

They heard the kitchen door, and a moment later, Liz joined them, patting down her sandy-coloured hair now that it was free of the industrial hairnet.

“Alfie dear, how lovely to see you,” she said. “What brings you here? Not that you need a reason.”

“He’s got a reason all right,” said Marge. “He’s got something to tell you. Haven’t you, Alfie?”

Alfie nodded but couldn’t think of the right words.

Liz gave him an encouraging smile. “What is it, dear?”

“I…” Alfie began. “That is, I’m afraid I may have been a little economical with the truth.”

Liz sat down on her usual easy chair, while Marge stayed standing, apparently guarding the door in case Alfie made a run for it.

“I’m sure you had your reasons,” said Liz.

“I did,” said Alfie desperately. “It was when Emma was rushed into hospital after being stabbed. I didn’t know what had happened to her, and I wanted to see how she was.”

“Well, of course you did, dear,” said Liz. “It was dreadful enough for me hearing that she’d been injured. And at least by then we knew it was her shoulder and that she wasn’t in danger.”

“Exactly,” agreed Alfie, hoping this meant that Liz would be understanding. “I thought they might not let me see her since I wasn’t a relative, so I told the nurse I was her fiancé.”

He caught the sudden gleam in Liz’s eye. He had long suspected that Liz and Marge had hopes of a romance between him and Liz’s great-niece. What they didn’t seem to understand was that Emma would never be interested in someone like him. She considered him old and staid, and tolerated him; that was all.

“I’m not her fiancé,” he added hastily. “Obviously.”

The gleam faded. “Yes, I see. But I quite understand why you said it, dear, and I think we can call it a little white lie. You really didn’t have to tell me about it, you know.”

“Oh yes he did,” said Marge, her tone grim. “His so-called little white lie went all round the nurses’ station, and now it’s all round the village, thanks to Dorothy. So, the whole place is convinced there’s about to be an engagement party.”

Alfie couldn’t bear Liz’s look of reproach, so much worse than Marge’s exasperation.

“Perhaps you could have a word with Dorothy when you see her,” he said hastily, getting to his feet. “Sorry, I really must get to the library.”

“Don’t think we’re going to do your dirty work for you, my lad,” Marge called after him. “You got yourself into this mess and you can get yourself out.”

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This was a nightmare, thought Alfie as he took a circuitous route to the library, dodging down back alleys to avoid meeting anyone who might have heard the news. Yes, it was a mess of his own making, but it had been a spur-of-the-moment thing because of his

anxiety about Emma. He hadn't meant to cause all this commotion. He hadn't even seen her since she was discharged, knowing that her sister had come to look after her. He didn't want to intrude.

Thanks to Betty, he knew more about Laura than he should; certainly more than Liz and Marge. He had met her a few times in *The Horse* when she was catching up with old acquaintances. The family resemblance was obvious, but while Emma was feisty and no-nonsense, there was a vulnerability about her older sister that made Alfie feel protective. And knowing what he did about her ex, he hoped he could reassure her that most men weren't callous egotists like James Fry.

But now what would Emma and Laura think of him? He would have to go round and explain. But not yet. He would stay in the library for as long as possible.

The library. He still had to work out how to respond to the email from Gwendolyn, whose post as librarian was the only paid job. She wanted to attract more borrowers, she said. Dr Anderson had recently got together with some fellow amateur musicians. What about inviting them to give recitals every Sunday afternoon? The villagers could come to hear them, and stay to borrow books.

Marge had been talking about the local GP as well.

"I was passing the surgery after hours and I could hear them all practising. They really were..." She paused, apparently searching for the right word.

"Talented?" Alfie had suggested. "Harmonious?"

"Appalling," Marge concluded.

Alfie was going to have to find some way of dodging Gwendolyn's suggestion without curbing her enthusiasm. She was no longer the nervous creature who had arrived in the library, barely out of her teens, but she could still be very sensitive.

