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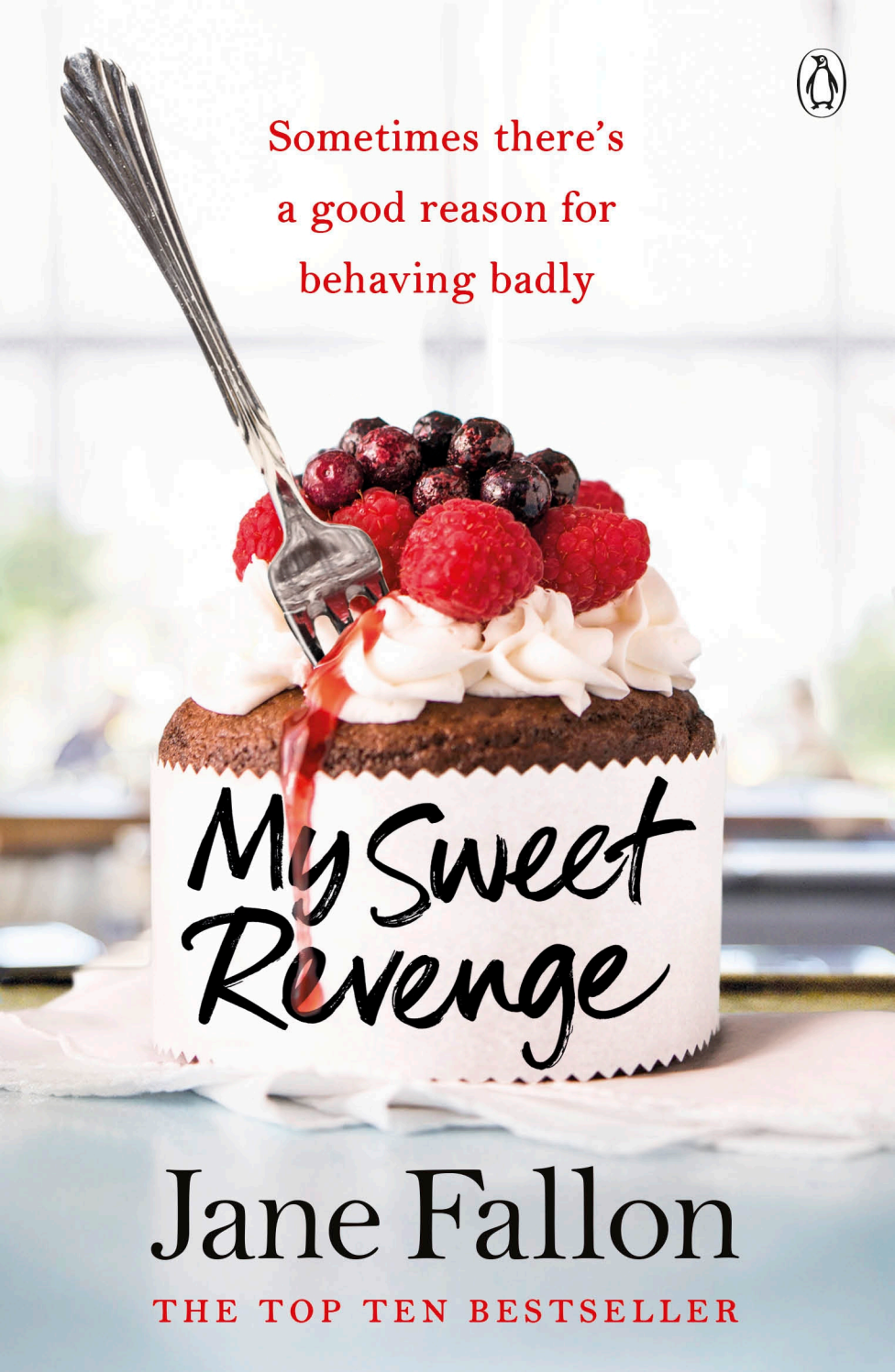
My Sweet Revenge

Written by Jane Fallon

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Sometimes there's
a good reason for
behaving badly
My Sweet Revenge
Jane Fallon
THE TOP TEN BESTSELLER

My Sweet Revenge

JANE FALLON



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I

Paula

I want to make my husband fall back in love with me.

Let me explain. This isn't an exercise in fifties wifeydom. I haven't been reading articles in old women's magazines. 'Twenty ways to keep your man'. That couldn't be further from the truth.

I want him to fall back in love with me so that when I tell him to fuck off out of my life he'll care. Or at least it'll register. He won't just think, 'Oh good.'

