

Chapter Twenty-two

Summer had turned to Autumn, and as the new term began, Posy felt a terrible sadness. There would be no new term for MABO. The orchestra had nowhere to rehearse; no means of paying Hugh, and nothing to aim for. One slight comfort was the trip to Godfrey Maxwell Minniver's cider farm; at least things were going well for Tansy.

'My favourite women!' Godfrey cried as Tansy and Posy emerged through the ticket barriers at Worcester Shrub Hill station. 'Welcome to the West Country!'

As Posy gave Godfrey a hug, she caught the gassy tang of alcohol on his breath.

'It's so kind of you to meet us, Godfrey,' she said anxiously. 'We could have got a taxi.'

'Nonsense! Step this way! I brought the Land Rover.'

In the car park was a large, mud-splattered car. Godfrey stood beside it proudly brandishing the keys. He too looked a little muddy, as if he might have fallen down in a field.

'I know,' said Posy, thinking quickly, 'Why don't I drive? Then you two can sit side by side on the back seat.'

'Oh, yes!' chimed in Tansy, apparently taking Posy's offer at face value. 'It'll be like on the course!'

'If that's what you want, sweetheart,' Godfrey replied, looking deeply into Tansy's eyes.

Posy gently tugged the car keys out of his hand. She scanned the small, busy car park, and wondered how she would manage to manoeuvre the Land Rover out of its narrow space. But that was less of a problem than ending up in a car accident due to Godfrey being out of control.

As Posy drove down the country lanes towards Loxley Farm, mostly in third gear, Godfrey expressed sympathy at MABO's loss of funding.

'It's a big blow for you, I can see that,' he said from the back seat. 'Your players won't know what to do with themselves. Kevin and Lloyd – talented lads. What'll they do? Start a rap band?'

'They're going to college next year, so I suppose they'll fall in with some other musicians.'

'Aye, it'll be all pop music though, I'll bet. Or I suppose there'll be a college orchestra doing old fashioned crap.'

Posy doubted whether Kevin and Lloyd would make it into a college orchestra, up against music undergraduates from more privileged backgrounds. An orchestra could use only so many trumpets.

‘Turn right at the crossroads,’ added Godfrey, ‘then look out for a little road on the left.’

Posy struggled to go down the gears as she approached the junction; the Land Rover’s gear lever felt like a wobbly old walking stick embedded in a plastic web. Finally, the vehicle wheezed into first gear and Posy found herself bumping along a narrow track marked Liliput Lane, which opened into the yard of Loxley Farm.

‘Park over there by the house,’ said Godfrey, ‘whoops – you’ve just run over one of Minty’s apples.’

‘Ooh – I’m sorry, I didn’t see it,’ apologised Posy.

Godfrey laughed. ‘Only joking,’ he said. ‘there’s apples all over the place this time of year. Hard not to squash them. They have a way of escaping.’

Posy glanced over to her left, and saw two small barns with a huge pile of apples stacked up between them. The sun had come out, and the crimson and lime-green skins of the apples reflected bright circles of light. It was like looking at a pile of delicious, precious jewels, and her mouth watered.

‘It smells lovely,’ commented Tansy as she got out of the Land Rover. ‘It’s like cider vinegar.’

Posy handed the car keys back to Godfrey and sniffed the air. It was beautifully fresh, the sweetness of freshly-picked apples basking in the sun mixed with the sour tang of fermenting juice, and the countryside essence of fertile soil and grass.

‘It’s very noisy, Godfrey,’ said Tansy. ‘How do you compose with all this going on?’

She looked curiously into the window of a barn where a large black conveyor belt was busily working, taking the chaotically bumping apples towards their final destination as juice.

‘I just get used to it,’ Godfrey explained. ‘Anyway, I can’t complain. I’ve lived off Minty’s cider for the last thirty years.’

He suppressed a burp, and Posy wondered if he was referring to the cider as financial backing or as a food.

