

The LAST  
WORD



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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## CHAPTER ONE

FIVE MONTHS LATER

**Y**ou didn't hear this from me."

I jump at the sound of a whispery voice over my shoulder and spin round to see a young woman in her late twenties dressed in a figure-hugging black dress and towering heels, holding a half-empty champagne flute loosely in her hand.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Are you talking to me?"

She nods, glancing up and down the pavement to check that we're alone while the noise of the party rages from the building a few yards behind her. It hadn't been easy to retrieve my jacket from the cloakroom attendant, who was irritated that his celeb-spotting was being interrupted. More than a few A-listers are here to mark the release of a highly anticipated album from Mercury Prize-winning band Dark Lights.

I scrutinize the woman's face—hazel eyes framed with heavy black-kohl eyeliner, perfectly arched full eyebrows, flawless skin, delicate features, and a sharp jaw—attempting to work out which genre of celebrity she belongs to. She's gorgeous, tall and willowy, so she could easily be a model or actor, but she is so stylish and well turned out that she could also be in fashion, makeup, or hair.

I suppose there's a chance she could be a journalist, like me—although judging by her outfit she probably works for one of the

high-end glossies with access to the fashion closet, as opposed to the weekend magazine supplement of a national newspaper.

“Like I said, you didn’t hear this from me,” she repeats in a low voice, “but Audrey Abbot has accepted the lead role in a new play. Rehearsals are about to start.”

“What?”

“It will be directed by Gabrielle Reed,” the woman continues.

“The one who directed *A Streetcar Named Desire* at The Old Vic last year?”

“That’s her. She wanted Audrey to take the role from the moment she read the play. It will be Audrey’s first acting role in—”

“Sixteen years.” I look at her suspiciously. “Who are you? How do you know this?”

She smiles at me guiltily. “I’m Gabrielle Reed’s PA. Nicole. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” I say. “But I need to tell you that I’m a journalist. So, if you want to take any of this back, we can pretend this never happened. I don’t want you getting in trouble.”

“I know who you are, Harper Jenkins,” she says, raising her eyebrows in amusement. “I’ve been waiting to get you alone all night.”

I blink at her. “I . . . sorry, I’m a bit confused. I’m obviously grateful that you’ve approached me—”

“Audrey Abbot is a good person,” Nicole says firmly. “She didn’t deserve how the press portrayed her after . . . *The Incident*.”

“I’m sure she didn’t.” I think back to the whirlwind that surrounded Audrey in 2007.

“She deserves to have her story told by the right person.”

I smile at her. “I’m flattered. But Audrey Abbot notoriously hates journalists. She hasn’t spoken to one, not even to give a quote, since ‘The Incident,’ as you put it. If what you’re saying is true and she has agreed to take a role, I doubt she’ll be doing any press.”

Nicole nods. “But that won’t stop everything from being dragged up again, and she won’t have her side of the story told.” Her jaw clenches. “It’s not fair.”

I jump at a horn beeping behind me and realize that my Uber has arrived. I offer the driver what I hope to be a winning smile and hold up a finger to signal that I’ll be just a minute, before turning back to Nicole.

“I think you should be the one to do the profile on her comeback,” Nicole says hurriedly. “Not the guy at *Expression*.”

“Jonathan Cliff?” I wrinkle my nose. “Does he know about this?”

“Not yet . . . this is a very well-kept secret. But I heard one of the producers saying that he’d be worth considering.”

“Terrible idea. He wrote a snarky piece about Audrey at the time.”

“I know. Why would they even think about asking someone like that?”

I sigh. “Because he can offer a big spread in a prominent monthly magazine. It’s rare publicity, especially for a play—the glossies are usually reserved for actors promoting commercial films.” I bite my lip. “Audrey Abbot is an icon. She deserves better than Jonathan Cliff.”

“That’s why I came to you,” Nicole says. “The news that she’s joined the cast will get out at some point, and I want to ensure that the person breaking the story will see her for who she is and where she’s going next. Not just what happened in her past.”

“It was pretty ballsy of you to tell me,” I say, studying her face. “I’m impressed.”

She smiles. “A good journalist wouldn’t reveal her source.”

“Never.”

“So, you’ll write the story?” she asks hopefully.

