

A Person of Interest

I was all set by seven o'clock, tyres checked, windscreen washer topped up and the fuel tank full. My nine-year old Fiat Panda was filled to the brim with everything I thought I might need. The weather forecast for Galloway was set fair and now the big day had arrived, I was feeling nervous, my first solo outing since my recovery.

Evan arrived to wish me a safe journey. My older brother had always looked out for me. Without his help, I might not have made it through rehab after the melt down of my marriage.

Evan is a Chartered Surveyor involved in commercial property developments and has a small portfolio of shops and offices which he owns. Mary runs the bookshop below my apartment which they let me have for a reduced rent in return for minding the shop when Mary is not around and child-minding when they are socialising. They have a lovely house with a big garden and three boys.

'How far a drive is it?'

'Almost three hundred and fifty miles, I think. But I'll take my time, detour through the Lake District, make a day of it. Check-in is not until four o'clock.'

'Emma, what put you in the notion for a week of stargazing?'

'An article on the news, months ago. I've always wanted to do it. Remember when we went camping in Cornwall, with Mum and Dad?'

'Yes, you and Mum lying on your backs with your heads poking out of the tent, sharing Grampa's old binoculars from the war.'

'I've borrowed a pair from Andrew Sullivan upstairs. In fact he said to keep them. They were his wife's. She was a bird spotter.'

'Zeiss! They look expensive.'

'They're an older model but new equivalents are over £500 on *Amazon*. Oh, and thanks for having my Panda serviced.'

'Take it as an early birthday present. How are you feeling?'

'Good, thanks. I've not had any bad dreams for nearly six months. Mr. Timpson has signed me off and no more pills so my gut is back to normal too.'

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'Here sis, give me a hug and remember to *WhatsApp* us when you arrive safely. Any issues, ring me direct, okay?'

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The journey was slow but uneventful. I arrived at two o'clock and parked beside a shiny Range Rover in a lovely dark blue trim with a personalised number plate. Beside it, my scruffy red Fiat Panda looked like a toy.

Birch House, the three-star country house hotel where we were based was freshly painted and the lounge was warm and welcoming. I was allocated a twin-bedded attic room for single occupancy with a great view to the west coast of Scotland on the far horizon.

I soon discovered I was one of three singletons. The two others were a quiet, dark haired chap in his mid-forties called Alan and a larger than life fifty-something gushing blonde called Larissa, who had spent twenty-five years in America and spoke with a harsh New York accent.

The others in our group were a mixture of husband and wife combos and pairs of ladies sharing rooms, making twenty-five of us in total. There were a few other hotel guests not on our 'Night Skies' course, short stayers and overnighers moving on every morning or so.

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Our course leader was an emeritus professor from Glasgow University called Louise Baldwin. She was super-organised and kitted us out with rucksacks which contained everything we needed. After breakfast on our first morning she told us we could expect warm sunny days and cooler clear nights, ideal for stargazing. She gave us a slide show of the night sky and printouts to study.

'I ask that we meet ready to hike up to our viewing area at nine o'clock each evening. The walk up is by a well-made path, clearly marked with tiny luminous markers to guide you on the way back. We should arrive with enough of the last of the light to get ourselves set up for our spectacular and world famous dark night skies. You are welcome to stay for as long as you wish but most people have had enough by around midnight.'

'On your return to *Birch House*, please approach quietly and retire in silence. Each morning at ten o'clock we will meet to share our experiences after which the rest of the day is free. I know some of you are also keen birdwatchers and a few are interested in wild flowers.'

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'I'm here to be used as an advisory service should you need me. I'll be in the garden with my watercolours. And yes, they are for sale. Always carry your mobile phones and contact me in an emergency, such as a fall or a twisted ankle. Please download and use the *Three Words* locator App.'

'Those of you who have ordered a packed lunch should find them in your rooms after breakfast. Lunch here is pub grub eaten in the bar. Evening meals are at six o'clock sharp, please. Enjoy your holiday.'

