion, but the policeman who attended the scene insisted."

"The *police* had to come?" Angela said, her head spinning.

"They were passing in their patrol car and stopped to help. The entire episode looked far worse than it was, although it happened quickly and took me by surprise. The main thing is that both Elsa and I are fine. And the reason I wanted to speak to you before you get home is because Elsa is with a friend of mine who looked after her while I went to the hospital in the ambulance. I didn't want you returning home and finding Elsa missing without speaking to me first."

"Oh, okay," Angela said, processing all this information. "Is Elsa okay?"

Lindsey's face turned panicky at this and tears brimmed in her sweet eyes, making Angela feel terrible.

"Elsa is fine, I promise," Olive insisted. "That stupid Mac tumbled her around on the pavement rather roughly, but that was all. She was checked over and she is absolutely fine."

"Hang on, Olive," Angela said, then turned to her daughter. "It's all okay, Lindsey. Elsa had a little run-in with that silly Labrador, Mac, this afternoon. I don't know all the details, but Elsa is fine. No injuries or anything like that. Okay?"

Lindsey nodded, seemingly reassured, then slipped her hand into Angela's, something she rarely did these days. Clearly her little girl was upset, and Angela pulled her close for a reassuring cuddle while she continued her phone conversation.

"Do you have to stay in the hospital overnight?" Angela asked Olive.

"No, and just as soon as this nurse has finished with me, I'll be discharged. In fact, I expect to be leaving in the next fifteen minutes."

"We can come there and help you get home," Angela said.

"That's unnecessary," Olive said, her tone firm. "In fact, one of the young policemen who stopped to help this afternoon is here right now, and he insists on driving me home. I've argued with him about it, but he won't take no for an answer."

"That's good that you're getting a lift back. We'll look out for you getting home. And what about Elsa? Should I ring this friend of yours so I can collect her?"

"Val has already been in touch, and will walk over to Foxglove Street with Elsa just as soon as she knows we're all back. I hope that's okay?"

"Of course it is."

"I was rather worried that you'd be angry with me for leaving Elsa with someone you don't know, after all my assurances that I was quite capable of walking the dog."

"I'm not angry, Olive, don't be silly. I'm only worried about you. It was thoughtful of you and your friend to make arrangements to care for Elsa while you went to the hospital. You should just have phoned me right away and I would've left work to come and get her."

"Nonsense. I wouldn't have allowed that for a minute, not when Elsa had nothing wrong with her. I know how important your job is to you, and that you should only be forced to rush away if it's a genuine emergency, and I didn't think this

constituted that label. Now dear, the nurse needs me to sign some forms and whatnot, so I'll ring off and see you soon."

"Bye, Olive." Angela hung up, blowing out a breath at the shocking afternoon events about which she'd been totally oblivious.

"Are you sure Elsa is all right?" Lindsey still, looking up at her with an expression on her face that was much too worried for an eight-year-old, and which made Angela's heart clench.

"She's fine, I promise. If there had been any doubt, Olive would have made sure Elsa was taken to the vet, but it sounds like it's been poor Olive who's come off worst."

"Is she hurt?"

"Not too badly, but we'll get all the details when she gets home, so let's get a move on so we can be there for her arriving. And Olive's friend will bring Elsa round to the house, too."

"Why does Olive's friend have Elsa?" Lindsey frowned.

"Because Olive had to go to the hospital."

"Couldn't Elsa go with her?"

"No," Angela laughed. "I don't think dogs are allowed in hospitals, sweetie."

"Oh. Poor Elsa. And poor Olive, too."

Before reading Olive's message, Angela's main concern had been what to make for dinner tonight. Now, her mind was filled with worry for her elderly neighbour. She didn't like the idea of the old lady being alone at home after a spell in the hospital.

"How about we ask Olive round to dinner tonight?" Angela said. "Just to make sure she's okay?"

Lindsey nodded. "I'll draw a picture for her."

"Good girl. I'm sure she'll love that."

She'd planned on defrosting a tub of bolognaise sauce that she'd whipped up at the weekend, and hoped Olive would enjoy it. After the shock she'd had and being knocked to the ground by that brute Mac, she would need some sustenance and a little bit of looking after.

Angela hoped that Elsa really was okay. What if she'd been hurt in the Mac incident but no one had noticed? She pushed the thoughts away. Once Elsa was back home, she'd give her a proper check over herself. Her mind strayed to this friend of Olive's who'd been looking after the dog all afternoon, and she hoped she knew what she was doing and that she was a kindly person.

As they hurried down Foxglove Street, Angela wondered if this whole arrangement involving Olive walking Elsa was going to work out after all. They'd agreed to a two-week trial, which was now almost over, and today's events didn't exactly suggest that it had been a roaring success. Elsa had had a nasty run-in with another dog and been taken away by a stranger, and Olive had suffered a fall and landed in the hospital.

She couldn't really allow Olive to continue walking Elsa now, could she? Probably Olive wouldn't want to continue anyway, after what had happened today.

The prospect of having to give up Elsa, after all, roared back into her head like a storm.

But now wasn't the time to think about that unhappy prospect. Fishing her keys from her bag, she hurried up the garden path and unlocked the front door, shepherding Lindsey ahead of her. Remembering the spare door key Olive had given her, she fetched it from the drawer in the sideboard, and took Lindsey with her while they popped round next-door. Before Olive got home, she wanted the lights turned on, the place warmed up, and the kettle boiled so that the old lady wasn't walking into a dark house all by herself. Once she was settled, Angela would invite her round for a bite of dinner, although it occurred to her now that after the day she'd had, Olive might not want to do that.

At any rate, she wouldn't leave the old lady alone until she'd made her a cup of tea and found out more about exactly what had happened that afternoon.

* * *

When the young policeman pulled the car to a stop on Foxglove Street, Olive glanced at her house in surprise.

"Oh, the lights are on inside!" she said. "But I switched them off when I left earlier."

She was even more surprised when she saw her front door open and Angela and Lindsey emerge and wave at her.

"Oh, what on earth...?" she wondered.

Her neighbour and her little daughter hurried out to the street just as the young policeman came around to help her out of the car.

"Hello, Olive," Angela said. "I hope you don't mind, but I used the spare key you gave me to go in and turn on your lights and switch the heating on. I wanted the place to be nice and warm for you getting home after the day you've had."

"That's very thoughtful of you, dear, thank you," Olive said, feeling touched by this friendly gesture.

"You've had your hair done!" Lindsey announced with a grin. "It's awesome!"

"Why, thank you."

After being tossed around by Mac the Menace and whisked off to hospital, Olive had forgotten about her new hair style. Her trip to the salon now seemed like a week ago. She brought her good hand up to the edges of her new bob and touched the ends as Angela glanced at her and smiled.

"It looks wonderful, Olive," she said and offered an arm for her to take. "Now, let's get you inside."

"I can walk perfectly well by myself, I assure you," Olive said, not meaning it to sound as sharp as it did.

“Don’t forget your bag,” the young policeman said, reaching into the back of his car and retrieving a small brown paper bag which he held out to her.

“I’d forgotten all about that,” Olive said, remembering the doggie bag of leftovers that she’d taken with her from The White Hart after lunch. It was a wonder the bag had made its way with her to the hospital, and hadn’t been discovered on the ground and snaffled up by either Elsa or Mac during the altercation on the high street after Olive was knocked off her feet. She ought to have passed the bag of leftover food to Val before leaving in the ambulance, but in all the excitement, she’d somehow kept it with her.

As Olive took the brown paper bag from the young policeman, she noticed the strange look that Angela was giving him.

“Oh, it’s you!” Angela said, as if piecing something together in her head. “Mike.”

“Mark,” he grinned.

“Sorry, Mark,” Angela said, and Olive saw the blush that crept across her neighbour’s face.

“You two know each other?” Olive asked.

“Sort of,” the young policeman said as he grinned at Angela. “Our daughters go to the same school.”

“We do?” Lindsey asked.

The policeman nodded. “You know Shannon Green, don’t you?”

Lindsey’s eyes flew wide and she nodded. “Yes! Are you her dad?”

“The very same,” he said. “She’s been telling me all about the plans you lot are cooking up for the spring concert.” His gaze switched to Angela. “So, you’re a friend of Mrs Nimmo here?”

“Friend and next-door neighbour,” Angela replied. “You’re the policeman who was there this afternoon?”

“That’s right.”

While this conversation proceeded between the two younger folk, they were all still loitering out on the pavement, which was far from ideal as far as Olive was concerned.

“Young man, would you care to come inside?” Olive asked. “Because I’m very keen to get into my house and sit down in my favourite armchair as soon as humanly possible.”

“Thanks, but no thanks, I won’t get in your way,” he said.

“Come in and have a cup of tea, at least,” Olive said.

“Please do,” Angela said. “It would help if you could give me a quick catch-up on what happened today, if you can spare the time.”

Mark seemed to put two and two together, judging by the look on his face. “So the dog Mrs Nimmo was walking belongs to you?”

Angela nodded.

“Young man,” Olive said and turned for the house. “I’m going inside whether you’re staying or not. It’s up to you.”

The policeman seemed to think it over for another second before nodding. “Thanks, I wouldn’t mind a quick brew.”

Olive followed Lindsey as she skipped up the front path and held the door open for her. Inside, the house was cosy and warm and bright, and as Lindsey took Olive’s coat, and Angela insisted on dealing with the tea, and the young policeman—Mark, she reminded herself—followed her into the living room and hovered while she made her way to the armchair by the fire, she was pleased to have people here upon her arrival home. After such a long afternoon, it was nice not to come home to a dark, empty house by herself.

After showing Lindsey how to turn up the electric fire, a task which the girl executed without incident or the need for further guidance, Olive sank into her armchair with a sigh. Mark the policeman continued loitering by the sideboard.

“Young man, do sit down,” Olive said, gesturing to the sofa. “You’re making the place look messy standing around

like that.”

Grinning, he headed for the sofa and sat down and was immediately faced with a barrage of questions from Lindsey.

“Did Shannon tell you what we’re planning for our song at the spring concert?” she asked him.

“I don’t have all the details yet,” Mark said. “Why don’t you fill me in?”

“Well,” Lindsey began, “we’re doing a routine to go along with our song. Mrs Gallagher says we can decide it for ourselves, but she wants to approve it all. And so when we sing our song about the summer garden, we’ll do these arm actions that go like this. Watch.”

Olive hid a grin as Lindsey launched into a rehearsal of the song and accompanying skit she and her friend apparently planned on performing. Olive exchanged a wink with Mark as the routine progressed, which he returned, his eyes warm with laughter as Lindsey pranced around in front of him. As the dance act neared its conclusion, Angela came into the room bearing a tea tray.

“Good grief, Lindsey,” she said. “You’re going to poke Mark’s eyes out if you get any closer.”

“Sorry!” Lindsey shouted and took a step back before completing her routine with a few final arm waves and a twirl.

“Well done,” Olive said, clapping. “I must say that certainly cheered me up.”

“Do you want to see it again?” Lindsey asked.

“Maybe later,” Angela said before Olive could find a diplomatic way of putting the little girl off. “I’m sure Olive enjoyed your dancing enough for now, and no doubt Mark has seen this routine from Shannon already, anyway.”

“Actually, I haven’t,” Mark said as the tea was passed around. “Shannon’s staying with her mum this week and I won’t see her again until Saturday.”

“Oh, you’re separated?” Angela asked, her eyes on Mark.

“Divorced,” he said.

“Careful, dear!” Olive said as Angela almost tipped a mug of tea into her lap. “I think one trip to A&E today is enough to be going on with, don’t you?”

“God, sorry Olive,” Angela said, and Olive saw how she was blushing again as she took the free armchair on the other side of the fireplace and perched on the edge with her tea.

Olive glanced at Mark, then at Angela, then back at Mark again, before smiling to herself. There was something going on there between the two young folk, she was sure of it. How else to explain Angela being so distracted by the man that she almost dropped a cup of scalding tea all over her?

“Anyway,” Angela said. “How are you feeling now, Olive?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” Olive said, slanting a gaze at Mark. “There was no need for me to attend the hospital.”

“Maybe,” he replied. “But we emergency services folk don’t like abandoning senior citizens to the fates after they’ve just suffered a nasty shock and fall. We needed to make sure your wrist wasn’t fractured, and you needed those cuts and grazes looked at.”

“Hmm,” Olive sniffed. “My wrist wasn’t fractured, and the nurse did nothing to these minor cuts I couldn’t have done myself here at home.”

“Still,” Angela said, “I’m glad you got checked out to be sure. You can’t be too careful.”

“So everyone keeps telling me,” Olive said.

“Is your arm sore, Olive?” Lindsey asked, looking at the bandage wrapped around it.

“Only a minor ache,” Olive said, although this wasn’t true. Her wrist was rather sore, and she was grateful for the strong painkillers the A&E nurse had packed her off with. She was sure she’d have to take one or two tonight before bed, just to smooth over the discomfort, and if the tablets knocked her for six, then she’d just have to put up with it.

“Mum said you got stitches,” Lindsey said. “Did it hurt?”

“I didn’t require proper stitches in the end, just little strips across one cut to help it heal.”

“Did Mac bite your hand?” Lindsey asked, her face filling with a mixture of horror and naked curiosity.

“No, he didn’t bite me. I hurt my hand when I landed on the pavement.”

“What exactly happened?” Angela said.

Before Olive could answer, the doorbell rang. “That will be Val bringing Elsa back,” Olive said. “I sent her a message when we left the hospital. Would you let her in, Lindsey?”

Obviously pleased to be assigned this task, Lindsey dashed off to the front door which was soon rattling in its frame as the child yanked it open. There followed the sounds of a joyful reunion, and Lindsey could be heard fussing over Elsa who barked in response. A moment later, Val appeared in the living room with the little dog on the lead and Lindsey skipping around beside them.

“Hello, Olive,” Val said, smiling at her and nodding a hello to the others. “How are you feeling, love?”

“I’m fine, Val, as I was just telling these two. This is my neighbour, Angela, and her daughter, Lindsey. And you already met this young policeman, Mark, after that stupid Mac knocked me over.”

A round of hellos were exchanged and Olive smiled to see Angela and Lindsey fussing over little Elsa who wriggled around at all the attention before rolling over on her back to receive tummy rubs.

“I fed the little pooch at tea-time,” Val told Angela. “I didn’t want her going hungry, so I sent my husband round to the shop for a can of dog food. I hope that’s all right?”

“Of course it is,” Angela said, giving Elsa a final pat and turning to Val. “It was kind of you to look after her. How much do I owe you for the dog food?”

“For goodness’ sake, you don’t owe me anything,” Val said and waved a hand as she took a seat on the sofa. “Getting to annoy my grump of a husband by sending him on the errand was payment enough for me, love.”

“So, Olive,” Angela said. “Are you feeling up to explaining what happened?”

“Well,” Olive began after taking another sip of tea. “We’d just left The White Hart where we’d had our ladies’ lunch club. Oh, which reminds me, that brown bag there on the coffee table contains leftovers for Elsa to enjoy, so don’t forget to take it home with you.”

As if understanding, Elsa sniffed the bag and looked rather hopefully at Angela.

“We were walking along the high street, Val and I and Elsa, when we heard barking and I saw Mac galloping down the street towards us, hauling his clueless owner behind him,” Olive continued. “And it all happened quickly after that.”

“It didn’t half,” Val said, and launched into a blow-by-blow account of the rest of the incident, to which Mark the policeman was soon adding his own details.

Olive was happy to let them both take over the summary. She didn’t want to go through it all again. Now that she was back home in her comfortable armchair, she felt exhausted suddenly, and although it was still early evening, her mind was already turning to how soon she could get rid of her well-meaning visitors so she could change into her nightdress and consider having a very early night.

But it stood to reason that Angela needed to know what had happened to her little dog, and so Olive let the conversation continue amongst them all. Soon, it had been determined that Elsa was fine, and Val reported seeing no worrying signs of injury or pain in the little dog during the afternoon she’d spent at her house, and Mark had explained the conversation the police had conducted with Mac’s owner and all the various consequences should there be any further mischief.

Finally, Angela turned to Olive and smiled.

“I’m so sorry you ended up injured, Olive,” she said.

“It was just one of those things,” Olive replied. “Simple bad luck. If I’d stepped left instead of right, perhaps the dog’s lead wouldn’t have wrapped around Mac’s legs and I would’ve stayed on my feet. Who knows? As it is, I’m sure this sore wrist will be on the mend in no time.”

She saw the worried look on Angela’s face. “Tomorrow, I’ll see if I can take a longer lunch break at work and get home to let Elsa into the garden.”

“No, I insist on sticking to our arrangement, at least for tomorrow,” Olive said. “It’s too late for you to make other plans for Elsa, and it’s not like my legs are broken. And I assure you that if I don’t feel up to a walk, I’ll just let Elsa potter in the garden for a while. Of course, if you don’t want me to walk her again after what happened today, I understand.”

The expression on Angela’s face suggested she wasn’t sure about Olive’s competence. It hurt her to see it.

“Let’s not worry about anything beyond tomorrow for the time being,” Angela said. “If you’re sure you could let Elsa out for a quick run around the back garden, that’d be a big help.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do,” Olive said.

Angela smiled. “You must be hungry after all this upheaval. Would you like to come round to ours for some dinner?”

“Thank you dear, but no,” Olive said. “We had a big lunch at The White Hart, and I’ll just stick to a slice of toast tonight. Now, it’s been very kind of you all to make sure I’m okay, but I think I’d like to close my eyes for a bit.”

Everyone agreed that this was an excellent idea, quickly draining their tea cups and getting up to leave. Angela and Val both promised to ring her the next morning to make sure she was feeling better, and Mark said he’d be in touch if there were any more updates on the police side of things as far as

the incident was concerned. Finally, Olive shooed them out towards the front door.

“Oh no!” Angela exclaimed in the hallway, pointing to the coat rack where Lindsey had hung Olive’s jacket when they’d all come inside. “Did that happen today?”

Olive glanced at the brand new pink jacket and at the tears and black scuffs now riddled over the left arm. “Unfortunately, yes. It happened when I fell, of course. But I’m sure the tears can be mended and the marks cleaned up.”

“Oh, I feel terrible, knowing your jacket is damaged,” Angela said.

“I can assure you the last thing I’m worried about is my jacket,” Olive said. “Now, off you go, all of you.”

Angela looked unhappily at the jacket again before they all piled out the door. Once her visitors had bid her goodnight and told her to sleep well and expressed their hopes that she’d feel better in the morning, Olive closed the door behind them and locked it.

Having these kind people looking out for her was wonderful. But just then, all Olive wanted was to make another cup of tea, watch television for a while, and then turn in for a nice early night and put the horrible and annoying events of the afternoon behind her.

ANGELA FOLLOWED the others out of Olive's house and then glanced back at the front door, an uncertain look on her face.

"I don't like leaving her alone after she suffered a nasty fall," she said. "What if she becomes unwell during the night?"

"She'll be fine, love," Val reassured her. "No broken bones, no bash on the head. Just a sprain and a few nasty cuts. A good night's sleep and she'll be as right as rain."

"Mmm, still..."

"The hospital wouldn't have discharged her if there was any doubt," Mark added.

"I'll phone her first thing to make sure she's on the mend," Val said as they exited Olive's front gate and stepped out onto the pavement. "And listen, love," she continued, a kind look on her face. "What happened today wasn't Olive's fault."

"Oh, I know that, it's just..." Angela sighed. "I can't risk her having another fall."

"She won't," Val assured her. "Assuming that lout of a dog we encountered today is kept under control, she'll be fine. And if you're rethinking this dog-walking arrangement the two of you have, don't be too quick to make a decision. I think it means a lot to Olive to be out with your little dog and it would be a shame to bring it all to an end."

Angela sighed and nodded. "I'll bear that in mind." She thought again of Olive's jacket, the one hanging up on the coat

rack by the door. “Was that pink jacket new? I don’t remember seeing Olive wear it before.”

“She mentioned something about buying it as a treat just this morning,” Val said unhappily. “Said it cheered her up to have something new to wear.”

“Oh dear,” Angela said. “The tears along the arm didn’t look like they could be mended, and I doubt those black marks will be easily cleaned. Did she say where she bought it? I should replace it.”

“I think she mentioned Lily’s Boutique,” Val said.

Angela winced. Lily’s Boutique was the priciest clothes shop on the high street. She could only imagine how much the beautifully tailored jacket had cost.

“Anyway, I better get home,” Val said and patted Elsa on the head before setting off. “See you all later.”

Mark, who was hovering by his car, paused with his keys in his hands. “Are you okay, Angela?”

“I’m fine,” she said with a shrug. “I’m just thinking about how much that jacket of Olive’s probably cost, and now it’s ruined.”

A thoughtful look crossed his face. “Leave it with me. I might have an idea.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll let you know once I’ve made a few inquiries,” he said mysteriously. “Let’s swap phone numbers, and I’ll be in touch.”

Curious about Mark’s idea, whatever it might be, Angela swapped numbers with him.

“Okay, I’m off home,” Mark said and unlocked his car. “Bye, Lindsey. Bye, Angela.”

“Bye, Mr Green!” Lindsey said, then hurried over to his car. “Mr Green, when will Shannon start work on her flower costume for the spring concert?”

Apparently surprised by the sudden turn in the conversation, he stared for a second before laughing. "I'm not sure. Why?"

"Just wondering," Lindsey replied. "Shannon says she likes it when you help with her projects instead of her mum, because you're better at art stuff than she is."

"I am fairly handy with coloured pencils and paint, there's no two ways about it," Mark grinned.

Angela watched Mark open his car door, remembering how she'd thought darkly envious thoughts of the man's wife when she'd seen him in the supermarket café, and how much she must enjoy having her husband share the load of their daughter's school projects. Now that she knew Mark was divorced, she couldn't help but wonder why this little piece of knowledge was burrowing deeply into her brain.

He was a good looking man, although that was just stating the obvious. Tall, dark, broad-shouldered, and with a warm sparkle in his eyes that was somehow both friendly and alluring.

Although it was annoying to be even thinking about his looks, good or otherwise, because she had enough on her mind already as it was.

"Thanks again for being there to help Olive today," Angela told Mark as he got into his car.

"All part of the job," he assured her.

"I doubt that taking the time to drive her home is part of it, though. It was kind of you."

He gave an easy shrug. "I don't live far from here and was happy to lend a hand. And if truth be told, Mrs Nimmo reminds me a little of my late grandmother, and I wanted to make sure she was okay. Not that I'd tell her that. I get the impression she doesn't want to be handled like fragile china."

"I get that impression, too."

Which was why she had to think carefully before making a decision about the future of Elsa and her walks with Olive.

“Take care, you two,” Mark said as he started his car. “And no more fighting in the street, Elsa, or I’ll have no choice but to arrest you and put you in jail for the night.”

Lindsey laughed at this as Mark pulled out onto the street and threw them a wave as he drove off, Elsa letting out a friendly yap at his departure.

“Mr Green is nice, isn’t he, Mum?” Lindsey said as they went back into their own house.

“Yes, he is,” she said.

Although she definitely would not dwell on Mike’s niceness, or the way his eyes twinkled when he smiled. She had plenty to be getting on with without getting waylaid with any of that sort of nonsense.

* * *

Later that night once Lindsey was in bed, Angela cleared up the dinner dishes and tidied the kitchen, sorted a load of laundry, fixed Lindsey’s packed lunch for the next day, dealt with some bills that were waiting to be paid, and was about to collapse onto the sofa with a cup of tea when her phone rang. Glancing at the screen, she saw it was Ryan.

She’d heard nothing from her estranged husband after angrily hanging up on him the last time they’d spoken. After the events of the evening, and getting up to speed on what had happened to poor Olive and Elsa that afternoon, she really didn’t have much energy left to deal with her annoying ex. But with a sigh, she answered the phone anyway.

“How’s things?” Ryan asked cheerily.

“They’re fine,” she said. “But if you’re ringing up to speak to Lindsey, she’s already in bed.”

“No, don’t wake her up,” Ryan said, as if she’d actually suggested this. “I’m finishing work early tomorrow and thought I could pick Lindsey up from school and take her out for dinner to that burger place she likes.”

Angela slumped onto the sofa, feeling a little stunned at the out-of-the-blue offer. “It’s a bit late notice.”

“Bloody hell, Angela, do you always have to find something to complain about?”

“I’m not complaining, Ryan. But it helps me to juggle things better if I have more than twenty-four hours’ notice of when you want to see your daughter.”

“Jesus,” he sighed. “So, can I pick her up or not?”

How did he manage to turn everything around on her like this and make her feel bad all the time? She wondered if she was being too hard on him after all. The last time they’d spoken, she’d said he had to be more involved in Lindsey’s life, which was what he was now trying to do. Okay, so it would definitely help if he gave her more warning of when he wanted to see her. But if she wanted Ryan to turn into a model parent, she’d be waiting forever.

“Sure,” she said. “I’ll let the school know you’ll be collecting her and that she won’t be at the after-school club tomorrow.”

“Since when did she start going to an after-school club?”

“Since I had to go back to work full time and needed to arrange childcare for her.”

“Oh, right,” he said, his interest in this aspect of his daughter’s life apparently now exhausted. “There’s one of those animated films she likes on at the cinema. I could take her to see it after dinner.”

Now she really was completely stunned. “She’d love that. She’s been asking to see it.”

“Great. I think it finishes around eight, so I’ll bring her home afterwards.”

“That’s fine.”

The phone filled with silence. Finally, Ryan spoke again. “So, I’ll see you when I drop Lindsey off tomorrow.”

Angela wondered if this might be the beginning of a normalisation of relations between them, and the start of a new era for Ryan in spending proper time with his daughter. She hoped so.

“See you then,” she said, keeping her tone friendly as they hung up.

Over breakfast the next morning, she’d tell Lindsey about the unexpected trip out with her father. It would be a nice Friday night treat for her. Her little girl deserved it. And while she was out, Lindsey would catch up on chores around the house so that on Saturday they might spend the afternoon somewhere together themselves.

Now that it was May, and the weather was warming up, they ought to get out into the fresh air. She thought of the little paddle boats on the lake at Westbourne Country Park, and how much Lindsey had enjoyed them last summer. Maybe they could catch the bus over there and have some fun for an hour or two. Last summer, Lindsey had also loved poking around in the enchanted fairy garden at the country park, and Angela knew it wouldn’t be long before her daughter grew out of such things. She ought to make sure they enjoyed stuff like that together while her daughter was still interested in them.

The idea of a Saturday afternoon doing something a little different pleased her. Elsa, who was lying on her bed by the radiator, looked up and sniffed.

“And just what are we going to do about you?” Angela asked the little dog, who toddled over for some petting. “You had quite a day today, didn’t you?”

Elsa hopped up onto the sofa and nuzzled into Angela’s side, making herself comfortable. She couldn’t help but laugh at the cheeky dog.

Her mind turned to Olive and the nasty fall she’d suffered, although the truth was she hadn’t really stopped thinking about the incident since the minute she’d found out about it. She hoped her elderly neighbour was fine, as everyone said she was, and that there’d be no nasty consequences from the fall. Before walking Lindsey to school tomorrow and heading to

work, she'd text Olive to make sure she was okay and see if she needed any help.

But a bigger question loomed. Should she let Olive continue walking Elsa? After today, she thought it might be a bad idea. What if poor Olive had another fall or accident? She couldn't have that on her conscience. But at the same time, she hated the idea of bringing the dog walking arrangement to an end, not just because it presented all kinds of problems for her, but because she knew how much the weekday chore meant to Olive. Even this evening, the old lady had been insistent about her ability to deal with Elsa's needs, and her eyes had almost pleaded with Angela not to rush into any decision.

Still, she'd have to make some kind of decision by Monday. Angela thought back to the dog walking services she'd researched a few weeks ago, and the prices they charged. Perhaps she could find some spare money from somewhere to cover the cost for a few weeks at least. Maybe she could even ask Ryan if he might contribute to Elsa's costs, and explain how close she'd come to doing the unthinkable and telling Lindsey they'd have to rehome the dog. Following their mostly civil conversation this evening, it was possible that Ryan might be interested in helping with something like that, for Lindsey's sake. Depending on how things went with his trip out with Lindsey tomorrow night, she'd ask him and test the water.

As she finished her tea and patted the little dog cuddled up into her side, there was one thing she knew for sure—she couldn't give up Elsa for rehoming. It was impossible and it probably always had been. Which meant she had to think very hard about whether Olive was up to walking the dog, or whether it was time to find another solution.

Setting her cup on the table, Angela leaned back on the sofa and closed her eyes. These days it felt like as soon as she dealt with one problem, another three sprang up in its place. Single parenthood, she'd discovered, was all about endless firefighting.

And loneliness. The loneliness was the worst part, because it came with the terrifying fear that at any moment she'd find

herself unable to deal with some fresh problem and that there'd be no one around to help.

She thought of Olive, who'd stepped in and helped with Elsa when Angela needed it badly. It meant a lot to her that she'd done this. She wondered if, despite their very different lives, they weren't actually more similar than she'd realised—two lonely people trying to get on and make the best of things following an unhappy change in circumstances.

Tomorrow, while Lindsey was with her father and before she got stuck into household chores, Angela decided she'd have a good talk with Olive and see if she was okay to keep walking Elsa. There was no other way to be sure. And she owed it to Olive not to treat her like a befuddled old fool who was incapable of making her own decisions.

“We'll find a way eventually, won't we, Elsa?” Angela asked.

Elsa snuggled her nose against her leg and Angela took it as a yes.

WHEN OLIVE WOKE the next morning, the first thing she did was stretch out her bandaged wrist to test just how awful it felt.

After going to bed early the night before, she'd ended up tossing and turning for ages, worried about how she'd feel the next day once the painkillers had worn off. But now, as she gingerly rotated her wrist, she felt only a dull achiness rather than actual pain. Even the cuts and grazes on her hand didn't feel too bad. There was a new stiffness in her shoulder, no doubt thanks to the jarring impact of the fall, but that was only to be expected, and when she swung her legs out of bed she noticed bruising on her left knee, also the result of where she'd hit the ground.

But the deep pain she'd feared would have settled into her old bones and joints was nowhere to be felt, which rather took her by surprise.

"Thank goodness for small mercies," she told herself as she pulled on her dressing gown and shuffled through to the kitchen to make tea.

She'd slept much later than usual, and the clock on the kitchen wall told her it was already past eight. Switching on her phone as the kettle boiled, she saw a few messages arrive from Angela and Val, both asking how she was feeling. It was nice to know that people cared, especially as it was just a couple of weeks ago that she'd felt like she was hiding away at home, unnoticed by the world outside. After replying to them both to say she was feeling much better than expected, her

phone pinged again with more messages. Val said she'd pop round later in the morning if she was up for a visit, and Angela promised to drop by after work for a chat.

Of course, it stood to reason that Angela would want to talk to her. They had things to discuss as far as Elsa was concerned.

As she ate her breakfast of toast and marmalade, Olive thought about how to proceed. What had happened yesterday with that silly lout, Mac the Menace, was just a piece of nasty bad luck. If it hadn't been for that, she felt sure Angela would have had no qualms about agreeing to continue their Elsa-walking arrangement beyond the two week trial they'd set up. Although she could easily put herself in Angela's place and understand the young woman's hesitance about continuing, Olive knew she didn't want to give up walking little Elsa.

She enjoyed taking the dog to the park in the afternoons. On Tuesday, she'd brought the little critter back home after their walk, and the dog had spent a pleasant afternoon asleep on her new bed by the fire in Olive's living room, before pottering around in the garden for ten minutes and then being returned home. Olive had enjoyed every minute. While it was perfectly possible for her to get out and walk by herself, she liked having the dog at her side for company. However ridiculous it sounded, she felt like they'd become friends of sorts.

Somehow, she had to convince Angela that she was still up to the task for which she'd volunteered.

After pouting for a while over her ruined new pink jacket, Olive got dressed and then spent some time styling her new hair-do which, she was delighted to discover, was the easy work of moments and she soon had style looking neat and smart once again, which cheered her up.

Next, she busied herself around the house, testing what she could and couldn't do while wearing the annoying support bandage on her wrist, and then dug out some library books that were due to be returned. When Val popped round as promised just before lunch time, Olive invited her for a walk to the

library so she could test her legs and stretch out any stiffness that was building up on account of her bruised knee, an idea which Val declared very sensible. The library was less than a quarter of a mile away and not only was Olive relieved to discover no lingering achiness in her knees or ankles after her fall, but she enjoyed chatting more with the friend with whom she'd reconnected, and also discovered a stack of newly released books at the library which she whisked away with her.

After Val went home, Olive fetched Elsa from Angela's house. Although she'd been tempted to take the dog with her to the library, she hadn't wanted to court disaster when Angela had said she should only let the dog into the garden. Olive didn't want to risk walking Elsa out on the streets today only to discover that Mac the Menace was once more on the rampage, despite the assurances given to the police by his clueless owner. It also made sense to make sure she gave her old joints the time they needed to heal.

Anyway, Elsa seemed happy sniffing around in the back garden and taking care of her business there. As the afternoon was bright with May sunshine, Olive sat outside on the garden bench while Elsa potted around, enjoying the spring warmth and the sounds of birdsong. By the time a bank of clouds blew in and cooled the air, it was almost four o'clock.

"We've had a nice afternoon together, haven't we, Elsa?" she asked the little dog and added some biscuit treats to the bowl that now remained permanently on the kitchen floor for the creature's visits.

A message pinged on her phone from Angela, saying she'd come round after work and would bring dinner for them both to save Olive from having to fix herself something. Olive paced back and forth to the front window until the time came for her neighbour to arrive, thinking about how she'd make her case and convince her new friend that she could be trusted to look after Elsa. It was quite ridiculous how much she didn't want to give up spending time with the little animal.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think I was blowing this quite out of perspective," Olive told Elsa, who only sighed. "It's

ridiculous, the way these scrappy dogs can sneak into our hearts.”

Elsa sighed once more and went to sleep, oblivious to the emotional hijacking of which she was being accused.

Angela appeared out on Foxglove Street just after five o'clock and came straight to Olive's door carrying a plastic bag.

“I didn't expect you so soon, dear,” Olive said when she opened the door and Elsa hurried out to greet Angela.

“I finished early because I didn't get my full lunch breaks this week,” Angela told her and held up the plastic bag she was carrying. “I hope you like Italian. I picked up some pasta dishes from the restaurant on the high street.”

“Perfect. I'll get some plates. Where's young Lindsey?”

“Her dad's taken her out for dinner and a film at the cinema tonight.”

“Oh, how lovely. She must be thrilled to see him.”

“She could barely contain herself when I told her he'd be picking her up after school. It was all a bit last minute. She misses him so much, and I expect she spent the entire school day squirming in her seat waiting for the end of class to arrive.”

They went to the kitchen and while Olive found plates and cutlery, Angela opened cartons containing lasagne and chicken fusilli and began spooning it out.

“How are your assorted injuries?” Angela asked as they sat down at the table.

“Much better than I could've dared hope,” Olive said, enjoying a forkful of the tasty lasagne. “I must be careful while the sprain heals, but I'm sure that in a matter of days, my aches and bruises will be on the mend.”

“I hate the idea of you being knocked over by that stupid Mac. He's such a big dog and so heavy, too. You must have got a terrible fright.”

“I won’t deny being shaken up. But it wasn’t as bad as it could have been, and for that I’m grateful. At my age...”

Olive pushed some pasta around her plate for a moment, feeling suddenly emotional. When Angela looked up and saw her expression, she set down her fork and laid a hand on Olive’s.

“It’s okay, Olive,” Angela said softly. “It’s only to be expected that you’d have a delayed reaction to what happened. The snarling dogs and all that commotion, and then you being knocked to the ground... it’s all right to feel upset.”

