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My Husband Next Door

Written by Catherine Alliott

Published by Michael Joseph

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My Husband Next Door

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MICHAEL JOSEPH

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

For my sister-in-law, Chris,
with love

Prologue

The first time I knew I was in any sort of trouble was this time last year, when I ran out of church, disastrous flowers in my hands, straight into Ludo. I was running from some very formidable women at the time, chief amongst them Celia Harmsworth, and the flowers were ones I'd been asked to arrange in the vestry. Celia had rung the week before to see if I could stand in for Venetia Rivers, who was heli-skiing in Argentina, like you do of a Monday morning in June. Although I sniggered with my friend Lottie about women like Celia and Venetia, pretending not to want to join their gang, we jolly well jumped if they asked us to do something. Or at least, I did.

'It doesn't have to be grand,' Celia had barked down the phone from Longhorn Manor, or Foghorn Manor as I liked to call it – had she barked from childhood, I wondered? When did one start? Adolescence? 'But it does have to be yellow and white,' she'd concluded. 'That's the theme. Just do two arrangements, keep it simple, and we'll do the rest. And don't attempt to place them yourself. Just drop them off on Friday in the vestry and the gels will place them on Saturday for the wedding.'

Slightly miffed at not being trusted to place my own arrangements I'd put down the phone, cravenly agreeing I'd do as she asked. Well, naturally, I'd forgotten. The flowers, the yellow and white theme, the wedding – everything. Had picked up my pencil and gone straight

back to my sketch pad, all of it cleanly wiped from my brain. Some days later, though, sauntering back through the village from coffee at Lottie's, I'd passed the exquisitely pretty Our Lady of Mercy's and, mid weighty decision about whether to treat myself to a Creme Egg or a Walnut Whip from the shop, had halted and gone cold. I'd flown home and fled down the garden to the only conceivable spot where something – anything, let alone yellow and white – might be blooming, but unfortunately Curly the goat, who escaped on a regular basis, had beaten me to it. He regarded my flower bed as a convenient fast-food bar and was even now licking his lips by the demolished roses, dribbling petals and moving seamlessly on to pansies for pudding. I cursed him roundly, which he took equably on his hairy chin, and ran inside. In panic, I rang the local florist. No problem, said one-eyed Susan, replacing her dentures audibly and probably her glass eye too. And actually, she said, she'd be chuffed. She knew the young couple who were getting married, and it'd be a pleasure. I promised to pick the flowers up later.

I had quaked slightly when I collected them because I hadn't meant for Susan to arrange them, just provide the stems: I'd planned to at least do that myself. I stole very quietly into the empty church to leave them – anonymously, of course – in the dark vestry and was just tiptoeing away, when I was halted in my tracks.

'You cannot *possibly* be serious, Ella!'

Celia herself emerged from the shadows brandishing a pair of secateurs and half a tree. She was tall, whippet thin and wore a white apron rather like a butcher. She gazed down in horror at the two arrangements I'd laid on the

stone floor, one of which spelled KAREN in white carnations, the other PAUL in yellow.

‘Y-yes – I mean – no. No, of course not. I’m really sorry, Celia. Susan did them, but it wasn’t her fault. I wasn’t – you know – specific enough.’

I shrivelled under her steely gaze. One or two of her henchmen had materialized from the shadows too, aprons efficiently tied, secateurs raised menacingly. I recognized Annabel Marsh-Price and the comedically named Puffy Trumpington.

‘You got them from one-eyed Susan?’ Celia’s eyebrows went into her hairline. ‘I meant you to pick from your own garden! We don’t get arrangements from florists – how *utterly* ridiculous. What on earth would be the point?’

‘Yes, no, quite. I do see, except – except there wasn’t very much. There isn’t really at this time of year, is there?’ I stammered. It was fragrant midsummer. ‘I mean – at least, in mine.’

‘Well, gather flora from the hedgerow, then,’ Celia belted in cadences sufficient to be heard at the back of an abbey let alone a village church. ‘*Anything* is better than that. Take them back and tell her they *simply won’t do*.’ She straightened her bony back, a gimlet gleam to her eye.

Well, obviously I didn’t have the nerve to do that – one-eyed Susan could turn quite nasty – but as I hurried out of the church with the wretched arrangements I ran straight into Ludo in the lane. He was at the wheel of his open-topped Land Rover, paused at the village crossroads.

‘Someone died?’ he asked, eyeing the huge floral tributes in alarm.

‘Oh, no, quite the opposite. Oh God, Ludo, listen.’ I explained, breathlessly, about Curly and Susan and Celia.

