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The Secret of Orchard Cottage

Written by Alex Brown

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'As sweet and charming as homemade apple pie'

Milly Johnson

The Secret Of Orchard Cottage



Alex Brown

*The
Secret
of
Orchard
Cottage*

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HARPER

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1

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Present day . . .

In the bedroom of a 1930s bungalow in Basingstoke, April Wilson slipped off her pink hand-knitted cardy and placed it back on the padded hanger before putting it away inside the wardrobe – managing, as she had become accustomed to doing, to avoid making eye contact with her late husband’s shirts still hanging neatly on his half of the hanging rail.

Graham had died eighteen months ago. Motor neurone disease. Ten years her senior, but with a zest for life befitting a far younger man, Gray had been the proverbial life and soul of the party until the cruel disease had taken hold, and then when his breathing muscles had degenerated so severely, he had slipped away one night in his sleep. And April would always be grateful for that. Having given up her nursing career to care for Gray, it had been his wish right from the start, on that sad, drizzly autumn day in the consultant’s room at the hospital when the diagnosis had first been given, to be at home in his own bed when the end came.

‘Only me,’ the effervescent voice of April’s stepdaughter,

Nancy, cut through her reverie as the door opened slowly. ‘Sorry, am I disturbing you? Only these arrived a few minutes ago addressed to Mrs Wilson.’ And a gorgeous array of vibrant red and orange roses appeared in the gap between the door and the frame.

April quickly closed the wardrobe doors and pulled on a polka-dot towelling robe, before smoothing down her curly brown hair, which had got mussed up from tugging the dress off over her head.

Gray used to help her with the zip.

April stopped moving.

Instinctively, she inhaled sharply and squeezed her right hand, pressing the fingernails hard into her palm to stop herself from going there. It was the best way. And it was always the little things that still managed to catch her off guard. But she’d get out her sewing machine and alter the zip, build in a small ruched panel on either side of the waist to create a looser fit and the problem would be solved. No more tugging at the dress and her heart-strings while yearning for Gray to be there beside her. Of course, that feeling would never completely disappear, but for now, April needed at least some of her waking hours to feel normal, to be free from the near-physical pain of her battered heart.

‘No, I was just getting changed, come on in sweetheart.’ April smiled, tying the belt as she walked across the room to take the roses from Nancy. ‘Oh they’re absolutely lovely, thank you so much.’ She pressed her nose into the highly scented flowers, figuring they must have cost quite a bit by the looks of the gorgeous white wicker

trug and elaborate puff of scarlet tulle ribbon wrapped all around it.

‘Oh, don’t thank me,’ Nancy grinned. ‘The cookery book and that melt-in-the-mouth steak were your birthday treats from me – flowers are a waste of money in my opinion,’ she added in her usual matter-of-fact way before bouncing down on to the end of April’s bed. Just like her dad, thought April; Gray had been a pragmatist too. ‘Here, see who they’re from,’ and Nancy plucked an envelope from a wire stem and handed it to April.

After placing the trug on top of the chest of drawers, April opened the envelope and pulled out a gold-embossed cream card.

To my amazing and beautiful wife on her birthday. Seize the day my darling, wherever or however that may be, as life really is too short.

Bye for now.

Love always.

Gray xxx

April pressed the card to her chest and gasped. Trust him to have remembered, even from beyond the grave, but then Gray always was so thoughtful, and they had joked about this bonkers idea years ago – it was over Sunday lunch in the local pub, shortly after the diagnosis, when they’d all been keen to keep spirits up and put on brave faces. Gray had said he was going to pay his sister, Jen, a florist, up front, to send roses every year on April’s

birthday. Gray had then teased April, telling her, 'But just don't be living until you're a hundred years old or the money will have run out by then and you'll end up getting a measly bunch of dandelions.' They had all laughed, and then later Jen had taken April aside and explained that she intended on honouring Gray's wishes no matter what. April would have roses on her birthday. It was the least she could do after all the love and care she had already shown her brother. And April had smiled and shrugged, for she liked taking care of people, loved it in fact; it gave her a purpose and made her feel like she was making a difference. It was the reason she had trained to become a nurse in the first place.

