

A SHORT STORY

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THE LONELY MAN



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The house in Harray wasn't quite ready for Willow and Jimmy Perez when they moved to Orkney, and they decided to rent a place for three months while the renovations took place. It was summer, a real summer of sunshine and long, light days. Through Ellie, a new police colleague, they found a cottage that had once been a holiday let. It was too basic for today's tourists and Visit Orkney had refused it registration, so the owner was glad for them to stay.

Davie Tait was in his seventies, a farmer, and the cottage was on his land. He lived alone in a house that had hardly changed since his parents' days. He'd never married and seemed glad to have neighbours again. Willow thought he must be lonely because he had no visitors and only left the place a couple of

times a week to drive into Kirkwall for shopping. He kept hens and put eggs in a basket on a flat stone next to the road each morning. Customers left money in an honesty box, so there was no need for them to come to the house.

Willow *did* go into his house though, either on her own or with Cassie, Perez's fourteen-year-old adopted daughter. She'd taken a liking to the man on their first meeting. The schools had broken up for the summer. Willow was carrying Perez's child, was in the middle of her pregnancy, and after the first weeks of tiredness and nausea, everything seemed easy. She was full of energy and loving this new family life. She would give birth to a boy, but they'd surely be in their own home in Harray by then.

In the meantime, this felt like a holiday. She'd taken unpaid leave before starting her new role as the officer supervising policing throughout the Scottish isles. She would begin when the baby was old enough and she could give work her full attention. For now, she'd help Cassie settle into this new melded family and get a sense of Orkney and its people. Davie welcomed her in whenever she tapped at his kitchen door, made her tea and told her stories about this new place, his old life as a child on the farm. He always

seemed pleased to see her.

Perez had already started work as an inspector based in the police station in Kirkwall, but he'd arrived at a quieter time, and there was still much of the day left when he got back from the town. The evening light seemed to stretch on for ever. Davie cut hay in the old way, and built stooks in the field for it to dry and then took it back to the farm, piled in a cart dragged by his ancient tractor. Perez offered to help, and Willow watched him grow brown and fit after each evening's labour. The guilt and grief that had followed the death of Cassie's mother seemed to seep slowly away.

Davie brewed his own beer, and some nights Perez would stop and have a glass with him. From the cottage, Willow would see the two men, sitting on a bench outside the farmhouse, watching the sun go down and talking. Perhaps Davie reminded Perez of his father in Fair Isle. The man would have been working his croft on the isle in the same kind of way when Jimmy was a boy.

One day, Cassie came back from helping Davie to collect eggs to say that he had a strange woman staying with him.

'Oh?' Willow was intrigued. Davie had never

mentioned a female relative. 'What is she like?'

Cassie shrugged. 'I don't know.'

Willow left it for an hour, but then curiosity was too much for her and she walked across the field to the farmhouse. A strange car was parked in the yard. The kitchen door was open, and she heard singing. A woman's voice. Somebody was belting out Abba very loud and not quite in tune. Willow stood for a moment, wondering what to do next. The woman seemed at home there.

'Hello!' It was Davie appearing behind her, surprising her. He was in his overalls with his dog Maggie at his heels.

Willow felt awkward, a bit of a voyeur.

'Well,' Davie said. 'It's fine to see you. You'll come in for some tea?'

'I'm sorry.' Willow had always found that honesty was the best policy. 'I'm being nosy. Cassie said you had a guest.'

'Yes.' He sounded proud as punch. 'Gloria is here for a visit. Come in, come in.'

Still as lithe and flexible as a boy, he sat on the step and pulled off his boots.

Willow followed him into the kitchen. Gloria had her hands in the sink. She was washing dishes.

She was in late middle age, plump and relaxed, but dressed quite showily, in a brown and gold dress and silver sandals. Her hair was dyed copper, and her lipstick was pearly pink. She gleamed among the dusty furniture and faded linoleum. It was as if an alien being had landed in Davie Tait's kitchen. She turned away from the sink and dried her hands on a tea towel.

'Hi.'

Just from that one syllable, Willow could tell that the woman was Orcadian, so perhaps not an alien after all.

Davie put his hands on the woman's shoulders. A gesture of affection and surprise, as if he couldn't quite believe his luck that such a creature was in his kitchen. 'This is Gloria.' There was still no explanation about who she might be.

'And who is this?' Gloria smiled indulgently, but her voice was a little suspicious.

Is she Davie's girlfriend? Can she be jealous of me? Resentful that I've turned up to disturb them?

Willow stuck out her hand. 'I'm Davie's new tenant. My family and I are renting his cottage.'

'Will you make tea for our guest?' Gloria said. It sounded to Willow more like an order than a

question. And Davie obeyed, still with that soppy smile on his face.

They sat together at the kitchen table. Davie had made tea in a pot, not in mugs as he usually did, and he'd brought out the porcelain cups that usually stayed in a cabinet, protected by glass.

'How do you two know each other?' Willow was pleased that Davie had a friend, but she couldn't quite take to the woman, with her made-up face and bossy demeanour. She'd grown very fond of their landlord and felt protective of him.

The couple smiled at each other.

'I knew Gloria's mother when she was a lass,' Davie said. 'Gloria and I met up at her funeral a few weeks ago.'

Willow remembered Davie going off to a funeral. An old schoolfriend, he'd explained. A woman called Edie Anderson. He'd been dressed in a suit that had seen better days and smelled of mothballs.

'Davie introduced himself,' Gloria said, 'and we hit it off.' A pause. 'He's been a great support. Of course I miss my mother a great deal. I cared for her myself in her last few months. We were very close.' She closed her eyes, and Willow saw that her lids

were painted a glittery silver to match her sandals.

