

Chapter Fifteen

‘So,’ Posy explained to Alexander, ‘They just stood holding hands, and eventually Godfrey said that he had to use her in his new piece. And she was just thrilled!’

‘But how did Kevin and Lloyd get involved?’

‘Godfrey decided to extend the Stockhausen influence...you know his old piece Mikrophonie, how it uses two microphones touching a gong, to get all sorts of sounds out of it? Well he wanted two microphones moving around the oboe, really close up, amplifying the sound of the keys, the breathing, the notes, knocking against the wood, everything. Only no-one in Leif’s orchestra would do it. Nicole said it was against Union rules. There was a danger that one of the players might be electrocuted.’

‘And how did Godfrey respond to that?’

‘Well I thought he was going to explode! He had to go off and be sick.’

‘But that was just his hangover.’

‘Oh, yeah, probably. Anyway I quickly texted Kevin and Lloyd and they couldn’t wait to help! They think it’s the coolest thing they’ve ever done.’

‘And you said that George Farrington got involved as well?’

‘Yes! The microphones were wired up to his old amplifier, and he has to twiddle the gain knob so that at the climax of the piece we get this incredible feedback.’

‘You mean what they call *howl*, like when the sound has gone wrong?’ quizzed Alexander.

‘Isn’t that dangerous to the ears?’

‘Only if it carries on. We’ve rigged it so that the power cuts out after five seconds.

Everything goes dead. All the lights go out. That’s the end. Dieoneus is dead.’

‘So Godfrey’s piece is...finished?’

‘It’s finished, and it’s an amazing integration of professional and amateur players. It’s going to be performed in front of this video screen of flames.’

‘Wow.’

‘I know.’

‘And what about our concert? How’s that going to go, do you think?’

‘It’s going to be great!’

Posy stood facing the small audience, and began to mutter.

‘Posy Gibson. Flat 2, Harefield House, Brook Road, Millfields, E5 HWW.’

Beside her, Tansy was muttering too.

‘Tansy MacIlwraith. 144 Commonwealth Road, Millfields West. E5 HBX.’

‘Neil Havers. Dundermin. 32 High Street, Homerton, London, E5 WRX.’

‘Roy Carlton. Number 3 Draycott Road, Upper Millfields, London, England, The United Kingdom, the continent of Europe, the World.’

Hugh stood before them, his eyes alight, his hands waving gently towards himself as if encouraging traffic to proceed. The muttering continued; every musician in the orchestra was stating their name and address, over and over again. It created a strange, nebulous wall of sound, like a chorus of ghosts trying to recall whom they had once been. Hugh began to waggle his hands faster, his eyebrows rising. The musicians began muttering louder and louder, until eventually they were shouting.

‘George Farrington! GROUND FLOOR FLAT! CAMBERLEY COURT! **MILLFIELDS HIGH ROAD! EAST... LONDON... AAAAARRRRRGHHHHH!!!**’

The declamations exploded in a huge screaming shout, with Hugh shaking his fists at the ceiling, his face red. As the scream still resounded, the musicians quickly returned to their seats and music stands, and picked up their instruments. The string players began creating searing chords – the sound of the heron which Alexander had helped to define, a few days earlier. Bows pressed into strings in powerful, downward sweeps, while Alexander, who had lent his violin to Carrie, scraped a triangle beater over a cymbal, creating a harsh, metallic exclamation. Posy stepped forward and spoke into a microphone. With a slight tremble in her voice, she read the words of her haiku:

‘The lily pond is still. Your stick plops into cool green water...and a heron shrieks.’

On the word shriek, the jagged chords stopped, and with the cymbal scrape still dying away, a gentle, rhythmic pattern could be heard from the clarinets: a simple little melody, repeated over and over again. Posy returned discreetly to her seat and picked up her flute, joining the clarinets with a melody of her own, harmonising sweetly with their lines. Neil Havers joined in with some soft metallic percussion; a ting on the finger cymbals marking the start of each phrase. Over this serene accompaniment, Lloyd now made his way to the microphone.

Watching carefully to make sure he knew what to do, Posy sputtered into her mouthpiece as she saw that the waistband of his low-slung jeans had sunk to a level just below his brightly coloured underpants. From the back, she had a full view of his bottom, and hoped that the front view was less distracting.

