

*Her
Husband's
Mistake*

Chapter 1

The morning after my father's funeral, I came home and found my husband in bed with the next-door neighbour.

The first thing I wanted to do, when I saw Julie Halpin bouncing up and down on top of Dave like a naked cowboy in a rodeo, was to unsee what I'd just seen. I wanted to tiptoe out of the house and pretend I hadn't been there at all. Which I know is a sadly weak response from someone who likes to believe that she's strong and resilient and good in a crisis. But at that moment I didn't feel one bit strong or resilient. Besides, my legs were far too wobbly to carry me out of the house without collapsing.

The thing is, I'd already been through a crisis. I'd managed to hold it together through the months of Dad's illness, when Mum was in denial and my brother too upset to be of any use. I'd coordinated hospital visits, talked to the nursing staff, made sure Dad was never alone for too long and even kept his business going. Strong and resilient stuff, no question. Both Mum and Aidan said so. Even Dad, weak as he was, had squeezed my arm and thanked me for everything I was doing.

But I hadn't given it a second thought because I'm the

Sheila O'Flanagan

one who always knows what to do when the chips are down. I pride myself on my ability to cope.

But I didn't know how to cope with seeing Dave and Julie together. I still don't.

If I'd ever imagined this scenario – not that I had, because I'd always believed that Dave was a keeper – I'd have pictured my total control as I hauled Julie's ample arse off my husband and dragged her down the stairs and out of my house. Possibly by her bouncy blonde curls. I'd have been in total control of throwing him out too. And though it would have been hard, I'd have got on with my life.

But it hasn't turned out that way. I'm frozen inside. I've no idea what to do. And no idea how to do it.

I trusted Dave absolutely, you see. We were a partnership. A team. We'd been a team for a long time. Dave and Roxy. Mica and Tom. He was the manager. I was the coach. Yet given the opportunity, he'd called in a sub and relegated me to the bench. I didn't want to believe it then and I wish I didn't have to believe it now. But it happened. I have to accept it, no matter how much it hurts.

The same feeling that engulfed me as I watched Julie's Clairol-enhanced curls bobbing around her shoulders and heard the creak of the mattress springs, is still with me now. It's regret. Regret that I got up early and drove home wearing nothing more than a light coat over my silk pyjama top and matching shorts so that I could surprise Dave before he went to work. Regret that I didn't stay where I was, alone in the single bed at my mum's house, assuming that he was alone too, missing me as much as I was missing him. If I'd stayed at Mum's, in blissful ignorance, I wouldn't have had to re-assess everything about my life. I'd have coped with my

Her Husband's Mistake

sorrow about Dad, coped with making sure Mum was OK, and got on with my life.

But now I can't.

The only reason I went home at all that morning was because I craved some normality after the stress-filled weeks we'd all gone through. My head was still spinning from it. I don't regret for a moment having spent so much time with Dad and Mum. Of course I don't. I'd do anything for my family. But that morning, I just wanted to be in my own bed, with someone looking after me rather than the other way around.

I know I'm being silly. Not knowing that Dave had cheated on me would have been far worse in the long run. At least, I'm pretty sure it would. In the couple of months since it happened, I've read lots of articles about cheating partners. There's a view from some that you're better off in ignorance. But I can't help thinking that sooner or later you'll find out anyway. And then you'll feel an even worse fool.

If I hadn't gone home at six o'clock that morning, I might not have found out straight away, but I would've had a little longer to avoid dealing with stuff I don't want to deal with. I'd have carried on secure in the knowledge – now faulty – that my marriage was rock solid. I wouldn't have to make decisions that I'm still quite unable to make. Decisions that aren't only about me but are about Mica and Tom too. I'd still be the wife who'd been cheated on, but I wouldn't be feeling as poleaxed as I do right now.

And I wouldn't be blaming myself for allowing my coping energy to be depleted by what was going on in my mother's house and not keeping enough in reserve for what was happening in my own.