“Oh, I know dear.” Olive pulled a handkerchief from her cardigan pocket and dabbed at a tear that was threatening to fall. “It’s just that... well, you’re too young to understand this right now, but when you reach my age, one of the biggest fears you can have is to suffer a terrible fall. When you’re young, you just bounce back from something like that, but it’s different when you’re old. During the winter, a neighbour who lived across the street had a gruesome fall on the ice and broke her hip and never recovered. Her name was Joan, and she passed away in the hospital in early February. We’d been friendly for many years and seeing what happened to her really shook me up. She was older than me, granted, and had a few health issues, but she wasn’t frail. But the broken hip was too much for her body to deal with in the end.”

“I’m sorry,” Angela said. “You must miss her.”

“I do, of course, and I’m still very sorry about what happened to Joan and about how she spent her final weeks in the hospital, away from the home she loved so much. Both of us lost our husbands around the same time, and we became friendly as a result. We popped in and out of each other’s houses for morning coffee once or twice a month, and took the occasional trip to the seaside together when the weather was fair. We even went to the cinema now and again. We were friends, not just neighbours, and despite our advancing age, we made sure we got out and about and enjoyed ourselves. And then, in the blink of an eye, Joan suffered this awful fall and was gone. I think that what happened yesterday has reminded me about how easily the tables can be turned on a person. If

I'd fallen a little differently, or more awkwardly, perhaps things might have been far worse."

"But they weren't. You're made of strong stuff, Olive Nimmo."

Olive smiled. "I appreciate you saying that. Though when you said you wanted us to talk this evening, at first all I wanted to do was find some way to convince you that I am still more than able to walk Elsa. But now, as I remember what happened to my poor neighbour, I realise that perhaps I'm being selfish. You see, in just a few short days, I've become very attached to that little dog of yours."

Olive glanced at Elsa, who was licking her bowl after gobbling down a pouch of food she'd opened for her.

"But maybe I should remember that I am an old lady," she continued, looking down at her plate. "Perhaps I'm not up to the challenge of all the things I think I'm able to do. It's not fair to allow you to rely on me when I might not, in fact, be reliable."

It hurt her to say this, but as soon as the difficult and unexpected words were out of her mouth, Olive knew they were the truth. Oh, how awful it was to be old and, worse, to feel old, too.

When she glanced up from her plate and looked at Angela, the young woman was smiling kindly at her.

"I know how much you enjoy helping with Elsa," she said. "It's true that after what happened yesterday, I was sure I'd have to book a dog-walking service and find some way to pay for it. But maybe I've had a change of heart, too. I don't like you feeling old, Olive, and I'd hate to make you feel even older by stopping you from walking Elsa."

"You must do what's right for your family. You mustn't do something because you feel sorry for me."

"I know. And I don't feel sorry for you, Olive, not in the way you think. And I also don't want to overreact to what happened yesterday, especially if it means I might have to sell a kidney in order to pay for a dog walking service."

Olive saw her young neighbour's mouth twitch with humour. "I hear those dog walkers charge an arm and a leg."

"Literally. So maybe next week we'll find a compromise, and you could just bring Elsa around here to your house for an hour or so in the afternoon, until you're sure you're up to walking her again."

Olive didn't realise she'd been so tense until she felt her shoulders relax with relief. "I think that sounds like a very wise idea."

"Good," Angela said, once more digging into her meal.

"That said, I had a nice chat with my friend Val earlier today, and she said that while I'm being careful with this wrist, she'd be glad to take charge of Elsa on a walk or two next week alongside me. She was planning on coming along now and again to the park while Elsa and I are there, and made the suggestion in the hope it might help. She has owned dogs before and is quite capable, and of course knows Elsa now after stepping into the breach yesterday, and—"

"Olive," Angela interrupted and smiled. "You don't have to convince me of your friend's abilities. She seemed on the ball when I met her yesterday. If she can take charge of Elsa's lead so that you can both get the park for some fresh air, that's fine with me."

"Good, that's very generous of you."

"We're two smart, single women, Olive. I'm sure between us we can figure out how to deal with a troublemaker like Elsa. But I have one condition."

Olive waited, wondering what it could be. "And what's that?"

"If you're going to continue helping me with Elsa, you must let me return the favour," Angela said, once more laying her hand on Olive's. "From now on, you'll come round to dinner at our house a couple of times a week, and that way I won't feel like this is a one-way street when it comes to being helpful and neighbourly."

Olive felt the younger woman squeeze her hand, and the gesture touched her deeply. "I'd like that."

"That's settled then," Angela smiled. "Let's finish up this food before it gets cold."

They'd barely taken another mouthful of dinner when Angela's phone rang. After searching around in her pockets for it, she dug it out and glanced at the screen. A mysterious blush bloomed on her cheeks as she answered.

"Hello, Mark," she said. "How are you?"

Olive glanced back at her meal but couldn't help but smile to herself. So, young Mark the policeman was now ringing up Angela, was he? How lovely. After seeing the two of them pretending not to look at one another yesterday when they'd been sitting in her living room, Olive wondered if there was something more going on between the two of them than they seemed to realise. As Angela spoke into the phone, Olive made a show of eating her food while the phone call proceeded.

"Uh-huh," Angela said. "Right... Oh, I didn't realise you could do that... Well, I'm here with Olive right now, so let me ask her."

At the mention of her name, Olive glanced up, and Angela tilted the phone away from her mouth to speak to her.

"It's Mark," Angela said. "He's wondering if you're free tomorrow morning to meet him by the water fountain in Peartree Park?"

"What a strange request," Olive said, mystified.

"I'll be there too. He has a surprise for you. He just explained to me what it is, and I told him I think you'll be okay with it."

"Goodness, how perfectly mysterious. I don't see how I could do anything other than agree to be there so I can find out what on earth is going on."

Angela grinned, then spoke into the phone again. "Olive says that's fine and we'll be there at ten o'clock... Okay, see

you then, bye.”

Once Angela hung up, she gave Olive a wide smile. “Don’t worry, it will all make sense tomorrow.”

“I certainly hope so.” Olive speared a few pieces of chicken fusilli and watched her neighbour resume eating dinner. “So, you and young Mark the policeman must know each other well to have exchanged telephone numbers.”

Angela’s blush returned. “Not really. We only swapped details last night after we left here.”

“Lindsey and his daughter go to school together?”

“That’s right.”

“And he’s divorced, I understand?”

Angela looked up from her plate. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason. He is a rather attractive young man, don’t you think? Perhaps you two should go out together?”

When Angela choked on a forkful of lasagne at this suggestion, Olive laughed.

“Believe me,” Angela said, as she wiped her mouth with a napkin. “The last thing I’m interested in right now is men.”

“That’s not how it looked to me last night. You almost tipped my tea cup in my lap when Mark said he was divorced.”

“I did not.”

“I rather think you did.”

Olive enjoyed the look of scandalised horror now spreading across her neighbour’s face, but before she could tease her any further, Angela’s phone rang again. This time, when she glanced at the screen, she frowned as she answered.

“Ryan, how’s dinner going?” Angela said into the phone.

As Angela listened to her ex-husband on the other end of the line, Olive saw how the frown on her forehead deepened.

“*What?*” Angela cried after a few moments. “But you can’t... But Lindsey was so excited about this, and... Okay,

fine, I'll see you soon."

She hung up the phone angrily and rose from the table.

"Is everything all right?" Olive asked.

"No, it isn't," Angela said, carrying her plate to the sink. "Ryan was supposed to take Lindsey to see a film after dinner, but he says he can't do that anymore because he needs to give his girlfriend's mother a lift somewhere and so he's bringing Lindsey home early."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Lindsey will be disappointed."

"You can say that again," Angela hissed. "Ryan said that Lindsey had a tantrum when he told her he'd have to cancel their trip to the cinema. But what he calls a tantrum is actually a little girl having her heart broken by the father she adores, the father she thought she'd have to herself for the entire evening."

Olive walked over to where Angela stood at the sink and laid a comforting hand on her arm. "Poor Lindsey. Does she know yet about her father's new girlfriend and the baby that's on the way?"

"Not yet," Angela replied, scraping her plate. "I'd hoped that if tonight went well with his trip out with Lindsey, I could convince him that the next time he takes her somewhere he ought to tell her what's going on. But after tonight..."

She trailed off and set her plate down, shaking her head. Olive found herself once more feeling badly for her neighbour and her unhappy predicament.

"I have an idea." Olive opened the freezer and removed a tub of salted caramel ice cream she'd bought at her last visit to the shops. "When Lindsey gets home, why don't you two dig into this and curl up and watch a film together by yourselves? I picked up the wrong flavour by mistake, and I don't especially care for caramel. Someone might as well enjoy it."

"Thanks, Olive," Angela said, accepting the ice cream. "She loves this posh stuff and I never buy it because it's too pricey."

“Is she on her way home right now?”

Angela nodded and turned for the door. “They’ll be back shortly. Sorry, what am I thinking? Let me do this washing up before I go.”

“Don’t you dare. Off you go and see to Lindsey, and I’ll clear up. It’s only a few plates. And take these leftovers home with you. I’ll never eat all this in a month of Sundays.”

Once the spare food was back inside the take-away containers, Angela placed the ice cream tub in the bag alongside them. “I hope Lindsey’s not too upset when she gets home.”

“If she is, she has you to cheer her up. She knows you’ll always be there for her.”

Angela smiled. “Thanks, Olive. Okay, Elsa, let’s go home.”

Elsa, who’d been sitting obediently by her bowl in the kitchen waiting for dinner scraps, got up and trotted after her mistress.

“Don’t forget we’re meeting Mark tomorrow at the park,” Angela said as she opened the door. “I’ll drop by at around quarter to ten and we can walk over together.”

“I shall be ready and waiting, dear. My curiosity is quite piqued.”

She locked up after Angela, and then went to the front window to watch her neighbour hurry around to her own house, Elsa scurrying at her heels. Five minutes later, a car pulled up outside and Lindsey got out of the passenger side. Even at a distance, Olive could see that the little girl had been crying. She watched as Ryan came round from the driver’s side and pulled Lindsey into a hug, and her heart twisted to see the child lean into her father’s embrace.

Children were so forgiving, Olive thought, at least until they grew up and discovered that some people just weren’t worthy of it. She wondered if Ryan knew how careless he was being with his daughter’s emotions. Probably not.

“Foolish man,” Olive muttered as she peered through the blinds, watching as Ryan ruffled Lindsey’s hair. “You don’t even realise what you’re missing out on, do you, young man?”

A moment later, Lindsey hurried off into the house and Olive saw Angela appear and walk out to the pavement towards Ryan. They began talking, and it was obvious that the discussion was not amicable, because as Ryan talked and gesticulated, a look of anger and disbelief soon spread across Angela’s face. Not wishing to intrude on her neighbour’s privacy any further, Olive stepped away from the window, hoping that Angela would keep her cool in the face of whatever information Ryan was now relaying to her.

It was so sad how once promising relationships could turn bad. No wonder Angela had shrugged her off when she’d teased her earlier about Mark the policeman. Broken hearts were not easily mended.

The house felt quiet again now that Elsa had gone. Olive glanced at the dog’s little bed by the fire, relieved that she and Angela had reached an understanding of sorts. Although she hadn’t even known the dog’s name three weeks ago, she couldn’t now imagine not having the animal coming in and out of her house.

Not to mention her sweet neighbour and her lovely daughter. Olive hoped that Lindsey wouldn’t be too upset tonight, and that the posh ice cream she’d sent Angela home with would cheer the little girl up, at least a little.

In the kitchen, Olive turned on the radio and filled the sink to wash the dishes. As she scrubbed the plates and wiped down the counters, her mind kept turning to this strange meeting she would have tomorrow morning with Mark the policeman, and Angela’s refusal to give her any information about it.

Why did the young policeman want to meet her in the park? She had absolutely no idea.

By the time the kitchen was tidied and Olive was brewing her last cup of tea of the day, she realised all this activity and

intrigue had made her forget entirely about her achy wrist and sore cuts.

Which made her very happy indeed.

ANGELA TRIED to make sense of the words coming out of her ex-husband's mouth, but it wasn't easy.

"You told Lindsey *what?*" she said.

"What's the problem?" Ryan spread his arms at his sides as if what he'd just said was perfectly reasonable. "I had to come up with some excuse! Cleo needed me to collect her mum. Did you want me to leave the woman waiting around for a bus that might not come?"

"But you told Lindsey that her grandmother was *ill* and that's why you had to leave?"

"It's just a little white lie, Angela."

"That's what made her upset, Ryan. Don't you see that? You told me she had a tantrum, but that's not what happened at all. You upset her." She glanced at the house to make sure she'd closed the door when she came out. She didn't want Lindsey overhearing this conversation. "Lindsey loves her grandmother, Ryan. She was worried enough about her in January when you said Granny Barton was ill and that you'd gone to stay with her, instead of telling her the truth, which was that you'd left us. Now she's worried that something's wrong with her granny again because you cancelled the cinema trip at the last minute and hurried away."

"So I'll phone Lindsey tomorrow and explain that everything's all right."

It was like talking to a brick wall. Had he always been this useless, and she just hadn't noticed?

“So, let me get this straight,” Angela said, pinching the bridge of her nose to make herself stay calm. It was her default position these days whenever she spoke to Ryan. “Your new girlfriend phoned and told you to pick up her mother from the bingo.”

“She *asked* me. She didn’t *tell* me.”

“And you said yes, even although you were about to take your daughter to the cinema?”

“Cleo’s mother needed a lift because her bus didn’t show up.”

“She couldn’t get a taxi home?”

“I wanted to help.”

“But helping your new girlfriend’s mother meant ditching your own daughter!”

“Now you’re just being dramatic,” Ryan laughed, shaking his head as if she’d lost the plot.

For the briefest of moments, she imagined slapping him in the face. All that stopped her was the knowledge that the last thing Lindsey needed right now was to look out the window and see her mother throwing punches at her father out here on the pavement.

“You don’t even understand the damage you’re doing,” Angela said. “You’re refusing to tell Lindsey that you’re involved with another woman and having another baby, and in order to keep it a secret, you’re telling these terrible lies about your mother being unwell. All Lindsey wanted was to spend an evening with you, but you can’t even do that without causing upset.”

“Look, I said I’d phone Lindsey tomorrow and put things right. What more do you want from me?”

The sigh that escaped from her felt bone weary. “I want you to act like the father you’re supposed to be, Ryan,” she said and turned for the house. “But I should’ve learned by now that’s too much to ask.”

As she went inside the house and closed the door, she saw Ryan getting into his car and shaking his head, as if their entire conversation had been totally baffling. When she found Lindsey in the kitchen, slumped at the table with a glass of milk in front of her, bright tears of anger brimmed in her eyes. Determined not to let her daughter see them, she pasted on a smile.

“Sweetie, I’m sorry your dad had to bring you home early,” she said.

Lindsey looked up, her face a picture of worry. “Is Granny Barton going to be okay?”

Damn you, Ryan, Angela hissed inside. “She’ll be fine, I’m sure of it. Your dad’s just being on the safe side and going to check on her. But I don’t want you to worry about this, all right?”

“Granny Barton’s been poorly a lot this year.”

“Not too poorly.”

Lindsey sipped some milk. “I’ll make her a get well soon card. Can we visit granny so I can give it to her?”

Now Angela wished she had smacked Ryan in the face after all. She was complicit in all this lying about Granny Barton’s health, and it just kept getting worse. The idea of her daughter making a card for her grandmother, who was perfectly healthy, made Angela feel physically sick. The charade couldn’t go on much longer.

“I’ll speak to your dad tomorrow and see how granny is,” Angela said. “And let’s wait and see about visiting her. It’s quite a few buses and trains we need to catch to get over there to her house, so we’ll have to plan it out.”

“Maybe dad could take me?”

“Well, let’s wait and see. But you mustn’t worry about your granny, okay? Promise?”

Lindsey gave a half shrug. It would have to do for now.

“Because you didn’t get to go to the cinema, Olive sent round some caramel ice cream,” Angela said, removing it from

the freezer.

Lindsey brightened up at this and looked even perkier when she saw the brand on the carton. “It’s the stuff with chunks and swirls in it!”

“Olive thought you might like it.”

“I do.” She hurried over as Angela scooped some of the ice cream into a bowl. “Is Olive feeling better today? Is her wrist okay?”

“She’s much better.”

“Good. I like Olive.”

“She likes you too, sweetie. Now, what do you say we get into our pyjamas, curl up on the sofa and watch a film together?”

Lindsey nodded. “Any film I want?”

“Any film you want.”

“I want *Frozen!*”

“I never would’ve guessed,” Angela laughed as Elsa barked at Lindsey’s sudden excitement.

“Yes, Elsa, you can have a chew to eat with the movie,” Lindsey told the little dog. “But first I’m putting on my Olaf pyjamas!”

While Lindsey hurried upstairs to her bedroom to change, Angela finished serving up the ice cream, adding an extra scoop to her daughter’s dish because the little girl deserved it. When she walked to the kitchen table to collect Lindsey’s empty milk glass for the dishwasher, she noticed a folded piece of notebook paper beside it. Opening it, she looked at it for a long moment as she absorbed what she was seeing.

The piece of paper contained a little drawing of two people, a little girl with hair the same colour as Lindsey’s, and a man who was tall and blonde like Ryan. The figures were holding hands and smiling. Written beside the picture were the words, *Thanks for taking me to the cinema Daddy! I love you, Lindsey.*

Angela's throat closed as tears once more threatened. Lindsey must have made the drawing during the school day. She imagined her daughter tearing a sheet from one of her workbooks in order to create the little thank-you note for her father in anticipation of their trip to the cinema. That's how much it meant to Lindsey, and yet Ryan had no clue. Her sweet, thoughtful daughter had made this, and he'd stolen her chance to give it to him.

Right then, Angela wished she could absorb all the hurt that Lindsey felt because of her parents not being together anymore. People said you shouldn't wrap your kids up in cotton wool, but Angela knew she'd give anything to shield her daughter from Ryan's carelessness.

The sound of Lindsey's footsteps hurrying down the stairs pulled Angela from her thoughts. Carrying two enormous bowls of ice cream through to the living room, she was determined to make up for Ryan's idiocy and make sure that Lindsey had a fun Friday night, one way or another.

OLIVE WATCHED as a group of cheeky starlings bathed in the water fountain at Peartree Park. They were having quite a time of it, splashing around and chattering to one another before darting to the nearby children's sandpit in order to dry their feathers. Observing their antics was a pleasant distraction, but eventually Olive couldn't resist turning to Angela, who was sitting on the bench beside her, and asking the same question she'd asked twice already this morning.

"So, are you going to tell me what's going on?" Olive said.

"You'll find out soon enough," Angela replied. "Be patient."

It was almost ten o'clock, and they were waiting for Mark the policeman to arrive. Olive wished she could remember the young man's second name, so she could stop thinking of him as 'the policeman'. As agreed, Angela and Lindsey had popped round and walked with her to the park for this mysterious meeting that Mark had arranged.

When Val had called Olive that morning to check up on her injuries, she'd told her friend about the strange rendezvous and Val had invited herself along.

"I wonder why he wants to see you," Val said from her spot on the other side of the bench. "Although I have my suspicions."

"You do?" Olive said, turning to her friend. "And what are they?"

Val grinned. "I don't want to spoil it in case I'm right."

“Well, good grief,” Olive said.

Lindsey appeared then, back from the short loop she’d taken with Elsa around the park, following the instructions her mother had given to make sure the little girl stayed in sight. “Is Mr Green still not here?” she asked.

Green, that was the young man’s name. Olive committed it to memory, relieved to remember it at last.

“Here he comes now,” Angela said, peering towards the park gates and getting up from the bench.

Olive looked in the same direction and saw Mark Green making their way towards him, accompanied by an older woman who looked sort of familiar, although Olive wasn’t sure where she recognised her from. As Mark approached, the woman stopped and hung back.

“Morning, Mrs Nimmo,” Mark said when he reached them, before saying hello to everyone else gathered there.

“Good morning, young man,” Olive said. “I must say this is all quite mystifying.”

“In that case, let me explain,” Mark said. “I’ve taken a bit of a risk doing this and I hope you’ll be all right with it all once I tell you what’s happening. But if not, it’s okay to say so.”

This only confused Olive further. “The plot thickens. Perhaps you ought to just hurry up and spill the beans.”

“Fair enough,” Mark said amiably. “After what happened on Thursday afternoon, I knew how upset you were about your jacket being damaged. I understand you’d only just bought it. So I got in touch with the owner of the dog that knocked you over and explained things to her. I already told you how sorry she was about what happened and she was even more upset to hear about your jacket. And so...”

Olive glanced at the woman still lingering by the park gates and thought she now not only recognised her but also finally understood what was going on. As if realising she’d put two and two together, Mark pointed to the woman then turned back to Olive.

“She wants to make amends,” Mark explained. “As you’d already mentioned where you bought the jacket, I passed the information along to Mac’s owner, Mrs Wilson, and she went there this morning and bought a replacement item.”

“Well, now I see,” Olive said.

“She’d like to give it to you personally and apologise face to face,” Mark continued. “However, as a police officer I’m fully aware that you endured a traumatic incident on Thursday and may not want to meet the, er, perpetrator of the crime.”

Olive blinked. “Crime? Good grief, there was no crime young man.”

Mark scratched his chin and grinned. “I’m just being careful not to gloss over what happened to you. I thought a public place was best to see if you were okay letting her say a few words to you. But this kind of meeting isn’t really in line with police rules about this sort of thing and—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Olive said. “It’s not as if you’re introducing me to a mass murderer. I’m touched you went to this kind of trouble at all. Whatever your police regulations are, I can assure you I am quite up to the challenge of listening to a well-meant apology. Now perhaps you ought to put the poor woman out of her misery and bring her over.”

Mark walked back towards the woman, this Mrs Wilson, and spoke to her for a few seconds.

“Are you sure you’ll okay with us setting this up?” Angela asked.

“Well of course I am. The woman didn’t exactly commit a monstrous crime against me. Her dog knocked me over, that’s all. Despite my bandaged wrist and irritation that the incident happened at all, I assure you I’m not suffering from some terrible emotional trauma that will cause me to crumple into a quivering heap if I happen to see the dog’s owner again. Please give me some credit.”

“Okay, okay,” Angela said, holding up her hands in mock surrender. “We just want to make sure you’re fine with this, and Mark wants to make sure you don’t end up reporting him

to the police for strong-arming you into something you didn't want to do."

"Good grief," Olive said. "Everyone's so worried these days about saying or doing the wrong thing."

"At least she didn't bring her stupid dog along with her," Val said as they watched Mark and Mrs Wilson approach.

"Well, yes I suppose that shows that the woman must at least have some good sense," Olive said. She turned to Val and narrowed her eyes. "Was your guess correct about what these two youngsters had planned?"

Val gave a coy smile. "Of course."

"Mmm, well done. Although I must say I couldn't have guessed myself, not entirely. I'm quite touched about all this, if I'm honest."

Mark returned with Mrs Wilson. Now that she was seeing her up close, Olive reckoned she was perhaps in her mid-sixties or thereabouts, and as she wasn't currently being hauled along the pavement by Mac the Menace, Olive noticed she had a kind look about her, with soft eyes and a gentle manner. Judging by the way she was wringing her hands together and eyeing Olive warily, she was, as Mark indicated, quite upset by what had taken place on the high street and seemingly nervous about this meeting.

"Olive Nimmo meet Emily Wilson," Mark said, and then did a quick run round of the rest of the introductions.

Emily Wilson nodded at everyone, and when she said hello to Lindsey and saw little Elsa at her side, her face paled, and for a moment Olive feared the poor woman was about to burst into tears.

"I want to say how sorry I am about what happened on Thursday," Emily said, still wringing her hands. "I feel sick about it. I see you've had to have your wrist bandaged up. Are you in a great deal of pain?"

"I'm much better now," Olive smiled. "Although I was quite sore to begin with, it's easing up. It's nothing more than

a bad sprain and a few cuts and scrapes which will heal in no time.”

Emily glanced at Olive’s wrist again. “I just can’t apologise enough.”

“Once is fine,” Olive said and smiled kindly. “I appreciate it a great deal, and your concern. Thank you.”

“And is the little dog all right?” Emily asked, turning to Elsa who was glancing around at the assembled adults.

“Elsa is fine,” Olive assured her. “She took a tumble and your dog certainly seemed intent on knocking her around on the ground, but once the barking and yapping was over it was clear that she was unharmed.”

“Elsa is actually our dog,” Angela said, “and we’ve kept a close eye on her. She’s completely unscathed.”

“Because if there were any vet’s bills to be dealt with...” Emily began.

“We didn’t need a trip to the vet’s,” Angela said. “But thank you.”

Emily seemed to remember the bag she was holding and held it out to Olive. “I’m very sorry that your jacket was damaged. If I’d known, I would’ve already done this and I’m only glad this nice young policeman got in touch to let me know what had happened. Replacing your jacket is the very least I can do.”

Olive accepted the Lily’s Boutique bag graciously and peeked inside, seeing the folded garment wrapped in tissue. “I’m very grateful, thank you. I’d only bought the jacket that very morning and I was quite upset to discover that it was ruined beyond repair. I’m certainly touched that you’ve done this.”

“Like I said, it’s the least I could do.” Emily wrung her hands for another moment, looking at the Lily’s Boutique bag and at Olive and Elsa and then at the others. A mixture of sadness and embarrassment swept across her face. “I know that Mac and I have made a nuisance of ourselves since we started walking here at the park. I’m quite ashamed, but the

thing is I'm struggling to control the dog. He's so powerful and hasn't been properly trained at all. We only just moved to the area, you see, and..." She trailed off and gave an awkward smile. "Sorry, you don't want to hear me making excuses for what happened. Rest assured I'll be attending training classes with Mac to deal with this problem."

The woman stepped back as if getting ready to leave, but Olive felt quite moved by the obvious upset on her face. "Don't hurry away just yet, Mrs Wilson. You said you're new to the area?"

Emily hesitated before nodding. "We moved here a couple of months ago, my husband and I. We took early retirement and wanted to downsize. We like it here very much. It was Colin's idea to adopt a rescue dog to give us a reason to get out and about and stay active. Unfortunately, the best laid plans and all that..."

The woman looked wretched, her face contorted with emotion.

"Good grief," Olive said as Mark, seeing the woman's reaction, put a reassuring hand on her arm. "Are you okay Emily?"

"Oh, I'm fine and I shouldn't be getting upset like this," Emily said and wiped at her nose with a tissue she pulled from her pocket. "But the thing is that my husband took up golf recently and now spends all his time on the golf course, and all the work he said he'd put into Mac's training has just fallen by the wayside. We knew the dog needed training when we got him, but Colin was dead set on giving the dog a second chance. I should've known it would be yet another of his projects that he abandons once he loses interest."

"Oh dear," Olive said. "That sounds like quite a predicament."

"Horrible!" Val added, looking indignant.

"Part of me thinks we should take the dog back to the rescue centre and say we've given up," Emily continued. "But it isn't the dog's fault. It's ours. And when Mac's at home, just

pottering around the house and garden, he's a lovely animal and very good company, and I don't like the idea of giving him up."

Olive's gaze switched to Angela, who was nodding along and looking sympathetic.

"I'm sure there are other ways to deal with the problem," Angela said. "Maybe the new dog training course that the police have suggested will do the trick?"

"I hope so," Emily said. "We start our first class on Monday evening. I'm determined to make progress because I enjoy having a dog to walk. With my husband now on the golf course all the time, it's nice to get out of the house and do something. It's been lovely downsizing and relocating here to Hamblehurst, but..."

"It can be hard making friends in a new place," Angela said gently when Emily trailed off. "We moved here a year ago and we're still finding our feet. Just give yourself some time."

Emily smiled and nodded. "Hopefully if we see some progress with the dog training, I'll actually be able to say hello to some people here at the park, rather than be yanked past them at high speed as Mac hauls me off my feet."

"It's certainly a goal to reach for," Olive said with a wink. As she looked at Emily Wilson, she felt great sympathy for her and the problem she was dealing with. "Do you have plans right now, Emily? Val and I were planning on having a cup of coffee together at the Coffee Cabin down the road. Why don't you join us?"

Emily looked surprised. "That's very kind, but are you sure? I mean, after what happened..."

"Unless you're planning on setting your dog loose on me while I drink my coffee, I'm sure we can put what happened on Thursday behind us," Olive assured her. "And I know from personal experience just how difficult it is to find oneself isolated. I've been fortunate to make new friends and renew old acquaintances,"—she smiled at Angela and Val as she said this—"and after your kindness in replacing my ruined jacket,

I'm only too happy to give you a belated welcome to the neighbourhood and buy you a cup of coffee. So, would you like to come with us?"

Emily glanced at Olive and Val and then a smile spread across her face. "I'd love to. And the coffee will be my treat."

"Absolutely not," Olive said firmly.

"In that case, I'll buy the cakes," Emily said.

"That sounds fair enough." Olive turned to Mark and Angela and grinned. "Thank you both for meddling and for bringing us together this morning. I think it's all worked out very well indeed."

"I'm glad," Mark said. "All I wanted was for Olive to have her jacket replaced. I didn't expect you all to scoot off and have coffee together."

"Scooting off for coffee is what life is all about when you get to our age, young man," Olive said. "Would you all like to come for coffee, too?" she added, looking at Angela and Mark.

"Lindsey and I have got plans today," Angela said. "But thanks anyway."

"Me too," Mark added and checked his watch. "In fact, I'll have to get a move on."

"That's fine." Olive turned to Val and Emily. "Shall we go?"

"Yes, let's go," Val said, slipping her hand through Emily's arm and giving her a warm smile. "I'm gasping for a latte."

At the park gates, Olive gave little Elsa a pat on the head and said goodbye to the others and then set off with Val and Emily towards the Coffee Cabin on the high street.

The morning had turned out to be rather surprising. She was immensely pleased to have a replacement jacket in her possession and happy to have met Emily Wilson and smoothed over the upset caused on Thursday. The woman wasn't quite the idiotic dog owner she'd first assumed and was instead someone who simply found herself in a difficult situation that she was doing her best to deal with. Having met Emily, Olive

now understood a little better the struggle she was facing, and it served as a useful reminder not to judge people too quickly.

What she hadn't expected from this morning was to encounter in Mac's owner someone who might very well become a friend in time. As Val chattered away and the three women turned for the high street, Olive glanced at Emily and saw the brighter expression she now wore, which was in stark contrast to her anxious look when she'd arrived in the park.

And now that this business with Mac the Menace had been cleared up—well, mostly, Olive thought, giving her bandaged wrist a rub—there would now be coffee and cake and conversation with friends old and new, all things of which Olive heartily approved.

ANGELA WATCHED the three women leave the park together, amused at how quickly awkward apologies had turned into a morning coffee jaunt.

“Can’t say I expected that to happen,” Mark said, slanting her a grin as they stood at the park gates. “If everyone settled their differences like that, my job would be a lot easier.”

“You did a nice thing contacting Emily Wilson and explaining how upset Olive was about her ruined jacket,” Angela told him. “I know that was above and beyond the call of duty.”

He gave an easy shrug. “Mrs Wilson wanted to make up for what happened. I just gave her a chance to do it.”

“I think it meant a lot to Olive that you gave up your free time to help.”

“Speaking of which,” Mark said, checking his watch once more. “I’m picking Shannon up in half an hour and need to get a move on.”

Lindsey, who had been twirling around and fidgeting during this exchange, perked up at the mention of her friend’s name. “Shannon said you were taking her to the new adventure fort at Hamblehurst Castle and having a picnic.”

Mark nodded. “We’ve gone there twice already since it opened and she loved it. Have you been yet?”

“No, Mum says maybe later in the summer.”

“We’re going boating today over at Westbourne Country Park, aren’t we, Lindsey?” Angela said.

“I like the paddle boats in the lake at the park,” Lindsey said.

Mark frowned. “Sorry to tell you this, but the lake is closed. They’re dredging the bottom or something like that to keep the water clean. The boating won’t reopen for another couple of weeks.”

“Oh, I had no idea,” Angela said. “Well, we’ll think of something else to do, won’t we?”

“I guess,” Lindsey said, but Angela could see she was hiding her disappointment. First her Friday night cinema trip got cancelled and now her Saturday afternoon boating fun was off the cards, too. The poor kid was having no luck at all.

“You’re both welcome to come to the adventure fort with Shannon and I,” Mark said.

Angela smiled but quickly shook her head. “Thanks, but I’m sure we’ll find something to do.”

“Obviously it’s up to you, but I know Shannon would love a friend to run around with there,” Mark said and then grinned. “And if I’m honest, I wouldn’t mind another adult to talk to while Shannon plays. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“Well...”

“Please, Mum!” Lindsey pleaded.

The desperate look on her daughter’s face was impossible to resist. “All right then, if Mark’s sure he doesn’t mind us tagging along.”

“I wouldn’t have suggested it if I did,” Mark smiled. “I’m heading home to collect the car and the picnic stuff, so I’ll pick you up in, say, twenty minutes?”

“We’ll see you then,” Angela said. “I’ll make extra sandwiches, so there’s enough for us all.”

“It’s a deal.” Mark gave them a wave and turned in the other direction along the pavement.

“I’m so excited!” Lindsey said. “Shannon says the new adventure fort is amazing.”

“We’d better get moving in that case or we’ll be holding everyone up.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Mark’s car appeared outside Angela’s house. She’d just finished wrapping the cheese sandwiches she’d thrown together, and she stuffed them into a chill bag alongside some fruit and juice cartons. As she hurried from the kitchen, she added a packet of biscuits to the bag, keen to contribute to the picnic lunch.

Lindsey was already barrelling out the door towards Mark’s car as Angela pulled her jacket on in the hallway.

“Can Elsa come too?” she heard her daughter ask Mark as he got out of the car.

“Elsa’s already had a big walk this morning, so we’ll just leave her here at home,” Angela called out, not wanting to push Mark’s kind invitation any further, but he was nodding his head at Lindsey even as she spoke.

“Bring the little scamp along, that’s fine,” Mark told Lindsey. “Just as long as she knows how to behave in the car.”

Shaking her head at her cheeky daughter, Angela grabbed the lead and hooked it to Elsa’s collar and locked up the house.

“Thanks again, Mark, for inviting us along,” Angela said as she checked Lindsey was buckled up in the back and that she was holding Elsa’s lead while the dog sat on the floor. “We need to change buses a couple of times to get to Hamblehurst Castle, which is why we haven’t visited for a while.”

“I’m glad you could both come,” he replied, getting back behind the wheel. “Like I said, I’ll enjoy having some company while Shannon runs around like a mad thing for a couple of hours.”

“I brought plenty of extra lunch stuff,” Angela said, holding up the chill bag.

“Good, I’ll have to remember to invite you again sometime,” he grinned and pulled the car out onto the road. “Right, let’s collect Shannon from her mother’s house and get this show on the road.”

The radio was playing and the spring sunshine was pouring down from a bright blue sky and it was a glorious morning to set off for an unexpected trip somewhere. As Mark drove, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel in time to the music on the radio, Angela stole a glance at him, taking in his easy smile and the permanent twinkle in his eye and his broad shoulders that seemed to fill up the entire driver’s seat.

“Are you okay there?” he asked, glancing away from the road and throwing her an odd grin.

Too late, she realised she’d been staring at the man. That was embarrassing. Clearing her throat, she turned her attention to the road ahead. “I’m fine, yes. So, does Shannon’s mum live far away?”

“Just across town,” he said. “Won’t take long to get there.”

They continued in silence for a bit. Angela tried to think of something to say, but nothing popped into her head. She had no idea why she was so tongue-tied. It wasn’t like her.

“Shannon said her mum’s getting a new kitchen,” Lindsey announced from the back of the car.

“That’s right,” Mark said into the rear-view mirror. “They started ripping out the old one on Thursday and apparently it’s been chaos ever since. Karen says Shannon can’t wait to get back to my place for the next few days.”

“Karen’s your ex-wife?” Angela asked, immediately feeling stupid because obviously the answer must be yes.

Mark nodded and seemed about to say something more, but Lindsey began chattering away then, asking questions about this and that, and Angela was happy to let her fill the space. Soon, they were pulling up outside a house on a quiet residential street and Mark turned off the car engine.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, getting out and jogging to the front door of the smart semi-detached house and ringing the bell.

