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Opening Extract from...

The Garden Party

Written by Sarah Challis

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The Garden Party

Sarah CHALLIS



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Chapter One

Sometimes when Alice Baxter couldn't sleep, which was often these days, she found that great cinematic scenes floated into her head from nowhere, and the idea for the party first came to her as she lay in bed in the half-light of a grey spring dawn. Suddenly, she could see the whole thing as if she were watching a film, with the parts that in real life would need attention brought up to scratch. The garden, for instance, was awash with bright summer flowers and the lawn was a startling emerald green and neatly mown in alternate silvery stripes, unlike the worn-looking March grass she saw through the kitchen window as she stood at the sink.

There was a small white marquee set behind the house, accessed through the dining-room French windows and lined with the sort of silky, blush-coloured

material that transforms a tent into a palace and casts a flattering glow on the complexions of the guests. There were elegant little gilded chairs drawn up to a long table draped with white linen and set with gleaming silver and glittering glasses.

And all the family were there with champagne flutes in their hands: Charlie, her eldest son, tall and dark as her husband, David, had once been, and his clever little wife Annie, and their boys Rory and Archie; her second son, Ollie, loud and energetic, with his wife Lisa, and her children, Agnes and Sabine, from her previous marriage to a Frenchman. She saw her daughters: Marina and her partner Ahmed, and baby Mo; and Sadie and her current boyfriend Kyle, and her daughters Tamzin and Georgie; and her sister, Rachel, in a navy two-piece and a lot of gold chains.

They stood with bright, expectant smiles on their faces, all turned towards the house, waiting for her and David to make an appearance, and here they came, hand in hand, laughing happily, stepping out of the French windows like eager contestants on a game show. David was wearing a blazer, something he had never worn in his life, with an unfamiliar pink shirt and tie, and Alice was looking quite unlike her usual

self, with her hair styled into a sleek bob and at least twenty-five pounds lighter than her present weight, wearing a navy linen suit with white piping and a white collar. That suit was a surprise – how had she dreamed up such an unexpected garment? She certainly had nothing like it in her wardrobe. For the last ten years or so, as her waist thickened, she had favoured stretchy skirts and easy-fitting tops, but here she was in something tailored and chic and evidently expensive. And it could be done, she told herself, if only she had the willpower to take herself in hand, lose the weight and get a more adventurous haircut. She had had the same style for the last fifteen years, trimmed every six weeks by her cleaner's daughter, Diane, while sitting in her own kitchen with a beach towel round her shoulders.

A transformation was perfectly possible. It was not too late. Women of sixty were always being told they could turn back the clock, develop a better dress sense, take up running half-marathons or learn a foreign language, and even wear a bikini on holiday, although that particular idea made her shudder. There was no excuse for having slipped comfortably into what she knew she had become: dull and matronly.

Now back to the vision, because Charlie was stepping forward, and he too looked tidier and better groomed than usual in a lightweight suit – he was a history teacher and didn't bother much about his appearance – and he was tapping a glass with a fork from the table and asking for quiet so that he could begin his speech. Alice had been to enough similar occasions to know what he would say, but he went beyond the expected and spoke so warmly of his parents that she and David, still hand in hand, looked at one another in delighted surprise and gratitude. What seemed even more unlikely was that throughout his speech there was no dissent or arguments or interruptions, the younger children all crowding round with smiling, happy faces and even Mo, a fractious, squalling baby, chuckling and waving his arms about. Roger, the old Labrador, was there, looking less portly and refraining from sniffing crotches in his usual party manner, but posing alertly, with his dear old greying face lifted towards them.

The scene was like a vision from on high, and Alice found she could pause and replay it as she chose. Each time she ran it through her head she became more convinced that it was quite possible to turn the dream

into reality. It would take a lot of goodwill and hard work, and quite a lot of money, but it was worth it for such a special and beautiful occasion.

