

## Chapter Thirteen

‘Oh Lord,’ muttered Alexander softly. Once again, he pressed the eject button on his ghetto blaster, and an empty drawer revealed itself cooperatively to him. He pressed the drawer back in again and looked around him, scratching his head. Posy noticed the ring of sweat under his arm.

‘It was here last night. I left it in the machine. I know I did.’

‘What’s the matter?’

Carrie approached, nursing a violin, borrowed from Alexander himself.

‘Pardon?’

The members of MABO were now making quite a din with their attempts to tune up.

‘I said, what’s the matter? Have you lost something?’

‘I’ve lost the CD of Beethoven One,’ explained Alexander. ‘I was using it as a fast-track way of teaching the music to the non-readers.’

Carrie gave a sympathetic smile-frown. ‘Oh. Yes, we do have a lot of non-readers. But look. Things will be better this morning.’

Alexander looked perplexed. Carrie beamed.

‘I’m here!’

‘You’re here. Yes. You are. It will be better.’

Carrie sat down in her accustomed position as orchestra leader, as the cheerful throng continued. Neil Havers’ timps made boing-boing sounds as he leant his ear to one in an attempt to tune it. On the oboe, Tansy was playing her A over and over again, and had begun to decorate the note with Arabic-sounding ornamentations. Hattie and Zoe were trying to tune their clarinets to her, but seemed to be having trouble picking the right note. Lloyd and Kevin were playing the first three notes of Copland’s Fanfare for the Common Man, having worked it out that far together. Posy felt horribly tense and out of control. She knew that despite Carrie’s presence, the loss of the CD could have a bad effect on the rehearsal. She found herself looking at Rhoda and Phil with narrowed eyes. They were gossiping together as if they didn’t have a care in the world. Had Rhoda stolen the disc? She was certainly against using it. Suddenly Rhoda caught her eye.

‘Everything all right, dear?’

‘Yes! Fine!’

‘I definitely left it here,’ Alexander was still muttering, his eyes scanning the room.

‘I don’t know what you’re so bothered about,’ said Phil. ‘I think I’ve memorised the first page anyway.’

‘We all have,’ Rhoda assured Alexander, whose face was pale and moist. ‘I think we could get through page one without a hitch!’

‘If I can get the beast to cooperate,’ added Tansy cheerfully, holding up her oboe. ‘It took me to page two to get it warmed up yesterday!’

‘Have you changed your reed, like I suggested?’ enquired Posy.

‘I’m trying not to waste wood,’ explained Tansy. ‘It’s one of the earth’s most precious resources.’

‘But your old reed was going mouldy. That’s why you couldn’t get the oboe to speak.’

‘I think I’ve got round that problem now,’ said Tansy. ‘There’s a swap-shop on the internet for second hand reeds. You can get nearly-new ones so cheaply. Someone has glued this one together but it works really well. You can hardly tell.’

Posy was at a loss for words.

‘We ought to start,’ stated Phil in a serious tone. ‘We haven’t got all day.’

He lifted his trombone to his lips and waggled the slide in preparation.

‘Right. Okay. This is our last rehearsal before the concert,’ announced Alexander. ‘We’ve got people coming from three different schools; if they book us for a workshop, we’ll get our funding for next year. If they don’t, we won’t.’

‘Extra tension won’t help us,’ commented Rhoda.

‘No. Sorry. I just wanted to make sure you were all fully in the picture.’

He smiled, and raised his arms.

‘Shall we have a go? Beethoven One. First movement. Let’s do it.’

‘Where from?’ asked Amina.

Alexander lowered his arms.

‘From the beginning,’ he replied. ‘Everyone clear? From the beginning. From Bar One.’

Posy thought she noticed a few resentful looks, as if people felt patronised. It was hardly Alexander’s fault.

