

Chapter Eight

That evening, Posy met Alexander in the bar, a facility for which the orchestra was paying dearly. It was basic, but quite cosy, and offered a good variety of authentic local beers, decent red wine, and the usual spirits.

‘So,’ began Posy, carrying a glass of Merlot over to a little table, ‘how are you feeling?’

‘You know, I really feel okay,’ replied Alexander. ‘I mean, it was tough, but by the end of the rehearsal I felt as though I’d started to get through to them. I’m quite ashamed of myself though, in a way.’

‘Ashamed? Whatever do you mean?’

‘All the nasty things I’ve said about conductors. There is an art to taking a full rehearsal. Just stopping them talking is a major challenge. The waving your arms about bit is quite easy.’

‘It takes a while to figure out what people can do,’ sighed Posy, ‘and what they can’t.’

‘Yes,’ he replied, and for a few moments there was a silence in which Posy realised that the standard of the Millfields Adult Beginners Orchestra had shocked their new leader.

‘We do take the inclusivity thing very seriously,’ Posy said by means of an explanation.

‘And so you should,’ said Alexander. ‘Don’t apologise for your principles, Posy. I am quite behind them.’

He gave her a warm smile. Posy noticed that he had changed his clothes, had obviously showered, and seemed daisy-fresh. That slightly nutmeggy smell was in the air; faint, and very pleasant.

‘I saw you out jogging this morning,’ she said.

‘Oh Lord! Did you notice me collapse in a heap on my way back from the woods?’

‘No, I just watched you jogging through the gardens. You looked very fit to me.’

‘Fit, no. Sorry. I do try, though. But I haven’t been keeping it up. I got a terrible cramp on my way back! I had to lie down on the lawn for ten minutes and pummel my calf muscles.’

‘You poor thing! I should have come and rescued you.’

‘That’s kind of you; but no, I was okay. Do you like to jog? You could come out with me tomorrow morning if you like.’

Posy panicked.

‘Oh, er, no, I don’t jog.’

‘Very wise. I only do it because it seems to help with the old mental health. Rhoda actually recommended it. I’ve been seeing her since I gave up music professionally, did I tell you?’

Part of me regrets letting it go, I suppose, and I do get a bit down at times.'

Posy was curious to know more, but Alexander brushed her concern aside.

'Now tell me about you. What sort of exercise do you prefer?'

'I, er, I ...' she thought hard. 'I occasionally go to the Millfields Baths. I like to plough up and down the lanes when it's not too busy. Which is maybe once a month...'

Alexander was smiling at her.

'Not a keep-fit freak,' he commented ironically.

'Oh God, no. And I'm sure it must show.'

'Certainly not. You look as fit and healthy as any young woman. I can't stand this obsession with being skinny. It's not good for a girl to be too thin.'

He looked embarrassed, as if he had revealed too much. But for Posy, he had revealed just enough. If he had opinions on girls' bodies, and especially if he preferred the more rounded type, then it seemed unlikely that he could be gay.

'So your girlfriend isn't the skinny type,' she pushed on, emboldened.

'I wish I could say No, she's a voluptuous red-head, but that's just a fantasy of mine,'

Alexander smiled, taking a sip of his red wine while still looking Posy in the eye. 'I'm afraid there's no girlfriend in my life at the moment. Shame.'

Posy smiled and tore open a pack of Nobby's Nuts.

'Have a Nobby,' she laughed. 'And here's to healthy bodyweights!'

Posy returned to her luxurious room at ten thirty; many of the players were obviously intending to drink far into the night, but Posy had too much work to do. There had been a couple of letters waiting for her, and she sat on the bed to read them, her spectacles perched on the end of her nose. One envelope made her particularly nervous. It was long and white with a window, and had a faint red stamp on it with the words Inner City Arts, and a heraldic logo. It was probably just some formality, some form asking for feedback or another time wasting thing. But as Posy read, she felt the blood draining away from her face.

Re: Grant for MABO Summer school

Dear Miss Gibson,

Thank you for your letter acknowledging receipt of your grant for this year's Summer school.

We wish you every success with the course.

