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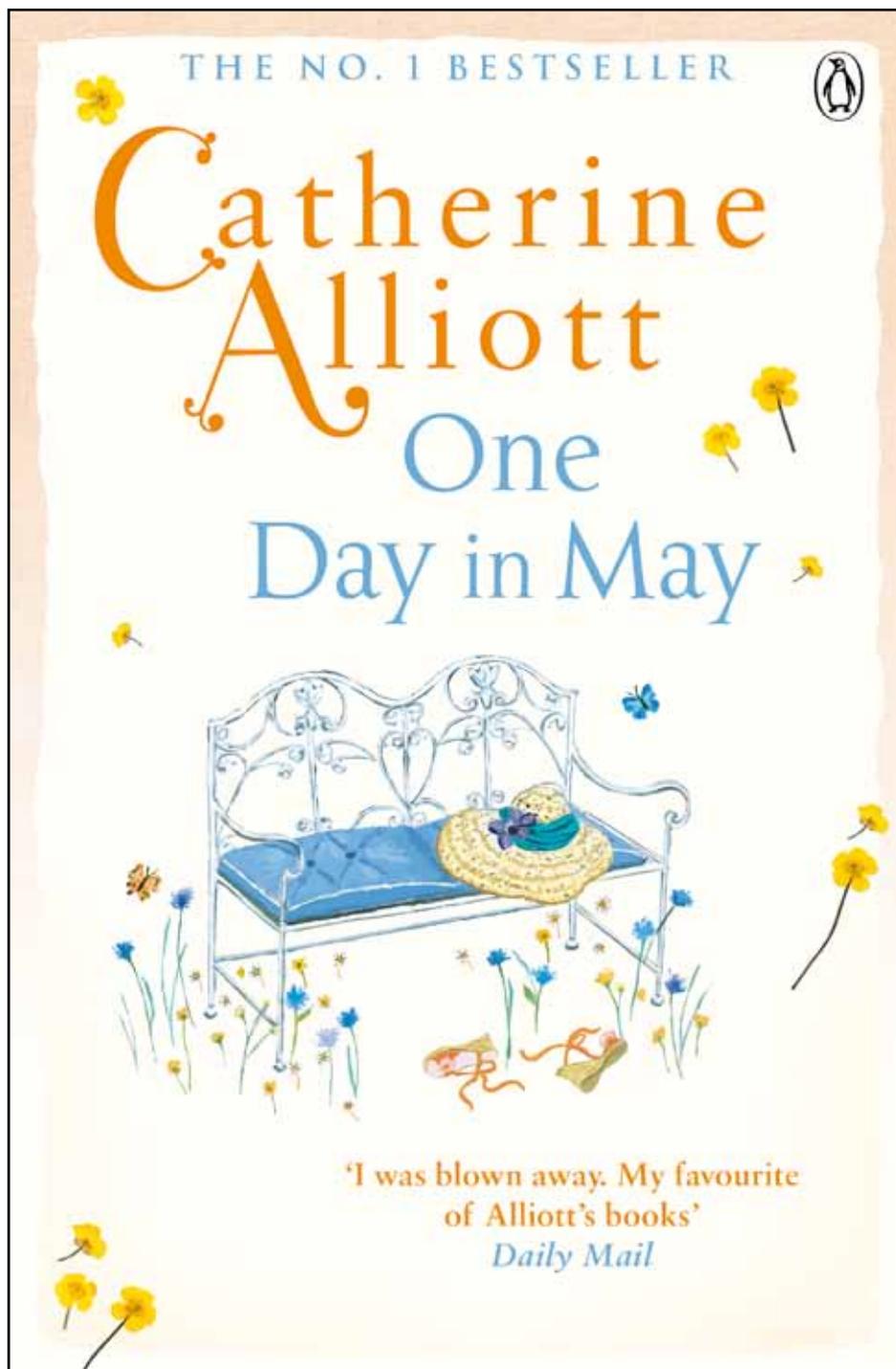
One Day in May

Written by Catherine Alliott

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I

Maggie's look of fixed concentration as we hurtled up the M40 was to be encouraged, and for a moment I pretended I hadn't heard her last remark. Instead I simulated sleep. An in-depth analysis of my family would surely require her to take her eyes off the road, and since her lack of white van handling skills was legendary, I wanted them firmly on the Friday afternoon traffic.

'Hattie?' she barked above the lawnmower roar of the engine, not one to be ignored. 'I said, isn't your sister spoiled beyond belief these days? I haven't seen her for ages, but I seem to remember she had everything she wanted even then. Didn't you say she'd eaten one interior designer for breakfast already?'

I sighed, realizing my pathetic eye-closing ruse was going nowhere. I also remembered that whilst it was quite all right for me to have a go at my family now and then, I resented it when my friends did.

'I didn't say she was spoiled,' I said evenly. 'I simply said she's got some quite grandiose ideas. But then her taste has never been anything like mine, particularly when it comes to doing up houses. She likes everything draped and patterned and swagged, which is fine in the country, but it's hardly you and me, is it?'

