

Chapter Seventeen

Posy could hardly believe her own choice of outfit for the evening. For the first time in many years, she had contradicted her Personal Style Statement from the Empowerment Through Clothes workshop. 'I am floaty, suggestive and...' she began, frowning into the mirror. 'Beautiful,' suggested Tansy.

'Half undressed?' Posy replied with a wry smile. She was wearing the turquoise bikini top under a chiffon kaftan borrowed from Rhoda. The kaftan had swirling patterns in toning shades of emerald, sapphire and silvery turquoise. With its translucent texture, the bikini top could be vaguely seen beneath it, and as it was a good two sizes too big, it draped off one shoulder. Posy had teamed it with jeans and her golden flip-flops. Tansy, who seemed to be in a meditative trance of contentment, was tying up Posy's hair so that it formed an unruly bunch at the back of her head, with tendrils tumbling around her shoulders. They caught each others' eye in the mirror and smiled.

'We've pulled,' Posy said.

'But mine's married,' Tansy replied, taking a hairpin from her mouth and pushing it into the base of Posy's messy ponytail.

'Does that matter?' asked Posy, who felt she had travelled a huge distance, emotionally, since the start of the course. 'I mean, I'm sort of married.'

'Hmm, Barnaby.'

'I feel completely estranged from him.'

'He was never very kind to you.'

'Well Leif isn't exactly kind to me. He's rude.'

'That's not the same. He's flirting.'

'Yes. And it feels really good.'

Tansy laughed, observing Posy's radiant expression as she completed the hairdo.

'You look so surprised! As if no-one would ever flirt with you.'

'I'm not worthy of flirtation.'

'You've no confidence, that's why you've never clocked onto him before. He was smitten right from the start.'

'I was too busy worrying about Alexander. I thought maybe he was the one.'

'The chemistry wasn't right.'

'But I hate everything Leif stands for. I'm more compatible with Alexander.'

‘I’m not sure what compatible means.’

Posy had no reply to that. Her adventure at the pool had taken her forward one significant stage: only a couple of days ago she was wondering if she should leave Barnaby, and had been agonising over her mixed-up feelings for Alexander. Now she was in no doubt: she no longer loved Barnaby, and neither did she love Alexander, apart from as a friend. In fact, her feelings for him were of deep gratitude. He had treated her with such kindness and respect, that she had begun to see clearly the drip-drip-drip of low-level emotional abuse that Barnaby had meted out. Whether she was destined for an affair with Leif le Carré was not really related to any of this; Posy had no idea what lay ahead, but was happy to let things unfold.

Posy turned from the mirror to face her friend. Tansy’s long, golden hair had never looked prettier, stringy and straight as it was. Having been washed with herbal shampoo it had a delicate aroma, and a daisy-shaped hair clip held her fringe out of her eyes. She was wearing a brown crocheted camisole and a long, tiered skirt, and her feet were encased in a pair of heavy clogs. Although she wore no make-up, Posy noticed that Tansy had applied a small transfer onto her cheekbone, a glossy little flower in yellow and green.

‘We look like a pair of woodland druid goddesses,’ said Tansy. ‘Only you’re more a water nymph and I’m a spirit of the earth. I wonder what Carrie’s going to wear?’

‘I don’t think she brought anything very dressy with her,’ replied Posy. ‘Anyway, look, it’s time. We’re meeting them in the entrance hall.’

In the few hours since she was last seen at the pool, Carrie had been shopping. Alexander had given her a lift into Warwick, and had looked after Dante while she found a new outfit. She strode into the entrance hall of Camargue Castle wearing a sexy black trouser suit. Posy and Tansy gasped in awe.

‘I know I don’t fit in,’ protested Carrie, ‘And I know it’s only a gastro-pub, but this suit is anti-maternity. It’s the suit of a woman in her own right. It’s the suit of a woman of the world. And it hides my flab.’

‘No, no,’ said Tansy, frowning as she tried to encapsulate her thoughts, ‘It’s...I’ll tell you what it is, it’s like you’ve just given the keynote speech at a fabulous conference for millionaire, entrepreneurial female violinists.’

