

## Chapter One



I sit on the edge of my mum's bed and take a deep breath. 'I've booked you in for a week's respite care,' I tell her.

She stares at me, aghast. 'But I don't want you to have any respite from me.'

'Things are quite difficult at the moment, Mum. You know how it is. The year's marching on and I need some time to get the café ready for the season.'

She folds her arms across her chest, unconvinced.

I've already brought her a cup of tea and a slice of the new coffee cake that I'm trying out, in the hope of softening her up, but my dear mother has turned up her nose at them.

'I'm not leaving here.' Mum's chin juts defiantly. 'No way, lady.'

For someone who is supposed to be an invalid, my mother has the strongest constitution and will of anyone I've ever met. I knew even as I was making the booking that it was overly optimistic. Even a cake fresh from the oven won't warm my mother's heart.

'There are loads of things I need to do, Mum. I could just do with a couple of days. That's all.' A couple of days without her

banging on the ceiling every five minutes, wanting this or that or something and nothing. She has a walking stick by the bed especially for the purpose.

My family have been blessed enough to be able to live in a beautiful home alongside the Grand Union Canal since my parents, Miranda and Victor Merryweather, were first married. Both my sister, Edie, and I were born and brought up here. One of us is more pleased about it than the other. The house is in the pretty village of Whittan, at one time on the outskirts of Milton Keynes, but now being nudged in the ribs by the thrusting city as it engulfs everything in its path.

When I became Mum's full-time carer, I gave up my paid job and, out of necessity, started a small cake shop cum café and tearoom – Fay's Cakes. I'd already started selling cakes from our dilapidated narrowboat, the *Maid of Merryweather*, which is moored at the bottom of the garden. It was a sort of hobby, I suppose, a bit of an ad hoc affair, but it gave me something to do with all the cakes and jam that I so liked to make. Now I run it full-time and it's grown to take over the dining room, veranda and garden of our house. The only problem with running a business that's based in our home is that half of my days disappear with me running up and down the stairs fetching and carrying for Mum while trying to keep things going with the café downstairs. Not that I really mind ... it's just that sometimes I do need a break from my caring duties so that I can concentrate on actually bringing in some much-needed money.

'They'll sit me in the corner with the dribblers and shakers,' Mum complains.

'They won't. This is a nice place.' I hold up the cheery Sunnyside Respite Care Home brochure encouragingly, but she averts her gaze, refusing to even look at it. 'It's not a hospital,' I press on. 'You get your own room. I researched it really carefully on the internet.'

‘Pah.’

‘It’s more like a hotel – *exactly* like a hotel – but with care. They’ll look after you.’

‘Just say if I’m too much trouble for you, Miss Fay Merryweather.’ There’s a sob in Mum’s voice and she dabs theatrically at her eyes beneath the rims of her reading glasses.

‘You’re not too much trouble.’ Once again, she makes me feel like the worst daughter in the world. ‘Of course you’re not.’

She pushes the plate of cake away from her, apparently too overwhelmed to eat.

‘I love you. You know that. It’s only that I have such a lot to do in the café.’ The list is endless. Even the thought of it is making me feel quite dizzy.

‘Oh.’ She rolls her eyes. ‘The café this, the café that. It’s all you ever think about. It’s all I ever hear about.’

‘It pays the bills, Mum.’ Just about. The ones that don’t go away just because I’m at home and caring for you, I add to myself but dare not say out loud.

My mum took to her bed with a bad bout of flu, four winters ago now. The flu became pneumonia and there’s no doubt that she was very poorly at the time. But, several courses of antibiotics later and when the pneumonia had run its course, she was still in no hurry to get up. Then she slipped in the bathroom and broke her hip. When she came back from hospital, she eschewed the physiotherapy programme that she’d been advised to follow and took to her bed again to convalesce. She made herself very comfortable there and, since then, she’s simply refused to get up.

Mum has decided that she’s still ill and infirm, no matter how many times the doctor tells her that she’s just fine. She’s stayed exactly where she is and no one can persuade her otherwise. I’ve coaxed and encouraged her. Doctors come and cajole her. Mental-health professionals turn up, try to counsel her and are duly rebuffed. Antidepressants were prescribed, dispensed and

found, by me, hidden down the back of the headboard. In short, my mother has decided she will be permanently bedridden and, quite frankly, she loves it.