'Hardly,' Maggie snorted with derision, then looked pleased. She returned her attention to the road and leaned sharply on the horn. A vast Hungarian juggernaut had dared to cut in front of us whilst we hogged the middle lane, rattling along at sixty miles an hour, which

was all we could do when loaded to the gunwales, our cabin full of fabric, sample books and furniture, the tools of our trade.

‘Pick a lane and stick to it!’ she roared, betraying her own rudimentary grasp of motorway driving. She flashed her lights furiously as she got right up behind him.

I gripped the upholstery. Another white-knuckle ride. Maggie had recently admitted to an adrenalin rush when sparring with fellow truckers, and I felt it was only a matter of time before she boasted a tattoo and a wife-beater vest. At least we weren’t in France, I reasoned, where we’d clocked up most of our miles together, and where Maggie’s aggressive handling of Chalky, our white Transit van, had caused more than one *monsieur* to slam on his brakes, leap from his vehicle and demand an explanation. At least in leafy Buckinghamshire all we encountered were V signs and the odd McDonald’s carton flung from windows in our faces.

‘So why does she want us then?’ Maggie yelled disingenuously as we lurched into the slow lane and beetled illegally past the lorry. ‘Your sister.’

‘You know why. Hugh wants us,’ I said wearily. ‘And even Laura knows better than to flagrantly go against him. And actually, I think it’s jolly loyal of them to ask us to quote at all. Even if we don’t get the whole house, even if it’s just a few rooms, they’ll still pay squillions.’

Maggie sat up a bit at this, silenced. When my brother-in-law had rung the shop and asked if we’d ‘cast an eye over the place’ for them, I too had been astonished. Saxby Abbey was hardly the French Partnership’s usual commission, Maggie and my habitual territory being basement kitchens in Fulham, or, at the most, a small house in Parson’s Green. But Hugh had been insistent.

‘Laura’s got ... well, she’s got some rather extravagant ideas, Hattie,’ he’d said nervously, and very quietly, even though he’d already told me Laura had gone to the village. ‘She’s got some London decorator coming down who wants to put silk everywhere. Even on the walls, for God’s sake. I need you.’

Small and shiny – cheeks and bald pate – he might be, but the words ‘I need you’ delivered passionately by a peer of the realm are inclined to sway one. Besides, I was very fond of Hugh. He was a dear, kind man and, when let off the marital leash, could scamper like a frisky terrier and be terribly amusing in his cups.

‘But, Hugh, Maggie and I do understated French charm, you know that. Shabby chic. A couple of huge garden urns and one or two baroque chairs in an otherwise bare room streaked with a bit of verdigris paint. It’s not going to be Laura’s *tasse de thé* at all.’

‘Paint?’ he’d yelped, like a Labrador after a scrap. ‘Did you say paint? That can’t cost much, surely?’

‘Well, ours isn’t cheap; we have it specially mixed. About thirty quid a litre?’

‘And a litre covers about fifty metres of wall, doesn’t it? Do you have any idea how much her silk Obsession wallpaper is?’

Ah. Obsession.

‘About a hundred pounds for one metre. And the Abbey must have ... ooh ... 20,000 square metres of wall space at least!’

There was a silence as we both did the maths.

‘Please come,’ he’d implored at length. Which, hot on the heels of ‘I need you’ found me not just swaying but melting. ‘Come, and bring your partner too. I swear to God I’ll make it worth your while.’

‘You don’t have to do that, Hugh,’ I’d muttered feebly. ‘I mean, overpay us or anything. We’ll charge our usual rates. But Laura—’

‘Laura will be fine,’ he’d interjected, quite firmly for him. ‘Leave her to me. Oh, and by the way, your mother’s here too,’ he added, in something more like his habitual nervous tone. ‘The pair of them are flying from room to room clutching swatches and bits of wallpaper shrieking, “Yes! Yes!” as they hold them up to windows, like a couple of born-again. Their Bible seems to be an enormous book by the prophet Bennisson, which they clutch to their breasts, open reverently and dribble over.’

I smiled; could just picture it. Mum and Laura, both tall, blonde and gorgeous. Laura in jeans and T-shirt, Mum in Bond Street’s finest and, now that it was back in fashion, fur-trimmed too, around her collar, cuffs, tops of boots . . . As Dad said, it was only a matter of time before it made it to her eyebrows. And boy, they’d be busy. Hastening around the Abbey shiny-eyed, discussing, conferring, holding up rolls of silk, Mum running to the lavatory when the excitement got too much for her middle-aged bladder, both thrilled to bits to be *finally* getting their hands on the pile, which Hugh’s parents had *finally* vacated, allowing Hugh, Laura and their three children to move from the tiny cottage in the grounds where they’d spent their first fifteen years of married life.

‘And it was only supposed to be five,’ Laura had complained to me once when she’d come to see me at my shop in London. ‘When we got married, Hugh’s parents said five, or maybe six years max, then we’ll swap, it’ll be too big for us. And, Hattie, I could have handled eight years, even ten. But now I’ve got two hulking great teenage

girls hitting their heads on the beams and throwing Ugg boots up on sofas, and Charlie's bouncing off the walls, and we're *still* in the cottage!

