

Deja View

Lisa Armstrong

Published by Hodder &
Stoughton

Extract is copyright of the Author

I

Sydney and Charlie Murray had the perfect marriage. They knew this because everyone kept telling them so. Charlie was happy to go along with the consensus – any consensus really – provided it didn't prevent him from getting to work by 8.27 a.m. And Sydney was so busy having affairs she could only assume that perfection was a relative term.

Granted, these affairs were in her head and mostly with her marriage guidance counsellor. Not that she divulged this to anyone. He wasn't really her type, but he looked soulful and seemed to listen. And some days that was enough to make her want to throw herself at his two-tone trainers. She didn't tell Charlie about the marriage guidance at all actually. He hadn't wanted to accompany her to these sessions; had looked incredulous when she had first suggested them and then refused to discuss the matter with her ever again, so that she sometimes wondered whether she had ever broached the subject with him. The simple truth was that the counsellor spoke the occasional nugget of wisdom, smiled, and he'd seen *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, one of Sydney's all-time favourite films, which was more than could be said for Charlie, who hadn't had time to go to the cinema since 1993 and even in those heady days, had preferred films with subtitles and harrowing subject matter. And now that she was thirty-six, a wife, a mother, with a rather exotic name that she still hadn't found a way of living up to, and an annual subscription – courtesy of her mother-in-law – to *Good Housekeeping*, she knew better than to underestimate talents such as a ready smile and a penchant for old black and white films.

Personally Sydney felt she was a little young for *Good*

Housekeeping. She had after all been known to wear the occasional Top Shop T-shirt, though more to impress herself than anyone else. Besides, while she might technically fit *Good Housekeeping's* demographic, her mind-set was more . . . well, she didn't know what it was. She liked reading *Heat* when she was waiting for marriage guidance. And *Private Eye*, and *Vogue*, *Allure* . . . anything she could get her hands on really. Still, *Good Housekeeping* was better than a subscription to *Horse and Hound*, which is what Francine had bought her one year.

She was a little young for Charlie too. Not that their fifteen-year age gap had ever been much of an issue. Or it hadn't been until Charlie had got cross. She couldn't quite pin-point when his mid-to-late life crisis had first kicked in – two months ago possibly – because it had settled in slowly, a prolonged grumble here, a pained silence there, the whole ill-tempered package rumbling into an ambient background of soggy anger. All she knew was that while other husbands occasionally found religion, or more often mistresses, golf or the pub, Charlie had found Cantankerousness.

Sometimes the imaginary affairs were with the marriage guidance counsellor. Sometimes with Charlie himself. Or rather, with Charlie as he had been BC. Before Cantankerousness, Charlie had given every impression of being a reasonably normal human being. Cleverer than most perhaps – which, with hindsight, Sydney could see was always going to be slightly problematic – and with an unhealthy interest in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's every move. He also, even though it was apparent to everyone that he had fallen head over heels with Sydney almost the first time he clapped eyes on her, sent her notes so dense with legalese and sub-sections that they could only very loosely be described as love letters. But Sydney had consoled herself with the knowledge that they had taught her to think rationally. To this day her shopping lists remained models of logic and clarity. And in essence, he was sound, decent and road-worthy, unlikely to have affairs with other women.

That said, Sydney sometimes felt it would be simpler to

compete with a mistress, golf or the pub than with Charlie's particular canker, although it wasn't that easy dealing with Canningtons, the legal chambers to which he set off – at an increasingly hurtful speed – every morning. A mistress might get lardy thighs or run off. Canningtons, though some of its barristers were flabby in the extreme, showed no signs of going anywhere without Charlie. What was it John Mortimer said about barristers breakfasting with murderers, lunching with a judge and dining with an actress? Charlie was more likely to breakfast with his laptop, lunch with a White Paper about national insurance scams and forget to have dinner. He never forgot to be grumpy though. He could harrumph for Britain. But he loved her and the girls, even though he quite often forgot about them along with everything else.

She did suffer the odd guilty twinge about the affairs. But then the marriage guidance counsellor had relocated up north – which on bad days Sydney couldn't help seeing as another rejection. Mostly, though, there were good days. Two adorable children (even more adorable since they'd both been safely delivered to full-time school and the adoration was now tinged with a bitter-sweet poignancy), one clever, if silent (at least he didn't argue) husband, a lovely house and Hamish, a West Highland terrier with only faintly disconcerting digestive problems whom Charlie had bought as a companion for Sydney when Molly had started school.