A moment later, Shannon appeared and barely spared her father a glance as she hurried to the car, obviously delighted that Lindsey was coming along with them on the trip. While the two girls chattered to one another in the back and discussed Elsa and what the little dog might make of the adventure fort and the castle, Angela watched Mark talk to his ex-wife, who was now at the door.

Karen was probably a couple of years older than Angela, she reckoned, and was tall and pretty with a twist of dark hair hanging in a long ponytail down her back, and looked elegant in black leggings and a long t-shirt. As she talked to Mark, she nodded and pointed over her shoulder into the house, updating him on the kitchen work taking place inside. The conversation looked friendly, and Angela wondered how they’d managed to get to that point after their divorce. The idea of exchanging easy and relaxed chit-chat with Ryan was a pipedream at the moment, but for Lindsey’s sake, it was where she hoped they’d one day find themselves.

Eventually, Mark pointed to the car and Karen peered out towards it and, seeing Angela there, raised her hand in a wave. Angela waved back as the two of them continued chatting. Angela saw a wry smile on Karen’s face as Mark shook his head at something she’d said before laughing and making his way back to the car.

“Have a nice time!” Karen called out and waved again.

“Bye, Mum!” Shannon yelled through the window from the back seat and waved.

“Good luck with the kitchen,” Mark called out as he opened the driver’s side door.

“And good luck with your day out,” Karen called back. “Have fun!”

Angela thought Karen’s smile looked ever so slightly teasing as she gave a last wave and closed the front door.

When she turned to Mark, his cheeks looked a little red and she couldn't help wondering why.

“Okay, girls, let's go,” Mark said and started the car again.

“Yay!” they both shouted in the back, with Elsa's barking adding to the racket.

As Mark's hand moved towards the gear stick, Angela shifted her arm to lift her bag from the floor, and they bumped together.

“Sorry!” Mark said at the same time as Angela, and when she looked his way, she saw the colour on his cheeks had deepened. A little ripple of electricity rolled over her skin where his hand had brushed against hers, causing her quickly to turn back to the bag she was wrestling with on the floor.

“Would you like a mint?” she said, yanking the recalcitrant bag from where it was tangled beneath her feet and pulling out a pack of Polos.

“Go on then,” Mark said, slipping the car into gear and turning down the street.

Pulling a mint from the tube, she held it out. When he took it from her, his fingers touched hers and she felt another burst of heat roll across her skin. The shock of it made her think she'd better not offer him anymore mints because... well, just because.

Her life was complicated enough without adding girlish crushes into the mix.

* * *

The adventure fort at Hamblehurst Castle was bursting with over-excited kids by the time they arrived at the castle grounds, and Angela understood why the place had become such a magnet for parents since its recent opening. It was a huge structure, with lots of rope swings and slides, and things to climb over and under, and wooden walkways and tunnels and scramble nets, and it was all securely fenced in to put parents' minds at ease about their children's safety.

Lindsey and Shannon ran off into the fort as soon as they arrived, and from her seat on the picnic bench they'd snagged on a grassy incline, Angela saw the girls pop up every now and again, waving from the top of a rampart or screaming as they went down one of the big slides. Elsa lay at Angela's feet on the grass, blinking in the sunshine, and she was sure the little dog would doze off any minute. Mark had bought coffees from the snack bar when they arrived and the caffeine was going down a treat.

"This will tire them out, that's for sure," Mark said as the girls ran towards a seesaw on the far side of the fort and began bouncing up and down.

"I don't know. Sometimes I think Lindsey is completely tireless," Angela replied and sipped her coffee.

Mark laughed. "Have you and Lindsey started work yet on the costume for the school's spring concert?"

"Not yet. Things have been a bit hectic. I'll have to make time for it next week and get the ball rolling. What about you?"

"Shannon hasn't been staying with me these last few days, so we haven't had a chance yet. When I'm on shift, she stays with her mother. I'm off now for three days, so we'll make some progress over the weekend."

"You and your ex seem to have a good working relationship when it comes to Shannon."

"We do."

"What's the secret?"

Mark looked over, his expression mild. "We didn't have a bad break-up and that's probably why we do okay now. We realised things had run their course and didn't fight it, and I think that made all the difference."

"Run their course?" Angela asked, and then shook her head. "Sorry, I'm prying."

"No, it's fine," he said, and slanted a smile her way.

“Lindsey’s dad moved out a few months ago, you see, and hasn’t been involved much in her life since he left. I won’t bore you with all the torrid details, but I wish we could find a way to bring up our daughter together even although we’re apart. I thought that was just a silly dream until I saw how friendly you and your ex were today when we picked up Shannon.”

“We were only married for a year when we called it quits. We got pregnant with Shannon not long after we started seeing each other, which was a surprise, and we decided to get married after she was born. Karen and I had a great thing for a while, but we realised pretty quickly that we’d rushed into it all. Shannon’s my entire world, but if it wasn’t for her, Karen and I never would’ve stayed together as long as we did. We didn’t try to keep our marriage going for all the wrong reasons. Now, we’re mates who have a kid and who rub along perfectly well to make sure Shannon gets all the love she needs.”

Angela felt a lump of emotion lodge in her throat as she listened. “I’m horribly, evilly jealous,” she laughed.

“We got lucky, that’s all,” Mark said easily. “I moved on and Karen moved on and there was no bad blood between us. When Karen’s boyfriend moved in with her a while ago, I couldn’t have been happier for them, because he’s a good bloke and she deserves to be with someone she loves. But most couples who separate don’t find it’s all plain sailing for obvious reasons. Whatever’s going on with your ex, I’m sure you’re doing the best you can by Lindsey, and that’s all that matters.”

Angela looked off again at the adventure fort and watched the girls on the seesaw, happily chattering away as they rocked up and down.

“They’re good friends, those girls,” she said. “When we moved to Hamblehurst last year, I was worried Lindsey might struggle to make new friends in school. It’s not easy being eight and starting again in a new class. But Shannon’s taken her under her wing. She’s a good girl.”

“She is that.”

Mark glanced off at the girls and Angela saw the unmistakable look of pride in his expression as he watched Shannon playing. With a jolt, she realised she couldn't remember ever seeing Ryan look at Lindsey with anything like the same look on his face, and it caused a sharp stab of hurt in her heart.

When Mark turned back to her, his smile faltered, as if he'd sensed her sadness. “It'll get better with time, I promise.”

“I'm not upset about losing my ex, not really. I'm upset because I want him to be a better father to his daughter, but I'm beginning to think that's never going to happen.”

Mark watched her for a moment and then surprised the life out of her by laying his hand on hers. Instead of the sharp electricity she'd felt earlier, this time his touch brought a deep, comforting warmth.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “That must be very hard.”

The simplicity of it meant more to her than if he'd spoken a thousand words on the topic. Together they sat there on the picnic bench in the spring sunshine as Elsa twitched in her sleep on the grass and their daughters laughed and played, and Angela felt as if all the pain from her separation from Ryan, pain that had been locked up tight inside for far too long, was finally being let go.

Mark squeezed her hand one final time, then shifted his arm away. Immediately, she missed the feeling of it against hers.

“When we stopped off to pick up Shannon earlier, Karen assumed we were on a date,” he said with a wry smile.

The sudden segue caught her unawares, and his frank statement made her blush. She remembered how he, too, had been blushing when he'd finished up his conversation outside his ex-wife's house and got back into the car, and now she understood why.

“Oh, well, I hope you set her straight,” Angela said, feeling her cheeks burning hot.

“I did.” He watched the girls hurtle past beyond the fort fencing and begin climbing a scramble net before he continued. “Are you, um, are you seeing anyone at the moment, Angela?”

“Me? God no,” she laughed. “I’ve got enough going on as it is.”

“Yeah, me too.” Mark leaned back against the picnic table and drained his coffee. “I was thinking maybe you and Lindsey could come round to ours this afternoon after we’re finished here, and we could all make a start on those spring concert costumes for the girls? What do you think?”

“Uh...” The conversation kept tilting and turning and knocking her off balance. One minute they were talking about their exes, then about dating. Now it was the girls’ concert costumes. It was hard to keep up. “I’m not sure.”

“We could order some takeaway afterwards,” he added. “Save us having to worry about dinner. Maybe have a glass of wine?”

She turned and looked at him. The twinkle in his eyes was darkly mesmerising. For a moment, she imagined herself saying yes, saying that dinner and wine at his house while their daughters worked together on their concert costumes sounded lovely, sounded wonderful, in fact.

But she got a hold of herself. There was no room in her life for what Mark was suggesting—not for dinner, not for cosy conversations over glasses of wine, not for anything that looked remotely like dating. Mark might be attractive and kind and easy to spend time with, but Lindsey had gone through enough of an upheaval already these last few months, and Angela wasn’t about to make it worse by adding the complication of a potential new boyfriend into the mix, especially when that potential new boyfriend was also the father of her daughter’s best friend.

There was enough uncertainty ahead as she waited for Ryan to do the right thing and be honest with Lindsey about his new girlfriend and imminent new baby. That news was going to come as a shock to her little girl and Angela had to be

there to get her through it. Which meant that there wasn't time for the complication of romance, no matter how casual, no matter how tempting.

Lindsey came first. Always.

"Sorry, I can't," Angela said to Mark. "I've already got dinner in the slow cooker at home and a mountain of chores I need to get through this afternoon, too."

She smiled easily, making it all into no big deal. Mark's eyes searched hers, and she saw the disappointment they held even as he tried to hide it.

"Maybe some other time," he said.

But there would be no other time. Angela already knew that. As she turned her attention to the girls still racing around the adventure fort, she imagined herself slamming shut the door to her heart, locking it up tight and throwing away the key. That's how it had to be from now on.

Mark Green might have turned her head a little with his good looks and honest charm, but it wouldn't happen again.

She wouldn't let it.

* * *

"I had fun today, Mum," Lindsey said that night as Angela tucked her into bed.

"I'm glad," she replied. "You and Shannon certainly made the most of your visit to the adventure fort."

"I love it there. If Shannon's dad takes her again, can I go with them?"

"I'm sure we can work something out."

When Mark had dropped Angela and Lindsey off at home after their trip out together, he'd already invited Lindsey to come along again the next time they went there. It made sense to get the girls together for playdates. They were best friends, after all. Angela had replied that the two of them might take

turns in taking the girls out to those sorts of places, share the load a little. Mark had seemed to understand what she was saying. At least she hoped he had.

She was relieved she'd drawn a line in the sand with Mark. It made things easier for everyone, especially for their two girls. And it was one less thing for her to think about and worry over.

After they'd arrived home, Angela had helped Lindsey work on her flower costume for the school concert and they'd made good progress, filling in some of the petal shapes on the thick card with scrunched-up tissue paper that they'd glued into place. They'd finished two petals out of five before Lindsey had lost interest and decided she wanted to watch a film instead. It was progress, at least.

"Mum?" Lindsey now asked just as Angela was about to turn off the bedside lamp. "Is Granny Barton really all right?"

Angela saw the worried look on her daughter's face and sat back down on the edge of her bed. "She's fine. We spoke to her this morning, remember?"

"I know, but do you think she's *really* all right?"

Before they'd set off for the park that morning with Olive to meet Mark and Mrs Wilson, Angela had phoned Ryan's mother while Lindsey was busy getting dressed in her room and informed her of what her son had done last night. Although June Barton knew her son was living with another woman and having another baby, she hadn't known that Lindsey was still in the dark about it, although she'd made excuses for her son's behaviour and evasions, just as Angela had known she would.

In fairness to her mother-in-law, when Angela had put Lindsey on the phone to speak to her, June had done a good job of assuring her that all was well and smoothing over Ryan's unexpected departure last night on account of her bogus health crisis. For the rest of the day, Lindsey hadn't mentioned Granny Barton at all. Obviously, however, worries about her grandmother continued to swirl inside her little head.

Despite Ryan's promise to call Lindsey and set things straight where her grandmother's health was concerned, no phone call had come. Angela wasn't surprised. No doubt Ryan had forgotten all about it.

"Dad rushed off so quickly last night to see Granny Barton," Lindsey now said. "I'm worried she's ill and you don't want to tell me."

"Did Granny Barton sound ill when you spoke to her this morning?"

"No, but I don't see her very often. Maybe I can't tell how she sounds when she's ill."

"I think your dad probably just overreacted and hurried back to Granny Barton's when it wasn't really necessary," Angela said, hating these awful lies she was having to tell to cover her cretinous ex-husband. "We can phone her again tomorrow if you like?"

Lindsey nodded, but that worried look remained in her eyes. Angela hated to see it there.

"No more worrying about things you don't have to worry about," she told her daughter and smiled. "Why don't you think instead about all the fun you had today with Shannon, and that will send you off into sweet dreams, okay?"

Lindsey smiled and hugged her ragged old teddy close. "Okay."

"Night, sweetie."

"Night, Mum."

Angela pulled the bedroom door over, leaving it open a little the way Lindsey liked it, so that light from the hallway seeped through the gap and made the darkness a little less scary. She headed downstairs and finished loading the dishwasher and clearing the kitchen table of debris left over from the flower costume decorating project, before moving on to the other chores she'd run out of time for before dinner and Lindsey's bath time.

It was almost ten o'clock when she finally sank into the sofa, her mind whirring from everything that had happened during the day. Pulling out her phone, she considered phoning Ryan and telling him how much his lies about Granny Barton's health were hurting his daughter and how he'd have to come clean about what was going on in his life. But the very idea of having that conversation with him left her feeling exhausted before she'd even dialled his number. It was probably sensible to wait until she was fresh and focused and ready to deal with his childish excuses head on.

After turning on the television and switching through the channels for a minute and finding nothing appealing, she turned it off again. Walking over to the bookshelf beside the window to straighten up the DVDs that Lindsey kept there, and which were in their usual messy state, Angela noticed a thick film of dust lining the top two shelves of the unit. How long had it been since she'd remembered to run a duster over those higher surfaces, she wondered. Too long, obviously. Fetching a duster from the kitchen cupboard, she dealt with the task and then ran the cloth over a few other harder to reach surfaces which were equally filthy.

It was one way to spend a lonely Saturday night, she thought with a wry grin as she moved knick-knacks and books and photo frames around in order to get the duster into all the corners.

She was almost finished with the additional piece of housework when she pushed the duster behind a stack of books piled at the back of a shelf and her fingers clipped the hard edge of something, knocking it onto the floor. Reaching down, Angela picked up the item that had lain forgotten on the back of the shelf. It was a small gilt-edged frame and when she saw the photo it held inside, her breath caught in her chest.

The photograph had been taken almost ten years ago and showed Angela standing proudly as she held a certificate in her hands, the smile on her face bright enough to power a small town. She wore a smart suit in the photo and stood next to a rotund, red-faced man called Alan Macintosh, who'd been

the regional manager at the supermarket chain where she'd worked before Lindsey was born.

Angela stared at the photograph in wonder. The certificate she held in the photo was one she'd been awarded for outstanding performance on the managerial course she was taking as part of her training with the supermarket chain. She'd come top of the class, the result of a lot of hard work and determination, and after the photograph had been snapped, she remembered that Mr Macintosh had told her she was destined for great things in the business and that he expected her to be managing her own branch within a few years. Angela had only been twenty-one at the time and had worked her way up the ladder after joining the company as a shelf-stacker aged seventeen and while still at college. She'd been as proud as punch to do so well on the management training course and to have Mr Macintosh's encouragement and advice. It had seemed like a wonderful career lay ahead for her, doing something she loved very much.

A few months after the photograph was taken, she met Ryan, and within a year she was married and expecting Lindsey. Then had come the shock of her mother's sudden death, which had shaken Angela to her core. The grief had been all-consuming, the loss unimaginable, and once Lindsey was born she felt her mother's absence so keenly, wishing she was there to ask questions about the baby and share those precious moments with her.

Her mother would have loved being a granny and spoiling the new infant, and would have been the steadying hand and wise older female Angela had sorely needed during those early months of new motherhood.

Instead, she'd had to learn everything by herself, and quickly too. Of course, Ryan had been there and become the rock she'd needed. They'd still been in love back then and the signs that things would eventually fall apart between them still lay far in the future.

After taking maternity leave and learning the ropes of new motherhood, Angela had been all set to return to her junior managerial role at the supermarket and the training she was

yet to complete. But it wasn't as easy as she'd thought it would be to combine the two things, and despite all the positive statements found in the supermarket chain's HR policies about mothers in the workplace, theory and practice turned out to be very different beasts and it wasn't long before she'd found herself unable to meet the rigorous demands of the management track because her little baby daughter needed her.

When Ryan was offered a promotion to senior sales representative at the logistics company he worked for just as Angela was contemplating the mechanics of returning to work full time after her period of leave, he'd convinced her that the logical thing to do was for him to take the better paid job and for her to go part-time even it meant a step back in responsibilities and seniority. He'd made it all sound so obviously the right way to go. She'd get to spend more time with Lindsey, which was what she wanted, and he'd take on the burden of earning the extra money. They'd get the best of both worlds.

Now, as Angela looked at the yellowed photograph in the dusty frame, she knew she'd made the wrong choice. Although she cherished every minute she'd got to spend with Lindsey when she was small, it had been a mistake to step away from her managerial career at the supermarket chain. She'd learned later of other women who'd been on the same management track as she had and who'd stayed there and fought and negotiated and made it work for them, even forcing changes in company policy when it was needed. Many of those same women were now in the senior roles she'd been working towards, somehow juggling their jobs and their children and continuing to get ahead.

As Lindsey had grown into toddlerhood and then started nursery school, Angela had imagined returning to the work she'd once loved. But the truth was she'd liked the in-store roles she'd taken on after returning from maternity leave. She'd always been a hands-on person, as comfortable stacking the shelves as she was scrutinising stock inventories. Part-time work had given her the gift of time spent with her daughter, and children were small for such a short while. She'd also

imagined one day adding another child to their family, although before that could happen, her relationship with Ryan had stumbled into rocky terrain. When Ryan's new job brought their move to Foxglove Street in Hamblehurst, Angela had hoped the change of scenery might give their marriage the reboot it needed. She'd also hoped that her own new part-time job in the local supermarket might shake things up for herself, too, and give her a bit of a boost.

Instead, Ryan had started an affair with another woman, got her pregnant, and left Angela for dust. The move to Hamblehurst hadn't exactly worked out as Angela had hoped. Still, she was where she was, and had no choice but to get on with it and make the best of things.

Now that Ryan was gone, and she'd one day be divorced from him, she wondered what path her life would take in the future. Looking at that dusty old photograph of her younger self, holding up the certificate of achievement of which she was so proud, it was easy to imagine someday returning to the path on which her twenty-one-year-old self had been travelling, once Lindsey was older and needed her less.

But in her heart, Angela knew that life was gone forever and with it the dreams she'd once chased.

No matter how much she wanted to believe in a fairy tale in which she began climbing the career ladder in search of the lofty heights she'd aspired to, it seemed to her now, as she looked at the photograph from all those years before, that the version of herself who'd chased after that goal was long gone, just as the version of herself that had fallen head over heels in love with Ryan was gone now, too.

Her dreams of managing her own supermarket branch felt like a relic from the ancient past, as dusty as the photo frame she held. At some point, once Lindsey was older, she knew she'd have to rethink what she wanted to do in life. But whatever it was, she knew without a doubt that it didn't involve being a busy manager in a smart suit.

What would it involve instead? Angela hadn't a clue. She liked her supervisor role at the supermarket, even if she was

constantly run off her feet. While the pay wasn't anywhere near the manager's salary she might have been earning by now, it was enough to make ends meet. For now, if she could pay the mortgage she'd found herself in sole charge of after Ryan walked out, cover her bills and put food on the table, that was enough.

Someday, she'd have time to think about what to do with the rest of her life. And once she'd got through this huge adjustment to single parenthood and juggling all these balls in the air alone, she imagined she'd look into online classes that she could take to sharpen her skills and maybe even discover new interests and abilities.

But right now, it was about getting through the tough time that life had thrown at her. Thoughts about the past, and who and what she might have been, were no use to her now, any more than were the fantasies she'd briefly entertained about spending more time with Mark Green to see if anything might come of it.

Angela looked one last time at the photograph of her grinning twenty-one-year-old self and then put the frame back up on the shelf behind the stack of books, out of sight where it belonged.

OLIVE'S PHONE rang the following morning at eleven-thirty while she was reading one of the new books she'd chosen at the library. The book was a thriller, comprising a pleasingly lurid and preposterous plot that had her turning the pages as quickly as she could. It was with some regret that she closed the book to answer the phone.

"Olive, it's Angela. I've made soup for lunch. Would you like to come round?"

"Oh, that's very kind. Yes, I'd like that, thank you."

"It will save you having to sort yourself something while you're meant to be taking it easy on your wrist. How's it feeling today?"

"Much improved and the grazes on my hand are healing nicely, too. When I go round to my GP's surgery next week so the practice nurse can do a check-up, I'm hopeful they'll remove the support bandage altogether. Now, what can I bring round with me to lunch?"

"Just yourself."

Olive popped round to her neighbour's just after noon. Arriving empty-handed was unthinkable, so she took the lemon sponge cake she'd picked up at the shop on the way home from coffee yesterday with Val and the new woman, Emily Wilson. At Angela's front door, she was greeted by Lindsey and Elsa, who shepherded her inside and make a great fuss.

“I drew this for you, Olive,” Lindsey said as Olive sat down on the sofa in the living room, handing her a drawing of a vase of flowers with petals of every colour.

“Wonderful, thank you,” Olive said. “You certainly have an artistic flair.”

Lindsey frowned. “What’s that?”

“A gift, an ability, a talent,” Olive explained. “In your case, for art.”

This seemed to please the little girl. “Yesterday, my mum helped me start work on my costume for the school’s summer concert. Do you want to see it?”

“Of course.”

Lindsey hurried off and returned a minute later holding an enormous piece of thick cardboard cut into the shape of a flower, with a hole in the middle of it into which Lindsey now inserted her face. “See, it goes on my head like this and sort of straps on. Do you like the petals?”

Two of the petals were covered in scrunched-up white tissue paper and Olive could only imagine the work involved to glue them all on. “I think the petals are beautiful, yes. And there’s a lot more to be done.”

Angela walked into the room just then. “It took us over an hour just to do those two petals. We’ll have to get our skates on and finish in time for the rehearsals.”

“I’m sure you’ll make it in good time.”

“How did your coffee jaunt go yesterday?” Angela asked. “I must admit we were surprised when you went off with Mac’s owner, seemingly the best of friends, after what happened.”

“It helps no one to hold a grudge, and it was perfectly obvious how apologetic the poor woman was. I felt rather sorry for her. She seemed lonely and I know just how that feels. We had a nice time in the end. One coffee turned into two and we also enjoyed a sandwich lunch together in the café, the three of us. I must say, it’s been an interesting couple

of days. I've reconnected with some old friends at the lunch club, including Val, who I hadn't realised I'd missed so much, and now I may have a new friend in Emily Wilson, who says she'll come along to our lunches in the future. It's very nice to feel connected to the world again."

Angela smiled. "After what happened on Thursday when Mac the Menace knocked you over, I worried it might scupper your hopes for getting out and about again. It's easy to find your confidence knocked after something like that."

"Agreed, but that fact that you're allowing me to continue helping with Elsa means I don't feel quite as useless as I otherwise might. Anyway, something smells wonderful."

"Just my homemade lentil soup. And I threw some frozen bread rolls into the oven, too."

"I brought you this cake," Olive said and passed her the box.

"I told you not to bring anything."

"Well, I ignored you, of course. It's just a shop bought cake, nothing to get excited about."

"I like lemon drizzle cake," Lindsey said. "So does Elsa."

"Elsa does *not* like cake," Angela insisted, giving her daughter a raised eyebrow. "Unless you want her to end up at the vet's having her teeth pulled out because they're rotten."

Lindsey's face formed a perfect oval of shock. "Can dogs' teeth rot?"

"Yes, you know they can," Angela said, a little exasperated. "We've talked about this before."

"I forgot."

With an amused shake of her head, Angela beckoned them all into the kitchen where the table was laid and the soup was ready to be served.

"Guess what I did yesterday?" Lindsey asked Olive as Angela ladled out the soup and passed around the warm bread rolls.

“I’m sure I couldn’t possibly guess, so you’d better just tell me,” Olive smiled.

“I went to the adventure fort with my friend,” Lindsey announced. “Her dad took us all.”

“That was very nice of him,” Olive said, sampling the soup, which was delicious. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

“We had tonnes of fun! And Mark and my mum brought a picnic, and it was brilliant.”

“Mark?” Olive said. “Mark the policeman?”

Lindsey nodded as she ate her soup and for a moment Olive thought how lovely it was that Angela and young Mark had spent some time together with their daughters. It would be quite wonderful if it was the start of something romantic between the two of them. But when she looked across the table and caught Angela’s awkward expression, she realised that such a thing might not be on the cards after all, which was rather a shame.

While Lindsey recounted the many fun things she’d got up to at the adventure fort with her friend, Shannon, they all ate their lunch in comfortable companionship, and it seemed to Olive that Angela was quite happy to let her daughter do all the talking. Once the food was gone and Lindsey had gone out into the garden to play with Elsa while her mother cleared the table, Olive helped carry a few plates to the sink and watched Angela carefully.

“It certainly sounds like you all had a fun afternoon yesterday,” Olive said.

“Lindsey loved every minute,” Angela replied, filling the sink.

“It was nice of young Mark to invite you along.”

“It was.”

Olive picked up a tea towel to dry some plates, but Angela shooed her away. “Not while you’re meant to be resting that wrist. I’ll deal with all this.”

Olive let out a sigh and shrugged. "Suit yourself. Well, I'm glad you had a nice time yesterday. I must say, it seemed to me that you and Mark were rather keen on one another when you were at my house on Thursday night," Olive said.

"We hardly know each other."

"Maybe you could remedy that?"

Angela turned from the sink and sighed. "You're not allowed to meddle, Olive. I'm so grateful for your help with Elsa, but I'm not interested in having pointless discussions about men you think I ought to be interested in."

Olive saw the flinty look on her neighbour's face. "I apologise. I didn't intend to meddle, not in the slightest. I only wondered if perhaps you were as interested in Mark as he seemed to be in you. It was quite clear that he couldn't take his eyes off you when you were both in my living room the other night. And I can't help but think you deserve to have a nice thing like that happen, especially after all the heartbreak you've endured."

Switching on the kettle, Angela shook her head. "I don't have time for romance, Olive. Ryan only left a few months ago and Lindsey doesn't even know the half of what's going on. I'm not about to get involved with some guy while there's all this instability in Lindsey's life, even one as good looking as Mark Green."

Olive saw the way Angela's mouth twitched when she said this and when the young woman turned round from the counter, she was grinning and blushing.

"Okay, so he's attractive," Angela said. "That's just stating the obvious."

"Well, you ought to see him in his police constable uniform in that case," Olive said with a wink.

Angela laughed and then looked very tired suddenly. She looked out the open door to where Lindsey was romping around on the back lawn with Elsa. "I need to tell Lindsey about Ryan's new family," she said quietly. "But I don't know

how to do it without making her feel even less important in her father's life than she already does."

"I'm sorry it's all so hard for you. I wish I could say something that would help."

"There isn't anything. It's not your problem to solve."

Olive watched Lindsey play for a moment, thinking. "You're carrying a heavy load alone, dear. You don't have family who could step in and be there more for Lindsey, perhaps spend some time with her?"

"I only wish I did. My parents died a long time ago and I don't have any siblings and neither does Ryan. His mother, Lindsey's Granny Barton, is a nice woman, but she lives over in Godalming, and as she doesn't have a car, and neither do I, she's too far away to be involved in any regular way." Angela stirred the teapot and laughed. "That's a sob story and a half. Sorry."

"It's not a sob story. It's simply the situation you are facing."

Olive accepted the mug of tea Angela handed her and they settled back into their chairs at the kitchen table. Outside in the garden, Lindsey had picked daisies from the lawn and was threading them into a daisy chain, her little face focused in concentration on the task at hand as Elsa lolled beside her in the sun.

"Perhaps Lindsey would like to come round to my house after school one day next week," Olive said. "We could work on her homework together and perhaps read those fairy tale books she enjoyed last time she visited, or bake a cake together or something."

Angela glanced at her with a surprised expression. "You're already doing enough, helping with Elsa."

"I'm only thinking that it might be nice for Lindsey to enjoy the company of other adults right now, especially if, as you say, she's feeling a little lost because of her father's absence. Children like to feel they are the centre of attention. And I'm not doing anything else with my time. It would be

nice to have her company. I'm sure I'd get as much out of it as Lindsey would."

Olive could see that Angela was considering the suggestion, but also looking for problems and obstacles. "I already have Lindsey's after school care all sorted out. If I pull her from the childminder, I'll lose her place on the other days, and she has an after-school club she goes to, also. On Wednesdays, another mother picks her up and keeps her after school, and I return the favour by looking after her daughter when she needs me to. It's all carefully organised, you see. It has to be."

"I understand. You don't want to mess around with your arrangements. But if you change your mind, just say the word."

Angela smiled. "I will." The younger woman's gaze stayed on her as she sipped her tea, her expression now thoughtful. "You must miss your own family very much."

"Oh, I do. And it's true that having you and young Lindsey living next door, and now getting to know you both, has made me think about all I missed out on with my own grandchild. When Malcolm and I were younger, we flew over to Canada a couple of times a year to see Gillian and Ed, but I haven't gone there for a long time. The flight is too long to do by myself, and the last time I made the journey, I had a rather terrible time of it. My family has come here to see me, and we do video chatting nowadays, but I know I've missed out on a lot. The life my daughter and her family have out there is what she always wanted in life and that's what matters most, but I still wish I'd had more involvement in it all."

"Did you ever think about moving out there to be with them?"

"Malcolm talked about it not long after Gillian and Ed moved over there and we knew she wouldn't be coming back, but he was never entirely serious about it and nor was I. It would've been a huge upheaval when we already in our middle age. But I often think about what I've missed out on in

my grandson's life and now, too, with my great granddaughter, Lucy."

Olive shrugged and gave Angela a careful look. "I don't want you to think for one minute, however, that my offer to have Lindsey spend a few hours at my house once or twice a week is some selfish attempt to create a relationship I never had with my own grandchild. That would be quite wrong. But hearing you talk about what's going on in Lindsey's life makes me feel very sad for you both, and I can't help but wonder if there's something I could do to help."

"I appreciate it, Olive. Let me think about it, okay?"

"Of course," Olive smiled. "You know where to find me."

Out in the garden, Lindsey was draping a daisy chain crown onto Elsa's head and laughing as the little dog lifted its paw behind its ear to knock off the accessory.

"She's a sweet child," Olive said. "I can't imagine what her father is thinking, turning his back on her as he is."

"It breaks my heart," Angela said quietly. "And I know Ryan will never do the right thing and tell Lindsey about the new baby he's having unless I force him to. I should just tell Lindsey everything myself, get it over with so there are no more secrets or lies."

"Children are tougher than we think. Maybe the news won't come as such a shock to her as you imagine. And once she gets used to the idea, perhaps she'll like knowing she has a half-brother or half-sister on the way."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe it's only me who's having trouble with all of this."

"Nonsense. Anyone would find it troubling, given the circumstances. But perhaps you'll be able to move on and concentrate more on your own life if you're no longer keeping secrets on behalf of your clueless ex-husband."

"He *is* clueless."

"A complete fool."

They grinned at one another. “How do things get so complicated?” Angela wondered.

“You don’t know the half of it, dear,” Olive assured her and waved her bandaged wrist in the air. “Wait until you get to my age and then you can talk to me about complicated.”

“Don’t play the old lady card with me,” Angela said, smiling over her mug of tea. “You’re much too fierce and scary for it to work.”

“Fair enough, but it was worth a try. Now, are we having a slice of that lemon cake or not?”

WITH EVERYTHING that had happened since her nasty fall and the resulting discomfort in her sprained wrist, Olive had forgotten about the funeral she had agreed to attend on Tuesday morning for her old colleague at the health centre, Dr Henderson. If Val hadn't rung her up late on Monday afternoon to agree a time to collect her so they could drive to the crematorium together, Olive would never have remembered at all.

With her memory jogged, she spent Monday evening thinking about her time spent working at the health centre and about Dr Henderson. Reginald Henderson, to be precise, although they'd all stuck to formalities at the surgery and Olive had never once addressed him as anything other than Dr Henderson, even although he'd addressed her as Olive and had used first names with the other women who worked in the office. They'd all begun working in the health service at a time when things were done a certain way, although when Olive retired those formalities had long been in retreat and the young women who'd worked in the office as she'd been preparing to leave no doubt thought she was terribly old fashioned, which she supposed she was.

Even if she hadn't been, she would still have addressed him as Dr Henderson, because he was a man who had carried himself in such a way that made it impossible not to confer upon him the utmost respect. He always looked immaculate in a pressed shirt, suit and tie, his shoes polished, and Olive had shared his dislike of the casual attire preferred by some of the younger doctors who joined the practice. When a patient

sought medical help for some malady or other, the least they could expect was a well-turned out GP who looked like they could instil confidence. Even on his last day at the surgery before he retired, Dr Henderson had worn his best suit and seen a full schedule of patients and insisted on working right through to the close of business.

He'd been such a gentle, kind man, Olive remembered, and adored by the patients he cared for. She remembered, too, the silly crush she'd had on him when she'd been a much younger woman. Although no man but her husband, Malcolm, could ever have claimed her heart, that didn't mean she didn't appreciate a handsome man when she saw one, and Dr Reginald Henderson had been very handsome indeed, capable of setting butterflies loose in her stomach if he smiled at her in just the right way, or cause her to muddle her words if his eyes twinkled while she talked. All harmless, silly stuff, when all was said and done, and no more than to be expected in a bustling workplace where everyone had to muck in together in order to pull off the minor miracle of delivering excellent health care to the local community they served.

Sometimes she still missed the busyness of the practice surgery, the feeling of being on the go and juggling any number of intractable problems that had to be solved for the good of the patients they cared for. After a long working life spent being useful and needed, it stood to reason that she'd occasionally pine for those long-ago days and for the people she'd worked alongside, even if that pining was coloured with more than a little golden-tinted nostalgia.

Poor Dr Henderson, she thought as she brewed her last cup of tea for the day and turned on the radio to see if there was anything worth listening to. She thought of what his final years must have been like, consumed by dementia and left a shell of the intelligent, sensible, kindly man he'd once been. How hard it must have been on his wife and on his children and grandchildren. As Olive stirred her tea, she wondered if she'd recognise any of Dr Henderson's family at the funeral service. Even as she cast her mind back, she couldn't recall what Dr Henderson's son or daughter looked like. Too many years had passed since she'd last seen either of them.

Too many years had passed in general, Olive sighed and settled down with her tea and her radio programme.

* * *

Sitting at the back of the busy crematorium the next day, Olive dabbed a tissue to her eyes and sniffed as the funeral service ended and the gathered mourners rose from their seats and headed towards the doors.

“It was a beautiful service, wasn’t it?” Val said from the seat beside her as she also pressed a tissue to her eyes.

“Quite lovely,” Olive agreed. “The eulogy made me remember all over again just what a wonderful man Dr Henderson was. I thought about him a great deal last night, but there was so much I’d forgotten about him altogether.”

“He was a proper old fashioned doctor,” Val said. “In a good way.”

Olive watched some mourners pass by along the aisle towards the exit. “It’s good to see so many people here to remember him. He was much loved and much respected in this community.”

Val nodded and then smiled. “Do you remember when I had my fortieth birthday and Dr Henderson brought in that enormous birthday cake for us all to enjoy?”

The memory flooded back from across the years. “I’d forgotten all about that. Oh, but it was a wonderful cake, and he’d even had it specially decorated.”

“I’ve always remembered how attentive he was to things like special staff birthdays and making sure they were acknowledged.”

“That kind of thing made us feel valued.”

