

Chapter Twenty

Saturday morning arrived, and Posy's heart sank at the sight of a miniature village of suitcases sprouting up around the main entrance to Camargue Castle. The course was over. Together, the members of MABO had built a powerful communal composition, reflecting their responses to the idyllic environment of the summer school. Alexander had learned to conduct. Some of the players had learned to practise. Improvisational skills had been honed; reading skills gently brought on. Educational workshops at local schools had been booked, securing the orchestra's funding for the following year. Carrie had overcome postnatal depression and was successfully combining motherhood with music. And Rhoda and Phil had been richly supplied with grist to their therapeutic mill. There was plenty to feel satisfied about.

'You look thoughtful,' commented Hugh, approaching Posy as she sat on the dusty stone steps, which were already warming up in the morning sunshine.

She squinted up at him and smiled. 'Feeling a bit sad,' she admitted.

'I think it's been our best course yet,' said Hugh, lighting a skinny, handmade cigarette. 'The joint piece was amazing. I've got it recorded and I'll have a CD for everyone by the time we start back.'

'That's great! Thanks, Hugh.'

'And I think I can edit that bit out,' he added.

'What bit?'

'The bit where that one voice juts out too much. And you can hear the words 'bad conductor'. You know, in the bit where people were supposed to mutter their name and address over and over again. Someone wasn't following the instructions.'

'You *know* who that was,' Posy chided him. 'It was Leif.'

'Was it?' said Hugh. 'Do you want me to leave it in, then?'

'No, I don't!' insisted Posy, regretting the grumpy tone that had entered her voice. Hugh was the one person on the course who was more concerned with music than relationships. He had no idea that Posy and Leif were no longer special friends, if he'd been aware of anything in the first place.

'I'll snip it, then,' he said agreeably.

'Thanks,' murmured Posy.

'You should be proud of yourself,' continued Hugh. 'We've got our funding, and it's all

down to you. You, creating trust between unlikely parties. Forming bonds.'

Posy began to feel panicky. Would he suggest some sort of continued liaison between MABO and L'OEIL?

'I think your taxi's here,' she said, getting rapidly to her feet. 'Oh, no, it's just a car.'

Hugh looked at her suspiciously.

'Sorry I can't stick around for Godfrey's premiere tonight,' he said. 'But there's a gig at the Purcell Room that I've got tickets for.'

'Well I'm only staying to support Tansy,' said Posy. 'Nothing else. Nothing at all.'

Posy realised that Amanda Hall was standing close by, scrutinising her. Their eyes met.

"Sorry love, sorry to butt in. Is everything all right?"

"Oh, fine," replied Posy, irritated afresh that everyone seemed to think she needed help.

"We've had a wonderful two weeks. Thanks for everything."

"You were lucky with the weather. It is gorgeous here in the summer time. But don't thank me: I didn't do anything, except force you to rehearse next door to Leif and his band. Still, it wasn't too bad, was it?"

Her large, mascara'd eyes searched Posy's.

"We coped pretty well," said Posy. "Anyway, here's to next year!"

"Oh, I hope so," replied Amanda. She paused and frowned. "I'm not sure how many bookings I'll get next summer. We normally have a pottery class coming, a few youth orchestras, and a dance course. But they've all had their funding cut. Some of the youth orchestras have disbanded."

"That's awful," Posy groaned. "Thank God we're OK. Our funding's been secured, have you heard?"

"Yes, I heard you did well getting all those local workshops. I *do* hope everything turns out all right for you."

The huge eyelashes batted for a moment, and with a brave smile, Amanda squeezed Posy's arm. "You take care."

Posy felt a small vibration of emotion passing from the red-nailed hand into her arm.

Probably just a little mark of sympathy for the embarrassing affair with Leif, which everybody seemed to know about. She looked at Hugh, hoping for a light joke to round off the conversation, but he said nothing. His eyebrows rose a little and he sucked on his small, soggy cigarette, staring into the middle distance. Posy opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the approach of Amina Osman, with Neil Havers and his young cohorts, Hattie and Zoe.

