



Shadows Of St Morfa Hall

The Story So Far

At St Morfa's Hall, Wales, in 1968, LADY ALEXANDRIA OXLEY is unhappily married to entrepreneur CHARLIE, who has plans to turn part of the estate into a nightclub.

Alex is determined to preserve St Morfa's legacy for future generations, with the help of estate manager JOHN BRADSHAW, to whom she has a growing attraction.

By 2010, St Morfa's is owned by a charitable trust, after Charlie died leaving huge debt.

ZOE WEAVER is marketing manager at

St Morfa's, working with MATT JACOBS to establish the house as a wedding venue.

Freddie Oxley is friendly to her, despite his resentment that his family no longer own the estate. He warns Zoe that his late mother haunts the property – something believed by gardener GLYN HUGHES, son of previous gardener ALUN, and ANWEN, Lord Oxley's PA.

"That's great, Emlyn," Zoe nodded at the photographer present to take promotional images.

"Don't forget to take some looking into the dining-room from the garden, like we discussed."

The affable young man moved immediately to follow her instructions.

Anwen had come up trumps with finding this

young photographer. He had an impressive portfolio and came very cheap.

She must remember to thank Lord Oxley's PA for her input with this project.

Zoe wandered amongst the guests, surveying the scene with satisfaction. It was all going to plan.

But it could have been very different.

"You e-mailed to cancel the chairs," the agent at the catering company had said in response to Zoe's anguished call the previous evening.

"I certainly did not. Why would I do such a thing?"

"You said you'd sourced a less expensive supplier." The girl was understandably surly. "I'll forward you the e-mail we received."

Zoe called Matt in exasperation.

"They have an e-mail purporting to come from me. How is that possible?"

"How weird."

"As if I'd cancel chairs the day before a function," Zoe went on. "I don't understand how this could happen."

Matt thought a moment.

"Could someone have hacked into your e-mail account?" he asked.

"I've no idea. I don't think so. But why?"

Zoe heard Matt inhale deeply on the other end of the line.

"Maybe someone wanted to sabotage the wedding reception."

"What? You mean like a jealous ex?"

"I was thinking on a less personal level. Did you leave your computer unattended yesterday?"

"You know I did – I was in Llandudno with you," Zoe reminded him. "There was only Anwen, me and Glyn.

"I doubt Glyn would know how to switch on a computer, let alone hack into an e-mail account.

"And Anwen wouldn't have wanted to ruin the reception: she's the one who recommended St Morfa to the Williams family in the first place."

"It must be the ghost of Lady Alexandria," Matt suggested teasingly.

"Seriously, Matt, what am I going to do?"

He'd taken over then, with a professionalism and efficiency that had been calming.

Within the hour he'd sourced chairs from a contact in the local events industry and they'd been delivered that evening.

Zoe and Matt had worked together all night to ensure the dining-room was ready to receive its guests.

"Almost closing time," Matt said as they'd stood surveying their evening's work. "The Black Bull has a passable house red. We've earned a drink."

His voice had been light and his smile friendly. It would have been so easy to accept.

"Thanks," she replied, taking an imperceptible

step back from those mesmerising dark eyes. "But I'll pass. I've an early start tomorrow."

It was a good decision, Zoe thought now, watching the bride and groom cut into their wedding cake.

After all, she'd learned the hard way that business and pleasure were a bad mix.

Daniel had been a client at the Manchester hotel where Zoe had worked.

Director of an expanding software company, his bookings had been worth a lot and therefore worthy of her personal attention.

"Thank you," he'd said after the first conference.

"Everything was brilliant. Let me take you for a drink to say thank you."

"No need," she'd replied.

Then those mischievous eyes twinkled at her in a way that subsequently became a regular part of their relationship, ensuring Daniel got his own way.

"But I'd really like to."

He was handsome, charming and attentive to her preferences: remembering her favourite flowers and fragrances.

"You're some woman, Zoe," he liked to say. "Independent, strong and gorgeous."

This normally earned him a playful swat, but inside Zoe had fizzed with pleasure. She'd been sure she'd met her match.

They both had their own interests and social lives, but that only seemed to enrich their relationship.

It was when she caught herself browsing engagement rings in the jewellers of King Street that she'd realised the extent of her commitment.

From then on, each wedding the hotel hosted had seemed a source of ideas and inspiration for her own wedding day.

Months passed. They enjoyed wonderful evenings and weekends together, plus an unforgettable holiday in the Maldives.

She felt lucky, yet, like a serpent in paradise, a need for something more surfaced inside her.

"We have a great time, don't we?" Daniel asked.