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Larissa was tiring and intrusive, determined to find out every detail about each of our lives. On the first evening she took a run at me but I deflected her invasive personal questions by remaining silent and eventually she moved on. During morning coffee after the first briefing, she cornered Alan. Pretending to study Elsa's info pack, I earwigged and learned he was a widower and part-time Oxford Don, a Reader in Botany. Further questions revealed he lived alone. Alan handled her well and gently eased the conversation roulette back to Larissa who soon clammed up and moved on to her next victims.

On our first evening, at dinner I was seated between Judith and Valerie, recent widows in the late sixties who had both lost their husbands during the early Covid years when it was hard to get a GP appointment. They had driven slowly north from Surrey, stopping overnight with friends en route. They had studied PE together as late teenagers, specialising in Hockey and Dance. Within an hour I had already heard their tales of woe several times over as they competed to command the conversation.

On the following evening we set off as a noisy gaggle, following Louise upwards to our viewing area about a mile from the hotel. I was with Judith and Valerie again. All three of us were hanging back, separated from the main group, avoiding Larissa. Safe to say, we were not alone trying to stay clear of her.

At our viewing area, we settled to stare upwards at the sky. On the climb, Larissa had focussed again on Alan and lay beside him. As she had the annoying habit of repeating incredulously every answer he gave, we learned he lived part-time on Harris in the Western Isles where his family owned an estate. We also discovered he had recently changed his work pattern to a part-time mode soon after his godparents had died tragically in a boating accident. We could not avoid hearing this interrogation. Whispering, Judith had speculated Alan might be gay but Valerie had pointedly disagreed.

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Lying in the dark, Larissa continued to question him incessantly until Louise intervened by calling for a period of quietness.

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The following afternoon, I was out on the hills spotting butterflies and moths when I came across Alan, lying prone in a little hollow with his binoculars focussed on a patch nearby. He heard me approach and turned to raise a finger to his lips and point to the spot beside him. I accepted his invitation. We lay side by side in silence watching a curlew sitting on a nest.

Time passed.

I sensed his binoculars drooping and looked sideways to find he was asleep, snoring gently, purring like a cat.

Moving slowly and quietly, I rolled over onto my side and studied him.

He was thin, wiry with a long face, dark bushy eyebrows, a thin beaked nose and an unkempt salt and pepper beard. I remembered he had lovely soft brown eyes which matched his Mediterranean olive skin tone. He was maybe just under six feet tall compared to my five-nine.

More time passed.

I watched him, my mind spinning ahead to delicious possibilities.

Something disturbed the curlew which flew directly overhead peeping loudly.

Alan rolled onto his back and yawned:

'Sorry. I don't sleep well nowadays. Not since Magda died. Cancer, three months of hell. Anyway, life goes on, they say. You're Emma, I'm Alan, Alan Frobisher. We meet at last.'

'Yes, Emma Owen.'

His hand was warm and dry, firm not crushing.

'Larissa said you live in Harris, that your family owns a big chunk of the island.'

'Yes, partly true, I suppose, but not that big, not the biggest estate by far. And yes, Mrs Larissa O'Malley is a bit of a Nosey Parker but she has a kind heart, I think. It turns out she

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married an oil millionaire who died of a stroke three years ago. She's Scottish, originally, and has a failing mother in Glasgow suffering from dementia so she's moved back to look after her. Her mother is in respite care this week. I think Larissa is desperately lonely, actually.'

'Mmmm. Poor Larissa.' I said this with doubt in my voice as her demented mother sounded like a tale being spun to gain sympathy.

'Yes, it seems her mother's prognosis is poor, only a few months to live.'

'Alan, forgive me for asking, but on Harris don't you have lovely dark skies enough there? Why come to Galloway?'

'Ah! Good question. Island life can be, well, claustrophobic. It seems I have become what the police might call '*a person of interest*'. Over the last decade or so there has been growing pressure from the locals to try to buy the estate for the community. None of us have any real desire to try to restore the estate to a viable working business and of course there is the burden of inheritance tax which has used up a fair chunk of the money my godparents' had built up from their other activities. Uncle Tim was a Stockbroker and Aunt Bethan was a Venture Capitalist who made a fortune during the 'dot.com' bubble.'

