

# Daddy Blackbird

The true story of a family surviving  
and thriving after loss by suicide



By Caroline Roodhouse

## SAMPLE CHAPTERS

## Daddy Blackbird is a story of three parts

**HISTORY** – From amazing adventures to a shocking succession of tragedies, these were the days before our family changed forever.

**HORROR** – As each catastrophic moment unfolded after Steve’s death, I describe the complexities of loss by suicide, one challenging chapter after another.

**HOPE** – By finding strength in myself, my children and my community, I was able to prepare for better times ahead.

### A selection of sample chapters from the book

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#### **TRIGGER WARNING:**

This book contains references to suicide and bereavement throughout.

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## Honeymoon drama

*from HISTORY*

Life as an engaged couple was reasonably normal. We were planning the wedding and all the related bumflufferies that go with it. Neither of us wanted a big fancy ceremony so we settled on a small daytime event at Littlecote House, a beautiful old Elizabethan country estate in Wiltshire with stunning parklands and a gorgeous walled garden – perfect for the photos. Twenty family members celebrated the day with us in the sunshine on 5 August 2005, followed by a party the next day at a nearby hotel for our wider circle of friends.

Unfortunately, while we'd been planning the wedding, Steve had been told he was to be made redundant, again. Meanwhile, my job at the bank had changed into a sales role and I wasn't enjoying it anymore. But rather than feeling downhearted, we turned the situation on its head, realising that if I resigned, we'd both be free to do whatever the hell we wanted!

This realisation influenced the wedding plans significantly. We kept the cost of the wedding low, topping up our travelling fund whenever we could. And in November 2005, we set off on the trip of a lifetime as Mr & Mrs Roodhouse.

Our first stop was Bangkok, and we had five amazing weeks touring Thailand. We loved exploring the bustle of the capital by tuk-tuk, which was a stark contrast to the beautiful beaches and peaceful islands in the south. We hiked through the mountains, went river rafting and rode elephants in the north before taking a night bus to Kanchanaburi where we took in the bridge over the River Kwai and visited the historic railway and the chilling

war museums nearby. Thailand really was the adventure of a lifetime.

Next, we landed in Singapore, and after the beach huts of Ko Samui, the opulence of a proper hotel was very much welcomed! Again, we loved navigating the contrasting settings of traditional local temples against the lavish cocktails and the luxury of the famous Raffles Piano Bar. And the food was out of this world!

The midpoint of our trip was back in Australia, which was to be followed by New Zealand, the US and then home. Sharing these moments together felt so special to Steve and I, and we didn't take for granted this opportunity we had created to build these incredible memories together. Our rip-roaring journey as newlyweds was awe-inspiring and we were crossing off that list of amazing places to visit with gusto.

On Day 53, however, a terrible accident put a very sudden and unexpected end to our adventure.

A horrifying fall from a balcony resulted in me crushing a vertebra which dangerously obstructed my spinal column.

We'd met up with Steve's good friend Jeremy and had been having a barbecue at his in-law's house which was just north of Brisbane on the east coast. After we'd eaten, we took a dip in the eternity pool on the top floor of this stunning home which overlooked the beautiful bay beyond. As I stepped out of the pool to go back inside, I was disorientated, it was dark, and I stepped off the edge, finding myself falling through the sky.

Excitement was abruptly ended and replaced with the inescapable prospect of lengthy surgery to save my spine. A tour of several hospitals ensued, stretcher-bound, flying ambulance terror, but safely landing at The Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane.

Steve was understandably traumatised but dealt with the entire situation brilliantly. From the moment I fell, through every terrifying journey we had to take, to the times he sat by my bedside reading to me and feeding me, and the lonely nights he spent in the nearby Red Cross hostels, he was incredible.

The operation took place a few days later. A spinal fusion, with three of my vertebrae being joined together using a bone graft taken from one of my

ribs and a titanium cage screwed in place. It was a success, but overwhelming pain and excruciating physio sessions were lying in wait.

Those days were among the toughest I'd ever experienced, and I felt it was equally hard on Steve as he went through every moment of it with me. Over the following weeks, the highly skilled and unbelievably patient doctors, nurses, and spinal specialists had me back on my feet and shuffling along the corridors of that amazing hospital with a Zimmer frame, wires attached to my drip and shockingly bad hair that hadn't been washed in weeks. I was quite a sight! I was fitted with a body brace which strapped around my torso to provide support for my spine, and I was told to wear it for the next three months of my recovery.