‘That’ll do me,’ said Carrie. She held out her arms to the side and let them drop with a slap against her hips. Then she wiggled her fingers. After that, she folded her arms.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Posy.

‘It feels funny not to have a baby clinging onto me. I don’t know what to do with my hands.’ Alexander appeared, and the answer to Carrie’s question hung in the air, awkwardly.

‘I’m driving,’ he declared, brandishing the car keys. ‘Godfrey and Leif are waiting at the car. Come on!’

‘What about Rhoda? Isn’t she coming?’ asked Tansy.

‘She’s babysitting,’ said Carrie guiltily. ‘She said she hated gastro pubs.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Posy. ‘I’m sure Dante won’t be any trouble.’

In the distance, coming from the direction of the annexe, a baby wailed faintly.

‘Quickly,’ commanded Posy. ‘Let’s go.’

In the back seat of Alexander’s car, sandwiched between Godfrey and Tansy on one side, and Carrie on the other, Posy had the strangest feeling. A sporty-looking red car overtook them, and as she looked on at the two silhouetted heads of driver and passenger, she had a feeling of familiarity. The car accelerated into the distance, before turning left into the driveway of an expensive-looking hotel. Posy craned her neck as Alexander’s car drove past the entrance. ‘You looking at the new hotel?’ asked Godfrey. ‘I considered staying there. Logged onto the website. Three hundred quid a night. That was the cheapest room.’

‘Wow,’ whispered Tansy, who had no experience of hotel rooms. ‘You could buy an oboe on Ebay for that.’

‘Had to laugh, though,’ continued Godfrey, ‘because this menu came up asking if I wanted a themed bedroom. You can book the James Bond Suite.’

The other passengers guffawed.

‘So I clicked on it,’ continued Godfrey, enjoying the attention, ‘and this other menu comes up. Which James Bond period would you like? So I picked Sean Connery. And then they give you a choice of whether you want your stay to be themed around Dr No, Gold Finger or Thunderball.’

‘That’s hilarious!’ said Posy. ‘And did you carry on?’

‘Oh aye,’ confirmed Godfrey. ‘I picked Gold Finger. And the Gold Finger package includes your own maid, and entertainment from an exotic dancer all made up in gold. And then – ‘ at this point, Godfrey himself began to shake with laughter, ‘they send you a string quartet to play music from the film while you dine in a private bit of the restaurant.’

‘Godfrey, you didn’t actually book it by mistake, did you?’ asked Tansy nervously. ‘I mean, it probably costs a thousand pounds for the whole package.’

‘No fear. When the ‘cheapest price’ came up, I pressed Escape pretty damned quick. I don’t

need to go into a world of James Bond in order to get my kicks. Give me the real world, any day,' he added, looking into Tansy's eyes.

'What sort of naff person would do that?' asked Posy. 'Little boys, pretending to be James Bond.'

'It might be fun to play in the string quartet,' commented Leif. 'I'm sure you would see many interesting things.'

Alexander drove the car smoothly down the country lanes, unfazed by the occasional tractor, and seemingly happy to follow patiently behind, one relaxed hand on the wheel.

'*C'est ici,*' said Leif, gesturing towards a collection of white buildings set back from the road. '*L'homme vert,*' he added, turning round to face Posy with a raised eyebrow. 'I think he is some kind of Morris dancer.'

He was pretending to be confused, but the Green Man was obviously some sort of fertility symbol, judging by the large painted sign which hung outside the pub. A smiling green giant held his large right hand directly in front of his genitals, clutching a bunch of wheat stems arranged in a phallic attitude. Posy tutted and shook her head, then allowed herself to laugh, instead of putting up her usual resistance. She had every intention of having a luxuriously relaxed evening.

The friends were shown to a large oak table in the centre of a cosy, higgledy-piggledy dining room, by an efficient young waitress with masses of scrunched burgundy hair, tied up casually with a sliver of black ribbon. She flicked a set of menus into place and with the same smooth gesture took out a cigarette lighter, making three tall candles burst into soft light.

