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Husbands and Other Lovers

Jane Elizabeth Varley

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Extract

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Part 1

WINTER

Chapter 1

Work

I've always found Friday the most difficult day of the week. A couple of years ago I fell into the habit of stopping off at Corney and Barrow, a City wine bar, on my way home. I told myself and Susannah, my wife, that this was part of the social drinking required of a successful City lawyer. I would stay for an hour or so, stop at Waterloo station to buy flowers and catch the train to Oxshott. This Friday pattern, minus the purchase of the bunch of flowers, extended first to Thursdays, then to Mondays, until it occurred on all evenings of the week. In January of this year my boss, Raul, took me aside and told me to cut out my lunchtime drinking. Clients had noted my lack of concentration and my breath. I considered his intervention an impertinence. I protested that I only ever drank at lunchtime with clients or colleagues. Raul is an American and, I reasoned, unfamiliar with British business culture, which has always been steeped in alcohol. Raul drinks herbal tea and carries a bottle of Evian water into which he drops tablets of soluble vitamin C. Case closed. Nonetheless his instruction was a shock to me and I vowed to clean up my act. Susannah, of course, had been urging me to cut down for years. We had, just days earlier, held a small New Year drinks party at which my behaviour had been found wanting. But I dismissed all her complaints as an overreaction. If I stopped drinking Susannah would only find

something else to complain about. However, it was clear that the net was closing in. I had to take action. I began with Susannah.

Susannah Agnew drove up to the gates of the Chapters and pointed the electronic remote control at a discreet metal box mounted on the right-hand supporting brick pillar. The black wrought-iron gates, topped with gilt finials, swung open.

Situated on the borders of Cobham and Oxshott, the Chapters had been described in the developer's brochure as a luxury, gated development of three five-bedroom detached houses and two semi-detached flint-faced cottages. Casual access, to the despair of deliverymen and impromptu callers, was impossible. A state-of-the-art video entryphone system allowed the residents to vet all those who sought to pass through the eight-foot-high gates. Once inside, the three main houses, fronted by expansive lawns and brick driveways, were grouped in a semi-circle around an asymmetrical lawned and planted central island. To the left of the houses stood the pair of semi-detached flint cottages, formerly a single nineteenth-century workman's dwelling, an afterthought following an acrimonious planning dispute in which the developer had been refused permission to demolish the original building and replace it with a fourth five-bedroom house. The whole development was encased by a tall brick wall separating it from Oxshott Woods and the world beyond.

James had brought the developer's brochure home. She could recall him, standing in their Fulham kitchen, reading out the text in a tone of mock pomposity. *This exclusive Surrey development will appeal to those discerning purchasers who are accustomed to homes of distinction and who demand personal security of the highest standard*. Or words to that effect. They had laughed, congratulating themselves on their metropolitan

sophistication in the face of such appalling prose, unaware that they were already falling under the spell of the copywriter's flattering words and the photographer's seductive images. Now she could see how each phrase and photograph was cleverly chosen to appeal to the forty-something affluent purchasers at which the Chapters was marketed. Bedrooms, all with en suite bathrooms, were shown romantically furnished with sleigh beds and white linen and flowers. Children's rooms – immaculately tidy – featured book-lined shelves and desks neatly set with schoolwork. The dining room was laid for an elegant dinner party. The conservatory was set for morning coffee. The kitchen portrayed a laughing couple preparing Sunday brunch.

The only laughable thing, Susannah realized in retrospect, was that she had been taken in by it all – the idea that life in the Chapters would be one long round of passionate sex and convivial parties set against a backdrop of studiously silent children.

She and James had held one party, a couple of days earlier on New Year's Day. It was a small gathering for the neighbours. In addition she had invited everyone from Peter Charron & Co, the Cobham firm of estate agents where she had been employed for the last three years as a senior negotiator. She had mixed feelings about Anthony Charron's attendance – pleasure that he had accepted the invitation coupled with nervousness at how James would behave in front of her boss. Anthony was the owner of the firm and son of its late founder, Peter Charron.

She did not especially want to hold a party but it was three years since they had moved in and it was important to 'reciprocate', as her mother would put it. Twenty or so people came. James, naturally, was in charge of drinks. She bought party food from Waitrose. Matthew, her fourteen-year-old son, helped hand it round. Lynda, the Charron secretary,

brought her husband and a plate of choux pastries and helped her in the kitchen. Their guests, men in chinos and checked shirts, the women dressier in velvet and cashmere, stood around the drawing room, a room James and Susannah hardly used, looking out through the French windows onto the lawn beyond. For the party Susannah had filled the terracotta patio containers with winter pansies and small red cyclamen which would die off at the first frost. They were necessary to add colour, however short-lived. She had still not come to terms with the garden: evergreen shrubs in groups of three along the borders, planted by the developer.

