

THE REAL
LIDDY JAMES



ANNE-MARIE
CASEY

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HODDER

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For Joe, always

And all the while, I suppose, he thought, real people were
living somewhere, and real things happening to them . . .

Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

THE REAL
LIDDY JAMES

A FIG TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN



Liddy knew Mrs. Vandervorst had been crying because she emerged from the corridor bathroom with her sunglasses on. There had been some confusion over timing, a not unusual occurrence during the holiday season, and Mrs. Vandervorst had arrived alone, so Liddy solicitously accompanied her to the conference room and settled her into a velvet upholstered armchair with a cup of camomile tea, which she had made in a white china teapot with loose buds, not a bag. The buds bloomed into pretty white flowers floating on the surface of the pale yellow liquid and the sight of this seemed to calm Mrs. Vandervorst, who sank back into the cushions a little and sipped slowly. Liddy hoped the woman would gather herself before the meeting began. She did

not want any scenes this afternoon—accusations, counteraccusations, sordid marital mudslinging. Drama inevitably delays everything. She had a twice-postponed interview with the *Times* at four that afternoon.

“What color is this?” said Mrs. Vandervorst, looking at the walls.

“It’s one of those fancy country house colors. Mist on the Heather, it’s called, or something like that.”

Mrs. Vandervorst took off her sunglasses. Underneath, her eyes were stubbornly ringed white with ill-matched concealer, but the telltale bloodshot around her pupils remained.

“I like it,” she said. “It’s very soothing.”

Liddy smiled. It was not the first such comment and she found it gratifying. Before she agreed to join Oates and Associates, in addition to the usual stock allocation, health coverage for her extended family, and use of a driver on weekends, she had insisted upon a supervisory role in redecorating the offices and had been delighted that her arrival as a senior partner coincided with the expiration of the lease on the macho marbled space on Fifth. She had found this town house on East Sixty-first through a client, another forced sale after the demise of a third marriage of unseemly haste, and set about refurbishing it in the manner of a boutique hotel or luxury *gîte*, probably one in the south of France but with American owners so the faucets didn’t screech like injured animals when turned on. The other partners scoffed at the discussion of a “color palette,” but Curtis Oates, founding partner and pioneer in the new world of extreme prenuptial agreements (compulsory face-lifts, monthly threesomes, or custody of children along

gender lines, *no problem*) had dropped into her office one evening brandishing a line drawing from the Hirst studio as a thank-you.

“Very clever, Liddy,” he said in the raspy Humphrey Bogart voice he had affected as a teenager because Leonora Mott, the object of his affection in 1971, had told him it was sexy. “You got a lotta class, kid.” (Liddy knew this; she had worked hard to acquire it.) “Make ’em relax before we screw ’em.”

Liddy turned to Mrs. Vandervorst and hoped she was relaxing, for she was certain to be screwed.

“Are you all right?” she asked, and meant it.

Mrs. Vandervorst looked straight at her. She had the sorrow under control now and so, left with disbelief, she kept digging the nails on her left hand into her palm hard, as if she could wake herself up.

“How do I get rid of his name?” she said. “I can’t take it off like the rings.”

Liddy glanced at the enormous pink diamond on the other woman’s finger and, mentally scanning through her list of Mr. Vandervorst’s demands, thought, *He wants the ring, my dear, the name he doesn’t care about, because it didn’t cost him anything.*

“You go back to your maiden name,” she said.

Mrs. Vandervorst thought about this for a moment.

“I don’t remember who Gloria Thompson was.”

Liddy looked away to see if anyone had appeared in the corridor (Mudlark Blue on the walls, an arrangement of vivid poinsettias on a side table).

“*How can you do this to me?*”

“Sorry? . . .” Liddy was not sure if she had heard something or

not. Mrs. Vandervorst had whispered, as she was a woman frightened of her anger and she did not want to cry again.

“Are you a mother, Ms. James?”

Liddy assumed her default low-register professional voice, designed to convey understanding as well as authority. “Yes, I have two sons.”

“Then don’t take my children away. They need me.”

“Mrs. Vandervorst. They need their parents. A shared custody arrangement is *not* taking your children away.”

Liddy glanced up at the corner of the room where a concealed camera, ostensibly for security purposes, videotaped all exchanges in case of a later dispute. *Perhaps conversation had been a mistake*, she thought.

“I’m going to find out where your attorney is,” she said, moving to leave.

Mrs. Vandervorst stood up too quickly, and the chamomile flowers in the bottom of her cup spilled onto the cream hand-knotted silk rug.

