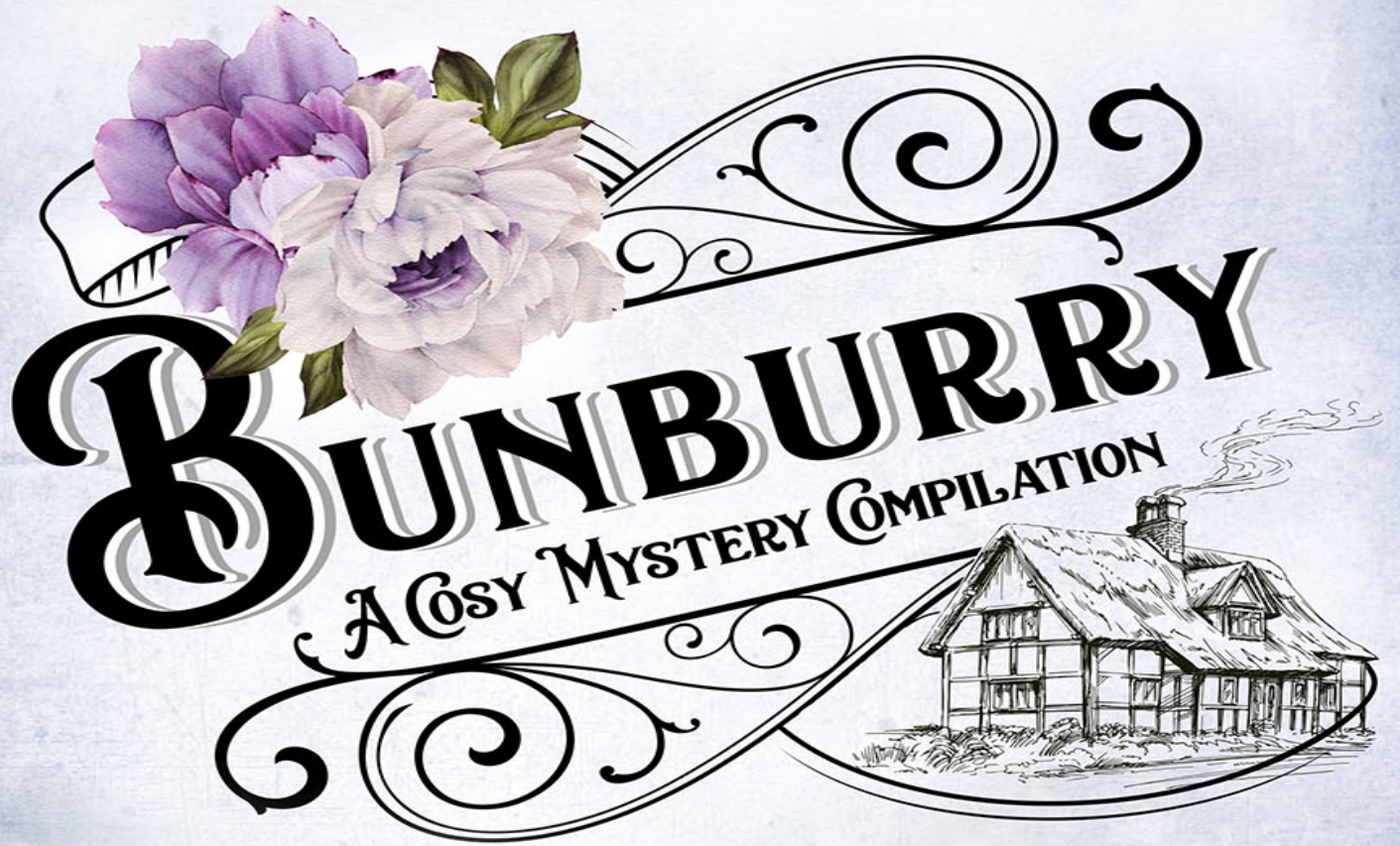


HELENA MARCHMONT



BUNBURY
A COSY MYSTERY COMPILATION

The graphic features a large, stylized illustration of a Tudor-style house with a thatched roof and a chimney, set within a decorative frame of black scrollwork. To the left of the house, there are two large, detailed flowers: a purple one and a white one with purple centers. The entire graphic is set against a light, textured background.