I am writing to you now to reiterate the conditions attached to the release of your Maintenance Grant for the following year. As you know there have been some changes at Inner City Arts, and every organisation whom we fund must meet the a strict set of criteria which has already been outlined in full at the annual conference on May 13th. These are the terms attached to your Maintenance Grant:

Posy's brow furrowed; she remembered that there had been an invitation to a conference, but she had not known that there was to be any discussion of funding. It had been a busy week and Posy had opted not to go. She recalled a pleasant, informal meeting with Chief Executive Derek Flowerdew, where she had been assured that the grant enabling MABO to continue for another year was quite safe. MABO's emphasis on working within the community meant that it was almost impossible for Inner City Arts to cut its funding without causing a riot. She read on:

The Summer school must give rise to three or more school workshops in the Warwickshire area. These may be junior or secondary state schools. All workshops will be subject to scrutiny by an Independent Observer.

The orchestra must be entirely constituted of amateur adult beginners with no deputising professionals.

Please send proof of workshop bookings by the end of the Summer school, July 29th. I enclose a form for your signature, confirming that the orchestra is entirely made up of amateurs.

Yours,

Derek Flowerdew.

Chief Music Officer, Inner City Arts.

Posy realised that she felt cold and shivery, and decided to get into bed, plumping up the

innumerable pillows and trying to make the most of the sparse blankets. She sat there, huddled with her arms around her knees, and stared at the letter with a growing sense of paralysis. Three school workshops, to be booked within a week; that would be hard enough to secure when MABO was at its strongest, but with Carrie absent and the orchestra sounding completely incompetent, how could she possibly achieve this? Posy couldn't believe she had been stupid enough to miss the conference in May, where she would have been forewarned of the need to secure these workshops. She realised she had been naïve to view the summer school as an achievement in its own right; she had assumed that the grant paying for it was a reward for the hard work the orchestra had done within the Millfields community over the past year. But MABO were expected to pay the funding body back with yet more proof of their usefulness, their worth. At a loss for what to do, she opened the other envelope, similarly long and white. It was another letter from Derek Flowerdew.

Dear Ms Gibson,

Further to my letter of 19th July, I am writing to assure you of my support in your efforts to meet the Inner City Arts funding criteria. I have personally arranged for three Heads of Music from the Warwickshire area to visit the MABO summer school on the first weekend, so they can observe workshops and attend the Saturday concert. I have spoken to them all and have passed on the warmest recommendations for your work. I am confident that all the necessary bookings will be secured.

Posy flung the letter down on the bed along with her reading glasses. In a way, it was good news, and yet she felt angry beyond measure. The summer school was not meant to be observed, judged, used as a means of securing further engagements, so she did not appreciate Derek Flowerdew's help in achieving this. It was still a case of being made to jump through hoops, with a little patronising help to make it all seem perfectly reasonable. She thought back to the disastrous first rehearsal, earlier that day. It had already crossed her mind to cancel the informal concert planned for the first weekend, perhaps have a party instead. It seemed doubtful that the musicians would be able to scrape their way through the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony. Still, Hugh Norbury's workshop had gone better, with people being sent off to contemplate objects of natural beauty in the grounds of Camargue Castle, and coming back with little haiku to forge into a communal composition.

After this bombshell, there was no possibility of sleep. Posy wandered over to her window, and tried to open one of the sliding inner panels to reach the outer layer of glass. With some effort, the panel budged, and immediately the sounds of the night met her ears; the faint, distant drone of traffic, some drunken shouting in the village, and closer, the laughter of MABO players drifting out of the bar back to their rooms. Suddenly she felt lonely, and longed for the comforting company of her friends. Posy closed the window and checked her appearance in the mirror. Her hair needed a bit of fluffing up, and her eyes did look a little tired; she went to the bathroom and ran her face cloth under the hot tap, then blotted her face with it, enjoying the intense but rapidly dissipating heat, the sense of renewal and refreshment. Her skin felt tight afterwards, and she massaged a little face cream in - Pond's, as she'd always used since being a teenager. Her cheeks had regained their colour. Posy grabbed her mirror-work shoulder bag, stuffed the offending letter inside it, and left her room, walking purposefully towards the bar. However bad the trouble was, it was better shared with friends. And perhaps Alexander would still be there; he might have some helpful insights, or at least, words of encouragement.

To her surprise and disappointment, as she pushed open the door, the bar seemed to be almost empty. In one corner she could make out the pale skinned, dark-haired figure of percussionist Neil Havers, nursing a pint of beer and several empty pint glasses. Next to him sat the young clarinettist Zoe Cavendish, with what looked like a gin and tonic, and like Neil, several empty glasses. The bar man had been too busy to go round clearing the tables. Zoe appeared to be laughing and yet half asleep, slumping forwards and running her hands through her crimson hair. Neil was looking at her sideways. Posy could see that Zoe had one of her hands on Neil's thigh. He seemed passive, as if unsure of how to deal with a drunken girl at least a decade younger than himself, and yet it was clear that he would rather be nowhere else. She heard Neil murmur something to his young companion, and once more she cracked up with laughter, this time sending an empty glass skittering onto the floor. Posy winced as the barman looked up.

