

Who Killed Anne-Marie?

CM Thompson

Chapter One

The overcooked eggs are not so much sunny-side up as misery-side down.

Misery is what emanates as his knife slices through the cold yolk. It is the main ingredient in the tough bacon sandwich but Daniel still savours every single bite of the over-salted burnt mess.

He burps mightily, releasing another stench of misery into the air. The only other sound comes from the loud rhythmic chop of a knife hitting a plate a little too hard. He had made this for her: he had waited patiently for her to come downstairs, eaten his own breakfast calmly, promised himself repeatedly that he wouldn't be the first one to crack, only to find himself snatching and shovelling her share, now too angry to notice that he is already beyond full.

This is all too good for her, she doesn't deserve such a feast. He does so fucking much for her and she just spits it right back in his face. If she did come downstairs now, she would only sit on the edge of the chair, nibbling morosely at a dry piece of toast, if she ate at all. No, these greasy remains are his alone to savour, he won't let her wreck another one of life's joys. He has so few left now. Good food is reserved for the person who does the washing up – not just the breakfast items that he dirtied but also those slimy plates and that mouldy bowl she promised to wash days ago. He is going to clean everything today, that's why he deserves both portions. In fact, he deserves more than breakfast, especially if he also cleans and sanitises the sticky kitchen. Hell, if he dusts the house then he deserves a frickin' medal.

So many jobs she has been promising to do "later" when she is "feeling better" that he will have to do now. It's not like he hasn't been working all week, it's not like his job is hard or demanding, oh no. He just wanted to spend the day relaxing in front of the telly, just a nice day off. But no, he has to do all of her jobs, he is the one who has to find the source of that smell while she just ... while she just lies around, doing ... what? What has her attention 24/7? What does she do all day? Maybe he should be asking who has she been doing all day? He has heard the rumour regarding his wife and Paul next door but he dismissed it with a chuckle. But maybe, maybe there was someone else, someone aroused by her unwashed smell and... Daniel's eyes stray over to the overflowing recycling bin. No. He knows what she does all day. An affair would be almost preferable to this. Cheaper too.

The two portions of breakfast sit uneasily in his stomach, and he slurps his coffee, letting the cooling, bitter liquid wash his own bitterness away.

It is not worth this. He can't stand the thought of another fight. He just wants one peaceful day. It won't take him that long to tidy up and it would make everything so much easier. He could give the kitchen a quick going over and find out what's causing that smell in the bathroom, then get the washing machine going, do the shopping and spend the rest of the afternoon relaxing in front of the telly. Maybe, she might join him, they could watch the match together like they used to, cuddle up with a few beers; maybe just for once she will even stop at a few beers, and maybe they could order a take-away and maybe, now he is really fantasising here, maybe they could talk to each other without shouting. Just like they used to.

Upstairs, he hears a door softly open and then a pause. Daniel holds his breath as she pitter-patters down the stairs, what kind of mood is she in? Please let today be a good day. She slinks into the room, her head bowed low, making eye contact impossible. There is a sharp scent as she scurries past. She hasn't bothered washing or even brushing her hair. She is wearing the same pyjamas as she was three days ago, and they had stunk then. The smell assures him that today is not going to be a good mood day.

The smell smothers him with memories, and the old feelings of anger flood back, memories of the last argument. The insults she had screamed. Now she is pretending he doesn't exist, just like his mother used to. He hates that and she knows it. She has spent years finding out his pet

hates, just to use them against him. He was willing to put the argument behind them and move on, but she isn't. She is going to continue with her childish antics. Why? What did he do this time? Is it because he accidentally woke her up, clattering the breakfast pans? Well, he has to eat sometime and it's not like its six o'clock in the morning. Or is it because he hadn't saved her any breakfast? She might be even more annoyed when she sees that there is no more food left. Well she should have gone shopping, shouldn't she? Like she promised. It's not his fault.

But it's up to him to break the silence. He can do this, he urges, he can be the better partner. "Good morning," he mutters, trying to force a smile on to his face.

Wordlessly she opens the fridge and he is answered instead by the waft of something rotten, then the unmistakable sound of something pouring. He knows there is no milk in the fridge, no juice. She is starting early again. Despite what they agreed.

Daniel will say nothing about it, this time. He knows what she will say: "I have a headache" or "I am just having one". Or she will cuss him out, knowing he hates hearing her swear. Let her be the one who talks about it, wait for her to be ready, that's what they tell him.

Unprovoked, she slams the fridge door shut, knowing she is doing something wrong, but not giving a shit. Then, quickly, she scuttles back upstairs, taking not just her glass but the bottle as well, along with his already diminished hopes for a peaceful day.

Daniel sighs, the anger draining back into his usual resignation. Is this really still all his fault? Is she really still his problem? He knows he should leave but she would kick up such a fuss. Daniel really does not like fuss. Maybe he should start looking, just for somewhere to escape to. Somewhere to go on the really bad days, but then he can't leave her alone on those days. He could ask friends for help, but that would mean admitting ... and besides, they don't have any friends left, even the neighbours have lost their friendly smiles.

She would never agree to a divorce either, but then he has never asked. He has screamed it a few times and so has she but they have never taken the idea seriously. He could ask quietly, for once, in a tone that is not fucking around. Maybe then she would cry and promise to change. Maybe he could use it as a way of encouraging her to seek help, professional help this time. Maybe she will agree to a divorce, since she "fucking hates him", and has told him repeatedly that she doesn't need him. After four and a half years of marriage, Daniel can see that. She has never needed him, only his wallet. No, that is not true, that is unfair. But still. Still. Maybe. No. Just keep telling yourself that you love her, he thinks, that's the easiest option.

He switches on the radio to drown out the accusing silence. He is tired of trying to figure out how to solve a problem like Anne-Marie. He is tired of cleaning up after her. He is tired of doing everything for her and getting nothing but abuse in return. The problem is he has married a woman who acts too much like his mother, and he won't act like his father did, no matter what. Even if the bitch does deserve it. Best not to think about the similarities. Or about his parents, dead and forgotten is best – dead, rotten and forgotten. Whilst his wife is alive, rotten and ... no, no more, concentrate on the washing up.