‘Posy, my dear,’ Amina said warmly, ‘I don’t know how to thank you. It has been such a fine learning experience. I thought to myself this morning, ‘I am a composer’. And I am! No-one can deny it. I was on the same programme as Beethoven.’

‘A composer and a performer,’ smiled Posy.

‘And to think, I was just a downtrodden housewife.’

Posy had heard Amina shouting at her husband quite fiercely on several occasions, and she made no comment.

“Just sending another Tweet,” murmured Neil Havers. “Maybe something celebrating our funding success. Here’s to the future of MABO.”

“Hurrah!” crowed Hattie and Zoe.

“Thanks, Neil,” said Posy, noticing that Alexander was approaching, dressed in his usual, casually handsome way: linen trousers and white shirt, sleeves rolled up.

‘I’m going to Warwick Arts Centre tonight,’ he said, ‘for Godfrey’s premiere. Are you going?’

His tone was so friendly, so entirely devoid of judgement, that Posy felt her defences slipping, and tears threatened to come.

‘Yes,’ she said, with a warbly crack in her voice. ‘Maybe we could go together?’

‘Let’s do that!’ smiled Alexander, in a firm tone that implied no romantic expectations. But his mere presence served to stir up Posy’s exhausted mind, and rather than feeling comforted by his continued good will, she was wracked with guilt and confusion.

‘I need to do some shopping in Warwick today,’ he continued, ‘So won’t see you till this evening. I’ll drive back and pick you up here.’

‘You don’t have to do that,’ said Posy, ‘it’ll be too much driving for you. I can come with Rhoda and Phil.’

‘Oh – of course. I forgot. Okay then, I’ll just see you at the Arts Centre.’

Posy’s stomach twinged in annoyance; she had given him the impression she wanted to avoid him. Actually, she was more in the mood to avoid Rhoda and Phil, who seemed to have a strong personal viewpoint on her situation which made Posy very uneasy. But it would sound silly to start back-peddling; it would only confuse the situation further. Besides, Alexander was probably just being polite. He probably wanted to get as far away from Posy Gibson and her unstable friends as possible.

The decision of what to wear to the concert was a lot less fun than it had done on that idyllic evening when the friends had gone for a meal at The Green Man together. Having decided to

pour all her energies into rekindling her relationship with Barnaby, Posy was now determined to maintain clear boundaries regarding Leif. It was important that he understood that she was no longer interested in trying to attract him. As for Alexander, that was even more difficult, in a way. The poor man had been rejected not once, but twice; would it send him back into a depression? It was all such a mess, that Posy wanted to erase the past fortnight in her mind; pretend it hadn't happened, and go back to being Barnaby's girlfriend. That meant digging out her old clothes. Instead of the gold raffia flip-flops, she slid her feet into her old clogs, though she left off the baggy socks, as Carrie had implied that they were ridiculous. She needed to be her old self, but worthy of respect. The clogs would remind Leif of the old Posy; the one who was self-contained and set upon an artistic path of her own. She wondered if she would repulse him; maybe that's what she wanted. And then Posy remembered that Leif had fallen in love with the Old Posy in the first place. Her attempts at transformation had come later. So maybe this outfit would conjure up painful memories for him; well, isn't that what she wanted? Didn't he deserve to be punished for misleading her? Stealing the CD, the orchestra's safety net, pulling the rug from underneath Posy's feet and forcing her to need his help? That argument felt wrong; Leif was not her enemy. What was he, then? And what was Barnaby, who'd taken care of dear little Mao in his dying moments? Posy pulled out her notebook and scratched a dark, biro line down the centre of an A5 page. On the left, she wrote BARNABY. On the right, she wrote LEIF. She stared at the page, then ripped it out and started again. This time, there were three columns: in the third, she wrote ALEXANDER. Maybe he was her true love? In the battle between Leif and Barnaby, she had ignored the gentleman of the trio; the one who had never hurt Posy in any way, but had showed her only kindness. *Kind*, wrote Posy, under his name. *My actual boyfriend*, she wrote under Barnaby's name. *Sex appeal*, she wrote under Leif's name. How was she to compare the three? Couldn't she roll them all into one, have a hybrid life partner?