‘Anyway, come into the kitchen and I’ll put the kettle on. I want to hear more about this weasel, Derek Flowerdew.’

‘I don’t really blame Derek,’ sighed Posy, following Godfrey into the farmhouse. ‘It’s the cuts.’

‘He should have known better than to promise you the funding. Especially as he made you work hard for it, as I recall.’

Posy halted for a second, wondering if Godfrey was referring to her affair with Leif; but he continued without waiting for a response.

‘I heard about that Saturday concert and all the agro you had getting the Beethoven up to scratch. Booking workshops and all that. It’s not easy to get schools interested in experimental music workshops. I should know. The London Sinfonietta did a big tour based on *Minniver’s Inferno*. Total disaster.’

‘The children didn’t like your music, that was the problem, Godfrey,’ came a voice. Minty descended into the kitchen from the hallway, guiding her wheelchair down a small ramp.

‘Greetings to you all!’

She took Tansy’s hand and squeezed it, then reached out to Posy to do the same.

‘I hope he’s not making tea,’ she continued. ‘Godfrey, don’t be silly. They’ve come for cider.’

‘I thought it was just me that had cider before six,’ he chuckled.

‘Nonsense,’ replied Minty. As she swept over to a low cupboard, Posy noticed how the otherwise traditional kitchen was kitted out with all sorts of bars, handles and ramps, so Minty could navigate her way around in her wheelchair.

‘I even cope quite well with the AGA,’ she said, as if reading Posy’s mind, ‘though I don’t really have to do much cooking. I have Paul to do all that.’

‘They must think we’re millionaires,’ said Godfrey.

‘Well, Paul certainly didn’t come on the National Health,’ laughed Minty. ‘But we do all right, thanks to my cider heritage. Although we have had to downscale a lot since we got married.’

‘Why’s that?’ asked Posy.

‘Well, we used to have fifty acres,’ explained Minty, ‘bush orchards and standard orchards, and about ten varieties of apple, including some ancient ones that actually couldn’t be identified! But we had to sell the land. Shall you tell them, Godfrey?’

‘We sold it to finance *Inferno*,’ said Godfrey simply. He looked out of the window, towards the remaining orchards, and blinked hard, then shook his head. ‘Aye, well. You do daft things.’

‘But it’s a masterpiece!’ gasped Tansy. ‘Your opera isn’t daft!’

‘Selling half of Minty’s farm was a bit rash,’ replied Godfrey.

‘But we’ve moved on!’ declared Minty. ‘We are still in business and, you know, I really believed in Godfrey’s work. As I still do. Though I’m not much use to him these days.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Tansy, as Posy cringed in embarrassment.

‘Well, I used to be Godfrey’s librarian and his general assistant, as well as his housekeeper. He does a lot more housework than he used to, since my illness.’

‘It’s good for me,’ argued Godfrey. ‘And I quite like getting involved with the harvest.

Though we do have our specialist chaps to do most of it: we’ve a cellarman and an orchardman along with a master cidemaker. Let me pour you some and you’ll appreciate what we do.’

Minty had placed four pint bottles of Loxley’s Organic Cider on the oak table, and Godfrey poured the clear, amber liquid into glasses. The smell was irresistible.

‘This one is an award-winner,’ said Minty, ‘it’s not too sweet and not too dry; slightly sparkling but not horribly gassy like commercial ciders.’

Posy took a sip. Like the air outside in the yard, the flavour of the cider was light and fresh, yet complex.

‘It’s like the countryside, distilled!’ said Tansy. ‘I can sense sheep and hens and beehives in it! Oh – and apples,’ she added quickly.

‘And it goes very well with a ploughman’s lunch. Godfrey will fix all that. Then you must go for a walk around the farm. We have a viewing platform above the pressing barn where you can get a bird’s eye view of the cider-making process. It’s great fun this time of year.’