"Yes, we do, but –"

"Zoe!" The young photographer cut short her reminiscences.

"Come and see what you think of the shots I've got."

She made her way through the fairy-tale wedding scene to where Emlyn was waiting.

Daniel was water under many Manchester canal bridges.

St Morfa was her future.

* * *

Lady Alex wasn't soothed. Freddie had been tearful when she'd left him – his nanny had insisted he remain at home – so Alex

Now he had returned to London, no doubt to try to raise money for his scheme.

Alex tried to swallow the panicked feeling that had been swirling around her stomach ever since she'd found out.

Her husband was completely right: as Head Trustee he could make any decisions he liked about the estate's future.

She'd been stupid to hand him so much power, but it had all seemed so natural.

After Freddie was born, flushed with new motherhood, she'd been

Who better to look after Alex's son's inheritance than his father?

only too happy to sign things over.

After all: who better to look after her son's inheritance than his father?

Guilt and misery misted ocean, path and fields, so she didn't see the figure approaching.

"Alex?" John Bradshaw stood in her path a distance ahead. She wiped her tears away.

"John, how lovely . . ." Her smile was bright, but died when she saw John's frown.

"Are you all right, Alex?" he asked.

"Fine." She beamed in a more determined fashion. "Such a brisk wind, making my eyes water. Were you on your way to the house?"

"Yes. I'm parked at the Evans place. I thought I'd walk, since it's a fine day. I needed to gather my thoughts."

"Sounds ominous." She gave a laugh and then, realising it sounded false, composed her features into what she hoped was a mask of polite enquiry.

"It was Lord Oxley I was hoping to chat with," he explained.

"My husband has returned to London."

John's body sagged like a deflated balloon.

"When will he be back?"

"I've no idea," Lady Alex admitted. "Can I help?"

John regarded her for a second, then seemed to come to a decision within himself.

"It's a little awkward. I'm not sure where to start."

"Shall we walk?" Alex suggested to put him at his ease.

He shrugged and pushed his fists further into the pockets of his battered waxed jacket.

They walked for a few seconds in silence.

"So . . ." Alex ventured. "It's a dreadful cliché, I know, but maybe start at the beginning?"

He gave a breathy laugh in which there was no mirth.

She saw him brace himself.

"I've been over at Evans's farm," he began. "Well, it seems your husband paid him a visit last week."

"Charlie likes to keep an interest in the tenants," Alex lied, pulsing with misgivings.

Too polite to contradict her, John continued.

"Something he said upset old Evans. I said I'd try to clear things up."

"It was a throwaway comment as far as I can make out, but it implied changes in the future that would affect the farm."

Fingers of fear closed around Alex's chest.

"I wondered if you knew what he meant?" he asked.

* * * *

"You realise I've only just found out myself . . ."

It had been a relief to unburden herself to John, even though the dismay that flooded his features mirrored her own feelings.

"I'm sure," she began, swamped with conflicting emotions of dread about Charlie's plans and disloyalty to her husband in discussing them.

"I'm sure Lord Oxley wouldn't do anything to adversely affect the tenants. It's early days yet," Lady Alex finished.

"When will you know more?"

The veins above John's scar twitched with tension.

She was touched in that moment to realise that he no longer seemed to find it

necessary to hide his face from her.

"I don't know."

Her fingers found his wrist and she felt him flinch slightly.

Her own skin singed from the contact, but she didn't remove her hand.

"I'll find out all I can," she promised him. "I'm sure it's not as bad as old Evans imagined."

For the rest of the walk their conversation revolved around observation of the coastline, seabirds and the changing seasons.

Superficial words, perhaps, Alex thought, but when laced with so much love for the landscape, they became a source of warmth and a comfort.

"There's your beach," she said, pointing down to St Morfa. "Not much sand for a boy to play on today."

"Ah, but I'd be fishing in rock pools while I waited for low tide." John chuckled.

"I used to hide in those rocks," Alex remarked. "When I'd given Nanny the slip. She never found me."

She laughed and so did John.

In that moment it was as if all external circumstances ceased to exist.

They were simply two people sharing childhood memories and a passionate love for a place that had moulded them both in different ways.

"I'd best be getting back," John said eventually.

"Me, too," Alex replied, but didn't move.

Then, with a determined nod, John turned and strode back along the path.

* * * *

Zoe cradled the cup of Nia's flask and blew on the hot liquid.

"Hot coffee and a picnic on the beach is the perfect way to spend a Sunday. Thanks for suggesting it, Nia."

"I thought it would do us good to get some fresh air." Nia giggled.

"You've been here for two months now and you've seen nothing apart from St Morfa Hall and the inside of my house!"

