

## *Chapter Four*

On the day of the summer school, Posy squeezed the last few essentials into her suitcase. She always ended up needing more pants than she'd packed - with the weather being so hot it was a great luxury to have an afternoon shower after rehearsals had finished, and then join the delegates in the dining hall, fresh and clean. She couldn't be bothered with the launderette. So in went more pairs - greyish pink, greyish yellow, greyish blue. And a couple of bras - ancient 34B's, non-wired. She had no idea whether this was her correct size, but as she was not terribly well-endowed up top, being a classic English pear, Posy thought it seemed just about right. The bras did not seem to give a great deal of support, but that hardly mattered, she was not the type to go jogging. Posy thought for a moment of the more energetic members of the orchestra who would get up early on the summer school and go for runs around the verdant grounds of the hall in Warwickshire. Still, they weren't burdened with all the administration that she had to do; they weren't up till the early hours checking the timetable and making sure that it would all work, that everyone would know where to go and when; they were bound to have a little more energy! But what about packing a swimsuit? Clutching the navy-blue rag uncertainly, Posy looked out of the window at the bright turquoise sky. It was going to be a hot summer. But would there be time to frolic in the hall's open air pool? She should spend her free time practising, and there'd probably be all sorts of problems to sort out, logistical things, people losing their instruments or having allergic reactions to the food or complaining about their rooms. She looked down at the floppy costume and wondered how old it was; it obviously dated from before she'd been on the Empowerment Through Clothes course, as she'd bought nothing navy blue since then. White flecks of elastic had begun to poke through the fabric here and there, looking suspiciously like dandruff in the shoulder area; twenty years old, could it be? Posy wondered where the time had gone. Most of her friends were married now, with one or two children; still, she had her orchestra, and a boyfriend who was generally considered very nice-looking. She should be grateful.

The doorbell of the flat startled her; that would be Rhoda, wanting to know if she was ready to load her suitcase into the car. Posy hurriedly threw the swimming costume into the case and shut it, then rushed to the door.

'Good morning my dear!' Rhoda greeted her, in her round, rich voice. 'I don't want to rush

you, but Phil and I are ready when you are. Do you need any help at all?’

‘No, I’m not taking much this year. One sundress, a pair of shorts, a pair of jeans, a few T-shirts.’

‘Posy! I’m surprised at you,’ said Rhoda. ‘this is the highlight of our year. You should be packing all your best things! I’m taking twenty pairs of earrings.’

Posy laughed; Rhoda was never seen without a flamboyant pair of earrings, usually pendulous and inspired by the ethnic culture of a South American or African country, and always in striking contrast with her cropped silver hair.

‘But those lovely turquoise ones will go with everything!’ protested Posy.

‘Oh no, they won’t go with anything gold; they’ve too much silver in them. Silver with silver, gold with gold, I always say. Though copper is wonderfully versatile.’

‘Well I don’t have pierced ears so I wouldn’t know,’ Posy laughed. Rhoda tutted.

‘I don’t know why you won’t let me take you to get them done. It doesn’t hurt, you know.’

‘It must hurt a bit, having a metal post thrust through a tender little piece of flesh,’ said Posy, wincing as she lifted her suitcase off the bed. ‘I can’t bear the thought.’

‘Oh well. Now are you sure you’ve packed enough clothes?’ said Rhoda, still incredulous at Posy’s economy. ‘I mean, I’ve only packed one pair of shoes – my Jesus sandals, naturally - but I’ve packed a different dress for each day.’

‘I’ll be fine, Rhoda! But I mustn’t forget my flute.’

Posy threw her mirror-work bag over her shoulder, picked up the flute case in her right hand and the suitcase in her left.

‘I’m ready.’

As she followed Rhoda out of the flat, Barnaby appeared at the top of the stairs.

‘I thought you’d have gone by now.’

‘No, we’re just setting off.’

‘Well – have a good time, both of you.’

‘Bye bye.’

Posy stepped forward to embrace him, and he responded with a small, angular hug and a light kiss.

‘Bye, Posy.’ He quickly turned to Rhoda. ‘Bye, Rhoda. Hope it all goes well.’

‘Don’t forget to groom Mao, will you?’

‘I won’t; though he’ll probably attack me.’

‘Not if you’re gentle. And there’s his worming tablet.’

‘I won’t forget that, either.’

‘And do try to encourage him to eat a bit more, won’t you? Maybe give him more fresh stuff, like tuna.’

