Opening Extract from...

About Last Night

Written by Catherine Alliott

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I stood at the gate with my laden wheelbarrow and ran a practised eye over my acres which stretched away in a plateau before me, rising gently to the hills beyond. I wished I felt more romantic and wistful about it – this sylvan scene and all that. I didn't, though: I felt tired, bleary-eyed and, frankly, fed up. There was barely a paddock I could enter these days without fearing for my safety, and feeding my sheep had become a matter of high subterfuge and low cunning. If I fed the boys first, the ewes in the far field were instantly alerted and came rushing across for their breakfast. But if I fed the ewes it involved going through Buddy's field, and Buddy wanted to have his way with me – the only one who did these days – and Buddy was a big ram. So desperate – and confused, obviously – was he, he'd knocked me clean over in his lather yesterday. He'd been separated from the flock because he'd already impregnated the ewes, most of whom had lambed, and was now in solitary confinement. Whilst it was driving both of us mad, I certainly didn't want him messing with my girls again, and he was not to be trusted with last year's boy lambs who were going to market soon, hopefully in one piece, with no black eyes, cauliflower ears or obvious signs of grievous bodily harm.

I pulled my hat down low, sank into my coat and set off with my mighty barrow of concentrated sheep nuts, which was darned heavy. As I went I dreamed of a quad bike like my friend Anna's, who fed her pigs with the wind in her hair, throttle out, lippy on. Buddy was no fool and came dashing

across to ambush me, but I'd thought ahead and distracted him with a scoop of feed on the grass. Wrong-footed, he dithered, wondering which was his greatest urge, and by the time he'd decided and given chase, I'd made it to the ewes' field. I just managed to shut the gate on his indignant black nose before being surrounded by forty-five hormonal females, all desperate for my nuts.

Sometimes I wished I started the day with a pot of tea delivered by a handsome man with a charming smile. Often, actually. Instead, I sliced open the feed sack with a Stanley knife and shoved my barrow ruthlessly through the sea of moving white wool to the yards of galvanized trough lying on the ground. Nipping ahead of Nora, who was head girl and horribly bossy, I poured from one end of the trough to the other. They rushed in a veritable surge, almost knocking me over before somehow sorting themselves out to feed in two reasonably straight lines on either side. A biddable sheepdog would be good, too, I reflected, watching them, instead of two hysterical Border terriers who were more of a hindrance than a help and consequently shut up in the kitchen. At length I sighed and turned for home, mission accomplished.

To be fair, the man I'd had, my husband David, would have been brilliant. He'd be wrestling the barrow from my hands this minute were it possible, absolutely in his element out here. It was everything he'd ever fondly imagined he'd be doing, in fact, before fate had so rudely intervened. Always an early riser, he'd be up with the light, feeding and tending these characters, before pottering off to Ludlow for a few hours' gentle conveyancing in his sleepy solicitors' office, the one he'd swapped for the City slickers' firm he'd come to hate. David had been a partner in a rather ritzy legal establishment in Liverpool Street, but the strength-sapping hours

and the workload had eventually ground him down. We'd snapped up this rural idyll he'd spotted – literally in the front of *Country Life* at the dentist's – with its pretty farmhouse and ninety acres, and then he'd found his easy-going job a short drive away. Everything had slotted ridiculously simply into place, no doubt because David was at the helm. We'd taken the children out of their pushy London schools, I'd given up my job, and we'd come down here, all ready for the Good Life. And good it had been, fleetingly. Until, disappointingly, one day David had taken our car to the village to get some shopping for a barbecue and never returned. I paused with my empty barrow a moment. I say disappointingly, in that ironic, deliberately shocking way, because if I delved any deeper into my grief I'd be back to square one. Back with my sleepless nights, my inability to get motivated, my weight loss, and my three distressed children. So five years down the track I've adopted this splendidly sort of upper-class, stiff-upper-lip approach to my husband's death, to stop myself from gagging when his name is mentioned. And actually, I can quite see how it got people through a war. It certainly works for me.

