

## Chapter Nine

The next morning, Alexander arrived at the rehearsal carrying a sturdy, old-fashioned ghetto-blaster. He was beaming from ear to ear.

‘Morning, Posy!’ he smiled.

‘Morning. Erm - I’m afraid we’re a bit short on numbers today, Alexander. One of the clarinettists...and Neil’s not here. Late night, I’m afraid.’

‘Not to worry!’ he replied, ‘Neil will catch up. He can read music pretty well. And Zoe, she’s not got much to worry about in the first movement of the symphony. No, we’ll be fine. I’ve had an idea!’

‘What’s that?’ asked Posy.

‘You’ll see. But it will eradicate all of yesterday’s problems. It will teach the players how the piece actually goes, basically, and at the same time, it will give them the most marvellous inspiration!’

‘What are you going to do?’

Alexander didn’t reply; he was surveying the orchestra, as the members of MABO settled themselves into their seats and began their habitual gossiping and exchanging of musical grievances.

‘Morning, everyone!’ he called out, over their bobbing heads.

‘Morning!’ they responded heartily, looking up at him expectantly.

‘I’ve a lovely surprise for you today. Something which will help you learn this marvellous symphony. It’s a digitally-remastered edition of the Vienna Philharmonic’s 1957 recording of Beethoven’s First Symphony with Furtwängler conducting. I thought we could listen through to it, following our parts as we go.’

‘Who’s Furtwängler?’ asked Lloyd.

Alexander smiled patiently. ‘One of the greatest conductors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,’ he explained. ‘But don’t worry about him! We’re not here to appreciate the ins and outs of the conductor’s interpretation. I just want you to hear how the music goes, purely and simply.’

‘Well I’m afraid I object,’ said Rhoda loudly. ‘The Vienna Philharmonic banned women from their ranks throughout the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. The only women they ever used were the harpists. Then there was a violinist who was sacked in mysterious circumstances. They are ideologically untenable, and I don’t have any intention of learning my craft from them. I really don’t see how you could suggest it!’

Posy cringed; she had seen this coming. Alexander had not yet come to understand the deeply-held ethical sensitivities of many of the MABO players.

‘And as for Furtwängler,’ added Phil (who was letting his trombone go cold, which Posy knew would destroy all hope of his getting a note out of it later), ‘he was not only an erratic conductor with precious little technique; he was a Nazi.’

A few of the younger members of the orchestra gasped.

‘What, a storm trooper?’ asked Lloyd, grinning.

‘Almost as bad,’ replied Phil, addressing the young trumpeter who sat just to his right. ‘He enjoyed a high profile in Germany during the war and often performed at Nazi party functions. And his concerts were broadcast to entertain the troops. Hitler’s conductor,’ he added scornfully.

‘Furtwängler was indeed tried as a Nazi supporter, but I believe he was found innocent,’ said Alexander firmly, laying down his violin in its case as if not expecting to do much playing that morning. ‘Indeed there is some evidence that Furtwängler took great risks during the war, for example by refusing to give the Nazi salute.’

The players looked far more interested in this than in the music itself, and Alexander seemed exasperated that once more he had allowed them to sidetrack him.

‘And anyway, anyway,’ he continued quickly, ‘that really is not the point. We are not here to put a dead conductor on trial for being a Nazi. We are here to learn our parts in Beethoven’s First Symphony.’

‘Well I don’t see why you had to bring along that version,’ grumbled Rhoda.

‘I happened to be passing Poundland, and it was the only one they had in the Bargain Bin,’ Alexander replied with a chilly smile. ‘Now can we get on?’

‘I can’t bear the idea that I’m learning my notes from a load of misogynists,’ Rhoda muttered to her neighbour. ‘It’s offensive, it really is. It’s not what MABO is all about.’

Posy overheard that last comment, and was stung. She saw it as her responsibility to set the tone of MABO activities and ensure that everything was perfectly in line with the manifesto. She couldn’t bear the idea of Rhoda disapproving of her, losing faith in her; Rhoda was like a mother-figure to Posy. But there was another, more uncomfortable feeling growing in Posy’s stomach; a feeling of annoyance. If Rhoda had bothered to learn the music herself, then Alexander would not need to bring along a recording to demonstrate how it was supposed to go. She was looking clearly at Rhoda’s limitations as a musician, and was not liking what she saw.

