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an extract from
Sleepless

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Sleepless

By Lou Morgan

There was a shocked silence in the room. Everyone looked from Grey to Tigs and back again because, honestly, that was the question none of them had wanted to ask. They'd all been thinking it, though – it showed on their faces. Izzy had thought it every single time she'd taken one of the foul-tasting yellow pills. She'd thought it ... and each time, she'd decided that the exam results were more important than knowing. The results were what counted – being good, being better, being the best. *That* was the only thing that counted. No matter what the consequences might be.

“What was in the pills, Tigs?” Grey repeated.

Tigs didn't answer. She just stared at him, her lips set in an angry line.

“What was in the pills, Tigs?” he asked again. He obviously wasn't going to stop.

She was still staring him down, but Izzy could see

the corners of her mouth softening, see her bottom lip starting to wobble.

The unthinkable was about to happen. Antigone Price, of all people, was about to cry. The ice queen's frosty exterior had cracked. She slumped on to the chair – Noah stepped out of the way, his eyes wide, as Tigs buried her face in her hands. "I don't know, all right?" she wailed.

"What does that mean?" Juliet asked.

Tigs glared up at her, then dropped her head back into her hands. "It means I don't know, all right? They're just supposed to be..."

"*Supposed to be?*" Dom leaned forward on the sofa. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. "What are they *supposed to be*, Tigs? What did you give us?" He spat the words at her.

Izzy had seen enough. "How about we all just calm down?" she said, stepping into the middle of the room. It felt like standing in a thundercloud.

"How about we don't?" Dom shouted back at her. His face was twisted, furious. He jumped up and took a step towards her, but Mia followed him and grabbed his elbow, pulling him back to the sofa.

"Dom! Would you sit down and shut up? Before

you *fall* down?” Mia tugged on his elbow and Dom collapsed back into the cushions of the sofa, blinking groggily.

Grey folded his arms across his chest. “Noah?” he said quietly. His voice was hoarse, but calm again.

Noah cleared his throat. “Tigs...” he said, more gently than Izzy had been expecting. Tigs’s bottom lip was still wobbling, and either she was doing a really good job of holding everything together or, more likely, she’d never been that close to bursting into tears in the first place. After all, it *was* Tigs.

Tigs looked up and Noah carried on. “Where *exactly* did you get those pills from?”

“I told you, the same place my mother gets all her stuff from!” She glared at him and wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“Yeah. About that...” Noah fiddled with his sandy brown hair, looking uncomfortable. Izzy froze. What was going on? She shot Grey a look but he blanked her, his attention completely fixed on Noah. “You sure?”

“Of course I’m sure!” Tigs snarled back at him, slapping her hand on the cushion next to her for emphasis. It had taken less than a minute for her to go from wounded and tearful to outraged.

Neither appeared to work on Noah. “Well, they’re not there now.” He jabbed at the screen on his phone, then held it out to Tigs. Jumping up, she snatched it from his hand and stared at the screen.

“So? They’re out of stock or something. Seriously, I don’t know what—”

“They never had them, according to the email I got.” Noah raised his voice slightly to make himself heard over Tigs. She stopped, shoving his phone back at him.

“What?”

“I said, not according to the mail I got from the customer service team. They’ve never heard of them, and they never stocked anything even vaguely similar.”

“But that’s stupid. Of course they did ... do.” She scooped up her expensive bag and started to rummage through it for her own phone. After a moment or two of searching, she sighed and dropped the bag back on to the floor. The soft leather made a quiet *hufffff* sound as it landed, almost as though it was sighing. “I’ll show you,” Tigs said as she stalked out of the room, only to reappear clutching an iPad with a bright pink cover. She slid her finger across

the screen and poked at it several times with a finger. The tablet made a clicking noise as she tapped in an address and skimmed through the pages of a website. The expression on her face changed from anger to surprise to confusion. “Oh,” she said, and her voice sounded small. She sat down and shook her head. More tapping. More scrolling.

“Oh...” again. Then – “I don’t get it.” Tigs looked up, her eyes moving from one to another of them, around the room. “There was a page on the site. With ... stuff. And it’s gone.” More clicking.

“Like I said...” Noah began, but Tigs held up her hand to cut him off. Obediently, he shut up. It was a force of habit – when Tigs wanted you to stop talking, you stopped talking.

“I had an email, like an order confirmation thing? It’s gone. And there was this other one – the email I got before that said they had this new product in... That’s how I found them in the first place!” Stricken, she looked at Noah. “How can it be gone? How can it all be gone?”

“Let me look.” He held out his hand and dutifully she handed him the iPad. He perched on the arm of the sofa, scrolling and frowning.