With the girls both at St Margaret's, Sydney had found her soul at a loose end, even if her time was quite amply filled with errands for her family. It wasn't as if she hadn't had other offers to mop up any ennui – should she be foolish enough to feel any. The Clifton Crescent Book Club, which was always inviting her to make up numbers. The request to run the Clifton Crescent residents' association.

There was also the offer to become a class rep, a task she was informed was only mildly onerous once you'd drawn up the nit rota, organized the traffic patrol, the summer fayre, the Christmas party, and attended half a dozen meetings with

the school head. After that came the repeated invitations to become a life member of The Rolling Scones, because 'We stay-at-home mothers must fly the flag for our cause'. Sydney never discovered quite what the cause was, other than a desperate need to look busy in the face of the showy, rush-rush-rushiness of the school's working mothers. So far she had politely fended off all invitations to join The Scones, which as far as she could gather were a virulent strain of local mafia who cooked communally over a giant Aga while assassinating everyone not in the group.

Going back to work four days a week had clearly been a positive step towards becoming one of those glamorous rush-rush-rush mothers herself – or at any rate escaping a life measured out by the number of times she called London Transport's Lost Property on Charlie's behalf or rushed down to chambers in the middle of the morning with something he'd left at home. Linda certainly thought so. Although being in dire straits in the *IQ* magazine offices, acutely understaffed and in the process of threatening to kill herself if Sydney didn't come and help her out, Linda could be said to have had a vested interest. The important thing was that Sydney was convinced she was doing the right thing in the long term and that Charlie was bound to come round. Eventually.

Sydney was an optimist. But this morning, as he peered over the parapet of *The Times* in that myopic way of his which could sometimes seem curmudgeonly to strangers – or perhaps it *was* curmudgeonly, increasingly Sydney couldn't tell – even she thought it might take slightly longer than eventually to win him over.

'Is there any bacon?'

'You're eating it,' said Sydney patiently.

Charlie studied the cinderized but organic flotsam – Sydney *always* bought organic, particularly since she'd gone back to work, which she knew was a guilt reflex – scattered over the sub-Saharan dried-up pool of egg yolk on his plate and nodded philosophically. 'So I am.'

Sydney cast a wary eye towards the hob where their elder daughter Harriet, who had been cooking for the family since she was six, though she had yet to master fried breakfasts, was juggling pans. Luckily Harriet was too engrossed with the egg poacher to hear.

Given that Charlie normally wouldn't notice whether he was eating cornflakes or the packet, the bacon request was a ruse, Sydney knew. A delaying tactic designed:

- i] to make her late for work.
- ii] to remind her of the futility of her work.
- ii] (sub-section b) clarify any misunderstanding that might arise between them pertaining to Sydney's mistaken belief that he had come round to the idea of her going back to work.

He tried again. He was making a big effort. 'Is that a new dress?' Which was ominous. Behind his new glasses his eyes narrowed as he contemplated an ancient velvet skirt that still just about did up over her stomach. 'Going out?'

Sydney silently counted to five. The Murrays never rowed. It was their USP as a couple, according to Linda. It was one of the reasons she'd asked Sydney to come back to the magazine as an agony aunt. So now, even if she'd wanted to row, Sydney couldn't because it would break the Trades Descriptions Act.

'Wednesday today.' She tried to sound breezily impervious to any intended criticism that might be lurking in her husband's seemingly innocuous enquiries. For the past two months, she had been going into work every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

Charlie glanced at the date at the top of *The Times*.

'So it is.'

Hamish let out a companionable little whine. A small but deadly rustle of air escaped from beneath the kitchen table. He wagged his tail sheepishly.

'Ughh, that's gross!' Molly wrinkled her nose and pushed away

her bowl of Puffa Wheat, which she had no intention of finishing anyway, and buried her head in *Young Scientist*.

'Where's your brace, Harriet?' mouthed Sydney. She didn't want Charlie weighing in on this one.

Harriet looked close to hysteria at the prospect of having to tell her parents she hadn't been able to find it for two days.

'Sydney, will you please do something about Hamish's diet?' said Charlie reasonably and not for the first time.

'He's very emotional since Nellie died,' said Molly.

'I see Dad hates his bacon.' Over by the hob, Harriet's lower lip quivered ominously. Sydney felt her shoulders rise protectively, like a street hawker defending his patch from police predators. In Harriet's case the predator was her own rampant sensitivity.

'I do not hate it,' said Charlie wearily.

'He loves it,' said Sydney simultaneously. She wished she'd taken the chance to sprinkle some sunflower seeds on the bacon while he'd been buried in *The Times*. He wouldn't have noticed a little extra crunch this morning and he could do with the roughage. It might leaven his mood.