'Sorry,' Neil called.

'No worries,' replied the man.

'They are drunk,' came a voice, and Posy spun round. It was Leif le Carré!

'She is too young to be taking in so much gin and tonic, and your percussionist, he should not be buying her so many *boissons*.'

Leif was seated at a nearby table, alone. On the red and white checked tablecloth was a

slender bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon, and a single glass. No sign of anything as commonplace as Nobby's Nuts.

'Mademoiselle Ma Beau. I mean, Mademoiselle Gibson. *Viens*. Would you like a glass of wine?'

'No,' replied Posy instinctively. Leif was the last person in the world that she wanted to meet; she had been hoping for the companionship of old friends. She had no desire for a tense, combative exchange with an arrogant French conductor.

'*Allez, viens!*' encouraged Leif. 'I want to 'ear about your day. Come and share some wine with me.'

Posy stiffly nodded; after all, there was no-one else to sit with, and she had no intention of playing gooseberry to Neil and his new girlfriend, one of the very ladies he had seemed so desperate to evade, after his tiring journey.

'The wine is shit, but you know, beggars cannot be choosers,' commented Leif cheerfully. He called for another glass, and poured some for Posy and himself.

'*Santé*,' he said, as Posy grudgingly chinked the rim of her glass against his. It felt like toasting the humiliation of her beloved MABO.

'Cheers,' she responded stubbornly, unwilling to take on the French way of doing things, as if that might suggest the inferiority of the English.

'*Alors*,' said Leif, combing back his ash blonde hair with the outspread fingers of one hand in that vain gesture which Posy hated. 'How did your rehearsal go, without a conductor?'

His voice seemed less mocking than before, and Posy hesitated. She took a sip of wine. Suddenly she felt very tired and couldn't be bothered to lie.

'It was challenging,' she said diplomatically. 'The problem was not with Alexander,' she added hurriedly. 'It was to do with people really struggling with their parts. Alexander is new to MABO and he didn't expect that they wouldn't have practised.'

'Wait,' said Leif, looking confused. 'you mean, he thought that they would have practiced?'

'*Oui*,' replied Posy without thinking. 'I mean, yes. He was a bit taken aback that they hadn't really prepared. You see the thing is, they can't work out how their parts should go without someone telling them. Some of them can barely read music.'

'*Mon Dieu*,' said Leif softly, and Posy sighed angrily. 'Like it or not, Monsieur Le Carré, that is the entire point of our orchestra. To give people a chance who would otherwise be locked out of the musical world completely. You would be amazed how well this can work! It's just - it's just that the early stages can be very hard.'

Leif was still looking at Posy with great curiosity. '*Alors*,' he said, 'what's the problem? You

‘ave two weeks of intensive rehearsals ahead of you. Alexandre will get used to the players, and gradually, they will learn. Though I pity your poor ears.’

‘Well, it’s not a problem, I didn’t say it was,’ said Posy crossly.

‘Then why are you sad? Why are you ‘ere at all, you should be in bed, ‘aving sweet dreams.’

Posy was very perturbed at the way the conversation was going deeper and deeper into her personal troubles; it was as if she had agreed to get into a car with Leif and he was driving it down narrower and narrower streets, refusing to stop until he reached the hidden centre of some mysterious maze - the maze that was Posy’s mind. She reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out the hateful letter.

‘This came for me today,’ she said, still doubting whether she could trust Leif. In the back of her mind was the possibility that he might betray her, use any weaknesses against her, against MABO.

‘Let me look,’ he said, and pulled out a little pair of reading glasses from the pocket of his black jeans. They had narrow, rectangular lenses with striking black rims, and gave Leif a particularly European air of rigorous academicism.

‘Ah, it’s from the funding board, *n’est-ce pas?*’ he commented with a dry chuckle. ‘*Zut*, what sort of shit are they hitting you with? *Merde....merde...*’ he continued to read and mutter under his breath. Posy felt strangely comforted by the fact that he seemed to recognise the imminent disaster implied by the letter immediately.

