

Coming Up Next

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Published by Harper Perennial

Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

In hindsight, the holiday had probably not been a good idea. Two weeks earlier, Katie Fisher had presented the Friday-morning programme, said, ‘Thanks for watching,’ to a nation in nightwear, and gone to collect her suitcase from the newsroom. Then, an unusual occurrence: she had been called in by the editor. He was normally too busy shouting at his minions to notice the presenters coming and going.

She had stepped breezily into his office and waited for him to say something. It was such a long time coming that, mentally, she started to take his clothes off. Yes, she thought. Unattractive underpants with his skinny little legs hanging out the bottom like spotty Twiglets. Possibly a fat pudenda, lightly sprinkled with ginger hairs. So, I have to make one choice to save the life of my brother. Lick the Twiglets. Or cut off my hand. No, too easy. Lick the Twiglets or . . .

‘Sorry?’ she asked.

‘I said,’ he put his fingers together, ‘that the annual research had thrown up some interesting information.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes.’

‘What?’

‘Well ...’ He paused.

She got the impression he was enjoying this.

‘They seem to be having a few problems with your, erm, allegedly quirky sense of humour.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘The viewers – and therefore the advertisers – appear to find your brand of humour unappetizing. Unappealing. Unfunny. Irritating.’

Katie had never been good at concealing what she thought. The viewers could always tell exactly how she felt about the celebrity she was interviewing, or the story she was telling. So Simon could see that she hadn’t been expecting what he’d just told her. And, yes, he was enjoying it. He didn’t like Katie. She had made it quite obvious that she thought he was repulsive, despite his considerable efforts when he had arrived at the breakfast-television station.

‘So, what do you want me to do about the fact that viewers have a problem?’

‘Nothing, really. I mean, it’s you, isn’t it? You’re the queen of the lame joke. The princess of puns. Top banana of the never-ending once-upon-a-story. The managing editor suggested I told you, in line with procedure. That’s all.’

In line with procedure? What was he talking about? ‘Well, thank you,’ she had said, after a pause, with a tight smile. ‘Thanks very much. In that case I’ll have a lovely holiday, shall I? Good. See you in a couple of weeks, then. And I’ll go via the humour-bypass surgeon and see if I can check in for a quick one. I’ve got BUPA, after all.’

On the plane, though, she had spent the entire flight worrying.

No matter which way she cut it, with a vodka and tonic or the next passenger’s roll and cheese (‘Are you sure you don’t mind? Just that I haven’t eaten since five this morning ...’), it didn’t look good.

The advertisers ruled the airwaves. They wanted mothers with children – they *craved* mothers with children. If they didn’t get their mothers with children they were like King Kong after a back-sac-and-crack wax. They were hurt and angry. They wanted to be soothed. Unlike King Kong, they were more articulate. They’d be demanding changes. And while nobody editing or managing a show would fire the presenters just because the advertisers said so, they’d certainly have a quick look at them.

At thirty-five thousand feet, Katie couldn’t stop wondering if her career was coming off the rails. Four years of four a.m. starts and going to bed at eight p.m. Four years of relationships crashing on the rocks of her bedtime. And possibly, if she was honest, her bed. She had never used the excuse that she had a headache. There had been no need. The faint snoring usually

gave away her terminal tiredness. She would be ready, waiting, willing and able in her rubber nurse's outfit, with a Rabbit vibrator primed and ready to go, but if the foreplay lasted longer than five minutes, the Rabbit was the only thing still buzzing.

She wasn't old, she thought. Strictly, yes, she was middle-aged, if you considered middle age to be halfway through life, but she didn't look old. How she felt was a different matter: more Volvo than Ferrari, more bedsocks than stockings.

Had her jokes gone off?

Or had they only just noticed the smell?

She groaned out loud. Which seemed to upset the man in the aisle seat. She was feeling bloody-minded and did it again, with gusto.

He gave her a look, but no more.

That was the wonderful thing about travelling with the British: in general, they didn't like to make a fuss.

If they sacked her, would she go quietly?

Right, she thought. I'll think about this for half an hour and then I'll enjoy my holiday. Do what Dad says: 'Don't worry about the things you can do something about. Just do something about them. Don't worry about the things you can't do anything about, because you can't do anything about them.'

Having made that decision, she proceeded to get more and more depressed about it. She thought about all the worst things that could happen. They gathered around her, looking worse and worse and worse.

Eventually she checked her watch, flagged down a passing stewardess and ordered the equivalent of an elephant tranquilizer in vodka.

The hangover had lasted two days. But most of the holiday had been wonderful. She had gone to Barbados to stay with some friends in a beautiful house on the west coast. She had rarely seen daylight. Barely eaten a meal.

