THE NIGHT SHE DISAPPEARED



LISA JEWELL

THE MILLION-COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
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First published in Great Britain by Century in 2021

www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 9781529125771
Trade paperback ISBN 9781529125788

Typeset in 11.75/16.63 pt Times New Roman
by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd, Pondicherry

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

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This book is dedicated to my dad

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Arachnophobia

Arachnophobia. It's one of those words that sounds as bad as that which it describes. The hard '*ack*' at the end of the second syllable suggestive of the repulsive angles of a spider's legs; the soft sweep of the '*fo*' like the awful wave of nausea that washes through your gut at the suggestion of a sudden movement across a wall or floor; the loud '*no*' at its centre the sound of your brain screaming, in disgust, nononono.

Tallulah suffers from arachnophobia.

Tallulah is in the dark.

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PART ONE

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1

June 2017

The baby is starting to grumble. Kim sits still in her chair and holds her breath. It's taken her all night to get him to sleep. It's Friday, a sultry midsummer's night, and normally she'd be out with friends at this time. Eleven o'clock: she'd be at the bar getting in the last round for the road. But tonight she's in joggers and a T-shirt, her dark hair tied up in a bun, contacts out, glasses on and a glass of lukewarm wine on the coffee table that she poured herself earlier and hasn't had a chance to drink.

She clicks the volume down on the TV using the remote and listens again.

There it is, the very early outposts of crying, a kind of dry, ominous chirruping.

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Kim has never really liked babies. She liked her own well enough, but did find the early years testing and ill-suited to her sensibilities. From the first night that both her children slept through the night, Kim has placed a very – possibly disproportionately – high value on an unbroken night. She had her kids young and easily had time enough and room in her heart for another one or two. But she could not face the prospect of sleepless nights again. For years she has protected her sleep vigilantly with the help of eye masks and earplugs and pillow sprays and huge tubs of melatonin that her friend brings back for her from the States.

And then, just over twelve months ago, her teenage daughter, Tallulah, had a baby. And now Kim is a grandmother at the age of thirty-nine and there is a crying baby in her house again, soon, it feels, *so soon*, after her own babies stopped crying.

For the most part, despite it happening ten years before she was ready for it, having a grandson has been blessing after blessing. His name is Noah and he has dark hair like Kim, like both of Kim's children (Kim only ever really liked babies with dark hair; blond-haired babies freak her out). Noah has eyes that oscillate between brown and amber depending on the light and he has solid legs and solid arms with circlets of fat at the wrists. He's quick to smile and laugh and he's happy to entertain himself, sometimes for as long as half an hour at a time. Kim looks after him when Tallulah goes to college and she occasionally gets a kick of panic in her gut at the realisation that she has not heard him make a noise for a few minutes. She rushes to his high chair or to the swing seat or to the corner of the sofa to check that he is still alive and finds him deep in thought whilst turning the pages of a fabric book.

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Noah is a dreamy baby. But he does not like to sleep and Kim finds this darkly stressful.

At the moment Tallulah and Noah live here with Kim, alongside Zach, Noah's father. Noah sleeps between them in Tallulah's double bed and Kim puts in her earplugs and plays some white noise on her smartphone and is generally saved from the nighttime cacophony of Noah's sleeplessness.

But tonight Zach has taken Tallulah out on what they're calling a 'date night', which sounds strangely middle-aged for a pair of nineteen-year-olds. They've gone to the very pub that Kim would normally be sitting in tonight. She slipped Zach a twenty-pound note as they were leaving and told them to have fun. It's the first time they've been out as a couple since before Noah was born. They split up while Tallulah was pregnant and got back together again about six months ago with Zach pledging to be the best dad in the world. And, so far, he's been true to his word.

Noah's crying has kicked in properly now and Kim sighs and gets to her feet.

As she does so her phone buzzes with a text message. She clicks it and reads.

Mum, there's some ppl here from college, they asked us back to theirs. Just for an hour or so. Is that OK? ☺

Then, as she's typing a reply, another message follows immediately.

Is Noah OK?

Noah is fine, she types. *Good as gold. Go and have fun. Stay as long as you like. Love you.*

Kim goes upstairs to Noah's cot, her heart heavy with the prospect of another hour of rocking and soothing and sighing and

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whispering in the dark while the moon hangs out there in the balmy midsummer sky, which still holds pale smudges of daylight, and the house creaks emptily and other people sit in pubs. But as she approaches him, the moonlight catches the curve of his cheek and she sees his eyes light up at the sight of her, hears his breath catch with relief that someone has come and sees his arms reach up to her.

She collects him up and places him against her chest and says, 'What's all the fuss now, baby boy, what's all the fuss?' and her heart suddenly expands and contracts with the knowledge that this boy is a part of her and that he loves her, that he is not seeking out his mother, he is content for *her* to come to him in the dark of night to comfort him.

She takes Noah into the living room and sits him on her lap. She gives him the remote control to play with; he loves to press the buttons, but Kim can tell he's too tired to press buttons, he wants to sleep. As he grows heavy on top of her, she knows she should put him back into his cot, good sleep hygiene, good habits, all of that, but now Kim is tired too and her eyes grow heavy and she pulls the throw from the sofa across her lap and adjusts the cushion behind her head and she and Noah fall silently into a peaceful slumber.

Kim awakes suddenly several hours later. The brief midsummer night is almost over and the sky through the living-room window is shimmering with the first blades of hot morning sun. She straightens her neck and feels all the muscles shout at her. Noah is still heavy with sleep and she gently adjusts him so that she can reach her phone. It's four twenty in the morning.