It is disgusting. Why have they let it get this bad? He should have stepped in earlier, but she said she would do it. He shouldn't have to do everything around here. It only takes a few minutes to wash the dishes, it wouldn't have taken her much effort or time, she could even attempt it whilst drunk, it wasn't that hard, but no, she would rather host a pity party in her bedroom. Her bedroom! His and her bedrooms! Whose stupid idea was that? Her mother, dear old Sherri. It had been her sneered suggestion when Anne-Marie had claimed that she needed so many nightcaps because of Daniel's "snoring".

He doesn't snore! He knows he doesn't. Any excuse to separate them. Sherri always closed her eyes to her daughter's drinking; it was always Daniel's fault, not her precious Anne-Marie's.

He needs to man up: he should tell Anne-Marie to leave, kick her out to live with Sherri. He shouldn't have to be the one who leaves – he pays for this house, he maintains it while she does fuck all. His hand scrubs angrily against dry crud firmly embedded onto the bowls. She should be the one who leaves, goes back to her mother. Let's see how well they cope with each other again after all these days. Then they'd acknowledge that he is a saint, and they'd stop with their snide comments, their guilt trips. Their affair accusations. It was just one fucking kiss. It meant nothing.

Yes, he is going to tell her to leave right ... tomorrow. No, he isn't even going to tell her, he is just going to pack her bags and put her in a taxi. Change the locks, disconnect the doorbell, take the phone off the hook, hammer the windows shut. Hell, why take such petty precautions? He should put the house up for sale, change his name, grow a beard, emigrate to a warmer country. Maybe her father had the right idea. He rants as he scrubs. He decides that the heavily chipped mouldy plates are not worth keeping and throws them in the bin instead. She won't notice as long as she has a clean wine glass and it doesn't even need to be clean any more. It takes over an hour of scrubbing, running more water and draining away gallons of greasy, filthy water before he finishes. An hour of fantasising about getting rid of his wife, one way or another, and shacking up with a cute blonde.

Nothing changes upstairs despite his clattering and clanging. She is still up there, with that bottle, like an evil presence in the house. A fermenting storm. He turns the vacuum cleaner on with a little glee, something to make her "headache" worse, maybe even make her feel guilty that he is the one doing the cleaning – again, despite what she promised. Maybe the constant noise will be enough to drive her out of her room and hopefully even out of the house. Daniel turns back to his fantasies about throwing her out, triumphantly slamming the door, yelling, "Don't come back!" to the applause of the neighbours. Of her quietly exiting, in a taxi, tears running down her face, vowing never to touch a drop of alcohol again. They joyfully reconcile a month later, never to part again. Then they will have two kids and a dog, and he will never have to see a spirit bottle or his mother-in-law again. He can dream. In reality, she will be scratching, biting and cursing from the moment he tries to pick her up, and there would probably be kicking too. There is no way to get her out the house without a fuss. Even if he took the coward's option of changing the locks the next time she left the house, she would just smash in the windows, or scream on the pavement until he gave in and opened the door. No neighbours would applaud that. They would probably take her side too, everyone always takes her side. It isn't fair.

He can't do it anyway, he doesn't have the guts. She took away his spine and his already diminished balls the minute he said "I do" at the altar. He can dream all he likes about leaving her, but he can't do it. End of. Still, on the bright side, the amount she costs to maintain is still cheaper than a divorce.

He is stuck with Anne-Marie, but it's not like she gets in his way that much. Yes, the arguments are bad sometimes, but they are fairly infrequent. Yes, it would be nice to come home to something more welcoming, but it could be worse. Maybe they should get a dog, a replacement for the baby they are probably not going to have, but could he trust her alone with a dog? It isn't worth finding out, and he would have to walk the darn thing every day. It would be another thing he would have to clean up after, and Anne-Marie would probably train it to attack him. But it would be a friendly face. Maybe when they start talking again, he could hint about a dog, see how she reacts. It might even help her, be a motivation for her to leave the house.

He finishes vacuuming in thoughtful silence and then he mops with little fanfare. No longer will he tread in something disgusting when he comes in, late at night, on a snack run. The kitchen could do with a better clean, one involving a stronger disinfectant, but it will do. She will only mess it up again anyway.

Upstairs, to the bathroom, he can do this. Taking a deep breath, he darts in, trying not to inhale as he forces open the grubby window. Oh god, what has she been doing in here?

Normally he avoids this bathroom, using the en suite in "his" bedroom, but the smell penetrating the hallway has become too strong to ignore.

Is this traces of sick? When was she sick? Why hadn't she told him? Why couldn't she clean up after herself for once? No wonder it smelt like something died in here. He didn't think it had got this bad again. Well he did, but there is no point in admitting it – it's another unapproachable, like the baby, their marriage, his parents. So many things they don't talk about by mutual agreement. One of those subjects that if he even breathes a mention of, she will start screaming at him, saying he doesn't understand. She is right, he doesn't understand, he barely even cares. He just can't reach her any more, can't even have a normal conversation. It is pointless to even try.

Is it so bad he needs to invite Sherri over? He can't stand the thought of that chain-smoking witch polluting his house, cackling about his shortcomings, and encouraging Anne-Marie to drink

that little bit more, but it would mean Anne-Marie willingly coming out of her room. Willingly socialising for once. She never misses the opportunity to complain about him to Sherri, and Sherri will coo and scold, maybe even suggest that Anne-Marie stays with her for a few days. Sherri could scold her about being too thin and make food that she will actually eat, without sounding “insensitive”. Sherri would be able to get her to shower without argument.

