Last Light

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Extract

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She stared at the door of room 204.

Like every other door along the corridor, a rich dark wood with the room number and door handle in gold plate.

A *bloody* expensive hotel, that's what Dad had said.

Enjoy it guys...we'll probably never stay in another as expensive as this one.

He'd made a joke to Mum about sneaking out the bathrobes and selling them at some place called 'eee-bay'.

The corridor was silent, her footsteps along it from the lift hushed by the thick carpet - not even the muted noise of quiet conversations or a TV on low, coming from any of the rooms, the doors were so thick and heavy.

Now it was decision time...and she *knew* this would happen on the way up from the foyer, where she'd left Mum waiting impatiently. She knew she was going to forget the number in the lift on the way up – way too busy thinking about what she was going to buy with the spends Dad had given her for the trip.

204? It is 204 isn't it?...or was it 202?

Leona wondered if Dad's business was all done now, or if he was still waiting for his mystery visitor. He'd been a little nervous and jumpy when he had shooed her and Mum out to go window shopping; snappy, tense, just like Leona remembered being on her first day at big school earlier this year.

Nervous - *exactly* like that.

Mum was pretty sure he must have finished his meeting by now. Since he'd bundled them out a couple of hours ago, they'd both visited a big department store glistening with Christmas displays, and grabbed a coffee and a Danish in a bustling coffee shop that overlooked the busy streets surrounding Times Square. And Dad had assured them his *very important* business meeting would be over quickly.

Leona hoped maybe he would be able to join them; to come back down with her now that the 'work' part of their family trip to New York

was over. It wasn't the same without him. But either way....she *really* needed to pick up that beanie-bag of hers with all her spends in. There were just too many things she'd seen in the last two hours that she desperately *needed* to buy.

She decided it was room 204 they were staying in, not 202 after all. She placed her hand on the old-fashioned brass door handle. She noticed a flicker of light through the keyhole beneath.

Dad nervously pacing the room? Or maybe his meeting had started already? She was about to hunker down and spy through the keyhole to be sure she wasn't going to interrupt his business, but her grasp of the door handle was heavy enough that, with a click, the latch disengaged and the door swung in heavily.

The three men stared at her, their conversation frozen in time. They stood at the end of the emperor-sized bed; three men, old men, very smart men, looking down at her. She noticed a fourth, younger, dark haired man standing to one side, a deferential distance away from the others. He broke the moment, starting to move swiftly towards her, his hand reaching into a pocket.

'No,' whispered one of the three. That stopped him dead, although his hand remained inside his smart jacket.

The one who spoke turned towards Leona, stooping down slightly. 'I think you've come into the wrong room my dear,' he said, his voice pleasant and disarming, like a doting grandfather.

He smiled warmly at her, 'I think your room is next door.'

'I'm really s-sorry,' Leona replied awkwardly, taking a contrite step backwards out of the room and into the corridor, pulling the door after her.

The door closed gently with a click of the latch and there was a long silence before one of the two older men who had remained silent, turned to the others.

'She saw all three of us. We were seen together.'

A pause.

'Is this going to pose a problem?'

'Don't worry. She doesn't know who we are. She doesn't know why we're here.'

'Our anonymity is everything...as it has always been, since-'

'She's a little girl. A few years from now, the only thing she'll remember will be whatever she got for Christmas and the millennium eve fireworks. Not three boring old men in a room.'

The Present

Monday

Chapter 1

8.05am – Monday
BBC, Shepherds Bush, London

'He's lost some weight,' said Cameron.

'Really? I think he's put some on.'

Cameron studied the monitors lined above the mixing desk. On it, Sean Tillman and his co-anchor, Nanette Madeley, were exchanging a few improvised witticisms between items.

'No, you can see it in Sean's face. It's less jowl-ly.'

His assistant producer, Sally, wrinkled her nose in judgement. 'I don't think he's lost any weight.'

'Do you suppose he's feeling threatened by the younger news team over on Sky?'

'Christ, yes. Can't blame him though,' Cameron replied. Let's be honest, if you've just woken up and you're channel-hopping first thing in the morning, whose face would you want yapping the news at you? Flabby old Sean Tillman, or someone who looks like Robbie Williams' younger, sexier brother?'

'Hmmm, tough call,' said Sally casting a casual glance across to their news feed screen.

