



Five years ago
I buried my husband.

Today I saw him
with his new wife.

MY HUSBAND'S WIFE

CARLA KOVACH

A totally addictive and unputdownable psychological thriller

MY HUSBAND'S WIFE

A TOTALLY ADDICTIVE AND UNPUTDOWNABLE
PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

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Her Last Mistake

Their Silent Graves

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To those who are grieving over the loss of someone dear to them.

PROLOGUE

It's positive. He's waiting at the other side of the toilet door for me to reveal the big news. Finally, I'm going to be a mother. That's all I've ever wanted. I dreamed I'd have two, or maybe even three, but this precious baby will likely be my only one. I place my hand on my stomach, and I know that my little one is barely more than a few cells, but I already love him or her more than anything. Nothing else in the world matters more than my little bean.

He knocks again. 'Well? Don't keep me in suspense.'

I slowly open the door and pass him the pregnancy stick. 'We're having a baby.' I can't feel any more love in my heart in this moment. My life is beyond perfect. The people close to me think we've rushed into this but when you know it's the real thing, you know.

He picks me up, kissing my face and my neck, then he spins me around until I'm nauseous – but in a good way. When I eventually manage to release myself from his arms, he heads to the kitchen and puts some music on, returning with two champagne flutes. One for him with bubbly in it and another for me containing orange juice. We clink glasses. 'To us,' he says, his gaze lovingly meeting mine.

I look away from him and swallow. Why when I love him so much am I lying so badly? I can't ever tell him that the baby isn't his. I grab his hand and rest it on my stomach. 'To us and our little life inside me.'

ONE

EVA

I always thought that once you'd found your one true love, there could never be another. How wrong was I? My heart is singing. As I tick off the jobs on my to-do list, I do it with a slight dance. Not only have I found the man I'm spending the rest of my life with, my ten-year-old son, Caiden, loves him to bits. I tape up the last packing box, then I write *Shed* on the cardboard.

Our West Highland terrier looks up at me and whines, his white fringe partly curled over his eyes. 'Big day today, Freddie,' I say. He wags his tail. I take a photo of him next to the box and post it to Instagram with the caption 'new beginnings' underneath.

My phone buzzes and I open the message.

Zach: I'm missing you like crazy. This place is amazing but it's empty without you. Can't wait for you to get here. I love you so much. X

I can't wait to move into our seaside house in Combe Martin with my son and new husband. I think of all the work that Zach has done. Over the past two months, he's transformed it into a home.

I packed the mostly eaten box of chocolates that I came home with yesterday. I'd been excited to finish working my notice and leave Malvern behind, though I'm going to miss my colleagues and I'll miss Mum.

The removal people are due any minute so I take a quick walk around the house. I catch Caiden sleeping on the sofa with his mouth open. I navigate the sea of boxes to kiss him on the forehead, and he stirs.

‘The removal people are on their way.’

He rubs his eyes and cuddles Doggo under his arm. The old stuffed dog that his father and I bought him as a baby looks like it’s been washed up after a storm, and its one amber eye is scratched to bits, but it always melts my heart that he loves Doggo so much. At just turned ten, he’s still my little boy. I gently hug him and inhale his apple-scented shampoo and the slight smell of biscuit where he dunked a chocolate digestive for too long then laughed as the soggy biscuit slid down his chin.

The more I look at him, the more I see his father. The way his nose looks slightly long on his face is identical to Hugo’s. My stomach sinks at the thought of what I’m leaving behind. Caiden has grown up in Malvern. He went walking up the hills with his father; they fished in local lakes and went birdwatching together. I worry that I’m taking Caiden away from his memories and that he’ll forget how wonderful his father was. A shiver runs through me. There are things I want to leave behind, things that haunt me at night but I can’t think about them now. I breathe in and then out to quell the anxiety bubbling inside me.

Hugo has been dead for five years. I swallow as I think back to the accident. I call it an accident but the official verdict was death by suicide. Things weren’t always perfect between us and I feel churned up inside as I think of the arguments we had. He lied for me, covered for my shortfalls and he was always there. I have this memory of this faraway look that used to spread across his face. Hugo knew all my secrets but I always had the feeling I knew none of his.

‘Love you, Mummy. It’s all going to be fine,’ Caiden says in a way beyond his years.

