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How to Kill Your Husband (And Other Handy Household Hints)

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Chapter 1

The Merry Widow

I was a forty-three-year old mother of two when I lost my orgasm. How can you lose an orgasm, you may ask. What is it, a sock? Is it in some sexual laundry basket waiting to be paired so it can become a multiple orgasm? People often lose things. Their tempers. Their sense of humour. Their figures. (Do the words 'control top panty hose' mean anything to you?) Their minds. (Post babies, definitely.) But not their orgasm. I just couldn't find it. It was more elusive than Peter Pan's shadow. Believe me, I looked for it harder than they looked for the Bermuda Triangle, Amelia Earhart, the Yeti, the Marie Celeste, the Loch Ness Monster and the scruples of George Bush.

Perhaps you think that I, Cassie O'Carroll, am the kind of idiot who always misplaces things? It is true to say that I can't find the square root of the hypotenuse either, but that doesn't make me gnaw holes in my pillow and cry myself to sleep at night.

No. My poor muff's in a huff. My pussy left high and dry: positively Miss Havishamed. And there doesn't seem to be a goddamn thing I can do about it.

Mind you, my best friend, Jazz, has lost something much more serious - her husband, the internationally famous surgeon, humanitarian and World Health Organisation expert, Dr David Studlands. And under rather suspicious circumstances too. In fact, as I write this, Jazz is being held on suspicion of murder. Which is where this story begins really, in the visiting room of Holloway Prison for women in North London.

'I've been arrested for killing my husband,' were not words I'd ever expected to hear from the mouth of Jasmine Jardine. 'I'm having George Clooney's lovechild,' perhaps, or, 'What if PMT is a myth and I'm just a bitch?' But definitely not this.

When I can finally talk, I feel I'm dubbing a film. 'What?'

'Murder ... Those moronic cops think I've killed Studz.'

'MURDER?' I dub again. And there is a made-for-TV movie melodrama to it all. I'm sitting bolt upright in a straight-backed chair in a prison visiting room, staring in a state of gormless astonishment at my best friend. I must have shrieked the last word because the eyes of the prison officer dart over at me, alert but neutral, like the eyes of an over-fed predator, too lazy to pounce. The screw remains slumped in her swivel chair, flicking her newspaper, surly but apathetic.

Fright licks like flames all over me. 'Fuck-a-duck, Jazz.' I'm whispering now, but it still sounds piercing. 'You ... didn't do anything stupid, did you?'

Jazz gives me the kind of look you'd give a sewage truck which has just backed over your groom on your wedding day. 'You may not have noticed in all the years you've known me, Cassandra, but I seem to be lacking many of the key talents necessary for success as a criminal mastermind.' There's an edge of hysteria in her voice which attracts the prison officer once more. The chair wheezes as she shifts her bulk to pivot our way. 'How could you even think that?'

'Well, excuse me,' I reply in a scalding whisper. 'How many times have I heard you make cracks along those lines? That "marriage is a fun-packed, frivolous hobby, only occasionally resulting in death," or "Where there's a will, I intend being in it," or that "Not all men are bastards - some of them are dead." And what about the time you "accidentally" picked up the wrong malaria tablets for Studz's Amnesty trip to Malawi? You started cooking with full cream to induce a heart attack, for God's sake! I mean, Jeez ...'

'I was just letting off steam! All women want to kill their husbands some of the time. But joking around doesn't mean I have a license to kill ... Good God, I don't even have a learner's permit.'

The prison officer snorts. 'Not what the papers say, chuck.' She tosses a pile of tatty rags down between us and, despite the No Smoking sign, lights up a fag.

'The papers? You're in the newspapers?' It's eight in the morning and I have pillow creases on my face, having jumped up from bed and rung a cab the second I got Jasmine's call. I'm still reeling at hearing from my oldest friend. It's been over two months since we've spoken - since she detonated a grenade in my life, to be precise. We'd all read, of course, of Dr David Studlands's disappearance three weeks earlier in South Australia from a place called, ominously, Termination Beach, Cape Catastrophe. (Now that's the place to book a holiday.) And then Jazz herself had gone to ground. Until the frantic summons this morning, her disappearance from my life had been as abrupt and bewildering as her husband's.

She flicks the newspapers across the scratched laminate table as though they're radioactive. Widow Too Merry? questions a tabloid above an old photo of Jazz quaffing champagne.