“If she lets me. It’s going to be tricky getting through to her.”

“If she’ll speak to anyone, it’ll be someone like you,” Nicole says confidently. “You just need to get in there before anyone else.”

My driver beeps the horn again.

“I’d better go,” I say, gesturing to the car. “Thanks, Nicole.”

“You didn’t hear about *any* of this from me.”

“Hear what?” I grin at her. “Enjoy the rest of the night.”

“Thanks, Harper. Good luck.”

She clacks back across the pavement and through the door to the party. I apologize to the driver for keeping him waiting before rummaging in my oversized tote for my phone. I need to Google Audrey Abbot to find who it is that represents her. When her agent’s name pops up, I grin. Shamari.

Her phone goes straight to voicemail and I realize she might very well be asleep, considering it’s already two in the morning. *Whoops*. I enjoyed the party more than I thought I would. There’s no way I can bring this up over email, so I decide to speak to her first thing tomorrow.

Before I toss my phone back into the abyss of my handbag, I read the WhatsApps waiting for me from Liam. He messaged hours ago to say he’s at my place, if that’s okay, as his flatmate had a date and he wanted to get out of his hair, but he hopes the party is great fun and if there’s any chance that he can join, to let him know and he will be there.

I feel a flash of regret that I gave him a key to my flat, swiftly followed by a wave of guilt. We’ve been seeing each other for three months and I think he is officially my “boyfriend” now. I do like him—he’s ambitious, enthusiastic, and passionate about his career, which is a big turn-on for me. Not to mention, he’s attractive in that sexy, scruffy musician kind of way.

It’s also very sweet that he wanted to let his flatmate and his date have the place to themselves. But I’m not sure I was entirely prepared for him to make himself comfortable at my flat quite

so soon, especially when I'm not even there. I suppose I've been single so long, I'm set in my ways.

Still, I'm glad I didn't see his message about joining me at the party. If he'd been there, Nicole may not have approached me.

*Audrey Abbot.* I was obsessed with her as a teenager. She was so elegant and brilliant in everything she did. A classically trained British actor with a dignified air, she was a master of restraint and had the ability to make you feel whatever her character was experiencing with barely any movement in her face.

Her career began in theater, then transitioned to film. She'd become famous in her late twenties and appeared in several Hollywood hits throughout her thirties, both as the lead and in supporting roles. She won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress in a film that was so dull, I didn't even understand the ending, but she was so fantastic and convincing as the chain-smoking, hard-done-by, bitter wife of the ranch hand that it was worth sitting through two hours of men looking cross and talking about cattle.

I was a teenager when *The Incident* happened. I felt mortified for her and angry at the cruel headlines. In the aftermath, she withdrew from the public eye and gave up acting, even though she was only in her forties. She became a bit of a joke—*The Incident* cropped up again and again, alluded to mockingly by comedians and throughout pop culture. It was a lyric in a hit song a few years ago, and a podcast host described it as an “iconic” public meltdown.

By the time I arrive at my flat, I'm convinced I'm the only person who should write about Audrey's return to acting.

Carefully turning the key in my lock, I tiptoe inside and shut the door quietly behind me. A loud snore comes from the bedroom. I leave my bag on the kitchen table and quietly make my way to the bathroom.

After a futile attempt at taking off my makeup, I brush my teeth and strip off my green midi shirt dress, leaving it on the

bathroom floor. I trip over one trainer and then another as I pick my way to my side of the bed. I have a vague recollection of tossing the oversized gray T-shirt I slept in last night on the duvet. I feel around and triumphantly locate it crumpled at the bottom of the bed.

I wish I was the kind of person that slept in silk lingerie or slinky posh pajamas, but there's something comforting about a T-shirt that's several sizes too big. Liam and I are surely past the point where I have to pretend I always sleep naked, which is the impression I wanted to give off at first.

I'm climbing into bed when I remember my phone and creep back out of the bedroom to retrieve it from the dreaded depths of my bag.

There's a lot swimming about in there: half-filled pocket notebooks, my digital voice recorder, loose lipsticks and eyeliner pencils, tissue packs, countless biros, stray business cards, miniature perfume samples, crumpled receipts, chewing gum packs, neglected hand moisturizer, a few sunglasses cases (unclear if there actually *are* sunglasses in them), a hairbrush, and the latest psychological thriller that I'm reading.