'All men are inadequate!' she shouted out loud.

'What was that, dear?' came a voice at the door. Rhoda was peering in; Posy realised she had not shut the door properly.

'Nothing. Just thinking out loud.'

Rhoda glanced at the notebook with its aggressive biro marks. Posy closed it and slipped it into her shoulder bag.

'I'm ready,' she said, forcing a smile.

They had seats at the back of the auditorium, directly facing the stage. The hall was about

two-thirds full, not bad for the premiere of a contemporary piece, thought Posy, though she knew Imogen Makepeace would be sorely disappointed. The truth was that Godfrey Maxwell Minniver's music was no longer as fashionable as it once had been, and rumours that he had lost his creative direction had spread throughout the musical community over the last few years. His new aesthetic, embracing amateur performers, electronics, chance procedures and French Baroque specialists was unlikely to be found convincing; though Godfrey himself was so in love that he seemed not to care. He was sitting at the end of a row close to the stage, near enough for him to be able to hop up at the end of the performance and join the musicians on stage for a bow. He turned to scan the audience, and catching sight of Posy, Rhoda, Phil and Alexander, gave them a jaunty wave. Posy wondered if he was drunk yet, or was perhaps saving his beer for later. She waved back, wondering if the woman next to Godfrey could be Minty; but then the woman turned her head, and Posy realised it was a young black girl. Minty was well over sixty and, if old black and white photographs could be relied upon, had a floury complexion. Where was she? Then Posy noticed a large lady in a wheelchair, positioned in a designated space close to an exit. Narrowing her eyes to try to focus them better, she took in the lady's strange appearance. She seemed to have a huge bush of frizzy hair, rather like an Elizabethan wig, and Posy could see the twinkling of diamante hair jewels in it. The colour of the hair was a rusty red, rather like Godfrey's had once been; this gave Posy the idea that perhaps the two could be associated. She started back as the woman abruptly lifted what appeared to be a pince-nez to one eye, and seemed to glare at Posy across the auditorium. Posy quickly looked away, but curiosity drew her gaze back to the woman. She had turned to a man sitting to her left, also in a wheel chair, and her face was now creased with laughter. Posy saw the woman bat the man's head playfully with her programme. Could this be Ermintrude Loxley, wife of Godfrey Maxwell Minniver? Posy was checking out the lady's outfit – a full-length, taffeta dress in a dove grey shade which bore a slight echo of Dickens' Miss Havesham. But the wearer was far from being an embittered crone; again, she was laughing merrily and making jaunty conducting movements as if demonstrating to her friend how she thought Godfrey's new piece might go.

'It's her,' said Rhoda, reading Posy's mind, as usual. 'Ermintrude Loxley. Heiress to the cider empire.'

'So Godfrey's a rich man?'

'Oh, yes. He hasn't got where he is on Arts Council Funding,' replied Rhoda grimly. 'I mean, he's never had a proper job. Most composers have an academic post. But Godfrey's just given a few educational workshops for the sake of credibility, I believe. How do you think he

affords a second home in France?’

‘I hadn’t thought about it. I thought he was just a really successful composer.’

Rhoda scoffed. ‘What? How many copies of the score of Minniver’s *Inferno* do you think he’s sold? It’s hardly *Mull of Kintyre*. Let’s all gather round the piano and sing along,’ she added scornfully.

‘But he must have made a bit out of the sell-out performances,’ Posy suggested.

‘He paid the opera house to put it on. Oh Posy, you are naïve.’