Maggie had been crouched in the shop window at the time, pretending to polish a ball-and-claw sofa foot. She'd made a 'lucky-you-to-have-a-free-cottage' face at the floor as she'd rubbed. But I'd felt for Laura, actually. To be fair, apart from this little outburst, she'd sat firmly on her resentment as her eighty-year-old parents-in-law rattled round an enormous twenty-room house, and whilst a family of five, plus dogs, squeezed into a tiny three-bedroom lodge at the entrance to the estate.

'Well, why don't they move then?' had been Maggie's exasperated reaction when Laura had gone. She sat back on her heels in the window as she watched my sister go off down the street, blonde hair swinging. 'Why don't they buy their own house, like everyone else does?'

'Because every time they decide to do that, Hugh's parents get all batey. His mother starts muttering about family loyalty and Hugh's father flies into a towering rage, so Hugh says they must stay a bit longer. Not upset them.'

Maggie had harrumphed at that and resumed her dusting with a vengeance, muttering darkly about people not having enough backbone to lead their own lives. But I'd ignored it.

I'd also looked at Laura that day, as she'd sat in the back room of my shop in Munster Road, on a shabby Louis Quinze chaise longue Maggie and I had recently hustled back from a *brocante* in Paris and lovingly re-covered in a few yards of thin but exquisite tapestry found in a flea market, and wondered how we'd ever reached this juxtaposition. My big sister: blonde and beautiful beyond

belief, who, in June 1992 had graced a cover of *Vogue* that bore the legend: ‘Britain’s latest beauty’ – oh, yes, seriously good-looking. Who’d given it all up to marry Hugh; who’d said goodbye to the photo shoots and the catwalk to live in the country and have children. Who’d made a resounding success of her life; and here she was, pouring her heart out to the one who’d made pretty much a bish of everything. The one who’d failed to marry at all, let alone successfully. The one who’d scuppered her chances early on in her twenties by adopting an orphaned boy from Bosnia, thereby accruing baggage ‘no sane man would want’, as my mother had put it crisply at the time. Who’d poured any paltry money she had into a risky and competitive business – the French Partnership wasn’t the only French décor shop in Munster Road, let alone in London: French Dressing, French Affair and Vive La France all prevailed. Who lived in a tiny terraced house with a crippling mortgage at the wrong end of Lillie Road, and yet here was my sister, blue eyes filling as she sat in her Marc Jacobs coat, fiddling nervously with the socking great diamonds on her fingers, insisting she’d been the one to bog it.

As a tear rolled down her cheek – Laura even cried beautifully, no slitty eyes and swollen nose for her – I’d passed her a tissue and moved to sit next to her: joined her on the faded pastoral scene. I put my arm round her shoulders and gave her a squeeze.

‘Nonsense, you haven’t bogged it. Just give it a bit longer and the old dears will see sense. God, they’ll be incapable of getting up the stairs soon. And Hugh’s even put a Stannah stair-lift in for them at the cottage, hasn’t he?’

‘Which will be broken soon,’ she said with a mighty sniff. ‘The children haven’t walked upstairs since it arrived. But, yes, we have. And if that isn’t a hint I don’t know what is.’

‘They’ll wake up one morning and realize they can’t manage any more. Can’t carry on. You’ll see.’

Laura had turned huge damp blue eyes on me. ‘Or maybe they won’t wake up at all.’

‘You don’t mean that!’ I’d gasped, knowing she didn’t. Laura was the gentlest of creatures.

‘No,’ she sighed. ‘Of course not. You know I’m fond of them. Even if Cecily is foul to me and Lionel still scares the pants off me.’ Hugh’s parents were a formidable duo, even in their eighties. ‘But the mind works in mysterious ways, Hattie,’ she went on wistfully. ‘I don’t want to hate them. I don’t want to be this person. But I do resent them, and that’s not nice. I know I’m selfish, and many women would kill to live in a cottage like mine.’ Maggie scrubbed even harder in the window, her mouth set in a grim line. ‘It’s just . . . at my age, at my time of life, I expected more,’ she finished sadly, giving a little shrug.

Ah, yes. Expectation. The route to all disappointment. Which was why I expected so little.

‘And Hugh won’t push it?’

‘No, he’s far too nice. I was the one who bought the stair-lift,’ she added guiltily. ‘So there I am, lying in bed beside him, wondering if Cecily’s motorized buggy, which she wobbles round the village on, roaring at the locals, ordering them to pick up litter, might one day hit a rut in the lane and send her soaring over the handlebars, feeling nothing as she somersaults to the ground. Or if Lionel, at six foot four, bellowing that he can’t find

his whisky decanter again, might one day fail to detect the doors he ducks so assiduously, and just walk straight into one – boof. How horrible is that, Hatts?’ She turned despairing eyes.

‘Well, as long as you’re not actually fiddling with the brakes on the motorized buggy, or removing those tassels Lionel hangs from the door frame to remind him to duck—’

‘No. Never!’ She clutched her handbag on her lap.

‘Then thinking is very different from doing. And your guilty secrets are safe with me.’

