

Dreamcatcher

Beverley Jones

Part One

Chapter One

Ellis sleeps.

He sleeps while his wife cannot.

He sleeps while she wakes, sweating, struggling, clutching the sheets with claw hands. He sleeps while she tumbles into wakefulness, trembling with murky confusion.

He sleeps while she dies, curled under the covers of their bed as her eyes widen, her hands clench. He snores a little as her last breath leaks out and her voice is stolen.

He doesn't dream, unless it's a dream of birds, great clouds of birds, swirling into the sky. He senses no alteration in the fabric of his universe as the last moment of his wife's life stretches towards breaking point; no premonition surges as it snaps.

When the doorbell rings, and keeps ringing, Ellis hauls himself, blanket-tangled and heavy, along the landing, down the stairs, towards the insistent sound. Groggy, feet stumbling through unseen drifts of sleep-sand, he opens the door with exaggerated slowness, as if drunk, or underwater.

A policeman stands in the doorway. He wears a helmet, not a flat hat. He touches the peak with his hand. There is something unfamiliar about the uniform he is wearing, but at the same time it is familiar too, rather like this night.

'Mr Andrews?' enquires the officer. 'I'm afraid there's been an accident.'

With a shuffle of his feet, the tall young policeman looks at the doorstep, then at Ellis. Silence expands. Ellis rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands, but the policeman remains stubbornly present.

'May I come in?' asks the officer.

‘What accident?’ Ellis hears himself say, his throat still treacly with sleep, his mind groping to grasp the everyday word dangling ominously at the end of the policeman’s sentence — *accident*.

‘It’s your wife, I’m afraid,’ says the officer on the step. His voice sounds strange, at one remove, like a policeman channelled from a TV crime drama. His words are from a TV script, a Hollywood cop. Then it dawns on Ellis why he feels this. He knows where he is. He opens the door a little wider.

The officer says, ‘There’s no easy way to say this, sir, but—’

And in the speaking of that ‘but’ — a single word, so small, so brutal — comes the alteration of worlds, the collapse of all the time that has gone before. With this word begins the slow winding out of Ellis’s happiness and hopes. It has already started. It started long before the knock on the door.

‘Mr Andrews?’ says the policeman again, as Ellis’s mouth gapes. The next words the officer utters will form unbidden in Ellis’s head over and over in the days and months to come, a virus of remembering multiplying in his cells. *‘I’m very sorry to tell you this, I’m very sorry to tell you this, I’m very sorry to tell you this...’*

The words have got their foot in the door, now. The policeman takes off his helmet and tucks it under his arm, the South Wales Police crest glinting in the hallway light. ‘May I come in?’ he asks again. His voice is less steady this time. He steps into the hall. And, in stepping back, Ellis knows that he is letting the world-breaking words the policeman bears inside. To stand his ground would only keep them there on the doorstep, hammering for admittance.

Ellis knows that something is not right, but he cannot say what or why. He suspects he’s still asleep and merely dreaming. He’d like to wake up now. *Right now*, before

the policeman can move towards him again. He's very young, thinks Ellis. Too young to have to deliver news like this, in the middle of the night.

The policeman runs a hand over his cropped black hair.

'There's been an accident. I'm afraid it's your wife.'

The policeman's mouth continues to move and sounds come out but Ellis can't seem to grasp the order of the words.

'I don't understand', he insists, when the officer gets to the end of his rehearsed speech of condolence, still standing in the hall, arms limp. 'That can't be right. My wife's in Paris. What would she be doing in New England?'

Ellis tries to mentally pinch himself then, to prod himself, poke himself into wakefulness. This is all wrong, he insists: the room; the policeman. I am still asleep. This is not what happens. Not tonight.

'I need you to look at something, sir—'

Then they move back down the hall, through the living room door. The words are inside now. It's too late to stop them or turn them back. Ellis sits down on the arm of the sofa.

'Is this your wife's passport?', asks the constable, standing over Ellis and handing him a folded sheet of paper. 'This copy was sent over from the Boston police department to us at Cardiff Central.'

Ellis takes the sheet, takes a deep breath. This isn't her passport, he thinks. This is a mistake.