EPISODE 4-6



COMPILATION

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BUNBURY – A COSY MYSTERY SERIES

Miss Marple meets Oscar Wilde in this new series of cosy mysteries set in the picturesque Cotswolds village of Bunbury. In “Murderous Ride,” the second Bunbury book, Alfie discovers that he has not only inherited a cottage from his late Aunt Augusta but also a 1950s Jaguar. He is dismayed: for reasons of his own, he no longer drives. Aunt Augusta’s best friends, Liz and Marge, persuade him to get behind the wheel again - but that’s just the start of his troubles.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Death of a Ladies' Man

The summer tourist season is in full swing in the picturesque Cotswold village of Bunburry. Among the visitors is Mario Bellini, a gelateria owner with film-star good looks, who is considering opening an ice-cream parlour in Bunburry. But shortly after his arrival, he is found dead – a tragic accident, or something more sinister?

Amateur sleuth Alfie McAlister hopes to uncover the truth with the help of his friends Liz and Marge. But is Liz too distracted by the prospect of financial gain to focus on the task in hand?

Drop Dead, Gorgeous

Deb's Beauty Salon becomes the last resting place for merry widow and property magnate Eve Mosby, whose passions include haute couture and a young lover. Plenty of people disliked Mrs Mosby, but enough to kill her? And what really baffles amateur sleuth Alfie McAlister and his friends Liz and Marge is that the body is found in a locked room – how did the murderer get in and out?

Murder in High Places

Alfie has tried for months to convince his best friend Oscar to visit him in Bunburry. But when a glamorous high society party in honour of celebrated actor Dorian Stevens is announced, Oscar just can't resist. He is - after all - Dorian's greatest fan and can't wait to meet his hero. But the evening at the lovely Saville mansion takes a murderous turn ...

THE AUTHOR

Helena Marchmont is a pseudonym of Olga Wojtas, who was born and brought up in Edinburgh. She was encouraged to write by an inspirational English teacher, Iona M. Cameron. Olga won a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award in 2015, has had more than 30 short stories published in magazines and anthologies and recently published her first mystery *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Golden Samovar*.

HELENA MARCHMONT



EPISODE 4 - 6

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Follow the author on Twitter: [@OlgaWojtas](https://twitter.com/OlgaWojtas)

CAST

Alfie McAlister flees the hustle and bustle of London for the peace and quiet of the Cotswolds. Unfortunately, the “heart of England” turns out to be deadlier than expected ...

Margaret “**Marge**” **Redwood** and Clarissa “**Liz**” **Hopkins** have lived in Bunburry their entire lives, where they are famous for their exceptional fudge-making skills. Between Afternoon Tea and Gin o’clock they relish a bit of sleuthing...

Emma Hollis loves her job as policewoman, the only thing she is tired of are her aunt Liz’s constant attempts at matchmaking.

Betty Thorndike is a fighter. Mostly for animal rights. She’s the sole member of Bunburry’s Green Party.

Oscar de Linnet lives in London and is Alfie’s best friend. He tries luring Alfie back to the City because: “anybody can be good in the country. There are no temptations there.”

Augusta Lytton is Alfie’s aunt. She’s dead. But still full of surprises...

Harold Wilson loves a pint (or two) more than his job as local police sergeant.

BUNBURRY is a picturesque Cotswolds village, where sinister secrets lurk beneath the perfect façade...

HELENA MARCHMONT



Death of a Ladies' Man

A good friend will always stab you in the front.
Oscar Wilde

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.”

Alfie leaped to his feet. “The fudge – I haven’t even taken it out of the bag.”

