

## **The Perfect Day**

*Saturday September 26th, 2020, Isle of Lewis*

It was a day for it. The Gods were angry. She understood anger.

The Met Office gale prediction of Beaufort 8 had been correct. The sky was dark and heavy. Rain lashed the windows. Gusts of wind thrashed the dried grasses on the cliff edge. The waterfalls on the cliff opposite, yesterday mere trickles, were today thunderous torrents cascading down, occasionally wind-whipped up into sprays like dragon's breaths.

Celia jumped as a large empty white plastic bag blew onto the window obscuring her view. It billowed off again, dancing away, its shredded edges twirling like a wraith. This weather was perfect. As was this cottage she'd chosen on the outskirts of the village - if you could call Aird Uig a village. According to Wikipedia, this grass and boulder-strewn peninsula was the UK's most north--westerly point. And about as far from Manchester as she could manage. God knows what the Cold War National Servicemen like her father had felt arriving here at the RAF Early Warning Station in the 50s, but she knew her mother had loathed its isolation. Many villagers lived in restored base houses, but other dwellings like this one were new-build Scandinavian kits, scenic bolt holes for letting which had been erected in sheltered spots. Though today, few spots were sheltered. Since arriving, they'd seen no one else except an old man with a dog and the lady with the key. Celia had worn her mask and hat. The lady had been masked and gloved, doubtless concerned incomers might bring deadly Covid, though not worried enough to refuse a rental fee. Life was harsh here. It was a place for survivors.

She watched some powerful waves surging as high as steeples before crashing onto the rockface and foaming back down through the deep granite cracks. Or rather, Gneiss rock cracks, as Douglas had pompously informed her. Gneiss rock here was, apparently, 3 Billion years old. Obsessed by trivia, was Douglas: endlessly, tediously spouting facts from A-level Geology or fishing lore. She'd known when she'd booked the cottage that fishing wouldn't be on the cards. Never mind the weather, there would be no time. But she'd packed his rods and boxes into the car anyway. Details.

“Come on Douglas, walkies time!”

“What? Are you mad - in this? I said on the ferry that Lewis in late September was asking for trouble! It’ll be snowing in a minute. Christ, I said to the guys in the office we were likely off to Devon!”

“Why not go for a walk? The wind’s subsiding. The fresh air will do you good. Let’s just go up to the point and look down on the shoreline- it’ll be spectacular! Live a little!” She laughed. As if.

“I’m not going out in that!”

“Come, on, don’t be a wooss! You promised me you’d be nice this week. Pretty please?”

He was looking at her with those chocolate-brown puppy eyes. Obedient. Desirous to please. When it suited. Then she watched his shoulders droop. Capitulation. Gratifying.

“OK, a short walk.” Putting down his Tom Clancy book, he made for his walking boots at the door, where Celia already stood welly-booted, scarfed and gloved-up. Zipping up his jacket for him, she kissed him lightly on the cheek.

He smiled. “I do love you, you know.” But she had already turned away and was outside.

They had to put their heads down to walk into the wind. She led him up the cliff past concrete blocks with metallic mounts for obsolete guns, aerials, satellite dishes or God knows what. Walking behind with measured tread, reluctance in every step, he looked in at the empty concrete shelters and doorless former offices as they passed by. In some, sheep huddled. Many buildings displayed garish graffiti of birds like eagles or gulls. Some sported Gothic-inspired submarine and aircraft designs, one a Viking head.

“Who in Hell’s teeth comes up here to deface buildings?”

Turning at his voice, she couldn’t catch his words, lost in the wind, but she could see that there was no one in sight. Nor any windows. The wind abated for a few minutes and the rain subsided to drizzle. A solitary gull screeched, soaring off from the cliff edge between gusts. This was the end of the world. Two lawyers from Manchester, all alone, had climbed up here bent forward into a howling wind amidst the detritus of WW2 and the Cold War. She laughed. When they reached the edge of the cliff, she took his arm.

“Isn’t this amazing? Don’t you feel the power of nature?” She took in a deep breath.

“I just feel frozen- let’s go back. It’s a day for hot chocolate and a good book!”

“Have you no soul?” she asked, stepping away.

Her voice had taken on that goading, challenging tone he’d noted recently. He knew the pattern. A smart, wounding remark was coming. This trip wasn’t going to help anything. He should never have agreed to it. But he needed answers.

“I’m beginning to think you are mad. Never mind my soul, what about yours? Have you sold it? I wouldn’t be surprised at anything you do now. Why did you meet that evil Gallagher last week? James saw you in *Mana* drinking champagne with him. And what’s with that Jemima Morgan driving licence in your purse?”