Before Posy could reply, the house lights dimmed, and in a second, Leif le Carré was striding onto the stage carrying his slim baton. Her cheeks began to prickle; from her left hand side she could sense Alexander looking sideways at her, checking her reaction. She clapped mechanically as Leif gave a brisk bow. There was more applause as Tansy McIlwraith emerged from the wings, wearing a fragile turquoise gown of semi-transparent voile, and with embroidered daisies placed here and there to contribute modesty. Her fine, strawberry-blond hair was long and loose, and she wore a slim golden hair band positioned horizontally on the top of her head like a halo, giving her the appearance of a medieval angel. Posy gasped as she saw that Tansy’s instrument was still covered in a neon red crocheted oboe-warmer. But without a second’s hesitation, Tansy pulled off the warmer and dropped it on the floor, before playing a few squeaky notes. She nodded to Leif that she was ready to begin.

Leif was holding a large, hi-tech wrist watch in his left hand, and raised the baton in his right. When the watch’s second hand reached the figure twelve, his right hand descended, and Tansy began pushing air into her reed. Posy cringed as the usual straining, puffing sound emerged. The instrument was, as usual, failing to speak, though it was not quite clear whether this was an actual failure on behalf of the player or some gesture designed as a metaphor; in any case, a grey screen behind the musicians flickered into life, glowing vermilion flames creeping threateningly upwards; it suggested some hidden meaning behind Tansy’s futile gesture. The words DEIONEUS INFERNO emerged from the black smoke above the flames, flickered for a second and then disappeared. Tansy turned her head to watch, and as the letters disappeared, raised her oboe to her lips again. This time, her squeaks grew into a strong note. Posy felt a surge of pride. She had encouraged her friend to work on sustained notes, and the pitch she now heard was a true one – rounded and penetrating. Tansy’s breath ran out quickly, but as she ended her solo note, the rest of the orchestra took over, and Posy recognised the clamorous noise she’d heard at the first rehearsal; this had been Godfrey’s original idea for opening the piece, but he’d obviously changed his mind and decided to let

Tansy lead the way. As before, the apparent cacophony became more coherent as Leif gradually lowered his arms, gesturing to the orchestra to slide their pitches downwards. Posy felt sure she heard a hint of a traditional three-note chord, and wondered if it had happened by accident, or whether the members of L'OEIL were defying Godfrey's express directions. It seemed an impossibility that they could have fully absorbed and memorised the instructions in the *Introductory guide to notational systems and playing techniques*, the huge tome handed out by Imogen Makepeace. However, as the piece progressed, such details seemed less important. Godfrey was writing for the orchestra with a broad, impressionistic brush; the orchestra's clusters of descending notes alternated with the lone voice of Tansy's oboe, implying a doomed protagonist pitted against the unstoppable forces of fate. Behind the players, the screen showed a silhouetted dancer, writhing as if constrained by an invisible cage; the oboe writing became more impassioned, Tansy's notes rising higher and higher, while the orchestra's tone clusters became deeper and more threatening. Leif turned a page of his score, and Posy could see the diagram of a circle which had caused so much debate at the first rehearsal. She couldn't recall if it had ever been decided how the German words filling the shape would be interpreted: *Bellend, Brummend, Klappernd*, and she watched the players with great curiosity. To her surprise, they lowered their instruments and began to speak; incomprehensible muttering, creating a unified sound, yet if she focussed in on individual performers she could tell that each player was using a different expressive technique. Nicole, the trumpet player, was making percussive clicking sounds with her tongue; Bernard, the orchestra leader, was declaiming words in a harsh, barking tone, and Norbert seemed to be speaking in a growling voice. Posy became aware of Rhoda, Phil and Alexander turning their heads in her direction. She looked back at them and found herself laughing. Godfrey Maxwell Minniver had 'borrowed' MABO's own vocalising technique!

'Plagiarism!' exclaimed Rhoda in a hissing whisper.

Posy shook her head.

'Creative adaptation,' she corrected her friend. 'We never used silly voices.'

