

Chapter Two

Posy arranged to visit Carrie the very next day, planning to return the following morning for her meeting with Alexander Hamilton. She set off from Millfields West underground station and made her way to the suburb of Richmond, where Carrie and Fergus had a smart townhouse which Fergus had inherited from his aunt, just a few minutes' walk from the railway station. She rang the bell and stepped back, waiting for the familiar figure to appear through the frosted glass panel. For a while, nothing happened, and as Posy stepped closer she thought she could hear a distant burglar alarm going off. Then she realised it was the sound of a baby crying. She hesitated, wondering whether she should ring again; possibly the first ring had already woken Dante from his morning nap, and a second strike at the doorbell might put Carrie under even more pressure. Abruptly, the door opened. Carrie stood there gazing out, looking bewildered. Posy expected her to be carrying the baby on her hip, but Dante was nowhere to be seen; instead, Carrie held a roughly-folded dirty nappy in one hand and a baby wipe in the other, which had a brown smear down one edge. The smell was unmistakable.

'Oh, Posy, I'm really sorry, I did hear the bell but I wasn't sure what to do as I was changing him on the bed, and I got to the bedroom door but then I thought Oh God he might fall off! So I put him on the floor. I must just get back in case he rolls down the stairs...come in, come in, Oh God forgive the smell!' She charged back up the stairs on legs that sounded heavy and tired. 'Now the poo's gone brown it's really smelly,' she called down.

'Oh, don't worry about it,' replied Posy, turning to close the door behind her. The Yale lock seemed to be stuck and she twiddled it left and right to try to get it to work.

'The lock's broken, but if you slam it very hard it should close,' Carrie shouted again. Posy looked down and saw that the dirty baby wipe had fallen to the floor. She put down her overnight bag and picked up the wipe, then went into the kitchen to look for the bin. But when she put her foot on the pedal, the lid seemed to be jammed, and Posy realised that the bin was stuffed to overflowing. She wasn't sure what to do, but then remembered that Fergus and Carrie had a downstairs toilet just off the hallway. She popped the wipe in the loo and flushed, just as Carrie reappeared, carrying the baby like a little sack of potatoes over one shoulder.

'Was that the wipe you just flushed?' she asked.

'Er, yes. Oh God, they're not biodegradable, are they?' said Posy guiltily. 'Oh, I'm really sorry. You probably have a special bin for them, don't you?'

'Bollocks,' replied her friend. 'I don't give a shit, excuse my French. Fergus was the eco-warrior around here. I'm afraid that wipes do get flushed away now. Oh dear, I've become terribly evil. All I care about is getting from one half hour to the next. Pathetic, huh?'

'Certainly not. Anyway, the disposal of the baby wipe was my crime, not yours,' replied Posy. 'Shall I put the kettle on? Or shall I hold little one while you do it?'

'Hold little one,' said Carrie quickly, as if desperate to get rid of her burden, which was squirming and bucking away from her while dribbling white milky sick onto her shoulder. 'It will be lovely to do an adult act.'

'I'm sorry?'

‘Putting the kettle on to make coffee for a friend. It’s like the sort of thing I used to do in the old days when I was a proper, functioning adult. Now it’s like I have both hands tied behind my back. I mean, look at that.’ She gestured towards a full cup of cold tea on the kitchen table, a creamy scum forming around the edges. ‘That’s my breakfast cuppa. I really thought that this morning I could make a proper breakfast for myself. Then he started screaming while I ate my egg, and I was so bloody determined to eat it, that I did so, and I resisted for two whole minutes! But then I gave in. I picked him up off his baby mat and I fed him again. And then I put him on the mat. And then I fed him again. And the tea went cold.’

Suddenly she bent forwards at the waist as if she was going to be sick. Posy looked on in alarm.

‘Carrie? Are you all right?’

Her friend had crumpled down onto the floor, squatting with bent knees and raking her hands through her long, unkempt hair. She was crying silently, her face screwed up like a grotesque gargoyle.

‘No, I’m not all right. I’m really sorry.’

Posy knelt down beside her, carefully balancing Dante on one shoulder, and gave Carrie an inadequate hug with her spare arm.