She was smiling. “We had a lovely meal. He appreciates me. *Mana* is a real classy Michelin place. Your mother would have hated it.”

He turned to face her. “Don’t mock my mother!”

She was now standing a few steps away, arms akimbo, face turned up to the sky. And smiling. “Isn’t it a perfect day?”

He shook his head and made to walk back from the edge. She was rhythmically kicking at a tuft of heather with her boot.

“Do you know what *Mana* means? It’s the elemental power of nature embodied in an object or person. This…” she gesticulated around them, “energises me to take control of my life.”

### *Manchester, 3 years earlier*

It was too hot at the unshaded restaurant window. Celia sat in sunglasses and wished herself elsewhere. With her Bar exams imminent, she had left the wedding planning to Douglas’s mother. Widowed only months earlier, Jean had stepped in enthusiastically.

“You sure you won’t have a bridesmaid, Celia? I’d buy the dress.”

“I’m sure. I don’t need a handmaiden.”

“And you’ve only given me six guests- aren’t there other members of your family you’d like to ask? Apart from your cousin Jack, that is.”

“No. As I said, my parents and sister died years ago. It’s been a struggle getting through Law on scholarships and I’ve worked so hard that I’ve lost touch with many people. But I do hope you know how much I appreciate you organising and funding the wedding. Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure. As you know, Douglas’s father has left me comfortable. So, now about the invitations- how do you like these?” She handed over a white card with silver entwined D and C amidst a wreath of pink and silver roses.

“Lovely. You’re doing a grand job.” Celia swiftly removed her glasses, placed them in a case and dropped them into her bag. Standing up, she gave a sudden smile flashing perfect teeth, fluttered her lashes and bent forward to air-kiss Jean. “Let me know if there’s anything else I need to do.” She donned her black linen jacket, lifted her bag, and left Zizzi’s. Such an

indifferent pasta lunch: this chain restaurant would never have been her choice. It confirmed what she knew already: having money didn't mean you had class.

Watching her future daughter-in-law toss back her long blonde hair and stride confidently out, Jean drained her glass and lifted her phone to dial Douglas. She hoped he knew what he was doing.

Six weeks later, it was a perfect sunny day for a wedding. Jean had to admit Celia made a stunning bride. Declining Jean's offer of money to buy a wedding dress, Celia had hired her strapless lace gown. At first, she'd also refused a church ceremony, but Douglas had insisted. A small victory in what Jean suspected was an unequal relationship. But she knew all about the dynamics of marriage: what suited some, repelled others. Giving in was sometimes easier. At least Douglas looked happy today as he led Celia up for the first dance. An intelligent boy, like his father. It would be fine. He was no fool.

Now she felt a hand on her own arm: Jack was gesturing to the floor. He seemed a personable chap, though with his dark-hair and olive-skin, he looked nothing like his cousin Celia. Probably mid-thirties, he said he was a 'City dealer.' He looked prosperous, was well-dressed and charming.

As they waltzed, she asked, "Such a shame Celia's parents didn't live to see her married. What happened to them? She never talks about her past."

"A fire, I believe. Tragic. Too painful for her, I suspect. But she is happy now. Thank you, Mrs Baker, for giving her a day to remember. She's told me of your generosity. It hasn't been easy for her. She was fostered, you know."

"Really? She never said. And I enjoyed planning the wedding for Douglas. He's all I've got, you know."

"I am sure they're a good match. Both ambitious to do well at the Bar. I believe Celia has already been involved in some high profile cases. Her Head of Chambers over there has high hopes for her." He nodded towards a corpulent grey-haired man in pinstripe suit flirting with four young women.

"Those girls are her work colleagues, I believe." Jean refrained from voicing her thoughts: where are Celia's old school or university friends? Or even her foster parents?

Jack laughed. "I'd have those pretty things defend me any day!" As the music ended, he excused himself and headed to their table.

Jean felt a flutter of anxiety but took a deep breath. It was not as if there was anything that she could exactly pinpoint...

Meanwhile, Celia was congratulating herself on how well the day was going. As Douglas led her off the dance floor, some tendrils of hair escaped from her diamante pinning.

“Sorry darling, need to go fix the up-do!” She kissed Douglas lightly on the lips and headed for the Ladies.

Re-arranging her hair at the mirror, Celia became aware of someone behind. The woman had her head cocked oddly to the side and was giving her an appraising stare.

Celia turned. “Hello?”

This woman had not greeted them in the reception line-up: she’d have remembered that expensively-cut jet hair, scarlet lipstick, and face to launch a thousand magazines. The voice was upper-crust. “Congrats. You look stunning, I must say. Isn’t that Jean’s necklace?”

