

## Preface

# Rap Sheets

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I left school with the intention of being either a lawyer or a mistress of espionage. As I hate pain and can't keep a secret, I achieved only one of these ambitions. (Well, that's what I have to tell you . . . unless you use my code name, of course.)

Today, I am prosecuting myself. The case you must judge involves a moral dilemma. My role is to lay the evidence before you. What you must decide is simple – is it ever right to take the law into your own hands? Especially if you're a lawyer.

This is a tale of emotional breaking and entering and acute lust in the third degree. As well as these crimes of the heart, this is also a story of violence, vengeance and betrayal. But it's up to you to decide where to lay the blame and whether to find me guilty.

So firstly, let me introduce you to the witnesses and defendants in this immorality tale.

If I were to show you my own charge sheet it would read:

**Matilda Devine**

35, accident-prone mother of one and barrister-at-law, 5'7", red hair, green eyes, size ten – well, eleven after a chocolate binge.

**Convictions:** that my arch-rival and frequent opponent in court, Jack Cassidy, is an A-grade ratbag.

**Previous convictions:** that Jack Cassidy was an A-grade ratbag way back when I first met him at law school and he always will be.

If I were writing a rap sheet for Jack Cassidy it would read:

**Jack Cassidy**

38, barrister-at-law, tall, dark embodiment of handsomeness, fluent in three languages – English, Sarcasm and Flirtation.

**Convictions:** tried and found guilty of relationship hit-and-run.

Jack was a couple of years ahead of me when we were studying law at Oxford. I had the misfortune of briefly falling in love with him before realizing that his specialist area was lying and heartbreak.

Like some corseted, cosseted heroine from a Victorian melodrama, I was late to lose my virginity. It didn't happen till university. Which is a surprise, I know. I mean, what typical, tattooed, rock-and-roll-lovin', inner-city-London state-school boy wouldn't want a nerdy, flat-shoed female wimp who was always in the library studying Latin and jurisprudence? It defies logic, clearly.

It wasn't long before Jack carved another notch on his bedhead – a notch with my name on it. If only I'd discovered the cad was sleeping with three other women before I fondled his metaphorical gavel.

After Jack's carnal double-cross, I'd planned to devour a whole smorgasbord of blokes, but immediately drifted into a relationship with Steve. I was like a holiday-maker who arrives full of intentions to set out on scintillating sightseeing trips, then finds herself simply sinking into the empty sunlounger by the pool and ordering a pina colada. If I were writing a charge sheet for Steve it would read:

**Stephen Myer**

40, psychiatrist.

**Looks:** a charmer of the old-school variety, with a leather-elbow-patched poetic streak. Natural habitat – his study, sipping Burgundy and listening to a late Beethoven quartet.

**Traits:** on our first date he told me that he found long-term relationships to be as annoying and repetitive as bad wallpaper . . . Needless to say, we married shortly afterwards.

Well, accidentally falling pregnant sealed that deal. I did not want Portia (now thirteen) raised in a single-parent family, like me. Portia (named after Shakespeare's legal heroine rather than de Rossi) obviously can't have a rap sheet as she is completely innocent, beautiful and the light of my life. No, rap sheets are reserved for people like Petronella. If I were writing a rap sheet for Petronella it would read:

**Petronella Willets**

35, barrister-at-law, piranha in Prada.

**Looks:** blonde; Viking goddess. More groomed than a pedigree poodle at Crufts . . . Only much more bitchy.

When not in court, I tend to dress as though I've been hired to de-algae your aquarium. But Petronella Willets always looks sleekly elegant in black, pinstriped pencil skirts and

immaculate white shirts. While I tend to gobble down chocolate at any opportunity, health-nut Petronella has her own nutritionist and acupuncturist – hell, she probably has a faecalist who feng shuis her faeces. I refuse to spend a fortune on face creams, believing that the secret of great skin is to be, well, Mediterranean. But Petronella tends to have every tanned pore individually pampered.

The piranha's true antithesis is my mother. It feels strange to write a rap sheet for Roxy, as she's guilty of only one thing – an over-protective, lioness-type love for her family. But if I *were* to write her a charge sheet, it would read:

**Roxanne Devine**

55, but depends who's asking. If it's a toy boy, then she's approaching 40, only she doesn't say from which direction. My mother's appetite for men borders on the carnivorous. Her motto is 'Have Your Beefcake and Eat It, Too'. Her latest beau, a 30-year-old DJ, is so good in the sack that he regularly launches her into the stratosphere. She calls him Cape Canaveral. 'Let's do launch,' she texts him on a nightly basis . . . Which is way too much information for any daughter to cope with.

**Looks:** at five foot one and ten stone, she's a butterball, with skinny, miniskirt-clad legs tapering off into leopardskin wedges. Her wild, dyed-blond hair is piled high on her head in a skew-whiff beehive. My mother has the kind of walk that should always be accompanied by a brassy saxophone solo. She dances everywhere, with everyone – on tables, in aisles. And often in an alarming amount of gold lamé. Resilient, strong, indomitable – in other words, Australian.

**History:** if what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, then my mother is made of titanium. Roxy ran away from her conservative Irish Catholic family in Sydney to Britain aged

18, to take part in the anti-nuclear demonstrations. Here, she fell in love with an environmental activist called Danny. After a passionate three-year relationship, he told her he had to disappear for a while as the police were after him, but promised to send for her soon, as he loved her so deeply. It was after he'd gone to ground that Roxy discovered she was pregnant with me. Her strict, religious parents disowned her. She waited and waited, but Danny-boy never returned.

My sassy and sexy mother now maintains that men have only two emotions: hungry or horny. 'If you see him without an erection, make him a sandwich' was her only dating advice.

**Career:** heartbroken by my father's abandonment and determined that nobody would ever take advantage of her again, Roxy put herself through law school to become a solicitor. 'Making me self-tort', is her Twitter-profile legalistic quip on the subject.

