

2. ANNE McALISTER

After a cup of tea, Anne was beginning to get her colour back.

Sitting opposite her in the café, Alfie was still amazed by how similar they looked to one another. Quite apart from the fact that she had been standing at his father's grave, he had recognised who she must be as soon as he saw her. And she had seen the family resemblance as well, though not quite in the same way.

"I really am so sorry," he said again.

She was able to smile now. "Stop apologising. It wasn't your fault, it was me being stupid," she said. Her accent was English, not Scottish. "Just seeing you like that – you looked exactly like Dad when he was younger. I thought I was seeing a ghost."

Lorna Fielding had told him he had a half-sister. Through her discreet enquiries, she had traced Calum McAlister's second wife, Linda, who was now in an Aberdeen care home.

"She has Alzheimer's and I'm afraid it won't be possible to speak to her. But she has a daughter, Anne, who's out of town at the moment. Do you want me to make contact with her?" Lorna had asked.

"No, it's okay," he said. "Just give me her details and I'll get in touch."

But he hadn't. How could he introduce himself to somebody who didn't even know he existed? Even when he got to Aberdeen, armed with Anne's address and phone number, he wasn't sure whether he would use them. He had decided to leave the decision until after the cemetery visit.

And now they had met when he had no chance to produce a prepared speech, but had simply blurted out his name and the fact that he was her brother.

What he didn't understand was her reaction, or rather her non-reaction. Calum McAlister hadn't known anything about him, hadn't known whether he was a boy or a girl, or even whether he had been born. But it was as though Anne found nothing extraordinary about a stranger suddenly materialising and claiming to be her brother.

Had Calum McAlister fathered children across the country and this was a regular occurrence? There was the family resemblance, of course. And perhaps she was so relieved to discover he wasn't a ghost that she was happy to accept him as a living relative.

And just as she knew nothing about him, he knew almost nothing about her apart from her name. He didn't know how old she was, what she did for a living, whether she was married or not. Could he ask these things at a first meeting?

Across the table, she was staring at him, studying every detail of his face.

"I can't get over it," she said. "You're so like Dad."

He wasn't even able to say whether she was right or wrong. His mother hadn't kept a single photograph of his father.

Almost speaking to herself, she said: "I can't believe I'm sitting here with my little brother."

Little brother? She might be tall, but he was taller. And she had to be younger than him – Calum McAlister had married her mother after abandoning Alfie's. He could make that point by telling her his age and asking her hers, but that was a dangerous question to ask a woman.

He tried a safer topic. "You don't have a local accent – I have to say I'm relieved. I haven't quite tuned into it yet, and I keep having to ask people to repeat themselves."

She laughed, a friendly, open laugh. "I know – when we first moved up here, I thought they were speaking a foreign language. They are, in a way. The local dialect's called the Doric, and even people from other parts of Scotland have trouble understanding it."

He swiftly grasped the opportunity she had given him. "When did you move up here?"

"I was five," she said. "This was where Dad's family was from, and he got a job working on the rigs. That was when there was a big boom in the North Sea oil industry. I was so upset. All my friends were going to school in Cirencester and suddenly I was being dragged away."

"Cirencester's a nice area," he said. "I live about forty miles away, in Bunburry."

She looked startled. "Really? But I thought..." Her voice tailed off.

"I know," he said. "I don't have the local accent either. I was brought up in London." He decided he might as well be frank with this new sister. "Your father was married to my mother in Bunburry. He left before I was born, and my mother moved to London for work. Three years ago, my mother's sister, my Aunt Augusta, died and left me her cottage in Bunburry. I've been there ever since."

He hadn't thought of what impact this bit of biographical detail would have on Anne McAlister. She flushed scarlet, began to speak but stumbled over her words. She took a mouthful of tea before trying again.

"Augusta? Was everything all right between her and your mother?"

"What do you mean?" asked Alfie uneasily.

"Oh, Alfie. I feel so dreadful about it all. I know it wasn't my fault, although I suppose it was in a way." She leaned across and put her hand over his. "Alfie, you're going to be really angry with me. But there are things you need to know."

3. BACK IN BUNBURY

Alfie woke to the sound of birdsong, feeling content in a way he could never have imagined after Vivian's death.

When the architect had rung to say the work was complete, he headed straight back from Aberdeen, a ten-hour journey with a couple of coffee stops. After a shower in the elegant new bathroom, which no longer had the slightest trace of avocado, he fell into bed and an untroubled sleep.

Now he was preparing breakfast in a newly refurbished kitchen, which still retained Aunt Augusta's exuberantly coloured tiles. He carried the food and cafetière out through the new back door on to the sunny patio overlooking the lawn and flower beds, and thought over the events of the past few days.

He had learned so much about his family, so much about Aunt Augusta. And, at last, he knew the truth about her relationship with Calum McAlister, rather than the dubious rumours that had swirled round the village.

Anne had said he would be really angry with her, but how could he be? Anyone would have done what she did. She had found the messages Calum McAlister had written – including what you might call a confession – and of course she had read it all, even though it had been addressed to Alfie. She had no idea where he was or how to find him. Not everyone was in his privileged position of being able to hire a private investigator.

He sipped his coffee, realising that he couldn't imagine ever being angry with Anne. After her initial awkwardness, they had relaxed into one another's company. She told him about her marriage and divorce, how proud she was of her daughter Ruby who had just started work, and he found himself able to tell her about Vivian.