‘I suppose harvest time must be very busy,’ said Posy. ‘I’d love to help, if there’s anything I can do.’

She was hoping to be kept busy, and away from prying conversations which would disturb the fragile peace she had created following her reconciliation with Barnaby.

‘Well, you could go round with a wheelbarrow, picking apples off the ground,’ suggested Minty.

‘Perfect!’

‘Our harvester gets most of them, but there are always a few it can’t reach. Just don’t try eating them. They’re not very nice.’

The sky was a deep, opaque turquoise as Posy emerged from the farmhouse just after three o’clock. After much drinking and laughter over lunch, she had been shown her bedroom, which had faded gingham curtains, a colourful striped carpet and a brass-headed single bed neatly covered in a thick duvet and crimson candlewick bedspread. She had found a black cat

snoozing in a wicker chair in the corner, and had taken care not to disturb it; she hoped it might stay. Minty had gone for a lie down, leaving Tansy and Godfrey in his large, book-filled study, where they sat on the grey carpet leafing through Godfrey's old scores. It was good to be alone on this beautiful autumn day; Posy felt an unfamiliar rush of wellbeing. Directly in front of the house was the noisy apple hopper, where the apples were washed and transported to the mill room; to one side were the two small barns with their glowing harvest of apples nestling in between, and to the other, Posy saw a pair of larger barns. Walking past the open door of one of them, she spied pallets containing hundreds of empty bottles; looking further she saw huge vats, some of them silvery and space-age, others like ancient wooden kegs. Here and there she spotted a tap where the cider could be decanted and tested. By the doorway was a wheelbarrow; Posy grasped its handles and after a few false starts, steered it towards the orchards. 'This is a new beginning for me,' she affirmed to herself. 'No MABO this year, but a second chance to bond with Barnaby. This could be the year I get pregnant. And if that doesn't happen, we'll buy a kitten. But it has to be a Persian. I'm not having one of Zabrina's Turkish Vans.' A little cloud covered the sun for a moment and she stopped to roll her sleeves down over her wrists. Then with a fresh determination, Posy strode towards the orchards.

There were three small fields, each one surrounded by neatly trimmed hedgerows and filled with apple trees, radiating the fusty smell of damp autumn soil. The trees were small with low-growing branches, and Posy recalled how Minty had used the term bush orchards; each tree looked wider than it was tall. This gave the orchards a fairytale quality, and Posy felt like a giant as she surveyed the land. She could make out the red semi-circles of the fallen cider apples, nestling in the bright green grass and half obscured by dandelion leaves. Where to start? She decided to make her way to the farthest corner of the field and work her way up and down, one row at a time, picking until her back had had enough. It did not take Posy long to establish a rhythm: park the wheelbarrow at a slight distance (to avoid banging head on handles); crouch down, pick up three apples in one go, stretch over to the barrow, pop them in, repeat twice, and move on. She quickly grew warm, and took off her blackberry-dyed sweater and tied its sleeves around her waist, to continue picking in just her old cream vest with three pearl buttons down the front. Her hair was becoming a nuisance, and she groped in her jeans pocket for a clip to hold back the unruly fringe. Posy crouched again to scoop up a handful of apples, finding three speckled beauties close by – the satin skins a mixture of vermilion, crimson and pale green. She stood upright and inhaled their delicate scent, and

looked back towards the farmhouse. A familiar figure dressed in black jeans and T-shirt was walking towards the orchard. He was pushing a wheelbarrow and having some trouble keeping his hair out of his eyes; whitish blond strands were blowing across his face and he was twitching his head to try to remove them. Posy dropped her apples in shock. What was Leif le Carré doing here? And how could she face him? Posy wracked her brains for the right attitude, the right thing to say; then she remembered Carrie's advice. Treat him as a musical colleague; someone she could help, someone who might help her. Treat him with respect.

'Bonjour!' called Leif. 'You have been working hard!'