‘Oh. Man. The flies,’ Lloyd stated, his nerves rendering him totally expressionless. ‘Deadly curries. Deadly *currants*,’ he corrected himself, ‘carrying germs. The grass stains my trainers.’ At this point he looked up from his cue sheet and directly out at the audience: ‘And I weep!’ He hung his head dramatically, then turned to look back at his friend Kevin, who gave him a big thumbs-up, which he returned, adding a triumphant grin, before lolling back to his seat, hoiking up his jeans.

The music changed again, in response to the urban references of Lloyd’s haiku. Now, Neil sat behind a drumkit and began playing a steady hip-hop beat. All the players now joined in, playing fragmentary motifs extracted from the clarinet and flute melodies heard just a few minutes earlier. These were written down on scraps of paper, each player choosing their own fragment, aiming to form a satisfying counterpoint to the music around them. Hugh conducted bouncily, smiling and occasionally gesturing to his ears, to encourage the players to listen carefully to each other. Posy couldn’t resist lifting her eyes to sneak a peek at the audience; she could see a few feet tapping. Now it was Amina’s turn to step forward, and as she did so, a white screen behind the orchestra came to life, with a video created by Kevin on his mobile phone. It showed the little ornamental pond, glittering in the midday heat. A murmur of approval and interest was heard in the audience.

Amina smiled radiantly as she read out her poem:

‘Cherub statue, spewing green water into the babbling pond. Your little penis has crumbled away!’

Approving laughter was heard amongst the listeners, and one or two people applauded briefly, to Amina’s obvious delight. She turned to look at the video, and saw the wobbly camera swerve from the pond and focus on the woodland copse beyond. A figure could be seen disappearing into the undergrowth; a man carrying a newspaper. The camera rocked from side to side as if its operator were jogging towards its target, trying to follow it into the woods; the viewers could discern that the figure was a man in his sixties with grey hair and a vividly patterned acrylic sweater. George Farrington! Before the mystery of what he was doing in the woods could be solved, the film ended, and sensing a moment of unwanted distraction, of loss of concentration, Hugh made a rotating gesture with his right arm. The MABO musicians knew that this meant to return to some earlier material of their joint

composition. One by one, starting with the percussion, then flute, oboe and clarinets, the players let their fragmentary rhythmic phrases die away, until only the string players were left. Rhoda's cheeks were glowing with anticipation, her eyes fixed on Hugh as he gestured for each orchestral section in turn to stop playing. For a moment, the conductor's arms were still. Rhoda's eyes flickered over to the orchestra leader, Carrie, whose bow was poised above the strings of the violin lent to her by Alexander. Hugh raised his arms, surveyed the whole ensemble to check that they were ready, then swiftly lowered his arms. The strings began to play their jagged, searing chords – the heron cries – over and over again. And then, the muttering effects recommenced. Behind her, Posy noticed an unfamiliar voice.

‘Leif le Carré. Vingt-et-un, Rue Lepic, Montmartre, Paris, sept-cinq-zero-un-huit, La France. Alexandre is a very bad conductor. He could not conduct his way out of a paper bag.’

Posy turned round and glared. Leif was not sticking to his name and address; he was making rude comments about members of the orchestra. His mouth began to turn up in a smile but he refused to meet her eye. Almost laughing now, Leif continued.

‘Mademoiselle MABO is very angry with Leif le Carré. She hates him because he is a musician of great talent.’ She turned away. Hugh was gesturing for the muttering to become softer, until it finally died away. There was a silence of a few seconds, then the audience began to applaud. The orchestra rose to their feet and smiled with pleasure and pride.

Derek Flowerdew was a man of medium height, with tea-coloured hair and a crimson face, and wearing a light brown pinstriped suit. His eyes were the clear, light green of seedless grapes, and were heavily creased at the edges as if he had laughed and cried abundantly in his fifty or so years.

‘It's so good of you to come,’ said Posy, a plastic cup of instant coffee in her hand. ‘And thanks for your help in getting us an audience tonight. There seem to be quite a few local teachers here.’

‘Well from what I've heard, some of them are very keen to offer you a workshop,’ he replied. ‘I've never heard such an effective communal composition. What was it called?’

