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Jeremy Harmer
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *The silent house*

It seems impossible to feel so happy and so sad all at the same time. Laughter and tears. Not what you would expect for someone in my situation. Maybe, in time, the future, in which I am so confident, will cancel out the bad memories of the past. There's so much to look forward to, after all. But there's so much to remember too.

It all started on the day that my wife disappeared. Well no, that's not quite true. It had started a long time before that, only I didn't know anything about it. That just shows you how stupid I was. Things were happening right in front of my nose, and I never even realised. I should have seen the signs, but I was blind to them.

On that particular day, I came home after a rehearsal. I opened the door and walked into the house. I put my viola case on the floor, took off my coat, and hung it up. Then I took my viola into our music room. I wanted to look through some of the new quartet music before the next rehearsal. That's when I noticed my wife's old trumpet, the one she had played for the last ten years. It wasn't in its case. It was on top of the piano, as if she'd abandoned it in the middle of a practice. That was strange. My wife always left her instrument in its case. Perhaps she had just gone upstairs for a minute. But then I noticed the silence in the house. You could feel it.

I went into the kitchen. There was a coffee cup in the sink. It hadn't been washed. That was strange too. My wife

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never left dirty cups in the sink. I went upstairs. The bed was unmade. Now I was really worried. Then I noticed the cupboard. It was open, emptier than usual. Suddenly I started to get frightened. I ran into the middle bedroom, the room she used as an office. I opened the cupboard door there. One of our suitcases was missing.

For a moment I stood there, my mind refusing to accept what was in front of my eyes. I thought somebody had taken her clothes and stolen her suitcase. Then I remembered the trumpet on the piano. Perhaps she had gone somewhere? But where? Why hadn't she told me? Then I thought, oh no, perhaps someone has kidnapped her, forced her to go away. But something told me this wasn't true, and I sat down on the chair in front of her computer. I tried to think but all I could see was her face, last night, in that Italian restaurant, smiling at me through the candle flame. She had been so kind, so beautiful. We hadn't argued at all. It was the happiest evening for ages. I thought everything was all right again.

I looked out of the window at the park behind our house. Half past five in the afternoon on a beautiful late August afternoon. Children were playing in the sunshine. The old man was walking his dog, talking to it sometimes, before pulling it forward on its lead. He walked his dog at the same time every day. Malgosia and I used to watch him and laugh together, but lately we hadn't been laughing very much at all.

And that's when I knew, suddenly, that she had gone for good. That's why she was so loving yesterday. She was saying goodbye.

I rushed downstairs to the hall, my heart beating far too

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fast. I couldn't find our address book in its usual place. I ran into the music room and got my electronic organiser from my viola case. My fingers were shaking so much that it was difficult to make the damn thing work but I found Rosemary's number in the end and dialled it. Rosemary was my wife's best friend.

'Rosemary,' I said when she answered, 'where is Malgosia? Where's she gone?'

'Who is this?' she answered, confused. 'Derek, is that you?'

'Yes,' I said, 'of course it's me. Where is she?'

'Derek, what's the matter? You sound terrible. What are you talking about?'

'Malgosia,' I said, 'where is she?'

'I don't know,' Rosemary said. I could hear her children in the background. 'Isn't she there?'

'Of course she isn't here. That's why I'm asking you,' I shouted.

'There's no need to talk to me like that,' she said angrily. I forced myself to calm down and apologised. Rosemary asked me to tell her what the matter was. So I did.

'You're not going to like this, Derek,' she said when I had finished, 'but I haven't got any idea where she is. I mean, I knew you weren't that happy together –'

'What?' I interrupted. 'What did you say?'

She must have been worried by the tone of my voice.

'Oh nothing,' she said, 'nothing. Just that Margie' – that's what she called her – 'said that sometimes you and she . . . well, that life wasn't always very much fun.'

'So you knew she was going to leave?' I insisted.

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‘No. No, of course I didn’t,’ Rosemary replied, and I wondered whether to believe her. ‘Look, Derek,’ she went on, ‘I’m sorry. I’ve got to go. But I’ll ring you this evening, all right. I don’t know anything about this, honestly.’

‘You can’t go now,’ I cried. I was desperate.

‘Hey, Derek,’ she said, cutting in. ‘It’s Wednesday, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, but –’

‘So have you rung the theatre? They might know something.’

The theatre. Of course. Why hadn’t I thought of that? I slammed down the telephone receiver without saying goodbye. Then I picked it up again and dialled the number of the Drury Lane Theatre Royal. That’s where Malgosia was playing trumpet three nights a week in the musical ‘Miss Saigon’.

In a few minutes I was talking to Duncan Gardner, the musical director of the orchestra for the show.

‘Duncan,’ I said, ‘is Malgosia there?’

‘No. Of course not.’

‘Why “of course not”?’ I asked.

‘She’s left the band,’ he said, sounding surprised.

‘She’s what?’

‘Derek,’ he said, ‘what’s going on? I don’t understand. She said that she was going away. I thought she was going somewhere with you.’

‘Do you know where she was going?’ I asked.

‘Derek, what on earth is going on?’

‘Did she say where she was going?’ I asked again.

‘No. She just said she was leaving England.’

‘Leaving England?!’

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‘Yes,’ he said, ‘leaving England.’

I sat there with my mind in chaos. Leaving England? But where was she going? The world is a big place.

‘Derek, Derek, are you all right?’ I heard Duncan say.

‘Sure,’ I replied, ‘I’m fine,’ and I put down the receiver. I looked at myself in the mirror above the telephone and saw my terrified face, the face of a man whose wife had left him. I felt like a fool.

I didn’t want to make the next call, but I couldn’t think what else to do. I dialled the number of Malgosia’s parents in Warsaw. Perhaps my wife had run back to Poland, her country, the country she had left when she came to study music in London ten years before.

Someone picked up the phone in Warsaw. They spoke in Polish, which was not surprising, of course, but it is a language I have never been able to use.

‘Hello,’ I said, ‘is that Teresa?’ Teresa is Malgosia’s mother. The voice on the other end said something more in Polish. I couldn’t understand a word of it.

‘Can I speak to Teresa?’ I said, ‘This is Derek. From England. Malgosia’s husband.’

There was a silence at the other end of the line. Then the voice started speaking again, quickly, trying to tell me something. I suddenly realised that it was Malgosia’s grandmother. She didn’t speak a word of English and I couldn’t say anything in Polish. So I said goodbye and put down the phone.

I went to the kitchen and got a bottle of wine. I opened it and poured myself a glass and drank it. Then I poured another. And another. I wondered what to do. It was beginning to get dark outside. I thought of Malgosia sitting