AFFINITIES

Sometimes, you can’t even trust yourself

by HOLLIS THOMPSON

Affinities: (noun)(pl)

1. Close connections
2. Close resemblances
3. Chemical attractions

PART ONE: NIGHT

1|NSOMNIA

The noises drove him to distraction, never too loud, but always there. They woke him in the dead of night then stopped him getting back to sleep.

Week in, week out.

Over and over.

Standing in the hallway, Andrew Goodwin felt tortured. Pitch darkness filled the lounge ahead and he could hear them through the doorway – scratches and scrapes, the kind of noises made by rats in the walls, but somehow not quite right. They had haunted him since the day he moved into the apartment, weeks of lost slumber turning him into a short-tempered, hollowed-out shell of a human being.

Warm summer air grazed the hairs on his chest. Bare toes sank into the thick carpet. Tiredness was like a leaden weight in his frontal lobe, tugging his forehead downwards. With only a little trepidation, he reached his arm inside the room to find the light switch, the ghostly image of his bedside clock seared onto his retina.

3:14 a.m.

When Andrew didn't wear his contact lenses, his poor eyesight was severely debilitating. It narrowed his universe to a few feet, beyond which most details were a blur. With a click, light flooded the room, but he gained very little. The darkness was instead transformed into a blended mess of furniture – the leather sofa, the matching armchair, the glass coffee table, and the kitchen cupboards on the nearside wall … different-coloured blobs, impossible to tell apart.

Almost anything could have evaded capture simply by standing still, but he knew that wouldn't be the case. He had followed the routine enough times to predict what happened next. The moment he flicked on the lights, his adversaries vanished, gone like they had never existed. No amount of effort would reveal them. Instead, he knew they would lie dormant until he returned to his bed and lowered his guard, whereafter they would choose their moment to jolt him back for another round.

Week in, week out.

Over and over.

He swore under his breath, stepping through the doorway to the cool kiss of tiling underfoot. His neighbours were no help, claiming they couldn't hear a thing. And in his experience, leaving the light off made no difference – his mere presence served as the trigger. He nursed a dull throb beneath his temples and wished for peace, painfully aware of how soon he would need to start the next day. He took a glass from the countertop along the nearside wall and filled it under the tap, craving water in the summer heat. Huge gulps spilled from the corners of his mouth and pattered onto the floor tiles.

Andrew hadn't lived there long enough to escape the contract with his landlord, not without proof of the disturbance. And in truth, his problems went far beyond rude awakenings. Even when he did manage a few hours, he found little respite, something no landlord would accept as their fault. Since the day he'd moved in – or perhaps even longer – he had been trapped in a cycle of recurrent, vivid, inexplicable nightmares. They came for him every time, and it didn't seem to matter where he rested. Often, he stole naps in the car during his lunch break or in the corner of his office after hours, trying to catch up on the rest he sorely craved. But every time, his dreams followed the same pattern, almost in the exact same sequence.

In his sleep, he would be tucked up and pinned under heavy blankets, unable to move as something large and invisible crept towards him. Dread would saturate the air, a kind of gnawing anxiety. Then, right as the emotion peaked, he would find himself somewhere outdoors to meet with harrowing, intense, bloody violence. Circumstances differed, but the result never changed.

Andrew died every night.

He had fallen more than once with a lurch in his stomach, plummeting from a high space. He had felt the impact as he struck the ground, along with the splitting of bones. He had drowned, his innards flooded with ice-cold water. He had suffocated, burned, and been riddled with bullets. As time went by, each death became more vivid, to the point where he felt the effects long after waking up.

Leaning against the counter in the stuffy lounge, he raised his hand and held it within his range of focus, trying to redirect his thoughts. His eyelid twitched, resisting the effort, and he instead peered towards the deep blue smudge of the window and the silent car park two floors below. Despite myopia, he could tell there wasn't a single light on in

the world outside, worsening his sense of isolation. He couldn't even bridge the gap – those windows didn't open. He didn't think the landlord had ever given him a key.

To cool himself down, Andrew pattered over to the refrigerator and held a carton of milk to his exposed chest for a few seconds – much more satisfying than drinking it. It was time to try again. He turned off the light and retreated down the hallway, hoping for an hour's rest before he woke. The clock on the bedside table read 3:22 a.m. and as he lay back down with his head on the pillow, his body took to slumber like a warm embrace. Sweeping fatigue washed over him.

Almost without trying, he plunged right back into his unwelcome dream world.

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Scratching, clattering.

Andrew couldn't say for how long he lay unconscious, but when he came to, it was still dark. Perhaps an hour had passed, but his racked body had succumbed to such deep slumber that it felt like much, much more.

The noises had returned, those same muffled sounds from the corners of the bedroom. He rolled over and put the light on, banishing them through the wall into the lounge, where they would continue to taunt him until he followed. The air felt heavier now, the bedroom claustrophobic. Andrew groaned, resigned once again to being wide awake in the dead of night, denied the quiet he needed to drift back off.