“Men,” said Marge to Liz. “No good at multi-tasking.”

“Not even Mario?” asked Alfie under his breath as he headed for the kitchen.

The ladies had brought their usual welcome gift of Liz’s fudge. Alfie had first encountered it as a small boy when staying with his grandparents – his mother called it the best fudge in the Cotswolds, and he had no argument with that.

He was reaching for a plate when the Hallelujah Chorus broke out. Aunt Augusta’s doorbell chimes were as idiosyncratic as the rest of the cottage.

“Do you want me to answer it?” called Marge.

“Please,” Alfie called back. “But if they’re selling fudge, tell them we’ve got some already.”

Liz and Marge had given him industrial quantities of the confection this time, but he found it so irresistible he would demolish it within days.

He was vaguely aware of conversation as he arranged a mound of squares on the plate and came back into the

hallway.

Marge was holding the door wide open, ushering in a man and a woman.

"A lovely surprise for you, Alfie," she said. "Friends of yours from London, Sasha and Sebastian."

"Alfie, darling!"

The familiar shrill squeal set his less-than-lovely teeth on edge. He braced himself as Sasha rushed towards him in a flurry of outré clothes and a jangle of jewellery. Her dress or wrap or kaftan or whatever it was called was undoubtedly designer, but Alfie always felt that her fashion statements would be better left unsaid.

She air-kissed him effusively. "I tried to ring you, darling, to tell you we were on our way, but it went straight to voicemail. I hope you weren't trying to avoid us!"

Alfie forced a smile. "Of course not. Good to see you both." He shook hands with Sebastian, who was wearing a gold-buttoned blazer, the silk handkerchief in the breast pocket matching his Paisley pattern cravat. He was also wearing his customary vague grin - he always seemed slightly disengaged from whatever was going on, letting Sasha do most of the talking.

Marge's eyes were owlish behind her large spectacles. "Put the kettle on for some more tea, Alfie," she instructed. "Liz and I will entertain your guests."

She shepherded them into the parlour and Alfie returned to the kitchen to boil the kettle and seethe inwardly.

"Alfie?" The voice at the kitchen door was diffident. "I've brought you the tea pot and the milk jug."

Liz was bigger than her friend, scarcely difficult since Marge was so birdlike, but Liz was very much quieter. He wasn't sure how old they were, and would never be rude enough to ask. Although he knew Liz was the elder, she didn't look it, her hair dyed a youthful sandy colour compared to Marge's white curls.

“Thanks.” Alfie emptied the tea pot and started again.

Liz fetched another two of Aunt Augusta’s Sixties cups. Speaking softly to avoid being overheard, she said: “Are these the people who phoned, the ones you’ve been trying to avoid?”

Alfie nodded.

“You have to forgive Marge,” she whispered.

“Sometimes she just doesn’t think.”

Alfie wondered what Liz would have done if she had answered the door. Told the duo that they were at the wrong address, perhaps, or that Alfie had left the country.

He smiled down at her. “It’s okay. They’re not that bad.” They were, but he could surely be civil for as long as it took to drink a cup of tea.

He put out more fudge and followed Liz back to the parlour with the tea tray.

Sasha and Sebastian were reclining on the vast black leather sofa. Sasha gave one of her little squeals when she saw him.

“We absolutely *love* what you’ve done with the place, don’t we, Sebastian?”

Sebastian grinned in agreement.

“This room is so amazing, so perfectly retro, such a lived-in feel. You’re so tremendously *artistique* that of course I thought you had done it all yourself, but Marge tells us you hired a designer.”

Alfie shot Marge a suspicious look.

“I said it had been designed by Augusta Lytton,” Marge explained innocently. His late aunt.

“She’s marvellous,” said Sasha. “What a feel for colour. You must give me her contact details – I could put a lot of business her way.”

Alfie thought he heard Marge murmur: “Good luck with that.”

