

Homecoming

May 2025.

With the smudge of North Uist on the horizon, I stood alone on the open deck and tried my best to focus on the future.

After another outage for repairs, the twenty-four year old *MV Hebrides* was back in service. Although it was a fairly smooth passage from Uig in Skye to Lochmaddy, there was a cold north easterly breeze. I pulled up my anorak hood and tightened the chin toggle then slipped the old photograph from my inside pocket and stared at it again.

My mind swirled away.

The blurred image had been taken by Callum Macleod, our elderly next door neighbour, long dead. It showed a tall, slim girl kneeling beside my father, leaning hard on his chest, pumping, trying to re-start his heart. I had studied this photograph time over time. It was as if I was there at the pierhead, watching the drama unfold, a scene which had haunted me down through the years.

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The ship's engine note changed as we arrived at the harbour, bringing me back to my current reality. My early retiral from Govan Health Centre had been 'firmly encouraged' by Debbie Hutcheson the Practice Manager, and rightly so. The deal would stay in-house, better for everyone. The last thing they needed was another witch hunt after the scandal two years earlier. In the distant past, the NHS had sought to protect its employees but nowadays all that had changed and individuals are named and shamed to divert attention from the failings of the ruling elite.

Although I believed I had not actually made any misdiagnoses up to that point, my absences had become intolerable. Everyone knew the reason. Alcoholism is hard to conceal from colleagues and I had lived in growing trepidation, aware it was only a matter of time before I slipped up. Being offered early retirement at fifty-one 'on health grounds' had been a huge relief for everyone involved, most especially me. In return, as I had promised I would, I had cancelled my registration and could no longer practice as a GP.

Approaching Lochmaddy, I had been dry now for six months and sixteen days.

Fergie

Could I make a fresh start on the island of my birth, face my demons head on, as my daughter Sylvie had suggested?

I ran through my fifteen second 'pep yourself up' routine ¹, smiled widely, then moved off to collect my gear and disembark.

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My previous trip 'home' to North Uist five years earlier had also been a relief, of sorts.

My mother, who had been in rapid decline with dementia, had slipped away in her sleep.

Margie (Margaret), had yearned for my father for a decade after his tragic death before slithering down into memory loss and confusion. During those final years my brief visits had been heartrending, holding the hand of a shrivelled person who no longer knew anyone, watching as her eyes became fearful, her body trembling with growing tension until the medication lulled her back to her customary zombie state.

Mum and I had always been close. It was where my love of cooking came from. My father not so much. I had little interest in games or strenuous physical activities, preferring books and documentaries on TV. Mum said it was jealousy, because I was clever and passed exams easily, almost always the top of my class at primary school. Dad had never been academic. He had wanted me to be a shinty player and part of the local football squad. I preferred the pipe band and country dancing which he thought was for sissies.

When he died, I was fourteen and living with my aunt and uncle in Glasgow. The accident had happened on a stormy night when his shore crew at the Lochmaddy ferry terminal had been short-staffed, struck down by a 'flu bug going the rounds. My father had been acting as a stand-in. He had tripped while bending to retrieve the ferry hawser throwing line, drowning in the churning water caused by the side thruster in the gap between the ferry and the pier wall. A tragic accident. At least that was the official version but I learned later from Alda Macleod (son of old Callum) that no one had actually seen him trip.

Was it suicide?

He was only thirty-four, three years younger than Mum.

¹

Three Brain Tricks to ensure mood change. https://youtu.be/pb6BIDpwdRI?si=lvqsIE-ISFV_GxuH

Fergie

As we edged nearer to the pier and I looked at the spot depicted in Alda's photograph, the familiar cocktail of guilt and grief welled up as I wondered again if my supercilious attitude had been to blame for the gulf between us. In early puberty, my 'intellectual debates' with my father had become increasingly fractious, arguments which I usually won with a grand riposte, leaving him confounded.

In the month before I was sent to Glasgow, my mother had stepped between us to grab at his raised hand. That was the last time he had spoken to me.

Rescue

My name is Kenneth Fergusson MacAlpine and I am an alcoholic.

My mother always insisted, without a shred of proof, that my father was a descendant of Kenneth MacAlpine, the first King of Scotland.

It might just be true because my father was a born leader, haughty and overbearing and completely fearless - or at least this was the image he projected to everyone. Standing six foot five in stocking feet, in an earlier time my namesake would have been a Viking marauder. As a Royal Marine sergeant in the Falkland's war he had earned a medal for 'bravery in the face of personal danger'. Or so Mum had told me. Where the medal with its citation had vanished to, remains a mystery.

My mother was a person who was certain of her facts, rigidly holding to her versions of events. Since her drift into dementia, I have often wondered if she was already heading into a different world even then.

Years after his death during my medical training I realised my father's mood swings, spells of dark introspection, argumentative and threatening muttering under his breath as he fended off unseen antagonists, had almost certainly been rooted in PTSD, most probably untreated.

I think this was why Mum had sent me to live with her sister in Glasgow. They enrolled me at Hyndland Secondary where Aunt Eunice was Head of English and Uncle Donald Macdonald was Head of Art. They had no children of their own but they did not spoil me. They pushed me hard and I made it to Glasgow University to study medicine.

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My mother's death unleashed the mixture of grief and guilt I had suppressed for decades, sweeping me off course for months during which my alcohol consumption soared. During this dark period, I began to live inside my head, selfishly planning my next secret drinking session in pursuit of temporary escape from the doubts undermining my resolve.

In those lost years, my horizon blurred, faded and, finally, disappeared. Now sober after months of trying and relapsing, my rational mind told me that I had also been escaping from the responsibilities of being a GP, listening to my patients delusional lies and watching over their decline as they approached their ends. When I was eventually rescued by Debbie Hutcheson, I knew I no longer had the inner strength to help them.

Fergie

That first day, returning to my West End flat in Vinicombe Street with my retirement documents, I went on a long bender.

Sylvie heard of my plight on the GP grapevine. When I did not respond to her WhatsApps, fearing the worst, she drove through from Edinburgh. When she saw my curtains were drawn and did not get a reply to her repeated Ring doorbell summonses, she used her spare keys to enter.

I was in bed, comatose, amid a pile of empty Laphroaig bottles. I had soiled myself, ruining the bedding and mattress.

It took her two days to get me back to a semblance of sobriety.

When she showed me photographs as she had found me, I knew I had reached rock bottom.

Sylvie stayed on as my chaperone and mentor, denying me alcohol, pounding away at me, taking me over the old ground of our previous discussions time after time, drumming it into me:

Only you can save yourself.

Only you can face down you demons.

As a GP herself, she knew the odds of a full and permanent recovery were low but she persisted.

Each day followed a pattern, going over the familiar ground:

About Mum.

About Dad.

About Magda.

About Angela.

About patients I had watched die, unable to help them.

About myself.

About my addiction.

Towards the end of that first week, she drove me to a morning AA meeting in Newton Mearns. It was mainly women, only one other man. At first they assumed Sylvie was the alcoholic after which she was invited to wait outside.

Fergie

After the meeting, we went to a shopping centre café and had a snack then drove to a recommended afternoon AA meeting at an evangelical church hall near Anniesland railway station, a place I could walk to from home in less than fifteen minutes. What surprised me was that I recognised Trevor, a tutor from my student days at university, now a retired Anaesthetist. During the meeting, I heard a synoptic version of his journey through a double bereavement when his wife and daughter were drowned during a sailing holiday, eventually learning he had been dry for fifteen years and two months.

After this meeting, I introduced Sylvie to Trevor and we walked to his flat in Beaumont Gate, only five minutes from Vinicombe Street and two minutes from *The Aragon*, my favourite pub on Byres Road.

When Sylvie and I left at around midnight, the first spark of hope had been kindled. In part this had come from my admission that my body was nearing its limit of abuse. As a GP I had sensed this deterioration but as with others who submit to destructive behaviours, I had been in denial.

That night I slept soundly until Sylvie called me to breakfast at eight-thirty next morning.

I still remember this as my best night's sleep ever.

She escorted me to The Western Baths and enrolled me as a member. I bought swimming trunks from their shop and went back for a long slow swim.

I had been dry for sixteen days when Sylvie returned to her wife Moira (also a GP) and their two adopted kids, Tommy and Karen, a brother and sister whose parents had died in a car crash when the twins were a few months old.

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My new life was based around attendance at AA meetings. The afternoon meetings at Anniesland were from two to four on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays with supplementary evening meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays in a church hall near Tesco Extra on Maryhill Road.

My recommended 'substitute' was exercise. First thing every morning I swam fifty lengths. I started by walking with a few of my new AA friends, building up from an hour three times a day, to longer walks lasting up to six hours or more. After a month, I bought a mountain bike on Gumtree and learned where to ride safely, mostly on cycle tracks, avoiding busy roads.

I was eating better and cooking again, a pleasure which had slipped away from me in favour of zap up ready meals from M&S and Waitrose.

Fergie

Encouraged by Trevor, I joined his AA group at a church hall in Yoker where they refurbished old bikes he bought online then sold them cheaply to anyone who attended their all-day maintenance course.

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At my three month anniversary, I penned a long WhatsApp to Angela, my ex-partner for nine years, explaining and apologising. My last known address for her was Nerja on the Costa del Sol where she was a nurse in a private clinic for tourists.

After a delay, she sent a simple message:

Good Luck Fergie!

With a smiley face and a thumbs up.

My follow-up WhatsApp bounced. She had blocked me. I had already guessed there was no way back for us. Angela had suffered too much and had moved on. It was no more than I deserved.

Fergie

Magda

My marriage to Magda had ended badly, leaving me bereft, shattered, juggling demands, constantly tired and with a three-year-old child to care for.

Magda (Magdalen) McKinnon was serving as a student nurse at Glasgow Royal Infirmary when I arrived as a houseman. Five years younger than me, she was from Oban where most pupils from North Uist went for secondary schooling. Magda was small and slim, elfin, very pretty, vivacious and in great demand. The North Uist connection made it easier for me to gain her attention.

After several refusals, she agreed to go to see a film with me, a re-run of the Sound of Music at the old Grosvenor off Byres Road. Magda was sharing a flat in Great George Street just nearby and invited me up for a coffee after the film.

Trudy her flatmate was in Edinburgh for the weekend on a home visit. As you might guess, nature took its course. Magda provided a supply of Durex so I knew I was not the first to enjoy her virtuosity. When Trudy moved to work in a hospital in Edinburgh a month later, I moved into Great George Street as her replacement.

Although we seemed perfect for each other at first, when Magda took up Am-Dram, she released her new inner self and was soon drifting away from me. It seemed I was not as interesting or challenging as she needed, that I did not 'stimulate' her enough.

I responded by trying harder to love her, arranging 'romantic surprises' at expensive hotels but with only partial success. It was probably during one of these encounters we slipped up, she forgetting her pills and me without a supply of Durex.

When our daughter Sylvie (Sylvia) arrived, it soon became clear that Magda was not the mothering type. She insisted I get snipped before allowing a resumption of marital relations. When Sylvie was not at nursery, I was her main carer with Magda drifting in and out of our lives, working as a freelance nurse, travelling to arts festivals, rehearsing, regularly staying away for long weekends, sometimes weeks at a time.

Sylvie did not seem to notice. She was a lively child, walking by nine months and talking clearly at two years old.

As a new GP partner, I was working flat out during daytime hours. Unable to respond to after-hours requests when listed for call-out duties, I was paying for a substitute locum service.

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Fergie

Those early years of caring for Sylvie alone tumbled by in a blur. Magda and I became less and less of a couple, more like resentful acquaintances finding ways to avoid having a proper conversation about our predicament.

When Sylvie was newly three, Magda was 'spotted' at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe by a producer who engaged her in a role in a period drama. This TV series was already established and was being filmed on location at a grand house in Yorkshire. Her inconvenient nursing career was put on hold.

During the nine months she was commuting to and from Yorkshire, she morphed into a person I hardly recognised. Chasing acting work, she moved to live in London.

Even then, in those early years of her new career, I had still hoped to win her back but it was not to be. When Sylvie was six, I agreed to Magda's request for a 'no fault, no blame' friendly divorce. She did not want Sylvie and disappeared from our lives.

Following her career in the newspapers and from TV chats shows, I learned of her two further marriages.

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Three years after the collapse of her third marriage, Magda was found dead of an overdose in a Paris hotel.

Perhaps if I had tried harder to understand her need for fame and adulation, I might have saved her.