Not today, he won't call Sherri today, he really needs a day off. Maybe next weekend, if Anne-Marie hasn't improved, maybe. He could pretend that he has to go on a business trip and ask Sherri to stay with her for a few days. Then he could have a few days alone in a hotel room, with room service. But then, what will he say when they start asking questions? Laying out the guilt trips, they might even start again with the affair accusations. Sherri is a suspicious woman: if she saw so much as a hotel receipt she would explode, but then, maybe he could use that to his advantage, maybe he could go away, stay in a hotel, then “accidentally” leave the receipt on show. The shit would not just hit the fan, it would bury it. Sherri would insist Anne-Marie leaves, for good this time, and there would be no pleas from her brother Peter, to take her back because she “needs” him and she has changed. But then there will be confrontation, yelling, everyone thinking the worst of him, and they would tear him apart in the divorce courts, take every penny he has, expose him as a cowardly worm. No, the fake affair is a bad idea. He needs to face the facts, there is no way of getting rid of his wife that easily. And it's not worth involving Sherri.

The bathroom smells lemony fresh again, the house is vaguely presentable. He is going to go; maybe if she hears him leaving, then maybe she will come out of her room, maybe even shower now the bathroom is clean. Maybe she will be in a better mood, maybe she will stop at one glass, and maybe pigs will fly.

At the supermarket he picks up enough easy-to-cook meals to last him the week and a couple more in case she feels hungry – easy things for her to heat no matter what state she is in. Anything to stop her attempting to cook again. He finds a couple of snacks to go with telly watching. He deserves them after all the cleaning he's done this morning, and, because he knows he is in for another lonely night, he adds a pack of beer. And it's cheaper to buy two packs so he might as well get two. Then he pauses. This is the decision he doesn't want to make. They are out of wine and spirits, she won't be happy with just beer. If he wants a quiet night, he needs to buy a few bottles. But then, that's not being supportive, or is it being supportive? If he buys them, she will scream at him for buying a temptation, but if he doesn't buy them, she will scream at him for ignoring her needs, for making her headaches worse. Maybe he will buy them and let her have one bottle at a time, an offering when the volcano erupts. The last time he didn't buy anything she tore apart the house, looking for hidden caches – they still haven't replaced the lamp or the drawer. And then she will go, without showering, back to the corner shop. He was beyond mortified when she was caught stealing, he can't let that happen again. Maybe a couple of bottles, he could hide some in the car, after all, he will probably need them for himself too. She is easier to love when she is drunk. Even easier if they are both drunk.

They had met in a bar, no surprises there. Anne-Marie had made the first move, came over to talk, and he brought her a drink, and another and another. Daniel fell straight away for her smile. He wasn't used to anyone smiling at him. She had fallen straight away for his wallet. But there was so much he had admired then about Anne-Marie, she was not afraid of anything. He, having spent most of his life hiding in fear, loved her reckless fearlessness. It was like being able to kiss a tornado in those first few months, wild, exhilarating, never knowing which way she would turn, so passionate, so exciting, so fun. Things he had only ever thought about before, he finally felt because of her.

And alcohol.

Which is why he needs the beer.

They had fallen in love drunk and they can't sober up now.

Whilst he waits in line to pay, he practises what he will say if the cashier asks if he is having a party, eyeing up the excessive amount of snacks and alcohol. He did go a little overboard, but he

can't be bothered to put anything back. He plans to say something jolly like: "Yes, I am having a little family get together, ha ha, of course you can come ha ha!" Something like that. Luckily, today the cashier is disinterested, only looks at him briefly, to check he is over the legal drinking age and goes back to scanning his goods. The thing Daniel misses most is human interaction; no one has spoken to him today, no one has smiled at him, it has been months since his last hug.

On the bright side ... He is tired of looking on the fucking bright side, of pretending everything is just fine. Of having to tiptoe around in his own house, of trying to figure out what to do or what to say. He doesn't want to go home to more silence. In desperation, he takes a detour, to pick up two fish and chip meals. He tells himself that it's just in case she is hungry when he gets back, that he is too tired to cook today, that it's not so he can hear a friendly voice. The woman behind the fish shop counter can always be counted on for a genuine smile and a "How are you sweetheart?"

He will never get a "How are you sweetheart?" from the stony face that watches him unload the car. The face belonging to their neighbour, Mrs Ludmilla Bryski. Anne-Marie has a different name for her, Lady Bitchski. So many times Daniel has arrived home to Anne-Marie rambling on about the Bitchski next door, at a volume they both know Ludmilla can hear. Or the muttered allegations against her "creepy" husband Paul. Daniel has tried to say that Paul is just old-fashioned but apparently that meant he was on Paul's side and they were all disgusting creeps. Daniel is reduced now to just giving Paul an embarrassed, apologetic smile and avoiding any other form of contact.

Anne-Marie hates all their neighbours, but Ludmilla next door and Penelope "Lying Penny" at number ten are the worst. The feelings are mutual. Daniel originally liked Ludmilla, she had welcomed them to the neighbourhood with home-made cookies and they had been on friendly terms for a short while. Daniel saw her as the Grandma he never had. But then too many sleepless nights, too many empty bottles carelessly flung into Ludmilla's pristine garden, too many shouted insults, then adding in the not-quite-true but juicy rumours spread by Lying Penny, had considerably soured their friendly neighbour. Daniel didn't think it was his problem that Ludmilla was a light sleeper, who woke up at the slightest bit of noise. In the last row, he had tiredly snapped that maybe Ludmilla should consider moving her bed away from their connecting wall, or maybe she could try ear plugs, or maybe she could try shutting her face. Ludmilla then made it very clear that Daniel and Anne-Marie Mills would never again be welcomed into her home, and Anne-Marie made it very clear that Ludmilla Bryski was welcome to go to hell. Daniel now pretends he can't see the Bitchski watching him, judging him, and hurries back inside.

The house is quiet, and he unpacks the shopping quickly, not wanting the fish and chips to go cold. Maybe he should go upstairs, ask her if she wants anything, but what if she has gone back to sleep? She would be angry if he woke her. Daniel is sure other husbands don't have this problem, they don't spend their days in a constant dread of their wives. He doesn't want to disturb her, doesn't want to share, his conscience guiltily whispers.