His lips were dry and cracked, a sensation he likened to the early throes of a hangover. He prised himself out of bed, swayed across the bedroom, then headed back towards the lounge, listening to excited scuffles as he approached the doorway. It was impossible to tell how many of the things he was up against, or even gauge their size. There could have been a dozen or just a few, small as mice or big as cats.

With the usual click and a flooding of light, they fell silent. He went to the counter and filled the same glass he had used before, water once again dripping onto the tiles at his feet. Dry tiles. That discovery gave him pause. He was surprised his previous spill had evaporated so fast, but then it registered what time he had noticed on the bedside clock.

3:14 a.m.

'That's strange,' he thought out loud, his voice dry and hoarse. Andrew backtracked to the bedroom and read the clock – eight minutes earlier than when he thought he went to bed, and the exact same time as when he had first woken up. He put the glass down

and sought his work trousers, before rummaging through the pockets for his wristwatch. Analogue hands confirmed it. Time appeared to be running backwards.

He relocated to the lounge and switched on the television for a third opinion – definitely no mistake, and to make things worse, below the time was the date.

Friday, 15 July.

Two days after he had first gone to sleep.

That would have meant he slept right through his Thursday, that he had slept for twenty-four hours instead of next to none. His concern drew him to the window to survey the silent world outside. His car rested in the car park, bright lights bouncing off the bonnet. There was a crispness to the atmosphere. Then he realised how well he could see. His contact lenses were in.

Andrew stumbled back, collapsing on the couch. He never, never consciously slept with them in his eyes. They tended to dry out, especially in the summer. And he hadn't been wearing them the last time he could recall being conscious, so unless they had jumped in while he slept, one disturbing fact seemed irrefutable – this was a completely different night. Andrew Goodwin had lost an entire day of his life.

Cool leather rubbed against his bare legs. He could remember Wednesday evening, a steak dinner with Claire. He had overslept that morning and been late for work, it was true, but he hadn't thought too much of it at the time. He jumped up and hurried to the bathroom, trying to suppress a mounting concern that something might be wrong. His reflection looked tired, his eyes bloodshot, his skin pale with a shadow of stubble. Part of him wanted to run straight to a hospital, but another voice in his head told him not to panic.

Days don't go missing. They just don't. Calm down and look for another explanation. He leaned in close and examined himself for lumps and bumps, coaching himself out loud. 'You're not dying,' he said. 'You're just fatigued. Give it four more hours until morning when maybe you can think straight.'

He took his contact lenses out and felt his way to the bedroom, determined not to panic. With slow and delicate movements, he sat on the mattress and lay down, willing the sun to rise. The alarm clock hummed in the darkness and he imagined the minutes ticking over. If things weren't right by the morning, he would skip work and head straight for the hospital.

Andrew set his alarm for seven, then as a final gesture, reached for the curtains and tugged them a few inches apart, revealing the metallic blinds behind them. Strips of

morning sunlight would invade the room and make all but the deepest sleep impossible, and then he could seek help. *Who knows,* he thought, *maybe this will turn out to be another dream.*

He stayed above the covers to compensate for the muggy air and waited. It was the strangest thing, but after that, it only took a few seconds to drift right off.

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Bright yellow sunlight cut a swathe across the room as Andrew had predicted. Particles of dust floated in still air. The morning felt bright and full of promise, but he knew without a doubt this one wasn't real.

He was still asleep.

Every inch of that scene was familiar, but he had never seen it in the waking world. It was like a prison cell, with four white, featureless walls. Deep burgundy bedclothes held him pinned to the mattress, their rich colour matching the carpet. There were no details – no shadows, threads, or creases – as though he was in a facsimile, an image of a stolen glance that had somehow become his false reality.

Andrew stared at the ceiling. He felt wide awake and could think clearly, relieved of his headache. He felt almost relaxed, but the fear of what always followed kept him tense. Then it happened. An abrupt slam sent clouds of dust into the air. The walls shook on their foundations. The bed leapt off the floor and his eyes moved towards the door. Someone was coming.

He heard scratches like nails along the walls, then a scuffle behind the door. Plaster rained from the ceiling. He felt an overbearing urge to get up, but the taut bedding held him firmly in place. The bed shook, rattling his jaw. The weight pressing down on his chest grew stronger, crushing the air from his lungs with an agonising wheeze. All he could do was lie there, a prisoner, watching in horror as the door handle turned and the first of his ribs began to crack.

Wake up, he told himself. *For God's sake, wake up.*

And then he was awake – not violently or suddenly, but calm and gentle. The weight on his chest eased off and his muscles relaxed. The dream world peeled back. He found himself in his own bedroom, under loose covers, still in the dead of night. He immediately turned to the clock, eyesight once again crystal clear without the need for glasses.

3:14 a.m.