‘It must be that Leif le Carré who’s getting to me,’ Posy thought, shaking her head.

She held her flute tightly and let her fingers patter nervously up and down the keypads.

‘Oh, that is a beautiful sound,’ said Rhoda, turning round to give Posy a smile. ‘We must build it into our group composition. Don’t forget!’

‘I won’t!’ Posy replied, relieved at the renewed warmth in her friend’s voice. She continued pattering, creating a percussive little tune.

‘It’s twenty past ten!’ said Alexander appealingly. ‘Can we get on? I’ll put the CD on. Now - can you all hear it?’

‘No, I can’t,’ said George Farrington. ‘You can’t expect us to listen on that bit of equipment. Ghetto blasters belong in the ghetto. For teenagers to listen to their rap music on. Rap music, crap music.’

He waited for the inevitable sniggers of agreement before adding with commanding authority, ‘That’s not the kit you need for Beethoven.’

‘I don’t have anything else, I’m sorry George,’ said Alexander with admirable equanimity, pausing the CD.

‘Couldn’t we get the P.A. set up?’ said George. ‘There’s got to be a PA in a joint like this.’

‘Well if there is, we don’t have permission to use it,’ Alexander replied. ‘Generally you have to book a PA if you want one.’

‘Ask Amanda Hall,’ replied George. ‘She’ll let us use it. No problem. She’ll be in her office in ten minutes’ time. Just ask her. If we’re supposed to be listening to a CD, we might as well do it properly.’

Posy looked on anxiously as Alexander seemed about to panic.

‘I’ll tell you what, why don’t you just come a little closer,’ he suggested, smiling brightly.

‘There’s nothing wrong with my ears,’ George shot back. ‘That’s quite beside the point.’

‘We’ll set up the PA,’ said Lloyd eagerly.

‘Yeah,’ chimed Kevin, “and connect it to my iPod. We can download the symphony off the internet. Maybe look for a version that Rhoda likes!”

They rose from their seats enthusiastically, anticipating an enjoyable technical challenge involving a satisfying spaghetti of wires and jacks, leading inevitably to admiration and heroic status. Alexander caught Posy’s eye and shrugged helplessly, and in return she indicated her watch and gave him a worried frown. He latched on to her meaning, and waved his hand in the air.

‘No, really, guys, we don’t have time.’

‘It won’t take a minute,’ Lloyd assured him.

‘It’s dead simple,’ added Kevin agreeably. “We could find a recording with an all-women

orchestra if you like.”

Posy felt her tension levels rising. Today was the second day of the course; the players had yet to learn the basic material of the Symphony, they had barely struggled beyond the slow introduction, in a few days’ time the music would be aired at a concert with vital promoters in attendance. The easy-going manner of the lads was acting like a screw-driver on her nerves, twisting and tightening. Suddenly it was as if her mouth were speaking of its own accord, bringing forth a flow of communication without regard to the dangers of causing offence.

‘Alexander said no, and he means no,’ she said, standing up with her flute gripped tightly in her hands. ‘We don’t have time to set up the PA, especially when Alexander has gone to the trouble of bringing in his own CD player for us. We just need to listen to the music and learn it. Learn it fast. If you can’t read it then you must *listen and learn!*’

Her voice rose in pitch and trembled. The players were silent. Posy continued.

‘In just four days time, we are giving a concert. There will be members of the public there, so the music needs to be ready to perform.’

The orchestra members looked confused. Surely they knew about the Saturday concert? It was a regular feature of the summer school.

‘I thought the Saturday concert was for sharing work in progress,’ said Phil. This is not an open course; we don’t allow spectators. It is simply a concert for our own enjoyment.’

‘Not any more,’ responded Posy. ‘I didn’t want to frighten you all, but I feel I must say something. I’ve had a letter from Inner City Arts, saying that in order to secure future funding, we have to do at least three workshops in schools off the back of this course. We have to demonstrate the artistic integrity of what we do, and its social usefulness.’

Posy closed her eyes, while all around her she could hear gasps of disapproval. ‘*Well!*’

‘*...never heard anything so ridiculous!*’ ‘*Disgusting!*’ ‘*Shocking.*’ ‘*It’s the Tories for you.*’

Alexander stood scratching his head. There was a visible ring of sweat under his arm.

