

Alfie quailed. “We’re not – that is, we are, but – what I mean is, the party itself is going to be in the Magnolia Inn.”

Carlotta’s dark eyes flashed. Oscar had dubbed her “the tempestuous Carlotta,” and right now, it seemed an accurate description. She stormed into the room to stand protectively at her mother-in-law’s side.

“You come to say you no want a party here?” Carlotta’s English tended to disintegrate at moments of high emotion. “You think we no good?”

Edith grasped her hand and stroked it soothingly. “Now then, I’m sure Alfie has more to say.”

“I no want to hear more. I tell my William to bar him.”

Carlotta made as though to leave, presumably to get William to impose the sanction immediately, but Edith tightened her grip.

“Don’t talk daft. Alfie’s one of our best customers.” She nodded to him, indicating that he should speak.

“It’s because it’s a Saturday,” he improvised. “We couldn’t ask you to close the place for a party and disappoint all your regulars.”

Carlotta’s eyes narrowed, but she said nothing, which Alfie hoped meant she conceded that it was a valid point.

“And The Horse is an institution,” he went on. “Those two young women are just starting out, and they can only dream of becoming as successful as you. We thought we should put a bit of business their way. And of course, if they attract more guests, those guests will want to enjoy a pint in a traditional English pub.”

“Not just a pint,” sniffed Edith. “They’ll want to come here for a decent meal, not that fusion nonsense.”

“That’s exactly it,” said Alfie, lowering his voice confidentially. “Everyone here loves your food.” He made sure he included both Edith and Carlotta in his look of approbation. “We would be incredibly grateful if you could help with the buffet, so the guests will have things they’ll enjoy.”

“*Perfetto!*” exclaimed Carlotta, as enthusiastic now as she had been enraged. “I make rainbow spring rolls, corn fritters, aubergine pâté-”

“They don’t want your vegan muck,” scoffed Edith. “Things they’ll enjoy, he said. That means sausage rolls, prawn vol-au-vents, bacon wraps-”

“It all sounds wonderful,” said Alfie. “Thank you – Liz and Marge will be delighted. I’ll get Emma to confirm numbers with you as soon as possible.” He paused. “Edith, were you serious when you said Betty was coming back?”

The elderly woman chuckled. “She really was hoping to take you by surprise, then? I got it from Philip, so it must be true – vicars don’t fib. She told him she’d be home this week. He’s all excited about her starting up the Green Party meetings again. He’s going to bring Haridasa along.”

Betty was the only Green Party member in the village, and the Tuesday evening meetings in The Horse had consisted of her, the vicar and Alfie. Alfie had only ever attended because he felt he should be supportive, not out of ideological commitment. But Haridasa, Bunburry’s yoga guru, would be into saving the planet, so there would still

be three people at the meetings. Because Betty certainly wouldn't want Alfie there anymore.

## 2. BETTY'S COTTAGE

All that was left to do was to put on the duvet cover. The small cottage had been littered with debris, including beer cans and cigarette butts, and Emma was right, fingerprint powder made a terrible mess.

But the place gleamed now, the bedding freshly laundered, and the pantry restocked.

Alfie had learned practical skills early: his mother worked long hours, and he had been responsible for most of the shopping, cooking and cleaning. But one skill he had never mastered was putting on duvet covers. He had heard there was a technique, something to do with imagining the duvet was a croissant, or was it a sausage roll? But he had never discovered the secret, and always ended up alongside the duvet inside the cover.

This was where he was when he heard footsteps behind him.

“Al?”

That single syllable was enough to reveal an American accent. And only one person called him Al.

“Betty?”

He tried to turn to greet her, but he was so entangled that he lost his footing and toppled on to the bed. He had known their meeting would be awkward, but had never pictured anything as bad as this.

“Need some help there?”

A moment later, the duvet cover was tugged away. Betty gazed down at him, her expression inscrutable. She was thinner than he remembered, and her eyes seemed deeper set, but she looked as striking as ever, her skin tanned, her fair hair sun-streaked. When he'd seen her last, she had been wearing a figure-hugging scarlet silk gown, an iconic item gifted to her by her mother, the Seventies supermodel Elisabeth Thorndike. He had found the flimsy garment hanging in her wardrobe as he checked the cottage for damage. It was a bitter reminder that she'd travelled thousands of miles to get away from him.

“Hello,” he said, getting to his feet. “Welcome back.”

“I'm sure there's a perfectly rational explanation for what you're doing in my bed, but right now I can't imagine what that might be,” she said.

“I left a note on the door,” he said in an effort to exonerate himself. He had also left the door open to air the cottage while he worked, which was how she had managed to get in.

“Okay. I must have missed that.” She went off and returned with the note in its plastic folder. “You have the keys for this place? And the door looks kinda new. Have you moved in?”