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She feels a small blast of annoyance. She knows she told Tallulah to stay out as late as she liked, but this is madness. She brings up Tallulah's number and calls it. It goes straight to voicemail so she brings up Zach's number and calls it. Again, it goes to voicemail.

Maybe, she thinks, maybe they came in in the night and saw Noah asleep on top of her and decided that it would be nice to have the bed to themselves. She pictures them peering at her around the door of the living room and taking off their shoes, tiptoeing up the stairs and jumping into the empty bed in a tangle of arms and legs and playful, drunken kisses.

Slowly, carefully, she tucks Noah into herself and gets off the sofa. She climbs the stairs and goes to the door of Tallulah's room. It's wide open, just as she left it at eleven o'clock the night before when she came to collect Noah. She lowers him gently into his cot and, miraculously, he does not stir. Then she sits on the side of Tallulah's bed and calls her phone again.

Once more it goes straight to voicemail. She calls Zach. It goes to voicemail. She continues this ping-pong game for another hour. The sun is fully risen now; it is morning, but too early to call anyone else. So Kim makes herself a coffee and cuts herself a slice of bread off the farmhouse loaf she always buys Tallulah for the weekend and eats it with butter, and honey bought from the beekeeper down the road who sells it from his front door, and she waits and waits for the day to begin.

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2

August 2018

‘Mr Gray! Welcome!’

Sophie sees a silver-haired man striding towards them down the wood-panelled corridor. His hand is already extended towards them although he has another ten feet to cover.

He gets to Shaun and grasps his hand warmly, wrapping it inside both of his as if Shaun is a small child with cold hands that need warming up.

Then he turns to Sophie and says, ‘Mrs Gray! So lovely to meet you at last!’

‘Miss Beck, actually, sorry,’ says Sophie.

‘Ah, yes, of course. Stupid of me. I did know that. Miss Beck. Peter Doody. Executive Head.’

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Peter Doody beams at her. His teeth are unnaturally white for a man in his early sixties. 'And I hear you are a novelist?'

Sophie nods.

'What sort of books do you write?'

'Detective novels,' she replies.

'Detective novels! Well, well, well! I'm sure you'll find lots to inspire you here at Maypole House. There's never a dull day. Just make sure you change the names!' He laughs loudly at his own joke. 'Where have you parked?' he asks Shaun, indicating the driveway beyond the huge doorway.

'Oh,' says Shaun, 'just there, next to you. I hope that's OK?'

'Perfect, just perfect.' He peers over Shaun's shoulder. 'And the little ones?'

'With their mother. In London.'

'Ah, yes, of course.'

Sophie and Shaun follow Peter Doody, wheeling their suitcases down one of the three long corridors that branch off the main hallway. They push through double doors and into a glass tunnel that connects the old house to the modern block, and continue wheeling the cases out of a door at the back of the modern block and down a curved path towards a small Victorian cottage. It backs directly onto woodland and is surrounded by a ring of rosebushes just coming into late-summer bloom.

Peter takes a bunch of keys from his pocket and removes a pair on a brass ring. Sophie has seen the cottage once before, but only as the home of the previous head teacher filled with their furnishings and ephemera, their dogs, their photographs. Peter unlocks the door and they follow him into the flagstoned back

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hallway. The Wellington boots have gone, the waxed jackets and dog leads hanging from the hooks. There is a petrolic, smoky smell in here, and a cold draught coming up from between the floorboards which makes the cottage feel strangely wintery on this dog day of a long hot summer.

Maypole House is in the picturesque village of Upfield Common in the Surrey Hills. It was once the manor house of the village until twenty years ago when it was bought up by a company called Magenta that owns schools and colleges all over the world and turned into a private boarding school for sixteen-to-nineteen-year-olds who'd flunked their GCSEs and A levels first time round. So, yes, a school for failures, in essence. And Sophie's boyfriend Shaun is now the new head teacher.

'Here.' Peter tips the keys into Shaun's hand. 'All yours. When is the rest of your stuff arriving?'

'Three o'clock,' replies Shaun.

Peter checks the time on his Apple Watch and says, 'Well, then, looks like you've got plenty of time for a pub lunch. My treat!'

'Oh.' Shaun looks at Sophie. 'Erm, we brought lunch with us, actually.' He indicates a canvas bag on the floor by his feet. 'But thank you, anyway.'

Peter seems unperturbed. 'Well, just for future reference, the local pub is superb. The Swan & Ducks. Other side of the common. Does a kind of Mediterranean, meze, tapas type of menu. The calamari stew is incredible. And an excellent wine cellar. Manager there will give you a discount when you tell him who you are.'

He looks at his watch again and says, 'Well, anyway. I'll let you both settle in. All the codes are here. You'll need this one to

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let the van in when it arrives and this one is for the front door. Your card will operate all the interior doors.' He hands them a lanyard each. 'And I will be back tomorrow morning for our first day's work. FYI, you may see some strangely dressed folks around; there's been an external residential course running here all week, some kind of *Glee*-type thing. It's the last day today, they'll be leaving tomorrow, and Kerryanne Mulligan, the matron – you met her last week, I believe?'

Shaun nods.

'She's looking after the group so you don't need to worry yourself about them. And that, I think, is that. Except, oh …' He strides towards the fridge and opens the door. 'A little something, from Magenta to you.' A single bottle of cheap champagne sits in the empty fridge. He closes the door, puts his hands into the pockets of his blue chinos and then takes them out again to shake both their hands.