As I started to feel a little better, I was able to sit up in bed and do some of the basics like brushing my own hair and feeding myself. I started to regain my appetite and Steve would head out on the bus to the nearest noodle bar or McDonald's, returning with our takeaway dinner which should have been a romantic meal enjoyed in the locations we never got to see like the Great Barrier Reef, Uluru and other famous places and landmarks. He'd even stash away those little cheese portions you get on hospital dinner trays with a small packet of crackers for those moments when we needed a cheeky snack.

Ironically, I was discharged on Valentine's Day, and we moved in with another of Steve's old friends who, luckily for us, had emigrated to Brisbane a few years before. John and his fiancée, Anna, took good care of us over the coming months, welcoming us into their home at a time when they were eagerly planning their own wedding. To cut a long story short: we finally scored a first-class upgrade on Singapore Airlines three months later, home to embark on a rather different journey.



## The witness statement

*from HORROR*

I hadn't left the house in days, apart from school and nursery runs, so I was strongly encouraged out the door by a friend to have a coffee in town. I felt so tired and uncomfortable but I'd become used to doing as I was told – it was a lot easier than following my own thought processes and making my own decisions.

As I sat self-consciously among the bustle of excited Christmas shoppers, I received a phone call from a police officer telling me I would need to provide a statement explaining what I knew about Steve's state of mind in the weeks leading up to his disappearance. She told me that I'd likely be asked to stand and read this statement out to the coroner during the inquest, which had now been scheduled for early in the new year.

I hadn't realised that providing such a statement was something I'd have to do and I was so shaken up by this news that I had to leave immediately and head back to the relative safety of home.

The police officer arranged to visit me at home on 23 November, two weeks after Steve had been discovered, and I felt permanently sick at the thought of the impending conversation. What would she ask me? Worse than that, what would she tell me that I might not want to know? I'd never had any sort of interaction with a police officer before, apart from those who had investigated Steve's disappearance and notified me of his death, so the prospect of this meeting was daunting to say the least.

How do you act in front of a police officer? Would we sit on the sofa or at the dining table? How clean and tidy should my house be? Would I offer

her a cup of tea and a biscuit? All sorts of odd thoughts went through my mind.

I was shaking when she arrived. But she was kind and gentle. I can't remember if I offered her a cuppa or not, or how clean and tidy my house had been. She told me the whole thing would take an hour or so.

I had irrationally feared some sort of suggested blame or judgment from her. But there was none whatsoever, thankfully the stigma of suicide was not part of this particular conversation. It was essentially a formality, a fact-finding mission as part of their investigation into Steve's mental state and subsequent death, which could not be officially recorded as a suicide until the inquest. I'd need to give her details of anything unusual or concerning that had happened, but I couldn't think of anything.

I was surprised at how far back we went in our conversation, as I found myself explaining how long we had been married, how both his parents had died years before and other details from our past. Incidentally, that day I gave the statement was the anniversary of his mother's sudden and shocking death just a few years before. I spoke about the relationship he had with his wider family and how they had not been particularly close.

I told her that Steve wasn't taking any medication for anything as far as I was aware, and he hadn't had any medical conditions, though he had often complained about stomach upsets. He had been to the doctor about this, six months previously, and I recalled him being very pleased and proud of the fact that they had noted he was in tip-top condition. We believed that his stomach upsets were potentially due to some kind of anxiety which may have been related to feeling unsettled at work.

To my knowledge, he had never suffered from any mental health issues and, whilst I knew he was down about his job and some of the roles he'd had, there had been no clues that he was deeply depressed or suicidal in any way.

I talked about how unhappy he had been at work and how he would complain about it daily. I knew plenty of people like this, so whilst it was a frustration for Steve, it certainly didn't seem unusual or concerning to me. I explained that he was scared to stand up for himself for fear of losing his

job, and that it was due to his low confidence that he stayed in a role he disliked for so long. We'd spoken on and off about him updating his CV, tidying up his LinkedIn profile and starting to look for another job but he would always put this off.

I told the police officer about how, shortly after Ada was born, she was unwell and I had suffered with post-natal depression. Steve had asked to reduce his working hours to allow him to be at home to support me and the girls. To enable this, his employers moved him into a recruitment role which meant he was able to work reduced hours at home four days a week, with Mondays in the office. He would often come downstairs from his workspace and tell me he'd received a strongly worded email letting him know he hadn't done something quite right or to tell him to do one thing and then immediately do the opposite. He was very frustrated when all his hard work was cast aside in a change of direction but he was not alone in that.