His ribs felt bruised and he was drenched in sweat. Another day of his life had gone, and now all he wanted was to get outside, back into the daytime, back to a normal life. He threw off the covers and leapt out of bed, calf muscles aching as though they hadn't been used for hours. He barely even noticed the noises in the lounge as he hurried to the bathroom and slammed on the light.

He studied his reflection in the mirror. Short, brown hair was plastered to one side of his scalp, standing upright on the other. He ran his fingers through it, feeling thick layers of product scraped through unevenly. He looked like a man who had tried to fix himself up while half asleep and it terrified him to think why that might be.

He flattened his hair back down with his palm then dressed in the shirt and trousers he had worn to work that Wednesday, still draped over the chair in the bedroom. Turning out his pockets, he realised his keys were missing. His anxiety bubbled over. Andrew picked up the laundry hamper and tipped the contents over the sheets, rummaging through vests and T-shirts, searching for anything that could hold his valuables.

He got down on all fours and looked under the bed when something caught his eye – a white object under the mattress. He slid his arm across the laminate and brought it out to look closer.

A shoebox.

He never kept things under the bed, not ever. Months of dust clung to his arm from the floorboards, but the box itself – made of shiny white cardboard – looked spotless. He curled his fingers around the lid and lifted it open. Inside, he found a small pile of opened envelopes, some pieces of notepaper, and his first physical evidence that things were beyond his control.

His keys and wallet.

There was no way he would have put them in there, no way at all. And there were other items in the box, letters he had received in the days he had lost. Among them, he found a folded piece of notepaper, chewed at the edges where it had been in somebody's pocket. He unfolded it to discover a hastily drawn layout of the roads nearby – a map to his flat.

The handwriting was too rough to identify, almost illegible, childlike. But he had seen enough. Andrew snatched the keys and stood, needing more than ever to be outside. He abandoned the room in its disarray with laundry all over the floor and the opened box by the bedside. He pulled on a blue T-shirt and a jacket before marching up

the hall, intending to go straight to the hospital and put an end to whatever was happening to him.

The moment his hand made contact with the latch, he felt a tingling beneath his scalp, like something pressing out from within. Then his headache flared up, rising to a deafening scream inside his skull. Searing heat blasted down his spine like a bolt of lightning. His jaw clamped shut and his arms became rigid. Andrew fell backwards, legs refusing to help him, and he crumpled to the hallway floor. He felt as though his veins were on fire. He clutched his head and crawled backwards, flailing, blind, and senseless.

It stopped.

As suddenly as it had started, the pain receded. He was left shaking on the floor in a state of disbelief, afraid to move an inch in any direction. His brain throbbed behind his wide eyes as he stared at the ceiling. It had felt unnatural, more than just a headache, emerging then dispersing fast enough to leave no explanation.

He raised a shaking arm and felt his temples. They had looked fine in the mirror only minutes before. He tried to focus on the objects in the hallway – hairs on the back of his hand, thin fibres of the carpet – then as he glanced along the skirting board, a new sensation rose above the stillness. Andrew's sense of balance distorted, as though he were teetering on the balls of his feet instead of lying in the middle of the floor. It scared him into action and he sat bolt upright.

The room was spinning. Steadying himself on the wall, he felt his head take on weight, pushing his chin down towards his chest. A horrifying wash of tiredness replaced the pain, as though he could collapse at any moment. He rose to his knees but crumpled back down as they denied his weight. Heartbeat galloping, he clawed his way along the carpet, catapulting his heavy bulk into the bedroom.

The second he made it through the doorway, he lost all sensation. Momentum carried him back to the floor and he landed hard on his elbows. It should have hurt like hell, but there was so much adrenaline flowing through his body that he felt nothing. Adrenaline that seemed to do nothing to keep him awake.

He made it to the bed but lacked the strength to climb onto the mattress. His arms and legs became dead weights, pinning him to the floor. He was exhausted, but his mind was racing. *Stay conscious,* he told himself. *Don't let it win*. He was convinced he would die if he fell asleep, but for no reason he could fathom, fear of sleep put him under even faster.

Andrew’s vision faded and a black, deep slumber came upon him. With horrifying rapidity, his senses shut down until he was alone in his mind, floating in darkness. Leaving a single question ringing in the silence.

What in God’s name is happening?

2|RICTION

Andrew mostly referred to his wife as ‘Kate’. Several alternatives came to mind – in recent times, a few had even made it to his lips – but she wasn’t to know. Kate could turn on a situation when it no longer took her fancy, and she hadn’t been seen or heard of for months.

They were separated, mostly by her choosing. He could have walked from his apartment to their house in the suburbs. His name was on the deed. He even had a key. What he didn’t have was permission. On their last encounter, hostile eyes had warned him not to come within a mile. It was a look he hadn’t noticed in the past, but colleagues and well-wishers assured him had always been there.

They were right about other things, too. The couple had married before they really understood one another. The whole affair, from first contact to final spurn, had lasted twenty months, in which adorable quirks had degenerated into annoyances, then eventually spawned hatred.