‘I will.’

‘Okay.’

So that was that.

‘Take care, then. See you when I get back.’

As Posy slumped into the back seat of Rhoda and Phil’s Volvo estate, she was aware that the usual excitement at the start of the summer school was entirely absent. Instead, there was a sad feeling, a vague unease, as if she were running away from her real life, from her problems. Perhaps it was just that Carrie wouldn’t be coming this year; yes, that was it. But she’d solved that problem, had already seen her friend and at least reassured herself that Carrie wasn’t going to throw herself under a Northern Line train. There was something else. It was to do with Barnaby. She was startled as Rhoda suddenly reached over from the front seat and grasped her hand.

‘This break will be good for you,’ said Rhoda firmly. ‘Don’t worry about Barnaby. He can look after himself.’

‘Oh, Rhoda,’ said Posy softly, making the most of this last moment of intimacy before Phil shut the boot of the car and got into the driving seat. ‘I don’t know what’s wrong. Barnaby seems so distant.’

‘He’s become a Career Man,’ commented Rhoda dryly, ‘he’s got the bit between his teeth. I don’t think he used to be so ambitious, but he’s done very well in his work and he’s acquired the taste for success.’

Posy didn’t know what to reply; Rhoda was so perfectly, absolutely right.

‘I know. And I’m really pleased for him - but it’s as if he’s not really interested in our relationship any more. I know he’s never wanted children so it wouldn’t be fair for me to press him, but recently I’ve been feeling...’

Phil got into the car.

‘...feeling a bit preoccupied, you know. Anyway - ’ she brightened her voice, ‘he’ll have a good time doing the publicity for his film, and I’ll have a wonderful time in Warwickshire. At the end of the two weeks we’ll both be happy.’

Rhoda’s eyes twinkled warmly, but her sympathetic smile implied that she didn’t quite buy into Posy’s interpretation of events. She squeezed Posy’s hand and turned round to face the windscreen. Phil, smelling of fine gentlemen’s soap and with the sleeves of his Viyella shirt rolled up, drove carefully out of Brook Road and on towards Millfields High Road, with

Rhoda beside him, nursing the map on her knee. From there, he continued with meticulous care to the M25, where Posy noticed that the conversation between Phil and Rhoda was replaced by a tense silence; the road was thick with cars, changing lanes with unnerving swiftness, sometimes behaving quite unpredictably. Junctions loomed down on them at a rapid pace, requiring Phil to quickly change to another lane or risk being swept off to Guildford, or Heathrow, or Reading. He kept to a speed of 50 miles an hour, retreating scrupulously to the left-hand lane so as to cause minimum annoyance to the other drivers.

‘Well done, dear,’ said Rhoda, as he finally indicated to take the M40 exit.

‘It’s the lorries,’ murmured Phil, ‘so many of them. They’re doin’ my head in!’ he added in a Mockney accent.

‘You did very well. Posy and I were not at all afraid at any point, were we?’

‘Certainly not!’ chimed Posy, noticing a few tiny beads of sweat mingling with the sparse grey curls at the nape of Phil’s neck. She knew that driving was becoming more of a challenge for him now he was over seventy. Gradually, though, he began to relax.

‘I always feel better when we reach the M40,’ he said. ‘Minute by minute, getting further away from the Smoke, and closer to Shakespeare country! The heart of England!’

Posy felt a happy stimulation at his words. And once they came off the motorway at Banbury and found themselves on the minor, country roads, Phil’s slow pace began to have a calming effect on her. She opened her window and rested her arms on the ridge, sniffing the air like a red setter, breathing in the promise of balmy summer days spent with good friends, making music. As the Volvo rolled gently along, Posy absorbed the summer countryside, the tiny villages, the hedgerows, the duck ponds. As they passed by the village of Hampton Magna, Posy spotted an old-fashioned red phone box standing by the gate to a church yard. She realised that she’d forgotten to charge up her mobile, and had a sudden urge to speak to Barnaby, to make a little gesture of connection, nothing more. She asked Phil and Rhoda if they would mind having a short break while she went to the call box.

‘Not at all! In fact, let’s have some coffee,’ replied Rhoda. ‘I brought a flask. It’s absolutely gorgeous here.’

‘Idyllic,’ added Phil in hushed tones. ‘I wish I’d brought my watercolours.’

