



HELENA MARCHMONT



BUNBURY
A COSY MYSTERY SERIES



A MURDEROUS RIDE



the best cream teas in the county.”

Alfie suspected David’s shape might be due to extensive comparison tests and ordered a more modest toasted teacake.

“So,” said David, once Alfie had been served, “what brings you to Bunburry?”

“An elderly relative left me a cottage and I’m staying in it while I decide what to do.”

“With the cottage or generally?”

There was genuine interest behind the question and for a second, Alfie contemplated telling David about Vivian, about how he didn’t care where he was as long as it wasn’t the home he had shared with her in London, about how he had no plans apart from trying to survive each new day without her. But only for a second.

“A bit of both,” he said easily. “I’m taking some time out from the day job.”

“Yes, I read something in the business pages a while back about you selling your start-up. So no plans yet for the next venture?”

“The next venture is getting the car roadworthy,” said Alfie, taking out his phone.

“This is what I inherited along with the cottage.”

David looked at the picture and gave a whistle of admiration. “She’s a beauty. And I can certainly help. I used to go to a chap on the other side of Oxford, which wasn’t particularly convenient, but there’s now an excellent mechanic just down the road, name of Mikhail Melnikov.”

“A Russian?” asked Alfie in surprise.

“Not so’s you’d notice. His parents are Russian, and I haven’t enquired as to why they came over, but he was born here. Here as in England, not as in Bunburry – I think he’s only been in the area for a couple of years. Everybody calls him Mike. He’s a real character.”

David spread a liberal amount of butter on his second scone and then upended the ramekin of jam over it.

“I’ve got a bit of a sweet tooth,” he said unnecessarily.

“Have you tried Bunburry fudge?” asked Alfie. He had first sampled it as a child and thought it was the most wonderful thing he had ever tasted. The highlight of his return to Bunburry was the discovery that it was made by Liz in what was literally a cottage industry: Liz concocted the fudge in her kitchen, while Marge marketed it and kept the books.

“Can’t say I have. But I’m very fond of fudge.”

“My mother always said it was the best fudge in the Cotswolds,” said Alfie.

“So you knew the Cotswolds already?”

“I consider myself a Londoner, since that’s where I grew up, but unlike Mr Melnikov, I was actually born here.”

No need to mention the circumstances of his birth, to admit that he had never known his father. He wondered how many people in Bunburry were aware of what had happened. Probably anyone over the age of sixty – it must have been a delicious scandal at the time. But so far, nobody had been tactless enough to mention it.

“So we’re two Cotswold boys together,” said David. “Excellent. Perhaps if we join forces, we’ll manage to persuade Oscar to venture into the country.”

“I doubt that very much,” said Alfie. “He spends his time demanding to know when I’m coming back to London.”

David sighed. “He has a fit of the vapours every time I invite him to stay. I keep assuring him that we have electricity and running water, but he doesn’t believe me.” He crammed the last chunk of scone into his mouth, then produced his wallet from his jacket pocket. “If you’re ready, shall we go and call on Comrade Melnikov?”

Alfie stood up. “Please, let me get this.” Ignoring David’s protests, he went over to the counter and paid the bill, making an extra purchase as he did so.

David had a sturdy 4x4 that sat high above the road. The garage was a fair distance outside Bunburry, but still closer than the other side of Oxford. David ushered Alfie inside, calling out a greeting. It was a large, well-lit space with two hydraulic lifts, one of them bearing a silver BMW.

“Mr Savile, sir!” A muscular, fair-haired young man emerged from underneath it, wiping his hands on a rag, which he shoved in the pocket of his overalls. He had a ready smile and eyes that missed nothing. Alfie summed him up immediately as an engaging rogue. “What can I do for you today?”

“Not a thing,” said David. “But I’ve brought you a potential new customer.”

Alfie was startled. He had assumed that David was seeing Mike about his own stable of cars.

“This is Mr McAlister,” said David and Mike The Mechanic approached with his hand outstretched.

“*Dobriy dyen,*” said Alfie.

Mike looked briefly surprised and then his smile widened further. “*Vy govorite po russki?*”

Alfie struggled to remember what that meant. “If you just asked whether I speak Russian, I only know a few phrases,” he admitted.

“But you’ve been there?”

