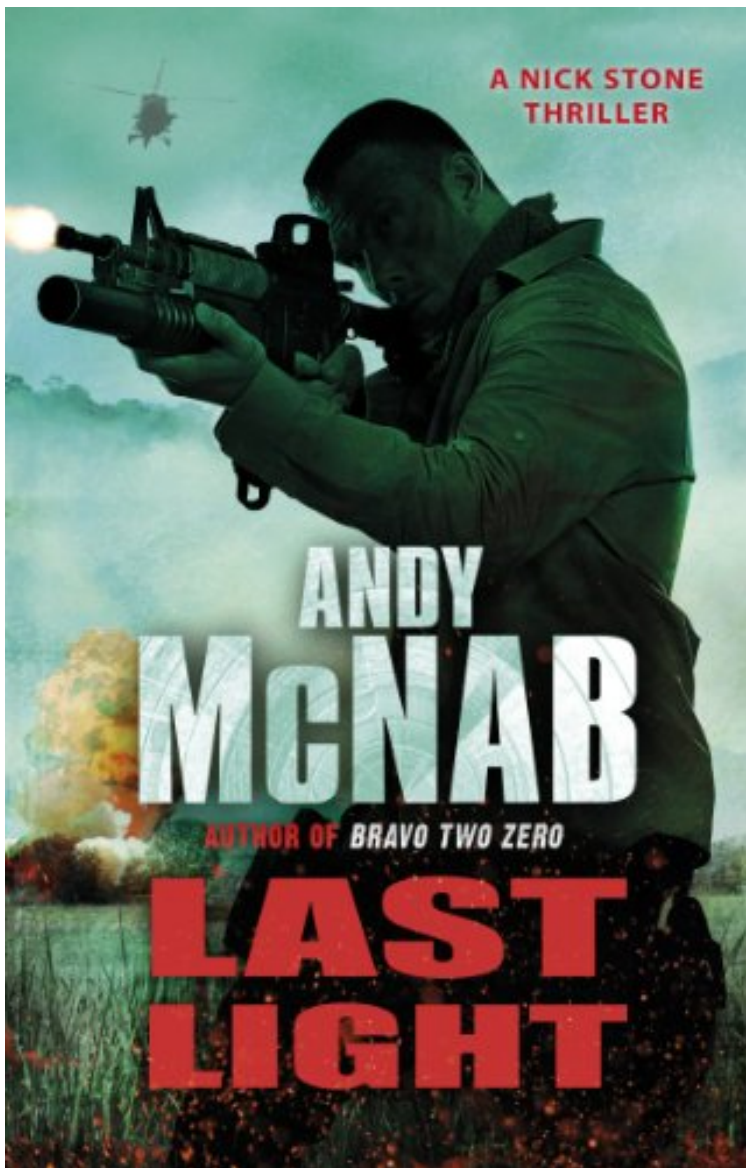


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Last Light: (Nick Stone Thriller 4)



Par Andy McNab
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Description : Description du produitThe best suspense writer to put pen to paper since Alistair MacLean (Stephen Coonts) follows up the international bestselling Firewall with the most gripping and timely Nick Stone thriller yet.Drawing on his experience as a member of Britains legendary Special Air Service, world-renowned Andy McNab delivers authenticity in spades (Publishers Weekly). McNabs greatest asset, according to Londons Sunday Times, is that the heart of his fiction is not fiction; other thriller writers do their research, but he has actually been there.Top-secret operative Nick Stone has just aborted his assassination assignment at the Houses of Parliament. Once he saw who his target was meant to be, he instinctively pulled out. Now Stone is in a world of trouble. His bosses have handed him a chilling ultimatum: fly to Panama and finish the job hes just botched, or Kelly, the young orphan in his guardianship, will be killed.Deep in the sweltering jungle of Central America, Stone quickly finds himself up to his neck in

high-stakes action as he closes in on a lethal conspiracy involving Columbian guerrillas, the U.S. government, and Chinese big business. Only Stone can stop an international crisis. Caught in the wrong-headed schemes of world powers, with countless innocent lives hanging in the balance, Stone is forced to make the toughest decision of his life. From the Hardcover edition.