My mother has 'Do Not Resuscitate' tattooed across her chest and, in case medics don't see the message, 'PTO' on her back. She's stipulated in her will that she'd like her ashes to be fired into the sky from a cannon. 'When I die, I want to be covered in scars, glory, scandal, totally zonked, declaring loudly, "What a bloody great ride!!!"'

When my husband, Stephen, a very smug non-smoker, nagged my mother to give up cigarettes, her response was to challenge him to a race up Parliament Hill. When he declined with the comment, 'That's so silly, Roxanne, at your age!' Roxy upped the ante and offered to smoke during the race. When Stephen arrived at the top five minutes after she did, my mother just couldn't resist lighting another fag from the one she'd sucked to the filter, and cackling, 'What kept you, possum?'

But I admit, my mother can be borderline too much of a

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good thing. The woman takes no prisoners – unless she’s performing a citizen’s arrest on a drug dealer or has tied a toy boy to her bed with silk stockings.

Her heart is pure gold. An old hippy, she grows her own vegetables, dispensing herbal cures to local crackheads and, as well as saving the orang-utan, lion and humble bumblebee, is a foster-parent for traumatized dogs. ‘Nobody wanted him. He’d been in the pound for ten years and yet he’s so adorable!’ Needless to say, what she sees as a harmless unloved pup, I see more as the Hound of the Baskervilles. And yet, although my mother and I are opposite in every way, we love Portia with equal passion.

As well as the main defendants in this case, there’s also a granny with a grudge, a few crims with testicular trauma and an entire den of thieves – and that’s just in my law firm. But one thing’s for sure. There’ll be a waterproof-mascara shortage after I’ve presented all the facts in this curious tale.

It all began two years ago, on the worst day of my life. When everything that *could* go wrong *went* wrong . . . and my world changed for ever.

# 1

## Courting Disaster

The question on most women's minds is – why doesn't chocolate go straight to your boobs? It may not be particularly Einsteinesque or existential, but it was definitely the question consuming me as I consumed my second block of Green and Black's hazelnut milk to alleviate the pain of losing my court case to my arch-enemy; my barrister's job at Diplock Chambers; my domestic stability; and quite possibly my sanity. And all on the same dismal day.

As I cracked open the silver foil on block number three, I tried to ward off despondency, depression and feelings of worthlessness by reminding myself that I was once the fastest, most victorious little sperm out of millions . . . But I was beginning to think of that as my one moment of glory. How had it come to this? That I, Matilda Devine, law graduate, feminist, voted Best Legs in law school (I feigned disdain while secretly thrilled), cryptic crossword queen and 33-year-old mother of an eleven-year-old darling daughter – would be curled up in the foetal position in my pyjamas,

crunching my way through an entire cocoa plantation while sobbing hysterically to Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* death aria.

The dreadful day began when I asked my husband, over tasteless organic cereal (*his* choice; Stephen says it's important to massage your bowels daily with bran flakes), what time he'd be joining me to watch our daughter, a tap-dancing cupcake, performing in the school musical. I was so excited about Portia's stage debut that only a Red Arrow fly-past would suffice by way of celebration.

Steve had grunted between spoonfuls that he couldn't make it, as he had to give a presentation at the Anna Freud Centre that evening.

My muesli-laden spoon stopped mid-air. 'At our wedding, the celebrant should have said, "I now pronounce you man and briefcase." You are married to your work of late, Steve.'

I waited for a response. I'd recently mentioned wanting another child, and all I'd seen of my husband since were his dark eyes glaring at me over the top of his *Psychology Today* magazine.

'You know how you're a shrink, Steve? Well, I think it might be time to book an appointment with yourself.'

Cue more glaring.

'A parent must always attend their child's school concert . . . whether you need the sleep or not,' I joked.

Still nothing.

Working from home seemed to assure Steve diplomatic immunity from all domestic chores, and so, as usual, I made Portia's breakfast, which she gigglingly referred to as her 'Freud eggs', found her sports kit, checked her homework, unpacked the dishwasher, folded the laundry, sorted the recycling and took out the rubbish, then did the school run before parking the car near Angel station and storming off to court, getting more and more steamed up on the Tube on the



way . . . Which is possibly why I lost my temper with the large, grey edifice that is Judge Jagers.

On this day, County Court 6 was the scene of a property dispute between two ex-spouses. I was representing a 26-year-old minor starlet from a reality-TV show who was being sued by her ex-boyfriend for the money he'd spent on her breast enlargements. He claimed that her new boyfriend was getting all the benefit.

Judge Jagers, who'd obviously graduated from Cambridge in Advanced Pomposity, was so blatantly dismissive of me all morning, rejecting my points of law and granting every challenge made by the claimant's barrister, that my blood pressure was soon reaching nuclear meltdown. Just before we broke for lunch, the judge interrupted my best point about possession being nine-tenths of the law to peer down his florid nose at me and boom in a voice dripping with condescension, 'Perhaps it would be useful if you undertook a refresher course at law school for a week.'

'This judge is about as *useful* as a solar-powered vibrator on a rainy day,' I whispered to my acned solicitor seated behind me. 'If he were any more moronic we'd have to water him once a week.'

Impetuosity. It's a trait I inherited from my Australian mother – the art of saying what you're thinking *without* thinking. I presumed I'd muttered my retort to the judge's outrageous comment in a discreet Rumpolesque aside. But judging by the machinegun-fire of laughter which erupted from the starlet, it was obviously a whisper that could be heard in the Outer Hebrides. When I'd first met my client, I'd reasoned that her survival in the reality-TV jungle (she'd beaten a fire-eating transsexual and a yodelling dwarf to win the competition) was because she could so easily escape by taking an inflatable-raft trip down the rapids on her own lips.

