

Chapter Eleven

Posy returned to her room, her mind reeling. She badly needed to process the trauma of the new situation with Alexander. Part of her felt wretched, having for once got what she wanted, only to find that she wasn't sure she wanted it. But there was no time to think about this. She needed to contact Carrie and invite her to Camargue Castle, and round up her main supporters in the orchestra and hope that they would go along with this crazy plan. Posy worked out that it would take Carrie at least an hour to get home, so Rhoda was her first port of call.

'A baby? Here on the course?' was Rhoda's first response, her face alarmingly blank.

'Who would look after it?'

'Well, Carrie would look after it,' replied Posy.

'And who would look after Carrie?'

'We would look after Carrie.'

'When? During rehearsals? During our tea break? I'm sorry, Posy, I just don't understand.'

'Carrie is cracking up!' said Posy with urgency, feeling as though she were cracking up herself. 'We can't leave her on her own. I can't leave the course. Someone has to take control, or we might find that our former leader has topped herself or abandoned her child!'

'Or done some harm to it,' muttered Rhoda grimly, looking downwards and frowning. 'Yes. Yes, Posy, you're right. It's the least we can do. We are a large community of adults. If we cannot integrate a vulnerable young mother and her baby, then we are a very poor lot.'

'Oh, Rhoda!' gasped Posy. 'Thank you. Thank you for supporting me. I thought I was going mad. But it's the only answer. It is, isn't it?'

'It is, my dear, because the good old NHS is not an answer right now, goodness me, no. Keep her away from the quacks. I'll set up a couch in my room!'

Posy stared for a moment, confused, before recalling that Rhoda's experience as a therapist may well be useful at this point, as well as her ability to push a buggy around the gardens.

'I'll go and ring Carrie and say that we want her to come. But how will she get here?'

'Phil will go to fetch her in the car. Don't worry about a thing! This will all work out!'

By late afternoon, it had all been organised, and Phil was driving the Volvo back to London, armed with a flask of strong coffee, some sandwiches for his tea, and a complex map

showing how to get from the M25 to Carrie's house in Richmond. After waving him goodbye, Posy and Rhoda sat on the grass outside the hall, staring at the empty driveway and listening to the sound of the departing car getting fainter and fainter.

'I do hope he doesn't go wrong,' murmured Rhoda. 'You can't just crawl along in the left hand lane on the M25, or you could get swept off to goodness knows where.'

'He doesn't like switching lanes, does he?' said Posy.

'No. I'm worried he'll end up on the Essex coast. I do hope he remembers to top up with petrol.'

Posy took her friend's hand. 'He'll be fine,' she said. 'He's got his mobile phone. And he is an experienced driver.'

'That used to count for something,' said Rhoda wistfully. 'But these days it's all about how fast you can go. Safety, courtesy...none of these things seems to matter any more.'

She looked at Posy and suddenly smiled brightly. 'But I'm not going to let petty anxieties get on top of me. This is pure projection! It's *me* that doesn't like driving. Phil loves it.'

'That's the spirit,' Posy replied.

Rhoda staggered to her feet.

'Ooh, I mustn't keep sitting on the floor,' she grumbled, 'I keep forgetting that I can't get up.'

'Where are you going?'

'To work on my contribution to the joint composition. I did find some interesting sounds this afternoon. Different layers of sound – counterpoint really – there was the drone of the lawnmower against the splash of ducks – really rhythmic! And then I heard Amina humming to herself; it sounded like a Turkish lullaby. If only I could capture these things on paper.

Hugh makes it sound so easy. What did you do earlier?'

Posy felt her cheeks blushing scarlet. What had she done? Had she done any work whatsoever? Or just messed around with a handsome man in the woods?

'Er, my sound was a bit comical,' she said quickly, feeling bad for her imminent betrayal of George's private moment. 'It was George, farting.'

Rhoda hooted with laughter. 'And how are we going to work that into the piece?'

'I was hoping Hugh might help me figure it out.'

'Not long to dinner,' said Rhoda, straightening her capacious floral skirt. 'You are coming, aren't you?'

'Yes,' replied Posy. 'But I want to be waiting here for when Carrie arrives.'

'That won't be for a good four hours. Come on and eat. Oh! I say. Don't look now.'

