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Wish You Were Here

Written by Catherine Alliott

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Wish You Were Here

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This one's for Jonathan

Chapter One

Somewhere over the English Channel, on a plane travelling north, closer to the white cliffs than to Cherbourg and whilst cruising at an altitude of thirty thousand feet, a voice came over the tannoy. I'd heard this chap before, when he'd filled us in on our flying speed and the appalling weather in London, and he'd struck me then as being a cut above the usual easyJet Laconic. His clipped, slightly pre-war tones and well-modulated vowels had a reassuring ring to them. A good man to have in a crisis.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I wonder if I could have your attention for a moment, please. Is there by any chance a doctor on board? If so, would they be kind enough to make themselves known to a member of the cabin crew. Many thanks.'

I glanced up from *Country Living*, dragging myself away from the scatter cushions in faded Cabbages and Roses linen I fully intended to make but probably never would, to toss attractively around the Lloyd Loom chairs in the long grass of the orchard I would one day possess, complete with old-fashioned beehive and donkey. I turned to my husband. Raised enquiring eyebrows.

He pretended he'd neither heard the announcement nor sensed my eloquent brows: he certainly didn't look at them. He remained stolidly immobile, staring resolutely down at the Dan Brown he'd bought at Heathrow and had

taken back and forth to Paris, but had yet to get beyond page twenty-seven. I pursed my lips, exhaled loudly and meaningfully through my nostrils and returned to my orchard.

Two minutes later, the clipped tones were back. Still calm, still measured, but just a little more insistent.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I’m sorry, but if there is a doctor or a nurse on board, we would be most grateful if they would come forward. We really do need some assistance.’

I nudged my husband. ‘James.’

‘Hm?’

His shoulders hunched in a telltale manner, chin disappearing right into his neck and his blue-and-white checked shirt.

‘You heard.’

‘They mean a *doctor* doctor,’ he murmured uncomfortably. ‘A GP, not a chiropodist.’

‘Oh, don’t be ridiculous, you’re a foot surgeon! Go on.’

‘There’ll be someone else,’ he muttered, pale-grey eyes glancing around nervously above his glasses, a trifle rattled I could tell.

‘Well, obviously, there isn’t, because they’ve asked twice. There could be someone dying. Just go.’

‘You know I hate this sort of thing, Flora. There’s bound to be someone with more general expertise, more –’

‘I really think, young man,’ said the elderly woman in the window seat beside him, a well-upholstered, imperious-looking matron who’d removed her spectacles to regard him pointedly and reprovingly over her tapestry, ‘that if you do have medical experience, you should go.’

She made him sound like a conscientious objector.

‘Right. Yes. Yes, of course. *All right*, Flora, you don’t need to advertise me, thank you.’

But I was already on my feet in the aisle to let him out, gesticulating wildly to a stewardess. ‘Here – over here. Make way, please.’ This to the queue of people waiting patiently beside us for the loo. We were quite close to the front as it was. ‘He’s a doctor.’

‘Make way?’ James repeated incredulously under his breath, shooting me an appalled look as the entire front section of the plane turned to look at the tall, lean, sandy-haired, middle-aged man who’d unfolded himself with effort from his seat and was now shuffling forwards, past the queue to the bog, mumbling apologies and looking, in his creased chinos and rumpled holiday shirt, more like a harassed librarian than a paramedic in a hurry.

I sat back down again, feeling rather important, though I didn’t really sit: instead I perched on the arm of my aisle seat to get a better view. Luckily, a steward had redirected the queue to the loo at the back and I could now see that a little crowd of uniformed cabin crew had gathered around a young girl of about nine who was sitting on the floor, clearly in distress. In even more distress was the very beautiful woman in tight white jeans and a floral shirt standing over her, her hands over her mouth. She was pencil thin with a luxuriant mane of blonde hair, and her heavily accented voice rose in anguish.

‘Oh, *mon dieu*, I can’t do it again – I can’t!’

I saw James approach and address her and she gabbled back gratefully in French, clutching his arm. I’m reasonably fluent, but at that range I couldn’t make it out, but

then she switched back to English saying, ‘And I have only one left – please – help!’

She thrust something into my husband’s hand, at which point I was tapped on the shoulder from behind.