After an interminable pause, the first chord resounded. The top oboe note was horribly out of tune. Posy tried to adjust her embouchure to blend better with Tansy’s pitch, but the oboe was simply too flat. Still playing, she raised her eyes to Alexander’s, and received a warning glance, indicating to just keep going. The slow introduction staggered to its conclusion, and Alexander’s body tensed as he prepared the orchestra for the faster tempo to come. The violins managed the first theme well, the cellos and basses dragging slightly behind, but

roughly together. Then the woodwinds were due to enter with a brief, rising gesture - Tansy's oboe failed to speak, and Posy played alone. She was determined to continue, dragging the rest of the orchestra with her, but Tansy was completely distracted.

'Come on little guy,' she said to her instrument, 'you can do it!'

She took a deep breath and played the rising phrase again. But by this time, the music had moved on. To Posy's horror, Tansy continued at this pace, several bars behind, and some of the other musicians decided to meander back a few bars and follow her. The result was cacophony.

'Okay, okay,' called Alexander, flapping his hands in the air. For a few moments, the wailing continued, until he placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled, hard.

'Ouch!' cried Rhoda. 'That's really upset my hearing aid.'

'I think he wants us to stop,' said Phil grumpily, lowering his trombone with a frown.

'I do apologise,' replied Alexander. Posy could barely believe his composure. Carrie stood up.

'MABO players,' she said in a clear voice. 'What on earth has happened? You're not reading, you're not concentrating, you're not listening to each other.'

For the first time that morning, there was silence, as the players looked on at their leader.

'This is not going to be ready for Saturday.' Carrie stated. She looked directly at Posy. 'I'm sorry Posy. But I'd no idea it was this bad.'

Alexander's mouth twitched.

'I'm sorry too. This is my fault.'

Posy's stomach turned to water. She could not think of a way out of this one. Her back was against the wall; there was no contingency plan; this was the end. No concert, no workshop bookings, no funding, no future for MABO.

She stood up and walked mutely towards the door, just as the shrieking of a baby was heard.

Leif le Carré was pushing Dante's pram into the room.

'You're having a break already?' said Leif breezily. 'Well that's good. He is crying, you know, I think he is hungry.'

Carrie rushed forwards.

'Lambkin!'

She scooped the little figure out of the cavernous pram, pulling half of the blankets out with the baby.

'Oh, yes, he is hungry. Thanks, Leif.'

Carrie sat down on the nearest chair and began to fiddle with the buttons of her blouse,

smiling serenely. Posy watched for a few moments. The MABO crisis seemed to have been forgotten, by Carrie at least. All she cared about was feeding the stupid baby! Posy began to cry. With one hand shielding her eyes, she turned back to the door, intending to let the cool, shady corridor of Camargue Castle swallow her up, and to disappear into the Kingsbury Suite, pull the Teflon-coated curtains shut, get into bed and become unconscious as soon as possible. She clocked anxiously that the cleaner would probably be buzzing around with a Hoover, but she would just have to be assertive and tell the woman to go away. And then she noticed a small man, hovering just behind Leif. An untidy fellow, with a mop of vigorous but slightly oily hair, a cappuccino-coloured complexion, and an old acrylic sweater worn over an expensive-looking shirt with lilac pinstripes. As she glanced at the man, he in turn looked at Leif as if waiting to be introduced.

‘Ah, pardon,’ said Leif. ‘Posy, this is Bernard. He is the leader of L’OEIL.’

‘Hi,’ sniffed Posy.

‘Bernard would like to join your orchestra,’ smiled Leif, squaring his shoulders for a confrontation.

‘Oh, yeah,’ Posy replied, feeling too profoundly defeated to hold back her sarcasm.

Bernard looked at Leif again.

‘He wants me to explain, that he is an adult beginner.’

‘He is an adult beginner? The leader of L’OEIL?’

‘Ah, pardon,’ said Leif again, ‘I mean, he *was* an adult beginner. He is now not a beginner, he is advanced. But he took up violin when he was 18, the same age as your Kevin, *n’est-pas?*’

‘Oh,’ replied Posy, her voice still trembling. She wondered whether Leif was lying, as she knew that most professional violinists began in early childhood.

Again, Bernard looked expectantly at the conductor.

‘Ah, *oui*,’ said Leif, responding to the cue, ‘The thing is, he played viola first. But he began on violin when he was 18.’

‘Oh, I see,’ said Posy. ‘Well, great.’