And then so much had happened since to keep her busy: there had been the funeral to arrange, sorting out his financial affairs and the memorial service – Gray had been a renowned research scientist, involved in pioneering work developing cures for a number of life-limiting illnesses, which Gray had often said was actually very ironic really, given the fate of his own health. And of course there was the grieving process to work through. That had hit April hard and somehow all the brave facing and wry jokes while Gray had still been alive had made it even harder once he'd gone. Back then it had been easy for April to occupy her thoughts and time by caring for Gray as he deteriorated: making sure all his needs were met; showing him she was strong and would be OK without him. It had been important for April to give Gray that, to ease the burden of worry for him, as she knew his biggest fear after the diagnosis was for those he loved

and was used to looking after, and would ultimately leave behind – his family. Twenty-two-year-old twins, Freddie and Nancy, how would they cope? Their mother lived on the other side of the world in New Zealand, having emigrated there with her new husband when they were teenagers. But the twins had coped remarkably well, in that robust, resilient way that many young people seemed able to do. Of course, there had been ups and downs, but April admired them, their strength, and having spent some time with their mother they now seemed OK and were starting to normalise . . . which was more than could be said for her.

Gray had worried so much about April; often confiding in Jen, asking her to look out for his wife and to support her through his demise and when he was no longer here. Because, although Gray and April had been together for a while, they had only been married for a year when the diagnosis came, and Gray had said he would completely understand if April wanted to end things with him then and move on. Make a life for herself with somebody new. Somebody fit and vibrant. Instead of ‘saddling herself with a sickly, older, and quite often grumpy git like me’ (Gray could be quite self-deprecating at times). It was a lot to expect of her to stick by him, but April was having none of it. In sickness and health. That’s what she had vowed, and gladly so. She wasn’t a quitter, never had been.

And caring for Gray had given April a purpose, something to live for, and God knows she had needed it, because if the truth be told, her world had fallen apart

that day in the consultant's office. April had hidden it well of course, put on a brave face, stoic, and she was good at that, having trained at Great Ormond Street hospital where nursing seriously ill children required an ability to protect one's self, close off emotions when required – maintain an emotional distance, if you like. It really wouldn't do for a nurse to cry. No, that was for other people. April's job was to be strong so that everyone else around her could cope. Hence, she hadn't cried once in front of Gray or the twins. Or burdened any of her friends from the knitting group or gym classes that she used to do in the local leisure centre before Gray became seriously incapacitated. And April used to love knitting: sitting next to Gray on the sofa of an evening, they would watch TV together and he'd tease her about the chunkiness of her size 12 needles for a cosy Aran jumper that had been her last project. It was the simple, everyday 'doing nothing' stuff that April missed most. But now, well . . . it just wasn't the same on her own. The happy association of knit one purl one and laughing along to *Gogglebox* wasn't there any more.

'Are you OK?' Nancy asked, leaning forward to stroke April's arm.

'Yes, sure. Sorry darling, I was miles away.'

April shook her head as if to clear her thoughts, and then smiled at Nancy.

'Don't apologise,' Nancy smiled back. 'We all knew today would be extra tough for you. Another birthday without Dad.' She shuffled her bottom backwards over

the duvet and then patted the bed, indicating for April to sit beside her.

‘Actually, today has been better than I anticipated,’ April replied, conscious that underneath the veneer of being OK, Nancy was still grieving too, and she didn’t want to upset her stepdaughter by appearing to be ‘getting over her father’s death’ too quickly. But deep down April knew that she most likely would never really ‘get over’ Gray. Yes she’d learn to live without him, be happy again perhaps, a different kind of happiness, she hoped, one day, but still . . .

‘Good,’ Nancy stated. ‘You know, Dad would never have wanted you to be “moping” all over the place.’ She paused to do quote signs in the air and April winced. ‘Especially on your birthday.’ A short silence followed. ‘Um, sorry, not that you are,’ Nancy added. ‘Gosh, sorry, I didn’t mean it like that, you aren’t . . . um, haven’t been “moping” at all, in fact you’ve been amazingly strong and kind and lovely as always to me and Freddie, putting everyone else before yourself. Sorry, me and my big mouth. I really must engage my brain before opening my gob and just letting words blurt out.’ Nancy pulled a face and shook her head, making her fiery red hair swish around her shoulders. ‘I just meant that . . . well, you know how practical Dad was about stuff, being a scientist and all. I didn’t mean to be so insensitive, God no, but somehow it always comes out that way.’

