

Epilogue

Two weeks later, Posy sat at an outside table at the Organic Bagel Bar. Opposite her sat Carrie, with Dante in his buggy. He was stuffing the head of a huge plastic dinosaur happily into his mouth, and making *yey, yey, yey* noises.

‘Show me the ring, then,’ said Carrie.

Posy offered her left hand. A large aquamarine surrounded with diamonds sparkled on her ring finger.

‘I know, it doesn’t fit in with my Personal Portfolio,’ she admitted.

‘Are you talking about the *Empowerment Through Clothes* course? Posy, that was back in the dark ages.’

Posy laughed. ‘My first choice was an amber stone in a copper ring.’

Carrie winced.

‘It seemed more in line with my identity. You know, sort of earthy and not very precious. And then I remembered: I’ve changed. I’m running off with the conducting Chippendale. Leif loves pale blue,’ she added.

‘Well, he’s a blonde,’ laughed Carrie.

Rhoda appeared at the table carrying a tray of coffees.

‘It’s a beautiful ring, Posy,’ she said. ‘Just what you deserve. I hope you’ll be getting married in some stunning white gown with lots of sequins.’

‘I might just do that, Rhoda. And there’s going to be lots of music at my wedding, too.

Bernard, Sébastien, Nicole and Norbert said they’ll play... and they even know an organist from Notre Dame, they’re going to twist his arm to come! Can you believe it? But... I do hope you might play something, Rhoda. The Swan, maybe?’

Rhoda sat down and sighed.

‘I’m sorry, Posy, I won’t be playing the cello at your wedding.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’ve given up. In fact, I’ve sold my cello.’

Posy had a terrible feeling of *déjà vu*. Things had come full circle; at the start of the course, she had been faced with Carrie leaving the orchestra. Somehow she had overcome this. She could not do it again.

‘Why?’ she demanded.

‘Because...I’ve decided I can serve the orchestra better in a different capacity. I hope you

agree with this plan, Posy. But I'd like to run a crèche.'

Carrie sat up a little straighter, her eyes bright.

'Tell us more!'

'Well, if this orchestra is to be truly inclusive, we need to acknowledge that many talented adult beginners have young children or babies who would otherwise prevent them from attending our summer school. I realised on our course that we could organise ourselves to cope with this. Of course as a therapist I am fully qualified to work with children, but I will look into the idea of training for others within MABO who might be interested. We take it in turns, skipping the odd rehearsal to help run the crèche. It's not an impossible dream.'

'Fantastic!' said Carrie. 'That means I can come back!'

'But hang on!' retorted Posy. 'Rhoda, you've sacrificed your own musicianship for this. It can't be right.'

Rhoda was stirring her cappuccino intently.

'Has something happened? Rhoda?'

Rhoda tapped the side of the cup with her spoon.

'I had a conversation. A conversation with Leif,' she said softly. 'In the middle of the course. He came to see me one day. He told me... he told me he knew I was miming.'

Posy and Carrie looked at each other.

'Well – you don't mime all the time,' protested Posy.

There was a pause.

'Do you?'

'Oh, Posy, you've no idea. You are too kind-hearted. But I'm just no good. I don't practise and I'm just hopeless at music. I still can't read a note. I just love being in MABO for the social life, and that's why I've been tagging along, no use to anyone in a musical sense. Well Leif rumbled me. You know how charmingly frank he can be. He said I was sabotaging your work, Posy. Because of so-called 'players' like me, MABO might fail to impress those workshop people and we could lose all our funding. He couldn't bear the idea of seeing you fail.'

Posy gave a wry smile.

'It's at that point that I realised how much he loved you, my dear,' continued Rhoda, warming her hands on the coffee cup. 'He dared to confront an old dragon like me.'

'What old dragon?'

A deep, male voice resounded from the doorway of the Bagel Bar. Alexander Hamilton! With smiles and kisses all round, Alexander joined the women at their table.

‘I’m so glad I found you,’ he said, pulling his chair in. ‘I was worried you’d moved away, Posy. Maybe gone off to France or deepest Worcestershire.’

‘Ah, no,’ explained Posy, ‘I’m still living just off Millfields High Road. It’s Barnaby who’s moved out.’

There was an awkward silence as they all imagined a forlorn Barnaby being kicked out of the flat.

‘He’s moved to Richmond,’ said Carrie. ‘So Fergus and me can keep an eye on him. Well actually, Fergus is just hoping Barnaby will be our babysitter.’

‘It will do them both a lot of good,’ said Rhoda. ‘It’s about time they had a proper idea of what looking after a baby entails. Barnaby will have all his greatest fears confirmed.’

‘Ah, it’s not that hard,’ said Alexander mischievously.

‘You say that because you have a talent,’ Rhoda replied. ‘In fact, I’m hoping to recruit you to a scheme I’m starting up within the orchestra.’

Alexander looked down at the table and frowned. Rhoda continued.