Celia clutched the diamond necklace that had been gifted to her by Jean. Her eyes were drawn to the woman’s stark sea thistle corsage on her full-length black velvet dress. Unsettling. She asked, “Are you a relative?”

The witch extended a left hand. No rings. Blood red talons. “No. I’m Morgan, former fiancé. Jean’s choice, actually. She invited me and I thought, why not?”

As Celia declined the handshake, Morgan raised her nose, blinked dismissively, and drifted off in a waft of Dior.

So, interesting. Celia had not known there was a rival for Douglas’s affections. *Jean’s choice*. But she was the one who had won the prize. He was handsome, intelligent -well, up to a point – and he would do.

#### *August 2020, Manchester, a month before Lewis*

It was an overcast Saturday afternoon. Douglas was fishing on the Irwell. Celia sat on the edge of the bed debating her next move. Having read all the recent correspondence between Douglas and his family lawyer, today’s steamed-open letter told her it was time. Jean’s estate was settled, and the balance would be in the account soon. The joint account. She had insisted early on. She knew this meant there would be no delay, no waiting for probate. The amount surprised her. More than she expected.

He knew the settlement was substantial and had been talking of buying a lodge with river rights. Over her dead body. Booting up his desktop (she had watched him enter his feeble Uni college password) she Googled ‘Cottage Lets Scottish Highlands and Islands,’ specifying several suitable places. But not the old family village. Too risky. There might be people with long memories. She smiled. Black Houses caught fire so easily. The police had thought it

fortunate she was away at guide camp. It hadn't been far away. She'd hidden her bike nearby. No one had seen her leave.

She found a cottage, booked it with his credit card details, printed the confirmation and binned the email from his sight. That night she persuaded him they needed a break, after all, Jean was finally at peace and didn't need him to stay around now. *She'd seen to that.*

"I've booked a romantic cottage and we're between court cases - why don't we escape for some quality time together?"

He'd agreed. She'd even promised sex, normally as rare as she could make it. She'd never explained about her distaste for it after her foster father's humiliating demands, which had been even worse than her own father's physical abuse. She had told Douglas that welts on her buttocks were due to a childhood scalding accident. But she'd put paid to her tormentor, and her complicit mother and sister who had turned a blind eye to her pain since it saved them. Her mother had shrugged- who would believe such things of a country policeman? As for the midnight deviant, Jack had taken out their foster father a few years ago, with relish. Useful, him being a gun dealer.

*2020, September 27th, Lewis*

A few weeks later, she drove away from Aird Uig early on the Sunday morning. As she had predicted, there was no one about on this Lewis Sabbath. She'd left the front door unlocked and his clothes strewn in the bedroom alongside a set of woman's size 10 clothing which included suitable dirty-weekend red lace lingerie. He hadn't noticed the extra new black overnight case that she had left in the car.

Difficult to predict when they'd find the body under the cliff. She had helpfully ensured his wallet was in his jacket pocket. Tomorrow night she'd phone the police, express concern that he hadn't returned from his 'fishing' break and hinting at her suspicion of a lover. If there was no word of his discovery, she would produce the house booking on his computer in 'All mail'. The quicker the death certificate, the better.

She had left the 'Jemima' licence in a bedside drawer in Aird Uig. Getting 'hard' man Boysie Gallagher off his murder charge had been enough to secure the favour of some fake documents. She had needed the 'Jemima' licence for the car she needed to hire after she had booked their own BMW into the garage with 'brake problems.' Picking the car up the day before they left had allowed her to alter the ferry booking number plate details that evening on Douglas's computer while he had conveniently been at squash. 'Jemima's' car now sat in a

Stornoway back street. If they were suspicious of the fall, 'Jemima' would be the suspect. She wished the police luck finding a phantom.

As a high-earning barrister, the police wouldn't suspect her of any involvement. Anyway, she had left no prints in the cottage: every switch, tap and surface had been Dettol-wiped. Details. She had read enough police murder cases files to avoid leaving clues.

She'd first ear-marked Douglas at a Law Society Ball for his pedigree and connections, having been told he was a judge's son. But career boredom and her lacklustre marriage had meant money became more of a priority. Jean had been easily hastened off the scene, deserving her fate for advocating that witch to Douglas as a wife and pushing for a pre-nup agreement! Patsy Douglas had been convinced by her tears that he should 'have faith in her' - she would never divorce him, Well, that was true.

Giving false contact tracing info for Jemima at the booking office, she boarded the ferry as a foot passenger wearing a mask as necessitated by law. God Bless Covid. And she had pulled on a knitted Aran hat as necessitated by the fact that 'Jemima' was a red-head. Details.

The day was perfect as the ferry pulled out past the little islands on time.

She dialled Jack to meet her in Ullapool.