There was a minor splash in the national newspapers and it made it to the BBC Scotland TV news but not the main news from London.

Her funeral was organised by her brother Nigel who, when I tracked him down on his mobile, said Magda had been definite that we were to be excluded. I had never liked Nigel, he was always full of himself, a typical Barrister but based in Reading, not part of the big league in London, probably why he had a chip on his shoulder.

In the aftermath of Magda's departure, it was caring for Sylvie which had saved me, given me a purpose, constrained me, kept me more or less normal.

However, when Sylvie moved to Dundee to study medicine, I knew I was starting to drift.

As a GP I could read the signs in myself, manifested daily in many of my working class patients.

At first I persuaded myself my 'affair' with alcohol was habituation, not addiction.

Arrival

At five months 'dry', I had made my move.

Guided by Sylvie and Moira, I made an appointment at Nationwide on Byres Road and used my lump sum and much improved bank balance to settle the remainder of my mortgage, leaving me with a balance of £80K and change in my current account. Free of mortgage restrictions regarding subletting, I then splashed out and had my flat upgraded by IKEA before renting it fully furnished on a six month rolling lease to Ms Anita Scoular and her partner Dot (Dorothy), a food hall manager with M&S.

Anita is the daughter of Tom Scoular, an elderly neighbour with multiple health issues that his wife Edith could no longer cope with on her own. Anita had found a job in HR at Scottish Enterprise. Like me, Anita and Dot are keen cyclists and I introduced them to Trevor and his workshop colleagues before I resigned.

On my journey back to North Uist, I had travelled by train to Fort William and then by service bus to Uig. The road from Glasgow is scary, to be avoided at every time of the year but especially in the summer months when tourists with left-hand drive cars and camper vans cause chaos.

I had gifted my old push bike to Trevor's workshop and bought a second hand e-bike from one of his other helpers. The winds in the Outer Hebrides can be fierce, tiring. I had also bought a five piece lightweight fly rod and a few favourite flies, all de-barbed, hoping for a few trout to catch and release.

I had booked myself a week at the Lochmaddy Hotel, lucky to get in. It was always busy with fishers and birders.

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As I disembarked, I was accosted by Alda (Alasdair) Macleod, one of my father's shore team who had worked his way up to become CalMac's Lochmaddy Manager. Alda and I had been classmates at primary school before I had been sent to Glasgow. Like many of my island friends from those long ago days, Alda had beefed up.

'Well, Fergie, are you well in yourself. I hear you have been through a bad spell, are you fully off the drink now?'

I heard myself lapse into a posher version of my boyhood vernacular.

Fergie

'Aye, well enough. And how are you in your own self? Putting on the beef, I see.'

'Aye, portly is how I like to think of myself. Did you hear I've taken up the pipes again? We have the core of a new pipe band going. Lots of youngsters. Come along tonight if you like and we'll fix you up with a snare drum. Our Mhairi will be there.'

'Is she visiting? Dundee, was it? Art school? Pottery, was it?'

'No, Fergie, not Dundee. Mhairi lived in Broughty Ferry, very much posher. And it was Ceramics, not Pottery. Mhairi won every prize there was to win and made a small fortune for herself. You know what she was like, 'a go getter. Agus ², still the same, I suppose. Finally got a divorce from that waster, JJ (Jason the Journalist). He's in London now, good riddance. Her son Brian has emigrated to New Zealand with his wife and two kids and now Mhairi's come back home to us, just like you. She runs a B&B from her house, is part-time at the primary school as a teaching assistant, agus helps with the Gaelic classes for the incomers. Oh, aye, and she fills in for absences at the Carinish Care Home and cleans the rooms at Langass Lodge too. She says she needs to keep busy. As I said, our Mhairi has always been focussed, driven, very hard to live with. But she knows that now, tells me she's learned her lesson, now she's off the drink.'

I remembered Mhairi McKinnon as a girl a few years older than me. A tomboy, always tagging along with Alda and me and the others, tall and slim with an offbeat sense of humour.

'Yes, Mhairi always liked to win, I do remember that.'

'She's still the same. It drives my Fiona mad when they partner at Bridge.'

'Fiona?'

'My new wife. I met her when I had a wee car accident. Hit a deer on the road.'

'And Morag?'

'Fergie man, Morag died the month after your mother's funeral. Bone cancer, gone in three weeks. Don't you remember? I sent you an email. It was a bad time for me and if Mhairi had not been back . . . Aye, anyway, all's well that ends well, eh?'

²

In Gaelic (Irish/Scottish), "and so" isn't a single direct phrase but conveyed contextually with words like *agus** (and), *mar sin** (so/thus/therefore), *dá bhrí sin** (for that reason).

Fergie

'Alda man, I'm so sorry.'

'Aye, but when I hit that stag, it was the luckiest day of my life. Fiona was in the next car along behind me. I was fairly bad. She's a Senior Nurse Practitioner at the hospital in Benbecula. Quite a brainbox is my Fiona.'

'Is she from Benbecula?'

'No, she's not local. From Fife, Ceres, near St Andrews. Agus, she's really into wild swimming and cross-country running. Travels all the islands and over to the mainland to compete. Just a girl, really, fifteen years my junior.'

'Alda, I'm really sorry. I have no memory of that email. I'm afraid I was, well, you can guess.'

'Aye, shit happens, eh? And there goes our Mhairi. Heading from the Lochmaddy down to the Care Home to serve evening meals to her guests. Didn't I say, she has fingers in every pie?'

I saw the woman driving past in an old Land Rover, the six-seater version. She looked across, tooted, waved and smiled, transforming her long, thin angular face.

'Oh, and you with your battery bike too, Fergie. Mhairi is into cycling now too. She'll have a real dig at you with that old man's e-bike of yours.'

'It's my left knee, twisted it badly years ago, slipping on an icy pavement.'

This was a familiar lie to cover-up a drunken stagger crossing Byres Road heading home from The Aragon.

'Aye, me too, Fergie. It's my right kneecap, got it smashed playing shinty when I was long past it. Still involved though, from the touchline. Fiona too. She's our medic and physio, when she's available.'

'Yes Alda, being over fifty puts us on the cusp of decline. Trust me, I've seen it in my former patients. After fifty we all have to make an effort to get fit and stay fit, rein in the excesses.'

'Aye, just what Mhairi says, singing from the same hymn sheet you two are. She's made the step up from chanter to a full bag o' pipes nae bother. We're lucky to have her back here on the island. She's a force of nature. And what about you?'

Fergie

'One day at a time, you know how it is.'

'So, you're thinking of resurrecting your father's croft, they tell me.'

'Aye, it's a thought that did occur. But it's a big leap. I'm a townie nowadays.'

'No, Fergie MacAlpine, you're one of us. Your mother always said you would come back and here you are. Agus, Mhairi has three rooms to let. You would be far safer out there with her at Loch Euport than biding here at the Lochmaddy with its temptations, now you're on the wagon. Aye, you'll be fine there with Mhairi, teetotal since she returned to us.'

'Oh, I hadn't heard.'

'That's seven years dry now, she says.'

'Good for her.'

'Oh and be warned, my big sister is a Green Warrior, fully organic everything.'

Island communities thrive on gossip and I guessed that Alda and no doubt many others had learned about my recent problems. Aunt Eunice had many Facebook followers out here on the Outer Hebrides. After Hyndland Secondary they had retired to Oban but nowadays she was more or less housebound, supported by carers. Given her small circle of friends since Uncle Donald has passed away two years after retiring from teaching, my lovely aunt spends her life on her iPad blogging and writing Gaelic poems. Uncle Donald had been in *The Red Hackle* pipe band and had tried to teach me to play the pipes but my thickset fingers were not deft enough. In the end I had settled for the drums.

'Right then, Alda, you're on. What time and where, tonight?'

'From half six to about nine, at The Hub ³. I'll WhatsApp Mhairi and let her know you'll be there.'

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Wearing my large rucksack and wheeling my e-bike with its two panniers, I called at the

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The Lochmaddy Community Centre is officially named Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Arts Centre which locals often refer to it simply as Taigh Chearsabhagh, a Gaelic name meaning Kersivay House. The building also houses a museum, gallery, café, and UHI art school. Some locals also call it The Hub.

Fergie

Lochmaddy Hotel. I was disappointed with my dingy single room which looked out onto the refuse bin area behind the hotel at the end of a long corridor.

When I investigated the intermittent slamming sound, I found that the door to the external escape stairway was swinging loose and flapping in the rising breeze. I reported this to Eva on Reception, a tiny blonde bombshell from Latvia. She listened, smiling coyly and told me the escape door had been 'knockered' for weeks. The other front of house staff were a mixture of Aussie and Spanish youngsters.

In the Resident's Lounge I enjoyed an excellent home-made steak and ale pie with mash and carrots and peas then returned to my room to shower and shave and change before walking through the gusting drizzle to The Hub.

Fergie

Mhairi

The hall was busy with folks dropping off kids, with the scraping noise of musicians arranging chairs.

Mhairi made a beeline for us, smiling.

'Well our Alda, look who the cat's dragged in, eh?'

'Agus, our Mhairi, you have to admit he's looking the better for being off the booze, eh?'

'And he does so. Well Fergie, what's your big news? Is it to rebuild your father's croft you are set upon?'

'Ah, you've been talking to Auntie Eunice on Facebook then?'

'No, FaceTime. There's a group of us meet and do a big catchup on a Sunday evening. But you are here for a while, eh? Eunice said you're set on rebuilding your father's old ruin. Are you? Eh? It's in a cracking location too.'

'Well, it's a possibility, I suppose.'

'That would make us fairly near neighbours then. It's less than half a mile from us.'

'Us?'

'My cousin Murdo moved back when his wife left him. He has his own place now. He rebuilt his grandfather's old croft, next along towards Obisary.'

'Was that, Iain the Leg's ⁴, place?'

'Yes.'

'I called him 'Uncle' Iain. He taught me how to fly fish for trout. But Murdo? I don't remember him.'

'Murdo McPhail. He was born in Glasgow. Used to play for Queen's Park, back in the day. Signed for Rangers but didn't make it to the first team. Started a building company and was going great guns when the drink got him. Lost his wife and family.'

I thought of Angela in Nerja.

'Are you alright, Fergie?'

⁴

An artificial leg below the knee, possibly caused by an undiagnosed diabetes.

Fergie

'Yes, sorry, miles away. Flashback. Is Murdo here tonight?'

'No, no. Murdo's an accordion man but that's recent. He has a new lady friend called Caitlan down in Benbecula who is teaching him. Agus, he's into sea trout and salmon fishing, ghillie-ing. And he has a nice big boat, takes parties out for sea fishing and trips out to Rockall. His dream is to catch a record breaking rod caught tuna. Since he moved here, Murdo has taken to building kit houses. He would be your man if you want a nice warm house, built properly by local people you can rely on.'

'Good to know.'

'Excuse me,' said Alda, 'I'll go and help the kid's to tune their pipes. Our computer wizard Donald put an App on my phone. It's brilliant.'

Now we were alone, Mhairi continued:

'Yes, our Murdo's come a long way, eh? It took us a while but he's three years dry now. He was in Marbella with his family and went on a bender, got into a fracas and ended up in prison. That was the last he saw of his wife. Sheila had had enough, eh? She upped sticks and took her two boys to Toronto to live near her sister. He'll want to tell you all the gory details himself, so be warned, eh? He's still trying to face up to his new reality, part of the grieving process, eh?'

'Yes, I can identify with that.'

'Caitlain is Murdo's rock. She has a boy and girl, both teenagers, ages with his two own boys. Her husband was a delivery driver, long haul. He absconded around the time Covid caused lockdown. The rumour is he's settled in Bulgaria with a fancy woman. When Caitlan was clearing out his things, she discovered packets and packets of different pills he had been taking. They say he used them to help him drive long distances without falling asleep at the wheel.'

'Yes, pep pills, probably based on amphetamines, highly addictive.'

'Anyway, the main thing is, Caitlan is good for Murdo. She is clever with it, keeping him busy, off the booze, giving him a new focus. He's only just forty, she is about six years older. Works from her converted garage, making curtains and blinds for people, to order. Bakes fancy cakes, for birthdays and anniversaries. Murdo is planning to build her a proper workshop with a full kitchen, all the bits. That's supposed to be a secret. Oh, and she makes wedding dresses although are a bit passe nowadays. Most youngsters here get a quickie wedding and then head off for a beach holiday. Ibiza is top of the list.'

'Good for Murdo and well-done Caitlan. Looks like a win-win situation.'