That had been a few months ago. And then spookily, days later she’d rung, breathless, to say that Cecily and Lionel were moving out. Not to the cottage, which Cecily had apparently always disliked and dismissed as poky and damp – join the club, Laura had yelped – but to Shropshire, to be near Lionel’s sister. They’d be gone by Easter.

‘At last, Hattie, we’ll be in. We’ll have the Abbey!’

I’d almost expected her to add, ‘It’ll be mine – all mine!’ together with a cackling Hammer House of Horror laugh, but she’d refrained. Then she’d reined in enough to remember her manners and added, ‘And you must come and stay.’

Like I say, that had been months ago. And what with all the moving and hectic reorganization and settling in of her parents-in-law – plus, to be fair, I’d been to Paris on business – I hadn’t been summoned.

But six months had passed now. Not since I’d seen her, because she came to London regularly and we always had lunch, and she’d excitedly tell me her plans for the house. But six months before I got the call from Hugh. The summons. And a tiny bit of me had thought – oh, thanks

very much. Not an invitation to stay, but to work. But the thing was, I'd secretly been dying to go. When they were in the cottage we'd spent a lot of time there, my son, Seffy, and I. We'd all cram in having a jolly time, boozy kitchen suppers, the cousins littered on the floor watching television, or roaming the grounds together, and I suppose I was disappointed that an arrangement I'd expected to become more fluid when space wasn't an issue had become static. And I also missed Laura; was hurt she didn't miss me. I wrestled with all sorts of feelings on the end of the line to my brother-in-law.

'I need you, Hattie, I really do. I can't seem to get through to her at the moment. And she listens to you. Come for the weekend.'

I'd licked my lips, standing as I was at the time when my mobile had rung, on a seventeenth-century console table, fiddling with a delicate crystal chandelier. The weekend. I was supposed to be quoting on a house in Battersea on Saturday.

'And don't worry, I know you decorators all charge consultancy fees these days,' he said quickly. 'I've factored that in.' He went on to mention a sum of money so huge I had to climb off the table before I fell off.

'Well, that's extremely generous of you, Hugh,' I said, trying not to wonder, if that was a consultancy fee, what the entire job would yield. Trying not to mentally pay off the mortgage and Seffy's school fees.

'Oh, believe me, it's a fraction of the price I've been told someone called Ralph de Granville charges, who will otherwise be unleashed in my house. D'you know him?'

'Only ... by repute,' I'd said, holding on to the console table now. I mouthed at Maggie – who was transfixed by

this conversation, standing stock-still in the middle of the shop, a pair of gilt rococo cherubs in her hands – first the amount of money, then the name of the competing decorator. The first she gaped at; at the second, looked horrified. She shook her head and made an eloquent throat-slitting gesture. I turned back to Hugh, vertebrae stiffening.

‘We accept, Hugh. We’ll come this weekend and price the job up for you. Expect us on Friday.’

‘Perfect,’ he’d purred in relief.

‘Are you mad?’ Maggie squealed as I snapped my phone shut. Ralph de Granville? If we go head to head with that man we’ll be the laughing stock of London! If that’s who Laura wants there’s no way she’ll have us. We’re chalk and cheese! *Fromage et froufrou*, in fact. Remember Albion Close? That woman proudly showing us her “de Granville” bathroom with the tart’s knickers hanging from the window? That blind had more colour and pattern in it than one would care to see in an entire house! Hugh clearly has no idea how different we are. He just thinks one decorator is much the same as another.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ I said slowly. ‘Hugh knows what we do, and he likes it. And at the end of the day, Maggie,’ I flicked her a look, ‘it’s his house, not Laura’s.’

She pursed her lips. ‘Right. Blimey. Not much has changed then, has it? I mean, since the days of Mr Darcy and Miss Bennet.’

‘Not a lot,’ I said shortly. ‘As Carla discovered to her cost.’ I climbed back onto the table and resumed my inspection of the chandelier. Carla was Hugh’s first wife: a fiery Italian who’d left him after a few years of unsatisfactory marriage for a Formula One racing driver.

She'd received a handsome settlement but if she'd expected half the Abbey, she'd been disappointed.

'Tricky for you, though,' Maggie mused behind me, still weighing up her cherubs and the implications. 'I mean, Hugh wants you, but Laura clearly doesn't.' Her voice couldn't resist a triumphant little rise at the end. I ignored her and carried on fiddling with the crystal droplets. Rather like Christmas tree lights, a dud one could jeopardize the entire show. 'And if we did get the job,' she persisted, 'we'd be there a lot, don't you think? I mean, weekends too, possibly?'

'Possibly.'

'Seffy would like that, wouldn't he? Now he's a weekly boarder.'

'I'm sure.'

There was a pause. I could tell she was building up to something. 'And Ivan?' Her voice betrayed a *frisson* of excitement.

Ah, Ivan. My other weekly boarder. The one that tended to stay during the week, and scarpers at weekends, who knows where. I carefully screwed in the last glass drop, then reached out and flicked a switch. The chandelier sprang into fabulous light, dazzling our tiny shop. We gasped as it glittered.