Anthony had arrived late and apologetically. 'The dammed car wouldn't start!'

She assumed he meant the 1985 Rolls Royce Silver Spirit that he drove at weekends. James and Matthew were very rude about it. James said it made Anthony look like a used-car dealer and Matthew said the sand-coloured paintwork made him feel sick. Anthony, in cavalry twills and a V-neck Pringle sweater, presented her with a poinsettia, the pot wrapped in gold-coloured foil and tied with a red ribbon. She was used to seeing Anthony in a well-cut chalk-stripe suit and noticed that a business suit was more flattering to his figure which, while not fat, could best be described as prosperous.

She led Anthony into the drawing room. James appeared with a bottle of champagne.

Anthony held up a hand. 'Orange juice for me.'

'No. We're not allowing that,' said James briskly and he handed Anthony a glass of champagne.

'Actually, I'd prefer an orange juice.'

James was good-humoured but his voice had an edge to it. 'Just as soon as you've drunk that.'

At that moment Susannah could smell the alcohol on James's breath. She looked at him and realized he was drunk. But he could be very drunk and not show it.

There was a silent stand-off.

'I'll get you one,' she said to Anthony.

'You're not at work now,' snapped James. 'No need to follow orders.' He turned to Anthony. 'I can see that my wife thinks she's in the office. Understandable. She spends enough time there.' She noted the sarcastic belligerence in his voice. No one could pretend that he was being anything other than obnoxiously rude – and it was quite obvious to Susannah that he wanted to pick an argument.

She felt the colour rise in her cheeks. She could not look at Anthony. And then Lynda appeared as if from nowhere. Susannah wondered, in retrospect, if Lynda had heard it all. She was wonderful. She grabbed James by the arm and said in a voice that brooked no nonsense, 'Susannah tells me that you're something of a gourmet . . .'

Susannah did not recall telling Lynda any such thing.

'. . . so I shall be very offended if you don't come and try my choux balls!'

There was presumably nothing that James could say to this. Susannah watched as he was led away. She turned to Anthony. 'I'm so sorry . . .' she began.

'Nothing to say,' he cut in briskly. And then, still holding the glass of champagne, he complimented her on the house and her dress – a shortish Monsoon red-beaded affair with a matching wide scarf draped across the shoulders – at which point Michael Belmont, a local solicitor and their near neighbour, came over and the three of them had a very pleasant conversation about a title-search problem on a property in Esher. James stopped handing round drinks after a while and settled himself on the sofa with Martin Hollis, who was something to do with home cinema and whom Susannah had always found an awful bore. She had to do the drinks herself until Lynda instructed her husband to take over. After a couple of hours the house had emptied, Matthew

had slipped out to his friend Jake's house, where he spent most of his free time these days, and James had exited from the kitchen where she was clearing up, taking with him a bottle of champagne.

'Work to do.'

She did not challenge him. There was no point. She heard the door of the study close and knew she would not see him for the rest of the afternoon until he emerged to make a pot of strong coffee. He would listen to music or watch the small television and then fall asleep in his chair.

At work the next day, Anthony had said nothing other than to tell her what a super party it was, and Lynda had been equally complimentary. She was grateful to them. Work at least was easy: no new instructions yet and few viewings. Most of Cobham was still on the ski-slopes of France.

She opened the front door, punched the code into the alarm and walked into the beechwood kitchen, kicking off her pumps so that they slid over the smooth maplewood floor. Taking a bottle of Perrier from the imported Maytag American refrigerator she pulled a glass from the dishwasher and went up the beige-carpeted stairs to the main bedroom, itching to change out of her work clothes. She pulled off the navy shift, untied her hair and carefully folded and hung up her Jaeger scarf in one of the built-in wardrobes. She pulled on a pair of jeans and a black polo neck and brushed out her hair. Her head felt suddenly heavy. She lay back on the pillow – percale and pastel-pink – testament to her undeveloped interest in interior design.

Matthew was sleeping over at Jake's, as was his habit on a Friday. She was conscious of the silence around her, the house ridiculously large, almost mocking her; they had all singularly failed to live up to the perfect life that this house had been intended to achieve. The people in the Chapters brochure did not have bitter rows. Or avoid the neighbours lest some open

window had betrayed them. Or shun each other for days on end, barely exchanging a word, the tension so unbearable that frequently she would retreat to the spare bedroom and wish she could retreat further still.