Rhoda gestured to the far corner of the hall. There again was Leif le Carré, with his mobile phone clamped tightly to his left ear. With his right hand, he was raking at his long, blonde hair, repeatedly pushing it out of his eyes, only to have it fall back over his face. Posy noticed that he was looking more unkempt than usual. His black T-shirt had worked its way out of his trousers, and she could see a strip of smooth, toffee-coloured skin.

‘We absolutely must begin tomorrow,’ Leif was saying. ‘You know, if we can’t start very soon, I can’t guarantee that the performance will be of the best quality. And, you know, I believe that Godfrey’s music deserves the finest premiere it can get. That’s what my orchestra is ‘ere for.’

Posy felt a pang of pity. He was being so polite, so respectful. And someone was taking the piss.

‘Please. Just the first movement, then – at least we can get started on it. Can you send that?’ He listened and raked his hand through his hair, again.

‘But, you know, there’s a completely radical system of notation in this piece – Godfrey explained it to me. My players need to learn the system.’

Then, Leif smiled.

‘What? He is not using the new system? Ah, *bon!* Well, that will help us enormously. If it’s just standard notation – ‘

The smile dropped from his face, as if tiny invisible hands were pulling his cheeks downwards.

‘A *different* system? To go with the *electronics*? But he didn’t mention electronics. We don’t have... we don’t have the equipment... tape machines, speakers, we’re not set up for that...’ Leif’s right hand scrunched at a mass of hair on top of his head, and Posy saw a few blonde strands drifting to the ground.

‘*Live* electronics? You mean we ‘ave to coordinate with a computer? And who will operate the computer? Ah! I see. Godfrey himself will do the mixing.’

Once more, Leif looked relieved. ‘So no doubt he will want to start rehearsing as soon as possible... that’s good... yes, we can cope with the electronics... as long as Godfrey comes soon and brings a full score and all the parts. We just have to start rehearsing!’

He took the phone away from his ear and looked at it, through narrowed eyes, then shook his head.

Posy watched him intently, and then felt the side of her face burning. Rhoda had been looking at her for the last minute.

‘I just feel so sorry for him,’ explained Posy.

‘Hmm,’ responded Rhoda, and left for the dining room.

At that moment, Leif looked up, straight into Posy’s observing eyes.

‘It’s going to be okay!’ he called. ‘I think it will work.’

The evening was growing dark and chilly, and Posy found herself sitting on the same bank of grass, her arms wrapped around her knees, gazing at the road. She was determined to be there at the moment when Carrie arrived. She envisaged her friend emerging from Phil’s Volvo, tired and crumpled, fighting with the baby seat for several minutes before pulling a squawking Dante out into the fresh air, as if the car itself were giving birth. She would rush forward to take the red-faced baby in her arms and hand it deftly to Rhoda before embracing her friend, who would collapse with relief. Dante would be whisked away to be bottle-fed and wrapped in soft blankets, and Carrie would be dunked in a perfumed bath and plied with Chardonnay. Posy smiled to herself. Carrie’s dilZoe had helped her to put everything into perspective. The Saturday concert, the issue of whether the players could get to the end of the first movement of Beethoven’s First Symphony, seemed very unimportant. The orchestra was about to save someone’s sanity - and, who knows, save their life along with that of their child. What else mattered? Of course, if the concert was a failure and nobody booked them for workshops, then MABO would lose its funding and could effectively die, with nowhere to rehearse and no teachers. But Posy put that out of her mind.

It was past midnight when she heard the sound of wheels in the distance, and saw a pair of headlights swooping towards the Camargue estate. Posy shot to her feet and drew in her breath in excitement. She realised how much she was missing her friend - Carrie had the ability to galvanise the MABO players, she knew all their little weaknesses and wiles, her patience shone out like rays of warm, steadfast gold. If only Carrie had been able to lead the course, the Saturday concert would have been a walk in the park. She’d put Leif le Carré in his place no doubt, and there would be no Alexander to worry about - no conflicting emotions, no confusion. *I need you as much as you need me*, thought Posy, looking forward to hugging her friend. The car drew nearer and pulled up rather abruptly in front of the main doorway. The back door opened immediately and a figure lurched out and onto the floor. Shocked, Posy rushed over.

‘Carrie! Are you all right?’