'You see?' I said triumphantly. 'Just needed a bit of TLC. That'll transform someone's hall, turn it into Blenheim Palace. We'll sell it for a fortune!'

That had been the Monday, and the sudden illumination had silenced my friend spectacularly. On the Friday, however, as we rattled off the M40 and onto the main road into Thame, she returned doggedly to her theme.

‘Will he come and stay, d’you think? Ivan?’ Her face was pure innocence, but her mouth twitched provocatively. She made a show of studying the road.

I pretended to give this due consideration, determined not to rise. ‘Why not?’ I said airily. ‘He might.’

She sniggered into the dashboard. ‘God, I can just see Laura’s face. And your mother’s.’

Even my sang-froid wobbled a bit at this, but I held my nerve.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ I said lightly. ‘They want me hitched. They’ll be delighted I’ve got a boyfriend at all. Probably be all over me.’

‘Until they meet him,’ she grinned, shooting me a look. Her eyes widened at my stony face. ‘Don’t give me that look, Hattie. You know very well I’m deeply jealous and would give my eyeteeth to have an Ivan, but I can’t help feeling a little bit of *schadenfreude* at your family’s reaction. Oh my God – your brother!’ She turned a hundred and eighty degrees and took a hand off the wheel. Clutched her mouth. ‘Isn’t he a vicar?’

‘MAGGIE!’ I screamed, grabbing the dashboard as, in a blare of horns, the whole cab was illuminated by flashing lights behind.

‘Bastard,’ she muttered, as yet another outraged lorry driver hurtled past, fist shaking, mouth a dark hole. I could tell she was shaken, though.

‘Surely we’re nearly there?’ she snapped, distracted from her train of thought, gripping the shuddering wheel. ‘I thought you said they were just off this main road, but no one ever mentioned it?’ She scanned the surrounding scenery. ‘Said everyone sat sipping Pimm’s on the lawn, seemingly oblivious to the thunderous roar of traffic?’

‘They do. In fact Hugh’s planning a waterfall in the river to drown it out. Oh – here, quick, hang a left.’

‘A water feature!’ said Maggie gleefully, hitting the brakes and spinning the wheel at the last minute. ‘They’ll be putting decking on the terrace next. Down here? My, but this is grand. Is this really their drive?’

It was. We’d shot through a pair of white gateposts flashing in the hedgerow and down a slip of tarmac, which plunged like an arrow, straight through an avenue of pollarded limes. The trees appeared to be holding hands facing us, their topiary branches pruned to cling. Wide grassy verges were mown neatly at their feet. Beyond, behind the post-and-rail fence, green fields spread flatly into the distance, and creamy cattle grazed.

‘Almost French,’ said Maggie, surprised. ‘I mean the avenue. The whole setting, in fact. They’ve even got the Charolais cows.’

‘Exactly,’ I said, pleased she’d noticed. I kept quiet, letting her take it all in.

‘Keep going?’ She’d slowed down for a little humpback bridge at the bottom.

‘Yes, over the river. You see it runs in front of the house, which is unusual, isn’t it? Normally in England the lawn runs down to the river at the back.’

‘Does it now. Funnily enough I’m not terribly *au fait* with the layout of the grand country houses of England. Most of my friends live in Croydon. Where’s the house then?’

‘You don’t see it until – oh, take the left fork.’ She obediently swung the wheel as I pointed. As the drive divided sharply, the house loomed up before us.

‘Oh!’ She stared.

‘What?’ I demanded, keen to know, but not to prompt.

‘It could be a château.’

Out of a clearing in a bank of trees along the flat valley floor, the Abbey rose up, its stone façade the colour of Dijon mustard. It was long and flat centrally, but had towers at either end, their conical slate roofs tapering sharply. Laura, when she’d first seen it, had wondered if, like Rapunzel, she’d be expected to let loose her blonde hair from one of those high windows as she sat spinning in an attic room. Dozens of windows flashed at us now in the evening sunlight, perhaps in welcome, perhaps not.

‘Exactly. Albeit a rather titchy château. But look at the pointy steeple roofs, just like that place in Chevenon. And the shutters, and the double front door.’

‘Tall windows too. Quite a lot of symmetry going on ...’

‘It’s by a Scottish architect,’ I rushed on. ‘And if you think about it, some of those Highland piles are very French. Look at that wide bank of steps at the side, tumbling down to the gravel terrace. Just cries out for one of our distressed café tables, don’t you think? A few wrought-iron chairs, a well-placed urn ...’

‘And look at your sister’s face,’ breathed Maggie, as we came to a halt in the gravel sweep at the front.

The very French double front doors had swung back and Laura appeared at the top of the steps, dressed in a gun-metal grey silk shirt and jeans. Her blonde hair was shining, and her face plastered with an anxious, reproduction smile. She was flanked by another blonde, my mother, whose smile was more practised, less nervous. Behind them a pair of baying lurchers bounded out,

nearly toppling my mother, and then Kit, my brother, appeared, a dog collar under his jumper. He beamed broadly from on high, a wine glass clasped to his chest. No sign of Dad, sadly.

