

## Chapter Twenty-one

‘Of course I don’t mind you going,’ said Barnaby. ‘It’s important that you consolidate your connection with Godfrey Maxwell Minniver. He could bring credibility to the orchestra.’

‘We don’t need credibility,’ retorted Posy, before remembering her new commitment to try to get along better with Barnaby – not to be constantly reading negative things into everything he said. *Barnaby is supporting me*, she said to herself emphatically.

‘No. Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.’

‘No, I’m sorry. I snapped. But – are you sure you don’t mind me going away again? I feel I’ve left you alone too much recently. All that stuff with Mao. You dealt with so much on your own.’

‘I’ll be fine. And speaking of cats, Zabrina’s Turkish Van has just had kittens. I said we might be interested in one.’

Posy felt a shudder of unease at the idea of having a kitten from Zabrina Ademola’s cat. It felt a bit like bringing up one of her children. *What an idiot you are*, she told herself strictly.

‘That’s lovely!’ she said brightly. ‘Though they’re not as cute as Persians, are they?’

Barnaby looked up from his cappuccino.

‘Cute? That’s not the point, is it?’

Posy hesitated. For her, it was the point – or at least, part of the point.

‘No, of course it’s not. I’m just being silly.’

‘Stop criticising yourself.’

‘Sorry.’

He looked up again.

‘Sorry!’ repeated Posy compulsively. ‘I mean I’m sorry I keep saying sorry. Oh, just ignore me.’

She could hardly believe the words that were coming out of her mouth. Was this the same woman who had put an arrogant French conductor in his place?

‘Posy, I really think you should just go and support Tansy. It might help to get all this recent trauma out of your mind. It’ll be different people, a different environment. And you might get a few bottles of *cidre*.’

Posy could not believe that he had called cider by its French name, without a hint of irony.

‘Hugh Norbury rang earlier,’ continued Barnaby, leafing through a copy of the Millfields Informer.

‘Oh, did he? I suppose it’s about the workshops,’ replied Posy.

‘You need to get on and do some planning. You have all these school events planned for next term, and you need a strategy. That’s what he said.’

‘A strategy? Hugh’s usually more relaxed than that.’

‘I thought he sounded a bit worried. Like a lot was at stake.’

‘Well it is! Our funding depends on these workshops....but there’s only a problem if someone cancels. Now we’ve booked the workshops, we get our grant. I can’t recall if they said our work is going to be observed or anything. Is it?’

‘Oh, Posy! Don’t be daft...there’s bound to be an Independent Observer, where public money’s involved. They’ve got to make sure that standards are maintained. It’s the sort of work Fergus does sometimes; only with him, it’s mostly literary projects rather than music. He has to send a report back to the council saying whether they spent their money wisely.’

Posy rubbed her hand over her forehead.

‘Can we stop talking about this now? I thought it was all fixed and I could stop worrying.’

‘Sorry,’ said Barnaby in a sing-song voice. ‘But I’ll tell you what; why don’t I ask Fergus to come and talk to you about workshopping? He might give you some useful hints.’

Posy felt flustered.

‘I don’t need Fergus’s help, thanks! Anyway, he’s got enough to do, getting to know his child.’

‘Well they’re coming round for dinner tonight, so if there’s anything you want to ask, I’m sure he’d be glad to advise.’

‘What?’ gasped Posy. ‘I wanted to go to a yoga class tonight; my back’s been bothering me again.’

‘Oops, sorry,’ said Barnaby. ‘I invited them round. With Dante, too.’

‘You invited the baby? That’s not like you,’ said Posy, feeling her anger rising, and being unable to resist a scornful barb. ‘Dante has a way of putting a bit of a damper on an evening. You know, it’s this thing that babies do, called crying. And they sort of thrash around. You can’t eat your dinner while holding a crying baby. And I know you don’t like your dinner going cold.’

She thought of the cups of cold tea that she had witnessed at Carrie’s house, the day of her visit. The way Carrie had described her miserable, failed attempt to have breakfast.

‘I can handle it,’ said Barnaby lightly. ‘And while you’re at Maxwell Minniver’s farm, I

intend to help Fergus out a bit. He needs a mate. Or he'll have to go along to these mothers' meetings. Can't have that.'

Posy felt a stirring of curiosity about Barnaby's interest in the baby. Could it mean that he was becoming interested in fatherhood? Perhaps his cool detachment concealed an inner conflict; his old antagonism towards fatherhood was breaking down, and yet, he hadn't quite managed to reconcile himself to a new, positive attitude. She smiled to herself and sat down beside him on the sofa. Barnaby caught her eye, but looked away.

