

Chapter I

Even in death, Hugo Ordoñez could make Laurita laugh.

Hugo died instantly when his car collided with a tractor-trailer en route to Union City General Hospital. His pregnant wife, Laurita, bore their only child in the wreckage.

The accident was one of the top news stories of 1988. Under pressure from family, and to help support her newborn, Rosa, Laurita Ordoñez, agreed to an exclusive on-camera interview for the television show, “Newsman, with Rich Burbank.” The interview was recorded two days after Hugo’s funeral.

Laurita shifted anxiously under the bright camera lights. She fanned herself with a hand-sized portrait of her husband pinched between her damp fingers. Rich Burbank, twenty-year veteran of TV news, took his seat for an interview he initially had balked at. He thought Laurita was too quiet and disinteresting, and her English subpar. His producer insisted a widowed mother appealed to their housewife demographic and overruled him.

Burbank sat upright, leaned slightly towards her, adjusted his tie, and assumed a look of mild pleasantness. The camera’s recording light blinked red and Burbank quickly introduced himself, his show, and his guest. He gave Laurita his condolences, congratulated her on

her healthy child, and inquired about her recovery. When the time came for Laurita to respond, the finely tuned rhythm of the interview came to a standstill. She looked visibly uncomfortable. Her forgettable words were hesitant and apathetic, but Burbank continued unfazed.

“The loss of a loved one and the birth of another. Life's most tragic and gratifying events occurring at nearly the same time.” Burbank said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Of these two life-changing events, which has resonated the most with you these past few days?”

“I don't understand,” Laurita said, with a look of astonishment.

Burbank glanced at his producer and repeated his question more slowly than before.

“Between the birth of your child, and the death of your husband—”

“No,” she said, defensively. “I heard your question. I don't understand. You want me to choose? Why should I choose?”

Laurita looked for a sign of support from her sister who was standing off camera, but she couldn't read her expression through the veil of camera light.

She lowered her head and massaged her eyes. She knew she had overreacted, but that's what she did when she was scared.

As a new mother, Laurita didn't want to admit on camera that she would choose Hugo over her child, who was still a stranger she wasn't prepared to raise alone.

“I know this has been incredibly hard for you,” Burbank said, placing his manicured hand on the back of her chair. “It looks like you have a photograph of your husband. Would you like to show it to the viewers at home?”

With a nod of her head, Laurita betrayed herself. She wasn't ready to share Hugo. She wanted every memory and emotion they shared together to remain undiminished, walled off within herself forever.

She held up the glossy photo toward the bank of lights. Hugo's wide grin beamed back under a haystack of black curls.

“A young husband and father cut down before his time. Having known him best, what’s something you’d like our viewers to know about your husband?”

Laurita had practiced her answer to this question more than any other. Hugo was a kind man, whose love of people—especially family—made him a good husband.

“Hugo was a kind man,” she began, with a quiver in her voice. Her eyes floated back to the photo and stayed there. She let out a quiet sigh as her tense posture softened and her shoulders dropped. For the first time in the interview, Laurita smiled.

“I wish people knew this smile,” she said as her finger traced the outline of her husband’s face.

“I know what you mean. It’s the little things—”

“No. You can look at the photo all you want, but you will never know his smile like I do. And you haven’t lived until you’ve heard that idiotic laugh of his.” she said as she dabbed the side of her eye with her sleeve.

“Tell me about it.”

“It was just... so him. He laughed all the time, like, an angel. How someone who had been through what he had been through could laugh like that, I don’t know.”

She had described his laugh was angelic, but she had meant otherworldly; a full-throated chorus of joy and childish sincerity, a trait which defined Hugo more than any other.

His death had come six years after Battalion 3-16, a CIA-backed intelligence unit, began kidnapping and torturing hundreds of political opponents in Honduras. He had left after his brother-in-law, a trade union activist, became a desaparecido when he was abducted from a crowded street by men in ski masks. To avoid the civil war in Guatemala, Hugo travelled aboard a fishing boat to Chetumal, Mexico and crossed the country mostly on foot. He entered the United States clandestinely and reconnected with extended family in Union City, Illinois, where he would later meet his wife.

Laurita stared at the photo while Burbank framed another question. Hugo’s perpetual smile defied her sadness. Deep within her memory, his roaring laughter welled up, filled her ears, and erupted from her lips in a tickled chortle which interrupted the interview.

Burbank glared at his producer, who gestured with a roll of his fingers to keep going.