‘Excuse me, madam, would you mind taking your seat? We’re experiencing a spot of turbulence.’

The glossy, lipsticked smile on the expertly made-up face of the stewardess meant business. The plane was indeed bumping around a bit. Reluctantly, I lowered my bottom, which obviously meant I missed the crucial moment, because when I craned my neck around the stewardess’s ample behind as she passed, the crowd at the front were on the floor and James was crouching with his back to me, clearly administering something. They’d tried to move the girl to a more secluded position and shield her with bodies, but a plane doesn’t yield much privacy. The blonde, clearly the mother, was the only one standing now, pushing frantic hands through her hair, clutching her mouth, unable to watch, but unable to turn away. My heart lurched for her. I remembered the time when Amelia shut her finger in the door and almost sliced the top off and I’d run away as James held it in place with a pack of frozen peas, and also when Tara coughed up blood in the sitting room and I’d raced upstairs, screaming for her father. You knew you had to help, but you loved them so much you couldn’t bear to watch. There was a muffled collective murmuring from the crew and then, without looking indecently ghoulish, I really couldn’t see any more, as the mother had dared to crouch down, obscuring James as well.

I went back to my magazine. An interview with a woman

from Colefax and Fowler informed me that, on the paint-effects front, Elephant's Breath was all over. Everyone was coming into her Brooke Street showroom asking for chintzes and borders now. Borders. Blimey. I had rolls of the stuff in the attic. Did Laura Ashley circa 1980 count? Probably not. My mind wasn't really on it, though, and I narrowed my eyes over my reading glasses. James had straightened up and was answering a series of quick-fire questions from the mother, whose relief was palpable, even though strain still showed in her eyes. My husband, typically, made light of it, brushing away what were clearly effusive thanks, and came back down the aisle, perhaps less hunched and beleaguered than when he'd gone up it, as quite a few passengers now regarded him with interest. I got up quickly to let him slide in and sit down. The ordeal was over and relief was on his face.

'Well?' I asked. The matron beside him was also agog, needlework abandoned in her lap.

'Nut allergy,' he reported. 'She'd taken a crisp from the girl beside her and it must have been cooked in peanut oil. The mother realized what had happened but had never had to administer the EpiPen before, and she cocked it up the first time. She had a spare one but was too scared to do it in case she got it wrong again. The stewardess was about to have a stab.'

'So you did it?'

He nodded. Picked up Dan Brown.

'Did it go all right?'

'Seemed to. She's not dead.'

'Oh, James, well done you!'

'Flora, I have given the odd injection.'

‘Yes, but still.’

‘I say, well done, young man,’ purred his beady-eyed neighbour approvingly. ‘I couldn’t help overhearing. I gather you’re a surgeon?’

‘Consultant surgeon,’ I told her proudly.

‘Ingrowing toenails, mostly,’ said James, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. ‘The odd stubborn verruca.’

‘Nonsense, he trained as an orthopaedic. He’s done hips, knees, everything, but he gets a lot of referrals from chiroprodists these days, when it’s out of their sphere of expertise.’ I turned to James. ‘Will she be all right? The little girl?’

‘She’ll be fine. It just takes a few moments to kick in.’

‘Anaphylactic shock,’ I explained to my new friend across his lap. Like most doctors’ wives I considered myself to be highly qualified, a little knowledge often being a dangerous thing.

‘Ah,’ she agreed sagely, regarding James with enormous respect now, her pale, rheumy eyes wide. ‘Well, that’s extremely serious, isn’t it? I say, you saved her life.’

James grunted modestly but didn’t raise his head from his book. His cheeks were slightly flushed, though, and I was pleased. Morale could not be said to be stratospheric in the Murray-Brown household at the moment, what with NHS cuts and his private practice dwindling. When he’d first decided to specialize, years ago, he’d chosen sports injuries, having been an avid cricketer in his younger days, but that had become a very crowded field. He’d seen younger, more ambitious men overtake him, so he’d concentrated on cosmetic foot surgery instead. A mistake in retrospect, for whilst in a recession people would still pay to have a crucial knee operation, they might decide to live