‘The Spirit of the Castle,’ Posy explained. ‘We were inspired by the atmosphere of Camargue Castle – not just the grounds and the natural beauty, but the history too. Amanda Hall took us on a ghost tour last night, and that just provided us with the finishing touches. That whole arch-form structure just came together at the last rehearsal. Our first idea was much more episodic.’

‘Well it worked brilliantly,’ said Derek Flowerdew, with genuine feeling, but looking

curiously over Posy's shoulder as Leif le Carré approached.

'Ah, the joint composition! Thank you so much for letting me perform,' said Leif.

'Well I said you could join in, I didn't say you could add your own...improvements.'

'I was improvising!' Leif protested. 'I thought you approved of spontaneity.'

'Not when you're muttering childish insults and trying to put me off,' said Posy.

Leif laughed. 'The muttering was making me uneasy. It was, you know, sort of erotic.'

'*Erotic?*' repeated Posy. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Erotic is when you are aroused,' said Leif.

'I know what it means,' said Posy crossly, 'I just don't see how –'

Leif was not listening. 'This coffee is shit,' he commented loudly, as Amanda Hall walked past, raising her groomed eyebrows with mock disapproval. 'But you know, I need some caffeine to get me through the Beethoven.'

Posy felt her face grow a little pale at the mention of the symphony. So far, MABO had passed this test with flying colours, doing what they did best, working together to turn limitations into strengths. But proper classical music! That was a different challenge altogether. She looked around to try to gauge the mood of the school representatives, and noticed two female teachers standing nearby, sipping their coffee and looking directly at Leif le Carré. They were whispering and giggling. Leif saw them and raised his coffee cup in a gesture of greeting. They smiled back. Posy looked at him uncertainly.

'Stop worrying, Posee,' he said casually. '*Regards*. The musicians of L'OEIL are here. With them in your orchestra, and your friend Carrie leading, what could go wrong?'

'No, no, I am indeed an adult beginner,' smiled Leif, his voice breaking into laughter. 'Why don't you believe me? It's true.'

The two lady teachers listened, enrapt.

'I joined MABO quite recently, because I believe the system in France needs to change. We 'ave to learn from the British, because you 'ave such great traditions of music-making for all. In France, it is more elitist, which I despise. So I am on a sort of cultural exchange, funded by La Fondation Jean-Michel Jarre. His aim is, quite simply, to bring music into the life of every adult and every child.'

'Oh, that's absolutely marvellous,' said one of the women. 'And if we booked MABO for a workshop...would you be there? Or would you just send out your education department?'

'We 'ave no education department,' replied Leif, 'We are all of us equally committed to education. *Alors*, I would come to your school. It would be my greatest pleasure.'

‘That’s wonderful,’ said the other teacher. ‘I’ve been trying to do some Beethoven with my students. I work at a girls’ school in Bromsgrove. I’m sure if you came, you’d inspire them...very deeply.’

‘You’re too kind,’ replied Leif. ‘Ah, let me introduce Mademoiselle Posy Gibson. She is the manager of MABO. She will talk to you about dates for your workshops.’

Posy looked at Leif with confusion. He smiled seductively and flicked his blonde hair out of his eyes. Just ten minutes after the end of the concert, Leif had secured six workshop bookings for MABO. All of them involved female teachers.

‘Are you sure you want to book us?’ she said, unable to suppress the disbelief, after the tension and worry of the last few days.

‘Yes,’ said the two women. ‘You.... and your amazing conductor.’

Posy had arranged to meet up with Carrie and Alexander in the bar after the concert, but had stopped off in the Kingsbury Suite to get changed. She also wanted to ring Barnaby; for the first time in some days, she felt up to the challenge; even if that woman answered the phone, her self-esteem was high enough to cope.

‘Yah, hello?’

Oh God! Posy had forgotten how hatefully confident the woman’s voice had been. There was a tremble in her voice as she tried to respond.

‘Hello, this is Posy. Who am I speaking to?’

‘It’s Zabrina,’ came the reply, the woman sounding as if her identity would surely be obvious. ‘Do you want to speak to Barnaby?’

‘Yes please.’