Their attention returned to the stage, where the screen was glowing platinum yellow, the dancer's silhouette fading to grey as her movements became slower and more tortuous. The muttering effects built to a climax – just as MABO's joint composition had done – and then Tansy's sustained notes gave way to a grotesque improvised burbling. Posy wondered if this were meant to represent the body of Deioneus, melting into the coals. She strained her eyes to find the relevant passage in her programme notes, but could only find a huge essay on Maxwell Minniver's general artistic development over the last three decades. Perhaps there

hadn't been time to prepare a proper programme note: after all, the details of the piece had not been finalised until the day before its premiere.

Posy returned her attention to the stage, where the background screen was glowing red once more. The colours of the original flame image had been reversed, so that the fire was black and the background, a livid scarlet. Tansy, now looking rather out of breath, had returned to sustained notes, as two performers emerged from the back row of the orchestra and walked towards her. Kevin and Lloyd, the two young amateur trumpet players, were about to bring Godfrey's latest masterpiece piece to its final climax! The responsibility rested heavily on their shoulders, and they walked with self-conscious rhythmic lilt, almost nodding their heads to an imaginary beat, looking at each other for reassurance. Both of them carried a microphone, trailing a long, thick lead; Posy couldn't see where the leads were plugged in, but recalling that exciting first rehearsal, she was sure they were connected to a large and powerful amplifier. Taking great care not to trip over their leads, Kevin and Lloyd came to the front of the stage and stood next to Tansy, one on either side. For a few awkward seconds, they faced the audience; Kevin's eyes scanning the crowd for his dad, Lloyd looking downwards as if at a solemn memorial service. Then Leif gave the cue, and with steady arms, they raised their microphones to the oboe, lightly touching the instrument's bell, brushing Tansy's hands, knocking against the metal keys. Violent bumping sounds emerged from speakers, hitherto unnoticed at the sides of the stage. Crackling effects fought with amplified oboe multiphonics (Tansy's one technical speciality was to split a note into two, creating a croaking effect) in a violent crescendo, and as the microphones faced each other, Posy recognised the terrible howling effect that was coming into play. It could be a severe danger to the listeners' ears unless someone cut the power at the tipping point. She winced; Rhoda already had her fingers in her ears to cut out the high-pitched scream, and Phil was protesting, 'I say!' – when suddenly, all was silent. The screen went black, and the stage lights were extinguished.

There was a full ten second's silence, and the lights came back on. The audience broke into enthusiastic applause. After a sweeping bow, Leif extended his arm towards Tansy, took her hand and kissed it. Posy wondered how much respect he really had for her performance; certainly, his smile looked genuine, though that could have been from a sense of relief. Kevin and Lloyd high-fived each other, then looked uncertainly at Leif as if afraid he might hug them. Leif merely applauded the duo, bowed again, then turned back to his orchestra, raising them to their feet with a sweeping movement of his arm. Posy looked keenly at their facial

expressions; a sort of surprised pleasure was being expressed by most, even Norbert and the grim Nicole. The applause increased and there were shouts of 'Bravo'; the players looked gratified. Some members of the audience began stamping their feet, waiting expectantly for Godfrey Maxwell Minniver make himself known to them. A couple of minutes seemed to pass as he kept them waiting, then finally, Posy heard a roar of approval as Godfrey mounted the steps and wandered onto the stage, wearing an expression of bewilderment, as if it had all been an amazing dream, and he couldn't figure out for the life of him why the crowd was so excited. Godfrey bear-hugged the conductor, his head punching into Leif's chest, his hands gripping Leif's back for a few seconds, then making hearty slapping movements. When he released him, he turned his attention to Tansy, delicately taking her hand and turning her to face the audience with a gesture of reverence. Posy found herself sighing irritably, recognising these actions as practised stage craft, though she was pleased that Godfrey hadn't betrayed his more passionate feelings towards Tansy. She was sure that Ermintrude Loxley Maxwell Minniver was watching every move.