Several weeks before his disappearance, he'd been in a particularly bad mood one morning as I was leaving the house with Ada in her pram, and it hit me in that moment how much it was affecting us all.

I explained to the police officer that, as I'd been walking into town I had messaged Steve to suggest that he looked for another job because his unhappiness was beginning to impact our relationship. When I saw him later that day, he told me that he'd thought about what I had said and had decided he was going to resign immediately. This worried me massively; we had a young family to support and relied on his income, so we talked about it and decided that resigning without an alternative job was not the best solution. Also, he'd struggled emotionally in the past when he was unemployed due to redundancy and I didn't believe that another period of unemployment would do him any good at all.

The next I knew; he'd been offered a new role and was due to start it on 12 November. It was a big relief and felt like something to look forward to.

The police officer dutifully noted down everything I said on her iPad until I reached the bit about his departure for work on that fateful day. The rest, she knew about.



She acknowledged that Steve's death had been an absolute shock to me and everyone that knew him; that no one had seen this coming; that there hadn't appeared to be any warning signs; and that I had no explanation as to why he would do it.

I signed my statement and glanced at the clock, noting that our conversation had taken twice as long as expected.

I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.



## Fearing funeral day

*from HORROR*

The need to sort, plan and organise took over absolutely everything. And the biggest thing that needed sorting by far was Steve's funeral.

I barely remember dealing with it. I recall needing a safe and familiar space to talk about it, though. A place that was away from my house and my children. I wanted to keep those conversations separate and removed. One Saturday afternoon, I met a close friend of Steve's to chat it through. He'd been in contact with the funeral directors on my behalf and wanted to run through the details with me. I struggled to focus or speak while he talked through options for flowers, coffins and suitable outfits for Steve to be dressed in. We eventually settled on pyjamas and his dressing gown because I wanted him to be warm and cosy. Shoes or slippers seemed unnecessary. After all, he wouldn't be walking anywhere. And I decided on a basic coffin with no frills or pointless details. It felt like the sort of thing he would have chosen himself.

I was very grateful for the support from that friend as well as Steve's brother, and the kind souls at the church who rallied round to help. It felt like I was being bombarded by an endless onslaught of impossible questions and decisions to make, and I found it all incredibly surreal and exhausting. I couldn't do it alone and I passed along many of those decisions to others who accepted them graciously.

One thing I was clear about at the time was that I did not want to see that coffin disappear behind a heavy red curtain into the flames that waited beyond. I did not want my children to see it either. Or anybody else for that

matter. I decided that the coffin would remain where it was until everyone had departed.

Before I left my office that day, Steve's friend gave me a lock of my husband's hair. I was reluctant to take it, but he gently reminded me that the girls may treasure it one day.

I took Evie to the funeral directors a few days before the service, so that she could say her own private goodbye. Emma came too for support. This was one of the toughest and saddest days by far. I felt sick at the thought of putting my child through something so painful and traumatic that could scar her forever. And on top of the nausea, I was seething inside. As I tried to hide the anger I felt towards Steve and not muddy the waters of sadness for both my girls, the internal dialogue I was repeating in my mind was intense.

The room where Steve's body was resting was tiny, with space for just a couple of chairs and a very small table with a vase of artificial flowers on it. I sat and looked around me, bewildered, and entirely unable to process the enormity of what we were doing. I was trying to make sense of it all but that felt futile. The large wooden coffin took up most of the room that remained. The lighting was an odd shade of deep red. Steve's name was carved on a small plaque in the centre of the coffin lid with a date engraved on it. I don't remember if it was his date of birth or his date of death. We didn't open the lid. I couldn't face the idea of seeing his lifeless body. Evie sang songs to him and we wrote him little notes on small, flowery cards from a box on the table. Evie wrote Ada's for her; I'd not felt it was suitable to bring her along.

*Daddy, you have been so kind to me. I hope I can still communicate with you.*

*Love Evie xx*

*Daddy, I love you very much and thank you for the stories, the fun,  
and the love you gave me. Love Ada xx*

*Puma, thank you for being my partner for 18 years and taking care of me.*

*I miss you very much. Caroline xx*

We left these notes behind to be placed inside the coffin after we'd gone, along with a football and a Cub badge that Steve had recently helped Evie to achieve.