I trundled my empty barrow back to the barn, reloaded it with a bale of hay for the boys in the far meadow – who charged me, predictably, but with less ferocity, it being only dry grass – and then walked back to the yard, wondering if anyone at the house was even up, had fed the dogs, or emptied the dishwasher, and by that I meant one of the lodgers rather than the children, the likelihood of the latter managing any of the above being little short of a miracle. Actually, ditto the former. The married Chinese accountants who were currently installed in the best bedroom were delightfully smiley but permanently attached to some piece of technology, so anything practical, like letting a cat out,

induced a look of panic in their eyes. It was their last day today, though, I thought with some relief, thinking of the cheque on the kitchen table and having my bedroom back. I didn't take lodgers as a rule, but the occasional B&B helped enormously, particularly when it had become clear that the minuscule pension David had collected from Perkins and Dawson, and the tiny one I'd paid into, were not going to go anywhere near supporting us once death duties had taken their toll. I paused a moment before I went into the barn to dump the barrow: gazed at the row of uninterrupted hills rolling away in the distance behind the house. How he would have loved this. And how pissed off he would have been to miss it, on account of a stupid, worn-out brake pad. That had been my overriding emotion for a long time, I recollected, as I went on to feed the chickens and ducks. Anger. At how hacked off he would have been to miss all this: his dream, his reward for all those years in an over-lit, open-plan battery farm in the City. His putative gold watch.

We'd been here all of six weeks. Five and a half, to be precise. The house was still full of packing cases and two of the children hadn't even started back at school. It was the end of the summer holidays. When it happened, Minna and Nico had been on the grass tennis court at the bottom of the garden, now a sea of weeds. I remembered that long walk out there after I'd had the visit from the police: remembered them lowering their rackets as I approached and as they saw my face. I knew they'd had a flash of recognition before I spoke, before I told them that their lives would never be the same again. I remember that like it was yesterday. Lucy's face I still can't even bring myself to remember.

But as I say, that was five years ago. And however much you think life will never move on one jot, it jolly well does, at

a rickety-rackety pace. And right now I had more pressing problems, like how we were going to stay here – my pledge, all those years ago to David's ghost – and how all my various concerns, the horse-dealing, the lavender soap, the sheep farming and, more recently, the boxer shorts and scanty ladies' underwear business, were going to keep us afloat. How they were going to collectively re-tile the stable roof, pay the bills and, more to the point, keep my eldest daughter, who I spotted through the kitchen window looking dubiously into the fridge, in designer yoghurt.

I mention this because I wanted Lucy to come down and peer in my fridge as much as possible now that she'd moved to London, and there was not a great deal to attract her these days. She was very definitely not dressed for Herefordshire today, I noticed, in tailored black trousers and a nipped in white jacket. She wrinkled her nose as she lifted the plastic lid on a packet of curly bacon before replacing it with disdain.

'What are you doing up?' I shut the back door on a blast of air. Two clearly unfed dogs yapped in delight and hurled themselves at my legs. I took in the debris of last night's wine and fag fest with her brother and sister, which clearly no one had thought to clear up.

'I'm going back to London. Can you drop me at the station?'

Please, I thought to myself. 'I thought you said the shop was shut today?' I gathered the empty ashtrays and glasses from the table and put them in the sink to hide my face; to try not to show I cared. 'And you were going to help Minna with her project?'

'It is shut, but I still need to be there; there's loads of admin to catch up on. And it's pointless helping Minna with her project, it doesn't exist. She only said that to get you off

her back in the holidays. It was a ruse, Mother. What d'you think she is, eight? Counting haystacks and colouring them in or something?'

'Right,' I said shortly.

'Is this orange juice OK?' She sniffed it dubiously.

'I don't know, darling, try it.'

She peered instead at the sell-by date. 'Fourth of March!' She recoiled in horror.

'Yes, but it's concentrate, that keeps for ever.'

'Because it's full of preservatives. You should buy fresh.'

'I should,' I agreed cheerfully. 'And if I could afford it, I would.' I banged the washing-up down harder than I might on the draining board.

'The bailiff came again,' Lucy told me.

I swung around, appalled. 'Did he?' She was leaning against the dresser sipping her black coffee, unconcerned. I abandoned the washing-up and sat down at the table, clutching the edge. 'Oh God. Which one?'

'The nice one, Tia.'

'Oh, thank the Lord. What did you say?'

'I said you'd sort it by the end of the week, or at least the following one. Don't stress, Mum, she was nice. I didn't give her the silver or anything.' She ran a hand through her mane of silky blonde hair.

'I've already sold the silver,' I said abstractedly, getting up again, knowing now I'd have to sell the farm, as I romantically called our smallholding. The bailiff. *Again*.

'You haven't paid the council tax,' Lucy said gently.

'I know.' My mouth was dry. 'But I told her, I'm paying it this week. Today, in fact, just as soon as I've got a cheque from Lu and Sam.'

'They left it.' Lucy plucked it from the mountain of detritus on the table. 'They went about twenty minutes ago. It's

precisely three hundred and eighty pounds, Mum. They were only here a week. The council tax is a deal more.'