“There won’t be his like again. It’s all different in the GP surgeries these days.”

“Now you sound like an old fogey,” Olive smiled. “I’m sure they still look out for one another and celebrate together.”

“I don’t miss my old life as a nurse in terms of the tough work that was involved, but I miss being part of a team. I’ve been thinking about that since I’ve been remembering Dr Henderson and the old times at the surgery.”

“Me too. It’s funny how, when I look back on it, it feels like it all went by in the blink of an eye.”

The crematorium was almost empty now, and Olive and Val rose from their seats and turned for the doors. When they got outside, Olive paused for a moment, her gaze caught on a woman who was making her way alongside her husband towards the parked chauffeur vehicle that would drive the immediate family to the wake being held in a nearby hotel function room. The woman, who was probably somewhere in her early sixties, was Dr Henderson’s daughter. She’d given the eulogy at the service, and the things she’d said were still swirling in Olive’s mind.

“I had no idea Dr Henderson lived such a full life after he retired,” Olive said to Val as they lingered outside the doors of the crematorium. “After you told me about Dr Henderson suffering from dementia for a few years before he died, and then having to go into a care home, I had this picture in my head of him turning into a shell of his former self. I couldn’t stop thinking about the tragedy of it, considering what a clever and kind man he was when we worked with him at the surgery. Now, having heard everything his daughter had to say about him in her beautiful eulogy, I must admit I’m rather astonished at the life he led after retiring, and before he became ill.”

“I didn’t know the half of it either,” Val said. “I didn’t keep in touch with the man after he retired, and as he lived on the outskirts of Hamblehurst, he wasn’t someone I bumped into much. But although I know his final couple of years were tough because of his illness, I had no idea he’d had such a rich and full retirement before that hideous disease took hold of him.”

As they ambled towards Val’s parked car, Olive thought about the eulogy and what she’d heard about the life Dr Henderson had lived after leaving the health centre. While it stood to reason that the man must have done many things with

his time between retiring in his sixties and succumbing to dementia in his nineties, Olive had been amazed at the life he'd led.

Two years after leaving the health centre, Dr Henderson had taken up hiking and undertaken many long distance walks, including the West Highland Way and the Cornish section of the South West Coast Path.

He'd discovered a flair for watercolour painting, and enjoyed exhibiting and selling his work at various arts and crafts fairs around the local area, donating all the proceeds from sales to the local hospice, where he also volunteered to help maintain the tranquillity garden that was a much needed place of respite for the patients and their families.

He travelled in France and Italy, and at the grand age of eighty-five enjoyed his last overseas trip with his wife to Paris, where they toured the Louvre, spent an evening at the opera, and shared a candlelit dinner in a rooftop restaurant with views of the Eiffel Tower.

As Dr Henderson's daughter had talked about all these grand adventures, and more besides, Olive had felt a mix of emotions.

On the one hand, she was delighted to know that Dr Henderson had led such a busy and stimulating life after leaving behind his work as a GP, and it pleased her to think of the man engaged in all these wonderful activities and adventures rather than as a husk of a man taken down by the scourge of dementia.

On the other hand, she felt a twist of regret, possibly even embarrassment, at the relative emptiness of her own life when compared to that of her old colleague and boss.

Dr Henderson had travelled to his favourite countries, hiked up fearsome mountains and along breathtaking coastlines, found new passions and interests, and made wonderful new memories with his wife and family. The man had grabbed life by the scruff of the neck and wrung as much out of it as he could. When he'd been the same age as Olive was right now, which was seventy-five, Dr Henderson had still

been taking part in vigorous day hikes with his local rambling club. When he'd been eighty-five, and the first signs of memory trouble were making themselves known, he'd taken his wife to Paris for one last romantic weekend in their favourite city, a trip which, according to their daughter, her mother had held close to her heart during the tough years that had followed before Dr Henderson passed away.

Olive thought about her own life and how small it looked in comparison to Dr Henderson's. While she didn't particularly want to start hiking up mountains or turning her hand to watercolour painting, she wanted to fill her days with *something*.

These last few weeks, that's just what she'd been trying to do, she reminded herself. Olive already knew she'd become too stuck in her lonely ways this past winter and had to reconnect with the people and the world beyond her little house on Foxglove Street. And while she was happy to be making at least some progress in that respect, she couldn't help but feel she was nevertheless leading too small a life and that, given her advancing age, time was running out to do something about it.

One other little detail from the eulogy stuck with Olive, too. Dr Henderson's daughter had spoken about how, after he retired, her father had begun the habit of cooking an enormous Sunday lunch once a month for his two grown children, their spouses and all the assorted grandchildren. Those Sunday lunches, his daughter said, brought them all together during the busy lives everyone led and helped anchor their family together with lasting memories of food shared during noisy, bustling, laughter-filled afternoons at her parents' house.

Those Sunday lunch memories, created by Dr Henderson for his children and grandchildren, were greatly cherished judging by the warm smiles and tears shed by the family gathered in the front row at the crematorium. Hearing that part of the eulogy had left Olive with a sharp stab of longing to share such moments with her own family, and wishing that the vast ocean that separated them could somehow disappear.

“Hey, are you okay there, Olive?” Val said when they reached her parked car at the far side of the crematorium building. “You look like you’re a million miles away.”

“Just thinking about old Dr Henderson and the funeral service.”

“Days like these always leave everyone feeling thoughtful.” Val unlocked the car doors and smiled over the roof of the car. “Shall we pop over to the wake for a bit and pay our respects to Dr Henderson’s family? I’ve got a card with a few words I wrote inside about how much I thought of the old GP when we worked together, and I want to hand it over to his wife in person.”

“I’ve got a card here too,” Olive said, patting her handbag.

“In that case, let’s get over there. And I wouldn’t say no to a cup of tea to revive me after having a bit of a cry during the funeral service.”

“Me too, Val. Me too.”

They got into the car and drove towards the hotel where the wake was being held. All the way there, Olive couldn’t stop thinking about all she’d learned about Dr Henderson’s life since she’d last known him, while pondering her own life, too, and wondering how many years might yet remain to her, and just what she planned to do with them.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Olive was fetching Elsa from next door to bring her round to her own house for a scamper in the garden when her phone rang.

“Olive, it’s Angela. Have I caught you at a bad time?”

“Not in the least. I was just collecting Elsa from your house. Why, is everything all right?”

“Actually, I’m in a bit of a fix.”

In the background, Olive could hear the noise of the supermarket where Angela worked, a cacophony of tills beeping and customers chattering and muzak playing. It was unusual for Angela to get in touch while she was working and so she knew there must be some issue.

“I got a message from my friend Diane, who usually picks Lindsey up from school on Wednesdays,” Angela explained. “Her mother had a break-in at her house this afternoon. She’s badly shaken up, and Diane has had to rush over there.”

“Oh, that’s terrible! Is the poor woman all right?”

“She’d had an awful shock, but as far as I know, she’s fine. The thing is, because of the upheaval, Diane arranged for her cousin to collect her daughter from school today, and although she said her cousin could take Lindsey too, I don’t know this person at all and don’t feel comfortable leaving her with a stranger. And so, although I fobbed you off at the weekend when you offered to take Lindsey one day this week—”

“You didn’t fob me off,” Olive interrupted. “And you needn’t say another word. I’d be glad to help.”

On the other end of the phone, she heard Angela exhale a loud breath. “Thank you. You’ve no idea how grateful I am.”

“Don’t mention it. Now, I assume you need me to collect Lindsey from school and bring her home to my house until you finish work?”

“Yes, please. She gets out at three o’clock, and I’ll let the school know you’re picking her up.”

“That’s fine. And shall I give Lindsey her dinner here?”

“No, we’ll eat a quick snack together when I get home before I drop her off at Brownies.”

“I shall feed the girl and that’s one less thing for you to worry about, given this unexpected upheaval. And if Lindsey has homework, I’ll make sure she gets at least some of it done.”

“Thank you, Olive. You’re a lifesaver. Oh, wait a minute.”

She listened as someone began talking to Angela on the other end, asking something about where they could find lightbulbs. After answering the question, Angela came back on the line.

“Sorry, it’s mayhem here today.”

“You’d better get back to work. Don’t worry about anything. I’ll take care of Lindsey and let you know once I’ve picked her up.”

“Just one other thing. Don’t take Elsa along when you collect Lindsey. You’re still nursing that sprained wrist and it can get pretty busy at the school gates with lots of other dogs there waiting with owners for the bell to ring.”

“I won’t take Elsa with me. No need to worry about that. As we agreed, I’m not taking her out for walks this week unless I have Val accompanying me. Although once I’ve visited the surgery tomorrow, I might be freed from the support bandage and back in action again.”

“Okay, and sorry for bringing it up.”

“Pfft, no need to be sorry, dear. I’ll speak to you later.”

She rang off and checked her watch. It was just after one in the afternoon. Plenty of time before she had to collect young Lindsey from school. Having clipped Elsa’s lead on and locked up Angela’s house once more, she returned home already thinking of how she’d spend the time with her unexpected visitor this afternoon.

* * *

When Olive arrived at the school gates at three o’clock to collect Lindsey, she was pleased Angela had advised her to leave Elsa behind. The street around the school was crammed with waiting parents, some with dogs. Although there was no trouble between the assembled dogs, the crush around the gates was enough to persuade Olive to keep her distance to avoid risking her sprained wrist by being jostled by some careless person.

Soon, the children began pouring out through the school doors, accompanied by teachers who supervised the handover to the waiting parents. When Lindsey appeared, Olive spoke with the teacher to confirm the details of the altered pick up arrangements, before explaining to Lindsey why she was collecting her instead of her friend’s mother. Once these details were satisfactorily outlined, they turned for Foxglove Street and home.

Lindsey seemed excited by the change of arrangements and spent the walk peppering Olive with information about what she’d done at school that day and what had happened in the playground during the lunch break and how her class had spent their last hour of lesson time rehearsing their song for the school’s spring concert. By the time Olive was unlocking her front door and ushering the child inside to greet Elsa, who’d behaved herself beautifully during her absence, her ears were buzzing with the endless onslaught of Lindsey’s chattering.

Once Lindsey had fussed over Elsa and run around the garden with the little dog, Olive poured a glass of milk for the child and set out a plate of biscuits before asking about her homework commitments. Lindsey seemed happy enough to deal with the various writing and arithmetic tasks she'd been sent home to complete by her teacher and applied herself to the work while sitting next to Olive at the kitchen table. Once her homework was dealt with, Lindsey stuffed her workbooks back into her school bag and pulled out a folded sheet of heavy art paper, which she thrust across the table at Olive.

"We did art today in school and I made this for my Granny Barton," Lindsey informed her, waving the sheet of paper in the air. "Do you like it?"

Olive squinted at the artwork through her spectacles and stilled Lindsey's hand to stop the child from moving the paper around in front of her face. With a laugh, she looked more closely at the drawing, done in bright coloured pencils and featuring a fantastical garden containing enormous flowers in improbable colour combinations and trees with leaves that were of every shape and size imaginable.

"This is quite something," Olive said, taking in the remarkable drawing and giving it her full attention. "You are a wonderful little artist, Lindsey."

Lindsey beamed at this praise, then pointed at various things in the drawing. "That's a daisy like the costume I'm wearing at the school spring concert. And those are tulips, like the ones I brought when me and mum came to your house for dinner. And that's a sunflower because I like sunflowers and last summer when I went to visit Granny Barton with my mum and dad, she showed me the sunflowers she'd grown in her garden and they were so tall I could hardly see the top of them."

Olive laughed at this outpouring of detail. "Your Granny Barton likes to grow sunflowers, does she?"

"It was the first time she'd grown them. She grew them from little seeds, and said that she'd let me help her grow something from seed this year, but I haven't visited her for a

while and it's nearly summer now, so I don't know if we'll still be able to do that or not." Lindsey paused and her smile vanished into a sudden frown. "Granny Barton's been poorly and my dad's had to look after her a lot."

It pained Olive to see the worry now creasing the little girl's face, especially as Angela had already told her the whole sorry story about the casual fibs her ex-husband had told their daughter about her grandmother's health to make life easy for himself.

"I'm sure your grandmother is quite well," Olive said, eager to calm the child's obvious anxiety but conscious of saying anything that might cause her to put her foot into the middle of a parental disagreement. "And I'm sure she'll love this drawing you've done for her."

Lindsey gave a sad shrug, her expression much too old for her years. "Granny Barton lives far away. We have to take a train and a bus to visit her because we don't have a car anymore, which is why I haven't seen her. I'm not sure when I'll be able to give her the drawing I made."

"I'm sure your mother will arrange a visit soon."

Lindsey gave another shrug. "To visit Granny Barton without a car, we have to catch the train, and then get off in Godalming and walk along the main street and catch the number seventy-two bus. That bus goes through Swanford, where Granny Barton lives, but once we get off the bus in the village centre her house is another ten-minute walk away."

As she described this convoluted journey, Lindsey tapped her finger on the sheet of artwork laid on the table, as if pinpointing the route on some imaginary map. Olive could tell from the various shifts and flicks of the child's chubby little fingers that she had a remarkably precise idea of just where her grandmother lived in relation to Hamblehurst. Swanford was just south of Godalming, to the east of Hamblehurst, and if it had been an actual map spread out on the kitchen table, instead of Lindsey's pencil drawing, Olive was sure that the small village of Swanford was exactly where Lindsey's finger

would have landed after tracing the route from her home here in Hamblehurst.

“You have quite a memory, Lindsey, to remember the route and the bus number and the details of the change-overs required during the journey to your grandmother’s house. I’m impressed. If I’m ever lost in the wilderness, I’ll hope you are lost with me, so you can help me find my way home.”

This earned Olive a wide smile, and she was pleased to see the anxiety now gone from the child’s face.

“Why would we be lost in the wilderness, Olive?” Lindsey giggled.

“Well, who knows? Perhaps we went off together in search of the magical elves or mysterious fairies who live in this wonderful garden you’ve drawn here, and we had so much fun, we got lost in the wilderness on our way home.”

Lindsey peered wide-eyed at Olive, considering this idea, before glancing down at the drawing on the table. “I forgot there might be elves or fairies living in the garden. I bet Granny Barton would love to see elves and fairies in the drawing!”

“I’m sure she would. Perhaps you ought to add some in?”

Before she’d even finished making the suggestion, Lindsey was already digging into her school backpack and pulling out a pencil case. When she unzipped it, a collection of coloured pens and pencils tumbled across the table. Moments later, Lindsey was immersed in the task of adding a series of whimsical fairies and elves to her drawing, her eyes bright as she coloured in their wings and chattered to Elsa about their magical powers.

Olive washed up the milk glass and biscuit plate at the sink, her gaze turning to the little girl seated at the kitchen table and lost in the wildflower dreamland she was creating on the sheet of art paper spread before her. Lindsey was a sweet child with a good heart, and Olive could only imagine how much it must hurt Angela to see her child pine for her father and worry about her grandmother. Even Olive’s heart felt sore

for the girl, and she'd only known her a matter of weeks, which meant that Angela must be feeling every kind of emotion about the unhappy situation with her ex-husband and the impact it was having on her daughter.

No one said that parenting was easy. Olive knew that only too well.

Her own daughter, Gillian, had been a dream as a little girl, sweet and lovely and outgoing. Olive had considered herself lucky to be the mother of such a wonderful child. But when Gillian's teenage years arrived, she mutated into a moody, grumbling, lazy stranger who turned their happy family home upside down with her erratic behaviour and epic sulks. She and Malcolm had been at their wit's end attempting to survive those awful years, and at a loss to understand what had happened to the angelic child they'd once known. There had been many occasions when Olive had wondered what she was doing wrong as a mother and how she could fix things before she lost her dark, brooding daughter forever.

And then, as quickly as Gillian the Teenage Monster had appeared, she'd vanished again. By the time she was eighteen and starting university, Gillian had transformed once more, regaining the sweet, soulful nature she'd had as a child while losing all the unpleasant grumpiness of her teenage years, but also somehow retaining the smart, edgy personality she'd found inside herself during the time in between. She'd grown from a child into a young woman, and Olive couldn't have been more proud of the person she'd become. All those worries and tears shed during Gillian's awful teenage years had been worth it to see the amazing woman she grew into.

Many years later, when Gillian had emigrated to Canada and her own son, Blake, was going through his own teenage trials and turning the family home into a war zone, Gillian had told Olive that she now understood just what she'd put her mother through as a teenager herself. Laughing on the other end of the phone call, Gillian had asked Olive to forgive her for all the horrible things she'd said and all the awful sulks and mood swings she'd put her parents through.

There had been nothing to forgive, Olive had told her truthfully. It was all part of being a parent. So much that happened during those years had left her bewildered and questioning her abilities as a mother, but her job was to be there for her daughter, even if Gillian didn't think she needed her. Knowing that Gillian was an excellent mother to her own son during his own terrible teenage years made Olive think that life was a circle that carried us around and around until we'd learned everything we needed to learn about ourselves and about those we loved. We travelled around the circle until we knew how to live the best life we could.

Olive blinked, wondering where these philosophical thoughts had come from. One minute she'd been thinking about her neighbour's unfortunate predicament with her ex-husband and the problems it was causing for poor little Lindsey, and the next minute she'd been lost in thoughts about her own family and times gone by... and what it all meant in the big scheme of things.

Dr Henderson's funeral and eulogy were still on her mind, that much she knew. They'd made her think about things, and had caused many disconnected thoughts to stitch themselves together into a strange patchwork in her mind.

From thoughts about Lindsey worrying about her grandmother and how hard that must be for Angela, Olive had found herself thinking about her own daughter and grandson and wondering... what exactly?

Wondering about how they were, all the way over there in Canada.

Wondering how her grandson, Blake, was coping with life as a new father to his sweet daughter Lucy, and as imminent groom to his fiancé, Kylie.

Wondering how her daughter was dealing with the transition to life as a grandmother, and how her husband, Ed, was dealing with it, too.

Wondering how Gillian and Ed, and Blake and Kylie and Lucy, lived their lives and spent their time two thousand miles away across the vast Atlantic Ocean that separated them. How

did their days look? How did they juggle the changes that a new baby brought? How was the planning coming along for the big wedding?

Olive wished she knew the answers to those questions. It had been three weeks since she'd last chatted to Gillian on the tablet video link. Gillian had cancelled their last scheduled conversation as she juggled work and grandparenting and a thousand other things. Olive had been happy to delay their chat, knowing just how busy Gillian's life was.

But now, as she dried the dishes at the sink, she realised how much she'd missed seeing her daughter's smiling face pop up on the tablet screen and settling in for a nice catch-up.

Checking that Lindsey was still content at the kitchen table with her colouring work, Olive fetched her phone from the living room and tapped out a message to Gillian, asking her when she was free for a chat. It was late morning in eastern Canada, and Olive hoped she'd hear back from Gillian if she had time to check her messages during the day.

When a text arrived back just ten minutes later, Olive grinned at the message Gillian had sent.

Great idea, Mum. We should make time to talk. It's manic here! Non-stop until the weekend, but how about Saturday afternoon, maybe one o'clock, your time? I'll get up early to chat before things get too busy here!

Thrilled at this, Olive tapped out a reply saying that would be just perfect.

"What are you smiling about, Olive?" Lindsey asked, still adding the final touches to the fairies and elves she'd drawn on the picture for her grandmother.

"I've just arranged to speak with my daughter this weekend," Olive said. "She lives in Canada, but we haven't had time lately to catch up."

"If she lives all the way over in Canada, you must miss her," Lindsey said.

"I do miss her."

Lindsey gave a sage nod. "I miss my Granny Barton and my daddy. It's hard when you miss someone, isn't it, Olive?"

The thoughtful look on Lindsey's face made Olive's heart squeeze for the child. "Yes, it's very hard."

Lindsey tapped a blue pencil on her art paper, her gaze distant. The expression in her eyes was much too old and sad for a little girl of only eight years old.

"Well," Olive said, and offered Lindsey a bright smile, determined to lift her spirits. "It looks to me like you've finished drawing your picture for your Granny Barton. Why don't you start another one to give to your mother when she comes to collect you? I'm sure she'd love that."

Obviously pleased with this idea, Lindsey pulled a fresh piece of art paper from her school bag and set to work, and was soon chattering away about the new drawing she'd begun and the various flowers and features she planned to include.

As Olive finished clearing up at the sink, she made a mental note to pull Angela aside for a quiet word about how sad Lindsey seemed when discussing her grandmother. She wouldn't be telling her neighbour anything she didn't already know, but given Lindsey's obvious preoccupation with her Granny Barton, and the fact that she'd gone as far as mentioning how much she missed her father and grandmother, it seemed only right that Olive should report back to Angela about what had been said.

Lindsey was a special little girl with a good heart. With her father gone and her mother working hard to make her feel loved and cherished, Olive wanted to do her part to look out for the child and help her neighbour in whatever way she could.

ANGELA HAD no idea how the weekend could have rolled around again, but it had.

It was Saturday morning, and as she stood at the kitchen counter and attempted to drink a cup of coffee she'd already reheated twice in the microwave after being caught up in things around the house, she drew in a deep breath and brought the mug to her lips. The coffee was bitter and barely lukewarm, but it would do.

The last week had flown by in a whirlwind of busy shifts at the supermarket, school drop-offs and pick-ups, childcare juggling, household chores, shopping errands, and too many other things to mention. She'd always known that returning to work full time would involve a big adjustment, but she hadn't realised just *how* big that adjustment would be. Life had seemed busy enough when she'd been working part time at the supermarket. Now, it felt like she was constantly running just to stand still.

The washing machine beeped as she gulped down a mouthful of coffee. No sooner had she started pulling out the load of laundry and sorting it to be pegged outside on the line, when the oven timer pinged to remind her that the casserole she'd popped in to cook was now ready to come out. After setting the casserole on the counter to cool before she portioned it out into tubs for the freezer to replenish her store of emergency dinners, she turned back to finish the laundry.

Which was when the doorbell rang. Wondering who it could be, Angela abandoned the laundry and headed for the

front door. Lindsey beat her to it, barrelling through from the living room into the hallway with Elsa hot on her heels.

“Shannon’s here at last!” Lindsey yelled as she twisted the lock on the door.

Frowning, Angela glanced at her watch and realised it was already half-past eleven. Where had the morning gone? In the busy rush of taking care of things around the house, she’d almost forgotten that Lindsey’s friend was coming round today so the two girls could work together on their costumes for the spring concert at school.

Angela had suggested the idea to Lindsey after Olive had told her how sad she’d looked when talking about her Granny Barton when they’d spent time together at Olive’s house after Lindsey’s usual school pick-up arrangement had fallen through at the last minute. Angela knew Lindsey wanted to see her grandmother, and felt bad that it wasn’t an option right now. A long trip over and back on public transport to visit Lindsey’s grandmother was impossible while Angela was still juggling her new working arrangements and attempting to keep everything running as smoothly as possible at home. She hoped that having her best friend over to the house for an afternoon might help take Lindsey’s mind off missing her grandmother, and her father too, for that matter.

Seeing the excitement on Lindsey’s face as she hurtled towards the front door was all the proof Angela needed that the idea of a Saturday play-date had been the right one.

Lindsey flung open the front door and greeted Shannon, who was standing on the step with her half-finished flower mask cradled in her arms. Angela felt a punch of surprise when she saw Shannon’s father, Mark, standing behind the girl.

Angela allowed herself an eye roll at her own absent-mindedness and surprise in discovering the child was accompanied by one of her parents. How else was an eight-year-old going to get here from the other side of town where she lived?

“Hi, Shannon! Hi, Mr Green!” Lindsey said, already ushering her friend inside the house. “My flower mask is in the living room, Shannon. Let’s get to work!”

“Hang on, young lady,” Mark called after his daughter and held out the pink and purple backpack he was holding. “Don’t forget your art supplies and whatnot.”

Shannon grabbed the backpack from her father, then sped off after Lindsey, the two of them disappearing into the living room with Elsa scrabbling behind them and yapping in excitement. As their chatter filled the house along with the sounds of craft supplies being laid out and discussed, Mark gave Angela a slow grin.

“They make for quite a whirlwind when they get together,” he said. “Are you already regretting inviting Shannon over here?”

“Of course not,” she said. “The sooner they get those concert costumes finished, the better. And it’s always nice for Lindsey to see her friends outside of school.”

“I’m glad Shannon arranged to come over here today, actually. Shannon’s mother’s new kitchen installation has hit the buffers after an accident with the plumbing, and they’ve had to turn off the water and electricity while they repair the damage. Shannon stayed at my house last night, which made things easier, but I’m due at work in an hour to cover part of a shift for one of my colleagues, and would’ve had to send Shannon back to her mother’s if she wasn’t coming here, which wouldn’t be ideal because they’re digging into the wall this morning and according to Karen the noise is terrible and...” He trailed off and gave an apologetic laugh. “Sorry, not your problem. The trials of modern parenting, right?”

“I know all about those,” Angela said with a smile.

“Anyway, Karen will collect Shannon at four o’clock this afternoon.”

“Four?”

Mark’s grin disappeared. “Sorry, is that not what the girls agreed?”

Angela waved a hand. “I’m sure it’s exactly what they agreed and exactly what I agreed, too. The details just slipped my mind, that’s all. It’s been a bit of a week.”

“I can let Karen know she should collect Shannon earlier, if that helps?” Mark said, already pulling his phone from his pocket.

“No, don’t do that. In fact, it sounds like there’s enough going on at Shannon’s mother’s house today for her to deal with already. Listen, it’s no trouble for Shannon to stay and have dinner here, if that helps with your work commitment this afternoon and means your ex can focus on her kitchen installation problems instead of coming to pick her up. You could collect Shannon at seven or eight instead, or whenever you finish.”

Mark’s gaze softened at her offer. “Thanks. Karen will appreciate that. I’ll let her know she doesn’t have to worry about picking Shannon up and can focus on the kitchen disaster she’s in the middle of.”

Angela watched Mark tap on his phone screen. Once he’d sent the message, he glanced back up. “Thanks again, Angela. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Happy to help.”

“Right, I’ll make a move.” Leaning inside the door, he called out, “Bye, Shannon.”

“Bye, Dad!”

“Bye, Mr Green!”

A chorus of high-pitched giggles followed the girls’ farewells. Angela laughed, and Mark joined in.

The sparkle in his eyes caused her gaze to linger on the man. Feeling a blush heat her cheeks, she raised a hand to wave him off.

Before she could say goodbye, there was a dull thud from the living room, followed by an ear-splitting screech from the girls.

“What the...?”

Angela exchanged a look with Mark, then raced to the living room. Mark hurried after her, almost colliding with her as they sped into the room.

Quickly surveying the scene, Angela saw the two girls standing wide-eyed as they peered at a pot of glue that had tumbled from the coffee table to the floor minus its lid, the sticky contents already pooling on the laminate flooring. Elsa sniffed at the gooey liquid before taking a speculative lick of the substance.

“Elsa! Don’t eat that!” Angela yelled, and clapped her hands together to startle the dog and draw it away from the spillage. “The last thing we need is to rush you to the vet for emergency treatment.”

Elsa scuttled away from the pool of glue, as if understanding every word.

“Sorry, Mum!” Lindsey muttered, still staring at the messy puddle. “The tub fell off the table.”

“Pull the rug away before the glue gets any closer,” Angela told her daughter. “I’ll fetch some kitchen paper and cloths.”

“I’ll help you clean this up,” Mark said. “Shall we put the dog into the garden before she stands in the paste and carries it through the house?”

“Good idea.”

While Mark shepherded Elsa through to the back door and the garden beyond, Angela grabbed a roll of paper towels from the kitchen counter and a bottle of cleaning spray from underneath the sink. Back in the living room, Mark scooped up the glue with a wad of paper towels and Angela scrubbed at the floor to remove the residue before it dried in. The girls held out the glue pot and lid so they could be wiped down, both of them looking sheepish.

“So, did this glue pot just ‘fall over’ or were one of you not paying attention to what you were doing?” Angela asked them after wiping glue splatter from their hands with a sheet of paper towel.

The guilty looks on the faces of the two girls deepened. “Elsa distracted us while we were organising our craft supplies,” Lindsey volunteered.

“Hmm. Poor Elsa, getting the blame for something that wasn’t her fault.” Angela shook her head, but she couldn’t help laughing at her daughter’s attempt to assign responsibility for the mess to her loyal little dog. “From now on, you both have to be more careful, okay?”

The girls nodded.

“Shannon,” Mark said, his tone serious as he spoke to his daughter. “I heard you whooping and giggling right before the glue pot thudded to the floor. If you can’t stay calm and sensible, you won’t be allowed to do any more crafting activities while you’re here at Lindsey’s house.”

“Sorry, Dad,” Shannon said. “We’ll be careful.”

“We’ll be *really* careful,” Lindsey added.

It was hard to resist the two cherubic faces peering up at them. “All right, off you go and get back to finishing those flower masks,” Angela said. “And no more messes or else there won’t be any chocolate chip cookies after lunch.”

With this fresh motivation to keep the place intact, the girls hunched over the big flower masks laid out on the floor and got back to work. Angela carried the cleaning things through to the kitchen while Mark brought the balled-up sheets of paper towel he’d used to mop up the glue and dumped them in the bin. Once they’d washed up at the sink, Angela filled the kettle.

“Thanks for your help, Mark. I think we need a coffee after all that.”

Mark checked his watch.

“Unless you don’t have time?”

“I’ve got time. A coffee would be grand, thanks.”

Angela spooned instant coffee into two mugs and set a bowl of sugar and a milk jug on the counter so Mark could serve himself. As she poured away the old, reheated coffee

she'd failed to drink earlier, she remembered the laundry basket on the floor beside the washing machine, filled with damp clothes waiting to be pegged out, including, she realised with horror, a selection of her bras and a handful of knickers scattered across the top of the pile.

Her cheeks burning with embarrassment, Angela grabbed the laundry basket and put it outside on the patio so Mark wouldn't have to look at her ancient, threadbare underwear while they drank their coffee. She made a mental note to remember the basket of laundry was out there waiting for her, so she didn't discover it hours later, turning sour and requiring another rinse in the machine.

"You look deep in thought," Mark said from the other side of the kitchen, where he was leaning against the counter.

"Sorry. I just got caught up for a moment in my endless mental checklist of household chores. Saturday's my day for keeping on top of the cleaning and cooking, or at least attempting to." Waving at the chaos around the kitchen—the cooling casserole on the hob, the freezer containers waiting to be filled, the vegetables she'd started chopping for soup, the mop and bucket waiting to go upstairs so the bathroom floor could be washed, the bundle of freshly laundered towels on the kitchen table waiting to be folded—she laughed and gave a quick shrug. "It's a never-ending battle."

"You should put Shannon and Lindsey to work helping you."

"Lindsey already took care of her chores today. She likes to do the Hoovering, and washing Elsa's food and water bowls, and putting away the groceries when we come home from the shop."

"In that case, put Shannon to work. She's a dab hand with a yellow duster and a can of furniture polish."

Angela laughed and filled their coffee mugs with hot water.

"In all honesty, if Shannon spending time here today means Lindsey finishes that flower mask thing she's making

for the school concert, I'll be thrilled and consider your daughter's time here well spent."

"Same here. I'm sure the school thinks they're being really helpful, giving the kids art projects to work on at home with their parents, but I'm sick to the back teeth of that flower mask of Shannon's. The thing is huge. We've spent hours decorating it and it still isn't finished."

"I only hope the kids can keep the mask boards attached to their shoulders once they're all lined up on the stage and singing their song together. Now that the templates are covered with paint and glue and scrunched-up tissue paper, they're pretty heavy."

Mark sipped his coffee and seemed to consider what she'd said. "Might be worthwhile having our phones at the ready in case we get the chance to film a few hilarious moments when our kids start swaying around under the weight of their flower masks and topple over like a row of dominos. Now that would be amusing."

Seeing his mock-evil grin, Angela laughed. "And there was me thinking you were a nice guy."

"I am a nice guy."

His gaze held hers, his eyes sparkling with something that might have been amusement, and might have been something more.

Angela was the first to look away. It was impossible for her to do anything else. If she looked into the dark depths of Mark's eyes much longer, she might do something stupid.

Like forget she was a busy, newly separated single mother with more on her plate than she could handle.

Like make the mistake of asking Mark if he and Shannon wanted to come over some time for dinner.

Because that *would* be a mistake. And Angela had no room in her life for mistakes, especially an ill-advised romantic mistake with the father of her daughter's best friend.

Gulping down some coffee, she returned to the vegetables she'd been chopping for soup. As she worked, the conversation turned to more boring topics—the weather, the roadworks in the town centre, the class trip the girls were going on next month to a museum. When Mark drained the last of his coffee and pushed away from the kitchen counter, Angela almost breathed a sigh of relief.

“I'd better get myself to work,” he said. “Thanks again for the coffee.”

“Thanks again for helping with the glue clean-up.”

She walked him to the door. When he stepped outside, he turned and looked at her for a long moment, his gaze sweeping across her face. His expression was uncertain, as if he was on the cusp of saying something, but wasn't sure whether or not he ought to.

In that moment, as she looked into Mark's eyes, Angela felt a bolt of attraction rush through her from her fingers to her toes, and her head filled with one undeniable thought.

If things were different, and this man asked me out, I'd say yes.

She wondered if he read the unspoken thought on her face, because his expression shifted and he opened his mouth to speak.

But instead of saying whatever it was he'd been about to say, Mark instead raked a hand through his hair before shoving it in his pocket.

“I'll be back this evening to pick up Shannon just as soon as I finish these extra hours at the station,” he said.

“See you then.”

Mark raised a hand in a farewell wave and turned for the front gate. “Bye, Angela.”

“Bye, Mark.”

She watched him walk to his car and drive off. Part of her was glad he was gone, but another part of her couldn't help

wondering what he might have been about to say before he stopped himself.

The expectant, uncertain look on his face was the same as the one he'd had during that sunny afternoon at the park, when he'd asked her back to his house for dinner once the girls finished playing in the adventure fort.

She'd turned down his offer then. Had he sensed that she'd turn down another offer if he made it, and saved himself the embarrassment?

Probably. She'd already made it clear that she wasn't interested in romantic complications.

So why was she still standing at the open door, watching Mark's car drive off along the street?

As she had no answer to that question, Angela closed the front door and returned to her household chores.

She was halfway down the hallway when she realised how quiet it was in the living room. Gone was the background noise of the girls' giggling and chattering that had filled the place just a few minutes ago. Backtracking, Angela peered into the living room to check that all was well.

Lindsey and Shannon were huddled over their flower masks on the floor, but rather than working on the painting and pasting tasks, they were instead whispering into one another's ears.

Angela watched them for a moment. Something about the determined look on Lindsey's face, and the oddly uncertain look on Shannon's face, as the whispering continued tweaked Angela's mother radar.

"Everything all right in here?" Angela asked.

The two girls jumped at her voice, their expressions those of kids who'd almost been caught doing something they shouldn't.

"Everything's fine, Mum," Lindsey said.

Shannon's cheeks were bright red, and Angela couldn't fail to notice the way her gaze dropped to the floor.

“What were you two whispering about?” Angela asked.

“Nothing, we weren’t whispering,” Lindsey said, before gesturing to the stacks of tissue paper laid out on the coffee table. “We were talking about which colour of tissue paper to use on the flower petals. I want to use some yellow, but Shannon says I should only use white. We were debating it.”

Angela glanced at the tissue paper, the flower masks, and the two little girls who were blushing and giving one another furtive looks. Something about the explanation Lindsey had given didn’t add up, and she knew her daughter well enough to know when she wasn’t being entirely truthful.

But before she could quiz them any further, the girls returned to their art work, scrunching up wads of tissue paper and fixing them to the cardboard flower template with dabs of glue, the two of them chatting about the tasks they were undertaking.

For a long moment, Angela peered at both children, now with their backs to her as they resumed their work. Something seemed fishy about the whispered exchange she’d witnessed, but she couldn’t put her finger on exactly what it might be.

