

Chapter Twelve

The last thing Posy did before bed was to check her mobile phone for messages. There was nothing from Barnaby. That wasn't particularly unexpected, as both of them were busy with work and saw no need for regular check ins. But Posy's heart was in a scramble of conflict. Couldn't he just ring to say hello? Did she want him to? Had he forgotten her completely, and did she care? She was in the dark about her own feelings as much as the situation itself. Hungry for more data to aid her analysis, Posy dialled the number. To her surprise, Barnaby answered very quickly.

'Yeah, hi?'

'Hello.'

'Hello?'

'It's me. Me, Posy.'

'Oh, hiya. How are things?'

'Fine. Were you next to the phone?'

'Yeah. I was expecting a call.'

'Oh, well I'd better not keep you, then. I was just ringing to say hello. See how you are.'

'Oh, thanks....' He sounded vague and tired.

'Well – are you OK, Barnaby?'

'Yeah, yeah, fine.'

'Who was about to ring you?'

Oh God, did that sound really nosey, interfering?

'Er, Fergus,' replied Barnaby. Posy heard him sniff, as if embarrassed. 'Yeah, I just thought I'd keep in touch.'

'Carrie is here.'

'What? She's come on the course?'

'Yes,' said Posy triumphantly.

'With the baby?'

'Yes. He's no trouble. We've arranged baby-minders for him.'

How efficient, how simple that made it sound!

'Wow. Great. Fergus will be really pleased.'

'How is he?'

'Not good. He's still blocked on his novel. I think guilt is tearing him apart.'

‘Oh,’ said Posy, not wanting to sound too smug. She waited for Barnaby to explain further.

‘I think he really misses his son.’

‘He’s changed his tune,’ Posy couldn’t help but inject a little tone of cynicism.

‘I don’t think so. He’s always loved Dante. But for a novelist, it was hell.’

Posy raised her eyes to the ceiling and tried to bear down on the rising tide of annoyance.

Carrie was a creative person too, but her own sacrifice was apparently not relevant.

‘Well,’ she sighed, summoning up every ounce of compassion in her body, ‘I hope he starts to feel better soon. Carrie’s already a lot happier. In fact I left her in the bar with Alexander, our new leader.’

‘Oh!’ Barnaby’s smooth, baritone voice registered surprise. ‘What’s she done with the baby?’

‘He’s in his cot. Rhoda’s minding him. Just for half an hour.’

‘So why aren’t you in the bar?’

‘I’ve just had a meeting with this conductor guy, Leif le Carré.’

‘Who?’

‘Oh, don’t ask! Well, he runs this French chamber orchestra and they’re booked into Camargue Castle for rehearsals in the great hall. They’re doing this new commission by Godfrey Maxwell Minniver, and he needed some advice. The score finally turned up and it’s got all this aleatoric stuff in it.’

‘Aleatoric? You mean chance procedures? That doesn’t sound like Maxwell Minniver.’

‘I know. Anyway Lief was really panicking and he need a bit of help with some ideas.’

‘Oh, I see.’ Barnaby sounded most surprised. ‘Can’t he figure it out for himself? Sounds a bit useless for a conductor.’

‘He’s not useless, he’s just not very experienced in contemporary music.’

‘Hang on, I’m just Googling him.’

There was a silence, during which Posy wondered why Barnaby was quite so interested. She heard the rapid tapping sounds of his fingers on the computer keyboard.

‘God! He looks like a member of the Chippendales, only not quite as beefy,’ murmured Barnaby. ‘Trained at the Paris Conservatoire... ah yes, a dyed in the wool traditionalist. It says here, his ambition is to conduct Rameau’s Dardanus. So he won’t be featured in my next South Bank Festival of Revolutionary Art. Though the hairstyle is a bit radical.’

There was more than a touch of self-importance in Barnaby’s irony.

‘Well, I’m glad you’re making friends,’ he said after a pause.

‘Thank you,’ replied Posy, uncertain as to what he meant, though it seemed to hurt, regardless.

She heard the faint sound of the doorbell.

‘Someone’s calling late,’ she commented.

‘Yeah...I’d better go,’ said Barnaby. ‘Great to talk.’

‘Yes. Take care. Bye.’

‘Bye.’

Neither of them said ‘I love you’. And the question of who was at the door nagged at Posy’s mind. Chewing the insides of her cheeks, she padded into the cream marble bathroom and instantly skidded as her woolly socks made contact with the polished floor. Regaining her balance, Posy caught sight of her face in the mirror. The sucked-in cheeks gave her an embittered look, and the shock of the near-fall added an air of imbecility.