'I know, but I'm getting loads from that chap who's buying Nutty.'

'Yes, I told her that, and she was fine about it, I told you. Although she did ask if Nutty was a relative or a horse.' She grinned. 'I rather liked her. Isn't she the one you do book club with? Maybe give her a ring?'

'Yes. Yes, I will.' I flew to find my phone on the overflowing dresser, rifling in panic under papers and bills and soap wrappers, rotting fruit in the bowl.

'What's this, by the way?'

I turned, mid-riffle. Lucy was gingerly extracting a purple thong with a fingertip and thumb from a pile she'd found on the table.

'What d'you think it is? I'm branching out from the gents' boxers into ladies' stuff. Is my phone under there?' I dived beneath the towering pile of lingerie.

'Why so sparkly?' She peered at the encrusted sequins on the front.

'Because it excites the gentleman friend, I imagine – or maybe it excites the lady as she's trollying round boring old Tesco's – I don't know, use your imagination. Ring my phone, would you, Luce?' I patted my pockets, glancing about the chaotic kitchen.

'And you're charging nineteen pounds fifty?' She blinked at the price tag in astonishment.

I snatched it. 'OK, so make that Waitrose.'

She dropped the thong disdainfully back on the pile. 'So the Faulkner family are flogging kinky underwear now, are they? Classy.'

'The Faulkner family will flog whatever it takes, frankly, and if you want to be kept in fresh orange juice, Lucy, I

suggest you come down off the moral high ground and help me find my sodding phone. I need to ring Tia. Where the hell is it?' I swung about.

'Here.' Lucy pulled it out from under a pile. 'But my train is in twenty minutes, Mum, so maybe when you get back?'

Muttering about a child who would rather skedaddle off to London than ensure her mother was not marched from the premises in handcuffs, I seized my car keys. But I stopped short at the back door. Cocked an ear up the back stairs which descended into the kitchen.

'Who else is up?' Distinct signs of life were emanating from above.

'Oh yeah, Minna is, like, awake, but she's in deep negotiation with Toxic Ted.'

'I don't care how deep she—' I leaped to the foot of the stairs. 'Minna? MINNA!' I yelled. 'Get down here and take your sister to the station, I've got better things to do!'

Silence, obviously.

'Go and get her,' I snapped furiously. Lucy had already slunk past me. 'And please ask yourselves why your lives are so much more important than mine!'

When they came down, Minna looking thunderous with a coat over her pyjamas and Uggs on her feet, I'll admit I was going for the sympathy vote. I sat slumped at the messy kitchen table, an array of bright red final demands and the bailiff's letter spread out before me on the undies, head in hands.

'Why can't Nico?' she snarled.

'I imagine he's still asleep.'

'Golden Boy.'

I ignored her and they slunk out to the car together, no doubt discussing how impossible I was. I raised my head. Or maybe not? I was so insignificant these days they were

probably already on to Toxic Ted, Minna's on-off boyfriend with whom she was in the process of splitting up, or actually, the other way round. I listened to the engine. Knew it wouldn't start first time. It didn't. They waited. The third time it fired, but only because they'd rested it between the second and third try for precisely three minutes. Which meant – I glanced at the clock – they'd now be late. I ran outside as Minna executed a smart three-point turn in the yard. 'And don't race! So what if you have to get the next train? Don't race like idiots to catch it!'

Two pairs of bored, blank eyes, one lightly and beautifully made up, the other red-rimmed and tearful, stared back at me. They roared out of the yard, scattering ducks and gravel in their wake, leaving me standing in a cloud of dust.

As I went back inside, something made me look up. A curtain twitched and fell back again. Ah. So Nico *was* up. Just avoiding the fracas. And who could blame him? Nevertheless, out of some sort of warped sympathy for his sisters, I banged around the kitchen, slamming cupboard doors and noisily putting plates in a rack, radio blaring, so that inevitably he came and sat on the stairs behind me, hunched in his dressing gown. Always his favourite spot from which to view proceedings, it had the benefit of spindles for protection, and an escape route back to his room, should the situation demand it.

I made a pot of tea for us, my mind on what to sell next should Nutty, my gelding, fail the vet. Ah yes, the transaction was subject to a vet's examination and report which scuppered half my sales these days. Megan had only scraped through last year because the new owners had decided to overlook the laminitis and take her for a thousand pounds less, which had left me with precisely eight hundred pounds. I went hot at the thought of losing that amount on Nutty.