Posy, Rhoda and Phil stayed on at the bar for a drink; Posy had arranged to meet Tansy there after the concert, which had gone on to include dances from Rameau's Dardanus and a trumpet concerto by Telemann, featuring L'OEIL's lead trumpeter, Nicole, as soloist. Posy wished she could have escaped immediately after Godfrey's premiere, but Tansy was determined to stay, as it would be rude not to. This meant there was a chance of bumping into Leif. She tried to focus her mind on Tansy's dilZoe, and forget her own embarrassments; in the meantime, Rhoda kept her wine glass topped up, and Posy found she didn't have the strength to resist. At least Alexander had opted to go home. She was finding his unceasing goodwill very hard to bear; his goodness made her feel wretchedly unwholesome.

'Look over there,' said Rhoda, pointing towards a man sitting alone at a table near the bar. 'It's Morton Helliwell, the music critic.'

The man was wearing an old beige raincoat over jeans and a sweater, what little hair he had was closely shaved and he peered through small, round-lensed spectacles at a spiral bound notebook, pausing to think before writing a few sentences with a yellow bic biro.

'Ooh, I'd love to know what he's writing,' said Posy. 'Do you think if we discuss the music loudly, he'll be influenced by our opinions?'

'I'm not sure what my opinion is,' said Rhoda. 'But I'm going to ask Phil to stand right behind him and peer into his notebook.'

Posy laughed as Phil manoeuvred himself into position; he was an unremarkable-looking

man, suspicious to no-one, and the critic didn't seem to even sense his lingering presence. After a few minutes of standing around with apparent innocence, Phil glided back to the table.

'Maxwell Minniver has finally found his Vein of Gold,' announced Phil. 'The composer has tapped into a rich new seam of cultural exploration. Mythology is still the bedrock of his art, but fertilised afresh with a new social sensibility.'

Posy and Rhoda nodded, not sure whether to be impressed or amused. 'Oh, and there was another sentence,' added Phil, 'something about Maxwell Minniver still giving the young innovators a run for their money. New compositional techniques leaving others behind... a collaborative mentality... and interesting use of vocal textures.'

'Well! What a nerve. You should tell him, Phil. Those vocal textures were developed by the Millfields Adult Beginners Orchestra. And the collaboration only happened because one of our amateur players wandered into a disastrous professional rehearsal. Saving the day. Saving Godfrey's skin.'

'Don't be bitter,' smiled Posy. 'Look at it this way. One of Britain's foremost composers has been influenced by *our* orchestra. Because of *our* work, he's got himself out of a major creative block. It makes me feel important.'

'Important? Just because Godfrey Maxwell Minniver has seen fit to pinch our ideas? He hasn't even acknowledged the debt! That doesn't make me feel important – it makes me feel small! Small, and cross!' Rhoda retorted. 'I'm going to tell Morton Helliwell all about it.'

'No!' hissed Posy, and noticed with relief that Godfrey himself was bearing down on them, beaming warmly.

'Posy! Rhoda! Phil! Wasn't she great?'

Tansy appeared at Godfrey's side, smiling shyly.

'Oh, yes!' agreed Rhoda, all her annoyance immediately forgotten. Posy watched the critic sidle away and leave the bar to catch his train.

'She was splendid. Tansy, this role has been waiting for you all your life. It was tailor-made for you.'

Rhoda gave Tansy a big hug.

'Thanks. It just felt amazing.'

'I was so proud of you,' added Posy, joining the hug.

'I'll get you both a drink. Godfrey?' inquired Phil.

'Beer, please mate.'

'And Tansy, a glass of wine?'

‘Ooh, yes please.’

She sat down at the table, and Posy could see the pink roses in her cheeks, telling of exhaustion, effort, achievement. She looked deeply into Posy’s eyes.

‘Where’s Imogen Makepeace?’ asked Posy presently. ‘I thought she’d have whisked you off to a champagne reception.’

“Champagne reception?” snorted Godfrey. “We used to have those in the old days. No money for it now. I’ll be lucky if she treats me to a cup of tea.”