"St Morfa Hall is pretty amazing."

"Yes, but all work and no play makes Zoe a boring bunny," Nia pointed out.

"Thanks a lot," Zoe said, smiling at her housemate.

"Still, I bet you'd like to see photos of the hall from yesterday, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, go on. But only because I'm nosy and want to see what Cadi Williams's wedding looked like."

Nia scrolled through the images on Zoe's phone.

"Wow!" she exclaimed. "Once these pictures get out you'll be inundated with enquiries, I reckon."

"Do you really think so?"

"Definitely." Nia nodded. "Local businesses will fall over themselves to be your suppliers. Maybe I could charge for introducing them to you."

They both laughed.

Zoe sipped her coffee and stared out over the shingle and sand sloping down to the wind-whipped sea.

"I'm glad you think local businesses will want to get involved," she remarked.

"Why wouldn't they?"

Zoe explained what Anwen had suggested about local resentment.

"Take no notice. Everyone knows she's bitter because she's in love with Lord Oxley."

Zoe laughed.

"She does sort of go into obedient puppy mode whenever he appears," she acknowledged.

"She'd do or say anything he wanted," Nia replied.

"It's him that's resentful. Put out since the Trust appointed that fancy business consultant –"

"Matt Jacobs?" Zoe interrupted.

"Yeah. Since he took charge, Lord Oxley hasn't had things his own way. He's lost control over the Hall and he doesn't like it."

"He's been really supportive of me. Very charming," Zoe pointed out.

"Oh, he's a charmer. There's a lot of respect round here for his family – especially amongst older people." She shrugged.

"Maybe he's seen it's in his best interests to be involved."

"Anyway, we're talking about your work when I'm supposed to be showing

you our local area!"

"OK." Zoe laughed.

"Where are we going next?"

"We'll finish our picnic, then I'll take you along the Legend Of St Morfa Trail."

* * * *

"What is this legend?"

Zoe's breath came in short gasps as they ascended the steep incline from the beach.

"It's an ancient folk story," Nia explained. "But I warn you: like all Welsh stories, it's really sad."

They stood getting their breath back, staring along the line of the estuary to the sea, where dark clouds were gathering.

"The word 'morfa' means marsh," Nia began.

"This area once was a deadly salt marsh. Only a few locals knew the path across it."

"Legend told that sea fairies lived under the surface and, on Midsummer's Eve only, a human might find the way to their kingdom."

"It was said to be a land full of flowers, strange fish and beautiful marine life unknown to man."

"A human may visit, but take away nothing on their return to the human realm."

"The lady of the manor in those days was Lady Morwenna ap Llewellyn – a woman so beautiful she could bend anyone to her will."

"That's a handy trait to have," Zoe giggled.

"Lady Morwenna was blessed with only one son, Osian," Nia continued. "He was strong-willed and spoilt."

"They say Osian succeeded in finding the fairy kingdom, but stole a sparkly sea urchin as a souvenir."

"The fairies were furious: they pursued Osian across the marsh, saying he must pay for his treachery with his life."

"Lady Morwenna pleaded for her son to be spared. The fairies agreed, but at the price of another human life."

"A poor fisherman who was madly in love with Lady Morwenna offered to trade his

► life for her son's. He returned to the marsh with the fairies and was never seen again."

Nia's eyes were wide.

"Poor thing," Zoe commented. "So much for being in love. Not ever a good idea."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yes." Zoe nodded decisively. "Don't you?"

Nia shrugged.

"I gather you've had a bad experience, but I like to believe it could be different with someone else."

"You're willing to risk being hurt?" Zoe asked.

Nia gave another shrug.

"I value myself more now. I'd be ready to take a chance with the right man."

"Don't you think you could move forward with someone new?" she asked.

Zoe scowled.

"We'd best get back. I don't like the look of those clouds."

* * *

"Planting going well, Alun?"

"Yes, your ladyship," Alun replied. "It's a fine scheme you've put together."

"There should be colour for every season in these beds."

"I'm following Granny Charlotte's originals," Alex explained. "I'm glad I found her plans with the rest of her papers."

"Lady Charlotte would be right proud, I reckon."

"Thank you, Alun." Alex flushed with pleasure under the gardener's praise.

"It was right to turn the house over to the hospital to help with the war effort in 1940, but it took its toll."

"Granny Charlotte said she was too old to start all over again."

"It always made her sad to see the state the gardens had got into."

"I'm determined we'll restore them to their glory days – just as she would have wanted."

"I'll do my best, your ladyship."

"I'm grateful, Alun."

From the cliffside, Alex spotted John striding out from a coppice and coming into the gardens.