It's hard to find time to read for fun, so when I do, I want real page-turners with lots of twists and suspense. I don't have time for long descriptions about bleak landscapes. I want to know who murdered whom and why.

I set alarms for 5:55 A.M., 5:57 A.M., 6 A.M., 6:03 A.M., and 6:05 A.M. before placing my phone gently down on my bedside table and snuggling under the duvet. I close my eyes.

Liam emits a loud snore.

I turn my head to glare at him through the darkness.

With the knowledge of only three hours' sleep ahead of me, I will him to shut the hell up. Rudely ignoring me (due to his state of unconsciousness), he continues his nasal symphony until I'm forced to tap him on the arm.



“Liam,” I whisper, “you’re snoring.”

Without really waking, he mutters something and turns over, falling silent.

I smugly turn away, too.

When he starts snoring again, I groan and pull the duvet over my head, accepting my fate. It’s my own fault. I know Liam snores and I’ve been meaning to buy ear plugs, but I keep forgetting. I also really wish I hadn’t given him a key. But after last week, I had to.

Liam had stayed Friday night and we’d gone on a coffee run the next morning before he planned to cook brunch back at mine. We were waiting for our drinks when I got a message from an agent that one of her supermodels was taking to Instagram to announce her retirement at twenty-eight—to start her own fruit farm in Devon, naturally—and would I like the exclusive? And if so, any chance I’d be available to speak now?

I apologetically ditched Liam at the café and dashed out with my flat white. It wasn’t until after the interview that I checked my phone. Liam had left his jacket in my flat, which held his house keys and wallet, which meant he had been stranded at the café the whole time. Feeling terrible, I tried to call him, before my phone promptly died.

I gave him a key on Monday.

I’m not sure how much sleep I get, but when my first alarm goes off, it feels like maybe I’ve shut my eyes for thirty seconds.

Liam grunts.

I whisper a half-hearted apology, but he’s already back asleep. I try to doze again, but when the third alarm goes off, I finally force myself out of bed and into the bathroom, kicking aside my rumpled dress from last night.

After showering, I begin my daily morning routine of riffing through my disorganized wardrobe, which is only more difficult in the dark.

“What time is it?” Liam mumbles into the pillow.

I don’t answer because I’m busy confronting the disappointment that nothing new has miraculously appeared in my wardrobe without me having to do any shopping. Then I notice a skirt that has slipped from its hanger and excitedly recall buying it last summer—a pink-purple floral print maxi that looks great with that black blouse I know I have somewhere.

I successfully find the shirt and tuck it into the skirt, and then slip my feet into my white sneakers—comfortable shoes that I can dash about in are a necessity in my job. Checking my outfit in the mirror, I nod satisfactorily at my reflection.

I wouldn’t say I spend a lot of time on my clothes, but I do take pride in my appearance. A fashion journalist once told me that I had a “playful London street style.” I’m not *entirely* sure what that means, but I was extremely flattered. I wear sunglasses everywhere I go—I have several pairs, partly because I lose them a lot, but also because they are the easiest way to accessorize without making much effort.

My face is a bit of a rush job, but I make do with foundation and dabs of concealer, a lick of mascara to try to brighten my hazel eyes and disguise the tiredness, bronzer and a matte berry lipstick that the magazine’s beauty editor, Amy, recommended for me. Before Amy, I used to always wear nude lipsticks or no lip color at all, preferring to draw attention to my eyes over my lips thanks to my slightly goofy, big front teeth, but I’ve become a bit more adventurous thanks to her encouragement—the teeth, she says, are all part of my “girl next door” appeal and I should be proud of them.

I sweep my thick wavy brown hair back and tie it in a ponytail. I cannot interview, take notes, or write with hair falling into my face. At the start of my journalism career, sometimes I’d spring for a blow-dry before a big interview, but I’d inevitably become frustrated at having to keep tucking it behind my ears

and would tie it back about five minutes after I sat down to work. I know better now and tie it back first thing.

Rushing back into the bedroom, I step round to Liam's side and lean over to give him a peck on the cheek. I admire his mop of dark curly hair and his long dark lashes. He has that relaxed, sexy look and style of an indie rock star, but one that bothers to shower.