Wearily, he settles in front of the telly, both plates and a tepid beer balanced on the side table, the rest of the pack and some post-match snacks cooling nicely in the now-full fridge. He tries to relax and stop thinking. Tries to stop listening for the door upstairs to open, waiting for the next confrontation with dread.

Daniel is a simple man, who just wants a simple life, a quiet life.

Chapter Two

Anne-Marie breathes in, inhaling the overpowering stench of stale bacon. She had woken up feeling tired and sick and this is making it worse. It means that Daniel is awake and he is in the kitchen. She can't face him right now, can't face anything right now, not right now. Later, she promises to herself as she lies back down and closes her eyes, willing both the smell and Daniel to go away. But even that slightest movement makes her head scream in pain. A throbbing urgency emanates from her bladder, forcing her to struggle out from the unforgiving bed.

Pain, so much pain, from her head to her lower back, even to her toes.

Downstairs Daniel eats on, not caring the slightest bit. The smell of his breakfast clings to her as she falls into the bathroom, struggling to close the door behind her, she sits. Her hands supporting her too heavy head. She can hear Daniel clattering downstairs. You would think that her loud flight to the bathroom would bring on some support, that he would bring her something for her head, some painkillers, a glass of water or even something simple like some tea and toast. Something that would take very little effort, but no; even if she asks, she would only get a long whine about how there is no food in the house because SHE didn't go shopping when SHE promised. He would go on and on, moaning about nothing. It is not her fault, she hasn't been well. He just doesn't understand, doesn't know how easy it is to lose track of everything.

She tries over and over to lift herself from the toilet, her body bursting with pain. Finally she manages, clutching the wall in an attempt to stay up. She lurches out of the bathroom into the hall, keeping her eyes firmly averted from the mirror. She wants to go back to bed, she should go back to bed, she deserves to go back to bed. If only she had a caring husband who would look after her on these bad days, someone who would bring her breakfast in bed and maybe even a comforting word or two. That has always been too much to hope for from Daniel; he doesn't even know what a comforting word should sound like. Where does she go? Downstairs where Admiral Undermining is no doubt waiting, his sarcasm canons ready to fire, or should she go back to bed, where there is no food or water? She really needs something to eat, something to drink. She needs pain pills too, strong ones, because she doesn't know what the fuck has happened to her legs but she is walking on painful stilts, so bruised, so swollen. Did she fall? Did someone take a hammer to them whilst she slept? She doesn't remember falling but she doesn't remember going to bed either. What happened? What did she do? Did Daniel hear her do it? She crawls back into her bedroom. Moving is bad, very bad. She needs to rest for a little while longer. She needs a jug of water. She needs a fucking worthwhile husband, not that useless lump.

Where the fuck are her painkillers? She wants to cry with frustration as her hand gropes around on the dirty floor, stirring up dust. She finds only empty packets and the mere effort has her dry heaving again. She peers around desperately in the gloom, focusing on the bin, overflowing with mistakes. Another smashed mistake lying close by, she recognises it as the bottle she was drinking from last night. How can it be empty? She didn't drink that much! She doesn't remember smashing it either. Someone else must have done that. They all hate her around here, she is surrounded by enemies, coming in, drinking her alcohol, hiding her painkillers, making her look bad; they must be laughing at her right now. No one believes her about them, Daniel never believes her, he always takes their side. They are all just looking for an excuse to get her. She tries tipping up the bottles, eager for some relief for her dry mouth. They can't all be empty. She didn't drink all of these. She can't let Daniel see. Got to hide everything, got to get something else to drink, got to find something to eat, got to get water. But that means having to go downstairs: he is waiting downstairs, Mr Judgemental, locked and loaded, Mr Disparaging all ready to start on her, but she needs to go downstairs, get it over with. She can't bear this pain any longer. Maybe she will be lucky, maybe he will take pity on her today, maybe he will love her today and take care of her, and maybe that fucking burnt bacon will turn back into a winged pig!

She will have to go downstairs, get another box of painkillers, some water – and nothing stronger than water, she tells herself – something to eat, something that hasn't been fried in a ton of lard. Maybe she will even apologise to Daniel for the state of the kitchen, although it wasn't as

bad as he made out. Maybe she will even apologise for what she said the other night; she didn't mean to call him a fat bastard, it just slipped out, along with the other things she didn't mean to say. Besides, he said some hurtful things too.

Her legs don't seem to work right and she is too tired to remember how to walk. She half steps, half falls down the stairs and then slowly slops through the living room into the kitchen. He doesn't even look at her as she limps past, no smiles, no good morning, no acknowledgement that she even exists. He just keeps chewing, stern-jawed, at his grease.

Fine, be like that. She is not going to apologise if he is going to act like this. She staggers forward to the fridge. Her feet sticking accusingly to the floor. He is probably still mad about the state of the kitchen, she will clean it when she feels better. Just get off her case already!

"Good morning," he finally mutters, sounding like a sulky child.

Where is her breakfast? Has the greedy pig eaten everything? No wonder he is looking, staring. Is he looking pointedly at the washing up? Why can't he leave her alone? She just can't cope with this argument right now.

She just can't cope with Captain Bring Down at all, all poised, ready to jump down her throat for not doing the washing up. She said she would do it, she will, when she feels better. God, what's the rush? She just feels like shit right now, for fuck's sake leave her alone. Doesn't he know how badly her head hurts?

She opens the fridge to look for food, her hands out of habit reach for a half-empty bottle. She doesn't remember opening this one. Maybe Daniel had opened it? Why isn't he saying anything? She waits for the sarcastic comment. He always has one ready. He just doesn't understand how bad she feels.

Nothing. Is he ignoring her? Where is the "Starting a little early, aren't we?" or the "Do you really need that?" She waits for the verbal assault, but it seems he has other plans. The silent treatment. This is why she doesn't want to leave her room when he is around, he just has to be so pathetic. Why can't he ever be nice to her?