Miss Radford-Jones had personally appointed her as librarian, and Alfie reckoned it was an act of charity because no other jobs were available in the village. Gwendolyn had shied away from the books as though they were about to jump up and bite her. Alfie's friend Oscar promptly dubbed her Gwendolyn the Timid Goth, but Miss Radford-Jones had seen qualities in the young woman that nobody else had.

After a while, Gwendolyn positively flourished in the role, and was determined that the community library would meet the needs of the community, often before the community knew what these needs were. She bombarded Oscar in London with precise demands for particular volumes, and Oscar duly scoured bookstores and charity shops for them. The volunteers were expected to keep up with all the new stock so that they could advise borrowers correctly. Gwendolyn often subjected Alfie to on-the-spot quizzes, to the extent that he had renamed her "The Intimidating Goth".

Now that she had a firm grip on running things, the library was enhanced by a dedicated Gothic section. All the books had a colour-coordinated sticker on the spine to identify their genre: blood-red for crime, pink for romance, light green for gardening, dark green for the environment, yellow for knitting. Gwendolyn had wanted to mark the Gothic books with jet-black stickers, a perfect match for her hair, eyeliner, fingerless lace gloves, flounced skirt and thick-soled boots. But given the number of

books with black spines, she had decided to have purple stickers instead, which matched her lipstick and satin bodice.

“You’re late,” said Gwendolyn reprovingly as Alfie walked in. There was a jangling of jewellery as she made a show of looking at her watch. It wasn’t the large skull-and-crossbones one she usually wore on her wrist, but a new heart-shaped one on a chain round her neck, along with various other bits of metallic decoration.

“I suppose you couldn’t tear yourself away from your fiancée,” she went on. She sounded gloomy most of the time, but she sounded particularly gloomy as she said this.

Alfie flinched. He had been thinking of the library as a refuge, but of course, if the news was all over the village, why would the library be exempt?

“There’s something I have to explain,” he began, but Gwendolyn waved a lace-gloved hand at him.

“You don’t have to explain anything, Alfie,” she said. “All I’m interested in is how well you do your job in here. What you do in your free time is nothing to do with me.”

She sounded for all the world like the managing director of a multinational, he thought.

“No, I mean Emma isn’t my fiancée,” he elaborated.

There was a faint upturn in Gwendolyn’s purple-painted lips that could almost be considered a smile.

“She’s not? Ms Chesney said she was.”

“Ms Chesney must have heard it from Dorothy, who heard it from Old Tom, but-” Alfie began.

Right on cue, Dorothy came in with the day’s mail.

“Alfie!” she said. “I hear-”

“No, you don’t,” he said desperately. “Please would you stop telling people that Emma and I are engaged? We really aren’t.”

Dorothy carefully put down the mail on Gwendolyn’s desk. “If you had let me speak,” she said, “what I was about to say was that I hear from Marge that Emma and you aren’t engaged.”

Gwendolyn would normally have been ripping open the mail by this time, but she was standing listening, still with that unfamiliar upturn of her mouth.

“Sorry, Dorothy, I didn’t realise.”

Dorothy sniffed. “Perhaps you won’t be so hasty about telling me off next time. Anyway, nobody’s interested in you and Emma anymore, not after the terrible news.”

“Terrible news?” asked Alfie.

“Yes, there’s been a break-in. At Rakesh’s. His poor wife, I don’t think she’ll ever get over it.”

8. **STOLEN GOODS**

His library shift finished, Alfie reluctantly made his way towards Emma's cottage. He had occasionally dropped her off there, but this would be the first time he had actually visited her.

Alfie, Liz and Marge all enjoyed cooking, and hosted dinners week around at Windermere Cottage and Jasmine Cottage, usually joined by Emma. She never returned the invitation since apparently she didn't know how to cook: Marge claimed she lived on nothing but crisps and chocolate.