Had the girls really only been discussing their craft project? Angela was sure that the guilty expressions on their faces weren’t caused by something as simple as a minor disagreement about tissue paper colours.

Her mother radar might have been tweaked, but she was at a loss to explain why. With the girls engrossed in their project once more, Angela lingered at the living room door before returning to the kitchen.

There was enough work to be done today without creating imaginary problems involving the two little girls busy with their crafting work.

Still, the image of them whispering to one another, and then blushing when quizzed about what they were talking about, lingered in Angela’s mind for the rest of the day as she tackled her household chores and to-do list.

Something about that odd look in her daughter's eyes
needled into her brain and wouldn't go away.

“OH MY GOD, Mum! What on earth happened to your hand?!”

Olive winced at the alarm lacing her daughter’s voice as Gillian gasped at her via the tablet screen perched on the kitchen table, her eyes wide as she stared at the still visible scrapes and cuts on Olive’s hand.

Although the bandage and butterfly strips had been removed when Olive had visited her local GP surgery yesterday for a check-up, the injuries were not yet fully healed and were still noticeable, even when spied through the medium of a jittery video call to the other side of the Atlantic ocean.

The injuries were especially noticeable to someone who hadn’t the first clue that those injuries even existed in the first place. Olive had chosen not to tell Gillian about the accident involving Mac the Menace and her resulting trip to hospital. The news would only worry her, and as the damage was superficial, Olive saw no point in causing angst where none was needed. Given Gillian’s busy life filled with work, family, a new baby granddaughter, and a wedding to help plan for her son, the last thing Olive wanted was for her to fret about her elderly mother and what amounted to little more than a minor canine-pensioner altercation, when all was said and done.

She realised now, of course, that if she’d wanted to continue keeping Gillian in the dark about what had happened, she should’ve kept her injured hand out of view during their video chat. But, as a natural gesticulator, Olive had absently raised her hand to her hair when Gillian complimented her

new cut and colour. And, just like that, the cat was out of the bag.

“I had a tiny, little accident,” Olive said, rubbing her other hand over the scrapes on her skin. “But I’m as right as rain now, and there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Gillian only stared, her face incredulous. “An accident? What kind of accident? Tell me what happened.”

“Nothing happened. It wasn’t even an accident, not really. I shouldn’t have called it that. Forget I even used the word.”

“Mother, if you don’t tell me what happened, I’m booking the next flight out of Toronto and I’m coming over there to see for myself what’s going on.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. There’s no need for that.”

“Prove it.”

Olive sighed. The expression on Gillian’s face told her she was serious about the threat of flying over at the drop of a hat. Defeated, and annoyed at having made the mistake of revealing her healing injuries in the first place, Olive recounted the tale about her accidental assault thanks to Mac the Menace. She kept the story succinct. After all, this video catch-up call was supposed to be an opportunity for Olive to find out what was going on with Gillian, her grandson Blake, her new great-granddaughter Lucy, as well as the rest of the family. She wasn’t about to waste time on her own ludicrous, not to mention embarrassing, tale of woe.

When she’d finished explaining, Gillian stared from the screen for a long moment before saying anything.

“So, you’ve been walking your neighbour’s dog as a favour?” Gillian finally said. “That’s a nice thing to do, Mum.”

“I might as well make myself useful.”

“But if walking your neighbour’s dog ends up with you flat on your face on the pavement and then being rushed to hospital, is it really such a good idea?”

“I wasn’t *rushed* to hospital, Gillian,” Olive said, exasperated. “If young Mark the policeman hadn’t already

called through on his radio to summon an ambulance, I wouldn't have gone to hospital at all. In the end, I didn't need any medical treatment I couldn't have dealt with myself at home."

"Still, I don't like the idea of you being yanked off your feet by some silly, out-of-control mutt."

"Nor do I. But these things happen. For all I know, Mac the Menace might have knocked me off my feet that day whether I had little Elsa at my side or not. His owner had lost control of him and he was hurtling towards the high street in search of, how should I put it? Social interaction? Yes, that sounds about right. There were other dogs being walked elsewhere on the street that day, and Mac might have galloped towards any of them and sent me flying as he passed."

"Is that supposed to put my mind at ease?"

Olive chuckled. "All I'm saying is that the world is filled with hazards. I spent the entire winter cooped up at home by myself for weeks on end on account of the treacherous snow and ice we had this year. Now that spring is here, it's time for me to get out and about again."

Gillian's expression softened. "I hate the idea of you being alone, Mum."

"I'm not alone. I have my neighbours. And since I started to walk little Elsa, I've bumped into old friends I'd lost contact with, like Val, the nurse who I knew from working at the GP surgery. And I've made new friends, too, like Mac the Menace's owner, Emily."

"You've really become friends with the woman who owns the dog that knocked you over and sent you to hospital?" Gillian asked, a smile curving her mouth.

"As it happens, yes. She was very apologetic about the entire episode and even replaced my lovely new jacket, which had been ripped and torn when I hit the pavement. She's a nice woman, a very nice woman, in fact. Val and Glenda and I are meeting her for coffee later today, and I'm looking forward to it a great deal."

“And you said that it was this policeman who attended the incident who brought you two together so this Emily person could make amends?” Gillian looked a little astonished at the turn of events Olive had recounted. “I didn’t think the police got involved in that sort of thing. Aren’t they busy enough hunting down burglars and villains?”

“I have no doubt they are very busy indeed doing those things. However, Mark is a very kind and thoughtful young man, and the sort of person who goes above and beyond for others.”

“He sounds lovely.”

“He *is* lovely. As it happens, I have high hopes that something romantic might happen between young Mark the policeman and my neighbour, Angela. I think they’d be well suited. Their daughters go to the same school and are already best friends. Angela has had a rough time these past few months, and deserves a little jolt of happiness in her life. I think Mark could be just the person to provide it.”

Gillian let out a snort of laughter. “I can’t keep track of all these people you know, Mother, and all the complicated stories about them.”

“I’ve enjoyed reconnecting with people in my community. It’s long overdue.”

That thoughtful look returned to Gillian’s face. “I’m glad you’re making friends, Mum. I was worried about you over the winter. It seemed that too many of your friends and neighbours passed away or moved house, and I know that made you sad.”

“I won’t deny that. But after every winter, there comes the spring. Things are looking up.” Olive waved her scraped hand in the air. “And I won’t let a minor setback like this spoil things.”

“While I applaud your spirit, Mother, I’m still annoyed you didn’t tell me about what happened before now.”

“You have enough on your plate.”

“You’re my mother. I don’t want you keeping important things from me because you think you need to protect me. I’m fifty-four years old.”

“Gosh, when you say your age like that, it takes me by surprise. Sometimes it seems like just the other day you were a little girl with pigtails, running around beneath my feet.”

“I feel the same way about Blake. How can my child already have a baby of his own?”

Olive smiled at the baffled look on her daughter’s face. “Time certainly flies. I just hope you’re enjoying every minute with that beautiful new granddaughter of yours. She’ll be toddling around before you know it.”

“Don’t say that. I wish she could stay a tiny baby forever. And I swear I could eat her up, she’s so gorgeous. I love her to bits.”

Laughing, Olive watched her daughter lift a sweet little baby outfit up to the screen, a soft yellow onesie dotted with woodland animals. “And I can’t stop buying things for her, either,” Gillian said. “This is just the latest of many purchases.”

“It’s beautiful. I’m sure Blake and his girlfriend will love it.”

“They’ve already told me to stop buying things because they’re awash with all the baby clothes people have given as gifts. But I just can’t help myself.”

“As Lucy’s grandmother, it’s your right to buy the child anything you want.”

“Ed says I’ll end up bankrupting us if I keep going like this,” Gillian laughed. “And as we want to help Blake and Kylie pay for their wedding, and give them a little something towards the money they’re saving for a house, I probably should rein in my spending when it comes to baby things. After all, Lucy can only wear one outfit at a time.”

“I plan on giving them a money gift for their wedding, too. I’m sure they’ll need every penny—or cent—they can get. It’s not easy being a young married couple with a new baby and a

wedding on the horizon and endless bills popping up all the time.”

“They’ll be very grateful for that, Mum. Thank you.”

Olive waved this off. “How are things going with the wedding plans, anyway? Has there been much progress?”

At this question, Gillian’s eyes widened and a huge grin spread across her face. “Yes, it’s all booked!”

“What? Well, that’s a surprise. Tell me everything.”

For the next ten minutes, Gillian filled her in on developments, explaining all about the reception venues Blake and Kylie had visited, the meal options they’d explored, the wedding dates they’d considered. Olive liked knowing that Gillian was being included in the process, alongside Kylie’s mother, and that the wedding planning appeared to be a family process, with help and advice welcome from all quarters. She felt a pang of regret at being so far away from the busy activity of it all, then reminded herself that she’d played a full role in helping with Gillian’s wedding all those years ago, and that was enough for any mother to hope for.

Besides, young folks did things very differently to how they’d been done when Olive was a young woman. No doubt she wouldn’t have a single iota of worthwhile input to give to her grandson and his fiancé. So, she’d content herself with writing them a cheque on their wedding day—assuming people still accepted cheques these days—and be glad she was able to do that much.

“Anyway,” Gillian was saying on the other end of the video call. “The upshot of it all is that they’ve settled on May the tenth next year for the wedding date, and they’ve already booked the civil ceremony and the hotel reception suite they liked best. So, it’s all good to go.”

“Well, that’s wonderful news. I’m so pleased for them both. And a spring wedding, too. How lovely.”

“Which brings me to the big question I need to ask you.” Gillian peered out from the screen, her face expectant. “Do you think you’ll be able to fly over for the wedding?”

Naturally, Olive knew to expect the question. They'd been discussing her grandson's forthcoming wedding, after all, and from the moment Blake had become engaged to his wonderful girlfriend, Kylie, just days after Lucy was born, Gillian had been prodding Olive about whether she'd fly to Toronto for the big day, once everything was arranged.

While the wedding plans remained up the air, Olive hadn't had to think too hard about the idea of enduring a transatlantic flight. But now that the date was set, she could no longer avoid the prospect of the long journey and whether she was up to taking it.

"Gillian, you know I'd love nothing more than to be there for Blake's wedding day," Olive said. "But I honestly don't know if I'm up to the challenge of such a gruelling trip at my age. And after what happened the last time I flew back home after visiting you all..."

Olive trailed off, almost shuddering at the memory of the terrible journey. She'd endured a delayed departure that had lasted over three hours, followed by an emergency mid-flight detour because of engine problems. When they'd finally resumed their journey across the Atlantic, they'd hit horrendous turbulence that had been nothing short of a nightmare. Even now, six years later, she still remembered the ache in her joints thanks to the twenty-hour ordeal involving airport delays and unplanned detours, not to mention the gruesome nausea triggered by the hour-long turbulence that had buffeted their aircraft from all sides and left Olive feeling like they might at any moment plunge into the ocean.

As if reading her thoughts, Gillian gave a sad nod. "I know you said you'd never fly again after all that, and believe me, I understand why. But I also know it would mean so much to Blake to have his grandmother at his wedding. He adores you."

"The feeling is mutual." Olive sighed and gave a shrug. "But that last terrible flight left me sore for days thanks to the delays and the cramped seats, not to mention sick to my stomach and terrified that everyone on board that flight was doomed to crash into the Atlantic. And I'm older now, too, and

while I'm certainly not quite decrepit yet, I worry what a long flight to Toronto might do to me."

"We could book you into business class, Mum. At least you'd be more comfortable."

"Hmm, perhaps."

Olive saw how much it would mean to Gillian for her to attend the wedding. The idea of not attending was painful for Olive to even contemplate.

But she feared that a long-haul flight at her age was a step too far.

"Let me give it some thought," Olive said at last, not wanting to rule anything out. "There's plenty of time to decide whether I can make the trip."

"You're right." Gillian gave a bright smile. "I don't want to pressure you, but we miss you very much."

"And I miss all of you."

"The wedding won't be complete unless you're there."

"I thought you said you didn't want to pressure me?" Olive laughed.

Gillian raised her hands in apology. "Sorry, you're right. You've promised to think it all over and that's all I can ask."

"Good. And think it all over is just what I'll do."

Gillian seemed on the cusp of saying something else, but when Olive raised her hand to tug a few stray hairs behind her ear, her daughter's gaze latched onto the cuts and scrapes still visible on her skin. The sight of the healing injuries caused Gillian's mouth to plop closed, the words she'd been about to say left unspoken.

In that moment, Olive knew exactly what her daughter had been thinking—that given her recent fall and her resulting injuries, no matter how superficial, perhaps a long-haul flight to the other side of the world really was too much for her these days, even if it meant missing her grandson's wedding day.

A flash of understanding passed between them through the video chat screen, the thought unspoken but there just the same. Suddenly, Olive felt incredibly old, far older than her years, and far older than she'd felt in a long, long time.

Gillian was the first to break the strange and sad silence that had descended. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you about the new furniture Ed and I have ordered for the dining room..."

Grateful for the change in the conversation, Olive smiled and let her daughter regale her with the details of her recent furniture purchases, but although she listened to the story and asked questions in all the right places, her mind was filled with one thought alone.

I'm going to miss my grandson's wedding day.

And that thought made her feel even older still.

* * *

At her coffee meet-up later that afternoon with the ladies, Olive was still brooding about her conversation with Gillian.

The idea of not being there for her grandson's wedding made her heart sore, and dwelling on the dilemma had left her feeling irritated and out of sorts. While Val, Emily, and Glenda chattered to one another, Olive did little more than nod in the right places during the conversation and offer the occasional half-hearted laugh or mumble.

It was Glenda who finally called her out on her strange mood.

"You've barely said a word since we arrived, Olive," Glenda frowned. "Is something the matter?"

"No, I'm fine." Olive smiled and sipped some coffee. "I can't get a word in edgeways anyway, because you three ladies are talking a mile a minute."

"Nothing new there, at least not where I'm concerned." Glenda gave her a thoughtful look. "Is your wrist still sore from that tumble you took the other week?"

Olive saw Emily blush at the question, her gaze growing worried. Keen not to alarm her new friend, Olive shook her head.

“My wrist is perfectly fine.” She waved it in the air to demonstrate its functionality. “No need for concern whatsoever.”

“So, what’s bothering you?” Val said. “It’s obvious that there’s something on your mind, so you’d better just spit it out or we’ll keep badgering you. Go on, tell your Auntie Val what’s wrong.”

Olive laughed, glad to have these kind women in her life, and glad to count them as friends.

“I spoke to my daughter, Gillian, earlier today, on the video link thingy,” Olive explained. “My grandson, Blake, and his girlfriend have set a date for their wedding. May tenth, next year.”

At this news, the other women beamed and offered congratulations, but Olive found herself shaking her head.

“But I don’t think I can go to the wedding,” Olive said. “In fact, I *know* I can’t.”

The smiles on the other women’s faces disappeared.

“Why on earth not?” Glenda demanded, her expression baffled.

“Because I can’t manage a long-haul transatlantic flight at my age, can I?” Olive snapped, not meaning to sound so grumpy.

“What nonsense!” Glenda said, her bafflement now turning into irritation. “Why would you think such a thing?”

“The last time I flew back from Toronto after a visit, I had the most gruesome flight imaginable, and it proved that I’m no longer up to the challenge of these sorts of journeys.”

Olive was keen to make her case. She didn’t want these women to think she’d just pulled some random excuse out of thin air. It was important to explain not only her reasons, but how much they troubled her.

“There was a three-hour delay at the airport before the flight even departed,” she continued. “And once we finally took off, we’d only been flying for an hour when we had to divert to another airport because of some mechanical problem with the aircraft. It was another four hours after that before we got airborne again, and then we hit turbulence that lasted for what seemed like forever. The plane was dipping and diving, and being thrown around in the air, and it was so awful I thought we were going to ditch into the Atlantic Ocean at any moment. I was as sick as a dog, and had to use those paper bags they give you in seat pocket, which was utterly mortifying, let me tell you.”

Cringing at the memory, Olive ploughed on.

“By the time I got home, I was sore all over from all those hours of delays and waiting and then finally flying in horrible conditions. Between sitting on plastic seats at the airports during the flight delays and the diversions, and then the uncomfortable seat I was wedged into on the airplane, I was in agony. Every muscle throbbed and my joints felt like they’d been clamped in a vice.”

Olive would never forget those aches. It had been the first time in her life she’d been so rudely reminded of her age, and of the impact of the wear and tear on her body.

“And then, as if it wasn’t already bad enough, I ended up with a miserable virus and was stuck in bed for three days while recovering. I know I caught that bug on the flight, there isn’t a shadow of a doubt in my mind. The passenger beside me was coughing and sneezing, and there was a small child across the aisle doing the same thing. In the end, it took me over a week to get back to normal.”

Olive paused to draw breath and gauge the expressions on her friends’ faces, who’d listened quietly to this tale of travel woe.

“The point is, between the delays and the diverted flight and the sickening turbulence, and then the added drama of catching a bug on the plane that put me in bed for days, I was

left reeling from the whole experience, and I swore I'd never fly again."

Olive ran a finger along the rim of her coffee cup, measuring her words, before adding, "But I'm fully aware that this is a special occasion. It's my grandson's wedding, and that puts me in an impossible position. On the one hand, it breaks my heart to think I won't be there to celebrate his big day, and I find myself wanting to do whatever it takes to be there. On the other hand, I'm terrified of boarding a plane and experiencing anything even close to what I endured the last time I flew. I'm six years older than I was back then, which makes the long-haul flight an even tougher prospect for my old bones and joints."

Olive slumped back into her seat and sighed. "So, there it is."

Across the table, her three friends swapped looks with one another.

"That does sound like a horrible predicament," Emily said. "And after what you went through, I can understand why you'd be nervous about flying again. It must have been a dreadful journey from start to finish."

"Emily's right," Glenda said. "But at the same time, you can't let one awful experience rob you of something so important. All of us have unpleasant experiences from time to time. But the important thing is to pick ourselves up and keep going."

"I couldn't agree more," Olive said. "And after being knocked over by Mac the Menace..."

Too late, Olive realised what she'd just said. Eyes wide with embarrassment, she glanced at Emily.

"Gosh, sorry, Emily. I shouldn't have described Mac that way when you're sitting right here at the table."

If Emily was offended by the description of her dog, she did a good job of hiding it. Laughing and with her eyes twinkling, she only shook her head.

“Mac *is* a menace,” she chuckled. “You should’ve told me that was the nickname you’d given him. I like it. I’m going to start using it myself.”

When Emily offered her a kind smile, Olive nodded her thanks, glad her new friend possessed a generous spirit.

“Anyway, go on with what you were saying,” Emily said.

“Well, all I was saying was that after my... unfortunate incident with Mac, I was keen not to blow it out of proportion. The last thing I wanted was for people to assume I was old and frail, and I especially didn’t want my neighbour, Angela, to rethink our dog walking arrangement on account of what had happened.” She glanced at her friends, and added, “Ladies, at our age we all know how annoying it is to be labelled as some fragile old age pensioner who must be wrapped up in cotton wool and who can’t be trusted to live independently.”

The women nodded in agreement.

“So, you are quite right, Glenda,” Olive continued. “We all have bad experiences from time to time, but we must keep going forward. But getting over a few nasty cuts and scrapes after taking a tumble onto the pavement is different from setting off on a long-haul transatlantic flight. At least, it feels very different to me.” Waving a hand in frustration, she sighed. “I found the whole thing very traumatic and difficult to recover from last time. I wish I could say otherwise. And I wish I could put the whole thing behind me and just hop on a plane as if it’s no small matter. But that’s not how I feel. And...”

The words she’d been about to say were lodged in her throat alongside a knot of emotion that caught Olive by surprise. When she felt hot tears prickle in her eyes, she dropped her gaze.

“It’s all right, Olive,” Val said kindly and squeezed her arm. “You’re among friends. Tell us what you were about to say.”

Olive swallowed hard against the emotion and blinked away the frustrating tears she didn’t want to shed. “I’m

terrified not only of the long flight leaving me sore and exhausted, but of arriving at the other end and being unwell. If I travelled over there to attend my grandson's wedding and then had to take to my bed because of the travelling, I'd feel terrible. I'd hate to risk spoiling Blake's wonderful wedding day because I'd taken a funny turn and ended up causing everyone a lot of worry and upset. The only thing worse than missing his wedding day would be to end up ruining it because of ill health."

Olive gulped down the last of her coffee. Around the table, the other three women were once more exchanging looks with each other.

"Well," Val finally said. "I can understand why you feel that way and why that worst-case scenario you've painted would give you so much cause for concern."

Both Glenda and Emily nodded in agreement.

"However, it *is* a worst-case scenario," Val continued. "Just because you had a terrible flight last time doesn't mean history would repeat itself."

"That's true," Glenda said. "And I think you're worrying yourself over nothing with this idea that you'd fly over there to Toronto and end up languishing in your sick bed while your grandson's wedding was taking place. It's not as if you'd be flying out the very day before the wedding, is it? Surely you'd travel over there well in advance? Considering this is your family we're talking about, there wouldn't be anything stopping you going weeks in advance if you wanted to."

"Well, no, I suppose not," Olive said, mulling this over.

"There you go then," Glenda said with a wave of her hand, as if this settled matters. "You could fly out there a week or two early and give yourself time to get over the flight and any tiredness or soreness you felt as a result of it. If you were unfortunate enough to catch a bug or some minor sniffle on the plane, I'm sure your daughter wouldn't consider it some huge inconvenience to take care of her own mother for a day or two while you were on the mend."

“Hmm,” Olive said with a frown. “Perhaps you’re right. But Gillian would be busy enough with the wedding to deal with. The last thing she’d need is me arriving in Toronto and needing to be looked after. I’d hate to be an inconvenience.”

“I’m sure that no matter what state you arrived in, your daughter would never think of you as an *inconvenience*,” Glenda said, rolling her eyes. “And like Val said, you’re imagining worst-case scenarios again. Perhaps you’d walk off the flight without a care in the world, ready to dance your socks off at your grandson’s wedding and show those young folks a thing or two about how to party.”

Olive could only laugh at the picture Glenda had painted as her friend’s eyes twinkled with humour.

“And although long-haul flights can be gruelling on the body, there are plenty of things you could do to counteract the effects,” Emily added. “My husband and I flew to San Francisco last year to visit friends and, although I’m a few years younger than you are, Olive, I was still worried about the long flight and how I’d feel at the end of it. So, I did some research online and found lots of ideas for short bursts of exercise I could do in the aisles of the plane to ease any discomfort and stave off any joint or muscle stiffness. And I read some advice about avoiding alcohol and drinking more water during the journey, and a few other tips too. When the flight was over, I still felt all those hours in the air on my body, there’s no doubt about that. But I felt much better than I had the last time I’d been on a long-haul flight, and I recovered much faster, too.”

“Really?” Olive asked, intrigued.

Emily nodded. “I’d be glad to share all the hints and tips with you. I’m sure they’d be a big help if you decide to fly over there.”

“Tell me, Olive,” Glenda said, looking thoughtful. “When you flew that last time, did you drink wine or anything else alcoholic on the plane?”

“Well, yes. I had a glass of wine when the cabin crew offered drinks after we departed, and then another glass of

wine with the in-flight meal.” Olive frowned. “To be honest, after the delays at the airport, and then having to divert after just an hour and land and then take off again, I thought I rather deserved a glass of wine.”

“I don’t doubt you did deserve it,” Glenda said. “But the alcohol probably dehydrated you and made you feel worse than it would have if you’d been drinking it on the ground instead of in the air. That’s the effect it has.”

“Add in the turbulence, and the fact that you were already tired and fed up because of the delays and whatnot, and the wine might well have done for you,” Emily said.

“I had no idea,” Olive said. “But two tiny splashes of airline wine can’t account for just how awful I felt at the end of that flight.”

“Not entirely,” Val said. “But I’m sure it didn’t help. Which means that avoiding wine the next time you fly might be one good thing you could do to make the whole experience a bit better.”

“That’s what you need to focus on, after all,” Glenda said. “No one can guarantee you’ll have a perfect flight if you decide to go to your grandson’s wedding. But there are things you can do to avoid it being as awful as it was last time.”

“Hmm,” Olive said. “Perhaps you’re right. Well, like I told Gillian, I need to think about all of this before I make a decision.” She smiled at her friends. “You’ve been very helpful, ladies, and given me food for thought.”

“If you want to chat more about those hints and tips I told you about for what to do during the flight to ease the strain on the body, just let me know,” Emily said. “I could print out a list of things, so you have them to hand and can prepare ahead.”

“That’s very kind, thank you.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you should just book your plane ticket and look forward to having a big adventure next year,” Glenda said. “Start browsing wedding outfits. Buy a new hat!”

“And you should chat with your daughter and tell her that if you’re going to fly all the way over there, then you’ll be staying with her for at least a month,” Val added. “Make the journey worthwhile and spend some quality time with your family.”

“Hmm, that does sound appealing,” Olive said, already imagining long weeks spent with her daughter and her family, and wondering just how lovely that would be.

“At the very least, stop dwelling on the problems and the doubts,” Glenda said. “And start getting excited about all the fun you could have.”

“I second that,” Emily said, raising her coffee cup.

“Me too,” Val said, clinking her cup to Emily’s.

“I’d raise my coffee cup too,” Olive laughed. “But it’s empty.”

“In that case, let’s get another round of lattes in,” Glenda said, gesturing for the waitress to come over. “We still haven’t heard the latest updates about Mac the Menace’s training school progress, and I’m not leaving until Emily fills us in.”

A resigned expression swept across Emily’s face. “Don’t even ask about that. Mac managed to knock over the woman who teaches the training class. He sent her flying while she was working on his recall command. He’s just so eager to please, but he doesn’t realise his own strength. We almost got barred from doggie school.”

Olive joined in with the brays of laughter from the other women at the table, and they were soon clutching their sides as Emily recounted Mac’s enthusiasm at the training school and how much trouble he kept getting into because of it. Poor Emily’s hilarious story was a pleasant diversion from the new thoughts now racing around Olive’s head.

Were her friends right? Could she find some way of enduring a long-haul flight in order to attend her grandson’s wedding? Was their advice worth exploring further?

Olive’s mind raced with all they’d said, and all the possibilities it opened up—and the question of whether she

could survive a journey across the Atlantic ocean after all.

* * *

The walk home from the café took Olive past the Corner Bakery, where the delicious aromas of sugar icing and warm bread were spicing the air outside the door as usual. A display of apple pies had pride of place in the window, and she couldn't resist going inside to buy one. The Corner Bakery pies were enormous, and much too big for one person, but Olive planned on putting some slices into the freezer to enjoy some other time.

She also decided to take some of the pie as a gift to Angela next door. Lindsey would no doubt make short work of the treat for pudding, and the drop-off would give Olive the chance to check a few details with Angela about next week's dog-walking arrangements for Elsa.

Pie portion in hand, Olive rang Angela's doorbell. When her neighbour answered, Olive held out the bakery item she'd brought.

"I succumbed to the Corner Bakery's apple pie," Olive said. "I've already filled my freezer shelf with several slices and there's still plenty left over, so I thought you and Lindsey might enjoy it."

"Thanks, Olive." Angela took the foil-wrapped pie portion and beckoned Olive inside. "I just put the kettle on. How about a tea or coffee?"

"Nothing for me. I'm awash with coffee after meeting my friends in the café this afternoon for a gossip, and if I have any more caffeine, I won't sleep a wink tonight. But I will come inside to have a quick chat about walking Elsa next week, if that's okay?"

"Of course."

Olive followed Angela through to the hallway. As she passed the living room, she saw Lindsey sprawled on the sofa watching television alongside another little girl.

“Olive!” Lindsey shrieked when she saw her. “What are you doing here?”

“I just popped over to speak to your mum for a minute. I brought some apple pie from the bakery, too.”

“I love apple pie,” Lindsey announced, then turned to her friend. “Do you like apple pie, Shannon?”

Shannon nodded. “Especially with ice cream.”

“Olive, this is my best friend from school, Shannon.”

“Very pleased to meet you, Shannon.” Olive glanced at the television in the corner, where an animated film was playing. “What’s this you’re watching?”

“*Minions*,” Lindsey informed her. “Do you like *Minions*, Olive?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea whether I like them or not,” Olive admitted. “What exactly are these minions?”

The two girls dissolved into gales of laughter at this question. Before they could quiz her any further, Angela shepherded Olive through to the kitchen.

“Those two have been going a mile a minute all day,” Angela said, flicking the switch on the kettle. “I don’t know where they get the energy.”

A shriek of giggles punctuated the air as the girls watched their film in the other room.

“It’s lovely to hear Lindsey having so much fun,” Olive smiled. “And lovely to see her with a little friend in tow, too.”

“Shannon is Mark Green’s daughter. You know, Mark the policeman?”

“Oh, yes, of course. Well, isn’t that lovely?”

“They spent most of the afternoon finishing the flower masks they’ve been making for the school spring concert. I swear the clean-up took longer than the crafting and painting.”

Olive laughed and Angela rolled her eyes with humour.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Angela said, and lowered her voice. “Lindsey got you a ticket to the spring concert. It’s on the last Friday in May. I expect she’ll mention it to you before you leave, but don’t feel under any obligation to come along. I don’t imagine it’s how you’d want to spend your Friday evening.”

“I’d be honoured to be invited and honoured to attend. I can’t say my Friday night diary is exactly brimming with other engagements, anyway.”

Angela smiled. “Well, if you come along, I know Lindsey will love it. She had a ticket spare because...” She waved a hand at nothing and sighed. “Well, her father says he doesn’t know if he can make it to the concert.”

“In that case, I shall definitely be there.”

“Thank you, Olive.” Angela smile returned, more thoughtful this time. “I appreciate that.”

“Well, I for one am excited to see this song and dance routine I’ve been hearing all about from Lindsey. It sounds like it will be quite the spectacle.”

“That’s one word for it,” Angela said, laughing again. “If I have to hear Lindsey and Shannon practise that routine one more time today, I might lose my mind.”

Through in the living room, another wave of giggling broke out. Olive found herself laughing at the young girls’ merriment.

“It’s wonderful to hear Lindsey having fun with her friend,” Olive said. “I was rather worried about her when she came to my house after school the other day. She seemed so sad, thinking about her grandmother and wondering when she’ll get to visit.”

“I’m grateful you gave me a heads-up on what Lindsey told you. I know all this business with her grandmother is on her mind, and her stupid father saying stupid things about Granny Barton being poorly is the last thing she needs.” Angela shook her head, obviously annoyed. “Anyway, that’s why her friend, Shannon, is spending the day here. Lindsey

needed some fun time with someone her own age to take her mind off things.”

“And fun is exactly what they’re having, by the sounds of it.”

Elsa trotted into the kitchen just then, and Olive turned the conversation to the questions she had about walking the dog next week. As the fortnightly lunch club would be meeting again, she was keen to make sure Angela was okay with Elsa going along to the get-together, considering what happened last time when Olive was walking home and landed in the middle of an altercation with Mac the Menace. Olive was glad that Angela seemed relaxed again about the arrangement they’d put in place, and was reassured that Olive remained up to the task of walking Elsa each day.

“We’ve got used to one another’s company in the afternoons, haven’t we Elsa?” Olive asked the little dog, who quirked her head and raised a paw in response. When Olive produced a gravy bone from her pocket and held it out to the creature, Angela chuckled.

“She’s got you wrapped around her finger, Olive.”

“Well, that’s perfectly fine, as far as I’m concerned.” Gravy bone dispensed, Olive turned for the kitchen door. “Right, I’m off home. After an afternoon spent in that noisy café, chattering with my lady friends, I’m looking forward to putting on my slippers and enjoying a quiet hour or two listening to the radio.”

“I’m just about to put some dinner on, if you want to stay and eat with us,” Angela said, gesturing to the vegetables she was preparing on the counter.

“Thank you, that’s very kind. But I had a sandwich at the café which was large enough to feed two people, never mind one, so I won’t need any further sustenance tonight. Well, perhaps I’ll force down a slice of apple pie later once my Saturday night game show is on the television.”

With a wink and a laugh, Olive headed towards the front door. Passing the living room, she was about to call in to say

goodbye to Lindsey and her little friend, but before she could open her mouth she was struck by the scene she saw there.

Perched on the sofa, their backs to the door, Lindsey and Shannon were engrossed in a whispered conversation, Lindsey muttering while cupping her hand to her friend's ear, Shannon nodding along with whatever Lindsey was saying.

The two of them looked as thick as thieves.

Angela was the one to interrupt them both.

“What are you two whispering about?” she asked, a frown creasing her forehead.

Startled, the two girls sprung apart on the sofa and glanced at the adults standing in the doorway.

“Nothing,” Lindsey said. “We were just discussing the film we were watching, weren't we, Shannon?”

Shannon's gaze dropped to the floor, her face flushing bright red. Although the girl nodded her agreement, it was obvious that whatever the children had been whispering about, it hadn't been the film playing on the television.

Angela didn't look convinced either.

“Well, I'm off home, Lindsey,” Olive said. “I'll see you later.”

“Bye, Olive,” Lindsey said cheerfully, while Shannon offered a wave.

With another frown at the girls, Angela walked the rest of the way down the hallway to the door with Olive.

“That's not the first time I've caught those two whispering like that today,” Angela said.

“Oh, I'm sure they're just doing what little girls have always done,” Olive reassured her. “Sharing confidences and secrets and building bonds between one another.”

“Hmm, Lindsey looked a bit shifty. It's not like her to act that way. Usually she's an open book.”

“Perhaps they’ll tell you what the big secret is once you’ve plied them with apple pie and ice cream?”

Angela laughed. “Maybe they will. Thanks again for the pie, Olive. Have a good night.”

“You too, dear.”

Olive walked around to her own house and let herself inside. She wondered just what young Lindsey had been whispering to her little friend when she’d glanced into the living room and seen them huddled close. Angela was right—Lindsey had looked shifty, and Olive had never seen her that way before.

As for Shannon, well, Olive might not know the child, but there had been no mistaking the guilty look on her face when their whispered conversation had been interrupted.

It was probably something and nothing, Olive thought as she locked the door behind her. Little girls whispering silly secrets to each other was nothing new—in fact, it was the very stuff of childhood. Olive may have agreed with Angela that the pair looked rather furtive, but she knew, too, that her neighbour was more than a little protective of her daughter right now, considering everything she was going through on account of her parents’ separation and her father’s absence.

She only hoped Angela didn’t worry too much about the whispering she’d overheard and what it might mean. It probably meant nothing.

Hanging her jacket on the peg, Olive shuffled into her slippers and settled into her comfortable armchair. When she pulled her phone from her bag, she realised she’d missed a message from Gillian earlier in the afternoon.

She read the text: *Definitely not pressuring you, Mum, but after our video chat I wanted you to know I really hope you’ll think about flying over for the wedding! Just saying!*

Olive smiled and sighed. She *would* think about it. Of course she would.

As the night wore on, she found she could scarcely think about anything else.

ON SUNDAY MORNING, Angela woke from a terrible dream and sat bolt upright in bed, her heart racing in her chest.

Catching her breath, she blinked as the last remnants of the nightmare disappeared. Already, she couldn't quite remember what the dream had been about. Images flickered, strange and unsettling, of Angela running down a dark corridor as doors slammed on either side, their locks grinding and slamming as she passed, and she was chasing something... or was she being chased?

She wasn't sure which it was, and as her brain came fully awake, the dream slipped away, leaving nothing behind except clammy skin and a churning stomach.

And the sense that something was *wrong*.

Swinging her legs out of bed, Angela glanced around the bedroom. Light slanted through the gap in the curtains. The clock on the bedside table told her it was almost seven o'clock. Out on the landing, the familiar ticking sound came from the hot water tank as it warmed up.

The house sounded the way it usually did at this hour.

Nevertheless, she couldn't escape the sensation that something wasn't quite right, and that the unsettling dream from which she'd just woken wasn't the only reason she felt uneasy.

Angela pulled on her dressing gown and stepped out onto the landing. Downstairs, she could hear Elsa scratching at the

kitchen door and whimpering. The dog always slept in the kitchen during the night, cosy beside the radiator.