I struggled to stand when it was time to go. We were leaving him behind, but he had already left us. How could my mind make sense of that? The lady from the funeral directors asked if we wanted to look at the options to memorialise the ashes, like teddy bears and trinkets, but she recognised that it was all too much and reassured me that these decisions could be made when we were ready. We left, drained by the emotion of this incredibly challenging experience but at least we felt a sense of accomplishment that Evie had been given her own private moment to say goodbye.

I still wasn't sleeping at that time. The nights were bad; the evenings painfully lonely. I was shattered, physically exhausted and emotionally drained, and yet there was always so much to do.

Another major task was writing the eulogy. Despite being passionate about writing, I found the thought of this paralysing. It certainly wasn't the type of writing I ever expected to be doing. But I knew it had to be done. So I reached out to those who knew Steve best and they each supplied a passage to include – meaningful memories and stories of times gone by. I put these pieces together and added my own to the mix. Although it was a relief to complete it, I dreaded the moment I would hear it read aloud at my husband's memorial. All these special times were to be recalled but no more of them would ever be experienced. Emma and I decided that the best approach would be desensitisation – reading it over and over again, until I became numb to the words. Those painfully lonely evenings were replaced by what felt like a hundred recitals of that eulogy. After the first few dozen read throughs, a peculiar cabin fever seemed to set in and Emma began to add a little dramatisation, a bit of role play, and a few questionable accents were thrown in for good measure. It did the job. It also made me smile, and I was grateful for that.

I was thankful for the colleagues of mine who designed and printed the order of service. Another job taken off my hands. We included these special words:

Steve was one of the good ones; described as a true gentleman by so many. Always putting others first - his two beautiful daughters, family, friends, colleagues and strangers - he believed in the value of people. He will be remembered for being funny, kind, respectful, motivational,

inspirational, loyal and utterly selfless. We will miss him forever.

The day before the funeral, I was in Hobbycraft, buying Christmas gifts for the girls. I'd found what I needed and was in a rush to return home. but was desperate for a wee. Luckily, they had a toilet there, but in my hurry, I stumbled and dropped my phone down the pan. I'm certain the other customers heard my wailing and swearing as I reluctantly retrieved it. I got home in a total panic, dead phone in hand. The rice trick didn't work. Neither did the airing cupboard. So, that evening, despite having plenty of other things to do, I found myself spending a lot of time and money in the Apple store. The tech support person was lovely though – patient, kind and very understanding.

As my shiny new phone burst into life, I received a call from the police officer who had taken my statement. She was calling to tell me she wanted to return Steve's phone which they had kept and were now ready to release back to me. She was out and about and offered to drive to the Apple store to give it me. I met her in a carpark nearby and as she got out of her vehicle and handed me a plastic evidence bag with Steve's phone inside, I remember thinking what a bizarre evening it had been, with plenty more challenges to come the following day.

I had arranged for the cremation to take place in the morning and a more uplifting service to be held at our church in the afternoon. Several of Steve's friends attended the cremation and I believe that six of them carried his coffin to its final resting place. It was a quiet, respectful moment, but not one I could bring myself to attend or let the girls be a part of.

I was overwhelmed by the hundreds of people who attended the service at the church later that day. Faces everywhere. Family, friends, work colleagues, neighbours, Evie's teachers, Ada's nursery ladies, people I hadn't seen in years and total strangers too. An odd mix of groups and communities, all from different places and stages of life, all in one room, all desperately sad. And all with their own stories to tell and endless compliments about what a brilliant person Steve was.

I didn't want to hear any of them. It hurt too much.

There was a small family area in the corner of the church with a little

table and chairs for kids colouring and craft. My mum kept an eye on Ada as she toddled around and coloured in pictures of Noah's Ark and Christingles. A huge brown teddy bear sat beside the table. I spent the entire service with my face buried in it, sobbing, while Steve's favourite songs were played and photos of his adventures were displayed on the big screen above the altar. Some very courageous people stood and paid tribute to him with meaningful words and memories. Evie read a prayer she had written for the occasion. My little nine-year-old child stood alone at her father's funeral, saying goodbye in the bravest possible way. My heart was broken.