'She should be a magician,' commented Godfrey, just loudly enough for the girl to hear. To the men's delight, the girl responded with blushing amusement.

'Our specials tonight are monkfish in a tarragon sauce, lamb shank or spicy chickpea stew,' she said. 'Can I get you anything to drink?'

'Champagne!' said Tansy quickly, then shrank back in embarrassment.

'*Non, non,* great idea,' said Leif. 'Let me look at the wine list, I don't want anything sour and 'orrible.'

'Are you an actress?' asked Godfrey, as the girl stood waiting Leif's choice.

'I'm doing performing arts at Warwick,' she replied.

'Great stuff!' said Godfrey.

‘You’re very good,’ said Tansy in her naive and open way. ‘When I tried to be a waitress once, I dropped menus on the floor and knocked over candles. I was so rubbish!’

Leif ordered a bottle of champagne; not the most costly, Posy noticed, but then, he was probably not that well off – none of them were.

‘It’s not the most expensive,’ he said, as if reading her mind, ‘but it’s the best. That £350 bottle, you know, that’s really stupid, it’s for rich businessmen who know nothing about wine.’

‘They probably serve it in the Goldfinger Suite,’ said Posy, and the others guffawed. The waitress returned and they watched eagerly as she opened the bottle with great confidence.

‘You should be on telly!’ Godfrey exclaimed.

The girl poured, and they drank. It slipped down ever so quickly – all soft, peppery bubbles.

‘Ahh, it’s gorgeous,’ said Posy. ‘Right. I’m going for the chickpea stew.’

Leif groaned.

‘Merde, merde!’

She looked into his eyes. They were full of laughter and affection.

By the time the six friends had finished the first course, Posy felt she had talked herself hoarse; they had discussed everything from Amanda Hall’s hair conditioner to the Palladian architecture of Camargue Castle. Posy couldn’t believe how, just a couple of weeks ago, most of these people had never met; she felt proud that she had helped bring them all together.

Where things would go from now was not at all clear, but she felt certain that good things were round the corner. She knew that Carrie had fancied Alexander from the moment she set eyes on him, and like Leif, he seemed able to deal with the practicalities of the baby. There was a slight awkwardness between herself and Alexander; many things had been left unsaid, and their stunted love affair still hung in the air, unresolved. Perhaps she needed to apologise. She’d never explained that he wasn’t the man for her – she had just let him surmise it.

Looking to her left, Posy saw that Alexander had his hand on Carrie’s leg. She turned back to face Leif across the table.

‘Qu’est ce que c’est?’ he asked.

‘What? Oh, nothing.’ She looked down and started pushing the last remaining chickpea round her plate.

‘Are you sad because Alexandre is not available now?’

‘I don’t know. I just feel a bit funny.’

‘You’re bound to feel strange, just a little,’ said Leif.

Posy noticed that Carrie seemed to be listening.

‘Do you know where the loos are?’ Carrie demanded. ‘Come with me.’

The toilets of the Green Man were small but luxurious, with flowers and hand lotion at the sides of the white vintage sink.

‘Posy, am I doing something really bad? I’ve started an affair with Alexander. I – I know you’re not a couple any more, but I feel bad.’

Posy smiled sadly.

‘There’s nothing for you to feel bad about,’ she said. ‘It just reminds me of how awful I’ve been to him. I just kept sort of fobbing him off...like he wasn’t good enough for me, or something. But he *was* – I mean, he was *too* good for me... I don’t know... but he’s not my cast-off. He’s a wonderful man.’

‘I know he’s not your cast-off... look Posy, maybe this is quite simple. There just wasn’t a chemistry between you. You’re very little and he’s too tall. Leif le Carré is far more suited to you, physically.’

They looked at each other and after a few moments contemplating Leif’s physicality, started to laugh.

‘Yeah, like I’m Mrs Universe,’ said Posy. ‘Come on – how can I be more suited to him?’

‘He’s highly strung and insecure,’ said Carrie, turning her attentions away from the concept of Leif’s body. ‘And he needs someone really grounding and down-to-earth. And physically....well you can see how he feels about you.’

‘So we’re both happy?’