The poor animal must need out into the back garden, Angela realised, and hurried downstairs. Elsa was usually fine in the mornings until Angela let her outside, and she hadn't slept any later this morning than she usually did on Sundays. Perhaps the dog had drunk too much water last night before bed.

Downstairs, Angela opened the kitchen door only for Elsa to come scrambling out and head straight for the front door, where she began pawing at the frame.

"It's too early for a street walk," Angela said, rubbing sleep from her eyes. "Come on, Elsa, I'll pop you out into the back garden."

In the kitchen, Angela unlocked the back door and swung it open, then stood non-plussed as Elsa remained at the front door, still scratching to get out. In the end, she had to pick the dog up and put her outside on the back lawn, all the while wondering what had got into the animal. Before she'd even filled the kettle, Elsa had taken care of her business on the grass and was already pawing at the door to come inside again.

"What's the matter with you this morning?" Angela asked the dog as she opened the door.

Elsa hurtled inside and headed straight to the front door again.

"I said it's too early for a street walk. Look at my hair, Elsa. I'll give people a fright if I go out in this state."

But Elsa just scratched and barked. Angela frowned, knowing this behaviour was out of character for the animal. She walked through the hallway and looked at the dog, puzzled.

"What's wrong, Elsa?" she said.

Elsa glanced up at her, the expression on her little doggy face anxious and unhappy. She let out a piercing yelp.

Angela was now more than a little puzzled about the dog's strange behaviour. Had an early morning package been delivered and left out on the front step, perhaps?

Or was someone lurking out there, hoping for a chance to break in, and Elsa was doing her best to alert her mistress to the danger?

With this unsettling thought running through her head, Angela stepped closer to the door to peer through the peephole.

Which was when she noticed the security chain wasn't in place.

She stared at the chain dangling by the door frame. How could she have forgotten to slot the chain into place last night before going to bed? She'd never forgotten before, and the more she thought about it, she remembered locking up the house last night, the way she always did. After closing the curtains, she'd followed the rest of her usual routine, slipping the chain into place on the door, turning the lock, and throwing the bolt...

Glancing across, Angela saw the bolt was pulled back. When she twisted the lock, she found it was already unlocked.

With a gruesome, sinking feeling, she pushed the handle and the door clicked open.

The door was unlocked.

But she *had* locked it last night. She had no doubt about that.

Panic gripped her. The house was unsecured. Had it been unsecured all night? Had someone broken into the house?

Was someone *still* in the house?

With a mother's instinct, she flew up the stairs to find Lindsey and make sure she was okay.

But when she threw open her daughter's bedroom door, she found the room empty.

Blind terror almost brought her to her knees.

“Lindsey!” she shouted, and then screamed, “Lindsey! Where are you?”

There was no response. The house remained silent.

Angela threw open the wardrobe doors, looked under the bed, even yanked open the lid on the toy chest beneath the window, as if there was even the slightest chance that Lindsey might somehow be inside the small box.

But she wasn't in any of those places. Fear froze Angela's heart inside her chest.

She might have barrelled through the house, checking every corner of every room, before plunging outside into the street and screaming her daughter's name in the blind hope that she'd gone outside for some unfathomable reason that was beyond the ability of Angela's panicking brain to contemplate at this moment, and that she hadn't instead been snatched from her bed by some stranger who'd somehow got inside the house.

But just as she lurched towards the stairs, something on Lindsey's bed caught her eye.

Rushing back into the bedroom, Angela saw a sheet of notepaper sitting on top of the pillow, and covered with her daughter's distinct penmanship.

Snatching it up, her eyes flying across the scribbled words, Angela read what was written there.

Mum, I woke up early and I'm going to Shannon's house. She said it was okay for me to go there. You can ask her if you want to. I'll be back soon. Bye! Lindsey x

For what seemed like an eternity, Angela read and reread her daughter's words, her heart beating wildly and turning her pulse into a storm crashing inside her ears. Her hands shook as she gripped the sheet of pink pastel notepaper.

I'm going to Shannon's house... I'll be back soon.

It took many long seconds for Angela to process what she was reading, or at least try to. But she couldn't process it, because it made no sense.

Lindsey was an eight-year-old child. Eight-year-old children didn't leave the house by themselves at the crack of dawn on a Sunday morning in order to visit their friends.

It was ludicrous. And yet that's what her daughter had written in this note.

Had Lindsey snuck out of the house while Angela slept? Was Lindsey the one who'd unlocked the front door? Angela remembered waking from her bad dream, and thought of Elsa whimpering and scratching at the door when she'd come downstairs.

How long ago had Lindsey left? Was Elsa scratching at the door because Lindsey had just gone?

Was it the sound of the locks being turned and the chain being unhooked that had caused Angela to wake in a cold sweat from that dream about slamming doors and grinding locks?

Had she known, even as she slept, that something was wrong?

These thoughts crashed through Angela's head in a terrifying tsunami of panic and dread as she contemplated the idea of Lindsey wandering around outside all alone. Rushing downstairs, she flung open the front door and ran out into the street, her slippers slapping on the pavement and her dressing gown billowing in the cool early morning breeze. With Elsa at her heels, she flew through the garden gate and out onto Foxglove Street, peering up and down as she searched for any sign of her daughter.

But there was none. Foxglove Street was Sunday morning quiet. There wasn't even a passing dog-walker she could quiz about any sightings of little girls walking around by themselves.

If Lindsey had set off for her friend's house, as her scribbled note indicated, then she was already gone.

Maternal compulsion almost had Angela sprinting along the pavement, hoping to catch up with her daughter. But rational thought pushed away those instincts, reminding her

she didn't know which direction Lindsey might have taken, or which shortcuts she might have used.

For the first time, Angela wished she'd succumbed to Lindsey's repeated requests for a mobile phone. If she'd surrendered to the demand, instead of telling Lindsey to content herself with her tablet device, she'd be able to ring her right now and find out what was going on. The regret didn't help much with the current crisis, though.

Angela drew in a breath of cold, fresh air and told herself to think.

Shannon spent time at both her parents' houses—she knew that much because Mark Green had explained it to her. Mark had collected his daughter last night from Angela's house after he'd finished work, just as they'd agreed. She remembered what he'd told her about how Shannon was staying at his house because her mother's place was in upheaval thanks to the kitchen renovation work.

Relieved to have rediscovered at least some ability to think coherently, Angela returned to the house, Elsa trotting behind her. Grabbing her phone, she scrolled through her contacts, found Mark Green's number, and dialled it.

The phone rang three, then four times, and then she heard a muffled, sleep-filled voice on the other end of the line.

“Hello?”

“Mark, this is Angela. Lindsey's mum.”

“Yeah, your name came up on my phone screen,” Mark said, more alert now. “Is everything okay?”

“No, it's not. Lindsey's gone from the house. She left a note, saying she'd gone to see Shannon. Is she there? Is she with you?”

Angela's words tumbled out in a rush. It was a wonder Mark could understand anything she'd said.

“Wait, slow down. You said Lindsey's *gone* from your house? Are you absolutely sure?”

She heard the calm and capable policeman's tones in his voice, and was grateful for it.

"I've searched everywhere. She's not in the house. She left a note on her bed, saying she woke up early and was going to visit Shannon. She said Shannon told her it was okay to come over."

Even as she said the words out loud, she knew they made no sense.

"Hang on a minute," Mark said.

She heard fast, heavy footsteps, and imagined Mark walking through his house. There was the creak of a door opening and then Mark spoke again, his voice softer this time as he spoke to his daughter.

"Shannon, sweetheart, wake up."

"Umf... what time is it?" Shannon said, her confused words barely audible on the other end of the call.

"It's still early, sweetheart. But I need to ask you something. Did you tell Lindsey she could come over here this morning?"

Silence.

Angela, her heart in her mouth and the phone clutched to her ear, waited to hear what Shannon would say.

"Um..."

"Shannon?" Mark said. "What's going on?"

Another long pause. "Yes, Lindsey's coming here to see me," Shannon said at last.

"At seven o'clock on a Sunday morning?" Mark said. It was clear from his tone that he wasn't convinced by what his daughter had just told him.

"Uh-huh."

"Your friend is coming here while you're still asleep in bed?"

"Uh-huh."

“And she was just planning on walking all the way here from her own house, was she? All by herself?”

“Uh-huh.”

Listening to this exchange, Angela was ready to tear her hair out, but Mark was obviously just as frustrated with the account Shannon had given as she was.

“Shannon,” Mark said, his tone now firm. “You’d better tell me what’s going on, right this instant.”

“Nothing’s going on,” Shannon said, her voice tiny. “Lindsey is coming over here. She’ll be here soon. And then we’re going to play with my doll house.”

Mark sighed. “Shannon, I’ve got Lindsey’s mother on the phone here and she’s worried sick about where her daughter is. Little girls don’t just turn up at one another’s houses at this time on a Sunday morning, and they don’t wander around with no one having a clue about where they’ve gone. I know you’re lying to me, Shannon. What I don’t know is why. I’m giving you one more chance to tell me the truth.”

“But, Dad...”

“Shannon, this is very serious. Is Lindsey really on her way over here to see you?”

A long silence filled the line. At last, Shannon answered her father’s question. “No.”

Angela squeezed her eyes closed against the panic boiling once more inside her stomach.

“So,” Mark said on the other end of the phone. “If she’s not on her way over here, do you know where she is?”

“But, Dad, Lindsey made me promise not to tell anyone.”

“Oh, God,” Angela said, her mind racing at what she might be about to hear.

“Tell me where Lindsey is,” Mark said, his serious tone unmistakable.

“Will I get in trouble?” Shannon asked.

“No, not if you tell me right now what’s going on.”

Angela waited. It seemed like hours passed before Shannon spoke again, even although it was only a couple of seconds.

“Lindsey’s going to visit her Granny Barton,” Shannon said, her voice a whisper down the line.

“Oh, God.” Angela sank onto the sofa, her knees turning to liquid beneath her. “Lindsey’s grandmother lives miles away, how can she possibly...”

Anticipating her thought, Mark cut off her question as he spoke again to his daughter. “Shannon, how was Lindsey getting to her grandmother’s house? Train? Bus?”

“Train. She looked up the times yesterday on her tablet. The first train was leaving at five to seven.”

Angela glanced at the time. It was already ten past seven.

Her daughter couldn’t possibly be on a train by herself, could she?

“So why did the two of you cook up this rubbish about Lindsey coming over to see you?” Mark asked his daughter.

“It was Lindsey’s idea,” Shannon said, her voice filled with tears. “She said if she left a note for her mum to find, then by the time her mum realised she was gone, she would’ve already caught the train. All I had to do was pretend she was coming over to see me, so she had time to get away, and once she arrived at her grandmother’s house, I could tell you the truth.”

“Shannon, I don’t know how either of you dreamt this up, and I don’t know how either of you thought it made the least bit of sense,” Mark said. “But we’ll discuss all that later. Right now, we need to find Lindsey and make sure she’s safe. Angela, which station would she get off at for her grandmother’s house?”

“Godalming,” she replied. “But she lives in Swanford, which is another bus ride from Godalming train station, and then a ten-minute walk from the bus stop. I don’t even know if

the buses are running this early, or if Lindsey even knows which direction to walk in, and what if she gets lost, or someone sees her by herself and kidnaps her, oh, my God...”

“Angela, take a deep breath,” Mark said. “Don’t let yourself panic. We need to find Lindsey, and we can’t do that if you’re panicking.”

“You’re right, I know, but...”

“Deep breaths, Angela. Take a big deep breath and hold it inside.”

She did as he told her, took a big breath in and held it. If Lindsey was out there, travelling alone on a train, or already walking around unfamiliar streets by herself in search of the bus stop in Godalming where she’d catch the service towards Swanford, then Angela had to find her and bring her home. That was impossible while her mind was racing and her heart was pounding and she felt like she might keel over at any minute on account of the black terror sweeping through every cell and nerve-ending in her body any time she thought of all the danger Lindsey might be in and the things that might happen to her...

Big breath in. Big breath out.

“Okay,” Angela said, her voice steadier. “I’ll phone a taxi and get out there and find Lindsey.”

“Don’t be daft. You don’t need a taxi,” Mark said. “I’m coming over to pick you up and we’ll find her together.”

She let out a shaky breath of relief. “Are you sure?”

“I’m a police officer, Angela. I’m not about to just leave you to search by yourself for your daughter who’s wandered off alone, am I?”

“Thank you, Mark. While you’re driving over, I’ll phone Lindsey’s grandmother and let her know what’s going on. Then I’ll phone the police, too.”

“You deal with talking to the grandmother, and I’ll phone this in to the station directly. If I call it in, it might be easier than you phoning nine-nine-nine and having to wait around

until officers arrive to take a statement. This way, we can get moving and cover some ground. I can get a couple of patrol cars out on the roads where we know she's headed. I can also get the station to contact the transport police and the train station control rooms and start looking at station platform camera feeds and see if there's any sign of her."

"Okay, all right." She appreciated Mark's policeman brain thinking of all these things to do. Her mind was buzzing with so many questions and terrifying thoughts about her daughter wandering around by herself, and she needed his level-headedness to ground her.

"I'll be at your house in five minutes," Mark said. "Shannon and I are walking out the door right now."

"Okay, I'll be waiting."

Ending the call, Angela raced to her bedroom and threw on jeans and a sweatshirt. Grabbing her phone again, she dialed the number for her mother-in-law, but after ringing over and over, the call switched to the answer phone. Frustration sizzling, Angela left a half-garbled message, summarising the details of Lindsey's ridiculous Sunday morning journey and asking June to phone right away if her granddaughter turned up at her door.

That done, Angela picked up her purse and keys, and hurried out of the house to wait on the pavement for Mark to arrive. It was only as she yanked the door closed behind her that she realised she'd forgotten all about Elsa.

Turning around, she saw the dog peering out of the living room window. The poor animal must be wondering what was going on. But Elsa would be fine until she got home. All that mattered was tracking down her daughter and making sure she was safe.

Angela stood at the edge of the pavement, fidgeting as she watched for Mark's car to appear while hoping and praying that her daughter was okay.

OLIVE OPENED the curtains at her front window and settled into her armchair with her first cup of tea of the day. She enjoyed a quiet moment at the front window first thing in the morning while she listened to the radio. Foxglove Street was quiet on Sunday mornings, but there were usually a few dog walkers out and about, and some joggers too, to provide a bit of interest as they passed by on the pavement.

What she didn't expect to see, however, was her neighbour, Angela, racing out of her house in her dressing gown and slippers, with Elsa at her heels, before rushing into the middle of the road, looking wildly up and down the street, and then tearing back into her house again.

Astonished, Olive paused with her teacup halfway to her lips, wondering what on earth was going on. Angela had only appeared in the middle of the street for a matter of seconds, but there was no denying her neighbour's obvious agitation and dishevelment.

Was something wrong? It had almost looked as if Angela was searching for something, or someone, somewhere out on Foxglove Street, although quite what, or who, that might be was a mystery to Olive. It couldn't be that the little dog had escaped from the house and needed to be found—Elsa had been right by Angela's side during the entire bizarre episode.

Olive sipped her tea, wondering if she ought to go next door and check if Angela was all right and that there wasn't some problem she might need help with. But, reminding herself that it was only seven o'clock on a Sunday morning,

she thought better of the idea. Olive might be up and dressed at this hour, but Angela had still been in her nightclothes and might not welcome a visitor this early in the day, even if she had just been running around out there in her pyjamas for reasons that left Olive quite mystified.

Still, the upset and distress on her neighbour's face was obvious. Olive wouldn't feel right ignoring what she'd seen.

After finishing the last of her tea, she carried the cup to the sink and fetched her shoes from the rack in the hallway. Once she'd pulled them on, she grabbed a cardigan from her wardrobe, not wanting to go out into the cool early morning air in just her light blouse and trousers.

In the living room, she looked out of the window again, wondering if she was overreacting by trundling around to her neighbour's house at this hour and quizzing her about why she'd been out in the street in her dressing gown and slippers. Perhaps there was a perfectly sensible explanation, and Angela might become annoyed at Olive sticking her nose in and giving the impression that her every move was being monitored by her neighbour who lurked at her front window and then demanded to know what people were doing.

She was debating all this with herself as she stood at the window when Angela once again burst out of her house, dressed this time in proper daytime clothes, and hurtled towards the pavement, where she peered up and down the road and shuffled her feet in a flustered state.

Olive could not ignore this repeat performance of Angela's odd behaviour and hurried outside to find out what was the matter.

"Angela, is everything okay?" she asked when she reached Angela on the pavement.

Startled, her neighbour spun around. Olive saw not only agitation in Angela's expression, but something close to terror.

"Oh, Olive!" she said, her voice a strangled moan. "Lindsey's run off!"

“What?” Cold fear gripped Olive’s heart at this unexpected news. “Are you sure?”

The stupid question was out of her mouth before Olive could stop it. Of course, Angela was sure. She was the child’s mother and knew what she was talking about.

“She snuck out of the house first thing this morning to visit her Granny Barton.” Angela’s eyes widened as she looked at Olive. “Wait, you didn’t see Lindsey out on the street this morning, did you?”

“No, I’m sorry. I only just opened my curtains in the last few minutes, which was when I saw you rushing out into the street in your dressing gown. I was worried something might be wrong.”

“Lindsey left a note saying she was going to her friend Shannon’s house. She seemed to think it would give her time to get to the train before I realised what was going on. Mark Green’s coming to pick me up so we can look for her. We’ve contacted the police, too.”

“My goodness. Lindsey has really set off by herself to catch a train to her grandmother’s house? I can’t believe it.”

Angela’s eyes filled with tears. “I’m going out of my mind with worry. Lindsey might know which train to catch, but what if she gets lost on the rest of the journey? There’s a bus she needs to catch after the train, and then a long walk to her grandmother’s house, and I’m sick with fear that she’ll take a wrong turn or, worse, that someone will...”

Angela gulped back the words and Olive saw what it cost her to keep her fears in check.

“Everything will be fine,” Olive assured her, laying a hand on her neighbour’s arm to comfort her. “I’m sure no harm will come to her.”

Olive wanted to say something more useful. She remembered the drawing Lindsey had done for her grandmother when she’d spent time at Olive’s house after school last week, and remembered, too, the way the child had

pinpointed the location of her grandmother's house on the drawing as if it was a map beneath her fingers.

“When Lindsey was at my house last week, she drew a picture for her grandmother and told me all about the journey needed to visit her. I was impressed by how accurately she understood the location and the route there. She knew the train and bus she had to catch, the precise location of the bus stop over in Godalming, and gave me chapter and verse on the directions required to walk from the bus stop to her grandmother's house. Her geographical understanding struck me as remarkable. I feel sure that the child has a good sense of where she's headed and won't get lost.”

Angela was eager to cling to these words of reassurance. “I hope you're right.”

A car sped down Foxglove Street and screeched to a halt next to where they stood on the pavement. Olive recognised young Mark the policeman behind the wheel, and saw his daughter, Shannon, in the back seat.

“I'll speak to you later, Olive,” Angela said, and hurried to the passenger door.

“Wait! What can I do to help?” Olive shouted, determined to make herself useful in this emergency. “Shall I come along and help with the search?”

“There will be three of us in the car with our eyes peeled, but thanks anyway.”

Angela opened the car door and then turned back before getting in. “But maybe you could keep an eye out for Lindsey, in case she comes back here while we're gone?”

“I'll stand guard at my living room window. If Lindsey appears, I'll let you know straight away, and make sure she's looked after until you return.”

“Thank you, Olive.”

Angela flung herself into Mark's car. She'd barely slammed the door before they were racing off down Foxglove Street. Once the car turned at the junction and disappeared

from sight, Olive went inside her house and straight to the front window.

Her head was spinning with the news of Lindsey's covert expedition. Worry and fear gripped her heart at the idea of the child out there alone in the world, and Olive could only imagine what Angela must be going through.

At least they knew where Lindsey was headed. With luck, they'd catch up with her sooner rather than later and bring her back home, where she belonged.

Olive remembered the concern in Lindsey's voice when she'd discussed her grandmother's health a few days earlier. She was glad she'd mentioned the conversation to Angela, but clearly no one had realised the lengths to which the child would go in order to visit her granny and check on her well-being.

What made the whole thing worse was that there was nothing actually wrong with Lindsey's grandmother. According to Angela, the woman was perfectly healthy. Lindsey's father had simply been reeling off what he thought were harmless 'little white lies' about his mother's poor health in order to account for his absence from his daughter's life.

Olive suspected that Lindsey's father would face a serious reckoning with Angela once he knew about the consequences of those 'little white lies' and what they'd ultimately led their daughter to do.

But that was a matter for later. Right now, the only concern was bringing Lindsey home safely. Olive sent out a little prayer that Angela would find her daughter quickly.

Prayer said, she focused her gaze on the view of Foxglove Street from her window, hoping that Lindsey would appear at any moment and bring this terrible nightmare to an end.

* * *

For fifteen endless minutes, Angela stared out through the windows of Mark's car, scouring the roads and pavements for

any sign of her daughter. Every second that passed brought her just that bit closer to losing her mind.

In the driver's seat, Mark Green steered the car while talking to his various contacts at the police station and receiving summaries from the patrol officers who'd been dispatched to the town where Lindsey's grandmother lived and updating them on what they'd found out.

Which wasn't much at all. The patrol officers had found no sign of a little girl out walking by herself, but were continuing the search. The staff monitoring the train station cameras had yet to report back on any footage recorded that morning and which might be of use.

Angela glared at the clock on the car dashboard. "If Lindsey boarded the six fifty-five train, she would've arrived before we even set out looking for her. It's only a thirty minute journey between stops."

"They're looking at the camera footage as we speak," Mark reassured her. "If she got off that train, they'll see her on the platform."

"*If* she got off the train?"

"You know what I mean." Mark raked a hand through his hair and gave her an apologetic look. "Sorry, I just mean that we don't know for sure whether she caught the train. She might have missed it, or—"

"If she missed it, then where is she?" Angela interrupted angrily, and then sighed. "Sorry, I don't mean to snap. It's just... I'm going crazy with worry."

"You don't have to apologise." Mark reached over and squeezed her hand. "We'll find her, Angela, I promise."

But Mark couldn't make that promise, and Angela knew it. Every second that passed brought ever more terrifying thoughts into her head, and it wasn't easy to push those thoughts away.

In the back seat, Shannon leaned forward and said, "When I told Lindsey she shouldn't go over to see her granny by herself, she told me it was okay, because if she got lost she

knew she was supposed to find a shop or a supermarket or something like that and ask an adult behind the counter to help her. She said you told her that's what she should do if you were ever out together and got separated. So she told me that's what she'd do today, too, if she had to."

Turning in her seat, Angela managed a smile for the little girl, even as the words she'd said sliced into her heart. The idea that Lindsey had thought about what to do if she got lost—or worse—during this ridiculous escapade was both reassuring and gut-wrenching. Her daughter was so clever, but also much too innocent, as this disastrous morning had already proven.

Mark's phone rang. He tapped on the dashboard screen to accept the call.

"Mark, this is Julie, from the train station monitoring control room."

They'd spoken with Julie ten minutes earlier, when Mark had summarised the situation for the control room supervisor. Angela had also sent Julie a recent photo of Lindsey to help as they reviewed the camera footage from the station.

"What's the news?" Mark asked.

"It's good news, I think," Julie said. "We've found a section of camera footage from just before seven this morning, showing a little girl matching Lindsey's description standing on the platform at Hamblehurst train station. I'm one hundred per cent confident it's your daughter."

Angela let out a hot breath of relief. At least they now knew they were on the right tracks in their search. But that relief was short-lived.

"However," Julie continued, "when the train arrived at the platform, Lindsey didn't get on board."

"What?" Angela said. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. Once the train doors opened, Lindsey hovered for a few seconds, and then stepped away. The doors closed and the train moved off."

“So, where did she go next?” Mark said, taking the words straight out of Angela’s mouth.

“We traced her movements on the station cameras. She left the platform and exited the station. The last sighting we have places her outside the station doors, looking around as if she can’t make up her mind what direction to go. In the end, she walked north along Station Road and turned left onto Jackson Street. That’s the last image we have of her.”

“And what time was this?” Mark asked.

“A few minutes after seven o’clock,” Julie said. “Just after the train left.”

“So this was more than twenty minutes ago,” Angela said. “Where did she go after that? I mean, why didn’t she get on the train?” A new thought occurred to her, bringing with it a burst of anger. “And why didn’t any of the train station employees ask Lindsey what she was doing there by herself? She’s eight years old! Do you always let children roam around train stations by themselves without checking up on them?”

Mark put a calming hand over her jittery one as Julie answered her question.

“Mrs Barton, the train station is unstaffed at this hour on Sunday mornings. The ticket office doesn’t open until eleven. If this had happened at a busier time of day, someone on staff might have wondered enough about a young child standing alone on a platform to ask questions, but as it is...”

“I’m sorry, I’m not being fair.” Angela was the one who’d slept through her daughter’s sneaky departure from their home. Guilt was making her lash out, and that was unfair. “Look, I really appreciate what you’ve been able to find out for us.”

“Thanks, Julie,” Mark said. “This is a big help.”

He ended the call and phoned his colleagues at the police station to update them on what they’d just learned. Angela listened while he agreed with a sergeant at the station that they ought to redeploy the patrol vehicles, because if Lindsey hadn’t boarded the train, then there was no point looking for

her all the way over in Godalming where she'd planned to disembark before catching an onward bus towards her grandmother's house.

“And that means there's no point in us going to your mother-in-law's house, either,” Mark said when he ended the call with his colleague at the police station. As soon as Julie at the station camera monitoring centre had confirmed that Lindsey hadn't boarded the train to Godalming, Mark had pulled over to the side of the road. Now, he turned the car around and headed back towards Hamblehurst.

“She didn't get on the train,” Angela said, her voice clipped with emotion and hope. “She walked out of the station. Do you think she's gone home? I should have stayed at home in case she came back.”

“When we left your house, we didn't know she hadn't got on the train,” Mark reminded her. “As far as we knew, Lindsey had every intention of boarding that train, and we wanted to pick up the trail at the other end of her journey. Could you really have sat at home when all we knew was that Lindsey had gone to the train station?”

“No, you're right, but...” Angela wrung her hands, determined to torture herself over this whole mess. “We should've scoured the streets back home before we left town.”

“All easy to say with hindsight. We've got better information now about what Lindsey did and we know she's not on a train, not waiting for a bus over in Godalming, not walking alone to her grandmother's house. This is all good news. We've made progress.”

“I know. You're right. I just... I just want to find her. Knowing she never got on that train, and was probably back in Hamblehurst this entire time while we've been driving to Godalming, makes me want to scream.”

“We'll be back in Hamblehurst in a few minutes. We'll go straight to the train station and start driving around from there. The patrol cars will do the same. We're much closer to finding her now than we were a few minutes ago.”

Angela nodded, grateful for Mark's encouraging words and comforting presence. If she'd had to go through this on her own, she would have already flipped out in a panic.

Lindsey hadn't caught the train. She wasn't taking a long journey by herself to her grandmother's house. Mark was right—this was good news.

But where was she now?

It was almost half an hour now since Lindsey had left the train station. Surely she wasn't still wandering around Hamblehurst by herself? Why would she do that? If she'd decided not to travel to her grandmother's after all, perhaps realising only once the train doors opened just how big a deal it would be to board the train and set off on her own, then surely she'd realise too that the best thing she should do was to go home?

Angela glanced at her phone screen, wondering if she'd missed a message or call from Olive to say that Lindsey *had* come home, after all. But there were no messages and no missed calls.

“What if Lindsey's scared to go home because she doesn't want to get into trouble because of all this?” Angela said, her voice catching.

Mark looked over at her, his gaze filled with sympathy. “Then we'll drive along every street and road in Hamblehurst until we find her.”

Tears pricked Angela's eyes. Her child was missing and if anything happened to her, she wouldn't survive it. The nightmare that had woken her that morning had been her brain's attempt to tell her that something was wrong, but she hadn't listened properly.

She should've checked Lindsey's bedroom sooner.

She should've installed a security system to alert her whenever the front door was opened.

She should've done a million things to keep her daughter safe. For as long as she lived, she'd never forgive herself for

this, or for how she'd let Lindsey slip out of the house unnoticed, and...

Angela's phone pinged with a call, breaking her tortured thoughts. When she saw Olive's name on the screen, she almost broke her finger stabbing at the button to accept the call.

"Lindsey is here," Olive said down the line in a rush. "Lindsey is home and she is perfectly safe and well."

"Oh, thank God," Angela managed to say.

And then her voice cracked as a flood of tears consumed her.

* * *

Mark hadn't even brought the car to a stop on Foxglove Street before Angela was throwing open the door and jumping out. The sight she saw inside Olive's front window—Olive standing beside Lindsey, her arm wrapped around the little girl's shoulders as Lindsey stared out at her mother and gave an uncertain wave—sent a flood of relief rushing through her.

Angela burst into Olive's house and ran straight to the living room, where she hauled her daughter into a fierce hug.

"Lindsey! Are you all right? Oh, I was terrified something had happened to you."

"I'm fine, Mum," Lindsey said, her words muffled inside her mother's embrace. "Am I in a lot of trouble?"

"We'll talk about that later." Gulping back hot tears, Angela ran her hands over her daughter, checking for any signs she might be hurt. "Are you sure you're okay? Are you hurt or injured?"

"Why would I be hurt?" Lindsey looked baffled. "I only walked to the train station and then back again."

Mark and Shannon appeared in Olive's living room just then, and before Angela could ask her daughter any further questions, Lindsey peeled away to hug her friend.

“What happened when she came back?” Angela asked, turning to Olive.

“Well, I kept watch out of the window like I promised,” Olive said. “About twenty minutes after you drove away, Lindsey came sloping up the street, looking rather upset. I hurried outside and brought her in here, made sure she was okay, and then I phoned you straight away. Before you arrived back here, Lindsey was telling me that, once she reached the train station, she had second thoughts about attempting to travel to see her grandmother, and was worried she might get lost and end up in trouble. So, she changed her mind and headed for home. She explained that she’d hoped to sneak back into the house before you woke up, so you’d never know she was gone. When I explained you were out looking for her, she turned as white as a sheet.”

“I said you’d get into trouble,” Shannon whispered to Lindsey.

“Am I in trouble, Mum?” Lindsey glanced up at her mother, her chin quivering. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

There was no escaping discussing what had happened this morning, even although all Angela wanted to do was sweep her daughter into another cuddle and never let her go.

“I know you didn’t mean any harm, sweetheart,” Angela said. “But you should never, *ever* have left the house without telling me where you were going. You know that, don’t you?”

Lindsey looked at the floor and nodded.

“And you should never, ever have set out to travel all the way over to your grandmother’s house on your own,” Angela said. “There’s no telling what might have happened to you, Lindsey, and you know better than that. You scared me half to death.”

“I just wanted to see Granny Barton. She’s been poorly and I wanted to make sure she was okay.”

Angela’s expression crumpled at this. She knew how much Lindsey was affected by the stupid lies her father had fed her lately about Granny Barton’s health, but she’d underestimated

the lengths to which her daughter would go to in order to see her beloved grandmother and check on her welfare. In the swirling mix of relief at Lindsey's return, and now mounting anger that she'd disobeyed her mother's rules and left the house in the first place, Angela felt desperately sorry for her little girl and all the hurt and confusion she'd suffered.

"I think this morning has been rather trying for everyone," Olive said. "Shall I put the kettle on?"

"Thanks, Olive, but I think Lindsey and I ought to go home and have a proper talk about all of this."

Olive nodded, as if this was just what she'd expected.

"Right," Mark said. "Shannon and I will get ourselves home. I expect the police will be in contact with you, Angela, to confirm that Lindsey is home, safe and well."

"Bye, Lindsey," Shannon said. "See you at school next week."

They all piled outside.

"Thank you, Mark," Angela said. "Thanks for all your help this morning and for keeping me sane."

"Don't mention it."

"You must think I'm the worst parent in the world, not realising my eight-year-old daughter had snuck out of the house and set off on some mad expedition all by herself."

He gave an easy smile. "Lindsey was gone for less than an hour. In my line of work, I've met parents whose kids wandered off hours earlier and they didn't have the first clue. Kids wander and do silly things all the time. Don't beat yourself up about this."

"I'm going to, anyway."

Perhaps realising that nothing he said would comfort her right now, Mark gave her another smile and then walked off with Shannon to their car. Once they drove off, Angela turned to Olive.

“Thank you, Olive, for being here when Lindsey came back,” she said.

“There’s no need to thank me. I’m only glad I could be of some use.” Olive looked thoughtful, and then added, “Mark is right, though. Children do all sorts of silly things, but that doesn’t mean they have bad parents. It’s just all part of growing up.”

“Something terrible could have happened to her,” Angela murmured, the words painful to utter.

“But something terrible *didn’t* happen to her. She was gone for less than an hour, as Mark reminded you. Gosh, when my daughter, Gillian, was eleven years old, she disappeared after school one afternoon to go to a friend’s house to play. We didn’t find her for almost four hours, because the mother of the girl whose house she’d gone to thought I knew she was there. It was much harder to track someone down then compared to now, but in the end, all was well, even if the fright I got meant I aged twenty years in one evening.”

Olive grinned and Angela was grateful for the reminder that things had turned out fine, because her mind seemed only to want to go to the dark places as she thought about what might have happened.

“Anyway,” Olive said. “You two get yourselves home and enjoy some breakfast. I have a feeling Lindsey will require an extra-large bowl of cornflakes after this morning’s adventures.”

Feeling overcome with emotion, Angela leaned close and gave Olive a hug. “Thank you for being there for us both, Olive. You’re the best neighbour in the world.”

“Well, that’s very kind of you, dear.”

When Olive squeezed her in return, and patted her shoulder in a gesture of thanks but which also felt a lot like much-needed encouragement, Angela felt all her pent-up emotions bubbling. Gratitude filled her to overflowing—gratitude for her thoughtful and supportive neighbour, Olive;

gratitude for the swift and amazing help she'd received from Mark; gratitude that her daughter had come home safely.

This morning's drama might only have lasted an hour, but it had wrung her out.

"I'm here if you need me, dear," Olive whispered in her ear.

"Thank you, Olive."

With a final hug, they separated, and Angela shepherded Lindsey back home for breakfast and more hugs, followed by a proper talk about all that had happened that morning.

* * *

"So, Granny Barton really isn't poorly?"

An hour after Lindsey's return home, Angela was still sitting at the kitchen table with her daughter, talking things through. Lindsey had wolfed down an enormous bowl of cornflakes followed by a round of toast and strawberry jam, but Angela couldn't eat a thing. Her stomach was still in turmoil from the panic and upset of the morning.

A brief visit from a couple of uniformed police officers, dispatched to make sure Lindsey was safe and well and that the emergency was over, had only added to her frayed nerves. The officers had assured her that this wasn't the first time they'd responded to calls about children setting off on their own and thinking nothing of attempting to board buses and trains without their parents having a clue what they were up to, but the kind reassurances hadn't done much to make her feel better.

She felt like the worst parent in the world, lazing around in bed while her daughter snuck out of the house and wandered the streets by herself. If anything had happened to Lindsey, Angela would never have forgiven herself and never got over it.

Now, her job was to sort out the mess that had caused Lindsey to embark on her expedition in the first place. If her

stomach was still churning after all that had happened, she'd just have to grin and bear it.

"I promise your granny is absolutely fine," Angela said. "The thing is, your dad has a lot going on in his life right now and I don't think he realised that he'd confused you when he spoke to you about Granny Barton." Clenching her teeth at this version of events, she battled on. "However, while you were eating your cornflakes, I phoned your dad and asked him to come to the house today so we can all sit down together and talk properly about what's happening."

Lindsey's eyes widened at this. "Daddy's coming over?"

"Yes, and there are some things we want to explain to you."

"Oh. What things?"

"We'll wait until your dad gets here and we can talk then, okay?"