A couple of hours later, Posy found herself in the kitchen, boiling up a pan of lentils to make her favourite Vegetarian Shepherd's Pie.

'Shame we couldn't do something Thai,' murmured Barnaby, sniffing the pan, 'Fergus is mad about it.'

'Well we didn't have time to plan anything,' said Posy, stirring the bubbling mass with an old wooden spoon and trying to skim off the orange scum from the boiling red lentils. 'We don't have the ingredients for a Thai meal, and we've got to think about Dante. What if he got a chilli in his mouth?'

'Or in his eye,' agreed Barnaby.

Posy glanced at him, to check his expression: again, it seemed unusual for Barnaby to show empathy with a baby.

'And this pie will be lovely and soft. He's just going onto solids, and if I puree some, he might like it.'

'You know, that's really clever,' Barnaby remarked. 'A meal that can be enjoyed by grown-ups and a baby.'

Posy glowed with pride.

'It's just a shame about the lack of flavour,' Barnaby added.

Posy's spirits sank. He's not being judgemental, she told herself; he's just telling the truth.

It's not a put-down.

'I know,' she agreed, 'but this onion is a really strong one. And I'll put lots of cheese on top of the mashed potatoes. It'll be nice.'

'Yeah. What wine do we have to go with it?'

'Er...let's see. There's a bottle of rosé in the rack.'

'Rosé? Are you joking? I can't serve rosé to Fergus. He trained as a Guild Senior Wine Master.'

'A what? A wine expert, Fergus? I'd no idea!'

‘He didn’t actually get through,’ Barnaby continued casually, ‘but he was pretty close. He dreamed of being a Master Sommelier.’

Posy again looked at Barnaby, with mistrust. How could Fergus have trained as a wine expert, while spinning all his other freelance plates in the literary world?

‘If it hadn’t been for the aggro from Minniver’s Inferno, he’d have passed. But the poor guy couldn’t focus at all.’

Posy drained the steaming lentils and stirred in the fragrant sautéed onions, along with some chopped tomatoes.

‘Right. This just needs to go into the big dish. Then I stick the mashed potato on top, and we’re done.’

‘And the cheese, don’t forget.’

Fergus and Barnaby were huddled around the hi-fi as Carrie and Posy sat at the dinner table with cups of coffee. It seemed like a miracle, but Dante had finally gone to sleep. Carrie rubbed her eyes and sighed. Dark smudges of mascara were left on her cheeks.

‘I’m so tired,’ she said. ‘I miss having people around to take over. Rhoda, Leif, Alexander. There was always someone around who’d just – just take him away for a little while.’

‘But there’s Fergus, now!’ smiled Posy. ‘And you do seem really happy together.’

‘We are happy. But he’s fucking useless with the baby.’

‘But he adores Dante!’

‘Ah yes, he adores him,’ said Carrie, then fell silent. She picked up her old wine glass, now filled with the rosé that Barnaby had urged Posy to hide away.

‘The thing is, you don’t need to *adore* a baby. You just need to keep picking it up.’

Posy listened helplessly.

‘I mean, you need to keep on doing things when the adoring feeling isn’t there. Fergus thinks that when the adoring feeling isn’t there, it’s a sign he should be doing something else.’

Posy frowned.

‘I suppose this just ties in with him not being able to cope. In the early days,’ she suggested.

‘Yeah. He knows now that he wants Dante. But he still doesn’t know how to be a parent.’

‘Dante is so lucky to have a mum like you. Someone who can keep going, even when she’s cracking up.’

‘That’s the definition of a mum, Posy,’ smiled Carrie. ‘When are you going to be one?’

Posy laughed. ‘Oh, me. I don’t know.’

Barnaby and Fergus were skipping from track to track on a CD which seemed to have been

recorded in the 1970's at the BBC Radiophonic workshop. They were laughing conspiratorially. Posy knew it was safe to continue; they would not hear.

'The thing is,' she said softly, watching a candle flame flicker lower and lower on the table, 'I think Barnaby is changing his mind. I really think he's ready to be a father. And I think I'm ready for a baby too. I don't want to wait any longer, Carrie. I'm genuinely afraid that it might not happen.'

'Well, it might not,' agreed Carrie bluntly. 'You're right. You shouldn't wait. I mean, you've come through your crisis, you're settled with Barnaby...you should go for it.'