“There’s still lots to be done,” he said defensively as he poured out the tea. “I don’t have a usable spare room yet.”

“You simply must tell us when everything’s finished and we’ll visit you properly – unless we’re not invited!” Sasha’s trilling laugh didn’t allow for that possibility. “Where we’re staying is all right, but it’s not exactly The Hilton.”

Staying? This was unwelcome news. Alfie had assumed they had simply called in en route to somewhere else. He handed round the tea and then passed round the fudge.

“And where are you staying?” asked Liz.

“It’s too funny,” Sasha collapsed giggling against Sebastian to demonstrate just how funny it was. “It’s a pub slash B&B called The Drunken Horse Inn.”

Alfie hoped he never committed the sin of mansplaining, telling women something they already knew perfectly well, but apparently Sasha had no qualms about Londonsplaining, informing the country bumpkins about their own village.

“I think I might know it,” he murmured and was rewarded by a suppressed cackle from Marge.

“So quaint and peculiar,” Sasha elaborated. “Low ceilings, creaking corridors, it probably has its own ghost. I had no idea these sorts of places still existed.”

Alfie had stayed in The Horse when he first arrived in Bunburry, soaked to the skin. He had fond memories of the four-poster bed, the palatial bathroom, and the superb full English breakfast. He was about to mention this when Sasha went on: “Naturally we wanted a drink when we arrived, but there was a funny old barmaid who didn’t even know how to make an Aperol spritz properly. She said nobody ever asked for it, and she couldn’t remember how much soda to put in. We thought we were actually going to have to go around to the other side of the bar and make it ourselves when a foreign girl came and sorted it out.”

Alfie noted the look that passed between Liz and Marge. “The ‘foreign girl’ is Carlotta, who’s married to William, the licensee,” he informed Sasha. “The ‘funny old barmaid’ is his mother, Edith.”

Sasha was oblivious to the implied rebuke. "How clever of him, employing his own family. He won't have to pay them." She gave her trilling laugh and then put on an earnest expression. "It's all very well for a few days, but honestly, Alfie, I don't know why you want to bury yourself down here."

Then she gave a small shrill scream and her hand flew to her mouth to stifle it. "Oh Alfie," she wailed. "I can't believe I said that. Reminding you of - I'm so, so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

"It's fine," said Alfie wearily, putting the depleted plate of fudge back on the tea tray.

But she sprang up from the sofa, flung her arms round him, and leaned her face against his chest.

"Your poor darling Vivian," came her muffled voice. "We were devastated to hear the news, simply devastated." Her grip on him tightened. "I could cut my tongue out."

He considered saying *Please, don't let me stop you*. Instead, he cautiously patted her shoulder and disentangled himself. "It's forgotten."

She straightened up. "But Vivian never will be," she said, a catch in her voice. "In our hearts forever."

Get out of my cottage, get out of my life, Alfie wanted to snarl. "Thank you," he muttered.

Sebastian was his usual grinning self, not even sensitive enough to adopt a mournful expression. Liz and Marge were politely studying the carpet, apparently oblivious to what was going on, but they couldn't fail to wonder who Vivian was.

Sasha resumed her seat, but apparently still felt she had to make amends. She gazed round the room. "So beautiful. Just perfect. I'm sure Vivian's looking down on you and smiling." She gazed round the room some more. "I shudder to think how much that wallpaper must have cost."

"I shudder to think of the wallpaper as well," said Alfie.

“Oh, darling, we know money’s no object for you, with all your squillions. I should feel dreadfully jealous of you, but I have to admit Sebastian and I are doing really rather well – in fact, I bought myself a little celebration treat the other day.”

She displayed a gaudy brooch, which had been half-hidden by the folds of her flowing robe. “It was five thousand pounds. A little bit naughty of me to spend that much all on myself, but I couldn’t resist.”

Marge peered at it in fascination.

“Here,” said Sasha expansively, unpinning it and taking it over to her. “Have a proper look.”