'I've only done one row,' said Posy, trying to sound natural, and neither friendly nor hostile.

'Well I did the North field this morning,' said Leif, 'and my back is really hurting.'

'I had no idea – Godfrey didn't say - ' Posy began blustering.

'He's lucky to have help, because his apple harvester has broken down,' Leif continued calmly. 'He mentioned it on the phone yesterday and I said, don't worry. I will come.'

'But he didn't say anything to me about – about - '

She realised she was about to reveal her feelings: that she cared whether Leif was there or not.

'About the harvester?' he suggested. 'And about me, maybe also?'

Posy sighed, too flustered and defeated to pretend.

'Yes, both. I'm sorry. I was just a bit shocked to see you. I thought you'd gone back to France.'

'I'm going back at the end of the week,' said Leif, and although Posy's eyes were averted, she thought she caught him looking at her for a reaction.

'Oh, right. Well. It's good to see you. I suppose I ought to carry on.'

'Why don't I help you? Let's fill your wheelbarrow first and then do mine.'

There was no answer to this. Without waiting, Leif crouched down and scooped apples into his hands.

'See, I can pick up more than you. My hands are bigger.'

'I'll just stand here, then,' said Posy. She was reminded of their old banter, but wondered if it would be misleading to start all that joking again.

'No, no, I pass them to you, and you gather them in your skirt then drop them into the barrow.'

'I'm not wearing a skirt,' Posy replied.

'What's that over your jeans? Ah, it's just your old jumper made with bits of wool off the hedge and dyed with old nettles. If you bring it round to the front, it can be like an apron.'

Posy reluctantly pulled her jumper round so that the tied sleeves were hanging down the back of her waist, and the body of the garment formed an apron. She held it out, and Leif threw three apples in.

‘Bullseye,’ he said as Posy caught them.

‘Well it would have been hard to miss,’ she said grudgingly, letting the apples tumble into the barrow.

‘Maybe,’ said Leif good-naturedly. ‘Catch!’

He threw a big apple quickly, and Posy failed to catch it.

‘I missed that time,’ he said.

‘No, I wasn’t ready,’ argued Posy.

‘Hey, I think maybe I am slowing you down,’ said Leif. ‘Like I did on the course. I made everything bad for you.’

Posy stared downwards at the grass; the confrontation she had dreaded had arrived. There were no words with which to deflect it; instead, she was horrified to find herself feeling tearful. Long seconds later, still no words came. It was only a matter of time before her real feelings escaped. But what were her real feelings? Just confusion, shame, fear. A big blob of not-knowingness.

‘Let’s take these apples back to the hopper,’ said Leif. ‘Have you been up to the viewing platform above the mill room? *Non?* It’s great. *Viens*, I will show you.’

Posy found that her well thought-out policy, the attitude of ‘neutral respect’ that she had discussed with Carrie, had become inaccessible. She did not know what her real attitude was, so all she could do was respond in the moment. She decided that whatever Leif said, she would simply try to give the appropriate answer.

‘Have you ever been somewhere as great as this?’ he said, gesturing to the Worcestershire countryside.

‘No,’ replied Posy; ‘it’s beautiful. And I love the farm.’

‘Loxley cider is pretty good. Well, considering it’s English.’

‘What do you mean?’

For a second, the self-consciousness vanished.

‘Cider is French, and was brought here by the Normans,’ said Leif.

‘That’s a myth,’ challenged Posy, ‘just you being arrogant.’

Leif laughed, and once again, Posy’s nerves sent up barriers of alarm. Why did everything lead back to flirting? Everything he said that was objectionable ended up in a funny joke.

‘If you look down from the viewing platform, you’ll see how bad it is. No, really, you won’t believe me. The juice that comes out, it’s like your English tea – orange and scummy.’

‘*Scummy* – where did you learn that word?’

‘I know lots of useful English words,’ smiled Leif.