Eventually, Mia sighed. “You want to tell us what all this is actually *about*?”

“I don’t quite know,” Noah said, shaking his head. “It’s like the pills don’t exist. Anywhere. At all.” He passed the iPad back to Tigs.

“But that’s not possible!” Izzy couldn’t keep up. From where she stood, it sounded like Noah was saying every trace of FokusPro had been removed – not just from the site where Tigs claimed she’d bought it, but even from her email account.

“Tigs, are you absolutely sure you bought them from that site?” Noah’s voice was stern.

“Of course I’m sure. It’s not like I’m just going to go and buy a load of pills from some random site, is it?”

“Tigs. This is serious.”

“I *know*!” Tigs rolled her eyes. “I get it, OK? But I’m telling you, that’s where the pills came from and that’s who sent me an email to confirm it. How can the email have gone?”

“You use webmail. It’s not impossible to hack the servers and delete something...” Noah shrugged. “But it’s unlikely. I mean, I don’t see why—”

Dom sat forward. “It’s *them*.”

“Them who?” Noah asked, turning to face him.

“Them. The watchers.”

“Oh, God. Here we go again...” Mia groaned.
“Enough, already. There’s nobody *watching* us, all right?”

“The man on the balcony. The man in the gardens...” Dom was on his feet again, spinning to face each of them in turn. “Don’t you see? Juliet...” he pointed at her, his eyes wide and bloodshot. Juliet shrank back into the sofa cushions. “There *was* someone in your house. They were watching us. They’re after the pills. They want them back. They know!”

“Dom ... what...?” Juliet tried, and even from across the room, Izzy could see the confusion on her face, the fear, but it was no use.

“We need to tell someone. We have to stop them. We have to. Have to. They’re watching us. They know!” He was wheeling crazily where he stood, spinning and spinning as the others looked on in horror. Izzy tore her gaze away from him and flashed another look at Grey. This time, she caught his eye and saw the same panic in his face that she knew was in hers.

Dom needed help.

It was, as always, Mia who stepped in. “Enough, bro. I’m taking you home.” She lunged forward and grabbed at Dom, who was still spinning wildly. She caught him just as he staggered sideways, bumping into the sideboard near the door. A row of delicate glass bottles arranged on the top wobbled dangerously. “Home. Now.” And without another word, Mia dragged Dom out into the hall.

Everyone else just stared at each other.

“Wow.” Izzy sank into the empty space left on the sofa by Mia and Dom. “Dom’s really losing it.”

“He’s not the only one,” Tigs sniffed, looking pointedly from Izzy to Noah.

Grey frowned. “Tigs...”

“What the hell’s going on?” Tigs turned on Grey. “You’re standing there looking at me like I’ve done something wrong. Like you didn’t take the pills, too?”

“Of course I took them! We all took them, didn’t we?”

“Everyone but Kara,” Juliet whispered.

“And look how that turned out for *her*,” Tigs snapped back.

“Yeah, well.” Juliet fiddled with her necklace, wrapping the fine gold chain round and round

her finger. She peered over the top of her glasses at everyone. “What *is* all this about, anyway?”

Noah shrugged. “Something’s not right. I went to look into the FokusPro, and it’s pretty much like you just saw – they don’t exist. They’ve vanished from the internet. Completely.”

Something niggled at the back of Izzy’s mind. A nagging idea. She opened and closed her mouth once, thinking better of saying it out loud, but then decided that it was probably worth it, anyway.

“Noah ... why were you looking for them?”

“I... What?” Noah looked crestfallen.

“Good point!” Tigs swivelled in her seat. “Why were you?”

Noah glanced at Grey, then stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I was looking for more.” His voice was heavy with defeat.

“Noah!” Izzy couldn’t help it. She was shocked. Noah, of all people. Noah, the smartest of them all by a mile. “You were trying to find more of the FokusPro? Why?”

“Why’d you think? They work.”

“But the exams are over. Why would you need more? I thought it was just supposed to be this one...”

Izzy tailed off, but Noah had already figured out what she was going to say.

He grinned at her. “You know as well as I do that there’s always more exams, Iz. I’m on a scholarship, remember? I can’t afford to blow this – like, I *literally* can’t afford it. The pills just seemed like they’d ... be a useful safety net.”

“I didn’t mean... It’s not...” Her face flushed – she could feel the heat of it climbing from the neck of her T-shirt up towards her cheeks.

“I know what you meant.” His face grew serious. “But that isn’t the point.”

“So what is?”