Présentation de l'auteur
The incendiary Nick Stone thriller from the bestselling author of *Bravo Two Zero*. Nick Stone - deniable operator for British Intelligence - has been assigned to carry out an officially-sanctioned assassination. When he realizes who the target is, he refuses. But he is then given a chilling ultimatum: fly to Central America and finish the job, or the eleven-year-old orphan in his care will get killed. Stone arrives in sweltering Panama close to breaking point. His life is in pieces, but things only get worse when he finds himself caught at the centre of a lethal conspiracy involving Columbian guerrillas. Hundreds of innocent lives are at stake. Their only chance of rescue is Stone. But he has a critically injured friend to rescue, miles of dense rainforest to navigate and the toughest decision of his life to make... 'Extraordinary' *The Times.co.uk*

Last Light is a resounding demonstration of Andy McNab's evolving abilities, offering a richer level of plotting, along with the customary well-turned rough stuff. McNab might initially have seemed to be some kind of briefly shining star in the bestseller firmament, his SAS experience and well-advertised pseudonym guaranteeing a couple of toughly authentic thrillers in the style of *Bravo Two Zero*, and no more. But such successive books as *Firewall*, *Remote Control* and *Crisis Four* have categorically demonstrated that he has more than enough top-flight skills to sustain a long writing career. In *Last Light*, after terminating an officially approved assassination bid at the Houses of Parliament when he realises the identity of the intended target, McNab's hard-as-nails protagonist Nick Stone, "deniable operator" of the intelligence services, is severely disciplined by his bosses. He is told to travel to Panama and finish the job, or he and Kelly (the 11-year-old girl he is guarding) will be "taken care of" themselves. As Nick gets ready for his assignment in central America, he soon finds that his enemies have turned the tables on him: he is now the hunted, and finds himself up to his neck in a murky plot involving Colombian rebels and the US government. All the usual McNab fingerprints are here: not too much shading, but flinty characterisation and a barrel load of high-velocity action.

--Barry Forshaw
Extrait
Chapter One
Sunday, September 3, 2000
I didn't know who we were going to kill -- just that he or she would be among the crowd munching canaps and sipping champagne on the terrace of the Houses of Parliament at three P.M., and that the Yes Man would identify the target by placing his hand on their left shoulder when he greeted them. I'd done some weird stuff over the years, but this job was scaring me. In less than ninety minutes, I was going to be sitting on my own doorstep big-time. I only hoped the Firm knew what it was doing, because I wasn't too sure that I did. As I looked down yet again at the clear plastic lunchbox on the desk in front of me, three flashlight bulbs sticking out of holes I'd burned in the lid stared back up. None of them was illuminated; the three snipers were still not in position. Everything about this job was wrong. We'd been given the wrong weapons. We were in the wrong place. And there just hadn't been enough time to plan and prepare. I stared through the net curtains across the boat-filled river. The Houses of Parliament were some 350 yards away to my half left. The office I'd broken into was on the top floor of County Hall, the former Greater London Council building. Now redeveloped into offices, hotels, and tourist attractions, it overlooked the Thames from the south side. I was feeling rather grand sitting behind a highly polished, dark wood desk, as I looked out at the killing ground. Parliament's terrace spanned the whole of its river frontage. Two prefabricated pavilions with candy-striped roofs had been erected at the far left end, for use throughout the summer months. Part of the terrace, I'd learned from their website, was for Members of the House of Lords, and part for the House of Commons. The public were not admitted unless they were with an MP or lord, so this was probably the nearest I was ever going to get. The Department of Trade and Industry's guests today were a group of about thirty businessmen, plus staff and some family, from Central and South America. Maybe the DTI was trying to curry a bit of favor and sell them a power station or two. Who cared? All I knew was that one of them would be getting dropped somewhere between the cream puffs and the clairs. Directly below me, and five stories down, Albert Embankment was thronged with hot-dog vendors and stalls selling plastic policemen's helmets and postcards of Big Ben to people lining up for the Ferris wheel, or just enjoying a lazy Sunday afternoon. A sightseeing boat packed with tourists passed under Westminster Bridge. I could hear a bored voice telling the story of Guy Fawkes' plot to blow up Parliament over a crackly PA system. It was the end of summer vacation and another news-starved week, so Rupert Murdoch and the tabloids were going to be ever so pleased with what I was about to do: the biggest explosion in London this year, and right in the heart of

Westminster. With the added bonus of a major shooting incident, it would probably put their ratings right off the chart. Unfortunately, good news for them was bad for me. SB (Special Branch) were going to be working their asses off to find out who'd pressed the button, and they were the best in the world at this sort of thing.