Alexander approached. ‘If Bernard wants to join us, why not?’ he said in a positive tone that was beginning to grate on Posy’s frayed nerves. ‘Look, Posy, if the Saturday concert isn’t going to work out, and MABO is doomed, the least we can do is enjoy ourselves while we can. Let’s do our best with this Beethoven. I’m not finished with it yet.’

Posy looked at him incredulously.

‘One player,’ she said. ‘How will that help?’

‘No, no, it’s not just one,’ said Leif quickly. He craned his neck around the door and into the corridor beyond, making a beckoning gesture.

‘*Venez!*’

Several musicians appeared, about nine men of varying ages and a tough-looking middle-aged woman, tall and slim with very business-like short hair and a stern expression, as if she had worked very hard to be accepted into the orchestra.

‘*Voici* Nicole, she plays trumpet,’ said Leif. Posy noticed Kevin and Lloyd scrambling to their feet to get a better look.

‘*Bonjour,*’ replied Nicole, unsmiling.

Posy had gone well beyond the stage of trying to square up to intimidating people. She felt as if her whole body was communicating smallness and failure.

‘And Norbert, he is *oboiste.*’

A twig of a man, perhaps in his late fifties, and with a red face and a slick of pewter-coloured hair, nodded cheerfully at Posy.

Leif continued to introduce the members of his orchestra, though Posy was sure that he’d left one of them out. She waited expectantly, but Leif had stopped talking and was standing rigidly, smiling. She wondered if his pearly teeth were whitened. They looked as though they had never seen a piece of chocolate, though she knew that he was partial to coffee and red wine. Shaking her head a little, to brush away irrelevant ruminations, Posy found her voice.

‘You’re not telling me that they’re all adult beginners,’ she said.

‘*Si,*’ said Leif, and the group of players nodded in affirmation.

‘Most of them were put on piano when they were children, and you know, it’s so boring! And so many notes, all at once! It’s only when they have pestered for many years that their parents put them on the instrument they love.’

This gave the members of L’OEIL a human face that changed Posy’s feelings towards them. She had imagined cold-hearted prodigies, trained by wealthy parents to become virtuosi; people who lived in an unhealthy marriage to their instrument of choice. The fact they’d started late on their final choice suggested something a bit more shambolic, a bit more real.

‘You’re welcome to play if you want,’ she said. To her surprise, Alexander gave her a huge, hard hug.

‘Good decision!’ he said.

Posy found she was still looking expectantly at the one player who had not been introduced. It was an obese man with an angelic pink face, glossy strawberry-blonde hair and huge black-rimmed spectacles. The man turned to Leif and began babbling in French. Leif responded

likewise, while the penny began to drop.

‘Does he play the flute?’ Posy asked.

‘Well yes, but he thinks you will not need him,’ explained Leif. ‘Because you yourself are *professionnelle*. He thinks he will go away.’

‘No!’ said Posy quickly. ‘Please. We are all really touched by your kindness. He is welcome. We need two flutes, in fact.’

It was clear that Leif knew this already, and Posy felt stupid and caught-out; trying to play Beethoven’s First Symphony with only one flute was an unacceptable artistic compromise. Maybe everything he had implied about her beloved MABO was true.

‘That’s great!’ said Leif, looking genuinely pleased, as if he really did care about the performance. ‘And you know, Alexandre could go back to his violin because I would be more than happy to be your conductor. Only for the Beethoven – not for the *composition commun*,’ he added firmly.

‘Hugh will conduct for that,’ said Alexander. ‘That’s a splendid idea.’

‘Merci,’ said the obese flautist, giving a little bow. ‘I am Sébastien. I will be your second flute.’

‘Welcome,’ said Posy. ‘But Leif, surely you’re not an adult beginner yourself?’

He shrugged and laughed. ‘Ave you ever seen a child conductor?’

‘No.’

‘*Alors!*’ smiled Leif. ‘I didn’t start to conduct until I was at the conservatoire. And then, I was still mostly playing the flute.’

‘Flute? You?’

He smiled again. ‘It’s how I know that you are good, Mademoiselle Ma Beau.’