Moving into Mum's for a few days seemed like a good idea at the time. She needed someone with her, and the children were a welcome distraction. Dave agreed that it was the right thing to do too. But I didn't realise that while I was shoring things up on one front, I'd left another completely exposed.

As exposed as Julie's round and – it pains me to say it – rather bootylicious arse.

All these things went through my head at the sight of the two of them together, and I tried to stifle the choked gasp that had risen in my throat, but I couldn't. Which meant that when Dave's stricken eyes met mine over Julie's mop of shining curls, there was no escape for either of us. Things had changed forever. We could never be the people we were before. And we would both have to deal with the fallout.

Everyone has their own opinion on how I should deal with it. My mum. My best friends Debs, Alison and Michelle. Even the girls in my Slim to Win WhatsApp group. (I haven't been to a meeting since it happened, but they've sent supportive messages anyway.) Word gets round on the Beechgrove estate, especially as Becca Brophy from across the road, and the biggest gossip known to man, saw Julie running from our house with her knickers in her hand. I'm sure she was messaging everyone before Julie had even reached her own door. Since then, I've had more advice from other people than I could possibly need. Yet my views are the only ones that matter. If only I knew what they really were. If only I knew how to deal with what I'm feeling.

When I googled 'cheating husbands', there were over 32 million results, but regardless of all the advice, there are really only two options. Forgive and forget. Or break up.

Her Husband's Mistake

The most recent article I looked at (I'm reading them obsessively at the moment) suggested that somebody else's cheating isn't about you; it's because they're unhappy with themselves. I don't think Dave is unhappy with himself. In fact, when I saw him with Julie, he looked far too self-satisfied for my liking. No – he saw an opportunity and took it. And he's broken my heart.

For the past few weeks, the flickering images of my husband and my neighbour are the last things I see every night and the first that come to me every morning. I don't want them to be. I've tried a million different ways to block them out. I've played meditative music to lull myself to sleep. I've focused on bringing myself to my happy place every night, although that's difficult, because the bedroom in Beechgrove Park no longer qualifies as my happy place at all. Sometimes, as I lie alone in my childhood bedroom, my mind wanders towards all the other stuff I have to get on with, and I spend five or ten glorious minutes not thinking about my total humiliation; but eventually the memories of Dave and Julie cavorting in my bed force their way in, taunting me and reminding me that even the people you love can make you cry.

I've loved Dave McMenamin since I was sixteen years old. We lived on the same housing estate in the Dublin suburb of Raheny and went to the same local school. Dave's younger brother, Phil, was friends with my older brother, Aidan. For a long time I was aware of him without taking any particular notice of him. I had short-lived flings with guys who burned bright in my life for a few weeks but then fizzled into nothingness. I had crushes on pop stars and celebrities, and,

unaccountably, on Dean Marinaro, the rather nerdy guy in my class who was kind of cute. Maybe I should've held out for Dean Marinaro, who (as far as I know) had never gone out with a girl. But I didn't. The year I turned sixteen I went to the annual Halloween party in the community centre. I dressed as a rather sexy witch. Dave was a blood-spattered vampire. We kissed while standing around the bonfire and that was that. I forgot about the celebs and the pop stars and Dean Marinaro. I was Dave McMenamain's girl and I stayed Dave's girl all through school and after we left and started work. Dave and Roxy. Roxy and Dave. From that night were always talked about as a couple, and that was fine by me. I wanted us to be forever. I believed we would.

When Dave was twenty and I was nineteen, he was offered a contract for a plumbing job in London's Docklands. Dave comes from a family of plumbers and it was the only thing he ever wanted to do. People may call plumbing a trade, but Dave is a craftsman and he's really brilliant at his work. The London job was a great opportunity and there was no way he was turning it down. Despite being in the middle of my accounting technicians course, I went to England with him. I couldn't bear the thought of us being long-distance lovers, even though London isn't really that far away. But it's overseas, so that makes it long-distance. Besides, being an accounting technician wasn't my dream. It was simply a qualification that would hopefully help me to get a job.

