

## Fallen

I hated him. Hated the way he looked, the way he talked, the way he chewed, the way he freaking *breathed*. His pleading voice. His cringy adoration. The neediness that oozed from his every pore. So, yes, of course I never should have married him. Still doesn't mean I killed him. When I talked to the police detective, I didn't go into all that, the *hate* part. Who'd admit that to the cops about a person who just died, even if it wasn't your own husband. It'd make you look heartless. Which I'm not.

I admit to being, you know, practical. Calm. Generous to a fault. That, actually, is why I married him. He wanted me to, so badly that I felt sorry for him. All those *feelings*, like he was drowning in them, overwhelming him, making him all vulnerable and desperate. He made it seem like he might actually die if I didn't say yes, which, okay, is kind of ironic now. Plus, he had money. And I didn't.

So I married him, knowing it was wrong. Sue me. I just wanted to do something nice. Still, it went straight downhill from the "I do" part. Seriously. During the reception, I hid out with the band in the back of their van, smoking dope, whispering over and over, *What have I done, what have I done?* The drummer thought I was kidding. Then the honeymoon. What a stupid name for a trip that fills you with dread. I got hives. Not the nice little measles-kind Doris Day and Cary Grant got in *A Touch of Mink*. Giant body boils that covered my legs and arms and trunk and swelled my eyes shut. I was hideous. And he didn't even mind. Not that he suspected the cause. He thought we were in love. I, on the other hand, sobbed quietly in the hotel bathtub. It felt, there's that irony again, like I might die. Or might as well die. But I carried on, pretty damn generously under the circumstances. Until finally, the practical me returned.

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I don't know where that detective went. He's been gone for much longer than a glass of water should take. Maybe I should just get up and walk out. It's not like I'm under arrest. I'm pretty sure I'm not even a suspect. I'm the grieving widow, for crying out loud. Lightly grieving, but still. That's just my personality. Calm, even-keeled even in a storm. Or a death. And even if I was a suspect, they have no proof. He fell. That's it. All of it. Standing there too close to the cliff's edge, taking yet another picture of me, of which I'm pretty sure he had several hundred thousand. And he just . . . fell. No one's fault. Well, maybe *his*, if we're being honest. I mean, really, dude, how many lives need to be senselessly lost to careless cliff-side iPhone use?

The detective had interrupted my statement to ask whose idea it was, that hike. I made sure he understood it wasn't mine. I hate hiking. All that tramping around. Uphill is bad enough, but then you think it's okay because downhill will be better. But no. Downhill sucks, too. Your thighs burn and the backs of your calves cramp and your already bruised toes slam into the toes of your boots with every frickin step. The detective had nodded along, like he hated hiking, too. Reassuring.

I look toward the door. I hear talking out there but can't make out any words. I think again about just getting up and walking out. But they haven't told me if they've found him yet. I told them exactly where it happened. How it happened. They have everything they need to know, so I assume they sent an ambulance, or maybe a helicopter to recover his body.

I hadn't looked, after he fell. He disappeared over the edge and I knew how far down it was to those huge boulders below so I knew he wouldn't survive. I didn't want to see him all smashed and broken. That seemed like one of those things you would wish you could un-see, so it was a little bit of self-preservation I guess, not looking. The detective had given me a small sad smile when I told him that. Like it *was* better not to have that image burned into my brain. Still,

I'm pretty sure they should have gotten him by now. Would they take him to the morgue? Or a hospital? Probably not a hospital. That would be useless. Maybe straight to a mortuary? The detective hadn't asked if there was one I wanted to use. Maybe there's one they take all accident cases to, just temporarily, until the family can make their own arrangements.

Arrangements. I hand the word over to my practical side. It would be nice if the detective had left his notebook and pen here so I could start writing stuff down. I'll have to call his brother. Who did not like me from the beginning, I have no idea why. I heard them talking after the wedding. His brother told him he could still get out of it. "You can get it annulled," he'd said. What an ass. Clearly he had no idea what real love was. His for me, I'm talking about, obviously. He'd told his brother to shut the hell up, he was happier than he'd ever been in his life. Which, now that I'm thinking about it, is actually pretty sad. Like his happiness bar was set so pathetically low, I'd cleared it by a mile.

And call our friends. Except it's not like we have any real friends. The couple at the end of the cul de sac we've had dinner with a few times. And his old high school buddy with a wife and kids we'd visited a couple times in Wyoming. But god, those kids. Four of them, all under the age of ten. It'd been a nightmare both visits. Why do people have the need to make miniatures of themselves? Talk about egocentric. And yet, he'd wanted kids, mentioned it practically on our first date. I'd just smiled at that. Generosity again. Instead of telling him what a hugely ridiculous desire that was. He might not have known that I didn't need children in my life, but never seemed to mind that I didn't have the need for friends. It made him feel, he said, like he was all I needed. And I'd just smiled at that, too. So, call the Wyoming couple and the cul de sac couple. Give them the sad news. Make sure they see I'm putting on a brave front.