He threw back his head and roared. When his face came back to me it was bright with delight. Blue eyes shone in a tanned, lean face. ‘So bony bum’s livid?’

‘That barely covers it,’ I hissed, terrified she was coming up behind me and would hear, not daring to look.

‘Well, do her good to get her blood up. I don’t suppose she gets much excitement in her life. This will tweak her up no end. Anyway, hop in. Let’s see what we can do.’

He leaned across and swung the door wide for me.

‘Really?’ I clambered in gratefully beside him, slinging the arrangements in the back. ‘You mean from your garden?’

He gave me an apologetic smile as he shifted the gears. ‘No, I’m afraid that’s out of the question. Eliza would be deeply unamused if I so much as pinched a dahlia, but we can still carry out General Celia’s orders.’ He grinned and tapped his nose. ‘I know a bank where the wild thyme grows.’

‘Ah,’ I said as we took off at speed, roaring down the hill. I had to clutch the top of the door for balance. ‘*Under Milk Wood.*’

His mouth twitched. ‘I’d go for something a little earlier but let’s not quibble.’

Feeling like an extra in *MASH* I hung on to the side of his beaten-up convertible jeep as we sped down to the bottom of the lane and splashed through the ford at the bottom, forking left through the valley. We took off into the sun. I don’t know about Celia but this was the most excitement I’d had in a long time and, rather uncharacteristically, I gave myself up to it: to the speed and the exhilaration, the wind in my hair, Ludo’s brown arms and

steady hands on the juddering wheel beside me. This man was in complete control, something woefully lacking in my life. I didn't glance at the slim-jeaned legs, knowing that would be a mistake, but I did sneak sidelong glances at his profile, noting the dihedral of his straight nose and the shock of blond hair whipping back from a high forehead. The noise from the engine precluded much speech but we yelled to one another, turning to exchange vivacious smiles. As ever, I thought, he exuded happiness. Every time I saw this man, I felt his optimism, his enthusiasm. He buzzed up the windows so we could talk properly. His eyes, busy as he drove, sparkled over everything, taking it all in. None of it belonged to him, but I felt his gaze to be proprietorial nonetheless.

'I hate going past this farm,' he said, as if to illustrate. I turned to look at the ponies I passed many times, standing by the gate, up to their hocks in mud. 'He's got plenty of paddocks at the back,' he told me. 'Could easily move them when it's wet, but he can't be bothered. So they get mud fever every year.' He shrugged, irritated.

And I'd just thought: muddy ponies. Hadn't considered it.

'You know this area like the back of your hand, don't you?' I called, wiping hair from my mouth where it had stuck to my lips. Happily I'd managed to apply something adhesive that morning, although it had originally been for Celia.

'Should do. I grew up here. Well, just over the hill. Rudolph and I scrambled through every ditch, dammed every river and climbed every dry-stone wall. I've still got the scars to prove it – mostly from farmers who don't take kindly to the right to roam.'

‘Your brother’s called Rudolph?’

He turned and grinned. As usual giving it both barrels.

‘My mother was terribly suggestible when she was pregnant. She had a crush on Ludovic Kennedy when I was born, then she saw Nureyev dance at Covent Garden when she was pregnant with my brother. Poor Roo. He’s learned to dread Christmas. And Red Nose Day, of course. She’d been weeping copiously at the end of *King Lear* when she was about to pop with my sister, Cordelia.’

‘Oh!’ I stared delightedly into the sun, imagining her hugely pregnant in the audience. ‘I love that she wept.’

‘Oh, she’s a sucker for a tear-jerker. So’s my dad. He’s seen *Casablanca* countless times. We tease him he wells up in the Hovis ad. It’s funny because he sees tragedy on a daily basis – stillborn lambs are an occupational hazard for him – but take him to a tragic play or film and he’s limp.’ He smiled ruefully. ‘Actually, we’re all horribly emotional.’

‘I like emotion.’

He glanced at me in surprise. ‘So do I,’ he said, with a wistfulness that took me back a bit. ‘A lot, in fact. Without feelings, what else is there?’

Our eyes locked for a moment longer than was absolutely necessary and I turned away quickly, trying to think what to answer. By the time I’d decided, it was too late. The silence became a bit deafening and I was grateful for the noise of the engine. I knew Ludo socially, as a friend of my sister’s, but mainly because he worked in my garden, and if that sounds grand, it isn’t. First, I’d hesitate to call Ludo a gardener; he’s a landscape designer – a Chelsea Flower Show exhibitor, no less – and most of his work starts with a pencil, although recently, with the recession, he’d been doing more with a spade. He gardened for me

these days as a favour, but my garden isn't big and it obviously shouldn't have taken seven months to complete. It certainly shouldn't be an on-going project.

