

Layla

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For Sidney

Friday

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You blink. Once. Twice. Double blink. The spotlights are dazzling today, an angry bright yellow. This deliberate, or what? It's not like you have to be tortured into getting your kit off: you're five minutes away from stark naked. Or is it a mind trick, a beacon from a guardian angel sent to put you off dancing and that?

What-*ever*, it's doing your head in.

You squint and turn to shield your eyes with the back of one hand, and at the same time the other – the left one – grabs hold of the pole. Now both hands come together as you swing, arse-first, away from the glare, and you grip the cold metal column, stalking around it best you can in towering new heels – and with a right cob on and all. One step. Two. And you stumble, nearly tripping over your long evening gown, false eyelashes flickering as you glance over at Derek. He's the floor manager, yeah, stood mouthing off at the bar as per usual, jammed in by a scrum of legs, thongs and too much eyeliner.

The other girls. Flies round shit.

Deep breath, and you decide the brightness ain't a warning sign. Guardian angel? You should be so lucky. Maybe ask Derek to dim the lights, then? A minute's hesitation to suss the situation while you slither down the pole. Nah, best not – be a bit like petting a pit bull. Not gonna happen.

Instead, it's bottom lip in, boobs out, as you bring one leg up through a split in the gown in a clumsy can-can kick,

your energy lifting as a new tune kicks in. Miles away, you hum along *la, la, la* to the music, your attention wandering off from the stage. Only Derek's staring you out, looking even greyer and grimmer than usual, so you tick yourself off, geeing yourself up to focus on the customers instead.

Customers? If only.

Only the odd one in this afternoon, everyone's getting warmed up down the pub: football on the box later, England playing. As for the non-footie fans, look at them, bunch of nobby no-mates, grazing the outskirts of the dance floor, peering into the depths of their drinks, shifty and nervous like they was throwing a party and nobody showed up. You smile, putting it right on, all white enamel and bright pink lips. A suit catches your eye and winks. Loser!

And to think at one point, not long ago even, you thought all this – the red leather booths, the leopard-print wallpaper, the pockets loaded with cash – was the business. 'Classiest spot Up West,' the boss, Jeremy, said. You snort. A tenner for a topless dance, fifteen for a private nude one, twenty for a 'lesbian show'. Very classy. But you're doing it for the baby, for Connor, yeah? It will all be worth it if you can rake in more cash for him.

You mull this over while snaking down the pole in an S-shape (not as easy as what people might think), totting up the dances you've done so far today. No: fat chance. You won't cover the house fee at this rate, never mind put something aside.

You sigh, close your eyes. Not cos of the lights this time but a pointless go at blocking it all out: the heavy blanket of smoke and sweat in the air; the repetitive beats; the fingers clutching at you; the four-letter words jabbing into your ears. Anyway. End of the day, it's only money. Not like Mum leaves Connor wanting, or that just money will be enough to get him back. Funny how he pops into your head whenever,

wherever, your Little Man, as if he was lying swaddled right there on the dance floor, screwing up his eyes like he does just before he cries out, wanting you, needing you. Such a good baby, so sweet-natured – always quick and easy to settle.

You blink. Once. Twice. Double blink. Try to swallow a golf-ball-sized lump in your throat. Again, not the lights.

Christ, what's that? Out of nowhere, a commotion on the main floor. What the – ? Oh, OK, an argument, raised voices (the suit and one of the regulars) competing with the intro to a catchy tune.

'La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la.'

That's you dragged back to the here and now.

Worse luck.

You hesitate, freeze-framed in a sexy pose till you realise the song's that old one from Kylie, 'Can't Get You out of My Head', and those licks, that voice, are just enough to take the edge off the other stuff, to blot out the baby blues.

Yeah.

Sod it. Sod Mum.

You look good.

You feel good.

You're a movie star swishing down the red carpet, centre of attention, lapping it up: autograph-hunters swarming, paps snapping at you. Strike a pose. *Flash! Bam!* 'Over here, Layla! Smile for the camera.' The fancy designer gown on the Oscars Best-Dressed list. You picture the headline: 'ENGLISH ROSE IS BELLE OF THE BALL'.

But, as you hitch up the gown to show off some leg, a cramping in your stomach blows the fantasy sky-high. Oh, God, someone's having a laugh, ain't they? Not *that*? Second turn on the pole today with an audience and Aunt Flo pays a visit. First period since the –

You're a pop idol on stage at Wembley, choked up on the love of the crowd. Flushed and hoarse, the fans chant your

name: *Layla, Layla, Layla...* hands clap in time to your latest hit... tickets sold out in minutes... a cover photo on *Heat* magazine.