I want it to hurt.

Robert is sitting at the breakfast bar in the kitchen while I cook. Oblivious. Nose in his phone. Thumbs tapping away at the keyboard like a teenager. Probably texting *her*. He has no idea that I know. He looks like the same person. The person who, yesterday, was just my husband, the man I've been married to for eighteen years. Today he's someone who is cheating on his wife. I find myself staring at him, trying to look for tell-tale signs. How could I not have known? He looks up and smiles.

'What? What have I done?'

As he talks he tilts the screen of his mobile away from me slightly. He probably doesn't even realize he's doing it.

I try to mirror his smile. 'Nothing. I was just thinking.'

He picks up the bottle and refills my glass and then his. This has always been our ritual whenever he's home in the evenings. I potter around making dinner while he perches on a stool and fills me in on the goings-on at work. Although these days he's more likely to keep one eye on his phone and only give me half his attention. At least now I know why.

'Dangerous,' he says now. 'Too much thinking never did anyone any good.'

I force a laugh. 'Well, lucky I don't do it too often then. Actually, I was trying to decide whether to do rice or mash, so it really was life-altering stuff.'

'Surprise me. Want any help?'

I shake my head no. The last thing I can face doing is playing happy families. It's too soon.

He hops down from his stool, glass in one hand, phone in the other. 'Then I'm going to have a shower.'

'Don't be too long,' I say. 'I promised Georgia we'd eat early. She's meant to be meeting Eliza at half seven.'

'Ten minutes,' he says, and I have to stop myself asking why he needs his mobile if all he's doing is having a quick hose-down.

It was his phone that gave him away, by the way. That old cliché. I wasn't snooping. It never would have occurred to me to snoop. I've never even bothered to ask him for his password because he never uses it, he just wafts his finger over the button so it can read his print. So it's complete chance that I saw what I saw. This morning before he left for the studio – befuddled from the early start – he left it on the counter when he went off to get dressed. I always get up with him on studio days, even though he has to leave the

house at six and I am pretty sure I hadn't even realized there was a five fifteen in the morning until my alarm started announcing it one day. I like to keep him company while he eats breakfast. Kiss him goodbye when he leaves. Neither of us is a completely functioning human at that hour so I can only assume it slipped his mind that he really shouldn't be letting his phone out of his sight these days.

I didn't even notice it. But then it buzzed to say a message had arrived and I glanced down without thinking. The words 'Love you' happened to catch my eye and the name at the top. *Saskia*. Without thinking what I was doing, I snatched it up quickly, before the message faded away, never to be accessible to me again.

'Jesus! That was too close for comfort last night! WAY too risky! Hope Paula bought it!!! Didn't feel comfortable having to lie to her face! Love you xxx'

I stared at the screen in shock, pressed a few keys, hoping I could magically access the whole conversation but knowing it was hopeless. I heard Robert moving around in the bedroom, knew he would be back at any moment. I committed the message to memory and threw the phone back down on the counter as his footsteps thumped along the corridor, pretended to be preoccupied with something fascinating in the cutlery drawer.

He clocked his mobile lying on the counter. Did I imagine it or did the slightest flash of fear sweep across his face? I tried to look casual, I didn't want to give away the fact that I'd noticed it. He picked it up and shoved it in his pocket, not even looking at the screen.

A huge part of me wanted to throw accusations at him the second he walked through the door. Or punches. Actually, yes, punches would have been good. But thankfully, I stopped myself. I knew that I needed to mull over what I'd seen. I had to make sure that there was no innocent explanation before I went down a path I couldn't retreat from.

Now he saunters back into the kitchen, freshly showered, smelling of some kind of chemical fruit and wearing the old track pants and T-shirt that he likes to slob around in. I plaster a smile on my face.

'Will you give Georgia a shout? Five minutes.'

'Sure. Something smells amazing.'

I turn my fake smile up to ecstatic. Thank God for my drama-school training. Although we never actually did a class called 'How to convince your husband everything's fine when in actual fact you want to stab him with a fork'. Remind me. If I ever become a drama tutor, that'll be my first assignment.

'It's only chilli.'

Robert moseys on out again and I hear him shout to Georgia that dinner's ready. I know that above all else I mustn't give away that anything is wrong in front of our daughter so I try to steady my breathing, hypnotize myself into thinking that all is right with the world.

I fight the urge to cry. Unscrew the bottle of red wine and pour myself another small glass. When Georgia comes hurtling through the door, bag bulging with the books she needs for an evening of revision at her best friend's house, I'm sitting at the counter sipping it as if I don't have a care in the world.

