

Chapter Sixteen

Posy woke to the lazy clang of distant church bells. She'd failed to draw the heavy curtains fully the night before, and a hazy beam of morning sunlight penetrated her room and rested on the bed. She held out her hand and let it be warmed by the beam. One of her fingertips caught the light; the nail was bright silver, and Posy recalled that she had allowed the young clarinettist Hattie to paint it during last night's prolonged session at the bar. She smiled, but felt melancholy. Next to her, the bed was empty. Despite the continuing inner conflict, Posy had expected that the evening would end with Alexander coming to her room, but he'd excused himself relatively early, and Posy had been unable to follow him because Hattie had a firm grasp of her hand while steadily painting the fingernail. Perhaps it was a lost opportunity, or perhaps it was just as well she hadn't tried to pursue him; it could have led to an embarrassing rejection. Just as she had rejected him. Posy frowned at the complexity of it all. She had no idea what she wanted, and felt as though she were going to hurt someone very badly, or else, be hurt. She wished that today was due to be a busy day, full of rehearsals and organisation – how would she fill the empty hours? Left to her own devices, she knew she'd be tormented with regrets and would waste the beautiful summer's day in a fog of confusion. The distant bells changed their pattern, and Posy wondered if one of the bellringers had been left behind or had simply got out of phase with the others. She recalled taking part in a bell ringing workshop with Hugh, which had been surprisingly challenging. Another sound caught her attention; the honking of geese, get louder, and then a splashing as their webbed feet hit the water of the lake. More honking; more splashing. Suddenly Posy was reminded of something: the swimming costume she had packed. There was an outdoor pool in the grounds of Camargue Castle: a Baroque affair that resembled a large bird bath, with a central fountain, built around a statue of Venus emerging from a shell. Although Posy had never known the fountain to be working, she found the pool amusingly non-functional, suitable only for floating around; the serious swimmer would get dizzy doing circuits. Still, she pictured the turquoise mosaic tiles glinting beneath the cool water, and wondered if this might provide a pleasant way of passing some time after breakfast.

To Posy's surprise, Tansy and Rhoda both turned up to breakfast wearing their swimsuits, only half concealed beneath flowing caftans and long, gypsy skirts. Posy, too, had built her outfit around her swimming costume – only it felt as though she were wearing a dull, bosom-flattening, navy blue vest with her brown linen trousers. From what she could see, Rhoda's

costume looked quite exotic; chocolate brown glossy lycra, rather low cut at both front and back, and with strings of turquoise beads stretched tightly over her freckled cleavage. Tansy on the other hand seemed to be sporting a small, triangular bikini in a bright shade of yellow under her thin, paisley skirt, worn with wellingtons; she reminded Posy of a young Joni Mitchell on her way to a gig in a field. Tansy squeaked in excitement when she saw Posy approach.

‘Aaaah! You had the same thought as us!’

Posy was embarrassed, hoping that the other breakfasters would not turn round and stare at her shabby costume.

‘It’s the perfect morning for a swim,’ commented Rhoda, sitting down to a big bowl of muesli and yoghurt.

‘I wonder if Dante would like to come in the water?’ asked Tansy. ‘Has he ever been swimming before? They say you can throw a baby into a pool and it will swim.’

‘Good God, I had a man on my couch a few years ago who said his mother did that to him,’ said Rhoda. ‘He developed an inability to relax his neck. He was constantly stretching his chin upwards, convinced he would drown if his nose and mouth dropped. Of course he turned up at his GP’s surgery with the most dreadful neck ache. And it all boiled down to a fear of drowning.’

How did you cure him?’ asked Tansy.

‘I’m afraid I never did,’ sighed Rhoda. ‘The silly man got in with some rebirthing experts who insisted he relive the whole experience by jumping into a lake. You can imagine what happened.’

There was an uncomfortable pause.

‘Let’s not throw Dante into the pool,’ said Posy.

Carrie arrived at the table.

‘Pardon?’

‘Nothing!’ smiled Posy brightly. ‘We were just saying, we’re all off for a swim this morning. Fancy coming?’

