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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Loving Husband**

Written by Christobel Kent

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He was in the room. She didn't know how long she'd been asleep, but she'd been dreaming.

In the dark something padded between the furniture, and loose change clinked softly. The mattress gave beside her.

In the dream there'd been a wide littered beach and a man looking down at her, standing very close, the sun high behind him so she couldn't see his face. The man reached into her breast pocket, she felt his fingers nosing, and he drew something out that glittered. Then the beach had gone and the space beyond the bed was all muffled blackness, no light came in from the landing. She might have been underground.

Cold crept under the duvet. She felt the furred brush of his leg against hers and obediently she turned away but his hand slid under her T-shirt; it rested on her hip and held her there on her side with her back to him. His hand was heavy.

Something blinked red off to the side, she couldn't tell

if it was inside her head or if she'd opened her eyes: the partial numerals of the radio alarm on his side of the bed. She knew if she turned her head they'd tell her the time but she didn't move, her eyes closed, wanting the wide beach again, she wanted to know what it was the man had pulled from her pocket, but he was gone.

Behind her something else shifted, his body – heavy like his hand or was she dreaming that – bulky and hot, was pressed close and she heard his quick breath. He wasn't going to sleep. And then his hand moved downwards, his palm was rough on the smooth of her backside. His fingers were between her legs and as they moved inside her she held her breath. It had been so long, for a second she didn't know if she could still do it, but all the more reason. She knew if she stopped, if he stopped, after all this time, it would be the end of them, it would be disaster. And then he said something into the hair at the back of her neck, something unrecognisable.

She didn't turn her head on the pillow and ask what he'd said so the words stayed mumbled, strange. But she let her breath go, and then his hands were on her shoulders, and he was inside her.

The cry woke her. If she hadn't learned with Emme that however deeply unconscious and dreaming she was, that sound would reach through the layers of sleep and drag her out, her second child would have taught her, once and for all. *You wanted him*: how many mothers had had to tell themselves that? She had wanted him. Fran jumped up, to get to him before he woke them. Woke Nathan in bed beside her, Emme, in the next room. Silence.

She hardly dared look back because it was all too quick, he couldn't possibly be ready for this – but then she saw he was smiling. More than that: she saw everything she was feeling mirrored there in his face – the panic, the amazement, the thrill – as if he had absorbed it all.

'Yes?' he said, eager.

'I . . .' she said. 'We . . .' And then his arms were around her, holding her tight against him, so tight, so warm. So safe.



## **Sunday night, Monday morning**

**02:07**

He might be beside Ben's cot, he might have woken before she did, her sleep might after all have been even deeper than usual, all things considered, and for a second a little happy world bloomed in the dark, the loving husband who'd looked down at her head on the pillow and thought, let her sleep.

Fran stood on stiff legs, the lazy warmth all gone to tension. It was so dark she felt unbalanced and she put out her hand to steady herself, moving hesitantly barefoot on the rug until she made the door and felt for the switch outside it. Light flooded the landing, lit the wide boards that tilted crazily the length of the old house, it exposed the rug worn thin, the dust in the corners. Silence.

Ben was asleep in the cot, an arm thrown back, chest rising and falling in the light from the door; she turned slowly in the dark room, checking its corners as if he might

be standing there watching her, monitoring her panic. There was no one there.

Moving on down the corridor she set her face against the door jamb to Emme's room. She saw the pictures on the wall above the bed, silver in the landing light, saw her daughter sleeping. Turning away, Fran whispered, 'Nathan.'

But the labyrinth of rooms around her all sat quiet under the eaves, the twisting staircases, the odd angles, the low secret doors that had made him turn to her in front of the estate agent with his face all lit and say, *Don't you love it*, as she tried to hide her discomfort.

'Nathan?' Her voice was high and thin, but not a whisper any more. More firmly. 'Nathan.' The children didn't stir. She was on the stairs, quick, holding her breath, down.

The kitchen looked untidy under the bad lighting: they still hadn't done anything to it; a year in, they'd done nothing. *Why not?* Jo would say if she saw it. *Isn't that Nathan's area of expertise?* Someone else's grimy farmhouse kitchen: she hadn't expected to find Nathan here, boiling a kettle, unable to sleep, it wasn't that kind of a room, not the heart of the home. It hadn't been that for the farmer, anyway, a man with oddly dyed hair and greasy clothes stiff with dirt. He might have been fifty, or seventy, Fran hadn't been able to tell. *No wife*, he'd said from under a lowered brow, as if to explain the kitchen, *women don't like the farming life*, although to Fran that had seemed the least of it.

There was a front door set at the centre of the house's handsome façade, with a wide hall behind it and an ancient cavernous fireplace but they still hadn't managed to get the door open in its Adam-pillared surround. Damp had

swollen it: even the agent had muttered agreement. So they came in and out of the kitchen door instead, a mean little door that opened onto a yard with bolts top and bottom and a big rusty key.

She was standing behind it. She put a hand to the door's high frosted pane, feeling how cold it was, the glass, and the kitchen itself. The room had no warm range to keep it cosy. Nathan had said *Maybe we can get one put in*, to convince her, *maybe, when we've got the cash*. His clouded eyes, making the calculation.

Nathan.