'So, Alda will have told you about me, eh?'

Fergie

'Yes, he did mention it. Is it seven years you've been dry, Mhairi?'

'Nearly eight. Enough said, eh? Day by Day is the Only Way, eh?'

'Yes, keeping busy and exercise, that's the key for me.'

'Me too. Agus, I saw you have an e-bike, eh?'

'Yes, a knee problem. And well, the wind too.'

'I borrow Murdo's old Land Rover when the weather's at its worst. I brought it tonight. Tell me, what's it like at the Lochmaddy? Did they put you in that dungeon at the end of the corridor?'

'Aye, it's clean and the bed linen is fresh though the room could do with a lick of paint.'

'And the door to the fire escape?'

'Yes, banging away it is.'

'Why don't you check-out of the Lochmaddy and come to stay at my place, eh? I have a nice bright single room up for grabs. You can have tonight free until you find something more suitable. Or you could do breakfasts for me and I'll let you have it half-price, eh?'

'Breakfasts?'

'I do evening meals too. I know you can cook. You're Mum told me.'

'Ah, so you knew Mum?'

'Yes Fergie, we were close towards her end. I was there when she passed over. We had a sort of bond, because of your father. Later, when I came back to North Uist, I had a helpers job at Carinish, still do, eh?'

I delved into my pocket and produced my copy of old Callum's photograph.

'Yes, that's me, taken by my Dad with his old Kodak Box Brownie. I used to teach first aid at that time while I was working as a trainee nurse, before I met JJ and he lured me away to the mainland. So, Fergie MacAlpine, what do you say, eh? Far better with me at Tigh-na-Dòbhran ⁵ than at the Lochmaddy and its temptations.'

'Yes. OK, Mhairi, that's very good of you. Let's give it a week and see how we get along with each other.'

'Ah, so Alda has warned you off, eh?'

⁵ Tigh-na-Dòbhran means Home of the Otter.

Fergie

'Well, I'm a bit of a loner nowadays.'

'Just one more thing, Fergie.'

'Yes?'

'I'm not expecting 'romance' as part of this deal. At my age I'm past all that, eh? In fact, the last thing I need in my life is that sort of complication. Agus, when you're settled in to island life again, I'll expect you to move on, OK? This offer is about trying to make sure you don't backslide. Living on North Uist year round is not utopian, eh? We all need each other so I'll be there for you, as I promised your mother.'

'Yes, Mhaira, I know, fighting the good fight, each Day and Every Day.'

Alda, who had been organising the band, called us to attention and off we went, straight into 'Bonnie Dundee'.

Tigh-na-Dòbhran

When Murdo arrived the next morning I was in the kitchen, dressed in a tartan apron, preparing breakfast orders for Mhairi's four other guests.

His huge meaty hand engulfed mine, squeezing hard. At six foot eight with long curly red hair in an unruly ponytail, he looked like a Viking warrior, reminding me of my father.

During our trip out to Loch Euport in the Land Rover with my e-bike and possessions in the back, I had learned that Murdo had been a goalkeeper, not an outfield player as I had assumed.

'Ah, so you're the famous Fergie, then. Mhairi gave me the heads up last night in a WhatsApp call.'

'Yes, she is out early, up at Langass Lodge to serve breakfasts and do the beds then back to the care home in the afternoon.'

'Aye, did she say Janis is down in Glasgow for a check-up? All a bit last minute. Mhairi said it's great you agreed you would fill in for her.'

I had learned from Alda that Janis has been struggling for months with kidney problems and that this was her third visit to Glasgow. The prognosis was ominous.

'Mhairi said you might want to eat here tonight, the three of us. What do you say to it, Murdo?'

'So, you're doing evening meals for her too?'

'Yes but I'm not sure what it will be. I've still to check out the freezer.'

'Tell you what, how about I bring some prawns and crabs? I'll see if I can scrounge a few scallops from Lexie too. There should be sea trout in your freezer and McCain's Home Fries so we can have a sea food extravaganza. We'll eat after the guests, after Mhairi get home from her shift and have a proper natter then, OK?'

'Sounds good to me.'

'OK Fergie, see you about five or thereby?'

'Ideal.'

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Fergie

Those first few days flew by. Guests came and went. They were full of questions, most of which I could answer. Top of the list was Otters and Eagles. Mhairi had provided a simple leaflet based on information from the Internet ⁱ and there were flyers on the notice board giving contact details for local nature guides organising wildlife walks.

Reading their comments in Mhairi's guest book, it was evident her guests were well-satisfied.

I quickly learned that Mhairi and Murdo shared a passion for harvesting green energy. The guest house was pristine with a new laundry room extension that Murdo had built incorporating a separate room with a rack of four Tesla Powerwall batteries which were linked to an array of robust ground mounted solar collector panels with a rated output of 16 kW complemented by a 6 kw wind turbine.

There was also a long polytunnel which provided organic vegetables and herbs in abundance, the summer and autumn surplus used to make soups for her three chest freezers.

Sad news reached us via Alda: Janis was very poorly, still in the Queen Elizabeth , struggling. I learned she and her husband Bert (Robert) had been heavy drinkers but had recently signed the pledge, rescued by Mhairi.

Living in the hamlet of Clachan near the road junction with the A867 road from Lochmaddy, Alda and Fiona were close neighbours of Janis and Bert.

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My first days morphed into weeks.

As I established a busy rhythm to my new life, I was able to fit in a few fly fishing sessions for Brownies, either fishing along rocky shores or wading in sandy machair lochs, taking care to protect my dicky knee. Murdo gave me a box of his hand-tied flies. He offered to take me sea-fishing later in August and September when the salmon and sea trout runs were due and the sea was teeming with mackerel and hopefully, enormous tuna. I did not refuse this offer, much repeated, although I was unsure how my dodgy knee would react to riding in a big RIB through heavy seas.

Murdo and I visited the ruin of my father's croft and we began a conversation of what I should build and what it might cost. He promised me 'mates' rates.

Loch Obisary

Loch Obisary ⁱⁱ has always been a favourite of mine. As boys, Alda and I fished it from the bank, mainly along its eastern edge and sometimes along its southern shoreline in the shadow of Ben Eaval. It is a huge loch dotted with many islands large and small. It is very deep in places, said to be 45 metres (150 feet) with a perimeter of around 28 km (18 miles).

In its upper layers it is a fresh water loch with a scattered population of distinctively coloured brown trout with very sharp teeth (they gnaw at tiny mussels which abound near the shore). This fresh water sits above a vast underwater lagoon of brine caused by the constant inflow of sea water from Loch Euport. The narrow and shallow stream which connects the two lochs allows entry to a few visiting and resident sea fish species such as coalfish and mackerel among many others.

When we were about eleven, during the school holidays, Alda and I made a complete circuit of its perimeter, camping out for two days, being eaten alive by midges while fishing during the rises at dusk and dawn. Only once had we fished it from a boat with Alda's Uncle James when he was visiting from Glasgow but he refused to land us on any of the islands.

With my new five-piece travel rod and my collection of de-barbed flies, I revisited the spots along the eastern edge which had been our favourites all those long years ago and enjoyed a few hours of catch and release Brownies. As in the distant past, I looked out at these alluring islands, longing to be able to fish around their perimeters.

I stopped for a coffee and on impulse, I called Alda.

'Hello Fergie, and how are you doing away today, eh?'

'I'm on the shore at Obisary staring out at the islands and thinking about you and me and those times we wanted to fish their shores. Do you remember?'

'I do so, yes. D'you know Fergie, I have fished around them in a boat over the years but not once ever have I set foot on them. What if I get a boat booked from the Estate office and we have a go?'

'I'm off duty on Saturday, Alda. How about you?'

'Yes, Fergie, Saturday is good, I'll let you know.'

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Fergie

Alda picked me up at Mhairi's. From the road end car park, we hefted our gear across the field to the boat anchorage and loaded up. We chose the better of two ancient grey painted boats. Alda reckoned they were over fifty years old with a single-skin GRP construction, patched and repaired many times over. Truth be told, I thought they were quite unsuitable for this huge loch where on a wild day the waves could get up to more than a metre high.

However, on that fateful day, it was fairly calm and we were keen and the islands were nearby.

Alda settled in the middle, fixed the oars with bungee cords and we set off, being pushed offshore by a light tailwind. Ten minutes later we landed at a small island, keen to make a start.

'Alda, what's this one called?'

'Probably too small to have a proper name. Back in the day we used to call it Eilean nan Sgarbh.'

'Isle of the Cormorant?'

'So your Gaelic's coming back, is it?'

'Yes. Mhairi changes from English to Gaelic mid-sentence.'

'Agus, it's her secret teaching technique, she told me once.'

'OK Alda, since I'm left-handed and you are right-handed, I suggest you fish anti-clockwise along the shore and I go clockwise.'

'Right, Fergie, see you later. Agus, how are you off for flies? Here, I made you up as wee selection box. Try the minnow imitation with the sparkle in it and remember, always'

'I know, I know - 'slow, slow, slow with a tiny wee jerk now and again.'

'And what else?'

'Keep it simple, use only one fly at a time.'

'Ah, good man, Fergie MacAlpine, Mòran fortan! (Much Luck!)

'And Tight Lines! to you, Alda Macleod.'

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The breeze picked-up but the bigger waves seemed to stimulate the fish.

Fergie

I fished steadily, getting into a rhythm of casting then moving carefully, negotiating the slippery weed covered boulders for a few paces then standing still while retrieving. After a few mis-casts and snags, I started hooking wee Brownies with every second or third catch, bringing each fish to the surface near to me to enjoy its beautiful colours before letting the line go slack, allowing it to wriggle free.

Then I caught a mackerel which raced away at high speed, taking line, leaping out of the water before diving deep, twisting and turning.

Excited, I stepped in deeper, slipped, crashing down on my backside. My borrowed lifejacket exploded and filled. I went down on my left side, letting go of my rod. When I attempted to stand up, the pain shot through my dicky knee and I went down again. I crawled ashore on my hands and knees and looked but there was no sign of Alda. I stood and hopped slowly along the shingle heading back towards the boat but it was gone.

I scanned the loch and saw it moving steadily, heading for a larger island, gathering speed.

It snagged on something, stopped, twirled then began to drift again, now listing, bow down, holed, slowing, filling with water, sinking lower until it turned onto its side, caught fast on a submerged reef.

I sat on a boulder and brought out my mobile phone. Its screen was cracked, waterlogged - no signal - dead.

I unclipped the whistle from the life jacket and gave three short blasts, three long and three short, hoping Alda would hear me.

I waited a few minutes, my knee throbbing.

I repeated my SOS whistle and called out his name.

Still no sight or sound of Alda.

Again I tried whistling and calling out his name.

Perhaps the rising wind was carrying my voice away.

Or perhaps he too had fallen?

With the recent purchase of my new iPhone 16, I had decided I no longer needed a watch. Looking southwards proved fruitless, the Sun was already obscured by ominous dark clouds and wind was creating small white tops on the waves.

I tried to work out what time it might be. We had snacked and drunk coffees back at the car park around ten o'clock or thereby, I thought. The plan had been to fish for around three to four hours or so then head back. I was due to help Mhairi to serve our

Fergie

guests and clear up after the evening meal and then go with her and Murdo to join Alda to play at a charity ceilidh at The Hub, an event to raise funds for the Carinish Care Home.

A few metres away I saw a driftwood branch on the tideline. I hopped across to it. Using my trusty Opinel pocket knife, I fashioned the branch into a make-shift crutch. As the first spit of rain reached me, a cormorant circled and landed out of sight. I tossed a mental coin and followed in the direction Alda had taken.

When I saw him lying on the bank, his head back, his mouth open, I thought at first he was sleeping. His rod was lying on the shore, its line slack, trailing into the water.

I lowered myself beside him and checked his pulse. Weak but steady. I checked his breathing. Shallow. There was blood on his lips, he had bitten his tongue. His skin was cool, clammy. I eased my skip cap onto his head to reduce heat loss, eased him into the recovery position then fumbled through his pockets.

His phone was locked, displaying a message to use touch control to open it. After a fiddle, his right index finger gave me access.

I looked through his contacts and saw Fiona's works number at the hospital.

I rang and after a delay, I explained my situation to Gemma Bridges, the student nurse on reception duty. The girl seemed vague, disconnected.

'Fiona isn't here. I think she was planning a run this afternoon. She'll have her works phone off, to cut out the 'chatter' as she calls it. I'll raise the alarm and get a first responder to you asap.'

