ANATOMY OF A SCANDAL

Sarah Vaughan read English at Oxford and went on to become a journalist. After training at the Press Association, she spent eleven years at the *Guardian* as a news reporter, health correspondent and political correspondent. She left to freelance and began writing fiction. *The Art of Baking Blind*, published by Hodder & Stoughton in 2014 and eight other publishers, was the result. *The Farm at the Edge of the World* followed in 2016. *Anatomy of a Scandal* will be published in the UK and US and translated into fourteen languages.

Sarah lives near Cambridge with her husband and two children.

SARAH VAUGHAN

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SIMON & SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

A CBS COMPANY

First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2018
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

www.simonandschuster.co.uk
www.simonandschuster.com.au
www.simonandschuster.co.in

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-4711-6499-6
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-4711-6500-9
eBook ISBN: 978-1-4711-6501-6

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and
incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are
used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living
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Typeset in the UK by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Stewardship Council, the leading international forest certification organisation.
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To my father, Chris
With love.

He needs guilty men. So he has found men who are guilty. Though perhaps not guilty as charged.

Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*

Kate

2 December 2016

One

My wig slumps on my desk where I have tossed it. A beached jellyfish. Out of court, I am careless with this crucial part of my wardrobe, showing it the opposite of what it should command: respect. Handmade from horsehair and worth nearly six hundred pounds, I want it to age; to accrue the gravitas I sometimes fear I lack. For the hairline to yellow with years of perspiration, the tight, cream curls to relax or to grey with dust. Nineteen years since I was called to the Bar, my wig is still that of a conscientious new girl – not a barrister who has inherited it from her, or more usually his, father. That's the sort of wig I want: one dulled with the patina of tradition, entitlement and age.

I kick off my shoes: black patent courts with gold braid on the front, shoes for a Regency fop; for Parliament's Black Rod; or a female barrister who delights in the history, the rigmarole, the sheer ridiculousness of it all. Expensive shoes

are important. Chatting with fellow counsel or clients, with ushers and police, we all look down from time to time so as not to appear confrontational. Anyone who glances at my shoes sees someone who understands this quirk of human psychology and who takes herself seriously. They see a woman who dresses as if she believes she will win.

I like to look the part, you see. To do things properly. Female barristers can wear a collarette: a scrap of cotton and lace that acts like a bib – a false front that goes just around the neck – and that costs around thirty pounds. Or they can dress as I do: a white collarless tunic with a collar attached by collar studs to the front and back. Cuff links. A black wool jacket and skirt or trousers; and – depending on their success and seniority – a black wool or wool and silk gown.

I'm not wearing all of that now. I have shed part of my disguise in the robing room of the Bailey. Robes off. Collar and cuffs undone; my medium-length blonde hair – tied back in a ponytail in court – released from its bobble; just a little mussed up.

I am more feminine, shed of my garb. With my wig on and my heavy-rimmed glasses, I know I look asexual. Certainly not attractive – though you may note my cheekbones: two sharp blades that emerged in my twenties and have hardened and sharpened, as I have hardened and sharpened, over the years.

I am more myself without the wig. More me. The me I am at heart, not the me I present to the court or any previous incarnations of my personality. This is me: Kate Woodcroft,

QC; criminal barrister; member of the Inner Temple; a highly experienced specialist in prosecuting sexual crimes. Forty-two years old; divorced, single, childless. I rest my head in my hands for a moment and let a breath ease out of me in one long flow, willing myself just to give up for a minute. It's no good. I can't relax. I've a small patch of eczema on my wrist and I smear E45 cream there, resisting the desire to scratch it. To scratch at my dissatisfaction with life.

Instead, I look up at the high ceilings of my chambers. A set of rooms in an oasis of calm in the very heart of London. Eighteenth-century, with ornate cornicing, gold leaf around the ceiling rose and a view – through the towering sash windows – of Inner Temple's courtyard and the round twelfth-century Temple Church.