‘I was going to tell you later today,’ Posy said to him. ‘I only got the letter yesterday.’

‘It’s okay,’ he said softly, with a resigned smile.

‘Anyway,’ said Posy, raising her voice again, ‘for this reason, we have to get on. Please, if you could, just gather round the ghetto blaster and listen. As Alexander said, we have to learn the piece.’

She heard one of the young lads mutter, ‘Posy’s soft on him,’ and turned round, alarmed. A few faces were looking intently at her, as if she’d undergone some sort of curious transformation. Rhoda and Phil seemed to be smiling. A rush of annoyance flared up in Posy’s stomach. Surely they didn’t think that she was just speaking up to support Alexander?

She was trying to save the orchestra! Didn't they realise? With flushed cheeks and determinedly pursed lips, Posy focussed her attention on the recording, hoping the other players would follow suit and finally internalise the rhythms and melodies of Beethoven's first symphony.

At lunchtime, Posy and Alexander sat outside on a tiny triangular lawn in the formal garden, eating their sandwiches.

'It was a really good idea,' said Posy. 'To bring in a recording. I mean, if people aren't going to practise, there's no other way to learn the piece.'

'Well, I feel a bit bad about it to be honest,' Alexander confessed. 'I feel I should have found a way of teaching them the notes myself.'

'You would have found a way had there been time,' Posy replied. 'But we're under enormous pressure now. It has to be learnt in just four days.'

'Do you think we can pull it off?' he asked, looking at Posy directly.

'I don't know,' she responded, looking down at the make-shift table-cloth, fashioned from a couple of serviettes. 'I mean, we had no timpanist today, one of the clarinets was missing, the violins weren't getting anywhere near it, and Kevin and Lloyd didn't seem to be concentrating. They were more interested in setting up the PA and having a rave.'

Posy found herself twiddling the corner of a serviette, unable to follow the conversation through to the conclusion she feared. Unable to express her feelings, she sat in silence for a while, hoping Alexander would rescue her, rescue the whole situation, though how he could possibly do this, she had no idea. To her surprise, he changed the subject.

'Thank you for standing up for me,' he said cheerfully. 'Hope it didn't ruin your reputation.'

'Ruin my reputation? How do you mean?'

'Oh, you know; mutterings about favouritism, unwise liaisons, lack of objectivity due to unsuitable friendships...'

Posy laughed. 'Actually, I did hear someone say I was going soft on you or something. Stupid boys!'

'Indeed. You were only trying to get people to shut up and listen.'

'Well, no,' said Posy, feeling that that interpretation went to the opposite extreme. 'I mean, I do care about whether you're happy here with MABO.'

'You know, Posy, I've never been happier. I feel I have a mission in life, a purpose, and although it's extremely challenging, I find that I'm actually forgetting myself. It's not like my

old teaching. And nothing like my old life as a player – all I used to do was think about myself, my playing, was I any good, was I getting enough gigs, was I being paid enough... I mean, I was ego-ridden and yet very under-confident. No wonder I ended up on Rhoda's couch.'

'I think a lot of musicians get like that,' Posy responded. 'I'm really glad you're enjoying it.' Despite her positive intention, Posy's words sounded empty, in the light of the inevitable failure of the course. Alexander seemed to pick up on her mood immediately.

'But whether I'm enjoying myself or not, we've a big challenge on our hands. We need cold, hard results, and cold, hard funding.'

'Yes.'

'But putting that aside for a moment, it's not just the orchestra I'm enjoying. It's meeting you.'

He stood up abruptly and brushed crumbs off his cream linen trousers.

'I'm going for a little walk round the grounds and then I'd better freshen up before this afternoon's session with Hugh.'

'Yes, yes, I'd better freshen up too,' said Posy, stumbling clumsily to her feet and almost dropping her half-eaten sandwich.

'Don't let me rush you,' Alexander urged. 'I'll see you later.'

'Bye.'

'Bye.'