A huge, involuntary sigh unfolded from my wellies, which I'd yet to remove. I handed a mug of tea wordlessly to my son. His pale, bony, nicotine-stained fingers reached through the spindles like a Hogarth illustration.

'Why so gloomy, Ma? So theatrically careworn?'

Nicholas, or Nico, the last of my brood, my only boy, regarded me in amusement from under a shaggy, recently peroxided blond fringe. Nothing sleepy about those eyes. He'd clearly been on Facebook for hours.

'We're going to have to move, Nico. It's final now. Lucy says the bailiffs have been back.'

'Ah.' He nodded, unmoved. 'Very David Copperfield.'

I shrugged, matching his composure. 'She says these days they don't come in and nick your DVD player, just politely ask for a cheque. That's certainly all they did last week.'

'And you know they have to come through the door? I Googled it. That's the only entry route available to them now. Doesn't a whole screenplay of other historical routes play out in your head? Accompanied by a seventies soundtrack from *The Sweeney* or something? Kicked-in windows? Smashing glass?'

'Thanks for that, darling.'

'And you have to actually invite them in. Even when you've opened the door, they can't just step over the threshold.'

'I'll bear that in mind. Feed the geese and the horses and the cats, would you? I need to mend that fence in the bottom paddock. Buddy's been rubbing his bottom on it.'

'Well, I'll feed the cat but I think you'll find she's very much in the singular these days. Cleo's buggered off to live with the Nelsons.'

'Permanently? I thought she just popped in and out. I'm sad about that.'

'Cleo's not. She's living on salmon and cream.'

I sighed. 'Well, feed the rest for me, there's a love.'

'And put some drugs in Nutty's?'

'Certainly not! He hasn't been lame for months. I don't sell dodgy horses.'

Muttering about a mare with a persistent cough who I'd moved on last year, and one just before Christmas who he'd test-driven out hunting and who didn't seem to have any discernible brakes, Nico nonetheless took his tea upstairs to get changed, go out, and feed what remained of our stock.

'Also, I opened a lot of your brown envelopes,' he said, pausing at the top of the stairs. 'The ones you hide down the sofa. They made interesting reading. But one was that tax rebate you've been waiting for.' He delved in his dressing-gown pocket and frisbeed an envelope down to me. It landed on the table. I fell on it. Ripped it open. A cheque fell out.

'You can at least get the council tax paid.'

I stared at it. Then I clutched it to my bosom and gazed up at him, starry-eyed. 'Oh *Nico*! Why didn't you say?'

He shrugged. 'I just have. You have to open this stuff, Ma. Not all of it's bad.'

And off he went; tall, skinny and dishevelled, knowing he'd delivered the best news of the week.

I instantly rang Tia and promised her that once it had cleared the money would be hers, to pay whatever bills she thought best.

'All of them,' she said happily. 'Get the lot off your back. Oh, I'm *so* pleased. But Molly, you're still going to have to think about selling. Tax rebates don't fall out of the sky every month.'

'I know.'

'Shall I get Peter to come round?'

Peter Cox was the local estate agent in the office next door to hers on the high street. Kind, avuncular and tweedy, he

was no shark and would, I knew, have my best interests at heart. Get me the very best deal. I hesitated.

'Why not? It's just . . . the animals, Tia. What am I supposed to do with them all? In a cottage? In the village?'

'Who says you can't find a cottage with a few stables? And paddocks?'

'But probably only a two-up two-down if it's got land. And then what about the children?'

'They're huge, Moll, and migrating to London. Couldn't Lucy and Minna share a room?'

'They could . . .' But then they might not come back, I thought, but didn't say it. Also it was premature. Minna was still at college locally. So maybe not destined for London eventually. All her friends were here.

'And if they did decide to stay,' she went on, reading my mind – oh yes, Tia and I had shared a lot of tea and biscuits – 'they could even pay some rent. Most kids around here do.'

'Yes, but not for ages. Lucy's the only one who's got a job, and I can't ask her to send back money like some mother in the Philippines.'

'I'd say Herefordshire is the British equivalent of the Philippines,' she said darkly. 'And let's face it, your own mother would have no such scruples. I saw her just now in town, by the way. She said your uncle had died. Sorry about that.'

I frowned. 'I don't have an uncle.'

'Oh. How strange. Funny name. Custer or something.'

'Oh. Cuthbert. David's uncle. Has he? I didn't know. Not sure I even met him, actually. How sad. But he must have been ancient.' I frowned. 'How on earth did Mum know that?'