The figure was laying on the floor, hardly moving; Posy could discern a tangled mop of shaggy hair, grizzled-looking under the amber fluorescent floodlights which surrounded the

castle at night. Baggy trousers, shoes with the laces untied, a waffle-knit jumper with holes in the elbows. My God! Things had moved on since that early visit to Richmond! Posy looked anxiously into the car. Where was the baby seat? Where was Dante? Her heart began to pound in panic. Had Carrie killed the baby? Is that why she had thrown herself onto the floor? Posy heard a low moaning sound. Even her friend's voice seemed to have changed! It was deep, as if heavily hungover. Alcohol and depression, an explosive combination - was the baby's body in the boot? Posy looked wildly into the blackness of the car.

'Where's Dante?' she cried. 'Carrie! Phil! *Where's Dante?*'

The prostrate figure stirred. 'Written out of my first opera,' came a dry-throated reply.

'Changed the title. *Minniver's Inferno*. So it's all about me.'

Unable to make out the words clearly, Posy gazed in confusion as a rattling laugh was heard, followed by a soft, worrying hissing sound. A dark puddle began to spread beneath the baggy trousers, as the laughter continued. 'Who's Carrie Phil? Am I supposed to carry Phil? Though the inferno and out the other side. No fucking problem. Fuck Virgil, let's carry Phil.'

There was more laughter, mixed with coughing, and repeated moans of 'Oh, Jesus' and 'Fuck'. It seemed to take an eternity before Posy's mind could grasp what was happening. A heavily drunken man had fallen out of a taxi.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I mistook you for somebody else.'

The taxi driver turned round and craned his neck so he could communicate with Posy, who was standing, paralysed with embarrassment, by the back door.

'I think he's going to be sick,' said the man. 'You'd better get him to his room.'

'But he's nothing to do with me,' said Posy. 'I'm just - I'm just on a course here. I don't know who this man is.'

To her relief, Posy heard footsteps hurrying towards her from the direction of the main building.

'I know who he is,' came the voice of Leif le Carré. 'It's Godfrey Maxwell Minniver.'

Posy's eyebrows were hoisted aloft with the shock of realisation. Of course; the man had been mumbling about *Minniver's Inferno* - the notorious opera which had scandalised the music establishment back in 1974.

'Is that him?' she asked, feeling very stupid. 'My God! He doesn't look much like his photos, does he?'

'Not right now,' agreed Leif. '*Écoute*. Godfrey. It's me, Leif. Your taxi driver needs some money. Do you have the money?'

'Trouser pocket,' slurred Godfrey Maxwell Minniver.

‘He’s just wee’d in his trousers,’ said Posy quickly. ‘I wouldn’t go in his trouser pocket if I were you.’

Leif didn’t answer, but gently rolled the composer onto his back. The front pockets of his trousers looked dark and mottled.

‘Which pocket, Godfrey? Do you remember?’

‘Back pocket.’

‘Ah, *merde*. Okay, let’s roll you back over. Careful! Take it easy, Godfrey. I’m just going to get the money out of your back pocket. Okay. Now, your trousers are a little tight.’

‘GET OFF MY ARSE! Fucking pervert!’

The man’s right arm came flailing backwards and caught Leif on the side of the head. He winced, but continued fiddling with the pocket.

‘Hold still. I’m just trying to get the money out. I don’t want to touch your arse.’

‘Nobody wants to touch my arse. My wife said it was smelly.’

Leif didn’t reply, but frowned as he pushed his hand into the composer’s back pocket, which was stretched tight against his well-rounded rump.

‘Okay, Godfrey, I’ve found the money. Godfrey? You don’t have to stay lying on your front.’

‘Fucking opera. My wife hates me because I’m not Wagner,’ he mumbled sadly.

‘I’ll give it to the taxi driver, okay?’ said Leif, glancing briefly at the wad of notes to ensure there was enough.

‘Thanks, mate. Good luck,’ called the man, and revved the engine hard, driving swiftly away.

Posy stood with Leif *le Carré*, looking down in revulsion at the figure of Godfrey Maxwell Minniver, who seemed to have gone to sleep on the drive.

‘He’s not my responsibility,’ she said quickly, ‘I think he’s disgusting, and I don’t want anything to do with him.’

‘Please,’ begged Leif, ‘don’t leave me on my own with him. I’ve got to get him inside, and into his bed. We’ve an important rehearsal tomorrow. He’s supposed to be doing sound projection for the new piece.’

‘Sound projection?’ repeated Posy. ‘So where’s his equipment? Shouldn’t he have a laptop with him?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Leif, ‘I’ve never conducted a piece with electronics before.’

Posy glanced sharply at him. ‘What, not ever?’