‘Right,’ I muttered, all courage deserting me. ‘I think we just pretend we’re delivering a house-warming present – that mirror in the back will do. We’ll stay for drinks, then turn round and go home, don’t you think?’

‘Nonsense,’ said Maggie, whose professional eyes were glittering as only a true Francophile’s could. ‘This place has got the French Partnership written all over it. I thought we were coming to some mouldy English pile, not a veritable Loire Valley pastiche. If you think I’m passing up a trillion-pound contract and the chance of having my name go down in the annals of interior design history with the likes of Mr John Fowler and Mrs Nina Campbell you’re mistaken. We’re here for the duration. This is working for me, Hattie. I’ve already picked my bedroom.’

She threw open the cab door and jumped out. ‘Laura – and Mrs Carrington – how lovely! Kit, what a surprise, loving the surplice, incidentally; you carry that off terribly well. How wonderful to see you all!’

Laura's hug at least was genuine, and I realized the synthetic smile was masking apprehension, not antipathy. I was aware of my own face not knowing quite how to play this either.

'I should have rung you,' were my first instinctive words, muttered guiltily in her ear, because of course I should.

'You texted me.'

'I know, but that was cowardly. I should have rung and asked, not texted and told.' I remembered her curt little text back: 'Well, if Hugh has asked you 2 come of course I'd love you 2.'

I should have punched out her number there and then, except I knew she'd be cool and polite down the line, but warmer in the flesh, as she was now. She looked gorgeous as ever but, close up, there were circles under her eyes.

'Actually, I'm really glad you're here,' she murmured. 'Mum's driving me mad, and Kit could do with a little diluting.'

'What's he doing here?' I glanced at my brother, beaming a canonized smile from the top step.

'He's on some Bible-thumping course in Oxford, so he's staying.'

'Ah, I wondered. He's got that ecstatic look on his face he always gets when he's topped up his fervour. What about Dad?'

'Due tomorrow. There's a strike in Geneva, would you believe, so he couldn't get a flight.'

My father had pretty much retired as a journalist now, but sometimes took freelance assignments. Currently he was doing a travel piece for the *Independent*.

‘Darling!’ My mother, realizing too much chat was occurring on the gravel without her, and that if she wanted to know what was going on she’d have to drop the Norman Hartnell ex-model pose – chin up, right foot slightly at an angle and to the fore – expertly descended the steps in heels. ‘How lovely, what a surprise!’

It wasn’t, of course, but Mum was lining up with Laura, placing herself firmly in her camp. Not for the first time I felt a guilty twinge of relief that Laura now had a house big enough to accommodate my family and its foibles, all of whom I loved unreservedly, but didn’t want to be proximate to all the time. In my darker moments, in my tiny house, with Seffy away at school, I sometimes fantasized about being attached, settled, having a proper family, but I was never quite sure about everything else that went with it. Part of me relished being the daughter who bombed in and then slid back to London: the one they no doubt discussed when I’d gone, worried about. If Mum had her way I’d be married to a nice GP in the village and work part time in a little antique shop selling Edwardian knick-knacks. I shuddered at the thought.

‘Mum.’ I kissed her fragrant cheek, marvelling at how she seemed to get younger: her shoulder-length ash-blonde hair was streaked with silver now, but the bones were still good, blue eyes bright, and she was slim and straight-backed as ever. ‘You look terrific.’

‘Thank you, darling. I’ve got a new girl doing my facials in Motcomb Street. It’s all to do with the rotation of energy and fluids, apparently. You might try her; I’ll give you her number. You’re looking a little peaky, if I might say so.’

‘Thanks.’ I grinned. ‘Oh, Mum, you remember Maggie, don’t you?’

Mum, who at five foot ten, never stooped to accommodate lesser beings, peered. Maggie flushed, and almost curtsied. There was certainly a bit of a bob going on there.

‘D’you know, I believe I do. Now, Maggie, you look awfully well. You clearly look after yourself, and you single girls should, you know.’ She cast me a reproving look as she air-kissed Maggie’s cheek. There, the first reference to my spinsterhood, and we’d been here, what, two minutes?

‘Did you go and see Mr Auchbach, darling?’ She was back to me, eyes penetrating.

‘Oh, no, I haven’t yet.’

‘I knew you hadn’t. I could tell by your worry lines. For pity’s sake, go.’

This, a reference to her counsellor, a complete stranger, to whom she poured her heart out once a week. Lord knows what about; she couldn’t be more happily married or solvent. Me, the problem daughter, no doubt.

‘And Laura tells me you failed to catch the Garnier.’

Not a bus, but an exhibition, by a little-known Cuban painter, thus completing, in under three minutes, the Hattie-will-not-be-beautified-analysed-or-cultured trilogy. Not bad, I thought, in awe.

‘A record, surely?’ murmured Kit, who, in his languid manner, had finally managed to stroll down the steps to kiss me, hands in pockets.

‘Must be,’ I muttered back. ‘She’s only got to mention Seffy’s long hair and alcohol consumption and things will really get provocative.’

