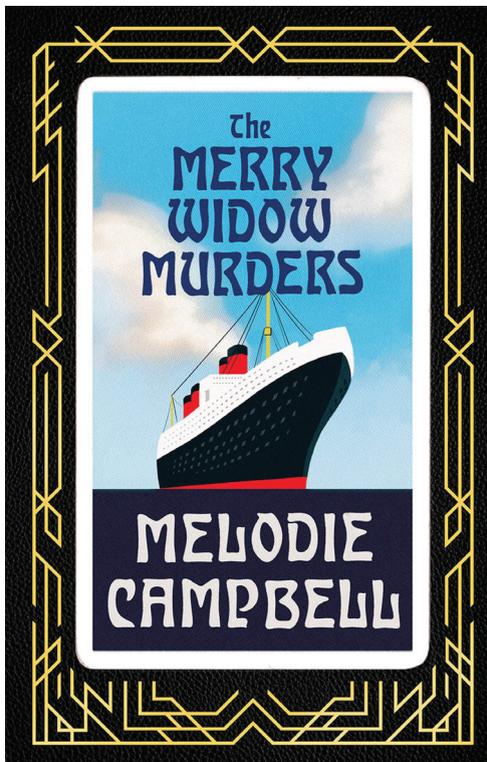


Excerpt from *The Merry Widow Murders*  
by Melodie Campbell



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## CHAPTER ONE

### DAY ONE AT SEA

I have exceptional hearing. So when I heard my name being discussed in such a delicious way, it was impossible not to eavesdrop.

“Why, that’s Lucy Revelstoke!” said Vera Horner, leaning as far to the left as she could without falling out of her deck chair.

“Who?” said her plump companion. Her head whipped toward me.

“You know, Amanda,” said Mrs. Horner, waving a bird-like hand. “Married Lord Revelstoke’s third son. Didn’t expect to inherit a thing, and then the others got killed at the Somme. Even the father. My, doesn’t she look smart.”

Vera Horner wasn’t wrong about fashion. The sleek amber shift with the handkerchief hem was Worth. Coupled with the matching scarf, it had cost me a bleeding fortune. Worth every penny, though.

I could feel their eyes on me. This type of scrutiny by women always made me feel uncomfortable. I resisted the urge to squirm. In my experience, gossip was rarely innocent. It usually came with a sting.

“Revelstoke. Wasn’t that the fellow who raced automobiles?” said the woman called Amanda.

“That’s the one,” said Mrs. Horner. “Johnny Revelstoke. Rather a daredevil. Probably would have died in a crash if he hadn’t been gassed in the war. Died a few years ago, of TB. Happy marriage, of all things.”

“Really?” exclaimed Amanda. “Remarkable.”

It could have been my imagination, but the ship seemed to give a slight lurch. I recovered my balance quickly. No one else appeared to notice.

“Look at that man with her now.” Vera Horner peered through her pince-nez. “Reminds me of my nephew Edward. Tall and good-looking with the same dark hair, but a little too flashy. Where have I seen him before?”

The other woman shook her head sympathetically. “So frustrating, when you get older. So many memories, and you can’t always come up with the right ones at the right time. Who was she before?”

“Well, that’s a mystery. I didn’t know her before,” said Vera. “Johnny Revelstoke met her on a ship crossing. She had money, I know that.”

“What was her maiden name?”

“Hamilton.”

“That’s a good English name,” said Amanda. “Is she from the Devonshire branch of the family?”

Both matrons stared at their quarry, unaware that they were being equally measured.

It had taken some willpower, but I had kept my mouth shut. So funny, to hear them go on about my pedigree. Hamilton was a good name, a historically significant name. I had always liked it.

But I could hardly be from Devonshire. Surely they could detect that from my accent?

“Penny for your thoughts,” said Tony Anderson, standing beside me at the rail.

I turned toward him. “Tuppence, and they’re yours,” I said.

Tony laughed. “Johnny told me you were a sharp businesswoman.” He produced a tuppence coin from his pocket and held it out.

I smiled. And took it. Even though I was wearing a Worth dress.

Even though my young son had inherited a small castle and a title. Money was money, my uncles would say.

But I would give him value for his coin. “I was overhearing those two women talk. I know one of them. Vera Horner.”

Tony glanced over. “The two fluffies over there?”

I choked back a laugh. “Those two fluffies could tear you apart with words alone, Tony.”

I put a hand on the ship’s railing and looked to my right. The dark-blue Atlantic roiled in the distance. New York had receded behind us until the smoke from the city was no longer visible, the Statue of Liberty a fond memory. It was June, a hot and humid time in Manhattan, the thick air laden with toxic fumes that had become the curse of any large city in the modern age. In contrast, it was a beautiful time to be on the ocean. The warm air was fresh with salt, and I inhaled deeply in mild euphoria. I was going to enjoy the next five days. Strange, how I loved the power of the sea. It had been completely unexpected, this passion for ships. That had come after Johnny’s death.

Beside me, Tony waited. I appreciated that about him. He didn’t rush me, in any aspect of our relationship.

So I gave him more value. “They were talking about my past. Specifically, about whether I was from the Devonshire branch of the Hamiltons.”

“And are you?” Tony raised an eyebrow.

“Nothing so dull, darling,” I said. The breeze swept my hair off my face. It felt glorious.

Tony laughed. “Glad to hear it. God forbid there be anything dull about you, Lucy.”