Charlie and Sydney exchanged glances, antagonism momentarily forgotten in this mutual display of unconditional love for their daughter.

'Even my own parents think I'm hopeless at everything!' Harriet hurled the metal spatula into the pan. It bounced on to the floor quite spectacularly, inspiring Harriet to stamp on it. Then she tripped over it and burst into tears. Sydney's heart concertinaed. She must have stubbed her toe as well as her pride. How could sensitivity be so bloody, violently insensitive?

'You need it on a lower heat.' Molly's nose finally emerged from her copy of *Young Scientist*. 'Meat vaporizes at 250 degrees Centigrade.'

'I hate you,' Harriet announced to no one in particular.

Charlie hurriedly crammed the charred remains on his plate into his mouth. 'Mmm, mmm, mmm.' He licked his fingers. 'Delicious.'

Sydney instantly forgave him the comment about her dress.

'It looks burnt to me,' said Molly. 'Carbon is carcinogenic,' she added helpfully.

Harriet let out a wail of bloodcurdling poignancy and slammed out of the room. Sydney heard her stumble on the stairs and had to stop herself checking on her. Harriet kept falling over lately. Instead, she bent down to pick up a fleck of paint that had been dislodged from the wall. Charlie grabbed his briefcase and his coat, which was draped over the piano where he'd left it the night before.

'Must go.' He folded up *The Times*. Was there a note of reproach in the way he flattened its corners, Sydney wondered, momentarily forgetting that Harriet's volcanic moods had been fully evolved way before she'd started working again.

She tried another tack. 'Fancy anything special for supper tonight? I could pick up something on the way home.'

He put his coat down momentarily and contemplated her with the slightly embarrassed, confused look of a pensioner who has just been apprehended wandering around the grounds of Buckingham Palace at midnight in his pyjamas. Then he retaliated with his master thrust. 'That would be lovely. But I don't want to wear you out. I know how exhausting that office is.'

'No problem,' she said breezily, ignoring his reference to the location of Clifton Crescent, which while one of Primrose Hill's premier streets, was a hell of a hike from the Tube. 'It really isn't that tiring. Steak Béarnaise all right?' Harriet would probably have the recipe for Béarnaise. Before she worked Sydney used to buy it ready-made.

'I probably have to work late tonight,' he began, tantalized by the Béarnaise, which as Sydney knew, was his favourite. 'Just leave something cold for me. Or I could pick up a pizza.'

Being an exceptionally reasonable couple, that was about as close to rowing as the Murrays ever got.

But oh, how the weasel words of marriage wounded, thought Sydney, watching Charlie make his way down the hall. In the normal scheme of things, offering to cook someone supper – and

having the offer refused on the grounds that it would be an onerous burden – would be tokens of caring, considerate love. But in this instance the caring, considerate love was freighted with seething, resentful agendae.

i] Charlie saw himself as the provider.

i.b] He was the provider. Before she went back to work Sydney used to feel she ought to go around with a Sponsored By Charlie sign hung round her neck. But Linda had pointed out that people might assume she was a crack dealer. Even now, her salary from *IQ* didn't make her entirely self-sufficient. But it was a gesture. And she was the one who'd found the house and convinced Charlie the wet rot-raddled wreck would make a perfect home for them. According to Gavin, the estate agent, 64 Clifton Crescent was the finest of all the stuccoed terraced houses in their street. Though how he could tell the difference Sydney didn't know, since they were a job lot built by a speculator who'd gone bankrupt in 1864.

ii] Just because you were handsomely provided for with two adorable-ish children, one workaholic husband and an open invitation to take over as secretary of the local residents' association (primary aim: removal of stone cladding on number 21; secondary aim: obstruction of planned Sainsbury Local on the grounds that it did not fit with community spirit of small independent, criminally over-priced local shops) didn't mean you were immune from feeling that something was missing from your life.

The Murrays' warfare may have been subtle in the extreme, but their children believed in all-out guerrilla tactics. From three floors down, Sydney heard Harriet slam the door to her bedroom. Molly looked up from her book stoically. 'I expect she's sobbing now.'

Sydney eyed her younger daughter wearily. Why had she felt short-changed until she'd gone back to work? How come The Rolling Scones were content to spend hours talking about new recipes they were sampling to tickle their husbands' taste-buds? It

wasn't as if Sydney hadn't been busy before she'd gone back to work. Acting as Charlie's unofficial chauffeur – he'd never got round to getting his driving licence – wheeling Harriet off to all the specialists who were meant to be helping her dyslexia, and organizing four people's lives had been quite full on, but she'd still felt a void. A void that hadn't even gone away when Charlie's mother, Francine, had given her the hardback of *How to Be a Domestic Goddess* the previous Christmas.