‘Let me help you,’ said Leif, turning to Posy and placing the letter on the table decisively.

‘Some of my musicians can play within your orchestra.’

Posy gasped. ‘Certainly not!’ she shot back. ‘We do not need your players. That is absolutely not the point of MABO. We can create a high-quality musical experience on our own! Without the help of professionals.’

Leif shrugged. ‘*Peut-être*. But you have, how do you say, a deadline? You cannot create a high-quality musical experience by this Saturday. Or you would not be so worried.’

Posy sighed, defeated by his logic. ‘It’s so unfair,’ she railed. ‘The results of our work, the benefits, go so far beyond concert performances – I mean, our concerts are good...but it’s the confidence-building, the teamwork, the sense of belonging, the sheer inspiration of being involved with music. Can’t these people see that we’re achieving all that? Why do we have to go on proving ourselves in ... measurable ways?’

‘Because you need their money,’ responded Leif agreeably. ‘Why don’t you just become a little ... hard, a little mercenary? You know you are doing good work, well, it’s good in your view. *Alors*, take my offer. We can bolster the orchestra, we will make you sound

magnifique.'

Posy felt more and more flustered, pressurised, and regretful that she had confided in Leif.

'I said no,' she repeated.

'As you wish,' said Leif, finishing off his glass of wine with another Gallic shrug. He put the empty glass firmly down on the table, and Posy hoped that he would decide to leave.

However, she detected a slight hesitancy. For a moment, she was sure that his all-round super-confidence had deserted him.

'I mean,' he added out of nowhere, 'we all have to fight for our funds. Even my orchestra, L'OEIL. Mostly, rich art lovers subscribe to our concerts, *le President* and all his friends. But in order to tour, ah, then you have to contend with these councils. We are being paid by Midlands Arts to do these rehearsals and the concert in Warwick.'

'Why are they paying you?' asked Posy bluntly. 'I mean, what good are you bringing to the community?'

'Nothing whatsoever,' grinned Leif, with pride. 'That is not what an orchestra is for. We are not a hospital bus service, or a programme for children with learning difficulties.'

'Quite,' said Posy scornfully. 'People requiring those services are totally locked out of your orchestra. And probably can't get to your gigs.' She took an emboldening swig of wine. 'So why *are* Midlands Arts paying you?'

'Because we are premiering a masterpiece by a local composer,' shrugged Leif, refilling his glass from the slim green bottle.

'Ahh,' said Posy, beginning to understand. 'Godfrey Maxwell-Minniver.'

'Well, we assume it is a masterpiece,' continued Leif, talking more quickly and looking a little less phlegmatic. 'We don't actually know because the piece has not yet been delivered.'

'He hasn't finished it?'

'*Non*. I suspect that he has barely begun.'

'Oh dear. That doesn't sound very professional.'

'He is an artist,' protested Leif. 'But he's being a little difficult.'

'Difficult?' snorted Posy. 'I could have told you that! The man is an odious pig. His pieces are all dire, and if it were up to him, music would be a museum culture.'

Leif looked uncomfortable. 'Well, I don't disagree with all of his opinions. He wants to protect music from being turned into a cheap commodity, full of quotations from popular culture. Drum kits with orchestras! Electric guitars with string quartets. *Merde*. And failing standards all round. Quite simply, he believes in excellence.'

'A perfectionist,' sneered Posy, 'which is why he can't get his piece finished. He's agonising

over whether that quintuplet in bar five is in the time of six demisemiquavers or seven.’

Leif frowned as if calculating the logic of this.

‘*Non, non*, a quintuplet is five notes in the time of four,’ he said.

‘Oh, you are old-fashioned,’ Posy mocked.

‘It’s not important,’ retorted Leif, again sounding less composed than previously. He was obviously rattled about the lateness of the score. ‘The thing is, Maxwell-Miniver is working on a piece of major importance in his *oeuvre*. He told me that. This is the most significant piece he’s written since the Five Beckett Meditations.’

‘Gosh, they came out in the eighties, didn’t they?’

‘Yes. *Alors*, I must be patient. I understand the creative struggle he is going through.’

‘But you can’t wait forever. You’ve booked this expensive venue for your rehearsals, and the concert is – when?’

‘On the final Saturday of the fortnight.’

‘Right. But that’s tons of rehearsal time, isn’t it? British orchestras only give a new piece a couple of days’ rehearsal if they’re lucky! I mean, ten days! Surely that’s more than you need.’