'Gemma, this is a serious emergency, it's not a sprained wrist or a twisted ankle. Alda needs to go to hospital in Glasgow, at once, please. Is there a helicopter available?'

'In theory, yes. In practice it could be three or four hours to reach you. The Coastguard are based near the airport at Stornoway but I have a number for the RNLI at Leverhulme. But I don't know if I'm allowed to do any of that stuff. I'm just a junior. Fiona could do it, if she was here.'

'Gemma, the Coastguard and Lifeboat would take hours to get here. Agus, what happened to the Coastguard Station at Lochmaddy?'

'Oh, it closed. There was a lot of resistance to that. Protest meetings and so on. My mother was involved.'

'Gemma, why did you say it was Fiona's works phone. Does she have another mobile? I need to get her involved. Its serious. Alda has had a heart attack or a stroke.'

Fergie

'I'm not supposed to . . .'

'Gemma, I'll take the flak. Text it to me.'

'Eh, Fiona will be mad at me.'

'Gemma, just do it. NOW, please.'

'OK. OK, I'll do it.'

The first big drops began to fall. In the distance lightning flashed and thunder rolled.

I took off my heavy walking jacket and my old woolly pully and wrapped Alda inside them, deflated my lifejacket and added it as a makeshift waterproof layer.

Alda's phone pinged.

I rang the mobile number supplied by Gemma. It went immediately to a voicemail announcement, a standardise version as supplied by the comms provider.

Please leave a message and I'll get back to you.

Seconds later, Alda's phone buzzed.

'Fiona, its Fergie here. There's a medical emergency situation with Alda.'

I explained what had happened.

'Fergie, where are you?'

I told her.

'Bloody hell, I can see you! Both of you.'

I scanned the shoreline but could not see her.

'Fiona, can you row a boat?'

'Of course. Right, gotcha. The anchorage, the other boat. I'll divert to it now. I'll ring you back.'

'Fiona, do you know about the hidden rowlocks?'

'No.'

As Alda had explained earlier, two sets of rowlocks and bungee cords were hidden in a black bin bag behind a yellow lichen covered rock above the anchorage. This secret arrangement saved locals a long trip to the Estate office in Lochmaddy to pick them up and return them, as required when visitors hired the boats and signed the various waiver forms and paid the deposit.

Fergie

I spotted Fiona as she ran past in her fluorescent pink rain jacket, blew my whistle and she waved back before disappearing over the hill above the anchorage.

Alda's mobile buzzed - Gemma.

'Dr MacAlpine, our first responder is off the island at a wedding on Skye and her designated back-up has a migraine and can't drive. I've tried everyone I can think of but no joy. Then I remembered that Lexie and Donald bought the Coastguard Rib and use it as a local call-out service. I rang her and she has activated the emergency WhatsApp group.'

'So, this is like a *local coastguard team*.'

'Yeah. Mum organised a lot of charity events with Lexie to raise the money. I ran three half-marathons in a Bunny Outfit and raised nearly £700 and I lost two stones.'

'When will this RIB arrive?'

'They're mustering a crew but they say it will be impossible to get their RIB over the moor down to the loch anywhere near you. They said they will launch Murdo's RIB at Loch Euport and go round and try the sea water inlet into Loch Obisary, if that makes sense to you?'

'Yes. But tell them I've managed to contact Fiona . . .'

I explained about Fiona, then added . . .

'Ask Lexie's team to forget about Murdo's RIB, Fiona is rowing out to me now. Tell Lexie to head on foot to the anchorage for the Estate boats and ask the team to bring their full CPR kit. We might have to defrib Alda.'

'Dr MacAlpine, I talked to the others here. Are you still a GP?'

'No, not any longer. I've, retired, eh, resigned. So it's just Fergie, from now on, OK?'

'Great, Fergie. My Mum told me all about you. She said you were very clever as a wee boy and you were sent away to a posh school in Glasgow but after University the drink got hold of . . . Oh, Dr MacAlpine, I'm so, so sorry.'

'No Gemma, it's all right. Agus, **please**, we need a helicopter. We are on an island as I explained and our boat has sunk.'

'Fergie, I'm not supposed to do it. I'm not on the list to authorise a helicopter call-out.'

'Gemma, do it on my authority and do it now, **please**.'

Fergie

'Fergie, sorry, I have to ask you, it's on the emergency protocol, you and Alda, you weren't drinking when this accident happened, were you?'

'No, Gemma we have not been drinking alcohol, only coffee. Request a helicopter now, *please*.'

'But it means filling out a big form which I have to email. I've never done it before.'

'Gemma, forget the form and phone 999 and tell them everything I've told you. Do it at once, *please*. With Alda the way he is, every second counts.'

'D'you know, Alda taught me to swim? OK, Fergie, I'll do it. I'll phone 999 now.'

Airlift

Fiona and I ferried Alda to the anchorage to get access to the Defrib Kit. We were greeted by an attractive, smallish, slim woman called Lexie and an older chubby man called Donald, two people I had heard a fair bit about but had not met before. Murdo was already standing in the water and lifted Alda into his arms and carried him ashore to the waiting stretcher.

I stood by as Fiona and followed the CPR protocol on Donald's iPad.

Lexie was at Alda's feet, sitting tall on her heels, elbows pressing into her sides, her hands outstretched, her back and head upright with her eyes closed, mumbling something under her breath. I thought she might be praying. When I noticed she had a small pink crystal in the palm of her left hand and a clear one in her right, I remembered Mhairi talking about the power of psychic healing and her kitchen drawer full of crystals in different colours.

I studied Lexie. She had shortish, curly red-brown hair, a pert little face, largish ears, a shining weather-tanned complexion and full lips. There was no sign of makeup.

Mhairi had mentioned Lexie, saying she had a heart of gold, one of her most trusted helpers. Lexie had been named Alexa McAlister after her grandfather until Amazon established its digital assistant. I had learned from Murdo that Lexie was newly forty and lived in Lochmaddy in a terraced house she had inherited from an uncle who had left to live in Troon with his twin sister. Both had succumbed to Covid.

Donald recited each item from the checklist then entered Fiona's stats, repeating her stats as she called them out quietly. I was relieved that the responsibility for Alda had passed to others.

Alda's blood pressure was critically low, signifying internal bleeding.

His heart rate was irregular, slowing.

Fiona asked:

'Fergie, what should we do?'

I made my decision. If I got hauled up for it, so be it.

'Listen up everyone, please. From these numbers it is quite certain that Alda must be taken to hospital. Perhaps to Raigmore in Inverness or preferably to the QE in Glasgow. Donald, can you email those stats to Gemma at the hospital in Benbecula. I asked her to

Fergie

try to get us a helicopter but there are bureaucratic issues. Gemma said she's never done it before and that she's not 'authorised'. This new information might just convince someone in authority to act.'

'D-d-done! Agus, I've added our exact GPS c-c-coordinates.'

Fiona asked:

'Fergie, should we move him to the car park? It would make it easier for the helicopter.'

'No. My best guess is that he has blood leakage from a damaged valve. The less we move him the better. The danger is lack of oxygen to his brain and vital organs. I suggest you continue with oxygen and apply very gentle heart massage.'

'Fergie, I'm too jittery to do it. Will you try? Please?'

If Alda died, there would be an inquest and an inquiry. I might lose my pension.

'OK. Move over, please.'

Ignoring the pain in my knee, I did what was required.

As if by telepathy, Donald held his open palm to my mouth. Two Ibuprofen tabs. I sipped them down with water from his beaker.

Fiona said:

'Thanks, Fergie. Thank God you're here.'

Lexie reached forwards and rubbed both crystals against the backs of my hands and said:

'Yes, Fergie, we're lucky to have you here with us on North Uist. Very lucky.'

The rain which had been intermittent, settled to a steady downpour. Donald and Murdo rigged a makeshift tent over us with a lightweight tarpaulin.

Standing behind Fiona, Donald continued to record Alda's stats on his iPad then looked up and advised:

'H-h-helicopter from QE n-n-now airborne.'

Lexie added:

'It will be the Airbus H145. We've been on exercises with it during simulated emergencies with the *MV Hebrides*. It has an airspeed around 150 knots. My cousin Bobby is ex-RAF and he might be the co-pilot. These guys are amazing.'

Donald added:

Fergie

'E-e-estimated airtime is 137 minutes, giving an E-E-ETA of 16:23.'

Fiona added:

'So, they did not scramble the Coastguard helicopter from Stornoway? Maybe it is already on a call?'

'Oh, I asked Gemma to request the helicopter from the QE. I didn't know there was a Search and Rescue helicopter at Stornoway.'

If it all went wrong, this would be down to me, not Gemma but I was convinced Glasgow was Alda's best hope as helicopter arrivals at the QE got priority treatment.

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Lexie heard the helicopter first, approaching through the dark clouds. She fired a flare to guide it.

The rescue operation was like clockwork. The aircraft hovered about thirty metres overhead, rocksteady. It took under ten minutes and then the Airbus H125 soared and turned southwest, heading for the helipad at QUEH, a sight I knew well from my previous workplace in Govan.

Fiona went with Alda as his next-of-kin. Donald had already sent Alda's most recent stats to Evelyn Morgan-McMillan the A&E consultant leading her onboard support team.

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Murdo helped me to hirple across the machair and up the rough track past the ruined cottage to the car park. The two Ibuprofen tabs from Donald were kicking in and my knee was less painful.

Lexie and I sat in her old Transit van out of the rain.

Fiona had taken Alda's phone. I borrowed Lexie's phone to contact Mhairi. I gave her a brief rundown.

'D'you know Fergie, I'd heard whispers that Alda had angina. It was supposed to be a secret. He was afraid he could lose his job if CalMac found out. He's been planning to retire when he's fifty-five, only four years away.'

'Ah, that makes sense.'

'But Fergie, are you going to make it back for the evening meals, eh?'

'Yes, I'm sure I can cadge a lift. Have you taken orders from the guests? Is their food out of the freezer?'

Fergie

'Yes, of course I have! But I'm already in Lochmaddy at The Hub. With your knee crocked, can you manage without me, eh? Ask Lexie to help, if she's free.'

'Okay. I'll check and ring you back.'

'Good. Now let me speak to Murdo.'

I waved him over. Taking Lexie's phone, Murdo went back to sit beside Donald in Alda's car while I explained what Mhairi had said.

Lexie said:

'No worries. Look, can I call you Fergie?'

She poured me a sweet, dark brown coffee from her giant flask. I sipped.

'Please do. This is perfect coffee. Thanks.'

'Well Fergie, how is it going since you came home? Still dry, is it?'

'Yes, thanks.'

'I knew you were coming, from your Auntie Eunice. Back in the day, she was my Mum's best friend. Bonded by Gaelic poetry.'

'Ah, Auntie Eunice's Facebook Chronicles.'

'No, FaceTime. Anyway, gone now, Mum is. She was in the same care home as your own Mum, went down the same sad route in the end. But when Margie was lucid, she told me all about you. And I hear from Mhairi you're better at cooking than some of those ones on Master Chef.'

She smiled sweetly:

'D'you know, nowadays I find cooking for one is such a . . .'

'Such a bore?'

'Yes, I mostly eat Ready Meals. Complete madness, eh?'

'Back in Glasgow, in my bad old days living alone with my best friend Laphroig, I often use ready meals. Tasteless, disappointing, most of them. And expensive with it.'

'Yeah. Spot on, Fergie, spot on. But the maddest thing is, I'm usually awash with seafood and Donald inundates me with fresh veggies from his polytunnel. Anyway, *Westward Ho!*, eh?'

'Well Lexie McAlister, how about I cook some ready meals for you, as a thank you for today?'

Fergie

She held my gaze. Her eyes were troubled, doubting, reminding me of Angela before she left, unable to trust me to keep my promises. The moment passed and Lexie smiled and chuckled:

'OK. Yes please, Kenneth Ferguson MacAlpine, you're on!'

Murdo returned, handing Lexie her phone:

'Lexie, Alda's left his keys in the ignition. Do you think it would be OK if I use his car and go straight to the Ceilidh? Donald is keen to get there too, to set up the sound equipment.'

'Yes, but please keep your own mobile on in case there's another call out. You're still on the rota until next Wednesday, remember.'

'OK Skipper.'

Then Murdo raced off, waving and hooting the horn.

'So, Lexie, you're the Cox, then?'