Posy's mind boggled at Alexander's words. He was enjoying the course because of her! A glow of satisfaction enveloped her; maybe I am still attractive? Maybe I can impress people? She watched Alexander walk away into the distance, and felt a strong impulse of affection towards this charming, considerate, gentle man. And he was handsome, well-turned out, and kept himself fit. *I would like him for my boyfriend*, she thought. *But I have a boyfriend!*

Posy's thoughts turned to Barnaby. Her old admiration for him, his strongly-held ideals, his dynamism, his career making arts documentary films, had turned into a feeling of intimidation and inferiority; after the physical side of their relationship had waned, there seemed to be a lack of softness and comfort between them. Posy felt looked down on, but a therapist had once told her to 'own her own feelings' and not blame other people for them; apparently no-one could make you feel inferior without your consent. So she regarded the problem as her own. Posy recalled a conversation she'd had with Rhoda, about the famous quote from Eleanor Roosevelt.

'Do you think it's true that no-one can make you feel inferior without your consent?' she had

asked, hoping to benefit from her friend's expertise as a psychotherapist.

'That's a complex issue,' Rhoda had replied. 'As human beings we are tribal animals; we depend on a sense of belonging for our psychological survival. If someone with status within the tribe rejects you, then you are programmed, on a very deep level, to feel some level of inferiority. And your reaction of deference would have the effect of protecting you from attack.'

'But who determines who has status? Isn't that something you are choosing to give that person?'

'Status is conferred upon people for many reasons, usually culturally-embedded,' explained Rhoda. 'Take Barnaby for example. Firstly he's a male; that alone confers him status within our society, sadly enough. He is tall, he is handsome, he has the appearance of virility...'

Posy remembered blushing at this; she wondered if Rhoda assumed they had a great sex life. The truth was somewhat different. Rhoda continued: 'and though they hold little economic relevance, the arts do have status; and Barnaby is a mover and shaker in the arts world.'

'So why can't I just admire him instead of feeling inferior?'

'Because on some level, Posy, Barnaby is rejecting you. And that is not your fault, you have not chosen to make it happen, you have not given your consent so don't assume you have. Thinking like that will only lead you into deeper waters. You'll end up on my couch, or Phil's, heaven forbid.'

As her daydream ended, Posy realised that she had been standing motionless on the grass for some time, probably looking like a bewildered escapee from a lunatic asylum, her mouth hanging open and a limp piece of sandwich drooping from her hand. She collected herself, brushed the bits of grass from her skirt, and tried to look purposeful. Her ego had scored a little victory, that was all; so Alexander liked her – so what? It would be a useful confidence-booster for future rainy days. That was all. She tried to push him out of her mind and turned to walk back to the building, but at that moment was distracted by the sight of Leif le Carré, walking briskly into the formal garden, talking loudly into his mobile phone.

'I have twenty-five professional musicians all waiting here with nothing to do,' he was saying. 'Monsieur Maxwell-Minniver said that his piece would be with us by this morning. You are aware that he has created a whole new system of notation. We need to see it as soon as possible. We cannot just sight-read.'

There was a silence, in which Le Carré's free hand swept habitually through his pale, ash-blond hair, grasping it and scratching his scalp in aggravation.

'I know British orchestras are used to such conditions, but we are French. We don't like to be

sight-reading at the event of a world premiere. We like to rehearse and prepare.’

Leif now slumped onto the grass, resting his elbows on his knees. His voice sounded ragged with stress, charm fighting with an ever-growing anger.

‘Please, if you could just ask Godfrey to send me whatever he can. Just something for us to start working with. It would help. I know, I know he has not been well. I don’t want to pressurise him. But I know that he cares about the quality of our performance. We want to do our best for his music.’

The silences were excruciating; Posy watched surreptitiously as Leif’s normally smooth face became a living gargoyle, the eyebrows furrowed in confusion then raised in alarm, the mouth opening and shutting, goldfish-like, as he tried to get a word in. Eventually Posy heard a different kind of silence, the one that indicated that reception had failed.

‘*Allo?*’ said Leif. ‘*Allo? Merde!*’

Posy couldn’t help indulging in a quick snigger. She could picture Godfrey Maxwell-Minniver’s personal assistant fobbing Leif off, cruelly indifferent to his anxiety, erecting an insurmountable barrier between the frustrated, needy conductor and her precious composer. Then to her horror, Leif looked directly at her.

‘What am I supposed to do?’ he called over. ‘*Dieu!*’

Posy didn’t want to get involved. As far as she could see, Leif was being punished for associating himself with grand, self-appointed pillars of culture, people with only a fraction of the talent of a relative unknown like her friend Hugh Norbury. He’d just have to learn. She shrugged her shoulders and gave a sympathetic smile.