‘A crèche! You’ll be happy to know, I’m no longer blighting the cello section with my terrible playing.’

Alexander gave her a look.

‘With my terrible *miming*,’ Rhoda corrected herself. ‘I’ve sold my instrument, and I intend from now on to play a purely administrative and pastoral role within MABO. I will make your job so much easier, Alexander!’

He laughed. ‘Well, Rhoda, I’ve some news of my own.’

Once again, Posy was affected by a sinking sensation in her solar plexus.

‘I’m leaving; going back to the profession.’

‘You’ve joined an orchestra?’ demanded Carrie.

‘No – not an orchestra. A string quartet.’

The women’s eyebrows shot upwards.

‘Wow – that’s amazing. One that we know?’

‘The Caccinis.’

‘Well I never,’ said Rhoda.

‘Really? That’s great,’ added Carrie.

They smiled at his incessant modesty; Posy was aware that the Caccini String Quartet had won several awards and had recently been named Artists in Residence at a Swiss music festival.

‘When do you start?’ she asked.

‘My first rehearsal is this evening. They’re picking me up here, and then we bomb straight off to Manchester.’

‘Manchester?’

‘Oh, yes. That’s where they’re based. They do a lot of tutoring up there. Masterclasses.’

‘I had no idea,’ said Posy.

‘It’s the best thing for you, my dear,’ said Rhoda, ‘I always knew you needed to get back into music properly. You’re a talented man.’

There was a pause while the news sunk in. Alexander was leaving MABO, leaving London, and returning to his old life as a professional musician. Posy wasn’t sure how to feel. She’d been under the impression that he’d had enough of the professional grind and had now thoroughly committed himself to working with amateurs. Maybe his negative experiences on the summer school explained his change of heart: betrayed by not one but two women. He must be desperate for an escape route. Posy looked sideways at Carrie, wondering if she was having the same thoughts. Eventually, Rhoda spoke.

‘You will be back for the wedding of the century?’

Alexander laughed and for a moment, took Posy’s hand.

‘I wouldn’t miss it for the world.’

‘It’ll be next June,’ said Posy.

‘So you’ll be around for Dante’s first birthday party, too!’ Carrie blurted, and then looked uncomfortable.

‘Yes,’ confirmed Alexander, ‘I certainly can’t miss that. He’s a fantastic little chap.’

Dante said *yey yey yey*, and threw the dinosaur at Alexander’s head. He caught it and gave a wry smile.

‘I’m sorry you’re leaving,’ said Carrie.

Alexander said nothing, and Posy saw the muscles in his jaw twitch, while his eyes maintained their friendly brightness.

The traffic droned past on Millfields High Road, and a light breeze stirred the foam clinging to the sides of the coffee cups. A slightly battered navy blue estate car pulled up in front of the café. In the driver’s seat there was a young woman, Scandinavian-looking, with two blonde plaits and a sporty, grey-marl T shirt.

‘It’s Mikaila,’ said Alexander. ‘Second violin.’

Posy then noticed that there was a small, old-fashioned suitcase at one side of his chair, and his violin, in its brown oblong case, at the other. He picked them up in either hand and rose to his feet.

‘Well, then,’ he said.

Carrie, Posy and Rhoda looked up. Carrie stood abruptly and accidentally pushed her chair over; Posy caught it before it could clatter to the ground.

‘Alexander, I –’ began Carrie.

Dante began to cry.

‘I just want to say -’

‘No need. Look – I’d better go.’

The blonde girl beeped the horn and gave a friendly wave.

Alexander began walking away.

‘I really am sorry you’re leaving,’ Carrie called.

He opened the passenger seat of the navy blue car and got in.

‘Really sorry. Goodbye, Alexander.’

Posy saw him look back at Carrie and give a small wave.

‘Look,’ said Carrie softly, sitting back down. ‘They’re all women.’

As the car drove away, Posy was able to make out the outlines of the two back seat passengers; they were clearly female, but then Posy knew that. She was aware that the Caccini String Quartet had been an all-girl formation for some years.

‘Yes,’ agreed Rhoda, ‘so stop feeling guilty and bad, both of you. He’ll be perfectly okay.

That blonde has probably got her eye on him already. Mikaila Petersson. She’s just split up with her husband, I believe.’

Carrie hauled Dante out of his buggy and sat the whimpering baby on her knee. A whiff of dirty nappy emanated from his warm little bottom.

‘I know. I should be happy,’ Carrie said as she groped for her nappy bag. ‘And I am. I have my family: Fergus and Dante. We are still together.’

She fumbled for a nappy, looking around to see if there were any other customers nearby who might be offended by seeing a baby changed on one of the wooden cafe tables. Her mouth was turning downwards; she looked anything but happy. And yet, Posy sensed that things had come right for Carrie. Dante now had an adoring father to provide emotional security. She thought of the sacrifices her friend would have to make, then thought of her future with Leif. For Posy, the sacrifices were over.

THE END