

TWO

SOPHIE

SIX WEEKS EARLIER: 21 OCTOBER 2016

Sophie has never thought of her husband as a liar.

She knows he dissembles, yes. That's part of his job—a willingness to be economical with the truth. A prerequisite, even for a government minister.

But she has never imagined he would lie to her. Or rather, that he might have a life she knows nothing about: a secret that could detonate beneath her lovingly maintained world and blow it apart forever.

Watching him that Friday, as he leaves to take the children to school, she feels a stab of love so fierce she pauses on the stairs just to drink in the tableau of the three of them together. They are framed in the doorway, James turning to call good-bye, left arm raised in that politician's wave she used to mock but which now seems second nature, right hand cradling Finn's head. Their son—fringe falling in his eyes, socks bagging round his ankles—scuffs at the tiles, reluctant, as ever, to go. His elder sister, Emily, ducks through the doorway: age nine, determined not to be late.

“Well, bye, then,” her husband calls, and the autumn sun catches the top of his still-boyish crop, illuminating him with a halo, highlighting his six-foot-three frame.

“Bye, Mum,” her daughter shouts, as she runs down the steps.

“Bye, Mummy.” Finn, thrown by the change to his routine—his father taking them to school for once—juts out his bottom lip and flushes red.

“Come on, little man.” James steers him through the door: competent, authoritative even, and she almost resents the fact that she still finds this attractive, commanding. Then he smiles down at his boy and his entire face softens. Finn is his weak spot. “You know you’ll enjoy it when you get there.”

He slips his arm over his son’s shoulders and guides him down their neat, West London garden, with its sculpted bay trees standing like sentinels and its path fringed with lavender, away from her and out down the street.

My family, she thinks, watching the perfect-looking trio go—her girl racing ahead to embrace the day, all skinny legs and swishing ponytail, her boy slipping his hand into his father’s and looking up at him with that unashamed adoration that comes with being six. The similarity between man and boy—for Finn is a miniaturized version of his father—only magnifies her love. *I have a beautiful boy and a beautiful man*, she thinks, as she watches James’s broad shoulders—a one-time rower’s shoulders—and waits, more in hope than expectation, for him to look back and smile at her, for she has never managed to grow immune to his charisma.

Of course he doesn't and she watches as they slip out of sight. The most precious people in her world.

That world crumbles at 8:43 p.m. James is late. She should have known he would be. It is an alternate Friday: one in which he is holding a constituency meeting, deep in the Surrey countryside, in a brightly lit village hall.

When he had first been elected, they had stayed there every weekend: decamping to a cold, damp cottage that had never quite felt like home, despite their extensive renovations. One election on, and it was a relief to give up the pretense that Thurlsdon was where they wanted to spend half their week. Lovely in the summer months, yes, but bleak in winter, when she would stare out at the bare trees fringing their hamlet garden and try to placate their urban children, who wanted the bustle and distraction of their real, North Kensington home.

They venture there once a month now, and James schleps down for a meeting in the intervening fortnight. Two hours on a Friday afternoon; he promised to leave by six.

He has a driver now that he is junior minister and should have been back by seven thirty—traffic permitting. They are supposed to be going to friends' for a kitchen supper. Well, she says *friends*. Matt Frisk is another junior minister—aggressively ambitious in a way that doesn't sit well with their set, where success is understood as inevitable but naked ambition considered vulgar.

But he and Ellie are near neighbors and she couldn't easily put them off again.

Sophie had said they would be there by eight fifteen. It was ten past now, so where was he? The October evening crept against the sash windows: black softened by the glow of the street lamps, autumn stealing in. She loves this time of year. It reminds her of fresh starts, running through the leaves in Christ Church Meadows as a fresher, giddy at the thought of new worlds opening up to her. Since having children, it has been a time to nest; to cosset with log fires, roast chestnuts, take brisk, crisp walks, and make game casseroles. But now, the autumn night was taut with apprehension. Footsteps tottered down the pavement and a woman's laugh rang out, flirtatious. A deeper voice murmured. Not James's. The footsteps rose and fell, died away.

