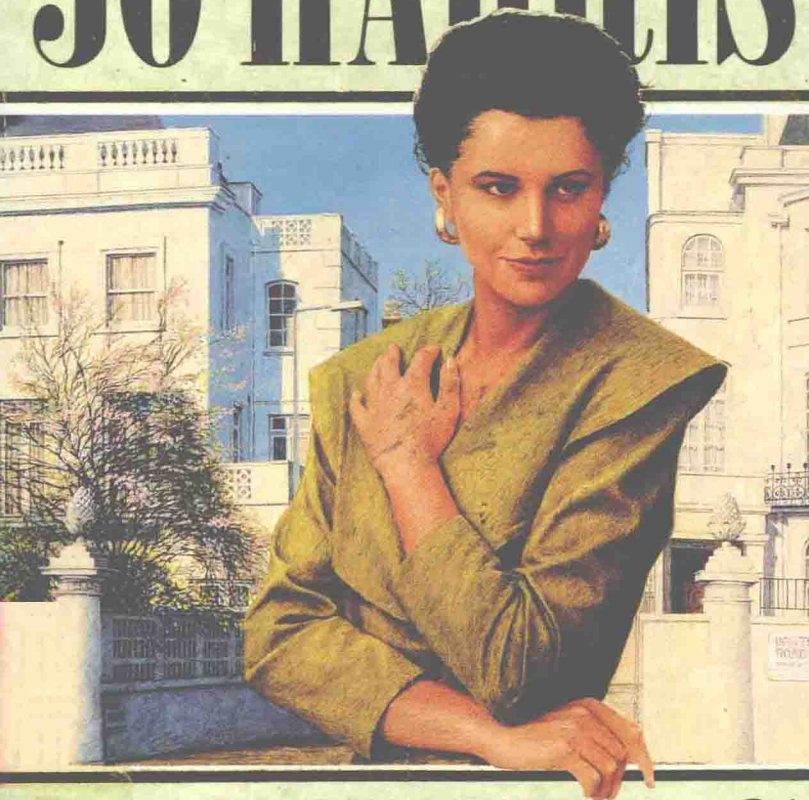


THE SPELLBINDING NOVEL OF A MARRIAGE IN TURMOIL

JO HARRIS



PARTNERS

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By the same author

Never Say Always

Gramercy Park

Close Relations

JO HARRIS

Partners

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This book is dedicated to my family and many friends.

Chapter 1

When James had picked the boys up from school, and given them something to drink and a piece of cake each, he sat at the kitchen table with them discussing the events of their day. It was hot. That afternoon the streets around Camden Square had been quiet, the general hum of the city somehow more muted, as though dissipated by the unusual warmth. James had gone out to the shops after lunch. They lived in a big, white house close to the square: James, Wessley, Alexander, and Elizabeth. There were some builders further down the road ripping out the interior of a house, creating clouds of white dust which floated lazily in the still atmosphere. James had looked into the interiors of the houses as he passed by, searching for signs of life, but the wilting sun had driven everyone away. A cat lay dozing under the warm shade of a dusty laurel bush, one paw outstretched on the hot pavement. It didn't stir as James walked past.

Later, before starting work again, James had prepared a salad for their evening meal and scrubbed some new potatoes. He worked methodically, making everything ready. Mrs Reed had been in that morning so the house smelt of polish. James had made them both coffee and sat with Mrs Reed for a while at the kitchen table discussing the minutiae of the day.

Now he turned his attention to the boys. Wessley, the eldest, was fourteen with a breaking voice and a face that was turning towards handsomeness, away from his childhood beauty. Both boys favoured their mother, Elizabeth,

with her dark eyes and hair. Wessley was already big; people mistook him for sixteen or seventeen. He was a good athlete, a fine tennis player, muscular for his age and lithe. Alexander was eight, a smaller, stockier version of his brother but just as attractive.

'Are you coming to watch me play on Friday?' Wessley asked through a crumby mouthful of sponge cake.

James nodded, sitting back in his chair and sipping iced lime juice.