‘Oh, Carrie! You poor thing! Look, this despair that you’re going through, it’s totally understandable. You are exhausted; everything you knew, everything in your old lifestyle has gone away, and now your man has walked out!’

Carrie looked up. ‘Oh Posy, I knew you would understand! The health visitor says it’s an illness and I need tablets. But I’m not ill! I’m just fucking miserable!’

'Of course you are,' murmured Posy feeling useless and helpless, 'of course you are!'

'And I'm just in a constant state of dread because it hurts so much when I feed him, and when I hear him cry I just get this... this surge of fear because of the pain.'

'God, they don't tell you this stuff, do they?'

'No. They don't tell you that it ruins your life!'

Posy's jaw went slack as she recognised Barnaby's words.

'I'm sure that's how it feels now, but...but it's bound to get better. Nothing can be worse than this!'

'No? What if I run out of energy? I have two grains left. One of these mornings I'll wake up and I won't be able to get out of bed, Posy! I'll just be paralysed and Dante will cry and cry until he dies of starvation!'

'That's just your imagination, Carrie. You have the strength to do this.'

'Maybe I *am* sick in the head.'

'I don't believe that.'

Dante was making irritable mewling noises that threatened to grow to a full-blown bellow of rage, and Posy was afraid that this would spark off a new outburst of emotion from his mother. She stood up unsteadily. 'Look, I'll take Dante into the other room and you just make coffee.'

'Yes,' agreed Carrie, sounding a little calmer. 'If you could just take him into another room, well, that would be wonderful.'

Posy went into the front room, normally so chic and cheerful with its polished wood floors, rattan rugs and vast bookshelves. It seemed like a cold and desolate space now. Plastic toys in lurid shades of blood red, custard yellow and ink blue were scattered around the floor, waiting for the tread of an unwary foot. A heavily-framed photograph had fallen onto the floor by the television, and Posy picked it up, gazing into the eyes of the two happy faces. There was Fergus with his arm round his much younger wife; his wild mop of grey hair, which centred around a large bald patch on the back, fanning outwards from his head like a halo, his silver-rimmed spectacles gleaming in the sunlight, the image of confidence and self-respect. By his side, Carrie looked blonde, pretty and vulnerable, pleased to have attracted this older man with his brilliant mind and protective instincts. Posy sniffed dismissively and balanced the photograph on top of the television, which was blaring to itself with a plum-coloured dinosaur puppet rollicking around on stage, children of every ethnic hue dancing around it with well-trained smiles on their faces. Posy's instinct was to turn it off, but she wondered if it might help distract the baby. Surely he was far too young to understand any of this? Still, Carrie had must have it switched on for a purpose. She awkwardly took hold of Dante with her hands around his middle and turned him round to face the screen. His legs kicked angrily and his little head wobbled around as if he were trying to look at anything else but the purple dinosaur. Posy anxiously held him there and tried to keep up a running monologue: 'There! Isn't that lovely! A great big dinosaur for you to look at! Bouncy, bouncy bouncy! Oh, look, Dante! Lovely dinosaur!'

She longed for Carrie to arrive back with the coffee. She had tried to amuse and communicate with the baby for about a minute and a half and already she was

restless, longing for a sit down with the newspaper, and that backache had started again. She could empathise with what Carrie had told her. Eventually, coffee arrived.

‘And it doesn’t help that I feel really guilty about leaving you in the lurch,’ her friend rambled on, compulsively. ‘That just adds to the feeling of chaos because I’ve done something I would normally never do; I’ve let down a friend.’

‘Oh, Carrie, you haven’t let me down. I know that MABO was like a family to you - you love it. I’m just worried about how you’ll manage without a musical outlet.’

‘I’m getting used to that. I don’t have any outlets for anything at all to be honest. It’s not just music. I can’t read a book. Or even a newspaper. Or a magazine. This is my life now.’

‘I thought new mums sat around in their dressing gowns watching daytime TV and feeling quite mellow.’

‘I would love to watch to daytime TV. But Dante won’t let me! If I put him down he wants to be picked up. If I pick him up he struggles. If I take him for a walk he starts wailing and everyone stares at me as if it’s bloody obvious what’s wrong, he needs feeding doesn’t he, so I come back and feed him, and he still won’t settle. I can’t do *anything*.’

