

Fir Cones and Pine Woods

Even as we're driving up the road I'm thinking this is a bad idea. My mouth is dry and I feel funny inside.

Leo is concentrating on the road. 'Here?'

I point ahead of us. 'Just down there, by the post box.'

Tom always used the post box as a landmark. It's right opposite the gate and it's usually easy to park in the road. Leo glances my way and smiles. I smile back but I don't want his gaze to linger so I look away quickly.

'Is this the same park where you take Judy for walks?'

'Yes. Not many people realise there's an entrance around here.'

'You said it was near but I never imagined it was this close.'

It seems odd that he didn't know the house actually backs onto the park. I've put this off for so long. Too long. I've been to Leo's place a million times. It's a rather clinical flat overlooking the hospital where we both work, not so much of a home, it's more of the place where Leo lives. He has few possessions and almost none of the trappings of life. We're

not very alike in that respect. I'm surrounded with piles. I don't mean to be. It just happens. I pile up some papers or some clothes ready to sort out and pop them on a chair. A month later, three months later, they're still waiting because I haven't got round to it yet. And there's another load on the top. It used to drive Tom mad.

Tom...

'Brilliant!' Leo's ecstatic cry jolts me back into the present. 'A parking place.' And the car glides into a custom made gap.

This is it. This is the moment I've been thinking about for weeks. He's never actually said anything, but Leo must have been wondering why it's taken me so long to invite him back to my place. He's never pressured me about it. That's what I like about Leo. He doesn't rush things.

As we walk up the path he reaches for my hand but I busy myself by looking in my bag for the front door key. My hand is trembling as I turn it in the lock.

We walk into the familiar hallway. It used to feel warm and comfortable, a kind of autumn fruit and berries feel. Fir cones and pine woods. I loved that smell. 'It's like a warm summer's day in the woods.'

Tom used to laugh when I said that. 'You're such an incurable romantic...'

It doesn't feel like that anymore. It's just a hallway.

I can feel Leo standing right behind me. I want to turn round and say, 'I can't do this. I'm not ready yet. Can you come back another day?'

'Aren't you going to invite me in?' he teases and the sound of his voice, dark velvet and gentle, makes my knees go weak.

As he closes the door behind us, I look up at him. Leo's eyes are so full of love when he looks at me. I wonder vaguely what he sees in mine. He pulls me towards him and his kiss on my lips is as fleeting as the brush of a butterfly's wings. I feel myself melting but for the first time, I'm not very comfortable with it.

I can feel Judy watching us. She's standing down the hall by the spare bedroom door, head on one side, wagging her tail. How odd. Why hasn't she come bounding up to meet us?

'Judy.'

That's funny. She's usually so friendly towards him. Too friendly, embarrassingly so sometimes.

'Oh dear,' Leo laughs, 'She doesn't seem to know how to react now that I'm on her territory.'

Neither do I.

We've often walked together, the three of us. Judy loves being with Leo. She couldn't understand it when Tom went. She kept looking for him by the back door, listening for the sound of his car by the front door, endlessly watching the front gate.

When we bumped into Leo in the park that day, she was almost hysterical with joy to meet him. It ushered us into a friendship which has deepened over the months but today she's holding back.

'What have you done, Judy?'

She puts her head down and looks at me through hooded eyes.

When I push open the bedroom door, the room is in utter chaos. It looks like a war zone. Somehow she's got everything out of the wardrobe. I tread on one of Tom's books as I walked inside. It's all chewed to pieces. Had he seen this, he would have been furious with her. And she knows it. She slinks over to a corner of the room and sits down with a small whine. Behind me, Leo let a little air escape from his mouth.

'Burglars?' he whispers.

'No,' I say jerking my head towards her. 'Judy.'

Judy was Tom's dog. He'd found her at the local dogs rescue centre. The offspring of a border collie and a retriever, she had an inquisitive face and bright button eyes. In the dog's home, Tom said she looked as innocent as a dove.

