

“No, he invited her in for a coffee.” Alfie thought fondly of his visits to the vicarage, with its lumpy settee and terrible instant coffee, delicious home baking from the parishioners, and Philip’s calmness and understanding.

“Philip told her adult baptism was perfectly acceptable in the Church of England, but that becoming a Christian involved slightly more than that. She seemed open to believing in God if that was part of the deal, but Philip still wanted to know why she was contemplating this step.”

Oscar attempted to look pious. “An angelic visitation, perhaps?”

“No, an email.”

“Goodness,” said Oscar. “Is that how the churches are recruiting these days? How very modern.”

“She’d had an email claiming to come from the trustees of a multi-million pound fund in a Swiss bank - ”

Oscar groaned. “Don’t tell me. The money would be hers as soon as she passed on the details of her bank account. No doubt closely followed by her PIN number.”

“Exactly. It might have been disastrous, but fortunately the so-called trustees said Dorothy had been chosen because she was a good Christian woman. She was terrified that if they found out she wasn’t, she wouldn’t get the money. So she approached Philip, who was able to set her straight.”

“And baptise her?”

“No, she lost interest once she discovered the email was a scam. In fact, I think she holds Philip partly responsible for depriving her of a fortune.”

“Poor Dorothy,” said Oscar. “What do you suppose she would have done with her millions?”

“Built a bigger post office, I imagine,” said Alfie.

Oscar took another delicate sip of wine. “I would buy several cases of this nectar,” he said. “And what news of Bunburry’s lady policeman? I was sorry not to meet her.”

Emma had been on holiday during Oscar’s brief visit to the Cotswolds. Alfie had come back to London with Oscar, so had never said goodbye to her. He wondered whether she had noticed he had left. But of course she had: there was little that Emma didn’t notice.

“Constable Hollis continues to be overworked, according to her great-aunt,” he told Oscar. “You know Liz, you know she’s the gentlest person you could ever hope to meet. But she utterly detests Sergeant Wilson – she’s convinced he gets Emma to do all the hard work and then takes the credit.”

“Yes,” murmured Oscar, “I met the good sergeant. I wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of him. He doesn’t like you, Alfie. You need to be careful.”

“I’m well aware that he doesn’t like me,” said Alfie drily. “But thankfully I don’t need to be careful, since Sergeant Wilson is in Bunburry, and I’m here.”

Oscar took a final mouthful and laid his cutlery on the plate.

“It’s been wonderful having you back in London,” he said. “If you hadn’t been with me this evening, I might well have drunk myself to death. Segways in Shakespeare –

there should be a law against it. But much as I adore your company, it's time you went back to Bunburry."

"What?" said Alfie, stunned.

Further conversation was curtailed by the haughty young waitress arriving to remove their plates.

"Would you like to see the dessert menu?" she asked.

Oscar smiled up at her. "Let us relax for a few minutes, if you would, and then we'll both have the frangipane tart."

"Of course, sir," she said with an answering smile.

"Did you just order for me?" Alfie asked when she left.

"I had to, dear boy," Oscar said airily. "If you can't work out where you should be living, you certainly can't work out what you want for dessert."

"Oscar, I don't find this funny," said Alfie.

"I've never been more serious. Bunburry isn't Mars, it's only a couple of hours in that sporty Jaguar of yours. You could still come up to London whenever you liked."

Alfie picked up the wine bottle and refilled his glass. "Why on earth would you suggest I go back to Bunburry?"

"It's obvious," said Oscar. "You sat through that atrocious performance of Antony and Cleopatra, which filled in a couple of hours. I'm sure you're enjoying this fine meal and fine wine. Another few hours gone. All you're doing is passing the time. But when you talk about Bunburry, your face lights up, you're animated. These are people you care about, a real community, where you should be. And what about all the projects you had there? You're not doing anything like that here."

Alfie drank some wine before replying. "You know why I left Bunburry."

"I know why you left London," said Oscar. "You were grieving over Vivian. It would have been pure hell to be here without her, being reminded every moment that she had gone. Of course, you had to get away. But leaving Bunburry was completely different. I'm sorry things didn't work out with the Green goddess, but if you ask me -"

"I'm not asking you anything," Alfie spat out.

But Oscar continued: "- it's time you stopped hanging about in London, moping. She may not even be in Bunburry."

The waitress arrived with the two desserts. Alfie waved his away.

"I'm sorry. I've lost my appetite."

"Can I get you a coffee?" she asked.

Alfie stood up. "Thank you, no. I really should be going."

"You really should," said Oscar patiently. "Back to Bunburry."

With the briefest of muttered farewells, Alfie left the restaurant and decided to walk home. After a while, he found himself passing St Martin's Theatre with its glowing neon sign proclaiming, "Agatha Christie's The Mousetrap." He had gone there with Vivian, that day they decided to play at being tourists. But he was shocked to find the pang of loss he always felt when he thought of Vivian wasn't his only reaction.

He also felt sudden guilt. He had been pressganged into becoming director of Bunburry's amateur dramatics group, dubbed "Agatha's Amateurs" by the villagers, since

the only play they ever put on was “The Mousetrap” at Christmas. That tradition continued, but he had managed to persuade them to put on a summer production as well. In his absence, nothing would be happening. And the community library – it needed a lot of hard work if it was going to succeed.

The pedestrian light switched from red to green. Alfie stepped off the pavement and was almost run down by a delivery bike whose rider swore loudly at him. Shaken, Alfie made his way towards The Strand. Even after three months, he hadn’t fully adjusted back to London life. The capital seemed too crowded, too frenetic. He missed Liz and Marge, he missed Windermere Cottage, he missed Sunday lunch at the Drunken Horse, he missed Dorothy quizzing him about his post, he even missed the cows which had terrified him so much when he first arrived.