Or maybe that was the glaring sunshine talking?

‘This still isn’t right.’

Kate kept shaking her head, over and over. Her loose bun of thick, wiry hair wobbled like a plate of jelly, undermining the appearance of her straight, slim figure. She didn’t seem in the least bit hindered by the late summer heat. Dark skin on her bare arms looked matte, without a hint of glisten.

Andrew, meanwhile, felt his short-sleeved shirt cling to the small of his back, held firm by the weight of his rucksack. ‘I know where I’m going,’ he said. ‘This will be the quietest part of the beach, you’ll see.’

‘Admit it – we’re lost already.’

‘I will not.’

Her flip-flops slapped against a soft tarmac pathway as they descended gently towards the coast. A tall hedgerow flanked by a wooden fence gave nothing away, but Andrew was hoping for a wide stretch of golden sands on the other side, motivated by the sound of chopping waves and a reluctance to admit defeat.

To their left and right, static caravans lined the pathway. There were little more than a dozen in total, each no longer than a couple of cars parked end to end. They had flat roofs and large windows down their sides, such that Andrew could see right through them. Some had wooden verandas; others had short steps down to ground level. All were lovingly tended and appeared occupied.

He kept his head down, aware they shouldn't be there.

'This is pleasant,' said Kate. 'I bet it's easy to forget the rest of the world in a place like this.'

'For a day or two, perhaps. I think some people try to live here all summer.'

'And you couldn't?' Any hope in her voice seemed insincere, as though she already knew the answer.

'Of course not,' he said. 'There can't be ten square feet to rub together inside each of those things.'

'We'd have the outdoors to expand into, which is the whole point.'

He shook his head. 'You won't sell it to me. Neither of us would cope with living on top of one another, being cut off from our creature comforts. You know our house feels small enough already and it must be ten times the size.'

He saw her chew the inside of her mouth as if trying to restrain her pugnacious inclinations. By coincidence or otherwise, her flip-flop caught a puddle of dry sand and flicked it over his shoes.

'And can you smell the salt in the air?' he continued, unable to stop himself. 'Is that good for your lungs in the long term?'

'You have no romance whatsoever.'

'Well, if we're being honest, you'd bore of that romance in a month or two and move on to the next thing.' He regretted his words the moment he spoke.

She fired back with a contemptuous scowl and garnished it with silence.

'I take that back,' he said. 'The concept is fine, but I can't get past the practicality. Did you see the gas tanks? What a death trap.'

'What do you know about gas tanks?'

'Propane. Those things go up, you know? You only need a spark.'

‘There you go again – universal expert.’

‘I’m reinforcing my point that this would be a bad place to live.’

‘It was supposed to be a fantasy, and would you please watch your volume?’

He closed his eyes and took half a dozen paces without looking, trying to reset his mood. The heatwave brought out the worst in him, shortening his temper and leaving him easily triggered. Kate seemed to realise and pulled those triggers just for sport. He needed to control himself.

They had driven to the coast on a whim, taking turns behind the wheel. Discovering how popular the area was, Kate had parked at the extreme end of a long promenade while Andrew searched his phone for a quiet stretch of beach away from the main thoroughfare, which, from a satellite view, should have been close.

He had taken them across an empty field to a slatted gate, which emerged at the rear end of a caravan park. The residents must have seen that trick before. Disapproving stares pierced through his defences, making him uncomfortable. His rucksack tugged at his shoulders. Every swing of his arms reminded him of the unpleasant state of his armpits. They hadn’t been in motion for ten minutes and already he regretted every decision that had led him to that point.

They exited the site through its main entrance onto a driveway that ran down to the shore. The sound of lapping waves was unexpectedly close, and Andrew’s heart sank as he realised the tide was high. The strip of golden sands he had expected was no more than six metres wide.

‘For God’s sake,’ he said.

‘There’s no beach?’ She laughed at the discovery. He sensed her mockery. ‘You didn’t plan that too well,’ she muttered, then refreshed her tone. ‘I’m hungry anyway. Maybe we should walk back to the car and move on.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘We came for sand, and it’s not gone completely. We need the view for something I brought to try out.’

Hoping to distract each of them from the other, he took off his rucksack and fished out a grey object, the size of his hand.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘A camcorder, for making memories.’

Again, she laughed. ‘What’s wrong with the camera on your phone? What are you now, a filmmaker?’

‘I’m serious. Someone at work sold it to me. He says it’s much better than anything you could shoot on your phone.’

‘Why do you care?’

‘I’m just curious. He convinced me it would be good, so let’s find out.’

‘Well, it’s not exactly handy, but … fair enough.’

She had always been a playful spirit. It dominated her personality. Andrew had found such traits exciting at one time, but the reality of living with them was something quite different. He wasn’t surprised when she flirted with the camera, warming to its presence. For three hundred metres, they forgot their squabbles and enjoyed the seaside walk they had come for. The narrow strip of sand was thick with dried shells and pebbles that crunched underfoot. Rich with sediment, the water looked brown and unappetising, but the soothing undulations nevertheless evoked a sense of calm that put them under its spell.