‘*Oui, oui*, you’re right,’ Leif agreed, but continued to look anxious. He waved his right hand expressively in the air as if searching for the words to explain a delicate situation. ‘And we do have other things from the concert to work on. But this piece... you know... he is forging a new musical language. He told me that he has developed a whole new form of musical notation.’

‘Ah. Right. Could be tricky,’ sympathised Posy, feeling gleefully smug. This was beginning to sound like a disaster on the same scale as her own troubles with MABO.

She noticed that Leif was rummaging in his black ruck-sack.

‘*Regard*,’ he said, pulling out some manuscript paper. ‘This is an example of what he has sent me. These were just ideas.’

Posy fished her own spectacles out of her bag, and scrutinised the paper. She quickly realised that Godfrey Maxwell-Minniver was using a system of quarter-tones, notes which were so close to each other in pitch that you could barely distinguish one from another. For some of the players this would mean completely new fingerings, new keys to depress, new blowing techniques...and that was assuming they could decipher the hieroglyphics in Godfrey’s score. ‘There’s an established method of notating quarter tones nowadays. Why has he invented all these new signs?’ she wondered.

On the paper were a spidery scrawl of inky music notes, with tiny fractions written either

above or below the note-heads.

‘What is that?’ muttered Posy to herself, holding the paper closer to her eyes. ‘That says a quarter. Right. So that’s a little bit higher than an A flat. And this one – is that an eighth? My God! It will just sound like an out-of-tune A flat.’

‘Heh, you may be right. I must admit, my players, they are not so used to avant-garde music. They are not like your MABO.’

‘Well, MABO are certainly used to novel forms of musical notation. Some of our players can’t read proper music when they join, so you have to find some way of telling them what to do.’

‘But that wouldn’t work for most music!’ said Leif sardonically. ‘You cannot put a written message saying ‘Play a high C. Hold it for two beats. Now play a D. Now an E. Now stop playing. Now do the same thing but louder...’ *Comprends? C’est ridicule.*’

‘*Oui*, I mean, yes,’ said Posy, ‘but my players can now read music properly. We gave them the chance. They learnt. But in the early days, they did pieces with more open scores. It fired their enthusiasm for playing in an ensemble. And so they progressed.’

She felt she had scored a small triumph. Leif shrugged sceptically and drank more wine.

‘Well maybe *I* need *your* players to help with this new piece.’

Posy looked at him, shocked. He started to laugh.

‘Ha, ha, only joking! We will be fine. Maybe the score will come in the post tomorrow.’

‘Let’s hope so,’ said Posy. She had started to feel depressed again; after the little diversion of their lively discussion, she remembered her dilemma.

‘But as I said,’ continued Leif as if reading her mind, ‘we can help you in your concert if you like. You will easily get the funding, because you will sound so good.’

Posy stood up, draining her wine glass.

‘I said, no thank you,’ she said firmly, though the effects of the wine made her sway a little from one foot to the other, ‘we can do it on our own. It would be totally unethical to get professional help. *Secret* professional help! It would fly in the face of everything we stand for.’

Leif stood up, too.

‘Can I see you to your room?’ he asked. Posy blushed at his chivalry – it seemed so genuine, and yet she was accustomed to responding negatively to such patronising offers of unnecessary help.

‘No, I’m fine,’ she said, wondering if she was being rude. With Leif le Carré, she didn’t feel so sure of the rules any more. ‘I mean, thank you, but I can see myself there.’

‘Well, okay. Good night. And sleep well.’

Posy thought that last comment was sarcastic, a punishment for her not accepting his devious, dishonest offer. As she walked to the door, she suddenly noticed Neil Havers and Zoe making their way out. Zoe was leaning heavily on Neil, who was struggling a little with her weight.

‘I don’t think she’ll make it to rehearsals tomorrow,’ said Neil, casually. Posy’s heart sank.

This was the last thing she needed.

‘Not sure I’ll be there in the morning, either. But I’ll make sure I send out some Tweets.’

He didn’t seem at all concerned about the effect of his absence on the orchestra as a whole; it was as if this course was just about fun, personal pleasure, nothing more important. Feeling a wave of despair, Posy was tempted to argue with Neil, beg him to attend, but she decided against it. She had no desire to become a Matron-figure to the orchestra; she felt she had no right to presume authority. She was just the co-ordinator, the person behind the scenes. With a long sigh, she made her way to the Kingsbury Suite for another restless night.