

REPUTATION

[halftitle artwork to come]

Sarah Vaughan read English at Oxford and went on to become a journalist. After training at the Press Association, she spent eleven years at the Guardian as a news reporter and political correspondent before leaving to freelance and write fiction. Her first two novels, *The Art of Baking Blind* and *The Farm at the Edge of the World*, were followed by her first psychological thriller, *Anatomy of a Scandal*: a Sunday Times bestseller, and Richard and Judy pick of the decade, developed as a Netflix series starring Rupert Friend, Michelle Dockery and Sienna Miller. Her fourth novel, *Little Disasters*, a Waterstone's thriller of the month, was published in 2020. *Reputation* is her fifth novel.

Also by Sarah Vaughan:

The Art of Baking Blind
The Farm at the Edge of the World
Anatomy of a Scandal
Little Disasters

SARAH VAUGHAN

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[title artwork to come]



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To Ella and Anna

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[halftitle artwork to come]

*O! I have lost my reputation. I have lost the immortal
Part of myself, and what remains is bestial.*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,
Othello, act II, scene III

I am Duchess of Malfi, still.

JOHN WEBSTER,
The Duchess of Malfi, act IV, scene II

Prologue

8 December 2021

The body lay at the bottom of the stairs. An untidy heap in this house that had been gentrified beyond all recognition. A jumble of clothes just waiting to be tidied away. His trouser leg had ridden up, and his ankle seemed to glow under the beam of my iPhone's torch. I couldn't bear to look at his face: turned away as if refusing to acknowledge that something like this could have happened to him.

There was no bannister at the top of the stairs: just sleek white walls in keeping with the shiny oak steps, and the halogen spots that, once switched on, would reveal just how he had fallen. I touched the wall, pressing hard to gain traction; conscious of the need to ground myself, to stop myself from beginning to sway. My heart was ricocheting, but my mind spiralled too.

Why was he here? How did this happen?

More than anything: had he felt much pain?

For a sliver of time, so brief I later refused to acknowledge it, I allowed myself to imagine that he had.

PART ONE

One

11 September 2021

EMMA

Looking back, it was the interview in the *Guardian Weekend* that started everything. Or rather, the fact I was on the cover. Exquisitely photographed, I looked more like an Oscar-nominated actress than a Labour MP.

It was hard not to be seduced by it all. The designer trouser suit elongated my legs, as did the suede heels: something I resisted at first because I always wore flats – pristine Stan Smiths, or brogues if I felt the need to appear more formal. But heels connoted power, according to the stylist, and it was a trope I chose to accept in that one reckless moment (the first of several). In any case, I hoped the heels were balanced out by the message on the crisp white T-shirt: *Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History*. I'd seen no reason not to scream this sentiment from the rooftops: it was something I vehemently believed. Only, when I saw myself on the front cover – with that defiant slash of red lipstick, my armour

against a hostile world, and my thick bob blow-dried into a dark halo – I hardly recognised myself. I'd morphed into someone else, entirely. Sex and power: that was the not-so-subtle subtext of that photo.

Sex, power, and unequivocal ambition.

Even before the publication, I'd felt uneasy.

'Crikey!' I said, when Tom, the photographer, showed me a couple of images through the preview screen on the back of his camera. They were tiny – 6 cm by 4 – and yet they were arresting. The back of my neck prickled. 'I look pretty formidable,' I said.

'You look strong,' Esther Enfield, the paper's newly appointed political editor, reassured me. 'Strong and determined. It fits the interview. Illustrates what you were saying perfectly. You didn't pussyfoot around with your message, and neither does this.'

'I don't know. Can I see it again?' I leant towards Tom, suddenly conscious of his physicality: the fact he towered over me; was long-limbed and energetic, like a teenager oozing testosterone though he must have been in his early thirties. His breath smelt of artisan coffee.

'You look great.' He was brisk and I sensed his eagerness to get on.

'I just look a bit ...hard?' I lingered on a shot of me in a butter-soft black leather jacket, the collar framing my unsmiling face. He'd captured a side to me I didn't like to acknowledge. Was I *really* as ruthless as he'd made me appear?

Esther shrugged, which made me feel foolish. In her

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mid-forties, like me, she knew what she was talking about and had sound instincts. I was a good contact – we’d lunched several times and had been discussing the possibility of this interview for several weeks. Besides, this was the *Guardian*, not the *Daily Mail*.

‘We won’t stitch you up, I promise.’ She seemed to read my mind, and then she gave me a proper, warm smile. And so, because this was my first national newspaper feature; because I didn’t want to look weak; because I was flattered, I suppose, that the *Guardian* thought me sufficiently interesting to put me on their magazine’s front cover, I let myself be swayed by her arguments. I let myself believe what I wanted to believe.

Besides, as Esther said, the photo would be balanced by what was inside: a sharp attack on the government’s austerity measures, apparent in my Portsmouth South constituency where the need for food banks had proliferated in the last couple of years; a critique of my party leader, Harry Godwin, as ‘ineffective and prone to self-indulgence’ with his refusal to be politically pragmatic; and details of my private members bill calling for anonymity for victims of revenge porn – the reason I’d agreed to this piece. It was a serious interview, worth doing, despite knowing it would irritate more established colleagues, and the photos would be seen through this lens.

‘It’s a fantastic shot,’ Tom, stubbled and artfully dishevelled, said. Later, I wondered if this was the reason I caved in so easily: this simple flattery from a younger man who had coaxed me into being photographed like this: ‘Just a couple

more; head up; that's it. That's perfect. Sweet.' Was I subliminally so desperate for male admiration? At 44, so conscious of becoming sexually invisible that, despite everything I stood for, I let myself be flattered by and play up to his uncompromisingly male gaze?

'OK. Let's go for it,' I told Esther. 'As you say: no point pussyfooting around.'

'Absolutely. Honestly, the pics *are* arresting, and it's precisely because of this that readers will spend time over this interview, and your colleagues will have to listen to what you say.'

And so I quashed my critical inner voice: the one that used the waspish tones of my late grandmother, with a smattering of my ex-husband David's caution, and that always gathered in volume and intensity until I felt like shaking my head to be rid of it.

Pride comes before a fall.

Of course, later I would regret this, bitterly, deeply, because that cover shot would be used repeatedly: the stock image that would accompany every Emma Webster story from that moment on. It would be the picture used when I was arrested, when I was charged, when the trial began. And this would rankle because, far from capturing the true me, it was a brittle, knowing version: red lips slightly parted in a way that couldn't fail to seem distinctly sexual; gaze defiant; a clear, almost brazen challenge in what the article would describe as my 'limpid, dark eyes'. A far cry from how I thought of myself, or who I'd ever been: an A-level

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history teacher at South Hampshire college; Flora's mum; or a Labour backbencher who tried so very hard to serve her constituents while campaigning on feminist issues more generally.

A picture paints a thousand words. And yet this one reduced me to nothing more than a glamorous mugshot: my challenge to the camera not so different from the insolent expression captured in every custody photo snapped by the police.

Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum. Don't let the bastards get you down. I had an old T-shirt with that message. Perhaps I should have suggested to the stylist that I wear it?

It would have been incendiary, of course. A clear two fingers to the trolls, the media, the critics in my own party – let alone my political opponents – who, I suspected, were poised, even then, to see me stumble.

Had I known what would happen, I might have put it straight on.