‘Erm...let me see... I don’t have a costume, and Dante doesn’t have a swimming nappy. But...I’ll see what I can do.’

Tansy dipped a toe into the water, and Posy noticed that the nails were painted in fluorescent yellow, not quite matching the sunflower hue of the tiny crocheted bikini. Tansy frowned.

‘It’s not freezing, but it’s not heated either.’

‘Sunbathe for a while,’ suggested Rhoda. ‘As the sun gets higher, it’ll warm the water.’

‘Good idea,’ replied Tansy, needing no further encouragement. She laid out a brightly-coloured, yet moth-eaten, towel on the concrete flags surrounding the circular pool. Delving into her large shoulder bag, appliquéd and embroidered, and with mirrorwork which flashed blindingly in the sun, she pulled out a bottle of tanning oil.

‘Are you sure that’s enough for this sun?’ asked Rhoda. ‘We used to use that oily stuff in the seventies.’

‘It’s SPF 30, I think,’ said Tansy, ‘I bought it in Tunisia last year and it smells divine. I didn’t burn. Posy, do you want some?’

Posy had already begun to cover her arms and legs with what looked like lard.

‘No thanks. I’ve no chance of tanning anyway.’

‘You could with this Desert Oil,’ Tansy assured her. ‘I’m normally pale but I went really golden last year. Hopefully by the end of today I’ll look a bit less mushy.’

Posy laughed. ‘You’re nothing like mushy! You’re already going golden.’

‘Like a young hippy, frolicking on the Isle of Wight,’ agreed Rhoda. ‘And I intend to look like a West African matriarch.’

Rhoda was indeed going very brown in the summer sun. There was a companionable silence as the three women reclined on their towels.

‘We mustn’t fall asleep,’ murmured Posy. ‘There’s a real risk of burning.’

‘Mmm.’

Posy couldn’t be sure how long she’d been dozing, when she became aware of a gentle splashing sound. She opened one eye and saw that Tansy had plunged into the water. She swam a smooth circuit around the shallow pool, then stood up, sweeping back her long blonde hair and squeezing the water out of it.

‘It’s lovely!’ she gasped. ‘It’s really warmed up! Come on in!’

Posy and Rhoda roused themselves and tiptoed across the hot concrete to the pool. With sighs of pleasure, they submerged themselves. Posy bounced up and down in the water like a cork, enjoying her buoyancy and watching in amusement as the excess fabric in her baggy navy costume flopped up and down, while Rhoda did the breast-stroke rather studiously, round and round the pool. Tansy joined her, mixing a relaxed backstroke with front crawl. The tensions of the last few days retreated, and Posy found herself smiling up at the sun, feeling like a child of nature. Then she heard a voice.

‘Allo!’

Instantly, her nerves stood to attention. Approaching male. Swimsuit. Lardy sun lotion. Wet hair.

‘Allo, can we join you?’

Not one male, but two!

Alexander and Leif were striding up the grassy hillock to the little ornamental pool, each holding a small towel folded over his arm. They were both wearing sporty shorts, the sort that doubled as swimming trunks. Posy didn’t know where to look, but was grateful for the discreet bagginess of the shorts.

‘Hi! Well – there’s not much room,’ Posy began, but they seemed not to hear.

Rhoda seemed delighted to have male company. ‘My dears! Of course you’re very welcome. It’s not a mothers’ meeting, you know.’

‘Yes,’ laughed Tansy, ‘And we’re not separatist feminists.’

‘Ah, thank God!’ said Leif.

Posy wondered if they were laughing at her reticence, but before she could add some pleasantry to indicate otherwise, Leif abruptly pulled down his shorts. Posy gasped in shock, expecting to be confronting with his bare and undoubtedly blonde penis, but instead was faced with a pair of small, snug-fitting black trunks. The swimwear equivalent of his habitual black T-shirts.

She was sure that Leif noticed her alarm, and grinned at her. Without warning, he jumped into the pool, submerging his entire body and head before bouncing back up again, his white teeth flashing a joyful smile.