She had kissed assorted men, none of whom she'd be able now to pick out in a police line-up, and only put on a pound. She could hazily remember an odd incident with a banana. Had she eaten it? Who *was* that bloke? And then she had answered the call on her mobile from her agent.

Jim Break had been brusque and to the point. 'Hi, Katie. I'm not going to beat around the bush. They're not renewing your contract. I understand you spoke to Simon before your holiday ...'

Katie, eight hours away by plane, five hours behind in time, had been about to drink her first coffee of the day. She put down her cup with a shaky hand. So it had happened. Her lovely job – her lovely, well-paid job, which she had worked so hard to get – was an ex-job.

'Katie?'

'I'm still here,' she said.

'We'll have a longer talk when you're back from Barbados,' he said, 'but I do need you to make a decision now, about whether you want to go back on air for the weeks you'd be owed, if you

got paid to the end of your contract, or take it as holiday. You don't have to tell me right now, but by the close of today. As in, within the next ... what time is it now? ... three hours. Remind me what time it is there.'

'Ten in the morning.'

'Right. So, if you ring me before lunch?'

'What do you think I should do?'

'Entirely up to you. There are upsides and downsides to whichever option you choose. But they'll announce it on Monday with the name of your successor.'

He could hear her breathing.

'Keera, I assume?' she finally said.

'Yes. Listen, I'll call you later when you've had time to think. Ring me if you need to talk it over.'

She had phoned him ten minutes before the deadline and spent her last few days in Barbados in a haze of rum punch.

The flight home had been a blur. She had avoided eye contact with everyone, apart from the stewardess with the drinks trolley.

Her mouth felt as if she'd been sucking on the lint from a tumble-dryer, and her eyes were as pink as soft-set raspberry jelly when she let herself back into her flat in Chelsea. She put down her bag, opened it and then, on autopilot, began to unpack everything into the laundry basket.

She ought to get on with whatever needed to be done about the job. Was there anything she could do on a Sunday?

She went to the fridge, opened it. Yes, it definitely needed tidying. She put the beers on the left, moved the vodka and

white wine to the right. She wiped the mayonnaise bottle and ate the pickled dill cucumbers so that she could throw away the jar. Then she took all the tins out of their cupboard and stacked them according to the size of the vegetables within. She retuned the radio.

She could procrastinate no longer. She pressed play on her answerphone.

It was Jim. 'Call me when you get in. You don't need to go to bed early on Sunday night.' Followed by The Boss. 'Just a brief message, Katie. I'll explain when you ring me. You won't be needed for the show on Monday.'

She stood in the kitchen, staring out of the window at a pair of ladybirds in the first throes of love. I should have gone caravanning in Shropshire to save the five thousand quid I'll be needing for the bloody mortgage, she thought. I should have seen this coming. I should have done something. I should have ... Should I have cleaned the windows so that I don't constantly have wildlife fornicating on them?

Bugger Dad's advice on worrying. What the hell was she going to do to pay the mortgage?

CHAPTER TWO

Katie Fisher had been bequeathed two outstanding attributes by her parents: wavy auburn hair (mother) and the ability to talk on any given subject for any amount of time (father). Both had stood her in good stead.

She had done her journalism training the hard way. After college, she had slept with the deputy editor of the local weekly newspaper – he had resembled a tapeworm in a stripy jumper. She had moved fairly quickly to a local daily paper, partly because of the tapeworm’s refusal to accept that hanging about with his hook out was not going to rekindle their ‘romance’.

A few years later, she had decided it was time to move on. She had performed various lewd acts on a man who had claimed he could get her into radio. Then she had discovered he meant hospital radio. After that, she checked the labels: if they did not display the four cherries in a row, she didn’t display her ample charms.

Her move into television had come at some cost to her sofa. But, then, the sofa was what she aspired to. The sofa of *Hello*

Britain! The cost to her own, in reupholstering and stain removal, was a small price to pay for her dream job. She had a beautiful penthouse flat in Chelsea with views over the river, a silver Audi TT and an enormous mortgage. When she had taken it on, she had experienced a moment of panic. But what was the worst that could happen?

She had smiled at that. Her brother had once asked the same thing when they had decided to hit tennis balls for the dog from her bedroom window instead of taking him for a walk. The neighbours had had rather a lot to say on the subject of wrecked greenhouses, and the dog had had to wear a cone round his neck for months to stop him gnawing at the stitches.

She had signed the mortgage document with a flourish, and her years at *Hello Britain!* had ensured that she'd paid off a fair chunk. Nevertheless . . .