'Anyway, the ownership of the Harris estate is split four ways. I'm the major inheritor with fifty percent and my three other cousins have equal shares. Jason and Martin have agreed in principle to sell but my cousin Beth is stubborn. She lives in New York where she is a patents expert. She's never been to Harris, never seen the crumbling ruin of the main house, the overgrown gardens and the derelict pier and harbour. From our talks about the estate in our Skype meetings it seems her notion of life on Harris is, well, verging on *Brig o' Doon*.'

'How does this make you '*a person of interest*'?'

'Well, Mrs Macleod says they are hoping to dig up some dirt on me, something they can use for leverage to force me to sell up. Sadly for them, I am quite a boring person, really. I live mainly in Abingdon, near Oxford in a small modern two-bedroom flat. Magda and I were buying it and saving hard to move up to a house with a garden before trying for kids. The car is inherited from my godmother. A bit ostentatious for my taste but I seldom use it. I'm more of a bike person really. There is a good cycle route into Oxford where I still do some teaching.'

'I have an e-bike. It can be quicker than driving.'

'Yes, I have two bikes now, my new one is an e-bike. I like to live under the radar so I'm not on social media. Low key and anonymous suits me best, really. However, when I visit Harris, I am

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watched closely by the locals, surreptitiously but constantly. Mrs Macleod, my visiting cleaning a cooking lady who looks after me, keeps me informed. They have a dossier, apparently. I understand they see me as their last hope, someone who might persuade the others to sell to them. Everyone is very nice to me but I can tell they would love to be rid of me. They're right of course. The Frobisher clan have been poor landlords. The truth is my godparents inherited the place but were never all that interested in living there or even visiting. They were part of a yachting set based on the south coast and the Isle of Wight area.'

'How about you Alan, are you a better landlord?'

'No, not really. As a youngster, I only visited a few times with my older brother and only in the school holidays. I went about with the estate manager, a man called Donald Angus Macleod. Everyone called him Don Angi. He was the husband of Mrs Macleod my daily lady. To be honest, I know nothing about sheep or crofting. Since Don Angi died, the estate has declined and it's become one big muddle, actually.'

'Very frustrating, I imagine. Is there any way to square the circle?'

'I'll keep trying to persuade Beth, I suppose. I've asked her repeatedly to come and see for herself but she says she's far too busy. But I'll keep plugging away. It's in my nature, doggedness. I suppose deep down I'm doing it for Magda, as a sort of atonement or a memorial, something like that. She was from Harris originally and like all the bright ones, she left after high school. She won a place at Glasgow University, then came to Oxford for her PhD, I was her supervisor. Magda was passionate about everything she did. She chose her own topic - 'Controlling Invasive Species'.'

'Interesting. Mmmm.'

'Ah, sorry, no offence intended.'

'No, I'm used to it. As you can tell I'm Welsh, from Cardiff. We think somewhere in our past we have slave roots, like Shirley Bassey. I have two older brothers, both white, except the same frizzy hair. I was a rebel at school, in with the wrong crowd. Left with no qualifications. After a spell in a supermarket I became a social work assistant, a dogsbody with a council van rescuing abused families, taking them to refuge accommodation, helping them to start again. Ten years I lasted at that. Met Mark and moved in with him. Then it started happening to me, shoving, slapping and punching. I fought back and he beat me up, broke my nose. After I came out of hospital Mark had skipped town, gone off with Tracy my best friend. South Africa they said. He cleaned out our joint bank account.'

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'Oh dear. You've had a tough time too.'

'My brother Evan is my rock. With his help, I started over, became a minicab driver and signed up for the OU. After the foundation year, I opted for zoology. My final year project was 'Moth populations in Wales'.'