'Lucky your parents hadn't been watching *Dumbo*,' I hazarded lightly.

He threw back his head and gave that barky laugh I loved. I liked the fact that I could make him laugh. People always think the other way round is more seductive, but I'm not convinced.

'Or *Lassie*?' he ventured.

I laughed myself. There. Both ways. I sank back happily in my seat. 'Your parents sound heaven.'

He looked across, surprised. 'I suppose they are.' He jerked his head to the right as we rattled along the valley floor. 'If you had x-ray vision you'd see them across there, through two banks of hills, just behind Jake Walter's place. Right now Dad'll be coming in from the fields and they'll be settling down to *The World at One*, the *Telegraph* crossword, bread and cheese and Mum's pickle. You can set your watch by them. And yours?'

'What d'you mean?'

'Heaven too?'

I hesitated. 'They have their moments. Dad does, anyway.' I felt disloyal. 'And my mum, of course.'

I looked away, letting the wind whip through my hair and take my head with it, feeling the sun on my eyes as I half shut them, using my lashes as shades. If only this drive could go on for ever.

'Where is home, Ella?'

I knew he meant in the essential way, not where I lived now. 'Commuter-belt Buckinghamshire. Practically the suburbs. Dad commuted to London.'

‘Don’t apologize; someone has to.’

‘But not you any more.’

His face broke into a radiant smile and he kept his sparkling gaze straight ahead. ‘No. Not me any more. As you know, I ran away. OK, here we are.’

He swung the jeep sharply into the side of the lane and we slid smoothly to a halt. The engine stopped and I was struck by the sudden quiet. A skylark whirled above our heads, a wood pigeon cooed softly to another, but, other than that, silence prevailed. A high hedge grew on both sides of the narrow lane so not much was visible other than a slim green corridor. In a moment, Ludo was out of the car and slamming the door. In another, he’d disappeared. Downwards, I realized.

I got out and went round the front of the jeep to the verge, looking after him. ‘What is this, *Through the Looking Glass*?’ I called.

‘Just bother to stoop a bit and you’ll find the ground gives way.’

I gazed down. So it did. Into a huge sort of hole. I lowered my legs gingerly into it. Then I slid down on my bottom into what I imagined was some sort of earth. It felt like a water shoot I’d been to once with the children. Would I ever come up again? Did I care? I crouched and ducked forward and my head popped out on the other side into an enormous field. I realized I’d gone under the hedge. A sea of poppies stretched as far as the eye could see.

‘Oh!’ I stared about. ‘Now that’s quite something.’

‘Isn’t it just?’ He gave me a hand and I clambered out, hopefully in an easy, at-home-in-the-country sort of manner. I brushed myself down and glanced knowledgeably behind. ‘Badger sett?’

‘No, ancient culvert, old drainage ditch. Foxes do use it, though, and you wouldn’t want to come here at night – they take exception to visitors. But there’s no gate to this field from the road, so this is the only way in. The gate’s over there.’ He nodded into the distance.

He stood for a moment with his hands on his hips, taking in the scene, which was certainly glorious: a swaying ocean of thigh-high grass just on the cusp of bleaching to hay, seed heads bobbing, sprinkled with jewel-like flowers. In amongst the poppies were ox-eye daisies, buttercups, speedwell and cowslips.

Ludo crouched down and cradled something pale and bell-like in his hand. ‘See this?’

‘What is it?’ I crouched beside him.

‘Fritillary. Conditions have to be incredibly pure for this to thrive. I’m not sure I’ve seen it anywhere else but here. There are orchids too, only tiny ones, but exquisite. Anyway,’ he said, straightening up, ‘this is your palette.’

He began to pick carefully, stooping low to gather right from the base of the stem anything yellow and white, blooms of which hue, along with the poppies, were abundant. I followed suit, but, out of the corner of my eye, I kept watch on the elegant cotton-picker beside me, bending gracefully down then arching up tall and slim to add strategically to his bundle. We kept apart but parallel, working our way across the field, ending up with a great armful each, and then I told him Celia had only asked for two arrangements.

‘Oh, right.’ He turned. ‘I thought you meant the whole church!’

No, I was just enjoying myself too much to stop the roundabout, I thought, but I didn’t say it.

‘Oh, no, sorry,’ I called, ‘just a couple. She said that she and the other gels would do the rest.’