Maybe if he said something like "Good morning, Darling, would you like a little breakfast?" then she would sit down with him, talk to him. But no, he just has to be hurtful and hateful, that is what he specialises in. Tears threaten her eyes, she grabs the bottle and leaves, as fast as her poor head will allow.

Back inside her room, she flings herself into the dirty sheets and gulps angrily at the bottle, waiting for the cold bitter liquid to soothe her. She loves him so much, why does he always have to be so nasty? Downstairs she can hear him running hot water, muttering, probably complaining to himself about the washing up. She said she would do it, damn it! Why does he always have to interfere? Why does he have to be so belittling? Why has their marriage become a silent squabble over the washing up? Why doesn't he love her any more? She takes another strong swig and waits for the pain inside to dissipate. Tomorrow she will win him back, tomorrow she will stop drinking. She will shower and clean the house. She will look at the job openings, work on her CV. Tomorrow she will see a doctor about her headaches. Oh god, what if Daniel is going to leave her today? Tomorrow would be no good.

She needs to make him love her again and never stop. It's his fault too, if only he could provide support for once. Their marriage can still be fixed, they can still go back to the happy times if he would just stop with his stupid little comments.

She hears the vacuum start up, the noise is piercing; she can't think any more. She takes another robotic gulp. What time is it? Maybe she should eat something but he is vacuuming close by and is sure to give her evil looks. She is so hungry though. So tired, everything just hurts. Why does he have to be so mean? It won't kill him to do the housework, just this once, will it? No, she can block him out, she is safe in the dark room, he wouldn't dare come in. Maybe she should go back to sleep for a while, sleep will make her feel better. The liquid is making her sleepy. If only he would shut up with the vacuuming. Yes, she got the fucking hint, OK? Shut up! Shut up!

She grips the bottle firmly in her hand. She should yell out his name, and when he comes to see what's wrong, she should throw the bottle at his stupid head. Hard. Then he will finally understand what it is like to have such a headache. She should get up, tell him to shut up, and fuck off. He needs to be quiet! She is trying to figure out how to fix their marriage. She could sleep right now if it wasn't for him. He is making her ill on purpose now, just to get revenge.

Ahh, finally the unwelcome noise stops. Finally! She lies back, embracing the dark, cold silence. Sweet peace at last! She starts to close her eyes, her heart calming down beat by beat, suddenly jolting dramatically as the front door slams. Where is he going? Why didn't he tell her he is going out? Why would he just leave her like this? He can't be going to the shops, he didn't ask her if she wanted anything. He must be going to see her again, going to spend his afternoon huffing and puffing his sweaty mass over another woman. How could he do this to her? She takes another gulp and then another, downing the last of the bottle.

The throbbing pain in her head begins to numb. Her eyes feel heavy. He can do whatever he fucking wants now. She can sleep this headache away, and it will be alright tomorrow. Daniel isn't seeing anyone, he will come back, probably just gone to get something else greasy to eat. She hugs herself drunkenly. It's OK, she can save their marriage. It's OK, she is just going to sleep this off, everything will be fine...

She wakes with a gasp. It is dark. She doesn't want to be awake. Is it morning again or evening? Oh god, she fumbles out of the room and into the bathroom, just in time to heave the morning's drink out into the toilet. Heave and heave, gasp, heave. Her stomach is in agony, her head screams as she spits out the last of the nausea. Fervently, she takes a gulp of cold sink water, then another. It trickles comfortingly down her burning throat. She longs to return to bed, back to the heavy sleep, but her stomach screams for food. Food, and a painkiller or three. What wouldn't she do for a painkiller right now? Stumbling out of the bathroom, she sways in the hallway, downstairs she can hear the television. Daniel must be down there, waiting. Why did he have to come home? What if he has brought someone home with him?

Muffling back a sob, she starts the shaky descent downstairs. No, don't let him see tears. Why is she such a prisoner in her own home? She should call Peter. Get Peter to teach him a lesson. But Peter told her not to call him any more. Peter said he is tired of these "stunts". They are not stunts! It was just a stupid joke, and Peter takes everything too seriously. She was going to give it back. What a fucking useless brother he is. She should call her mother. That will piss the piggy off. Get them both in trouble. Her mother is the only one who cares.

She feels sick again. There must be something wrong with her head, there must be an angry mass of tumours growing in there, it's not normal for it to hurt this much. She should go see a doctor. Then the piggy will be sorry, sorry he didn't believe her, serves him right.

The stench of chips hits her as she passes the television room. She peers into the flicking darkness to see him, slumped, snoring like a pig. She creeps forward, there is a carton of half-eaten cold chips, bobbing up and down on his sizeable belly. A half-finished beer at his side. She stuffs a handful of chips in her mouth, then takes a swig of warm beer. Another handful of chips, another, desperately feeding that hangover. Now they are all gone but she needs more! She creeps into the kitchen in search of more. Oh fuck.

He has brought another bottle. How many times has she told him?

No, she is not going to take it. He must have brought it because he felt guilty about seeing that woman. No, she won't take his dirty booze. He is trying to placate her or keep her out of the way. No! She won't take it. She is going to call her mother about this! Hush drink, that's what this is, hush drink and she won't hush!

She is not going to take the bottle this time...

But it would make her headache go away. Just a couple of gulps, then she would feel better, just a few mouthfuls. She could even go and sit with him in thanks, be the good wife for a while. A few more mouthfuls, a little more food, some water, then she will be OK. She might even be able to cope with him if he doesn't start being Mr Sanctimonious. Maybe they could even share a beer, like old times. She hears another snore. So sexy! So romantic! She turns her attention back to the fridge, what else did he buy? More disgusting junk food. Well, the pig must feast. He won't notice if she took a few items back to her room. And the bottle.

Daniel doesn't stir as she creeps past with laden arms.