She pressed redial. His mobile rang then clicked to voicemail. She jabbed the sleek face of her phone—rattled at her loss of customary self-control. Dread tightened her stomach and for a moment she was back in the chill lodge of her Oxford college, the wind whistling through the quad, as she waited for the pay phone to ring. The look of sympathy from a college porter. The chill fear—so intense in that last week of her first summer term—that something still more terrible was about to happen. Age nineteen and willing him to call, even then.

Eight fourteen. She tried again, hating herself for doing it. His phone clicked straight through to voicemail. She plucked at a piece of imaginary lint, rearranged her friendship bracelets, and

glanced critically at her nails—neatly filed, unvarnished, unlike Ellie’s gleaming gelled slicks.

Footsteps on the stairs. A child’s voice. “Is Daddy back?”

“No, go back to bed.” Her tone came out harsher than she intended.

Emily stared, one eyebrow raised.

“Just climb back into bed, sweetheart,” she added, her voice softening as she chased her daughter up the stairs, heart quickening as she turned the corner and bundled her under the covers. “You should be settling down, now. He won’t be long.”

“Can he come and say goodnight when he gets in?” Emily pouted, impossibly pretty.

“Well, we’re going out, but if you’re still awake . . .”

“I will be.” Her daughter’s determination—the set of her jaw, the implacable self-belief—marked her out as her father’s daughter.

“Then I’m sure he’ll come up.”

Sophie gave her a quick peck on the forehead, to curb further arguments, and tucked the duvet around her. “I don’t want you out of bed again, though. Understand? Cristina’s babysitting just like normal. I’ll send Daddy up when he gets back.”

Eight seventeen. She forced herself not to ring his number. She has never been the sort of wife who behaves like a stalker, but there was something about this complete silence that chilled

her. It just wasn't like him. She imagined him stuck on the M25, working his way through his papers in the back of his car. He would call, text, send an email, not leave her waiting—the au pair hanging around the kitchen, keen for them to disappear so that she can curl up on the sofa and have the house to herself; Sophie's carefully touched-up face becoming a little less perfect; the flowers bought for the Frisks wilting in their wrapping on the table in the hall.

Eight twenty-one. She would call the Frisks at half past. But that deadline came and still she didn't ring. Eight thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven. Aware that it was bad form to do so, at eight forty she sent Ellie Frisk a brief, apologetic text explaining that something had cropped up in the constituency and they were terribly sorry but they wouldn't be able to make it, after all.

The *Times* had a piece on the Islamic State by Will Stanhope but the words of her old college contemporary washed over her. It might as well be a story about dinosaur astronauts, read to Finn, to the extent to which it engaged her. Every part of her was attuned to one thing.

And there it is. The sound of his key in the door. A scrape and then a hiss as the heavy oak eases open. The sound of his footsteps: slower than normal, not his usual brisk, assertive tread. Then the thud of his red box being put down, the weight of responsibility abandoned for a while—as glorious a sound, on a Friday night, as the slosh of dry white wine being poured from a bottle. The jangle of keys on the hall table. And then silence again.

“James?” She comes into the hall.

His beautiful face is grey, his smile taut and not reaching his eyes, where his light crow’s feet seemed deeper than usual.

“You’d better cancel the Frisks.”

“I have done.”

He shrugs off his coat and hangs it up carefully, averting his face.

She pauses then slips her arms around his waist—his honed waist that deepens to form a V, like the trunk of a sapling that burgeons outwards—but he reaches back and gently eases them away.

“James?” The cold in the pit of her stomach flares.

“Is Cristina here?”

“Yes.”

“Well, send her to her room, will you? We need to talk in private.”

“Right.” Her heart flutters as she hears her voice come out clipped.