‘I’ll just get him.’ She then sounded more cooperative, but that annoyed Posy – surely the woman would be unnerved to find herself speaking to Barnaby’s long-term girlfriend. Instead, her voice had taken on the relaxed grandeur of Lady of the House.

‘Barnaby? Hi. It’s me,’ she said, her mind working quickly to decide whether or not to confront him. She decided to wait and see; check out his attitude, let him explain if he had a mind to.

‘Oh, hi. How’s things? How’s Dante?’

‘Dante? He’s fine, I think...well I don’t know where he is right now,’ said Posy, feeling wrong-footed as usual.

‘You don’t know where he is? Right,’ said Barnaby in a lightly concerned tone of voice.

‘Well it is nearly eleven o’clock, I expect he’s asleep in his cot,’ she replied.

‘Yeah, I guess so,’ said Barnaby.

Suddenly Posy heard a loud, booming voice in the background.

‘MANY PEOPLE REMEMBER THE 1968 REVOLT OF STUDENTS AND WORKERS AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT OF CHARLES DE GAULLE IN FRANCE,’ boomed the voice, ‘BUT HOW MANY REMEMBER THE EGYPTIAN STUDENTS WHOSE ACTIONS SERVED TO DEEPEN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES IN THE WAKE OF THE SIX DAY WAR? SIX DAY WAR? SIX DAY WAR? SIX – SIX – SQQQDDDD.’

Posy realised that a tape recording was playing, and that it was distorting as someone was trying to edit it. The voice on the tape was Zabrina’s.

‘Can you turn that down?’ Barnaby asked, turning away from the phone.

‘No I can’t,’ came the reply. ‘It needs monitoring properly.’

‘There are headphones,’

‘Oh, shit!’

‘What is it?’

‘The computer’s crashed.’

‘Did you save the back-up?’

Posy was fascinated by the conversation, but annoyed that Barnaby had turned his attention away from her.

‘Shall I call you back, Barnaby?’ she asked. She could hear Zabrina’s voice again, saying: ‘I can’t find the back-up.’

‘No, don’t call me back,’ Barnaby said, much to Posy’s surprise. ‘I need to talk to you.’

Posy heard the closing of a door, and a new atmosphere of quiet. She was longing to ask more questions about Zabrina, but Barnaby began to speak.

‘I told Fergus I’d pass on news of Dante. He’s just a bit worried that there’s another bloke on the scene.’

‘What, already?’ snapped Posy. ‘Well tell him there isn’t. Carrie is doing a brilliant job on her own, looking after him. She’s learned to cope without a man.’

‘Okay, okay, I’ll tell him. Don’t shoot the messenger.’

There was a slight pause, and Posy decided to take the plunge.

‘Who is Zabrina?’ she said, ‘and what is she doing in our flat at this time?’

‘Good question,’ said Barnaby, sounding tired. ‘Well you know Zabrina, don’t you? Zabrina Ademola, the actress.’

‘Oh – it’s her?’

‘She’s co-producing the film and we’re just trying to edit the voice-over. But I think she’s

just cut something out without saving the backup.’

‘Oh dear. Can’t she just re-record it?’ asked Posy, cringing in anticipation of Barnaby’s response.

‘She’s going to Malawi tomorrow.’

Sophie could think of nothing to say.

‘For eight months,’ added Barnaby.

‘Oh.’

Just then, there was a knock on Posy’s door. She recognised the rhythm as Alexander’s.

‘Come in!’ she called. ‘Oh hi, Alexander, I’ll be with you in a minute.’

Now it was Barnaby’s turn to be the interrogator.

‘What’s he doing, bothering you at this time?’

‘He’s not bothering me,’ laughed Posy, recalling her earlier, happy mood, ‘we’re going for a drink together. To celebrate.’

‘Celebrate what?’

‘The concert was brilliant tonight! We’ve secured all the workshops we need. MABO is safe!’

Barnaby was quiet for a moment.

‘That’s great. I’m really pleased for you.’

‘Thanks.’ Posy now felt anxious to get away, away from the scene of stress in the London flat, and back to the joyful celebrations that were taking place here at Camargue Castle.

‘Say hi to Fergus, if you see him,’ she said.

‘I’ll see him tomorrow,’ said Barnaby. ‘Yeah. And I’ll tell him Dante is OK.’

You do that, thought Posy smugly.