Sometimes her depression would deepen and she would tell herself that they weren't even a proper family, let alone a picture-perfect brochure one. Matthew was *her* son and fourteen with it – too old for the trips to Pizza Express and Sunday mini-rugby and walks at Painshill that all the other Cobham families indulged in. Not to mention the fact that the proper families had been married for ages and only to each other.

They had packed up their misery in Fulham and unpacked it in this house.

However hard she tried she could not stop her thoughts turning to the party, replaying it in her mind. It was not that the incident had been so dramatic. In the past he had been just the same on holiday. They would go to some beautiful resort, with sun or snow or both, and James would uncannily seek out another man just like him – high-flying, hard-drinking – and she would have to drag him out of whatever beach bar or hotel lounge he had holed up in and he would complain and tell her not to be so bloody boring.

But this was worse because it was in front of their neighbours and her boss. It seemed to her to be another line that they had crossed. She deserved an apology and this time she was going to get one.

It had not always been this way.

When she had met him he hardly ever drank during the week and never at lunchtime. Susannah's friends at the time of her engagement, of whom she had many more than now, were clearly shocked and then openly envious at her news. One, Lavinia, who owned the ground-floor Wandsworth flat above Susannah's rented basement one, could not successfully

disguise the fact that she felt that Susannah had in some way jumped the marriage queue. Lavinia had been single all her life, had no children and therefore considered herself to be several places ahead of Susannah who was divorced, with a seven-year-old son and no money to buy fashionable clothes or even get a decent set of blonde highlights. All these were handicaps placing Susannah, if not at the very back of the queue with the overweight single mothers, then in accordance with Lavinia's rules definitely barring her from jumping straight to the top.

Matthew's father, whose involvement with his son had been steadily declining since the divorce he instigated – he was, it turned out, not ready for family life – took her remarriage as an opportunity to disappear altogether amid mumbled comments about not wanting to 'confuse' Matthew. Her parents expressed repeated surprise that she had managed to snare a man. On her first trip home to her parents with James, her mother, washing up in the kitchen while the men drank brandies, whispered that at least she wouldn't have to worry about money any more. Which was true – it would be absurd to deny it – but lately when Susannah looked back it was the years of struggling, when it was just her and Matthew and her friends, that were actually the happiest.

Susannah had not married James for his money. She didn't hanker for a Mercedes sports car or a country club gym membership. She certainly didn't want to give up work. She liked selling houses and if other people looked down on that she had long since ceased to care. James's money promised her something more valuable than a life of leisured luxury. It offered her stability, the security of being able to open every envelope and pay every bill – something taken for granted by those who have money and an endless source of worry for those who do not.

There were other reasons. It was as if the maxim that opposites attract had been invented for them. James loved all that she feared. He liked to bet on horses, fight in court cases, take on all comers and win. She avoided confrontation and hated uncertainty. Their marriage promised a counterbalance for both of them. And sometimes it was fun to live vicariously through him. She sat in the passenger seat while he broke the speed limit; sat at his side as he debated late into the night at smart London dinner parties; sat on aeroplanes to far-flung destinations. And in return she packed the bags, kept the accounts and tied up the loose ends James left in his wake.

She had thought, after they married, that he would settle down. He had, after all, told her often enough that he yearned for marriage and the peace of a home and a wife and an end to the bars and the searching and the disappointments.

He had at least kept his promises to Matthew. Their relationship had strengthened over the years. James was 'Dad'. Of late, they had taken to watching television late at night on Saturdays, holed up in the inaccurately termed family room, eating Doritos and drinking – beer in James's case, Pepsi in Matthew's – and she worried about the example James was setting his stepson. James and Matthew made joshing comments to each other about her nagging, her obsession with healthy eating and her complaints about the stream of wrappers and crumbs they left in the sofas, on the floor and everywhere else besides. They imitated her, not unkindly, but it hurt enough for her to withdraw and go to bed alone and fall asleep before James came to bed.

She wondered if it would help to get someone else to talk to him. Not his mother; Estella would laugh out loud at the very idea that her elder son had a drink problem. Not his brother; James and his younger brother Robert had never been close and as they aged they seemed to delight all the

more in outsmarting and outshining each other. No, there was only her.