As she laughed, the disputed property – two round, creamy breasts nestled in low-cut, pale-pink silk ruffles – began to wobble so violently I was worried they might puncture, causing her to zoom around the court like a deflating party balloon.

But my client wasn't to laugh for long. Her merriment was quite abruptly curtailed when I lost the case and she was ordered to pay her ex £8,000 and his court costs. Even worse, the judge said he could charge me with contempt of court for calling him a moron. Even more upsetting, though, was the fact that I had lost the case to my arch-rival, Jack Cassidy.

It was the first time I'd encountered Jack since I'd graduated and been called to the Bar eight years earlier. Seeing him again, under these humiliating circumstances, I felt a strong call to another kind of bar – the one with swizzle sticks and swivel stools. (Try saying *that* when you're pissed.)

As Court 6 drained of people and the judge harrumphed off to call my Head of Chambers to complain, Jack winked at me. 'Well, I think Clarence Darrow can sleep soundly at night. The reason there's a penalty for laughing in court is because, otherwise, the jury would never be able to hear the evidence . . . Still, no one can ever accuse you of being dull, Matilda. You obviously haven't changed a bit.'

Chuckling lightly, Jack removed his springy lawyer's wig. I looked for any change in him. His thick mop of dark wavy hair now had a tinge of silver shimmering on his temples but other than that he looked just the same. As he shrugged off his long black gown, I gave my ex a good ocular going-over. Despite the fact that he held pride of place on my top-ten list of Least Likable Men on the Planet, after Mugabe, Putin and Rush Limbaugh, my insubordinate heart skipped a beat. The man must have been taking handsome lessons: he was looking lip-moisteningly better than ever.

Since moving back to London and joining Diplock Chambers, I'd heard that women stalked Jack Cassidy with everything except a net and a tranquillizer dart. I'd also heard that he'd sold out. Once, he'd been a radical student, but he had lost his socialism along with his distinctive Yorkshire burr. I had loved his accent. It sounded like syrup on sandpaper. But the man now had pinstriped principles to match his new velvet vowels. He used to be so idealistic that everyone had presumed he'd become a human rights lawyer or go to New York to run the UN. Instead, the man had developed a talent for rushing to the defence of the winning side. He was charming, debonair, lazy; his colleagues referred to him as 'Sir Lunchalot'.

'Why don't I take you out to lunch and give you some tips on how to manage your anger,' Jack suggested, loosening a few buttons at the top of his shirt.

'I wouldn't need to manage my anger, Mr Cassidy, if people would learn to manage their idiocy. That judge is a misogynistic cretin. He rejected every reasonable point I made while favouring every inane argument you dredged up.'

As I shed my robes, I felt his gaze running up my legs and body. I turned to meet his eyes just as they locked on to mine.

'Do you know the difference between a good lawyer and a great lawyer?' Jack said to me, smiling wryly. 'A good lawyer knows the law. A great lawyer knows the judge. Judge Jagers is so far back in the closet, you can see Narnia, a white witch and snow. I just batted my lashes at him – in a manly way – and he was mine.'

This kind of cynicism sums up everything I loathe about Jack Cassidy . . . That and the fact that he's seen me naked.

'What happened to you, Jack? I . . . well, *we* all thought you were going to stride the globe, righting wrongs, liberating

underdogs from their kennels . . . But you haven't exactly taken the world by storm. I think your "storm" got downgraded to "light drizzle". I picked up my stack of files. 'You're the one who should be accused of contempt of court, for the contempt with which you view your profession and your talent.'

I executed a pretty formidable flounce from the room, considering I was wearing high heels. Despite the fact that high heels make me walk like a dressage horse, I wear them in court to enable eyeball-to-eyeball contact with opposing, condescending male barristers.

'I like your shoes, Matilda . . . Of course, the reason men created stilettos is so that women feel good lying on their backs no matter what,' my narcissistic nemesis called after me.

Laugh, and the world laughs with you. Fall flat on your face, and the whole world laughs – whether you've grazed your knees and snapped one heel or not. If ever I'm a contestant on *Mastermind*, 'Humiliating Moments Witnessed by Jack Cassidy' will be my specialist subject. As I swivelled to zing back a stinging retort in his direction, I'd lost my balance in my stupid shoes and was now spreadeagled on the landing, halfway down the stairs.

The law of probability states that the likelihood of being watched is directly proportional to the embarrassingness of your action. Jack skipped lightly down the stairs to pick me up off the floor.

'You would be watching, wouldn't you?' I grumbled.

'Do you know what's behind every great woman? A man checking out her peachy posterior.' Jack winked.

I was very restrained. After all, I didn't stuff my broken stiletto up his nose. But, gathering my scattered papers, I was beginning to feel that the whole world was against me – which was totally irrational and paranoid. I mean, Sweden is neutral, right?

‘Have a good day,’ the security guard commented as I limped by. To say I was *not* having a good day was like saying that the members of the National Rifle Association are sane, rational, peace-loving liberals. But I should have stopped then and there to strap on a bulletproof bra, because, on this particular day, fate was clearly using me for target practice. It was only October, but London was already in the grip of a deep, early winter, with the sun hanging low among the bones of the trees.

Too dejected to take the Tube, I splurged out on a taxi. Alighting near Chancery Lane, I changed back into flat shoes before trudging through the rain to my Chambers. Lincoln’s Inn was built in 1422 by churchmen, who were the lawyers of their day. This explains why the picturesque squares and cobbled courtyards resemble medieval cloisters. But the vine-entwined arbours, fragrant rose gardens and graceful, four-square sandstone buildings with their arched windows and Juliet balconies belie the cut-throat struggles that go on within these ancient walls.

