

Cambridge University Press

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Jeremy Harmer

Excerpt

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## Chapter 1 *The precise moment*

London, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1995. At first, it was a day like any other. Katy got up, showered, had breakfast with Paul, listened to the news. Then she got her things, kissed Paul goodbye and left the house. She walked down the road to the Underground station. She got on the train and travelled to London Bridge. Then she walked from there to the building where she worked – the offices of *The Daily Witness* newspaper.

For the first three hours after she arrived she sat in front of her computer, phoning her contacts and typing out what they told her. As usual, Katy was writing for the newspaper's younger readers. That was her job: she wrote 'youth-focused' features.

Her phone rang. And that's when Katy's life started to change. At that precise moment.

Katy picked the receiver up. The editor wanted to see her. Now. Katy made a face at Benjamin – her best friend at work, who sat at the next desk – and got up.

'Where are you off to?' he asked. 'What's the matter?'

'Jones,' Katy said. 'She wants to see me.'

'Oh, dear! Have you done something wrong?' asked Benjamin.

'I don't think so,' she replied. But she was suddenly nervous. Caryl Jones, the editor of the newspaper, could be very nice if she thought you were doing a good job, but she shouted at people when things weren't going well, and nobody liked that.

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Katy knocked on the editor's door. 'Come in,' a voice said sharply. She turned the handle. Her throat was dry. She noticed that her hand was shaking slightly. She opened the door.

When Katy entered the room Caryl Jones was just getting up from behind her desk. She was a small slim woman of about fifty years old. She had short hair and designer glasses.

'Ah, hello, Katy,' the editor said. 'Come in and sit down.' She walked over and took Katy by the arm, leading her towards a large black sofa. She sat down and Katy sat down next to her, feeling uncomfortable.

The phone rang. Caryl Jones jumped up and went to the door. Opening it she called out, 'I said no calls. No calls at all. You know what that means? It means NO calls!' Her voice had a surprising strength for someone of her size. She closed the door sharply and came back to the sofa. The phone stopped ringing.

Katy was looking round the walls. On the few occasions she'd been in the room, she'd always enjoyed the photos of Caryl Jones with the Queen, Caryl Jones with the prime minister, and a more recent one of her standing between the actors Tom Hanks and Morgan Freeman at the Oscars ceremony in Hollywood before they knew which of them had got the prize.

'Do you like your job on *The Daily Witness*, Katy?' the editor asked. It wasn't the question Katy had been expecting.

'Well, yes,' Katy replied nervously.

'Good. I'm glad. I like your work.'

'You do?' Katy asked.

'Yes, of course. I hired you to attract younger readers and

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you seem to be doing just that. Our market research shows that our fastest growth in readers is among the sixteen to twenty-five age group. And some of that – not all of it, but a lot of it – is due to the writing you’ve been doing. I particularly liked your piece on the digital future and what it’s going to mean for the way in which people will communicate with each other – this “World Wide Web” we’re learning to live with.’

‘Thanks. Thanks very much,’ Katy said. ‘I think—’

‘Yes, well we can worry about all that another day,’ the editor interrupted, coming back to the present. ‘I’ve asked you to come and see me for a different reason. I don’t have much time, so I’ll come straight to the point. I’ve got a suggestion. One that will involve big changes for you. But I think you’re ready for them. Would you like to hear about it?’

\* \* \*

After Katy had left Caryl Jones’ office, the one thing she needed was to talk to Paul. Caryl Jones had suggested it. ‘I know this is a big decision,’ she’d said, ‘so why not take a day to think about it? You can go home now and talk to your boyfriend if you want. But I’ll need to know your answer by five o’clock tomorrow, all right?’

Forty-five minutes later Katy let herself into the little house that she shared with Paul. She was about to call out his name, but something stopped her. She went into the kitchen. The house seemed very quiet. But it didn’t feel empty.

There were two wine glasses on the kitchen table. Katy stared at them. There was something wrong with that. She stood there looking at them. She knew that they ‘meant’

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something, but she couldn't think what it was. Her brain seemed to have stopped working. But in the end she walked out of the kitchen, back down the passage, until she came to the stairs.

Katy removed her shoes. She climbed the stairs one by one. All the time the silence in the house was getting louder and louder. At the top of the stairs she paused, her heart beating wildly. 'I must be brave,' she told herself and walked towards the bedroom.

The first thing she saw was Paul's T-shirt on the floor by the door. Next a pair of women's shoes, black with heels. As she came round the door she saw a pair of jeans, untidy on the floor, a skirt, boxer shorts, underwear ... clothes. Clothes everywhere telling the story from beginning to end. She raised her eyes.

They were asleep, exhausted, his beautiful body and a woman's – my God, the neighbour! She hadn't expected the neighbour. She stood there in shock looking down at them, studying the woman's blonde hair, her arm thrown over Paul's chest, the rise and fall of her breathing.

Paul's subconscious mind must have sensed that something in the atmosphere was different, even though he was sleeping. He opened his eyes just a little. Then he closed them again while his mind thought about what he'd seen. And then, suddenly, he was awake, pulling the sheet over him before sitting up, his mouth falling open in surprise.

'Katy! What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at work,' he said.

'I came home early,' Katy said quietly.

'Yeah. Look, I'm sorry. I didn't expect ... This isn't ... I mean ...' Paul started.

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The neighbour had woken up now, wide-eyed and afraid. 'Oh, Katy,' she said. 'I'm sorry. Honestly. This isn't what it looks like!'

'It looks like sex,' Katy snapped back, brutal.

'Katy ...' Paul mumbled.

'What are you doing with *her*?' she shouted at him. Paul looked uncomfortable, ashamed. Katy marched over to the bed and pulled the sheet away. 'You!' she commanded, pointing at the neighbour, frightening herself and the other two by her unexpected anger. 'Get out of my house right now! Go on. Get out!' And then, before the woman could start dressing, Katy had stormed out, down the stairs, trying to stop herself from crying. She slammed the door loudly behind her as she marched out into the street. She went into the phone box on the corner and dialled a number.

'Hello,' said the voice in her ear.

'Mum. It's me, Katy,' she said, trying not to sound hysterical.

'What is it this time?' her mother said in her usual 'I told you so' voice.

'Can I come and stay for a few days?'