

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THEN SHE WAS GONE

LISA
JEWELL

THE
NIGHT
SHE
DISAPPEARED

A NOVEL

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.

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 ear plugs 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, Talulah, 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, *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 easy 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 realization 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.

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 ear plugs and plays some white noise on her smart phone and is generally saved from the night-time 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 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.

She feels a small blast of annoyance. She knows she told Tallulah to stay out as late as she likes, 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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August 2018

“Mr. Gray! Welcome!”

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

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

Then he approaches 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.”

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 at the back and continue wheeling the cases out of a door at the back of the modern block and down a curved path toward a small Victorian cottage nestled at the back of the playing fields backing directly onto woodland and surrounded by a ring of rose bushes 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 headteacher filled with his furnishings and ephemera, his dogs, his photographs. Peter unlocks the door and they follow him into the flagstoned back 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 flunked their GCSE's and A levels first time round. So, yes, a school for failures, in essence. And Sophie's boyfriend Shaun is now the new headteacher.

"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, actu-

ally.” 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, mezze, 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 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 seem 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 toward 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 wineglasses 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 between the rosebushes that form the boundary of the back garden leads onto a velvety green woodland interspersed with patches of lawn onto which the midday sun falls through the treetops into pools of gold. She can hear the sound of birds shimmering in the branches. She can hear the champagne bubbles fizzing in the wineglasses. 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?"

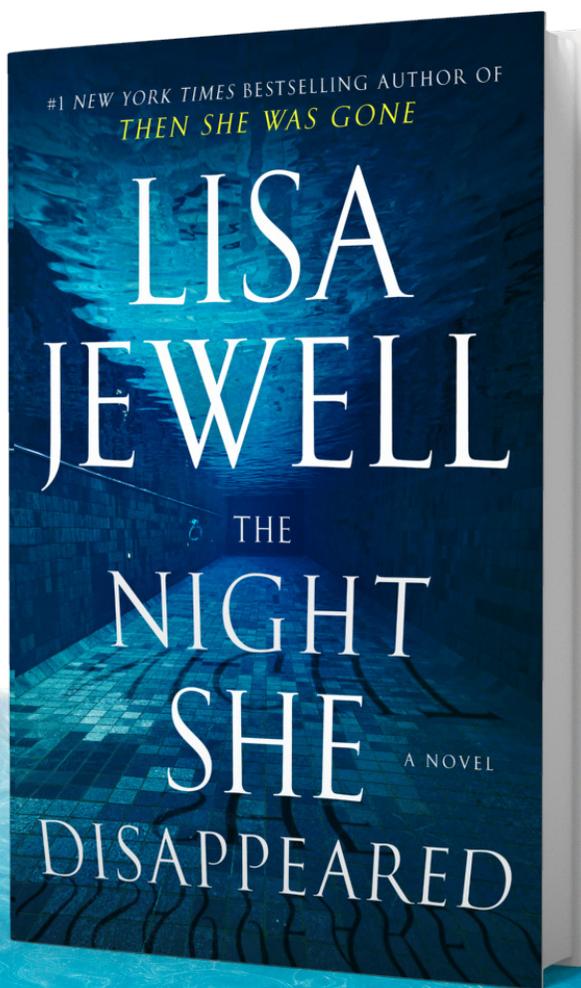
They smile wryly at each other. This is one of the many unpleasant things that Shaun's ex-wife, Pippa, had found to say about Sophie when she'd first found out about her. Also, "*She looks much older than thirty four*," and "*she has a strangely flat backside*."

"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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