My heart melts like it always does when he tells me he loves me.

‘Love you too, son.’

It's actually happening. I'm leaving all this behind and the past will stay in the past. I am happy, really I am, but there's a tear in the fabric of my happiness when I think of Hugo. He wouldn't want me to remain unhappy until I die. I know he loved me and he adored Caiden. Scrolling through my phone, I find the photo of Caiden when he was only three, on the beach at Combe Martin in Devon. We alternated our holidays between there and the Scottish Highlands even before Caiden was born, and we wanted to share our love of these places with our little boy. The joy on Caiden's face as he built sandcastles with his plastic spade never fails to make me smile. I put my phone down and check for the removal van out of the window, but it's not quite eight in the morning.

I think of Zach, who is waiting for us to arrive. When Zach had asked, 'If you could choose to live anywhere in the world, where would it be? We can go anywhere?' I didn't hesitate in saying Combe Martin because it was a place he loves too.

Soon the cold March mornings will be replaced by summer, and all I can picture is our new life and our sea view. A niggle makes my stomach nervously flutter. I wonder if it's wise to go back to a place that holds so many good memories of my dead husband – but I love it. I love the rockpools, the cute cafés and the pub on the beach. The sheltered cove feels like it's hugging its visitors, and I'd love to walk the South West Coast Path with Freddie. What I do know is I can't stay in the area where my husband died. Swallowing hard, guilt washes through me again so I swallow it down and send Zach a quick reply.

I love you so much too, and I can't wait to start our new life together.

See you soon. XXX

A whirlwind of activity follows and the removal people have come and taken all our worldly possessions in a lorry. I lock the front door to the cottage that has been our home for a year and I post the keys.

I get into the car and glance in the rearview mirror. Caiden has a bit of jam stuck to one side of his face. I pretend to scrub my face and he laughs as he wipes it off. Freddie is secured so we're ready to go.

'What are the flowers for?' Caiden asks.

'I thought we could go and visit your dad's tree one more time, before we leave.'

He nods, not taking too much notice of what I say. It hurts me to think how little he probably remembers of Hugo. My phone beeps. It's Mum.

Have a safe journey and give Caiden a kiss from Nanna. I'll come and visit soon. Call me when you get there. Love to you all. X

As I drive along the steep road down the hillside, I try not to cry. I'll miss my mum most of all. We said our temporary goodbyes last night over dinner, and she promised she'd visit soon. She's been my rock since Hugo's death. I take a deep breath. It's not like we're moving to Australia; it's a three-hour drive to our new home. Mum used to drive coaches to the Highlands in Scotland before she retired. Driving to Combe Martin will be a walk in the park for her, and I kept reminding her that I'll be coming to visit all the time.

As we reach our old house in Malvern that Caiden and I shared with Hugo, I pull over.

'Can I stay in the car with Freddie?'

'I'd really like you to come with me. I think we should both leave these flowers for Dad, don't you?'

'Of course, Mum. I'll come with you. Shall I put Freddie's lead on?'

'Yes, please.'

Above us, a sheet of grey cloud is pierced by a golden ray of sun. It bounces off the car window, almost blinding me, as I open the back door to release Freddie and Caiden safely onto the path. My son presses his lips together as he looks at the Victorian house we called home for nearly nine

years of his life. It stands proudly, double fronted and three-storeys high – solid and imposing on the panoramic landscape behind it. The curtains I made for the upstairs windows are still hanging up. I almost see the ghost of Hugo holding Caiden as a baby, bouncing him up and down while pointing at the birds nesting in the tree opposite.

Hugo and I moved in three months after we got married. The tall ceilings, original tiled hall and the dining room that fitted a ten-seater table in it overwhelmed me. Growing up, it was just Mum and me, living in our small apartment in Redditch right opposite Grandma's bungalow. Meeting and marrying Hugo felt like a dream. Soon after I found out I was pregnant, we danced around the living room, ecstatic with the news.

Here I go again, living in the past. I feel my chest getting tighter and my breathing quicken. Being back here does that to me. While playing with my wedding ring, I count and breathe slowly to quell my anxiety. As my heart rate returns to normal, I open the passenger door and grab the bunch of daisies off the seat.

‘Come on, Mum. We’ve got a long drive ahead.’