The domestic feed, a horizontal, news text bar, was scrolling some dull story on a farmers' dispute in Norfolk whilst the Reuters feed was streaming results on an election in Indonesia. Pretty uninteresting stuff all round.

Cameron cast a glance up at the monitor to see Sean Tillman checking himself in a small hand mirror. 'I know Sean's also worried about the *chin* factor.'

Sally snorted with amusement.

'Yuh, that's what he calls it. He's really pissed off about the studio floor being re-covered last month with a lighter linoleum. I heard him having a good old moan to Karl in make up that the floor's deflecting the studio lights. That he's getting lit from underneath.'

Cameron leant forward and studied the monitor, watching both Sean and Nanette preparing for the hand-back from Diarmid. 'He's got a point though. He's really coming off worse there. Nanette actually looks better, more radiant since they changed the-'

'Cameron,' muttered Sally.

'-floor covering. Poor Sean though. It sort of makes the flesh under his chin glow. And there is a fair bit of it wobbling away under his-'

'Cam!' Sally said, this time more insistently.

'What?'

She pointed to the Reuters news feed.

The words scrolling slowly across the display bar, he read them one after the other, gradually making sense of the text he was reading.

'Shit!' he said, turning to Sally. 'We're going to need a whole bunch of graphics. This is going to hog the news all day.'

'It's not *that* big a deal is it?'

'You're kidding me right?'

Sally shrugged. 'Another bomb. I mean we get a dozen of those every day in Ira-?'

'But it's *not* Iraq! Is it?' Cameron snapped at her. She flinched at the tone of his voice, and despite the sensation of growing urgency and the first prickling of a migraine, he felt she deserved a word or two more from him. 'Trust me, this story's going to grow very quickly, and we don't want to be left chasing it. Let's get ahead of the game and get all the assets we're going to need. Okay?'

Sally nodded. 'Sure, I'll get on to it.'

'Thanks,' he muttered as he watched her disappear out of the control room. He shot another glance at the Reuters feed, more detail on the story was already coming in.

There was a couple of other control-room staff in there with him

and they stared silently at him, waiting for orders. Normally he fed his input through Sally to them. But with her gone and chasing down the things they were going to need, it was just them.

'Okay Tim, patch me through to Sean and Nanette. I suppose I'd better let them in on this.'

Chapter 2

8.19am GMT
Shepherds Bush, London

Jennifer Sutherland hopped awkwardly across the cold tiles of the kitchen floor, whilst she struggled to zip up the back of her skirt and tame her hair with the straighteners, all at the same time. Too many things to do, too few hands, too little time. That bloody little travel alarm-clock had let her down again.

Jenny checked her watch; she had ten minutes until the cab was due; time enough for a gulped coffee. She slapped the kettle's switch on.

Today, if all things went well, was going to be the beginning of a new chapter; the beginning of a *brand new* chapter to follow the last one; a long and heart-achingly sad one - twenty years long. She had a train to catch from Euston station taking her up to Manchester, and an interview for a job she dearly wanted; needed, in fact.

So this was it.

If they offered her the job, she could be on her way out of what had become a painful mess for her and Andy. This whole situation was hurting him a lot more than it was her. She was the one who was leaving and she knew when the dust settled and both his and her parents performed a post mortem on this marriage, the blame would fall squarely on her shoulders.

Jenny got bored of him. She put herself before their kids, put herself before Andy.

And the rest…

You know she had an affair, don't you? A little fling at work. He found out, and he forgave her, and this is how she repays him.

The kettle boiled and she reached into the cupboard above it pulling out the last mug. The rest were packed away in one of the many cardboard boxes littered throughout the house, each box marked either with 'Jenny' or 'Andy'. Jennifer had been busy over the last week, since Andy had gone off on his latest job, sorting out two decades of stuff into *his* and *hers* piles.

The house was now on the market, something they both agreed they might as well get on and do now that they were going to go their separate ways. Living together under the same roof, after both tearfully conceding it was all over, had been horrible; passing each other wordlessly in the hallway; waiting for the other to leave a room before feeling comfortable enough to enter it; cooking meals for one and then eating alone.

Not a lot of fun.

Dr Andy Sutherland, the geeky geology student from New Zealand she had met twenty years ago, who had loved The Smiths and The Cure, who could quote from virtually every original episode of Star Trek, who could do a brilliant Ben Elton impersonation, whom she had once loved, whom she had married at just nineteen years of age...that same Andy had somehow become an awkward and unwanted stranger in her life.