This is my world. Archaic, anachronistic, privileged, exclusive. Everything I should – and normally would – profess to hate. And yet I love it. I love it because all this – this nest of buildings at the edge of the City, tucked off the Strand and flowing down towards the river; the pomp and the hierarchy; the status, history and tradition – is something I once never knew existed; and to which I never thought I could aspire. All of this shows how far I have come.

It's the reason that, if I'm not with my colleagues, I slip a hot chocolate – with extra sachets of sugar – to the girl hunched in her sleeping bag in a doorway on the Strand whenever I grab a cappuccino. Most people won't have noticed her. The homeless are good at being invisible or we are good at making them so: averting our eyes from their

khaki sleeping bags; their grey faces and matted hair; their bodies bundled in oversized jumpers and their equally skinny wolfhounds as we scurry past on our way to the seductive glitz of Covent Garden or the cultural thrills of the South Bank.

But hang around any court for a while and you will see just how precarious life can be. How your world can come tumbling down all too rapidly if you make the wrong call: if, just for one fatal split second, you behave unlawfully. Or rather, if you are poor and you break the law. For courts, like hospitals, are magnets for those dealt a rough hand from the start of life; who choose the wrong men or the wrong mates and become so mired in bad fortune that they lose their moral compass. The rich aren't quite as affected. Look at tax avoidance – or fraud, as it might be called if perpetrated by someone without the benefit of a skilled accountant. Bad luck – or lack of acumen – doesn't seem to dog the rich quite as assiduously as the poor.

Oh, I'm in a bad mood. You can tell I'm in a bad mood when I start thinking like a student politician. Most of the time I keep my *Guardian*-reading tendencies to myself. They can sit oddly with the more traditional members of my chambers; make for heated discussions at formal dinners, as we eat the sort of mass-catered food you might get at weddings – chicken, or salmon en croute – and drink our equally mediocre wine. Far more diplomatic to limit oneself to legal gossip: which QC is receiving so little work they're applying to be a Crown Court judge; who will next be made

silk; who lost their cool with an usher in court. I can rattle through such conversations while thinking of my workload, fretting about my personal life, or even planning what to buy the next day for dinner. After nineteen years, I am adept at fitting in. I am skilled at that.

But in the sanctity of my room I can occasionally let myself go, just a little, and so, for a minute, I put my head in my hands on my mahogany partner's desk; squeeze my eyes tight shut; and press my knuckles in hard. I see stars: white pinpricks that break the darkness and shine as bright as the diamonds in the ring I bought for myself – for no one else was going to buy it for me. Better to see these than to succumb to tears.

I've just lost a case. And though I know I will have got over the sense of failure by Monday; will move on for there are other cases to pursue, other clients to represent, still it rankles. It's not something that often happens or which I like to admit to, because I like to win. Well, we all do. It's only natural. We need it to ensure our careers continue to sparkle. And it's the way our adversarial judicial system works.

I remember it came as a huge shock when I had this spelled out to me, early in my Bar training. I had gone into the law with high ideals – and I have retained some; I haven't become overly jaded – but I hadn't expected it to be so brutally expressed.

'The truth is a tricky issue. Rightly or wrongly, adversarial advocacy is not really an inquiry into the truth,' Justin

Carew, QC, told us callow twenty-somethings, fresh from Oxford, Cambridge, Durham and Bristol. Advocacy is about being more persuasive than your opponent, he continued. You can win even if the evidence is stacked against you provided that you argue better. And it's all about winning, of course.

But sometimes, despite all your skills of persuasion, you lose; and, with me, that invariably happens if a witness turns out to be flaky; if they didn't come up to proof with their evidence; if, under cross-examination, their story unravels like a skein of wool tapped by a kitten – a mass of contradictions that becomes ever more knotted when pulled.

That happened today in the case of Butler. It was a rape case clouded by domestic violence: Ted Butler and Stacey Gibbons, who had lived together for four years, for most of which he had knocked her about.