'Want a glass?' I say, knowing what the answer will be. Georgia pulls a face that says I might as well have offered her some cat's pee.

'Yuk. Why can't you ever have white wine? Or vodka?'

'Because then you'd say yes when I offered you a drink.'

She laughs. 'That's OK. They're doing cheap Jägerbombs at Vogue tonight. I can get legless later.'

'George . . .' I say, and she interrupts me before I can continue.

'I'm joking!'

'You'd better be.'

'I am . . . it's absinthe, actually.'

'Very funny.'

She leans over my back and plants a kiss on my head just as Robert comes back in, not a care in the world.

'Uh oh. What have you done?' he says. His old joke that any affection from our teenager must be an apology.

Georgia laughs and ruffles his hair as he sits down. I lean over and fill his glass.

We're the picture of a happy family.

2

I'm not a vengeful person by nature. Partly because I'm too lazy. Revenge takes effort. But I've never been the type who spends hours plotting how to get back at my co-worker because he doesn't contradict the boss when she praises him for something I've done. That makes it sound as if I have a high-powered career where rival colleagues are locked in a struggle for supremacy, clawing their way up the ladder to the top, shoving each other aside and trampling on the weak. Actually, I work in a bakery. Oh, the hilarity. The fat lady works in a cake shop. I can see it on people's faces when I tell them. No doubt dying to ask me if I get paid in produce or if my role is chief taste-tester. For the record, I do the selling, not the baking. Make coffees in our swanky machine, heat paninis and pasties, take the money.

But this time Robert has pushed me too far. I know he can be self-centred. He has a tendency to take himself and his job too seriously. And I know we've drifted apart a bit lately. It's not as if we haven't been getting along, more that he's stopped sharing his world with me. He used to come home in the evenings and we'd run through his lines for the next few days together, laughing at the ludicrous turns in the plot. Or he'd regale me with tales from the set over a glass of Merlot. He never asked me much about my own day – probably because nothing much

newsworthy ever happens to me – but his stories about the other actors, the incompetent make-up artists and interfering producers always entertained me so much I never really minded. Because I always thought he still cared about me deep down. He just had a high-pressure job that left him a bit preoccupied.

I never in a million Sundays would have thought he was seeing someone on the side. Actually, that's not true. I've wondered, every now and again. Just over the past couple of years. Just the odd 'what if . . . ?' when he's told me he's going to be working late or he's been away filming on location. But I've always dismissed it. Told myself not to be paranoid.

And if I ever had allowed myself to think it might be true, I never in a million decades would have thought it would be Saskia.

Robert and I have been together for twenty years. We met at drama school, both of us with big dreams about the stellar careers that were undoubtedly in our futures, despite the statistics telling us otherwise. I think I once read that ninety-nine per cent of actors are unemployed at any one time. And that's not even taking into account the fact that only about five people share every single starring role on ITV. But that didn't stop everyone in our year at the North London School of Speech and Drama thinking they were destined to become the Next Big Thing.

Out of our classmates there's only Robert and four others who you ever hear about now. One because she went to Hollywood and was the new ingénue on the block for about five minutes. She lorded it over us all mercilessly, until the work started to dry up. Now she talks in a weird

mid-Atlantic accent and pops up occasionally in the British press talking about her latest obsession with cupping or tantric meditation or the healing properties of cruciferous vegetables, even though she disappeared from our screens so long ago no really even remembers who she is. Two make very respectable livings in the theatre, and the fourth is doing fifteen years for fraud.

Financially, Robert is probably the biggest success story. He has been a regular in the prime-time Thursday-night rural-community drama *Farmer Giles* since it began five years ago. Sadly, he's not the eponymous Farmer Giles, who, with his wife and three children, is the heart of the piece, but second fiddle Hargreaves, Farmer Giles's nice-guy neighbour. Saskia, by the way, is Melody Hargreaves. Nice-guy neighbour's cantankerous but sexy spouse. Robert's on-screen wife. A woman he has professed to loathe for years.

What with repeat fees and the many overseas sales – the Americans, in particular, love the depiction of the countryside idyll that bears no resemblance to any place I've ever been – he earns a small fortune. He would give it all up to be one of our two former contemporaries who earn praise and respect for their work treading the boards, even if their bank balances are nowhere near as healthy. But he would never admit it.

We have – scrub that – we *had* a good life, the three of us. Me, Robert and seventeen-year-old Georgia.

Until now.