How was it that he seemed to be enjoying the conversation, when Posy’s own head was flailing around, desperately seeking firm territory – a place where she knew what was going on?

Arriving at the mill room, they found a rough-looking, winding staircase of whitewashed brick, swathed in cobwebs. Feeling as if she were exploring an ancient castle, Posy began to climb the stairs, grateful to have something other than Leif and his conversation to focus on. She arrived at a small viewing platform, illuminated by three large windows under which there was a bench, offering a good view of the apple pressing going on below. Huge wadges of pale amber foam came piling out of one machine; next to it, fragrant brown liquid spurted from a pipe into a square bath. Posy leaned over the wall to gain a better view, as Leif emerged from the stairs and came towards her, still wearing a friendly smile. He laid his arms on the wall, too.

‘See. It’s disgusting.’

Posy could not help laughing.

‘You are ridiculous.’

‘*Regard*,’ he said, and from beneath the bench, brought out a bottle of cider. ‘Godfrey brought it up for me when I was here earlier. You want to share?’

‘I’ve already had a pint,’ said Posy. Leif gave her an expectant look.

‘Okay, then, let’s share. It’s not that strong, is it?’

‘Now it is you who is ridiculous.’

Posy felt a strong urge to laugh; she had forgotten how much fun it was to converse with Leif. But she was still anxious that he would return to the mortifying subject of their affair.

‘I don’t have any glasses, we’ll have to drink from the bottle. Do you mind?’ Leif enquired, producing a Swiss army knife.

Posy felt a sting of pain in her heart. A man with whom she had shared a bed, now reduced to asking if she minded drinking from the same bottle. How she must have hurt him.

‘Of course I don’t mind!’ she said brightly, ‘I’m sure you haven’t got a cold...or anything.’

The bottle top gave way with a glorious clink, and fragrant vapour emerged from the rim.

Leif offered the bottle to Posy first; she sat on the bench and drank, as a beam of late afternoon sunlight warmed the back of her head. Leif sat beside her.

‘In case you are wondering, I didn’t come back for you,’ he said suddenly. ‘I don’t want you to think I’m being a stalker.’

Posy passed him the bottle.

‘I never thought that,’ she protested. ‘I haven’t had time to wonder why you’re here.’

‘And don’t you want to know?’

‘No,’ said Posy. Suddenly she heard the echo of her reply in her inner ear, and was taken aback by the rudeness of it. This time, she could not keep the laughter down. It was as if their courtship were starting all over again, going irrevocably down the same tracks, which led to only one place. She had become a helpless passenger on a train, when she began the journey in her own car, independent of thought and able to decide where she went and with whom.

‘Why are you laughing?’ said Leif, looking at her with great curiosity.

‘Because I’ve become so rude,’ said Posy. ‘I apologise.’

‘But I like it when you’re rude. It’s your real self, I think,’ he said. Leif was still looking very directly at Posy, underlining the intimacy of his comment.

‘I don’t even know my real self,’ said Posy, grabbing the bottle for relief. She took several gulps.

‘You love cider, that much is true,’ said Leif. His right arm slipped behind her. His hand fell onto her shoulder. Placing the cider bottle delicately on the floor, Leif strengthened his grip around Posy’s body.

Panicking, Posy groped for the bottle again and drank the last of it, quickly. Her senses were becoming fuzzy, although she was still aware of an unpleasant tingling in the nerves of her stomach, registering conflict.

‘I don’t like seeing you so sad,’ said Leif, moving closer so that Posy could see the very small pores on his smooth, honey-coloured nose. ‘It’s like you are really worried. What is there to be sad about?’

I am so ashamed, thought Posy. I just want this man. But I am not available. She saw no point trying to explain this to Leif. He would only argue that she was available if she so wished.