Under its ugly lighting the room seemed to crystallise around her. She tried to keep it neat, but things appeared. The mugs on their hooks, the tidy pile of newspapers and bills on the table and Emme's drawings pinned to the dresser, *roses are red, violets are blue* because she hadn't been able to wait till next Sunday, the day itself. Valentine's. The dirty doormat under her bare feet. She looked down and saw the mat was rucked and askew; she saw bootprints, she registered wet mud on her skin. Leaning on the door she contemplated the dirty sole of her foot.

The bolts had not been shot. She put a hand to the key but she knew before she turned it that the door was unlocked. She didn't want to open it, to step out into the wide dark that carried all the way to the horizon. Nathan's mud-crust-ed boots stood beside the mat and she slid her feet into them, took a coat from the hooks at random, that was Nathan's too, scratchy wool. She didn't want to do the next thing.

Why hadn't she looked at the clock's numerals when he came in, to know now, how much time had passed?

Had she even opened her eyes? She remembered the red light of the alarm, she remembered how deep the dark in the room had been otherwise. She remembered holding herself under as she came, burrowed still in sleep as she lay on her side with Nathan's weight still behind her and pushing. She remembered thinking, this is the trick, the trick is just to stay quiet, to stay inside, eyes closed, and then she came, with an exhalation. She'd let go, drifting into sleep. She remembered the exact weight of his hand on her.

Fran stood thinking a moment as the act's ripples spread, the consequences, *had they, had he, what about . . .* and then she opened the door.

Even in daylight stepping out here took a conscious effort to keep the spirits from dipping: the sheer emptiness of it made her head ache, the uninterrupted flatness. At night it was different, it seemed less empty, it harboured pockets of deeper dark, the outbuildings, a line of poplars, a distant grain silo. Landmarks that by day were dwarfed by the wide, bleached, lovely sky, invisible in the night they still seemed to cluster, they offered places of concealment.

Emme had come out to look for an abandoned doll one evening and had run back in whimpering about funny noises and Nathan had looked up from the sofa. Fran hadn't been able to see his eyes that time, the light reflecting off his reading glasses, she couldn't have said if he was being accusatory because he had said nothing. And then there'd been a noise from upstairs, Ben in his cot stirring, and she'd run out of the room.

The cold was clammy, coating her face in the dark, and she pulled the coat round her. It smelled of him, of Nathan.



She stepped carefully, still uncertain, in the dark; her balance felt off. One hand holding the coat together, the other one reached out into the darkness, her hand flapping stupidly, to stabilise her. She should have brought a torch.

The yard was cluttered, she had to step carefully or she'd trip. She moved past the shed. There was a faint orange glow far off to the side that revealed the line of the horizon, but it wasn't sunrise. A February sunrise would be more than five hours off, it was the lights of the town, miles away but low-lying, and the light it shed went a long way on the endless flat windswept plain.

The barn loomed. The farmer had kept chickens in it, a battery shed. You could smell it from the back door then, and even Nathan's face had turned stony. The estate agent had stood with his back to it as if to bar their way. In the car on the way home Nathan had said, his eyes on the road, *It's prefabricated, there are people who take them down for you, take them away and put them up somewhere else.* Fran had sat stiffly in silence in the passenger seat, trying not to see it, even though she'd been the one that had insisted. A single bulb swinging and the chickens' eyes red, a thousand of them and more. The smell had been indescribable.

No one had come to take it away yet but Nathan had taken down the walls, to let air blow through it, trying to get rid of the smell. Now it loomed, a roof on girders – she walked inside. What was she afraid of? She didn't know. Something.

The air was still contaminated with decades of chicken shit and entrails and she held her arm across her face, the rough wool against her mouth. She looked up in the dark, her eyes must have made some small adjustment to it

because she could make out the structure's concrete rafters. She'd stood here next to Nathan as he contemplated them, that time when she told him she was pregnant again although she'd felt he must know. Wondering what he was thinking, his face pale, upturned. A builder contemplating a structure, estimating concrete's stress levels. Now, she realised she was holding her breath. She made herself scan the roof space, straining her eyes and seeing nothing. She walked on across the powdery dirt floor, out of the back of the barn.

This was what she was afraid of. The yawning space, the black distance: it stopped her. It upset Nathan to see her panic, she had to control it. His face tense, fourteen weeks into the first pregnancy, to see her eyes wide outside the room where they'd scan her, to see her arms stiff by her sides on the high hospital bed. And after Emme was born, when she ran breathless to her cot in the middle of the night to make sure she was alive, she'd heard Nathan make a sound under his breath. And now they were both on their own in the house behind her, a four-year-old and a three-month-old, in that house that should feel like home but still made her heart clench in her chest as the light faded around it every night. She'd left the door unlocked, anything could happen, anything. She turned round but the barn obscured her view of the house and quickly she turned back to the horizon.

There was something there.

Something like a snake, something darker than the dark, it was just in front of her. She couldn't see it, she couldn't hear it, didn't know if it was under her feet or it was about to flap in her face but something was there. She couldn't move.

Far off, a car's headlights swept the plain, a lone bush was illuminated, the black furrows of a ploughed field fanned out, grasses on the edge of a drainage ditch – a something else. She saw herself, or a mirror image of herself, across the fields, a figure silhouetted like a scarecrow in an old coat on their edge. Then the car's lights moved on, casting long low shadows away to the horizon and gone, only not before she'd seen what was at her feet.

There was something in the ditch. In one sweep of the light she took in a shoe. Then the length of him, head down, and she dropped to her knees.

He was in the ditch.