He moves as my lips brush his stubbled cheek, but doesn't open his eyes.

"Sorry, early start today," I whisper as he snuggles farther into the duvet. "Help yourself to coffee or anything you need."

"Have a good day," he mumbles, still not opening his eyes.

I'm halfway down the stairs when I remember my phone charging by the bedside. I run back up, reaching around for my keys—I really should keep them in the inside zip pouch of my bag.

"Harper?" Liam asks, squinting at me as I burst back into the bedroom.

"Sorry!" I whisper, grabbing my phone. "Forgot something."

"Dinner tonight?" he says, his voice muffled into his pillow.

"Sounds great."

I make it to the front door before I remember that my AirPods, which I'll need to do my transcribing later, are on the kitchen counter. By the time I make it outside my building, I imagine I've done a considerable amount of my goal steps today, but I'll never know because the smartwatch I bought is god-knows-where.

I speed walk to Brixton tube, hop on the Victoria line, and zip up to Oxford Circus, emerging into the sunshine and making my way to Soho.

I reach my destination at quarter past seven.

The Lark is a trendy independent café, perfectly located far away enough from Regent Street and Oxford Street that it doesn't attract too many tourists, but still central enough on a bustling side street to fuel the local office workers and the West

End artists with its top-notch coffee. I order a flat white to go before walking down the road to lean against a wall and scroll through my phone while I wait.

At half past seven, I see Shamari heading into The Lark. I smile to myself. She really is a creature of routine. Shamari is five foot four and a force of nature, one of the best agents in the business, and renowned for being fiercely protective of her clients. She's never afraid to go after what she wants on their behalf, even if it's a decidedly punchy request. With her poker-straight black hair cut in a chic bob, bold red lipstick, and a fitted black dress with heels, Shamari looks ready for battle today. As ever.

I put my phone away and saunter back toward the café, sipping my coffee and lingering to the side. A few minutes later, she marches back out. I head straight toward her.

"Shamari!" I gasp, feigning complete surprise.

"Harper Jenkins," she says, a knowing smile creeping across her lips as she comes to a stop in front of me. "What are you doing here?"

"Just grabbing the best coffee in London before I head to the office," I say, gesturing to The Lark. "I don't know what beans they're using, but this stuff is gold."

"Your office is in Vauxhall," she remarks. "Nowhere near Oxford Street."

"A small sacrifice for the really good stuff."

"Funny I should bump into you at the exact time and place I get my coffee every morning," she says, tilting her head at me.

"London is just one big small town, isn't it? Anyway, tell me your news! What have you been up to?"

"You can walk me to the office and tell me what you want on the way," she offers, rolling her eyes.

"How cynical of you to think I want something," I remark, falling into step with her. "Comes with being Britain's most esteemed talent agent, I guess."

“Flattery gets you everywhere. Come on, Harper, get to the point.”

“I heard that Audrey Abbot is returning to acting.”

She halts in her tracks to stare at me in disbelief.

“How did you find out about that?”

“So it’s true, then.” I brighten. “That’s great news!”

She sighs before continuing toward her office. “Who told you?”

“You know I never reveal my sources.”

“Don’t get any ideas about Audrey, Harper, you’re wasting your time,” Shamari says loftily. “You know as well as I do that she does not do press. She won’t go anywhere near journalists. She’s made that very clear.”

“She also made it clear that she wouldn’t act again, but you obviously have sway there,” I point out carefully.

“I didn’t *sway* her to do anything.”

“You have to let me do a piece on her,” I plead.

“How about, instead, you interview Julian Newt?”

“Who the hell is Julian Newt?”

“My latest client and the fabulous actor playing her nephew,” Shamari informs me. “I’m sure you’ve watched *Tell Me Again*, the Netflix rom-com he was in recently? That’s right up your street.”

“Oh, yes! The main guy? He’s sexy,” I recall.

“You want to interview him? He’s *very* charming.”

“Ah.” I smile mischievously. “You have a *thing* for him.”

She shoots me a look. “No, Harper! He’s my client.”

“A sexy client.”

“All my clients are sexy. I represent actors and models,” she reminds me.

“And I want an interview with your client Audrey Abbot.”

“Harper—”

“Think about it, Shamari,” I press, refusing to back down.