Next, Emma read our carefully crafted eulogy which ended with the following sentiment:

Whatever demons tormented Steve's mind; we may never understand. What we do know is that Steve was a brilliant, loving and kind-hearted man. Committed to his close friends and family; calm, funny, full of life and love and he touched so many lives. Steve, we will miss you so much.

As we left the church and entered the adjoining hall, we were met by a hive of activity. People were busy chatting in small groups, passing around teas and coffees and tentatively helping themselves to food from the very long buffet table that was heaped with platters of sandwiches and cakes.

An old friend of Steve's who lives in Spain had travelled over for the funeral and bought gifts for the girls. I remembered the most surreal moment when they both disappeared for a while and returned dressed in red and black flamenco dresses. They entertained, sang on the stage, danced and lifted spirits where they could. A little light relief.

I remember having to continually step away and hide in the church which was now empty. I needed space and silence and a moment where I didn't feel obliged to smile at all those people who had made the effort to attend. I didn't want to leave the girls for long though and kept returning to the hall to check that they were alright.

I don't remember leaving or getting home that day. But I know it would've been a huge relief to shut the world away again. I do vividly remember thinking that it wasn't over. The inquest was yet to come. And the impossible decisions that needed to be made about Steve's remains.



## Improving my mental health

*from HOPE*

Shortly after Steve died, as well as being prescribed anti-depressants, I had been encouraged by my GP and a few good friends to seek help from the bereavement charity, Cruse. But when I did, I was told that the waiting list was long and their preference was to see people several months after a loss rather than immediately following one. So, I sought out a counsellor who could provide a safe space for me to sit and cry each week. I'm not sure how useful this was at the time, but it felt like the right thing to do and it satisfied my friends. The counsellor had a little summerhouse in her back garden where we would meet, and a friendly little dog who would sit on my lap throughout the sessions. I liked the comfort of that. After a couple of months of these weekly visits, though, I decided I wanted more practical and impactful support. I wanted to learn coping mechanisms and techniques that would actually make a difference in those panic-stricken moments that were hitting me all too often.

So, about six months after Steve's death, I found a local trauma therapist called Phil who had a background in law enforcement and the military. I immediately took to his no-nonsense approach. Phil's first priority was to sort out my sleep because, as the narrator from one of my favourite films, *Fight Club*, helpfully explains, "With insomnia, nothing is real. Everything is far away. Everything is a copy of a copy of a copy".

I needed to get real to make sure that whatever treatment Phil offered would stand a chance of being effective. He recommended I look into taking Melatonin - a naturally occurring hormone our bodies produce to

regulate the sleep cycle. He also went through some relaxation exercises which I recorded and listened to at night. Within a few weeks my sleep had started to improve. It wasn't perfect by any means - it never has been - but I was definitely getting at least a few hours' shuteye each night and feeling more receptive to help.

The next step was to determine exactly what needed treating when it came to my mental health. After a few tests, Phil established that I had PTSD as a result of the trauma caused by Steve's death. He treated this with some intense sessions of imaginal exposure, in which I recalled and described my experiences in order to reduce the feelings of fear towards them. I would sit in the dark with my eyes shut tight, talking through everything that had happened from the moment Steve went missing to the horrifying point at which I heard how his body had been found. I had to focus on the most triggering, upsetting and distressing times. It was horrific.

Each week, we would assess and record how I was feeling and whether the intensity of the triggers I was experiencing had reduced. I was beginning to find that the moments I looked out onto the empty driveway where Steve used to park his car, or approached the roundabout where he turned right instead of left in those final moments of his, or simply lay in bed with the vivid image of his face as he took his last breaths - all these experiences were beginning to feel less and less extreme.

Despite being a little sceptical at first, I truly believe to this day that the treatment I received from Phil had a profound impact on the way I was processing things and it helped to make those horrifying moments a bit more bearable.

I continued to see Phil weekly, but when I later became entangled in an unhealthy relationship, I found that I was no longer getting value from his sessions. So, I eventually stopped going. There was little point in attending any sort of therapy at that time - the pressure from this toxic environment was cancelling out any progress I might have made. So, I took a break and focused my efforts on being single again instead. Despite the ensuing loneliness, there was nothing worth remaining for in that relationship.

The PTSD therapy had helped with one area of my life in those earlier



days, though there was plenty more work to do when it came to the impact of Steve's suicide. On top of that, two years on, I now had to deal with the damage caused by this regrettable relationship too.

