

THE LAST WIFE

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For my family

Prologue

Clients trust me because I blend in. It's a natural skill – my gift, if you like. I focus my lens and capture stories, like the ones unfolding tonight: natural and guarded expressions, self-conscious poses, joyous smiles, reluctant ones from a teenage bridesmaid, swathed in silver and blood-red. The groom is an old friend, yet I've only met his now-wife twice. She seems reserved, hard to get to know, but in their wedding album she'll glow. The camera does lie. My role is to take these lies and spin them into the perfect story.

I take a glass of champagne from a passing server. I needn't be totally on the ball during the latter half of the evening because by then, people naturally loosen up. I find that the purest details are revealed in the discreet pictures I snatch during the final hours, however innocuously an event starts. And besides, it seems this event is winding down.

The one downside of my job is the mixed bag of emotions evoked. I rarely take family photos any more, so normally I'm fine, but today, watching the wedding festivities, the longing for what I don't have has crept up on me. People think that envy is a bad thing, but in my opinion, envy is a positive emotion. It has always been the best indicator for me to realize what's wrong with my life. People say,

'Follow your dreams,' yet I'd say, 'Follow what makes you sick with envy.'

It's how I knew that I must stop deceiving myself and face up to how desperately I wanted to have a child. Delayed gratification is overrated.

I place my camera on a table as the tempo eases and sit down on a satin-draped chair. As I watch the bride sweep across the dance floor with her new husband, I think of Nina, and an overwhelming tide of grief floods through me. I picture her haunted expression when she elicited three final promises from me: two are easy to keep, one is not. Nonetheless, a vow is a vow. I will be creative and fulfil it. I have a bad – yet tempting – idea which occasionally beckons me towards a slippery slope.

I must do my best to avoid it because when Nina passed the baton to me, she thought I was someone she could trust. However, as my yearning grows, the crushing disappointment increases every month and the future I crave remains elusive. And she didn't know that I'd do anything to get what I want. Anything.

Chapter One

Ben isn't at home. I used to panic when that happened, assume that he was unconscious in a burning building, his oxygen tank depleted, his colleagues unable to reach him. All this, despite his assurance that they have safety checks in place to keep an eye out for each other. He's been stressed lately, blames it on work. He loves his job as a firefighter, but nearly lost one of his closest colleagues in a fire on the fourth floor of a block of flats recently when a load of wiring fell down and threatened to ensnare him.

No, the reality is that he is punishing me. He doesn't have a shift today. I understand his hurt, but it's hard to explain why I did what I did. For a start, I didn't think that people actually sent out printed wedding invitations any more. If I'd known that the innocuous piece of silver card smothered in horseshoes and church bells would be the ignition for the worst argument we'd ever had, I wouldn't have opened it in his presence.

Marie Langham plus guest . . .

I don't know what annoyed Ben more, the fact that he wasn't deemed important enough to be named or that I said I was going alone.

'I'm working,' I tried to explain. 'The invitation is obviously a kind formality, a politeness.'

'All this is easily rectifiable,' he said. 'If you wanted me there, you wouldn't have kept me in the dark. The date was blocked off as *work* months ago on our calendar.'

True. But I couldn't admit it. He wouldn't appreciate being called a distraction.

Now, I have to make it up to him because it's the right time of the month. He hates what he refers to as enforced sex (too much pressure), and any obvious scene-setting like oyster and champagne dinners, new lingerie, an invitation to join me in the shower or even a simple suggestion that we just shag, all the bog-standard methods annoy him. It's hard to believe that other couples have this problem; it makes me feel inadequate.

One of our cats bursts through the flap and aims for her bowl. I observe her munching, oblivious to my return home, until this month's strategy presents itself to me: nonchalance. A part of Ben's stress is that he thinks I'm obsessed with having a baby. I told him to look up the true meaning of the word: an unhealthy interest in something. It's not an obsession to desire something perfectly normal.

I unpack, then luxuriate in a steaming bath filled with bubbles. I'm a real sucker for the sales promises: *relax and unwind* and *revitalize*. I hear the muffled sound of a key in the lock. It's Ben – who else would it be – yet I jump out and wrap a towel around me. He's not alone. I hear the voices of our neighbours, Rob and Mike. He's brought in reinforcements to

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maintain the barrier between us. There are two ways for me to play this and if you can't beat them . . .

I dress in jeans and a T-shirt, twist my hair up and grip it with a hair clip, wipe mascara smudges from beneath my eyes and head downstairs.

‘You’re back,’ says Ben by way of a greeting. ‘The guys have come over for a curry.’

