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Till Death, Or A Little Light Maiming, Do Us Part

the REVENGE CLUB

KATHY LETTE



An Aria Book

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For the Sisterhood…

Especially my three actual sisters, Jenny, Liz and Carolyn; my cherished mum, Val; dear daughter, Georgie; all my many warm and witty gal pals and, of course, all those courageous, inspirational feminist heroines who fight to make the world a fairer place for women.

No men were harmed in the making of this book, well, only a couple of misogynists and they totally bloody deserved it.

~ PART ONE ~

1

THE LADIES' GUIDE TO REVENGE

The best thing about revenge is that it's sweet but totally non-fattening. No wonder the female of the species is drawn to it. I know, I know. Taking revenge is wrong – very, very wrong… but it's also very, very fun.

Of course, fate sometimes does the dirty work for you. It's called karma, and it's pronounced 'Ha ha ha, you bastard!' But be honest. How many nights have you lain awake writing imaginary notes: *Dear Karma – A List of Men You Missed*. Also, the trouble with karma is that it takes too long. Surely, sometimes it's just easier to, well, knee him in the metaphorical nuts. Or the actual nuts, proximity allowing.

You may say that revenge is not your style… but hey, accidents will happen, right? Take me. I'm not a pushy person. Truth is, I have the killer instincts of a koala. If a friend admires my new dress, I cringe, mumbling, 'Oh, I got it in the sale!' When some boring colleague invites me to his birthday party, instead of groaning, 'Good God! I'd rather gnaw through my own ovaries,' I reply with enthusiasm, 'Great! See you Friday night!'… then wonder which would

be the most plausible excuse – leprosy, self-immolation or leg amputation. So, the devious, diabolical and mischievous manoeuvres I've made over the last year have surprised me more than anyone. But the reality is, it's still a man's world, and when the odds are against you – a gal's just got to get even. Yes, there's a glass ceiling; but there's also a sign on it that reads 'In Case of Emergency, Break'. And this was definitely an SOS situation.

New scientific studies reveal that the kind of face a woman finds attractive on a man can differ depending on where she is in her menstrual cycle. For example: if ovulating, a woman is attracted to men with rugged and masculine features. If menopausal, she's more drawn to a man… with duct tape over his mouth and a spearfishing harpoon lodged in his chest, especially if she's just been deceived, demoted or dumped by the ratbag.

So, don't judge me till you've heard my side of the story. It all started with a blast from the past. An old friend came back into my life and changed it forever – just as I'm about to change yours. So, in case karma doesn't slap your male nemesis in the face before you do, let this be your manual: the Ladies' Guide to Revenge.

It was a cold, rainy morning in March, International Women's Day, in fact. I was slumped at the desk in my cramped but cosy office, Dickensianly crammed to bursting with books, trying to write an article for a women's magazine about the joys of romantic love while distracted with despair over a credit card bill revealing that the father of my two children had frittered away yet more of my hard-earned dosh. I

thought I'd cancelled all our joint cards years ago, but I'd somehow forgotten about this one.

The Japanese method of decluttering encourages a woman to hold every object in her life and if it doesn't bring joy, throw it away. Did that count for lying, lazy, ne'er-do-well de factos, I thought to myself? I don't know if I was more upset by Lochie's lingerie purchases of lacy whatnots that I would never wear, his squandering of money on horse races I didn't get to cheer or his quaffing of magnums of champagne purchased to drown his gambling sorrows.

This time, my on-off partner of nearly three decades had not only taken the biscuit, he'd iced it, covered it with sprinkles and put a big fat cherry on top. It hurt every time I thought about my ex – like a nerve exposed to air. The hardest thing about a relationship break-up is picking your heart out of the trash while wearing a washing-up glove. In truth, I didn't miss him all the time – only the days when the sun came up. Whenever I did see Lochie, no matter how furious, I would just fall into his warm, sea-green eyes and my mind would turn to custard. For the sake of our kids, I'd often taken him back – well, in the past anyway. Proof that I should be in one of those Oliver Sacks books because clearly I have a rare head injury. But *No More*.