‘It’s OK,’ April replied. ‘Like father like daughter, eh?’ and she nudged Nancy with her elbow, before both women exchanged glances and a smile.

'Hmm, I guess so.' Nancy pressed her hands together as if to break the moment and lift the mood, buoy them both back up. 'I know! How about we watch an old film together? *Mamma Mia*, you love that one.' April's smile widened. 'Whaaaaat? What's so funny?' Nancy lifted her shoulders and pulled a face.

'*Mamma Mia!*' April laughed. 'It's hardly an *old* film . . .'

'Hmm, weeeeell . . . it is to me. Or would you prefer to watch something *really* ancient, like *Dirty Dancing* perhaps?'

'Or how about *Some Like It Hot?*' April couldn't resist, and Nancy creased her forehead.

'Sounds like filth to me.' Nancy folded her arms. 'April, you fox! Never had you down as a porn fan,' she teased.

'Nooooooo!' April protested, her cheeks flushing. 'Oh gosh no, nothing like that. It's a classic, starring Marilyn Monroe. With Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon – they dress up as women and—'

'Cross-dressing! Hmm, guess that could be cool.' Nancy raised her eyebrows.

'Hmm, it's a bit more than that,' April said.

'Well, I've never heard of it!'

'Ha! Now why doesn't that surprise me?' April gave her stepdaughter's thigh an affectionate pat. 'You know, I feel *reeeeally* old now.' She shook her head and let out a long sigh.

'Oh don't be daft! You're still young. A million miles away from the menopause.' April shook her head; trust Nancy to be so blunt. 'Tell you what . . . why don't I do

your hair and make-up this afternoon? I could do your nails too; we could have a girly makeover party. I'll get us some chocolate and maybe a cheeky bottle of bubbles . . . what do you say?'

'That sounds lovely, are you sure though?' April said, surprised, as it wasn't really Nancy's thing.

'Yep. It's your birthday and I want to make it nice for you. And you love all that beauty and pampering stuff.' A short silence followed. April swallowed, hard. And then Nancy added, 'Weell,' she hesitated, 'you used to before Dad died, and I know it's hard, I really still miss him too, but he'd want us to make an effort on your birthday and you made an effort on mine, even though I bet you didn't really feel up to it.' She pulled herself off the bed and went in search of April's beauty paraphernalia. She opened the top drawer of a chest. It was full of underwear. 'Sorry,' she said, closing it again. 'Nail polish?'

'No problem,' April replied, 'it's in the basket on the shelf in the ensuite.' She paused and fiddled with the belt of her dressing gown. 'And I say that a pamper afternoon is a very lovely idea, thank you sweetheart.'

'Great!' Nancy chimed. 'But I'm sensing a big *but!*' She stopped moving and turned to look at April.

'It's just that I thought my hair looked OK! Why didn't you tell me *before* we went out for lunch?' April pretended to admonish, but knew seriously that she hadn't really bothered with all of that since Gray went, often wondering what was the point. Of course, she always made sure her hair was brushed and that she looked presentable

and had clean clothes on, that sort of thing (well . . . underwear at least), but she had found it hard to muster up much enthusiasm for applying make-up or painting her nails. To be honest, the last eighteen months had seen her operating as if on autopilot, going through the motions really.

‘April, your hair looks lovely. Honestly. I just thought it would be something nice to do for the rest of your birthday.’

‘Ahh, OK. Then thank you, and sorry, ignore me, I’m just being oversensitive. Come on, you grab the chocolate and champagne and I’ll sort out what we need up here,’ April chivvied, seizing the opportunity to busy herself and be in her preferred state.

‘Perfect.’ Nancy walked towards the door. ‘Ooh, before I forget – this came too. It’s addressed to “Miss W. Lovell”, no idea who that is, but it looks like a birthday card and Lovell was your surname before you married Dad so I’m guessing it’s for you.’ She pulled out a crumpled lilac envelope from the back pocket of her jeans and gave it to April. ‘Sorry for squashing it.’

