



The
GRIPPING
page-turner
rated
★★★★★
by readers

They're saying he's
a monster.

And they're saying
she knew.

THE
**SERIAL
KILLER'S**
WIFE

ALICE HUNTER

THE SERIAL KILLER'S WIFE

Alice Hunter

avon.

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Dedication

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

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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.'