They'd been formed to stop the IRA carrying out exactly the kind of stunt I was about to pull. Three lightbulbs were still unlit. I wasn't panicking, just concerned. At either end of the row of lights was a white, rectangular bell-push from a door chime set, glued in position with the wires curling into the box. The one on the left was covered with the top from a can of shaving cream. It was the detonation pressel for the device that I'd set up as a diversion. The device was basically a black powder charge, designed to give off a big enough bang to grab London's attention but not to kill anyone. There would be some damage, there'd be the odd cut or bruise, but there shouldn't be any fatalities. The shaving cream top was there because I didn't want to detonate it by accident. The pressel on the right was exposed. This was the one that would initiate the shoot. Next to the box I had a set of binos (binoculars) mounted on a mini-tripod and trained on the killing ground. I was going to need them to watch the Yes Man as he moved about the crowd and ID'd the target. The lunchbox contained a big, green, square lithium battery, and a mess of wires and circuit boards. I'd never tried to make things look neat; I just wanted them to work. Two purple plastic-coated wire antennas stuck out of the rear of the box, trailed along the desk, over the windowsill I'd pushed it up against, then dangled down the outside wall. I had the window closed down on them to cut out as much noise as possible. The loudest sound in the room was my breathing, which started to quicken as the witching hour got closer. It was only outdone by the occasional scream of delight from a tourist at ground level or a particularly loud PA system from the river. All I could do was wait. I crossed my arms on the desk, rested my head on them, and stared at the bulbs that were now level with my eyes, willing them to start flashing. I was shaken out of my trance as Big Ben struck two. I knew the snipers wouldn't move into their fire positions until the last moment so that they didn't expose themselves longer than necessary, but I really wanted those lights to start flashing at me. For about the millionth time in the past twenty minutes I pushed down on the uncovered pressel, resting the side of my head on my forearm to look inside the box, like a kid wondering what his mom had made him for lunch. A small bulb, nestled among the mass of wires, lit up with the current generated by my send pressel. I wished now that I'd burnt another hole in the lid for the bulb inside to join the others -- but at the time I couldn't be bothered. I released it and pressed again. The same thing happened. The device was working. But what about the other three that I'd built for the snipers? I'd just have to wait and see. The other thing I did for the millionth time was wonder why I couldn't just say no to this stuff. Apart from the fact that I was soft in the head, the answer was the same as always: it was the only thing I knew. I knew it, the Firm knew it. They also knew that I was desperate for cash again. If I was truthful with myself, which I found pretty hard, there was another, much deeper reason. I got my eyes level with the bulbs once more and took a deep breath. I'd learned a few things since attending the clinic with Kelly. Even at school there was desperation in me to be part of something -- whether it was joining a woodworking group, or a gang that used to rob the Jewish kids of the dinner money they'd wrapped in hankies so we couldn't hear it rattle in their pockets as they walked past. But it never worked. That feeling of belonging only happened once I joined the Army. And now? I just couldn't seem to shake it off. At last. The middle bulb, Sniper Two's, gave five deliberate, one-second pulses. I put my thumb on the send pressel and, after a nanosecond to check I wasn't about to blow up London in my excitement, I depressed it three times in exactly the same rhythm, to say that I had received the signal, checking each time that the white circuit-test bulb inside the box lit up. I got three flashes back immediately from the middle bulb. Good news. Sniper Two was in position, ready to fire, and we had comms (communications). All I needed now was One and Three, and I'd be cooking with gas. I'd put everything these snipers needed to know -- where to be, how to get there, what to do once in position, and, more importantly for them, how to get away afterward -- with the weapons and equipment in their individual DLBs (dead letter boxes). All they had to do was read the orders, check the gear, and get on with the shoot. The three had different fire positions, each unknown to the others. None of them had met or even seen each other, and they hadn't met me. That's how these things are done: OPSEC (operational security). You only know what you need to. I'd had an extremely busy ten nights of CTRs (close target reconnaissance, or recces) to find suitable fire positions in the hospital grounds on this side of the river and directly opposite the killing ground. Then, by day, I'd made the keys for the snipers to gain access to their positions, prepared the equipment they would need, then loaded the DLBs. Two hardware stores and a remote-control model shop in Camden Town had made a fortune out of me once I'd hit ATMs with my new Royal Bank of Scotland Visa card under my new cover for this job, Nick