“This is.” He reached down to his bag and pulled out his laptop, setting it on the table. “Tigs might not be able to use the internet properly, but I can.” He leaned over the computer and calmly pressed a button, turning the whole thing round so that the screen was facing into the room. He dropped into a chair next to the table and folded his arms across his chest.

“Watch. You’ll see.”

A black rectangle filled the screen. There was something written at the bottom in functional white text – a string of numbers and letters, and what

looked like a date – but it was gone too quickly for Izzy to make it all out. Something about July? The caption dissolved into the screen, which was suddenly replaced by blurry black and white footage, the kind of thing she'd seen on CCTV and surveillance programmes on television. Like the others, she stared at it, trying to work out exactly what it was she was seeing.

The footage was of a small, square room. It was sparsely furnished and brightly lit. It looked clinical, somehow. There was a narrow metal bed, which appeared to be bolted to the floor. A dressing table with an empty frame that had obviously once held a mirror above it. A small, wooden stool in front of it – again, bolted to the floor. There were no windows and only one door, with a tiny barred hatch cut into it at head height. There was no door handle.

The image remained static for what felt like an age. Nothing moved. And then, suddenly, there was a shadow on the far side of the bed that hadn't been there before. Izzy held her breath as a figure slid out from beneath the bed and stood up. It was a man. He was wearing a kind of pale-coloured jumpsuit, and he had a long, matted beard. His hair was curly

and bushy – it stuck out wildly from his head. He stood with a slight stoop, and for a moment it looked like he was waving his hand up and down alongside his face, until Izzy realized that he was scratching. It was just that his nails were so long, he didn't need to touch his skin with his fingers.

She glanced at Noah. He was watching her – watching all of them – watching the video on the screen.

“Keep watching,” he whispered.

“What is this?”

“Keep watching.”

She turned her eyes back to the screen.

The man in the room was still scratching; still running his long nails down one side of his face. Even on the grainy camera footage, Izzy could see three long gouges beginning to appear on his cheek where his nails dug into his flesh. Blood trickled down his jaw, splashing on the shoulder of his jumpsuit.

Movement on the other side of the screen caught Izzy's eye. The door was opening and a man and a woman walked in. She was wearing a suit, he was wearing what looked like a uniform. Something vaguely military, Izzy guessed, although even on a

less grainy picture she wouldn't have been able to tell exactly what.

The suited woman hurried over to the original occupant of the room, who was still standing there, idly tearing at his face, and pulled his hand down. He didn't appear to notice. She steered him to the bed and sat him down on the edge of the mattress. He sat quietly, staring ahead with his hands in his lap as the man in uniform paced. Izzy guessed he was talking. The woman looked at him for a moment, nodded and then left the room. She closed the door behind her.

It was hard to watch what happened next, but every time she tried to look away, Izzy found Noah scowling at her. "You need to see."

The uniformed man talked and paced and talked and paced. Then he talked and paced some more. But he wasn't the one Izzy was watching. It was the man in the jumpsuit. At first, he sat motionless, his hands still folded in his lap. Then his head twitched to the side, just once. The uniformed man was still pacing up and down.

Another head twitch.

A couple of fingers jerking.

Another twitch of his head, which ran into another and into another until he was shaking his head from side to side so violently that even the man in the uniform stopped what he was doing and moved over to him, putting a hand on his shoulder as if to restrain him.

The man in the jumpsuit stopped. And sank his teeth into the other's hand.

Even as the military man recoiled, pulling back and away, the prisoner leaped at him. He hit him with such ferocity that they both tumbled to the floor, rolling over and over. Until they stopped, and something liquid and dark began to pool beneath them, spreading slowly outwards.

Across the room the door was thrown open and the woman rushed back in. She was carrying a bundle of fabric straps that trailed on the floor behind her.

The man in the jumpsuit – the prisoner, or whatever he was – rocked back on to his heels and snarled at her. His face twisted as she stopped dead halfway across the room. The bundle of restraints spooled on to the floor. She didn't stand a chance.

The video dissolved into a snowstorm of static, but all Izzy could see was that final image of the man

in the jumpsuit throwing himself at the woman. And her final desperate look straight into the camera.

“What did we just see?” Grey was the first to speak, and when he did he sounded shaken.

“That?” Noah closed the lid of his laptop. “That’s what happened to the last guy who took FokusPro.”

No one said anything else while that really sank in. Finally, Juliet spoke. “I think I’m going to be sick. Is this some kind of joke?”

“I don’t know, Jools. You reckon?”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she repeated.

Izzy watched as Grey leaned against the wall, rubbing his face with the heels of his hands. It was an unpleasant echo of the man in the video scratching at his cheek.

If Noah was right, and he usually was, then getting caught was suddenly looking like the least of their problems.