I pick up a chewed trouser leg and wince. 'Why, Judy?'

'We can soon clear it up,' Leo says soothingly.

'You don't understand,' I say sharply. 'Nobody is allowed to touch Tom's stuff.'

He looks slightly confused by my outburst but he doesn't reproach me... not the way everyone else does. Since Tom died, my sister and my friends never stop trying to make me get rid of his stuff.

'It's been three years, Amy,' my sister said. 'It's time to move on.'

'I don't need to move on,' I retorted. 'Tom was my life.'

She sighed in that exasperating way of hers. 'I'm not asking you to expunge him from your life...'

But that's how I felt.

I'm aware of a heavy silence in the room. Judy moves a little closer doing what Judy always does whenever she's caught red handed. She looks ashamed, so full of remorse I'm tempted to forgive her right away. Only this time it is a little more difficult.

'Let me help,' Leo says and he picks up a torn shirt.

It seems strange to see him with Tom's things but we began picking up and discarding the ruined clothes. Hardly anything is worth keeping now. We work slowly. It's as if Leo senses the way I feel. He's like than when we make love. He takes time. He makes me feel so special, holding back his own passion until he's sure I'm comfortable and able to enjoy our times together.

I'm staring at the back of his neck as he bends to pick up a sweater and the penny drops. I've fallen in love with him.

I've always thought of this as a cold room. I'd forgotten the way the afternoon sun filters through the curtain like that. Judy tries to lick my hand but I'm still too cross with her. 'Bad dog. Look what you've done.'

She looks at me like I've whipped her and I'm cut to the quick. I reach out my hand to stroke her and she welcomes it with embarrassing gratitude. She really loved Tom. So why has she done this?

I stop for a minute and watch Leo still stuffing the half eaten things into the bin liner. Judy is watching him too. All at once, it feels like he's stuffing Tom in that black bag. It feels like he and Judy are in this together. I feel horribly disloyal to my dead husband's memory. Didn't I once promise to love him forever?

Leo's eyes meet mine. 'Is this too painful for you?'

My heart turns to stone. He wants to get rid of Tom. He's just like all the others. Move on, move on... well perhaps I don't want to move on.

'Darling?' he sound anxious.

'I think you'd better go,' I say coldly.

'What?'

'This was a bad idea.' I can't look at him as I repeat, 'I think you'd better go.'

He doesn't argue. I'm waiting for the usual 'I know how much you loved Tom but he would have wanted you to be happy' stuff, but it doesn't come. He just drops the bin liner and moves quietly out of the room. Judy

follows him. I can hear her claws clip-clipping on the laminated floor as she follows him to the front door.

I look around the room. Everything is a mess. The sun has gone and the room is grey, empty. I shiver. I can hear Leo opening the front door. He really is going. Judy barks excitedly.

'No girl,' he says quietly. 'Stay.' And he closes the door.

Stay. She doesn't want to. She whines and waits for him to come back.

Stay. Stay here in this wrecked room, surrounded with broken dreams. Stay here with only the memories of Tom... I can't do it. I can't stay. I want to be with Leo. I want warmth and life. I want to live again.

Judy starts barking by the front door. She wants to be with Leo. He's already half way down the path and I know if I let him go today, there's a danger he won't come back.

'You're playing a game,' he once told me. 'You want people to persuade you it's all right to have a life of your own. You don't need approval. We all know how much you loved Tom. It's not a betrayal to love again.'

I dash down the hallway and fling open the front door. 'Wait!'

He stops by the gate and time stands still.

'Help me, Leo. I love you.'

That's funny. There's distinct smell of fir cones and pine woods in this hall.

He comes back up the path, not rushing but with a deliberate step and all the while his eyes never leave mine. He stands in front of me and I say it again. 'I love you, Leo.'

And the next minute I'm in his arms and I can feel Judy jumping up at us and barking excitedly as his lips close tenderly over mine.