Imogen Makepeace hurried over at that very moment, carrying a small bottle of mineral water.

“Godfrey. I missed you at the bar. What can I get you? Tea, did you say? I think the café’s shut, but there is a machine over there.”

“I’m all right, thanks,” Godfrey replied, shaking his head in the direction of the table, as if in disbelief. Imogen smiled, confused. “Okay, then. Do you mind if I...?”

“No, do join us,” Posy replied, wishing to dispel the impression that she was entirely unwelcome.

“Well, congratulations, Godfrey,” said Imogen, turning her back on Tansy, who was sitting next to her, still glowing angelically in her turquoise gown. “I think we can really build on this.”

“You mean build *creatively*, or *capitalize*?” asked Godfrey.

Imogen gave a light laugh.

“Both, I hope! I think Deioneus Inferno could reach a huge potential market. I’ve been talking to Greg Finch, who’s in charge of our Introduction to Contemporary Music series...you know, the ensemble pieces that are marketed at students... and your new piece could be perfect. If we can get it into University libraries, we’ll tap into a whole new income stream. A whole new audience for you, I mean.”

“University libraries,” echoed Godfrey. “Is that the same as The Ivory Tower?”

Imogen looked confused.

“Or just contemporary music’s dustbin?”

Posy noticed that he had already downed half of the pint that Phil had placed in front of him.

Imogen continued.

“Really Godfrey, you should be excited. If you get into the ICM series, you’ll be making a lot more money.”

“And so will you.”

Rhoda pushed an opened bag of dry roasted peanuts in front of Godfrey and moved his glass

slightly further away.

“You need to eat, Godfrey,” she said. “Make him eat, Tansy.”

“Have a peanut, Godfrey,” said Tansy.

He picked up a cluster of peanuts and pushed them into his mouth, dropping a couple of them on the floor.

“I’m sure Godfrey appreciates your work as his publisher, Imogen, he’s just pretending to be ungrateful,” Rhoda said. But Imogen Makepeace refused to be patronised.

“I’m used to working with artists of the highest calibre,” she reassured Rhoda. “I don’t expect gratitude; that’s not what the publisher is there for. I’m just a midwife for Godfrey’s art, and his art is the only reward I need.”

Posy was sure she detected signs of emotional disturbance beneath the smooth surface of Imogen Makepeace’s alabaster complexion.

“I’m glad to hear it. And I hear that Julie Rutland’s Christmas carol arrangements are selling better than ever this year, which should help you to continue supporting Godfrey.”

Rhoda looked triumphant, and Posy cringed. Her friend seemed determined to take a dig at Godfrey for appropriating some of MABO’s creative territory.

Godfrey laughed.

“You don’t have to pretend. It’s Julie Rutland who’s keeping us all afloat.”

“She is very talented,” simpered Imogen, after which there was a silence. Julie Rutland was clearly one of Imogen’s composers and it would have been disloyal to speak of her top-selling Christmas carol arrangements in a tone of cynicism.

Rhoda seemed to soften a little, recognising Godfrey’s vulnerability.

“Well I’ve no doubt that Godfrey is more talented, even if his work raises very little income. MABO’s music raises very little money too. But that is no reflection of its importance.”

“Who?” said Imogen.

“Someone remind her,” said Godfrey, who had now drained his beer glass.

“Oh – sorry,” laughed Imogen. “I had forgotten. It’s the amateur orchestra who were rehearsing next door to L’OEIL. Actually - ” her eyes suddenly shone – “They could be a target market for us, Godfrey. An orchestra of adult beginners might like to buy your piece. They could probably manage it, maybe if they got some help from students at top academies. I wonder if a scheme could be set up? Why don’t I come to your farmhouse for a meeting about this? If we broaden the market for your scores, then we’d broaden the audience.”

“No business meetings in the farmhouse,” said Godfrey.

“Oh,” said Imogen, looking a little downcast, “okay.”

Tansy had been listening politely, understanding very little of what was going on. Posy felt it was very rude of Imogen to ignore the soloist of Godfrey's piece.

