

Chapter Three

Posy returned to Millfields with a couple of hours to spare before her meeting with Alexander Hamilton. She was more excited than she cared to admit, and spent a good deal of time in the bedroom selecting an outfit. She had never considered herself one of those hopeless women who had a wardrobe bursting with clothes but nothing to wear. Every garment had been chosen with care, so that it reflected something of what Posy considered to be her inner self. She thought back to the Empowerment Through Clothes course she had attended, and the Personal Style Statement that she had created at the end of two days' soul-searching. 'I am creative, compassionate and real,' she had decided. Creative meant that her clothes must not look corporate. No pencil skirts, no pin striped trousers, no fitted jackets, no fitted shirts, no navy blue, no black. Compassionate meant clothes that were kind to her skin, to the environment, to animals, and to the people working in clothing factories: so, no leather, no fur, no synthetic fibres that could irritate the skin, nothing from cheap fashionable stores where the people making the clothes had been paid a pittance. And real? That meant clothes that made no pretence at things which Posy knew she was not and could never be; so, no glamour, no sequins, no gaudy colours, nothing low-cut, nothing see-through, nothing trendy. Opening her wardrobe she had a flat feeling; a sort of dull satisfaction that yes, it had all been planned according to her style statement, nothing had been bought on impulse, everything was comfortable, reasonably clean and went with everything else. She pulled out a beige linen skirt hand-decorated with recycled buttons, and matched it with an organic cotton jersey top, coloured with blackberry dye to a dirty purplish red. When she had had glossy auburn hair, it had suited her well. Now the hair had faded to a sandy colour it was not so flattering; but how could she replace it? That woman from Camden Market had long since moved to Israel to live on a kibbutz. Posy turned her attention towards footwear, and chose a pair of leather clogs to go with her slouchy ribbed socks. Then she checked herself in the mirror. The overall effect was less creative than she would have liked. Still, once she got her mirror-work bag swinging from her shoulder, and had added her pink beret (knitted by oboist Tansy McIlraith), she'd look a bit livelier.

Posy was a regular at the Millfields Organic Bagel Bar, where they sold not only exceptionally tasty wholemeal bagels but served excellent decaffeinated coffee. The owner, Gareth, greeted her heartily as she entered the café.

‘Are you going to be sitting outside today Posy?’ he asked. ‘I’ve put up a parasol just for you. I know you don’t want to get freckles.’

Posy laughed and blushed. Her face was peppered with pale freckles, even her lips were freckly, and at this time of year a fresh smattering always appeared across the bridge of her petite nose. ‘A bit late to start worrying about that now.’

‘Only joking, girl. But you want to watch that skin in this weather.’

‘Thanks, Gareth, I do. I’m wearing sunscreen. But anyway I’m not sitting outside. I’m meeting someone.’

No sooner had Gareth registered this surprising comment - Posy loved her solitude and usually sat alone - than a man, unnoticed in the furthest corner of the café, stood up and introduced himself.

‘You must be Posy Gibson,’ he said in a pleasantly smooth, deep voice.

She turned and stared. The man was tall, dressed in a light summer jacket, white with a thin navy stripe, ivory trousers and brown deck shoes. He was wearing a white linen shirt with a burgundy spotted cravat tied loosely around his neck. His hair was short and slicked back from a prominent forehead which shone a little in the midday heat. The hair was not silver; it was brown. He was perhaps 50 years old.

‘Are you Alexander Hamilton?’

‘Pleased to meet you.’ His warm hand shake answered her question. ‘I’ve just bought myself a coffee and one of those delicious bagels. What a wonderful idea to meet here. To think we could have gone to that dreadful Starbucks right opposite. You have good taste.’

Gareth smiled, listening in to the conversation.

‘Your usual, Posy?’ he butted in.

‘Decaff latte,’ she affirmed.

‘Ah, this is a decaff too,’ said Alexander gesturing towards his coffee.

‘I’m afraid it’s all they do here. You’ll have to go over to Starbucks if you need caffeine. Mind you, their stuff is so weak you wouldn’t know it.’