“It’s *Christmas*, Ms. James, it’s my religious holiday. I want the children. My youngest, Karl. He’s only four. He barely knows his father. My husband travels for weeks on end and Karl cries when I’m not there. *Liddy*, you must work all hours. You know what it feels like to hear your child begging you to stay—”

Liddy turned. She was not frightened of her anger. Her eyes went beady and cold and her nostrils flared imperceptibly.

“Having reviewed your domestic arrangements . . . *Gloria* . . . I fear that a woman who left a lucrative job to bring up her children but who has availed herself of maternity nurses, day and

night nannies, weekend housekeeping, and homework assistants for the past fifteen years can hardly claim to have devoted her entire existence to them.”

“I didn’t want it to be like that.”

“Then who did? You say your husband is never there.”

“I suffered from exhaustion after the twins.”

“Yes. I understand you took a two-month recuperative break to a spa in St. Barts, where you improved both your health and your doublehanded backhand.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

The change in tone was so abrupt that Liddy almost cheered. Clearly Mrs. Vandervorst had suddenly remembered who Gloria Thompson was: the brightest girl in her high school, a woman who spoke four languages including Russian and had an MBA.

Gloria realized that somewhere on Liddy’s computer might be a JPEG file containing photos of her in white shorts with Carlos, the tennis coach, copies of her biweekly therapy bills, and, perhaps most worrisome, recordings of a series of ill-advised messages she had left on her husband’s phone late at night that, if judiciously edited, might make “unstable” sound like an understatement.

“That’s why your husband hired me,” said Liddy, and headed for the door, where she paused. “I understand how you feel, Mrs. Vandervorst. You want to savage him and I probably would too, but believe me, the price of going to court is too high—and I don’t mean the eight hundred dollars an hour you’re paying Gillespie, Stackallan and Ross.”

She gestured toward the table. “If you want to use the phone, you press extension one.”

Liddy glanced at her watch as she marched up the corridor: 3:25.

“Where the hell is everybody?” she yelled into the reception area, where an enormous fir tree decorated entirely in white lights and silver bells twinkled splendidly. There was no reply save an extraordinary honking laugh that Liddy realized was emanating from her new paralegal, Sydney Grace, a young woman who had given no previous indication that she had any sense of humor at all. Sydney was doubled over in hysterics, her right hand clutching the sleeve of a long coat of dark color worn by the extremely tall man beside her, her left brushing a few stray snowflakes from his shoulders.

Liddy turned to the window in surprise. Outside, the first proper snow of winter was falling, and Liddy remembered there were seasons, and that she had not been aware of them for about six years, since her life had changed, since she began moving between office and home by luxury car, since weather became something she looked out of a window at.

“Did I miss something?” she said. Sydney looked up and opened her mouth, but Liddy spoke first. “Hello, Sebastian.”

The tall man in the snow-flecked dark coat turned to look at her. “Hello, Liddy. I’m here to divorce the Vandervorst,” he said with a wink at Sydney, who scurried back to her desk collapsing into giggles once again. “I know you were expecting Mr. Gillespie, but he’s got food poisoning—a dodgy oyster over the weekend—so I drew the short straw.”

At this moment, Curtis appeared in the doorway of his office,

grinning in anticipation. “Top o’ the morning, Mr. Stackallan. How are you?”

“I’d rather be negotiating a ransom with pirates in the Malacca Straits,” Sebastian replied.

“Thank you,” said Curtis, genuinely gratified, before ducking back inside again.

From somewhere a tinny version of “Danny Boy” started playing. Sebastian began first patting the pockets of the coat, then his Donegal tweed suit (authentically matted with what could have been wolfhound hairs), until he located the iPhone tucked into a red sock beneath the bicycle clip on his right leg, above his brogues. He pulled it to his ear, his attention caught by the row of legal certificates lining the wall, in particular the one for a certain Lydia Mary Murphy.

He glanced at Liddy.

“Excuse me, Lydia Mary,” he said.

“No one’s allowed to call me that, apart from my parents. It’s Liddy . . . or *Ms. James*,” Liddy replied, but Sebastian Stackallan turned away to take call, “Hello, Gillespie?”

Liddy took the moment to consider how annoying she always found him. And not in an *adorable* annoying way, not in a way sizzling with sexual attraction like the setup of a Preston Sturges movie or *Much Ado About Nothing*. She looked at his green tie, patterned with tiny shamrocks, knotted roughly beneath the face of a Celtic poet, with an aquiline nose and a sensitive mouth. She saw the one graying forelock of his jet black hair that he flicked absentmindedly away from his blue-gray eyes, his complexion so

palely handsome that he seemed permanently to be in black and white.