She felt herself smile as

she moved to meet him.

"Hello," she said. "How lovely to see you."

John scowled.

"I'm afraid it's not much of a pleasure for me. I need to speak with your husband. It's quite urgent."

"Oh," Alex replied, taken aback by his tone. "I'm afraid he's still away."

John looked as if he wanted to curse.

"What is it, John?" She moved to make sure they were out of Alun's earshot. "You look upset."

"Can we walk?"

"Of course."

"Go on, then," Alex prompted after several seconds of silence. "You have me worried now."

"It's this."

He passed across an envelope and Alex withdrew a letter from inside.

"This is Powell's letter," John explained. "All the tenants have received them. I know nothing about it."

Alex scanned the page.

"It speaks of a review to tenancy agreements, but it doesn't say what or how."

"Why wasn't I told?"

"John, I'm as much in the dark about this as you are."

"What on earth is going on, Alex? If there are to be changes to tenancies, I have a right to know."

"Of course you do."

Alex's stomach squeezed with anxiety. "And so do I!"

"I'm sorry." John looked abashed. "I didn't mean to imply I had more right –"

"It's quite all right."

Alex reread the letter, tapping it against her hand. "I'll speak to Uncle Billy: he's the estate solicitor. He'll tell me what's going on."

"It's most embarrassing to have to ask him." Her voice caught. "This is my family's ancestral home."

"The fortunes of our family and our tenants have always been bound together."

Raindrops began to spatter loudly against their jackets as dark clouds rolled in from the sea.

"Come on." Alex beckoned. "We'll cut across this side of the coppice: there's a back entrance into the dining-room."

By the time they reached

the hall they were soaked.

Alex pushed open the door to a service corridor.

"I used to play here when I was a child. Granny told me it's where all the dishes were lined up for dinner in the glory days of St Morfa."

"That passage . . ." she pointed ". . . leads to the kitchen. It would have been a hive of activity back then."

"You never knew the house when it was like that?" John asked, his voice echoing in the corridor.

"I feel as if I did." Alex laughed gently. "Granny told me so many stories."

"That's why I used to come here when I was little: I used to imagine I was sneaking a peak at glamorous people dancing and dining – just like my father did as a child."

"It made me feel closer to him in some bizarre way."

"You never knew him?"

"No. He was killed in the Battle of Britain before I was born. Mummy went to pieces afterwards."

"Where is she now?" John asked kindly.

"She has a flat in Chelsea. It suits her better."

Alex pushed open the door and they stepped into the dining-room.

John whistled.

"Like it?" Alex asked. "Somehow it seemed important."

"It's breathtaking!" he exclaimed.

"It was the first thing I did when I came into my trust fund – much to my husband's disgust."

"It was some restoration." Alex shrugged.

"Granny hadn't long died, so I suppose it was my tribute to her."

"She was a tremendous influence on me. She taught me so much about family, duty and joy."

"I'm sure she'd have been very proud of what you've achieved here."

"I hope so." She smiled.

John moved to stroke the marble of the fireplace just as Alex turned towards it.

His fingers inadvertently brushed her cheek.

She swivelled and they stood inches apart. Alex could smell the damp of his jacket.

Neither of them spoke.

His gaze roved her face and she felt as if an invisible force were pulling her toward him.

"We're soaked," he said suddenly. "I'd better go."

Alone, Alex stood for a moment, watching through the window as Alun and his son, Glyn, worked on the garden, waiting for her heartbeat to subside.

* * *

"Good morning, Glyn."

Although Zoe suspected the gardener of having had something to do with the rat incident, her conversation with Nia had made her mindful of local loyalty that still existed for the Oxley family.

It was important that neither she nor the Trust appeared to be opposing them, so she'd decided to try again to get the old man on side.

"It'll be better if you can," Matt had advised. "Guests pick up on atmospheres."

"I know," Zoe agreed.

"The last thing we need on someone's wedding day is a gloomy gardener scowling at everyone."

Matt laughed and she felt a little flare of pleasure.

It was good that they agreed about a lot, she thought, turning towards where Glyn was working. It was necessary for the business.

"I wanted to thank you for giving the gardens such a lot of attention before the wedding," Zoe told him.

The old gardener drew himself up slowly from his task, returning her gaze with unwavering intensity and without smiling.

"Just doing my job," he said.

"I know," Zoe replied. "But I wanted to say how much I appreciated it."

"The gardens are a big part of this place's attraction and set us apart from other venues."

Glyn remained silent, but made no attempt to move away, which Zoe took as a positive sign.

She ploughed on. "It was a beautiful wedding, wasn't it?"