I logged on to my account and cancelled the card. I then clicked on to my emails to tell Lochie not to contact me again; the locks had been changed and I was putting our kids up for adoption. Would their ages of twenty and twenty-two be a barrier, I wondered sarcastically? Our daughter, Melody, is on the autism spectrum, so in reality would never cut the psychological umbilical cord; and I'd only just used

said cord to lasso my wayward son, Charlie, and drag him home from his backpacking gap year – sorry, *years* – and into higher education. Until last summer, he'd been busily flunking out of the University of Life with low grades. And dear God, did the boy need educating. I'd recently heard him describe 'Hollandaise' as the language of the Netherlands.

It was the kind of moment when, if I was partial to the odd sneaky ciggy, I'd have chain-smoked. But I had to make do with two chocolates and a little light seething while taking a cursory flick through my inbox. Amid the endless bills and requests to speak at far-flung literary festivals, a name sprang out at me: Jo Logan. Well now, that was indeed a blast from the nomenclative past. Intrigued, I clicked open the message. It was addressed to the three of us: Cressida, Penny and me – Matilda Divine. Scanning the page, I gleaned that Jo was a special effects supervisor on big budget superhero franchises in Hollywood and that she was coming back to London for the first time in thirty years to work on a film at Pinewood studios. She was suggesting lunch in Covent Garden for a long overdue catch-up.

I sat back in my chair. Crikey. How long had it been? The May Ball, Oxford, I deduced. That was the last time I'd seen any of the gang. The details blurred in my memory. All I could recall was an inebriated pinball around the cobbled streets and a row – a misunderstanding of some momentous kind, the wounds so bitterly divisive we'd had nothing more to do with each other. And it wasn't just the natural shift and drift that happens post-uni, when old pals get busy with jobs, flats, husbands, dogs… it was a real rift. But the details remained just out of my grasp – something to do with our band breaking up was all I recalled.

We'd met when answering an ad Jo had placed in the student mag for a girl band. After culling a heavy metal lead guitarist who could only play the same handful of songs in the same order ('OC/DC' we nicknamed her) and a keyboard player from a Christian rock band who was so bad I'd threatened to kill myself in order to complain in person, Louche Women was formed. And we were pretty good too. Jo had wanted us to get serious about a music career and take our little band big time. The female singers in Sleeper, Lush, Echobelly and Elastica were gazing unapologetically from the testosterone-soaked pages of the rock press. These women were sexy, but with their androgynous, alternative styling, they were sexy on their own terms – and she'd wanted us to join their subversive ranks.

We'd prevaricated – hell, you'd be hard-pressed to see more flip-flops on a beach in Ibiza – but in the end, Cressida, Penny and I had decided that music was too precarious a profession. It had broken Jo's heart.

Oh well, surely there'd been plenty of chardonnay under the bridge since then?

Jo's chatty email went on to say how much she was looking forward to seeing Penny: '… your own kickass daytime politics show! Wow! Bet you're nailing those toxic Tories' testicles to the wall.' And Cressida, '… four fabulous daughters and a house in Hampshire. You go, girl! Living the dream.' And me, '… still a super successful novelist, Tilly, I hear; the doyenne of domestic noir, right, pet?'

Pet? Living in LA hadn't diluted her northern ways then. I remembered then that she'd wanted to call our band 'Fannies Fear Nowt' but was overruled. Fuelled by curiosity and desperate for distraction, I replied 'Great. Can't wait!'

while thinking – how much weight can I lose by Friday and how much fleshy acreage will my kaftan actually successfully cover?

The following Saturday I was wafting into the Petersham Covent Garden restaurant in floaty floral chiffon, Spanx underpants cutting off circulation to both legs. Ahead of me, slim, trim, obsessively punctual Penny was already striding to a table for four. She was brisk and busy, running blunt nails through short-cropped hair while still working her phone. I took a moment to drink in my old friend. Penny had always sported a boyish bob, snapped off straight at the eyebrows. Her ash-blonde hair now boasted one magnificent Cruella de Vil streak of stylish grey. Her make-up-free face was still strong, with sharp cheekbones. It was an intelligent face that could sometimes stun you with a flash of raw beauty. She wore a practical, tailored trouser suit and brogues but, famed for her work as a war reporter, looked under-dressed without a flak jacket and armoured tank.