She tipped in a spoon of decaf' granules and poured some boiling water into her mug.

But it wasn't all her fault. Andy was partly to blame.

His work, his work...always his bloody work.

Only it wasn't *work*, as such, was it? It was something else. It was an obsession he'd fallen into, an obsession that had begun with the report he'd been contracted to write, the special one he couldn't talk about, the big earner that had bought this house and paid for a lot more besides. And of course, the rather nice family trip to New York to hand it over in person. He'd earned a lot of money on that, but ultimately, it had cost them their marriage.

The walls of his study were filled with diagrams, charts, geological maps. He had become one-dimensional over that damned fixation of his. It had eroded the funny, complex, charming person that he had once

been, and now it seemed that anything that he could be bothered to say to her, in some oblique way, linked back to this self-destructive, doom-laden fascination of his with the end of the world.

And she remembered, it had all started with a report he'd been commissioned to write.

When he'd first stumbled upon...*it*...and breathlessly talked her through it – what they should do to prepare, should it happen - she had been terrified and so worried for their children. They had taken a long hard look at their urban lifestyle and realised they'd be thoroughly screwed, just like everyone else, if they didn't prepare. In the early days they had looked together for remote properties hidden away in acres of woodland or tucked away in the valleys of Wales. He had even nearly talked her into moving to New Zealand; anything to get away from the centres of population, anything to get away from people. But, inevitably, life - earning a crust, paying the bills, getting the kids into the *right* school - all those things had got in the way. For Jenny, the spectre of this impending disaster had faded after a while.

For Andy, it had grown like a tumour.

Jenny gulped her coffee as she finished fighting with her coarse tawny hair and turned the straighteners off.

Sod it. Good enough for now. She could do her makeup on the train.

The interview was at one o'clock. She was surprised at the shudder of nerves she felt at the prospect of sitting before a couple of strangers and selling herself to them in just a few hours' time. If they gave that job to her she would have to pull Jacob out of his prep school; the very same school she had fought hard to get him into in the first place. Jake would be going up north to Manchester with her. Leona on the other hand, had just started at the University of East Anglia; home for her was a campus now, as it would be for another two years.

Jenny hated the fact that she was being instrumental in breaking her family up, but she couldn't go on like this with Andy. She was going to make a new home for herself and Jake and there would always be a bed for Leona - wherever it was that Jenny eventually found for them to

live.

The worst task lay ahead of course. Neither of the kids knew how far things had gone, and that she and Andy had made the decision to go their separate ways. Leona perhaps had an inkling of what was on the cards, but for young Jake, only eight, whose focus was on much more important matters such as his next major Yu-Gi-Oh deck-trade, this was going to be coming right out of nowhere.

Outside she heard a car horn, the taxi. She drained the rest of the coffee and grabbed her handbag, heading out into the hallway. She opened the front door, but then hesitated, looking back inside the house as the taxi waited outside.

Although she planned to be back in a couple of days to begin tidying up all the loose ends that were left for now flapping loosely, it felt like she was walking out for the last time; it felt like this was the moment that she was actually saying goodbye to their family home.

And goodbye to Andy.

Chapter 3

8.31am, GMT
University of East Anglia (UEA), Norwich

Leona stirred, slowly waking by inches. And then still yet asleep, she remembered who was sharing her bed. She shuddered with a smug, secret pleasure, as if she were holding a million-winning lottery ticket but had yet to tell anyone.

Danny stirred in the bed next to her. She sat up and looked down at him. He was breathing evenly and deeply, still very much lost in the land of slumber, a content half-smile spread across his lips.

Daniel Boynan.

He looked even more lovely with his eyes closed, his lips pursed, and not pulling any stupid faces to make her laugh. Totally angelic. His mop of dark hair was piled around him on the pillow, and his dark eyebrows momentarily knitted as his mind randomly skipped through a dream. Leona had spotted him on the first day, registration day, queuing like her to get his Student Union card and his campus ID.

Donnie Darko, she thought. That's who he had reminded her of.

And throughout most of the first term Leona had pursued him, discreetly of course. Never appearing too interested, though, just enough that he got the message, eventually.

God, boys can be so flippin' blind - He hadn't noticed Leona had been eyeing him up for the last eight weeks.

