

## A FLAGRANT FOWL

For Carol, the hardest part of the funeral had been resisting the urge to smile. Thank goodness she had taken her sister-in-law's advice and worn a black veil.

Now, however, two weeks later and a thousand miles from Steens Harbor on Long Island, the 48-year-old widow had no reason to hide her happiness. Life was worth living again. She drained the last of her banana daiquiri and signalled the good-looking young waiter hovering nearby for a refill. The new widow was thoroughly enjoying her stay at the small and exclusive beach resort on Tobago's north coast.

Yes, she reflected smugly, I orchestrated the perfect crime. When she returned home next week a sizeable check would be waiting for her. Enough money to set her up for the rest of her life. She'd been adamant that she wanted to get away by herself. Imagine trying to maintain a mournful image every day of her trip if Margo, her best friend, and her sister-in-law, Julie, had accompanied her. It was going to take some acting on her part to fall back into the 'grieving widow' role once she returned home anyway. Well, she figured, she could manage the pretense for few more months.

\$1.5 million . . . that's what her late husband, David Ulysses March III was worth. *Ulysses*—why would anyone hang that name on their first born, she'd often wondered? Didn't matter to her now, though. Carol was the sole beneficiary of the substantial insurance policy. When she thought about it, taking out the big buck policy was the only decent thing her cheating husband had done for her in the past 20 years.

She chuckled aloud as she took the first sip of the fresh daiquiri, recalling that her husband joked to his country club cronies that he was probably worth more dead than alive! *Well, Davy my boy, I'm about to prove you right!*

Carol got her idea from the US Airways Flight 1549's 'Miracle on the Hudson'. If a flock of geese could knock out both engines on a big jet—which resulted in the flight's captain gliding the stricken craft to an amazing landing on the river without loss of life—then it should be a lot easier to bring down her husband's small, single-engine Cessna.

It had taken her weeks to put her plan together, pausing at each step to ensure she had all the bases covered, before putting it in motion at the crucial moment. Hundreds of shore birds, including

ducks and the larger Canada geese, frequented a marshy area a few miles east of their waterfront home on the narrow end of the island. From the private airstrip where David kept his plane, pilots were supposed to climb straight ahead to an altitude of 3,000 feet before turning over the island. By following this recommended flight path they would be clear of the waterfowl feeding area, thus lessening chances of a bird strike.

'DUM 3', her personal but unspoken name for her husband, liked to flaunt the rules and turn left just seconds after take-off to make a low pass over their neighborhood. On the night before his accident, she overheard him telling his drinking buddies that he'd be giving them a wake-up call in the morning. That was her cue. Carol had driven them home from the club. Twenty minutes after her tipsy husband had crashed into bed without so much as a 'good night, she stole down to the shoreline in front of their property to complete preparations for his demise.

The next morning, Sunday, dawned bright and clear. Her husband left early for the short drive to the airfield on Oceanview Point. He was planning to fly to Boston. As the crow flies, the airport was only a mile across the bay from their home. A flying club was the small airport's only commercial business. Although David bragged about 'his plane' to anyone who would listen, he didn't own it. He had share in a lease arrangement with four others for the Cessna. He had learned to fly at the club, though, and had accumulated 210 hours flying time since earning his private license eight years ago.

Her husband was a successful financial planner and he used the plane to fly to meetings and seminars up and down the east coast. Normally he would be away for two or three days, trips that provided him with enough time to spend at least one night in bed with one of the bimbos who found him irresistible. Carol knew the type well—she'd seen enough of them come and go as his secretary. The latest—Jasmine something or other—was a perfect example. Her surgically altered breasts defied description: double her bra size and you 'd probably come up with her IQ, she thought.

Ten minutes before DUM 3's planned departure time, Carol went upstairs and opened the drapes in the guest bedroom. She had a clear view of the airfield across the bay through her binoculars. Anxiously she scanned the ramp area for the distinctive blue and yellow tail of his Cessna.

"There it is!" she whispered. Her hands were trembling as she watched the plane taxi towards

the runway. She braced an arm against the window frame to steady herself. The plane stopped, presumably while DUM 3 performed the necessary checks before taking off. Carol crossed her fingers, hoping that he wouldn't find fault with anything and have to cancel his flight.

Luck was on her side. A few moments later DUM 3 moved onto the runway. As soon as he started his take-off roll, Carol rushed downstairs and out the patio doors. The dogs were already in a frenzy, barking furiously at the large gathering of birds at the end of the lawn. True to form, DUM 3 ignored the recommended flight path and turned left immediately after getting airborne. Carol's heartbeat was racing as the Cessna approached. Timing was crucial—if she let the dogs out too soon, DUM 3 might see birds in time and take evasive action.

"Now!" she shouted. "Go get 'em boys!"

Her plan worked perfectly. Big and Strong, her Labrador retrievers, almost bowled her over when she opened their cage. Barking furiously, they charged towards the waterfront. A squawking whirlwind of feathers filled the air. And DUM 3 flew right into the melee . . .

The plane had just disappeared over their house when she heard its engine cough a few times, followed seconds later by a loud 'whump'. The dogs, splashing in the water's edge in frustration at the retreating birds, eventually calmed down and responded to Carol's calls. She shooed them back into their pen, latched it, and went back inside the house.

She closed the doors, drew the drapes, dropped into an easy chair and let out a long sigh of relief. The couple who lived in the home to their left were on vacation in Europe, and the house to the right had been vacant for two months. If one or the other had been occupied, she might not have been able to pull off her deadly plan without being seen.

It took much longer than she had anticipated for the door chime to sound, almost five hours. When she opened the door, the local sheriff and the pastor from their church were standing there with sombre faces.