And then he is gone and Shaun and Sophie are alone in their new home for the very first time. They look at each other and then around and then at each other again. Sophie bends down to the canvas bag and pulls out the two wine glasses she'd packed this morning as they'd prepared to leave Shaun's house in Lewisham. She unwraps them from tissue paper, rests them on the counter, pulls open the fridge and grabs the champagne.

Then she takes Shaun's outstretched hand and follows him to the garden. It's west-facing and cast in shade at this time of the day, but it's still just warm enough to sit with bare arms.

While Shaun uncorks the champagne and pours them each a glass, Sophie lets her gaze roam across the view: a wooden gate

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between the rosebushes that form the boundary of the back garden leads to a velvety green woodland interspersed with patches of lawn onto which the midday sun falls through the tree-tops into pools of gold. She can hear the sound of birds chittering in the branches. She can hear the champagne bubbles fizzing in the wine glasses. She can hear her own breath in her lungs, the blood passing through the veins on her temples.

She notices Shaun looking at her.

'Thank you,' he says. 'Thank you so much.'

'What for!'

'You know what for.' He takes her hands in his. 'How much you're sacrificing to be here with me. I don't deserve you. I really don't.'

'You do deserve me. I'm "sloppy seconds", remember?'

They smile wryly at each other. This is one of the many unpleasant things that Shaun's ex-wife Pippa had found to say about Sophie when she'd first found out about her. Also, 'She looks much older than thirty-four,' and, 'She has a strangely flat backside.'

'Well, whatever you are, you're the best. And I love you.' He kisses her knuckles hard and then lets her hands go so that she can pick up her glass.

'Pretty, isn't it?' Sophie says dreamily, staring through the back gate and into the woods. 'Where do they go?'

'I have no idea,' he replies. 'Maybe you should go for a wander after lunch?'

'Yes,' says Sophie. 'Maybe I will.'

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Shaun and Sophie have only been together for six months. They met when Sophie came to Shaun's school to give a talk about publishing and writing to a group of his A-level English students. He took her for lunch as a 'thank you' and at first she felt nervous, as if she'd done something wrong; the association between being alone with an older male teacher and having done something wrong was buried so deep into her psyche she couldn't override it. But then she'd noticed that he had very, very dark brown eyes, almost black, and that his shoulders were broad and that he had a wonderful warm, hearty laugh and a soft mouth and no wedding band, and then she realised that he was flirting with her and then there was an email from him in her inbox a day later, sent from his private email address, thanking her for coming in and wondering if she might like to try the new Korean place they'd chatted about at lunch the previous day, maybe on Friday night, and she'd thought, I have never been on a date with a man in his forties, I have never been on a date with a man who wears a tie to work, and I have not, in fact, been on a date for five full years, and I really would like to try the new Korean place, so why not?

It was during their first date that Shaun told her he was leaving the big secondary school in Lewisham where he was head of sixth form at the end of the term to be a head teacher at a private boarding sixth-form college in the Surrey Hills. Not because he wanted to be in the private sector, working in a mahogany-lined office, but because his ex-wife Pippa was moving their twins from the perfectly nice state primary they'd both been at for three years to an expensive private school and expected him to contribute half of their school fees.

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At first the implications of this development hadn't really hit Sophie. March tumbled into April tumbled into May tumbled into June and she and Shaun became closer and closer and their lives became more and more intertwined and then Sophie met Shaun's twins, who let her put them to bed and read them stories and comb their hair and then it was the summer holidays and she and Shaun started to spend even more time together, and then one night, drinking cocktails on a roof terrace overlooking the Thames, Shaun said, 'Come with me. Come with me to Maypole House.'

Sophie's gut reaction had been no. No no no no no. She was a Londoner. She was independent. She had a career of her own. A social life. Her family lived in London. But as July turned to August and Shaun's departure drew ever closer and the fabric of her life started to feel as though it was stretching out of shape, she turned her thinking round. Maybe, she thought, it would be nice to live in the countryside. Maybe she could focus more on work, without all the distractions of city living. Maybe she'd enjoy the status of being the head teacher's partner, the cachet of being the first lady of such an exclusive place. She went with Shaun to visit the school and she walked around the cottage and felt the warm solidity of the terracotta tiles beneath her feet, smelled the sensuous fragrance of wild roses, of freshly mowed grass, of sun-warmed jasmine through the back door. She saw a space below a window in the hallway that was just the right size for her writing desk, with a view across the school grounds. She thought, I am thirty-four. Soon I will be thirty-five. I have been alone for a long, long time. Maybe I should do this ridiculous thing.

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And so she said yes.

She and Shaun made the most of every minute of their last few weeks in London. They sat on every pavement terrace in South London, ate every kind of obscure ethnic cuisine, watched films in multi-storey car parks, wandered around pop-up food fairs, picnicked in the park to the background sounds of grime music and sirens and diesel engines. They spent ten days in Mallorca in a cool Airbnb in downtown Palma with a balcony overlooking the marina. They spent weekends with Shaun's children and took them to the South Bank to run through the fountains, for al fresco lunches at Giraffe and Wahaca, to the Tate Modern, to the playgrounds in Kensington Gardens.

And then she'd let her one-bedroom flat in New Cross to a friend, cancelled her gym membership, signed out of her Tuesday night writers' group, packed some boxes and joined Shaun here, in the middle of nowhere.