'Yeah. I like to keep busy. Essential, actually. Look, as you probably know from Mhairi, I've had a problem with the drink too. More like a fond liking rather than addiction but I could feel myself slipping so I've signed the pledge now. Mhairi keeps a close eye on me, still calls me every evening for a chat and a check-up. That's why you're with her, isn't it? 'Under surveillance' as it were. Like the rest of us in her merry band.'

'Is there an AA group here?'

'Yes, but they're very keen happy clappy types, if you get my drift.'

'Works for some.'

'No, not for me. How about you Fergie?'

'No, not really.'

'One day at a time, eh? *Westward Ho! Eh?*

'Gemma said you started the local inshore rescue service when the Lochmaddy Coastguard station closed.'

'Yeah. Donald and I run it together. I do the cajoling but he's the brains behind it and does all the paperwork. Look Fergie, you may as well know - everyone else does. I have issues, dyslexia, which is quite severe, and dyspraxia, which is milder, so my arithmetic is a bit wayward at times. I was twenty-eight before I was diagnosed. At school, I was the perpetual dunce. But I've always known deep down I wasn't stupid. Thank God for FaceTime and Zoom, eh? And Podcasts.'

Fergie

'You're not alone, Lexie. Around one in ten of the population is affected by these issues., more of you count other neurodivergent conditions. Thankfully, there have been great strides forward during the last decade. It's better recognized than in the past.'

'I know, I know. Please, spare me the platitudes. Anyway, I have a scallop diving operation so I know this coastline fairly well. My ex-partner started it but he found a new partner and they moved down to Barra. They have a four-bed-guest house, a wee flock of sheep and three breeding Border Collie bitches to keep them busy. Actually, it was a relief when my Kevin emailed me to say he and Malcolm had decided to get married. The laugh is, the three of us were always good pals but I had no idea they were, well, you know. It's all settled down now, ancient history, really.'

'Ah, yes. True love will not be denied.'

'Yes, like your Sylvie and her Moira, eh? Sorry, Aunty Eunice is a bit of a menace, I'm afraid. Nothing is ever secret for long if she finds out, eh?'

'Lexie, any chance of a lift back to Tigh-na Dòbhran? I'm on evening meal duty and I'm running it tight as it is.'

'My pleasure. Look, the rain's off at last. Would you like me to strap up your knee? Open the door and I'll come round with my first aid rucksack.'

'That's it, stretch out your legs and I'll get your waders off. Let the dog see the rabbit, eh?'

She eased off my waders and unzipped my trousers, lowering them to expose my knees.'

'Oh, what nice shapely legs. Hairy too. I do like men with hairy legs.'

After she had the strapping in place she rubbed it with each of her crystals in turn then leaned forward and kissed my knee lightly.

'There, a magic kiss too, you'll be better in no time.'

'My Mum used to say that, when I was a wee boy.'

'I know Fergie, she told me. She was so proud of you.'

'You knew her?'

'Yes, I was working at the care home as an auxiliary when she was admitted. That's why I volunteered to look after her dog, Luna, taking it in to visit your Mum when I could sneak her in. Jumped in through the window, Luna did. On occasions, that dog had the power to bring Margie back to us. We used to chat away with Luna playing her part in the

Fergie

conversation, her big brown eyes fixed on your Mum's face, whining quietly from time to time.'

'Thank you. I did wonder what had happened to her dog. After Dad died, Mum and Luna were inseparable.'

I saw tears in Lexie's eyes. She leaned into me and gave me a hug, burying my head against her chest. She smelled of rosemary.

Then Lexie was upright, all business, moving back to sit in the driver's seat. I glanced across: she was smiling, humming 'Somewhere over the Rainbow'.

'Lexie, my iPhone is knackered, can I use yours to let Mhairi know I'm on schedule for the evening meals?'

'Sure, let's make a move, call her from the van on speed dial. Agus, let me have your phone and I'll ask Donald to have a look at it, he's the island's 'go-to' man for mobiles.'

We set off on the short drive to Mhairi's place.

'Ah, Donald, has he always had a stammer?'

'Yes, so far as we know. After a while you sort of blank it out. Agus, sometimes he becomes more fluent when he gets to know you. He's truly amazing. There's not much defeats him when he puts his mind to it. Our Donald McIvor is a bit of a mystery man, never married, so far as we know. We think it was his stammer that put paid to any romantic involvement.'

'Is there a family history of stammering, do you know? Research shows most stammers are genetic. In my experience it's also common in people with a higher IQ. I noticed he's left-handed.'

'Yes Fergie, Donald is very, very bright. And yes, he's left-handed, just like you.'

She giggled and laughed explosively:

'And Snap, so am I!'

'Yes, Lexie, I noticed. I just hope you weren't chastised for that too at school, were you?'

'No, at primary I was left in a corner to amuse myself, drawing and playing with Lego most of the time when the lessons involved reading or counting. Anyway, they say Donald is from Dingwall where he worked for the local authority running their IT systems until the operation was outsourced and he was given early retirement. He told me his maternal grandfather John Skinner was from Lochmaddy but no one remembers him. As you know, folks from the Western Isles are scattered all over Scotland, mainly to Glasgow like

Fergie

yourself. The War and National Service was a big influence, especially for young men who went away and often did not return or, if they did, they did not settle.'

'Donald seems very reserved.'

'I suppose he is but we could not manage without him. Safe to say, our Donald McIvor is a Godsend. He's one of a very few people on the island who seems to know how to sort out phone and computer problems. Actually, there's not much he can't fix. Cars, washing machines, electrical apparatus, lawnmowers, you name it. His workshop is like that Repair Shop place on TV. Agus, he charges only for the materials unless he already has them in his hoard. People donate stuff to him all the time. Yes, our Donald is a fine man. We could not get by without him.'

Fergie

Hectic

Six weeks on and Alda is home at last but still struggling. Fiona is holding up well in public but Mhairi keeps in constant touch using WhatsApp video calls. Alda has three new heart valves, two stents and a pacemaker. Ten years ago, he may not have made it. I've been visiting most days but he lasts only a few minutes before he falls asleep on me.

Genius that he is, Donald sent off for parts and repaired my iPhone. Thankfully, Sylvie had set it up so that all my data was backed up to iCloud.

Janis is home but poorly. She may need dialysis but they are trialling a new drug which might avoid this. It seems most unlikely she will be returning to Tigh-na-Dòbhran.

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Murdo and I have been along to inspect Taigh a' Chladaich (House by the Shore), my father's old croft, now a ruin. In Donald's office, we sat at Murdo's laptop studying options from about a dozen or so kit house suppliers. I opted for three bedrooms, hoping that Sylvie and Moira and their children might come to visit in the future.

We settled on GreenStar Homes who offer a flexible approach which Murdo endorsed enthusiastically.

Back at the site we took photographs and site measurements. Using a designer app and Photoshop, Donald superimposed an outline of a three bed cottage with a garage/workshop, a good sized panoramic lounge looking south over Loch Euport, a dining-kitchen area, a communal bathroom and an ensuite shower room in the master bedroom.

He added planting and a driveway down to the main shore road, a solar farm and a wind turbine on the hill behind the house, and a battery storage shed and workshop with space for freezers, mimicking Mhairi's set-up.

We emailed this outline design to GreenStar. Within a few minutes, Donna Fraser telephoned to discuss our first ideas. We agreed on a time and date a week later when we joined her in a FaceTime meeting. She took us through her initial proposals and costings for a kit house on a supply only basis, with groundworks and erection by Murdo and his local contacts.

Murdo added his costs and, with a ten percent contingency, the basic budget was circa £280,000 (unfurnished).

Fergie

I asked for a pause, to be sure I was comfortable with the layout and to make contact with Anita Scoular to ask if she was willing to buy my flat to free up funds. I also needed to discuss these proposals with Sylvie who would inherit the croft in due course.

Bracing myself, I knew I must review my pension details and savings, to try to work out a budget and attempt to forecast whether I could remain solvent as the years progressed.

In truth, I was jittery. Everything seemed to be moving ahead too quickly. I had never been disciplined with money although Sylvie had constantly badgered me to make provision for the future. My assets comprised my NHS pension at around £48K after tax, and ISAs of £178K. A quick survey of recent sales of two-bedroom flats in Vinicombe Street showed my flat might fetch around £230K, perhaps more.

With Mhairi's help, we set everything out in a spreadsheet and sent it off to Sylvie.

In a follow-up FaceTime discussion, I reviewed everything which had happened so far and assured Sylvie I had a good support group keeping me on the straight and narrow and shared my feelings with her about Lexie. Sylvie ask for time to consider my proposals and I assumed she would use this time to check with Auntie Eunice.

00000

Two days later, Sylvie sent a WhatsApp asking me to call her that evening on FaceTime and to make sure I was alone.

This sounded ominous.

It was a long session.

The gist was that Sylvie had learned from Mhairi that Lexie had suffered serial miscarriages. In my experience as a GP, this can lead to complex mental health issues. In Lexie's case she had turned her anger on Kevin blaming his faulty genes, driving him into the arms of Malcolm. Alone and hiding her condition, Lexie had turned to heavy drinking until Mhairi had 'retrieved' her. Sylvie and I agreed it would be best not to raise this with Lexie and risk causing her to regress.

We moved on to discuss my house building plans.

In the end, Sylvie gave me her blessing.

In a follow-up WhatsApp message, she added:

Dad,

Fergie

rebuilding Taigh a' Chladaich is a big step forward. Gran Margie would be proud of you.

As you know, I have checked out your new friends. Mhairi in particular seems to be the lynchpin of your support group, Donald McIvor too. With their help, Moira and I think you will make a success of your new life on North Uist.

Regarding Lexie, tread carefully. Make allowances. Please respect her and do not violate the trust she has placed in you. Like you, she is still fragile. Hopefully, you will help each other as your relationship grows and strengthens.

Involve Lexie in your new house build project. Let her help, if she is willing. Sharing issues as they arise will be good for both of you.

Regarding your future on North Uist, may I repeat my advice from months ago, before you moved there.

You must find a purpose for the years ahead, some hobby or long-term project that will engage you physically and stimulate you mentally. Remember you promised me you would not allow yourself to slide back into your old TV binge-watching days.

Keep us posted, please.

Love and Hugs,

Sylvie and Moira

00000

Under the terms of my retirement from the NHS, I was prohibited from working in a front line medical role. Working as a carer or as a 'therapist' was not excluded but neither roles appealed.

I wanted something outdoors, something active, creative.

With Janis unlikely to return, Mhairi had already offered me her job. Mhairi also told me she was keen that I should find alternative accommodation soon, so that she could rent out my room.

If I continued to do meals for her thereafter it would be on an ad hoc month to month basis until she found a replacement, pointing out the wage she was able to afford while realistic, was disappointing, netting me around £330 for a forty hour week.

While I was still enjoying cooking for her guests, we both knew it was not what I wanted as a long term solution.

Fergie

Of course as a former GP I knew that living alone was a risk. What if something went wrong as I got older? A physical problem like my knee, an accident, mental health issues. Living the retirement dream on the Outer Hebrides brought up many challenges, particularly accessing specialist health care.

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Mhairi was helpful and patient, taking me through her experience of upgrading her parent's 1960 era croft, showing me her costs and photographs as the project progressed to completion, a process which had taken only twenty-nine weeks from start to finish.

'Fergie, I can vouch for Murdo. Agus, he'll expect you to help him. You'll learn how to operate a wee digger, make concrete and use a nail gun. That'll keep you busy. Great fun. We began in April and got the best of it. The sooner you get started the better, you definitely don't want to be doing it in a howling gale.'

From the spreadsheet of my finances, I knew with the money from Vinicombe Street I should be able to complete the rebuild without a mortgage. Nevertheless, I could not shift the notion that I needed to find something definite to give me a purpose, a goal, something that would fill the short days and long nights of winter with the wind howling like a banshee.

Ideas kept popping up but each time I looked out at the landscape, my incident on Eilean nan Sgarbh reminded me that I could not expect to engage in rough walking, trail biking or messing about in boats where my knee would be at risk. The knee operation just before Covid had only been a partial success and my Orthopaedic Consultant had told me it was the best I could expect at my age.

Fergie

Lexie

Since Alda's rescue, Lexie has become a frequent visitor to Tigh-na-Dòbhran, frequently bringing scallops, langoustines and an occasional lobster or crabs. If she is coming, she phones ahead arriving by late afternoon with her catch, often staying to help serve the meals and answer questions posed by our guests. She has a nice friendly, bubbly manner and lots of tales to tell about wildlife and occasionally about locals (who are always given fake names to preserve their anonymity).