You don't look as if you're in mourning, she thought.

They chatted for a little while longer. Willow saw the longing in Davie's eyes. She thought he'd never had a woman to share the farm or his bed and now this exotic woman had flown into his life, with her bright colours and her comfortable curves. His desperation made Willow uneasy. She'd hate him to be hurt.

She and Perez talked about it later that evening. Cassie was in bed, and it was still warm enough to sit outside. The sun was low over the loch and the hill beyond. Everything was still and calm and filtered through the rosy glow of a northern dusk. Willow had taken a walk after their supper and had noticed that the little car was still parked outside Davie's house. Perez thought her concern was ridiculous.

'They're consenting adults. It's wonderful if he's found some company at last.'

'I worry that she's taking advantage of him. It feels like some form of catfishing.'

'Hardly that! They met in person, by chance, at a funeral. She can't have stolen an identity, and I can't see how she could have hooked him in. They're two

lonely people, looking for a little affection.'

'Maybe.'

But Willow wasn't convinced. She thought she'd delve a little further into the life of Gloria Anderson. Davie had no living relatives and his farm, and this cottage, would be worth a good deal. He must be nearly thirty years older than Gloria. He'd surely die before she did, and she would be a wealthy woman if he made a will in her favour. What had she seen in an elderly man in an ancient shiny suit if it wasn't his money?

Willow had felt there'd been something predatory about the woman, and her imagination was running wild. She thought it wouldn't be hard to cause an accident. An elderly man could slip and fall over the cliff or hurt himself with some of the ancient machinery he kept in his yard.

The next day, Willow booked Cassie into a holiday activity in the leisure centre in Kirkwall, and that left her free for a few hours in the town. It was packed with tourists who streamed off the cruise ships, blocking the main street, jostling like sheep being herded into a cru for clipping. Willow had arranged to meet Perez's colleague Ellie Shearer for

coffee. Ellie was English, married to an Orcadian. She was the one who'd found Davie's cottage for them and was as nebbly as Willow, with an outsider's detached take on local events. Willow knew better than to check Gloria out on the police computer. That would have been unethical. But Ellie would probably know more details about the woman than the system would carry.

They sat in a small café well off the tourists' route.

'What do you know about this woman? Gloria Anderson.'

'Not Anderson now,' Ellie said. 'Fowler. She was married for five years. Her husband was a funeral director. A good man.'

'Was?'

'Aye,' Ellie said. 'Gloria's a widow now.'

'How did Fowler die?'

'It was sudden,' Ellie said. 'But no suspicion around his death. He was a lot older than her.'

'Gloria seems to go in for older men.'

They talked about Gloria while they drank milky coffee and ate chocolate cake. At the end, Ellie looked across the table at Willow. 'I was pleased when you took Davie's cottage. He always seemed a nice chap. Kind of vulnerable.'

Willow nodded. 'I'll talk to him this evening. It won't be an easy conversation.'

'Do you want me to see Gloria Fowler?'

'Maybe hold off until I've spoken to Davie. I'll give you a call.'

Willow waited for Perez to get home to look after Cassie before setting off to the farmhouse. Gloria's car was no longer parked in the yard. At first, she thought Davie was away, but she saw him cross the field, carrying a bucket of mackerel, the dog at his heels. He had a small boat, and he must have been fishing.

'You're welcome to take a few for your supper. There's nothing like fresh fish straight from the sea.' He went into the kitchen and rinsed his hands under the tap.

'I was hoping for a word,' she said, 'about Gloria Fowler.'

'Ah,' he said. 'A wonderful woman.'

'Wealthy too. She inherited her husband's business when he died.'

'Indeed.' It was as if the matter was of no importance to him.

'She's used to nice things. I could tell that about

her. Do you think she was after your money, Davie?’

‘Not at all.’ He sounded shocked. ‘What money do I have? It’s all tied up in the land.’

‘So, you could be in need of some cash yourself.’

‘What are you saying exactly?’ He was no longer the vulnerable elderly man they’d known and fallen for. His voice was sharp, and his eyes were shrewd.

‘I’m saying that you target lonely middle-aged women who have a bit of money, and you persuade them to hand a chunk of their cash over to you. According to Ellie Shearer you have a bit of a history. The women fall for your charm – you are very charming – and they want to help you out. What story did you tell Gloria? That you need to repair the roof, build a new byre? She’d lost her husband and her mother, and she needed some support. She came here, all dressed up, hoping for romance and fun, not knowing that you were intending to scam her.’

Willow paused, but there was no reply from the farmer, and she continued:

‘Do you go to funerals to find your victims? Ellie thought you could never have known Edie when you were young. You’ve always lived here, and she grew up in Shapinsay.’

‘I have done nothing wrong. I have broken no law.’

‘Ellie asked us to stay in your cottage. She told me that you always *seemed* a nice chap and a little bit vulnerable, but she couldn’t quite believe the act. You had a go at her mother-in-law, turning up at the husband’s funeral. Pretending at a connection that didn’t exist. What a great performer you are! I was taken in.’

‘I have broken no law,’ he repeated. He was stubborn now, his chin thrust out, his hands clenched tight. He had the air of a small boy used to getting his own way.

‘Probably not,’ Willow agreed, ‘but you have been greedy and unkind.’ She got to her feet. ‘We’ll be moving out of the cottage tomorrow. We’d rather live in a building site than in your property. The old manse at Harray will be our home from now on.’

As she walked back towards the cottage, she wondered what Perez would say when she explained that they’d be moving. But, she thought, he was a *kind* man, and he would understand.



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