That's when Emma did some research for me and found Kirsty, a local clinical psychologist.

At this time, the world was still battling with the global pandemic and the biggest topic on everyone's lips, apart from the discussions about toilet roll and pasta shortages, was the desire to 'return to normal', to the comfort of how things had been before Covid-19 had become a thing. I would look on tearfully as the families in our street banged their pots and pans every Monday night to the beat of this determined intent and I reflected on how my life immediately before Covid had been about loss, grief, loneliness, fear and anger. Day after day of painful unknowns and uncertainties.

And when the families around me were praying for familiarity, I had nothing like that to go back to. I saw no route to a normal and stable life ahead of me either. I was stuck. So, with Emma's help, I arranged to have virtual sessions with Kirsty because of the lockdown restrictions in place at the time.

Kirsty came across to me as a beautiful, kind soul, inside and out, as well as being a highly skilled and experienced psychotherapist. The months of drinking and cutting myself, on top of the bereavement and grief I was yet to process properly, had all left me limp and lifeless. After everything that had happened, I was struggling to see a calm and happy future ahead. I spent all my time feeling traumatised by the past and anxious about the years in front of me.

The first and most impactful thing that Kirsty did was acknowledge my need for hope. I couldn't even imagine what hope actually looked like, and I'll never forget the most compelling statement she made:

"I will carry hope for you until you are ready to carry it for yourself."

That profoundly kind gesture permeated every part of me and I knew with absolute certainty that she would carry out her promise.

Over the coming months, I had many sessions with Kirsty which were primarily focused on the here and now, using mindfulness tools and

techniques to keep me grounded, stop the rumination and prevent me worrying about the future. She taught me a technique called 'behaviour chain analysis', to help me understand why certain moments during the day - such as Ada's bedtime story - were so much harder than others and how I could improve them. And she helped me to track those unhelpful thinking patterns that would leave me stuck and stressed, along with ways to address and escape them.

All the while, these tools were developing my resilience. I was getting mentally stronger, repairing and resetting, and beginning to build an acceptance of everything that had happened, particularly Steve's suicide.

Whilst I'd heard of many of these 'thinking errors' and techniques based on dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) before, or variations of them, I was finally getting to grips with applying them to my own life and making them work for me.

One of the most troubling of these thinking errors has been my tendency to always overthink things. I've been chipping away at this particular challenge for as long as I can remember, long before suicide was a part of my life, and there have been times when I've actually felt like I'm making progress. But that progress took a major battering when Steve departed. The negative thoughts were playing on repeat in my head like a stuck record, leaving me holding on to all the worry and anxiety and stopping me from finding that hope I so desperately needed.

The sessions I had with Kirsty had encouraged me to take a greater interest in psychology and self-help and it was around this time I found a brilliant book called 'Soundtracks'. The author, Jon Acuff had a study carried out to ask 10,000 people if they struggle with overthinking, and 99.5 percent said yes. I was relieved to realise I was clearly not alone!

Being partial to a good metaphor, I loved the idea that when our minds are full of broken soundtracks that we're constantly ruminating over, the solution is to become the DJ of our own thoughts by finding and playing better tunes. When I started questioning my own worth, worrying about what sort of wife I had been and struggling with my own self-esteem I had to challenge myself by reflecting on some particular questions: Is this worry

true? Do I know it to be fact? Am I overemphasising the negative and underemphasising the positive? Is it helpful? How is this thought affecting me? Is it aiding my recovery or holding me back? Is it kind? Is it playing into the self-sabotage traps I'd set for myself along the way or can I be a little more forgiving than that? These questions have really helped me to reassess my thinking, be a little gentler with myself, and play out some much more helpful scenarios that have lifted me when I've really needed it.

I became part of several grief recovery networks following Steve's death, like Widowed and Young, a national UK-based charity for young widows to navigate life after loss. (In case you're wondering, they define 'young' as under 51.) I wasn't interested in the in-person meet-ups once they'd resumed after lockdown, that just wasn't my bag, but I did get some value from the online groups and the conversations they were having. Other people can be a great source of new soundtracks, and these individuals had real, authentic experiences I could relate to. They weren't all directly relevant to me, but I found that other widows bereaved by suicide had some profound perspectives that were worth hearing and adding to my own playlist. I learnt that it was helpful for me to identify my old broken records and replace them with new more optimistic and memorable thoughts grounded in evidence gathered from the people around me as well as through my own personal growth.