The new owner comes to the window. She rocks a tiny baby in her arms while pointing at a raven sitting on the stone wall that divides the drive and the road. She turns my way, her features hardening as she pulls the curtains closed.

I follow my son to Hugo's apple tree, the one we planted on the edge of what was our land, when we moved in. The wall that separated the car parking space from the sheer drop below was never rebuilt. My heart bags and blood thuds through my ears as I think of our old car being driven through those bricks, straight over the steep ledge. The weathered tape that someone from the council had tied across the gap has been there for years now. I should have fixed the wall before I moved out, but money had been tight back then. Hugo had a life insurance policy in place to cover the outstanding mortgage on his death, but there wasn't much left in the way of savings. I always thought we had more but it seemed we didn't have a buffer.

Freddie drags Caiden to the tree and pees. 'Freddie, that's Daddy's tree.' Caiden gently pulls Freddie over to a patch of grass.

I smile and sit opposite the base of the tree. Placing the flowers against the bark, I take in the messages that Caiden and I have carved into the wood over the years. *Hugo's tree... Sadly missed... Love you to bits...* With my help, Caiden had scratched a smiley face into the bark. Beneath the earth, I'd buried a brief letter to Hugo, asking why – just why. I told him I loved him over and over again. He really left a hole in my heart; but now I've met someone who has filled that void, though it feels disloyal being at the tree while I'm so happy. I'll always bring Caiden here when we visit Mum, but I am saying my final goodbye to sadness and mourning. I owe it to Zach to find closure and concentrate on us. He's a good man who deserves all of me. It's not that he isn't understanding, he is. He's known loss too; that's why we are such a perfect fit.

'I will never forget you, Hugo.' I pull my first wedding ring from my pocket and the mini gardening spade from my bag. Digging up the earth around the tree, I drop my ring into the mud before refilling the hole and placing a grey stone on top. There's a slight lump in the earth where I buried my letter. It looks disturbed so I shovel some of the mud away, and when I dig a little deeper, I find my letter has gone. Someone has taken it. It saddens me that someone would do such a thing.

I glance at the edge of the drop and my stomach lurches. Caiden is getting closer to the drop as Freddie pulls him in every direction. I want to shout at him to get back, but if I alarm him, he might fall over the edge.

My knees turn jelly-like as I get up and creep up behind my son. I snatch him in my arms, drawing him close. 'Don't you ever do that again, Caiden,' I shout.

He stares at me, wide-eyed, like I'm crazy. It's been a long time since someone has looked at me like that. Guilt immediately washes over me. Caiden has every right to look at me in that way; he just doesn't know why.

'I was just looking at the fields and trees. I wasn't near the edge, I promise.'

‘You were, I saw you.’ One pull from Freddie and he’d have been at the bottom of the hill, dead amongst the treetops below. The sheer drop sends my stomach whirling. The miles of green fields ahead of us, interspersed with roads and houses, make me lightheaded. I place Caiden down then I pull him even further away from the dangerous drop. A raven lands in Hugo’s tree and croaks, sending shivers through me. It’s as if Hugo is there, watching over me and reminding me of my past failings.

‘Are you angry, Mum?’

‘You scared me. Your dad lost his life here, you know that. I don’t want to lose you, too, do you understand?’ I see from his reddening face that he thinks I’m telling him off, but I’m not. I have nightmares of what happened to his father and I couldn’t bear anything like that to happen to my son. In my mind, I picture Hugo going over that edge in his car and it haunts the hell out of me.

He bites his bottom lip and nods in his usual exaggerated way. ‘I’m sorry.’ He pauses and stares at the flowers. ‘Bye, bye, Daddy.’ He smiles. ‘Can we go now?’

‘Yes, I’d like that.’ I grab the mini spade and throw it in my bag.

As we get into the car, I feel lighter now that we’re leaving the old for the new, and I can’t wait to get to Combe Martin. I turn the radio up and ‘Happy’ by Pharrell Williams plays. Caiden shouts ‘happy’ every time Pharrell sings the word, and right now, apart from my son standing too close to a steep edge while we were by the tree, I am happy and nothing can take that away from me; from us.

I should be able to leave the past behind, but all I can think of is Hugo going over that edge. Guilt threatens to overwhelm me. Hugo also took my secret with him, one so big, if my son found out what I did, he’d never forgive me.