"I suppose." He nodded. "Not that the likes of Cadi Williams has any business

getting wed at St Morfa."

"Your flower-beds made a fantastic backdrop," Zoe continued.

"When the photos are on the website and in the brochure they will do us proud."

"I think," she went on, crossing her fingers behind her back, "that the family would have been proud."

"I hope Lord Oxley is always proud of the place," Glyn declared.

"I'm sure he is," Zoe said carefully. "He did want to promote St Morfa himself, didn't he?"

Glyn looked down at the gnarled hands that rested on his spade.

"Glyn." Zoe swallowed. "I understand you're not keen on what we're doing, but it is the only way for St Morfa to survive."

"It's all so stunning." She gestured around her. "What Lady Alexandria created here is special."

"Isn't it wonderful we can share it in this way and at the same time preserve it?"

"She wouldn't like it," Glyn said stubbornly.

Zoe hesitated.

"Don't you think this house and gardens were made to be filled with laughter and love? Wouldn't she be happy to see people enjoying them?"

"She wouldn't want exploitation," he said, and suddenly his eyes seemed far away. "She loved this place. Even as a lad I could see it."

"Dad said she was always out here, working alongside him sometimes. She wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty."

"Do you remember her well?" Zoe asked.

"Aye, I do. She was kind to a young lad."

Zoe, who'd never heard Glyn speak more than one or two words before, was mesmerised as he went on.

"And I'll tell you something for nothing," Glyn continued.

"There's no way she would've done away with herself."

He shook his head and all

of the softness that had diffused his features disappeared.

"Like I said, she wouldn't want all this commercial stuff in her dining-room."

"There's a special atmosphere in there, isn't there?" Zoe remarked. "I feel it often."

"That'll be her." Glyn nodded solemnly. "She'll be keeping an eye on you and what you're doing, that's for sure."

Zoe put out a hand, stopping just short of touching the gardener.

"If I promised you I wouldn't do anything Lady Alexandria would disapprove of," she began.

"Glyn." Zoe swallowed. "I understand you're not keen on what we're doing, but it is the only way for St Morfa to survive."

She held her breath as Glyn opened his mouth to answer.

"Zoe!" Anwen appeared on the terrace. "Telephone for you. It's the photographer."

"I'll let you get on," Glyn murmured.

* * *

"Emlyn," Zoe said into the receiver. "I haven't received your proofs yet. I know it's early but I'm excited to see them."

There was a pause.

"About that . . ." Emlyn began. "I don't know what happened, but, well, there's a problem."

"What do you mean?"

Zoe's stomach snaked into a sick spiral.

"I don't know how it happened, but they've gone. I can't access them on the memory card."

"Can you get them back?" she asked.

"I've tried everything . . ." Emlyn trailed off.

"So we have no photos?"

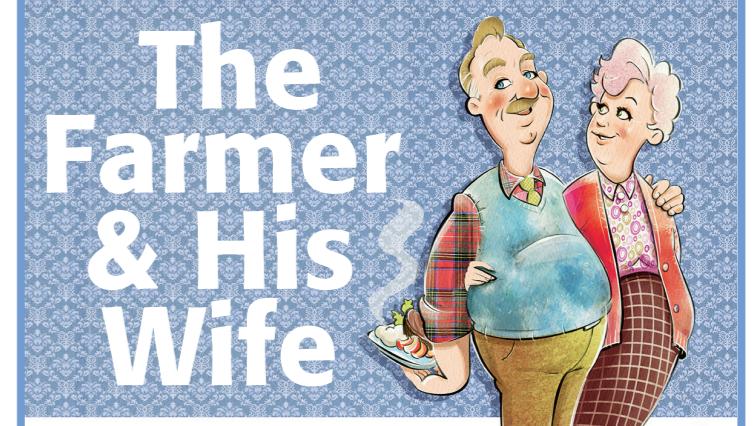
Zoe asked, feeling tears coming to her eyes.

"I'm afraid so."

"But there are no more weddings this season! Without the photos, we've no way to promote St Morfa for next year!"

To be continued.

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There was something fishy about this duck, John Taylor says . . .

ANNE and I were invited out to supper by a fellow farmer and his wife.

Well, we read through the menu.

The dearest item was a T-bone steak.

If I had been paying, I would have loved it, but thought I had better go for a middle-of-the-road price.

The answer was soup of the day, followed by curried chicken and coffee.

Anne chose the curried chicken and coffee, too, but cut out the soup – too fattening.

As soon as the fellow who took the order had left, she had a go at me.

"John, you shouldn't have ordered the soup at your weight."