He would always remember that part of the walk, but eventually the beach grew wider. Andrew and Kate found themselves among a crowd of more than a hundred, which dampened their enthusiasm for horseplay. The heat showed no sign of relenting, so they decided to abandon the beach and circle back around towards the car.

Kate took the camera, preserving their interactions.

‘Let’s quicken our pace,’ he said. ‘I can feel my skin burning.’

‘That’s what you get for not wearing suncream.’

‘You’re lucky you don’t need it.’

They padded up stone steps, where she paused to sweep her feet clean. He could have sworn it was a delay tactic and his irritation reached the surface. As the rising tide forced everyone else to follow, a shambling crowd formed along the promenade. Andrew and Kate hurried back to their car to discover someone had parked behind them, close enough to touch bumpers.

She filmed the gap carefully, proving that she was unable to squeeze her finger into it. ‘Your turn to drive,’ she said. ‘Good luck.’

Andrew muttered under his breath. Road traffic thickened by the second, echoing his anger as vehicles wove between cars that had parked sloppily, bonnets and boots jutting into the road. He slid into the driver’s seat with a plastic smile and tried to adjust the mirrors.

Kate’s camera missed nothing. ‘That was … brief.’ She taunted him, as though daring him to respond. ‘An entire day at the beach, condensed into half an hour.’

‘At least we tried,’ he said through gritted teeth. The engine spluttered to life, irate at being woken up. Andrew wrestled with his seat belt, then rolled the car forwards six inches. There was a clunk as bumpers made contact and part of him hoped it would leave a mark.

She moved the camera closer to his face rather than zoom in. ‘Are you sure you can do this?’

‘I see no choice.’ He changed gear with a crunch and rolled backwards, trying to worry out of the space. Again, they touched bumpers, which set off the alarm of the car behind. The resulting wail summed things up for him as any last trace of his good mood shattered into tiny fragments.

Kate squirmed. ‘Okay, this is pointless. Let’s write someone an angry note and find something else to do.’

Andrew locked the steering wheel, waiting for a break in the traffic. He ignored her attempts at reason, glaring into his wing mirror.

‘You’re only winding yourself up,’ she warned.

He nudged the car out into the road and the traffic swerved around him. He was determined to force a bottleneck, a bitter taste in his mouth.

‘Are you listening to me?’

Andrew saw a tiny gap and rammed his foot down on the accelerator. The rear wheels slipped on the road and the car lurched forwards, pushing him into his seat. With one eye fixed on the rearward traffic, Andrew tore away, up to speed in less than fifty metres.

Kate gasped. Andrew smirked with petty victory, then saw red brake lights and a slew of slowing vehicles up ahead. Elation turned to horror, his foot stuck to the pedal as their speed still increased. By the time he realised what was going to happen, it was too late. The split second in which to react passed with Andrew’s hands frozen to the wheel.

They were going to crash.

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The alarm clock hummed as Andrew watched the minutes pass by. He was driven out of sleep yet petrified of leaving the bed.

3:14 a.m.

His face was half buried in the pillow, one eye wedged closed and the other wide open. His contact lenses were still in and he could read the clock face without having to

squint. It was earlier than when he went to sleep, which could only mean this was an entirely new night, the fourth since being confined to his home.

Muffled scratches jeered from behind the walls. The crippling headache had grown dull and distant, though threatened to return at the slightest provocation. In the darkness, he could see echoes of his latest dreams, new images mixing in with the familiar. There were snapshots of memories such as striking landscapes and faces in crowds. His life, flashing before his eyes.

With a deep breath and enormous effort, he rolled out of bed, landing on his knees with his back to the wall. Only once he felt prepared did he turn on the light.

The room was tidy.

The dirty clothes he had thrown out of the hamper had all gone, returned to their rightful place. The room looked immaculate. Glancing down at himself, Andrew discovered he was wearing a black T-shirt when he had previously been wearing blue. And he had woken up under the covers this time although he remembered passing out on the floor.

He reached under the bed in search of the cardboard shoebox. Outstretched fingers found something metal, cold and hard. He drew the object to his knees – a small red tin casket with smooth, polished faces and rusted corners. It didn't look familiar, and it certainly hadn't been there before. And it was locked. Andrew lifted it up to feel its weight, tilting it from side to side. He could hear papers sliding about and his heart sank when he heard the jangle of keys.

That settled another argument.

Someone was going to increasing lengths to keep them from him.

The night was cooler than before, telling him the weather had deteriorated. He stood and peered through the bedroom curtains, seeing intermittent clouds, wondering how it felt to be outside. He could still feel the embers of last night's pain beneath his temples, unlike anything he had felt before. He went to examine his front door, but it looked mundane, with a smooth gloss frame and wooden grooves. Andrew extended a finger and touched the keyhole. Nothing, so he moved towards the handle.