'No idea. That famous crystal ball? Perhaps for once it really did give off some information. She was on her way to see you, anyway. Perhaps she got a vibe.'

'Perhaps.'

At that moment a throaty exhaust pipe backfired in the yard, making me glance out of the window. An old black Volvo was pulling in. Ah. Talk of the devil. The woman herself was getting out and going round to open the boot to remove some shopping. 'She's already here, Tia. The eagle has landed. No doubt come to press-gang me into lending a hand at the Hereford show, where she's taken a tent – reading palms, no less.'

'Blimey, remind me to give that a swerve. OK, I'll let you go. Come and have lunch with me next week, though, Moll. We can even splash out and try that new veggie place. My treat.'

'You're on.'

I put the phone down as my mother came beetling across the yard, shopping bags in hand. Her hair was piled up in a sort of mad haystack bun but then, as she said, it befitted her image as Cosmic Pam, which the children had originally called her as a joke, but which had stuck and become, God help us, her professional name. Oh yes, I was lucky enough to have a mother with psychic powers. She paused to stroke Nutty's nose over the stable door and I noticed her eyes were very bright this morning, her cheeks flushed. She turned, headed, no doubt, for the Romany-style caravan sitting in my back garden where she read tarot cards and now, it seemed, palms. I'd let her park it there temporarily a year ago as her own back garden was minuscule, but since one of the wooden wheels had rotted and fallen off last winter, I think we both knew it was moribund and permanent. I didn't mind. In fact, I liked having her close by. And I'd hazard she liked it too. It might even be why she was there. Also, we had rules to prevent the situation becoming a time-waster. She'd breeze on by with a cheery wave first thing and I'd wave back. We didn't

chat and eat biscuits for – ooh, ages – although the children had no such scruples. They were in there a lot, fascinated by their fates.

This morning, however, I wanted a word, and so, apparently, did she. She came straight to the back door when I opened it, and before she'd even said hello, to the point.

'Uncle Cuthbert's died,' she told me importantly as she swept past me. She set her shopping down on the floor and jangled a veritable armful of Gypsy Rose bracelets as she reached for the mug of tea I'd been about to drink myself on the side. 'Thanks, love.' She fixed me with beady dark eyes as she slurped and settled herself down on a chair at the kitchen table.

'I know.' I shut the back door behind her. 'Tia told me. Apparently you've seen fit to spread the word around town before you even told me. And he wasn't even my uncle, Mum, let alone yours. He was David's.'

'Exactly. Your husband's uncle. And he was his only relative.'

'Who was?'

'David.' She gave me those eyes again.

I stared at her for a long moment. Then slowly I sat down opposite her. I had a nasty feeling I knew where she was going with this.

'Mum . . . if you think for one moment . . .'

She raised her eyebrows disingenuously. 'What?'

'I know the way your mind works.'

'Well, it's a thought, isn't it?'

I gaped at her in disbelief. 'Oh don't be silly,' I snorted eventually. 'Cuthbert's an uncle-in-law, he's not going to remember a woman he's barely met! I'm not even sure I did meet him. And anyway, how do you know he's died?'

'I read it.' She reached in her bag and flourished a copy of

the *Telegraph*. Cosmic Pam had some surprisingly trenchant right-wing views. 'I make it my business to know these things. After all, you never know who might be trying to get in touch.'

'How d'you mean?'

'From beyond.' She jerked her head meaningfully. 'Particularly if they've only just popped off, all sorts of things they might have meant to say. Important to read the announcements.' She set her reading glasses on her nose and peered down at the Court and Social page which she'd already folded into a neat quarter. 'Ah – here we are.' She cleared her throat and raised her chin importantly. 'Faulkner: Cuthbert James Christopher. Died peacefully at home on April the fourteenth.' She removed her glasses and looked up.

I blinked. 'That's it?'

'That's it.'

'Bit sort of . . . short, isn't it? Aren't they usually much longer? Funeral details? Stuff about flowers? Donations?'

'Exactly.' My mother was making her famous face. The one with wide eyes and pursed lips. 'Interesting, eh? Sort of . . .' She contrived to look concerned, '. . . solitary.'

'No, not remotely. Just succinct. And anyway, even if he doesn't have family, he'll have left whatever he had to – I don't know – friends, a dog's home, a charity. Something close to his heart.'

The lips became a pucker. A cigarette was placed between them, set alight and inhaled deeply. She removed it and released the thin grey line ceilingwards.

'He might,' she agreed thoughtfully, eyes following the smoke. 'But on the other hand,' she lowered those bright eyes for dramatic effect, 'he might not.'