It is her passport. Rae smiles faintly from the inky grain, a poor, heavy-handed reproduction of her face, of her continent-sized smile, her water-blue-grey eyes, like the ocean in the pre-dawn, pre-morning, pre-policeman world.

Ellis reads her name three times before he can speak. Rachel Eleanor Andrews.

‘Yes, this is my wife’, he says, though it costs him his world forever after to acknowledge it.

‘I’m very sorry, sir,’ says the policeman. ‘I need you to come to the station with me. Is there someone you need to call?’

At that moment Ellis knows he’s not dreaming. He also knows he will never again wake from the fatal impact of the officer’s words.

Chapter Two

It had been *the anniversary*, the day the policeman had come. A year to the day — *almost*.

Rae had circled the date on the kitchen calendar, the one with the glossy pre-Raphaelite paintings. She hadn't written anything beside the black biro ring — she'd need no such prompt. She knew the date by heart: 2nd July. Below the date Edward Burne-Jones's *Flaming June* slumbered obliviously in her bower, in her flowing dress, glowing like an orange sun.

Perhaps the circling of the date was meant to be a signal to him, to Ellis, that *he* should remember? Though how could he forget?

A worm of irritation had nibbled at his stomach when he'd spotted the black circle the morning before the policeman came and spoke his world-altering words. A spurt of bile had fired in his middle, a surge of resentment followed. A bitter taste of the too-strong coffee he'd drunk earlier returned to his tongue. Rae was always the one who mastered the intricacies of the coffee machine.

Had his spotting of the date at breakfast been an omen? Or just something glanced askance, absent-mindedly noted as he pulled open the fridge; random, meaningless?

Rae hadn't phoned that day, but she hadn't been due to call. Her trip would keep her busy; a feature on 'authentic Paris' to write, whatever that was, and several interviews planned over the three days. When he'd waved her off that morning at Cardiff railway station, as he thought at the time, to head to St Pancras and the Eurostar, she'd said she would call on Sunday evening, and on Sunday evening the call would come. And if he was honest, lying now in his cold and empty bed, he'd had a few really good nights' sleep without the

tossing, mumbling, muttering form of Rae whirling in her tornado of sheets and sweat beside him.

He'd missed her though, in the deepest part of the night, in the deepest part of his sleep-self which sensed the emptiness of the bed where she was not. The scent of her vanilla perfume curled along the pillow towards him. Sliding his hand out, he'd run his fingers over the almost imperceptible dents in the mattress that remembered Rae asleep, making do with this touch rather than the usual contour of her smooth, naked hip.

Ellis loves the fact Rae never wears pyjamas or a nightshirt. He loves that there's nothing between them, in their skins, in the dark, except a warm space easily breached by his own exploratory hand.

Then he'd heard the banging on the door, the doorbell in his head and the voice in the house. *I'm sorry to have to tell you this, I'm sorry to have to tell you this*, while *Flaming June* slept on at the head of her very own month, in her sunshine-warm dress, in the dead of night, oblivious to the circle marking *the anniversary*, her left toe pointing to the carefully applied biro inches below.

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The words and the date continue to beat in his head as he drives to the airport in the creeping dawn that takes an age to arrive. They hum through the six-and-a-half-hour flight to Boston, a long, hot journey, thick with the condensed noise of families and leaking headset music. A large party of Americans on board are in high spirits — there is a holiday atmosphere. There are drinks and food and more drinks, brought in efficient rotation by smartly attired attendants. And there's a great deal of time to think. And to remember.

Ellis knows the order of things is not quite right. He puts that down to the shock and the confusion. The Cardiff police had been so terribly understanding and helpful. They'd

offered answers and condolences and provided contact names and numbers. They'd helped him speak to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and make 'arrangements'. But he has questions of his own, multiplying with the miles of landmass sliding beneath his economy-sized seat.

You don't have to come in person, they'd said in Boston. But he does have to. He can't bear the thought of Rae out there alone, under unfamiliar skies and unfamiliar hands.