'Penny! Wow, you look great. Even better than you do on screen!' I enthused, while thinking, *No children or husband – that's explains the lack of bags under your eyes*. I'd just spent half an hour in the bathroom, trying to camouflage my own ocular luggage carousel with gallons of concealer.

Penny wheeled around to face me. 'Matilda! Holy shit, woman! How long's it been? You look really well.'

My heart sank. *Really well* – a euphemism for *Jeeezus, motherhood and Lochie-wrangling have definitely taken their toll.* I recalled Penny's coverage on International Women's Day just the week before, when she'd interviewed a psychologist who'd explained how cohabitation suits men much more than it suits women… 'Married men live longer

than single men, have less heart disease and mental problems, whereas single women live longer than married women and have less heart disease and mental problems…' Throughout the interview, Penny had looked more and more smug; gay, single and childless, the gal was clearly going to live till one hundred and fifty-bloody-seven.

'No need to bullshit me, Penny. I know I've piled on the pounds.'

'Stop it. You're a perfect weight.'

'Yeah… for a twenty-five-foot-tall woman. But so what? That's what kaftans were invented for, right?'

We sat down at the table in the big bay window, ticking through an itinerary of small talk – family, friends, work, parents… We hadn't got as far as ailments, or what my sexagenarian friends call the 'organ recital', when Cressida breezed in, flustered and mouthing an apology for being late, even though she wasn't. Her thick, blonde, highlighted hair swished from side to side as she walked towards us – swish, swish, swish… Nearby diners gave her the same up-and-down she always got, being five foot ten, slim but curvy, with creamy skin, the palest blue eyes and a succulent mouth with a picket line of tiny perfect teeth.

But it wasn't just Cressida's beauty nor the metronome swing of her hair and hips that made her so mesmerising. Hers was an iconic face from the 90s, due to a career-defining role in an early Danny Boyle movie (the nude scene, pearls draped across naked breasts like a belle époque courtesan, had become seminal – literally, considering the amount of onanism it inspired). Consequently, an excited ripple spread out about Cressy whenever she was clocked. Within moments, diners had paused mid-chomp to whisper

her name and look her way. It was like being friends with a traffic light.

Cressida's yellow dress fitted her to perfection, and she looked like a sunbeam in it. It was exquisite Italian silk; no doubt bespoke, worth more than my entire wardrobe – *including* the wardrobe, that is. With all eyes upon her, Cressy sat down at our table and scissored her lovely long legs.

'Don't judge me! I know I look awful. I sooo need to get my roots done.'

'Fuck off. You look fabulous,' Penny harrumphed.

I said something similar while secretly thinking, *I know I'm a feminist but, you bitch!* followed by *Are they your real eyelashes?* and *No wrinkles? – clearly you still don't work for a living, then.*

'Matilda, you look faaaaaabulous – doesn't she, Penny?'

Penny responded with a low wolf-whistle.

'Well, you two broads are looking rough as guts,' I replied, then beamed, just to remind them this was Australian for friendship.

'Love your outfit too, Tilly,' Cressida added, although I could tell from the expression of horror in her eyes that what she was really thinking was – *I don't know who made your costume but clearly somewhere in England there's a Ford Escort minus its seat covers.*

I caught sight of my reflection in the bay window. My red hair was piled Medusa-like atop my head and my body was swathed in enough material to slip-cover a small island. I raised a sarcastic eyebrow. 'You mean I don't have to quash my dream of making the cover of *Vogue*? No need to bullshit me, Cressy. Tell the truth. You've seen better-dressed lobsters.'

Cressida started to trill that this wasn't so, then abandoned the facade and laughed. After a series of mistimed kisses involving rouged cheeks colliding across the table, we three old friends settled back into our chairs, genuinely happy to see each other. I'd been nervously expecting a lingering tension, a friction that would smack of scorched hearts, betrayal and unfinished business… But all I felt was residual love and affection.

