

FIVE

AS IN DREAMS, SO IN LIFE

The dream couldn't have been more prophetic. Andrew turned up the following morning, Saturday morning, just before eleven. Romy stared at him as he stood on her doorstep, not even attempting to return the tentative smile he wore. She watched as he retrieved a bouquet of flowers wrapped in lavender-patterned paper from behind his back.

"For you," he said. "For your new place."

"How did you know where I was? No, let me guess. Mum."

"In one."

Romy made no gesture to either take the flowers or allow him over the threshold. She didn't want him in, didn't want any trace of him anywhere in her house. Maybe there were still echoes of his monster scratching around inside her head or under her skin, she didn't know, and maybe her initial reaction may have been different had she not dreamt about him or his grotesquery, but she was suddenly defiant and stood her ground against him.

"What do you want?" she asked, stone-faced.

"Come on, Ro," he said, his bouquet faltering in his hand. "I know we've had some shit but we can still be civil, can't we?"

"I got shit, you got laid, remember?"

Her words came out curt and she liked them. She wondered why they'd not come out like that more often when they might have actually done some good.

Andrew's smile slunk away like a scolded dog. He did seem genuinely hurt. And she hated herself even as she relented and took a step sideways and consented to his coming in with a brief nod of her head.

He smiled with shamed gratitude, and Romy closed the door after him.

She followed him into the kitchen and saw that he'd set the flowers down on the countertop and was already gazing around the room as though he was a potential buyer. She half expected him to start sucking air in through his teeth and pointing out where repairs or renovations might be needed. But he just looked, full circle, until his eyes came back once again to look at her.

"So," he started, "how have you been?"

"I see," she countered, folding her arms. "It's going to be small talk, is it?"

"What is?"

"Just came round to shoot the breeze, did we? I didn't think you'd be up and about at this time of day. I thought you'd still have some slut wrapped round your waist."

The words came thick and fast, gaining momentum as each one slipped from her tongue. A rush of adrenaline came with them, hand in hand with all the hurt and all the negative emotions that she'd been forced to sit through and stifle for the last year. They had the desired effect, though. Andrew

stood motionless, chastened, and simply stared at her in utter disbelief. Her former lapse of compassion at the door had taken full retreat, and she was now ready to give out a whole lot more.

"This is my house, Andrew," she stormed, "and not somewhere you can just turn up when you feel like it. If you want to see me - and God knows why, seeing as how you didn't much want to when we were married - then I suggest you call first and make a fucking appointment."

The F word shocked even her. It wasn't a word she used often or even liked to hear, but it came out just the same, directed as hard at him as any weapon ever could be.

Still he gazed, part open-mouthed and part wide-eyed, and for a moment she thought he would just stand there in her new kitchen and never say another word.

Romy noticed she was breathing hard, puffed out as though she had just run a marathon, a two year marathon on an uphill route. But her head felt lighter for it, more livid, like a raging fire, but somehow still under control. Maybe more in control.

"That said," she went on, her voice and tone calming, almost comically so, as she composed herself. "What is it that you came here for?"

Andrew paused before answering, uncertain, thoughts flickering visibly behind his eyes.

"I think anything I could possibly think of to say now," he said, "is going to be a bit of a come down, isn't it?"

That was another of his traits, a sense of humour with a matching time and wit that could force the edges of her mouth into a smirk even when

she didn't want them to. She'd adored him for it so many times in the past, but now it grated. It was old, irksome. But the smile came just the same, right on cue, and he was standing directly in front of her to witness it.

Romy felt the dominant stance she'd just made crumble like the blocks of an ancient ruin. Andrew had made a comfortable position for himself out of an uncomfortable situation yet again.

"I guess it's kind of awkward," he went on, somehow finding the words when he'd just admitted to them being elusive.

Maybe they'd been rehearsed in advance, Romy thought. Or maybe he was just good at bullshitting the second it was required. God knew he'd had the practice.

"It's about Terri," he went on, then stopped as if that was explanation enough.

Romy stared.

Clearly it wasn't.

"I'm not sure if her name ever came up," Andrew said, wandering to his gift of flowers and toying with the lavender-patterned paper with his fingertips. "She was someone I met when we, you know, had our differences."

"I recall it was only you who had our differences, Andrew."