‘No,’ said Leif, rather loudly, and raked his hand through his blonde hair, which seemed less free-flowing than usual, as if matted with nervous perspiration. ‘We don’t do much contemporary music. I told you. We specialise in Rameau.’

Posy felt a strong pang of sympathy. She hadn't quite realised just how out of his depths Leif le Carré was.

'And what about the parts?' she persisted. 'Isn't he supposed to be bringing you the parts? Or have they arrived?'

Leif looked at her, his eyes dark with despair, panic almost.

'Non.'

'Oh, Leif,' replied Posy, and unable to prevent herself, she grasped his hand. It was warm and a little damp, but as he squeezed her hand in return, his grip was strong. Posy felt a bolt of electricity flash through her insides. And then, her practical side took over.

'Come on. We've got to get him to his room. I'll go and find Neil.'

'He's in the bar. I just came from there.'

'Thanks. Stay here, Leif. And don't worry about the music. If he's left his things in the taxi, I'm sure the driver will bring them back. Or maybe his P.A. is sending them separately.'

Leif looked at Posy as if she were mad.

'I'm going to get Neil,' she said, decisively. As she rushed away in the direction of the bar, Posy could hear Leif, struggling to control the drunken man.

'*Arret!* Godfrey. Get off my leg! Stop it!'

'Fucking French asshole. You're like all the others. I'm not Wagner, so you hate me. Oh, Jesus.'

'But I hate Wagner.'

'Arsehole.'

'Yes, maybe I am an asshole. But I am also your conductor and I need the parts for your new piece. Did you bring them with you?'

'Overnight bag,' mumbled Godfrey, and Leif noticed for the first time a huge, khaki-coloured ruck-sack laying in the middle of the drive a few yards away. The taxi driver must have thrown it out of the car.

'It's all in there. No electronics, though. I'm sorry. Computer crashed. No backup. Fucking computers! Lost the whole thing! Months of work! Oh, Jesus!'

'No electronics? *Pas de problème, Godfrey, pas de problème, mon ami.*'

Godfrey was now staggering to his feet. 'Good lad,' he said to Leif, slapping his shoulder and hiccupping grotesquely. 'Oh, Jesus,' he groaned again. 'Must get to bed. Do you know where I've got to go?'

Leif looked around helplessly and was pleased to see Posy hurrying towards him, with Neil

Havers, who was looking both grumpy and trepidatious.

‘No, but my friends here will take you.’

‘I’ve just called Amanda Hall,’ said Posy, ‘And she’s told me that Mr Maxwell Minniver is in the annexe, room 3. It’s open, apparently.’

‘Can he walk?’ asked Neil.

‘*Oui, oui,*’ said Leif hurriedly. ‘You can walk okay, can’t you, Godfrey?’

‘Just shut the fuck up and get me to a bed.’

Neil and Leif stood either side of Godfrey Maxwell Minniver and offered their shoulders for him to support himself on. Posy watched as they stumbled slowly away.

“Don’t do a Tweet about this, will you, Neil?” she called. There was no reply.

Posy’s attention was caught by the soft purring of a car engine, getting louder. She turned and saw the headlights flash towards her. Posy recognised the characteristic boxy shape of Phil’s Volvo straight away.

‘Carrie!’ she cried, waving wildly.

‘Are they here?’ came another voice, Rhoda’s. ‘Oh, thank God! They’re all right!’

Rhoda approached from the annexe building, and grasped Posy’s hand.

‘Of course they’re all right!’ said Posy, squeezing the hand tightly. ‘Phil is a good driver!’

‘And I’m sure Dante was the perfect passenger,’ added Rhoda vaguely. ‘Good grief, I never thought, we should have had a Baby on Board sticker. And, oh my goodness, a baby seat! I do hope Phil hasn’t done something illegal.’

It soon became apparent that Dante had his own baby seat. Phil jumped out of the front with surprising energy, and opened the back door for Carrie, who was delayed by the unbuckling of various straps. She stepped out onto the drive, hauling the little baby out with her. A mewling cry accompanied the gesture.

‘We’re here, little guy,’ said Carrie, kissing his white-bonneted head. Dante cried again, and this time Carrie said nothing. She spotted Posy and turned towards her. Her eyes filled with tears as she leaned forwards to sink her head onto her friend’s shoulder. Rhoda deftly nipped between them and scooped the baby away. Carrie’s arms went around Posy’s neck and they stood for a few moments, saying nothing. Eventually Carrie spoke.