He wakes up later in time for the nine o'clock news. A report on a morbid story, about a man who killed his wife in a fit of anger and tried to disguise it as a burglary gone wrong. Daniel has been following the story with interest, as have most people, he's even sympathising a little with the accused. After wondering where his chips went, he goes into the kitchen to grab some popcorn and another beer. He notices the bottle has gone. He is in for another lonely Saturday night, wondering what it would be like to be surrounded by a loving family. Watching all those happy families on the television, watching and wishing and hoping that there is still time.

He waits a few hours, listening but not hearing as much as a drunken laugh from her, so he decides it is safe to go to bed.

She stays quiet all night, which worries him. He spends Sunday pretending to watch TV, but all the while waiting, holding his breath, waiting. He checks where he hid the other bottles, but they are gone. Stolen by a thief in the night, a drunken thief of happiness. He doesn't dare confront her, they will never speak of this again. He goes to bed on Sunday night thinking that he has avoided the worst of it. He is just so tired of the arguments. This is what he needs, a quiet weekend with no drama.

Anne-Marie is drunk. She can't remember what she has been drinking or even why. All she knows now is that she wants another drink and the bottles are empty.

She feels like a helium-filled balloon, rising above everything, like she is falling in love for the first time, limbs shaking, heart racing, words slurring, stuttering love. She floats out of the room, gliding down the stairs, hands gripping the smooth walls to steady herself. Then she is down, barely remembering the journey, not remembering what she wanted. Where was she going? Why is everything so dark? Where is Daniel? Danny? Danny? DANIEL???

"SHUT UP and go back to sleep!" comes the irate yell from upstairs. He is not going to get up at 4 am to deal with her shit AGAIN. He has to go to work in four hours and ten minutes.

Danny, it's so cold. Danny, it's so dark. Why has she come down? What did she want? The alcohol has made her lips tingle, thirsty for more. Why is it so dark? Her hands rise up, groping the wall. Why is she on the floor? Why can't she get up? Her hand hurts, something is trickling. Why can't she get up? A plaster, she needs a plaster ...

"DANIEL!"

Chapter Three

“I want a plaster,” she wails as Daniel rushes down the stairs. “I want a plaster.”

He panics at the sight of the smeared blood.

“PLASTER!” she screams after the ambulance arrives, pointedly showing the paramedics the glass-embedded wound.

“I just want a fucking plaster,” she continues to screech as they load her into the ambulance, Daniel glumly following behind. “Plaster, piggy, PLASTER.”

The neighbours peek out from behind curtains, pretending not to see. No doubt they are rejoicing that Anne-Marie is being taken away and hoping that they don’t bring her back.

Then the questions start.

“What happened, Mrs Mills?”

“No, really how did this happen?”

“How much did you drink, Mrs Mills?”

“Do you often drink that much, Mrs Mills?”

“How are you feeling, Mrs Mills?”

“Where is Anne-Marie?” Peter asks impatiently, his eyes wrinkling in disgust at the sight of Daniel. He would not have agreed to dinner if he had known Anne-Marie was not coming. He reluctantly agreed to see his sister at his mother’s insistence. He has not forgiven her for her last “joke” when she “borrowed” money from his wallet and he is not expecting an apology. He grits his teeth and waits for the weary “She is unwell”, or “She has another headache” or “She will join us later if she is feeling better.”

Instead his brother-in-law mutters, “She is in the hospital. I would have called you but I didn’t get the chance.” Peter wouldn’t have thanked him for a 4 am phone call. “I thought it would be better to tell you in person. It’s not serious, she is only being held for observation.” Daniel tries to reassure.

Peter loudly grits his teeth.

“I thought we could eat then go and see her. Visiting hours aren’t for another two hours.”

Typical Daniel, always thinking of food, Peter thinks. “What happened?” he asks finally.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know what happened. She doesn’t remember.” All Daniel really knows is that she just wanted a plaster.

Everyone keeps asking what happened? What happened? Daniel feels guilty every time he has to admit he was asleep. But it was four in the morning when she fell. “She fell down the stairs.”

At least Daniel hopes she fell. He doesn’t know what happened before she fell, all he heard was “Danny, Dannnnnnnyyyyyyyyyy, DANIEL,” using that voice that told him this was more than drink-induced sadness. That’s what finally made him get out of bed. He knew that tone of voice too well. It always meant trouble. He knew he had to get up before the neighbours called the police, again. He dragged himself out of bed, finally flippantly flipped the light switch, expecting to see her doing something stupid, not expecting to see all that blood, not that he would tell Peter this. Peter is not a sympathetic ear. To Peter, Daniel’s behaviour is always inexcusable. Anne-Marie’s behaviour is inexcusable too, but she is family.

Daniel thought it would be easier to lie to Peter here. Yes, they could have met at the hospital but the food is better here. Just not at the house, Peter can’t see the house! Nor the state of Anne-Marie’s room. No twisting of the truth would be believed if Peter saw the full carnage. Daniel had gone home briefly, to shower and change, and had been overwhelmed. He was grateful the paramedics didn’t go upstairs otherwise he would have had even more difficult questions to answer. It didn’t take a genius to realise what had happened though. She broke a bottle, probably to get out the last drops or because she was enraged that there was no more, and she had cut her hand on the glass, quite deeply. Then, like a naughty child with a crayon, she had

smears the blood across the wall as she struggled to get up, continuing to the hallway then stopping abruptly halfway down the stairs. A puddle of stagnated blood marked where she had lain, screaming for him and how long it took him to answer. It had scared the breath out of him when he turned on the light, a nightmare trying to stay strong enough to pick up the phone, to stammer to an indifferent operator that he needed an ambulance.

"It's not as bad as it looks," the paramedic had said, as his wife tried to smear blood onto the man's face. But they still needed to take her to hospital. Six stitches and a minor sprain, mercifully held for observation. His wife refused to say another word to him or cooperate with anyone. She just wanted a plaster. Daniel needs to clean up the blood before she gets released, he can't let Peter see it. He can't let anyone see it.

Peter is pretending to study the menu, but he is really adding the evidence in his mind. A fall late at night, the guilty expression on his brother-in-law's face, excuses he has heard before.