"Mrs. Marchant, I'm afraid we have bad news for you," the sheriff said.

Carol had practised the role of a shocked spouse, and played it to perfection. She sat numbly on the living room sofa while twisting a handkerchief in her hands. The sheriff explained

what was known so far about the accident that had killed her husband. Eyewitnesses told of hearing funny noises from the plane's engine followed by a loud bang as it passed over them. Others testified to seeing the aircraft descend suddenly and crash into Cockle Cove on the island's north side. Would-be rescuers reached the site within minutes, but the pilot was already dead. The doomed Cessna had come to rest upside down in fifteen feet of water. The NTSB had been notified and accident investigators were on their way. Her husband's body had been recovered and taken to the morgue.

The sheriff suggested that because of where the aircraft had come down, its flight path may have taken it quite close to the Marchant residence. Had she seen or heard her husband's plane this morning?

Carol hesitated, not wanting to let on she'd been expecting the question. Did the sheriff know that DUM 3 usually disregarded the recommended departure route? Probably. . . Steen's Harbor was a small community after all. No, she'd lied, she hadn't heard a thing. She had woken just long enough to kiss her husband goodbye and fallen back to sleep until nine o'clock. To her relief, the possibility of a bird strike wasn't even mentioned by the sheriff.

That information came a few days later. The Cessna didn't have a 'black box' and the pilot hadn't made any radio call. But preliminary investigation of the wreckage revealed feathers and other bird parts in the engine and also in the cockpit. Investigators thought it possible that a large bird—perhaps a Canada goose—had smashed through the windscreen and rendered the pilot unconscious.

*Oh, I'm such a devious devil!* Carol mused as she slipped into the poolside hot tub. She enjoyed the heat for ten minutes before moving to the large pool. After four lazy laps, she climbed out, showered, and then headed for the patio restaurant. *Yes*, she thought, while waiting for her mango salad and club sandwich, *I think I handled their questions about bird activity quite convincingly.*

The next morning Carol was on her way home from Tobago. There would be lots of trips

like this in her future, she vowed. Flying first class, staying at ridiculously expensive resorts, and, who knows? Maybe a 'toy boy' to keep her company.

Her euphoric state took a hit only three days after her return, however. She had an unexpected visitor, an investigator from the insurance company. He was pleasant enough, and seemed sincere with his condolences. Before paying out large policies such as the \$1.5 million on her husband, he told her, the company was obligated to ensure that there were no extenuating circumstances.

"Like what?" the mystified widow asked.

Was her husband upset about anything? Business problems, perhaps? Did he have any enemies? "Just standard procedure," he assured her.

"No, no, nothing like that," she replied quickly. When he asked her if she had any objections to him having a look around outside, she could hardly refuse.

She peered anxiously from the corner of the drapes as strolled down to the water's edge. He glanced both ways, then stooped down over several rocks and appeared to pick up something. He repeated the process on the grass above the rocks. When he'd finished, he turned and studied the house for a good two minutes before heading back to it. To Carol, it seemed an eternity. She stepped onto the patio as he approached, putting on her best smile.

"Mrs. Marchant, do you have a ladder I could use?" he asked, returning her smile.

"In the garage," she said, "help yourself."

When he climbed down from the flat roof over the family room he was carrying a green garbage bag. "What did you find up there?" she asked weakly.

"Ah, just the remains of a duck. Probably knocked down by your late husband's plane. It was the crows fluttering around up there that prompted me to take a look. I'll turn it over to the accident investigators. You never know, it might help them. Anyway, thanks for your cooperation, Mrs. Marchant. We'll be in touch real soon."

*Real soon* turned out to be three weeks. Twenty-one days of torment and sleepless nights

for Carol. The same investigator was back. She managed a hesitant smile when she opened the door and showed him in. He stepped into the hallway without returning her smile.

"Mrs. Marchant, I'll be brief. Here's the check to settle your husband's policy."

Carol stared at it in disbelief: the amount payable was only \$28,287. "What . . . I don't understand . . . why—"

"That's the total amount of the premiums paid on the policy," he told her. Carol struggled to speak, but the words wouldn't come. The investigator suggested she sit down first. She made her way shakily to the living room and slumped on to the chesterfield.

"There are two reasons why we won't pay the full amount. First, we believe your husband's disregard for the approved departure path contributed to the accident." When Carol started to object, he held up his hand to stop her. "Hear me out, please."

He said that she could probably find a lawyer to take on his company over it, but that could cost her thousands—maybe even hundreds of thousands—and years to resolve. His second reason killed any hope she had left. He told her what he'd found on the shore in front of the house. A few large seeds trapped in rocks, seeds that matched those found in the duck carcass he'd retrieved from the roof.

*Damn! I thought the tide would have washed them away!* "Anyone could have scattered those seeds! People walk along there all the time!" she blustered.

"True," he agreed, "but it wasn't just anyone, was it, Mrs Marchant?" He showed her a copy of a credit card receipt for a twenty pound bag of wild bird seed. A receipt with her name and signature on it . "If you had made your purchase at a store a hundred or so miles away, instead of just twenty, I might never have traced you." He tucked the receipt away in his breast pocket and waited for her to speak.

Carol swallowed hard a few times before she could find her voice again. "So . . . what are you going to do now," she asked softly.

He tapped the check Carol was still clutching. "Cash that in the next three days and we'll close the file."

". . . And if I don't?"

"We turn our findings over to the police. Let's be honest, Mrs. Marchant. What publicity seeking DA wouldn't jump at the chance to try the case? 'Murder by bird seed' . . . has a nice ring to it, doesn't it? The tabloids would have a field day."

The next morning Carol cashed the check.