

**THE  
SERIAL  
KILLER'S  
WIFE**

**ALICE HUNTER**

**avon.**

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For Katie Loughnane  
an inspiring editor and friend, thank you.



## Chapter 1

BETH

*Now*

I'm half relieved, half annoyed when I hear the insistent knocking on the front door. Poppy has only just settled after the third reading of *The Wonky Donkey*. I've promised her repeatedly that Daddy will definitely be home to give her a goodnight kiss. It's gone eight, two hours past her usual bedtime.

'Daddy's here,' she says, her aquamarine eyes springing back open, all sleepiness evaporating.

'And it seems he can't be bothered to use his key,' I sigh, rising up from the Disney Princess bed. 'You close your eyes again, my Poppy poppet, and I'll send him up in a minute.' I run my index finger from the bridge of her tiny button nose to the tip.

I dash down the stairs, unconsciously bobbing under the low oak beam, ready to fling the door open and shout at Tom for his lateness and lack of consideration. But at

the same time, I want to throw my arms around him: he's never late back from work and I've been winding myself up thinking something bad must've happened to him. I've tried convincing myself his train was delayed, or he's been caught up in traffic on the way back from Banbury station – having to commute from Lower Tew to central London and back every day isn't the quickest of journeys – but if that'd been the case, he'd have called to let me know he was running late. He wouldn't let his little Poppy down – he loves hearing her delighted squeals when he does the daft voices. It's something I clearly haven't mastered, given the number of times she made me 'try again' to get it right.

I unlock the solid wooden door and take a steadying breath. There's no need for me to be mad at him. He's late, that's all. Doesn't matter if he's woken Poppy up; he'll happily settle her while I reheat his dinner. *Don't shout at him.*

I swing the door open. 'Why haven't you got your key?' The scolding words are out of my mouth before I even realise.

It's not Tom.

'Oh, erm . . . sorry, I was expecting . . .' My sentence trails off. My heart tumbles in my chest.

'Good evening. Mrs Hardcastle, is it?' one of the two men says. They stand shoulder-to-shoulder at my small doorway, obscuring the view outside; I can't see the vehicle they've arrived in. But given their smart, suited appearance and the fact they know my name, I instinctively know they're police.

'Y–yes,' I stutter.

My limbs tremble. I was right. Tom's had an accident.

I grasp hold of the edge of the door frame, closing my eyes tight. My breaths are coming fast and shallow as I wait for the inevitable.

‘We need to speak with Mr Thomas Hardcastle, please.’ The man, who looks to be in his early fifties, with hair greying at the temples and thinning on the top, opens a leather wallet and flashes a badge at me. ‘I’m Detective Inspector Manning from the Metropolitan Police and this is a colleague from Thames Valley, Detective Sergeant Walters.’

His words fly over my head as relief floods through me. If they’re asking to see him, they’re not here to tell me he’s been killed.

‘He’s not here. He’s late back from work. I thought you were him, actually,’ I say, my voice now more controlled. ‘What’s it in connection with?’ I frown, suddenly aware DI Manning is encroaching on the threshold of my cottage. The other detective, whose name I’ve already forgotten, has stepped back and is now strolling around my front garden.

Manning doesn’t respond.

‘Can I help?’ Irritation is creeping in now. What do they want?

‘We’ll come in and wait,’ he says. He turns to the detective, who’s now back by his side. ‘Walters – check the back first,’ he demands, in his gruff voice. I log his name in my memory this time. I don’t feel I have a choice about letting them in to wait, despite my apprehension at allowing two men inside my home at this hour when I’m on my own. As if sensing my unease, DI Manning asks if I want to call the station to confirm they’re official. I give a nervous laugh, say it’s fine, and open the door wider.

I hear Poppy calling from her bedroom and shout ‘I’ll be up in a minute, sweetie,’ up the stairs. ‘Go on in there,’ I point towards the kitchen and follow behind DI Manning as he walks. His stride is long, purposeful. I check my mobile. No missed calls. No texts from Tom.

*Where the hell are you?*

I slip the phone into my trouser pocket. ‘Can I offer you a cup of coffee, or tea?’

‘Yes, thank you. Tea. Black, no sugar.’

My mind works overtime as I put the kettle on and take two mugs from the kitchen dresser hooks. ‘You didn’t answer me. What is this about?’ I attempt to keep my voice light; a curious tone, not a demanding one.