Peter gives his order to the waiting waitress as pleasantly as he can, but as soon as she moves away, he starts. "How drunk was she?" His voice is stern.

Daniel's face answers for him, he can't look his brother-in-law in the eye.

"How did she get it this time?" Peter's voice drops. "You brought it for her? After everything we agreed?"

"I brought it for back-up."

Peter watches the worm snivel. "Back-up? What the fuck do you mean, back-up?"

"You are not there when she can't get a drink, you don't know what she is like, what she might do."

"I told you to call me."

Actually, you told me not to call you, Daniel wants to say, you said you were done with this shit. Daniel knows it is not worth protesting. Peter is like his mother, they are never wrong, they always know best, they are never anything but "reasonable". There is no point pointing out their inconsistencies, it is not worth a fight.

"I haven't told your mother yet."

How typical of you, you fucking coward, bet you are waiting for me to volunteer to tell her, Peter thinks. He clenches his teeth, sealing in his retort.

There are a few minutes of silence broken by the food clattering down in front of them, the now nervous waitress quickly tip-toes away without a comment.

Daniel isn't one to let food go cold, so he bows his head, avoiding Peter's accusing glare, and starts shovelling.

Peter picks at his food, composing his next attack and wondering what should he tell his mother. Sherri is prone to seizing the wrong end of the stick. Telling her Anne-Marie had an "accident" will not go down well. It is not something he can keep hidden from her either. Go to the hospital first, he decides, see how bad it is. No need to set his mother on a rampage unnecessarily. It is for the best that Daniel doesn't tell her, she can barely tolerate him and his excuses on a good day. Peter can feel the headache building, an angry bubble of pain behind his eyes. Anne-Marie's drinking isn't the only thing that is becoming a big problem.

"I know things are difficult right now ... but..." No, that isn't the right approach.

Daniel immediately tenses, readying himself for stronger defences on hearing the "but".

"Do you know Anne-Marie is thinking of leaving you? She thinks you are not being sympathetic enough, that you are making her worse. She is only thinking about it at the moment," Peter lies softly, hinting that maybe Daniel could still change things. His mother is not the only one who can manipulate, she is just better at it. A lot better.

This is news to Daniel. At first it hurts, she can't leave him, not after all they have been through. Then he reminds himself of how much he has been thinking of leaving her. He is tired of always being taken advantage of.

"Well maybe she should." Daniel stabs angrily at the remains of his food.

Peter had not been expecting this kind of response. Normally his brother-in-law is more docile, more apologetic. Anne-Marie must have really gone too far this time.

"She is just depressed."

"She is always depressed. She has been depressed for over a year now."

"Well, whose fault is that?"

Daniel's fork hits the plate with an extremely angry ding. "I said I was sorry." This reply escapes through gritted teeth, while the knife scrapes across the plate.

"Well why don't you act like you are sorry, instead of..." Peter doesn't venture any further. This is not a good time to be pushing his brother-in-law further by listing his many faults. As fun as it would be.

"There is only so much I can do."

"But you don't do anything. You can see she is hurt, that she is depressed and what do you do to compensate? You ignore her, you mutter stupid comments and hurt her even more. How is that helping?"

"FUCK OFF." Daniel is done with this family. She has been spreading lies again, hasn't she? "I do nothing to help her? Without me, she wouldn't even eat, she would sit drinking in squalor, day in, day out. Why don't you help her for once?" Daniel is not the one who hasn't spoken to Anne-Marie since she was caught stealing money from a wallet, Peter's wallet.

He slams back his chair and pulls on his coat.

"Where are you going?"

Daniel doesn't answer, he just keeps walking. Let Peter go to the hospital and deal with Anne-Marie and her moods for once. Let him do the comforting, the soothing, let him do all he can to cheer her up, only to be let down again by her lies and then afterwards, when he remembers what a lying bitch Anne-Marie can be, he can be the one snivelling with an apology, broken, begging for help.

Daniel marches towards his car, lowers himself in and slams the door. Not that Peter could hear him but it felt good. He is not a man to be messed with tonight. The Fowlers need to learn that he is not a man to be messed with at all. He starts the car, over-revving the engine, and squeals out of the car parking space.

Fuck playing nice, fuck Peter, fuck it all. It's all Peter's problem now. He should just kick Anne-Marie out of the house, send her to live with Peter. Peter would soon change his tune, when he has to deal with Anne-Marie on a daily basis. Sure Anne-Marie was easy to love when you only saw her once every two or three weeks but on a daily basis? Peter would soon learn the importance of having a back-up drink supply then. The fool wouldn't even last a week with her, he would be begging Daniel to take her back. Daniel speeds down the road, smiling for the first time that day, fantasising over and over in his mind how Peter would grovel. He should do it, while she is still in the hospital. He could just gather up the remains of her stuff and dump it, along with the mountain of empty bottles all on Peter's doorstep; better yet, dump it on Sherri's doorstep. Then he should just coolly bellow, "She is your problem now." Just imagine the look on Sherri's face. It has been years since anyone stood up to the old bitch. She would be stunned into silence. Then he would leave quickly, before she regained her senses.

But then if he did that, the neighbours would think he is a monster, so would the nurses. "I see why she drinks," they would chorus. Anne-Marie and Sherri playing the roles of the innocent victims, villainising the cruel, cruel husband, who purposely got his wife drunk, let her fall down the stairs and then abandoned her. "Disgusting don't you think so, Nurse?" Milking it for drop of pity, the whole town would be on their side. Wherever Daniel went, everyone would whisper about him. Worse still, what if Sherri got in one of her moods, she knows where Daniel lives, she would just go storming into his house, screaming out his faults, the neighbours listening intently. He would have to watch his step every time he left the house, fearful that she might be hiding in the shadows, readying for a fight. Imagine how the police would treat him? "Waah waah baby can't cope with his mother-in-law?" Even if they did believe him, if they went round to caution Sherri, she would ply them with cookies or pie, something mumsy. Sherri has had a lot of practice over the years at manipulating police officers, if you believe his wife. Then over coffee, Sherri would launch into a well-practised sob story: "He just kicked my daughter out, Officers, no warning." All this whilst urging Anne-Marie to show the nice young men her current bruises. The next thing Daniel knows is that he is in jail for assault, and Anne-Marie is getting a divorce and his house. It just wasn't worth it.