Lindsey's expression sagged. "Is he coming over to tell me off because of this morning?"

"No, of course not."

If Ryan so much as hinted at doing such a thing, Angela wouldn't be held responsible for her actions. Lindsey had disappeared this morning because of Ryan and his stupid lies.

Not that he'd appreciated the connective tissue between these two things when she'd spoken to him half an hour ago while Lindsey was eating breakfast. He'd launched into a rant and begun criticising Angela's parenting skills in letting Lindsey wander out of the house by herself. But she'd stood her ground on the matter. Just because she was blaming herself for all of this, didn't mean Ryan could blame her, too, and he'd piped down when she'd explained exactly where his daughter had been going and why.

In typical Ryan style, he'd attempted to side-step the idea that his lies about his mother's health had anything to do with Lindsey's concerns about her grandmother, but she could tell from his tone over the phone that the news she'd delivered had rattled him.

Not wanting to continue the conversation on the phone, Angela had asked Ryan to come to the house at noon, to sort everything out. It was time for him to tell Lindsey about his new family and his new home, and to prove to her that she didn't have to worry a second longer about her perfectly healthy grandmother.

If Ryan could move on with his life, then Angela and Lindsey were entitled to do the same thing. Until he told his daughter the truth about his new relationship and the baby he was expecting with his new girlfriend, and stopped making up silly fibs about his mother's health in order to get himself off the hook for not spending as much time with Lindsey as he should, neither Angela nor Lindsey could start living the life they deserved.

"Can I go upstairs and draw a picture for daddy?" Lindsey asked, pushing away her empty orange juice glass.

With a sad smile, Angela nodded, and watched as her child scurried away with Elsa at her heels. They'd sat here at the table long enough, unpicking the morning's events, and it was clear that Lindsey knew she should never have crept out of the house and attempted such a journey on her own. Lindsey was quite obviously sorry and understood the fear she'd caused her mother. Angela could only pray something like this would never happen again.

Hopefully, once Ryan arrived and came clean about everything in his life, Lindsey wouldn't feel upset or rejected about the choices he'd made. How did an eight-year-old girl process the idea of her father leaving her behind in order to have a new baby with a new girlfriend? Angela didn't want to make this day any worse than it already had been, or cause any more sadness or upheaval in Lindsey's life.

But she also knew it was time for the truth and time for her ex-husband to be honest with his daughter, once and for all. And whether Lindsey took the news well or badly, Angela would be there for her, just like she always had been.

Just like she always would be.

WHEN THE DOORBELL rang at noon, Angela hurried to answer it before Lindsey appeared from upstairs. She'd glimpsed Ryan pulling up outside the house from the window and had been stunned to discover he wasn't alone.

Standing at his side out on the front doorstep was Ryan's new girlfriend, Cleo.

The young woman was very pretty. And, of course, very pregnant.

Ryan's new partner coming along today hadn't been part of the plan. They certainly hadn't discussed it on the phone earlier. A meeting between Lindsey and Ryan's new girlfriend was surely something they should arrange *after* Ryan had told his daughter about her? Angela couldn't help thinking that an announcement about Ryan's new partner and imminent baby would be enough for Lindsey to deal with, without coming face-to-face with the woman at the same time.

Angela exchanged a glance with Ryan, his eyes resigned as he offered a placating smile. When her gaze shifted to the woman at his side, and she saw her warm and open expression, Angela understood instantly that Cleo's appearance here today hadn't been Ryan's idea.

"Hi, Angela! I'm Cleo. It's great to finally meet you."

Cleo extended her hand and Angela, dazed but determined to be polite, shook it.

"Uh, hello, Cleo. I didn't realise you'd be coming along."

“I’ve been harassing Ryan for ages about arranging something so I can meet his little girl, but he keeps putting me off,” Cleo said with an eye-roll. “He said he didn’t want to upset Lindsey, or you, for that matter, Angela. But I said, the sooner you get your head out of the sand about all of this, Ryan, the sooner everyone can just get on with it. Ryan, I said, you’re actually not the centre of the world, shocking though it might be for you to hear it. Angela and Lindsey have got their own lives, and I’m sure they don’t spend every waking minute wondering what you’re doing and who you’re spending time with.”

Cleo’s gaze was on Ryan as she said this, who looked scolded by her words. When Cleo turned to Angela and smiled, she realised the woman’s matter-of-fact tone and warmth were not at all what she’d expected.

“And then when I found out about what happened this morning with Lindsey,” Cleo continued, “I gave Ryan an earful about it. I had no idea he’d been telling Lindsey all that rubbish about his mother being ill. Believe me, Angela, he heard all about it from me on that score, and then again from his mother when she spoke to him on the phone. There’ll be no more nonsense like that happening from now on, trust me.”

Cleo gave Ryan a stern look. Angela opened her mouth to say something, although she had no idea what, because she was simply too stunned to gather her thoughts. But before she’d even drawn a breath to speak, Cleo started talking again.

“And before you say anything, I know this might be a bit weird, me just popping up on your doorstep like this.” Cleo laughed loudly before looking more serious. “I know you probably hate me. For the record, I didn’t know Ryan was married when we started seeing each other. That came as a shock when I found out, let me tell you. I was furious with him. I’m not a cheater, and I don’t go around stealing other women’s blokes. But by the time I realised Ryan had a wife and kid, well, the two of you were already on the brink of separating and I was expecting this little one.” Patting her stomach, she gave Angela a pleading look. “So, that’s my side of the story. All I want now is to sort things out and make sure

this idiot here,”—she tilted her head at Ryan as she said this —“doesn’t confuse his daughter with any more stupid made-up nonsense.”

Cleo’s speech ended and she eyed Angela uncertainly.

“So, can we come in, then?” she said and held up a pink glittery gift bag. “I’ve got a present for Lindsey, and I can’t wait to meet her. And I need to use your loo, if you don’t mind, Angela.” She patted her baby bump again. “This one was dancing the foxtrot on my bladder all the way over here, and we’re at code red, if you know what I mean.”

Cleo let out a hoot of laughter. During this entire exchange, Angela had been staring at the woman as the cheerful verbal onslaught progressed, feeling stunned and lost for words and entirely oblivious to the fact that she hadn’t yet invited her visitors inside. Now, as she swung open the front door and they both stepped into the hallway, a strange but undeniable thought filled her head.

She sort of *liked* Cleo.

It was hard not to like her. Her no-nonsense manner and easy smile put Angela at ease. And it was obvious from the interaction she’d just witnessed on her front door step that Cleo had the measure of Ryan and wouldn’t put up with his stupid and selfish behaviour in the way Angela had foolishly done when they were married.

The woman might be her soon-to-be ex-husband’s new girlfriend, the woman with whom he’d cheated on her, but Angela couldn’t dwell on any of that. During the whole horrible separation from Ryan, she’d never thought much about the ‘other woman’, because her brain had been too filled with anger at Ryan and sadness for her failed marriage and concern for her daughter to give the ‘other woman’ any head space.

But now that Cleo was right there in front of her, chattering away and being so refreshingly honest about all of this, Angela almost felt relieved. When she’d looked out of her window a minute ago and clapped eyes on the pregnant

woman getting out of Ryan's car, she'd feared the day was about to go from bad to worse.

Now that she'd met Cleo—or more accurately, now that Cleo had cheerfully talked at her non-stop while introducing herself—she thought that maybe things might not be about to take a nosedive after all.

They'd just stepped into the living room when Lindsey barreled downstairs. Angela watched her hurtle towards her father, arms open for a hug, and then stop when she noticed the stranger standing beside him. Unusually shy, Lindsey shuffled closer to her mother.

For a moment, they all just stood there, looking at each other. Ryan threw a look at Angela, and she knew what that look said. It said, *Help me out here, Angela, and tell our daughter about my girlfriend.*

And it also said, *Yes, even now I'm still too much of an idiot coward to do the right thing.*

Angela met her ex-husband's gaze and held firm. Cleo glared at Ryan for a long moment, and Angela guessed it was Cleo's expression drilling into the side of his head that finally made him speak.

"Lindsey, I've missed you," Ryan said, opening his arms. "Come and give your old dad a cuddle."

Lindsey did as her father asked, but Angela felt the doubts and questions rolling off her daughter in waves. As Lindsey leaned into his embrace, her eyes were fixed on Cleo.

When he released her from the hug, Ryan looked at his daughter and drew in a deep breath, before nodding to Cleo.

"Lindsey, this is Cleo. Cleo is... well, Cleo's my girlfriend."

Lindsey peered up at the woman, thinking this over. Angela could barely breathe, wondering how she'd react to this news.

Cleo seemed to sense the child's uncertainty. With reassuring care and consideration for the little girl and how

this news must be going over, Cleo smiled but kept her distance, obviously not wanting to overwhelm Lindsey.

“Hi, Lindsey,” Cleo said softly. “It’s great to meet you. Your daddy talks about you all the time and I’ve been so excited to see this special little girl who he adores.”

Angela could have hugged Cleo for those words, even as a ripple of sadness rolled through her at the knowledge that what she’d said about Ryan most likely wasn’t true. Ryan’s surprised glance at Cleo confirmed as much. He probably never spoke about his daughter at all.

Right then, though, that didn’t matter. Cleo had understood what Lindsey needed to hear in that moment. Her intuition reaped rewards as Lindsey’s uncertain expression broke into a smile.

“Hi, Cleo,” Lindsey said, and wrapped her arms around the woman. “Cleo’s a pretty name.”

“Thank you.”

Lindsey stepped out of the hug and stared at Cleo’s pregnant belly. “Are you having a baby?”

Cleo glanced at Angela and then back at Lindsey.

“Yes, sweetheart, I’m having a baby.”

Cleo glared at Ryan over Lindsey’s head. He cleared his throat.

“Cleo and I are having a baby together, Lindsey,” he said. “Isn’t that nice?”

Angela stood frozen as Lindsey absorbed this, her gaze darting between Cleo’s belly and her father. Would Lindsey dissolve into a puddle of tears? Would she get angry about this unexpected news?

But Lindsey did neither of those things. Instead, she grinned and pressed a hand to Cleo’s belly and said, “Does that mean that the baby will be my brother or sister?”

Angela let out a whoosh of relief as Cleo smiled.

“Yes, darling,” Cleo said. “The baby will be your brother or sister. Although we don’t know yet if it’s a boy or a girl.”

Lindsey nodded at this. “I hope it’s a girl. I don’t like boys.”

Cleo laughed and held out the gift bag. “I brought a present for you, Lindsey. Would you like to open it?”

Lindsey’s eyes flew wide and she nodded. “Yes, please!”

After pulling out the pink tissue paper from the top of the bag, Lindsey removed a box from inside and squealed at the Barbie doll gift. When Angela saw the Barbie was kitted out in an artist’s smock and came with matching accessories comprising an easel, a paint palette and other arty things, she couldn’t help but glance at Cleo with surprise and appreciation.

“Your daddy mentioned you love to draw and paint,” Cleo said to Lindsey. “I thought this Barbie doll would be the perfect companion to keep you company while you work.”

“I love it!” Lindsey shouted, already tearing open the packaging.

Cleo brushed a hand over Lindsey’s head, her expression delighted, then glanced at Angela and patted her belly. “Right, now that the introductions are out of the way, do you mind if I pop to your loo, Angela?”

“Of course not. It’s the first door at the top of the landing.”

“I’ll come with you in case you can’t find it,” Lindsey said, clutching her new Barbie doll and making a beeline for the hallway. “Then you can come and see my room, if you like?”

“I’d love to.” Cleo looked at Angela to make sure this was okay, and Angela nodded. With a smile, Cleo took Lindsey’s outstretched hand and allowed herself to be led upstairs.

“Well, that went well,” Ryan said, blowing out a breath.

“Yeah, it did. Cleo seems nice.”

Ryan’s gaze softened. “She is.”

For a moment, they stared at each other. Angela could see from Ryan's face how much he loved this new woman in his life. She'd already known that, of course, but seeing the evidence with her own two eyes made everything real.

Angela realised, with some surprise, that she was relieved that Cleo was part of Ryan's new life. The friendly, kind, no-nonsense woman had a smarter head on her shoulders than Ryan did. Her thoughtfulness towards Lindsey touched Angela's heart. Given Ryan's attitude towards his daughter, Cleo could have stayed out of the picture and ignored Lindsey if she'd wanted to, but she hadn't done that. Instead, she'd been the one to push Ryan today into sorting out the mess he'd helped create, and she'd been the one to invite herself over to meet his daughter, not to mention his ex-wife.

Perhaps Cleo would be the one who would now steer Ryan towards being a better father to his daughter than he had been so far.

That would be a turn up for the books, and if it happened, Angela would welcome it.

"I'm sorry about all the things I said about Lindsey's granny," Ryan said. "I shouldn't have given her the idea she was poorly, and I didn't realise Lindsey would be upset, thinking there was something wrong. It won't happen again."

"I hope not." She tilted her chin, gesturing upstairs. "While Cleo and Lindsey are upstairs, I think you and I should have a proper chat to sort some things out and make sure we're on the same page from now on."

Ryan nodded. "Yeah, okay."

Angela turned for the kitchen, but Ryan spoke again. "I know I've been a prat, Angela. I'm sorry. I should've made more effort to see Lindsey."

"She's your daughter. It shouldn't take any effort at all."

Ryan held up his hands. "I know. I didn't mean it like that. I... I'm trying. I want to do better. I *will* do better."

Seeing him standing there, shuffling his feet and searching for the words he wanted to say, Angela could only shrug.

“I hope you will do better, for Lindsey’s sake. But it’s your decision, Ryan. If you want to be part of Lindsey’s life, then be part of it. I’m done hounding you over it.”

“Understood,” he said, with an evenness that surprised her, considering a comment like that would have had him accusing her of nagging him previously.

“But before you leave today,” she said, “there’s a lot we need to talk about and agree on. Lindsey wants to see more of her grandmother, for one thing.”

“I know,” he nodded. “So let’s start by talking about that.”

Ryan’s behaviour and attitude were more than surprising. Perhaps the upset over Lindsey’s brief disappearance this morning, coupled with Cleo’s input, had finally shown the man what was at stake here.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” Angela said.

“Yeah, good idea.” He followed her into the kitchen and hovered. “What can I do to help?”

Turning, she looked at him in astonishment. When he’d lived here, he’d barely lifted a finger, especially towards the end of their marriage. “You? Help in the kitchen?”

Ryan’s eyes widened, and then he laughed. “Like I said, I’m trying not to be such a prat.”

“Cleo’s clearly a good influence on you, Ryan.”

“Yeah, she is.”

Angela once more saw the look in his eyes, a look filled with love and wonderment. Feeling her throat catch, she turned to the kettle.

“Okay, let’s talk about Lindsey visiting her grandmother more often,” she said, determined to stay focused on the important things they had to discuss.

But as Ryan pulled out his phone and started adding dates into his calendar when they agreed he’d collect Lindsey and take her to visit her Granny Barton, Angela’s mind wandered back to that look she’d witnessed on Ryan’s face when he’d

talked about his new girlfriend... and to the strange thoughts and feelings it had triggered inside her.

OLIVE WAS UNLOCKING her front door just after noon, after hauling home a bag of groceries she'd fetched from the corner shop, when she saw a car pull up outside Angela's house. A man she recognised as her former neighbour, Ryan, got out from behind the wheel.

When a very pregnant female shuffled out of the passenger seat and slipped her hand into Ryan's as they walked up the path towards Angela's house, Olive realised that things must be afoot next door. This must be the new girlfriend Angela had told her about, and whose existence Ryan had insisted on keeping a secret from his daughter. Apparently, everything was now coming out in the wash, for better or worse.

Not wanting to stand gawping across the garden railing at the events unfolding at her neighbour's house, Olive shuffled inside with her bag of shopping and thought about what she'd just seen.

After Lindsey's disappearance this morning and her foolish, yet well-meant, attempt to visit her grandmother, Angela must have called time on her ex-husband's dilly-dallying with regard to telling his daughter exactly what was going on in his life. If so, then all Olive could say was, *Well done, Angela.*

Given what she knew about the feckless Ryan, she doubted he'd organised this visit under his own steam. The man had barely clapped eyes on his daughter these last months, according to Angela. After this morning's dramas and upsets,

Angela must have summoned him to the house for a proper talk with their child before anything worse came to pass.

Olive wondered how Lindsey would react to hearing confirmation from her father that her grandmother was perfectly healthy and that he'd entirely misrepresented what was going on. She doubted the man would be completely honest about the whole shoddy business. After all, a man who pretended his mother was sick in order to have a handy excuse for not spending time with his daughter wasn't someone who could be relied upon to tell the truth about why he'd done what he'd done and to accept that he'd been wrong in doing it.

She also wondered how the child would react to meeting her father's girlfriend and finding out about the baby they were expecting. That was a far bigger thing for Lindsey to absorb. Olive crossed her fingers that things would go smoothly. The child had had enough upset and family intrigue for the time being.

After putting her groceries away and warming up some soup for lunch, Olive contented herself with a radio programme. If she hovered near the front window from time to time, she told herself it was only because she was naturally curious about how things might be proceeding next door with Angela and her ex-husband, and curious about how long he and his pregnant girlfriend would stay. Her window-hovering had absolutely nothing to do with the possibility that she might be just a little bit too nosy for her own good.

When Ryan and his girlfriend exited Angela's house an hour after they arrived, Olive craned her neck as she stood at the front window, attempting to gauge how the visit had gone.

Lindsey skipped down the garden path behind her father and his girlfriend, looking cheerful. At the garden gate, Ryan's pregnant girlfriend turned and hugged Lindsey and gave her a kiss on the cheek as Lindsey beamed up at her.

Olive was astonished at this fond exchange, although she quickly decided she shouldn't have been. Young Lindsey had such a good heart and a generous spirit. It only stood to reason that the child would be excited to meet someone new in her

father's life, considering how much she adored him, and excited, too, to learn about the new sibling that would soon be born.

And if Ryan's girlfriend had agreed to accompany him to this meeting at his ex-wife's house—which she obviously had, or else why would she be there?—then she, too, must be a reasonable person, and keen to do the right thing for his child.

As the couple got into their car, Lindsey stood at the gate, waving madly. From her perch at the front window, Olive could just make out the sight of Angela standing on her front step, watching her guests depart. It was impossible to judge from her expression how the visit might have gone as far as she was concerned, or what she might have made of it. When Ryan at last drove off, Lindsey threw another excited wave at the departing car before rushing back towards the house.

Olive was pleased to see the young girl looking so happy and relaxed following her father's visit with his girlfriend in tow. To look at her, no one would guess she was the same child who, just a few hours earlier, had sloped along Foxglove Street after her short-lived adventure to the train station, her expression sad and defeated.

Children had an astonishing ability to bounce back from things and just get on with life. Seeing Lindsey's cheerful face as she hurtled back into her house made Olive smile.

Thirty minutes after the conclusion of the summit at Angela's house, Olive's phone beeped with a message. Adjusting her spectacles as she squinted at the screen, she read the message that Angela had sent.

Don't suppose you fancy popping round for a coffee?

Olive wouldn't mind it one bit. After sending a reply to that effect, she picked up her keys and trundled around to her neighbour's front door.

"Thanks for coming over, Olive," Angela said as she invited her inside. "Lindsey's dad and his girlfriend were just here, and I wouldn't mind having someone to talk to for a minute about it."

“I can certainly spare more than a minute,” Olive said. As they walked through to the kitchen, she saw no sign of Lindsey. “Is young Lindsey upstairs?”

Angela nodded. “She wanted to play with her toys in her room. I think she’s all talked out from this morning and from all the chatting that happened while her dad and his girlfriend were here. Elsa’s up there with her, and I wouldn’t be surprised if the two of them don’t end up having a nap together.” She let out a laugh, and added, “I could use a lie down myself after the shock I got this morning when I realised Lindsey wasn’t in the house, but after Ryan’s visit, I’m too wired to sit still.”

“The visit didn’t go well?” Olive asked, wondering if she’d misread the farewell scene out in Angela’s front garden.

“No, it went better than I could’ve expected, which is just as well considering I’m the one who insisted on Ryan coming over here to straighten things out with Lindsey and put an end to all this nonsense he’s been spouting about her grandmother’s health. It was only after I told him that if he cared at all for his daughter, then he’d better get over here right away, that it occurred to me it might be one more thing piled on Lindsey’s plate that she just didn’t need after everything that happened this morning...” She trailed off and waved a hand in the air at nothing in particular. “I knew we had to sort this out, and just hoped Ryan wouldn’t somehow make a bad situation even worse. He has form for just that sort of thing, as I know only too well.”

Angela gestured with a teaspoon. “Tea or coffee?”

“Tea, please.” While Angela dropped tea bags into the pot and poured in the hot water, Olive said, “I should confess that I saw Ryan arrive earlier when I came home from the corner shop, and I happened to see him leave, too. And, naturally, I noticed he had his girlfriend with him, so I won’t deny being curious about how things went while they were here. How did Lindsey deal with meeting his new partner and hearing about the new baby?”

For a moment, Angela stirred the teapot, a thoughtful look on her face.

“Lindsey took it all amazingly well,” Angela said at last. “I hadn’t realised Cleo—that’s Ryan’s girlfriend—was coming over with him. When I saw her getting out of the car, I panicked, wondering how Lindsey would react to being presented with the new girlfriend and news of the impending baby all at the same time, especially after what happened this morning. All I’d wanted was for Ryan to talk to Lindsey and explain what was happening, and I assumed that Lindsey would get to meet his new girlfriend later. Actually, I don’t think Ryan wanted to bring Cleo with him, but she was the one who insisted it was time.” Angela paused to pour the tea. “She was right.”

“Well, that’s good news,” Olive said, accepting the mug of tea Angela passed to her.

“Lindsey was brilliant about the whole thing. The news that Ryan has a new girlfriend and a baby on the way, and the fact that the woman appeared right there in our house at Ryan’s side—Lindsey just took it all in her stride. It was like water off a duck’s back.”

Angela sipped her tea, the expression on her face a mix of amusement and amazement. “I’m sure Lindsey will have questions later once she’s had more time to absorb everything. But she was so lovely and welcoming to Cleo, and so friendly with her. I was so proud of her. I mean, Lindsey is a lovely, friendly little girl, but suddenly being presented with your father’s pregnant girlfriend is no small matter. But Lindsey was excited about the news, and asking all kinds of questions about the new brother or sister she’ll soon have. She was a little star and I’m so, so proud of her.”

“You raised a good daughter. You have every right to be proud of her.”

Angela shook her head, as if still bewildered by the day’s events, which Olive thought was perfectly understandable.

“And what about this Cleo woman?” Olive asked. “How do you feel about her? Is she an acceptable person for your

daughter to spend time with?”

Angela drank some tea and laughed. “She’s surprisingly nice. If I’m being honest, I don’t know what she’s doing with Ryan. She’s much too good for him.”

Olive shared a conspiratorial smile with her. “So, she seems like a decent enough woman?”

“Annoyingly, yes, I think she is. She’s funny, easy-going, uncomplicated, at least from what I saw of her. She talks a mile a minute, and I got the impression that she doesn’t take any nonsense from Ryan, which is more than can be said for me when I was with him.” With another laugh, she toyed with her mug of tea, thinking. “Cleo seemed eager to involve Lindsey in their lives, which is a good thing, considering Ryan just walked away and never looked back to give his daughter a second thought.”

Olive thought it was sad that it required the input of Ryan’s new girlfriend to get the man to commit to spending time with his daughter, and it was obvious from Angela’s expression that she thought the same thing.

“Who knows how long it will last?” Angela said. “I don’t want Lindsey to be picked up and then dropped depending on Ryan’s mood and whether Cleo is pushing him to do the right thing.”

“Well, it would be very sad indeed if that’s what he did, and not at all fair on Lindsey. Let’s cross our fingers that he understands his responsibilities and fulfils them from now on.”

Angela nodded, but her gaze was thoughtful.

“I realised something today, something I suppose I’d known intellectually but not practically. It’s up to Ryan to be involved in Lindsey’s life. I can’t force him to do it, but that’s exactly what I have been doing ever since we split up. Or at least that’s what I’ve been trying to do, without much success.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t easy seeing your ex-husband disappear out of his daughter’s life. It’s only natural that you’d want to

involve him for Lindsey's sake, and to push him in that direction."

Angela sighed softly, her hands clasped around her mug. "I realised something else today, too. It happened while we were having coffee, Ryan, Cleo and I, while Lindsey was busy drawing a picture for Cleo to take home with her. Ryan and I were able to sort out some visiting issues while Lindsey was giving Cleo a tour of her bedroom and introducing her to all her toys and so on. Once those things were dealt with, and once Lindsey was in the room with us by then anyway, we obviously weren't talking about visitation matters anymore. So, we were all just making general conversation, which wasn't as weird as I thought it would be, considering the company. Cleo was chatting about her pregnancy and the colours they'd chosen for the nursery, and was asking about Lindsey's school concert and a bunch of other things. Like I said, she talks a mile a minute."

Olive smiled at the image Angela had painted and waited for her neighbour to finish the story.

"While Cleo was chattering, Ryan didn't say much. He was never a big talker, but even this prolonged silence seemed strange for him. While Cleo kept talking, I looked over at Ryan, and I realised..."

Angela's eyes turned distant. For one awful moment, Olive feared that the woman was about to confess that she still loved the man, ludicrous though that would undoubtedly be. Perhaps seeing her doubtful expression, Angela continued.

"I realised that Ryan was completely captivated by everything Cleo was saying," she said, astonishment lacing her voice. "He was hanging on her every word. And the way he was looking at her..." She paused, lost in her recollection. "He looked totally smitten and totally in love."

Olive wasn't sure how to respond to this. Considering the man was having a child with this Cleo person, it could only be a good thing that he had genuine feelings for her, surely?

"Did it make you sad to see your ex-husband so clearly in love with another woman?" Olive asked.

Angela surprised her with wry laughter and an amused headshake. “No, it didn’t make me sad at all. Quite the opposite, in fact. It made me realise that while Ryan has moved on, I’ve been clinging to all the hurt and pain he caused when he left, because I’ve been too scared to let go of it.”

Olive wasn’t sure she understood. “What do you mean? It seems to me like you’ve done a wonderful job creating a new life for yourself and your daughter since your marriage ended. I’m sure it hasn’t been easy, but you’re making it work.”

“When it comes to all the practical things in life, that’s true,” Angela nodded. “Taking care of Lindsey basically as a single parent, running the house, going back to work full time, juggling all the things that need to be juggled. Yes, I’m making it all work, or at least I’m trying my best to make it all work, although God knows I’m making plenty of mistakes along the way. But when it comes to me and my own feelings about everything that’s happened, I think I’ve been holding on to the hurt Ryan caused because...” She paused and sucked in a long breath of air. “Because that was easier than letting go and finding a way to move on in my personal life.”

Olive thought about this, choosing her words carefully. “Why wouldn’t you want to move on?”

“Because it’s scary,” Angela said with a strained laugh. “I think I’ve been scared of opening myself up to the possibilities of a life after Ryan. When he walked out so he could be with another woman, it hurt. It hurt to be replaced, to be cast aside, and it hurt to know that my husband, the man I thought I’d spend the rest of my life with, had found someone else he loved.”

“Well, of course it hurt. And of course you needed—still need—time to recover from that hurt.”

“It’s been months since we separated. But still, I too often let my mind fill with painful thoughts about what Ryan did. Partly, that’s because it truly is still hurtful to think about it. But partly, it’s also because I’m scared to allow myself the chance to think about having a personal life again.”

“A personal life?” Olive said, faintly amused at Angela’s awkward wording. “You mean romance?”

The blush on Angela’s cheeks gave Olive her answer.

“The possibility of it, yes,” Angela said. “I told myself that romance was out of the question because my priority is Lindsey, and making sure she’s okay and knows she’s loved.”

“That child doesn’t doubt your love for one instant. But I feel sure a smart young woman like yourself is more than capable of prioritising her daughter’s needs while still making time for herself.”

Angela’s arched eyebrow made her laugh.

“I know. I’m sure that’s easier said than done,” Olive smiled. “But after everything that has happened today, it sounds like it’s something you want to start thinking about?”

“Seeing Ryan with Cleo, it was like a wake-up call. I’ve been clinging to pain and hurt, and that’s doing me no good. I’ve been pretending I don’t need anything more than my daughter, and that I can’t have anything more anyway because of my job and my responsibilities. But today, watching Ryan and Cleo together, it felt like a heavy chain fell from my shoulders at last. I felt free.”

“And ready to think differently about your future... and what, or who, might be in it?”

Angela blew out a breath. “I’m not talking about anything huge or life-altering. I’m just talking about...” An uncertain smile crept across her lips. “I’m just talking about not rejecting out of hand the offer of coffee or dinner with a really nice guy who I happen to like spending time with.”

Olive grinned. “This really nice guy, as you describe him, wouldn’t happen to be a local friendly policeman with whom we are both recently acquainted?”

Angela laughed at Olive’s question. “Yes, it would happen to be him. Mark is lovely and funny and incredibly kind and generous. After we took the girls to the adventure fort a few Saturdays ago, he’s suggested we all get together again. But I

said no, because I knew he wasn't just suggesting a helpful playdate for our kids. He was suggesting..."

"Something romantic?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's been quite obvious to me that Mark had a soft spot for you. It's also been quite obvious to me that you were determined to pretend otherwise."

Olive laughed at Angela's scowl and self-mocking eye-roll.

"That said, I understood your reasons and your desire to put your daughter first in your life. You are her mother, and the bond you two share is more important than ever now her father has left. But if you're now coming round to the idea that it's possible for you to prioritise your daughter while still having a life of your own, then I'm quite thrilled."

Angela laughed and sipped the last of her tea. "Don't get too excited. I've already turned Mark down a couple of times when he's suggested dinner. I doubt he'll suggest it again."

"In that case, *you* should suggest it."

When Angela's eyes widened at this idea, Olive shrugged.

"Isn't that how you youngsters do things these days? Don't women take the lead just as much as men do when it comes to asking one another out?"

"Sure, but..."

Angela's expression changed suddenly, her eyes closing as she winced.

"Oh, no," she murmured. "I just realised that I didn't really thank Mark properly for all his help this morning finding Lindsey. I said a token thanks as we all left your house, but I was so focused on Lindsey, I barely spoke to him before he drove off."

Olive waved a hand at this. "I'm sure he understands your attention was rightly elsewhere."

“Still, he drove over here as soon as we knew Lindsey was gone, and he talked to his police colleagues as we started the search, and stopped me from losing my mind.” Angela frowned. “If he hadn’t rushed over to help, I would’ve been hurtling around in a taxi, trying to find my daughter all by myself.”

“Well, it sounds to me like you owe the man a phone call.” Olive grinned and gave an amused wink. “And perhaps you ought to invite him for a bite to eat at your house, to show your gratitude for all his wonderful assistance in your moment of crisis.”

Angela’s expression lifted at this suggestion. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right.”

Laughing, Angela shook her head in apparent bewilderment. “What a day. When Lindsey disappeared this morning, it almost scared me to death. And although I wish she’d never run off like that in the first place, the things that have happened because of it are... more than a little surprising.”

Angela counted on her fingers as she rhymed off the various developments of the day. “Ryan finally told Lindsey about his new girlfriend and the baby they’re having. Lindsey actually met Cleo and they got on like a house on fire. I had a wake-up call and realised it was time to let go of my failed marriage and all the pain that came with it, and start thinking about what might still be out there for me in life.”

Counting on her fourth finger, she gave a sheepish grin. “And now I’m about to phone a man, a man I like an awful lot, and offer to cook him dinner.”

“From near disaster to wonderful triumph in barely a single morning,” Olive laughed. “That sounds like a productive day in my book.” Olive set down her mug and rose from the kitchen table. “I’ll make myself scarce so you can phone Mark. I insist you do it right away, so you don’t allow yourself to become discouraged or talk yourself out of it altogether.”

At the front door, Olive turned to say goodbye to Angela. “Thanks for the tea.”

“Thanks for the chat,” Angela replied.

“If it helped, I’m glad.”

“Of course it did. I don’t know where I’d be without you these days, Olive.”

“You’d be perfectly fine, that’s where you’d be, because you’ve got a good head on your shoulders, Angela Barton.”

As her young neighbour laughed and waved her off, Olive shuffled back around to her own house. She hoped Angela would call Mark straight away and ask him and his nice little daughter over for dinner. He was a good man, and obviously rather taken with Angela and interested in spending time with her. In her mind’s eye, she could already see a new and lovely family blending between the four of them, if Angela would only give things a chance.

The young woman deserved happiness. At the very least, she deserved a bit of exciting romance in her life.

Funny to think that if it hadn’t been for that nasty fall Olive took while out walking Elsa a few weeks ago, Angela and Mark might not have found themselves spending time with each other at all. While they knew one another somewhat vaguely thanks to their children being at school together, it was Olive’s hospitalisation followed by Mark’s insistence on driving her home once she’d been discharged that led to the two of them striking up more of an acquaintance. And when Mark had arranged for Emily Wilson to replace the jacket damaged by Mac the Menace, their rendezvous at the park had been the trigger for Angela and Mark to spend the afternoon together with their children and get to know one another a little better.

Until now, Angela had resisted taking things any further, but as she said herself, today’s events had shone a new light on everything. As Olive closed her front door behind her, she wondered if Angela was perhaps, at this very moment, dialling Mark’s number and preparing to make dinner plans.

Olive hoped so. She'd lived long enough to know that inside every disaster there lay the seeds of eventual triumph, from every sadness there would come eventual joy, and that from every ending came a new beginning.

Perched at the front window to observe the proceedings out on Foxglove Street, Olive thought about that for a moment. She'd enjoyed her own new beginning of late, thanks to her decision to knock on Angela's door on that day she'd heard the young woman sobbing on the other side of the fence. But for that, so many other things might not have happened.

Olive wouldn't have got to know her young neighbour better, and now be able to count both her and her lovely daughter as friends. She wouldn't have become reacquainted with her old pals, Glenda and Val, from the lunch club. She wouldn't have found out about the sad passing of old Dr Henderson from the GP surgery and had the opportunity to pay her respects at the funeral.

The order of service from the funeral was still sitting on the side table beside the window. Olive had flicked through its pages several times since the funeral, looking at the collection of photographs of Dr Henderson and thinking about the remarkable life he'd led after retiring from the GP practice. She picked up the order of service now, turning to the various photographs of Dr Henderson—kitted out in walking gear as he strode along a rugged coastal path, raising a champagne glass beside his wife from a rooftop restaurant terrace in Paris as the sun set behind them, standing beside a display of his watercolours at a craft fair, digging in the garden at the local hospice while surrounded by a clutch of other smiling volunteers...

Olive continued to be amazed by the richness and fullness of the life Dr Henderson had led after his retirement. Before the dreaded Alzheimer's had claimed him, he'd done so many wonderful things that made him happy. The man had seized the day, every day, and that was something Olive just couldn't stop thinking about.

Knowing this about the man she'd once worked alongside for so long, a man she'd held in the utmost respect, triggered

something inside her.

As she sat at the window, looking out at Foxglove Street, she thought about how Dr Henderson had filled his life with activities and adventures that made him happy, even after his diagnosis, because he was determined to face the future with courage and determination.

She thought, too, about little Lindsey, who just this morning had set out in that same spirit of courage and determination in order to visit her grandmother because she loved her and missed her. While the manner of her expedition had left everyone in terror, Olive couldn't fault the child's spirit and resolve.

Dr Henderson and young Lindsey Barton were two very different people who'd never even met one another. But in that moment, they both offered Olive a valuable lesson, one that she wanted desperately to learn.

You must face life with bravery and passion, and with joy in your heart. You must seize the day, every day. You must do these things and be grateful for the chance to do them, too.

Olive knew all this, and had always known it. The long hard winter she'd be so relieved to leave behind, combined with all the surprises and encounters that had happened these past weeks, made Olive realise that knowing these things was not enough—you had to take action, too.