‘Thank you. Ooh, it’s from Edie,’ April said, taking the envelope and recognising the old-lady spidery writing on the front.

‘Your great aunt?’

‘That’s right.’ April opened the envelope and slipped out the card, drawing in the faint, but evocatively familiar scent of her childhood summer holidays spent in the quaint little village of Tindledale with her grandfather’s sister. This was before her parents had died in a car crash

shortly before her sixteenth birthday and her life had changed for ever. April, an only child, had gone to live with her mum's parents at the other end of the country and the strong connection with her great aunt Edie faded until she was able to visit more frequently as an adult. And then her grandparents died, leaving Edie as April's last living relative.

April wafted the card in front of her nose. 'Ahh, lavender mingled with mothballs. Takes me right back – I used to get told off for fiddling with the mothballs hanging in the little muslin bag in the back of her wardrobe whilst playing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* game, thinking I was on my way to Narnia.'

'Really? I can't imagine you getting told off for anything, April,' Nancy grinned. 'I always imagined you as a polite, well-behaved child . . . much like you are now.'

'Trust me, I had my moments.' April rolled her eyes before opening the card. 'Ooops!' She bent down to retrieve a five-pound note that had fluttered from it, while simultaneously reading.

Happy birtfiday Winnie

Treat yourself to a nice dinner somewhere fancy.

Lots of love

Your Edie xxx

April frowned.

'What is it?' Nancy asked, sounding concerned. April sighed as she realised what this meant, showing the card

to Nancy. Her great aunt Edie must be getting forgetful and somewhat confused. And a fancy dinner for a fiver? Oh dear.

‘Ahh! Well, it’s nice that your aunt remembered your birthday, eh? Probably just got into a muddle with names, that’s all, no need to worry. How old is she?’ Nancy asked, folding her arms.

‘You know, I’m not sure exactly,’ April said, feeling a twinge of guilt as she racked her brains trying to recall when she had last visited her great aunt Edie or indeed sent her a birthday card. ‘I reckon she must be ninety at least.’

‘Wow! And did she come to Dad’s funeral? I don’t remember seeing her there, but then it was all such a blur . . .’

‘No, she wasn’t up to it – was getting over a fall, I think she said, I can’t really remember either, as it was, like you said . . . all a bit of a blur for me too. But I do know that I promised to—’ April stopped talking.

‘What’s the matter?’ Nancy asked gently. ‘You look like you’re about to cry. What’s up?’

‘Nothing.’ April dipped her head and busied herself with putting the card and the money back inside the envelope.

‘Something clearly is.’ Silence followed. ‘Come on, out with it,’ Nancy cajoled.

‘I feel dreadful,’ April eventually said.

‘Why?’

‘OK.’ April inhaled and let out a long breath. ‘When Great Aunt Edie wrote to apologise for not coming to

Gray's funeral, I said I'd visit her soon, and well, that was over a year and a half ago . . .' April's voice dwindled, knowing that it was eighteen months, two weeks and three days to be precise. She crossed off the days in her diary. At first, it had been a comfort, well, more of a life-raft, something to cling on to, because every day ticked off was a day closer to shedding the cocoon of numbness in favour of feeling something again – she had hoped. But now it was just a habit, because April had learnt over the months that grief really wasn't as kind as all that. It came in peaks and troughs like a giant rollercoaster with no predictability; it was not a set process to be worked through at all, despite what people had assured her.

'Oh April, come here.' Nancy pulled her in for a big hug. 'I'm sure she'll understand – your husband had just died! I'd say that's extenuating circumstances, wouldn't you?'

April knew that Nancy was trying to make her feel better, but it had to be at least a couple of years since she had visited her great aunt in Tindledale. The last time had been with Gray, when he was still fairly mobile. They had driven down one sunny Saturday afternoon, stopping on the way at a quaint old black and white Tudor-framed pub with a lovely garden full of pink hollyhocks and a couple of goats in a pen for children to pet. Gray had surreptitiously fed them his salad – never having been a fan of 'rabbit food', as he called it. They'd had a wonderful time relaxing, and for a few precious hours it had seemed like the old days, carefree and fun, before the diagnosis changed everything.