‘Ah, *c’est magnifique*,’ he cried. ‘Don’t you think so, Posee?’

‘Lovely, yes,’ replied Posy, blinking as he splashed her.

‘Where’s Carrie?’ asked Alexander.

‘She went to see if she could fabricate a swimming nappy for Dante,’ explained Rhoda.

‘Though I can’t see the point. None of us would object to finding a little baby poo in the water, would we?’

Leif looked directly at Posy and raised his eyebrows.

She found herself laughing. ‘How on earth was she going to try to make a swimming nappy?’

‘I gave her a polythene bag,’ said Rhoda, ‘and she was going to cut two holes in it for Dante’s legs to go through. Then just put it over his regular nappy and fix it somehow, around his waist.’

Posy noticed that Leif was still looking at her, still enjoying the joke. With a sudden loss of control, she found herself blurting, 'You could have lent Dante your trunks, Leif. They're small enough.'

She heard Tansy shriek with laughter, and Rhoda chime in with the comment, 'She's got a point, dear.' But there was no time to follow up with an apology or explanation – Leif had dived under the water and with two strong hands had seized hold of her calves. As he pulled them towards him, Posy lost her footing and fell backwards with a big splash. When she finally came up for air, Posy felt her cheeks burning red. But not with anger – this was fun, this was pleasure. She began to laugh, and could not stop. Tears ran down her cheeks. 'I'm going to cry,' she said. 'I am crying.'

Posy's emotions were now completely out of control. Leif waded forwards, his toffee-coloured thighs cutting through the water, and put his arms around her, and within seconds, Posy's cold, wet head was resting against his smooth chest.

'Oh, I'm sorry Posee. You thought I was going to drown you.'

'N – no, I didn't,' she half laughed, half cried. 'It's just...oh God!'

She found herself sobbing again and considered some sham reply, but nothing would come.

'It's just, no man has ever made a grab for me in a pool. They always go for other girls.'

Arghh, thought Posy, I don't want Leif to pity me! But Leif took a step back, as if amazed.

'*Comment?*' he frowned. 'That's not possible! You're so gorgeous!'

Posy was now paralysed with embarrassment, and was painfully aware of the little audience who had witnessed this mortifying scene.

'Where's Alexander going?' she asked, bewildered, as he disappeared quickly down the hillock.

'He's going to help Carrie with Dante. Don't worry, Posy,' said Rhoda, 'He's fine!'

Leif was still looking at Posy, as they stood under the blazing sun, water dripping from their hair. He reached out and touched one of the stringy lengths. '*C'est vrai,*' he said softly, 'You are gorgeous.'

Posy could not think of a reply.

'Even in your school swimsuit,' he added ironically, and Posy finally felt she had been released from his hook of seduction. She collapsed onto the grass, next to Tansy who had pulled out a skein of wool from her bag.

'You're not making more oboe warmers are you?' asked Posy, desperately changing the subject.

'No,' said Tansy, fingering the bright turquoise yarn. 'I'm making another crochet bikini.'

‘Ah, excellent!’ said Posy. ‘Turquoise is really your colour. You really are clever Tansy, I thought you’d bought that yellow one from a designer shop.’

‘No way! I made it myself. So you do like it, then?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good, because this turquoise one is for you.’

Posy’s laugh turned into a gasp.

‘It’s a different design, though, isn’t it? Much bigger?’

Tansy held up two tiny crocheted triangles.

‘No, it’s the same,’ she smiled innocently.

‘Well, if you ever finish it, I’ll be glad to try it on.’

‘It is finished.’

‘What, already?’

‘Yes, I’ve just got to tie the bits together.’

‘I’ve nowhere to get changed.’

Tansy looked around, taking in the many bushes which surrounded the pool.

‘Shame,’ she said, with a secretive smile.

Leif was now doing rapid circuits of the pool, looking every inch the Olympic swimmer.

‘Do you think he made Alexander cross, flirting with me?’ Posy whispered.