'It's my sports day, too,' Alexander added.

'When?' James asked, laughing.

'Soon.'

'It's not for ages yet,' Wessley told his brother crossly.

'Next month,' James said. 'We'll be there, won't we, Wes?'

'I suppose so.'

'Will Mum come as well?' Alexander wanted to know.

James shrugged. 'Your mum's very busy; we'll have to see.'

'She'll be away on business.' Wessley sounded resigned and world-weary.

'Will she, Dad?' Alexander asked.

'I'm not sure.' James smiled. 'I'll ask her and see.'

'Better get her to check in her Filofax first,' Wessley told him.

'I'll do that, too,' James said, getting up at last. 'Now, go and get changed and decide what you're going to do until dinner time.'

Alexander put the large glass to his lips and drained the remains of his drink in several noisy gulps. 'I'm playing in the garden with my Action Men,' he announced, banging the tumbler on to the old refectory table.

'I'm going round to Simon's house,' Wessley told James.

'Right.' James nodded, gathering up his sheaf of papers. 'I'm going to read through this lot.' He heard the boys clattering and slamming around upstairs as he settled into a comfortable armchair by the open French windows overlooking the garden. James turned over the first page of his new novel and began to read through the typescript.

James wrote books. His heroes and heroines were attractive and usually intelligent with a degree of wit and ambition. He wrote about London and New York and of torrid sexual antics although there was, he hoped, more often than not humour in their coupling rather than just lurid fucking. His books were for 'adults': they concerned power and lust and avarice, but mostly James wrote about relationships; marriages in turmoil, wayward children, reluctant spouses, affairs of the heart. His protagonists were strong and astute, people who knew what they wanted and where they were going. They were usually women. James smiled at the thought.

James's work sold well both at home and abroad, especially in America where business had been good in the past and James had been described as a sort of masculine Marilyn French – something that had never been properly explained. If James had lived alone, and in somewhat reduced circumstances, he'd have had no trouble supporting himself from such earnings. He'd been writing for years – he'd taught classes on writing, creative literature and poetry classes at his Polytechnic. He had taken Open University Summer Schools and had even signed creased paperback editions of his own work. Now all of that was over: no more undergraduates, no more lectures, no more tutor seminars with panic-stricken final year students, no more examinations to set, no more marking, no more internal politics in higher education.

The boys came downstairs again, breaking James's

reverie. Alexander marched out through the French windows into the garden, with his box of toys ready for guerrilla warfare amongst the tatty flower-beds. Wesley, dressed in garish Bermuda shorts complete with a T-shirt with 'Bermuda Windsails' printed across his chest, sat opposite his father for a moment.

James looked up. 'All right, Wes?'

Wesley nodded. 'How's the book going?'

James scratched his head. 'I'm not sure.' He laughed. 'I'm never sure until it's finished and then it's normally too late.'

'Is Mum eating with us tonight?'

James shook his head. 'Too busy. She's having a meeting with Nick and Ruby until around eight-thirty.'

'Don't they have any homes to go back to either?' Wesley asked.

'Well,' James sighed, 'once this office is opened in New York things won't be so frantic.'

Wesley didn't look convinced. 'What time's dinner?'

'Be back by half-six, we'll eat at seven.'

'Right.' The boy nodded. 'It's the school tennis tournament in a few weeks' time. Is anyone coming to see me play?'

James grinned. 'I expect so.'

'Is Mum?'

'I don't know, why not ask her?'

'Because she's never here,' Wesley grumbled.

'A slight exaggeration, Wes.'

'She's never here,' Wesley muttered to himself, walking away.

James ignored him – he'd soon get used to this new way of living. He heard the front door slam before starting on his work once more.

* * *

After their evening meal the family sat together in the lounge watching television. The French windows were still wide open and the evening air was warm and close. Elizabeth arrived home a little later just as James was kneeling at the side of the bath, washing Alexander's hair.

'Hello, Mum,' Alexander called out, his eyes tightly shut against the soap suds.