And now, as the sun shines down through the tops of the towering trees, splashing dapples on to the dark fabric of her dress and the ground beneath her feet, Sophie starts to feel the beginning of happiness, a sense that this decision borne of pragmatism might in fact have been some kind of magical act of destiny unfurling, that they were meant to be here, that this will be good for her, good for both of them.

Shaun takes their lunch things through to the kitchen. She hears the tap go on and the clatter of dishes being laid down in the butler's sink.

'I'm going for a wander,' she calls to Shaun through the open window.

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She turns to put the latch on the gate as she leaves the back garden and as she does so her eye is caught by something nailed to the wooden fence.

A piece of cardboard, a flap torn from a box by the look of it.

Scrawled on it in marker and with an arrow pointing down to the earth, are the words ‘Dig Here’.

She stares at it curiously for a moment. Maybe, she thinks, it’s left over from a treasure trail, a party game, or a team-building exercise from the *Glee* course that is finishing today. Maybe, she thinks, it’s a time capsule.

But then something else flashes through her mind. A jolting déjà vu. A certainty that she has seen this exact thing before: a cardboard sign nailed to a fence. The words ‘Dig Here’ in black marker pen. A downward-pointing arrow. She has seen this before.

But she cannot for the life of her remember where.

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3

June 2017

Zach's mum is older than Kim. Zach is her youngest child; she has another four, all girls, all much older than him. Her name is Megs. She answers the door to Kim in combat shorts and a voluminous green linen top, sunglasses on her head, a patch of sunburn on the bridge of her nose.

'Kim,' she says. Then she turns immediately to Noah and beams at him. 'Hello, my beautiful bubba,' she says. She chucks him under the chin, and then glances back at Kim. 'Everything OK?'

'Have you seen the kids?' Kim says, hitching Noah onto her other hip. She walked here without the pram, it's hot and Noah is heavy.

'Tallulah, you mean? And Zach?'

'Yeah.' She shifts Noah again.

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'No. I mean, they're at yours, aren't they?'

'No, they went to the pub last night, no sign of them now and they're not answering their phones. I thought maybe they might have come back to yours to crash.'

'No, love, no. Just me and Simon here. Do you want to come in? We're just out in the garden. We can try calling them again?'

In Megs's back garden, Kim lowers Noah down on the grass next to a push-along plastic toy that he attempts to pull himself up on to. Megs takes out her phone and presses in her son's number. Megs's husband Simon nods at Kim curtly and then turns back to his newspaper. Kim's always had a horrible feeling that Simon finds her attractive and that his offhand manner is his way of dealing with how uncomfortable this makes him feel.

Megs scowls and ends the call. 'Straight through to voicemail,' she says. 'Let me call Nick.'

Kim throws her a questioning look.

'You know, the barman from the Ducks? Hold on.' She prods the screen of her phone with blue acrylic nails. 'Nick, love, it's Megs. How are you? How's your mum? Good. Good. Listen, were you working last night? You didn't happen to see Zach in there, did you?'

Kim watches Megs nod a lot, listens to her making receptive noises. She pulls a lump of earth from Noah's hand just as he's about to press it into his mouth and waits patiently.

Finally Megs ends the call. 'Apparently,' she says, 'Zach and Tallulah went off after the pub to someone's house, someone Tallulah knows from college.'

'Yeah, I know that. But any idea who?'

'Scarlett someone. And a couple of others. Nick seemed to think they were heading out of the village. They went in a car.'

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'Scarlett?'

'Yes. Nick said she's one of the posh kids from the Maypole.'

Kim nods. She's never heard of a Scarlett. But then Tallulah doesn't really talk much to her about college. Once she's home, Noah is pretty much the only topic of conversation in the house.

'Anything else?' she asks, pulling Noah onto her lap.

'That's all he had, I'm afraid.' Megs smiles at Noah and stretches her arms out towards him, but he curls himself closer to Kim and she sees Megs's smile falter. 'Should we be worried, do you think?'

Kim shrugs. 'I honestly don't know.'

'Have you tried calling Tallulah's friends?'

'I don't have any numbers for them. They're all on her phone.'

Megs sighs and leans back into her chair. 'It's strange,' she says. 'If it wasn't for the baby, I'd just assume they were sleeping something off somewhere, you know, they're so young, and God knows the things I got up to at their age. But they're both so devoted, aren't they, to Noah. It just seems a bit …'

'I know.' Kim nods. 'It does.'

Kim wishes that she and Megs were closer, but Megs never seemed to believe in Zach and Tallulah as a couple and then after Noah was born she backed off completely for a while, barely visiting Noah and acting like a distracted aunt when she did. And now she's missed her moment with Noah, who recognises her but doesn't know that she's important.

'Anyway,' Kim says. 'I'll go and do some research into this Scarlett girl. See what I can dig up. But hopefully, I won't need to. Hopefully, they'll be home by the time I get back, looking sheepish.'

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Megs smiles. ‘You know what,’ she says, brightly, in a tone of voice that suggests that really she just wants to get back to relaxing in the garden in the sun, that she really isn’t in the mood for worry, ‘I bet you anything they are.’

In Tallulah’s room, Kim rifles through the contents of her schoolbag. Tallulah is studying Social Care; she wants to be a social worker. Most of her coursework is done at home and she only has to go into college three times a week. Kim watches her at the bus stop from the front window sometimes, her fresh-faced baby in her casual college gear, her hair tied back, clutching a folder to her chest. Nobody would ever guess that she has a child of her own at home, she looks so young.