Word of my morning’s performance had spread like – well, like the genital lice which no doubt plagued the pious churchmen who once practised here. My Head of Chambers asked to see me the moment I had shed my coat, gloves and hat. I’d been on probation for a while now. Because I am nothing if not an amazing businesswoman, I’d actually made a loss in the last quarter. This was mainly due to the fact that I’d taken on too much work for free. As far as my Chambers is concerned, the terms ‘pro’ and ‘bono’ should be used only when referring to a penchant for the lead singer of an Irish rock band and not when working for free on Death Row cases in the Caribbean. My breast-implant-ownership case was supposed to have been a step towards landing more lucrative cases. But Judge Jaggars’ call, threatening to report me to the

Bar for unprofessional behaviour, proved the final nail in my commercial coffin.

Of course, my Head of Chambers, who has the sort of face you wouldn't wish on a bull terrier, didn't call it 'getting the sack'. Mr Phibbs, which was a perfect name for a lawyer so adept at bending the truth, referred to his request that I vacate Chambers as a 'career-alternative-slash-enhancement opportunity' and a chance to 'vocationally relocate'. Whatever way you looked at it, with my legal practice kaput, to continue with his euphemisms, I was now 'economically marginalized' and, with mortgage payments to be met, soon to be 'under-housed'. Unless my husband started to pull his financial weight, that is. Not only was Steve into his second year of researching some academic tome which would never sell, but he'd inherited his father's old Porsche and was spending a fortune fixing it up. He was committed to that car, in sickness and in health. I would go straight home and insist that he put his opus on hold and take on more clients. 'You have responsibilities now,' I would say. 'You have an unemployed wife and a car to support!'

I was halfway out of Phibbs's room when I turned back to throw myself on his mercy. I approached the large mahogany desk and the cold stare of its occupant in the hope of winning a stay of execution. But, if I really *had been* a spy, my code name would be 'Bloody Idiot', because my Head of Chambers interrupted my plea bargaining to remind me brusquely of the calibre of former members of the Inn, from Sir Thomas More and John Donne, to Prime Ministers Pitt the Younger, Disraeli, Gladstone and Thatcher . . . Was it any wonder that my boxes had to be packed? I was two months behind in Chambers rent and had until the next day to move out. A high-earning barrister who had applied from another Chambers was moving into my room forthwith.

Numb with disbelief, I descended into the fuggy air of the Tube. No more taxis for me. On Holborn platform, I just stood staring into the black tunnel waiting for the myopic eye of the train. A mouse twitched along the track. I momentarily envied his busy, purposeful little life down there in the semi-dark.

As the Tube hurtled me home to Islington, I steeled myself not to sob until I was wrapped up in the warm, protective arms of my husband. After all, the man was a professional. He knew how to cope with a person in psychological crisis. Despite everything, we had always taken comfort in each other's arms. I'd come home hurt from the small humiliations I'd endured in court to find Stephen burdened down by patients' complaints, and we'd somehow turn all that emotion into desire. Stephen's office is in the front room of our tall terraced house in Cranbrook Crescent. I knew from the communal calendar we keep in the kitchen that preparation for the Anna Freud event had required him to cancel that day's sessions – which is why I opened his closed door without knocking.

I'd always joked that psychiatry really is a terrible waste of couches. Well, my hubby obviously thought so, too, as he was putting his own couch to much more imaginative use. It was more bonkette than banquette, judging by the vigorous up-and-down motion of his pale buttocks. Stephen always said he'd married me because he admired my morals and integrity, and yet here he was, pumping away at a woman whose moral integrity couldn't be located by the Hubble telescope. Petronella Willets had been my room-mate at college. We'd been fierce rivals at law school, vying for the highest marks, and had kept in competitive touch ever since.

When my eyeballs stopped sending SOS signals to my cerebral cortex, I relocated the power of speech. I wanted to

say, 'That's all for today. Your allocated time is up,' or some other aloof spoof of shrink jargon, but instead heard myself shriek, 'What the hell, Stephen? What the fucking hell?'

I now watched in stunned disbelief as Petronella propped herself up on her elbows, her highlighted blonde hair streaming back from her face like the goddess at the prow of an invading Viking ship.

'I'm sorry you had to find out like this, Matilda,' she replied, with her carefully cultivated air of languor. 'But it's clear that you just can't give Stephen what I can—'

'What? An incurable genital disease?' Not my best line, but I hadn't had any chocolate at this stage.

'Why are you home so early?' Stephen said, as though it was me who was at fault.

'Why are *you* so lazy?' I retorted. 'I mean, if you wanted to have an affair, couldn't you have at least got dressed and strolled to the end of the street – instead of using any old thing that was *lying around the house*?' I said pointedly, glaring at Petronella. 'Get out!' I yelled at her. 'Get out of my home! And never come near us again.'

Neither of them moved. My college room-mate was still pinned beneath my husband like an exotic butterfly on an entomologist's board.

So much for selling Steve's vintage car to help with the mortgage. It was clear that Petronella was the type of woman who would lick his Porsche all over as part of their foreplay. And foreplay, after all, was her forte. I'd topped the year in the written Bar finals, but Petronella had pipped me at the performance post in the Advocacy exams simply by pouting provocatively at the aged male assessors who obviously required urgent counselling for lipgloss addiction. What I learnt back then is that when Petronella smiles at you for no reason, there's a reason.



## COURTING DISASTER

‘You have to choose right now, Stephen. Is it her or me?’

She smiled up at my husband, then they both went into Trappist-monk mode. I turned on my heel, scrambled into my car and drove straight to my mother’s modest little solicitor’s practice above a butcher’s shop on Camden High Street, sandwiched between a hairdressing salon and Oxfam. Roxy (she prefers to be called by her Christian name) mainly spends her time chasing fathers who haven’t paid their child maintenance, taking on local councils to help secure disability benefits or sorting out non-molestation and restraining orders for victims of domestic violence. Today, she might be advising me on how to claim that it was PMS that made me kill my husband and cut him up into teeny-weeny pieces.

## Till Homicide Do Us Part

'Promise me you won't say "I told you so,"' I announced, kicking her office door shut and flumping down on her sofa in a fugue of shock.