She thought about how, ten minutes earlier, she'd urged Angela not to delay on acting on her instincts about Mark Green and to call him straight away and invite him to dinner. Now, she must take her own advice in her own life.

Olive picked up her phone and found her daughter's number. It was time to let Gillian know that she'd be there at her grandson's wedding next year, come hell or high water.

There was no way she could miss such a wonderful family occasion, no way she could sit here at home while her beloved grandson got married without her there in person to celebrate and wish him well. If the prospect of the transatlantic flight

terrified her, then she'd just have to find some way to deal with that terror.

Just before she hit the button to dial the phone, Olive was seized by a flash of inspiration as another new and thrilling idea began to take form. Grinning as it all came together inside her head and set butterflies fluttering in her stomach with excitement, Olive pulled up her contacts again.

Before she called Gillian, there was another call she now desperately wanted to make.

Olive dialled the number and waited for Val to pick up.

“Val,” Olive said when the call was answered, her voice bubbling with anticipation. “I’ve got a rather mad proposition for you.”

ANGELA STARED AT HER PHONE, thinking over the conversation she'd just had with Olive.

The idea of phoning Mark to thank him again for his help that morning in finding Lindsey was now racing around her head, and she imagined what she might say. It needn't be complicated, after all. She'd thank him, let him know that all was still fine and well with Lindsey, and then invite him to share some dinner sometime at the house to apologise for crashing his Sunday morning. Easy.

Part of her longed to do it. Another part of her told she must be stark raving mad.

After everything that had happened today, she'd be insane to start thinking about her undeniable attraction to Mark Green, let alone act upon it. There were plenty of other things for her to deal with, the most important of which was making sure Lindsey really was okay after her early morning escapade to the train station followed by the unexpected appearance of her father's new girlfriend and her baby bump.

Before Lindsey had gone upstairs to play in her room, Angela had quizzed her about her feelings about all these changes in her father's life. Lindsey had seemed cheerful and upbeat in response, chattering about the baby that was coming and the Barbie doll Cleo had given her and the visit in general. When Angela's inquiries had continued, Lindsey had finally complained about being fed up talking and having to answer so many questions, which was when she'd gone upstairs with Elsa to play in her room.

Angela understood her daughter well enough to know she needed some time alone to process everything. The fact that Lindsey hadn't appeared downstairs when Olive dropped by suggested her daughter was more than a little wiped out by the day's events. Before she could even consider calling Mark with her dinner offer, she wanted to check on Lindsey one more time, even if she was risking her daughter's grumbles about the constant questioning.

Upstairs, Angela found Lindsey busy drawing at her little desk in her bedroom, Elsa snoring at her feet on the carpet. The artist-style Barbie doll Cleo had gifted her was propped up beside the pencil pots, complete with her tiny Barbie easel and paint palette.

"Hi, sweetheart," Angela said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm good, Mummy." Lindsey turned in her chair and gave her a beaming grin. "I'm drawing a picture of my new Barbie. Do you like it?"

Lindsey held up the sheet of paper, and Angela gasped at the likeness of the drawing to the doll.

"Wow, that's amazing. You're a fantastic little artist, you know that?"

Lindsey's smile widened even further at this. "I'm making the drawing for Daddy and Cleo. Do you think they'll like it?"

"I think they'll love it." Angela's heart squeezed at her sweet daughter's kind spirit. "So, how are you feeling now about the news that your dad has a new girlfriend?"

Lindsey's smile didn't falter. "I like Cleo. She's nice. She talks a lot."

Angela laughed. "Yes, she does. And have you thought any more about the baby they're having and how you feel about it?"

Lindsey closed one eye, as if working hard to consider the matter. "What do you mean, how I feel about it?"

"Well, does it make you happy? Excited? Does it make you confused or sad? Because whatever you feel is okay,

and...”

“I was confused because Cleo kept having to go to the loo and saying the baby was dancing inside her. That sounds silly because babies can’t dance.”

Suppressing a laugh, Angela lowered herself to the edge of Lindsey’s bed. “Babies move around a lot when they’re inside their mummy’s tummies. Sometimes, because they move around, it makes their mummies need to go to the loo more often. In fact, when I was expecting you, you were always jumping around inside my tummy like a little lightning bug.”

“Really?” Lindsey was clearly pleased with this information. Her expression shifted as a new thought occurred. “Can I buy a present to give to the new baby?”

With love bursting inside her heart for her amazing, thoughtful child, Angela nodded. “We’ll do some shopping and find something you want to give as a gift.”

“Okay, Mummy.” After adding a few quick pencil strokes to her Barbie doll drawing, Lindsey glanced back at her mother. “I’m glad Daddy has a new girlfriend.”

Surprised by this assured comment, Angela studied her daughter for a second. “Why’s that?”

“Because maybe he’ll be happy now.”

Angela stared at her daughter, searching for a response, but before she could find one, Lindsey continued.

“You should get a new boyfriend, Mummy, and then you can be happy too.”

Her daughter’s words left her stunned. “I’m already happy, sweetheart.”

“Oh.” Lindsey looked confused, as if what her mother said didn’t quite add up. “Sometimes you seem sad, Mummy. I bet you wouldn’t be sad if you had a new boyfriend.”

“Uh...”

“And I bet it’d be fun if you had a new boyfriend. Shannon’s mum got a new boyfriend ages ago, and Shannon

gets loads of presents now for her birthdays and Christmas, and she loves it. She gets presents from her mum and dad, presents from her mum's boyfriend, presents from her grandparents, *and* she gets presents from her mum's boyfriend's sister *and* his mum and dad, too, and she says it's ace. And Shannon's mum's boyfriend has a daughter who is really old, like fifteen, and sometimes she puts make-up on Shannon and styles her hair and Shannon says it's brilliant fun."

With this whirlwind of information now delivered, Lindsey peered at her mother. "So, can you get a boyfriend too, Mum? Then maybe I could have fun like Shannon. And maybe you'd have fun, too?"

Angela stared at her daughter, trying to absorb everything she's said. In amongst the excitement of a little girl contemplating an abundance of presents from a potentially extended family, there lay a brutal honesty in the child's words.

Sometimes you seem sad, Mummy.

So much for putting a brave face on for her daughter these past months since Ryan left. Lindsey was a clever and intuitive little girl, and had obviously picked up on the emotional undercurrents Angela had tried hard to keep hidden. It pained her to know that her daughter thought so deeply about those she loved. Lately, she'd worried about her grandmother's health and she'd missed her father, and now it seemed she'd recognised her mother's bouts of sadness, too. It was all too much for an eight-year-old child.

"You mustn't worry about me, sweetheart," Angela said with a grin. "I'm very happy. And how could I not have fun when you're around?"

Lindsey responded to her mother's bright smile with one of her own. "I want to finish my drawing, Mummy."

With a laugh that covered a bewildered sigh, Angela rose from the bed. "Okay, I'll leave you in peace."

At the bedroom door, she turned again, and took a moment to watch her sweet daughter, happily colouring at her desk.

“Are you sure there’s nothing else you want to ask me about everything that happened today?”

“No thanks, Mummy,” she replied without looking up from her drawing.

Angela had stepped out into the hallway when she heard her daughter’s voice again.

“Mummy?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

Lindsey turned in her chair and gave her mother a sly smile. “Can we have pizza tonight for dinner?”

It was a cute move and Angela was happy to be won over by it. Right then, she’d do anything for her sweet girl. “Yes, we can have pizza.”

“Thanks, Mum!” Lindsey grinned and turned her attention back to her drawing.

Downstairs, Angela blew out a long breath as she mulled over the conversation she’d just had. There was so much to unpack from what Lindsey had said, and so much to think about. It made her head spin.

At least one thing was clear. Lindsey wanted pizza for dinner tonight. In a life that too often seemed much too complicated, Angela was grateful she could fulfil at least one of her daughter’s wishes.

Standing at the kitchen counter, she saw her phone where she’d left it before heading upstairs. She picked it up, her mind whirring, and then pulled up Mark’s number.

He answered after two rings.

“How’s Lindsey?” he asked straight away. “Is she doing okay?”

“She’s doing fine,” Angela said.

“That’s good to hear. And how are you doing?”

“Well, my heart’s no longer racing at a thousand beats a minute on account of blind terror, so I’m feeling good about that.”

Mark laughed down the line and Angela joined him, relieved she was able to laugh about something that had felt beyond horrifying just a few hours ago.

“I didn’t have time to really thank you properly for all your help this morning, before you left with Shannon,” Angela said.

“Don’t mention it.”

“Honestly, Mark, if you hadn’t helped me look for Lindsey, I would have been in an even worse state than I was.”

“I’m glad I could help. And in the end, everything worked out and Lindsey came home just fine, which is all that matters.”

“I know. I just want you to know I appreciate you rushing over and being there for me. It meant a lot. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

His voice was soft, his tone warm. Drawing in a breath, Angela spoke again.

“Lindsey’s asking to have pizza for dinner tonight... and I wondered if you and Shannon would like to join us?”

Even down the phone line, she could almost see Mark’s grin when he spoke again.

“We’d love that.” He paused, then added, “*I’d* love that.”

“Me too.”

When they’d settled the arrangements and hung up, butterflies were still fluttering inside Angela’s stomach, because she knew that what they’d organised wasn’t just dinner.

It was a date.

* * *

When Mark and Shannon arrived later that evening, it was to a cacophony of excited barks from Elsa combined with noisy chattering from Lindsey who couldn't wait to tell her best friend all about the visit from her father and Cleo, and show her the new Barbie doll they'd given her. As the girls hurtled upstairs with Elsa at their heels, Angela led Mark through to the kitchen where she was setting the table in preparation for the pizza delivery.

"Lindsey seems in good spirits," Mark said as he helped Angela carry napkins and cutlery to the table. "Is she definitely okay after this morning's adventures?"

"It's like it never even happened," Angela said with a baffled head-shake. "I thought she'd be upset after running off and then not getting on board the train in the end and having to come all the way back home again to face the music. But she's fine. She also seems fine after her father's visit with Cleo." Angela had filled Mark in about Ryan's visit alongside his pregnant girlfriend when they'd spoken earlier on the phone. "I keep asking Lindsey if she's okay and I know I'm annoying her with my constant questions. I just don't want her to be secretly traumatised and me being clueless about it."

"I doubt you'd be clueless. You're too good a mum for that."

"That's kind, thanks. And listen, I know I've already said this, but you have no idea how grateful I am for your help this morning. I don't know how I would've coped without you being there to stop me flipping out in blind panic."

"I'm glad I could do something useful. But even if I hadn't been there, it would still have been the same outcome, because Lindsey made her way home just fine without us."

"I know I should be relieved about that, but the truth is I shudder every time I think about her wandering around the streets by herself."

"The perils of parenthood."

Angela laughed. "To avoid my hair turning prematurely white, and to avoid a repeat performance from Lindsey, I've

already ordered one of those video doorbell systems. From now on, if there are any covert comings and goings through that front door, I'll know all about it."

"Good thinking. No doubt that'll come in handy once Lindsey's a teenager and wants to sneak out of the house to meet her friends, or sneak back inside when she's blown her curfew."

"Don't even joke about that. I'm still recovering from this morning's shock. I'm in no position to think about what horrors Lindsey's teenage years might hold in store."

They shared a laugh as Angela gathered glasses from the cupboard and carried them to the table.

"Anyway, I'm glad you could come over for pizza so I could thank you properly for this morning," she said.

"I'm glad to be here." He slanted his gaze in her direction, his eyes dark. "I like spending time with you, Angela."

She felt suddenly shy on account of the way he was looking at her, and nervous shivers rippled over her skin.

"I like spending time with you, too, Mark."

Mark set down the napkins just as Angela laid out the last of the dinner plates. She felt an irresistible desire to reach out to him and pull him close.

Was it too soon to do that? He'd only just walked through the door. And what if she'd misread Mark's signals, and they weren't signals at all, and...

"Mark?" she said, refusing to let her mind run off into la-la land. "We're both grown adults, we've both been married, we're both divorced, well, I will be soon enough. What I mean is, we've been there, done it, and bought the t-shirt when it comes to romance, right?"

His eyes widened at her frank question. "Yeah, I'd say so."

"And I'm guessing neither of us are interested in beating around the bush about how we might feel... or not feel... when we meet someone we happen to like an awful lot and find just a teensy, tiny bit attractive."

Her amused tone made Mark's uncertain expression dissolve into a smile. "Sounds about right, for me, anyway."

For a moment, they held each other's gaze. As she looked into Mark's eyes, Angela realised just how hard she'd been fighting to deny her attraction to him.

And how she really didn't want to deny it anymore.

She stepped towards him, her heart beating madly, and laid her hand along the strong line of his jaw. His warm, spicy scent made her brain turn fuzzy as his hand grazed her hip and pulled her closer.

When she tilted her head and met his mouth with her own, the kiss felt like fireworks exploding inside her and making every nerve ending thrum.

"Wow," Mark said when they pulled apart. "That was even better than I imagined it would be."

"You've imagined kissing me?" she whispered.

"You know I have."

His words left her tingling all over again and pulling him closer for more. But she'd barely sunk into their second kiss when the doorbell rang, triggering a volley of barks from Elsa, followed by the thunder of feet as Lindsey and Shannon barrelled downstairs behind the dog.

"It's the pizza man!" Lindsey yelled, landing with a thump in the hallway and flinging open the front door so hard it rattled against its hinges. "Quick, Mum, come and get the pizza boxes!"

"I think dinner is here," Angela said, laughing as Mark released her from his embrace.

"Pity," he said with a smile that made her blush. "We'll just have to continue this later."

As Angela turned for the hallway to save the pizza delivery man from the two excitable little girls and the barking dog leaping around in front of him, she decided she was looking forward to continuing what she'd started with Mark very much.

In fact, she could hardly wait.

ANGELA WATCHED her daughter singing along with her classmates up on stage at the Hamblehurst primary school's spring concert, her heart filled with so much pride she thought it might burst.

The musical performance was the finale of the Friday evening's entertainment. The children were singing enthusiastically and mostly remembering the various choreography moves they'd learned to accompany the song. In their seats, the gathered parents were exchanging amused glances with one another at the children's attempts to keep their flower masks and decorations in place on their heads and shoulders. As predicted, the heavy and over-decorated floral pieces were destabilising some of the smaller children, causing warm laughter to ripple through the crowds.

Angela could tell from the light in Lindsey's eyes that she was enjoying every minute of her time up on stage, singing and dancing along with her best friend Shannon. Every child in the performance was having fun, and they were all clearly delighted to be showing their friends and family the fruits of their hard work and endless rehearsals.

Although Lindsey's attention stayed focused on the teacher standing in front of the stage and orchestrating their performance, she looked often at her mother, her smile growing wider every time their eyes met. Lindsey's gaze also strayed to two other members of the audience, seated further along the row from Angela.

Ryan and Cleo were in attendance this evening, too, which Angela could scarcely believe. When Angela and Ryan had been together, Angela had usually come along to these sorts of school events by herself, because Ryan almost always found some excuse for not being there.

But he was here tonight, and Angela knew that was thanks to Cleo.

After seeing Lindsey perform her song-and-dance number when they'd come to the house last Sunday, Cleo had said they'd attend the summer concert to see the entire show for themselves. Angela had been braced for Ryan wriggling out of the commitment made by his girlfriend, but Cleo was obviously made of formidable stuff, because there he was, watching the show alongside all the other parents. Admittedly, Ryan kept looking at his phone, even as Cleo paid rapt attention while Lindsey was on stage and in the middle of her song, but at least the man was here.

It was a small win, and Angela would take it.

The children finished their performance and the audience broke into applause. As the kids took a bow, clutching their flower masks in place, Angela felt a tap on her arm.

"That was quite a show the children just gave us," Olive said from her seat next to Angela's. "I must say, it was far more polished and tuneful than I'd imagined it would be."

"The teachers do a wonderful job with the kids," Angela replied as she clapped her hands. "They go above and beyond the call of duty to make sure the children feel part of something they can be proud of."

"I can see that, and I'll bear it in mind when making my donation before we leave. These children and teachers deserve to see lots of cash flowing into the school funds as a reward for tonight's achievements."

"They'll be very grateful, Olive."

Olive nodded and gave her a wink as the applause died down. Up on stage, the headteacher began running through a list of thanks to everyone who'd worked hard to put together

the concert, and acknowledging the confident and brilliant performances of all the talented children. At this praise, the kids grinned and looked very pleased with themselves. Once the headteacher's final remarks were over, another round of applause began in recognition of the school, its teachers, and its smiling, happy pupils up on stage.

With the concert over, everyone in the audience rose from their seats and began moving towards the doors of the assembly hall. The kids clambered off the stage, chattering to one another and searching out parents and grandparents. Angela watched Lindsey spy Ryan and Cleo as they shuffled out of the row of seats and then run towards them, her flower mask bouncing up and down as she tried to hold it in place. While Cleo embraced Lindsey and chattered with her, Ryan ruffled her hair and planted a kiss on her face. After a few moments, they said their goodbyes to Lindsey and after throwing a wave to Angela, who was still trapped in the middle of the aisle, waiting for people to move along, Ryan and Cleo headed for the doors.

Angela was glad Lindsey's father had turned up for her big night on stage, and she was strangely grateful for Cleo's presence in his life if it meant she'd have more success than she did in reminding him of the importance of being part of his daughter's life. She had no idea how long this new and improved version of Ryan would last. All she did know was that what happened now in terms of Ryan's relationship with Lindsey really was up to Ryan.

Letting go of the responsibility for forcing Ryan to do the right thing had been like setting down a heavy weight she'd been carrying for too long and that didn't belong to her anyway, and Angela had no intention of picking that heavy weight back up again.

While she waited for the seating row to clear and kept her eye on Lindsey as she struck up a new conversation with a school friend, Angela felt another tap on her arm, this time from the other side. Turning, she saw Mark leaning towards her.

“I’m glad the girls’ masks stayed in one piece while they were dancing around up there,” he grinned. “Considering how much work we put into the things, I think that success entitles us to a glass of wine tonight.”

“Sounds good to me,” Angela smiled.

“And how about some takeaway, too?” Mark said. “My treat, to say thanks for the dinner you cooked for Shannon and me during the week.”

“You don’t need to thank me.”

“I want to anyway. And before we pick up the takeaway, we can stop at the ice cream parlour on the high street and buy dessert. That’ll be my treat, too.”

“Now you’re just spoiling me.”

“Well, only if we don’t let the girls choose the dessert this time. The bubble-gum ice cream cake they picked last time was no treat, let me tell you. I’ve never eaten anything that shade of blue before and I don’t plan on doing it again.”

Angela laughed as Mark mimicked looking nauseous, which wasn’t far off how he’d looked after taking a spoonful of the blue cake Lindsey and Shannon had insisted on having after they got together for dinner during the week. She’d laughed then, too, at Mark’s horrified expression when he’d removed the cake from the carton and told the girls they ought to have put on radioactive hazmat suits before unboxing the lurid dessert.

It had only been two weeks since she’d shared that first blissful kiss with Mark in her kitchen, but in the time they’d spent together since, Angela thought she’d laughed more than she had in the last six months. Mark Green had brought fun and lightness into her life, and made her feel attractive and desirable again, and every moment spent in his company only made her want more.

The fact that their little girls were already inseparable was the cherry on top.

“If you buy the food, and promise to intercept the girls if they make a beeline for any more guy-destroying desserts at

the ice cream parlour,” Angela said, “then I’ll buy the wine.”

“Perfect.”

Yeah, Angela smiled to herself. It was.

* * *

Olive followed Angela and Mark out of the school assembly hall and into the evening sunshine, their two little girls skipping ahead of them. When she caught sight of Angela’s hand grazing Mark’s, and him squeezing her fingers in return, Olive could scarcely keep the smile from her face.

Since she’d first seen Angela and Mark in one another’s company, when they’d all come to her house following her hospital visit on account of Mac the Menace, Olive had known that the two young folk had a thing for each other. Now that they’d acted on it, she couldn’t be more pleased. She had high hopes for them both and for the lovely romance that appeared to be blossoming between them.

“Did you enjoy the concert, Olive?” Lindsey wanted to know, twirling in front of her like a dervish.

“I did enjoy it, very much,” Olive replied. “I thought both you and Shannon did an excellent job of singing your song and performing your choreography routine, which looked very complicated indeed. Well done.”

The two girls beamed at the praise.

“I wish Elsa could’ve been there,” Lindsey said. “But dogs aren’t allowed, so we told her she’d get an extra gravy bone treat when we get home tonight, didn’t we, Mum?”

“Yes, we did.” Angela’s expression was amused. “And I think Elsa was very happy to hear about it, so let’s get a move on and go home and see her.”

The girls skipped towards the school gates, and Olive turned to Angela and Mark as they started walking together.

“Thank you again for inviting me along to tonight’s festivities. It was a lot of fun.”

“We’re ordering takeaway for dinner,” Mark told her. “Would you like to join us, Olive?”

“That’s a very kind offer, but I have another engagement.” Olive grinned. “I’m meeting up with the ladies to finalise our plans for next weekend.”

Angela smiled and favoured Olive with a look of mild amazement. “I think it’s fantastic that you’ve made these amazing plans, Olive. You must be so excited about it all.”

“I am rather excited, that’s true.”

After her talk that Sunday two weeks ago in Angela’s kitchen, coupled with all the things she’d thought about later that afternoon, Olive knew she wanted nothing more than to commit to travelling to Canada next year for her grandson’s wedding. But she knew, too, that she had to do more than just commit—she had to make sure it would actually happen and that she wouldn’t chicken out once the time came to board that long transatlantic flight.

Missing Blake’s wedding was not an option anymore, and Olive couldn’t live with herself if she said she’d be there and then failed to turn up. To avoid just such a scenario, she’d decided that a visit to spend time with her Canadian family in advance of the wedding date would be the perfect way to make sure she was up to the challenge of the journey next year. When she’d suggested to Gillian that she might fly over later in the summer and spend three or four weeks there, her daughter had almost booked her a flight there and then.

But to prepare herself for the gruelling seven-hour flight that was now on the horizon, Olive also decided that a shorter trip was necessary in advance to blow away the lingering fears that remained after that last terrible airplane journey.

And so, she’d called her friend Val and asked if she’d be interested in joining her on a trip to Edinburgh for a girl’s weekend.

After hooting down the phone with laughter, Val had said she’d love nothing more. Olive had never visited Edinburgh and thought that was not only rather a shame, but something

she ought to remedy. As the flight north was little more than an hour, she knew it would be the perfect way to get to grips once again with the trials and tribulations of commercial airline travel.

When Glenda and Emily caught wind of the trip, they'd invited themselves along, too. It was all turning into quite the little shindig, and Olive was thrilled about it.

They'd already booked flights from Gatwick and found a last-minute deal on hotel rooms. This evening, they were getting together to decide what activities they'd get up to on their little jaunt. There was talk of visiting Edinburgh Castle, enjoying afternoon tea somewhere on the Royal Mile, and perhaps even a visit to the botanic gardens if they had time.

No matter what they got up to, though, Olive was simply excited at the prospect of the impromptu weekend trip away with good friends. A lovely little adventure awaited, along with the challenge of facing head-on her fear of travelling and, she hoped, beating it.

No, she didn't hope she'd beat it. She *knew* she would. There was nothing else for it. And if at any point she had doubts, she'd simply imagine herself at her grandson's wedding next year, surrounded by her family, and with that as motivation, she'd win the day.

"Have you decided what things you'll all get up to in Edinburgh, yet?" Angela asked as they turned the corner onto Foxglove Street.

"Well, that's precisely the item on the agenda to be discussed over dinner tonight," Olive said. "Although I suspect we might be in for a heated discussion. Glenda is campaigning for us to book something she describes as a haunted dungeon ghost tour, which sounds rather gruesome, if you ask me. However, Glenda insists it will be fun and that if we are all left traumatised, we can revive ourselves with a dram or two of whisky afterwards."

As Angela and Mark laughed, Olive favoured them both with a wry grin.

“I fear that if Glenda plies us all with too much wine this evening, we shall end up with tickets for this dungeon ghost tour, whether we like it or not. If we succumb to her mad idea, I only pray I won’t keel over with a bad turn if I’m left scared out of my wits.”

“I think you’d might just like it,” Angela said. “If nothing else, it’ll be an experience to remember.”

“Well, an experience to remember is just what I’m after, so perhaps I ought to give it a go.”

Olive laughed as she thought about her desire to broaden her horizons and try new things, just as lovely old Dr Henderson had done. Participating in this dungeon ghost tour Glenda was so excited about might not be quite what Olive had in mind when she’d suggested this Edinburgh getaway, and it was certainly a different kettle of fish from Dr Henderson’s adventures involving coastal hikes and Tuscan wine-tasting tours, but Olive couldn’t deny being rather curious about it all.

“Anyway,” Olive said, “I only hope I haven’t left you in a sticky spot as far as Elsa’s lunch time walk is concerned when I fly off the Friday after next. I feel rather bad dashing away and leaving you in the lurch. I promised not to do such a thing, after all, but the Friday morning flight was the best option we could find.”

Angela waved off her worry. “Don’t give it a second thought. Mark is off that day and has volunteered to pop over to take Elsa out while I’m at work.”

“It’s no problem,” Mark smiled.

“Hmm, well now that I’m planning a long visit to Toronto later this year, I’ll be leaving you and Elsa in the lurch when I go there, and I feel terrible about that.”

“Well, don’t,” Angela said. “I’ve got plenty of time to sort something out, which I will. We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“Hmm,” Olive frowned.

They reached Angela's front gate. Lindsey and Shannon were already at the door, twirling around together as they waited for the parents to catch up. Angela handed Mark her door key and once he said goodbye to Olive, he unlocked the house so the girls could pile inside and drop off their flower masks and embrace the yapping Elsa, who was soon scurrying around their feet in the hallway.

Angela hung back and turned to Olive.

"I mean it when I said I don't want you to worry about Elsa when it comes to making your plans to fly to Canada," she said. "You've already done so much to help me, Olive. If you hadn't stepped in a few weeks ago when I was at my lowest and offered to help with Elsa's daily walks, we might not even still have her right now."

Olive glanced through the open doorway into Angela's hallway, where Elsa was still yapping and the two girls were skipping towards the kitchen at the back, beckoning the creature to follow them and receive the gravy bone she was due for being such a good dog. What a shame it would have been if Elsa had been rehomed. She belonged inside that house with that family—with that growing family, Olive reminded herself—and if she'd played some small part in making sure she stayed there, then she was a happy woman.

"You're right, I mustn't worry so much," Olive said. "And perhaps by the time I've booked my Toronto trip, young Mark might be available more to help walk little Elsa?"

Angela gave an amused eye-roll. "You're a meddler, Olive Nimmo."

"It seems to me that there isn't much meddling required. You two are clearly getting on like a house on fire."

With a glance back inside the house, where Mark was dealing with the girls and the dog in the kitchen, Angela smiled softly. "Yeah, we are."

"However, once I've settled on my Toronto trip details, if it turns out you still require the help of a dog-walker, then you should call upon my friend, Val. I happen to know it would

please her no end to walk little Elsa from time to time, if only to wind up her husband, which, I believe, is one of her favourite pastimes.”

Angela laughed and shook her head. “You really have some strange friends, Olive.”

“You don’t know the half of it, dear. Once you get to my age, it’s almost inevitable that everyone has turned a bit strange.”

With another laugh, Angela stepped closer and gave Olive a hug. “Thanks again for coming tonight, Olive.”

“Thanks for inviting me.”

“And thanks for being such a lovely neighbour, too.”

“Well, ditto, dear.”

Angela walked up her front path and threw Olive a wave before heading inside. Waving back, Olive continued to her own gate and stepped into the front garden. Pausing, she glanced around Foxglove Street, enjoying the sunlight of the late spring evening and the birdsong in the trees and the quiet peace of the place.

Foxglove Street really was a lovely place to live, and Olive was grateful to call this little part of the world home.

Key in hand, she turned for her front door with a smile, already thinking of her evening ahead with the ladies, and the grand adventures that awaited beyond.

EPILOGUE

AS MAY TURNED into June in Hamblehurst, the temperatures rose with the arrival of summer and the air became scented with the aromas of blooming gardens and long sunny days. On the morning of Olive's trip to Edinburgh with her friends, she hauled her suitcase out the front door and locked up, then stood for a moment admiring the signs of summer all around her.

In the front garden, the foxgloves were in full flower, their whimsical nodding heads dappled with pink and white buds and drifting in the morning breeze. Glancing up and down Foxglove Street, Olive saw foxgloves everywhere. Many residents added at least a few of the pretty plants to their front gardens, and in June, the effect was spectacular, creating a beautiful swirl of soft pastel colours from one end of the street to the other.

When Foxglove Street was blooming with foxgloves, it was a sight to behold, and one that made Olive's heart glad.

As she hauled her suitcase along the garden path and through the gate, she thought about how just a few weeks ago she'd looked out her front window at grey skies and chilly rain, feeling rather bleak about things. She'd felt alone and isolated in the world. Those feelings hadn't sat well with her at all, but she hadn't quite known what to do to change them.

Now, her life was completely transformed. Olive knew she'd be forever grateful for the spur-of-the-moment decision she'd made on that late April afternoon, when she'd gone

round to Angela's house and knocked on her door and offered to help her walk her little dog.

Because of that one tiny action, so much had happened, all of it good. Yes, even that nasty tumble she'd taken thanks to Mac the Menace had come with its own silver lining.

And now here she was, suitcase packed and propped beside her as she stood on the pavement waiting for the taxi to turn up and whisk her off to the airport for a weekend getaway.

After chatting with Glenda, Val, and Emily, they'd decided to club together and book an airport transfer service. Not only was it far less hassle than dealing with the train connections to the airport, but they'd all agreed it would be rather exciting to splurge on a fancy taxi to drive them directly to the departure terminal.

With an easy airport journey under their belts, they'd have plenty of spare energy to throw themselves into their weekend activities as soon as they arrived in Edinburgh. Which was just as well, because their agenda was packed with lots of lovely things to keep them busy and it would be non-stop fun from the moment they arrived.

Olive could hardly wait. She was so excited, in fact, that she couldn't bear to linger inside the house for the taxi to turn up. Standing out here on the street, she'd see it driving along the road in good time and be ready to join her friends inside the vehicle the moment it came to a stop. She was the last pick-up before they headed towards the airport, and Val had pinged her a message just a few moments ago to say the taxi had arrived at her house and they'd be with her shortly.

Olive's stomach turned somersaults as she waited, a mixture of excitement about the weekend away with friends and nerves over the impending flight.

The sooner she got on board the aircraft and up into the air, the better. The best way to deal with a problem was to confront it outright, and she was determined to overcome her anxiety about flying, come what may.

Olive nodded, satisfied that her little mental pep-talks would get her onto the airplane and safely off again at the other end. All would be well.

As Olive peered along Foxglove Street, looking for a sign of the taxi, she saw a young woman walking along the pavement towards her, whose face looked vaguely familiar. The young woman carried a shopping bag in one hand and had a distracted look in her eyes as she walked along. Olive tried to place the youngster, but failed. When she drew nearer, the young woman glanced in Olive's direction, taking in the suitcase at her feet, and offered a smile.

"Hello there," the young woman said. "It's Mrs Nimmo, isn't it?"

"Yes, but please call me Olive." She narrowed her eyes. "I'm sorry to admit I can't quite remember your name, dear."

The young woman laughed and waved this off. "I'm Jess Shepherd, but you wouldn't remember me. My mother, Sally, lives at the other end of the street."

Olive thought about this. "Sally Shepherd. That rings a bell. Yes, I know who you're talking about. Your mother is a lovely woman, although I only know her in passing to say hello to."

Jess nodded to the suitcase at Olive's feet. "It looks like you're off somewhere nice?"

"Indeed I am. I'm spending the weekend in Edinburgh with a few friends. I'm just waiting on the taxi turning up to drive us to the airport."

"That sounds lovely," Jess smiled. "I hope you have a great time. It sounds like the weather will be brilliant all weekend, too."

"So they say on the forecast, and I'll be keeping my fingers crossed that this wonderful sunshine lasts."

"Are you going to visit the castle while you're there?"

"Oh yes, that's on the agenda. And we're also booked on a haunted dungeon ghost tour, which was the brainwave of one

of my friends, and which will involve us traipsing around forgotten alleyways and vaults beneath the city. We tried to talk her out of it, but she insists we'll love it."

"I'm sure you will," Jess laughed.

"So, are you on your way to visit your mother, dear?"

Jess's expression crumpled at the question. "Not quite. I moved back in to live with her a few weeks ago. I had my own place for a while, but... well, it's a long and complicated story."

Although Jess let out a short laugh as she said this, Olive saw the dismay on the young woman's face. She was about to risk being nosy and ask what had caused her to return to stay with her mother, but just then, a taxi appeared further along Foxglove Street. Before it had even come to a stop outside Olive's house, a magenta-haired head popped out the back passenger window.

"Olive! We're here!" Glenda yelled, waving madly. "Isn't this exciting!"

"Morning, Olive," Val said, throwing open the taxi door and getting out. "I'll give you a hand with your suitcase, love."

"Let me do that," Jess said, already grabbing the suitcase handles. "You hop in, Mrs Nimmo, and I'll wheel this around to the driver."

The taxi driver was already out and opening the boot to stow the suitcase that Jess was handing him.

"Thank you, dear, that's very kind," Olive said.

"Come on, Olive," Val said and climbed back into the taxi beside Glenda and Emily. "Let's get this show on the road!"

"Have a lovely time, Mrs Nimmo," Jess said.

"Thank you. And do say hello to your mother for me."

"Will do."

"Hopefully we'll chat again soon, dear."

Jess smiled. “I hope so, too. The next time we bump into one another, you can tell me all about that haunted dungeon tour.”

“Assuming I survive it,” Olive laughed.

Jess closed the taxi door and waved before walking off down the street. Olive thought about the unhappy expression she’d noticed on the young woman’s face when they’d chatted and hoped she was all right. She couldn’t help wondering what had brought her back to live with her mother on Foxglove Street.

Perhaps she’d find out the next time they saw each other.

For now, though, Olive was brimming with excitement at the weekend ahead. As the taxi pulled away from the pavement and drove off towards the high street, she turned to her friends—Val, Glenda, and Emily—gathered around her in the back of the vehicle.

“Ladies, I’m so glad to see you all,” Olive smiled. “And I can’t wait for our weekend to begin!”

The chatter began amongst the women, and packets of sweets were opened and shared for the journey, and the prospect of the days ahead shone before them like sunlight on water. Olive watched Foxglove Street disappear behind them and let out a long sigh filled with happiness and anticipation of the good times that were coming.

And the good times that had already arrived.

A MESSAGE FROM ALIX

Thanks for visiting Foxglove Street and I hope you enjoyed spending time with Olive and Angela.

Life on the street continues in the next book in the series, *Friends On Foxglove Street*, where we'll discover Jess's story, who we met in the epilogue just before Olive left for her weekend of fun with her friends. I hope you'll visit with Jess, who's having a tough time that's forced her to move back in with her mother, and also unexpectedly reconnect with the boy-next-door. We'll meet more lovely residents of Foxglove Street in the next book... and we'll also catch up with Olive, too.

Thanks again for reading, and see you next time.

With all good wishes,

Alix Kelso

* * *

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* * *

What to read next

Enjoy another visit to Foxglove Street in the next book in the series, *[Friends On Foxglove Street](#)*. Meet Jess Shepherd and her mother, Sally; spend time with Jess's handsome boy-next-door neighbour, Darren, and his grandfather, Walter; and catch up with Olive after her weekend away with the ladies. Another heartwarming story of everyday life and love on Foxglove Street awaits...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alix Kelso writes warm-hearted stories about romance, friendship and family. She's happiest with her nose in a book and loves being whisked off to imaginary story worlds. Alix lives in Glasgow with her husband, where she enjoys pottering in the kitchen, exploring the great outdoors, and buying far too many Christmas decorations.

Alix loves to hear from her readers, and you can find her online on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) at @AlixKelsoAuthor

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