‘Oh, we’ve already done that. I thought I’d get it out of the way early. I told her a bottle of wine a day was quite normal for a fifteen-year-old, especially one who’s spent so much time in France.’

I giggled. ‘Thanks.’

He moved on to shake hands with Maggie; all six foot two and eyes of blue, with cheekbones and swept-back blond hair to boot; surely the most decorative and affable vicar the Church of England was ever likely to get. My family are red hot in the looks department, or at least most of them are. I’ll come to me and Dad later. I saw Maggie swoon visibly.

Hugh was amongst us now, muttering, ‘...how marvellous, thanks for coming, splendid, splendid ...’ as he kissed and shook hands, palpably relieved, I think, that we’d actually made it, and that his wife wasn’t sulking at being outmanoeuvred. However, as we all climbed the steps behind him – his hair had finally retreated, I noticed, apart from two plucky outposts above his ears – and he pointed out architectural features and turrets to Maggie, who was exclaiming politely, Mum helpfully sticking her tour-guide oar in when she felt her son-in-law wasn’t being effusive enough, Laura linked my arm – held it, rather – and we fell back. She discreetly got down to brass tacks.

‘Presumably you know I’ve got Ralph de Granville coming to look at the place?’ she said softly.

‘I do, and listen, Laura, he’s streets ahead of us in design terms. Whoppingly famous and totally different, too. You stick with him, if that’s what you want. Maggie and I can

just give you a bit of advice on – I don't know – the odd spare bedroom or something?' I waved my arm vaguely, upstairs somewhere.

'Or I thought the kitchen,' she said eagerly, 'because that's the sort of thing you do so well, isn't it?'

Basic, functional, utilitarian rooms: yes, we did, I thought, heroically holding my tongue and trying not to think about the elegant drawing room we'd just done in Chester Square, or the morning room in Wiltshire, or indeed the entire house in Streatham.

'In fact, tell you what. Why don't we leave the others to get a drink and I'll show you what I mean?'

I knew, though, because I knew her kitchen. It was the only room I rated. In the old days, when Cecily and Lionel were away, we'd creep around the house together, feeling slightly treacherous – reorganizing, giggling, making plans – and I'd praised the kitchen's simplicity, its integrity, said I wouldn't touch it. It was with a sinking heart, therefore, that I obediently followed her through the great domed hall, which managed to be both huge yet claustrophobic – busy Victorian floor tiles and oppressive oak panelling – mentally painting it a pale mouse colour and picking out the beading in something slightly stronger – down towards the back corridor.

'Hughie, darling,' she called over her shoulder, 'will you get everyone a drink? I'm just going to show Hattie the kitchen.'

The look of panic that crossed Hugh's face, as he stopped *en route* to the drawing room with the rest of the crew, told me this was not going to plan.

‘Oh, I think Hattie would like a glass of wine too, after her long drive, wouldn’t you, Hatts? Why don’t we all have a drink, and then do the house together?’

There was a silence. Laura swallowed. ‘All right, darling.’

She about-turned and we all trooped into the shabby drawing room – one or two good pieces but far too much furniture, every available surface crammed with doodahs and whatnots. All eyes were firmly on the threadbare Persian carpet. Laura and Hugh went into a furious whispered huddle over by the fireplace, Kit suavely engaged Maggie in conversation and escorted her to the window to show her the view, whilst Mum held my arm.

‘Don’t get involved,’ she said in a low, portentous voice.

‘I’m not getting involved.’

‘Yes, but you’re here to quote.’

‘Because Hugh asked me!’

Mum made her famous face: the one that suggested I’d overstepped the mark. I counted to ten.

‘This is something they have to sort out for themselves,’ she went on in the same, *gravitas*-laden manner. ‘And poor Laura is terribly upset and emotional at the moment.’

‘Yes, but why?’

Another well-known expression: the one with pursed lips. ‘Personally I think it’s hormonal.’ Mum’s answer to most things. She drew herself up importantly. ‘Speaking of which,’ she peered at me critically, ‘when did you last have a Well Woman?’

‘I’ve never had a woman, well or otherwise,’ I quipped feebly.

‘Don’t be fresh, young lady, you know I mean – a gynae.’

He-lp. I looked around desperately, but everyone else was occupied.

‘You have got a good man, haven’t you, darling? You’re not still trotting down to that heaving surgery on the North End Road with the rest of south London?’

‘Er, well, you know. Now and then.’ I sank into the glass of wine Hugh had handed me. I wasn’t going to tell her I let years go by, ignored countless reminders for check-ups; let them gather dust.

‘It’s about time you saw my man Stirrup. I’ll give you his number. Oh, do stop smirking, Hattie. It really is time you grew up and stopped giggling at names. He’s quite the best.’

‘Right.’ Hugh was upon us now, beaming nervously, rubbing his hands. ‘That’s decided then. Laura’s going to take Hattie and Maggie to the kitchen. Apparently she wants you to see it in natural light, Hatts, before it gets dark. That’s why she headed off there in the first place. The rest of us can stay here and chew the fat.’