He gives her another tight smile, and a note of impatience creeps into his voice, as if she is a disobliging child, or perhaps, a tardy civil servant. “Can you do it now, please, Sophie?”

She stares back at him, not recognizing his mood—so different to what she had expected.

He massages his forehead with firm, long fingers, and his green eyes close briefly, the lashes—disarmingly long—kissing his cheeks. Then, his eyes flash open, and the look he gives her is the one Finn gives when he is trying to preempt a telling off and plead

forgiveness. It's the look James gave her twenty-three years ago before confessing to the crisis that had threatened to overwhelm him, that had caused them to split up, that still sometimes causes her to shiver, and that she fears is about to rear its head again.

"I'm sorry, Soph. So sorry." And it is as if he is carrying not just the weight of his job—undersecretary of state for countering extremism—but responsibility for the entire government.

"I've fucked up big time."

Her name was Olivia Lytton—though Sophie had always just thought of her as James's parliamentary researcher—five foot ten, twenty-eight, blonde, well connected, confident, ambitious.

"I expect she'll be dubbed the blonde bombshell." She tries for acerbic, but her voice just comes out as shrill.

The affair had been going on for five months, and he had broken it off a week ago, just after the party conference.

"It meant nothing," James says, head in hands, no pretense that he is anything other than penitent. He leans back, wrinkling his nose as he trots out another cliché. "It was just sex, and I was flattered."

She swallows, rage pushing against her chest, barely containable. "Well, that's OK then."

His eyes darken as he takes in her pain.

"There was nothing wrong with that part of us. You know that." He can usually read her so clearly: a skill honed over two decades, one of the things that binds them so closely. "I just made a foolish mistake."

She waits, poised on the sofa opposite, for her anger to subside sufficiently for her to speak civilly, or for him to bridge the distance between them. To reach out a tentative hand, or at least offer a smile.

But he is rooted there: head bowed, elbows on knees, fingers touching as if in prayer. At first, she despises this show of sanctimony—a Blairite trope, the penitent politician—and then she softens as his shoulders shake, just the once, not with a sob but with a sigh. For a moment, she sees her mother as her charming, rakish father confessed to yet another “indiscretion.” Ginny’s dry resignation, and then the quickly suppressed flash of pain in her marine-blue eyes.

Perhaps this is what all husbands do? Sorrow surges, then anger. It shouldn’t be like this. Their marriage is different. Founded on love and trust and a sex life that she does her very best to maintain.

She has made compromises in her life, and God knows, she took a huge leap of faith when they got back together. But the one certainty was that their relationship is solid. Her vision begins to blur, her gaze filming with tears. He looks up and catches her eye—and she wishes he hadn’t.

“There’s something else,” he says.

Of course he wouldn’t confess to an affair without a reason.

“Is she pregnant?” The words—ugly but necessary—discolor the space between them.

“No, of course not.”

She feels herself relax a little. No half-sibling for Emily and Finn. No proof of a liaison. No need to share him in any other way.

And then he looks up with a grimace. Her nails bite into her palm in sharp crescents, and she sees that her knuckles are ivory pearls thrusting through the red of her skin.

What could be worse than some other woman having his child, or perhaps choosing to abort his child? Other people knowing. The affair, a particularly juicy piece of gossip, dropped into the ear of a favoured few in the Commons tea rooms until it becomes general knowledge. Who knows? His colleagues? The PM? Other MPs' wives? What about Ellie? She imagines Ellie's silly, plump face alight with barely suppressed pity. Perhaps she already knows and recognized her lie of a text.

Sophie forces herself to breathe deeply. They can deal with this; move beyond it. They have experienced far worse, haven't they? There is no crime in having a quick fling. It can be brushed over, quickly forgotten, absorbed. And then James says something that takes this to a more damaging, corrosive level that strikes her in the solar plexus hard as she contemplates a scenario so terrible that, fool that she is, she hadn't quite seen coming.

“The story's about to break.”