Alexander laughed. ‘Shall we sit down and talk about the orchestra? I hope you don’t mind but I’ve brought a print-out of the Manifesto.’

Posy was impressed.

'My, you have been doing your research. One or two points are probably out of date now, or rather, we don't all agree on them any more. Like the one about having to subscribe to Unite Against Facism. I mean, it's not that we don't encourage people to subscribe – they do great work – it's just that we decided it wasn't essential.'

'That's a relief,' said Alexander, 'because I'm not a member. But I was studying one of their leaflets just this morning.'

'Were you?' said Posy, 'You are a proper citizen.'

She looked at Alexander out of the corner of her eye as he scanned through the Manifesto. His hair was silver at the sides, though brown on top. His eyes appeared to be hazel; she couldn't quite tell from this angle.

'And this point,' Alexander continued, 'is a really important one. That no-one should be turned away from the orchestra on grounds of ability. If you start auditioning you're into a very different animal. Things get competitive.'

'I totally agree,' said Posy, noticing that his eyes were actually a very deep, chocolate brown.

'The whole secret of an organisation like this is in the inclusivity. That's where the magic lies. Passionate music making, that's what you get when people come here simply with their desire, their creativity, their good will. I'm convinced that you can potentially end up with better performances than the professionals.'

He looked at Posy with a calm confidence. She was now more than impressed.

'Especially when you get composers in, as I notice you are doing at the Summer school. Genuine contemporary music, out of the ivory tower, made my real people, not 'experts'. It's so much more valuable, culturally, creatively, socially, morally – in every way!'

Posy resisted the urge to crow 'You've got the job,' and instead, braced herself.

'Right, I suppose I should ask you some questions.'

'Go ahead.'

'What would you do if...you were leading a workshop of Grade 5 level players – so reasonably competent - and there was a new person who came in who was an absolute beginner? Would you let them drone along and potentially spoil the experience of the other players? Or would you exclude them?'

'There is a third way,' responded Alexander smoothly. 'In tailor-made pieces which account for all standards of playing. That's why contemporary music is such a gem.'

Though I do have some ensemble works by Boccherini which have parts which were originally designed for incompetent eighteenth-century noblemen! Often these folk would be desperate to join in, so the unfortunate composer had to cater for them somehow. Some have just two or three notes! Still, I'd look first at contemporary repertoire, composed imaginatively for players of different abilities, maybe with some inbuilt flexibility of scoring. Or – to be honest – I'd try to encourage the players to drum up some music of their own.'

'Wow,' responded Posy, in a hushed voice. 'I have to tell you, Alexander, that is the best response I've ever had to that question. I'm afraid I do tend to ask everyone I take on the same questions – the idea of mixed abilities is absolutely central. You have to be positive, but more than that, you have to have solutions.'

Alexander drained his coffee, neatly folded his serviette and put it under his plate. Posy realised that there was no point drawing out the formal part of the interview any further. She had made up her mind. This man was the perfect replacement for Carrie.

'My violinists are going to love you. In fact the whole orchestra will,' she said frankly. 'You'll have the ladies eating out of your hand.'

His face fell a little.

'And the men,' Posy added quickly, realising that he might be gay.

But he was still frowning. 'I've a lot of experience working with impressionable folk,' Alexander explained, 'not just young people but adults who're desperate to learn, and who've perhaps been kept away from culture for no fault of their own. Those people can get very emotionally involved with their teachers, the people who are offering them the key to a fuller life, a fresh start in some cases. I've learned to keep my distance. No relationships with the students!'

'Oh, I totally agree,' said Posy. She thought for a moment that there was something about his fastidiousness which seemed a little buttoned-up. Still, he was right – relationships could get the tutors into no end of hot water, even though they were all consenting adults, whom Posy considered 'orchestra members' more than 'students'. As they stood and shook hands, Posy smiled brightly and said, 'Well, if you're still interested, I would love you to have the job.'

Was that a flicker of hesitation she caught on his face? No; he was looking at her with an unnerving intensity.

'Yes. I would love to come and work with you.'