Holding it together. They'll be relieved, probably. So they won't have to get bogged down in bucking up the dead friend's wife.

And the lawyer, of course. There's a trust. It should all go smoothly. David Dunn. That's the lawyer's name. Handsome, middle-aged guy in a nice suit. Who, if I'm being honest, wasn't very subtle in the looks he kept shooting me. I pretended not to notice, as if I haven't been getting those looks from guys since I turned fourteen. But I filed him away under *Useful*. If the detective hadn't asked for my phone, I could've called Dunn now. But maybe that would look bad? Like I was some kind of gold-digger, glad to get the big pay-out. Which wasn't all that big, really. A couple million maybe, not counting the house. The house. Another thing I hated. It was too big, too old fashioned. Like it had been decorated by your depressed grandmother the week before she killed herself. It dragged down your spirits the minute you walked in. So bad that even the idea of redecorating seemed exhausting. Better to bulldoze the place and start over. But now I guess I can just start over somewhere else. What was the name of that realtor with the nice blue and silver signs that sold the high-end properties farther up the hill? She'd –

They found him. The detective just came in to tell me. He set down my glass of water, his voice sad, asking if there was someone I'd like them to call. I shook my head. Told him this all feels unreal. Which is the truth. It's like I'm watching it all play out from a corner of the room. What would I think of me? I'm not crying or carrying on, but that doesn't mean anything, I hope he knows. It's just my even-keel style. I want to tell him this, but his face doesn't tell me he finds it weird, my calm. Probably he thinks I'm in shock. Probably I *am* in shock. This was a tragic event. A traumatic event. Probably it's the most natural thing in the world *not* to cry.

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When he goes out again, I realize I'd forgotten to ask why I'm still here. Shouldn't I be offered a ride to the medical examiner's, where he said they'd taken the body. Or a ride home, so I could recover some of my composure before identifying the body, which he said I'd need to do *for the record*. Sounded just like a t.v. cop, saying that. Then again, I guess I look pretty composed already. Maybe I should have cried after all? He said he'd be right back, just checking a couple things.

So. The realtor. Then again, I'd read somewhere that you shouldn't make any big decisions or moves for at least a year after the loss of your husband. Some women's magazine, maybe. Apparently the newly widowed are too fogged from grief to make good choices. But I don't feel fogged. Never mind grieved. Which makes sense, right? I mean, not everybody has the perfect marriage. And if you don't, and if you lose that partner, husband, spouse, whatever, you naturally wouldn't be, you know, overflowing with grief at the loss. Let's just be honest. And even if you do feel, honestly, a little bit of relief, that doesn't make you a bad person. Look how much pain this incident has spared everyone involved. Not just me, but him. He absolutely would not have survived my leaving him, right out of the blue. It would have crushed him. Ugh, that thought summoned up a boulder-related image I have to shake my head to clear.

I sit up straighter and roll my shoulders which have stiffened up. This wooden chair wasn't exactly built for comfort. I look at the door. This is stupid. I'm just going to go out there and ask to get the identification over so I can go home and start, you know, processing this terrible event. Plus, I'd like to finally get out of this stupid hiking get-up. God, what I wouldn't give for a nice hot bath. But just as I push my chair back, the detective comes back in . . .

Okay, I think I handled that okay, considering. The detective did not look sad anymore and his voice was very cold when he told me they'd not only found the body, but they found his phone. Intact. And it turned out he wasn't just taking a picture of me. He was taking a video. The detective waved a small plastic bag in my face. Inside was the phone. He pressed the play button through the baggie and held it up for me to see, all cued up. And I couldn't help it, for a second I freeze. I knew I had to say something. Freezing up like that made it look like I panicked. Like I was guilty. But really, I was just stunned. It was stunning, seeing that video. Obviously. The detective's voice veers from cold to downright mean when he says he's never seen a more murderous snarl than the one on my face as I'm running toward my husband with my arms outstretched in front of me.

Freaking iPhones.

It took another second but then I righted myself. I shook my head sadly, no, no, no. I told him I was so sorry it looked scary to him. I could see how someone might misinterpret our game that way. But that's all it was, a game my husband and I played. We'd call out a person or a scene or an animal for the other to pretend to be. He'd just asked me to act like a Cujo, that rabid crazed dog in the Steven King novel, which we'd just been reading. We were kidding around, just like always. It's just that this time, it happened right at the very moment he lost his balance and fell. It was just a terrible, terrible, but completely innocent coincidence.

I gave the detective a small sad shrug. He just glared back at me and turned on his heel and left.

I know. Probably less than a fifty-fifty shot he believes me. I make sure to keep my face looking shocked and distraught in case there are cameras, which isn't that hard because I am actually finally feeling that way. What if they don't believe me? Suddenly there *are* tears in my

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eyes. I breathe out a couple times and pull myself together. Okay, so maybe not the most believable defense. But just let 'em try to prove it isn't true. There. Even keel. But I keep the sad face, of course. The cameras.