She sat up in bed and switched on the bedside light. The party scene disappeared, but not the residual excitement. She looked with wakened eyes at her shabby, comfortable bedroom furnished with old, so-familiar pieces of furniture; at the bedspread with the egg-shaped ink stain and the colour faded by the sun that streamed through the window. Everything about her was so worn and marked by years of family life. Her gaze settled on the hatbox on top of the wardrobe, containing her two wedding hats, and on top of that the shoebox in which she kept treasures left over from her children's childhood years: first teeth, first shoes, little curls from first haircuts tied with coloured cotton. This is what I have become, she thought, like this room, that box – a repository of the past. We have a family history that started with me and David, where we have come from, what we have become. It's all prized and beyond value and it needs celebrating.

She and David had never been ones for splashing out on anything much – certainly not giving parties. From the penny-pinching days when they first got

married, living quietly and modestly had become their modus vivendi. Having four children was their biggest extravagance, and what marked them out from most of their friends. A large family was the preserve of the well-off and confident, or the feckless poor, not ordinary, careful people like them, although Sadie, their fourth child, was not planned. She had simply happened. When Alice had found she was pregnant again, there had been a week or two of shock before the delight took over.

With the serenity of motherhood upon her, she knew they would manage somehow on David's pitiful salary as a university lecturer. It would be difficult, but they would get by. David had been less sanguine, because he was pessimistic by nature. He had sat with his head in his hands for a week or two, but then Alice's parents had bailed them out with a loan to cover the mortgage on their house, this very house that they still lived in, and everything was all right again.

Naturally, with a fourth baby, extravagant parties were never on the agenda, and Alice and David were not the sort of people who ever wanted to be the centre of attention. The great milestones in their lives

to date had been celebrated quietly, but that didn't mean, thought Alice, that they shouldn't push the boat out for once. After all, they had a family to be proud of, and they were still married after forty years, which was an achievement in itself these days. As for being sixty, well, that was something that had crept up on her almost unawares. The busy years had flown by until suddenly here she was, drawing a pension and applying for winter fuel allowance while still feeling inside exactly as she had at twenty-one when she and David, both university students, had got married.

Now she was so wide awake she might just as well get up and make a cup of tea. She felt for her slippers with her bare feet, and when she found them noticed with her fresh eyes how extremely shabby they were. The mock sheepskin had turned grey and bald. That was another thing she could take in hand – she could throw out everything that was past it, threadbare, worn out. It was high time for a bit of spring-cleaning.

Passing the door of the bedroom she still thought of as belonging to the boys, even though they had left home years ago, she heard David's rhythmic snoring from within. Since he had retired from the

university last year, he had developed strange sleeping patterns, staying up late and lying in in the morning – like an old teenager. One evening when she was washing up and tidying the kitchen before going to bed he had said, without looking at her, 'I'll sleep in the boys' room tonight. I can stay up late then, and read if I want to,' and she had known that something had come about, something important, but all she had said as she swirled the water round with the silly brush was, 'Okay, if you prefer.'

She had never told him that she felt put out by this new arrangement because it seemed to her less like consideration and more like rejection, as if he actually preferred to sleep alone. If she was honest, they both slept better as a result, and there was a luxury in having the whole bed to herself and being able to turn on the light or listen to the radio when she wanted. But there was a tug of loneliness in sliding her hand across the cold side of the bed and finding it empty.

Going downstairs, she thought again about the party. A small doubt had already asserted itself, because she had to admit that she had been misled before by what David called her flash-in-the-pan ideas. In fact, all her life she had been guided by inspirational visions of

how she imagined things might be, usually followed by a process of slow disillusionment and final acceptance that her daydreams had been misleading. She remembered how, even as a quite small child, she would dream about an approaching Christmas, or a birthday party, and how very often the reality would be a disappointment. In her head her sticking-out party dress with its velvet sash would be the prettiest and she would win Pass the Parcel, whereas the truth was that she was a stout little girl who looked comical jammed into an organza frock, and she was so shy and reluctant that she was overlooked by adults when they handed out prizes.