Oh, what's the use? Your period's on the warpath now, making itself known with a savage ripping and roaring through your stomach. No choice but to skip out to the loos, even if it does mean a bollocking from Derek, not to mention a ten-quid fine. But – ah, good – there's Ivana, lurking on her own by the exit. You wave both hands wildly to tip her the wink – if anyone's going to steal your spot, it has to be her – and she flounces over, legs up to her perky Lithuanian boobs.

'Got to pee,' you say, hoping she'll read the urgency in your face.

'After all the trouble weev the boss this week? You taking the peess?'

You screw up your forehead. Wince. 'You know, pee...'

She doesn't seem to get it, but never mind. You help her jump up on stage and she gives your hand a squeeze. At least she's there for you, unlike the other hussies, out for themselves.

Even so, when she breathes a 'thank you' you can almost see the pound signs in her eyes.

It's OK – you understand. You're good mates, but when it comes to the hustle on the main floor it's dog eat dog, every girl for herself. So there are no hard feelings as you say, 'Thanks, babe,' though you're already scampering off by the time 'babe' has escaped your lips, rushing across the smoky main floor to the stairway, the hulking double doors marked 'Private' groaning as you push past them, your feet breathing a sigh of relief as you whip off the new shoes to take the stairs two at a time, and you arrive at the changing room puffing, panting, gasping for –

Whoah! Only, walking through the door, the breath is completely sucked out of you, and you sink like you was

drugged into the *tss tss* of deodorant cans, into cackles and crackles of laughter; tripping out on lurid fairground colours and choking back a cough brought on by a fug of glitter, talc and smoke what barely covers a rank whiff of shit (the drains must need clearing again). For a second you dither, watching them, the night shift girls jostling and preening at the front of the mirrors – hell-bent on using up the world’s supply of Rimmel Sunshimmer – before creeping past them to get to your locker where you root around for your handbag. And there, nestled at the back among your clothes, you find the scruffy bald toy chihuahua. You chuckle, in spite of yourself. But no time to say more about that right now cos your hand’s on the cubicle doorknob; you’re pretty desperate to sort yourself out, as it goes. But then – *grr!* – Celeste, your sort of friend-cum-arch-rival, holds you up, asking how you are: she’s heard that Jeremy has given you a warning, put you on day shifts.

‘You must be gutted,’ she finishes, blocking your way.

God, you wish you was invisible sometimes.

‘Nah, fine, long story,’ you mumble, not bothering to ask how she is, sweat breaking out above your top lip.

And then, as you slip past her oiled-up, half-naked orange flesh, your stomach turns over, and you’re gripped by a sense of panic what clings on till you’ve thrown the bolt across the cubicle door.

What the hell’s wrong?

Are you going to puke?

You’re sinking up down, up down, like you was on a rollercoaster, getting more spun out by the minute. With faint spots dancing in front of your eyes, you fish in the cavern of your handbag for a tammie. Four months since your last period – what are the chances? Ooh, lucky you, there’s a Lil-let Super – ‘Heavy Flow’. Perhaps you *do* have a guardian angel. Ha! But the tammie’s plastic casing is ripped,

the tampon itself glittered with make-up, shredded slightly at the tip.

Whatever. It'll do.

And so you fold down the plastic loo seat what's speckled with cigarette burns, the loo bowl decorated with a dirty rainbow of reds, browns and yellows, in a right state and all – the kind of loo what, truth be told, screams 'This Is Your Life'. But you've no choice but to yank down your G-string and pee in it, screwing up your face at the heaviness of the flow – *gross!* – then wiping once... twice... inserting the tammie, careful to tuck the cord inside, far enough so that it don't hang outside the G-string, not so far that you'll wind up on your backside spreadeagled with a mirror and a pair of tweezers later on. Been there, done that.

And squatting there over that loo, against the backdrop of chitter-chatter in the changing room, you're stung by a feeling you've got to know only too well in the past twelve months (since all the problems began). And, even though time is money and you're missing your slot on the pole, you allow these thoughts to skim through your mind. Thought it'd be well easy to come up London and find a place to stay and a job, that life'd be one long party and you could blank out all thoughts of your Little Man. Thought – silly moo – that the streets of London would be paved with opportunities: office and PA work and that. Paved with wide boys and chancers and oxygen thieves, more like. Mugged yourself right off there, didn't you?

You clench your teeth. Slide your bottom jaw to the right. Take a little bite of cheek. Throw yourself a pity party, in other words. Only to immediately shake your head, try and fill it with some sense. And, pulling up your G-string, you force yourself to tune into a typical changing room conversation instead. 'And so I says, for a sit-down, darling, it's a hundred,' someone's mouthing off outside the cubicle.

