

Chapter Six

Posy struggled for a few moments with the plastic key-card, until finally a little yellow-green light flashed on, and she was able to depress the metal door handle and enter her room. She found herself in a small foyer with a built-in mirrored wardrobe on one side, left open to reveal a few coat hangers and a white towelling bath robe. On her right was another door, which she pushed open to reveal a huge, marbled bathroom, gleaming mirrors reflecting the twinkling light of half a dozen halogen bulbs, set into the ceiling. She frowned in puzzlement as she noticed that the toilet seat had been taped down, and turning her head on one side read the words 'HYGEINE SEAL'. By the side of the sink, which was set into shell pink marble, there was a clear Perspex stand containing several little bottles; marine blue bath gel, shampoo, body lotion.

'Why don't they ever supply something useful, like a spare toothbrush and some toothpaste?' grumbled Posy to Alexander, who was silently marvelling at the luxury of the room.

'Fresh flowers in the bathroom,' he commented. 'And by the side of the bed. I hope you don't get hay fever.' He suddenly sneezed.

'Damn! And I forgot my Piriton.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, Alexander. I'll get rid of these flowers.'

'No, don't! They are beautiful. And it's your room.'

Posy squirmed a little - had her offer to get rid of the flowers sounded like an assumption that he might like to spend more time in her room? She hoped not. God, my nerves are all over the place, thought Posy, looking round for the kettle amidst the dark, mysterious furniture.

Alexander placed her suitcase on the bed, and Posy put down her flute case next to it.

'Thanks,' she said, rubbing her forehead. 'I'm sorry, but I'm a bit flustered after the shock.'

'What - you mean the other orchestra?'

'Yes.'

'And that arrogant young chap.'

'Leif le Carré. Yes, he was ghastly. The sort of musician I don't trust.'

'And you are quite right not to,' agreed Alexander. 'Running an orchestra based entirely on elitist values.'

'At least they're honest, though,' Posy conceded. 'They do have the word *elite* in their title.'

'Yes. They could have called themselves the *Paris Community Orchestra!*'

They both laughed.

‘That would have been an unforgivable distortion of the truth,’ grimaced Posy. ‘Anyway, hopefully we won’t have to have anything to do with them. We rehearse in the little ballroom, they have the big one.’

‘Good! And maybe we could arrange for our breaks to be at different times.’

‘Great idea! We could start a bit earlier and break at half ten instead of eleven. We don’t want them siphoning off all the coffee.’

‘That’s if they’ll stoop to drinking Illy.’

Posy laughed, and began to feel more relaxed.

‘Oh, thanks Alexander. It’s great to have a bit of moral support. I really appreciate it.’

‘Not at all. I could tell that man was getting under your skin. I just wanted you to know that *your* values pass muster here. I am right behind everything this orchestra stands for. I’ve already started to get to know people. I can’t wait for tomorrow’s rehearsal.’

‘So did you get the schedule?’

‘I did. We’re working on Beethoven’s First Symphony up until coffee time, and Hugh is doing the communal composition afterwards.’

‘Then after lunch, the players will be roaming round gathering ideas for the composition. Hugh’s asked them to each write a haiku inspired by the building or the grounds. Then we all gather together after tea at four, to discuss our findings. You’re welcome to join in as well - although if you’d rather just have some free time, that’s OK.’

‘I fully intend to join in,’ said Alexander.

‘Great!’ said Posy. ‘Oh honestly, where is the kettle?’

Alexander strode over to the huge, mahogany-veneer desk and smoothly opened the large, bottom drawer on the right hand side. Sure enough, a tray was stashed away inside, with two small white cups, a tiny kettle and a caddy of coffee and teabags.

‘Ta-da,’ he cried triumphantly.

‘Join me for a cuppa?’ suggested Posy.

Posy groped for her alarm clock and pressed the little button which lit up the digital display. It was 2.45 am, and she was cold. The bed was Queen-size, and instead of a duvet, it was topped with a starched sheet, a lightweight brown blanket, and a heavy bedspread with the stiff, unyielding quality of an oven glove. The sheet beneath her felt hard and crisp. Posy clicked on the nearest light switch, inadvertently turning all the lights on rather than just the bedside lamp, got out of bed with one eye screwed shut and went to the loo. She then rearranged the bedding, doubling over the blanket and bedspread so they just covered one