‘Let’s park here. Careful, Phil - here, by the green. I’ll get out the picnic rug and we’ll have coffee and a biscuit. You go and make your call, Posy.’

Phil parked the car and switched off the engine. As Posy got out, shutting the car door behind her, she was entranced by the peace and quiet. Beneath the bonnet she could hear the engine gently ticking as it cooled; a wood pigeon purred from a telegraph wire above her, creating a

perky rhythm, and a family of mallards splashed in a nearby pond, curious about the new visitors and their biscuits. The warmth of the summer day and the green, fuzzy aroma of the countryside were intoxicating to Posy. This was escape. As her jaded eyes sharpened and became more alert to her new surroundings, she spotted a the shaggy outline of a heron by the pond, its shoulders hunched, its yellow beady eyes glaring dully like the eyes of a stuffed animal. All around the water's edge, flowering rushes rose up from their smooth stems, forming a lacy pink fence which disguised the presence of sleepy moorhens and coots. Posy made her way to the phone box, the soft, cool grass tickling her toes through her flat sandals, daisies springing up everywhere with their bright heads gleaming up at her optimistically like children's faces. A wave of goodwill to all mankind washed over Posy's heart as she felt the almost-forgotten heaviness of the metal door, resisting her first feeble attempt to open it, then yielding as she pulled with all her bodyweight. That old, familiar smell! Fusty, hot, a little dirty and headachey: the smell of dandruff, old paper, sweaty hands on the bakelite receiver, girlfriends and boyfriends in flares and tank tops arranging secret trysts after Youth Club. She smiled to herself, fished out three 20p pieces; how things had changed! Posy could remember making calls with nothing but a 2 pence piece. Uncertainly, as she could barely remember the routine of making a public call, she put in the coins and dialled the number of the Millfields flat. A high-pitched, shrill dialling tone sounded for a few seconds - and then, a click; Posy's heart leapt in anticipation. Then she heard a woman's voice.

'Hello?'

Posy panicked; she must have the wrong number.

'Oh, I'm sorry - is this the number for Barnaby Amis?'

'Yeah. Hang on: he's just in the living room.'

Who was this woman, referring to Posy's living room as if it were her own? Posy's mind was reeling; her emotions were not yet kicking in, she was too confused.

Eventually she heard Barnaby's voice.

'Barnaby speaking?'

'It's me!'

'Who? Posy, is that you?'

'Yes. Who was that?'

'It was Zabrina. She's working with me on the South Bank film festival.'

'A friend?'

'A colleague.'

'Oh. It's just - I didn't expect someone else to answer our phone.'

‘Well no, you wouldn’t, as you didn’t know she was here.’

‘Yes, but what I meant was, a guest doesn’t usually answer the phone. I suppose you were terribly busy,’ she added quickly.

‘We’ve the final edit coming up. Lots of work to be done. Trouble with the sound track.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.’

There was a silence. Posy realised she was probably being tedious.

‘But I’m sure it’ll all work out.’

‘Yes,’ replied Barnaby, sounding a little annoyed. ‘I suppose it will in the end. Anyway - what is it you were ringing about? We need to get on.’

‘Nothing. I wasn’t ringing about anything. I just stopped in a beautiful village and I saw this old phone box by a church yard with a duck pond and - I just wanted to call. And say hello.’

Again, Barnaby said nothing. Was he moved by her description of the scene?

‘Right. And is your journey going OK?’ he said eventually.

‘Fine, yes, fine thanks.’

‘I’d better get on, then. Say hello to Rhoda and Phil.’

‘OK, I will. Bye, then.’

‘Bye.’

Posy replaced the receiver and was surrounded by thick, heavy silence. A feeling of hollow loneliness came over her. The cosy fug of the phone box became claustrophobic and profoundly alienating, full of fear. ‘What am I doing here?’ thought Posy, with a sudden terror that she was losing her mind. What a stupid idea! Why phone Barnaby at this time, the middle of his working day, when she had nothing to say? What sort of reassurance had she been looking for? It was pathetic, and he had every reason to be non-plussed by the interruption. And why shouldn’t that woman be there? At times like this, when one of Barnaby’s films was nearing completion, their sitting room became a working studio, an office, an administrative centre – Posy had no particular claim on the place. She pushed at the phone box door and found that she didn’t seem to have the strength to open it. Was it jammed? She pushed again, harder, enhancing her efforts with a growling, straining sound this time; she could hardly shift it. The walls were closing in on her, the air was becoming thicker, the windows steaming up. A huge harvest spider, dead for a couple of days, dangled down from the ceiling, just inches from her forehead, and as her eyes focussed on it, she jumped back in alarm.