Now, every day Miranda Merryweather sits in her bed, snuggled in a duvet, surrounded by fluffy pillows, holding court like the queen of a very small country. These days, she refuses to let most people enter her domain. Occasionally, our lovely GP, Dr Ahmed, is reluctantly allowed an audience. I think at first she liked the attention. Then, as the months went on, she simply became entrenched until, finally, she was frightened to get up and go out at all. Now it's simply become a way of life.

The friends she once had have all gradually fallen away until, now, I'm the sole person at her beck and call. I cook, clean and run the café. While Mum can still get herself back and forth across the landing to the bathroom, she needs my help to shower, and I wash her hair for her too when she requires it. Though some days I don't have time to wash my own hair. There's an ever-growing cache of tablets that have to be administered at regular intervals – blood-pressure pills, water tablets, sleeping potions, statins. The list goes on. The longer she stays in bed, the more medicines she needs. I change her nightdress every day and her sheets once a week.

'Your sister would never treat me like this,' Mum says.

'She wouldn't,' I agree. 'You'd starve before you got tea and cake from Edie.'

Mum recoils as if I've slapped her, then turns her head to stare resolutely out of the window at the garden and beyond at the canal which meanders past. The trees along the bank are coming into full bud and soon the hawthorn will be in glorious blossom. It's so beautiful out there. Yet she'll stay in this room and miss it all.

'Eddie could teach you a thing or two about caring, madam.'

She couldn't. Believe me, she really couldn't.

Edie, my younger and only sibling, is the shining girl of the family. Edie, the unemployed, heavy-drinking, recreational-drug user who is currently kept by a married man, can do no wrong in Mum's eyes. As she lives in New York, my mother is unaware that any of this actually goes on. As far as she's concerned, Edie is busily working away at a wonderful career and has a boyfriend who is a fabulously wealthy lawyer. As such, she is a far better daughter than I am. My sister is very scant on detail when she speaks to our mother, and Mum only sees Edie through rose-tinted spectacles. Whereas I am so very often cast as the Wicked Daughter.

The truth of the matter is that Edie rarely rings unless she wants something and never comes home now. She hasn't been back at all since Mum took to her bed – even when she was actually quite ill. And, let's face it, New York is just around the corner these days. You can go there for the weekend. It's not as if Edie's in Australia or New Zealand or somewhere on the other side of the world.

Even though Edie can be a complete pain in the backside, I do miss her terribly. I wish she was here, and not just because I could do with some help with Mum. Though being the sole carer for your parent can be an onerous and thankless task, it would be nice to have Edie here just as a friend who'd know what I'm going through, so that we could, perhaps, share the emotional burden.

I press on, even though I'm beginning to realise that my mission is fruitless. 'I thought I could decorate your room while you're away.'

'I'm not going away, Little Miss Cloth Ears. I told you.'

Goodness only knows this room needs a bit of a makeover. I don't think it's been decorated since about 1972. Some of the pastel-pink, flower-sprigged wallpaper is curling and there's a damp patch on the ceiling that says we may well have a leak in

the roof. Not the first. I don't even dare to go into the loft these days. To be honest, the whole of Canal House could do with a bit of tender loving care. It hasn't had any money spent on it in years, simply because there hasn't been any to spare.

I am forty-one years young and this is the only home I've ever known. I was born here, in this very room, and, at the rate I'm going, I will more than likely die here.

'I could bring in some wallpaper samples.'

'Not listening.' My mum puts her fingers in her ears. 'La, la, la. Not listening.'

I wouldn't mind if Mum was actually really ancient, but she's only seventy years old. That's all. Surely seventy is the new fifty. She should be out there having the time of her life. Yet the concept of the University of the Third Age has, unfortunately, passed her by. It's so frustrating that she seems to have given up on life and is content just to lie here. Even more frustrating is the fact that she seems to revel in it: she spends her day languishing, watching soap operas and quizzes. Or home-renovation programmes which are never destined to help this particular home.

Before I can remonstrate with her any further, I hear the back door open, and a voice travels up the stairs from the hall.

'Is me!'