Pain rose behind his temple.

It was less intense this time, as though a threat, hovering behind his eyes. His nerve collapsed. Andrew couldn't face the full force of it again, but maybe he wouldn't have to. He could bring the police to the door instead and maybe they could worry about how

to get him through it. Andrew backed away and returned to the bedroom, searching through the wardrobe and cabinets for a way to communicate with the outside world.

In his bedside drawer, he found his mobile phone and charger. The discovery took him off guard. It made no sense. Everything else was in a locked box. He opened the drawer further to see what else he could find and two transparent syringes rolled into view. They had no labels, and their plungers had sunk all the way down. Both were empty. Andrew immediately straightened his naked arms and ran his fingers over the skin, looking for puncture marks. He stood and paced around the room, trying to control his breathing. A bizarre picture was building, evidence he couldn't explain any other way.

He took his phone and held the power button while he checked the walls for hidden cameras. Could someone be spying on him, gaining sick pleasure from watching him unravel? He expected the phone to be broken – a trick – but the screen came to life and reported nine missed calls. Five were from work, concerned at his absence, three were from a blocked number, and two were from Claire, along with a text message that read simply *'Where are you?'*

His head gave a thump, fatigue coupled with disarray, trying to draw him back to bed. Four days of confinement and still he felt an urge to rest. He opened the calendar and checked the date – Sunday the seventeenth, and still no clue what his captor looked like. He drew a deep breath and tried to gather his thoughts. Someone had to be monitoring the phone or it made no sense to leave it so accessible.

Maybe he could do something similar. Andrew put the metal tin back under the bed then rummaged through the wardrobe until he found another box, one of his own. Inside was a collection of old photographs and letters, what little he had managed to salvage from the house before Kate threw him out.

There was a defaced wedding picture and scraps of holiday photos, torn to shreds by heartless hands. Underneath all that, he found his video camera. He hadn't used it since their day at the beach, not once, but hadn't been able to part with it. And of all the things they owned, it was the one item Kate had shown absolutely no interest in. It could rot in hell for all she cared.

Andrew plugged the camera in beside his phone and fiddled with the buttons. It took a while to get it working, but then Kate's image appeared on the tiny screen, walking along the sand, flirting with the lens. He forwarded through the footage, reliving that awful day until he couldn't take any more. It left four hours of empty space on the

memory card, enough space to record until seven thirty, long enough to provide a touch of insight into what the hell was going on.

He swept back the curtains and placed it on the floor in the corner, trying to hide it so only the lens protruded. He propped up the front end to point at the bed then threaded a power cable around the back of the furniture. To him, it was obvious, but a stranger might not notice.

He pressed record then turned his back to pretend it wasn't there. He felt a rush of excitement as he raised his mobile phone and started to dial for help.

Nine.

A pain swept over his temples, like someone screaming in his ear. A throbbing sensation built in waves. Tiredness, the same as the night before.

Nine.

He tried to continue, feeling his muscles resist. It was the same disturbance he'd felt with the door, sudden and unexplained. An intervention from someone who wanted him to stay put. His limbs took on weight, trying to drag him to the floor. Even his finger, hovering above the handset, felt like it couldn't continue. Andrew swung his legs up onto the mattress, trying to distance himself from the camera in case they didn't realise it was there. He felt fatigue, despite having been awake for no more than a few minutes. One by one, his muscles started to shut down, turning numb, limp, and heavy.

The walls seemed to twist and compress, closing in all around as he collapsed on the mattress with his back to the headboard, half- sitting, half-slumped. The feeling of death, dark and horrible, crept up his neck and spread behind his eyes. Andrew's heartbeat slowed before consciousness faded.

Nine.

He lost all feeling, paralysed. His eyelids grew heavy and pulled his gaze down with them, staring at the phone. The number was right there, ready to dial. His thumb rested beside the green connect button, but he was too weak to move it. His captors had reduced him to nothing in a matter of seconds, completely helpless. All the willpower in the world couldn't keep him from falling into a deep, disturbing sleep. His eyes drifted closed, and in darkness, something happened that hadn't for years, something Andrew had vowed never to do again.

He prayed.

3|ARM

The dreams that night were the most intense yet, almost flawlessly vivid. It wasn't the physical detail that made them so believable, but the feel of surfaces and the sense of familiarity.

If anything, in those first few nights since losing his freedom, Andrew lived more through his sleep than at any other time. He was once again in his prison cell, in the stark white room he had seen so many times before. Taut, burgundy covers pinned him to the mattress, leaving no choice but to stare helplessly at the ceiling.

He couldn't understand why he felt so completely aware of himself. He could even remember falling asleep, paralysed in his apartment with the phone in his hand, poised to dial for help. That could have been minutes or hours ago. Time ceased to have any importance as he listened to the silence, embracing the chance to pull his thoughts together.