Natural light my foot. He’d capitulated. Maggie and I obediently took our glasses and fell in behind Laura, who led us, pink-cheeked, head held high, out across the hall, then down the long passage to the kitchen.

Through a heavy panelled door we encountered a cool, high-ceiling room smelling slightly of ancient stone and polish. A giant baroque chimneypiece rose up before us from the old black range, and a vast oak dresser thick with copper pans flanked one entire wall. An old refectory table stretched centrally, a bench either side, and a white butler’s sink sat on a cupboard under the tall window. Original grey slate tiles spread at our feet. The room hadn’t been

touched for fifty years, and although the peeling cream walls badly needed a lick of paint, other than that, it was perfect. Maggie stood still in the doorway, awestruck.

‘Oh, but this is terrific. It’s like a museum piece!’

‘It is a bit of a relic,’ Laura agreed, chewing her thumbnail and looking round.

‘Yes, but that’s the point. Apart from the walls – and I love that floor, by the way – I wouldn’t touch it. I certainly wouldn’t dress those windows, and that cracked old paint on the shutters is fab. Lucky you!’

‘This is the room Laura would like us to do,’ I explained helpfully.

‘Oh.’ Maggie’s eyes widened. ‘Right.’

‘You see, the walls are such a state,’ Laura rushed on, ‘and in here too, the pantry.’ She led us into another totally perfect room, albeit with peeling walls, but lovely slate shelving all the way round, more tiles on the floor. ‘Needs totally revamping.’

‘Yes,’ said Maggie, faintly.

Hugh stuck his head around the door. ‘Just come for the ice.’ He smiled and reached into the freezer for the bucket. ‘Don’t forget to show them the breakfast room.’

‘They’re not doing the breakfast room, Hughie,’ said Laura. ‘Ralph is doing that, remember?’

‘We’ll go,’ I said quietly to Maggie later, as we climbed the stairs to get changed for supper. ‘If they haven’t agreed this beforehand between themselves, I can’t get involved. This has all the makings of a family feud and I won’t be caught in the crossfire. I’m annoyed with Hugh, actually, for putting me in this position.’

‘Nonsense, it won’t turn into a feud. It’s only decorating, for heaven’s sake.’

‘Remember Lambrook Gardens?’ I intoned darkly.

Maggie paused on the stairs, shaken. Forty-one Lambrook Gardens had housed a recently married, loving young couple, with diametrically different tastes. Things had finally come to a head when he slashed her suede headboard and punctured the water bed with a knitting needle, but not before she’d tap-danced in studded rugby boots all over his highly glossed and varnished floorboards, which ran throughout the entire house. The decree absolute was through in six months.

‘But he’s adamant, Hattie,’ Maggie insisted in a low whisper as we went on upstairs to the gallery. ‘He’s got it all planned out. He told me when he showed me round. He wants all this horrible oak painted in the hall to lighten it—’

‘And she wants it all French-polished,’ I hissed. ‘She told me!’

‘And he wants to get rid of all the chintz and heraldic stuff—’

‘And she wants more chintz and more heralds. Wants to recreate a Victorian country house, as far as I can tell. Doesn’t want to modernize at all.’

She frowned. ‘I thought Laura had style?’

‘She does,’ I said loyally, ‘but it’s a conventional sort of style. She certainly doesn’t do minimalist.’

‘Maybe there’s a compromise?’

‘No, there isn’t. This is a disaster, Maggie. I’m so sorry to have dragged you in and it’s all my fault for not sorting it out properly, but we’ll leave in the morning.’

‘Don’t be silly. We’re here now; we can at least stay the weekend. It would be rude not to. Ooh, is this me? I can’t

remember.' Maggie pushed a door into what was palpably not the spare room she'd been allocated. We stood surveying Hugh and Laura's master bedroom, complete with four-poster bed, hideous parrot wallpaper, and matching curtains and bedcover. Parrots do require the lightest of touches and there were more here than one would care to see in a rainforest.

'God.' Maggie boggled. 'How do they stand it?'

I shrugged. 'Well, it was Hugh's parents' room up until recently. That's the point: they want a revamp.'

'Whoever does it, it'll cost a fortune,' she murmured, going to the window, feeling the ancient cloth. 'This place is huge. Each room to be stripped, repapered, recurtained ... has he got the moolah?'

'Easily. That's why Laura and Mum are so twitchy with excitement. City bonuses still go a long way these days.'

'She's quite shrewd, your sister, isn't she?' Maggie dropped the cloth and turned to me, narrowing her eyes. 'I mean, she's nabbed an aristo, but he's not a chinless wonder: he's got brains too. Most of them are penniless and stupid, aren't they?'

'No, she's not shrewd,' I said shortly. Maggie was an only child, and sometimes I sensed she resented the closeness Laura and I shared. Single girlfriends can be awfully possessive. I ushered her out before we were caught loitering in the master bedroom. 'She loves him,' I said simply. 'Always has. She certainly didn't marry him for his money. After all, money doesn't buy happiness, does it?'

She gave me an arch look before going into her bedroom, the one she'd been shown to. 'Maybe not,' she drawled, 'but it certainly helps.'

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