‘I think he might need feeding,’ she said, looking anxiously towards the baby, who was nestled in Rhoda’s generously padded arms.

‘I’ll see to that,’ said Rhoda.

‘No! He’s not on the bottle. I have to breast feed him.’

‘One little bottle feed won’t hurt,’ said Rhoda firmly.

‘He won’t take it,’ protested Carrie. ‘It’s not what he’s used to.’

‘I’ve got this lovely extra-rich stuff. Let’s give it a try. Yes! Yes, Dante! Let’s give you a little try on da bottle,’ continued Rhoda in a baby voice.

‘But...’ Carrie began. Rhoda was already walking briskly away, towards the direction of the annexe.

‘I’ve got a lovely cot set up in my room,’ she called, ‘I’ll look after him for an hour. You must rest, Carrie dear. You can feed him in an hour’s time if he’s still hungry.’

Posy felt uncomfortable; she wondered if Carrie was feeling bullied. She was aware of the enormous issue of breast feeding – it seemed to her to be almost a moral matter to most new mothers. To her surprise, Carrie was glowing.

‘An hour! An hour to rest!’ she sighed. ‘Someone has taken him away! Oh! Thank the Lord!’ She sat down on the grass, and Posy laughed.

‘Don’t sit there!’ she said, ‘Come to my room. I’ve a great big bottle of Sauvignon Blanc chilling in the fridge. And some Sainsbury’s Giant Peanuts.’

‘I’m not allowed wine,’ said Carrie. ‘I don’t suppose I should. Do you have any herbal tea?’ This time it was Posy’s turn to be firm.

‘No I don’t have any herbal tea. You need wine! And if you miss a feed, the wine won’t get into Dante.’

‘No, I don’t suppose it will,’ said Carrie without much hesitation.

‘Come on, I’ll take your suitcase,’ said Posy, and Carrie followed her, lamb-like, to the Kingsbury Suite. Posy unlocked the door and smiled. ‘I’ve got some proper food as well. Not just peanuts. I don’t suppose you’ve eaten.’

‘I can’t remember,’ replied Carrie. ‘Posy? You do suppose Dante will be okay?’

‘Rhoda is great with babies,’ said Posy, who had no idea whether this were true.

‘But he’s never been away from me since he was born.’

‘What, not ever? Didn’t Fergus ever take him for a walk?’

‘No, he didn’t,’ sighed Carrie. ‘He felt that the buggy affected his status as a man. He said it made him invisible. Not a person in his own right, or something.’

‘That may be true for women, but not for men,’ protested Posy, inviting Carrie into the room and drawing the heavy curtains. ‘A woman with a buggy sort of blends into the street, but if it’s a man, everyone thinks it’s a great novelty and worthy of admiration.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Have you heard from him?’

‘No.’

‘What, not a word?’

‘I don’t even know where he is. He was going to stay with his friend Otto in Cambridge for a few days – but that was ages ago.’

‘So where can he be now?’

‘God knows. He’s probably gone on a retreat. He might be at the Krishnamurti centre.’

‘Hmm!’ Posy tried not to be too judgemental: it was Carrie’s place to do that. ‘Here. Have some wine. And I’ve got some bhajis and samosas from M&S. Sorry they’re not warm. But they’re really yummy.’

‘I need more wine first. I’m still feeling sick about what I did. What I nearly did to my baby.’

‘Nothing happened.’

‘It would have done, though. Without you.’

‘No. You would never have got on that train. Or if you did, you would have got off at the next stop.’

‘Would I? You don’t realise how much I’m hating it. Being a mother. It’s crap.’

This fought with Posy’s inner determination to believe in motherhood; to defy Barnaby’s negativity.

‘It just seems like that now. You’ve been abandoned by Fergus – that’s what’s crap.’

‘I do love Dante, I think I’ve bonded with him quite well,’ Carrie explained, ‘but I have no life.’

‘I suppose it’s just watching Barney the dinosaur now,’ sympathised Posy.

‘Dante won’t let me do even that. I can’t sleep, and when I get up in the morning, there’s nothing to get up for; I just get up then sit on the settee. I put him down, pick him up, put him down, pick him up... and feed him over and over again. And it really hurts!’

‘Breastfeeding hurts?’

‘It does for me, but I think it’s just because I’m doing it wrong. I’m not getting him to latch on properly.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘The Breastfeeding Counsellor.’