‘I’m really happy with Alexander. I don’t know where it’s going but I don’t care. I need sex.’

They returned to the dining room, which had quietened a little. Outside the small, leaded windows, the sky had turned an inky black, and the candlelit atmosphere made the red brick walls glow.

‘They asked if we wanted the dessert trolley, but I said no, you girls are watching your figures,’ said Godfrey mischievously.

‘Not tonight we’re not,’ said Carrie, patting her stomach which was still quite wobbly underneath the flattening black suit.

‘*Ah non*, we are watching *your* figures,’ said Leif, who seemed to think this was very funny, and started to laugh while pouring more wine into their glasses. It was a corny comment, and

yet when Posy looked at Leif, her heart leapt with what she could only describe as a womanly joy. She realised that he had begun the first steps of serious seduction, which would lead irrevocably to his bed. It was all a gorgeous downhill ride from here. She picked up her wine glass and looking directly into his eyes, took a big drink.

The waitress appeared.

‘Where’s t’dessert trolley?’ demanded Godfrey, lubricated by wine.

‘It’s just coming – but – I think there’s some people looking for you. They’re just here...’

She walked swiftly away and in one astonishing second, Fergus and Barnaby had materialised. The little nerves at the sides of Posy’s head, just beyond her eyebrows, began to tingle. An unpleasant feeling settled in her lower abdomen, as if a miniature boat were in there, bobbing around on choppy waters. The wine had taken away her ability to think quickly, and she looked passively at Barnaby, waiting for some clue as to what was going on. Barnaby stood there, looking at her in turn; his posture was stiff, angry, feet firmly apart, his fashionable clothes seeming aggressively city-like. Posy remembered that he’d bought that black cashmere hooded top several years ago in a designer sale; it had yellow Chinese lettering on the front which was supposed to spell *crisis*, which, Barnaby had been informed by the salesman at Paul Smith, was made up of two words: danger and opportunity. He had taken that up as the slogan for his production company. Crisis, thought Posy: a good way to describe this moment. Standing to the left of Barnaby, and slightly behind him, was Fergus. Where Barnaby’s posture was as upright as a fresh lollipop, his dark colouring and flaming cheeks suggesting a blackcurrant flavour, Fergus resembled a fine green bean that had been left, forgotten, in the fridge; narrow and long, yet slightly wrinkled and bent, and faded in colour. His bird’s nest of hair had grown longer, in an upwards and outwards direction, and his frameless rectangular spectacles seemed bizarrely modern in contrast to the rest of him, which evoked a Dickensian fustiness. He was wearing a long, beige duster coat which had evidently been purchased at a shop for the taller man; even on Fergus, it was too long, as if exaggerating its own extremity. His bow tie was cock-eyed, and despite the soft lighting, Posy could see a greasy blotch.

Leif, Alexander and Godfrey had never clapped eyes on the pair before, and waited for the men to explain themselves.

‘Are you detectives?’ asked Godfrey. ‘If so, I plead Guilty but Insane!’

Barnaby frowned in confusion.

‘We’re not detectives,’ he said with quiet control. ‘I’m Barnaby. I’m Posy’s partner.’

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Posy.

‘We’re staying at the new hotel,’ replied Barnaby. ‘Thought we’d come out for a bite to eat. And...as you said you’d be here, well, we thought it might be nice to join you.’

Posy felt her eyebrows shoot upwards, while she groped for a way to express her surprise and confusion.

‘But why are you *here*? In Warwickshire?’

Fergus spoke for the first time.

‘Look. May we sit down? I can see you’re all having a good time, but there are things we need to talk about. Can we all agree about that?’

His tone of voice was deep, resonant, and reasonable.

Carrie’s cheeks had turned very crimson.

‘I’m not sure this is the time or the place,’ she said quickly.

Fergus raised his palms towards her in bewilderment.

‘How else could I reach you? Your phone is switched off. I tried to ring but you wouldn’t answer.’

‘I’m busy!’ responded Carrie with a laugh, ‘I’m at work!’

Fergus looked down and frowned, as if sorry that she had shown herself up – a semi-inebriated woman arguing that she was at work. He said nothing.