“I have.” He had wanted to take Vivian on the Trans-Siberian Railway, a journey of almost six thousand miles from Moscow to Vladivostok. She had protested, saying it was too close to the beginning of filming, that she had other projects she had to complete first. He had argued that it was only six nights on the train, but she pointed out that they would have to add on at least another three days to get there and back.

“I just can’t do it. Once the film’s finished, we can go then.”

But he had managed to whisk her away for a long weekend.

“I’ve been to St Petersburg,” he told Mike.

Mike spread his arms wide as though taking the credit for the trip. “That’s where my parents are from.” He went over to a small desk in the corner of the garage and picked up a mobile phone. “It would really make my mum’s day if you said hello to her in Russian.”

David was leaning against the wall, grinning, enjoying the spectacle.

Mike keyed in the number, spoke in rapid Russian to the person at the other end, then handed the phone to Alfie.

“*Dobriy dyen,*” said Alfie again.

There was a peal of delighted laughter and a female voice said: “*Dobriy dyen.*”

Mike made a circular movement with his hand, indicating that Alfie should keep speaking. He dredged his memory for another phrase. “*Kak vas zovut?*” he managed, which he hoped was asking her name.

More laughter. “*Menya zovut Marina. A kak vas zovut?*”

“*Menya zovut Alfie.*”

“Alfee,” she repeated.

Mike’s hand was still circling. There was only one other phrase that Alfie could remember. “*Ya khotyel by piva.*”

Mike’s mother’s laugh was drowned out by her son’s. “He just said he wants a beer,” Mike translated for David’s benefit.

“What did you think of the beer?” asked Mike’s mother in attractively accented English.

“The beer was good, and the vodka was even better.”

“And my home town, what did you think of it?”

“It’s one of the most beautiful cities I’ve seen,” said Alfie. “I would like to go back for longer.”

“You must do that. And first you must come to visit me. I will tell you all the places to see, and I will teach you some more Russian.”

“I would like that very much,” said Alfie.

“So it’s fixed? I can expect you?”

Alfie couldn’t imagine ever returning to St Petersburg, every street reminding him that Vivian was no longer with him. But he had felt an immediate rapport with Mike’s mother, and some Russian lessons might be a much-needed distraction.

“You can.”

“*Otlichno!* Can you repeat that, Alfee, *otlichno?*”

“*Otlichno,*” said Alfie obediently.

“Perfect! Remember, you are welcome any time. *Do svidanya.*”

“*Do svidanya,*” Alfie said, handing the phone back to Mike, who had a brief jokey conversation with his mother in Russian before ringing off.

“She’s very impressed,” he told Alfie. “Thanks for that. She really means the invitation – she says you’re the first British person to have spoken to her in Russian since she arrived, and that was 26 years ago.”

“We’re not known for our language skills, are we?” said David ruefully. “We just shout loudly in English to get foreigners to understand us.”

“But not Mr McAlister,” said Mike.

“I don’t necessarily know what I’m saying. What does *otlichno* mean anyway?”

Mike grinned. “Nothing bad. It means ‘excellent’ – and Mum says your accent’s great. And now, if I can’t do anything for Mr Savile, what can I do for you?”

Alfie got out his own phone and displayed the photo of the Jaguar. “This car hasn’t been driven for a long time. I’m looking to get it roadworthy.”

Mike enlarged the picture. “Nice. Very nice indeed. An XK 140. Cotswold Blue.”

“Sorry?” said Alfie.

“The colour. That’s the name of it, Cotswold Blue.”

Alfie wondered whether Aunt Augusta had deliberately chosen that colour of car, and decided that she probably had.

“If Mr Savile doesn’t have anything urgent for me, I can get on with it pretty quickly. Where is it at the moment?”

“Bunburry,” said Alfie, describing the location of Aunt Augusta’s garage and handing over the garage key.

“I’ll get it picked up ASAP.”

“It doesn’t have seatbelts,” said Alfie.

“That’s okay,” said Mike. “You don’t have to have them if that’s how it was built. The only thing is that you’re not allowed to carry children under three in it.”

“But I’d like seatbelts,” said Alfie.

Mike raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? That could be a problem when you come to sell it. It ruins the original look.”

Had Vivian been wearing a seatbelt? Surely she couldn’t have been so reckless as to set off without putting it on. Alfie had never asked, had never been able to bring himself to read the details on the death certificate.