That's my assistant, Lija. The café isn't open for a few hours yet but Lija has come in early today to help me scrub down the tables and chairs that have over-wintered in the garden. The first thing on a long list of glamorous tasks that we need to do before we start heading into the busy summer season. Then we won't get a minute to do anything.

'I have to go,' I say.

'My tea's gone cold,' Mum grumbles.

There are times when I'd swear she spends all day thinking up small ways in which to torture me. If she's woken up in a particularly belligerent mood, she often waits until I'm at the

bottom of the stairs to call me back for some little instruction she might have forgotten, or to plump up her pillows.

I take her cup. 'I'll bring you a nice fresh one.'

'Not as much milk this time. It tastes like rice pudding when you make it.'

I could suggest that she's perfectly capable of getting up and making her own tea and then she'd have no cause to complain, but I don't. It would be a total waste of my breath as, sadly, I lost that argument quite some time ago. Instead, I scoop up the laundry – the sheets I changed yesterday, the nightdress that was swapped for a fresh one this morning – and head back downstairs.

This is my life, like it or lump it. And I simply have to man up and get on with it.

## Chapter Two



When I go into the kitchen, Lija has already stripped off her coat and is taking some eggs from the fridge.

‘Morning,’ I say as I go to shove the washing in the machine and set it going. I can iron it tonight when I’m watching the episode of *Escape to the Country* that I’ve recorded. My guilty pleasure. ‘Shall we go out and clean the furniture now while it’s fine? It’s forecast to rain later and we can come in and bake then.’

This afternoon, if all goes to plan, we’re going to try out some new recipes.

‘Is always bloody raining,’ my assistant grumbles. ‘Rain, rain, rain.’

Lija Vilks is young, lithe and Latvian. She’s not really an ideal assistant for a customer-facing business as she’s quite spiky. Particularly with the customers. On the other hand, she’s a great and loyal worker who can turn her hand to pretty much anything. She bakes the most wonderful cakes, which, if I’m honest, are far better than mine. You’ve never had carrot cake until you’ve tasted Lija’s, and I’d swear that her chocolate brownies could win awards. She is a swearsy, Goth version of the goddess Mary Berry.



‘How is Old Bag today?’ Lija throws a disdainful glance at the ceiling, above which my dear mother reposes.

‘Not great,’ I admit. ‘She won’t go to the respite-care place, no matter what I say. I’m going to have to ring and cancel it.’

Lija tuts. She’s not my mother’s biggest fan. But then my mother isn’t hers either.

‘I’ve tried,’ I say. ‘I don’t know what else I can do. We’ll just have to work round her.’

‘Can you get nurse in?’

‘I can’t afford it, Lija. There’s just not enough cash in the pot.’ I let out a heartfelt sigh. ‘I wish Edie would come back and help. Even if it’s for a week or two. Perhaps I’ll have another talk with her later.’

‘Good luck with that.’ Lija gives me a black look.

My assistant’s usual colour of choice is black – both for withering stares and for clothing. Today is no different: she’s wearing black jeans with a skin-tight black T-shirt and she has her poker-straight black hair yanked back in a ponytail. Only her skin is as white as the driven snow.

Lija seldom wears a scrap of make-up, but she doesn’t need it as she’s stunningly beautiful without it, despite a slightly vampiric look. Her fringe hangs like a curtain skimming her big blue eyes, and sometimes I wonder how she actually sees through it. She eats cake morning, noon and night and has the skinniest, most sharply angled body I’ve ever seen. I’m most envious of her tiny frame. She has no breasts, no bottom, no hips, no thighs, no cellulite to contend with. Despite being up and down stairs all day looking after my mother, I run towards curves and only have to look at a cake to form another one.

The other thing I like about Lija is that she’s as reliable as the town-hall clock. She lives in the city, not far from our village, and cycles to work along the towpath come rain, hail or snow. Lija has a room in a rented house that she shares with three

other Latvian girls. Collectively, they drink like fish and party all night, but she's never once been late in the two years or more that she's worked for me. On the rare occasions that she takes a day off, one of her friends always steps up to the plate to stand in for her, so I never have to worry about cover. The other girls are all similarly black and spiky, but slightly less abrasive than Lija.

I boil the kettle again. 'Mum's tea's gone cold,' I say. 'Do you want one?'

