

Chapter Eighteen

Leif's body felt as comfortable as a duvet, as warm and as familiar. How could a man so exotically beautiful send Posy into a dream of such ease and relaxation? He had no need to tell her she was lovely, or intelligent or amusing; the relationship they'd built up simply made her feel that way. Stretching her naked body beneath his, Posy's mind was luxuriously still, free from the stupid affirmations she had used while making love with Barnaby: *I am worthy. I am attractive.* Now, all thought had stopped, everything was focussed in on what Leif was doing with his hands, his lips. When he began to push inside her, though, a small flicker of doubt rose up, and she looked into his eyes questioningly.

'I love you,' he said.

'But we should –'

'There's no need.'

He silenced her with his mouth, kissing her deeply while his body kept on pushing forwards, gently until Posy felt the hot, stretching pain dissolve. It had been a long time, but she was glad of it; somewhere in her mind, Posy felt she was a young girl again, and that Leif was her first lover. He didn't seem to care whether she got pregnant or not, and this fearlessness melded with her fantasy. The pushing started to feel easy, then comfortable, then exciting. He was not going to stop. Leif's bed began to creak. Posy started to laugh. She pushed back. The bed creaked louder. Posy had closed her eyes, but now opened them, and looked. Leif's tanned shoulders were glistening with sweat; how hard he was working! She watched the damp strands of blonde hair falling towards her, and was overwhelmed with the sheer sexuality of the man. Oh, the joy of not having to suppress it, deny it, and look the other way! Posy's eyes felt greedy with lust, and she threw her arms back on the pillow to watch him make love to her.

'When we are married,' said Leif, 'I want to come and live in London. It would be better for the children, and good for my career.'

Posy laughed. 'I lived with Barnaby for ten years and he never proposed to me.'

'You mustn't be bitter about that. It was all for the good. Barnaby knew that he would never want children. Maybe his behaviour towards you was...because he knew he had to let you go.'

'That's a very passionate way of looking at it. But Leif, you don't have to rush into all

this stuff, just to sort of ‘respect’ me. I wouldn’t mind if you don’t want to commit completely...you’ve already helped me such a lot.’

Leif frowned. ‘Don’t you want me?’

Posy looked into his eyes and felt a huge surge of love. She felt about to cry. ‘I can’t tell you how much I want you. And to have your children.’

His arms closed around her and held her almost painfully tight.

‘Then, it’s settled.’

Posy sat on the toilet in Leif’s hotel bathroom suite, her feet cold on the spotless, tiled floor, her eyes aching with the whiteness of the room compared to the dark bedroom. It was three o’clock in the morning and she had stumbled to the loo with one eye half open, her more sensitive left eye squeezed shut. But now both eyes were open. She was holding in her hands a CD: Furtwängler conducts Beethoven. She had found it in Leif’s toilet bag. She was only looking for a bar of soap, not wanting to be bothered fighting with the cellophane on the hotel’s courtesy toiletries. And there it was: Alexander’s CD, the one that had mysteriously vanished, the one that he had needed in order to help the MABO players to learn their parts. Her mind was working slowly at this time of night, but the direction of her thoughts was clear: Leif had stolen the disc. Leif had sabotaged Posy’s orchestra! She could feel the delicate little branches of thought spreading out towards a myriad of hurtful conclusions: Leif had muscled in on her work; Leif had humiliated Alexander; Leif had manipulated her into bed. And now she had told him she wanted his children! Posy tried not to let the thought branches blossom any further, too tired to feel pain. A numbness settled over her as she got up from the toilet, softly put the lid down, flushed it without energy. She wondered if she might have woken him, and stood in the bathroom doorway staring into the darkness. He did not move. Leaving the bathroom light on to help guide her, Posy found her clothes and got dressed, then crept out of the room.

Wandering down the dim corridor which led away from the Aldridge Suite to the Kingsbury, Posy felt a desperate urge to call Alexander. She wondered if that would be a stupid thing to do – he might be sleeping with Carrie for all she knew. Still, she fumbled in her shoulder bag for her mobile phone, and switched it on. There was a message. Maybe it was from Alexander. Maybe it would give her an excuse to call him. She desperately needed some comfort; to relay the story of the CD and to get somebody else’s perspective on it. Maybe this was all unimportant. *He stole the CD!*

She dialled voicemail and listened. It was Barnaby.