Kim finds a planner in the bag and flicks through it. It’s full of Tallulah’s dense, somewhat inelegant handwriting – she’d started off left-handed and forced herself to learn to write with her right hand to fit in when she was at primary school. There’s no point looking for phone numbers – no one writes down phone numbers any more – but maybe Scarlett’s name will appear on a class list or some such.

And there it is, glued down and folded up on the back inside cover of the planner: ‘Student Contacts’. Kim scans it quickly, her finger coming to rest on the name ‘Scarlett Jacques: Student Event Planning Committee’.

And there’s her email address.

Kim immediately starts to type a message:

Scarlett. This is Tallulah Murray’s mum, Kim. Tallulah hasn’t come home since going out last night and isn’t

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answering her phone and I wondered if you had any idea where she might be? A friend said she was with someone called Scarlett. Please call me on this number as soon as possible. Many thanks.

She presses send and then exhales and rests the phone on her lap.

Downstairs the front door clicks shut. It's 2 p.m. and it'll be her son Ryan home from work. He works at the grocer's in the village every Saturday, saving up for his big summer holiday to Rhodes in August, his first without his mum, just with friends.

'Are they back?' he calls up the stairs to her.

'Nope,' she calls back down.

She hears him dropping his keys on a surface, throwing his trainers into the pile of shoes by the front door, then bounding up the stairs.

'Seriously?' he says. 'Have they called?'

'No. Not a word.'

She tells him about Megs calling Nick at the pub, and the girl called Scarlett and as she talks her phone rings with an unknown number.

'Hello?'

'Oh, hi, is this Lula's mum?'

'Yes, hi, this is Kim.'

'Hi. It's Scarlett here. I just got your email.'

Kim's heart begins to race painfully, then skitter.

'Oh,' she says, 'Scarlett. Thank you. I just wondered—'

Scarlett cuts in. 'They were at my house,' she says. 'They left at about three a.m. That's all I can tell you.'

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Kim blinks; her head rocks back slightly. 'And were they … did they … say where they were going?'

'They said they were going to get a cab home.'

Kim doesn't like the tone of Scarlett's voice. She has one of those clipped, chilly voices that tells of four-poster beds and bohemian private schools and gravel on the driveway. But she also sounds disinterested, as though talking to Kim is beneath her somehow.

'And did they seem OK? I mean, had they had a lot to drink?'

'I guess, yeah. Lula was sick. That's why they left.'

'She threw up?'

'Yeah.'

Kim pictures her slight, kind girl, bent double over a flower bed, and her heart lurches.

'And did you see them? Get into a taxi?'

'No. They just left. And that was that.'

'And – sorry – but where do you live, Scarlett? Just so that I can ask around the local cab companies?'

'Dark Place,' she replies, 'near Upley Fold.'

'Street number?'

'No street number. Just that. Dark Place. Near Upley Fold.'

'Oh,' says Kim, drawing two rings around the words on the paper where she's written them down. 'OK. Thank you. And please, if you hear anything from either of them, will you give me a ring. I mean, I don't know how well you know Tallulah …'

'Not that well,' Scarlett interjects.

'Yes, well, she's not the type just to disappear, not to come home. And she has a baby, you know.'

There's a brief pause at the other end of the line. Then, 'No. I didn't know that.'

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Kim gives her head a small shake, tries to imagine how Zach and Tallulah could have spent a whole night with this girl without once mentioning Noah. 'Well, yes. She and Zach are parents. They have a son, he's twelve months old. So not coming home is kind of a big deal.'

There's another silence at the end of the line and then Scarlett says, 'Right, well, yeah.'

Kim says, 'Call me, please, if you hear anything.'

'Yeah,' says Scarlett. 'Sure. Bye.'

And then she ends the call.

Kim stares at her phone for a moment. Then she looks up at Ryan who has been watching the phone call curiously.

'Weird,' says Kim. She relays the detail of the call to her son.

'Shall we drive over there?' he suggests. 'To her house?'

'Scarlett's?'

'Yeah,' says Ryan. 'Let's go to Dark Place.'

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4

August 2018

Shaun heads into work early the following morning. Sophie stands at the door of the cottage and watches as he disappears up the glass passageway, towards the main school building. He turns at the double doors and waves at her and then he is gone.

The grounds of the school are full of people wheeling small cases behind them, heading towards the car park at the front of the school. The residential *Glee* course is over, summer is coming to an end, from tomorrow the boarding-school students will start returning. Cleaners wait in the shadows to enter their vacated rooms and prepare them for the new term.

She heads back into the cottage now. It's a pleasant house, functional. The air inside is clammy and cool with small windows grown over with ivy and wisteria branches that don't let in much

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light. It still smells of other people and there's that odd, damp bonfire smell in the hallway which seems to emanate from between the floorboards. She's covered the floorboards over with a runner and placed a reed diffuser on the sideboard, but it still lingers. It's going to take a while to make the cottage feel like home, but it will, she knows it will. Shaun's children are coming the weekend after next: that will bring it to life.

Sophie turns to a box that she is halfway through unpacking when there is a knock at the door.

'Hello?'

'Oh, hi! It's Kerryanne! The matron!'

Sophie opens the door and sees a woman with thick golden hair held back with sunglasses, bright blue eyes and a sun-burnished cleavage. She's wearing a maxi dress and bejewelled flip-flops. She does not look like a matron.

'Hi!' says Sophie, reaching out to shake her hand. 'Lovely to meet you!'

'You, too. You must be Sophie?'