I knew the odds were stacked against us from the start. Juries are keen to convict the predatory rapist, the archetypal bogeyman down a dark alley, yet when it comes to relationship rape, they'd really rather not know, thank you very much.

Though, in general, I think jurors get it right, in this case they didn't. I sometimes think they are stuck in the Victorian era; she is your wife, or common-law wife, and it's completely private, what goes on behind closed doors. And, to be fair, there is something rather mucky about delving so intimately into a couple's lives: about hearing what she wears in bed – an oversized T-shirt from a leading supermarket chain – or

how he always likes a cigarette after sex, even though she is an asthmatic and he knows it makes her chest tight. I wonder at those who sit in the public gallery: why do they come to watch this sad, sorry drama? More gripping than a soap opera in that these are real people acting it out and real sobs coming from the witness – who thankfully those in the public gallery cannot see; her identity shielded by a screen so that she doesn't have to watch her alleged assailant: fat-necked and piggy-eyed; in a cheap suit and black shirt and tie; his menacing take on respectability, glowering behind the reinforced glass in the dock.

So it feels smutty and prurient. Invasive. But still I ask the questions – questions that pry into the most exposing, frightening moments Stacey has ever experienced – because deep down, despite what that eminent QC told me all those years ago, I still want to get at the truth.

And then the defence lawyer brings up the issue of porn. An issue that can only be raised because my opponent has made a successful application in which he argued that there is a parallel between a scene in a DVD on their bedside table and what happened here. 'Is it not possible,' my learned friend, Rupert Fletcher, asks in his deep, coercive baritone, 'that this was a sex game that she now finds a little embarrassing? A fantasy indulged in that she felt went a little too far? The DVD shows a woman being tied up, just as Miss Gibbons was. You may feel that at the point of penetration, Ted Butler believed that Stacey Gibbons was going along with a fantasy they had discussed at some point beforehand.

That she was just acting a part she had, in all willingness, already agreed on.'

He relays further details of the DVD; then refers to a text message in which she admits: 'It made me hot.' And I can see the shudder of distaste on a couple of juror's faces – the women in late middle age, dressed smartly for court, who perhaps anticipated sitting in on a trial for a burglary, or a murder; and whose eyes have been well and truly opened by this case – and I know that their sympathy for Stacey is disappearing faster than a tide slithering from the beach.

'You fantasised about being tied up, didn't you?' Rupert says. 'You texted your lover to let him know you'd like to try such things.'

He waits a beat, allowing Stacey's sobs to ring around the windowless courtroom. And then: 'Yes,' comes her muffled admission – and from then on it does not matter that Ted half-choked her as he carried out the rape; or that there were welts on her wrists from where she struggled to free herself; rope burns she had the foresight to record on her iPhone. From then on, it is all downhill.

I pour myself a shot of whisky from the decanter on the sideboard. It's not something I often do, drink at work, but it's been a long day and it's past five now. Dusk has settled – soft peach and gold illuminating the clouds, making the courtyard excessively pretty – and I always think alcohol is permissible once it's dark. The single malt hits the back of my throat; warms my gullet. I wonder if Rupert will be celebrating in the wine bar opposite the High Court. He must

have known, from the welts, from the choke, from the smirk on his client's face as he heard the verdict, that his client was as guilty as hell. But a win's a win. Still, if I were defending a case like that, I would have the decency not to gloat, far less to buy a bottle of Veuve to share with my junior. But then again, I try not to defend in such cases. Though you're deemed a better barrister if you do both, I don't want to sully my conscience by representing those I suspect to be guilty. That's why I prefer to prosecute.