‘Well, then this will probably do us.’ He missed my quip and I hoped he didn’t think that was the way I said girls. Too late to rectify because he was already talking as he came towards me, shirt as blue as the sky, hair not far off the buttercups, arms full of flowers.

‘Now what you’re going to have to do, Ella, since they’re wild, is sink them in tepid water the moment you get home, right up to their necks in buckets.’ He demonstrated with one hand cupped under his chin. ‘Leave them like that overnight and let Celia do the rest in the morning. If you don’t, because they’re organic, you’ll have dead weeds on your hands tomorrow.’

‘Got it, sir. And surely you don’t arrange wild flowers, anyway? Just bung them in a vase?’

‘Something a little more careful might be in order for a wedding, but I know what you mean. I can’t bear formal arrangements, either. And as a matter of fact I know Karen; she helps Mum in the farm shop. She’ll love these. It’ll go down much better than anything stiff or stylized.’

I took the bundle he handed me into my arms. ‘You’re a star, Ludo, and I can’t thank you enough. You’ve completely saved me.’

I hadn’t meant to say anything profound but I think we both knew this could be taken on many levels. It was entirely possible Ludo could save me; I certainly needed saving. Even to the most casual observer, my life was terribly complicated. So complicated, in fact, that the entire village would doubtless have views on the topic. Go into huddles outside the shop. One thing was for sure,

though. It would take more than a bunch of flowers to rectify it.

‘And they won’t mind?’ I asked, lurching off at a tangent to protect myself. We were walking back towards the lane. I was that aware my response to this man was very potent. That I needed tangents.

‘Who?’

‘Up at Highgrove. I didn’t know you worked there too.’

‘You’ve lost me. I don’t.’

‘But you know the gardeners?’

‘Some, why?’

‘This is Highgrove land, Ludo. Prince Charles. Didn’t you know?’

He stopped. Looked shaken. ‘Since when? It always used to be Dick Baker’s field. Set-aside.’

‘No, he sold it, apparently. On account of all the wild flowers. Can’t you see the secret service men in the bushes?’

He did actually turn to look, but it was only a glance. He was back to me in an instant, his face both outraged and delighted. He threw back his head and hooted up to the heavens. He was good at being teased and I loved that he didn’t try to pretend he hadn’t been had.

‘Witch!’ he roared, impulsively throwing an arm round my shoulders and giving them a squeeze. I leaned in, laughing. It was only an arm and a squeeze and a lean but the current took us both by surprise. He dropped his arm quickly and we walked on. I gazed fixedly at the tall hedge ahead, knowing it was terribly important to keep doing that. To watch the pendulous, creamy, elderflower heads swaying in the breeze. Ludo prattled on easily enough, about the importance of fields like this, and how other

farmers should at least manage just a few acres of organic land without pesticides, but I knew we were both jolted. We'd been alone before, of course, but this was different. Up to now we'd been in professional mode, within legitimate parameters. For just as an office affords a screen to a burgeoning romance, so the workplace of my garden did it for us. We'd hide behind pruning decisions, stare purposefully at herbaceous borders or recalcitrant iris bulbs, managing to keep ourselves safe. This poppy-strewn meadow with its high-hedged seclusion was the equivalent of a city wine bar after hours: last orders called, the place deserted, except for two people alone at the corner table, no colleagues for ballast, no meetings for protocol, no structure for protection.

As I said earlier, I knew I was in trouble when I ran out of the church and got impulsively into his car. Knew it was pivotal. As we achieved the hedge I had an overwhelming urge to give in. To stop him right there in his farming chat and tell him how much I liked him. He later told me he'd wanted to kiss me. Neither happened. We slipped easily back down the culvert, out the other side to his car, and back into the real world. The world of work and money worries and domesticity: of children and husbands and wives. But when we drove home it was in an unlikely silence, and when he dropped me off there was something soft and heavy to his eyes as he said goodbye. I watched him drive away and stood for a good few moments in the empty yard after his Land Rover had gone. I knew it was the start of admitting things to each other, things we'd hardly dared to admit to ourselves. The turning point in our friendship. For a long time I'd been aware that this man brought order, not just to my garden, but to my life.

Joy, too. And I'd been joyless for too long. I'd begun to recognize the sound of his tyres on my drive, to glance quickly from my sketch pad through the attic window to make sure it was him. But thus far I'd tried not to make my eyes light up when I handed him a cup of coffee, tried not to let him see I'd seen a light in his. After this day, I didn't try any more. And neither did he.