Somerhurst. The only aspect of the business I was totally happy about was OPSEC. It was so tight that the Yes Man had briefed me personally. Tucked in a very smart leather attach case, he had a buff folder with black boxes stamped on the outside for people to sign and date as they authorized its contents. No one had signed any of them, and there was no yellow card attached to signify it was an accountable document.

Things like that always worried me: I knew it meant a shitload of trouble. As we drove along Chelsea Embankment toward Parliament in the back of a Previa MPV with darkened windows, the Yes Man had pulled two pages of printed legal-size paper from the folder and started to brief me. Annoyingly, I couldn't quite read his notes from where I was sitting. I didn't like the condescending jerk one bit as he put on his best I-have-been-to-university-but-I'm-still-working-class voice to tell me I was "special" and "the only one capable." Things didn't improve when he stressed that no one in government knew of this job, and only two in the Firm: "C," the boss of SIS (Secret Intelligence Service), and the Director of Security and Public Affairs, effectively his number two. "And, of course," he said with a smile, "the three of us." The driver, whose thick blond side-parted hair made him look like Robert Redford when he was young enough to be the Sundance Kid, glanced in the rearview mirror and I caught his eye for a second before he concentrated once more on the traffic, fighting for position around Parliament Square. Both of them must have sensed I wasn't the happiest camper in town. The nicer people were to me, the more suspicious of their motives I became.

But, the Yes Man said, I wasn't to worry. SIS could carry out assassinations at the express request of the Foreign Minister. "But you just said only five of us know about this. And this is the U.K. It's not a Foreign Office matter." His smile confirmed what I already knew. "Ah, Nick, we don't want to bother anyone with minor details. After all, they may not really want to know." With an even bigger smile he added that should any part of the operation go wrong, no one would be held ultimately responsible. The Service would, as always, hide behind the Official Secrets Act or, if things got difficult, a Public Interest Immunity Certificate. So everything was quite all right, and I'd be protected. I mustn't forget, he said, that I was part of the team.

And that was when I really started to worry. It was blindingly obvious to me that the reason no one knew about this operation was because no one in their right mind would sanction it, and no one in their right mind would take the job on. Maybe that was why I'd been picked. Then, as now, I comforted myself with the thought that at least the money was good. Well, sort of. But I was desperate for the eighty grand on offer, forty now in two very large brown Jiffy envelopes, and the rest afterward. That was how I justified saying yes to something I just knew was going to be a nightmare. We were now on the approach road to Westminster Bridge with Big Ben and Parliament to my right. On the other side of the river I could see the County Hall building and to the left of that, the London Eye, the wheel turning so slowly it looked as if it wasn't moving at all. "You should get out here, Stone. Have a look around." With that, the Sundance Kid curbed the Previa, and irate motorists behind hit their horns as they tried to maneuver around us. I slid the door back and stepped out to the deafening sounds of jackhammers and revving engines. The Yes Man leaned forward in his seat and took the door handle. "Call in for what you need, and where you want the other three to collect their furnishings." With that, the door slid shut and Sundance cut in front of a bus to get back in the traffic stream heading south across the river. A van driver gave me the finger as he put his foot down to make up that forty seconds he'd been delayed. As I sat at the desk waiting for the other two bulbs to illuminate, I concentrated hard on that eighty grand. I didn't think I'd ever needed it so badly. The snipers were probably getting at least three times as much as I was but, then, I wasn't as good as they were at what they did. These people were as committed to their craft as Olympic athletes. I'd met one or two in the past when I, too, thought of going that route, but decided against it; professional snipers struck me as weird. They lived on a planet where everything was taken seriously, from politics to buying ice cream. They worshipped at the church of one round, one kill. No, sniping might pay well, but I didn't think I belonged there. And, besides, I now found bullet trajectory and the finer points of wind adjustment pretty boring after talking about them for half an hour, let alone my entire life. From the moment the Yes Man dropped me off with my two Jiffy envelopes, I'd started protecting myself far more than I normally would. I knew that if I got caught by Special Branch the Firm would deny me, and that was part and parcel of being a K, or deniable operator.