with their unsightly bunions and just buy wider shoes. He'd even joked with the children about getting a van, like Amelia's boyfriend, who was a DJ, adding wheels to his trade, morphing into a mobile chiropodist, perhaps with a little butterfly logo on the side. 'A website, too?' Amelia had laughed, 'I'll design it for you.' But I'd sensed a ghastly seriousness beneath his banter. He spent too much time in what we loosely called 'the office' at the top of our house in Clapham, aka the spare room, pretending to write articles for the *Lancet* but in fact doing the *Telegraph* crossword in record time, then rolling up the paper and waging war on the wasp nest outside the window. Not really what he'd spent seven years training at St Thomas's for. This then, whilst not the Nobel Prize for Medicine, was a morale boost.

I peered down the aisle. I could see the young mother standing at the front of the plane now, facing the passengers, her face a picture of relief, casting about, searching for him. I gave her a broad smile and pointed over my head extravagantly.

'He's here!' I mouthed.

She'd swept down the aisle in moments. Leaned right over me into James's lap, blonde hair flowing. 'Oh, I want to thank you so very much,' she breathed gustily in broken English. 'You saved my daughter's life.'

'No no,' muttered James uncomfortably, but going quite pink nevertheless. He tried to get to his feet, his manners, even on an aircraft, impeccable.

'No, don't get up,' she insisted, fluttering her pretty, bejewelled hands. 'I will see you later. I just wanted to say how grateful I am, how grateful we all are. My Agathe – you saved her!'

‘Well, I administered an EpiPen, but not at all, not at all.’ James murmured, gazing and blinking a bit. She really was astonishingly beautiful. I marvelled at the yards of silky hair which hung over me, the tiny frame, the vast bust, the enormous blue eyes. Was she a film star, I wondered? She looked vaguely familiar. A French one, perhaps – well, obviously a French one – in one of those civilizing arty movies I went to with Lizzie occasionally at the Curzon when James was watching *The Bourne Identity* for the umpteenth time. I didn’t think this was the moment to ask and watched as her tiny, white-denimed bottom undulated back to its seat.

Once off the plane at Stanstead, on the way to baggage reclaim, I saw a father point James out to his son, perhaps as someone to emulate in later life: where all his GCSE biology studies could lead, and the reason he, the father, enforced the homework. The boy stared openly as he passed, as did his younger sister, and I surreptitiously got my lippy out of my handbag and gave a quick slick in case anyone should want his autograph. By the time we got to the carousel, however, most people seemed intent on getting out of the place and had forgotten the heroics. Including the mother and child, who hadn’t yet materialized, I realized, glancing around. Perhaps they were hand luggage only? Had swept on through already? Hard to imagine what they were doing on easyJet at all. But then, just as James returned from the fray with our battered old suitcase, I saw them enter the baggage hall. The little girl seemed fine now and was skipping along in front, holding a man’s hand. He couldn’t be the father, I thought; too thuggish and thick set. Indeed, there seemed to be a couple of similar heavies in tow, whilst the mother strode

along in their midst, in sunglasses. Were they staff? Certainly the small, dumpy woman carrying all the Louis Vuitton hand luggage must surely be an employee, and the swarthy man with the cap couldn't be the husband either.

The blonde seemed about to sweep on through, but then, just as she neared the exit she spotted us. She whipped off her sunglasses and came striding across, beaming.

'*Alors*, there you are! *Regard* – look at my *petite* Agathe. As right, as what you English bizarrely call rain, and all thanks to you, *monsieur*. My name is Camille de Bouvoir and I am eternally grateful.'

James took her tanned, extended hand. 'James Murray-Brown.'

'Orthopaedic surgeon,' I purred. 'And I'm his wife, Flora.'

She briefly touched the fingers of the hand I'd enthusiastically offered but turned straight back to James.

'I knew you were a surgeon. I could tell by those hands. So sensitive, yet so capable.'

'Aren't they just?' I agreed, although no one seemed to be listening to me.

'And I would like to repay your skill and kindness.'

'Oh, there's really no need,' demurred James, embarrassed.

'May I take your email address? I somehow imagine you would be too modest to get in touch if I gave you mine.'