Still, my default position is chippy humour, so, after ordering a bottle of wine, I added, 'Well, this is like a noirish trope from one of my own novels. *An unexpected invitation heralds a murder mystery with personalities from the past assembled to expose skeletons in the cupboard and settle old scores in blood*… I just hope I'm not about to become a ghost writer, literally.'

Cressida and Penny gave a little titter, but the tinge of truth in what I said sent a small chill around our table. Why had Jo summoned us back together after all these years?

'If this were one of your novels, Tilly, what would be the pitch? *A reunion of four hugely talented young women who, in their early twenties, forged an intense and life-defining friendship*,' Cressida began.

'… *Only to see it crash and burn with disastrous effect*… Why *did* we fall out?' Penny asked, snapping off the end of a breadstick. 'Can any of you even remember? Something to do with the band breaking up…'

'It was so long ago…' Cressida mused, flicking her hair as though in a shampoo ad.

'It was probably over nothing. Or a *man*… Which amounts to the same thing, really,' I joshed.

Penny wasn't classically pretty, but oh, when she smiled

it was as if someone had turned on a light. And her smiles were hard to win. Caustic, sceptical, dry, wry, she never gave them away easily. Which is why I was so pleased to see the high wattage on display now. 'Exactly, Matilda! You should come join me on Team Tits!'

'So, Tilly, tell me, are you still with Lochie?' Cressy segued.

'The feckless poet… Surely a tautology?' Penny drawled.

I felt a prickling of embarrassment. No way did I want to admit my romantic failures, not on this, our first reunion. 'Come on, girls. It's no surprise I fell for a wild Highlander. Most British blokes can't get it up without wearing a nappy, lederhosen or a matron's uniform… and only then after being grabbed on the gonads by a gardening glove.'

They laughed. We were just slipping back into our old camaraderie like comfortable slippers. What had drawn us together in the first place was still there: dry humour, a touch of anarchy, political passion and, above all, a love of books and music.

With ethereal Cressida's flowing golden hair and soft femininity, Jo's jet-black bob and sporty, androgenous frame, Penny's bad-ass 'take no prisoners' feminist vibe and my bohemian, arty look, our band, Louche Women, could have been manufactured by some pop Svengali Simon Cowell type. But we weren't. We were the real deal. We'd felt part of a wave of women who were finally starting to break through Britpop's male-dominated brashness. I seemed to recall that there'd even been a whiff of a recording contract in the air?

'But Lochie…' Penny's voice brought me back into the present. 'Not just a poet, but a failed poet? That's scraping the bottom of the biological barrel.'

It was as if she had emotional X-ray eyes. I studied the

menu with pathological intensity, which prompted Cressida to pat my hand while jabbing a glare Penny's way.

'Um… he is the father of her two children, don't forget, Pen.'

'Sorry. Shit. Yes, Cress. You're right. Hey, in my next life, I want to come back with money and looks… instead of this sparkling, affable personality,' she joked. Penny had come to Oxford on a scholarship. Defensive about her council-flat upbringing, she'd arrived with not just a chip on her shoulder, but a whole *forest* of resentments. The woman basically made the Grinch look laissez-faire – traits that made her a fearless reporter and formidable interviewer but sometimes too brutally honest in the pal department.

'And what about you, Cressy?' I asked, letting poor Penny off the conversational hook. 'Still happily married to Rupert?'

'So happy,' she purred. 'It's nauseating how happy we are. Although he's threatening to leave me if I buy any more shoes.' She glanced down at her gold kid-leather high-heels. 'I really need counselling for shoe addiction. And yes, before you ask, the sex is still faaaabulous.'

Looking at Cressida, so slender, fair and delicate, I felt assailed by a consciousness of my own heavy clumsiness. 'My favourite sex fantasy of late is… a partner,' I grumbled. 'So shut up or I'm going to beat you to death with that stiletto of yours. Penny? Any love on your hormonal horizon?'

'Work. That's the love of my life.'

As we waited for Jo to arrive – and where was she? – the three of us agreed that we could each show one photo only of either a dog, a cat or a kid. We'd just started to exchange these photographic iPhone mementos when the wine arrived.

And with it, a man.