When Ellis emerges tired and stunned from the plane's cocoon into the Boston terminal, the young American policeman who greets him offers his deepest sympathies as he checks his identification. Then there's another long drive before he meets the man who seems to be in charge. This older policeman looks to Ellis like a sheriff from a TV drama. He keeps his large, gnarled hands quite still in his lap across the desk from Ellis, his grey head and grey face nodding rhythmically as Ellis speaks. He adjusts his tie in the close, heavy heat of the office. Occasionally he makes a humming noise, encouraging Ellis with a muttered, 'I see', and 'Yes, of course, sir', as he explains what little he has been told.

A fake-looking Sheriff's badge lies on the table in the glass partitioned cubicle, in the clapboard police station on the corner of Main Street. Two cups of black coffee, freshly filtered, sit between Ellis and the sheriff, upright and stiff in their seats, to breach the gaps in their conversation.

A woman called Theodora, a theatrical name for someone with such severely scraped-back hair and so dark a suit, speaks with practised empathy about his *great loss* and *deep shock*, and how she and the Commonwealth Office will help him in any way possible. When she has no more to say the silence lies thickly, stifling them all in the late afternoon.

'She was in the middle of the street. There was nothing the driver could do', the sheriff offers, at last. 'It was dark. There was no time. He couldn't stop. He hadn't been drinking. He's just an ordinary Joe. A fisherman on his way home.'

He's said this already. Twice.

'Why would she have been standing in the middle of the street?', asks Ellis for the second time. Why was she in New England at all and not in Paris where she'd told him she would be? Rae was always where she said she was going to be, when she said she was going to be there. But Ellis knows why. He looks at the date on the sheriff's desk diary. It shows a photo of a fishing boat against the filter-enhanced glow of a summer sunrise. Fifth of July 2011. He is three days late. More than three days — a year. A lifetime.

Why had Rae lied and said she was going to Paris? He'd asked her if she was going to be okay, if she would cope with *the day* coming. She'd smiled sadly and said that working was the best way to get through it. He'd believed her.

The sheriff clears his throat. 'Would you like to see her now, Dr Andrews? We need a formal ID, if you are up to it. Then we can get the death certificate and release her to you.'

Ellis nods. Is that all there is to it? So quick? So simple? *Release her to me*, as if she is merely being held in handcuffs in an adjacent cell and can be given over into his custody.

The Sheriff makes a slight movement with two fingers of his left hand. The signal is acknowledged by a ginger-haired officer at a desk in the main room. He picks up a telephone and speaks into the handset. A moment later he returns the hand gesture.

'They're ready for us at the hospital, Dr Andrews, if you'd like to follow me.'

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Ellis doesn't want to follow the sheriff into the hospital basement, into the room with a double-drawer unit he assumes is a fridge and a stainless steel table. The room is tiled and windowless, poorly lit, though large arc lights hang darkly from the ceiling on long flexes. Ellis suspects there's a discreet and sensitive reason for the gloom. Theodora with the severe hair puts her hand on Ellis's arm and asks, 'Are you ready?'

An orderly draws back a curtain. When the Sheriff lifts the sheet to uncover the face of the woman-sized form on the table, Ellis has a moment of indescribable, almost religious joy. A choir bursts into song, clean and bright. He's seen salvation. *It's not his wife's face before him.* It's similar, but not hers, this pale, white, blue and black statue, cool and silent, that lies before him. It's not his Rae.

Darkness crowds the edge of his vision. Blood thumps at the base of his skull. Tears of relief prickle and well. His lips move a little, form some words. Perhaps he prays. He thanks someone for this gift, this reprieve. Maybe it's the god he hasn't spoken to since childhood. His words float up and away into the dark.

Then the light reassembles itself over the woman's face. His eyes focus and he knows it's her. *It is Rae.* This woman of cold flesh and cleverly applied make-up, an artistry that all but hides the tell-tale lattice of lacerations on the right side of her head. It is his wife. *It was his wife.*

Ellis wonders what's beneath the rest of the sheet, whether they've concealed all of her injuries as they have on her face — impressions of the wheels perhaps, the limbs crumpled by contact with the bumper of the truck — *the fender, they say fender out here,* says Rae's voice in his head. *Fender not bumper, trunk instead of boot, blinkers not indicators. Two countries divided by a common language, right?*

It's been three days since the policeman came, since Rae ceased to say anything at all — the time taken for Ellis to be found and contacted, to book a flight from Heathrow to Boston, to drive from Cardiff to Heathrow, the solid ground vanishing miles beneath him, travelling east to west, chasing the setting sun — the sun setting on his wife on her metal table, on his marriage, on his life.