I lapsed back into my thoughts. Johnny had gone to war as he’d done all things: with great enthusiasm. Tony had been a fellow officer in the trenches, and they had become fast friends. It was easy

to see why. They both had a similar zest for life and irreverence for rules. That very irreverence had probably contributed to the circumstances that led to Johnny's illness and death, in the end.

It had been ten years since the war ended. Johnny had died four years ago. A long, lonely four years. Oh, how I had loved that man. Every bone in my body missed him. I had grieved hard for four years, and I was only just emerging from the dark. "Like a butterfly from the chrysalis," Tony had said.

Life had moved on, as it does. I had a son to think of, to love and nurture, to send on his way.

So for his sake, I had done my best to buck up and meet society's giddy expectations that I would become a Merry Widow. Why be boring? It was the 1920s, after all. Women had the vote in many places. Every day I thanked my lucky stars to have been born at a time that allowed women more freedom than ever before.

As for my slightly scandalous reputation? For a woman to be travelling alone with her maid was still slightly scandalous. Johnny would have approved.

Tony seemed to read my mind. "Do you miss him still?" he said.

"Of course," I said softly. "Why? Did you think I married him for his title?" I stole a sideways glance at him. The poor man looked shocked. I patted his arm. "Steady on, Tony. It's a valid question. Everyone else thinks I did."

"Lucy, you are the very devil," muttered Tony, looking off into the distance.

I smiled. "Funny you would say that. Reminds me of something. 'Dancing in the fire, laughing at the devil.'"

"Is that a quote? I don't recognize it," said Tony.

"Something Johnny said once." I leaned back against the ship rail and spread both arms to grip it behind me. "He was going to put it on my gravestone."

Tony started. "That's a bit rough."

I laughed and shook my head. "You should hear what I threatened to put on his!"

Tony didn't ask what that was, and I regretted my words the second they were out of my mouth. Oh, why had I mention grave-stones? What a foolish thing to say. It put us both under a solemn cloud for a minute or two. In truth, Tony had more reason than I did to avoid such thoughts. He had witnessed so much death and destruction firsthand at the front.

"You met him on a ship crossing, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. "Before the war." Little did Tony know how relevant his question was to the present. I was on this ship for a reason. I wanted to relive the crossing from New York to England that had brought me to this point. Even now, I can't be sure of my motivation. Was it to put the past to rest? Find some closure to my old life with Johnny?

And then there was Tony. He had been such fun in New York, showing me around town. I hadn't expected to have an admirer on this voyage to England. It was a complete surprise, this easy companionship.

I was raised to believe in fate. I had met my first husband on a transatlantic crossing. Could it be that I was fated to acquire a second husband in the same way? I liked Tony very much. My son needed a male role model.

But marriage? That thought should bring one joy. Not the sober, wary feeling that came over me now. I'd made a hasty marriage the first go-around and had been very, very lucky. Johnny was a whirlwind I couldn't resist. But I was older now and had seen enough marriages to know that they bound a woman to the whims of her husband. The law was not kind to married women. I'd have to consider very seriously before I made that leap again. Or be insanely

in love.

“Tell me about when you met,” Tony said. “Was it love at first sight?”

I chuckled. “I’m not sure I would call it that. I happened to see a young lad in an Irish scally cap relieve Johnny of his wallet, and called the alarm. Johnny sprang to the chase and tackled the fellow.”

Tony sucked in a breath. “Now that is an unusual way to meet!”

I shrugged. “The unusual thing was that Johnny laughed it off. He let the poor wretch go and didn’t report him. This was long before we had ship security on board.” It was a new world after the war. Now, we employed security officers to ensure the patrons wouldn’t be bothered by pickpockets, card sharks, or loose women, and to break up rowdy fights in third class, when need be. Prohibition wasn’t a law on the high seas. Ships weren’t dry, and if there was one thing you could always count on, it was the combination of men and liquor leading to fistfights.

“Sounds like Johnny,” said Tony. “The chase would be sport to him. I wouldn’t doubt he’d buy the wretched bloke a drink if he were skint.”

“I think that’s why I fell in love with him,” I said, thinking back. “At least one of the reasons.” Johnny seemed to understand that a man who would steal had been given a rocky start in life. That was an exceptional show of compassion for someone who had been born rich. He often said after the war, “We were all the same in the trenches.”

“What happened next?” said Tony.

I watched an older couple walk past us, arm in arm. How wonderful that looked. It was hard not to envy couples who had been married for decades.

“Johnny insisted that I be moved to his table at dinner. I was

travelling with only my maid, so one more at the table was easy to accommodate. From then on, we were inseparable. I taught him all the latest scandalous dances from America, and he taught me the constellations in the sky. By day four, he had proposed.”

“That was quick work. But I don’t blame him,” Tony said.

“I didn’t even know his father was a lord when I said yes.” I had come from money in the new world, for sure. There was no other way I could be travelling first class. But little had I realized the usefulness of a title. It was an unspoken badge of respectability. Being on Johnny’s arm meant instant acceptance everywhere.

“How did his family react?”

“With shock, I’m sure.” My voice reflected my smile. “But you know how Johnny was. He could charm the stars out of the sky. He brought them around. And remember, he wasn’t in line for the title.”

“That makes all the difference,” muttered Tony.

I looked at him swiftly. What story lay behind those words?

The chiffon scarf lifted off my shoulders and flew off into the sea.

“Bloody hell!” I yelled in a voice that was hardly ladylike.