'Correct!'

Kerryanne has a huge set of keys hanging from her hand. 'How are you settling in?' she says, passing the keys from one hand to the other. 'Got everything you need?'

'Yes!' says Sophie. 'Yes. Everything's just fine. Shaun's first day. He headed into work about ten minutes ago.'

'Yes, I just saw him. We exchanged pleasantries! Anyway, I wanted you to take my number, in case you need anything. Obviously, my primary function is student welfare, but I'll be keeping my eye out for you as well, I know how weird and new everything must be feeling, so please consider me to be your

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matron too. And if you're missing home and need a shoulder to cry on …'

Sophie blinks, not sure if she's being serious or not, but Kerryanne beams at her and says, 'Just joking. But honestly, anything you need – advice about the village, about the staff, the kids, *whatever*. Please just text me. And I'm on the second floor of Alpha block, just …' She crouches slightly to peer beneath an overhanging tree on the periphery of Shaun and Sophie's garden. '… that window there. With the balcony. Room number 205.' She passes Sophie a piece of paper with her details written on it in neat, schoolteachery script.

'Is it just you?'

'Most of the time, yeah. My daughter comes to stay sometimes, Lexie, she's a travel blogger so she comes and goes. But mostly it's just me. And I hear there'll be some little ones here from time to time?'

'Yes. Jack and Lily. Twins. They're seven.'

'Aw. Nice age. Right, well, any questions, anything at all, just ask. I've worked here for twenty years. I've lived in the village for nearly sixty. There's nothing I don't know about Upfield Common. In fact, you and Shaun should come over for a drink tonight, I can chew your ears off over a glass of wine.'

'Oh,' says Sophie. 'That would be lovely. Thank you.' She is about to thank her again and head back indoors, when her eye is caught by a pair of magpies taking flight from the treetops in the woodland beyond her garden. 'Those woods?' She gestures at them. 'Where do they lead?'

'Oh, you don't want to go too far into those woods.'

Sophie throws Kerryanne a questioning look.

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'They go on for miles. You'll get lost.'

'Yes, but where do they come out at?'

'Depends which direction you go in. There's a hamlet about a mile and a half that way.' She points to the left. 'Upley Fold. Church, village hall, a few houses. It's quite pretty. And if you head straight for a mile or so' – she points ahead – 'there's the back end of a big house. "Dark Place", it's called. Empty now. It belongs to a hedge-fund manager from the Channel Islands and his very glamorous wife.' She rolls her eyes slightly. 'Their daughter was a student here for a while actually. Scarlett. Amazingly talented girl. But I really wouldn't recommend trying to get there. Students head over there sometimes because there's an old swimming pool and a tennis court, but then they can't find their way back and there's no signal in the woods. We even had to get the bloody police involved once.' She rolls her eyes again.

Sophie nods. She's feeling a bristle of excitement. In London when she needs writing inspiration, she'll walk up to Dulwich or Blackheath and look at the grand old houses there and imagine the stories that lie within. Now she thinks of her walking stick and her compass and her water bottle and the opportunity to get some proper steps on her fitness app. The sun is hazy, it's about twenty-two degrees, perfect walking weather. The words 'old pool' and 'tennis court' swim through her imagination. She thinks of the dryness of the air of a house abandoned throughout a long, hot summer, the bleached lawns, the dusty, cracked flagstones, the birds nesting in grimy window casements.

She smiles at Kerryanne. 'I'll try to resist the urge,' she says.

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5

September 2016

Scarlett Jacques is standing next to Tallulah in the queue at the canteen. She is five foot ten, thin as a stick, her bleached hair is dyed pale blue and gathered on top of her head in a bundle and someone has drawn a tiny rainbow on her cheekbone. She's wearing a man's hoodie, with sleeves that come to her knuckles, and a pair of oversized jersey shorts, with high-top trainers. Her fingers are covered with heavyweight rings and her fingernails are painted green. She hovers over the miniature cereal boxes, her fingers dancing across their spines until they land, decisively, on Rice Krispies. She grabs it and adds it to her tray, next to a carton of chocolate soya milk and an apple.

Tallulah watches her head to the till. Her people are already gravitating towards her, following in her wake, ensuring that they

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will find space next to her once she has decided where she will sit. Tallulah picks up a ham sandwich and an orange juice and pays for them. She sits at a table close to Scarlett's.

Scarlett sits with her long legs stretched out, her huge high-top trainers resting on the chair opposite her, her shins still boasting a silky summer tan. She opens the chocolate soya milk and pours it on to her Rice Krispies, then lowers her face to the bowl and shovels them into her mouth with a spoon. At one point she spills chocolate milk down her chin and wipes it away with the cuff of her hoodie. She's with the kids she always hangs around with. Tallulah doesn't know their names. Scarlett and her clique all used to go to the posh school in Tallulah's village, Maypole House, which has a reputation for being for thick rich kids or rich kids with behavioural issues or rich kids with ADHD or rich kids with drug-abuse problems. They screech around the village in their convertible Mini Clubmans, stalk into the local pubs with their fake IDs and their loud voices and their rich-kid hair. In the Co-op you could hear them before you saw them, calling to each other across the aisles about how there was no fresh mozzarella, then talking across the heads of the village teenagers manning the tills as if they didn't even exist.

Now a small group of them has, for some unknown reason, ended up at the local FE college in Manton, the nearest town. Most of them are in their first year of a Fine Art Diploma. A couple of them are studying fashion. They clearly all come from families that had expected them to end up in good universities and instead had ended up at Manton College of Further Education and consequently there is a defensiveness about them.