His head shook with anger as he rose from his seat. After a moment from the set with his producer, Burbank hurriedly retook his seat, leaned slightly towards her, and reassumed his look of mild pleasantness. While the camera crew prepared to restart, Burbank leaned closer and whispered to Laurita.

“I assume you watch TV, don’t you? I’m going to ask you about the accident,” he said, never changing his expression. “I want you to look at the camera and relive every second. Every feeling, every pain. That’s what we’re paying you for. No tears, no dinero. Comprende?”

The subtle lines of reminisced joy ebbed from Laurita’s face as the camera resumed recording. Burbank asked her about the accident, and she searched the silence to decide where her answer would begin. She felt the heat of the camera lights, which shone upon her as brightly as the low sun the morning Hugo lost his life.

The sun’s radiance flashed from the parked cars into Hugo’s eyes as he bolted down a sleepy urban side street in an orange two-seat convertible. Hugo had borrowed a seven-year-old MGB ragtop from his gear-head friend after he had heard from a drinking buddy that people driving pregnant women to hospitals could not be ticketed.

Laurita struggled to sit up from her reclined passenger seat to judge their proximity to the hospital.

“Hugo! Have you lost your mind? Slow down!” She shouted from under a halo of dancing black hair.

“Don’t blame me. I’m only trying to keep up with the baby! Are you going to tell her to slow down?” He said, with a laugh. “On second thought-this does seem very, very dangerous. You see the things you make me do for you?”

He laugh giddily as his loose curls whipped above the low windshield. His mood was a mixture of adrenaline, lack of sleep, and his dream of building a family in America like the one that raised him, which he had left behind in Honduras.

A contraction rippled over Laurita’s abdomen and she collapsed back on the black vinyl seat. She waited for her belly to

soften as she watched the long limbs of neighborhood trees flash by overhead and lash the warm colors of a morning sky.

The howl of tires crescendoed through a wide turn as Hugo swung the car out of a maze of side streets onto Joliet Avenue. Hugo shouted over the bluster of air that blasted over the short windshield. "Hang on, Cariño, we're almost there, just a bit further!"

The height of the buildings grew ever skyward as the car plunged into the heart of the city. Hugo pinned a bit of paper fluttering in his lap with a finger that pointed to the next step of his written directions. Hugo glanced down and moved his hand to his wife's bulging stomach.

"Keep breathing, Mamá. We're here. I just need to get over to Emergency. Hang on in there, little Rosa, you're almost ready to say hello!"

He spun the tiny car down a wide alley behind the hospital, planning to cut through receiving to the emergency entrance. Sunlight blinded him as he turned. His tired eyes clenched in an extended blink and reopened to a semi-trailer rolling from a hospital loading dock into his path.

His foot reached the brake pedal at the same moment the bottom of the trailer sliced through the top of the speeding car like a guillotine. The lower half of the vehicle burst from the other side of the trailer in an unholy wail of grinding metal and rolled idly to a stop in the middle of an empty Sunday morning street facing the hospital.

Laurita opened her eyes. The trailer had passed over her while she was reclined in the passenger seat. Hands shaking, she looked at her body covered in glass and debris, afraid to move. She lay her head back to see several people looking down at her from the hospital windows above.

A man who had witnessed the accident from across the street stood motionless on the sidewalk. As Laurita began to scream, he lowered his head and walked quickly around the corner.

An anxious face appeared in the small window of a hospital maintenance door. The door flung open. A housekeeper wearing a blue smock over a pressed white dress stepped into the alley. She clutched her broom nervously as the sound of screaming echoed around her. The housekeeper stepped carefully towards the crinkled

car, unable to lay eyes on the source of the screaming. Behind her, the driver of the truck yelled something from the alley.

Three men and a woman rushed out of the hospital's emergency entrance to join a pair of ambulance drivers sprinting from the underground parking bay toward the car. As the group approached the wreckage, the housekeeper let out a chilling shriek as the wooden handle of her broom smacked the ground. She turned to the people rushing toward her while frantically pointing at the front seat of the car.

The crowd halted at the sight of a headless torso behind the driving wheel of a partly crushed persimmon-colored sports car. A nurse immediately directed other men to lift the screaming woman from the car but Laurita spread her arms and legs to resist.

The nurse pushed through the men to see a baby's head crowning from under her dress and redirected one of the men back to the hospital while the others cleared away as much of the debris from the area around Laurita as possible.

Minutes later, Laurita's cries gave way to the tears of a newborn, whose soft body was wrapped in white and rushed inside away from her mother's outstretched arms.

—Excerpt from the debut novel, *Holding On*, by James Vest