No, she disliked everything about him, because she was a woman who lived in the vivid color of a constantly reinvented present, and she distrusted those who clung to an idea of a caste or the past. Sebastian was a foreigner's caricature of a sensitive, sexy Irishman and Liddy had learned in seventh-grade writing class that cliché always diminishes what it describes.

"Yes, I understand . . . *Holy Jaysuz, man, see a doctor!*" he was saying as he held the telephone away from his mouth. Liddy and Sydney heard violent retching before he hung up.

"It seems our client wants to agree to your client's proposal," he said, fixing Liddy with his blue-gray eyes, his stare no longer pale but icy.

"Shall I take you to her?" she replied, returning his gaze with wide-eyed innocence, unleashing her killer wide-toothed smile. She gestured for him to follow her down the corridor, where he might perhaps appreciate her perfectly proportioned figure in her plum-colored dress, the pencil skirt fitted to just above the knee, all the better to show off the long, slender legs that had walked unscathed through forty-four years, a solitary childhood, one divorce, and two pregnancies. But Sebastian was distracted and, as usual, appeared utterly indifferent to Liddy's considerable charms.

"Par for the course," he said, more to himself than her. "Nobbling our client at the status conference and terrifying her out of litigation. Straight out of the Curtis Oates playbook."

Liddy could not bring herself to defend her boss; Curtis Oates

was, after all, a man so loathsome that even his adult children would not tell him where they lived.

“I’ve saved Mrs. Vandervorst a lot of money,” she said.

“Fair enough,” he replied, and Liddy was conscious that this had some sort of double meaning.

They were outside the closed conference room door now and for a moment Liddy was struck by how perfectly Sebastian fitted in with *Mist on the Heather*.

“We would have got what we wanted, just so you know,” he said, “if we’d gone to court.”

“There are no winners and losers in the field of marital warfare, Sebastian,” she said, mostly because she knew it would annoy him.

He turned to her, the icy stare returning.

“Okay, maybe,” she conceded. “You’re always good at the big emotional appeal out of nowhere. The lilting Irish accent helps.” This was true. She had often seen Sebastian command the attention of a noisy courtroom simply by adjusting the timbre of his voice. “That soliloquy you did for Judge Carson last month about the little boy with his backpack and his teddy on the plane. Genius. You can make the most absurd statement sound moving. Shame you never let fact or precedent get in the way.”

He nodded. “You know what you’re good at?”

He did not wait for her to answer.

“Making a complicated situation look simple.”

There was something in his tone that went beyond collegial banter and into contempt.

“Someone once said to me that this business makes nice people do nasty things,” she said, stung.

Sebastian laughed rather hollowly and moved his hand to grab the brass doorknob. “And for always getting what she wants in the long run, commend me to a nasty woman,” he muttered, the beauty of his voice contrasting with his words.

Liddy flinched.

“Edith Wharton. *The House of Mirth*,” she said, shocked by the force of her reaction, looking at him but remembering another voice entirely, in another place, at another time.

“Precisely,” he said, but he was disconcerted. The laconic, erudite aside was something of a trademark of his; normally people responded with a knowing smile or a roll of the eyes. Liddy’s eyes, however, had filled with unexpected tears and she spun away, raising her hand to her mouth. There was no point in claiming she wasn’t upset, because she never cried in an understated, glamorous way, and was now red and snotty like a toddler. But before she could wipe her face with her silk jersey sleeves, Sebastian pulled a tatty, but clean, monogrammed handkerchief from his cuff.

“Liddy? . . .”

“I’m fine,” she said, seizing the handkerchief and bolting toward the corridor bathroom, her sudden grief stuck like bile in her throat. He followed.

“I’m sorry. I was rude.” His tone was gentler now.

“People have been much ruder to me than that,” she said quickly. (She had no intention of qualifying the statement, although she could have said that she was sure there were small wax effigies of her regularly burned throughout the five boroughs.)

And only the previous weekend she had been shunned at a spinning class by a couple of furious first wives.)

“I can imagine.”

She turned and looked at him, askance. He continued. “I mean, it’s what you said about this business. How many more times can I watch wedding videos where the happy couple vow to always smile in the sunshine or, worse, pick up guitars for their customized rendition of ‘Your Song’ and know that one of them was on the phone to me seventy-two hours later? My wife says it’s made me irredeemably pessimistic.”

“Not me.” Liddy paused for a moment and blotted at her eyes, although she knew it was too late to regain control of the situation. “I believe in love.”