“Ooh, a parrot.”

“A cockatoo,” Sasha corrected. “Look, its body and the branch it’s sitting on are eighteen karat gold. Its feathers are diamonds and rubies, and that’s a Ceylon sapphire for the eye.”

She displayed it to Liz, who murmured in awe, and then to Alfie, who thought it looked like something you might win at the funfair.

“Sebastian absolutely insisted I get it, because he knew how much it meant to me. The cockatoo is my spirit animal.”

“Your spirit animal?” said Marge.

“It’s the wisdom of the Native Americans. We all have a spirit animal who guides us through life. The cockatoo represents the power of the spirit – it indicates the presence of strong energy, representing enthusiasm, alertness and happiness – all the things that are really very me.”

She took back the brooch and refastened it as she snuggled up to Sebastian on the sofa. “I’m such a lucky girl. We’re blessed that our business is doing so well.”

“We’re in business too, and it’s also doing very well,” Marge piped up.

Alfie noticed Sebastian press his leg against Sasha’s.

“Really?” said Sasha. “What business are you in?”

“Fudge-making,” said Marge, gesturing towards the uneaten piece of fudge in Sasha’s saucer. “Why don’t you have a taste.”

Sasha obediently bit into it. “Goodness,” she cried. “This is absolutely delicious!” She popped the other half into Sebastian’s mouth. “There, darling, isn’t that the most wonderful thing you’ve ever tasted?”

He chewed, nodded and grinned.

“So how long have you been making fudge?” she asked Marge.

“Oh, Liz is the fudge-maker,” said Marge, gesturing towards her friend as though this was of minor importance. “But she just did it as a hobby until I moved in with her and became her business and distribution manager.”

“That’s not quite –” began Liz mildly, but Marge kept speaking.

“Liz can’t add up to save her life, and she’s got no commercial sense. I’ve sorted it all out for her.”

Sebastian’s leg pressed against Sasha’s once again.

“How wonderful,” breathed Sasha. “And you know, with our expertise, I’m sure we could help you monetise your business even further. A tiny investment on your part and I guarantee your profits will soar.”

Alfie stood up. “Apologies for being so rude, but I have some things to sort out.” He wasn’t going to let Liz and Marge fall into the Londoners’ clutches. They had no concept of the high financial stakes Sasha and Sebastian played for, and their small business was doing perfectly well without the complex business development plans Sasha and Sebastian would come up with. He would have to offer himself as a distraction. “Let’s meet up for dinner at The Horse this evening, so that we can discuss the business opportunity you told me about.”

Liz and Marge struggled out of the vast armchairs.

Sasha stood up as well. "Will you be joining us for dinner, ladies?" she enquired with an encouraging smile.

"Definitely not," said Alfie. "Liz and Marge would be bored to tears. I wouldn't dream of inflicting our business conversation on them. Is seven thirty okay?"

Sasha's smile didn't waver. "We're probably staying for a day or two, so don't worry, ladies, we'll make sure we have a proper chat about how we can help your fudge-making business. Here, let me give you our card," she said. "Come on, Sebastian, let's leave Alfie in peace."

Alfie showed them out, then turned to Liz and Marge, who were reaching for their coats.

"Please don't leave if you don't have to," he said. "I just said that to get rid of them. I can only stand them in very small doses."

Marge looked at her watch. "Goodness," she said. "Gin o'clock."

Alfie laughed. "Resume your seats and your drinks will be with you shortly."

When he returned, Liz and Marge were well into their dissection of the new arrivals.

"They must be loaded," said Marge. "Did you see their clothes? I'm sure her outfit was The Vampire's Wife - it was just like what's-her-name's at Harry and Meghan's wedding. And those shoes. Christian Louboutins."

"I don't think so, dear," said Liz. "Louboutins have red soles."

"Jimmy Choos, then."

"They look very expensive, whatever they are. She must be very good at monetising," said Liz. "Perhaps I'll be able to buy a pair if I monetise the fudge."