“No,” he said, trying to give a reassuring laugh. “Of course not. This is your cottage.”

“Sure doesn’t seem that way.”

He had imagined Betty reading the note and coming round to Windermere Cottage, where he would offer her coffee, and they would sit at the wooden table in his brightly tiled kitchen while he turned the story of the break in into an amusing anecdote.

Now, in a rush, he said: “Someone broke in. A squatter. The door was damaged, but I got it replaced, which is why there are new keys. I don’t think anything’s been stolen - I was just trying to clean up a bit before you got back.”

Her expression softened. “Hey, Al, I’m sorry. It’s been a long trip back and I’m not at my best. I should have known it was okay – you’re one of the good guys.”

“No apology necessary. It must have been a shock to come back and find the door wide open and someone in your bedroom. I don’t suppose I can take you up on that offer to help me with this duvet cover?”

She laughed at that, exactly as he’d hoped she would when they chatted in his kitchen. She retrieved the cover, shook it, and turned it inside out, laying it on the bed.

“Let me. You were doing it all wrong.”

She put the duvet on top of the cover and began rolling them up together.

“See? Easy. Like a burrito.”

“Ah, a burrito,” he echoed as with some sleight-of-hand folding and unrolling, the task was accomplished. “Most impressive. Here are your keys. I’ll leave you to settle back in.”

“Al?” Her tone changed. “We’re still friends?”

*I wouldn’t have done all this for an enemy*, he thought. Aloud, he said: “I hope so.” He wasn’t sure whether he should follow this up by giving her a hug or a kiss on the cheek, so did neither.

“By the way,” he said, “since I was mostly inside a duvet cover, how did you know it was me?”

“Unless Bunburry’s changed a lot since I left, you’re the only guy round here who drives a blue Jaguar convertible. It’s sitting outside.” She hesitated. “You have to run off? I’m sure you could use a coffee after all your hard work. I picked up a jar on my way here.”

Was it a test, to see if he would be petty or bitter enough to refuse? They could scarcely avoid one another in a village as small as Bunburry, so the sooner they could learn to be friends again, the better.

She led the way to the living room, which included a small kitchen area. There was a standing desk in one corner, beside stacked wooden bookshelves. And there was no television. Alfie reckoned that was Betty’s choice rather than it having been stolen by the intruder, since he could see nowhere obvious for it to have been.

He had carefully replaced the brightly coloured rugs on the living room floor, but it was only now that he became fully aware that there was no seating other than a cushioned ledge under the window, and what looked like a large beach ball.

Betty, approaching with black coffee in two mugs which he had recently washed, said: "You want the balance ball?"

"I think I'm safer over here," said Alfie, taking one of the mugs and perching on the ledge by the window.

Betty sat down on the ball and began shifting her weight from side to side, without spilling her coffee.

"I needed this," she said, circling her shoulders backwards and forwards. "I've been travelling for days."

"We now have a yoga teacher, Haridasa, who comes highly recommended by Liz and Marge," said Alfie.

"They're doing yoga? Good for them."

There was a silence. In order to fill it, Alfie said: "How was the Amazon?"

"Big," said Betty.

Alfie could only speculate as to what environmental mission she had been on. Possibly dangerous. There was no point in trying to question her further.

"And you were in the States as well?"

"I went to New York to see my mom."

Alfie had heard this from Philip, the vicar, but he was still surprised. Elisabeth Thorndike seemed to have little interest in, and little affection for, her daughter.

"Yeah, I know," said Betty, as though he had spoken his thoughts aloud. "We're never going to be buddies, but she's my mom and I feel better now I've checked up on her. She's still big on the charity circuit and her latest husband seems an okay guy, so it's all good."

"And your dad?"

"He wasn't on my itinerary."

Alfie remembered that when Betty finally tracked her father down, he hadn't wanted to know her. Was that what was going to happen to Alfie too?

"I've hired a private detective to try to find my father," he said.

Her eyes widened. "Big step. How do you feel about it?"

"I'm not sure," he confessed. "It took me long enough to give her the go-ahead to look for him. Partly apprehensive, partly hopeful, I suppose."

Again, she seemed to read his thoughts. "Listen, Al, there's no reason to think your experience is going to be the same as mine."

"Except that he walked out on my mother before I was born," said Alfie wryly. "That's hardly a good sign."

"But you don't know why he walked out. If you don't know, your imagination goes into overdrive. When I was a little girl, I built up a whole fantasy about my dad searching for me. You might be as wrong about your dad as I was about mine. At least when you find him, you'll get the real story."

Twenty minutes later, back in Windermere Cottage and still kicking himself for getting trapped in the duvet cover, he relayed the conversation to Oscar. One of his friend's eccentricities was that he would only talk on a landline, and Alfie had taken to calling him on his own landline, which sat on the bedside table.