The surroundings changed as they always did eventually. The walls and windows distorted. Andrew found himself in a place he didn't recognise – another room, with a woodchip ceiling of jaded brown, almost orange in places. A musty smell lingered in the air, damp from water that had seeped through the rooftop and dried in crusted rings on a thin blue carpet.

He was in another bed, the covers peeled back to his knees. He could feel weight on his chest and realised he wasn't alone.

There was a girl in his arms.

She lay draped across him with a tight grip, that same pressure he had felt from the burgundy blankets, pinning him down. He couldn't see her face, only long curls of thick, mousey blonde hair that tickled his bare skin. The anonymity made the scene

somehow empty, with a tension that he couldn't put his finger on, as stale as the damp wallpaper.

Her skin felt warm against his, her weight intimate yet stifling. Andrew drew breath to speak, but a thud from the ceiling cut him short. As he glanced up, the room vanished altogether. He was thrown off the bed into a strong gust of wind. A flicker of white light yielded a palette of blues, greens, and greys. He was outdoors on a clifftop, looking over a billowing, undulating sea. Wind ploughed inland, pushing him back from the crashing waves far below, breaking over jagged rocks. A howling gale kept constant pressure on his chest, but the dream was so intense – so exhilarating – that he scarcely even noticed. The impression of space was breathtaking.

Taking his breath.

An object hovered in the air ahead of him, just off the edge of the cliff. It was a bird of prey – a kestrel, looking stark in contrast to the blank horizon. It flew against the current of the air, as though trying to head out to sea but thwarted by the relentless gusts. Its feathers ruffled; its wings flapped furiously, yet the bird stayed in one place, close enough for him to imagine he could extend an arm and touch it.

He couldn't grasp the meaning, nor recall having been there before. The crashing of waves became the murmur of a crowd and, almost without perceiving the change, he was inside a restaurant. Now he sat on a short wicker chair, pushed tight against a table, right up against his chest. Spread before him was an endless banquet of fatty breakfast – fried eggs with milky yolks; grey bacon, streaked with fat; glistening, slime-covered sausages. It was enough to turn his stomach, but the knife and fork were already in his hands and a strange compulsion made him want to stuff his face.

His arms took on a life of their own, stabbing through slabs of meat and shovelling them into his mouth. It was cold against his tongue, the fat, congealed. His throat constricted as it tried to resist, but he couldn't stop, like he wasn't in control. The food kept coming, and his fork rammed it deeper into his mouth, compacting the mush faster than he could chew it.

Chilled slop pushed past his tonsils, right down his throat. Andrew's airways blocked and his stomach lurched. He panicked, fighting against his own arms as he started to choke, blood rushing to his head. The other people in the restaurant just sat there and ignored him as he tried to mouth words.

Somebody help me.

Huge chunks dripped from between his jaws. He thumped at his chest with a tightened fist, trying to force the food out. Choking to death.

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Andrew jerked painfully out of sleep to find he was in his own bed, back in his flat, his arms and legs back under his control. He clutched at his throat, feeling the ghost of its restriction, unable to keep up with the rapid change in his surroundings. The air felt stale – thick and muggy – but to breathe at all was immeasurable relief.

Once again, it was the small hours of the morning. 3:14 a.m. Once again, he could hear the sound of scratching. He gripped the side of the mattress and pulled himself up to sitting, unsure where to draw the line between reality and imagination. Had someone choked him while unconscious? Did that explain his violent dream?

He turned on the lamp and surveyed the room, willing something to have changed. Before him, the furniture – the wardrobe, the chest of drawers – was exactly as he had left it, tidy, as though his flat hadn't been lived in for almost a week. The bedside drawer hung open just a crack and he grabbed the handle, once again finding his phone inside. There were used syringes, too. Three of them now.

Once again, he had been drugged.

Andrew screwed his eyes closed, trying to remember what he had been doing the night before. Fatigue and disorientation slowed his thought processes. Then he saw the trail of a power flex running along the skirting board. He bent down to find the lens of his camera peering out from behind the curtain, exactly as he had left it. Excited, he threw off the duvet and carried the camera to the lounge, turning the light on to banish the noises without a second thought.

He sat down on the couch and started to review his footage from the night before. He found three hours of it. A tiny screen with a low resolution showed the top half of the bed, looking up from the floor. He could make out the glowing display of the bedside clock. Andrew had gone back under a few minutes after waking up at not quite twenty past three. He was lying on the bed with his back against the headboard, slumped with his phone ready to dial the emergency services.

There, he remained. No one came to adjust him. There was no big reveal. Goodwin slept. He pressed fast forward. For two hours, he saw no signs of activity. Eyes twitched as he dreamt. The picture grew brighter as the blue hue of morning seeped through the curtains.