'Ah, my crisis. Oh God, don't remind me.'

'What do you mean? I did much more embarrassing things than you,' laughed Carrie.

'At least we both had the experience of a fabulous affair. You'll have the memory of Leif for the rest of your life! And it's not as if you'll have to bump into him again.'

'Carrie, that's not true! Are you forgetting? Leif is supposed to be running the workshops! If I turn up at these schools without him, those teachers are going to be *well* disappointed! They'll probably complain about misrepresentation and all sorts.'

'They won't. Take another attractive man with you. You don't need Leif. Take, er...Neil Havers...'

'Oh God!'

The two of them burst into laughter.

'Seriously though,' insisted Posy, 'I'm really worried about how MABO will get on at the workshops without Leif. I know we've done them without him before, but this time, it's tougher. We're going to be observed!'

'Fergus can help,' said Carrie. 'He'll tell you how to run a workshop! He'll tell you what the funding bodies are looking for.'

'And what if – what if...'

'What?'

'What if Leif *does* come to the workshops? That's even worse!'

'Why? How can it be worse? The workshops will go well and the teachers will be delighted, silly cows.'

'How will I talk to him? What will I say? How can I ever look him in the eye?'

'What's the problem? You had a brief affair, you realised he'd lied to you, you realised you still love Barnaby...and...it's the perfect outcome! I don't see a problem.'

Posy drained her wineglass.

'I don't see one either,' she said. 'I just *feel* one.'

‘Look,’ said Carrie decisively, ‘You just need to forge a new sort of relationship with Leif. If you can both just...smile about what happened...I mean, it is a bit comical...and just be friends...I’m sure that music itself can bring you together. Think of yourself as his sister.’ Posy’s first reaction was that this was quite ridiculous. How could she be the sister of a man referred to as the conducting Chippendale?

‘How can I do that?’ she asked incredulously.

‘Well, you don’t fancy him any more; you’ll never be close friends as you’re too different; just enjoy being colleagues.’

‘You’re right. Colleagues. Just two musicians who have an interesting exchange of ideas. Who come from very different traditions, but who can help each other from time to time.’

‘Exactly.’ Carrie reached over and squeezed Posy’s hand.

‘Anyway, the workshops aren’t for ages. You’ve got this cider pressing adventure to come before then!’

‘Yes. I’m so looking forward to it! Godfrey’s wife is an amazing woman! She is being so kind to Tansy. It’ll be such a change of atmosphere for me – they’ve got this gorgeous little farm in Worcestershire, the Loxley Estate. I’m going to be a country girl for a week, quaffing cider every night and picking apples by day...and I couldn’t be further away from Leif le Carré.’

Their intimate conversation was interrupted by a curse from Barnaby.

‘Oh, God! Who’s ringing at this time of night? I suppose I’d better get it.’

He returned to the living room with the phone. ‘It’s Hugh Norbury,’ he said.

Posy took the receiver.

‘Hi, Hugh! Are you OK?’

‘Hi Posy. I’m fine. I just wanted to talk about the funding.’

His voice had a regretful edge to it.

‘Why? What’s wrong?’

‘Have you seen the news about the cuts?’

Posy felt like an idiot; she’d taken no interest in the news for some time.

‘What’s happening?’

‘Well Inner City Arts are having to cut their grants by thirty percent.’

‘Oh.’

‘And the rumour is that amateur orchestras are going to be hit hardest.’

‘But our funding is guaranteed, at least for the next two years,’ said Posy, frowning.

‘I’ve got Derek Flowerdew’s letter somewhere around here. He clearly said, that as long as

MABO secured the workshops in schools, we would be funded for the next two years.’

‘But if you remember, the condition of having to do those workshops sprang up at the last minute. That sort of thing could happen again. Things could change.’

‘But we’ve got Derek’s personal support. He’s really on our side.’

‘Yes. I hope that will make a difference. He’s seen our work and he really believes in us. But he hasn’t promised anything.’

‘But – he’s given his word.’

‘It’s not the same thing. I think this will be out of Derek’s control. The cuts are huge.’

Posy didn’t know what to say. How could she deal with a situation that was totally hypothetical?

‘Look,’ continued Hugh, ‘I’m probably just panicking. We might be perfectly OK. I just wanted to warn you. This is happening, and we might be affected.’

‘We could get Fergus to write a glowing report for us. About our workshops,’ said Posy, feeling a little desperate.

