

Chapter Nineteen

‘It’s perfectly simple,’ said Rhoda. ‘You are facing up to one man’s weakness, and another man’s strength.’

Posy lay on the make-shift couch in Rhoda’s humble, annexe bedroom, staring at the ceiling.

‘Weakness repulses us, and strength attracts.’

Posy frowned.

‘Leif was weak enough to act dishonestly, because he didn’t feel he could win you any other way. Barnaby was strong enough to sign away the life of his beloved cat.’

The two incidents seemed bizarrely unrelated, and Posy wondered what conclusions she was supposed to draw from this.

‘I believe,’ continued Rhoda, ‘that as we enter into a significant partnership with another human being, life has a habit of testing us. It tests our resolve, and hard. It presents us with the worst in our prospective partner, and asks us whether we are prepared to take those weaknesses on board.’

Phil burst into the room.

‘Good God, Rhoda, you’re not still counselling her, are you?’

‘Phil! You are such a tactless man! Posy and I are just talking.’

‘I don’t hear a conversation,’ said Phil ironically. ‘Just you, droning on.’

Rhoda laughed. ‘Posy, am I helping you or not?’

‘Er, I don’t know,’ said Posy. ‘Yes, because when I’m on my own, I’m just going mad. My head is like a hive of angry bees.’

‘You’re angry with yourself my dear, that’s your problem,’ replied Rhoda knowingly.

‘Well yes, I am,’ admitted Posy. ‘I’ve been so awful to Barnaby – just ignoring all his strengths and focussing on my own feelings all the time. I abandoned him for Leif le Carré, and then I abandoned him again, when Mao died.’

‘Two crimes,’ acknowledged Phil mournfully. ‘That’s at least twenty years in prison.’

‘That’s what I deserve,’ said Posy, knowing his gentle teasing was meant to comfort her. ‘I can’t believe what I’ve done. I ran away from Barnaby and left him to cope with a terrible experience. But I wasn’t even supportive when he got into editing difficulties on his film.’

Posy had spent many hours thinking this through, making lists in a lined notebook, to try to get to grips with her behaviour. She was seeking a clearer perspective; to work out what it all added up to. Finally an answer had come: she had been very silly and very weak. She should go back to Barnaby.

Rhoda hovered over the couch.

‘You look dreadful,’ she observed. ‘You’re exhausted from over-thinking. It’s the worst thing you can do in these situations.’

‘You’ve taught her all you know, and she still knows nothing,’ joked Phil.

Posy smiled and sat up. Her stomach was hurting, a dragging, yearning ache, but at least her head was still, as she clung to her conclusion.

‘Well, it’s been an amazing course and I’ve had my little mid-life crisis,’ she said as briskly as she could. ‘But on Saturday I want you to drive me straight back to Millfields. I’m not staying around to watch Leif conduct Godfrey’s premiere.’

‘But it’s on Saturday night,’ said Rhoda, ‘we could wait and drive you back afterwards.’

‘No,’ said Posy. ‘I’m not staying.’

‘But what about all the other MABO musicians who’re staying? Kevin and Lloyd; Tansy – she’ll need your support.’

‘It’s not Tansy who needs my support, it’s Leif le Carré, who shouldn’t be dabbling in contemporary music without proper training.’

Rhoda and Phil both looked at Posy with surprise. Her words obviously were contrary to the MABO manifesto.

‘Well, he shouldn’t,’ she protested. ‘But he doesn’t need me now. He’s worked on the piece with Godfrey and the others, and they know what they’re doing. I might as well go home.’

Rhoda sighed.

‘It seems a bit harsh, after Leif helped MABO in last Saturday’s concert,’ she said. ‘Without him, you wouldn’t have your workshops booked, and all next year’s funding would have gone up in smoke. You must be a little bit grateful.’

‘I am grateful,’ Posy replied, ‘but not so grateful that I ever want to sleep with him again.’

Phil had gone into the bathroom, and Rhoda came closer to speak more frankly.

‘You’re a fool!’ she whispered. ‘I wouldn’t kick him out of bed!’

Posy laughed, but an unwanted vision of Leif’s lovemaking flashed before her eyes – totally embarrassing, in the company of Rhoda.

‘Well, you’re sex mad,’ she quipped.

Rhoda looked serious.

‘As are we all,’ she replied, gazing into the distance for a moment, as if communing with Sigmund himself. ‘But remember, Posy, this is a test. I don’t want you to fail.’

Carrie and Posy sat on a towel by the pool on an overcast Thursday morning. The breeze was

cold. They had put on their swimsuits, optimistically, but unrealistically. Dante sat between Carrie's knees, wriggling, his head flopping disagreeably to this side then that. He made straining, groaning sounds which grated on Posy's nerves, though she knew that however much they were annoying her, to the baby's mother they were more of an aggravation: a challenge to do something, fix it, and quick. Conversation was going to be difficult.