The light was fading now. Through the bedroom window shone soft yellow light from the mock-Victorian street lamps that were placed between each house. God knew when James would get home. Fridays often meant a taxi home. About a year ago he had got into a fight on the train coming back from Waterloo. It was unbelievable but it had happened. It was just past midnight when she had heard his key in the door and then a loud thump as he hit the hardwood floor. She had sprung out of bed – she found it impossible to sleep when he was out, even after all this time – and had flown down the stairs. He was crouched on the hall floor, blood covering the lower part of his face, ugly red smears on his white shirt.

'Oh my God,' she had cried out. Her first thought was that he had injured his head.

He said something incomprehensible.

'What?'

'It's nothing . . .'

She could hardly understand him. His speech was slow and laboured. Concussion? A cold shot of fear ran through her. 'I'm calling an ambulance.'

'No!' Now he was clearer. He started to get up. She saw that he had blood on the palms of his hands and it had left handprints on the floor. He was struggling to balance and reached out to steady himself.

'Don't touch the wall,' she said, imagining bloodstains on the stark white paint. She grabbed his arm and tried to steady him. 'James, I'm calling an ambulance.'

'Don't fucking call anyone!' His tone, the fear in it, stopped her short. She began to think more clearly.

'How did you do this?' she demanded.

He was more coherent now but clearly reluctant to say much. 'A fight. On the train. Some yob . . .'

She watched him as he straightened up, blinking hard. 'You mean you were *attacked*?'

'Leave it.'

He staggered slightly and she saw that his jacket was ripped. It was a beautiful jacket, handmade by Gieves and Hawke. Since being made a partner James had used part of his bonus to buy one very good bespoke suit every year. She could see immediately that the jacket was beyond repair. He was not wearing a tie. He looked ghastly, his skin a shade of grey and his eyes bloodshot and unfocused. She reached out and touched the jacket. He looked down at it as if noticing it for the first time. She had a hundred questions in her mind.

'You *must* go to the police. You can't let him get away with this. What if it happens again to someone else?'

But he was already walking unsteadily into the guest cloakroom opposite his study. He fumbled for the light, leaned heavily on the marble vanity unit and peered at his reflection in the mirror. 'Christ!' He raised a shaking hand to his face.

She took a step towards him. 'Let me see.'

She clasped his shoulder and turned him to her. Now in the light she could see that it was a deep cut to the lip, nothing more serious, though a bruise was forming on his right cheek. It was astonishing that one cut could produce so much blood. He stank of drink and cigarettes; he had obviously spent all evening in some bar.

Now, realizing that he was less seriously hurt than she had initially feared, her concern turned quickly to exasperation. 'What have you been *doing*? Where have you *been*?'

His voice was indignant. 'Where I always am. Broadgate.' He meant a bar in Broadgate.

Her voice took on a pleading tone. 'James, you must go to the police.'

'No. I said leave it.' And this time she could tell that it was useless to try to reason with him.

Perhaps it was just as well; he was hardly in any state to give a coherent witness statement, and goodness knows what the neighbours would think of a patrol car arriving at this time of night. She forced herself to concentrate on the present and what needed to be done. She ran her eye over his jacket – what a waste. The thought of money jolted her. 'Have you got your wallet?'

He nodded and pulled it from his inner suit pocket. She shuddered. He had a wallet full of credit cards and the cards for their bank accounts, including their current account. She took it from him, as from a child, and checked that they were all there.

He said nothing. She lifted up the edge of his cuff to confirm that he was still wearing his watch.

'Go into the kitchen.'

She had cleaned him up with antiseptic wipes. She gave him some water to drink, which he sipped reluctantly, and then he seemed to drift into a stupor. She tried to be thankful that nothing more serious had happened. He could have been beaten half to death, or worse, for nothing more than his wallet and his Tag Heuer watch. Of course he was vulnerable, the state he was in. She knew James well enough to know that he was not the type to get into fights. He was not a violent drunk, more a sarcastic one, with an original turn of phrase if she tried to stop him drinking. Generally, though, he liked to drink by himself, in his study or watching television. His drinking had the effect of isolating him from her. The rows came when he sobered up the next day.

She could see it was hopeless to get any sense out of him that night. She took his ruined jacket from him, emptied the pockets, rolled it up and took it outside to the dustbin so Matthew wouldn't see it in the morning. Then she remembered to wipe the hall floor. And then she had got James upstairs, where he had all but passed out on the bed,

fully clothed. She couldn't face the smell or the snoring so she had left him there and gone to sleep in the spare room. Spare rooms, she recalled from the Chapters brochure, were described as *guest suites* and presumably not envisioned as boltholes for the disgusted wives of drunken lawyers.