And then it sort of happened last night. What should have been Step Five of her Ten Step Plan to conquer the heart of Dan Boynan, had turned into a rapid tiptoe through six, seven, eight, nine...

And Step Ten had been just about perfect.

She watched him breathe easily, and pushed a lock of hair away from his porcelain face. Here he was, Daniel, gorgeous normally - doubly-so asleep. A brass Ankh pendant, dangled down from his neck, the fine leather thong draped over his collar bone, the small looped cross nestled in a hollow at the base of his throat. That's what she liked about him - any other lad, that would have been a big chunk of *bling* on a thick silver chain.

Outside her room, she could hear the others stirring in the kitchen. The dinky little portable TV was on, and she could hear the tinkle of spoons on mugs as someone was making a brew.

Beside her, the radio-alarm clock switched on quietly and she heard the nattering, way-too-cheerful voice of *Larry Ferdinand* bantering with one of his studio sidekicks. Leona smiled, Mum listened to him too. If you asked Mum, she would swear blind that it was *her* who turned on to him first, and then got Leona listening to him; which was, of course, rubbish.

She turned the volume down slightly, not wanting Daniel to be woken up, well, not yet anyway, and then slid gently out of bed. She picked up Daniel's burgundy coloured FCUK hoodie, discarded by the side of the bed, and slipped it on. It was so big on her, it hung down almost to her knees.

Daniel said he loved her Kiwi accent. Leona didn't think she had even a trace of Dad's clipped vowels. For the most part she thought she sounded like everyone else; same ol' same home counties blandness. But there you go.

It was odd though, it's not like she had been particularly close to Dad, not for the last four or five years, anyway. In fact, she hardly ever saw him. He was always either off on some contract abroad, or distracted with some freelance work in his study. But perhaps from earlier years, when he'd had the time for her and Mum and Jake, that's where the faint echo of his New Zealand accent had been picked up.

Still who cares, Danny loves it. Bonus.

On the radio she heard Larry Ferdinand hand over to the newsreader.

Daniel stirred in his sleep, mumbling something that sounded like 'take my other d-d-dog…'

He had the slightest stutter, just very slight. Leona found it charming. It made him seem just a little vulnerable, and when he was cracking a joke, somehow that little hitch in his delivery seemed to make the punch line that much more amusing.

She smiled as she looked down at him. *Love* seemed too strong a word right now - way too early to throwing around a word like that. But she certainly felt she was more than just *in lust* with him. And you can bet she wasn't going to let Daniel in on that little secret though.

Play it cool, Lee.

Yup, that was what she was going to do, especially after she had let him get his cookies last night.

'…now this could mean a very serious shortfall on oil supplies….'

Leona cocked her head and listened to the faint voice coming from the radio.

'...if the situation is allowed to get much worse. As it is, it's early days, and it's unclear exactly what has happened over there. But this much is certain; it will have an immediate knock-on affect on oil prices…'

She sighed. Oil…war….terrorists…..bombs: that's all news seemed to be these days; angry mobs, guns being fired into the sky, faces full of hatred. The news reminded her of the tired old doom-'n'-gloom Dad tended to spout after a glass or two of red wine.

...it'll happen quickly when it happens....one thing after another, going down like dominoes. And no one will be ready for it, not even us, and Christ, we're in the minority that know about it....

Shit. Dad could be really wearing when he got going on his pet hobby horse; rattling on about stuff like *Hubbert's Peak, Petro-dollars, hydrocarbon footprints*…it was his special party piece, the thing he talked about when he couldn't think of anything else interesting to say. Which, to be honest, was most of the time. God he just wouldn't shut up about it when he got going, especially when he thought he had an interested audience.

Leona reached over and snapped the radio off.

She knew Mum was getting to the point where she'd had enough, to put it bluntly; she wondered if Mum was getting bored of Dad. She could feel something brewing at home, there was an atmosphere. Leona was just glad to be away at uni', and glad her little brother, Jacob, was at his prep school. It gave her parents some room and an opportunity to sort out whatever they needed to sort out.

She padded lightly across the floor of her room, stepping over the trail of clothes both her and Daniel had shed behind them as they'd worked their way briskly from first base to last, the night before.

She opened the door of her room and headed into the kitchen where a pile of pots, plates and pans encrusted with beans and ravioli were waiting in vain to be washed up, and half a dozen of her campus floor-mates were watching Big Brother Live through a haze of cigarette smoke on the TV nestled in the space above the fridge.