For I am on the side of the truth, you see, not just the side of the winners – and my thinking is that, if I believe a witness, then there is sufficient evidence to bring a case. And that's why I want to win. Not just for winning's sake but because I am on the side of the Stacey Gibbonses of this world; and of those whose cases are less muddied and even more brutal: the six-year-old raped by her grandfather; the eleven-year-old repeatedly buggered by his scoutmaster; the student forced to perform oral sex when she makes the mistake, late at night, of walking home alone. Yes, particularly for her. The standard of proof is high in the criminal court: beyond a reasonable doubt, not on the balance of probabilities, the burden of proof applied in the civil court. And that's why Ted Butler walked free today. There was that seed of doubt: that hypothetical possibility conjured up by Rupert, in his caramel voice, that Stacey, a woman whom the jurors might assume was a bit rough, had consented to violent sex and it was only two weeks later, when she discovered that Ted had a bit on the side, that she thought to go to the

police. The possibility that she might be traumatised and shamed; that she might fear she would be mauled by the court and disbelieved, as she has been, does not appear to have occurred to them.

I refill my heavy crystal glass; add a splash of water. Two shots is my limit and I keep to it. I am disciplined. I have to be, for I know my intellect is blunted if I drink any more. Perhaps it is time to go home – but the thought of returning to my ordered two-bedroom flat doesn't appeal. Normally I enjoy living alone. I am too contrary to be in a relationship, I know that; too possessive of my space; too selfish; too argumentative. I luxuriate in my solitude, or rather the fact that I don't need to accommodate anyone else's needs when my brain is churning as I prepare a case, or when I am dog-weary at the end of one. But when I lose, I resent the close, understanding silence. I don't want to be alone – to dwell on my professional and personal inadequacies – any more. And so I tend to stay late at work, my lamp burning when my colleagues with families have long gone home; searching for the truth in my bundles of papers and working out a way in which to win.

Tonight, I listen as the heels of my colleagues clatter down the eighteenth-century wooden stairs and the burble of laughter drifts up towards me. Early December, the start of the run-up to Christmas, a Friday night and it is palpable: the general relief of reaching the end of a long week. I won't be joining my colleagues in the pub. I have a face on me, as my mother would say, and I've done enough acting for one day. I

don't want my workmates to feel they have to console me; to tell me there are other cases to fight; that if you are dealing with a domestic, you're on to a losing streak from the start. I don't want to have to smile thinly while inside I rail; I don't want my anger to curdle the atmosphere. Richard will be there: my one-time pupil master; my occasional lover – very occasional these days for his wife, Felicity, has learned of us and I don't want to rock, still less to wrench apart, his marriage. I don't want him to feel pity for me.

A crisp knock on the door: the brisk rat-a-tat-tat that belongs to the one person I could bear to see at the moment. Brian Taylor, my clerk for the entire nineteen years I have been in 1 Swift Court. Forty years in the profession, and with more nous and a better insight into human psychology than many of the counsel for whom he works. Behind the slick salt-and-pepper hair, the neatly buttoned suit, the perky 'Miss' – for he insists on sticking to hierarchy, in the office at least – there is a sharp understanding of human nature and a deep sense of morality. He's also intensely private. It took me four years to realise that his wife had left him; four more before I realised it was for another woman.

'Thought you'd still be at it.' He pops his head round the door. 'Heard about the Butler case.' His eyes flit from my empty whisky glass to the bottle and back again. Saying nothing. Just noting.

I make a noncommittal murmur that comes out as a growl in the back of my throat.

He stands in front of my desk, hands behind his back,

relaxed in his own skin; just waiting to offer some pearl of wisdom. I find myself playing along with it and lean back in my chair; unfurling just a little from my bleak mood, despite myself.

'What you need now is something meaty. Something high-profile.'

'Tell me about it.' I feel the breath rush from my body: the relief of someone else knowing me so clearly and stating my ambition as a fact.

'What you need,' he continues, and he looks at me slyly, his dark eyes alight with the thrill of a juicy case, 'is something that will take you to the next level. That will completely make your career.'

He is holding something in his hand, as I knew he would. Since October 2015, all cases have been delivered electronically: no longer wrapped in dark pink ribbon like a fat *billet doux*. But Brian knows that I prefer to read physical documents: to pore over a sheaf of papers that I can scrawl on, underline; cover with fluorescent Post-its until I create a map with which to navigate a trial.