His lips felt dry, but his palms were wet. As the clock on the table rolled past 6:00 a.m., there was a flicker of movement. He slowed the footage to normal speed and leaned closer to the screen. The image of himself stirred, its face screwing up tight as though dazzled by the brightness. His image looked down at the mobile phone in its hand, then placed it on the mattress. Mesmerised, Andrew watched himself crawl out of bed as on any other day. The figure advanced with a sway towards the bathroom, clearly aware of its surroundings.

A shudder ran down his spine, and he rewound the footage to play it again. The eyes were open, barely a slit, like someone moments from sleep – moving heavily, but normal behaviour. The recording continued as the figure wandered out of view, then a moment later, a shadow on the wall tracked its progress down the hallway. The clock read half past six in the morning, three hours after passing out. There were no signs of a struggle.

Andrew slumped back on the couch and stared coldly at the window, his mind racing. No one had injected him with anything and he clearly wasn't sedated. He had woken up as always and got on with his morning. How could he not remember? How could anyone navigate across an entire room and have no memory?

Moments later, something filled the screen. Andrew brought his attention back over to it, in time to see a face come from nowhere – the mouth and chin of a man, right in front of the lens, so the image was blurred. He thought he saw concern, the expression of someone not liking what he found. It was an emotional reaction, not typical of someone walking in their sleep.

Someone had been in the bedroom with him after all, right there inside his flat. They had a chiselled jaw and a faint cloud of stubble. Andrew had walked right past them and paid no attention. He couldn't remember doing it, just like he couldn't remember a thing he had done on Friday, Thursday, Wednesday … Even Tuesday was a little hazy, back before it all began.

He needed to look himself in the eye and hurried to the bathroom. The cool tiles of the lounge became soft threads of the hallway carpet, then warm linoleum. He clicked on the light and leaned into the mirror, shocked by what he saw. Andrew was almost unrecognisable. One eye was swollen, painted in browns and yellows. Tiny flecks of blood decorated the mirror. Andrew looked down at his hands to find red crusts under his fingernails, and scratches on his forearms. He pressed down and felt pain, very real and irrefutable. Signs of a struggle.

It couldn’t be a dream.

He ran his arms under the tap, pouring freezing water into open wounds. The footage on the camera hadn’t shown any bruises, so his injuries must have been fresh that day. He shuddered, the manifestation of terror, then went to the bedroom in a haze of panic. His phone had registered several new missed calls, only one of which came from work this time. Most were from the blocked number, which he couldn’t return, but he didn’t care. Right then, he only needed to talk to Claire. Andrew called her number and she answered on the fifth ring.

‘Do you know what time it is?’ her whispering voice hissed down the line.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Andrew. ‘I wouldn’t call you if it wasn’t important. I need your help.’

‘What is it? Be quick.’

‘I’m trapped in my flat.’

There was a pause on the line. ‘How do you mean?’

‘I mean I tried to get out, but something’s stopping me. I think someone’s holding me here.’

‘You think?’ she said. ‘Surely you’re either trapped or you aren’t.’

‘Just come over and take a look, will you?’

‘I can’t leave now. It’s half past three in the morning.’

‘Claire, *please* …’

Again, a pause. ‘This isn’t an excuse to get me to stay over, is it? We’ve talked about it before and—’

‘Of course it bloody isn’t,’ Andrew snapped. ‘I don’t normally call you like this, do I? Someone’s keeping me here. I’m sure of it.’

‘So call the police.’

‘I tried. They won’t let me.’

‘Then open the window and shout for help.’

‘I don’t have a key.’

‘For Christ’s sake, break it then.’ There was a pause on the line and she sighed. ‘No, don’t do that. Listen, I can’t get there tonight. I just can’t. But if you want, I’ll come on the way to work in the morning, okay?’

‘It has to be tonight, Claire. In the morning I won’t be able to—’

An ear-splitting screech flooded Andrew's ear, like a scream of distress. The handset slipped from his fingers and clattered on the floor. He dropped to one knee and retrieved it, trying to call her back, afraid something had happened to her.

'Come on, damn it.'

The phone rang and rang, without being answered. He picked himself up and grabbed a long, serrated knife from one of the kitchen drawers. He threw on some trousers and a grey T-shirt, threading the blade through his belt for protection. Then he dared to approach the door.

He didn't see a choice. Andrew couldn't abandon her to the mercy of his kidnappers. He had to get out. With a deep breath, he sprinted down the hall and grasped the door handle, giving no one – including himself – time to react. Instantly, he shuddered as though electrified. His arm seized up and a horrific pain began to emanate from the front of his skull.

This time, however, he was determined. Andrew couldn't stop now, or he would never find the courage to try again. His vision distorted under a pressure within. The corridor seemed to twist, pulsing in and out. He wouldn't let go – in that moment he was ready to risk his life to escape. A desperate voice screamed inside his head, drowning every other thought. *Don't risk it. You'll die.*

His innards churned, but despite immense resistance, he managed to twist the handle halfway around. Every fibre in his body worked together to pull the door open until he could fit through a narrow gap.

And he left the flat.