Even so, why the urge to take on more? It wasn't – as Charlie had pointed out on more than one occasion – as if their house ran like clockwork. Sydney spied Charlie's coat lying on the piano. He'd be ringing soon to ask her if he needed it. In addition to being one of the untidiest people Sydney had ever lived with, Charlie was incapable of functioning on a practical level. When they'd met, this forgetfulness had been one of his endearing USPs. That a man could clearly be so brilliant in his chosen field and yet in danger of concussing himself with a kitchen cupboard door on the rare occasions he felt the need to open one, had struck Sydney as profoundly endearing once upon a time. Sometimes she dreamed that he'd mislaid one of the girls somewhere. It was fair to say that after twelve years of marriage the charm of this had evaporated marginally. Actually it struck her now as being less of a selling-point and more like a rare form of Passive-Aggressive Acute Bloody Mindedness.

8.35. Sydney called up the stairs with what she hoped was an air of unflustered authority.

Her voice wavered slightly when she glanced at her watch and realized she had ten minutes to complete a school run that took fifteen under optimum conditions – i.e. between 1 and 3 a.m. Molly appeared on the top landing. White, baby-blond pigtails. Tiny grey tunic. Three Puffa Wheats clinging to it like thistle-down, adding a surreal glow to her appearance. She was so beautiful Sydney caught herself mooning over her daughter like a love-struck Romeo.

'Harriet's locked herself in the bathroom,' Molly announced with her father's incendiary calm.

8.36. Sydney lay on the floor outside the bathroom, pushing a note under the door. She didn't need x-ray vision to know that her daughter was also crouched on the floor, sobbing. She could hear her. Thinking how hot it must be in there, she worried Harriet might pass out.

'Go away.'

'Come on, I miss you.'

'I doubt that when you think I'm so useless at everything.'

'Harriet, you know that's not true.' Sydney kept her voice even and then spoilt it by telling Harriet to stop feeling sorry for herself in a jokey voice. Harriet didn't have a sense of humour. It was one of the issues Sydney wanted to raise at the next PTE.

'There, I told you. You all think I'm stupid.' There was more muffled sobbing and the sound of taps being turned on full. Drowning? Surely Harriet was too young to be attempting suicide?

'Harriet, open this door.' Voice sounding less jokey by the second.

'Go away.'

Stalemate.

Why was it, Sydney wondered, that like all imperial forces, Charlie always withdrew whenever trouble was brewing?

Molly loomed above Sydney's head and pressed her mouth against the bathroom door. 'You're making us late, you cow.'

'Molly!' Sydney tried to fix her with a disapproving glare. It wasn't easy from the floor. Her younger daughter stared back at her belligerently, tears coursing down her cheeks, making her look like a small Gwyneth Paltrow.

'What's the matter with *you*?' said Sydney harshly.

'It's the class play dress rehearsal. We're performing next week. I need to take in my curate's costume today.'

'What curate's costume? What curate?' Why were they having a play at the start of November? What were they celebrating?

Divali? Hannukah? Sydney's knowledge of religious festivals was sketchy.

'I told you last week,' Molly sobbed. The bath sounded as though it was getting quite deep. What exactly was a curate? And what in God's name did they wear? She ran to the little drawer she kept locked in her bedside table and pulled out an antique crucifix that had belonged to her great-grandmother, who according to family legend had converted from Judaism to escape persecution in Russia. She handed it to Molly and returned to the landing.

'Harriet, will you come out now please!' Would her daughter recognize the difference between a rhetorical question and a craven plea?

'You never listen. I'm neglected because Harriet gets all the attention.' Sydney looked down at her small daughter who was shaking with distress now. She took a deep breath.

'Molly, you said nothing about this costume and you know it. I'm perfectly happy to help you as much as I can, but you must stop pretending everything is somebody else's fault.'

'But it's eight-thirty-nine.' Molly wiped her arm across her face, creating a lake of snot and tears on her cheeks. Sydney reached into her pocket for a Kleenex.

'I'll just have to write a late note for you. We'll say the car broke down.'

'But that's a lie.'

'Sometimes lies are necessary.'

'When?'