She nods. 'I will take the tea to Old Bag. She won't bang-bang on ceiling all day if she thinks it will be me.'

That's another thing in Lija's favour. Despite her grumbles, she really doesn't mind helping out with my mother either. I'm not saying that she's a rival for Florence Nightingale or anything. Far from it: Dr Crippen was probably more charming than Lija. Her bedside manner is somewhat unconventional but she's right, my mother is suddenly a lot less trouble when Lija is looking after her. Lija stands no messing from Miranda. Which is fine by me.

While Lija stomps upstairs with Mum's tea, I fill a bucket with hot, soapy water and find two scrubbing brushes. I slip on my comfy old cardigan, pop the brushes into my pockets and go out into the garden.

This is a large house, strong and sturdy. It was built of serviceable red brick in the 1920s and is hugely proportioned compared to today's modern boxes. We're lucky to have a kitchen big enough to convert into a working one.

We keep Fay's Cakes open during the winter months, but business pretty much only limps along. We still continue to sell cakes from the *Maid of Merryweather* and direct from the kitchen, but it's only when we have a bright and sunny weekend that we see a steady stream of customers. We have a few tables in the spacious dining room, which is done up prettily with pink

gingham cloths and bunting, that I made myself, draped around the picture rails. It's a comfortable space that meets the current trend for retro chic, but only because most of the things have actually been here since they were first in fashion. My mother's collection of pink glassware is definitely enjoying a new lease of life.

The back of the house has a pretty ironwork veranda which runs the full length of it. Now it's covered in wisteria, whose blooms will soon be hanging heavily like clusters of grapes. Later in the summer a purple clematis takes over. It's a lovely, sheltered spot and we have a few tables out here too.

I have to say that the main attraction of the cake shop, apart from Lija's cakes, is the stunning garden. It's a generous plot by any standards. Broad and long, it sweeps right down to the edge of the Grand Union Canal.

It's bounded on both sides by tall, red-brick walls which screen it from our immediate neighbour. We don't get a lot of passing trade here as Canal House is situated at the very end of an unmade lane and is generally only discovered by those who are determined to find it. Not exactly the ideal place for a cake shop-cum-café, but then needs must. If I were to try to find premises like this elsewhere, it would cost me a small fortune. A small fortune that I don't have.

As I look down the garden towards the canal, there's a modest orchard of gnarled apple trees. This is protected by the high wall behind it, which is currently smothered with pink clematis that will, later in the season, be followed by climbing roses. On the right, just beyond the veranda, there's an old magnolia which is quite magnificent if the early frost doesn't get it. The wall is hugged by a variety of flowering shrubs, all of which are in desperate need of pruning now.

We've had a terrible year, so far, for weather. This *is* England. It's been unseasonably cold and has done nothing but rain since

January. The garden has certainly suffered for it. Though today is dry, the heads of the shrubs are mostly bowed, sodden and heavy with moisture. Further towards the canal, the beautiful cherry trees with their delicate pink blossom have taken a battering from the wind and rain of the last week. But it's still an idyllic spot.

Before Mum took to her bed, she used to love the garden – though all the hard work was down to my dad. He was the one who made the garden so pretty. This was, once upon a time, a humbly priced family home – until several property booms took it to the realms of astronomical. I feel so fortunate that my parents were able to buy it when they were first married, as I wouldn't have a hope of living somewhere like this otherwise. And I love it here. Truly I do. This is my family home and is filled with my memories. Call me unadventurous, but this is my own little slice of paradise and I'd never want to live anywhere else.

There's no denying that I could do with an extra pair of hands to help me maintain it though. It's an overwhelming amount of work for one person. The high winds we had back in February have brought down several big branches and there are mounds of leaves a foot deep against the boundary walls. Thankfully, the cherry blossoms have survived. If I'm honest though, all the paintwork around the place could do with a freshen-up. In the last few years the house has progressed from charmingly weathered to just plain tatty. Today is the first properly sunny day for absolutely ages, even though it's still chilly and rain is predicted later, and I'm so glad to be out in the fresh air. Easter is late this year, at the end of April, and we usually fully open the cake shop that weekend. If we want to be ready for then, we need to get a move on.