Roxy looked up from her case files. 'Of course not, possum. Now tell me everything . . .' I regaled her with my morning's woes. 'I told you so!' she erupted Vesuvially. 'That needle-dicked numbskull was never good enough for you, Tilly.' She was up and out of her chair with the speed of a ninja to wrap her strong, firm arms around me.

'Why has Steve done this to me, Mum?' I bawled, only it came out as 'Ughgg assteeve darn tumey mmeerm', as my face was firmly buried in her ample cleavage.

'Where is the snotty, swotty, piss-weak wanker?' Roxy finally broke the seal that suctioned me to her and started fossicking around in her voluminous handbag. 'I know I have a Taser gun in here somewhere.' Frustrated, she upended the bag on to her desk. A colourful detritus cascaded forth. Crossword puzzles, rape whistle, screwdriver, nail varnish, hair straighteners, handcuffs for work or pleasure, HRT

patches, a diamanté tiara ('Nobody can be mean to you when you're wearing a tiara, darls'), a hardback biography of Emmeline Pankhurst ('My secret weapon, possum. When it's Handbags at Dawn, I can bring a man down with a quick thwack to the side of the head'), organic dog biscuits, a silver vibrator, a capsicum spray, a Taser gun and flat shoes, for running between high-heeled appointments. 'How come they can put men on the moon but not invent a heel which goes up and down? I've already thought of a name for it – "The Social Climber",,' she told anyone who cared to listen.

'A vibrator, Mother? Really?'

'Well, you never know when you'll be at a loose end and in need of a little relaxation.'

I slumped my head into my hands. 'Do you think Steve is really going to leave me?'

'A beautiful, clever girl like you, Matilda? Never.'

My voice dropped to a despondent whisper. 'It takes two to make a single mother . . . Obviously, I wasn't enough for him.' A sob was lurking just behind my tonsils.

'That's ridiculous. You've busted a gut for that bloody man . . . Even though, to be honest, I've often thought you should be committed for ever loving a bastardly boof-head like him. The question is do *you* still want *him*?', she asked tenderly.

'I love him. He's the father of my child. And I love my family.'

'Men are so stupid. We really should take the "men" out of "Mensa".'

'The worst thing is . . .', I was really weeping now ' . . . Steve's a shrink. He knows what my greatest fear is.'

'Wearing a thong two sizes too small on a first date and cutting off all circulation to your whatnots?' my mother hazarded, in an attempt to raise my spirits.

'Turning into my mother.'

The wind went momentarily out of Roxy's monumental sails. 'Oh.'

'... When I was in the antenatal group, the health visitor asked me what was my biggest fear? And I said, "To turn out like my mother."' I blurted this out between huge, gulping howls. 'I'm sorry, Mum, but I don't want to bring up Portia the way you brought me up. I want a stable, normal home for my daughter, with bedtime rituals and Sunday roasts and a mother and a father. I'm a 33-year-old woman who's never met her dad. I have no idea what happened to him. I don't want Portia always to be looking for her father's hand to hold walking home from school or in the scary dark.'

I hadn't meant to cut my mother to the quick. It had all just tumbled out the wrong way. My mother retreated from me faster than if she'd caught her bra strap in a train door. She sat back down at her desk, deflated. She braved a smile, but it clung to her lips like biscuit crumbs. 'Baby kangaroos live in single-parent homes and they're pretty okay,' she said briskly. 'So, what are you planning on doing?'

'Nothing much. I just thought I might cry hysterically into my pillow and pray for the sweet release of death.'

My mother doesn't believe in feeling depressed. She will admit to the occasional bout of ennui, which is really just depression in a pair of satin mules and silk scanties. But she could knock ennui on the head after just one iddy-biddy night out with the girls, croaking karaoke, which is why she now said, 'Well, aren't you the most adorable black hole of need! Yes, Stephen's behaving like a selfish prick, but you are of pioneer stock.'

'But if Steve leaves, how do I pay our mortgage? And Portia's school fees? My Head of Chambers has asked me to vacate the premises. And I can't afford the fees to set up in any other Chambers. I can't even think of any set of

Chambers that would offer me a seat right now. Not with my reputation of late and my low earnings.'

'Oh, possum, I wish I could offer a more effective remedy than a hug, a barbecue and a bedroom. But these, at least, are yours,' Roxy said. Although my mother lives in a modest Georgian cottage in a Camden backstreet, her heart, meals and generosity are enormous. 'We'll go and see Portia being a tap-dancing cupcake, then you'll both stay the night. We'll watch silly movies, eat ice cream, drink plantations of my home-grown camomile tea and reassess in the morning. Okay, darl?'

I passed the night in a fog. I woke from a fitful sleep with a hangover – only I hadn't drunk anything the night before. It was as though my heart had indigestion. I booted up my laptop and checked my inbox, hoping for hand-wringing apologies from both Steve and Petronella. But the only email I'd received was one of those 'Ten Reasons Not to be Depressed' lists encouraging me to send it on to ten of my closest friends and colleagues. Sadly, I could think only of my psychiatric doctor husband . . . and the woman whose temperature he'd been taking with his fleshy thermometer.

When I sloped into the kitchen on the hunt for coffee, my mother clapped her hands in joy.

'I've had a brainwave!' She poured out espresso and dished up Danishes. 'If Diplock Chambers really have been stupid enough to throw you out, why don't you join my law practice? The fees are modest. And legal aid is a pittance. But there's enormous satisfaction to be had from helping the locals. Leaving that stuffy, uppity Chambers of yours could be a blessing in disguise. It's not as though you were happy there.'

I looked at my mother. Was early senility setting in? 'Mum, it may have escaped your notice, but you're a solicitor and

I'm a barrister. Your job is to liaise with the client. Mine is to represent them in court.'

'Exactly. So why not offer both legal services under the one roof?'