Her arms had become uncrossed during their exchange, but she crossed them again now as she stared at him. Painful thorns had already formed inside her chest and were steadily growing. Their needle-points hurt, jabbing at her delicate innards, but she wasn't about to show it on her face for him.

"Well, the thing is," he told her, glancing up

now from the flowers to look at her, (don't show him the hurt, she demanded of herself, don't you dare), "is that we want to get married."

The thorns congealed into one single ice-cold spike of steel and speared her right through the heart.

Her throat was sandpaper. Tears welled before she could turn away. And the sob came before she could cloak it with her hands.

"You bastard," she gasped, her words barely audible as they croaked across a throat drier and more painful than any desert floor.

Romy turned away from him then, her hands clasped to her face as she stumbled away, out through the nearest door and into the hallway. Tears skipped down her cheeks, she felt them go, her chest stricken as though it had been seized by some almighty fist. He was watching all this, damn it, she thought, and she hated herself perhaps more than him for that. He'd done it to her again, hadn't he? The bastard had smiled his way in one more time and speared her through the heart.

She heard him say her name, his voice still in the kitchen. She was thankful that at least he was not coming after her. She couldn't bear that, couldn't bear to have him desecrate another room of her house. He'd already poisoned the front door, the hallway and the kitchen. What more did he want?

Romy continued on through the house, her face awash with tears and snot, her feet stumbling and graceless, past the doors to the living room and the dining room, until she came to a halt at the foot of the stairs that led up to the bedrooms.

Romy stood at the end of the hallway, sobbing

into her hands like a schoolgirl with her first broken heart. He'd done it again. That's what kept rattling around inside her head. The bastard had done it to her yet again.

She'd not heard the front door shut behind him and she presumed that he was still waiting for her to come back, maybe still dumbfounded by her inability to be reasonable about his fucking around. But she would never go back in there, not until he was out of the house and gone. She had no other choice but to retreat even further into her own home. So outstretching one hand to the balustrade to steady her ascent, Romy climbed the staircase to the first floor landing.

Sunlight shone in through the upstairs windows, oblivious to her pain. It seemed so wrong that she should feel so bad when all the rest of the world appeared to be so glorious and content.

She stumbled through into the master bedroom and collapsed onto the bed, wringing her hair with her hands as the tears continued to come. She thought about the spare bed that she and Andrew had kept in their guest room. They'd never slept in that bed themselves, but she wondered now (as the image of him with another woman, maybe this Terri to whom he was already betrothed, raced into her head), whether they had fucked on it like animals when she had not been home.

She wept face down into the pillow, concealing her heaving sobs from both Andrew downstairs and the rest of the house that somehow seemed to be watching her. She didn't even want the bricks to see her so utterly reduced.

She cried until her eyes stung, until her throat

threatened to seize up entirely, until her stomach knotted so painfully that she thought it would never right itself again.

Romy couldn't recall stopping crying. Or even falling asleep. When she lifted her head again the pillow was damp and stained with mascara, the room dark, and the windows through which the sunlight had earlier been so bright were now soulless panes with which to frame the night.

Her bladder ached and it was an effort to push herself off the bed, so tired and aching were her muscles. She pushed her hair behind her ears as she stumbled through into the bathroom, glancing out at the road with sleep-beleaguered eyes as she passed the undrawn curtains. She started as she saw a figure there, standing motionless on the pavement and staring up at the front of the house.

A sudden cold fingertip of unease tapped Romy inside her chest. The hairs on her neck bristled. The figure was dressed from head to foot in black, and stood mostly unlit by the wash of the yellow streetlamps. It was impossible to see any features, anything that might aid recognition, but it was clear that it was not Andrew. The stranger was definitely a woman.

Perhaps it was this Terri.

The thought burned like acid in the pit of her stomach, and she tried to think it away, but it was persistent.

Perhaps she'd come to see Andrew's ex-wife, her mind thought, come to make either peace or war. Whichever was easier to draw. Placated smiles or blood.

Romy stood as still as her observer, her chest

thumping madly.

Surely the stranger couldn't see her, Romy thought. Surely it was impossible to see someone in an unlit upstairs bedroom from outside in the street.

Romy swallowed. Her bladder reminded her with a renewed ache that it was in danger of folding in on itself. She pressed a hand to it but couldn't turn away from the stranger still standing there. Romy tried to make something out, anything, any small detail about the strange woman staring up at her house, but her eyes could make out nothing.