Alfie quickly changed the subject. "I wonder what my spirit animal is," he said.

"Judging from the speed with which you're renovating the cottage, I should think it's a sloth," said Marge.

"And what about me, dear?" asked Liz.

“An elephant,” said Marge without hesitation.

“An elephant, dear?” There was a slight edge to Liz’s voice.

“They like sticky buns, so I’m sure they like fudge, and they never forget.”

Alfie was relieved that Marge hadn’t mentioned the elephant’s most obvious characteristic – its size.

“So, what’s my spirit animal?” she asked.

“A West Highland terrier,” said Liz. “They’re small, they’ve got white curly hair, and they never stop yapping.”

It seemed that Liz had inferred the size remark.

“Let me refresh your glasses,” said Alfie to prevent the conversation going further. The generous measures he poured out practically emptied the bottle.

His own spirit animal, he decided, was the chameleon. Since Vivian’s death, he had spent a lot of time concealing his true feelings. And he definitely wasn’t looking forward to dinner.

2. OSCAR

Armed with a mug of coffee, Alfie headed to the bedroom to ring Oscar. Oscar refused to talk except on a landline, and Alfie had now taken to ringing him only on Aunt Augusta's. He recognised that this was completely illogical, but it felt right. Perhaps he was getting as eccentric as his friend.

Oscar answered in his usual fake persona of "Lane the butler," a ruse to get rid of cold callers.

"Good afternoon, Lane," said Alfie. "Please tell the young master that for the moment I am withdrawing his open invitation to come and stay in Bunburry."

"Ah," said Oscar in his normal voice. "Reverse psychology. You really paid attention in that course of yours, didn't you? Tell me I can't come, and then I'll want to. Well, I'm terribly sorry, my dear fellow, but nothing will induce me to visit a lot of fields. Instead, my mission is to bring you back to civilisation."

Alfie took a swig of coffee and changed from sitting to lying full length on the bed.

"How can you think I would be so devious?" he said. "A psychologist would say it's a reflection of your own behaviour. No, I'm being completely altruistic in keeping you away from Bunburry while Sasha and Sebastian are here."

"No!"

Oscar's reaction was so loud that Alfie pulled the receiver away from his ear. When he put it back, Oscar was saying: "- me that you didn't invite them."

"Of course I didn't invite them," said Alfie. "I've been desperately trying to avoid them. But they've got an

investment opportunity that they can't bear to let me miss out on. An opportunity so incredible that they've come all the way from London to sign me up."

"I have yet to meet a more dreadful couple," said Oscar. "Money, deals, it's a complete obsession with them to the exclusion of all else. I'm sure they've never gone to a play or a concert or an art gallery in their lives. Haven't they got enough money by now? Why do they need more and more?"

Sasha and Sebastian had attempted to ingratiate themselves with Oscar's artsy in-crowd but had been firmly sent packing. But Alfie's avoidance techniques had apparently been too subtle to put them off. He sat up and had some more coffee.

Oscar was off on another tack now. "And tell me what extraordinary thing Sasha was wearing."

Alfie, who was still reading a new biography of Oscar Wilde that Oscar had given him as a farewell present, said: "According to the original Oscar, you can never be overdressed or overeducated."

Oscar snorted. "He clearly never met Sasha. She seems to wear Asprey's entire jewellery collection all at the same time, and her clothes would make the most dedicated fashionista wince."

"Whatever she was wearing, there was a lot of it," Alfie conceded. He eased himself back to a sitting position so that he could have some more coffee. "And she was wearing a five-thousand-pound brooch of a cockatoo, which is her spirit animal."

"Oh, please," said Oscar in disgust. "If you ask me, her true spirit animal is the Barbary ape, expert at relieving the unwary of their wallets."

"That's not fair," Alfie protested. "Business development is risky. Sometimes things work out and sometimes they don't. I don't think it's the money that drives the pair of them, it's the excitement of the risk. And it often pays off very handsomely."