She stared down at the apple mill churning below, spewing out foamy pommace as her stomach seemed to be spewing out acid. And yet, a sense of greater calm was descending; she was looking her own sexuality in the eye. Perhaps it was not so embarrassing; difficult, yes, but not shameful. She had been pushing it away for months, mortified by its failure to play by rules of moral correctness. The integrity she had worked so hard for all her adult life was slipping further and further out of reach.

‘I’m supposed to be back with Barnaby,’ she mumbled helplessly.

‘Don’t go back,’ said Leif. His hand caressed her hair. He gently turned her face towards his. Posy had no more words, and surrendered to the kiss. Each second felt like a luxury, as her body relaxed completely, finally at ease with itself. Posy thought that she should feel dishonest, giving herself to a man who was not her boyfriend. But all she felt was truth, honesty and peace. She kissed Leif for a long time.

‘You know I love you,’ he murmured.

‘I love you too,’ said Posy, her head spinning pleasantly from cider and lust.

‘You don’t have to come and live in France. I can find work here.’

‘I might as well move to France,’ said Posy sadly. ‘MABO has lost all its funding. There is no more MABO.’

‘I know,’ replied Leif. ‘Godfrey told me. But it’s not possible. You can’t let your orchestra go.’

‘I’m not filling in any more Arts Council forms,’ said Posy. ‘I’m tired of all that. I’ve no fight left in me.’

‘You don’t have to fight,’ said Leif. ‘I’ve got an idea. Come with me.’

He took Posy by the hand and led her down the steps, back out to the noisy yard, where the sun was now setting.

‘Did Godfrey show you the big barn?’

‘No.’

‘It used to be full of vats, but they had to sell them.’

He led her round the back of one of the smaller barns she had passed earlier, and towards a long, low building that Posy had not noticed.

‘You could have your summer school here,’ said Leif. ‘It could be made into a fantastic rehearsal space.’

‘Godfrey wouldn’t want MABO taking over the farm every summer. And there’s Minty to think about too.’

‘I think you might be surprised. Godfrey has changed. You know, I think he was really lost before he came to Camargue Castle and met you and Tansy and all your adult beginners. You remember how late his piece was? How he was planning a percussion concerto, then something for electronics and computer, and it turned out to be an oboe concerto with two young guys improvising with microphones? It was not like anything he had ever written before. He has a new direction and he is longing to work more with amateurs.’

Posy was doubtful. She had assumed that Godfrey’s oboe concerto – like his ‘new direction’ – was merely a result of his passion for Tansy.

‘Come on, let’s go and ask him, and then I will take you to bed,’ said Leif.

Godfrey was delighted when Posy asked him about the barn. It turned out that he had been intending to convert it into a rehearsal space for some time, since the formation of his New Music ensemble, Double Helix. The ensemble, consisting of six of Britain’s foremost contemporary music performers, had dissolved following conflicts surrounding repertoire. Godfrey, who was providing financial backing, insisted on having a piece premiered at every concert, but despite their skill the players had struggled to get his pieces ready on time. Things had come to a head when he produced *Infinite Inferno*, a two hour-long music drama based on the climactic scene from his opera, and scored for a solo oboist who was also required to dance. The disappointment had contributed to Godfrey’s breakdown, and the sight of the empty barn seemed to symbolise his abandonment by musicians he had trusted. Now though, he leapt at the chance to bring new music to the Loxley Estate, on the one condition that he take on some sort of official position within the orchestra; Composer in Association perhaps, and that he would be able to write for MABO on a regular basis – at least one piece per year. On hearing that, Leif secretly squeezed Posy’s hand, and laughed. ‘Now, the boot is on the other foot. You will have to perform the music of Maxwell Minniver, while we return to the simplicity of Rameau,’ he whispered.

‘I’ll expect you to help,’ Posy retorted. ‘You’ll be Conductor in Association.’

She was joking, but Leif’s eyes lit up.

‘Great idea!’

Minty, meanwhile, wiped a tear from her eye.