Then it became something of a sick game.

Who would turn away first?

Who was the weaker?

Again her bladder tweaked, painfully so, and Romy instantly lost the game. She moved away from the window, quickly, and hurried through into the bathroom to pee. She kept the light off, urinating in the darkness before zipping up her jeans and feeling her way back into the bedroom.

She approached the window cautiously and from a distance, as though afraid that the glass might shatter inwards under the weight of the woman's intense scrutiny and slash her face with lethal shards.

Romy craned her neck to see out into the street an inch at a time, realising even as she did so how ridiculous her behaviour was. It was her house, for God's sake. The stranger outside in the street was the one being obtrusive.

She moved closer until the front garden came into view, then the driveway, then the pavement. But it seemed that having won the game, the stranger had tired and moved on. The pavement was now empty once again.

Romy stepped closer to the window and now studied the empty road with more confidence, but there was nothing moving in any direction, nothing at all. Lights burned in the windows of the other houses, but she could see no one about. The street had returned to quiet once again. The woman had gone.

SIX

RELENTLESS

When she went downstairs, she found Andrew gone. His flowers too, for which she was glad. The memory of the woman outside the house remained uncomfortable in her head, however, as she wandered through into the kitchen to find something to put into her growling stomach.

Had it been Terri come to check out the opposition, she wondered? She did seem the likeliest suspect. Who else would come to stare up at a house and not even knock at the front door? That said something about Andrew's new woman at least. Spineless. What a complementary trait to go along with starting a relationship with a married man. At least they'd not had kids. What a mess that would have been.

Romy pulled some cold produce out of the fridge - meats and cheese, some pickles and a jar of green olives - and set them down on the counter. From one cupboard she retrieved a box of crackers, and from another a plate, and then set about making herself a decent snack. She wasn't in the mood to cook. It was too late, her hunger too severe to wait. She just wanted to satisfy it quickly, collapse in front of the tv and drift away from all the shit of the real world.

Wandering out of the kitchen with her plate of food and a large glass of red wine, she hesitated as she reached the living room door. There was a sound coming from somewhere, a strange kind of humming sound, like a low whine of something electrical.

She stood, head cocked, filtering out the noise from the silence of the house. She took a step into the living room, switched on the light with the hand that held her wine glass, and then walked further into the room to put the glass and the plate down on the coffee table before going back into the hallway to listen again.

It almost sounded like the hum of a generator, which first made her panic thinking that there might be an electrical problem somewhere. But the meter was out in the porch, and she hadn't heard anything when she'd been in the kitchen where she would have been closer to it and the sound more prominent.

Then she inclined her head towards the dining room. She didn't know why her skin prickled when she did so, but hairs bristled all over her body as her fears were confirmed. The sound was definitely coming from inside.

She reached a hesitant hand inside the room to switch on the light before she took a step across the threshold. When she did so, the sound grew louder still. Now with more information to work with, her hearing defined the sound as irregular, building and falling like something organic, something living, something breathing, less like the buzzing whine from some kind of turbine and more like the deep low groan from some kind of -

She wanted to punch herself before the word even sprang into her head. Gooseflesh came right on the back of the shiver as the word 'monster' declared itself in all its glory, etched in bold and italicised.

"That's good, Romy," she forced herself to say out loud, saying anything to drown out the groaning that still ebbed and flowed from under the floor, even if it was only for a second. "Scare yourself witless, you stupid bitch. What a fucking treat."

It seemed to do the trick though. In the aftermath of her spoken words, the room fell back to silence as if shunned.

She stood listening, hugging herself with shaking arms, but it was true. The deep low groan had gone.

Romy waited only a few moments, long enough to take one steady look around the room, and then she stepped out, slowly but bravely, and switched off the light from the safety of the hallway. Then she returned to the living room, whereupon she turned on the tv and turned the volume up a little louder than was usual.

The meats and the cheese went down well, as did the olives and the crackers. She forced herself to eat steadily with measured bites as though nothing was wrong, but when she got to the wine she couldn't stop herself downing it in one go.

After the first glass Romy returned to the kitchen to fetch the bottle, which described the contents as light and easy-going. The dining room remained in silence when she passed it, and nothing untoward happened throughout the rest of the evening as she finished off the wine and watched tv until late. When she went to bed and slept again,

however, that was when the dreams started up again. And this time they decided to step things up a notch.