I didn't need my unfinished qualification, though. A few days after we arrived in the English capital, I landed a position as a receptionist in a Jaguar car dealership. Thanks to my dad, I know a lot about cars, although I'd never even

Her Husband's Mistake

seen a Jaguar up close before. But the job was perfect for me, I got on well with the staff and the customers, and despite missing home, I liked being part of London life.

We stayed for six great years. Then Dave was offered a contract on a massive commercial development back in Dublin. Returning was a no-brainer. Happy as I'd been in London, I was delighted to come home for good. We'd been talking about having a baby, but neither of us wanted to bring up a child in London. It was nothing against the city that had been good to us. It was simply that I wanted to start my family at home.

We bought a house in Baldoyle, a ten-minute drive from where we'd grown up, although we stayed with my mum and dad for a few months while Dave and his mates renovated it. I think I became pregnant on our first night there. A few months after Michaela was born, we were married in a ceremony that was way more lavish than we could afford given all the money we'd lashed out on turning the house into our dream home.

'Till death us do part, babes,' Dave said that night. 'So it's worth it.'

Or until Julie Halpin and her bootylicious bum moved in next door.

I'm awake ten minutes before the alarm is due to go off, and the image of the pair of them is in my head again. I always wake up ten minutes before the alarm, a somewhat useless talent that does, however, mean I have a few minutes to gather myself before getting out of bed. It used to be a time when I'd think about the day ahead, and I savoured those ten minutes as an oasis of calm before I had to throw

myself into the fray. Now it always seems to be filled with images of Dave and Julie and the fact that she was on top.

Wiping away the hot tears that have filled my eyes, I pick up my phone and silence the alarm before it starts to ring. Then I tiptoe out of my bedroom and across the hallway to the bathroom, stepping carefully over the squeaky floorboard so as not to disturb anyone else. When I brought Mum up to speed on what had happened and asked if we could stay with her for a while, she wanted me to take the main bedroom with the en suite. She said it would be far more suitable. But there was no way I was turning her out of her own bedroom. I insisted that I'd be fine in the room I'd slept in as a girl, even though sleeping in a single bed after the comfort of the much bigger one I shared with Dave is really difficult. I thought I wouldn't miss him in the narrow bed. If anything, I miss him more.

I let myself into the bathroom and close the door behind me. In a further effort to keep things quiet, I don't switch on the ventilation fan but open the window instead, although the dawn light has only reached the very edge of the horizon and the early-morning air is more autumnal than height of summer. But Mum is a light sleeper too, and after the months of Dad's illness, she needs her rest.

She could have done without me turning into an unexpected lodger with two children in tow. But where else could I have gone? Who else would I have run to?

I pull my hair into a knot and cover it with a shower cap. Mum is as supportive as it's possible to be, but no matter how much it suits both of us for now, I can't camp out here indefinitely. The children are looking on this interlude with their grandmother as part of their holidays and have taken

Her Husband's Mistake

it in their stride so far. But I can tell that Mica is starting to wonder if there's more to it than just keeping her granny company. Her questions are getting more and more pointed. Tom is blasé about things. I'm still a mess.

I turn on the shower and wait for the water to heat up. As it chunters into life, I tell myself that I might be missing the shower in my own home more than I'm missing my husband. It's a top-of-the-range power shower that's practically a workout for your skin. A fantastic bathroom is one of the advantages of being married to a plumber. The disadvantage, of course, is that he's a lying, cheating plumber.

I stop torturing myself with the train wreck of my life, lather up, rinse off and get out of the shower. As I pat myself dry, I pause, as I always do, to look at the faded scars of my two Caesareans. I remember being rushed into the hospital the second time, knowing that, once again, things weren't going to plan. While we were waiting for the ambulance to arrive, Dave used my lipstick to write 'cut along dotted line' across my enormous stomach. Even though I was sick with anxiety, it made me laugh. Dave has always made me laugh. I thought it was a sign that we were good for each other.