She never did get a proper explanation of what had happened on the train. He muttered something about an altercation and she had asked why no one had come to help him. He had asked her if she had read a newspaper lately. And then he had told her to stop obsessing about it. She told Matthew that he'd fallen over. For a few weeks after that he came home earlier, but soon the late-night Friday routine started up again. Now he took a taxi home, which cost a fortune but was at least safe.

There was no one she could tell about the Friday nights and all the other nights. It was too embarrassing and almost too fanciful. She was actually afraid that people wouldn't believe her, that they would think she was making it up. James was such a clever and charming man, after all. In public. Like it or not, she was alone with this. She would just have to try harder to show him that he might not *want* to cut down his drinking – but he certainly needed to.

Robert Agnew was a bastard. A cold, hard, unsympathetic, judgemental, critical bastard. But right now Natasha needed him – who was she kidding? She was desperate for him – and so she said nothing as he scanned the third page of the *News of the World* spread open on his desk.

Right now he was the only thing standing between her and her collapsing career.

'You *stupid* cow. I told you. Over and over again. But no – you knew better. Why the fuck – just out of interest – do you employ me to manage what we might loosely term your career if you then go off and ignore every piece of very good

advice I give you?' He leaned forward across the desk and she had to admit, even in her misery, that he was rather magnificent. 'Natasha, they're closing in. They have been for a long time. I told you months ago.' He read from the half-page report on page three.

'"Sarah Lewin, betrayed wife of Arsenal footballer Mark Lewin, speaks exclusively to the *News of the World* about the affair that rocked her marriage . . . and how she won her husband back . . ."'

For one heart-stopping moment she thought he was going to read the whole thing. Instead he pushed the paper at her. A picture of the Lewin family glared back at her: Sarah looking unbearably smug, Mark smiling weakly and the two children all posed in the enormous back garden of their Essex house.

'"I'm just glad to have him back. And the boys have got their Daddy home,"' he quoted. He folded the paper disdainfully. 'You got off lightly. This is what they could have written: "Natasha Webster, everyone's favourite girl-next-door, is a marriage-wrecker with a fast-declining reputation. And she is about to lose all the lucrative endorsements that her PR supremo worked his arse off to negotiate for her." That's the truth, honey, isn't it? And that is what they're going to write soon.'

God, this was getting heavy. When she'd first met Robert he'd seemed such a gentleman. Suave but sort of homely at the same time. Safe and middle-class and not like all the other agents and PR people she had considered to represent her. But now she realized that was just part of the deal. He *was* safe and middle-class and respectable – with all the instincts of a bare-knuckle fighter. That felt really good when he was battling for you, but distinctly uncomfortable right now.

She couldn't look at him. Instead her eyes rested on the walls of his Soho office and the display of framed covers. *PR Week* Best Agency. Three times. Profiles. *Evening Standard*

Top Media PR. On his desk she could see a framed photograph of his daughter. Arabella? Arabia? Something like that.

Robert's voice cut in. Startled, she realized that he had walked round to the front of the desk and was standing in front of her.

'They're onto you. They're after you. They've built you up and now they're waiting to pull you down. You've got an image problem. Why don't you fucking deal with it?'

She felt a surge of anger. 'I have *not* got a problem. This has all just got . . . out of hand. I'm fine.' She felt him about to interrupt so she raised her voice and ran on. 'I turn up at work and I do my job. In fact, I've been working very hard. *Very* hard,' she repeated unnecessarily, giving herself time to collect her thoughts. 'I made a mistake. He told me he loved me, that he'd leave. And he did leave—'

'Before fucking going back!'

If she didn't laugh she was going to cry. He caught her eye and she began to giggle.

He raised his eyes to the ceiling. 'Darling. What were you thinking of? A *footballer*.'

She rallied. 'Don't be such a snob. He was very . . . attentive.'

'At passes and ball skills.'

She'd asked for that one.

'And playing away from home,' he continued.

She looked away. 'All right, all right.'

He sat down and leaned back in his chair. But he was not finished. 'Natasha. You are the nation's sweetheart. Sexy enough for the dads to tune in but not so vampish that the women hate you. You love kids and animals and old ladies.' He put on a fake coy voice. 'You're just so . . . natural and unaffected.' He looked at her hard and slowed his words to emphasize his point. 'That's your image – some naïve, kind-hearted girl who just happened to wander into a television

studio one day and start reading from an autocue.'

She was silent. They both knew, without needing to acknowledge it, that her career had been anything but accidental. It had been plotted and manipulated from childhood. She had been moulded and packaged as carefully as any product on a supermarket shelf.