'That was taken years ago.' Jazz sighs so loudly I mistake it for an asthma attack. 'Truth is, David and I were trying to get our marriage back together. That's why we went on holiday to Australia - for the sun, surf, sand, sex. But you know what a tremendous risk-taker Studz is - night scuba-diving, helicopter skiing, driving too fast, going into war zones for M?decins Sans Fronti?res ... Late that afternoon, we were skin-diving. I got tired and swam in, but David snorkelled out beyond the headland. When it started to get dark, I went to look for him. I found his clothes and watch on the beach, where he'd left them earlier. Then I knew something was really wrong.' She wipes away a tear and takes a moment to compose herself.

'We got boats and searched all night,' she goes on. 'People tried to be kind. They kept saying, "You mustn't give up hope." So I clung on, which was worse in a way, because I imagined him like a lost child, hurt and alone. For days I grabbed at theories - that he was working for MI5 and had gone undercover; or kidnap by submarine. I went around in a daze, completely empty inside. Josh says that the truth's staring us in the face - that his dad was swept out to sea. Or worse.' She shudders. 'But I refuse to believe it. I won't believe it.' She slumps forward.

As I wait for her to recover, I take in my friend's thick, straight eyebrows framing sea-green eyes with lashes long enough to hike through, her ripe lips, chiselled cheekbones and golden hair - and marvel for the millionth time how her profile, so delicate it belongs in a Botticelli painting, could be so at odds with her smile, which suggests the possibility of anonymous sex in a dark doorway. And then there's her chin, which juts forward slightly as if to say, 'You and whose army?'

'Jazz...' At the sound of my voice she glances up at me with no recognition at all. 'Then why have they arrested you?'

She snaps back to life with alacrity. 'Remember Billy - that prison playwright I had a fling with? Well, he's claiming to the police that I hired him as a hitman. Moi! Can you believe that?'

'What the hell else did you expect, dating a criminal? Men like that write ransom notes, not thank you notes. What on earth did you see in him anyway?'

She looks at me sadly. 'Oh, Cass. How long had it been since my husband had made love to me? You know what it's like when you're on a diet and even a rice cake looks delicious? Well, Billy and the other men, that's what they were like. Sexual rice cakes.'

'Your boyfriend's gone an' got 'imself banged up,' the eavesdropping prison officer puts in, uninvited, 'for armed robbery. An' he's plea-bargainin'. Which is why the beak's refusin' bail.'

'Is that true, Jazz?'

'Basically, yes,' she concedes. 'The man's an evil, lying, Olympic-standard scumbag ... but of course I wish him only the best.'

The enormity of the situation punches into me hard. I've been following Jazz's escapades at a nervous distance for decades, but this latest scenario has me terrified. We are middle-class women in our forties. We cleanse our pores and shave our Parmesan. We leave notes under the windscreens of cars we've bumped. Our record collections are classical not criminal. Jazz has the sort of face which you instantly associate with the comment, 'I'd like to travel, meet interesting people and help bring about world peace.' Not the sort of face you'd see on a mug shot.

'Bloody hell, Jazz,' I say. 'What are you going to do?'

'Oh, fake my own death, take a new identity and go and live in a tree with Lord Lucan obviously.' Rage bubbles up out of her. 'Life begins at forty, not Life Imprisonment for Killing Your Hubby. What I'm going to do is fight. And until Studz turns up, you are my best weapon, Cassandra O'Carroll.'

'Meee?' Jazz's clipped English vowels make my own Antipodean accent ring coarse and trailer-trashy by comparison.

'This,' she gestures indignantly at the papers, 'is character assassination. Now, who knows me best? You, that's who. We've been bosom buddies ever since college. Literally. We bought our first naughty bras together - lacy and racy, with tassels, do you remember? I want you to talk to my solicitor, Cass. I want you to tell her everything. Okay, Studz betrayed me. He drove me insane. And yes, at times I felt like killing him ... But he's the father of my only child. How could anyone think I would want Josh to be fatherless? What kind of a woman would do that?'

An angry, pissed-off, horny woman, I want to say, but don't. In fact, looking at her, all dishevelled, her silken blonde hair tangled and fly away, her cashmere jumper coming unstitched on the shoulder, I feel a knot in my heart. A knot of affection, despite all the things she's done to me this last year. The prison smells of old cigarette smoke and the worn intimacy of cloth too long against flesh. The odour is only made worse by the overlay of antiseptic, seeping up from the linoleum floors. There are no windows. The room sets me on edge, like a dentist's waiting room, or the room where you wait before a job interview - for a job you don't want.

I lean across the rickety table and take her hand. 'What do you want me to do, love?'