By now, Alexander and Leif had clocked on to what was happening. This was the man who had abandoned his wife and baby. Alexander spoke.

‘Perhaps we could meet up in the morning. It’s been a very long day and we’re all tired – in fact we were just about to leave.’

He turned to Carrie, who looked at him gratefully.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name,’ said Fergus with scrupulous politeness.

‘Alexander Hamilton. I’m here on the course – I was orchestra leader until Carrie came back.’

Fergus looked from Alexander’s face to Carrie’s, and back.

‘I see. Nice to meet you,’ he said coolly. ‘Look. This is very awkward. I need to talk to Carrie alone.’

Carrie looked at Alexander in panic. She had not prepared for this. Barnaby misread the pause.

‘You can talk in my car,’ he offered graciously.

‘But – ‘

‘She doesn’t want to talk in your car,’ said Posy incredulously. ‘If you have something to say

to Carrie, then I think you should put it in a letter.'

'A fuckin' solicitor's letter, mate,' added Godfrey Maxwell-Minniver with a belch. 'You've missed the boat, you stupid bastard. She doesn't want you any more.'

Fergus' face went very pale and Posy felt sure that she saw the pupils of his colourless eyes dilate. He spoke in a soft voice.

'This is a highly personal matter between my wife and I.'

A red mist seemed to descend on Carrie. Her words were choked.

'I'm not your wife any more. I hate you.'

A ragged silence surrounded the table; the one or two couples left in the restaurant mumbled words of alarm.

Carrie turned to Alexander and pulled on his arm. She was beginning to cry.

'Please take me away,' she begged. 'Get me away from him.'

'Caroline! Don't be so childish! I just want to talk to you!'

Alexander stood up firmly and looked directly into Fergus's eyes, which had now taken on a khaki-coloured darkness. 'I think you'd better leave,' he said sharply, 'You're causing a lot of upset.'

Now, Barnaby stepped forward.

'And you would say that,' he sneered. 'First you go sniffing round after Posy. And – no, don't interrupt – when she rejects you, you try for someone more vulnerable.'

He looked as if he had more to say, but backed down; Barnaby was not accustomed to direct confrontation and preferred to insult people behind their backs.

Leif le Carré tapped him on the shoulder.

'Hey, you are insulting my friend,' he said, his French accent sounding inappropriately charming. 'Why don't you go back to your hotel and let us all finish our meal? Coming here like this, you are fools. Go home!'

'Yes, fuck off home,' added Godfrey, whose gaze was ranging around the table. He was blearily drunk. 'And that's Minniver's orders. You didn't know I was Godfrey Maxwell Minniver, did you? Famous composer extraordinaire, second only to Wagner in the opinion of some, Melvyn Bragg among them. But you probably don't have a fucking clue who Godfrey Maxwell Minniver is anyway. Nobody does.' Godfrey was now sounding maudlin rather than aggressive.

'On the contrary, I do know who you are,' replied Fergus in the same calm voice. 'I edited the libretto on your opera, Minniver's Inferno.'

'What? You're the twat who cut out all the swear words!'

‘And the bestiality scene,’ added Fergus.

‘Ruined the whole structure,’ Godfrey accused. ‘None of the sheep references made any sense after that.’

‘When you say sheep references, I suppose you mean the Baa Baa Blacksheep Fugue,’ replied Fergus smoothly, as if the details were very fresh in his mind. ‘If you recall, there were plans to cut that number, because it made the opera too long to be broadcast on Radio 3.’

‘Plans! No-one consulted the composer on any of this! And anyway, Radio 3 changed their schedule so the scene could be kept in!’

‘Yes, and I remember the furore when they didn’t have time to broadcast Carols from Kings, because Inferno overran! But still...’ he added, collecting himself, ‘I suppose a new opera is more important than Carols from Kings.’

‘Are you being fucking sarcastic?’ challenged Godfrey.

‘No, no, I assure you. I’m a Creative myself.’

‘God help us.’

‘In fact I’m preparing a libretto right now, based on my latest novel. But I’m sure that doesn’t interest you.’