Sydney was stumped. Now didn't seem the moment to dismantle one of the fundamental shibboleths of civilized society. 'I suppose curates wear black and white, like vicars.' That at least shouldn't present too much of a problem. Sydney had created an entire sub-section of her wardrobe devoted to black – a doomed attempt to look as though she hadn't forgotten to lose a stone after her pregnancies.

'Harriet.' She aimed for cheerful authority this time. 'We really need your help with a costume. You're the only one in this family with the style to get us through this.'

There was an agonized delay while Harriet considered her options, which were, roughly, waiting to asphyxiate slowly in a bathroom where the window had never opened since the cleaning lady Juanita's brother had painted it to the frame, or demonstrating her flair in the costume department. After a few moments' deliberation, the taps were turned off, the plug was freed and the door unlocked. Shrouded in steam and framed in the doorway, Harriet looked strangely apocryphal, like a contestant on *Stars in Their Eyes*. 'I don't think Molly looks very nice in black,' she said with a glimmer of satisfaction.

9.22. In an ideal world Sydney would now be proceeding with implacable efficiency along the Docklands Light Railway to her office and Harriet would be at school with her brace in her mouth. Instead, she was back outside number 64 because Charlie had called her mobile and asked her if she would mind nipping back home to read him some vital information contained in a letter he had left next to the plate of burnt bacon. And there was no sign of the brace.

She did mind, very much, but somehow she felt churlish saying so.

Her neighbour Mrs Protheroe's reflection loomed ominously in her wing mirror, a skeletal figure in pink satin with a crown of purple-tinged hair, heckling from the pavement as Sydney struggled to park between the beaten-up wreck belonging to Daniel, the distressingly handsome student from number 62, and a skip.

As Sydney stepped out of the car, Mrs Protheroe brandished a copy of the *Daily Sport* under her nose. 'Look at this!' She thumped the paper with a gnarled fist. Sydney looked at the headline. *Ten ways to tell if your neighbour is a werewolf.*

'That's helpful,' said Sydney neutrally. She wondered if she ought to ring the office to say she'd be late or whether that might merely draw attention to the situation. She backed up the steps to her front door. There appeared to be a removal van outside number 69, which suggested that the developer who had, in the

view of the entire Crescent, committed a gross act of vandalism by ripping out all its cornicing, had finally sold it. Strange, there had been no signs.

'Maybe we could have a chat tonight, Mrs P.' If she didn't take a firm stand now it would be after lunch before she got to work.

'I'm a bit delayed.'

'Nanny problems?' asked Linda sympathetically. Being single and childless, she assumed that all problems in later life boiled down to nannies, orgasms and a lack thereof. They were the only excuses that elicited any of her sympathy.

'I'll explain when I get there.'

'That's okay. The girl I wanted you to see just called to cancel.'

For once Sydney was thankful that Linda's never-ending search for a PA to replace the saintly Helen, who after eight years' devotion was shortly leaving to work for VSO in Africa, had once again been thwarted. 'I'll be in by ten,' she offered as compensation.

'No panic. I'm popping out for an hour to Accounts.'

Sydney was always amused by her friend's lies. Why, when Linda was perfectly happy to discuss her abortions (two); her phone sex disasters (six); her boyfriends who had turned out to have serious fetish issues (three); her years in therapy (five) with anyone who expressed a passing interest, she couldn't simply come clean about her twice-weekly trips to the hairdresser was beyond Sydney. But they clearly ran against the ethical grain of the *IQ* office.

'I'll see you later then.'

'Cometh the hour cometh the woman. But don't fail me. I need you. It's a viper's nest here and you're the only one I can trust.'

Marginally gratified, Sydney called a taxi to take her to the Tube station.

Vipers was putting it a bit strongly, Sydney thought, hurriedly searching for Charlie's missing letter. But things at *IQ* had become a bit tumultuous lately. The doorbell rang. Sydney

opened it to say she'd be out in two minutes. A small upturned face with vivid eyes and a dark bob gazed up at her.

'I'm really sorry to disturb you,' a considered, upper-class American accent floated up to her. 'But I'm supposed to be moving in across the street today. Only it transpires the builders haven't finished some vital work. The removal men have disappeared and the electricity isn't working . . .' She trailed off. She was clearly distressed. Sydney paused uncertainly.

'I wondered whether you were having a power cut too, or whether it had been uniquely bestowed on my house. I'm Eloise Fairweather,' she added.

'I'm afraid it's unique,' said Sydney, taking in the woman's tiny, fluttery hands and small, pointy, white teeth, which were so perfect and dazzling she must have got them in Harry Winston's. She suddenly felt like a huge velvet blob.