He turned and walked over to face the window that ran from floor to ceiling, twisting the blinds open to look out on the early Friday evening, the lights appearing all over London. She was wise enough to keep quiet.

'OK. This is what we do. A piece . . .'

'No!'

'Shut up! Just fucking listen. A piece. With someone nice. We offer them the story – the stress of the last year – not that you have any real stress in your life, but we'll think of something . . .'

God, he was infuriating, but what was the point in arguing? She could see him going into action, doing what he was best at. 'We'll have to give them something . . .'

'What?' Panic gripped her. She knew the form. Head off a hostile story by cooperating with the journalist. But they'd want something in return.

'Relax.' Robert's voice was soothing. 'We'll think of something. How you cope with the pressures of your busy life: namely exercise and a healthy diet.' He looked at her amusedly. 'Walks in the country. Get you photographed in a pair of Hunters. Rent a dog for the day.'

Reassured, thoughts of Mark Lewin receding, she started to unwind. Robert's enthusiasm was catching.

'And in the meantime you keep your head down. I don't want you out in town. Not for the next few weeks. Lie low, stay at home, just go out for work. And when you do go out, dress like Doris Day. Let me hold them off. But I need you out of the way. Moores are bloody edgy.'

Her stomach turned over. *Moores.* Moores for Babies – manufacturers of creams and lotions and potions – everything the caring mother needs for her children. Her contract with Moores currently involved her in the most naff TV commercial conducting fake interviews with snooty middle-class mothers and their mewling precocious children about Moores' new range of organic cereal bars and juices and those chocolate-covered rice cake things. She shuddered at the memory – anyone would have deserved a shag after that day's filming. But Moores paid the mortgage on her Putney house and the Audi and lots more besides. Above all they had, after so long, given her the financial security she craved.

She hesitated, then said, 'What did you tell them?'

He paused, aware of her discomfort. 'That it's a blip. That we have it under control. I assured them that their star presenter has no immediate plans to run off with one of their customers' husband.'

'And the interview . . .'

'Your footie friend? You can't avoid questions on Lewin. We haven't got the clout to demand a no-go on that. But we'll work something out. I'll get onto it.' He sat down at his desk and fell silent, looking at her. 'You OK?'

'Yes. It'll be fine. We'll do the interview and it'll all blow over.' Who was she trying to convince – Robert or herself?

'Well, take it easy. Lay low.'

'Definitely! No problem. I've really learned my lesson, Robert.'

His appraising look continued for a couple of seconds until he turned away, reached for a file and began making a pencilled note. She relaxed. She felt safe now that everything was under control. As he wrote she looked at him anew, noticing the shadow on the slight tan, the slightly too-long hair greying at the temples and the strong hands. He wasn't her type: too old. He must be nudging forty. But he was

attractive and she knew plenty of predatory women who would go for him. And as she shifted slightly to look again at the photograph on his desk she tried to recall how long he had been divorced and whether he had ever mentioned a girlfriend.

James, she had to concede, at least retained the ability to surprise her. He was home at just past six o'clock. And he was sober. Moreover, he had just placed a small, square, pale-blue Tiffany box on the kitchen table next to his steaming cup of coffee.

'Well, aren't you going to open it?'

He spoke nonchalantly, casting off his pinstripe suit jacket, unbuttoning the top button of his white shirt, loosening the navy silk tie. His expression was impossible to read, his features composed if slightly guarded, looking exactly as she imagined he would in some late-night high-stakes legal negotiation.

She felt absurdly embarrassed at a gesture that even James must surely know was extraordinarily inappropriate? The atmosphere between them had never been worse. They had barely spoken since the party two days earlier and the more she had thought about it, the more she was determined to receive an apology from him – an apology she had no doubt he would not see any good reason to deliver. As much to delay untying the ribbon that elegantly encased the box, she pulled out a kitchen chair and felt some small sense of comfort when she saw James mirror her and pull up a chair so that he faced her across the pale-grey marble-topped table. At least they were going to speak. Beyond them the garden lay in darkness, save for a narrow corridor of light shining from their near neighbour's conservatory.

He pushed the cup of coffee away from him and sat back. His features were drawn, his dark eyes guarded.

'I come in peace,' he said dryly.

She could not help but smile. This was James in control, charming and very difficult to resist.

She was going to try. 'I think you owe me an apology.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'What for?'

She did not rise to it. 'For the party.'

'Oh, I see.' He took a very slow sip of coffee. His voice was casual, his expression a touch confused. 'What exactly do I have to apologize for?'