She began to cry again, but Posy noticed that the tension was lifting a little; now somebody else was holding the baby, now Carrie was sitting in a comfy armchair nursing nothing more than a cup of coffee, the colour was returning to her cheeks. Posy realised that there was no need to keep the baby entertained or happy, even. She just needed to hold it, and somehow keep on holding.

‘And what about night time? Is he sleeping through yet?’

Posy instantly regretted her ignorance.

‘Sleeping through? You are joking, aren’t you? He’s not due to ‘sleep through’ for months! He’s nowhere near ready for solids yet. And breast milk goes straight through, so he’s ready for a top up every couple of hours! But *Oh, it’s so good for baby, don’t you know!*’ She put on a prissy, health-visitors’ voice. ‘It’s just total shit for bloody mother, but what does she matter?’

Posy cringed beneath the onslaught, and yet sensed that the release was doing her friend some good. She pressed on with her Fairy Godmother act.

‘When the summer school’s over, Carrie, I’m going to come round here and be your nanny. Your home help. Whatever. You just need someone to hold the baby. You need another pair of arms, that’s all.’

This stunned Carrie into silence. She looked at Posy dumbly for a few moments.

‘Arms,’ she echoed, eventually. ‘Oh Posy! I’ve lost Fergus!’

Dante suddenly threw his head backwards and nudded Posy hard on the nose.

‘Ooh! Er, I mean Fergus, yes. But are you sure he isn’t just panicking? Like, just a temporary trauma? He must miss his son.’

Posy could see quite plainly how a person could not miss a baby at all, when a full night’s sleep was on offer, and possibly a day with the odd pocket of freedom, meaningful time when small things could be accomplished.

‘He rang last night. He does miss Dante. But he was just making ominous mumblings about seeing him at weekends. *Seeing* him, Posy! You don’t see a baby for God’s sake, you look after it, you are responsible for its survival!’

'That is indeed a criminal thing to say. An animal act,' said Posy, hoping that Carrie's old sense of humour would be revived.

'Yes, it's the act of a lowly beast - a garden pest. A slug. A worm. Like Fergus's penis. It is a worm. Sex with Fergus was like putting in a mini tampon.' Now she began to laugh. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes looked brighter.

'Oh Posy, thanks for coming round. Before now I've avoided having visitors because they do have a way of judging you. I mean, who can blame them? The place is such a tip.'

'It's not as bad as you think,' replied Posy, and quickly changed the subject. 'But listen – I've just remembered something I had to tell you. This man rang up asking to come on the course, and it turns out he's one of Rhoda's patients, that's how he found out about us. Well...oh, I hope this doesn't sound horrible Carrie, like I've just got on with my life without you or something, but I've asked this guy to lead the orchestra. He's an ex-pro.'

'Ooh, a professional! And have you met him yet?'

'No. I was just in a flap. I thought that the course couldn't go ahead without a leader - without you, I mean, and I was clutching at straws, this guy just rang at the right moment and ... do you think I've been a bit rash?'

'You won't know that until you've met him. You will meet him before the course, won't you?'

'Of course I will! I'm meeting him tomorrow, at the Organic Bagel Bar.'

'Fantastic! I'm really pleased for you. God, it's like a weight off my shoulders.'

She drained her coffee. 'Would it be taking advantage of you if I had a bath right now?'

'No! You go. I'll be fine with Dante.'

Posy's confidence was growing. She turned Dante away from the television and towards herself, and bounced him a little on her knee. Immediately a wail emitted from his gaping, gummy mouth. Carrie stopped, half way to the door. 'Oh bugger! I knew he wouldn't let me go. I'm like a fucking prisoner.'

The little bubble of lightness evaporated.

'No, I said go,' repeated Posy firmly. 'He'll be fine.'

'I'll be able to hear him from the bathroom and my breasts will start squirting milk.'

Posy was unable to think of a reply to this. She was shocked. 'My God. You *are* a prisoner,' she whispered to herself, as she handed the shrieking, bucking bundle over to its mother.