‘Too right it doesn’t. Why don’t you sling your hook?’

Godfrey belched and drained his wine glass, then turned to Tansy and laid his head on her shoulder with a sleepy smile. She stroked his hair, but looked very ill at ease. Meanwhile, Fergus was leaning forwards on the oak table, his eyes bulging in disbelief.

‘I’ve never known anything like this,’ he murmured, as if surrounded by lunatics. He took a deep breath. ‘Very well. But I must insist that I talk to my wife alone. If not tonight, then in the morning. If you would be good enough to bring her to my hotel, perhaps we could have a civilised talk over coffee.’

‘Which room is it?’ Alexander enquired.

‘Don’t tell me,’ deadpanned Godfrey Maxwell Minniver, ‘It’s the James Bond Suite.’

Fergus looked at him, bewildered.

‘How did you know?’

They paid the bill, and although there were attempts to recreate the earlier, cheerful mood, Posy had a terrible sinking feeling, an awareness that the chickens were coming home to roost. Outside, in the chilly gravel car park, Tansy began to feel sick, and bent down shaking as Godfrey held her. ‘It’s all right,’ he slurred, ‘You’ve had a really nasty shock.’

The car park was eerily quiet; the low-pitched trill of a tawny owl could be heard in a nearby oak tree.

‘I thought there was going to be a fight,’ sobbed Tansy, ‘I was really frightened. I thought you might get hurt, Godfrey.’

‘*Ah non*, we three men against those two ponces, they knew they had no chance,’ said Leif. ‘*Allez*, let’s get in the car, then have a nice brandy when we get back.’

Alexander unlocked the car and they squeezed themselves back into position for the drive home. Posy hesitated outside the car for a moment, to let Godfrey and Tansy have a moment of privacy on the back seat. Suddenly, she was aware of a presence behind her, and she spun round to find Barnaby standing just inches away. He looked at her with thunderous anger.

‘Just tell me;’ he hissed, ‘what’s going on?’

Posy gasped with shock. ‘I don’t love you any more, Barnaby,’ she said. ‘And I know you don’t love me, so it’s going to be okay for both of us. Our – our friendship has reached its natural end.’

‘And?’

‘And what?’

‘I saw the way Leif le Carré looked at you. Are you sleeping with him?’

‘No!’ Posy insisted. ‘I’m not sleeping with anybody. This is nothing to do with me being seduced away from you, Barnaby. I’m leaving of my own volition. And anyway...’

‘And anyway what?’

‘You’ve got Zabrina Ademola to keep you company.’

Barnaby looked genuinely confused.

‘What? You don’t think – oh, Posy!’

The hard, gritty look in Barnaby’s dark eyes gave way to a look of fatigue and sadness.

‘Posy, you must realise...Zabrina is a lesbian. She did a major interview in last Sunday’s Observer. And she’s been in the Guardian Weekend going on about it. You must have seen that.’

Posy recognised Barnaby’s old method of humiliation: to mention a Sunday supplement feature that she was bound not to have read. A spark of anger erupted within her.

‘Oh, so what if she’s gay? That’s so much the better for you – typical male! You probably begged her for a threesome, didn’t you?’

With these thoughtless words, Posy realised she had lost control of the situation. Her old detachment lay in shards on the ground; maybe it had all been an illusion anyway.

‘I’m sorry,’ she sobbed, again, hearing the old Posy, the one who had always been Barnaby’s

inferior. 'It's just – she is a beautiful actress and you let her answer my phone as if she lives there. As if she is the mistress of the house. It's not the sex – I really don't care about that – it's the humiliation of it, the way you let her take my place. You shouldn't have!'

'Oh, Posy,' Barnaby groaned, 'you've been worrying your silly little head about me having sex with Zabrina. Oh, no wonder you've been so confused. And I – I'm so sorry, but I thought you were having an affair with that awful conducting Chippendale.'

An icy knife cut into Posy's heart.

'He's not an awful conducting Chippendale. In fact, I love him. And although I haven't been sleeping with him, I fully intend to. Tonight!'

She slipped into the car and slammed the door.