Now it was his turn to look at her askance. They had been acquainted for over fourteen years, so why she had chosen this moment to say it she did not know; what she did know was that the statement was true. Practicing family law had not made Liddy cynical. She did not believe that most couples made those solemn vows with their fingers crossed behind their backs; she knew from experience that it was just, to misquote the old song, that love and marriage did not always go together like a horse and carriage. (In fact, in Manhattan, by conservative estimate, half the time the horse bolted through Central Park and left the carriage overturned.)

And Liddy still felt empathy for the broken ones, the people like Gloria, blown apart by divorce with no guarantee that the pieces would ever fit back together. She hoped always that kindness and friendship would triumph amid the wreckage, in the

end. But she could not deny that these days, as the economy plummeted but romantic expectations soared, negotiations were growing more and more unpleasant—as Curtis Oates was making a fortune proving.

Sebastian smiled.

“How very optimistic of you,” he said, and though she expected this comment to prefigure a further apology, Sebastian waved good-bye to his handkerchief and headed back to the conference room to escort Mrs. Vandervorst from the building without as much as a backward glance at Liddy.

In the bathroom, Liddy leaned over the sink and splashed cold water on her face, avoiding the small puddles and pile of soggy tissues Mrs. Vandervorst had left behind. But it would be a good five minutes before the angry pink blotches on her cheeks faded, so she sat down on the armchair in the corner and rested her head against the toile de Jouy wallpaper. She tried to take a breath and count to five, but her mind wandered. Of course she was annoyed with herself for sobbing in front of Stackallan—although she had occasionally used vulnerability strategically, she knew tears always left professional women open to accusations of hormonal imbalance. But who could have predicted the extraordinary coincidence of his quoting Edith Wharton? The very words her ex-husband had said to her, almost seven years ago, in the terrible aftermath of what she had done; a scene she could hardly bear to remember and that she had made her mission to forget. Liddy could sometimes be a *nasty woman*, it was true, but up to this point in her life that fact had never made her cry.

For a moment, she pondered the possibility of hormonal imbalance.

Sydney came into the bathroom to deliver the news that Mr. Vandervorst had finally arrived, only to promptly leave to await papers at his office, but not before fiddling an overfamiliar arm around her waist.

“He’s repulsive. Mrs. V’s better off without him” was Sydney’s opinion, but she did not continue for, smitten with Sebastian, there was only one man she wanted to discuss. “But Mr. Stackallan’s so cute!” she said. “And that voice. I want to close my eyes and listen to him read. Anything. Even *Constitutional Law*, 17th.”

Liddy said nothing.

“No one makes me laugh, really, but he was joking about my name. He says with so many American names, you can’t tell if it’s a girl or a guy, *a bird or a bloke!*” Sydney honked again.

Liddy stood up, smoothed out her skirt, checked herself in the mirror, and attempted to affect an expression of complete indifference.

“You know,” continued Sydney, “*Mackenzie*, bird or bloke? *Campbell*, bird or bloke? Last week, he was due to meet someone called Roger and it was a woman!”

“That didn’t happen,” said Liddy sourly, walking into the corridor, thinking, *What is it with all the “sharing” today?* Curtis Oates, who was currently in reception barking at the girl to put on the Christmas “chill-out” album he had purchased on Liddy’s instruction, would never make such mistakes.

“I asked him out on a date, but he said he was married. I said

it didn't matter, and he laughed and said I was charming but far too young for him."

Sydney stopped and looked at Liddy uncomprehendingly. "I mean, what sort of a man says that?"

"Not me," said Curtis Oates cheerfully, flashing his pearly veneers and running a hand through his hair transplant. "Liddy, it's four p.m., the gal from the *Times* is here."

Over the speakers came the familiar organ introduction of "O Holy Night." The tune did not soothe Liddy, and, still discombobulated by the contemplation of her *not*-niceness, she knew the interview would have to be postponed for the third time.

"Oh, no," she said. "I can't do that now, Curtis."

"Why not? It's good for business. Remember to mention our growth areas. Gays and geriatrics."

"*Pfft* . . ." She exhaled. "It's the Style section. Do you ever read that? I won't do it. I'm not in the mood."

He looked over at her.

"Who gives a fuck?" he replied, and pointed toward her office before sashaying into his.

"Quick. *Look at this*," whispered Sydney, who had been googling. "I found a photo of Sebastian and his wife at their wedding."

Liddy glanced over because she couldn't help herself. Mrs. Chloe Stackallan had straight blond hair, high cheekbones, and tiny ankles. She wore her cream lace Temperley gown as if it had been made for her, which it undoubtedly had. She had a bouquet of lily of the valley in one hand, as the other rested casually on Sebastian's arm, and she was staring up at him adoringly.