But the more she thought about it, the more sure she was that her idea for an anniversary celebration was a good one. As soon as she judged the moment was right she would break the news to David. She did not expect him to be enthusiastic, but obviously she would have to have his support. She would need to deploy the tactics of a politician to get his approval. To begin with he wouldn't take it seriously. He would think of it as another of her hare-brained schemes, best ignored until it went away. He wouldn't be able to visualise it as she could. He wouldn't be able to

imagine the whole family gathered in the garden on a lovely summer day to celebrate both her birthday and their fortieth wedding anniversary, or how it would provide them with happy memories to last them into their old age.

In the kitchen, she waited for the kettle to boil and rubbed Roger's warm tummy with her foot as he snored in his basket. She knew what David would say. That was one of the things that happened after years of married life. You ended up being able to write the script for many situations. His first objection would be on financial grounds. He would say that they couldn't afford it and what was the point of spending a lot of money on a grand family gathering when they could have a barbecue or something simple, sausages stuck in rolls and cans of beer. Yes, thought Alice, already arguing with him in her head, and the kitchen would be hot and chaotic and they would have to carry everything back and forth to the garden and then there would be all the dirty plates to deal with, and she would be in the middle of it all in her old jeans with her midriff bulge and her face red and shiny with effort and her hair untidy.

He would say what was the point of getting them

all together when the journey would be long for two of the families and there would not be enough room for them all to stay. He would say that it would not necessarily be a happy get-together. Agnes and Sabine were now eleven and thirteen years old and would be bored, and Lisa and Annie had never been the best of friends. There had been one or two 'situations' in the past, at christenings or Christmas, where there had been a bit of an atmosphere and some pointed remarks exchanged. He would say that it would be uncomfortable for Ahmed, the newest recruit to the family. He would be overwhelmed by the Baxter clan en masse and Marina seemed to look for an opportunity to take umbrage. She always had been huffy – even as a small girl flouncing out of rooms and slamming doors. He would make all these objections and a lot of others and a few would have some truth to them, but that didn't alter the fact that Alice knew that the celebratory nature of the party would overcome any of these minor difficulties and they were sure to have the most wonderful day.

The real reason for David's inevitable objections, she thought, fishing for the tea bag in her mug with the end of a fork, was the fact that he was apathetic

and often morose these days. He had been retired from the university for a year and did not have much to show for it. His last decade of lecturing had been fraught with frustrations and disenchantment and he was the first to admit that he had limped towards the finishing post, worn out and demoralised. The sad thing was, thought Alice, that he had never really recovered any vigour or appetite for life. He hadn't done anything in the garden, for instance, in which she thought he might have taken a bit of interest. He hadn't painted the peeling window frames or cleaned out the gutters. He hardly bothered to get dressed before midday, wandering about in his drooping boxer shorts half the morning, displaying his thin old man's legs. He often did not bother to shave, and badgery-coloured stubble sprouted on his chin.

He was depressed, she supposed. It hadn't been easy for him to adapt to being at home all day, but then he had complained so bitterly about his job that it was reasonable to suppose he would be glad to do anything other than sit through the endless departmental meetings, moaning with his other old codger colleagues about the new head of department and the woeful collapse of academic standards.

He wouldn't talk about how he felt. His face took on a pained expression if she pointed out that he seemed a bit low. He perceived it as criticism, which it was, in a way. As well as voicing concern for him, what Alice was really saying was 'Why aren't you a more cheerful companion?' and even 'Is this how it is going to be for the rest of our lives?'