‘I’ve just got back home. I think you should come. It’s nothing to do with me. It’s Mao. I just think you should come. He’s ill and I don’t know what to do. Will you ring me? Please? Bye.’

Posy unlocked the door of her room, went in, and began packing.

‘You shouldn’t have left him alone!’

‘It was only for a day! We often left him alone for a day! Sometimes we left him for *two* days!’

‘That was when he was young and strong! He’s old now, he’s fragile!’

‘I’m sorry!’

‘But how did he get like this?’

Posy looked at the tiny, hunched figure that had once been a big, fluffy bruiser of a cat.

‘I don’t know.’ Barnaby reached down and stroked Mao’s grey head. The cat did not respond, but continued his silent meditation, head pointing down, eyes half-shut, yet tense, wakeful.

‘He’s been off his food since you left, and I thought he was just having one of his bad patches, and he’d recover. But when I got home last night I found him hunched up in the corner. When I tried to pick him up, he wailed.’

‘Oh, Mao!’ Posy crouched down next to her cat and tried to look into his tired eyes.

‘Mummy’s home now!’ she whispered. ‘You’ll be all right. We’ll take you to the vet and they’ll make you better.’

She looked at Barnaby coldly. ‘It’s just as well you didn’t stay at the hotel. You might have come home and found him in a worse state than this. He might have died alone, Barnaby!’

‘I’m sorry,’ Barnaby said again, a flat tone creeping into his voice. ‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left him.’

Posy looked up, wondering if he was about to cry.

‘Let’s take him, then.’

Posy held Mao’s carrying basket almost vertically over the vet’s table, and he slid out unwillingly. On the table, his legs seemed to bow under the weight of his body. The vet stroked his cheeks and looked into his eyes, then ran her hands along his body, palpating the flesh gently.

‘Oh, you’re a bag of bones, little guy,’ she said softly. ‘How long has he been like this?’

‘He’s been having off days for a few months,’ explained Barnaby.

‘But he always rallied,’ Posy butted in. ‘He might be just having one of his off days.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said the vet regretfully. She was a short young woman, round-faced with a dark ponytail, but she had an air of experience. ‘I see from his records that he’s nearly sixteen. I’m not sure what we can do for him at this stage. Are you keen to keep him going?’

Posy hardly knew what to say: the question was a shock.

‘I don’t know.’

There was a pause. Posy swallowed hard to stop herself crying.

‘I can see if we can do something to stimulate his appetite,’ said the vet cautiously, ‘and we could put him on a drip, get him re-hydrated. And observe him overnight, if you’re okay about letting him stay.’

‘Okay,’ said Posy, looking into Barnaby’s eyes. ‘What do you think?’

‘Yes, could you keep him overnight?’

The vet nodded.

‘We’ll do some blood tests and then ring you in the morning with the results. And then take it from there.’

She gave a small, kind smile. Posy and Barnaby left Mao slumped on the scratched, black table, and returned to Barnaby’s car.

Barnaby turned on the engine and gripped the steering wheel, staring blindly through the windscreen, his face slack with misery. He looked too upset, too full of self-loathing to cry.

‘We probably looked like a typical married couple,’ he said bitterly, ‘grieving over their pet.’

‘Most people round here aren’t married,’ replied Posy. ‘Anyway, this isn’t about us. It’s about Mao.’

‘So what will you do?’ asked Barnaby. ‘I mean, are you coming home? Or are you going back to Leif le Carré?’

‘I can’t go back while Mao is in this state. I’ll stay in the flat until we know what’s happening, if that’s OK.’

‘It’s fine.’

He reversed the car out of its space in the small car park, and drove slowly and jerkily back to the flat in Millfields. Posy sat in silence.

The phone rang at eight o’clock the following morning. Barnaby answered.

‘Hello? Oh, hi, thanks for ringing.’