He always prints my papers out and they are the sweetest of letters, presented now with a magician's flourish.

'I've got just the sort of case you need.'

Sophie

21 October 2016

Two

Sophie has never thought of her husband as a liar.

She knows he dissembles, yes. That's part of his job: a willingness to be economical with the truth. A prerequisite, even, for a government minister.

But she has never imagined he would lie to her. Or rather, that he might have a life she knows nothing about: a secret that could detonate beneath her lovingly maintained world and blow it apart forever.

Watching him that Friday, as he leaves to take the children to school, she feels a stab of love so fierce she pauses on the stairs just to drink in the tableau of the three of them together. They are framed in the doorway, James turning to call goodbye; left arm raised in that politician's wave she used to mock but which now seems second nature; right hand cradling Toby's head. Their son, fringe falling in his eyes, socks bagging round his ankles, scuffs at the tiles,

reluctant, as ever, to go. His elder sister, Emily, ducks through the doorway: determined, aged nine, not to be late.

'Well, bye then,' her husband calls, and the autumn sun catches the top of his still-boyish crop, illuminating him with a halo, the light highlighting his six-foot-three frame.

'Bye, Mum,' her daughter shouts, as she runs down the steps.

'Bye, Mummy.' Toby, thrown by the change to his routine – his father taking them to school for once – juts out his bottom lip and flushes red.

'Come on, little man.' James steers him through the door: competent, authoritative; even, and she almost resents the fact she still finds this attractive, commanding. Then he smiles down at his boy and his entire face softens, for Toby is his weak spot: 'You know you'll enjoy it when you get there.'

He slips his arm over his son's shoulders and guides him down their neat, west London garden with its topiaried bay trees standing like sentinels and its path fringed with lavender, and away from her and out down the street.

My family, she thinks, watching the perfect-looking trio go: her girl, racing ahead to embrace the day, all skinny legs and swishing ponytail; her boy, slipping his hand into his father's and looking up at him with that unashamed adoration that came with being six. The similarity between man and boy – for Toby is a miniaturised version of his father – only magnifies her love. I have a beautiful boy and a beautiful man, she thinks, as she watches James's broad

shoulders – a one-time rower's shoulders – and waits, more in hope than expectation, for him to look back and smile at her; for she has never managed to grow immune to his charisma.

Of course, he doesn't and she watches as they slip out of sight. The most precious people in her world.

That world crumbles at 8.43 p.m. James is late. She should have known he would be. It is an alternate Friday: one in which he is holding a surgery, deep in his Surrey constituency, in a bright-lit village hall.

When he had first been elected, they had stayed there every weekend: decamping to a cold, damp cottage that never quite felt like home, despite their extensive renovations. One election on, and it was a relief to give up the pretence that Thurlsdon was where they wanted to spend half their week. Lovely in the summer months, yes: but bleak in winter, when she would stare out at the bare trees fringing their hamlet garden, while James went about his constituency business, and try to placate their urban children, who wanted the bustle and distraction of their real, North Kensington home.

They venture there once a month now, and James schleps down for the Friday surgery in the intervening fortnight. Two hours on a Friday afternoon: he promised to leave by six.

He has a driver now he is junior minister, and should have been back by seven-thirty – traffic permitting. They are supposed to be going to friends for a kitchen supper. Well,

she says *friends*. Matt Frisk is another junior minister: aggressively ambitious in a way that doesn't sit well with their set where success is understood as inevitable but naked ambition considered vulgar. But he and Ellie are near neighbours and she can't easily put them off again.

They said they would be there by eight-fifteen. It is ten past now – so where is he? The October evening creeps against the sash windows: black softened by the glow of the street lamps, autumn stealing in. She loves this time of year. It reminds her of fresh starts: running through the leaves in Christ Church Meadows as a fresher, giddy at the thought of new worlds opening up to her. Since having children, it has been a time to nest; to cosset with log fires, roast chestnuts; brisk, crisp walks and game casseroles. But now, the autumn night is taut with potential. Footsteps totter down the pavement and a woman's laugh rings out, flirtatious. A deeper voice murmurs. Not James's. The footsteps rise and fall; die away.