She lay on the leather sofa and pondered her future. And thought about the reaction of her friends, most of whom would be obviously upset for her, but probably secretly thrilled. Who had said something about it taking a strong man not to see the rise of a friend without thinking it should have been them up there – and not to gloat as that friend fell?

Whoever.

She needed to speak to someone.

Andi. She was in the business yet not. Andi was a producer at Greybeard Television, which made some of the best-known programmes on the box, mostly dramas and serials with style.

'Andi? It's me. I've been sacked.'

‘God. Why?’

‘Not being funny. Or something. Probably not *just* not being funny. It was sort of intimated before I went on holiday, and when I was on holiday the sharpened axe fell on my sunburned neck. I was given the option of working out the month left on my contract or taking it as holiday. I chose to work it out. Then they came back and said they’d decided otherwise. So I don’t even get the chance to say goodbye.’

‘Or slag them off?’ asked Andi.

‘As if I’d commit career suicide like that. My replacement is the wicked witch of the north, Keera Bloody Keethley. I bet she’s been putting on that fake poor-Katie face she does so well. It’s amazing she can manoeuvre her toothbrush of a morning, she’s holding so many knives to plunge into people’s backs.’

‘You always said you liked her.’

‘*Quite* liked her.’

Katie pulled out three eyelashes in a clump. It was a habit that left her with occasional bald spots, but was curiously satisfying. Not top of her list – like tidying. Not up there with sneezing either. But a bloody close third. She selected one and chewed it.

‘Katie?’

‘Yes – sorry. Just thinking about all those bastards who are going to be *sooooo* happy about this. Colin the news editor for one. He’s never liked me – not since I threatened to report him for fondling the barmaid at the Queen’s Head and Artichoke. Do you know how hard I worked for that bloody job? All those

wankers I had to shag? Not to mention all that training. Law, friggig public administration, shorthand. Talking of which, do you remember Don – with the really short arms and small hands?’

‘I don’t know. Erm. Local radio?’

‘No. Don. The editor of the *Evening News*.’

‘Sorry. There have been rather a lot.’

‘Thanks for reminding me.’

Don had been short, balding, with a few teeth missing at the back, and a round, hard stomach – from endless business lunches and copious quantities of ale – which he was fond of patting as he said, ‘All bought and paid for.’

‘Don,’ Katie had said, ‘you was robbed. Surely you could have got a bigger one for all that money.’ She had given him a smile and raised her eyebrows.

That had been all he had needed to leap on her after a drunken lunch just down the road from the newspaper offices. He’d given her a peach of a job, doing fashion and motoring. Noses out of joint all round because of the freebies.

‘Anyway. He was the one I nicknamed Mr Horse.’

‘Oh, right. The one who liked you to get toggged up in jodhpurs and whip him while he whinnied?’ She laughed. ‘How could I forget him? Didn’t you call him “Horse By Name But Not By Nature”?’

‘A veritable nub of a knob.’ Katie smiled. She looked at her elegant feet propped up on the sofa. Would anyone else give her a job? Once she had been young and thrusting. Now there were

so many others – much younger. And still capable of thrusting without the hips squeaking.

‘You’ll get another, don’t worry,’ said Andi.

‘What? Man?’

‘No. Job.’

‘Who’ll want me after it gets out I’ve been sacked? There’ll be some crap statement about how it was mutual, how I want to spend more time with my microwave, how I’m happy for Keera and wish her all the best, and in ten years’ time, I’ll be invited on to the forty-eighth *I’m A Nonentity Get Me Out of Here*. I’ll be the first to get voted off. And the only way I’ll get back on air is if I develop some sort of terminal illness or something. Which, let’s face it, would be terminal. And unpleasant.’

She paused. Then: ‘Do you think I should disappear?’

‘Well, I suppose you could go and bury yourself in Yorkshire for a bit, let your parents take the strain. Would your mum and dad mind you hanging round the house like a depressed weather front, all cloud with occasional periods of heavy rain?’

Suddenly Katie thought that might be exactly what she needed. Dad trying out recipes from his Jamie Oliver cookbook, practising the saxophone to drown out the sound of her mum ‘wittering on’ to her friends and relations. ‘Actually, you’re right. Mum’s taken up art. I can paint black canvases, slash them and sell them to the Tate Modern. A new career. And I can get fat on Dad’s food because it won’t matter any more. And eat Jaffa cakes with Mum. And sell the flat and live with them until

I get wrinkly. Talk about how I used to be famous, as I pick hairs out of my chin and dribble egg on my saggy jumper?’

‘You’ll be fine,’ murmured Andi.