An unfamiliar voice – a new girl. Sapphire maybe? ‘Got a monkey out of him in the end.’

Yeah, Sapphire – nobody else’s voice squeaks like that.

‘Never!’ somebody – Celeste, maybe – replies.

What bollocks! A hundred quid for a sit-down? In her dreams! And a weariness, an anxiety, an uneasiness washes over you, a new worry to add to the growing pile. Cos, recently, Sapphire and a group of new girls arrived, right? Gang of them from a club on some grubby industrial estate in the East End. Boss took them on ‘to get in more of a crowd’. Dirty dancers, they are, grinding and groping their way through their shifts. *So* not playing by the rules! And that Sapphire, she loves herself, forever crowing that she’s done Page Three (of the *Daily Star*, not the *Sun* – which speaks for itself) and swanning about like she was an old-timer, when she’s only been here five minutes. You bet she wishes she was an ice cream so she could lick herself, the silly cow.

Damn it, what’s wrong with you? You tell yourself to put the claws back in, to not let the period, the hormones, get the better of you.

Not wanting to miss an opportunity, the miniature bottle of JD at the bottom of your handbag calls out for you then, an old mate who’ll see you through the next couple of hours of shaking your booty and treading carpet. You swig it back, do up the straps on the high heels, kick open the cubicle door... only to catch sight of Susie. Shit (pardon your French) – you didn’t hear her arrive! She doesn’t notice you at first, thank God, cos she’s fussing over the girls, giving pep talks, handing out stockings and that. Susie, she’s the house mother, yeah? Meaning that she’s a housekeeper, mum, shrink, nurse; police, judge and jury – all those things at the same time. Though you couldn’t do without her, getting on her wrong side ain’t an option, so you swallow back the JD in one mouthful. To make the smell evaporate, right?

Her eyes narrow when finally she spots you, sneaking towards the door. She bristles.

‘Thought you were on days this week.’

‘Yeah, bang on, just...’ And you scabble about for an excuse for being away from the main floor, while she gives you the evil eye. Your thoughts spring back to her first rant at you all them months ago. *If you split up with your boyfriend, I want to know. If you have a cold, I want to know. If you get a drug habit, I want to know. If you forget to take your pill or to run it together, I want to know. And, worst of all, if you get your period...*

‘Yeah, sorry, upset tummy.’ No way you’re being sent home now, after making, like, nada quid so far today.

A flash of worry flits over her face. OK, she might have a crap job, looking after us bitches, but she’s alright really. For an old bird. What is she, like, forty or something? Same age as Mum, as it goes.

‘Well, get back out there, then, and give it some welly,’ she says, her knee bent across Celeste’s back, pulling on her corset strings, ‘Derek’ll have a heart attack if he knows you’re off the floor.’

You imagine flipping her the bird, your middle finger an inch from her crow’s feet, the other girls egging you on.

Instead, knowing which side your bread’s buttered, you channel meek and mild and say, ‘Sure, sure, I’m on my way.’

She’s blooming right, though, Christ knows how much Derek will fine you for being away this long, so you’re out of there, gone, a ghost. Only halfway down the stairs the new stiletto heel spikes the carpet, and you’re forced to look down while you dig it out, the threadbare once-floral pattern massacred by fag burns and an invasion of high heels, reminding you that Elegance is hardly the Harrods of lap-dancing establishments. Primark, more like. Yeah,

forget the ‘glamour’ shots of ex-dancers what line the wall, prisoners banged up in fancy gold frames – a dive is what this place is, no matter how much the boss tries to sugar-coat it. It’s a joke really, how you used to fancy your chances of joining the boss’s pet girls here in his pathetic ‘Hall of Fame’. Or ‘the art gallery’ as Derek calls it. You snort. Art? As if! Cos art makes people think, right, and not with their dicks...

But as you reach the bottom of the stairs you shrug off them negative thoughts, thanks to the JD mellowing you out and the muffled beats of an Ibiza classic vibrating through the walls. Gotta dance, might as well be to that – and you skip back through the double doors where there’s a bit of a crowd now, the little round tables what surround the dance floor half-filled, the pole empty, Ivana squirming unrhythmically on some dude’s lap. You snicker. Ivana the Terrible you call her (not to her face, natch), cos she can’t dance for toffee. The boss keeps her on cos she’s a dead ringer for Paris Hilton – and everyone’s leched over that *One Night in Paris*, right?

Uh-oh, you’ve just realised who she’s with: Halitosis Bob.

You lucked out with the loo trip.