‘Sounds perfect,’ I say, kissing him before hugging our friends hello.

I feel smug at the wrong-footed expression on Ben’s face. He thought I’d be unable to hide my annoyance, that I’d pull him to one side and whisper, ‘It’s *orange*,’ (the colour my fertility app suggests is the perfect time) or suggest that I cook instead so I can ensure he eats as organically as possible.

‘Who’s up for margaritas?’ I say with an *I’m game for a big night* smile.

Ben’s demeanour visibly softens. Result. I’m forgiven.

The whole evening is an effortless success.

Indifference and good old-fashioned getting pissed works.

Ben snores after drinking, but I lie still, resisting the urge to prod him. There’s no point in antagonizing him. It was actually my therapist who first planted the idea of playing it cool in my mind. Judy had implied (annoyingly, because I always want her to be on my side) that Ben’s feelings mattered, too.

Last week’s session began awkwardly as I struggled to find things to say, once again doubting the benefit of *talking things through*. Secrets develop out of necessity, and I’d already offloaded enough. Perhaps I’d simply run out of things to say or finally got bored of my own voice. But clearly not, because there I was, sitting opposite her. Again.

Fighting the urge to leave, I studied the titles on the bookshelf behind her.

‘I hate silence.’

It was the best I could come up with until a thread of thought tugged. Relief. I grasped and ran with it: a list of all Ben’s good qualities and the positive aspects of our relationship.

I’m glad I persevered because I left the appointment buoyed up, full of hope. I imagine that if anyone ever found out that I was *seeing someone* they might assume it was because of Nina and her shock diagnosis the summer before last, but it was way before that. Not even Ben knows. I like keeping it to myself, a lost hour each week, tucked away on the other side of the New Forest.

Now that Nina has popped into my consciousness (and how can she not), I’ll lie awake for even longer and my irritation with Ben will escalate until I’m forced to silence him. I get up, scrabble around for my clothes on the floor, put my underwear and T-shirt back on, drink the glass of water I had the foresight to place beside me, and go downstairs.

Wine and cocktail glasses scatter surfaces of the living area through to our galley kitchen. It looks like the aftermath of a party, not just four of us. I switch on the tap and down a pint of water. I diluted my cocktails, so I don’t feel too bad, but I want to flush out as many toxins as I can. It can’t do any harm to try.

This is a good opportunity to work as I’ve been so busy lately that I have a backlog. I clear a space at the dining table and open my laptop.

I love editing. There’s something so indulgently omnipotent about the process because I get to choose what people retain

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as a memento of their special events. I try not to abuse their trust. I take my time, studying faces, expressions, colours, shadows, scanning for the unexpected to focus on. People think they can hide their feelings, but it's impossible, in my opinion, to succeed at it one hundred per cent of the time. It takes practice. The way I do it is that I imagine that I'm being constantly filmed, which isn't difficult nowadays. It's hard enough to avoid surveillance, let alone everyone with their phones at the ready.

It's hard to concentrate. Distracted, I look back on old events. I can't help but zoom in on one person: Stuart. His pain is evident to me even when he's smiling because I'm privy to his vulnerabilities given that I am the closest friend of his deceased wife. He is much better looking on film than in reality. The urge to reminisce overwhelmingly takes hold as I browse through more of my collection. I have hundreds of photos of his and Nina's children because I find those harder to delete.

Friends sometimes email me random shots or post them on social media. As a rule, I don't keep many of those because mine more than suffice; however, one has slipped in. It's of me and Stuart, dancing at someone's thirtieth three years ago. Clearly, I couldn't have taken it, and although we look natural and relaxed, it's not a great shot. I can't think why I didn't discard it. I never mix my files up; it's disconcerting. I guess the stress of the past few years is bound to manifest in varying ways.

It's gone two by the time I return to bed. I know when I next open my eyes that it's morning because I never wake up late. I reach for Ben. My hand slides along the cool flatness of the sheet until I reach the edge of the bed. I sit up.

He was seemingly out cold a few hours ago, plus he doesn't

have a shift today. He's not in the bathroom or downstairs, and his bike is missing from the hall. Dread, the anxious kind when truth is forcing its horrible reality into your consciousness, forms. He knows from all the advice that it's best if we try again this morning to maximize our chances.

I compose a message, then delete it. I can't think of the right words until I decide to keep it simple and unpressurized.

I love you xxx.

I press send.

My phone rings, hope reignites; Ben isn't avoiding me, perhaps he's merely nipped out for croissants or milk.

It's not him.