Fuuuuuck.

What did he do to deserve this?

Daniel slams his front door shut and then immediately regrets it. What if the neighbours heard him? He can't face any more questions about last night. He needs to clean up before anyone sees the shameful mess. He waits for a few minutes, but no, no one rings his doorbell. Everyone is pretending that they heard nothing, that he is not home. The neighbours are past the polite all-is-forgiven smiles, past the *you-are-off-the-Christmas-Card-list* stage and onto the *next-time-she-does-this-I-am-calling-the-police-this-time-I-swear* stage.

Daniel stares at the bottom of the stairs. The blood has dried into a blackish puddle. The sight of it reignites Daniel's anger. He hits the back of the front door with his fist, hard enough to leave a bruise on his hand. He curses silently at the world, Anne-Marie, alcohol, his parents and every single action that brought him here.

But that doesn't change anything. His curses don't magically clean his house, no fairy godmother arrives, mop bucket in hand, to help. He moves into the kitchen and turns the radio on for distraction. There is so much to clean – the floor, the walls – then he will have to go into her room, sort out the broken glass and other stains. Take out recycling. The radio blares out a gushy dedication to a husband loved with all her heart. Bollocks, despite their twerpings and twutterings, they didn't really love each other. It is all a fucking lie. Happy couples are a lie; they just call up radio stations with their lies to annoy everyone else, to gloat. They weren't really happy.

They sold him into this lie with an "I do". No one said in the "for better or worse" part that it meant he would be stuck washing his wife's blood and vomit off the floor in the name of love. He plunges the mop deep into the bucket of warm soapy water and returns to the stagnant mess. In the background he can hear the radio drone with a gloomy song about a man, left at the altar, that just goes on and on. Daniel doesn't know why the singer is so miserable, he got off lucky.

Anne-Marie's blood is determined not to leave, refuses to budge without a fight. Every time Daniel thinks he is finished, he sees another droplet, mocking him. The whole time he is scrubbing away at his anger, but is creating a bigger mess. Maybe he shouldn't have left Peter like that. He needs all the friends he can get – but Peter is not his friend, a dark thought interjects, no one from the Fowler family is his friend. He should go to the hospital, first give them time to conspire, then show up with a bunch of flowers, prove them all wrong. Yes, he will finish the stairs then go. The fingerprint smears on the walls can wait until he gets back. Why is he clearing up after her again? He spent all weekend cleaning the house, so she should be the one scrubbing. Why is he thinking of going to the hospital, he should take this opportunity to leave? Why is he even thinking of apologising? He has nothing to apologise for, they should be apologising to him. He shouldn't go to the hospital, he should let her stew. If he goes, she will only sit there, complaining about him to Peter, screeching the old *he-never-takes-cares-of-me-any-more*. Daniel slams the bloodstained mop back into the dirty water, then thinks about kicking the bucket. He thinks about creating a huge bloody mural to their marriage and then leaving everything, including her, out to dry.

He didn't force her to drink the whole bloody bottle or the other bottles. He didn't break the glass. He didn't push her down the stairs. So why should he feel so guilty? Why is it his problem? Why does he have to spend all his time and money on her without getting anything in return? Fuck Anne-Marie, fuck Peter, fuck them all. If Peter cares so fucking much about his sister then why didn't he help her? No, that is Daniel's job while her family sit on the sidelines, criticising him just like his mother always did. Fuck them all. He is quitting. Yes, he is going to clean the house, put it on the market and sell it before Anne-Marie is released. Get out of the range of Sherri's fists and go where no one bleeds, criticises or drinks. An isolated farm, in the middle of nowhere, just him and a dog.

Daniel closes his tired eyes and sighs. If only he had the balls. He tries to go back to the old fantasy, the one that has kept him going for a few years, the fantasy of a chubby little angelic girl, with Anne-Marie's hair and his eyes, asking politely for a bedtime story; for a little boy to declare that he is the greatest Daddy in the whole wide world. A happy wife and a loving family to come home to, that's all he wanted. He tries to believe that he can still have that, if he can get them

through this. They could still have a happy future together. That's all he wants, why can't they have that? Why can't they try again?

He goes back into the kitchen, carefully empties the red water into the sink, then washes out the bucket and refills it. He arms himself with bleach, a disinfectant spray and as many old rags as he can find. He can't let the hand smears stay on the walls. He needs to wash away the shame before anyone else sees.

The paramedics last night, they saw too much, they were probably talking about him right now, the pathetic loser and his blood-smearing drunk of a wife. Shame burns at his cheeks as he scrubs. Memories come flooding back of all the times he wet the bed as a child, and then tried to scrub away the evidence before the slaps came. As he scrubs at the blood, he is tensing, waiting another stinging slap, of feeling that his skin is about to burn with more than a sense of shame.

There is something forbidden about washing away blood. He feels like a murderer, trying desperately to hide his own guilt; he didn't do anything wrong ... except buy her the bottles. That had been a mistake, but he didn't force her to drink it all. Shame and guilt propels him to keep scrubbing at the hand smears until even the cheap green paint starts flaking off. They can't keep going on like this. The image of Anne-Marie, lying bleeding at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at him with those pleading eyes, flashes into his mind. Maybe he will get lucky this time, maybe they will keep her at the hospital for a few days. Maybe he will get very lucky and they will keep her there for a long time. Maybe they will fix whatever is wrong with her. Maybe the old Anne-Marie will be the one who comes home this time. Just keep telling yourself that you love her and you can still be happy together, he thinks. She really does need me, he lies to himself, I can't leave her.

Until death do they part.