'I guess so. But I've still neglected her,' April said.

'Then do something about it. Go and see her.' Nancy stepped back from April and put her hands on her hips. 'Go on! It'll do you good – get away from here for a few days, give yourself some space, and you know what they say, a change of scenery and all that.' Nancy looked April in the eyes. 'A mini break is exactly what you need.' She nodded.

'Hmm! Are you trying to get rid of me?' April asked, instantly wishing she didn't sound quite so needy. It really was unlike her, but it was something she had noticed creeping upon her more and more since Gray had died. She felt exposed, vulnerable even, and she wasn't really sure why, preferring not to think too much about it, hoping the feeling would go away if she ignored it.

April coughed to clear her throat. 'But I can't go and leave you here on your own.' She wasn't sure it was right, certainly not so soon after the memorial service – the twins might need her.

'Of course you can.'

'But what about Freddie?' April knew how hopeless he was at getting himself up for his job as a car mechanic every morning. And hadn't she promised Gray that she'd be here for the twins no matter what?

'What about him?' Nancy shook her head. 'No. It'll do Freddie good to look after himself for a day or two. He's a lazy arse and relies on you too much. And you really must stop doing his washing!' She wagged a finger in the air.

'But it's no trouble to put it in with my stuff, I quite

like doing it in fact,' April said, always happy to help out.

'Oh April, pleeeeeease, go and visit your great aunt. If only to remind her that your name isn't Winnie! And you never know, you might even solve the mystery!'

'Mystery?' April raised her eyebrows. 'What do you mean?'

'You know . . . find out who this Winnie woman is,' Nancy joked.

'Ahh, yes, indeed. And I could very well have her fiver here,' April smiled, waving the note.

'Exactly! And Freddie is perfectly capable of seeing to his own washing and I'll be here to make sure he pulls his weight around the house,' she laughed.

'Hmm. But joking aside, the name Winnie does seem to ring a bell. I'm sure I've heard it before . . . a relative perhaps. I think there was an old black and white picture of her on my aunt's sideboard in the sitting room . . . in a uniform during the war . . . It used to fascinate me as you don't often see that, it's mostly men, the soldiers.' April creased her forehead, casting her mind back trying to remember more.

'Sounds intriguing, what happened to her?'

'I'm not sure – you know how family history gets lost in the mists of time – but I'd like to see if I can find out before it's too late. My aunt is getting on now and once she's gone that'll be it, I suppose, for my family, my flesh and blood. It'll just be me left.'

'Then you must go right away, before, as you say . . . it's too late.'

'Yes, I should do that. And I *am* concerned about Aunt

Edie.' A short silence followed, leaving April deep in thought.

'And it can't be easy for her on her own at that age. Has she got a husband? Any children? I can't remember . . .,' Nancy asked.

'No. She never married,' April replied, then pondered, casting her mind back. 'She used to joke that there was a shortage of men around after the war, and the only eligible ones in the village were either daft, or already spoken for . . . And that she much preferred the company of horses in any case.'

'Oh dear.'

'Indeed. She always had a good circle of friends though, but I guess most of them have probably died by now.' April shook her head.

'I guess so. Ninety is a ripe old age. And definitely more reason why you should go and see her.'

'But are you sure?' April checked, but now that all the practicalities following Gray's death had been completed, she was actually starting to feel a tiny bit brighter each morning. Gone was the dreadful split-second gear change on waking, that glorious moment before the synapses of her brain kicked in and it was as if Gray was still alive and still well, only for the grief to come hurtling back all over again when her memory was restored. Yes, April was definitely on the way to feeling a little bit more like her old self, less wobbly, and it would certainly keep her busy for a couple of days. All this sitting around doing nothing very much really wouldn't do. And hadn't Gray said on his card for her to seize the day?

The Secret of Orchard Cottage

So, April made a decision. Nancy was right: she could do with a break, time to gather her thoughts, dust herself down and figure out what next. And it was a pleasant, pretty drive through the countryside to get there, which would give her plenty of time to do just that. Yes, first thing tomorrow morning April would go to Tindledale and visit her great aunt Edith in Orchard Cottage.