And now, as I sit in front of the dressing table and pull my hair into its work-day ponytail, I don't know what to think. I try not to think at all as I dab tinted moisturiser on my face and pearl-grey eyeshadow on my eyelids. It's the same look as always – I'm not one for experimenting. (Could that be why Dave was having it off with Julie Halpin? She's far more glamorous than me and has a range of make-up that accentuates her good cheekbones and bee-sting lips.) I use the same dark-brown mascara on my lashes as I've done since I was a teenager. There's no good reason to change.

Sheila O'Flanagan

Even Dave agrees my lashes are my best feature. They're long and thick and more than once I've been asked if they're real. So my Maybelline is fine. It and the Boots eyeshadow bring out the cool blue of my eyes. (Too cool, too blue? Julie's are a rich chocolate brown, eminently more seductive.) I finish my face by adding a peachy blusher and coral lipstick, before getting dressed in my working outfit of white cotton blouse and navy trouser suit. I slide a single pair of gold stud earrings into my ears; although I have a couple of extra piercings in them, I only wear more earrings if I'm going out socially, never when I'm working.

I assess myself in the long wardrobe mirror. Dave says I look like Clare Danes in *Homeland* when I'm in my suit. *Homeland* has always been one of our favourite shows, and of course I'm flattered whenever he compares me to her, but it's not true. I'm a watered-down version. I'm neither a Hollywood actress nor a super-spy. I'm a thirty-seven-year-old mother of two who can't tell the difference between the wrinkles and the worry lines that are etched across my face.

Julie Halpin doesn't have lines on her face. She doesn't have children. Nor does she have a husband any more. She moved in next door after her split with Doug and I did my best to be warm and welcoming, though clearly not as warm and welcoming as Dave. I stare at my reflection and wonder, fleetingly, if getting Botox or fillers would have stopped Dave from cheating on me. I don't know, and the Roxy staring back at me doesn't have the answers either.

I make another determined effort to push my unfaithful husband from my mind and pick up the satchel bag that contains my purse, credit cards and iPad. I let myself out of the bedroom and walk quietly along the landing, comfortable

Her Husband's Mistake

block-heeled shoes in my hand. I stop at the first door and open it gently.

Tom, who's seven, is lying on top of the bed, the sheets crumpled around his ankles. His red-gold hair falls over a face flushed with sleep. He doesn't move, even when I kiss him fleetingly on the forehead and whisper that I'll see him later. I close the door softly behind me and go up the steep stairs to the attic bedroom. Dad converted it years ago, when Aidan and I were still living at home. I desperately wanted to move into the conversion, but Aidan, being older, insisted that it was his by right. My complaints that it was stupid for him to have a room where he'd keep banging his head on the dormer roof fell on deaf ears. My brother got the attic room and I stayed where I was. To be honest, my own room is fine and gets the morning sun, but I was inconsolable for weeks. It made no difference. We were an equal-opportunity house. There were no concessions to weepy females. So eventually I stopped moaning and got on with it.

That's me. Getting-on-with-it Roxy. Accepting what's happened and moving on. Easier to do over an actual bedroom than what's gone on *in* a bedroom, though.

I thought there might have been a bit of an argument between Mica and Tom over the sleeping arrangements too, but Tom's such a happy-go-lucky person, and was so thrilled at the adventure of an extended stay at his granny's, that he didn't care where he slept. Mica (eleven, and veering between staying my little girl and starting to grow up) was delighted with her attic room, which is much nicer than her room in Beechgrove Park. But I doubt it will compensate for her dad if Dave and I make our temporary split permanent. Not that she'll have the attic room anyhow, because I simply can't inflict

us all on Mum. If asked, she'll say we're welcome, but having us stay permanently is an entirely different prospect to putting up with us for a few weeks until I sort myself out. I've seen those TV programmes about children moving back with their parents. It's never a good idea in the long run. I love my mum to bits, but we have separate lives.