The woman's shoulders sagged visibly and to Sydney's horror she began to sob.

'Listen, I didn't mean to sound flippant. Moving's a nightmare.' The woman's shoulders heaved like crashing surf. 'Do you want to come in and use the phone or something?'

The heaving subsided momentarily. The head nodded and Sydney led her into the kitchen, relieved she'd removed the worst of the debris.

Sydney left her guest to make her phone calls and returned five minutes later to find her scrutinizing the kitchen pinboard, with its haystack of invitations from the past twelve months, telephone numbers and the Council's litter hotline. Visibly startled, she seemed to have made an encouraging recovery, which made Sydney feel slightly better about turfing her out.

'I was just admiring the art.' She blushed. 'It's very interesting. Is this a farm?'

'An abattoir. Harriet – my elder daughter – is very active when it comes to animal rights.'

'I see.' She clearly didn't.

'It's sweet of you to call it art,' continued Sydney. 'My husband

thinks it's Harriet's passport to life-long therapy.'

The visitor gazed at her blankly and tiptoed over towards Molly's Impressionistic take on *My Little Pony*. 'These flowers are adorable.' She craned her neck. She was tiny. But perfectly – exquisitely – packaged, right down to her pony-skin pumps. Clearly she liked horses too.

'That picture is of *My Little Pony*, surrounded by, let's see, all seventeen of Molly's Sylvanians. I'm afraid Molly's mad on them. And *My Little Pony*. She's got at least ten, each more garish than the last. She combs them obsessively. Still, perhaps it means she's gearing up for a career as a horse whisperer. Or Vidal Sassoon.'

The stranger's eyes had drifted back towards the sunshine-yellow walls of Sydney's hallway and the lovely landscape oils painted by Sydney's mother. Then she turned to a coffin-shaped box, embellished with fake silk flowers and a silver plaque, that had pride of place on the piano. 'Don't tell me. *My Little Pony's* boudoir.'

Sydney shook her head. 'Nellie's coffin.' She noticed Charlie's coat again. She picked it up. He would, she decided, be needing it. Maybe she should call him.

Eloise looked at the box gingerly. 'Who's Nellie?'

'Our ex-tabby.'

'You're kidding.'

'Don't worry. She was ancient. She died this past summer. We've had a bad run recently. Homer, our hamster, went AWOL three months ago. Under the floorboards we think. Hasn't been seen since.'

The stranger looked aghast. 'Can't you get cholera from living with dead things?'

'She's been cremated. She's not just rotting away. Harriet can't bear to think of Nellie confined to the earth.' Their cleaner, Juanita, on the other hand had said that if they left it there much longer a curse would descend on the back of the house and she would be unable to clean there. She didn't clean

Charlie's office either – since the time she'd thrown away some vital briefs and nearly set fire to the spaghetti wiring in there. Soon the whole house would be out of bounds to her noxious detergents for one reason or another.

Sydney glanced at her kitchen clock. She needed to go. The woman turned weepy again.

'I'd better leave. I really shouldn't take up any more of your time.'

Sydney capitulated. 'Would you like a quick coffee? I'm expecting a cab any second to take me to work but I'm sure it can wait a few minutes. You look as though you need fortifying.'

'Only if you're positive it's no bother?' She sat down before Sydney could answer, and a wave of Shalimar engulfed Sydney, taking her back to another life. She flashed Sydney a grateful, dewy smile. 'I give you my word I won't doorstep you every morning.'

Sydney wondered where Linda was in the blow-dry chain. 'I love the way you've decorated,' said Eloise, gazing at Molly's cactuses next to the sink. 'It's so . . . organic. How many children do you have?'

'It feels like twenty-two sometimes, but it's just two,' said Sydney, frothing some milk. 'And they both loathe washing. You've probably smelled them?' She placed her last clean mugs on the table, whipping away Harriet's brace that grinned up at her from the bottom of one. 'Although lately the little one, Molly, has found God. It's a phase quite a lot of them seem to go through. I'm hoping it will encourage her to try and walk on water.' Eloise looked on nonplussed. 'Or at least take a bath.'

Sydney willed the kettle to boil. Eloise seemed to have no idea what she was talking about.

'How lovely having girls – and such different personalities.'

'How did you know they were different?'

'I saw you all leaving for school.' She gazed round the room dolefully. 'What a beautiful platter.' Eloise put down her bouncing bunnies mug and pointed to a chipped, mint-coloured

plate garlanded with pale pink roses that had pride of place on Sydney's old blue dresser.