Not quite ready to get back in the thick of it, you hover by the bar for a bit, watching her dance. She flexes back and forth on his lap. Flexes back and forth on his lap. Flexes... And, as you’re silently urging her to put a bit of variety into it, Bob leans away and starts looking around the room. This ain’t a good sign. She must have picked up on it, though, cos she’s now trying to bend backwards over his knees, back arched, hands trailing the floor, only – uh-oh! – this makes her blonde Paris wig slip to one side. Blushing, she lifts one hand to secure it, and – *whoops!* – her entire body rocks and she nearly falls from his lap to the floor.

You cringe, hold back laughter. Bless poor Ivana – or should you say Paris? – a cardboard blooming cutout could do a better job.

God, look, can you just say something? You're not usually one of them snide gits who takes the piss out of their mates. But your period's bugging you and it's sort of like the boss's trap, playing you girls off against each other, trying to make you – whatchamacallit? – competitive and that. You shiver. Wrap your arms around yourself in a hug. Try and stop the raging hormones from getting one over on you.

And as Ivana/Paris gets her act together, stripping down to her perfect C-cups, you try to lighten up, your thoughts turning to the chihuahua. It was you who started it. Left the ugly toy dog with the googly eyes in Ivana's locker as a joke present, no gift tag, the perfect accessory for her Paris Hilton gimmick. Then the next time you was in the club you found it, without a word from Ivana, back in your own locker. Backwards and forwards it's gone between your lockers, ever since. Over your forced club expression you grin as you think of the laughs you and Ivana have enjoyed, a shared silliness what makes the club bearable, helps pass the time of day. So by the time you're back on the pole you've calmed it down a bit, the JD in full effect now and all, a warming light sending out little ripples of heat on your nearly naked skin...

You're sunbathing on a luxury private beach, getting lost, good lost, in the lazy reds, pinks and oranges of a tropical sunset... the yacht anchored not far out in the marina... champagne and oysters on ice...

Whoops...! You sway – make out like it was deliberate, try and get back into the groove.

From the crowd, a gob of bad language whistles through the air across the *thump, thump, thump* of a mighty rock anthem, and you raise one leg in a kick. The hormones rage and surge and make a nuisance of themselves. Spurred on,

you decide to give the saddos what they came in for, and, belly sucked in, you:

clamber up the pole

wrap both legs around it boa-constrictor-tight

let your arms fall to your side, flipping your top half upside down.

And as you're dangling there, right, the aftertaste of one too many JDs racing down your throat, your long, dark hair sweeping the floor, a customer's face lines up with the silky rear-end of your evening gown, a randy dog panting its hot breath on your thighs. You squeeze your pelvic floor muscles, praying for it not to be obvious; a complaint about being on your period is the last thing you need. (It's happened – though not to you.)

More to the point: three metres away? As if!

Not like the bouncers give a monkey's. Light bounces off the shining billiard balls of their heads – they've seen it all before... too busy whining about the England manager's team choice, probably, to keep an eye on things. Besides, you lose out these days if you play by the rules. Oh. Don't matter – after turning upright, you see that the customer's backed off – phew! – and that he's beckoning you to a booth on the edge of the dance floor with a chipolata finger (the tight-arse, not paying for a private dance). You follow his denim jacket, flesh creeping for a split-second, sweat beading your top lip. A familiar niggle.

But you shrug it off cos he's saying, 'Come on, gorgeous, cat got your tongue?'

You gyrate towards him. He waves a tenner in your face. Your eyes glaze over. And, as you flick a switch on the edge of the booth to time his three-minute dance, your thoughts drift off to...

Covent Garden, The Royal Opera House. You're a prima ballerina, dancing Juliet, bending over the lap of your

Romeo; it's the finale – a last pirouette and the audience are in raptures, throwing endless bouquets on –

‘Ow!’

‘You alright, love. Got a problem?’ the guy’s piped up, turning your face around in line with his, squeezing your cheeks with thumb and forefinger – hard.

‘Uh, sorry?’ you say, the words muffled by hollowed-in cheeks.

‘Gonna look me in the eye or what?’ He squeezes harder.

‘Oh, sure, right, of course, babe,’ you soothe in a honey voice, wondering where the bouncers have got to. You go eyeball to eyeball.

‘Good girl,’ he says and lets go.

Then, with his mates cheering him on (not paying for nothing, though, are they?) you pull off your evening gown, sway your hips, your gusset brushing the zip of his jeans, all the while your eyes glued to his, the real world gatecrashing in on your fantasies.

You’re a nobody. A nothing. Barely human. Nearly nineteen years old and down on your luck, all undressed and nowhere to go.