side of the bed, and got back in. The folded bed-toppings slid onto the floor. Crossly, she got out of bed, pulled on a jumper, rearranged the bedding, turned off the lights and tried to settle down again. But she was stiff with tension, and sleep would not come. Posy thought about Alexander. She wondered if he were single, straight or gay. It was impossible to tell. He was a fine figure of a man, and yet it was not possible to fancy him without being quite sure about his status. Still, she was strongly attracted to the air of integrity, charm and kindness which he radiated. Barnaby had not been particularly kind of late; not that he'd been unkind as such, but there was little consideration for Posy's feelings in his behaviour. She wondered if their relationship would survive, settle back down to normal, or whether some traumatic change was on the horizon. Perhaps she'd return to Millfields to find him setting up home with that Zabrina person, who sounded so sure of herself on the phone. Somehow, the confrontation with Leif le Carré had taken away the last bit of confidence Posy had; she'd always been so clear about her beliefs, her skills at keeping the orchestra together, motivating and organising everything for them. But that man had made her feel inept and naïve. Then she remembered; if everyone in the orchestra had been auditioned and quizzed on their cultural knowledge, then Amina Osman would have been excluded as the only classical composer she knew was Beethoven, Lloyd and Kevin because they knew nothing about high art and were more enthusiastic about football than oil paintings, and Roy Carlton because he couldn't cope with Italian musical terminology and needed everything translated into English. The people who were so important to the organisation - and to Posy herself - would never have been given a chance. Posy dreaded to think what Kevin and Lloyd would be doing had they not been given trumpet lessons for the last two years with the help of MABO funding. At the age of sixteen, they had only just qualified as Adult Beginners, but Posy had been rewarded for trying them out. They took a sort of macho pride in learning the trumpet, vying with each other to strengthen their chops, build up their stamina and play higher and faster. And being young, they affected the chemistry of the whole ensemble, adding an element of fun and unpredictability. Now, both of them were applying to a local college to study Music Technology. What had Leif le Carré's orchestra done in terms of getting disaffected youth off the streets? If anything, his orchestra would just confirm young peoples' prejudice about classical music: that it was stuffy and owned by rich gatekeepers whose job it was to keep away anyone who was not to the manor born, musically speaking.

Posy turned over angrily, punching the flat, cold pillow to try to manipulate it into a more comfortable shape. Eventually she drifted into a light sleep, waking several times in the night to go to the loo. It was only around five in the morning when her sleep finally became

heavy and dream-ridden. Images of Barnaby came into her mind; his face disapproving, with that distant look in his eyes, the look that spoke of alienation, incomprehension. She dreamed that he was dropping Mao out of the window of their flat; she screamed and rushed down to the tiny, communal back garden, to find nothing but the cat's skeleton, the bones tiny and white. Then there was another dream: she was knocking and knocking on Carrie's door, hearing the sound of running water, then blood pouring from the bathroom window. And then a vision of Fergus, walking away from the house, deep in conversation with someone - was it Barnaby? Around seven o'clock, Posy realised that she was awake, her back aching, staring unhappily at the heavy curtains of her room. She felt a flood of unease after the unpleasant dreams, combined with a kind of guilt, almost; what was she doing in this dark, luxurious room, set apart from the other members of the orchestra? Then she remembered the night before, the comforting reality, when she had invited a few of her closest friends to come round for a nightcap, and how pleased they all had been for her, how they approved and said that she deserved to be spoilt a little and how happily they had retired to their own, simple rooms. Maybe I should start listening to them, Posy thought. She stretched in bed and padded over the soft carpet to the window to draw the curtains, which appeared to be made out of the same hard, heat-resistant material as the bedspread. Light shone into her room, bright pastel colours, the pale blue of the early morning sky, the gentle green of the gardens surrounding the hall. The nasty taste of the dreams began to recede. Focussing her eyes on the view directly below her first-floor window, she was surprised to see the figure of a man, jogging calmly along the path. He was wearing a light grey tracksuit, and was carrying a bottle of water. Posy recognised the short but floppy brown hair as belonging to Alexander, and she instinctively ducked behind the curtain, not wanting to be seen. She peeped out again, more carefully, and watched as he jogged away towards the formal gardens. He kept a steady pace; Posy noticed the little towel round his neck and surmised that he was quite a serious exerciser. When Alexander reached the central fountain in the garden, he stopped for a breather by a bench. But he did not sit down; he raised his legs onto the seat in turn, leaning over them to stretch out the muscles, and wiped his face with the towel, before taking a small swig of water. Then he continued his journey to the far end of the garden before making his way into the woodland beyond. He looked impressively fit and classically English; Posy could imagine him starring in a Merchant Ivory film, where he would play the good guy, definitely. She smiled to herself as she thought of the day ahead.