Over these weeks, I have learned quite a bit about Lexie McAllister. She lives in Lochmaddy where she has her boat moored or beached in the protected water beside the Coastguard station where the RIB is located.

Donald's cottage is nearby and he looks after the RIB and Lexie's engine and boat.

Lexie only snorkels for scallops when the weather is calm. The location of her shallow scallop beds are a closely guarded secret. Likewise, her succulent mussels, are harvested from secluded seaweed beds in hidden nooks and crannies. These shellfish harvests are the cream of her crop. In reality, her main income is creel fishing for crabs, langoustines and lobsters. She baits her lobster pots with freshly caught mackerel and coleys (coalfish) caught using glittering metallic feathers on a trolling line.

Her main clients during the tourist season are local hotels and a few selected luxury guest houses like Mhairi's. In winter she exports her catch to Spain and in rougher weather, she works from the shore harvesting Scottish whelks ⁶ using smaller baited pots, cooking and freezing them for export.

Throughout the year she photographs wildlife which, during bad weather, she uses to inspire her lifelike paintings and sketches offered for sale at cafes and gift shops during the tourist season. With other offerings from local artists and artisans, her images also sell well from a community website online shop operated by Donald. His refurbished cottage is near the Coastguard boat shed at Loch Strumore ⁷ where the RIB is hoisted in its trailer, ready to launch at Lochmaddy.

⁶

Scottish whelks, known locally as 'buckies', are common whelks, *Buccinum Undatum* and in England as periwinkles, are popular edible sea snails harvested from UK shores, caught in baited pots, cooked, and enjoyed with vinegar or in seafood dishes, with their distinctive spiral shells and firm meat being a delicacy, often found in European cuisine.

⁷

Fergie

Self-taught from YouTube videos, Donald is responsible for the upkeep of the RIB and its engines. He also runs a 'for friends' taxi service using a Renault Zoe EV. This is a free service available for people like me who do not own a car or do not wish to drive. At Vinicombe Street, parking was a nightmare becoming worse with each passing year. Prior to Covid, I gave up my BMW saloon in favour of the Subway to commute to Govan.

Loch Struth Mòr connects to the sea, offering access to the sheltered waters of Lochmaddy and ultimately the wider Atlantic (Sea of the Hebrides) on the eastern, rockier coast of North Uist.

John Bonthron, for Writer's circus, January/February 2026, 'about a picture'.

Ultimatum

In early September, Mhairi asked me to look for alternative accommodation. She had sourced a replacement for Janis who was now on dialysis. Sandra MacLachlan was a cook at the Military Base who was finding the forty mile round trip from her home in Sollas on the top of North Uist down to the Remote Radar Head station at Benbecula ⁱⁱⁱ time consuming and sometimes scary.

'Yes, it's not a nice road in winter,' I agreed, mindful of the causeway drowning tragedy in 2005 ⁸.

'Fergie, Lexie McAlister has a room available. Agus, I took the liberty of sounding her out and she is willing to give you houseroom until you get your own place. You two seem to get along okay and, well, Lexie is a nice person, grounded, eh?'

'Are you sure she could put up with me?'

'Fergie, for God's sake man, surely you must know by now Lexie is dead keen on you, eh? Agus, Sandra is desperate to make a start here before the worst of the autumn gales. Look, Fergie, I'm sorry if I seem pushy but I feel if I don't give you a nudge, you might still be thinking about Taigh a' Chladaich this time next year, eh? Agus, I think you missed the boat for this year and Murdo and Donald agree. Building houses out here in winter is way too risky, eh? Look, I hate to nag but sadly, I think you need prodding. Have you always been so dithery, eh?'

I suppose I had been waiting for Lexie to make the first move but it was true, we seemed to suit each other. I retreated to my room and sent a WhatsApp.

Mhairi suggested I ask if your spare room is still available?

Lexie called back on WhatsApp video immediately.

⁸

On the night of 11 January 2005, a family of five attempted to escape a violent storm battering their home on the island of South Uist. Winds gusting to 124mph had coincided with a high tide, and a surging sea was threatening to overwhelm the MacPhersons' house. The conditions were so severe that wind and waves hurled sand and rocks against the outside walls. Archie and Murdina MacPherson, their children Andrew, seven, and Hannah, five, along with Murdina's father Calum Campbell set off in two cars. They hoped to reach the safety of Archie's parents' home, just over a mile away, but they never made it; their cars were swept away.

Fergie

'Fergie, I thought you'd never ask! Yes, I've repainted it and I've got a new king sized bed and mattress on its way. It should be here on Friday. I'll need help to put it together.'

'Ah, sounds great. So, shall I tell Mhairi I'll move in this weekend?'

'Yes, Fergie. Look, what if I pop along later today? OK?'

'Yes, sounds great. See you later alligator!'

'Westward Ho! Eh?

My mental log jam was unblocked.

00000

Donald arranged a FaceTime meeting with Donna Fraser. With Murdo and Lexie we met at Donald's office to firm up details of the house design. A delivery date of the kit from GreenStar was set for mid-April. A few minutes later, Donna advised she had made provisional bookings with CalMac for two HGVs.

I transferred the 20% deposit to GreenStar's account.

The Taigh a' Chladaich rebuild project was moving ahead at last.

A week later the famous five (Lexie, Murdo, Donald, Mhairi and me) met at Murdo's house for a seafood extravaganza celebrated with Schloer grape juice.

Donald used his mini-projector to display the info pack we had received from GreenStar and his own AI generated walk-through video of my new home.

A week later, Donna had re-confirmed her two HGVs were booked for Thursday 9 April 2026.

Murdo and I planned to make a start soon on demolitions and groundworks.

Later that night as we lay side by side under my king-sized duvet, Lexie told me she had always wanted a polytunnel but did not have enough land. I promised to include one which she would have full access to.

At our next project review meeting, we talked about adding a polytunnel for salad vegetables and herbs. Donald linked his laptop to his projector and we compared the various offerings and costs and debated where to position it on the site.

Fergie

We settled on the Polycurb ⁹ version which Murdo and Mhairi had chosen because of its green credentials and excellent ratings from existing purchasers. Lexie was ecstatic.

Donald and Donna progressed the paperwork with the council. He knew all the buttons to push and made an application to BT for a broadband connection and follow up applications for water and electricity supplies then drafted orders for my wind turbine, solar farm and storage batteries.

He sent me the invoices and orders and I settled the amounts due online.

⁹

Polycrub:

Designed in Shetland and built to withstand high wind speeds and the harshest of climates with some sources guaranteeing resistance up to 130 mph winds, its frame uses recycled farm piping set into concrete for maximum stability. The covering is a durable polycarbonate that is expected to last in excess of 20 years. It has been used widely across the Outer Hebrides with no reported damage from severe weather.

Fergie

Luna

A few days later I was visiting Donald to check if I was needed to make any outstanding online payments. When I arrived he was standing at the lochside with a remote controller in his hand, flying a tiny drone.

'Well Donald, yet another string to your bow, is it?'

'N-n-no, it's not mine. It b-b-belongs to a wee laddie from Clachan. A birthday p-p-present. He crashed it and it fell into the water but I d-d-dried it out and repaired it. This is my second t-t-test flight and it seems to b-b-be okay. Y-y-yes?.'

'They use drones a lot nowadays for filming. You can see that from Landward and Countryfile.'

'N-n-no, camera drones are not for me. I tried one then d-d-discovered I suffered from v-v-vertigo. I s-s-sent it b-b-back to Amazon, got a refund.'

'Donald, you're not alone, around fifty percent of adults suffer from vertigo to various degrees and it gets worse as we get older ¹⁰.

But the seed was sown. Back at Lexie's, I went online and checked out camera drones, using YouTube and Amazon to get an idea of what they cost. The entry levels seemed to be around a hundred pounds but these were clearly meant as toys and many reviews were critical of them, especially when used outdoors where they were easily blown off course.

At around £2,000 the drones avail were claimed to be 'near-professional' and initially I was tempted to order one. Wisdom prevailed and I sent an email to Donald with a link to Amazon and a few minutes later he sent me a YouTube link ¹¹ to a series of video tutorials on the DJI Mavic 3 Pro Cine drone.

His email was emphatic:

Fergie,

¹⁰

Anyone of any age can suffer from vertigo, but it becomes more common as you get older. It affects women more often than men. While it's not hereditary in itself, some of the conditions that cause vertigo may be inherited. Certain medications can lead to vertigo attacks.

¹¹

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLkaol6xBVLZ-BiI8NnPcA1GaPKp2afk22>

Fergie

I had the earlier version of this particular drone and in terms of quality and ease of use, it was excellent. If you're feeling loaded, you can easily spend £10K plus on higher specs for the sort of fully professional versions used by TV and film crews. However, many forums suggest the latest DJI Mavic Pro 3 Cine variant is far and away best value.

Hope this helps,

Donald.

I waited for Lexie to get back and explained my idea to her.

After we had eaten we sat side by side and projected the Mavi Pro 3 tutorials from my iPad to her 50" TV screen, chatting away and stopping from time to time to rewind and replay bits we were unsure of.

Lexie was blown away by the specs for the three onboard cameras and the quality of the screen on the hand-held screen, technical term - Digital Remote Controller (DRC).

'Wow! Look Fergie, the main wide angled lens is Hasselblad! And look, the drones range is up to thirty kilometres with around nearly an hour's flight time, forty minutes when hovering. Agus, think about it - imagine the ability to change between three high spec cameras at the click of a switch.'

I added:

'Agus, did you see it can fly in strong winds at up to Force 6 with onboard GPS to hold it in position.'

Lexie paused the TV and looked into my face, worry lines showing around her mouth.

'Fergie, for a powerful drone like that you'll almost certainly need a licence, eh? Will that be a problem, eh? I mean, you don't have any black marks against your name, do you, eh? You know, Police issues, tribunals, that sort of thing?'

My mind whipped back to my conversation with Debbie Hutcheson:

"Fergie, please, I urge you to accept this exit package and go quietly. If you don't, I may have to go a different route and then you might lose everything, including your clean record."

'No. No, of course not.'

Lexie noted my hesitation.

Fergie

'Fergie, come clean with me. Are you sure you have no black marks, no endorsements, eh? You know how it is nowadays with everything being held in databases the authorities use to check up on people.'

It was hard to know how much had been spread about me after I left Govan for North Uist. On social media unfounded rumours could travel thousands of miles in milliseconds.

'No. No, my retirement as a GP was a mutual agreement. No dirty linen to conceal. Hand on heart.'

'That's great, Fergie. Sorry, I just had to ask, you know, in case.'

Smiling, she squeezed my hand and pecked my cheek.

'Tell you what, Lexie, let's ask Perplexity how to apply for permissions to fly drones.' ¹²

I tapped my query into my iPad and we read the response.

'Oh God Fergie, look at the paperwork.'

'Mmm, sounds complicated. I'll discuss it with Donald.'

'Of course, thinking about it, he must have been through all this for himself, eh?'

'Yes Lexie, he's our go to man for this as well.'

'Fergie, did he ever tell you why he bought his drone?'

'No.'

'In fact the drone was my idea. I thought we might be able to use it for our rescue work. There are lots of situations where we need to search along the coastline where the RIB cannot reach, shallow areas, behind reefs and small islands when we have to rely on binoculars.'

'Yes, I can see having a camera drone for search purposes would be a useful tool.'

'When Donald discovered he couldn't fly it using the controller screen because of his vertigo, I had a go but I kept crashing it. I was so nervous and his drone was so expensive. I asked Murdo if he would have a try at it but he refused saying it would never work. Agus, you know what he's like when he digs his heels in on something. Anyway, to be fair, he is seldom available, more of a back-up crew member than a regular. Agus, with your knee the way it is, I wouldn't allow you to join our RIB crew.'

¹²

Perplexity is an AI search engine which Donald had recommended.

Fergie

'Lexie, it's still early days. Maybe I won't be any good at flying it either. Let's see how it pans out. If it goes to plan, maybe when I am proficient I could tutor you. In fact, why don't we buy a cheap drone, an indoor one and we can both practice with it, maybe at The Hub, as a try out?'

'Yes, Fergie, I'm up for that.'

As a tester, we ordered a small camera drone from Amazon at just under £150 with a charger and six tiny back-up batteries. It worked well enough indoors and after a few hours we could both fly it around Lexie's house. Flying it at The Hub was easier, allowing us to increase the speed and try out swooping and soaring manoeuvres but, when we tried it outdoors, the wind whipped it away into the loch and it sank without trace.