“I’d like seatbelts,” he repeated. “Is it possible to fit them?”

“Anything’s possible for the right price,” said Mike with a broad grin. “I’ll check the car over, but if it’s structurally sound, I should be able to fit brackets without too much problem. Come back on Wednesday and I’ll have a better idea of the timescale.”

“In the meantime, Alfie needs a car to get around in. Can you fix him up with something?” asked David.

“No, really, I’m fine,” said Alfie, but found himself ignored by both David and Mike.

The mechanic sucked in his breath. “I don’t have another Jag at the moment, sorry.” He gestured towards the BMW on the hydraulic lift. “But I’ve got a Beemer very like that one. Or I could do you a Lambo for a very reasonable price.”

Alfie shook his head. “I’m not looking for anything like that. All I want is a little runaround. Something basic.”

It was Mike’s turn to shake his head. “No can do, I’m afraid. This is a strictly high-end business.”

“Are you sure, Alfie?” asked David. “That doesn’t sound very interesting. Why don’t you have a look at the Lamborghini?”

He couldn’t say he had no intention of getting any car at all, that he never planned to drive again.

“I’m still not used to these narrow roads of yours. I don’t want anything too big.”

“Tell you what,” said Mike, “if you’re really serious, the best person to go to is my old boss at Bunburry Motors, Richard Smith. Tell him I sent you.”

It sounded genuine enough, but for some reason Alfie felt wary about the suggestion.

“Okay,” said David, “Bunburry Motors it is. Thanks, Mike. Alfie will be back in his basic car on Wednesday to see how you’re getting on.”

“No problem, Mr Savile. Good to meet you, Mr McAlister. I’ll give you Mum’s address and number on Wednesday. Seriously, she would love a visit – and she’s a great cook.”

“A great cook?” mused David as they walked back to the 4x4. “Perhaps you could ask if you can bring a friend. Right, next stop, Bunburry Motors.”

“Please don’t trouble, David,” Alfie said. “Just drop me anywhere near the village. I can’t possibly take up your time like this.”

“Nothing else planned for today,” David reassured him. “Oscar told me to make sure you were fixed up with a car, on pain of being scored off the Christmas card list, so that’s what I shall do.”

He might have known Oscar was behind this. He couldn’t blame David, who thought he was doing a good deed and had no idea he was being thoroughly manipulated by his old school friend. If the worst came to the worst, he might have to hire a car briefly just to get David off his back, and then return it to the garage as quickly as possible.

Bunburry Motors, a few miles out of the village on the Cheltenham road, was much less impressive than Mike’s slick operation. Its sign was missing some letters, its paintwork was flaking and the cars in the forecourt could never be described as high-end. That was no indication of the quality of the work, Alfie knew, but it had the air of a business that was struggling.

David walked in with Alfie and called: “Hello!”

A bulky middle-aged man with thinning hair and a distrustful expression emerged from an office. “Can I help you?”

Alfie prepared to explain why he was there, but David apparently thought it was his duty as a local to smooth Alfie’s path, and was already speaking. “Mr Smith? My friend here wants to hire a car for a while, just something basic while his Jaguar is being repaired. Your former employee Mike Melnikov recommended you.”

Alfie winced. He had had no intention of mentioning Mike, sensing that it would be a bad idea, and the garage owner’s expression proved him right.

“Did he? Did he indeed? The man who sneaked off with my customer database and my supplier list, and is trying to ruin my business?”

“Now then, Richard.” A younger woman came out of the office and laid a calming hand on the garage owner’s arm. “You’re not competing in the same market, and he’s not exactly trying to ruin your business if he’s sending you new customers.”

She was wearing overalls, her hair was hidden under a baseball cap, and there were smudges of oil on her face, but she was extremely attractive. Alfie decided this quite dispassionately, as though she was a painting in a gallery. Now that he had lost Vivian, he couldn’t imagine ever wanting any other woman.

Richard Smith looked as though he was inclined to argue, but Alfie saw the woman’s grip on his arm tighten and he said nothing.

She smiled at Alfie and David. “Did you say you were looking for a car to hire? Let me show you what’s available.”

“Thank you, Ms —?”

“Beth. I’m the —”

“Grease monkey,” muttered Richard Smith under his breath.

“Yes, I work here as a mechanic,” she said without rancour. “I’m also the wife of the owner. Would you like to have a look at the cars?”