'Hello, you.' She looked down at the scene for a moment. 'Your hair needs a trim.'

'It's okay,' Alexander told her, taking a face flannel to wipe at his eyes as James finished rinsing his hair with the shower attachment.

Elizabeth smiled at James. 'All right?'

James grinned back up at her. 'Fine. Wes is downstairs watching TV.'

She nodded. 'I know, I just spoke to him – he's in the grumps as usual.'

James didn't respond. He stood up and lifted Alexander out of the soapy water, wrapping a bath sheet around him before drying his hair.

'That hurts,' Alexander complained.

Elizabeth laughed. 'Don't be such a baby' she said, turning to leave the room. 'See you in a minute,' she told James, touching him on the shoulder.

James watched her, comparing Elizabeth's immaculate dark suit with his own rather dishevelled and water-spotted jeans and T-shirt. He looked at Alexander, staring into his son's pretty face and beautiful dark eyes.

'Come on then, you, let's find some clean pyjamas.'

He picked the little boy up and carried him into his bedroom.

Elizabeth came into Alexander's bedroom just as James was finishing a story. She'd showered and changed into a

loose-fitting white cotton dress, short and childlike and rather fetching. She bent over to kiss Alexander and spent a few minutes talking to him while James returned the damp towel to the bathroom.

'Are you going to have dinner with us tomorrow?' Alexander asked her.

'We'll see, darling. I'll try.'

James followed Elizabeth down to the kitchen where she made coffee and rootled around in the refrigerator for the remains of their salad. James was busy pushing soiled clothes into the washing machine. Wesley came through as he heard the sounds of food preparation.

'What's for supper?' he enquired.

Elizabeth looked across the kitchen at James and they both laughed.

'When did you last eat?' she asked.

'A while ago.'

'Two hours ago, plus snacks since then, no doubt.'

'I'm growing,' Wesley protested.

'You've hollow legs,' James added, standing up.

'What do you want?' Elizabeth asked him.

Wesley pulled out a chair and sat down at the kitchen table, 'What are you having?'

'Whatever I can find . . . sandwiches, salad and cold potato by the looks of it.'

'Is that all?'

'I had a business lunch,' Elizabeth explained, starting to place things onto the table.

They sat down together, James drinking a mug of coffee, Elizabeth nibbling a sandwich and Wesley tucking into a plate piled high with food.

'Are you coming to my tennis tournament, Mum?' Wesley asked. 'It's in two weeks' time.'

Elizabeth hesitated. 'In the daytime?'

'Afternoons.'

'I'll try,' she said.

'Can't you do better than that?' Wessley was annoyed.

'No,' Elizabeth insisted, 'I'm going to New York in two weeks' time and there's lots to be done before, lots to plan and scheme.' Elizabeth turned to James and grinned.

'Just one afternoon then,' Wessley insisted, 'the Friday, the final.'

'How do you know you'll make the final? Don't start counting your chickens already,' Elizabeth warned.

'I'll make the final, no sweat.'

'Like mother like son,' James said.

'What if I win and you're not there?' Wessley continued.

'Your dad can video it for me, I'll watch it later.'

Wessley groaned. 'Dad can't handle that kind of technology. He still uses a manual typewriter, he won't even adapt to the word processor you got for him.'

'I like my typewriter,' James explained. 'I'm very attached to it in fact, we've been together for many a long year.'

Wessley gave his father a scathing look. 'You must be the only writer in the country who has a word processor and doesn't use it.'

James shrugged. 'I'm still learning,' he replied, smiling at his son. 'I keep it nice and clean, you have to admit that – I dust it and keep the VDU sparkling.'

'It's easy for you,' Elizabeth added. 'We didn't grow up with all this technology; we had to use our brains, we couldn't just plug in and switch on.'

'No, you were both part of the sixties generation – we've been studying that in history, hippy, dippy, dopey,' Wessley remarked disparagingly.

'You make us sound like war criminals,' James said and

both he and Elizabeth laughed. 'Anyway, sunshine, have you got any homework to do?'