However, we were both hooked on the idea of owning a camera drone and following Donald's recommendation, we ordered the DJI Mavic Pro 3 Cine with all the add-ons.

00000

Two weeks later, with all my registrations and permissions in place ^{iv} the three of us stood on the grassy bank above the Coastguard shed at Loch Strumore, near to Lexie's workboat mooring. During the registration process, Donald had asked me to choose a name for the drone. I chose Luna, the name my mother had chosen for all her dogs.

With the cameras turned off, Donald had already flown Luna over the moorland by direct sight alone, returning it to a caravan stool he had painted in bright fluorescent colours as a mini helipad, the idea being to keep Luna clear of the rough grass and heather.

Now it was my turn.

I knew most of what Donald was telling me from watching the video tutorials and our indoor flights with the toy drone but nonetheless, his reassurance was helpful. Under his guidance, using the DRC I eased Luna upwards to about head height. Flying initially by direct sighting, I moved the drone slowly ahead, following the circuit that Donald had taken earlier before landing without incident a few minutes later. To embed this experience, he encouraged me to repeat this circuit three more times, still flying by direct sighting.

Lexie, who was not registered to fly it, had a go but crashed within the first few seconds. Luna bounced on the heather and was undamaged. We restarted Luna from the landing pad again but after three further crashes Lexie decided to leave it for another time.

At Donald's suggestion, I took Luna on another flight this time with the cameras enabled, using a mixture of flying by direct sight while checking on the DRC screen. This time I

Fergie

took Luna directly upwards, parking her above us at the hover, fixing her position at a constant height using the onboard GPS system.

Switching lenses, I made a short series of video clips before bringing Luna back safely to our helipad stool.

We changed the battery and re-launched Luna, following the original circuit again. This time I flew mainly using the view on the DRC screen with occasional direct visual glances to be sure I knew where the drone was.

Donald, who had been watching my progress on his binoculars, suggested we break for a coffee and try again in a half an hour when my brain had 'processed' what I had learned.

We downloaded our clips using a USB C cable to connect the DRC to Donald's laptop. He explained he would clean them up using Apple software and make them into a mini home movie.

After three further rehearsal sessions under Donald's guiding hand and several in-depth re-runs of the YouTube tutorials, I stood again at our 'helipad' and sent the drone along the perimeter edge of Loch Strumore, flying by camera alone with Donald and Lexie watching the drone on their binoculars. After ten minutes I reversed the procedure and after a few erroneous fly pasts, I landed the drone on the helipad, having completed this new circuit flying entirely by camera.

After a coffee, I completed a similar circuit twice more.

Flying by camera began to feel natural.

At the end of each session, we downloaded our clips to Donald's laptop.

Later, cuddled together on the settee watching Donald's home movies, Lexie said:

'Fergie, I really, really must learn how to do this. Can't you just see how amazing it would be for me to have one of these drones for rescue operations. Do you think you could teach me.'

'Well my dearling, I have a wee surprise present for you.'

It was an DJI NEO 2 Combo Kit costing under £400 with all the add-ons and gismos and spare batteries ¹³.

¹³

DJI NEO 2 Drone

<https://youtu.be/rN4hGxTE2hg?si=xdCU0QKGZQRLUy5H>

Fergie

We opened the box and studied it then watched the recommended YouTube video which explained and demonstrated its features. With its rotors enclosed and protected this drone is rugged and durable. Many forums consider it to be the best entry level drone for adult beginners.

Soon we were back in The Hub practicing with Lexie's new drone which she had decided to call Shep. Within an hour, she had more or less mastered flying it indoors.

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The next morning we were both back at Donald's place on the edge of Loch Strumore, practicing side by side with Shep and Luna. I was hoping that with more experience, Lexie would overcome her nervousness and step up from Shep to Luna.

The robust DJI NEO 2 Drone worked well and she soon moved on from flying by direct sighting to using her DRC screen to fly by camera and using the RTH (Return To Home) feature when she lost track of where the drone was flying. With intense daily practice sessions, within a week Lexie was fully competent flying Shep by camera and we agreed that Donald would add her to the paperwork allowing her to fly Luna. Likewise, he added me to Shep's paperwork.

Within a few days Lexie and I were flying Shep and Luna together with Donald observing, adding helpful comments and, later, teaching us how to edit our video clips and make them into useable presentations.

00000

Two weeks later we were ready to proceed with confidence.

We devised a plan, a mini competition. Lexie had opted to take Shep out in her workboat to search along the coast to the north of Lochmaddy, hoping to video an otter family she had been watching over the summer.

Donald and I were on the high bank above the boat anchorage at Loch Obisary, on our first ever 'Fly with Luna' drone safari. From our portable helipad, I flew the Luna using the DRC camera out to Eilean nan Sgarbh.

Hovering directly above it, I took a slow 360 degree video clip to capture the panorama of the huge loch. Activating the medium telephoto lens I searched downwards. Spotting a heron poised ready to strike, I changed to the long telephoto lens and moved the hover

The DJI Neo 2, like the original Neo, weighs under 250 grams (typically around 135g) and includes a camera, placing it in the UK's C0 category under CAA rules. This requires only an Operator ID for legal outdoor flight in Scotland, including the Outer Hebrides—no Flyer ID or additional competency certificates are needed.

Fergie

location in order to frame the heron in profile then waited. The heron plunged into the weeds near the shore and came up with a small fish which disappeared into its gullet.

Back on station over the island I switched again to my long telephoto lens and framed a view of Ben Eabhal ¹⁴ around three kilometres away.

Donald nudged me.

'L-l-look, our heron's being hassled. My G-g-god, it's a sea eagle. The w-w-word is there is a nest on the far side over there b-u-but I've not seen it so f-f-far.'

The eagle swooped again and again until the heron moved away, flapping lazily, veering low above the water heading south, dipping over the promontory towards Loch Euport, out of sight. We waited and in due time the sea eagle returned, soaring upwards in a wide circle until it disappeared into the clouds.

The battery warning light on the DRC flashed and I brought Luna home to our helipad to change the battery and download the raw images to my new MacBook.

I was keen to carry on flying but Donald had a meeting back at his office and we packed up our gear into my backpack. Donald carried our helipad stool and I leaned on my walking pole to support my knee which had been acting up again.

00000

In his car Donald asked if I still had a valid licence to drive a car.

'Yes but it expires soon. I think I'll let it lapse.'

'N-n-no. Renew it as an insurance p-p-policy. Y-y-yes? You s-s-said you gave up your car in Glasgow because p-p-parking was difficult. But that's not an issue here. And with your k-k-knee being d-d-dodgy, your e-bike might not b-b-be the answer. And there is the w-w-wind and rain too. We've h-h-had great summer but it c-c-can't last, can it?'

'Right, I get it. You're telling me I'm becoming a burden, needing lifts from you and Lexie and Murdo and Mhairi?'

'Well y-y-yes, it has been m-m-mentioned recently.'

'So what would you recommend?'

'L-l-look Fergie, it's your l-l-left knee that's the issue. Y-y-yes? So g-g-get yourself an EV. One pedal driving, everything with the right foot, like the d-d-dodgems at the

¹⁴

Ben Eabhal (or Eaval) is the prominent, steep-coned hill dominating the western end of Loch Obisary. For many decades it has been the site of a Golden Eagle nest.

Fergie

fairground. Y-y-yes? Check it out on P-P-Perplexity. I think you'll find the R-R-Renault Zoe is the most s-s-suitable all round EV for our s-s-situation out here b-b-but the BMW i3 has a higher seating p-p-position and better ground c-c-clearance for the r-r-rough tracks you m-m-might need to cover searching out w-w-wildlife. Y-y-yes?'

'OK Donald. I'll check it out but it's about twenty years since I've driven a car of any kind.'

'No w-w-worries Fergie, I'll t-t-take you out for refresher l-l-lessons. Driving is a muscle m-m-memory thing, like riding your b-b-bike. Y-y-yes?'

'Yeah. OK, Donald. OK, I'll check it out. Thanks.'

'L-l-look, if you d-d-decide to buy one, c-c-come to my office and we'll have a l-l-look online. Y-y-yes? Remember Fergie, you a-a-are in a strong p-p-position. In your s-s-situation you d-d-don't need a scuff free car in pristine c-c-condition. Y-y-yes?'

Bargain Hunt

It took three weeks to find a second-hand BMW i3 EV which met with Donald's approval.

It was a 2016 year model with the larger battery and a promised range of around 160 miles. It had done 43,330 miles and belonged to a lady Dentist in Oban. It had been listed on Autotrader for over a month. It was the less popular Solar Orange Metallic colour but Lexie thought it was 'cool'. On the plus side, it was fitted with a new set of all-weather tyres, had new brake blocks and had a full service history. We checked using its registration to be sure it had not been involved in an accident.

The owner agreed to drive it to the Uig ferry terminal where we inspected it. The driver's door panel was badly scraped. (This had occurred in a supermarket car park and the perpetrator had left a note on the windscreen saying "Tough Luck Matey".) Other areas were scratched in places, especially the bottom of the rear hatch.

The car was generally scruffy and the rear seats showed signs of dogs claws. After a short haggle, conducted mainly by Lexie, the deal was struck at £8,250, which I transferred using PayPal in exchange for the documentation. The lady explained the controls to Lexie then caught the bus for home with Topsy her labradoodle.

Lexie drove the short distance to join the queue for the next ferry. We sat in the car with carry-out coffees and salad baguettes using the owner's manual, studying the dashboard layout and testing the controls. Everything seemed to be working as specified.

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Back in Lochmaddy, while he was topping up the EV's battery, Donald ran through a checklist of possible faults other BMW i3 owners had posted on internet forums then declared the car to be 'sound'.

Explaining how the car worked as he drove, Donald took me out on a refresher course along the North Uist 'superhighway' (A867) towards Clachan. Just past Langass Lodge, we turned off onto the quieter Loch Euport road and drove to the road end carpark near Loch Obisary where I moved to the driver's seat.

On our return journey to Lochmaddy I turned left for Clachan and then took the longer clockwise loop on the A865 where Donald delivered a laptop he had repaired to Roddy MacLachlan, Sandra's eldest boy.

I had never driven an automatic vehicle before and, as Donald had promised, I found the EV right foot one pedal driving experience made it easier on my weaker left knee.

Fergie

By the time I arrived back at Lexie's place I was hooked.

Donald pointed out that our test drive had used 45 battery miles and I still had 123 miles left. Donald said with his Scottish Power EV Optimise tariff, this journey had cost less than three pence and pointed out with my green energy approach planned for Taigh a' Chladaich, the cost of charging my new car should be virtually free.

Over the next few days Lexie took charge and valeted the car inside and out. Following a YouTube link, she used ultra-fine wet and dry sandpaper and T-Cut to remove the scuffs and scratches to good effect.

Admiring the result, Donald said:

'Y-y-yes Fergie, if you w-w-wanted to s-s-sell it here and n-o-ow, I b-b-bet you would get around £12,500 for it.'

EVangelist

Lexie, who was now named on my car insurance, took a real fancy to my BMW and soon became evangelical about it, showing it off to everyone, taking them for trips along the 'superhighway' to demo my new EV's amazing acceleration and quietness.

Within days, she became determined to replace her vintage 2004 Transit Connect van and upgrade to an EV. The Transit had belonged to her uncle and although Donald had it running well and it had a new MOT, it was tatty and old fashioned inside and out. To rectify this, Lexie applied her new valeting skills and soon it was much smarter and photogenic. As a backstop, Donald entered her details and photographs at 'We Buy Any Van' online and their algorithm returned an offer of £1,200 provided the vehicle was delivered to Glasgow for inspection. However, we knew this cash offer would be negotiated downward at the tyre-kicking stage.

With Donald's help, Lexie decided on a Nissan e-NV200 Visia van with a 40kWh battery and a range of around 150 miles when used for rural driving.

After a search on various sites a suitable vehicle turned up on eBay which ticked all Donald's boxes.

His chosen Nissan EV was a 2019 vehicle with a milage of 17,230, a full 12 month MOT and a 6 Month Warranty. It was listed at £8,100 o.n.o. On request, the vendor supplied a link to a full set of photographs of a white van in gleaming showroom condition inside and out. Donald checked out the Nissan's provenance and declared it 'clear and clean' of any insurance or hire purchase negatives.