Her mood changed abruptly. 'What for? What do you think?' Her voice rose. 'Your behaviour!'

'My behaviour?' he said, giving the appearance of not understanding.

'Yes,' she snapped. 'Getting drunk, being rude to Anthony, embarrassing me—'

'Anything else?'

'Yes, actually. Leaving me to clear up on my own, leaving Lynda's husband to top up everyone's drinks . . .'

'OK, OK.' He lifted his head back, looked at the ceiling, then returned her gaze. 'I'm sorry. Is that all right?'

'No, it's not!' She was almost shouting now.

'You said you wanted an apology,' he said innocently.

'Yes – and a promise that it won't happen again.'

He sighed loudly. 'Anything else?'

God, he could be infuriating. He had the ability to keep his cool while provoking her to lose all control.

'James, you have a drink problem!' she shouted, leaning across the table and extending her hand in the air.

He did not move. 'Susannah, we need to look at this in a calm, sensible and logical way. Instead of overreacting. I do not have a drink problem . . .'

'Yes, you bloody do!' She forced herself to sit back.

'There's no need to swear at me. God, I get criticized enough if I say a word out of place to you—'

She wanted to defend herself but there was no opportunity.

'And frankly, I can't promise you I will never, ever get drunk again. Be reasonable. As for the party, I'm sorry I didn't help you clear up. I did suggest we had caterers but you wanted to do it all yourself.'

She felt as though she was sinking. But there was no time to gather her thoughts in defence. James's voice was relentless.

'Let's look at this sensibly. Let's say – for a moment – that you're right. That I'm some gutter alcoholic on skid row and you're right to try and save my soul—'

'That's *not* what I'm saying!' she cut in.

He raised his hand. 'Calm down. Let's say, for argument's sake, that I do have a drink problem. Where's your evidence? Let's run through the options.'

He paused. She felt completely defeated, surly and resentful. Outmanoeuvred because she knew exactly what was coming and she couldn't do anything to stop it.

'Well?' he said questioningly.

She couldn't even look at him.

His voice fell still lower. 'Susannah. You're the one who wants to discuss this. I'm offering to do just that. The least you could do is cooperate.'

She could have hit him. Screamed and shouted. And he'd have told her that she was hysterical and neurotic and how could anyone be expected to take anything she said seriously?

'OK. Do I drink in the mornings?'

She said nothing.

'No,' he continued, 'I don't drink in the mornings. I get up, make coffee and I don't add a shot of vodka to my Gold Blend.'

He paused and took a sip of his coffee. Then he paused to undo the cufflinks of his shirt and casually roll up his sleeves. He gave every appearance of being effortlessly relaxed.

'Do I drink at work? No. To summarize: no vodka in the coffee and no Scotch in the filing cabinet. Do I drink and drive?'

That was too much. 'Yes you bloody do!'

He sighed. 'I have never been stopped by the police. I have never taken a breathalyser test – let alone failed one – because my driving has never given cause for concern. If in doubt I take a taxi.'

'You *have* driven over the limit!' She felt enraged now. 'What about after the Hollises' party?'

He gave an even deeper sigh. 'The Hollises live half a mile away. It was two a.m. along a road I have driven down countless times before. If you felt unsafe why did you come in the car with me? Or why didn't you offer to drive instead?'

'Because *you* had the keys and *you* got into the driving seat and I wasn't about to make a scene in front of everyone.'

'It's very difficult to talk about this if you're going to get upset every time I defend myself.' He paused and took another sip of coffee. 'If you're going to accuse every man who's had one glass too many and got in a car of being an alcoholic then you might as well point the finger at half the population – and plenty of women, too. What about your ladies' lunches? They serve wine; you're not telling me all those girls stick to Perrier. It's drinking amongst women that's the real problem in society.'

How had they moved from discussing her husband's drinking to analysing trends in alcoholic consumption? There was no time to consider this. James had moved on.

'I hold down an extremely responsible job. I am one of the firm's most successful partners. That hardly fits with your image of me on a park bench with a can of lager and a mongrel on a string.'

She exploded. 'You drink every bloody day, twice a day! You can't have a meal without a glass of wine. The first thing

you do when you walk through the door is open a bottle. And then you finish it. And then you open another—'

'You have some too,' he interrupted.

'I have a glass, James. *One* glass. And lately I don't even feel like that. And before you say, as you always do, that you need to unwind, let me tell you that it's worse on holiday. Drinks in the room and then in the bar and then at dinner and after I've gone to bed back to the bar with whatever boring cronies you've picked up. You're so hungover you don't get up until midday and when you do you're a pig to be around. It was like that in Antibes. When I tried to get you to come to bed you called me a "controlling freak" in front of the whole bar!'