Katie thought of her bedroom at the back of the house, looking over the orchard and Dad’s vegetable patch-cum-burial ground: three dogs, two rabbits mown down with a rotavator, one inexpertly hibernating tortoise, and a pigeon that had broken its neck by flying into a window.

She put down the phone and burst into tears. She cried as she put the washing on and cried while she was watching television, in the absence of anything more constructive to do.

She ran a bath, put on Richard Strauss’s *Four Last Songs* and cried some more. She cried until the bath was cold. She got out and looked in the mirror. A swollen, red-faced, rubbery-lipped thing gazed back at her. With a clump of lashes missing on the right eyelid. ‘Oh, yes,’ she said with a thick voice. ‘No doubt about it. I’ll get a job just like that. First sign of madness, talking to yourself,’ she added.

‘Right,’ she said, and opened the medicine cabinet. ‘Party time.’ She took out the Benylin for throaty coughs. Went upstairs and got the whisky bottle. Put on a CD by Leonard Cohen. Sank into both bottles and further into misery.

Hours later, she woke up. Not an ounce of moisture in her entire body. She had not felt so wretched since Matt Dougal had dumped her when she was sixteen. She had cried non-stop for three days and sworn she would never let anyone dump her again. And she had held to that promise. Any man who had got

close, she had split up with as soon as she'd seen signs of waning interest. One had told her he had wanted to knit his soul with hers and had mapped out a future with her in the stars. He had been the most romantic boyfriend ever. She had arrived at his flat one night to be serenaded by a violin and cello duo in the corner of the sitting room. They had tactfully left and he had led her through to his bed, strewn with rose petals. But one day he had said idly that the new girl at work reminded him of Catherine Zeta-Jones. And that had been it. The end. Many years later, he told her he had been planning to propose to her.

Anyway. No man had dumped her since Matt. But now she had been dumped as publicly as it was possible to be. Or she was *about* to be dumped as publicly as it was possible to be.

No point in thinking about that now. She'd be better off trying to get some sleep that didn't involve whisky and Benylin, so that she would look all right if the photographers took shots of her tomorrow.

Tears were leaking again.

She decided to clear out her wardrobes. She cried intermittently as she made an enormous pile of colourful suits in one corner of the room. Her breakfast-television outfits.

The Boss who had employed her to replace the veteran newscaster Beatrice Shah had told her that the viewers wouldn't care if she fucked up her interviews, but they did like to have a nice bright splash of colour in the morning while their kids were throwing the hamster around. 'It's not whether you're good or

not. It's how good you *look*. Frankly, we could put a talking gorilla on the sofa as long as it wore nice clothes,' he had said. 'But they're more expensive than humans. Never make the mistake of thinking you're irreplaceable.'

Maybe she had. She'd felt too secure in her work. She knew she'd done a good job. But Keera was younger, prettier . . . exotic.

Keera had come to *Hello Britain!* after losing her job as a radio disc jockey in Devon: she had done a raunchy video that had been featured in most of the tabloids. She had got herself an agent, and the management at the breakfast-television station had agreed to her doing a stint as a reporter in a small civil war they hadn't been thinking of sending anyone out to – no one from Britain holidayed there so most people hadn't heard of it. She wouldn't be paid, but she'd get a little bit of air-time. 'Nothing guaranteed, mind you,' The Boss had said.

She had worn tiny little vest tops and combat trousers, which had shown off her lean figure. And a little Tiffany heart necklace . . . the station had been swamped with replacements when she lost it.

She had come home to a heroine's welcome and endless pieces in glossy magazines. 'Beauty and the Beast of War'. 'My Heart Remains In Africa'. 'Out of Africa and Into the Top 10' – that was about how she'd become one of the top ten icons of the year. No one ever revealed that her reports had been written for her and faxed over for her to rehearse.

Katie had been supportive when Keera had started at *Hello Britain!* 'You don't need to be a trained journalist to do this job,'

she had told her, over coffee at the canteen one morning. 'Obviously it helps. The main thing, though, is to be interested. And as informed as possible.'

In the last few months, she had belatedly recognized the threat Keera posed to her previously unchallenged spot as queen of breakfast television.

Mike, her co-presenter, had told her not to be silly, that she had his unwavering support: 'You know I could never work as well with anyone else. We're like an old married couple, you and I. There'd be an outcry if Minnie Mouse pointed her bony arse at the sofa.' That had been his nickname for Keera ever since she'd squeaked during a live interview when she had mistakenly thought a car backfiring was a sniper.

Katie had laughed, but thought that *he* would have done more than squeak in that situation: he would have had to wash his little white Calvin Klein pants.

She checked her tear ducts. Almost dry. She took two Nurofen, and went to bed.

She woke up at dawn, and managed to wait until six o'clock before phoning her agent.