“There you go, making excuses for them. You only have yourself to blame for them pursuing you. You’re too polite. They’ve never bothered me again since I made my feelings plain.”

“Politeness costs nothing,” Alfie murmured.

Oscar gave no indication of having heard this. Instead, he said: “If Sasha and Sebastian are in Bunburry, it’s definitely time for you to come back to London. Let me tell you about life in the metropolis.”

Alfie fortified himself with more coffee.

“I introduced Kathrin and Rebecca to Bellini’s Ice Cream Parlour.”

Just as he had introduced Alfie and Vivian to it. Bellini’s was to ice cream what Liz was to fudge – Alfie found himself yearning for the Chi-Chi Chia Cheesecake.

“It’s just opened a new branch in Kensington High Street, and you won’t believe the latest USP – it’s got a liquor licence.”

“Seems reasonable,” said Alfie. “Nothing like a glass of chilled Chablis with your sundae.”

“No, you dolt, they’re making milkshake cocktails, including a Bellini with fresh peach ice cream. I’ve never tasted anything so exquisite in my life. You must try one.”

Alfie and Vivian had gone to Bellini’s, what, three, four times? It had outlets all across London, but Oscar’s favourite was the original parlour in Islington. Established by Italian immigrants in the Sixties, it had been transformed by their son into a gastronomic paradise with a multitude of exotic flavours from Angelic Acai to Goji Berry Bonanza. Vivian had loved the place. She played along with Signor Bellini – he flirted outrageously with every female between nineteen and ninety, insisting that his use of organic ingredients and superfoods meant that the ice cream was completely calorie free.

Alfie realised that Oscar had stopped speaking. “Oscar?”

“I was just thinking,” said his friend quietly. “Vivian would have adored it.”

As Alfie got ready to go out for dinner, he compared Sasha’s over-the-top faux sympathy with Oscar’s genuine understanding.

Alfie had met Oscar when they both joined an amateur dramatics society, which was putting on Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Oscar de Linnet was an Old Etonian whose cut-glass accent was perfect for a Wildean character. The director was ecstatic to find that Alfie could mimic it perfectly, claiming that they both sounded utterly authentic for the 19th century. And Oscar turned out to have an encyclopaedic knowledge of his namesake, to the extent that he often appeared to be channelling him.

“How old are you, Alfie?” he asked one day. “Forty? The same as me. To get back my youth, I would do anything in the world, except take exercise, get up early, or be respectable.”

One evening, the director clutched Alfie’s arm, exclaiming: “Have you seen Oscar?”

“No, but I’m sure he’ll be here soon,” said Alfie.

“He *is* here,” said the director impatiently. “I mean have you *seen* him? He’s wearing a double-breasted jacket with a green carnation in the buttonhole – it’s just too perfect!”

And that was how Alfie, who could barely tell one end of a flower from the other, discovered that Oscar Wilde was famous for wearing a dyed green carnation, arguing that “to be natural is to be obvious, and to be obvious is to be inartistic.”

When the cast went for a post-rehearsal drink, Oscar insisted on one particular wine bar. “They cater to my tastes,” he said. Alfie wondered what these might be. The

place was quite dimly lit, but otherwise seemed unexceptional. Oscar came to the table with a tray holding a jug of iced water and a drink as green as his carnation.

“What on earth is that?” asked the director.

Oscar raised the glass. “Absinthe.”

“I thought absinthe was a hallucinogenic,” she said.

“Oh, I do hope so,” said Oscar. Before their fascinated gaze, he brought out a small bag of sugar lumps and a tiny silver trowel-like implement.

“An absinthe spoon,” he explained, putting the slotted trowel across the top of the glass, placing a sugar lump on it, and slowly sluicing it with iced water. The green liquid became a cloudy white.

He pushed the stemmed glass towards the director. “Try it – it’s delicious.”