‘Rhoda!’ called Posy. ‘Rhoda – help me!’

Through the thick glass of the door she could see Rhoda and Phil smoothing out their

checked picnic rug on the village green, Rhoda patting it down around the edges, Phil stamping on a renegade thistle. She couldn't hear anything outside the phone box at all, not the purring riffs of the pigeon, not the splashing and squawking of the ducks, not the conversation of her friends; and they, undoubtedly, could not hear her. Posy pushed again and suddenly the door gave; it swung open, and with a great gasp, she stumbled out, back into the absurdly tranquil scene that had charmed and delighted her just a few minutes earlier. Rhoda looked round.

'Was he there?' she called.

Posy's face began to crumple.

'Oh, Rhoda!'

Rhoda hurried towards her. 'What is it, dear? Posy, tell me what's wrong!'

'I'm just being silly - ' Posy allowed the tears to come. 'I just got stuck in the phone box and I was terrified. I know that's really stupid.'

'No, no; I'd be a bit alarmed, too! It's only natural! Calm down now; you're okay.'

Posy was shaking, partly from the effort of pushing the stiff, imprisoning door, and partly from fear and relief.

'There's something else,' Rhoda pressed. 'Did you speak to Barnaby?'

'Yes.'

She looked directly into Rhoda's eyes.

'There was a woman there – one of his colleagues, this woman he's working with on his film...but I was just taken by surprise. She answered the phone.'

'How dare she,' responded Rhoda with a matter-of-fact calm. 'Posy, I'm not surprised you are upset.'

'But it's not just that. It's as if – as if there's no connection between me and Barnaby any more. I feel as if he doesn't love me any more.'

Rhythmic sobs juddered forth now, and Phil looked up from his place on the picnic rug. He poured some steaming coffee from the flask into a white melamine mug decorated with blue roses, and brought some over to where the women were standing.

'Have some of Rhoda's magic coffee,' he said gently. 'It's got rum in it.'

The simple act of kindness touched Posy's heart, and although she was feeling hot and a little nauseous, she took hold of the amusingly genteel mug gratefully, and sipped. There was only a little rum in the coffee, but it penetrated comfortingly, and she managed a smile.

'Thank you, Phil. I'm sorry; I'm not quite myself. I'll be fine in a minute.'

'My dear, we all have our moments of weakness. Old Sigmund said 'a person should not

strive to eliminate his complexes, but should get into accord with them; they are legitimately what directs his conduct in the world.’’

‘He actually said ‘*a man* should not strive’, dear,’ Rhoda corrected him with a twinkle in her eye. ‘He wasn’t as forward-thinking as you are.’

‘Yes, but what I mean Posy, is don’t push these feelings aside. The fact that you feel like this simply indicates that something unhappy has been going on in your life, and you shouldn’t deny it.’

‘No, indeed,’ added Rhoda. ‘On the contrary – you should deal with it.’

Posy gave her a helpless look. How could she deal with a problem that might not be a problem, hundreds of miles away? And at the start of the summer school, surely all she could do was to push the problem to one side and hope that it would go away. As she stood dumbly, feeling outwitted and uncertain as to what to say, the heron took flight from its reedy perch next to the pond. They could hear the heavy whoosh of its wings, slowly fanning the air as it took off in search of a better source of frogs. Posy looked up and envied the creature’s freedom, its inability to worry.

‘Shall we get on?’ she said weakly. ‘I don’t suppose it would hurt if we arrived early.’

‘No,’ agreed Rhoda. ‘Phil, don’t have any more coffee, you’re driving don’t forget. I’ll finish your cup.’

Rhoda and Posy quickly drained their cups. A cloud had appeared from nowhere, covering the sun and dropping a grey veil over the bright village scene. Posy shivered, and climbed back into the warm car.

Posy’s spirits did revive, much to her surprise: it was the sight of the brown and white sign showing directions to Camargue Castle, ‘Conference Centre and Site of Historical Interest’. Her heart was filled with images of music, friends, fun, productive work, busyness, and a sense of being important - quite independently of whether Barnaby loved her or not. ‘MABO loves me,’ she affirmed silently.

‘Two miles,’ commented Phil. ‘Not long now!’