She could feel herself close to hyperventilating, rage and frustration spilling out of her, an urge to shake him.

He looked at her with disdain and spelled out his words with affected slowness. 'So I have a drink – in the evening, on holiday. Is that it?'

He got up and went over to the kitchen sink, jerking the tap so that water splashed out of the glass he was filling.

She spoke to his back. 'And when you can't drink it's worse. You're so . . . edgy and miserable. Drumming your fingers waiting for the waiter to take your drinks order. Or the time we went to that restaurant, the vegetarian one in Covent Garden, and we'd ordered and you found it was unlicensed. You tried to hide it but I could see you were livid.' She rushed on. 'And I've seen you at dinner parties when your glass is empty and the host hasn't noticed. Do you realize, James, that your glass is *always* empty before everyone else's?'

'You are obsessed!' He swung round and she could see how riled he had suddenly become. 'Listen to yourself. Checking my glass.' His tone was contemptuous. 'Haven't you got anything else to do with your time?'

But she was lost in her thoughts. 'And the worst thing is that you change. It's as if there's a different person inside you

– an angry, unhappy, wretched person – and when you drink that person comes out—'

'I've never heard such psychobabble in my life—'

'That person comes out and I hate that person. It's like an addiction; you just have to have that drink. And you'd rather have that than be with me or Matthew or anyone else. And that's another thing: you surround yourself with people who drink – men like you – and God help anyone who doesn't.'

'Nonsense!' He was shouting now. 'For fuck's sake. Have you any idea how hard I have to work? If you had my life, you'd drink!' He checked himself. 'Not that there's a problem. No one else thinks the way you do. For God's sake, other men go home and have a glass of wine and their wives don't give them the third degree.'

A silence fell between them. Their argument was all too predictable. Her accusations were as well worn as his responses. He sat down again at the kitchen table.

She reached out a hand across the table. 'You could go and speak to someone. What if I were to make you an appointment with Dr Palmer? It would be totally confidential. No one need know.'

He was clearly affronted. 'That idiot? I'd sooner go to the vet. Susannah, no one is going to know because there is nothing *to* know!'

'What harm—'

'No! Look. I can see there's nothing I can say that will change your mind. So this is what we'll do. Just to show you – to demonstrate once and for all that there isn't a problem – I will give up drinking. No alcohol whatsoever. For a whole month.' He paused as if to allow her time to absorb the significance of his statement. 'And I'm sure you would agree that no one with a real problem could stop drinking for a month. It would be impossible.' He spoke with an unshakeable assurance. 'Their alcoholic cravings would take

over – hands shake, that sort of thing – and inevitably they'd be driven back to the bottle.'

He reached out his hand and took hers, running his fingers softly over her wedding ring. 'Hey, look at me.'

She forced herself to raise her eyes from the table. His gaze was concentrated upon her. The unbidden thought came to her that her husband didn't look like an alcoholic. He was good-looking and lean, with the air of a man who could run five miles and swim a couple more, his features apparently unchanged in the years since their first meeting.

'Susannah. I love you. I want this to work. And I'll do whatever it takes to put your mind at rest.' He took the blue box that lay between them and pushed it towards her. 'Aren't you going to open it?'

She forced a smile. Her head was spinning from James's abrupt shift from anger to affection. His resolve to stop drinking for a month seemed to have ruled out the possibility of any further debate about his drinking. She wanted to ask him what would happen after the month was up; she needed assurances that the drinking wouldn't resume in the same old pattern of destructive excess. But to raise that point risked reopening the argument and arousing accusations of churlishness. Instead of saying more, she pulled at the bow and untied the small knot before gently easing off the close-fitting top of the box. Inside lay a small fabric pouch. As she lifted it from the box she felt the circular hardness of a ring. Despite the anxious thoughts that held her, a small wave of excitement welled up. She looked at him and read the pride in his eyes.

'Go on then.'

She took out the ring and gasped. It was gold, inset all around with blue sapphires.

'It's an eternity ring. A symbol.' He took the ring from her and held her hand, easing it next to her wedding ring.

'James . . . it's beautiful.'

'A symbol of a new start. Susannah, just give this a chance. Don't kill us off. I believe in us but you have to believe in us as well. You have to trust me.'

At that moment she felt she had no alternative, in the face of his promises and his words of commitment to her and his generosity.

She spoke quietly. 'I do. I'm sorry.'