I took a break from therapy, continued with my reading, and enjoyed a short period of calm before a recurring problem with our neighbour reared it's noisy head again. The violent behaviour and the endless screams and shouts from the boy next door had ramped up again and my mood and sleep were being badly affected.

My work colleagues recognised that I was struggling with the stress of it all and the inability to rest was impacting my mental health, allowing some of those old broken records to start playing again. They offered me a short course of therapy sessions through a programme they had signed up to. I got myself booked in and dug deep to find the energy I needed to explain my whole story yet again, with the extra addition of this latest distressing challenge.

I was exhausted and the advice from this new therapist, Lucy, came in

the form of another excellent metaphor. She suggested I picture my energy as a bank account, with debits that drain me and credits that revive me. I've come across similar approaches before, where I've looked at things that either nourish or deplete me. But having it framed in a new way using this 'bank account' analogy really helped me to get on board with the whole idea. It can be helpful to apply an imaginary value to each credit or debit; a half hour walk could bank you thirty credits, whereas a stressful meeting might cost you twenty.

As a busy working mum, it can be tough to seek out those credits but, without getting too uptight about it, I now keep a close eye on my 'balance', anticipating future costs to my bottom line and planning top ups when they're likely to be needed most.

During those conversations with Lucy, she reminded me about the very evident need to ease up on myself a little and start playing some of those new soundtracks I'd been finding so helpful. I couldn't control the situation with our neighbours, and I could see the impact it was having on the girls. After everything that had happened since Steve's death, I was desperate to give them everything, including a home that was safe and quiet. I couldn't even do that, and it had been really getting me down. Although I was doing everything I possibly could to keep them happy, I still felt like I was failing as their one and only parent.

I wanted to fill Steve's shoes as a father as well as fulfil my own responsibilities as a mother. I didn't want my children lacking in anything because of his death. With fairness being one of my core values, I had set myself the impossible task of making sure they had everything they were entitled to, and more! The effect of this was that I was being very unfair on myself in my quest to be the perfect parent, and nobody was winning in this game.

Setting ourselves high standards can be a good thing. But it can also lead to us being too critical of ourselves and we end up falling short of our own unreasonable expectations. I wanted the girls to have a perfect life, I wanted to be the perfect parent to them, but that was never going to happen. I had to accept that.

I'd continued my reading and came across a book called 'Time to Breathe', by Dr Bill Mitchell, in which he explains how we can learn to shape unachievable perfectionism to work in our favour, loosening our grip on this entrenched mindset.

Some of the justifications he gives for letting go of perfectionism really struck a chord with me:

- Perfectionism is linked to depression
- Perfectionism is one of the main reasons people suffer from low self-esteem
- Perfectionists can't relax
- Perfectionists can become pushy parents
- Perfectionists can struggle with change

I didn't need any more convincing! As far as I'm concerned, perfectionism can do one!

Instead of focusing on being the perfect parent, I started to adjust the expectations I'd imposed on myself, realising that the girls didn't need a mum who was constantly uptight and frustrated at her own perceived failings. Looking back on all I had achieved, I focused in on Kirsty's kindness and Lucy's lessons. I steadied myself and reflected back on what I had overcome through my PTSD treatment with Phil. I encouraged myself to dwell a lot less on the past thanks to the new soundtracks I'd started to play in my mind. I was focusing much more on my own personal balance sheet of credits and debits, prioritising the positives wherever I possibly could and banking those energising moments.

Despite our ups and downs, the girls were doing well. I started to ease up on myself, accepting that good enough is ok. And through all that tireless work I'd been doing on my mental health, I realised I was starting to feel hopeful again.



## Sharing my lived experience

*from HOPE*

Despite the boost in confidence that these newfound connections brought me, I'll be the first to admit that I'm rather different to my children when it comes to their natural-born performing abilities. I generally stay out of the spotlight as a reclusive introvert. The catastrophic impact that suicide has had on my ability to trust, the damaging relationship I found myself in after that, and the lasting effects of the pandemic's periods of lockdown emphasised all this further and I have grown much more comfortable in my own company.

However, the tentative conversations I began to have about my lived experience had such a profound impact on many others that I have felt compelled to follow it further. I speak at different organisations on suicide awareness and loss, sharing my experience and the things I have learnt from it and this is now a significant and rewarding part of my life.