When we first left college, setting up home together in a cramped bedsit in Finsbury Park, we both went all out to try to get work, scouring the internet for open

auditions and accepting every unpaid offer that came our way. Gradually, Robert started to get bits and pieces here and there. An agent took him on. Casting directors began to know his name. When I found myself pregnant with Georgia, it seemed that the obvious thing to do to – as Robert put it – was for him to work on his career first while I did all the childcare, and then, once he had got himself established, he could take a break and be the homemaker for a while, while I pursued my own dream. Even though it made me anxious that I was being left behind, it also made sense to me. And, if I'm being honest, I wanted to be the one taking care of our daughter. I just hadn't expected to have her so young.

Anyway, I'm sure you can all see where this is going. The years rolled on and Robert just never felt that the time was right for him to opt out.

Once Georgia hit Year 7 I nervously tried to dip my toe back in the water but with no track record, no agent, nothing on my CV except childcare and a bit of part-time clerical work when we needed the money, I couldn't even get through to anyone on the phone, let alone through their door. If I'd been prepared to go miles from home for an unpaid gig, performing a one-woman show to three people above a pub in the back of beyond then, maybe, I could have clawed my way into contention. But I was the wrong side of thirty with a soon-to-be-teenage daughter who needed her mother. And, besides, Robert always said it was important to him to know I was at home, keeping everything running smoothly. It meant he didn't have to worry about the mundane daily details of our life. It allowed him to shine.

Yes, you heard me correctly. He said that it allowed him to shine.

And somehow that was it. That was our life. Robert could take any job, work any outlandish schedule in any remote location, because he knew that everything was all taken care of at home.

Then he got the job on *Farmer Giles*, which meant for the ten and a half months of the year they filmed he would be flat out, dividing his time between the studio in west London and the exterior locations in Oxfordshire, and I threw away the glossy headshots I was still inundating casting directors with (which were already several years and many stones out of date), and took the job in the café. No qualifications necessary. He's become a minor TV star, or at least a recognizable face. I've become someone who works in a baked-goods store because the hours suit my desire to be home when Georgia gets back from school.

I imagine you have questions. I would. Like why would an intelligent, independent woman like me fall for an arrangement like that? The only answer I have is that I loved Robert and I honestly believed my chance would come. And I think he meant it when he first proposed it, too. I don't think he thought he was conning me. It was just later on, when he was enjoying his career, when he didn't want to give it up even for a few months, when he started worrying that to turn things down might mean he would never get offered anything again, that he changed his mind. And I suppose I could have insisted. Put my foot down and refused to wash another gym kit until he agreed to take a break. But the truth is that by

then I had no confidence in the idea that I would be able to find work anyway. And the thought of watching Robert turn down some plum role just so he could stay at home and watch me failing to get a single audition was just too humiliating.

And because I never imagined he would throw it all back in my face.

The evening is agony. Trying to pretend to Robert that all is well while I work out what I am going to do. It doesn't help that Georgia leaves the second dinner is over, promising to be home by eleven at the latest. There's no ballast.

If Robert has any idea that I've found out his secret, he doesn't show it.

'Saskia turned up two hours late again today,' he says to me as we sit side by side in the living room. I'm scrolling through the Sky menu like there's no tomorrow, desperately hoping to find anything that might be a distraction and mean we don't have to spend the evening chatting.

I almost choke on my drink at the mention of her name.

'God,' I say. How would I usually react? I suddenly can't remember how to behave normally. 'Did she get a bollocking?'

Saskia's bad behaviour is one of his favourite topics. And, to be fair, I would be upset about it too if I were him. Although now I realize he probably isn't. It's just a smokescreen.

'Of course not,' he sighs. 'Because no one can face the tears and the threats to quit.'

Although Robert professes that he can't stand Saskia, a part of him lives in terror that she might decide to leave

the show altogether. He is very much aware of the fact that while the show couldn't survive without Farmer Giles, it would most definitely live on if his neighbours moved away and were replaced.

'They'll probably sack her eventually,' I say, and I get a little jolt of satisfaction from the panicked look on his face. 'Oh, look, there's a new drama on BBC2 tonight. *Trouble in Paradise*. Didn't you go up for that?'

I know full well that he did. That he'd been gutted when he hadn't got it.

'Let's not watch that,' he groans. 'There must be something better on.' Robert hates watching programmes that he missed out on. Even worse if the actor who got the role he coveted gets any praise or, God forbid, an award nomination. He just assumes that he would have garnered the same attention too had he got the part. Never a doubt in his mind about whether his performance would have been as compelling.