She had once talked about it to Ollie, who was a doctor, and he had said, 'I shouldn't worry too much. Dad's always been a miserable old sod. It's become a habit. He's cheerful enough with other people. It's you he takes it out on.' And this was true. David reserved his most gloomy behaviour for when they were alone at home together. He always had, and he wasn't alone among husbands, Alice knew that. Quite a few of her friends said their men were exactly the same; even those who were married to life-and-soul-of-the-party types said that they were moody at home. Thank goodness she still worked, and got out of the house to her part-time job as a receptionist at the doctor's surgery.

Taking her mug, and a piece of paper and a pen from the muddle of stuff that collected beside the

telephone, Alice made her way back to bed to plan the party.

David heard her pass his door. It was really annoying that she made so much noise in the morning, he thought irritably. She seemed unable to turn a handle properly. She always turned and pushed at the same time, so that the shutting mechanism rattled and the door banged open. She thought he could sleep through anything and did not seem to concern herself that it might disturb him when she made tea at an unearthly hour.

He thought about the physical distance that had recently developed between them, when for years and years they had shared the same bed. As students it had been a mattress on the floor, when Alice had been a gangly girl with long legs in miniskirts; then a small double bed with a dip in the middle in the first flat they rented together. A cheap king-sized bed followed when they moved into this house. It had seemed embarrassingly enormous in those days. He used to think that his parents, who slept side by side so tidily in a small double bed for their whole married life, eyed it with distaste when they came to visit.

Into that bed each of the children had been gathered as milky babies, and then as toddlers, scarlet-cheeked with fever or sobbing in the grip of a nightmare. As they got older they had still climbed in every morning and squabbled and giggled and fought one another for space, kicking out with their lovely smooth, unblemished feet. What had happened to that bed? wondered David, turning over and bunching the pillow under his head. Ah, yes, Alice had read a magazine article about how you should have a new bed every decade and insisted they threw it out and bought a new one ten years ago. That was another of her annoying traits. She got ideas into her head and wouldn't let them go.

He wondered if he missed lying beside her and thought he probably did. A single bed was a lonely place when you were a grown-up, but in some ways David wanted to feel lonely. Sometimes he felt tired of being part of his family, pulled this way and that by them all. At least when he had a job to go to he had some sort of escape route, an independent existence that they weren't part of, somewhere where they couldn't get at him to suck him dry with their demands and expectations.

Now he was at home all day, he had to give explanations, justifications for how he passed his time. Alice was always leaving him notes, making suggestions. Paint the bloody windows was one of them. The thought of buying paint and brushes and turpentine and then all the scraping and filling of rotten woodwork made him feel worn out before he even began. No way was he going to take up DIY to please her. She treated him as she had done the children on a wet day in the holidays – finding him things to do, making bright suggestions about how to pass the long hours. She'd be giving him pocket money next and making him a bloody star chart for good behaviour.

He turned over again. With any luck he would go back to sleep, the deep early-morning sleep that would render him unconscious until well after Alice had left for work and he could have the house to himself again. In which to do nothing useful at all.

The party idea continued to grow. Alice thought about it as she drove to work through the splashy wet countryside and parked in the lane behind the doctor's surgery. The first twenty minutes of the day were given over to general organising and chatting before

the telephones started to ring, but this morning she listened distractedly to Margaret's complaints about the computer system.

Margaret, one of her fellow receptionists, was what you would call full-figured if you were being kind, and wore very tight skirts and low-cut spangly T-shirts for someone in her fifties. She had a lot of auburn hair done up in various combs with tumbling bits escaping as if she was fresh from a sex romp. This morning her black skirt looked all right from the front, but when she turned round to move some files, a slit was revealed almost to her rump. The backs of heifer-like knees are not really attractive, thought Alice, on anything other than cows or small children.

When Margaret first started work at the surgery, Alice had wondered whether Deidre, the practice manager, would have a word. Instead, after a week or two, she had sidled up to Alice during a coffee break and asked her if, as senior receptionist, she would bring up the subject of appropriate clothing for the workplace in an informal way. Alice had firmly refused. She judged that Margaret was not someone you offended lightly, and after all, she had to work beside her.