'So did you go to Fergus's hotel room?' Posy began.

Carrie's face looked strained and unhappy. She nodded.

'The James Bond Suite,' added Posy contemptuously. 'With a *Dr No* theme! God!'

Carrie did not reply. She turned to Posy and sighed.

'Do you know why he booked that suite?'

Posy looked puzzled.

'Because of our honeymoon. We went to an island just to the North of Jamaica. It was supposed to be just like the one on *Dr No*. I bought a white bikini just like Honey Rider's.'

'Oh, I see.'

Posy felt ashamed. She had been full of mockery when she heard about the hotel's James Bond theme. Fergus, that ugly string bean, fancying himself as Sean Connery.

'I walked out of the sea holding a shell and Fergus took my photo. He always carried it around with him.'

'Oh Carrie, I'm really sorry. So booking that room was a really significant gesture.'

'And that's not the worst of it! If you want significance, have a look at this.'

Supporting Dante's wobbly body with one hand, she delved into her large, purple nappy bag, beneath the clouds of white cloths and creams and cotton wool balls. A typewritten document came out, almost the size of a telephone directory, enfolded in a transparent plastic sleeve.

Carrie slapped the document down at Posy's feet. It was clearly a novel. Fergus's novel, Posy realised, that he'd been working on for the last few years; a work that she'd assumed he would never be capable of finishing.

'Look at it, then,' said Carrie, 'look at the title. And the dedication.'

Posy read. ORPHANED, said the title: *A CHILD'S SEARCH FOR HIS FATHER. To my darling wife and son, in the hope of forgiveness.*

At that moment, Dante let out a searing wail.

'Oh,' said Posy flatly.

Carrie managed a rueful smile.

'Oh, indeed. This has all been a dream, hasn't it? Coming on this course and having sunshine and childcare and a lover. It's not real life, is it? Real life is that Fergus is Dante's father. A

father who had a brainstorm and is now very sorry.’

From the little hillock where the pool was situated, they could see down to the front grounds of Camargue castle. Alexander was coming out of the building, wearing his track suit and carrying a water bottle. He leaned against the wall to stretch his calves, then set off into a slow jog, down the main path.

‘He is lovely,’ said Carrie sadly. Dante wailed again.

‘And Dante loves him,’ commented Posy.

‘Dante’s too young to love anybody,’ Carrie argued. ‘He doesn’t care who’s looking after him – it could be Rhoda, Phil, Alexander, Leif, anyone. It doesn’t matter at this stage. It’s later on where it matters. Fergus going away hasn’t hurt Dante one little bit. That’s the truth of it.’

‘It’s hurt you, though!’ Posy retorted.

‘But I’m fine,’ said Carrie. ‘Absolutely fine.’

She smiled. Posy had not enjoyed hearing Leif’s name just now, and her stomach turned over in stress.

‘I’m feeling a bit like you. That this has all been a mad dream,’ she said. ‘I’ve realised that my real life is with Barnaby. We’ve got a flat. And friends. And we had Mao. He was our little boy.’

Posy noticed how Carrie was now struggling to calm her baby, and her last statement resounded in her head as profoundly stupid. Mao had been a passive, trouble-free presence in their lives, a source of shadowy affection. How could a pet be compared to a child?

‘I’m sorry you lost him,’ said Carrie. Posy’s mind flashed back to the desolate room in the vet’s surgery, Mao hunched in his pen, giving a little muffled cry of greeting as he recognised her. The kiss she had planted between his fluffy ears before she left him; abandoned him to the fatal injection. Her throat began to ache with tears.

‘Oh Carrie,’ she sobbed, ‘my life is a mess!’

As if on cue, her phone began to ring.

‘Go away!’ she shouted at it, then anxiously grabbed it to check who might be calling. It was Leif. She hesitated. Posy had been mortified by Leif’s desperation to explain himself and be forgiven. Over and over again, he had told her how sorry he was and how he was just trying to make her notice him; trying to find a way into her life, and besides, he thought Alexander was doing a terrible job as a conductor and that MABO genuinely needed his help or they would probably lose all their funding and be disbanded. That was probably true, Posy had to admit, but he had no right to undermine Alexander, steal his CD, and act so deceitfully. She

switched off the phone decisively, pondering on the indignity of being tricked into bed.

‘Was it Leif?’ asked Carrie. ‘Why don’t you want to talk to him?’