'Moths. Yes, amazing creatures. Terrific pollinators, far better than butterflies and most are active day and night. I suppose I should know more about them but I don't.'

'Yes, unlike butterflies and bees, moths operate under the radar. In the UK we have around two and a half thousand species with just over seventeen hundred in Wales. Yes, amazing creatures and some are very attractive.'

'Wasn't there a recent invader, from overseas?'

'Yes, *Carmenta Brachyclados* from Guyana, previously unknown to science. Found in Port Talbot. It's a beautiful clearwing moth. My Prof reckons it came here in a photographer's equipment bag. It's out there now, in the wild and thriving.'

The sun passed behind a dark cloud and the wind dropped.

'Drat, I hadn't expected midges here. We do get them in Wales but I thought they were mostly on the north west coast of Scotland, not in Galloway.'

'Try some of this. It's *'Skin So Soft'*. It works for me. Keep that. I have a second bottle.'

'Mmmm. Yes, smells nice.'

'It's a favourite remedy in Harris. The midges there can be ferocious. Ah, nearly five o'clock.'

'Yes, perhaps we should head back and discover what the offering is for our evening meal.'

'Last night's beef and ale pie was excellent. So nice to eat home cooked food again. I mostly use ready meals. I did try *Hello Fresh* for a while but *Waitrose* meals are quite good, I suppose.'

'I cook in batches and use my freezer but I eat mainly freshly cooked vegetables. Evan has an allotment so veggies are free for the picking.'

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As Prof Baldwin had promised, the weather was perfect. Since our first meeting, Alan and I had met most afternoons at the same spot, lying side by side, chatting and dozing, applying *Skin so Soft* when the wind dropped and the midges arrived.

As the week progressed I learned Alan suffered from insomnia, haunted by his bereavements. Gradually his story unfolded.

As his Aunt Bethan had been unable to have children, they had eventually adopted Beth aged six, a refugee from Serbia whose family had been killed in a reprisal attack. The Frobishers paid for her rehabilitation, her expensive public school education, funded her studies at Oxford and later still for her PhD at Harvard.

Aged eighteen when Beth arrived, Alan was sidelined, now on the periphery of his godparents lives, making his own way through university, working part-time serving in restaurants, stacking shelves and making deliveries for *Waitrose* then working as a local guide for touring bus parties visiting Oxford. Awarded with a First Class Honours degree he was quickly signed up for a PhD, adding light teaching duties during his three year research period. Offered full tenure, he joined the staff, completing a six-year journey of fruitful study and research.

Emma waited in silence, expecting there would be more.

'My life changed when Magda Nicholson was assigned to me for her PhD. Actually, such romances are not uncommon in academic circles. We were married the week after her graduation. We went to Paris on the *Eurostar* and found a tiny garret room with terrific views of the Seine, climbed the Eiffel Tower, visited the Louvre and Notre Dame Cathedral. Ten days walking everywhere, with our *Lonely Planet* guide book.'

'Mmmm. Sounds amazing.'

'We put off children, saving for a proper house with a garden. Then, just when we were ready to start, Magda was gone. Aunt Bethan came to my rescue but then within a few months both of them were gone too. I was on my own again, jittery, disorientated, depressed and lonely, so very lonely. I had a bit of a relapse with a spell in hospital receiving counselling. Thankfully the worst is behind me now, at least I hope so. They suggested sleeping pills but I refused. I need to do this by myself.'

'How long ago was this?'

'Magda? Coming up for five years. Aunt Bethan and Uncle Tim drowned almost immediately afterwards.'

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'How horrible. Yes, I can see how that must have affected you.'

'Actually, their death also changed my situation significantly. I knew of course they were rich but I had no idea I was to inherit their main assets in a fifty-fifty split with Beth. The Harris estate was split differently, some whim of my Uncle Tim who thought I might like to become the Landlord. My financial adviser says when the Harris estate is sold, I should have enough to retire, if I should choose to do so. I'm still involved as a part-time tutor and research advisor but the fizz has gone out of it without Magda. The irony is, with the money from my godparents, I now have enough to buy the sort of house we always wanted. But I think what I need is a complete change of scene. Ms Charteris my medical consultant agrees.'