She presses redial. His mobile rings out then clicks to voicemail. She jabs the sleek face of her phone – rattled at her loss of customary self-control. Dread tightens her stomach and for a moment she is back in the chill lodge of her Oxford college, the wind whistling through the quad, as she waits for the payphone to ring. The look of sympathy from a college porter. The chill fear – so intense in that last week of her first summer term – that something still more terrible was going to happen. Aged nineteen and willing him to call, even then.

Eight-fourteen. She tries again, hating herself for doing this. His phone clicks straight through to answerphone. She plucks at a piece of imaginary lint, rearranges her friendship bracelets and glances critically at her nails: neatly filed, unvarnished, unlike Ellie's gleaming gelled slicks.

Footsteps on the stairs. A child's voice. 'Is Daddy back?'

'No – go back to bed.' Her tone comes out harsher than she intends.

Emily stares at her, one eyebrow raised.

'Just climb back into bed, sweetheart,' she adds, her voice softening as she chases her daughter up the stairs, heart quickening as she turns the corner and bundles her under the covers. 'You should be settling down, now. He won't be long.'

'Can he come and say goodnight when he gets in?' Emily pouts, impossibly pretty.

'Well, we're going out – but if you're still awake . . .'

'I will be.' Her daughter's determination – the set of her jaw; the implacable self-belief – marks her out as her father's daughter.

'Then I'm sure he'll come up.'

She gives her a quick peck on the forehead, to curb further arguments, and tucks the duvet around her. 'I don't want you out of bed again, though. Understand? Cristina's babysitting just like normal. I'll send him up when he arrives.'

Eight-seventeen. She won't ring to check. She has never been the sort of wife who behaves like a stalker but there is

something about this complete silence that chills her. Usually so good at communication, this just isn't like him. She imagines him stuck on the M25, working his way through his papers in the back of his car. He would call, text, send an email: not leave her waiting – the au pair hanging around the kitchen, keen for them to disappear so that she can curl up on the sofa and have the house to herself; Sophie's carefully touched-up face becoming a little less perfect; the flowers bought for the Frisks wilting in their wrapping, on the table in the hall.

Eight twenty-one. She will call the Frisks at half past. But that deadline comes and still she doesn't ring. Eight thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven. Aware that it's bad form to do so, at eight-forty she sends Ellie Frisk a brief, apologetic text explaining that something has cropped up in the constituency and they are terribly sorry but they won't be able to make it, after all.

The Times has a piece on Islamic State by Will Stanhope but the words of her old college contemporary wash over her. It might as well be a story about dinosaur astronauts, read to Tobes, to the extent to which it engages her. For every part of her is attuned to one thing.

And there it is. The sound of his key in the door. A scrape and then a hiss as the heavy oak eases open. The sound of his footsteps: slower than normal, not his usual brisk, assertive tread. Then the thud of his red box being put down: the weight of responsibility abandoned for a while – as glorious a sound, on a Friday night, as the slosh of dry white wine

being poured from a bottle. The jangle of keys on the hall table. And then silence, again.

'James?' She comes into the hall.

His beautiful face is grey: his smile taut and not meeting his eyes where his light crow's feet seemed deeper than usual.

'You'd better cancel the Frisks.'

'I have done.'

He shrugs off his coat and hangs it up carefully, averting his face.

She pauses then slips her arms around his waist – his honed waist that deepens to form a V; like the trunk of a sapling that burgeons outwards – but he reaches back and gently eases them away.

'James?' The cold in the pit of her stomach flares.

'Is Cristina here?'

'Yes.'

'Well, send her to her room, will you? We need to talk in private.'

'Right.' Her heart flutters as she hears her voice come out clipped.