'It was my mother's,' said Sydney. 'Nellie used to lie on it and one day she broke it,' she added quickly. 'I ought to throw it away, but . . .'

' . . . you can't,' finished Eloise gently.

Sydney nodded. Sometimes she missed her mother more badly than she thought she ought to. She changed the subject. 'Is your husband American too?'

Eloise pushed her Bovril-coloured bob behind her ears so that it framed her heart-shaped face like two commas, and laughed. 'No, Dylan's as English as they come. Or rather as Welsh. I still haven't got my head round the subtleties of your nation state. I'm from San Francisco originally, you see.'

Sydney was conscious of the ticking clock but she was fascinated by Eloise. She had never met anyone who would even consider wearing a Chanel mini-skirt to supervise moving house. 'Have you been married long?'

'Six months.' She turned her eyes rapturously on Sydney. They were, Sydney could see now, a mixture of green and violet. 'And we've known each other for seven and a half. It was quite a whirlwind. More of a hurricane actually.' Eloise giggled. 'We met in the middle of one of the worst storms to hit New York in twenty years. It was practically a monsoon. The rain was bouncing off the sidewalks right up to my thighs and since I was wearing my brand-new Marc Jacobs' dress and matching coat I naturally thought I deserved the last remaining cab in New York more than Dylan.'

'He had different ideas?'

Eloise shrugged. 'He was wearing Brooks Brothers. That was before I got him into Missoni. I had to explain the laws of outfit priority in Manhattan. Jacobs before Brooks Brothers. It's Darwinian. You can't blame him entirely. He was already in the cab at the time. The stupid driver had forgotten to turn his light off.'

'So you hijacked his taxi anyway?'

'I prefer to think of it as car pooling. It's very environmental. Dylan seemed a little taken aback to begin with, especially as I lived downtown and he was up in the Eighties somewhere.' She paused, pursing her lips again to blow on her coffee. She was like an extraordinarily pretty doll. Molly would adore her, Sydney thought, though Harriet might be a bit more sceptical. 'But I have to say he rose to the occasion. By the time he dropped me off he'd asked me to go to St Barts with him on holiday. Six weeks later we were married.'

Sydney thought of Charlie's thoughtful and prolonged courtship of her. 'Wasn't that a bit risky?'

'I love risks. And as you'll discover, he's pretty gorgeous, clever, charming. I thought he was bound to be psycho or gay. And look at the great ring.'

Eloise thrust a tiny, delicate hand at Sydney so that she could get a better view of her diamond engagement ring, though it could probably have been seen from space. No wonder Eloise had such good muscle tone. It must weigh a ton.

'It is very beautiful,' said Sydney admiring the rose-cut facets. 'It looks antique.'

'It is. It was Dylan's mother's, or grandmother's or something.'

'That's romantic.'

Eloise grimaced. 'Hideous setting. So I got Asprey's to design a new one.' She wiggled her fingers ecstatically.

A rattling of keys at the front door heralded the arrival of Juanita. She swept into the kitchen, barely registering Eloise, and sank on to a chair. 'My God!' She reached for the coffee pot and realizing it was empty, looked desolate. 'I'm going to keel this woman.'

Sydney looked sympathetic. 'What's she thrown now?'

'Thees!' Juanita held up an ancient Mason and Pearson hair-brush, matted with an incriminating tangle of pale mauve hair. 'And called me sperm of a beetch.'

Eloise looked at them both with mounting alarm.

'Our neighbour, Mrs Protheroe,' explained Sydney.

'The one with the bad armchairs in the front yard?'

'Wait till you see her mattresses,' said Sydney. 'I don't know where she keeps getting them from. Sometimes the area outside her house looks like Tate Modern.'

Eloise was not amused. 'Clearly our estate agent chose his viewing times carefully. There was never any sign of discarded junk whenever we came to look.' She drummed her fingers on the side of her cup. 'We'll have to see what we can do about that. It's hardly adding to the beauty of the road.'

'Mrs Protheroe's all right,' said Sydney, magnanimously overlooking her neighbour's suggestion the previous evening that Sydney join Weightwatchers. Juanita scowled at her in disbelief.

'She's just gone a bit strange since her daughter stopped speaking to her,' Sydney continued. She didn't want this new neighbour coming in and thinking she could throw her illiberal views around without encountering any objections. 'She used to be a pillar of the community. She's lived in Clifton Crescent longer than anyone – since just after the war I think.'

'The Falklands?' said Eloise.

'Malvinas,' snapped Juanita.