She invited him to her home, and it turned out that she lived in a cottage as well, although quite different from his own. A fisherman's cottage, part of a 19th century fishing village built beside the beach near the old harbour. Much squatter and smaller than Windermere Cottage, but still cosy and welcoming.

Anne invited him to stay, and it was clear the offer was genuine, but Alfie, trying to sound regretful, explained that the hotel was paid for upfront.

"And we've only just met," she said. "It's maybe a bit too early for you to know whether you could stand my company."

That wasn't it at all. If he was honest with himself, he hesitated only because he was more than happy in the spacious high-ceilinged hotel room, which he reckoned was probably bigger than Anne's entire cottage. But he was so confident about enjoying her company that before he left, he invited her to come and stay with him in Bunbury.

After a moment's pause, she said diffidently: "I've got a long weekend next weekend – it's a local holiday. I could come down by train, get to you on Friday evening, and go away on Monday morning. But that's not giving you any notice, and you're probably busy. There'll be another time, I'm sure."

"I'm not busy at all," said Alfie immediately, which wasn't entirely true, but he would happily rearrange all his other commitments for this visit.

Anne's face broke into a smile. "That would be wonderful. And you could meet Ruby - she actually works in Oxford. I know she'll be very excited to meet her new uncle."

Now back in Bunburry, Alfie was determined to have everything perfect for his sister. He finished breakfast on the patio and went to examine the redecorated guest bedroom. It had lost its jarring Seventies vibe and now looked restful and comfortable, in a streamlined Scandinavian style, with off-white walls and plain wood furnishings. He would pick some flowers from the garden for Anne's arrival – they would look good in a vase on the small circular table by the window.

It felt appropriate that the first guest would be his sister. Given what he had discovered, neither he nor Anne would have been comfortable with her staying in a room designed and furnished by Aunt Augusta. But with all the changes, the cottage at last felt his.

And now to report to Liz and Marge. The elderly ladies had been Aunt Augusta's best friends, so he wouldn't tell them everything just yet. Perhaps he might never tell them everything. It was his history and Anne's, after all, not anybody else's business.

He had done enough driving the previous day, so walked through the village, enjoying being back in the cobbled streets flanked all by the proudly individual buildings in honey-coloured limestone. London and Aberdeen were all very well, but Bunburry was his home now.

Reaching the neat two-storey Jasmine Cottage with its sloping front garden, he climbed up the steps to ring the bell.

Marge, petite and white haired, answered the door and peered at him accusingly through her oversized spectacles.

"Hello, stranger. When did you get back?"

"Only last night, very late," he said.

She sniffed. "I suppose you'd better come in, then."

The greeting from Liz, larger and milder than her friend, was more enthusiastic.

"Oh, Alfie, we've missed you," she said as she gave him a hug. "Come and sit down. Cup of tea?"

"Or-" began Marge, which usually heralded an offer of something stronger.

"Or nothing, dear," said Liz firmly. "It's just after breakfast. I'll put the kettle on."

Alfie settled himself on the chintz-covered sofa while Marge perched on her rocking chair.

"Well?" she asked. "How are the renovations? Any snagging problems?"

"Not that I've found so far," he said. "I'm very happy with it all."

Marge gave a satisfied smile. "We kept an eye on the workmen while you were away."

It struck Alfie that he could have saved himself the expense of an architect and simply let the ladies supervise the work. Marge in particular would have terrified everyone into doing a perfect job.

"The outside looks very smart with the carriage lights all polished up, and the door and window frames repainted," she went on. "But I'm surprised they're still purple. I would have thought you'd want something more subdued."

"Is that your way of telling me I'm boring?" he said. "In that case I definitely need to borrow a bit of pizzazz from Aunt Augusta."

"Never boring," Liz assured him as she came in with the tea tray. "And how lovely that you've kept the outside of the cottage the way Gussie had it. She would be very happy about that."

"It's now a mixture of Aunt Augusta and me, and that makes *me* happy," said Alfie. "You must come round and inspect it soon."

"Of course we will," said Liz, handing round the china cups, and leaving a plate of her celebrated fudge within Alfie's reach. "Maybe not just yet. We've got some things to sort out first."

Marge began to say something but, unusually, was quelled by a look from Liz. Slumping back in the rocking chair with a defeated air, she said: "How have you enjoyed all this time with Oscar?"

"Good to catch up, but I wasn't in London the whole time. I've just come back from Aberdeen."

"Aberdeen?" squawked Marge, incredulous. "Scotland? What did you want to go all the way up there for?"

"I'm sure it was lovely," said Liz. "Did you visit a lot of castles?"

"I wanted to visit my father's grave," said Alfie awkwardly.

Marge's eyes goggled behind the large spectacles. "I can't imagine why, after he ran out on your poor mother. Unless you wanted to dance on it."

"Margaret!" Liz's voice rang out with unaccustomed force, and Marge lapsed into silence.

"It was just something I felt I should do," said Alfie. "My father moved to Aberdeen with his second wife and his daughter, and I wanted to see what sort of a place it was. It's a beautiful city."

"I bet it was freezing," muttered Marge mutinously. "I hope you had a jumper with you."

"There was a bit of a breeze off the sea, but it was very sunny," said Alfie.

"Did you find where your father was laid to rest?" asked Liz delicately.

"I did, and more besides," said Alfie. "I found my sister."

"Sister?" repeated Marge.

"You can't have been listening, dear," said Liz. "Alfie's just told us that Calum McAlister had a daughter."

"I've been listening perfectly well," snapped Marge. "There's nothing wrong with my faculties, thank you. But she's not a sister, is she? She's just a half-sister."