He's hardly slept in this time. He is weighted and woozy with sleeplessness, his head barely attached to his body — his mind attached to nothing at all.

He stares at Rae's face, at the depression in her left temple that the make-up cannot hide. He can't think what to do next. Reaching to lift the sheet, the sheriff gently stays his hand.

'We had to perform an autopsy sir. It's part of the process in a death like this.'

Autopsy not post-mortem, thinks Ellis. He withdraws his hand.

He stands silently, trying to remember Rae's body, to remember it as it was, not as he fears it is now. His fingers touch her bare shoulder. She is cold. *Cold feet, cold hands, warm heart*.

Three days. She has been sleeping in the fridge for three days, preserved for this viewing by those unfamiliar hands.

The sheriff is patient. He waits for Ellis to say goodbye.

Ellis smooths Rae's waxy cheek with the back of his hand, just as he used to do in their life together. He knows it's the last time he will make this gesture, this simple unthinking motion. The face he would know out of ten thousand, ten million, is so still — he cannot reconcile it with one he's known so well. This is someone else's wife, someone else's girlfriend, someone else's daughter. He's glad of that, glad he can pass on this great, weighted universe of loss, slide it easily onto someone else's broader back. Until, he knows it's not true.

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'Has your wife been depressed lately, Dr Andrews; has she been distressed?' asks the sheriff. They are back in the police station on Main Street. Theodora has stayed behind to speak to the medical examiner. Another mug of hot coffee is in Ellis's hands. Mechanically, he takes sip after sip.

They sit at the sheriff's desk in the pool of light from his angle-poise lamp. It has a green glass shade, the kind seen in the offices of private detectives from the movies of the

1930s. Ellis has visions of men in visor caps surrounded by palls of cigarette smoke. But there's no smoking in the premises of the Massachusetts state police, Cape Cod division.

Ellis tries to focus. He notices the ink stain on the folder that sits on the desk, and the model ship in the paperweight that sits on the folder. The folder contains all that is left of Rae's legal existence: her passport, a photocopied image in pixels and ink, her post-mortem form (*her autopsy*), her personal details.

Depressed? Was she depressed? Not Rae, not his Rae. She was sad sometimes, naturally; she was a little despondent. How could she not be, near the anniversary? It was natural but...

'Is there any chance that, well, she might have been deliberately standing in the road?' asks Sheriff Burnham. 'That—' His words trail away. He sips the last dregs of his own coffee.

It takes a moment for Ellis to understand what the old grey officer, with his old grey voice, is implying.

'Had she given you any reason to think she might do something to hurt herself, Dr Andrews?'

He stares at the man. Had she? Had she given him any sign?

'No', Ellis manages to say with effort, an effort both to answer at all and to control his voice in doing so.

The sheriff makes a note on his form. He shifts in his seat. His fingers trace the edge of a paper blotter bearing a little map of Cape Cod. Ellis sees the familiar spit of land that extends like a flexed arm into the Atlantic Ocean with Boston at the armpit. There's a star marking Chatham, the sheriff's town, placed between the elbow and the wrist.

Ellis looks at the sheriff. Something about his appearance makes him doubt whether he's actually a sheriff at all. He's imagined he is because he looks like one, a sheriff from the

TV. And the sense of unreality is so strong Ellis is unsure what is real and what is only remembered from elsewhere. He is a sergeant, Sergeant Bill Burnham. His desk nameplate says so.

She really had been feeling better, Bill.

Ellis had taken Rae's recent calmness as an improvement on the last year. But she still had the nightmares — every night.

Sergeant Burnham shifts in his chair. 'Is there any reason your wife might be here in Chareham, Dr Andrews? Why she might come here on her own?'

Ellis wonders if this is a trick question. He wants to say yes, yes of course, as you well know, Mr Sheriff. He probably should say it but he can't. He can't say the words — *she's here because I let her down*. Besides, they *had* to know, surely? They were just trying to make him say it.