'What's stopping you?'

'I can't seem to settle to what I want to do. If I could get the Harris estate sold to the community trust, maybe then I'll find a new direction. And what about you Emma? Do you have plans?'

'I would love to travel but I'm not sure I could hack it alone. I know I give off a confident vibe but it's a facade. Inside I'm cautious. Maybe if I went somewhere safe, like New Zealand. I have some cousins there. They have a vineyard. On *FaceTime*, they're always asking me to come and work for them.'

'*Viniculture!* My PhD research project was funded by a family who wanted to develop a fully organic vineyard in Dorset. They're in full commercial production now, still small scale but growing steadily year on year.'

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It was our last night of stargazing. Louise had provided each of us with self-inflating mats to lie on and a lightweight bivouac style tent to lie under if it was breezy. Breezy was better, less chance of midges. I hadn't seen Alan at our usual afternoon meeting spot. His Range Rover was missing and I wondered why.

When we arrived at our hilltop, the last of the evening light was fading. Elaine said he had called her to say he had some important phone calls to make and would join us later. Larissa was expounding her latest theory, something about celestial storms causing neurosis. I chose a spot on the edge of the group, applied *Skin So Soft* and settled to watch the stars. After an hour or so, I fell asleep, my head poking out from my bivouac.

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Later, it clouded over and the others drifted away as I slept on.

Time passed.

Alan arrived and lay down near me, gave me a gentle nudge and whispered excitedly:

'Hi! Guess what? Beth has agreed to sell the Harris estate. I've agreed to buy out her share. She's found a dream apartment she must have but doesn't want to liquidate any of her investments. We had a group *Skype* call with Jason and Martin. I've spoken to Fiona the chair of the Harris Community Trust and she confirmed they have all their funding sources lined up and are ready to sign. First thing tomorrow, I'll need to get our family lawyer beavering on finalising the transfer paperwork. I'll travel to Harris in a few days to sign the papers.'

He leaned closer to me:

'Emma, I'll need an independent witness to verify my signature, fancy coming with me?'

'Yes please. That sounds amazing.'

He moved closer, slipped into the bivouac beside me.

We closed the zip, snuggled together.

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Alan collected me from my flat in Cardiff above Mary's bookshop.

When I told Evan about Alan, he hugged me and said:

'Sounds like Alan Frobisher might be the right one for you. Good luck.'

It was a long drive to Uig for the ferry to the Western Isles.

At the Scottish border, we detoured to Roxburgh where we shared a room at the *Schloss Hotel* as Mr and Mrs Frobisher. It was the best night of my life.

Next morning, we travelled to Galashiels to see the *Great Tapestry of Scotland* then onwards to Glasgow where we stayed at the *Hotel du Vin*, dining at 1 Devonshire Gardens.

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Next morning we drove to Uig on Skye and caught the afternoon ferry to North Uist where we stayed at the Langass Lodge. On the advice of the Analise the receptionist, we were up early and down by the edge of the loch to watch for the otter she had promised would be there. He was! My first ever otter.

Later we crossed on the tiny ferry from Berneray to Harris where we settled into the Lodge House where Mrs Macleod had left a venison casserole which we ate with roasted potatoes, buttered carrots and parsnip purée, everything local, the vegetables from her garden.

Two days later with the transfer papers signed and witnessed, we reversed our journey and travelled back to Glasgow where we spent a few days sightseeing, using the train to visit Edinburgh.

On the battlements of Edinburgh Castle beside the one o'clock gun, Alan proposed and I accepted.

For our honeymoon we imagine an open-ended world tour to include a visit to my vineyard cousins in New Zealand, just to check out possibilities.

In our vague plan, we might return to England and look for a suitable house, probably near Oxford, somewhere with a garden we can share.

At my thirty-seven to Alan's forty-two, we plan to try for a family.