'Hi, Stuart,' I say.

'I hate to ask you but . . .'

He phrases it in the same way that Nina used to. Buried indignation rises, but I manage to suppress it because I already know that I'll do whatever favour he's going to ask me.

'Yes?'

'Someone tried to break in to the garage last night. There's a locksmith available at nine thirty' I note that his Australian accent sounds slightly more pronounced on the phone. 'Any chance you could wait in after taking the kids to school? I'm unprepared for a meeting I can't cancel. I don't want to leave the garage door broken because it makes the interconnecting entrance to the house less secure.'

'Didn't the security alarm go off?'

Nina insisted on having one installed earlier this year.

'I haven't got into the habit of setting it. It was something Nina usually did before we went to bed.'

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Fresh sadness hits me, as does guilt at my initial irritation.
‘I’ll be around ASAP’

I’m reminded of how much I enjoy being needed, although not taken for granted. There is a difference. Stuart and I have a clean slate. I must tread carefully, though, because by making myself so available to Nina and her family, it fuelled my discontent in the first place.

Chapter Two

There are moments when I genuinely forget until silence hits. Even then, it's not hard to imagine that Nina's nipped out for a sprig of rosemary, gone to chat to the holiday-cottage guests, or – later on – is upstairs resting. The locksmith was efficient and quick, he didn't even accept the coffee I offered him. He said that whoever had tried to break in couldn't have been that determined. The damage was minimal.

I never enter any rooms in her house (it's still her home to me) unless I have to, but today, it feels like there's something I need to get over with.

I go for it. I rush upstairs. My heart quickens, cringing at the thought of being caught out, despite having a plausible story at the ready. I push open the door to her room. Their bedroom. Now just Stuart's. Evidence is everywhere that he still sleeps here. I had wondered. Their place is so large, too large really, he could easily have moved. Yet, he hasn't.

There's something heart-wrenching about the way he's spread his belongings out, as if by doing so he'll disguise Nina's absence. The last time I was in here, Nina made me make promises. It gave me goose bumps: the intensity in her

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expression as she refused to break eye contact, the urgency of the way she grabbed my wrist as I stood up to leave.

‘Please, Marie. No matter what, make sure everyone remembers the kind of person I truly was.’

It was the first time she’d used the past tense. I think that’s when it actually hit me, that’s when I knew she was going to die, because if she believed it, then I must, too. There was no one else she could turn to, not really, because I was the only person who understood the intricacies of her life. Our friendship was forged when we were at primary school. Still, I wish I’d listened better even though it took all of my self-control to remain strong while I agreed to all she asked without pushing for a proper explanation.

I sit down on a white wicker chair in the corner, folding one of Stuart’s ties over the armrest. It slithers to the floor. I used to pull this seat up, close to Nina’s side of the bed. I read to her on the days she was too tired to talk properly. I thought Nina would prefer uplifting stories; however, she said it gave her strange comfort to experience fear in an alternative way to her reality, so we stuck to crime and horror.

I’m grateful for those peaceful memories. I tried not to overwhelm her because there were so many genuine offers of help intermingled with shared helplessness. Nina absorbed all the love and care; meanwhile I tried not to betray my utter devastation and frustration at the unfairness of the situation.

‘I think this time I’m pregnant,’ I say out loud. ‘It just feels . . . right.’

If Nina really were here, I’d say more. Obviously. She was pleased when I met Ben; she’d offer good advice when it came to dealing with his aloofness. Her absence is stark. I lean

down and pick up Stuart's tie from the floor. It's too . . . red. He has loads. Nina and Stuart had this thing where she'd buy him one every anniversary because she thought he looked handsome in a suit. I roll it up and push it into my jacket pocket. The past can hold people back; I'm here to help him heal. Christmas isn't far off and I feel a twinge of pleasure at now having a decent gift idea for Stuart.

Yet, all this is a delaying tactic because I'm not being decisive enough to do what I really came up here for, and I'll be frustrated if I don't. I can't waste any opportunity. I slide open Stuart's bedside drawers, check beneath the bed and open the wardrobe. After a quick scan of the bathroom, my heart rate slows. There's nothing incriminating. Which is good, because I feel slightly grubby at having poked around. But it's not as if I can ask him what I need to know outright, so for now, stealth is necessary.

As I walk down the stairs, my footsteps are muffled by thick carpet. Nina hated her feet getting cold. A large print, one of the first she completed at our art college, is framed in the middle of the wall, exactly halfway down. I briefly stop and study it, even though I could paint it myself from memory. It's alive, rich in primary colours.