'A bit.'

'Then you'd better say good-night and get yourself sorted out.' James continued to smile but there was steel in his grey-green eyes.

Wessley kissed his parents good-night. 'Come to my matches,' he told his mother as she hugged him.

He went round the large table to kiss James, 'Sports kit,' he said into his father's ear in a rasping stage whisper.

'Airing cupboard,' James whispered back, breathing his son's strange sweaty adolescent aroma; half boy now and half man.

'Night then.' Wessley turned to them at the kitchen door. 'Wake me early, Dad, I want to wash my hair in the morning.'

'Yes, oh-great-master, anything else?'

Wessley spent a moment deliberating. 'No, not right now, thanks all the same.'

'God,' Elizabeth said as he left, resting her head on the back of the chair and staring up at the ceiling, 'do you think we made a mistake in not sending them both away to school?'

'No, but sometimes I wonder,' James replied. 'Not to worry, it can only get worse.'

Elizabeth sat up and stared across the table top at him and burst out laughing.

'How was your day?' Elizabeth asked later as they prepared for bed.

'Busy,' James replied as he turned on the shower. 'What about you?'

'The same,' she said as James stepped under the powerful jet of hot water. Elizabeth sat on the closed

toilet seat with her moisturizer and a hand mirror, working the expensive cream into her neck and face. 'I shall really be very pleased when this New York office is set up and working.'

'Come off it, Liz, you love all of that jet-setting, it's glamorous, exciting . . .'

'To one of your characters, perhaps; to me it's only knackerings.'

James laughed. 'ERN Limited takes over the world.'

'Hardly, it's just a very small office in New York.'

'I rang Jenny Grove today,' James said.

'Who is Jenny Grove?' Elizabeth asked, curious.

'The counsellor.' James pulled the shower curtain back quickly, popping his soapy head out, suds dripping down over his face. 'You gave me her name and number, remember?'

Elizabeth yawned and nodded. 'She's really Ruby's contact, I just passed on the message, I don't know anything about her.'

James resumed his shower. 'Are Ruby and Nick working as hard as you?'

'Of course they are.'

'Are they as excited over the American connection?'

'Yes, I suppose so . . . What's she like?'

'Who?' James asked, stepping out of the tub.

'Jenny what's-her-name?'

He reached for his towelling robe and slipped it on. 'She sounded very nice.'

'Nice?'

'Yes.' He started to rub his wet hair with a towel.

'Not a very descriptive word.'

'Isn't it? Well, anyway, I thought I'd probably go along and see what's what.'

'What do you think it will achieve?' Elizabeth asked.

‘Make me feel better?’

‘About what?’

‘Oh, things, you know . . . Myself probably.’

‘But I don’t understand, what things? What’s the matter?’ Elizabeth was genuinely confused.

James shrugged.

‘Oh, come on,’ Elizabeth persisted, her voice registering a mixture of disbelief and irritation. She moved from the toilet seat and began to brush her teeth. ‘There has to be a reason.’

‘I’m not sure,’ James insisted, picking up a comb and pulling it back through his damp hair. ‘To gain control over my life perhaps.’

Elizabeth dabbed at her lips with a fresh hand towel. ‘When did you lose control of your life, James?’ she asked. Their eyes met and they stood staring at one another for a long uncomfortable moment.

James laughed and tried to make a joke out of it. ‘I’ll go along and meet her and see what happens . . . It’ll be good material if nothing else.’

‘Fine, then go and find out.’ She went into the bedroom.

James followed her through. ‘You will try to make Wes’s match, won’t you,’ he said, changing the subject as they got into bed.

‘I’ll try,’ Elizabeth replied, ‘I always try.’

James reached over and kissed her. ‘Too much work, too many fingers in too many pies.’

‘I wish Wes wouldn’t keep making me feel so bloody guilty about everything,’ Elizabeth admitted. ‘I thought we’d explained everything to them and I was stupid enough to think they understood.’

‘They do. It’s what the family is for, though.’

‘What?’