But she hadn't joined them since being discharged from hospital, after which Laura had moved in to take care of her. Liz and Marge looked in every day, but Alfie was hesitant to turn up without any invitation. He had sent flowers and, taking on board what Marge had said, he had sent chocolates. Emma rang to thank him, but she sounded tired, not her usual brisk self, so he hadn't asked if she wanted a visit.

But now he had no choice. He had to apologise.

He turned the corner into Emma's street, an eclectic mix of different sizes and styles of cottages, some with mullioned windows, some with impressive chimney stacks. It had always surprised Alfie that Emma's home looked even bigger than Liz and Marge's, with a ground floor and an upper storey under the grey slate roof. He hadn't imagined that police constables were paid enough to be able to afford such a desirable residence.

It was only after Emma's injury that he had found out this was her parents' house and that both her parents were dead. He had been in Bunburry for three years and was still discovering things that everyone in the village had always known.

But now he knew things about his late Aunt Augusta, who had bequeathed him Windermere Cottage, that not even her closest friends Liz and Marge knew. And then there was what Betty had confided in him about Laura. That was another closely guarded secret.

Edith certainly had no idea. "I always knew you could do better than that James Fry," she had told Laura in Alfie's hearing. "I never knew what you saw in him. And there must be no end of nice young men in Birmingham, since it's taken you so long to come back."

Laura had smiled weakly, and Alfie went over to rescue her, ushering her to a nearby table and inquiring about Emma's progress. Now he was going to find out first-hand how Emma was.

He rang the bell and moments later, Laura showed him into a large sitting-room where Emma was lying stretched out on a sofa, her left arm in a sling and her shoulder still padded.

When she saw who it was, she gave a gasp and quickly swung herself into a sitting position, her free hand fluttering towards her throat.

“Hello, fiancé,” she said in a tremulous voice.

“I’m sorry, I-”

“You’re apologising for making me the happiest woman in Bunburry? It’s like a dream. It’s totally like a dream – they gave me so many painkillers in hospital that I don’t even remember you proposing.”

“I didn’t exactly-”

“Laura’s going to be chief bridesmaid. She got me a whole pile of wedding magazines and we’ve been choosing dresses. Mine’s a secret, obviously, but see what you think of Laura’s. And I hope you’ll be wearing a kilt, with your Scottish ancestry. What colour’s the McAlister tartan? We could get matching tablecloths for the wedding breakfast.”

“Emma, stop being so mean to the poor man,” said Laura. “He’s gone as white as a sheet. Sit down, Alfie, and pay no attention to her. Glass of red?”

“Thank you, a drink would be very welcome,” said Alfie slightly hoarsely. He took the nearest seat, a large, overstuffed armchair that sagged alarmingly when he sat down. It was going to be a struggle to get back out of it, which gave him a sensation of being trapped.

Laura had disappeared, presumably to fetch another glass. Emma surveyed him coolly, and he couldn’t imagine feeling at a greater disadvantage if they were in the police station interview room.

“Perhaps you’d like to explain why you told the nurses I was your fiancée?” she said.

Because I was terrified that you were going to die – I had no idea how badly injured you were, and I needed to be with you, he wanted to say. She had looked so vulnerable and frail lying in the hospital bed, attached to monitors and drips, her face obscured by an oxygen mask.

Now, apart from the sling and the padding, she looked as vigorous and assertive as ever. She would just laugh at him if he admitted he would have told any lie in order to see her.

“Well?” she prompted.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” he said lamely.

“Really? From a police point of view, it’s quite a bad idea, falsely presenting yourself as someone you’re not. You know you can get a ten-year sentence for fraud? Mind you, that would be a welcome escape from the whole village thinking we’re engaged.”

Was she referring to him or to herself, he wondered? Was she angry about him embarrassing her publicly?

Laura, clutching a large wine glass, returned in time to catch the end of the conversation.

“What did I say, Em? Stop upsetting our guest.” She turned to Alfie, and handed him the glass. “Don’t give it another thought, Alfie. Aunt Liz and Aunt Marge are sorting it