Downstairs is child-friendly, no glass tables or sharp corners. Two giant bean bags, one green, one blue, take up space in the living room between the oval wooden coffee table and the TV. It's not quite to my taste, yet I've spent many happy evenings here watching movies with the kids (*Paddington* being the most popular choice lately) or discussing books with Nina's book group friends.

My favourite place, however, is the kitchen, with its black marble island, underfloor heating and built-in wine racks. Nina

was a gadget person (I'm not sure what the purpose of some of them even is) but they look interior-design-magazine chic.

The guest cottage to the rear of the back courtyard is designed to be a true haven. Nina came up with the idea to rent it out as a holiday let when we first viewed this house. It's hard to think that was less than two years ago. Before . . . we all knew. There were no obvious signs; innocent times.

Stuart was doing well, there was no reason for them not to put in an offer for the spacious five-bedroom family home, complete with an acre of childhood-heaven-like grounds. It was very late in proceedings to put a halt to the buying and selling of their old and new homes – Nina didn't want to rent – so they went ahead. Denial? Maybe. Or perhaps it was a desire to inhabit the future family home, however briefly.

Nina had further plans: help organize family holidays, team up with a local horse riding business and a nearby canoeing club, sell artwork (prints and pottery) at local markets. She was so utterly determined to be *there* for her children. Ever since Felix, her eldest – my godson – started primary school, she worked hard to ensure she could control her own working hours. Life is cruel.

However, my dreams aren't totally dissimilar to hers: I'd like to sell more prints. I could learn to enjoy horse riding, for the children's sake. There's no harm in being flexible; I will alter my future plans so they're more in tune with Nina's.

'Hello?'

I stop. Nina's mother is at the bottom of the stairs looking up.

My brain kicks in. 'Hi, Deborah. Stuart asked me to take

the children to school. Felix mentioned a cuddly toy he'd lost, I thought I'd search his room and leave it on his bed for when they get home.'

'I got such a fright. Seeing you, walking down . . .'

Surely she must've seen my car? 'Sorry. I didn't mean to give you a shock.' Still, she stares. It gives me the creeps. 'Shall I make you some tea?'

'What, here?' she says.

I push my hands into my pocket and grip the smoothness of Stuart's tie. 'Um . . .'

'Which toy?' she says.

My mind races. 'His lion,' I say softly. Nina bought it for him on one of their last ever days out at a zoo. 'Stuart also asked me to help out because they had an attempted break-in last night.'

'Oh, my! Not again! Are the children all right?'

'Yes, everything's fine. I waited in for the locksmith. All sorted. What do you mean, again?'

'Someone tried to break in eight or nine months ago.'

'Stuart didn't mention it.'

'Well, anyway, it was nice of you to help out. I'm going to check on the guest cottage; there are people arriving tomorrow for a long weekend.'

'I can help,' I say.

'You do enough.'

'I don't mind.'

She looks past me as though she expects Nina to follow me down. I take my hand out of my pocket and gently walk past her. She turns to follow me, and as she does so, I see her place her hand in the small of her back and wince slightly.

I stop.

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‘I promised Nina I wouldn’t let you do too much,’ I say, truthfully. ‘Please let me help.’

She nods her acquiescence.

I unlock the back door. We walk down the steps and cross the courtyard. To the right, are empty stables. Two metal pails, left by the previous owners, hang off a white-painted side wall. *Déjà vu* hits.

Nina and I looked around here together when it first came on the market. Stuart was away somewhere – Glasgow, I think – at the time, and Nina had such a strong feeling that this would be The Place that she hadn’t wanted to postpone a viewing. Nina asked me to keep it to ourselves though; she knew I wouldn’t mind lying by omission. This meant that after they’d moved in, I had to ensure my surprise and awe appeared genuine. It wasn’t hard; it is impressive.

Deborah and I walk side by side along the paved path edged with rose bushes that leads to the guest property. There’s always a disconcerting moment as I push open the cottage door. Are the previous guests still here? What odd items will we discover they’ve left behind?

‘Hello?’ I call out as we open the front door.

The sound of the back door slamming shut makes us both jump.

Silence.

There is no sign of anyone as I check the back door. It’s unlocked. I relax as I glance around because the cleaning company have definitely been and gone, I can tell by the residual smell of furniture polish and bleach. The door must’ve been left open by the cleaners. In fairness, a rare oversight.

While Deborah fills a vase with carnations, which she takes out of a basket I hadn’t noticed she was carrying, I flick

through the guest book, skim-reading multiple paragraphs of compliments. *Clean, stunning location, wonderful attention to detail, comfortable.* I make a note to add the latest testimonial to the website.