‘Carrie, these people are taking away all your confidence!’

‘No, Posy, they’re trying to help. If I did it right, it wouldn’t hurt. That’s what it says in all the books.’

‘Maybe Dante needs to learn how to do it, too?’

Carrie shrugged.

‘More wine, please.’

Posy quickly poured more.

‘I shouldn’t.’

‘Drink! It won’t get into his feed.’

‘I don’t care anyway. It might help him sleep.’

She started to laugh, and Posy felt certain that the relaxing effect of the wine on Carrie was well worth the risk of poisoning her baby.

‘Can’t he have the occasional bottle feed?’ she asked.

‘Ooh, not really. Because if I miss a feed, I make less milk.’

‘But then you make more the next time he feeds, don’t you?’

‘I don’t know. I daren’t risk it! Imagine if he sucked and there was no milk!’ Her eyes were wide with horror. ‘What a betrayal!’

‘Well then, you’d have to give him formula again.’

‘Yes, and that’s the vicious circle the Breastfeeding Counsellor warned me about!’

Carrie put down her glass and looked at her watch.

‘Oh God! Look at the time! I must go and get him!’

Carrie was half way out of the room before Posy could stop her; but at that moment, there was a knock on the door.

‘Come in!’

It was Alexander.

‘Hi – oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’ll go away. I’ll come back later.’

‘No, no, come in! Alexander, this is Carrie Hammond. She’s the former leader of the orchestra. Carrie, this is Alexander Hamilton – he’s our new leader.’

‘Just while you’re away,’ Alexander responded quickly. ‘Hi! Pleased to meet you.’

Carrie stood up and slopped a little wine out of her glass.

‘Hi! I’m Carrie. Ooh, sorry, did that go on your shoe?’

‘No, no.’

There was an awkward silence.

‘No, really, don’t worry at all. They’re very old shoes, anyway.’

‘Ooh, they’re lovely shoes.’

‘Sorry, Alexander, do you want some wine?’ asked Posy.

‘No, no, I just came in to talk about the rehearsal tomorrow. It’s our penultimate one before the Saturday concert. I just wondered if you thought I should bring the ghetto blaster again, or whether it might be better to just ... expect them to do it. You know. Force them!’

‘Ghetto blaster?’ repeated Carrie.

‘Yes,’ replied Alexander, looking a little sheepish. He turned to Posy. ‘Shall I explain, or shall you?’

Posy sighed. ‘Erm, I’ll explain. The orchestra are having real problems with Beethoven One. We’ve got to perform the first movement at the Saturday concert. And there’s going to be a group of officials at the gig, from local schools...and we need them to book us for workshops. Otherwise we won’t get our funding for next year.’

‘That’s it, in a nutshell,’ agreed Alexander. ‘And things aren’t going too well, for which I take full responsibility.’

‘Oh, nonsense!’ riposted Posy. ‘He’s doing really well, Carrie. It’s just the orchestra have got really lazy. And they haven’t responded very well to the pressure. They’re really not up for it, they don’t like having to prove themselves.’

Carrie smiled wryly, recognising of the true MABO spirit.

‘I see,’ she said. ‘Oh God. I should have brought my violin. I could have helped. But look at me, I’m just here drinking your wine and giving you more problems.’ Her shoulders drooped.

‘Did you know I’d brought my baby with me?’

‘Oh, yes, I did know,’ replied Alexander. ‘Nothing wrong with that. It sounds like you needed a break. Very much so.’

‘I’ve been a bit pathetic,’ sighed Carrie. ‘But anyway, this isn’t about me. It sounds like the orchestra’s in a bit of trouble. I wish I could help.’

Posy and Alexander looked at each other, wondering if the same thought had entered each other’s minds.

‘Well,’ began Alexander, still looking at Posy, ‘maybe you can. You could play my fiddle and I could concentrate on the conducting. That would be an enormous help.’

‘Yes!’ chimed Posy triumphantly. It was the perfect solution – the performance might well be saved from disaster, and Carrie’s self-esteem would be restored at the same time.

‘I’d love to, but there’s no way Dante would let me.’

Posy’s heart sank. She had forgotten the whole problematic issue of the baby. There’d be no point asking Rhoda to look after him during rehearsals.

‘Couldn’t he go down for a nap while we play?’ she suggested.

‘He doesn’t nap.’

‘Ah. Well, maybe the playing would soothe him off to sleep. Or he might enjoy watching us!’