I took a scalding sip of my espresso. 'That's ridiculous. It would be like a specialist surgeon setting up shop with a GP.'

'Yes. And imagine how time-saving that would be.'

'But Mum, it's not the done thing.'

My mother rolled her iridescent, green-lidded, thickly mascaraed eyes. 'Oh, how I hate that British expression. Once we do it, it's done, so then it is "the done thing".'

'Mum, huge solicitors' firms can hire a barrister inhouse, but a two-person joint practice doesn't make sense as a business model,' I said, practically. 'Plus it would create so many ethical problems. I mean, think of the dilemmas. Solicitors get too close to their clients. Especially you, Roxy.'

'And you barristers don't get close enough. Especially you, Matilda,' she retaliated. 'Your trouble is, you keep trying to fit in, when you were born to stand out. Ours could be a law practice where we champion only women's causes.'

'Mum, I love you, but we could never work together. Apart from yesterday's backchat to the judge, when my inner monologue somehow bypassed my firewall of British courtesy, I'm a stickler for the law, while you break all the rules.'

'Which means we would complement each other perfectly. I want to be the patron saint of fallen women.'

'Did they fall? Or were they pushed?' I commented bitterly.

'You see? Even though our approach to the law is very different, darl, we do both agree that it's a man's world and that the bastards get away with it far too often. I mean, women still don't have equal pay. Plus, we're getting concussion from hitting our heads on the glass ceiling.'

'I know – and we're s'posed to clean it while we're up there.' Despite the fact that my mother sounded like a bumper sticker, I couldn't help but join in.

'Exactly. Which is pure bloody heaven compared to what happens in the developing world, where women are fed last and fed least.'

'Apparently, a billion women will be beaten up or killed by men during their lifetime. That's one in three.' I shuddered, clearly going for first place in the Long-distance Cross-bearing competition.

Roxy beamed. 'You see? Yes, we're opposites, but we're united in our desire to help women who've been cheated, abused, abandoned, bushwhacked or just plain buggered up by blokes . . . We could call it the "All Men are Bastards Bureau . . . Except George Clooney Who Is Crumpet" . . . Or what about the "Charlie's Fallen Angels Agency".'

'Or the "Wash that Man Right out of Your Hair Organization",' I riffed. '"The hair you will never again have to wax".'

"Goddesses R Us",' Roxy enthused, pouring more coffee into my cup.

"Pest Control for Love Rats" . . . Or, better still, "Love-rat Fumigation Services".'

"Lady Godiva's Chambers . . . Only We ain't No Ladies".'

I laughed for the first time in twenty-four hours – although, admittedly, it was the sort of laugh that goes with a strait-jacket and incessant hair-braiding.

'So what do you say?' my mother prompted. 'Take a risk for once. You always take the safe option. That's why you married Stephen. And look how well *that* worked out.'

Talk of Steve brought me back to earth with a thud. I checked the clock. It was time to get Portia up for school and then win back my errant husband, if only for the sake of our

darling daughter. I adore my mother, but she's not a good influence. Roxy is a let-them-eat-cake-in-the-bath-type granny, meaning that I have to be the uptight one who is always banging on about broccoli. Roxy always babysat if I had a case on and Steve was away at a conference. Portia, at only eleven, already seemed to be taking after her maverick and mischievous gran. I love my mother, don't get me wrong, but sometimes, distant relatives are the best . . . and the more distance between you the better.

'Oooops. Look at the time. It's school o'clock. Thanks for the offer, Mum, but no thanks.' After breakfast, I buckled my daughter into my sensible car, an A-class BMW which, I admit, does look a lot like an orthopaedic shoe, but at least it won't crumple like a cigarette packet upon impact. I glanced back at my mother's house. It was the last in a row of crooked little cottages leaning secretively in together around a communal garden. Each door is painted a different colour – mauve, pink, green, pistachio, peach – like a row of doll's houses in a toyshop. It was time to go back to the real world. Of late, life had been giving me a ride as though it were a bucking bronco. I left, determined to rein things in.

The most dangerous thing about being thrown from a horse is to avoid a kick in the head from a flying hoof. In my case, I most definitely did not see it coming. It wasn't until I'd dropped Portia at school and paused at a supermarket cash machine that I discovered our joint account had been cleaned out. And that wasn't all. When I walked into our three-storey red-brick Victorian house, I found that all Stephen's possessions were missing. And many of our shared things, too. Apparently we didn't even have joint custody of the coffee-maker.

You must be asking yourself how I could not have noticed



that my husband had fallen in love with someone else. But he hadn't taken up any strange new hobbies that kept him out at night or at weekends. Nor had he started taking his phone into the shower. Or using two phones . . . Although, now I thought about it, he had started a new grooming regime and his sexual repertoire had suddenly extended. Plus, there had been an upgrade in the underpants department. And so many 'conferences' requiring overnight stays . . .

How long had it been going on? The note he'd left said *'I'm clearly having some kind of mid-life crisis. I know it's clichéd. Especially given my profession. [You're right there, mate. Who did you train under? Dr Seuss?] I just need some space. [The space between Petronella's thighs, obviously.] Tell Portia I'm sorry. It's not her fault. I'll be in touch soon. Will pay you back when I can.'*

Sifting through a flutter-click snapshot of our marriage – my accidental pregnancy, his grudging agreement to become a father, his slow drift away from us, I was well on the way to demolishing a fourth block of Lindt chocolate when Roxy arrived. I heard her before I saw her. My mother drives an MG Midget, which she bought at a bargain price because it doesn't go in reverse and sometimes the soft top gets jammed halfway up or down. At five foot one, my mum is so short, oncoming drivers can't see anything but her hands gripping the wheel. She careers around London's streets like the headless horsewoman. I've tried to convince her to drive a sensible car. But nobody tells my mother what to do.