There's a shrill shriek of an electric bell. I jump. The prison officer ignores it at first, too enthralled in counting her own dandruff flakes, then she begrudgingly stubs out her cigarette before heaving her grey bulk upwards.

'But,' I look at my watch, scandalized, 'I'm supposed to have another half an hour.'

'Welcome to the wonderful world of Law Enforcement,' Jazz utters sarcastically, passing me my coat. I think she's going to help me on with it, but she seizes my arm instead. 'Cassie.' Her voice is small and terrified. 'I'm being framed. You have got to help me. My solicitor rejoices in the name of Quincy Joy.' She crumples a scrawled address into my hand. 'Her euphoria comes no doubt from the fact that she is not the one up before the Judge like the thousands of poor saps she represents ... You must tell her everything. Explain things to her. You know - why I behaved the way I did. How things got so Kafka-esque.'

Wake up and smell the Kafka, I would have said in days gone by, but now just stand there numbly as my best friend of twenty-five years is led to her cell. The last thing I hear her say to the prison wardress is, 'You can't stripsearch me on a first date, sweetie. I definitely need dinner and a movie first.'

Dazed, I trudge out into the wintry light. The chill January air nips at my face, and the brick walls of the prison cast long shadows which fall over me like a trap. Free from Persephone's Holloway underworld, I gulp fresh oxygen and dart over Camden Road to hail a taxi as though fleeing back across the River Styx. By the time the cab pulls up at the Inner Temple, a cobbled Dickensian lawyer's enclave by the River Thames, my fine legal brain is saying, Fucking hell! Jazz may have trained as a chef, but only lobster should be in water this hot.

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Quincy Joy's office is furnished with ornate, bow-legged antiques which give the room a ponderous feel. She is blowing on a cup of scalding tea as I enter and introduce myself.

'I've applied for a bail re-hearing.' Her two-pack-a-day voice is languid with tiredness. 'The first magistrate weighed up your friend Jasmine in one hand and his loathing of me in the other, exactly like a man who is holding your tits. Then he squeezed both. Hard.'

Quincy has red hair, a face constellated with freckles, and not just bags but baggage beneath her eyes.

'Can they try someone for murder,' I ask, bewildered, 'without a body?'

'Yep, if there's reasonable doubt. Corpus Christie, it's called. There is some rather nasty circumstantial evidence against her. How on earth did a woman like Jasmine Jardine ever get involved with a convicted murderer? And what was he doing in Australia? She assures me that you can tell the whole story objectively.' The woman drums her fingers on the desk impatiently.

'Me?' I sit down on the edge of a wrinkled leather chair, facing a painting of two dead ducks and an Irish setter. How to tell the tale in all its complexity? The story of a tripartite friendship: Jazz, the stay-at-home domestic goddess. (To me, any woman who says she gets high on housework has inhaled way too much cleaning fluid.) Hannah, the childless career woman with a couple of venture capital portfolios

tucked up each sleeve and her own art gallery, and me, the primary-school-teaching kid-and-career juggler, who keeps dropping everything.

'Three is a difficult number, don't you think, Quincy? And three women friends is a particularly difficult equation. Especially when you throw love, sex, kids and toy boys into the mix ... Crikey. I don't know where to start.'

'Just give me a verbal mug shot of you all,' Quincy says hastily, flinching from her scorching cuppa.

Yes, and then she can wrap us up in Crime Scene Tape and bring on forensic teams to piece together the evidence of our felony - which was to fall out as friends.

'Since teacher-training college, Jazz, Hannah and I have been part of a kind of girl minestrone, sharing secrets, reporting arguments with our husbands ... and then arguing about why we argued with them - and about why the secret of a happy marriage is such a well-kept bloody secret! That's how we would have gone on for ever, if it hadn't been for a party we all attended at Jasmine's a year ago. That's when each of our worlds began to fall apart.'

Quincy glances at her watch, then jerks to her feet. 'Look, I've got an urgent submission to get in,' she rasps, in a voice that is one pack short of lung cancer. 'Why don't you write it all down?' She prods a yellow notepad across the blotting-papered desktop. 'And phone me when you're done. That might be easier.'

Easier? I don't think she realizes the emotional roller-coaster I'm about to take her on. The woman needs an official warning not to strap herself in if she has neck problems or is pregnant. What I want to say is, 'This is a bumpy ride. For safety reasons, please keep all arms and legs within the speeding vehicle.'

Instead, I pick up the yellow paper.

I'm supposed to spend the day correcting Year 6 exercises on grammar.

Question: What comes at the end of a sentence?

Answer: Life imprisonment for murder.