‘Just a few questions at this stage,’ he says, sitting heavily at my large oak farmhouse table. It was one of my favourite buys when we first moved here two years ago. I’d wanted to embrace the change, so we’d gone from modern, London furniture to the rustic Cotswold cottage look.

My pulse quickens at DI Manning’s choice of words. *At this stage.*

‘Oh? Questions relating to . . .?’

Before he can answer me, the back door into the kitchen rattles. I open the upper part of the barn-style door. DS Walters is there. He’s obviously been checking the perimeter of the cottage.

Do they think Tom is hiding? *That I’m hiding him?* Something close to panic rises inside me as my imagination begins to run wild. I swallow hard, trying to push it back down.

I let Walters in and ask if he wants a drink. He doesn’t



speaking, just shakes his head – a piece of sandy-brown hair flopping over his forehead with the motion, which he silently brushes aside with his forefinger. If they're trying to put me on edge, they're doing a great job.

'You say your husband is late home from work. Do you have any idea where he is?'

'He commutes to London Monday to Friday. He works in banking . . . for Moore & Wells.' I can't think of what else to say, so I stop talking.

'Have you tried calling him?'

'I did earlier, just before putting our daughter to bed. But not since, no.'

'Could you try again now, please?'

My fingertips shake as I attempt to press Tom's name on the 'last numbers dialled' display. I accidentally press Lucy's instead and have to quickly cancel the call. On the second try, I hit the right contact. It rings twice, then goes to voicemail. Christ, he must've diverted it. I'm about to try again when I hear the front door.

It's Tom. Thank God. Now whatever this is can be sorted out.

'Tom! Where've you been?' I rush up to him, pulling him towards me tightly, taking in a slightly sour smell. He isn't wearing his suit jacket; he must've left it in the car. I whisper in his ear. 'Some detectives are here and they want to talk to you.'

I pull away from him in time to see his face go pale. His peacock-blue eyes flicker – with what looks to me like fear.

Anxiety gnaws at my stomach.

'Mr Thomas Hardcastle?' DI Manning is standing now as we walk back into the kitchen, his badge outstretched

as he approaches Tom. ‘Detective Inspector Manning, Metropolitan Police.’

I see Tom’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallows.

‘Yes. How can I help?’ Tom says, glancing at me before returning his attention to the detective. Did I catch a tremor in his voice?

‘We believe you might be able to assist us with a murder enquiry.’

## Chapter 2

BETH

*Earlier*

The Nespresso coffee machine whirs noisily as I dash around the kitchen trying to do three tasks at once. It's not just because it's a Monday; every weekday morning begins like this. Frantic, loud, rushed . . . and very early. Poppy was awake by five, and for about ten minutes I could hear her pottering about in her bedroom, talking to her most-prized stuffed animals – a lion, a tiger and a sloth that Tom bought her – before she came in to me, not a hint of bleariness in her pretty eyes.

Unlike in mine. I never seem to sleep for more than four hours, meaning my eyes are *always* bleary.

Tom was already up, showered and dressed in one of his many suits – dark grey, his colour of choice for the majority of his clothes – sitting at the farmhouse kitchen table, his nose stuck in his iPad, awaiting his coffee, and for me to cook up a quick breakfast. It's the usual morning

routine before he heads off, driving the twenty minutes to Banbury station where he'll catch the 7.04 a.m. train to Marylebone. He has no clue what my routine is after this, but I often tell him when I kiss the top of his head, as he sits calmly sipping his coffee and eating his scrambled eggs, that it's chaotic.

And he always smiles, looks up into my eyes, winks and says: 'But you wouldn't have it any other way.'

He's right, of course. Life is great. We both get to do what we love – him a finance portfolio manager and me, finally my own boss running a ceramics café – and then we come home to each other and our little Poppy. We are the envy of our neighbours and friends. Well, I suppose I have one or two friends, anyway – Tom is rarely inclined to socialise and hasn't really got involved in village life at all since we moved here. That's what living in London for too long will do to you – he's become *de-skilled* in the art of making friends. When I first met him, seven years ago, he'd been the life and soul, oozing charm, wit and intellect. But the London scene doesn't require effort like he'd need to put in here, in a small village. I must try and organise a dinner party; push him along a bit. It would help me, too – I work such a lot at the café I've been rubbish at 'putting myself out there'. But I'm hoping to change that with my new book club.