Every time I have the opportunity to help others find comfort, strength and hope by sharing my story, it heals a part of me that I once thought could never be healed.

Those people I described earlier, who lost parents to suicide when they were very young, have commented that hearing openly and honestly from survivors like me has given them strength to speak out and ask for the help that they have desperately needed for so long.

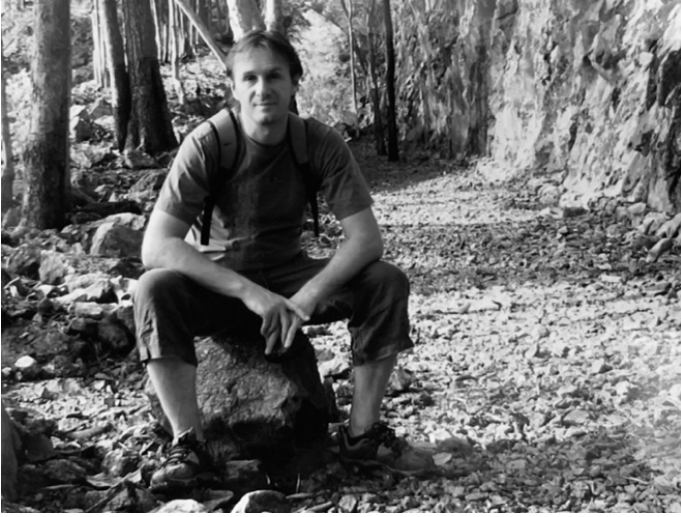
To me, this is reason enough to share my story, but beyond this I've found so many more people who value stories such as mine for different reasons - from those who have recently suffered a loss through suicide or

who have a close relationship with others who've attempted to take their own lives, to people working as mental health or bereavement counsellors, as well as others who see my talks as a learning opportunity to broaden their knowledge as Mental Health First Aiders or line managers in the workplace. And then there are the many who simply want to understand more about all of this, hoping that they can help to make a difference in the future.

My talks set the scene by sharing the shocking statistics, such as how there are more than 800,000 people each year whose lives are impacted by suicide. I describe that moment I was notified by the police that Steve had been found and the devastating impact that all of it had on our daughters. I share how I've been supporting them in their grief over the years, with the help of incredible friends and amazing charities. I describe the help we received from our local community and my workplace, and what more employers might do to be proactive and supportive for those who are suffering. I also share Evie's animation, highlighting the need for schools, workplaces and other institutions to consider the damage that thoughtless everyday language can do. And I open up the conversation to discuss how we can continue the journey together, to tackle the stigma that remains.

When we share our lived experiences from a place of vulnerability, we can all begin to open up more and support each other when it comes to suicide awareness and prevention. People describe my sessions as brave, powerful, captivating and inspiring, and a pivotal starting point for more of these vital conversations.

This is where I stand in my journey today – a place where I can talk openly about what we have been through with a confidence I never realised I could feel again. I fully intend to continue doing everything I can to share my story about how I have slowly, gradually, and determinedly carried us from horror to hope.



*Steve in Kanchanaburi, Thailand, December 2005*



*Steve and me (I don't know the elephant's name) in Chiang Mai, Thailand, December 2005*





*Ada, me and Evie at Steve's funeral, December 2018*



*Me, Ada and Evie, at Ada's birthday party, May 2022*

# BOOK SYNOPSIS

*“We’ve found him. He’s not alive.  
And it’s clear he has done it to himself.”*

These were the fifteen unforgettable words uttered by the police officers who delivered the shocking news that my husband, Steve, had taken his own life.

No warning. No signs. No note left behind. No explanation given.

Loss by suicide is like grief with a microphone. Everything is amplified. Louder, sharper, deafening at times.

Over the years, Caroline has discovered that time cannot heal a catastrophic loss like this. It just dampens the noise a little. All the sorrowful sounds of bereavement continue to be heard through every moment and milestone of life. Yet, the sweet singing of the blackbird can be heard when the storm passes too.

In this book, Caroline reflects on her most personal thoughts, experiences and learnings, and those of her young children, to give a voice to those left behind.

Whether you’re suffering directly from loss, you’re supporting a friend, relative or colleague whose loved one had died by suicide, or you’re struggling with your own mental health, *Daddy Blackbird* is an honest, inspiring and relatable story that can offer you hope beyond the horror.