She sniffed at it suspiciously. “Urgh, liquorice, horrible. I don’t know how you can drink it,” she said, pushing it back.

“It’s easy. I open my mouth and pour it in.”

As the conversation round them got noisier, Alfie murmured: “I presume if it’s sold over the counter, it’s not that hallucinogenic?”

“I remain optimistic,” said Oscar, “but it fails to live up to its hype. As do you.”

Alfie blinked and set down his pint. “Sorry?”

“For a multi-millionaire, you’re remarkably low-key. I thought you would have a chauffeur-driven car, drink nothing but Dom Perignon, and light Havana cigars with hundred-pound notes.”

“You know who I am?” said Alfie, conscious as soon as he said it that it was a somewhat unnecessary question.

Oscar quirked an eyebrow. “I know a lot about the 19th century, but I know quite a lot about the 21st as well.”

If it was meant as a rebuke, Alfie felt he deserved it. Oscar’s fey persona was so strong that Alfie had dismissed him as someone with only the vaguest grasp of the

contemporary world. But none of the other cast members had made the connection between their fellow actor and the so-called maverick entrepreneur.

“Don’t they say nine out of ten start-ups fail?” Oscar went on.

“I’ve been lucky,” said Alfie.

“I imagine you’ve made your own luck,” said Oscar. “So now you’ve sold the business, what occupies you apart from amateur dramatics? Are you planning a new start-up?”

Alfie shook his head. “So far, I’m just enjoying my freedom. I’ve been travelling, and I’m taking a psychology course.”

“The human mind is a wonderful thing,” said Oscar, retrieving some undissolved sugar from the bottom of the glass with his silver spoon. “Especially when fuelled with absinthe. May I get you one?”

Alfie was about to refuse when he reflected that he had eaten and drunk all manner of strange things on his travels. Why play it safe in a London wine bar? Half a dozen of the cast proved equally adventurous, and soon Oscar’s sugar lumps and absinthe spoon were being passed round.

Alfie took a tentative sip. Not liquorice. Aniseed. Fennel. And something else mingling with the sweetness of the sugar, something very familiar.

“Is there coriander in this?” he asked.

Oscar shot him a look of admiration. “Well discerned.”

“I do a bit of cooking,” Alfie said. “I like picking up recipes on my travels. I’ve just been in China, so I’ve been using a lot of coriander.”

“Cooking. Now there’s something I’ve never been tempted to try,” said Oscar.

“I thought Oscar Wilde said you should try everything once except incest and Morris dancing?”

Oscar grimaced as though in pain. “No, he didn’t. Nor did he say ‘Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken.’ You have much to learn, young padawan.”

And Oscar had got him together with Vivian, for which Alfie would always be grateful.

3. DINNER AT THE HORSE

The summer tourist season was in full swing, and The Horse was more crowded than Alfie had ever seen it. Visitors were knocking back Bunburry Brew and enjoying the excellent cuisine. William had taken on extra bar staff to cope, and they were rushing around, noting orders, serving and clearing.

Alfie would have expected Carlotta to be orchestrating her team, welcoming new arrivals, thanking those who were leaving. But she was behind the bar, deep in conversation with a customer. Their heads were practically touching, their dark hair an almost identical shade. Most people were in summer casuals, but the man was wearing a long-sleeved pastel pink shirt and white trousers with an immaculate crease. Alfie noticed that he was also wearing fine Italian leather shoes, very like Alfie's favourite pair, which had come to grief at a crime scene. He really should order replacements.

There was something quite un-English about the man's easy style. As he got closer, he could hear Carlotta speaking in rapid vivacious Italian, punctuated by the man saying: "*Si. Si. Bene.*" There was something familiar about him, about the voice.

"Signor Bellini?" said Alfie uncertainly.

The man swung round on the bar stool, his wide smile displaying perfect teeth. "At your service! What can I do for you?"

"You won't remember me," said Alfie. "But I'm a friend of Oscar de Linnet."