After Tom finishes his eggs and pops his plate and mug in the dishwasher, he kisses Poppy goodbye first, then comes to me, wrapping his arms around my waist, pulling me in close as he plants his lips on mine. His deliciously soft, full lips. As rushed as our mornings are, I savour this moment. Drink him in. He grabs my bottom and squeezes hard, immediately stirring up my excitement.

‘I could take you right now, against the worktop,’ he breathes heavily into my neck, peppering it with more sensual kisses.

‘You could. But I think our daughter might have something to say about that,’ I whisper, breathlessly.

Poppy is too engrossed in moving her breakfast items from one segment of her plastic plate to the other, mixing the toast soldiers with the banana slices, then stacking the halved strawberries on top, to notice what we’re doing. But he pulls away anyway, and takes a deep breath.

‘God, what you do to me, Mrs *Hardcastle*.’ He laughs at his usual joke, causing the corners of his piercing blue eyes to crease. ‘Fancy sending me off to work in this state,’ he says, taking my hand and pressing it against his crotch. ‘You really should finish what you’ve started. What am I meant to do with this?’

I laugh. ‘Oh, behave! You’ll cope.’ I go to remove my hand, but he holds it tight against him for a moment longer.

‘Right. Well, clearly I’m going to have to. I’ll be on my way, then. Maybe we can pick it up from here when I get home.’ And he’s gone, leaving me slightly breathless, my back against the worktop. Poppy makes a grab for Tom’s iPad, which he’s left in the middle of the table.

‘Watch CBeebies?’ she says, her hands outstretched.

‘Ooh, hang on.’ I snatch a wet wipe and quickly dab her hands with it. ‘Don’t think Daddy would want sticky little fingers on his screen.’ In actual fact, Daddy wouldn’t want her to use it at all. He’s very protective over his iPad, but it’s so convenient for keeping Poppy entertained, and I’ve been using it myself a bit more recently too when he’s not around. I hand it to her to use while I get ready.

\* \* \*

Just over an hour later, Poppy is dressed, her little *In the Night Garden* rucksack packed, and she's waiting patiently at the front door for me to gather my things. She wiggles side to side, singing something to herself that I can't make out. Bless her. She doesn't love going to nursery, but she's okay once she gets there. She hasn't particularly warmed to any of the other children; at least, she never seems to mention any by name. I think she takes after me at that age – slow to trust. Maybe I still am. I grab my keys and the pile of posters from the hallway table.

'Oh, wait a moment. Where did you put Daddy's iPad, sweetie?' I glance around the hallway and then quickly peer into the kitchen, but don't spot it.

'Er . . . I put it in . . . er.' Poppy gives a shrug.

'Never mind, I'll find it later.' I haven't got time to search now. 'Okey-dokey my little Poppy poppet, let's go!'

When we step outside, I take her hand. 'They're very pretty, Mummy, aren't they?' she says, pointing at the flowers in the garden with her free hand. I'm unsure what any of them are, but she's right – they are beautiful: purples, blues and pretty pinks. Trailing white flowers frame the doorway, giving it a homely and happy feel. It was what drew us to this large cottage when we decided to move to Lower Tew from London. Immediate kerb appeal. With its picture-postcard thatched roof and striking red bricks, we fell in love with it almost as quickly as we'd fallen in love with each other.

I first set eyes on Tom at the Sager + Wilde bar in Bethnal Green on the night of my twenty-fifth birthday. I felt a spark of energy as he moved through the people sitting at the outside terrace to get to my table. Another at his confidence when he ignored my friends and spoke

just to me, taking my hand and kissing it. There was a spark when we saw this cottage, too. It was meant to be.

I believe in sparks.

‘They are lovely, Poppy,’ I say, bringing my attention back to the moment. ‘I must find out what they are.’ *It’s only been two years*, I add to myself. Two years, almost to the day, since we moved in, and not long afterwards that I began my pottery café business – a dream I would never have thought possible when I was working as a recruitment consultant in the heart of London. I can’t believe how everything has aligned so we can have this life. It’s very nearly perfect.

But there’s always something more, isn’t there? Something else to strive for. Perfection is a state which is always at least one step ahead of where you already are. A completeness that’s not really achievable. Flawlessness rarely is.