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Tallulah puts a hand to her belly. The flesh there is still so loose and blubbery. It's been nearly three months since she gave birth, but it feels like half her insides are still made of baby. She just stopped breastfeeding a week ago and her breasts still leak sometimes and she keeps pads inside her bra. She switches on her phone and looks at the photo of Noah on her home screen. Her stomach flips, a mixture of unbearable love and fear. For three months she and Noah have been inseparable; her first day at college last week was the first time she'd left him for longer than a few minutes. Now he is half an hour away from her, a bus ride, six and a half miles away, and her arms feel weightless, her breasts feel heavy. She texts her mum. *All OK?*

Her mum replies immediately. *Just got back from looking at the ducks. All good.*

At the next table, Scarlett has zoned out from talking to her clique and is staring at her phone in a way that suggests she's not really looking at anything. She rolls the apple on the tray round and round with the fingers of her spare hand. Her face, in profile, is interesting; there is a bump in her nose, a slight curve to her chin. Her mouth is a thin line. But still she is somehow pretty, prettier than any other girl at the college, even the ones with perfect noses and pillow lips. She turns and catches Tallulah staring at her. She narrows her eyes, then turns away from her, drops her feet back to the floor, picks up the apple, tucks it in the pocket of her hoodie and leaves her group of friends without saying goodbye to any of them. As she passes Tallulah she narrows her eyes again, and Tallulah imagines for a split second that she sees a smile pass across her face.

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6

June 2017

Kim buckles Noah into his car seat and gives him one of his fabric books to flick through. Ryan sits in the back with him, while Kim gets into the driver's seat and switches on her phone to put the address into Google.

'Dark Place,' she says as she types. 'It's only a mile away, I wonder why I've never heard of it before.'

She slots her phone into its holder, presses start, and pulls out of the quiet cul-de-sac where she has lived since she was twenty-one years old. She hums distractedly under her breath. She doesn't want Noah to pick up on her anxiety, doesn't want Ryan to have to deal with her mounting feelings of dread and fear.

They drive through the sun-dappled lanes that connect Upfield Common with Manton, the nearest big town. Just before

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the large roundabout that marks the end of the village, Google tells them to turn right, up a tight dog-leg. The signpost is overgrown with buddleia, but Kim can just make out the words 'Upley Fold ½'.

It's a single-lane road and she drives cautiously in case she meets a vehicle coming the other way. It's nearly 4 p.m. and the sun is still high in the sky. She peers into the rear-view mirror and says to Ryan, 'Can you put the screen down on Noah's side? He's in full sun.'

Ryan leans across and pulls it down. Noah points at something in his fabric book and attempts to tell Ryan what it is, but he hasn't learned how to talk yet so Ryan just looks at the page and says, 'Yes, piggy, that's right. Piggy!'

Google tells her to take the next turning on the right. She cannot believe that there is actually a turning on the right, but there it is, a track with a line of meadow grass running down its centre, the hedgerows lower here so Kim can see blinding fields of rape, some cows silhouetted in the distance, a cluster of cottages. And then, after another few minutes, a pair of metal gates, a gravel driveway pointing due south, the name 'Dark Place' fashioned out of wrought iron, the suggestion of a turreted house in the distance. Kim turns off the engine and puts her phone into her handbag.

'What are you going to do?' asks Ryan.

Her eyes scan the gate for a doorbell or entry system, but there's nothing. A footpath runs alongside the gravel drive. She gets Noah's pushchair out of the boot and assembles it, batting midges out of her face. 'Come on,' she says to Ryan, unclipping the fastenings on Noah's seat. 'We're going to walk.'

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Ryan uses his phone to google Dark Place and he gives her a running commentary from its Wiki page as they walk. Kim enjoys the distraction from her thoughts.

'It was built in 1643,' he says. 'Wow, 1643,' he repeats. 'But most of it got burned down a few years after it was built. It lay empty for seventy years and that's how it got the name "Dark Place", because of the charred wood that surrounded it. The Georgian wing was added in 1721 and the Victorian wing in the late 1800s by a coffee plantation owner called Frederick de Thames. Who … God …' He pauses and scrolls back. 'Who fathered at least thirty-eight children in Colombia¸ seven in the UK and died of the Spanish flu when he was only forty-one. The house was left to his last wife, Carolina de Thames, who was only twenty when he died, and who passed it on in turn to her son, Lawrence. In 1931 three of Frederick's older children plotted to have Lawrence assassinated, but the man they hired to kill him got caught in a fox trap in the grounds of Dark Place and wasn't found until six days later when he'd been partially eaten by foxes and had his eyes pecked out by crows. He had the assassination orders on a signed form in the pocket of his coat. The three brothers who'd plotted Lawrence's death were sent to prison and Lawrence lived in the house until he died in 1998. Whereupon, with no living heirs, the house went back on the market and was purchased by an unknown buyer for nearly two million pounds in 2002.'

As they walk Kim casts her eyes across the ground, across the horizon, all around her, looking for signs of her daughter. She'd called all three local taxi companies before leaving the house and none of them had collected anyone from Dark Place last night.

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They walk for nearly ten minutes until finally she sees the house. It looks just as Kim had expected it to look from Ryan's description. A hodgepodge of disparate architectural styles, blended almost seamlessly together across three wings, set around a central courtyard. The sun sparkles off the diamonds of leaded windows on the left wing and the larger Victorian casement and sash windows on the right. It should be a mess, but it is not; it is exquisitely beautiful.