‘I’ll make us some tea,’ I say. ‘I’ll clean up afterwards,’ I add before she can object.

I drop Stuart’s tie into the bin, along with the teabags and mini-cartons of long-life milk. Although it’s only little by little, I’ve removed yet another unnecessary reminder for Stuart. It’s rewarding. This is just one example of the many small but effective ways I can help.

I make Deborah’s tea extra milky, exactly how she likes it.

‘Thanks,’ she says as I hand her a mug decorated with poppies.

‘Shall we sit down?’ I say, pointing to the sofa.

‘No, we shouldn’t. We’ll leave creases. I’d rather stand to be honest.’

Grief makes me want to control things, makes me furious, makes me want to *live*. I mute my irritation; standing it is, then. She sips her tea with obvious non-enjoyment.

As I struggle to think of something neutral to say (a contrast to our relationship pre-Nina’s diagnosis), I compare my own surroundings with these luxurious ones. Our semi is nice enough, there’s nothing wrong with it, but it’s new and the walls are thin. It has a temporary feel to it as if the big bad wolf could blow the house down with one breath. Here, the old stone walls give off an air of permanence and security. I would feel happy and safe if I lived in a place with history. I’ve suggested to Ben a few times that we move; it’s time to bring the subject up again.

It's the word *Stuart* that jolts me back into the moment.

'Pardon?'

'His parents have offered to come and stay,' Deborah says. 'I think it would be a good idea, it would give him the support he needs from the people best able to provide it.'

'Oh,' I say.

He hasn't mentioned this to me.

'People mean well. I've seen the steady stream of . . .' she pauses, '*women* – mostly – knocking at the door with a cottage pie, a casserole, a lasagne, books or an offer of this, that and the other, but that's not what he needs. He's a grown man, and it's best if he concentrates on the children for now, without distractions.'

'People want to be kind and help. As you say, Deborah, he's a grown man.'

However, she's not wrong. Still, I have the situation in hand. I wish I could tell her that. It's not something she needs to worry herself with.

'*Stuart* loved *Nina*, no, he adored her,' I continue. 'He isn't going to lightly replace her with some random woman in the near future just because she can cook,' I say with what I hope is a reassuring smile.

It doesn't work. She washes up the mugs, wiping them dry with kitchen paper so as not to dirty a tea towel, while I remove the bag from the bin, tie a knot at the top and replace it with a new one.

'I'm pregnant,' I blurt out.

I want to give her something else to focus on, I want to draw her back into my confidence, to trust me again. It's not a complete lie because you can do tests so early nowadays, my news is only a week or so premature.

It works. I can physically sense her warming towards me again now that she's got proof that I don't have designs on her son-in-law (technically, is he still)? She smiles and comes over to give me a hug.

'That's wonderful news!'

'It's very early days,' I say. 'So it's vital to keep it to yourself.'

Deborah locks up while I dump the rubbish bag in the outside bin.

She asks all the questions I've been dying for people to ask me as we amble back to the house: due dates, scans, boy or girl preference, plans for work afterwards. It feels good until she changes the subject to her disappointment in the latest gardeners Stuart has employed. Time to say goodbye.

I reverse. Bumping over the cattle grid, I exit the village as I head back to my own responsibilities and worries. Red, yellow, orange and brown leaves scatter the lane. I love the colours at this time of year. Smoke wafts from a cottage chimney, reminding me of my childhood home because Mum lit fires early on in the season. I loved going stick-gathering with her in the woods. A yearning to visit her as soon as possible forms; it's been too long.

As I slow down to avoid a trio of ponies huddled together, a horrible thought forms: Deborah will go upstairs and spend time in the children's room. I know she will, she always does. Felix's lion isn't on his bed. Lies work better when I go easy on the details, stick to my own tried and tested rules. It would be careless not to keep her on my side if I'm to figure things out in a way that works best for me.

I'll bake a Victoria sponge with the children on Sunday and use some of her homemade raspberry jam. Ben will be

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at work, and Stuart has never turned down an offer of child-entertainment assistance. We'll drop it round to Deborah's afterwards as a surprise. She can't fail to be softened by the gesture.

And, thinking about it, how can Deborah realistically react if I say that I (or she) was mistaken about a mere toy lion? There's not much she can do or say. It's not as if she can accuse me outright of being a liar, not without proper proof. Anyway, it's because of Nina – her daughter – that I was forced to make something up.

I must relax and quit the overthinking. Stress isn't good for a baby.