‘Morning, Lucy,’ I call as I walk into Poppy’s Place half an hour later. I’d wanted to call it ‘Poppy’s Pottery Place’, but Tom said it was alliteration overkill.

I hear a distant, muffled ‘morning’ from out the back. Lucy must be taking out the now-cooled glazed items from yesterday’s painting session from the kiln.

After dumping my stuff in the break room, I take one of the posters I made up at home and pin it on the noticeboard. I’m excited about starting up the book club here again, but nerves aren’t far beneath the surface. I’m not entirely sure how it’ll go down; I don’t want people to think I’m trying to jump into Camilla’s shoes. A shiver runs down my back. It’s been nearly a year, though – I’ve given it a respectful amount of time after her passing, haven’t I? She was such a hugely popular member of the village, among the mums especially. There might be some who think it’s inappropriate

I'm taking over something she started. The effects of her sudden death are still felt – the aftershock rippled through the community, because she left a two-year-old without a mother. Little Jess is almost three now, the same age as my Poppy – I can't even *think* about leaving her; it's too heart-breaking. Camilla's husband, Adam, must have gone through unimaginable pain. Probably still is doing.

I shake my head; I don't want to dwell on the tragedy.

'We all set?' Lucy's voice makes me jump. I spin around to see her, apron on, all ready to open up. Her long, auburn corkscrew curls are bundled up in a loose bun, a blue, flower-print bandana headband fixing the rest in place. She's only twenty-three, but she is confident, hard-working and trustworthy – and the kids (and adults) love her bright, cheery demeanour and the way she sings while they paint. Mainly it's songs from Disney films, but she pops in the occasional show song for the adults. She was a great choice when the café got popular enough for me to need someone else to help. She prepares the café and ensures all the machines are on and the fresh pastries and cakes are displayed, while I drop Poppy to nursery. Then she holds the fort while I leave to pick her up. She even opens up from nine until midday on Saturday mornings to serve hot drinks and snacks – my weekends are always reserved for family time; I was adamant about that right from the start. Lucy basically does all the hard work – something she jokingly tells me on a daily basis. Then I tell her she's paid well, and we laugh and carry on.

'We are indeed. Let today's fun commence,' I say, rubbing my hands together.

If only I'd known the day would end on such a serious note.



## *Chapter 3*

BETH

*Now*

My hands tremble as I pour a glass of Pinot Grigio. DI Manning and DS Walters have taken Tom with them to the police station in Banbury.

‘Does he need a solicitor?’ I’d asked, cautiously, as they led him out.

Manning had used the same phrase, ‘It’s just a few questions at this stage’, before thanking me for the tea and turning his back. It was surreal – my mind was two steps behind. I’d watched helplessly as Tom had left, only moments after he’d returned home. I’d had no chance to talk to him, ask how his day had been; ask why he was late. His shocked expression is imprinted on my mind.

But was it something more than shock I saw fleeting across his face?

I push the thought aside.

*Oh, God. Poppy.*

Poor little mite – I'd said I'd be up in a minute when the detectives first arrived, and that was over half an hour ago. Leaving my glass on the worktop, I run upstairs to check on her. Through the crack in the open door, I can see her, sound asleep, her hands lying over her chest. My heart melts. So innocent. *The closest thing to perfection we've ever achieved*, I think, as I gently close the door. *My sleeping beauty.*

All I want is the best for her; the best I can ever give.

I won't abandon her the same way I was as a child. I'm still haunted by the memories of my father not loving me enough to want to stay. My mother sank into depression and later, alcoholism, leaving my nanna to practically bring me up. She did her best, but the damage was done. It still affects so many of my decisions.

Poppy won't have a bad childhood; I refuse to let that happen to her. She has to have a happy, secure home with loving parents who will never let her down.

I drain the glass, then open the fridge, grab the wine bottle and refill. As I take another large mouthful, an image of my mother flashes across my mind.

*Don't be like her.*

I pour the remaining liquid down the sink and put the glass in the dishwasher. I need to stay clear-headed. It's only been half an hour since they took Tom; they've probably only just got to the station. He could be hours yet. Maybe I should try and settle in front of the telly – or even go to bed. Although I'm fairly certain that'll be pointless; I can't quell the tumultuous thoughts racing

around in my head now, let alone if I lie down in a quiet room.

A murder enquiry, Manning had said.

Whose? Where? When? How?

And what makes them think my Tom will know anything about it?