‘He’s repulsive!’ Posy growled. ‘He’s got this...this horrible vulnerability, that Barnaby doesn’t have. He’s being all sort of desperate. Ughh. I can’t stand it! I just see him in a different way. Not at all sexy.’

Carrie laughed.

‘That’s nature’s way of testing you,’ she said.

‘What are you on about?’ said Posy irritably, remembering how Rhoda had also referred to her situation as a ‘test’.

‘Before you commit to a man, you will go through a phase of finding him repulsive. You have to face up to his full humanness before you’re ready to marry him.’

‘I don’t remember feeling like that about Barnaby,’ said Posy.

‘That’s because Barnaby never wanted to marry you. So you were never threatened in that way.’

‘Oh God, you sound like Rhoda.’

‘Sorry. I have been seeing quite a lot of Rhoda recently. In fact I might go and find her now, and see if she can look after Dante. I need to talk to Alexander.’

As Carrie stood, Posy looked up at her, awed by her clarity and courage. Her own mind was a jumble.

She made herself a coffee in her room, not having the courage to go to the café where she might bump into Leif. It was a sour, instant brand with granules which refused to dissolve fully, and Posy found herself stirring the fake milk round and round obsessively, trying to create something ingestible. Then she began to worry about the caffeine; she’d had a strong coffee at breakfast, and this might bring on the shakes. She had been feeling a bit unsteady since the shock of Mao’s death. At least there was a shortbread finger to help mop it up. She carefully unwrapped it and counted the little dimples on top of the biscuit, wondering if this was mindfulness, or a madwoman’s attempt to evade thinking about things which threatened to overwhelm her.

‘Twelve dimples,’ Posy heard herself mutter, then her hand jolted as she heard a knock at the door.

‘Oh, shit!’ she whispered, dreading the sight of any of her friends; each one of them sparked off a different, confusing perspective on her plight. ‘Why don’t they leave me alone?’

The knock came again, and this time, Posy realised she could hear not only shuffling outside

the door, but crying. It seemed to bring her to her senses, and blinking a few times, she rose from the comfortless mahogany desk chair, and went to the door. Standing in the corridor was Tansy.

‘I’ve heard!’ Tansy sobbed. ‘I’ve heard you’re not staying for Godfrey’s piece!’

‘Oh, Tansy,’ Posy groaned, ‘come in, come in.’

Tansy’s face was pink and swollen, her lips rubbery.

‘But you’ve got to stay.’

‘Tansy, you have proved to be everything Godfrey wants in a musician! Your sound, your attitude, everything! You are the perfect soloist! I know it’s your first concerto,’ she continued, resenting Godfrey for changing his mind about the format of the piece about a hundred times, ‘but you are ready!’

Tansy’s turquoise eyes looked into Posy’s, the short, pale eyelashes spiky with tears.

‘It’s not that,’ she said.

There was a pause, while Posy frowned in confusion.

‘Minty’s coming!’

Posy’s eyebrows shot upwards.

‘Godfrey’s wife?’

Tansy nodded.

‘Oh.’

‘Godfrey said he couldn’t stop her. His publicist has given Minty a complimentary ticket already.’

‘Ooh, the cow!’ hissed Posy. ‘That Imogen Makepeace! You’d think butter wouldn’t melt!’

‘I know. But I was with Godfrey the other day and Imogen came up to us both and – she was all sort of triumphant – she said ‘I’ve sent an invitation to Minty and arranged for transport. Your usual driver, is that okay?’’

‘That sounds pretty conclusive.’

‘It is! And she gave me this catty look. It serves me right, Posy. I’ve fallen in love with a married man. And Imogen Makepeace knows it.’

Posy berated herself for being so selfish; she hadn’t even stopped to think about Tansy’s dilZoe, getting involved with Godfrey Maxwell Minniver.

‘You know what,’ she said with spiteful energy, ‘I bet Imogen Makepeace wants Godfrey for herself! No, don’t laugh! Why else would she try to get Godfrey’s wife down here? Just to keep you out of the picture! Because *you* are the true threat! She’s probably hoping Minty will die, then she can have Godfrey all to herself!’

‘That may be true. But it doesn’t help me face up to Minty. Godfrey’s *wife*, Posy!’

‘Look,’ said Posy, trying to make sense of it all, ‘Minty doesn’t actually know about you, so what does it matter? So she sees some girl doing an oboe concerto. She’s not going to know that you’ve slept with her husband.’

Tansy gave Posy a bleak look.

‘I think she does know.’

‘How could she?’

‘Because Godfrey has told her he wants to spend the rest of his life with me.’

There was a pause. Posy sighed.

‘All right, then. I’ll stay.’

Tansy fell into Posy’s arms, no longer weeping but silent with relief, and hugged her for a long time.