'He would,' I confirmed, scrabbling around in my bag for a pen but withdrawing a distressed tampon instead, but Madame de Bouvoir had already produced her iPhone. She handed it to me wordlessly and I tapped away dutifully, very much the secretary to the great man. Very much peripheral to proceedings.

‘I will be contacting you’ she promised, pocketing it as I handed it back to her. ‘And now, Agathe wants to say something.’ She gently shepherded her daughter forward. ‘*Cherie?*’ The child was as slim as a reed, with widely spaced almond eyes in a heart-shaped face. Although not yet on the cusp of puberty she was very much in the Lolita mould: destined for great beauty.

She took a deep breath. ‘Thank you so very much, *monsieur*, for saving my life. I will be for ever grateful to you and thank you from the bottom of my ’heart.’

She’d clearly practised this small, foreign speech on the plane with a little help from her mother, and it was delivered charmingly. An elderly couple beside us turned to smile. James took the hand she offered, bowing his head slightly and smiling, for who could not be enchanted?

‘*Mon plaisir,*’ he told her.

Courtesies having been observed, Mme de Bouvoir then kissed James lightly on both cheeks three times. She briefly air-kissed me – only once, I noticed, as I lunged for the second – and then, as a soaking great pile of Louis Vuitton suitcases were wheeled towards her by one of her chunky attendants, she sashayed out of the concourse ahead of the trolley, bestowing one last lovely smile and a flutter of her sparkling hand.

James and I gave her a moment to get through customs, where no doubt she’d be met by a man in a uniform, before we waddled out with our bags.

‘Great. You know exactly what that will be, don’t you?’ muttered James.

‘What?’ I said, knowing already: even now regretting it.

‘Some poncy restaurant we’ve been to a million times

already. We'll have to sit there pretending we never go anywhere smart and endure a lengthy, excruciating meal, which we're force fed anyway on a regular basis.'

'Not necessarily,' I said, with a sinking feeling. I grabbed my old blue bag as it threatened to slide off the trolley.

'We're probably going there tonight!' he yelled.

I avoided looking at him, stopping instead to look in my handbag for my passport. James froze beside me.

'Dear God, I was joking. Please tell me we're not out tonight, Flora. I'm knackered.'

'We have to, James. I've got to get the review in by tomorrow.'

'You're not serious.'

'I am.'

'Jesus.'

'How else d'you think we're going to pay for that bloody holiday? Shit. Where's my passport?' I delved in my bag.

'I've got it.' He produced it from his breast pocket. 'Where are we going?'

'Somewhere in Soho, I think. Oh yes, Fellino's. I have a feeling Gordon Ramsay's trying to take it over and he's resisting.'

'Hasn't he got enough bloody restaurants? Have you texted Amelia?'

'Yes, and she's outside whingeing about us being late. Apparently, we should have let her know the plane was ten minutes delayed. As if I haven't sat for enough hours in that bloody car park waiting for her.'

'Can't you ask Maria to put it in next week's edition? Say you'll go tomorrow?'

'I've tried, but it seems Colin's already let her down. He

was supposed to do the new Marco Pierre but he's got a sore throat, so someone's got to do one.'

'Oh great, so Colin's got his excuse in first, as usual.'

I ignored him. We were both very tired.

'You could Google the menu on the web? Write the review from that? Say how delicious the tiddled-up turbot was?'

'Oh, good idea. Like I did at Le Caprice, only, unfortunately, the turbot was off that night, and the scallops, both of which I'd waxed lyrical about. I'd rather keep what remains of my job, if it's all the same to you.'

'But you know Fellino. Can't you ring him and ask what the special is? See what he recommends for tonight?'

'It's fine, I'll go on my own.'

'No, no, I'll come,' he grumbled. 'Blinking heck. Who goes out for dinner the night they get back from holiday?'

'We do, if we're going to go on holiday at all,' I said with a flash of venom. There was the briefest of pauses. James's voice, when it came, was light, but it had the timbre of metal.

'Ah yes, forgive me. For a moment there I thought I was the successful alpha male in this partnership. The high-earning surgeon with a career on a meteoric rise to the stars, providing for his family.'

Heroically, I held my tongue as, tight-lipped, we followed the other weary travellers down the corridor to the escalator. We climbed aboard wordlessly, passed through Passport Control then trundled out through Nothing to Declare.