'No, this looks good,' I say, pressing the button to watch. It takes all my strength to pretend to be absorbed in it for the next hour and a half. But it beats having to make conversation.

I slope off to bed as early as I can but I don't sleep at all, just go over and over it in my head. What does the text mean? What happened that made Saskia feel they were close to being caught? Caught doing what (yes, yes, I know). I think back. Last night I phoned Robert to ask if he knew what time he was likely to be home. The studio day finishes at seven but the cast are free to leave once their last scene is completed. A woman answered. Saskia, I now assume. I'd almost forgotten, it was such an

insignificant event. Robert always has to leave his phone somewhere when he goes on set. No one wants to be the idiot who ruins a good take because some ironic eighties pop-song ringtone suddenly blasts out mid-scene. I've spoken to countless other people over the years who have answered on his behalf.

I didn't ask her name. Why would I have?

'Robert Westmore's phone,' she said when she answered.

I remember feeling like a bit of a saddo that I was calling my husband at work to ask what time he wanted his tea.

'Oh, hi. It's Paula, Robert's wife.'

I remember that she said, 'Hey!' in a very matey way.

'It's nothing important. I just wondered what time he was going to wrap tonight. Maybe you could get him to call me if he gets a moment?'

'No problem, Paula,' she said.

Twenty minutes later he called me back. Maybe a little flustered, but he often is if we speak when he's at work. He said that they might overrun a bit but he should be back by quarter past nine, latest. A mundane, routine call.

He got home at nine in the end. Nothing in the way he looked or acted gave away that he had been doing anything other than working. There was no lipstick on his collar, or anywhere else that I could see for that matter. He went straight upstairs for a shower, but then he often does. He was his normal, usual self. Which makes me think his normal, usual self is a man who is having an affair.

After he left this morning I turned on my computer. Googled Saskia Sherbourne. Of course, I already know what she looks like, but now I was confronted with

hundreds of glamorous photos of her on red carpets and glitzy nights out. The thing that annoyed me most was how pleased with herself she looked. That 'oh yes, you think I'm attractive' smirk. It made me want to punch her.

Of course, she's slim, verging on half-starved. But she has that kind of round-faced, cleavagey look that – hopefully – doesn't age well. She'll be busty barmaid before she knows it. I checked myself for being bitchy. I've always tried not to judge people on their looks because I know from personal experience how hurtful that can be. Then I reminded myself she was quite possibly sleeping with my husband so I allowed myself to revel in the two pictures I found of her in a short skirt which showed off her surprisingly straight-up-and-down legs and bony knees.

According to her Wikipedia page, she's three years younger than me, which probably means we're the same age. Born Susan Mitchell. Ha! Not so glamorous now. Grew up in Exeter. Went to LAMDA (chip on its shoulder because it's not RADA). First job Nat West commercial.

I scanned down through the list of her credits, not really interested. Got to Personal Life. The Susan Mitchell/Exeter/LAMDA information was repeated. Married at twenty-seven to Simon, divorced two years later. Then again in 2009 – which would make her either thirty-one or thirty-four at the time, depending on who you believe – to Joshua. They seemed to still be together; no mention of children, no mention of what it is that Joshua does.

There was a link to a profile piece in one of the Sunday magazines so, of course, I tortured myself by reading the whole thing. She's very grateful for the part in *Farmer Giles*, which came along just as she was wondering whether

or not to call it a day. She would never take the role for granted. It's important for actors on TV shows to remember they're just a tiny cog in a huge machine. She reminds herself of this regularly to ensure she remains down to earth. If I didn't know it was all phoney, I'd probably have thought she was coming across quite well.

In the next paragraph she banged on about how lucky she was to work with Robert. How they've become good friends and so they instinctively work well together. I've read enough of these kind of interviews to know this could just be PR bullshit but that didn't stop it infuriating me. It was as if she was taunting me.

I found more interviews with her and then reread old ones with Robert that I must have read before with different eyes. Both of them are always at pains to tell the world how fabulously they get on, how they're so relaxed around each other they sometimes squabble about the most mundane things, like a real couple. I remember laughing with Robert when we scoured one of these spreads together. Teasing him about the way he managed to make it sound as if he and Saskia were such great friends when, of course, he hated her. I remember him telling me it was important that the viewing public bought into their relationship. That was the key to its success.

'I've never worked with anyone who cared so much', interview Robert had apparently said, and real-life Robert had read the quote out to me in a mock-serious tone and added 'about herself', which had me falling about, I seem to remember.

When actually it seems as if the joke's on me.