"Are you happy?" she asked with a smile.

"Oh, yes," Tansy replied, her face radiant. "This is the happiest day of my life."

Posy's smile vanished as behind Tansy's shoulder, an eccentric figure in a wheelchair approached.

"What's the matter?" asked Tansy. She froze as she heard a strident voice.

"Godfrey Maxwell Minniver! Have you forgotten your wife?"

The gentleman who'd been sitting next to Minty in the concert was pushing her chair, and settled it next to Godfrey's.

"Who's this?" joked Godfrey. "Forgotten my wife? How could I do that?"

To Posy's relief, Minty broke into peals of laughter.

"You are a naughty man. Now introduce me to your new friends! The friends who've helped you find your new direction! The friends whose ideas you've stolen!"

Posy laughed and Minty gave her a wink.

"I know all about it," said Minty. "All about MABO. Godfrey has been simply bowled over by your work. He says he's discovered a whole palette of musical sounds he never knew existed. He never knew how to create them, but you people have shown him the way. He probably hasn't said thank you, but he is truly grateful. And so am I. I don't have to listen to his whining any more. And that terrible Huang Po person. He was no help at all. I don't believe in all this past life therapy. I'm a Freudian myself."

"Oh, I say!" responded Rhoda, blushing with surprise and pleasure. "My husband and I are both therapists!"

"No!" cried Minty. "Good God, you probably could have saved Godfrey from his last decade in the wilderness. He's had such a hard time."

She patted Godfrey's knee, then continued her enthusiastic flow.

"And where is the beautiful girl who inspired your piece? Ah! You must be Tansy!"

She grasped Tansy's hand and shook it.

"You know, Godfrey is completely in love with you. But you mustn't let it pressurise you. I felt pressured into marrying him all those years ago. He can be very intense."

"Nobody forced you," quipped Godfrey, sipping the beer brought to him by Phil.

"You did say you'd burn all your music if I said no," responded Minty.

"Fair enough," chuckled Godfrey.

"But listen, my dear," said Minty turning to Tansy again, "I just want you to know that anyone

whom Godfrey adores is welcome at the Loxley Estate. Why don't you come down for cider pressing? We need all the help we can get. And I don't want Godfrey to drink it all himself. He gets terribly sick and I need someone to help control him. I'm not as quick on my feet as I used to be, am I, Paul?'

The man standing dutifully behind the chair smiled.

'No, Minty, you're not,' he replied in a mild cockney accent.

'He's not my lover. I know what you're thinking,' said Minty to Tansy. 'He's my nurse and housekeeper. What's that word they use in the Barber of Seville? My factotum. Do Everything. Well not quite everything.'

Paul raised his eyes to the ceiling, as if used to this sort of humiliation.

'So. Interested?' said Godfrey.

'Pardon?' asked Tansy, still reeling with shock at this apparent warm acceptance from Godfrey's wife.

'Interested in coming down for the cider pressing? You do know I've got a farm in Worcestershire, don't you?'

'Er – no, I didn't know.'

'How could she know, Godfrey? And the farm is mine, don't forget. My dear, I insist that you come.'

'Can I bring my friend?' asked Tansy, quick as a shot. Posy felt a pang of anxiety.

'The more the merrier,' responded Godfrey. 'We'll make it a real party.'

At that moment, Posy caught sight of Leif le Carré, making his way across the foyer. He had changed out of his dinner jacket, and was wearing his usual black jeans and T-shirt, with a leather jacket on top. She looked down at her wine glass and kept her eyes focussed on her thumb at the stem of the glass, as her scalp prickled and she urged him silently to go away. Even out of the corner of her eye, she could see him clearly; his pale, ash blonde hair standing out against the murky surroundings. His face was pointing towards her. Her breathing grew more shallow and her heart pounded. She had to look up. She could not pretend she had not seen him. As if compelled by a force beyond her control, Posy raised her eyes. Leif had gone.