But there was more to it this time. The stuff I did normally didn't happen in the U.K., and no way would anyone in their right mind give this the go. Everything felt wrong, and the Yes Man would never want to be on the losing side. He'd knife his own grandmother if it meant promotion; in fact, since he took over the Ks Desk from Colonel Lynn, he was so far up C's ass he could have flossed his teeth. If things didn't go according to plan, and even if I did evade SB, he wouldn't hesitate to fuck me over if it meant he could take any credit and pass on any blame. I needed a safety blanket, so I started by noting down the serial numbers of

all three snipers' weapons before grinding them out. Then I took Polaroids of all the equipment, plus the three firing positions during the CTRs. I'd given the snipers photographs in their orders, and I kept a set myself. I had a full pictorial story of the job, together with photocopies of each set of sniper's orders. It all went into a bag in Left Luggage at Waterloo Station, along with everything else I owned: a pair of jeans, socks, underwear, toilet kit, and two fleece jackets. After loading the three snipers' DLBs, I should have left them alone -- but I didn't. Instead I put in an OP (observation post) on Sniper Two's dead letter box, which was just outside the market town of Thetford in Norfolk. There was no particular reason for picking Sniper Two's to OP, except that it was the nearest of the three to London. The other two were both miles away: in the Peak District and on Bodmin Moor. All three had been chosen in uninhabited areas so that once they'd gotten the weapons, they could zero them to make sure that the optic sight was correctly aligned to the barrel so that a round hit the target precisely at a given distance. The rest -- judging the wind, taking leads (aiming ahead of moving targets), and working out distance -- is part of the sniper's art, but first the weapon sight and rounds need to be as one. How they did that, and where they did that within the area, was up to them. They were getting more than enough cash to make those decisions themselves. Inside the DLB, a 45-gallon oil drum, was a large black Puma tennis bag that held everything needed for the shoot and was totally sterile of me: no fingerprints, certainly no DNA. Nothing from my body had made contact with this gear. Dressed like a technician in a chemical warfare lab, I had prepared, cleaned, and wiped everything down so many times it was a wonder there was any Parkerization (protective paint) left on the barrels. Jammed into a Gore-Tex bivouac bag and dug in among the ferns in miserable drizzling rain, I had waited for Sniper Two to arrive. I knew that all three would be extremely cautious when they made their approach to lift the DLBs, carrying out their tradecraft to the letter to ensure they weren't followed or walking into a trap. That was why I had to keep my distance: sixty-nine yards to be exact, which in turn had meant choosing a telephoto lens on my Nikon for more photographic evidence of this job, wrapped in a sweatshirt to dampen the rewind noise, and shoved into a garbage bag so that just the lens and viewfinder were exposed to the drizzle. I waited, tossing back Mars bars and water and just hoping Sniper Two didn't choose to unload it at night. In the end it was just over thirty boring and very wet hours before Sniper Two started to move in on the DLB. At least it was daylight. I watched the hooded figure check the immediate area around a collection of old, rusty farm machinery and oil drums. It edged forward like a wet and cautious cat. I brought up the telephoto lens. Tapered blue jeans, brown cross-trainers, three-quarter-length beige waterproof jacket. The hood had a sewn-in peak, and I could see the label on the left breast pocket: L.L. Bean. I'd never seen one of their shops outside the U.S. What I'd also never seen outside the U.S. was a woman sniper. She was maybe early thirties, slim, average height, with brown hair poking out of the sides of the hood. She was neither attractive nor unattractive, just normal-looking, more like a young mother than a professional killer. She reached the oil drums, and carefully checked inside hers to make sure it wasn't booby-trapped. I couldn't help wondering why a woman would take up this line of work. What did her kids think she did for a living? Work at the cosmetics counter in Sears, and get dragged away a couple of times a year for week-long eyeliner seminars? She'd been happy with what she saw inside the drum. Her arms went inside very quickly and lifted out the bag. She turned in my direction, taking the weight of it in both hands, and threw it over her right shoulder. I hit the shutter release and the camera whirred. Within seconds she'd melted once more into the trees and tall ferns; like a cat, she'd probably find a place to hide now and check out the spoils. Sniping does not simply mean being a fantastic marksman. Just as important are the fieldcraft skills -- stalking, judging distance, observation, camouflage and concealment -- and judging by the way she lifted the DLB and got back into cover, I bet she'd won gold stars in all of those disciplines. While in the Army I had spent two years as a sniper, in a Royal Green Jacket rifle company. I was as keen as anything: it had something to do with being left alone just to get on with it with your sniper partner. I learned a lot and was a good shot, but I didn't have the passion required to make it a life's vocation. I was still staring at the three bulbs, waiting for One and Three to sign in. A helicopter clattered overhead, following the riverbank on the north side, and I had to look up to satisfy myself that it wasn't looking for me. My paranoia was working overtime. For a moment I thought that it had found the explosive device I'd placed on the roof of the Royal Horseguards Hotel in Whitehall the night before. The hotel was just out of sight, behind the MoD (Ministry of Defense) main building across the Thames to my half right. Seeing the three service flags fluttering on the roof of the massive light-colored stone cube prompted me to check something else for the millionth time. Keeping the row of lightbulbs in my peripheral vision, I looked down at the river to check the wind indicators. In urban areas the wind can move in different directions, at different levels, and in different strengths, depending on