The stranger slid into the empty chair at our table, removed his sunglasses and zapped a smile in our bewildered direction. We three stared at him, doing a quick body scan. Handsome, tall, trim, well groomed, neat beard, designer shoes, bespoke suit, a confident demeanour and easy grace; it was the regulation 'silver fox' look, complete with requisite arresting, long-lashed hazel eyes.

I gave him a polite smile, the kind you'd give to a talkative crazed loner on the last Tube home from Piccadilly Circus. 'Sorry, mate. That seat's taken.'

Silver Fox simply leant back in his chair and dazzled us with another fluorescent beam.

Cressida re-scissored her legs, then purred in her most polished tones, 'Darrr-ling, flattered you find us so irresistible…' – there was a hint of flirtation in her tone, Cressida's default setting – 'but we're expecting a friend.'

'I know,' the stranger replied with poise. There was an intoxicating tang to his aftershave – something spicy, musky, alluring.

Impervious, Penny lasered him with her famous 'don't fuck with me' look – a look that had skewered many a blustering male politician, murderous warlord or corrupt businessman. 'Buzz off, buddy. Like my friend here said, we're expecting someone.'

'Yes, I'm aware,' came Silver Fox's cool reply, as he casually crossed an ankle over the opposite leg. 'You're expecting Jo… Jo Logan.' His Adam's apple rode up and down his throat like a little flesh elevator.

A suspicious hush fell over the table. Cressida and I exchanged a wary glance.

'How the *hell* do you know that?' Penny, her voice sharp enough to draw blood, lasered him with another look.

The man returned her gaze, unperturbed. 'Because I'm Jo. Or rather Joe… with an E.'

With the synchronicity of an Olympic swim team, all three of us swivelled simultaneously in his direction.

Cressy's eyes pinwheeled. Penny's eyes, which spent ninety per cent of any given day rolled to the back of her head, gave a hard stare as she tried to detect the features of our former friend beneath the manly stubble. I was also studying the stranger in forensic detail. Even though I'd never seen this man before, I felt a strange pulse of recognition.

'Can you really not place me?' the stranger asked, thumbing a microfibre cloth around the lens of his sunglasses.

I took in the rangy, athletic body and the loose-hipped, supple way he held himself, and a far-off bell rang. I took stock of the dimples, the deep-set amber eyes, not brooding exactly, but thoughtful, pondering… and then Jo suddenly came into focus, like a lens being turned.

Cressida leant forward, mostly with her neck – the human version of an Anglepoise lamp – to enable closer inspection and a more rigorous interrogation. 'Jo, is that really you?'

'All day, every day,' he/she grinned. 'But people call me Joseph now.'

We took a moment to drink in the apparition before us. The face was still like tanned leather, although it no longer stretched so tautly over the sharp cheekbones. There were thin lines around the bearded mouth, like parentheses, and finer lines radiating from eye corners, eyes that were still sharp and clear. The shrewd watchfulness also struck a

chord. But the jet-black hair was no more, replaced by a gunmetal silver grey, close cropped, like a marine.

'So, what…? You're Jo's brother?' Penny insisted.

'Nope. I'm Jo. Your old buddy.'

'Jesus Christ, that's one hell of a menopause,' I whistled. 'Your mo is so bristly it could clean the oven in *Withnail & I*.'

But nobody was listening to me right now.

'So, what… you've transitioned?' Penny probed.

'No. I'm just living as a man.'

Penny gave a startled blink. Cressy's sparse guileless eyebrows shot towards her hairline. My own full eyebrows have a lot of personality, and I could see in my window reflection that they'd become very animated and chatty now. 'Christ almighty, *Joseph*. There's a lot to unpack here.' I fluttered my fingers for the maître d'. 'Clearly, we're going to need a *lot* of cake. Waiter?!'

'But your Adam's apple…?' Cressida queried.

Jo touched a hand to his/her throat. 'Prosthetic.'

'But why?' Penny had gone into full interview mode now, her professional curiosity well and truly piqued. 'Why the hell are you living as a man?'

'One word,' Jo said succinctly in her new, deep, velvety voice. 'Revenge.'