He owed Oscar an apology. Oscar had been trying to help, and Alfie had just been too pig-headed to listen to the truth. Perhaps Oscar was still in the restaurant – Alfie could go back and join him for a nightcap.

He got out his phone, which he had put on silent in the theatre. He had six missed calls. All from Marge.

He was preparing to ring back when Marge called again. He dodged into a shop doorway to minimise the traffic noise.

“Marge? Marge? Sorry, I can’t hear you. Could you speak up?”

To his horror, he realised she was crying.

“Oh, Alfie,” she sobbed. “It’s awful! Something terrible has happened. Alfie, please, we need you to come and help us.”

2. BACK TO BUNBURY

The distinctive Cotswold Blue Jaguar headed down the Mall towards Buckingham Palace, bearing right at the Queen Victoria Memorial to reach Hyde Park Corner.

Alfie had tried to get Marge to tell him what terrible thing had happened, but she was too distressed. He reassured her that he would come first thing in the morning. Having barely slept, he set out before 7am after a rushed cup of coffee and a slice of toast.

Even at this early hour, there was traffic, and it took Alfie a while to traverse London and get on to the motorway.

As the Jaguar swallowed up the miles, he thought back to the last time he had seen the elderly ladies.

The doorman had called the flat. “Mr McAlister? There’s a lady here at the desk for you, a Ms Hopkins, calling on behalf of Liz and Marge.”

He had felt almost the same alarm as yesterday. Liz, in London? Which he knew the ladies considered a filthy, dangerous place, to be avoided at all costs. Why was she here?

“Thanks, Darren – please send her up.”

Alfie was waiting at the lift door when Liz emerged, flustered.

“Goodness, Alfie, this is all quite something, the sliding glass doors and the carpets and the doorman. He said it was all right for me to come up, I hope you don’t mind -”

“Of course I don’t mind,” said Alfie, kissing her on the cheek. “But is everything all right? How’s Marge? Where is she?”

Liz fluttered a hand in the direction of the street. “Outside in the car. She’ll drive off if any blue meanies appear, and then come back for me.”

“We can’t have her worrying about parking tickets,” said Alfie. “She can have a visitor’s space in the underground car park. I’ll sort that out. Come and have a seat.”

He ushered her into the drawing room overlooking the Thames.

When he returned with Marge in tow, Liz didn’t appear to have moved from the spot where he had left her.

“Goodness,” she said faintly, sitting bolt upright on the settee as though trying not to disturb anything. “You can see Tower Bridge from here.”

“I know,” said Alfie, smiling. “It’s particularly lovely at night, when everything’s lit up. And if you come round here and look in that direction, the pointy skyscraper is the Shard.”

“Goodness,” she said again, more faintly, not moving an inch.

But Marge had already rushed over to the floor-to-ceiling windows and was exclaiming about the view.

“And a balcony! Alfie, this is marvellous. Look at that cruise boat with all the people on it! Do you sit out here with your coffee and croissant, and wave to them?”

“Sometimes,” said Alfie, amused by her enthusiasm. “Speaking of which, what can I get you? Tea? Coffee? Gin?”

“Ooh, gin, please,” said Marge. “Easy on the tonic.”

“Margaret!” said Liz sharply. “You can’t drink – you’re driving. Alfie, we’ll have a nice cup of tea.”

“Driving?” said Alfie. “But you’ve only just got here.”

“We can’t stay long,” said Liz firmly. “We want to get home before it’s dark.”

“And we want you to come with us,” declared Marge.

“Pardon?” said Alfie.

“You’ve been away for a week,” said Marge. “It’s time you came back. We’ve come to get you.”

Liz gave a long-suffering sigh. “We agreed, dear, that I would do the talking, didn’t we? And you’ve rushed in like a bull in a china shop. I’m sorry we’ve just sprung it on you like this, Alfie, but Marge is right. We’ve been worried about you, just running off like that.”

“I had things to sort out here. Urgently,” said Alfie. He was lying, and he knew they knew he was lying.

The two-storey flat had three bedrooms. There was no sign that the ladies had brought overnight bags, but the concierge service could get them whatever they needed. He could invite them to stay, show them round London. But no. They would wear him down and he wasn’t prepared to reverse his decision.

“Let me get you that tea,” he said.

An hour later, he was waving them off, mortified by the look of disappointment on their faces.

“I just need a little more time. To sort things out. I’ll be back soon,” he assured them. He hadn’t meant it then, and again he knew they knew that. Now they never asked him about his plans in their weekly phone calls, never talked about Agatha’s Amateurs, the community library, volunteering at the hospice. They never mentioned Betty, and he never asked. He had no idea whether she was back in Bunburry.

But now it didn’t matter whether she was or not. Last time, Liz and Marge had asked him to come back for his sake. This time, they were asking him to come back for theirs, and there was no question of him refusing.

He took the next motorway exit, and was soon on the narrow roads that had unnerved him so much when he resumed driving. Now, he felt elated to be among the gently rolling hills, to see the warm golden stone of the tiny villages, catching sight of the occasional patient fly-fisher in a limestone stream. He wished the roof of the Jaguar was open, so that he could breathe the clear air, but there was no time for that. He wanted to get to Liz and Marge as quickly as possible.

He reached the familiar turn-off for Bunburry, and minutes later was in the village itself, reducing his speed to a sedate twenty miles an hour. He passed the Drunken Horse, with its lop-sided agglomeration of buildings; he passed the post office, closed