the buildings it has to get around. Sometimes streets become wind tunnels, redirecting and momentarily strengthening the gusts. Indicators were therefore needed at different levels around the killing area, so the snipers could compensate by adjusting their sights. The wind can make an immense difference to where a round hits because it simply blows it off course. Flags are really useful, and there were more around here than at a UN summit. On the water there were plenty of boats moored with pennants at the stern. Higher up, on both ends of Westminster Bridge, there were the tourist stalls, selling plastic Union Jacks and Manchester United streamers. The snipers would use all of these, and they would know where to look because I'd keyed them onto the maps supplied in the DLB. The wind condition at river level was good, just a hint of a breeze. My eyes caught movement in the killing ground. I felt my face flush and my heart rate quicken. Shit, this shouldn't be kicking off yet. I had a grandstand view of the terrace, and the times-twelve magnification of the binos made me feel as if I were almost standing on it. I checked it out with one eye on the binos, the other ready to pick up any flashes from the bulbs. A feeling of relief flooded through me. Catering staff. They were streaming in and out of the covered pavilions to the left of the killing ground, busy in their black and white uniforms, laying out ashtrays and placing bowls of nuts and nibbles on square wooden tables. A stressed-looking older guy in a gray, double-breasted suit stalked around behind them, waving his arms like a conductor at the symphony. I followed the line of the terrace and spotted a photographer on one of the wooden benches. He had two cameras by his side and smoked contentedly as he watched the commotion, a big smile on his face. I went back to the conductor. He looked up at Big Ben, checked his watch, then clapped his hands. He was as worried about the deadline as I was. At least the weather was on our side. Taking the shot through one of the pavilion windows would have made things even more difficult than they already were. The three sniper positions were all on my side of the river; three trailers on the grounds of St. Thomas's Hospital, directly opposite the killing ground. Three different positions gave three different angles of fire, and therefore three different chances of getting a round into the target. The distance between the first and third sniper was about ninety yards, and they'd be shooting over a distance of between 330 and 380 yards, depending on their position in the lineup. Being one floor up, the killing ground was below them, at an angle of about forty-five degrees. It would be just good enough to see the target from the stomach up if it was sitting down, and from about thigh up when standing, since a stone wall about a yard high ran the length of the terrace to stop MPs and lords falling into the Thames when they'd had a drink or two. The riverbank in front of their positions was tree-lined, which provided some cover, but also obstructed their line of sight into the killing ground. These things are nearly always a matter of compromise; there is rarely a perfect option. This would be the first time the snipers had ever been to the fire position, and it would also be the last. Soon after the shoot they'd be heading for Paris, Lille, or Brussels on Eurostar trains, which left from Waterloo Station just ten minutes' walk away. They'd be knocking back a celebratory glass of wine in the Channel tunnel well before the full extent of what they'd done had dawned on Special Branch and the news networks. Copyright 2002 by Andy McNab