It's only a year since... But not for Rae, says a voice in the crack behind his eyes — you know that. For her it was yesterday, it's today, it's every day before or since. You hated her for that, didn't you? For a fraction of a second each day you hated her? For not letting go?

Ellis is shocked by the spite in the voice. Of course I didn't hate her, he snaps at it silently. I loved her.

I loved you, Rae.

He realises he is close to crying. His embarrassment is acute and searing. The sheriff looks away towards a nearby noticeboard. He pretends to take an interest in a poster about registering firearms and a flyer for a barbecue cook-off at the town hall while Ellis pretends to rub a lash or some dust from his eyes.

'Dr Andrews', asks the Sheriff, attempting to look him square in the eye. 'It's not easy to ask you this, but could your wife have been here with... with someone else?'

He means a lover, Ellis knows this. It's the first and easiest assumption, perhaps usually the right one, when a woman is found without her husband in a foreign place. But not for them. Not for Rae. Not here.

'Why would you ask that?' he hears himself say, more indignantly than he feels because, though the answer is obvious, he feels he has to say it. In Rae's defence. In his own defence. His arm flexes and tenses into the shape of the spit of sand that is Cape Cod and draws across his body towards Boston. He feels his hand form a fist without his permission.

'I'm just trying to think what she might be doing here. I mean, it's a long way to come and not tell your husband isn't it?'

Ellis wonders if the sheriff is some kind of an idiot. If this is some sort of interrogation technique. And if Sheriff Bill's the good cop, where's the bad cop?

'It is a long way,' he concedes. *And you must know why she was here, Bill? Now, of all times?*

Silence fills the room. Their coffee cups are empty. Sergeant Burnham says, 'Well, that's all for now, Dr Andrews.'

He says it in a kindly, homely fashion. Ellis is fascinated by it, half expecting him to say 'git along home with you now, son. I'm real sorry for your loss', or offer some similar American-sounding platitude. Ellis finds the sympathy beneath the words an affront. He feels it like a blow. He fears he will break before it. But then his own unused fist falls open and his arm drops to his side.

'My deputy will take you to your hotel', adds the sheriff. 'We can finish this in the morning. The medical examiner will make out the certificate. The state police will probably want to speak to you. But it would be better for you to get some sleep first. No doubt you need it. We'll finish all this then.'

'It's finished *now*, isn't it?' Ellis asks. *All of it. It's finished now.*

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Ellis stares at the running tap, the water spiralling into the porcelain bowl. He's standing at the hotel sink, toothbrush in hand, facing down his image in the mirror. He is staring at the blanched, sleep-deserted man who holds the toothbrush, willing him to move in the familiar motions he's observed for decades. Wash face, comb hair, unbutton shirt.

The tap is still running. '*Turn it off, evil water-waster*', calls Rae's voice from the other room. Before he can stop himself, he turns his head at the sound, then returns to the face in the mirror. The tap gurgles reproachfully. He turns off the tap.

Kicking off his shoes, he lies down on the bed. A neon pink light flickers against the hotel window from the roadside sign outside. It's a clean motel, functional and comfortable. There are better than average snacks in the mini bar and free bottles of water. The pink pulse of light from outside is hypnotic, mesmerising. The word 'Vacancy' flicks in and out of existence against the wall of the reception. Ellis hears the faint trundle of trucks on the Mid Cape Highway surge and recede like breakers on the shore.

I have to call Jan and Mike, he reminds himself. They'll be waiting for me to ring.

What will this do to them? When my voice comes down the line from across the ocean and into their living room, precision-aimed, designed for detonation on impact? When I say, *it is her*. There's no mistake.

Will they rant and tear at their hair? Fall to the floor and wail? Will they put on their best coats, fill up the car with petrol and drive to meet their daughter at Heathrow in her casket? Will they believe it's happening? Will they pray to wake from this recurring nightmare every time the morning comes and they open their eyes? Will I?

Ellis doesn't move from the bed — all at once he weighs a hundred tonnes — the phone is sitting on the table by the door and that is a lifetime away. He lies on the bed, still and heavy as the dead.

Ellis dreams, or remembers, or both.