In the driveway are four cars and a golf buggy. Even from here, Kim can hear the sound of people splashing in a swimming pool. Ryan helps her pull Noah's buggy up the steps to the front door and she rings the bell.

A young man answers. A huge Saint Bernard dog follows behind and collapses, panting, at his feet. The man is bare-chested and holding a six-pack of beers in one hand and a tea towel in the other.

He looks from Kim to Noah to Ryan and back to Kim. 'Hi!'

'Oh, hi. My name is Kim. I wondered if Scarlett was around? Or her parents?'

'Er, yeah. Yeah, sure. Hold on a sec.' He turns and yells out, 'Mum! Someone for you at the door!'

Behind him, Kim sees a pale stone staircase, with a striped runner up the middle. She sees modern art and designer light fittings and then a woman in a loose white sundress and white flip flops appears. The dog stands heavily to greet the woman, who peers at Kim curiously through the door.

The boy smiles at Kim and then disappears.

'Yes?' says the woman.

'Sorry to disturb you like this, on a Saturday.'

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The woman looks across her shoulder at the gravel sweep and says, 'How did you get here?'

'Oh,' says Kim, 'we parked at the gate, and walked.'

'But that's half a mile! You should have rung the bell.'

'Well, we looked, but we couldn't see one.'

'Urgh, yes, sorry, it's a movement sensor. You need to stand over it. Lots of people miss it. You should have called.'

'Well, I didn't have a number. Or at least, I had a number but I didn't realise how far the house was going to be from the gate, but anyway, it's fine. It's just … I'm looking for my daughter.'

'Oh,' she says, 'are you Mimi's mum? I think she left this morning …'

'No,' says Kim. 'No. Sorry. I'm not Mimi's mum. I'm Tallulah's mum. She was here last night?'

'Tallulah?' The woman scruffs the dog's head absent-mindedly with a hand bearing just one wide band on her wedding finger. 'Gosh, no, I don't think I know a Tallulah.'

'Lula?' she suggests. She hates the name Lula, but her daughter's friends have always tended to shorten her full name; it's something she's learned to accept.

'No.' The woman shakes her head. 'No. I've never heard of Lula either. Are you sure she was here?'

Kim is hot and anxious. There's no shade where she's standing and the sun is beating down on the back of her neck. She can feel a hot dampness breaking out all over her body and feels a flash of anger at this woman in her crisp white sundress and freshly brushed hair, her cool, dry complexion and the suggestion in her clipped English accent that Kim is somehow mistaken and in the wrong place.

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She nods and tries to keep her voice pleasant. 'Yes. I spoke to your daughter a couple of hours ago. She said Tallulah was here last night with her boyfriend, Zach, and they left in a minicab at three a.m. But I've called all the minicab numbers and none of them has a record of a pick-up from this address or anywhere in the vicinity of this address. And it's nearly four p.m. and my daughter is still not home. And this' – she points behind her at Noah in his buggy – 'is Tallulah's son and she would never deliberately leave him. Just never.'

Her voice begins to crack dangerously and she breathes in hard to stop herself from crying.

The woman looks unperturbed by this display of emotion. 'Sorry,' she says after a pause. 'What was your name again?'

'Kim. And this is Ryan. My son. And Noah. My grandson.'

'Gosh,' says the woman. 'A grandmother! You look far too young to be a grandmother. Anyway. I'm Joss.' She puts out a hand for Kim to shake and then says, 'Come on, then. Let's go and see what Scarlett has to say about all of this. Follow me.'

She leads them across the courtyard and through a tall wrought-iron gate set in an ancient brick wall grown over with ivy. The huge dog pads heavily behind them. The courtyard is smattered with tiny white stone figures set on Perspex plinths. They follow her down a flagstoned path lined with sculptural plants in cobalt-glazed pots and then turn a corner.

In front of them is the pool.

It's set in a cream marble terrace with a curtained pagoda at one end housing a huge cream-cushioned day bed. At angles along its length are wooden steamers with matching cream cushions. Floating at the pool's centre, inside a bright pink inflatable

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flamingo, is a tall, thin girl with lime-green hair and a black bandeau bikini top. She peers at Kim and her entourage curiously. Then she says, 'Oh,' as the penny drops.

'Tallulah?' says Joss, shielding her eyes from the sun shining off the pool's surface with her hand. 'Apparently, she was here last night. Any idea where she got to?'

Scarlett pushes herself to the pool's edge by paddling her hands through the water; then she dismounts the flamingo and ascends the stone steps. She pulls a black towel around herself and sits down at a teak circular table covered with white candles in glass jars.

Kim sits opposite her. 'I know', she begins, 'you said that you don't know where they went. I know you said that Tallulah was sick and they got in a minicab. But the cab firms are all saying that they didn't pick anyone up from here. I just wondered if there was anything else that happened last night that might explain where they are.'

Scarlett picks at the wax on the top of one of the candles and makes no eye contact with Kim. 'Genuinely,' she says, 'honestly. That's all I know.'

'And did you see them getting into a car?'

'No. I was out here, with Mimi. And Zach came and said Lula had been sick and he was going to take her home, that there was a taxi coming.'

'He said that? That the taxi was coming? Or did he say he was going to call one?'

Scarlett shrugs. Kim watches crystal beads of pool water coalesce and collapse on her angular shoulders and run down her arms in rivulets. 'I'm pretty sure he said one was coming.'

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