He gives her another tight smile, and a note of impatience creeps into his voice, as if she is a disobliging child or, perhaps, a tardy civil servant. 'Can you do it now, please, Sophie?'

She stares back at him, not recognising his mood – so different to what she had expected.

He massages his forehead with firm, long fingers and his

green eyes close briefly, the lashes – disarmingly long – kissing his cheeks. Then, his eyes flash open, and the look he gives her is the one Toby gives when trying to pre-empt a telling off and plead forgiveness. It's the look James gave her twenty-three years ago before confessing to the crisis that threatened to overwhelm him; that caused them to split up; that still, sometimes, causes her to shiver, and that she fears is about to rear its head again.

'I'm sorry, Soph. So sorry.' And it is as if he is carrying not just the weight of his job – under secretary of state for countering extremism – but responsibility for the entire government.

'I've fucked up big time.'

Her name was Olivia Lytton – though Sophie had always just thought of her as James's parliamentary researcher. Five-foot-ten; twenty-eight; blonde; well connected; confident; ambitious. 'I expect she'll be dubbed the blonde bombshell.' She tries for acerbic but her voice just comes out as shrill.

The affair had been going on for five months and he had broken it off a week ago, just after the party conference.

'It meant nothing,' James says, head in hands, no pretence that he is anything other than penitent. He leans back, wrinkling his nose as he trots out another cliché. 'It was just sex – and I was flattered.'

She swallows: rage pushing against her chest, barely containable. 'Well, that's OK then.'

His eyes soften as he takes in her pain.

'There was nothing wrong with that part of us. You know that.' He can usually read her so clearly: a skill honed over two decades, one of the things that bind them so closely. 'I just made a foolish mistake.'

She waits, poised on the sofa opposite, for her anger to subside sufficiently for her to speak civilly or for him to bridge the distance between them. To reach out a tentative hand, or at least offer a smile.

But he is rooted there: head bowed, elbows on knees, fingers touching as if in prayer. At first, she despises this show of sanctimony – a Blairite trope; the penitent politician – and then she softens as his shoulders shake, just the once: not with a sob but with a sigh. For a moment, she sees her mother as her charming, rakish father confessed to yet another 'indiscretion'. Ginny's dry resignation – and then the quickly suppressed flash of pain in her marine-blue eyes.

Perhaps this is what all husbands do? Sorrow surges, then anger. It shouldn't be like this. Their marriage is different. Founded on love and trust and a sex life that she does her very best to maintain.

She has made compromises in her life and, God knows, she took a huge leap of faith when they got back together; but the one certainty is meant to be that their relationship is solid. Her vision begins to blur, her gaze filming with tears. He looks up and catches her eye – and she wishes he hadn't.

'There's something else,' he says.

*

Of *course,* he wouldn't confess to an affair without a reason.

'Is she pregnant?' The words – ugly but necessary – discolour the space between them.

'No, of course not.'

She feels herself relax a little: no half-sibling for Emily and Tobes. No proof of a liaison. No need to share him in any other way.

And then he looks up with a grimace. Her nails bite into her palm in sharp crescents and she sees that her knuckles are ivory pearls thrusting through the red of her skin.

What could be worse than some other woman having his child – or perhaps choosing to abort his child? Other people knowing: the affair a particularly juicy piece of gossip, dropped into the ear of a favoured few in the Commons tea rooms until it becomes general knowledge. Who knows? His colleagues? The PM? Other MPs' wives? What about Ellie? She imagines her silly plump face alight with barely suppressed pity. Perhaps she recognises her lie of a text and already knows.

She forces herself to breathe deeply. They can deal with this; move beyond it. They have experienced far worse, haven't they? There is no crime in having a quick fling: it can be brushed over, quickly forgotten, absorbed. And then James says something that takes this to a more damaging, corrosive level; that strikes her in the solar plexus hard as she contemplates a scenario so terrible that she hadn't quite seen it coming.

'The story's about to break.'