‘You have no idea how much this means to me. Godfrey has been an absolute nightmare to live with for the last few years. Like a ship without a compass. And drinking like a fish....he hasn’t even had any friends, apart from hangers-on and a few PhD students who want to study his music. And none of them has even brought out a thesis. He thought he’d been forgotten! And now, he’s found inspiration and support! And thank God, he’s got a job! Heaven be praised.’

‘Composer in Association to the Millfields Adult Beginners Orchestra. That’s one in the eye for those Inner City Arts bastards.’

And the cider flowed.

It was midnight, but Posy could not resist phoning a friend to share her triumph. If Carrie were asleep, then it wouldn’t be a heavy sleep. She usually fed the baby round about this

time, anyway.

‘Hello?’

She sounded groggy.

‘It’s me!’

‘Posy? Are you OK?’

‘I’ve just had the most amazing experience. I’ve got to tell you about it.’

‘What?’

‘Godfrey has offered the use of his barn to MABO, to hold our summer school in. He’s going to be Composer in Association!’

‘That’s great news!’

‘And I’ve just had sex with Leif le Carré.’

The voice on the other end of the phone sharpened.

‘Posy, are you drunk?’

‘Not now,’ replied Posy, wrapping the candlewick bedspread around her as she opened the curtains a little, to look out at the black night.

‘I was a little bit, before. But now I’m sober.’

‘Are you sober enough to drive? You should get back here! How come Leif le Carré is at Godfrey’s farm? Is he stalking you?’

‘No, he’s in love with me.’

‘Well I knew that. But – Posy, you’ve been really silly! You’re with Barnaby now, remember!’

‘But listen, Carrie, you have no idea what an amazing lover he is.’

‘I’m sure he’s wonderful, but – ‘

Posy started to giggle. ‘Oh my God, you have no idea of the stuff we have done.’

Carrie was silent for a moment. Posy’s mind reeled pleasantly as she recalled her evening.

The slow caresses, the play fighting, the gorgeous submission, his patient determination to remove every last scrap of resistance until all Posy could do was grasp the bed head and let him slide into her and push until her insides were melting, her legs were shaking, and she was making embarrassing noises of pure joy.

‘That seems important now, but for a lasting relationship, it really isn’t. I mean, did I tell you that Fergus has terrible trouble with premature ejaculation? He comes straight away, but the thing is, it’s not important! You can’t use sex as a guide. At your stage in life, Posy, you need to settle down quick, with someone who...who reads the same newspaper as you, who has the same sort of education...sex doesn’t mean anything!’

Posy shuddered as she thought of Fergus in bed, premature ejaculation or no premature ejaculation.

‘You need to think about babies, Posy, and Barnaby is the one!’

Posy hiccupped.

‘Posy, you’re drunk, and you’ve just been a bit wild.’

‘Have I? It felt right. When I’m with Barnaby, it doesn’t feel right.’

‘Get back here tomorrow, and you’ll see, it does feel right. I’m sure Barnaby is ready for fatherhood. He’s been helping Fergus with Dante. They changed a nappy together today.

Barnaby even got wee in his eye, and he was okay about it!’

‘Oh, great,’ Posy replied, unimpressed. She looked down into the farmyard below, and saw the shadowy shape of the cat, slinking towards the kitchen door. The flap rattled and a few seconds later, the creature was sitting by her feet, looking expectantly at her lap. Posy patted her knees and it sprang into position, purring loudly. She stroked its black fur, cold from the night air, and could not bring herself to take on Carrie’s anxiety. She had had a perfectly triumphant day.

When Posy awoke the next morning, the triumphant feeling had gone. It was not replaced by anxiety or confusion, but by a calm sense that there was an important matter to be cleared up. She had to decide.

‘I’ve got to go back to London,’ she told her friends. ‘There’s a document I need to sign, it’s to do with the lease on the flat. I’ll be back tomorrow.’