'Did that mongrel really take all your money?' she said, bursting through my door like a gun-slinger in a Wild West saloon, only vertically challenged and in lime-green leopardskin.

'I inserted my card into the cash machine and it just laughed and spat it out.'

‘That mingy, stingy, two-faced dog turd. How can he have a mid-life crisis when he’s clearly never left puberty?’ Although she wasn’t really all that surprised. Roxy was burnt so badly by my father’s disappearance that her philosophy has always been: If everything’s going well, you have obviously overlooked something. Her immediate solution was to refloat our joint legal venture. ‘Your life’s going down the gurgler, love. How else are you going to pay your bills, Matilda?’

‘Something will turn up.’ I’ll say it again. I love my mother. But the chances of me setting up in practice with her were as likely as King Herod being asked to babysit.

Diplock Chambers at Garden Court was expecting me to collect my belongings. The humiliation was so overwhelming I was tempted to call the clerks to explain that I wouldn’t be able to make it in today, due to the fact that I was deceased. But I fortified myself by eating my own body weight in brownies, then plodded out to my car. A chill wind burrowed into my skin like a worm. Teeth chattering, I drove on automatic pilot, down through Clerkenwell to Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

It was here, in 1586, that Babington, the man who tried to assassinate Elizabeth I, was hanged. (In those days, justice came with strings attached.) Babington’s body was then drawn and quartered, which involved extracting his entrails and burning them before his goggling eyes. The punishment proved so gruesome, the stench of burning bowels so overwhelming, that Elizabeth mercifully allowed Babington’s thirteen accomplices merely to be hanged. Well, today I knew just how old Babington must have felt.

I slunk into Chambers unnoticed. I was knee deep in half-full cardboard boxes when I heard a knuckle rap on wood as the door snapped open.

‘Why do you bother knocking when you just barge right in anyway?’

‘I was hoping to catch you unawares, preferably changing into a bikini,’ said Jack Cassidy.

‘In the middle of an arctic London winter . . . Right.’

‘A boy can dream. There are many people I would pay money not to see naked. You are definitely not one of them. From what I remember from our student days, that is . . .’

I felt a hot colour rising on my neck. Even though my mother walks around naked all the time – scaring neighbours, Jehovah’s Witnesses and pollsters – I am more the Loch Ness Monster of nudity, but there are *no* sightings. I haven’t even seen *myself* naked. Which made the memory of my first encounter with Jack Cassidy on the streets of Oxford even more nail-gnawingly humiliating.

‘I believe the police report stated that a pretty eighteen-year-old woman, stark naked with a traffic cone on her head, had been arrested,’ Jack reminded me. ‘Her defence was that she was fresh out of the shower and had darted on to the secluded private balcony of her ground-floor student room to retrieve a drying towel . . . Only the towel had blown away. Then the balcony door slammed and locked behind her. When banging and yelling didn’t rouse her fellow students, she feared hypothermia and so scaled the small brick wall and grabbed the nearest cover, which just happened to be a rubber, cone-shaped roadside bollard, which she put on her head to hide her identity before darting down the lane and around to the front of the building to frantically ring the bell . . . It was then that the traffic cone slipped down and she found herself wedged in the “Keep Left” sign and then got lost.’

I busied myself packing up another box of my possessions so that he couldn’t see my discomfort. Of all the people to bump into naked with a traffic cone on your head, the fickle Fate Fairy would make sure it was Jack Cassidy, wouldn’t

she? Although Jack did manage to convince a suspicious policeman that he should not arrest me for indecency . . . but simply hold my coned head while Jack wrapped me in his jacket, before tugging at my bare legs to set me free. I was so discombobulated with gratitude that I accepted his invitation to dinner – an experience which proved so deliciously, decadently, erotically pleasant that, three weeks and ten dates later, I gave him my briefs – the lacy, not the legal, kind. Over the next month we basically became human origami – well, orgasmic origami, really.

I was well and truly in love by the time I found out that he'd had three wives already. None of them his own. Turns out Jack Cassidy had bedded one female professor on campus and the wives of two others.

'In retrospect, knowing the exact location of all officers of the law within the immediate vicinity is obviously the minimum precaution one should take before exposing one's genitalia to the elements,' I said to him now, in my crispest tones. 'And I thank you for assisting me. But there's been a lot of sewage under the bridge since then. So, did you come here for any purpose other than to gloat?'

'Well, from what I hear on the grapevine . . . the sour-grape vine . . . your husband has absconded with all your money and your college rival, Petronella Willets, who, unlike you, is in great demand at the Bar. Not only has she not been sacked from her Chambers but it's rumoured she's about to get Silk.'

'Being an unmitigated failure is not as easy as it looks, you know.'

'Is it true? About your husband?'

I felt a sharp pang of embarrassment that word of my marital humiliation had travelled so fast. 'Let's just say Stephen flunked the practical exam for his marriage licence,' I replied glibly.

‘What a bloody idiot . . . Anyway, I just thought you could do with some help.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Fine? Really? Remember, you don’t have a traffic cone on your head right now, Matilda. I can see your face, you know.’

My cheeks were now blazing red, two expressionist splotches of colour. ‘Okay, I admit it. Things are a little fraught . . .’

‘In the circumstances, “fraught” reminds me of that British chap who was asked what the Second World War was like and said: “My dear, the *noise*. And the *people*.”’

‘All right already. “Fraught” may be an understatement. Sadly, no one at present seems to find offering me a full-time job absolutely necessary. But something will turn up.’

‘Yes. Me. That’s what I came here to tell you. I could smooth the way for you to join my Chambers.’

‘Regal Helm Chambers? Don’t be ridiculous. I could never afford the rent.’

‘I could pay your rent until you established yourself. For the amusement value alone it would be so worth it.’ He grinned.