‘You are getting old,’ she thought. ‘Stupid twit!’

There was a knock at the door.

‘Hang on!’

She opened it and found Carrie standing there.

‘That Alexander. Is he your boyfriend?’

‘Pardon?’

‘He’s lovely and he obviously adores you. So I need to know. Are you having an affair?’

‘Oh, God. You’d better come in.’

A strong whiff of alcohol entered the room. Posy hesitated, waiting for the expected, anxious comment about Dante. But none came.

‘I just wondered...I’m just being nosy...sorry...well, no, it’s not nosiness. It’s just that if you don’t want him, I’ll have him.’

‘What about Fergus?’

‘I’ll never live with Fergus again. Not after this.’

‘But he’s Dante’s father.’

‘So? I don’t need him. I can find Dante another daddy. A better one.’

‘Gosh. This is very quick.’

‘I have to be decisive. I’m on a summer school and I’m surrounded by nice, musical men.

I’ve realised – I have to grab this opportunity. I want to look for someone.’

‘Nice, musical men. I never looked at it like that.’

Posy’s mind filled with images of the MABO members. Neil Havers; Kevin and Lloyd; Roy the retired baker. She realised with a shock that Alexander Hamilton was indeed a rare jewel.

‘There is something between Alexander and me,’ she explained. ‘I don’t quite know where it’s leading. But I am having problems with Barnaby.’

She let out a heavy sigh; it was a great relief to admit her unhappiness about her relationship. 'He's so cold to me, Carrie. He just seems to hold me in contempt. It's like he's just obsessed with his work. And I think he's seeing someone.'

'In that case, you must stick to Alexander! He is gorgeous, Posy! And he's yours for the taking.'

'Is he? Maybe...' she found herself smiling. 'I'm really lucky. God knows why he likes me. I'm such a frump.'

'That's not true,' protested Carrie, 'though you mustn't let him see you in those socks.'

'He's already seen me in these socks,' replied Posy, bewildered.

'Ah. Well, not to worry. It obviously didn't make any difference. He sees the sexy woman in you, with or without floppy socks.'

'And there's someone who sees the sexy woman in *you*,' said Posy mysteriously, purposefully turning the conversation away from herself. Carrie looked at her sharply.

'Who do you mean?'

'Someone who likes babies very much.'

'No! You don't mean... Leif le Carré?'

Posy nodded, beaming.

'He obviously wants to get in there! I mean, why else would he offer to look after Dante?'

Carrie's response was to squeal like a teenaged girl.

'That blonde God, interested in me? Fucking shit!'

She collapsed full length on the bed.

'It's not that weird!' Posy retorted, beaming. 'Just make sure you're at the rehearsal tomorrow, looking your best and playing like Viktoria Mullova.'

Carrie's face fell.

'Practice! I've got to do some practice!'

'Oh, bugger the practice. You'll still be brilliant. Anyway, you'd better get back to Dante.'

'Dante! Fucking shit!'

'Will you stop saying that?'

'Sorry. Rhoda's watching him. You know what, Posy? I'd actually forgotten about him for a moment.'

'It's called *escape*,' replied Posy. 'And you need to do it more often.'

When Carrie had left, Posy shook the woollen socks off her feet. Surely, floppy socks were better leisure wear than acrylic carpet slippers? Fashion was so confusing. Would Alexander

indeed find the socks repulsive? She noticed that the magazines on the room's functionless table had been refreshed, and that an edition of Marie Claire was lying on the top of the pile in a clear cellophane envelope. FREE! Designer flip flops! The cover declared. Posy tore open the wrapper and a pair of size 5-6 flip flops plopped into her lap. They had raffia insoles and the thongs were of gold leather.

'Quite pretty,' thought Posy, 'And not too showy.'

She struggled to recall her Personal Style Statement from the Empowerment Through Clothes workshop.

'I am creative, compassionate and real,' she murmured, looking at the sandals. The raffia insoles hinted at a close relationship with nature, and the gold reminded Posy of the highlights which had once been in her hair. Perhaps silver would have been more suitable now. She tried them on; they fitted, and didn't seem to rub too much between the toes. She studied the magazine blurb to see if she could be sure that they hadn't been made in an Indian sweat shop. But all she could find was a tiny label on one shoe, saying 'Made in Bulgaria.' Posy practised walking around the room in her new shoes. Dare she wear them to the rehearsal tomorrow, instead of her usual sock/clog combination? How she would hate the patronising, admiring comments. Then she remembered Alexander. Perhaps it was time to try and impress him, if it wasn't too late. She might have blown it already, with her behaviour in the woods. Posy went to bed with an unfamiliar feeling of excitement and hope.