It had been owned from new as a delivery runaround by a florist who had retired. The seller was a small family firm based in Falkirk called 'Brodies Vans'. We visited their website to discover their 'mission' was to help van owners to transition to greener driving. The images of their forecourt looked neat and tidy. Their inventory listed around fifty vans, about half of which were EVs.

'Brodies Vans' were rated 'Excellent' for reliability and customer satisfaction on Trustpilot.

Donald pointed out that they had several identical Nissan models listed with higher mileages and lower prices, some as low as £6,300 but by this stage Leckie was certain she wanted the original one he had suggested.

After a FaceTime negotiation, subject to physical inspection, Lexie agreed to pay £7,560 to include new brake pads and new all weather tyres. As a further inducement, if she

Fergie

would drive to Falkirk with her Transit, they would offer her a trade-in allowance of up to £1,350 for her eleven year old Transit van, (subject to inspection).

Lexie paid a non-returnable deposit of £200 as confirmation of her interest and Brodies agreed to hold the Nissan for her for 5 working days. I asked her if she would like me to accompany her but she refused, determined to see the deal through by herself but, because of her dyspraxia, she was nervous about paying online under pressure.

Donald suggested a work around. Before leaving for Falkirk, he helped Lexie to transfer £7,500 to my Nationwide account and we agreed I would support her on FaceTime (if required) during her face-to-face negotiations.

During this transfer process, I was flabbergasted to learn Lexie had a bank balance of just over a quarter of a million pounds.

When I raised this with her later, she explained most of this balance was from the sale of her Aunt Kirstine's house in Troon. The money had arrived from the solicitor only a few weeks earlier after a delay of almost three years. Lexie showed me the mound of letters she had received which had bamboozled her, a situation made worse each time she had called them, asking for explanations.

It was only a month or so since she had shared her dilemma with Donald who had explained what forms she had to sign to release the monies due to her, adding:

"Donald also drafted a follow-up letter for me to sign and they eventually paid me interest on the money they had been holding in their Client account.'

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On the day, the deal went through at a reduced price of £7,450 for the Nissan and Lexie received the full £1,350 amount promised for the Transit. We discussed this on FaceTime and I settled what she owed Brodie's using my PayPal App, making her the proud new owner of the car of her dreams.

An hour later, while she was topping up at Stirling, she called me back on FaceTime and gave me a tour of the car. Each time she stopped to top up she called me. I was waiting at the ramp when her ferry arrived at Lochmaddy. She stopped to pick me up, beaming a huge smile, relieved to be able to charge her new Nissan van at Donald's charger, frustrated by the lack of working chargers and their costs which ranged from 35 to 70 p/kWh. While I was waiting, I had checked the six chargers provided by ChargePlace Scotland and only two were working, a situation which was not uncommon.

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Later, as we lay in bed, she said:

Fergie

'Fergie, some of the Bozzos driving over there on the mainland should be locked up. The youngsters are the worst in their souped up boy racers, overtaking on blind bends like budding F1 drivers. I had ~~six~~ near misses. What saved me twice was the acceleration of my new van. It makes me realise how lucky we are living away out here.'

'Yes, 'Far from the Madding Crowd'.

We had watched this recently on Netflix.

'Fergie, d'you, you look quite like Garbriel Oak.'

Her hand moved across.

'Yes, 'Oak' - very appropriate.'

'And you are way prettier than Bathsheba.'

I slipped by hand across under the duvet and stroked her gently.

'Mmm. No rush. Some aromatherapy oil?

'Yes. Rosemary, please. Possibly my favourite herb.'

'Yes, a handful of sprigs in with the wash works wonders, eh?'

Question and Answer

Our new EVs had sparked interest in many others. Donald had been inundated with requests for information and help. In response he prepared and circulated a checklist explaining how to go about buying and charging an EV.

Even Murdo had eventually capitulated. He had been online with Donald checking out the options to replace his Eco-Blue diesel Transit Tipper truck with a modern EV version. Mhairi and Lexie had been back to Brodies (travelling together by bus to Falkirk). Mhairi now has a twin of Lexie's Nissan e-NV200 Visia van, purchased for £3,740.

She now has three charging points at Tigh-na-Dòbhran, offering free overnight charging for guests and has upgraded her profile on the Visit Outer Hebrides to promote herself as a Eco Tourism guest house offering organic meals.

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Donald's checklist resulted in a tsunami of other questions which led to a meeting at The Hub.

It was good to see Alda fit and well again. He was svelte, three stones lighter on his new diet, now back coaching the Pipe Band group, assisting with the Shinty team and helping Gemma who was now in charge of Swimming Lessons down in Benbecula. Fiona had told me he was hoping to return full-time to his CalMac job at Lochmaddy Pier in mid-January after his final check-up at the QE.

Lexie was our spokesperson with Donald and I seated in the front row to offer support if required as she gave the PowerPoint presentation prepared by Donald.

Those attending were also interested in my plans for Taigh a' Chladaich. With my agreement, Donald used his laptop and projector to show the plans which were now approved by the authorities.

This in turn led to questions about our Uists Drone Project and our mini-series of 'Fly with Luna and Shep' wildlife videos, narrated by Lexie in two versions, English and Gaelic. These are available to view at Donald's community website online shop for a suggested voluntary subscription of £10 per year in support of The Hub.

In the question and answer session, I gave a brief overview of the technical aspects and a quick review of a few highlights from my current video collection, emphasizing this was a work still in progress.

Fergie

I did not reveal I had been contacted by the BBC who were interested in signing me up as one of their team of contributors, not just for wildlife drone photography but for other issues such as wild weather reporting, the use of drones for search and rescue, locating lost sheep and pets, inspecting salmon farms, pothole and road subsidence surveys, wildfire incidents and the like.

Several local wildlife guides, upmarket B&Bs and aspiring boutique hotels had also asked me to assist with upgrading their websites with embedded videos. Local bloggers had asked me to help them with videos to support their efforts. Likewise local businesses with an online presence wanted footage to enhance their website presence.

Now only weeks away, 2026 looked as if it would be a busy time. It seemed I had found my new trajectory, the new purpose and the supportive friends I needed to keep me on the straight and narrow.

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Lexie was winding up the proceedings. In her new pale blue trouser suit made to measure for her by Caitlan to emphasise her dainty, curvy figure, she was radiant, bubbling, magnificent.

Then a large blonded woman with garish make-up from South Uist stood up and asked:

'Fergie, I hear you and Lexie MacAlister are living together along the road there. When are you going to make an honest woman of her? She's a lovely lassie and deserves better than she got with her last man. As her aunt, I have the right to know. I promised her mother I would look out for her.'

The short stunned silence was broken by Mhairi:

'Jeanie Bridges, you really are way out of order. Mind you, if Lexie doesn't want him, I'm sure there're many others around who would be happy to a have a try for him. Is this what you're angling at? Are you looking to give your Robbie there the heave? Are you after Fergie for yourself?'

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Later, as we cuddled under the duvet, I nuzzled Lexie's ear and whispered:

'Well, what do you say my dearling? Shall we make an honest woman of you?'

'God Fergie, I thought you'd never ask.'

'I'll take that as a yes then.'

Fergie

I sat up, switched on the bedside lamp and reached under my pillow for the dark blue box.

Weeks earlier, by FaceTime, while Lexie was away in Falkirk, I had asked Sylvie and Moira to help me choose, sending them one of Lexie's keeper rings as a size guide. We met at the jewellers on FaceTime to browse options and finalise our agreed choice which I paid for by PayPal. Since the engagement ring arrived, I had been waiting for the right moment to ask.

'Lexie MacAlister, would you do me the honour of becoming my wife.'

'OH MY GOD, Fergie. **Wow** - Hamilton and Inches.'

She put it on and studied it, tearing up.

OH - MY - GOD! It's beautiful. Thank you and yes please.'

She leaned across and kissed me then whispered into my ear:

'Fergie, your Mum told me once you were the one for me. She was very, very definite about it. And now you've made my dream come true.'

i

The Scottish Otter

In Scotland the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) is a versatile, semi-aquatic mammal found across a wide range of habitats.

Coastal Dwellers: A significant proportion of the Scottish population (estimated at around 8,000 in total) lives along the coast, particularly the west coast and islands like Skye, Mull, and Shetland. These "coastal otters" feed almost entirely on marine life but must return to fresh water daily to wash the salt from their fur to maintain its insulating properties.

Inland Dwellers: The same species also lives inland along rivers, lochs, and burns, preying mainly on fish, eels, and amphibians. Inland otters are typically more nocturnal than their coastal counterparts, which are often active during the day, timed with the tides.

Golden Eagles and Sea Eagles

Yes, you can see both magnificent Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) and White Tailed Sea Eagles (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) here on North Uist which is a prime spot in Scotland for spotting these iconic raptors in diverse landscapes, especially around coastal areas. The moorlands and hills near Lochmaddy, offer fantastic birdwatching opportunities year-round, particularly in winter and spring. Unlike mainland eagles, to avoid being blown away by strong gales, North Uist Eagles generally fly only a few hundred metres above the land, making them easy to watch.

Where to Spot Them

Golden Eagles: Look for them soaring over the uplands and moorlands, with territories found across the island, including areas near Lochmaddy and the rugged east coastline.

White-tailed Sea Eagles (Sea Eagles): These massive birds are often seen near coastlines and lochs, with sightings reported as they cross the island or follow shorelines.

Key Locations: Areas like the hills near Lochmaddy and Benbecula, and moorland around large freshwater lochs, are excellent for viewing both species.

Tips for Viewing

Best Times: Late winter and spring offer excellent opportunities, but they can be seen throughout the year.

Look Up & Around: Scan the skies and hillsides in wild, open, and mountainous habitats.

Patience Pays Off: These shy birds can often be seen surprisingly close to roads and villages in undisturbed areas.

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Loch Obisary and other North Uist Lochs

Here is a synopsis from Wikipedia:

Loch Obisary on North Uist is a classic Uist loch, known for its excellent wild brown trout fishing, offering fish up to a good size (often 1-2lbs, sometimes bigger) in a beautiful, rugged landscape with peat-stained waters, though it's generally less fertile than some other Uist lochs, providing challenging but rewarding fishing for experienced anglers seeking quality trout and sea trout.

Loch Obisary is a unique, deep, *brackish* loch with a tidal connection to the sea, so it hosts a mix of freshwater and marine species and is designated as an SSI (Site of Scientific Interest). The loch's varying salinity, with a

Fergie

distinct layer of freshwater over deeper, saltier water, creates diverse habitats that support these different fish communities. Saltwater fish species that can be found in the loch include:

Sea trout (also known as "slob trout" in this specific habitat), *Pollack* (also called *Saithe, Coley, or Coalfish*), *Eels, Common Goby* found in deeper areas below 15 metres and, occasionally, other sea species such as *cod, ling, haddock, mackerel, bass*, and various rays and skates may enter the loch from the sea, although the presence of a shallow tidal sill can limit the size and frequency of some marine visitors.

For more information, follow this link:

https://ceb.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loch_Obisary

For a helpful review or other top trout lochs on North Uist try this link:

<https://www.czechnymph.com/en/fly-fishing-articles/fly-fishing-destinations/84-north-uist-top-10-trout-lochs>

iii

Remote Radar Head, Benbecula.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RRH_Benbecula#:~:text=For%20the%20airbase%20after%20which,now%20known%20as%20MoD%20Hebrides.

iv

Flying drones in North Uist requires compliance with standard UK Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) regulations, supplemented by local environmental and site-specific permissions.

1. Mandatory CAA Registrations

Most drones require two types of ID, which can be obtained via the CAA Drone Registration Portal:

Flyer ID: Mandatory for anyone flying a drone weighing **100g or more**. You must pass a free online theory test based on the Drone and Model Aircraft Code.

Operator ID: Required for anyone responsible for a drone weighing **250g or more**, or any drone with a camera weighing **100g or more**. You must be at least 18 years old and pay an annual fee (currently **£11.79**). This ID must be clearly labelled on your drone.

2. Local Permissions and Restrictions

While much of North Uist is open, specific areas require prior authorization:

Airports: North Uist is near

Fergie

Benbecula Airport and must not fly within its **Flight Restriction Zone (FRZ)** without prior permission from Air Traffic Control.

Protected Sites: Flying over **Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)** or **Special Protection Areas (SPAs)** may require consent from NatureScot to avoid disturbing wildlife.

Historic Sites: If flying at properties managed by [Historic Environment Scotland](#), you must apply for consent at least 5 working days in advance and provide proof of insurance and a risk assessment.

Landowner Consent: Always seek permission from the landowner for your launch and landing sites.