

# 1. VISITORS IN THE VILLAGE

“Liz, I swear he’s the most handsome man I’ve seen in my life.”

Alfie came into the parlour with the tea things in time to hear Marge enthusing to her friend and business partner.

He smiled down at the tiny white-haired lady perched on the edge of the black leather armchair. “Talking about me again?”

She snorted. “Don’t flatter yourself, my lad.”

“Marge, dear, that’s unkind and unfair,” said Liz. “I think Alfie’s very handsome, and I’ve heard you say the same many times.”

Marge peered at Alfie through her oversized spectacles. “He’s handsome enough, I grant you.”

“Thank you, kindly,” Alfie murmured.

“But he’s handsome in an ordinary way. Mario looks like a film star. Hair as black as a raven’s wing, teeth as white as ...” She paused, searching for the right word.

“Snow?” suggested Alfie, setting the tray down on one of Aunt Augusta’s occasional tables.

“They’re lovely teeth,” she snapped.

Alfie poured the tea into the Scandinavian-style cups he had recently discovered. “I can’t compete with someone called Mario. Especially not somebody called Mario with lovely teeth,” he said, handing a cup to Liz.

“Oh, Gussie’s crockery!” she said in delight. “It was so fashionable in the Sixties.”

“I found it in a box in a cupboard,” said Alfie. “I still haven’t gone through all her

things.” His late aunt had been even older than Liz and Marge, but while their style was chintz curtains and fine bone china decorated with roses, Aunt Augusta had a taste that was all her own. The parlour’s psychedelic wallpaper, swirls of black, white, pink and purple, still made him shudder, and he couldn’t stand the avocado bathroom suite. But he also couldn’t face the upheaval of renovating. He spent most of his time in the brightly tiled kitchen, or the bedroom, which was a haven of tranquillity.

He gave Marge her tea and settled himself in the remaining armchair. “So, tell us more about the lovely-toothed Mario.”

Marge sighed in wistful reminiscence. “Gorgeous and utterly charming. Perfect continental manners. He’s Italian.”

“Is he a relative of Carlotta’s?” asked Liz.

“I don’t think so,” said Marge. “They were yabbering away in Italian together, but she just served him like any other customer.”

“You met him in The Horse?” asked Alfie. Liz beamed. “I did. He bought me a gin and tonic.”

“Now we have it,” said Liz. “Marge doesn’t have beer goggles, she has G&T glasses. Any man who buys her a drink is the most handsome man she’s ever seen.”

Marge’s retort was interrupted by Alfie’s mobile phone ringing. He saw it was Sasha, muttered: “Not again,” and switched it off.

“Double glazing?” asked Liz.

A double-glazing salesman would be less persistent than Sasha and Sebastian. This was getting tiresome. He had made it clear he wasn’t interested in their business proposal. But there was no need to bore Liz and Marge with the details.

“London acquaintances. They suggested coming down to Bunburry to see me. I told them I couldn’t have visitors because I was renovating the cottage.”

Liz tutted disapprovingly at the blatant untruth.

“I’ll get around to it some time,” said Alfie. “But the wallpaper saps my energy.”

Marge eased herself off the large armchair and went to pour herself another cup of tea. Alfie reflected that they were probably much more at home in Windermere Cottage than he was. As Aunt Augusta’s lifelong friends, they had been constant visitors. He could barely remember his aunt, hadn’t given her a thought for decades when he learned she had left him her cottage in Bunburry.

She would never know what a godsend it had been, giving him an escape from London. Apart from the vicar, nobody here knew what had happened back there and that was exactly how he intended to keep it.

“I always think,” remarked Marge, “that a cup of tea is very dry without something to go with it.”