‘Posy,’ said Rhoda rather sternly, ‘I think Alexander gave up on you a while ago. You haven’t exactly encouraged him.’

Posy looked at her feet. ‘No, I don’t suppose I have.’

Before she had time to torture herself for this wrongdoing, Posy heard Carrie and Alexander approach.

‘Hi there!’ called Carrie, ‘Look! Baby with swimming nappy!’

‘Aaaah!’ cooed the women.

‘It says ‘Fairtrade bananas,’’ Carrie pointed out. ‘How cute is that?’

Alexander was carrying the rustling baby who was pouting angrily.

‘Though I’m not sure he’s very happy with my avant-garde tailoring.’

Dante’s mouth gaped open and a wail emerged, followed by hiccupping sobs.

‘Ah, poor thing,’ said Alexander, and held the baby closer to his chest. Dante’s little fist closed on the thicket of black hair and pulled. ‘Ouch! He’s pulling my rug off.’

‘Ooh, sorry,’ said Carrie, holding out her arms to reclaim the non-plussed baby.

‘No, it’s okay,’ Alexander smiled, ‘he’s a lovely little chap.’

‘Great, well if you don’t mind having possession, I’ll take a little swim on my own,’ said

Carrie, amazed that Alexander was content to jiggle her discontented infant. She unwound the towel that was acting as a mini dress, and revealed a plain, but flattering, red costume, borrowed from Hattie the clarinettist. Posy noticed that she was still looking into Alexander's eyes, as if expecting him to hand the baby back. But he simply smiled and flapped Dante's hand in the air. 'Bye bye, mummy.'

Rhoda looked at Posy knowingly, but before Posy could return the glance, Tansy let out a cry of jubilation. 'Finished!'

'Oh God,' said Posy. 'No, Tansy, please don't make me wear a tiny string bikini. You don't understand. I'm not built like you.'

'What do you mean? I'm nothing special.'

Posy laughed grimly. 'You're the sort of girl who got teased at school for being slim, aren't you?'

Tansy looked genuinely confused.

'Well, I've never been ashamed of my body,' she explained, 'but I don't see it as being like a supermodel or anything. It's just a human, female body. Just like yours, Posy. Nothing to be ashamed of. Look. If you're embarrassed, watch this. I'm going to take off my bikini and just be here, nude. If I do that, will you try on the turquoise one?'

Leif was lying back on the grass with his eyes closed, but Posy saw his mouth twitch.

'You're going to go topless?'

'No, not topless. Bottomless.'

Posy's heart was pounding, because she had no doubt that the turquoise bikini would make her look like a pale, ginger Michelin Man.

'I'm stripping!'

'Stop, Tansy.'

'Too late. Look! I'm nude.'

Posy was spared this ultimate challenge by the sudden appearance of Godfrey Maxwell Minniver, puffing up the grassy hillock carrying a rucksack which was evidently heavy with composing equipment – sharp pencils whose points poked through the canvas, geometric compasses which did the same, only more dangerously so, and reams of manuscript paper which had been rolled up to form a long, unruly tube. His wheezing breaths implied a poor level of fitness, and Posy grimaced in anticipation of the terrible shock that he was about to undergo.

'Jesus Christ!' Godfrey cried, his voice choked with emotion. 'Joni Mitchell on the Isle of Wight! I've gone back to my youth!'

He sank to his knees. ‘I can’t believe what’s happening. Oh God! I have to have this woman!’ Tansy turned round, still smiling calmly. With Godfrey on his knees, her sprawling bush of pubic hair was parallel with his forehead. He looked as if he might faint.

‘Come for a swim with us,’ she said, in her most friendly voice.

Godfrey buried his face in his hands and wept.

Bottles of beer and lemonade, serviettes and crumbs of cake surrounded the sunbathers’ towels. Dante, having been immersed in the cool water and shrieked in rage, had been taken away for a nap.

‘We really ought to go and do something useful,’ mumbled Rhoda, her face half-pressed into the ground.

‘I just want to make love,’ replied Godfrey, who was still crying, an hour after his outburst. He was lying on the grass next to Tansy’s threadbare towel and was caressing the skin of her upper arm with reverence. ‘And then I want to write an Oboe Concerto.’