‘It won’t work,’ said Carrie firmly but despondently. ‘He’ll just cry. I have to handle him constantly.’

For the first time, Posy began to see how tying a baby could be. She felt some of Carrie's hopelessness settle on her own shoulders and experienced her first flash of frustration towards Dante. She began to understand just how Carrie must feel – torn apart by conflict, love fighting with resentment.

Oh God, she thought.

Suddenly Carrie slammed down her glass.

'Dante!' she cried. 'Oh my God, I'd forgotten about him. I'm leaking milk. I've got to feed him. Now!'

Alexander gazed around the room. 'Where is he?'

'With Rhoda,' said Posy, responding to Carrie's urgency by rising to her feet. 'In the annexe.'

'But I've just seen Rhoda in the bar,' said Alexander.

Carrie's mouth gaped open and the colour drained from her face.

'I don't remember that she had a baby with her. I didn't see a pram. Probably just me...'

Jesus Christ, thought Posy, we have lost the baby.

Carrie let out a tremulous wail. 'Dante!'

'*Maman!*'

A voice was heard outside the window.

'Dante?' called Carrie again.

'*Je suis ici, maman,*' came the voice again.

Posy pulled open the heavy curtains violently and looked out of the window.

'It's Leif le Carré! He's got Dante.'

'Who's got Dante?' asked Carrie, confused.

'Oh, it's Leif,' Posy explained, quickly trying to contain her shock and anxiety. It would be better if she pretended that Leif were a trusted friend.

'He's a conductor on a course here, and he's been helping me with this problem about the funding. He's lovely,' she gushed warmly.

Now it was Alexander's turn to look confused.

'Yes,' he confirmed, 'a great guy.'

Carrie relaxed. 'Oh, how kind of him to look after Dante. Though I wish Rhoda had mentioned it. I nearly had a heart attack just then.'

She joined Posy at the window and waved down.

'Ooh, he's got long blonde hair,' she murmured admiringly, beaming as she recognised the little white globe that was Dante's bonnetted head. Leif was holding the baby and jogged him

up and down in response to Carrie's appearance.

'*Je viens,*' he called, 'I'm coming up. Wait there.'

A few moments later, there was a gentle knock on the door. Posy opened it to find Leif standing there beaming, with the baby in his arms.

'*Eh, bien, viola!*' he smiled, passing the white crocheted bundle over to Carrie. Dante's small pink hands flexed and clenched, and he made soft murmuring sounds, his mouth opening and closing repeatedly.

'He's hungry,' Carrie confirmed, and fumbled with her T-shirt, balancing the baby's wobbly head in her left hand and groping inside her nursing bra with her right. Dante's little mouth gaped open wide before clamping on like a rubber plunger on a plug hole.

'Ooh, good boy,' said Carrie. 'Why don't you always do a nice big mouth for me?'

The occupants of the room gathered round like shepherds kneeling at the crib, and Posy noticed that no-one seemed remotely embarrassed. Leif's face was radiant.

'Ah, 'e feeds so well!'

'Better than usual,' murmured Carrie.

'My sister, she could not get her baby to feed. She was so sad. She 'ad to buy milk and use a bottle.'

Posy glanced at Carrie's face, pleased to see a small smile of satisfaction playing at the corners of her friend's mouth.

'Yes, you're lucky, having a hungry little chap,' added Alexander. 'But anyway...I don't want to disturb your private moment. I'll see you in the morning, Posy. And I'll bring the ghetto blaster. Best way.'

'Oh, thanks, Alexander. Yes, I don't see how we can manage without the CD. They won't have learned the Beethoven by tomorrow.'

Carrie looked up.

'I'd really like to help,' she said. 'If I could join you for just an hour or two, it might make a difference. They're used to following me. You could conduct and...well if I could borrow your violin...and if Leif could...' Her voice trailed off and she cringed apologetically. It seemed such a huge favour to ask.

'I will look after your baby,' he responded eagerly. 'Our rehearsal is not until the afternoon, as Godfrey will be too ill to do anything in the morning.'

Posy gasped. 'Oh, Leif, are you sure?'

'*Bien sur.* It's no problem. I can take him for a walk and then bring him back to watch. I

would love to.'

They all looked at Dante. Quietly suckling, his tiny fingers spread out on his mother's breast like a delicate star fish, he seemed like the easiest baby in the world.

'I think we have a solution,' said Alexander.