I'll have to make a decision soon. And I will. Honestly. But not yet.

Mica is also sound asleep, although in her case with the covers tightly wrapped around her. Tom takes after his dad, with his Viking heritage, but Mica is a mini-me. Her hair is buttermilk-blonde like mine and she has the same heart-shaped face and blue eyes. Additionally, like me, she wakes up in an instant, which is why I simply blow her a kiss rather than touching her.

'I hope nobody ever breaks your heart the way your dad did mine,' I whisper. 'Sleep well, pet. See you later.'

Then I close the door behind me and make my way quietly downstairs.

'What on earth are you doing up at this hour?' My tone is half accusing, half exasperated as I see my mother sitting at the table, a cup of coffee and a dry Ryvita in front of her. 'I couldn't have been quieter, for heaven's sake.'

'I knew you'd be up early,' she replies. 'So I woke up too. I'm sorry. It's a habit.'

'You don't have to be sorry.' I immediately regret my words as I notice Mum's still-too-pale face and the shadows under her eyes. 'I'm the one who should be sorry. I'm the one in the way.'

'You know you're not,' she says. 'You never will be.'

Her Husband's Mistake

‘On one level I’m aware of that,’ I agree. ‘On the other – I’m a grown woman with a family of my own and I shouldn’t have had to come running back to my mammy like a child.’

‘Aren’t you still my child?’ Mum gives me a smile, then picks up a knife and begins to smear Low Low on her Ryvita. ‘I’d have been upset if you didn’t stay with me.’

I don’t know if Dave was supportive about me coming here while Dad was in the hospice because he knew it would give him the opportunity of some offside action with Julie. I like to think not, but he’s spent a lot of time in her house over the last year. I always thought it was because Julie’s brother, Robbie, had brought his seventy-five-inch OLED TV with him when he started to house-share after his landlord had jacked up his rent to unmanageable levels. I thought Robbie and Dave watched the footie on it together. That’s what my husband told me. But maybe it was nothing more than an excuse and I’m utterly naïve.

‘The coffee machine is still on,’ Mum says, breaking into my thoughts. ‘And there’s hot water in the kettle. Are you going to have something before you go out?’

‘I’ll just have hot water and lemon.’ I fill a cup with water, then slice one of the lemons on the worktop and drop it in. ‘I’ll get coffee at the airport while I’m waiting for Gina Hayes.’

‘I didn’t think that driving people around the place meant you had to follow their hare-brained ideas,’ says Mum.

‘If I had the willpower to follow everything she says, I’d be a sylph by now.’ I run my finger around the waistband of my trousers. I’m comfort-eating and it’s beginning to show. But I haven’t the heart for Slim to Win. ‘Lots of people have hot water and lemon juice in the morning,’ I add. ‘It helps with your digestion. It’s not specific to Gina Hayes.’

Sheila O'Flanagan

'A decent breakfast would be better.'

'Says the woman with a Ryvita on her plate.'

Mum looks abashed and then smiles. Instantly, she looks years younger. 'You've got me there,' she admits. 'But it's only five thirty. I'll have something else when the kids are up.'

It's five thirty already! I have to go. I finish the hot water and lemon juice (secretly wishing I'd had coffee after all) and glance out of the window as I rinse the cup under the tap.

The sky has lightened but it's covered in a fine grey haze that's brought a soft summer drizzle.

'Take care,' says Mum. 'Let me know how things are going.'

'I'm sorry for leaving you with the kids,' I say. 'I know it's a long day today.'

'Don't apologise. I like it. You drive safely, OK?'

'OK.'

I pick up the car keys from the bowl on the kitchen table. I turn to leave and then turn back again. Mum looks at me questioningly and I walk around the table and put my arms around her.

'Love you.' I give her a hug that could crack her ribs.

'Love you too,' she says

And then I leave.