Tansy smiled at him sleepily. ‘What’s for dinner tonight? Did anyone see the noticeboard?’

‘Ah,’ replied Leif, ‘It’s the usual shit. I know. Why don’t we all go out for a meal tonight?’

Posy, who was lying on her towel facing him, yet still at a slight distance away, responded with enthusiasm. ‘There’s a gorgeous old pub in the village. They do gourmet bistro food. Let’s have a big slap-up meal, to celebrate. MABO’s funding has been guaranteed.

Godfrey’s premiere is going to be brilliant. And our two orchestras are working together.’

She beamed and stretched. Leif moved closer.

‘This pub,’ he said, ‘It’s not just lentils is it? I don’t like that vegetarian shit.’

The sudden insult hit Posy in the solar plexus, but this time her response was different. Leif le Carré had met his match. If he wanted to fight, let him fight – in the bedroom.

Posy’s pleasant train of thought was interrupted by the sound of her mobile phone ringing.

‘Posy!’ snapped Rhoda, coming round from her reverie, ‘how can you bear to have that thing switched on all the time?’

‘I didn’t used to have it switched on all the time,’ Posy informed her, ‘but since Carrie had her crisis, I’ve been more nervous. Oh. It’s Barnaby.’

She clicked to accept the call.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello? Is that you Posy? I can’t hear very well, the signal’s bad.’

‘Sorry. I can hear you.’

‘Where are you?’

‘By the pool at Camargue castle. Where are you?’

She wondered why he asked.

‘I’m...just around, you know...’

‘Are you still there?’

‘Yah, sorry – just wondering what you were getting up to. Who’s that?’

‘It’s Leif, singing.’

She gestured to Leif to be quiet. She wasn’t ready to let Barnaby know what was going on; besides, a future with Leif was certainly not guaranteed.

‘Sounds out of tune.’

‘It’s part of Godfrey’s new score.’

‘*Godfrey*, now!’ remarked Barnaby. ‘I thought he stood for everything you despise.’

‘I was prejudiced,’ said Posy, frankly.

‘You had well thought-out objections to his aesthetic,’ Barnaby said. ‘Though I admit he’s a charismatic man. You’ve probably fallen for his authority.’

‘Oh, bollocks,’ said Posy, smiling, noticing that somehow Barnaby was unable to draw her into an argument. His comments weren’t hurting any more.

‘How’s Fergus?’

‘Oh, you know...getting through. It seems like Carrie has forgotten him. He’s had his mobile on permanently for the last four days and she hasn’t called.’

‘Ooh, what a surprise!’

‘Well, actually, it is a surprise; they used to talk to each other several times a day.’

‘That was before he walked out on her. A depressed mother with a newborn baby.’

‘Don’t mention depression to Fergus. He’s just started a course of cognitive therapy. For him, it’s not just hormones and dirty nappies, it’s...it’s the abyss.’

Posy sighed. ‘Do you want me to get Carrie to ring him, then? Because I don’t know where she is right now. She went off with Alexander, who’s helping with the baby.’

‘Oh, helping with the baby! What a gent. Amazing how many guys seem to want to help with the baby. They’re like status symbols for postmodern man.’

‘You sound jealous.’

Barnaby made an explosive choking sound. How odd it was that Posy was now pulling his strings; something really had changed. Her feelings weren’t cold, or hating; just cool, neutral, observing their interaction with detached compassion for both players.

‘I’m sorry, Barnaby, I didn’t mean that. I know how you feel about babies. Anyway, look – I’ll ask Carrie to call Fergus tomorrow. She’s busy tonight; we’re all going to the Green Man

for dinner.’

‘Who’s going?’

‘Carrie, me and Tansy, Godfrey Maxwell Minniver, Alexander and Leif.’

‘Leif le Carré? I thought he was the enemy.’

Suddenly Leif grabbed the phone.

‘She’s got to go now, someone is drowning in the pool. Goodbye.’