I stopped packing and turned to appraise the man who had tricked me out of my virginity. Maybe he had changed? Perhaps I was looking at a Born-again Human Being. I knew for sure there was a kind side to the man. When we were dating he never passed a woman with a pushchair without helping her up or down the stairs. He’d emptied his wallet for beggars on numerous occasions. And I felt sure there’d been a sponsored goat in a village in Africa somewhere. ‘Really? You’d do that? Pay my Chambers rent until I get on my feet again?’

‘Yes . . . If you’ll agree to go out with me.’

I placed my hands over my ears. ‘Hear no evil, see no evil, date no evil.’

‘Contrary to popular feminist belief, not all men are hideous bastards, Matilda.’

‘Yes, you’re right. Some of them are dead.’

‘Seeing you again yesterday morning – well, it really stirred me. You broke up with me at Oxford before we even got started.’

‘Well, that’s because you’d obviously *started* with so many others. I gave you my heart, not to mention other parts of my anatomy, only to discover that you were also sleeping with a professor and two professors’ wives, while also shackled up with a gym-junkie aerobics instructress. Which reminds me, have you ever noticed that I’m not your type? I didn’t make it to the gym today. That makes it, oh, ten years in a row.’

Jack gave the kind of cavalier, lusty laugh last heard in a swash-buckling Errol Flynn movie. ‘You are absolutely my type, Tilly. Curvaceous, clever, crinkly-eyed . . . did I mention curvaceous? Won’t you give me a second chance? We were young. I was a hot-blooded male.’ He twinkled. ‘Can I help it if women fall at my feet?’

‘Only when you get them drunk first . . . You led me on and lied to me.’

‘I was just pandering to the macho, immature lad-culture of the time.’

‘Hang on a moment while Jack Cassidy passes the buck. You are a World-class Champion Buck-passer, you really are. Why are you staring at me like that?’

Jack was giving me a curious look – a look I couldn’t quite read. Could it be a look of remorse, I wondered, astounded.

‘I’m just remembering you naked . . .’

‘And I’m remembering you with scruples. I suppose a scruple would be out of the question, Jack Cassidy? By the way, here are your eyeballs. I found them in my cleavage.’

‘You’re judging me so harshly that you’re starting to look

underdressed without a guillotine and some Madame Defarge knitting needles. I'm not a bad person, Tilly. I give to charity. I help old ladies across the street. I open doors for women . . .'

'It may have escaped your notice, Jack, but women no longer want men to give us their seats on the bus. We want them to give us their seats on the board. We want positions of authority.'

'I seem to remember your favourite position. Lying back against a satin pillow while I kiss you slowly from top to toe . . .'

'Do you know my favourite position, Jack?'

'Tell me. I'm intrigued . . .' he positively purred.

'Supreme Court Judge. I fully intend to make it to the top, you know.'

Jack couldn't disguise his amusement. He guffawed. The full throwback-of-the-head snort. 'If only that train of thought had an engine . . . You see? This is why I like you. You make me laugh so much. Which is why I think we could be so good together. I'm flying off to Dubai next week on a lucrative arbitration case. Why don't you come with me? You could act as my junior.'

'How tempting. A hot, sweltering city . . . standing on the edge of a cultural desert. What happened to you, Jack? You had so much potential. Yet you've ended up working for oil barons and despots.'

'Ambition is a poor excuse for not having enough sense to be lazy. Hard work pays off in the future. Laziness pays off right now. I'm still good at deal-making, though. Join my Chambers and I'll lend you as much money as you need. Let's finish what we began all those years ago.' The hand he placed over mine was warm. The air between us crackled.

I shook him off. The best way to deal with him was to

channel my inner Roxy. 'Did I mention the kick in the balls you're going to get if you look at my breasts one more time?'

'You don't just bite the hand that feeds you, you rip off the whole arm at the shoulder. How do you think you're going to survive in the big, bad world, Matilda? I also hear you have a daughter to take care of – which means school fees. And a mortgage. Mind you, I like dating a homeless woman – it's so much easier to get her to sleep over.'

'I'm going to set up a practice with my mother.' The words were out of my mouth before I'd fully formed the thought in my brain.

'Don't be ridiculous. Your mother's a solicitor. That would be like having a GP and a surgeon in the same office.'

'Yes. And imagine how time-saving that would be.'

'But it's not the done thing.'

'Once we do it, it's done, so then it is the "done thing",' I heard myself say.

'You'll be the laughing stock of the Bar.'

'I'm tired of trying to fit in when I was born to stand out.'

'Oh, well, I suppose it doesn't really matter.' Jack creased up. 'I mean, it's only your career.'

'We're going to champion women's causes and nail the knobheads who have blighted their lives.'

He was really laughing now – big, rich, rolling belly laughs.

'Do you know what, Jack? There is so much less to you than meets the eye. Just watch this space. Devine and Devine. So heavenly, they named us twice. The world's first two-person, mother-daughter, solicitor-barrister, boutique feminist law firm. We are going to make legal history. And we're going to make a hell of a success of it.'

Twenty minutes later I was climbing the warped stairs to my mother's Camden office.



'Where's Roxy?' I asked the gaggle of clients in the small waiting room.

'She just took off for a nooner with the local butcher,' said an Aussie guy on crutches nonchalantly.

I gasped. Not because she'd left complete strangers here in her workplace unattended, but because I knew it was a distinct possibility.

I power-walked the two blocks to my mother's house and leant on the bell till she answered, all dishevelled, lipstick smeared and smelling slightly of pork.

'"Pandora's",' I announced. '"Thinking outside the box".'

'Pandora's! I love it!' she shrieked, crushing me into a bear-hug.

We laughed and embraced there on the step, our breath sending up smoke signals in the icy air. My mouth had signed me up to Britain's first two-person, mother-daughter, solicitor-barrister boutique feminist law firm . . . and the rest of me was now forced to follow. But it felt good. It felt exciting. Mother and daughter setting up a law practice together. I mean, how hard could it be?