He listened.

‘Oh, right. Oh dear. Right, I see. No, of course. Yeah – yeah, I understand.’

Posy watched him, her heart sinking.

‘We’ll come round. Can we come now? Okay, we’ll be with you in twenty minutes.’

He put the phone down and turned to Posy.

‘They’ve done tests and he’s got kidney failure and there’s nothing they can do.’

‘Okay,’ said Posy quietly. ‘Well let’s go, then.’

They both stood at the same time, and Posy’s hand brushed against Barnaby’s. He fumbled to hold it, and she allowed him to. At that moment, it occurred to Posy that Barnaby had not been unfaithful to her; on the contrary, she had been unfaithful to him. He had simply been getting on with his work, business as usual, while she had been dallying with one man after another. And now, his punishment was to have been left responsible for a dying cat. Posy held her free hand up to her eyes and sobbed, softly and bitterly. She wondered if Barnaby would hold her, but he didn’t. She sensed that he had nothing left to give.

The surgery was still empty at twenty past eight, and the two receptionists gave Posy and Barnaby sympathetic looks as they entered.

‘She’ll be with you in just a minute,’ said one of them, gesturing to Barnaby and Posy to take a seat. Her lower back aching miserably, Posy sat opposite a display of puppy foods and toys, her heart sinking at the contrast between the happy young dogs whose lives were just beginning, and her own pet, awaiting death. Barnaby managed a wry smile as he pointed to a poster advocating pet castration. A shaggy mongrel was surrounded by rollicking puppies, a harassed look in his brown eyes. *Worried about unwanted babies? Talk to your veterinary expert about having your pet castrated.* The appealing pups had no effect on Posy’s spirits; the idea of fertility and young ones seemed miles away from her current concerns. Her eyes ranged onto another humorous poster, apparently advertising the fertility clinic next door. A bright-eyed, handsome Labrador gazed at the viewer, his thoughts expressed through a speech bubble: ‘Just one snip is what it took, and I’m as right as rain! Are your fathering days over? Pop into the clinic and talk to one of our qualified nurses. It won’t hurt a bit. Trust me!’ Fertility seemed to be nothing more than a matter of convenience, almost a joke. Posy rested her hands on her tummy, and wondered if Mao would be the closest thing to a child she would ever have.

The young vet appeared, and beckoned Posy and Barnaby into small corridor, and then to a room piled high with animal pens, dozing rabbits and small dogs looking perfectly healthy

and on the road to recovery. Mao's pen was near the back of the room, and he crouched in that same, tense position. He raised his head as they approached, and Posy saw a look of recognition in his amber eyes. As she greeted him, he responded with a small, croaky meow. 'He looks more comfortable,' she said to Barnaby. 'He looks fine. Like we could take him home.'

'It would cause him more suffering if we took him home,' he replied. 'It's kinder to have him put to sleep.'

Posy turned to the vet, who was keeping a respectful distance from them.

'It is,' she affirmed. 'His kidneys have just shut down. He's dehydrated and can't retain any fluids. It's what I'd do if he were my own cat.'

'But it's like killing him,' said Posy, who now found she could not stop the tears.

'Little Mao!' she whispered, stroking him through the bars of the pen.

'There are forms to sign,' said the vet gently.

'Yes, I don't mind,' said Posy. 'I know it's the right thing. If he can never get well. And he can't eat. Well we can't have him starving to death.'

Mao seemed to enjoy the petting.

'Look! He's still able to respond,' observed Posy in an anguished tone.

'It's better this way,' said Barnaby, 'than if he got to a stage where he was in so much pain that he couldn't respond. Let's do it now while he's still okay.'

'That doesn't make sense!' said Posy, and a tear splashed onto the form, where she was about to sign. 'But I know you're right. I do understand.'

The biro wouldn't work, and Posy shook it.

'I'm not sure I can stay,' she said. 'Do you mind if I go?'

Barnaby nodded. 'It's okay. Go back to the car. I'll sign.'

He took the biro and paused while Posy turned to the cat one more time.

'Goodbye,' she sobbed.