Eloise beamed and held out her hand again. 'Delighted to meet you, Malvinas, I'm Eloise Fairweather.'

'Delighted too,' said Juanita, flattered by Eloise's good manners. The phone began ringing. 'And I help you kick thees old bag out,' she whispered conspiratorially when Sydney got up to answer it. It was Happy Cabs to say their driver had had a puncture but would be there shortly.

'How shortly?' Sydney asked guiltily. At this rate she wouldn't get to the office before Linda disappeared for a mammoth lunch with one or other of her contributors. Juanita got up reluctantly to find a broom and shift some mountains of post around.

'Why don't I drive you there?' said Eloise. 'I might as well. My car's outside and let's face it, I don't have anything else to do.'

'Oh, I couldn't let you. It takes ages in the traffic,' Sydney really didn't think she wanted to be beholden to this person. 'And the removal men might turn up any minute.'

Eloise reflected for a moment. 'Okay. But at least let me take

you to the Tube. And you can tell me about your cleaner. I'm looking for a good one. I have certain bacteria issues and frankly I'm a little worried about cleanliness in Europe.'

Eloise's black Mercedes sports car, almost as shiny as her bob, pounced into the traffic. Sydney did up her safety belt and gripped the sides of her seat.

'Are you happy, Sydney?' asked Eloise, pressing her foot on the accelerator.

Sydney was so taken aback she didn't answer for a moment. Surely the misgivings of the past few months weren't that visibly etched on her face?

'Haven't really thought about it,' she mumbled. She ought to be happy, with the job and everything. People always said she ought to have been happy *without* the job. 'Yes, I suppose so. English people don't ask themselves those kinds of question very often. We just sort of chunter on. Not sure I can recommend Juanita unreservedly though.' Sydney thought of the little piles of unopened letters – one in particular – that disappeared for days, sometimes weeks, to reappear in some illogical new location, and decided life wouldn't be worth living for any of them if Juanita went to work for Eloise. 'She's more into displacement than actual cleaning and tidying.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me?' Eloise sighed. 'Honestly, domestic staff . . . speaking of whom, my God, who's that?' she asked as a hunched figure in a voluminous, shabby black coat with a face like a haunted camel's waved violently at Sydney.

'That's Miranda Plympton,' said Sydney. What was Miranda doing in the area? Probably heading out on a recruitment drive for The Rolling Scones. Even though she knew Sydney would be at work. Any minute now she'd be dropping one of her concerned notes through the letterbox about how stressful Sydney must be finding it all. She sank further into the passenger seat.

'I thought those velvet hair bands went out with the wimple.'
'She's the wife of one of my husband's colleagues.'

'She looks about a hundred.'

'Not quite. But she is a founding member of the local cooking group. They bake cakes together. I expect they'll ask you to join.'

'Oh, please. Are you and I the only women who have careers around here? What exactly is it that you do by the way, Sydney?'

'Just helping out a friend on a magazine,' Sydney said vaguely. She didn't want to discuss her job. That way subterfuge and deception lay, since Charlie had very little idea what she actually did there, and she intended to keep it that way. 'And you?'

'Sotheby's – when I was in New York. Impressionists mainly. Obviously I won't be doing that here.' She sounded wistful. 'I'm going to be working with Dylan.' She honked her horn at the car in front. 'My husband's keen for me to go into the family business. And I'm always up for a challenge. So when he said he wanted to move closer to his family—'

'His family live in Primrose Hill?'

'Wales. But nothing's very far in England, is it? They've lived there about a thousand years so I figure it must be okay. Something to do with the Plantagenets, I believe.'

Sydney wondered whether Eloise realized that the Plantagenets had died out six hundred years ago, but it seemed petty to disabuse her of what was clearly a very satisfactory family connection.

Eloise turned up the air-conditioning. 'Dylan's the first one not to go straight into the family business. He got the bug for kicking against family tradition early on when he went away to Bristol. The men in his family had always gone to Cambridge.'

'Did you say Bristol?' Sydney felt her mouth go dry.

'I certainly did. That's West Country, right?'

'Perfectly right.' Sydney's heart was beating so loudly now she was amazed anyone could hear Eloise's horn over the top of it.

'Do you know it then?'

'I went there too,' said Sydney as calmly as she could. Fairweather must be Eloise's maiden name. 'Your husband's last name isn't Glendower by any chance, is it?'

Eloise threw back her head and laughed. 'Jesus, I knew England was small, but this is ridiculous. Don't tell me you know Dylan?'

You could say so, thought Sydney. But the pertinent question was, what the hell was he doing back in England, and back in her life?