‘Fergus wouldn’t be allowed to act as an Independent Observer for us,’ said Hugh. ‘He wouldn’t be independent.’

‘Oh, no, I don’t suppose he would. He’s a friend.’

‘Exactly.’

Posy’s mind flailed around for ideas.

‘And there’s Minty: Godfrey’s wife. She’s disabled. We could recruit her. Then we’d tick every box!’

‘We already tick every box, Posy,’ laughed Hugh. ‘We’re the motleyest crew of adult beginners you could ever band together.’

‘They can’t cut our funding,’ Posy finally cried. ‘Not after all we’ve done to jump through their hoops.’

Not after I slept with Leif le Carré, she added silently to herself.

‘Well maybe they won’t,’ said Hugh. ‘I just wanted to make sure you were aware of the situation.’

The letter came the next morning. It was from Derek Flowerdew himself.

‘Dear Ms Gibson,’ Derek wrote, and Posy registered the return to formality in his greeting. ‘I am writing with great regret to inform you that it has not been possible for Inner City Arts to provide your ensemble, Millfields Adult Beginners Orchestra, with funding for the next two years as we had hoped. Our financial projections have proved to be over-optimistic, and in

the current climate Inner City Arts have been obliged to make cuts of thirty percent to our budget for amateur music making. As compensation for this disappointment, I have nominated the Millfields Adult Beginners Orchestra for a Jean Colleywood Award. This is a protected bursary made by Inner City Arts to a specially deserving project which provides experience in the performing arts to underprivileged people in the London area. The bursary provides the ensemble with a grant of £100, to be spent on music. Yours sincerely, Derek Flowerdew.'

To be spent on music! Music was the last thing MABO needed. 'We improvise, you stupid bastard,' sobbed Posy, sitting at the breakfast table with the hateful, official letter in her hands. 'Or we write our own, you cretin!'

Her voice rose to a shriek, and she threw the letter down, stomping back into the bedroom where she slumped at the foot of the bed, not knowing what to do with herself. Posy's fingers clawed the carpet in frustration. A wispy skein of grey fur came away in her hand. Mao's fur, still clinging to the bedroom carpet, which had never been hoovered since his death. Posy gave a cry of grief. All she had gone through this summer had been for nothing. The wretched concert, the stress Alexander had endured trying to force Beethoven's first symphony down the player's throats, the devilish bargain she had made with Leif le Carré, exchanging sexual favours for musical assistance!

'I'm a prat!' Posy wailed. 'I'm a stupid moron! A total failure!'

Barnaby, still in bed, stirred and sat up.

'What's the matter? What are you doing on the floor?'

'They've withdrawn our funding! We were supposed to have money to hire our rehearsal space and to run our next summer school and pay for teachers and buy materials but they say they can't give us any and instead we've won a stupid award of a hundred pounds! Even though the summer school was a big success and I got us all those workshops!'

'Oh, Posy! I'm really sorry.'

She sat crying, arms around her knees, tears soaking her pyjama legs.

'Come here,' said Barnaby.

Posy raised her tired, ruby-rimmed eyes to him, and slowly rose to join him in bed.

Barnaby put his arm around her.

'I've seen this coming for a while,' he said regretfully. 'The whole situation with arts funding is dire. I was lucky my festival of revolutionary cinema went ahead. Even then, there were cuts – did you know Zabrina was working for nothing?'

Posy couldn't find it in herself to care.

'And I didn't earn much from it.'

Posy made a mental note to check their bank balance as soon as possible. Her own term-time teaching barely made enough to make ends meet; Barnaby's earnings were crucial. Suddenly, her whole world shifted queasily.

'Do you know who Jean Colleywood is?' she asked abruptly.

'Jean Colleywood? Yeah, I think she was a rich Conservative MP who fancied herself as a conductor. She used to pay orchestras to let her conduct them. She once appeared at the Proms, during the war, I think.'

'Ughh! Well we've been offered a hundred pounds from her trust fund.'

'You can't take it,' said Barnaby smoothly, 'not if you want to retain any credibility. A Jean Colleywood Award is seen in the arts as a poisoned chalice.'

'How can the arts poison themselves with just a hundred pounds?' asked Posy crossly. 'It will hardly register!'

'I suppose you could take it, and have a rave up,' responded Barnaby, 'buy a load of cheap booze and some Pringles, and have a party to mark the end of MABO.'

Posy turned away from him and cried into her pillow.