“A huge profile piece about her illustrious career and welcome return to the stage. It’s the comeback of the year! The comeback of the decade! Maybe even the century.”

“You wrote that about Craig David.”

“Okay, fine, I stand by that. But still, Audrey Abbot returning will make front page of the magazine, guaranteed.”

“She hates journalists, Harper. You need to let this go,” she insists.

“She has every reason to hate journalists, but you *know* me—you know what kind of journalist I am. I’m not in this to tear people down; I’m all about bringing people up. With me, Audrey can tell her side of the story—or if she doesn’t want to talk about what happened, we’ll focus on her landing a kickass role after sixteen years out of the game, in a play written by a woman and directed by a woman. Shamari, this is her opportunity. I know it! Don’t let someone else write this and screw it up. Let me reintroduce her to the public in the respectful manner she deserves.”

Shamari slows down, coming to a halt outside her office door. She takes a sip of coffee and then looks at me earnestly.

“Harper, did you get much sleep last night?”

“Huh?”

“I got a call from you at two in the morning and then you’re waiting for me at half seven, acting bright as a button,” she remarks. “How do you do it?”

I hold up my cup. “The best coffee in London.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “You still with that guy? You said there was someone new when I saw you about a month ago.”

“Liam? Yes.”

“He’s lasted longer than most,” she remarks. “Nice to see you happy.”

“I’ll tell you all about him if you let me chat to Audrey Abbot.”

She sighs. “You’re like a dog with a bone.”

“You know it will be excellent publicity for the play, too. The

producers will love you for setting this up. They must have ideas for press in the pipeline.”

“They knew Audrey wouldn’t do any. They’ve lined up Julian Newt to do most of it.”

“So a man can take all the credit for a show that wouldn’t exist without the female talent on and offstage?”

Shamari closes her eyes in despair. “I’m envisioning the conversation I’ll have with her when I pitch this. She’ll bite my head off at the mere suggestion.”

“You can vouch for me. Do you remember how you introduced me to Heather Violet at the launch of her delicious rosé? You said I was the one celebrity reporter who genuinely cared.”

“I was a bottle of said delicious rosé down at that point,” she recalls. “I also described her role in the film *Little Pig’s Grand Adventure* as ‘inspired’ to a renowned director.”

“I’m sure she was very good in *Little Pig’s Grand Adventure*.”

“She was, actually. Not easy working with a pig.”

“How about this—a profile piece on Audrey Abbot’s comeback, front page, *and* I’ll feature that sexy Newt actor that you have a thing for in one of my regular features. He could do the ‘My Little Luxuries’ column.”

“I do *not* have a thing for him,” she emphasizes.

I smile and say nothing.

She lifts her eyes to the sky before relenting. “*Fine*. I’ll see what I can do.”

I beam at her. “Thank you! And when she agrees—”

“*If* she agrees,” she corrects. “Let me remind you, she has refused to speak to any journalists for sixteen years.”

“We can sort it quickly, yes? I want to break this before any other journos come sniffing around. We go to press in three days—I can turn it round by then and guarantee she gets the front page.”

“Fine, fine. You know they haven’t even started rehearsals yet?”

“Tickets will be sold out within minutes of being released. I’ll have her audience primed and ready.” I drain the last of my coffee. “You’re the best, Shamari. Call me when you have it locked down and we can organize a time and place for the interview. I’m around all of today and tomorrow.”

“You’re talking as though she’s already agreed to it,” Shamari mutters, pushing open the door to her office building.

“If anyone can do this, it’s you. Oh, before you go,” I say quickly, “speaking of Heather Violet, how is she doing?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I saw that her ex, that record producer, was spotted out for dinner with someone else—when I interviewed her, she was totally smitten with him. I read about their breakup a few weeks ago, but it still feels quite soon for him to be openly dating. I’ve been wondering if she’s all right.”

Shamari looks at me curiously. “You really aren’t like the other journos, are you? I haven’t spoken to her about it, but when I do, I’ll say you were asking after her.”

“Thanks.” I check the time on my phone and give her a wave. “I’m off. Let me know when Audrey wants to do the interview!”

“*If* she wants to do the interview,” she calls out after me, her voice echoing down the street as I hurry away in the direction of the tube. “*If*, Harper!”