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Then She Was Gone

Written by Lisa Jewell

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THEN SHE WAS GONE

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LISA JEWELL

THEN SHE WAS GONE



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For Lor

A note on the character name of 'Sara-Jade Virtue'

The name 'Sara-Jade Virtue' was given to me by a real life Sara-Jade Virtue, the winner of last year's Get In Character auction which raises money for the UK charity, CLIC Sargent. Incidentally, Sara-Jade is one of the greatest, most passionate and influential people currently working in British publishing and I was super-proud to use her name.

CLIC Sargent's mission is to change what it means to be diagnosed with cancer when you're young. They believe that children and young people with cancer have the right to the best possible treatment, care, and support, throughout their cancer journey and beyond. And they deserve the best possible chance to make the most of their lives once cancer treatment has ended.

http://www.clicsargent.org.uk/

Acknowledgements

I finished writing this book in December 2016. I read it through and thought, hmm, this is either brilliantly bizarre, or just bizarre. I'd lost all objectivity and passed it to my editor with no worldly clue how she would respond.

A few days later she said, let's meet up, I have a radical suggestion. I knew then that my book was simply bizarre.

She said that she and another editor had spent ages together brainstorming my book, trying to find a way to balance out the bizarreness. And they'd had a light-bulb moment. And her suggestion was indeed radical.

I said, yes, yes, of course. That's brilliant, you're brilliant. Thank you!

And now I'd like to say thank you again to Selina Walker and Viola Hayden for being brave and clear minded, for sitting together with my bizarre pile of paper and talking and thinking and talking and thinking and seeing exactly what needed to be done and then telling me exactly how to do it. People might think that writers are possessive of their work, think that no one but them can possibly know how it should

be. But a sensible writer knows that's not true. Sometimes the writer is the least able to see the solution and sometimes the editors are the geniuses. And this was definitely the case with this book. So thank you both again. I am so grateful to you.

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Those months, the months before she disappeared, were the best months. Really. Just the best. Every moment presented itself to her like a gift and said, *Here I am, another perfect moment, just look at me, can you believe how lovely I am?* Every morning was a flurry of mascara and butterflies, quickening pulse as she neared the school gates, blooming joy as her eyes found him. School was no longer a cage; it was the bustling, spotlit film set for her love story.

Ellie Mack could not believe that Theo Goodman had wanted to go out with her. Theo Goodman was the best-looking boy in year eleven, bar none. He'd also been the best-looking boy in year ten, year nine and year eight. Not year seven though. None of the

boys in year seven were good-looking. They were all tiny, bug-eyed babies in huge shoes and oversized blazers.

Theo Goodman had never had a girlfriend and everyone thought maybe he was gay. He was kind of pretty, for a boy, and very thin. And just, basically, really, really nice. Ellie had dreamed about being with him for years, whether he was gay or not. She would have been happy just to have been his friend. His young, pretty mum walked to school with him every day. She wore gym gear and had her hair in a ponytail and usually had a small white dog with her that Theo would pick up and kiss on the cheek before placing it gently back down on the pavement; then he would kiss his mum and saunter through the gates. He didn't care who saw. He wasn't embarrassed by the powder-puff dog or his mum. He was *self-assured*.

Then one day last year, just after the summer holiday, he had struck up a conversation with her. Just like that. During lunch, something to do with some homework assignment or other, and Ellie, who really knew nothing much about anything, knew immediately that he wasn't gay and that he was talking to her because he liked her. It was totally obvious. And then, just like that, they were boyfriend and girlfriend. She'd thought it would be more complicated.

But one wrong move, one tiny kink in the timeline,

it was all over. Not just their love story, but all of it. Youth. Life. Ellie Mack. All gone. All gone forever. If she could rewind the timeline, untwist it and roll it back the other way like a ball of wool, she'd see the knots in the yarn, the warning signs. Looking at it backwards it was obvious all along. But back then, when she knew nothing about anything, she had not seen it coming. She had walked straight into it with her eyes open.

PART ONE

One

Laurel let herself into her daughter's flat. It was, even on this relatively bright day, dark and gloomy. The window at the front was overwhelmed by a terrible tangle of wisteria while the other side of the flat was completely overshadowed by the small woodland it backed on to.

An impulse buy, that's what it had been. Hanna had just got her first bonus and wanted to throw it at something solid before it evaporated. The people she'd bought the flat from had filled it with beautiful things but Hanna never had the time to shop for furnishings and the flat now looked like a sad post-divorce downsizer. The fact that she didn't mind her mum coming in when she was out and cleaning it

was proof that the flat was no more than a glorified hotel room to her.

Laurel swept, by force of habit, down Hanna's dingy hallway and straight to the kitchen where she took the cleaning kit from under the sink. It looked as though Hanna hadn't been home the night before. There was no cereal bowl in the sink, no milk splashes on the work surface, no tube of mascara left half open by the magnifying make-up mirror on the window-sill. A plume of ice went down Laurel's spine. Hanna always came home. Hanna had nowhere else to go. She went to her handbag and pulled out her phone, dialled Hanna's number with shaking fingers and fumbled when the call went through to voicemail as it always did when Hanna was at work. The phone fell from her hands and towards the floor where it caught the side of her shoe and didn't break.

'Shit,' she hissed to herself, picking up the phone and staring at it blindly. 'Shit.'

She had no one to call, no one to ask: *Have you seen Hanna? Do you know where she is?* Her life simply didn't work like that. There were no connections anywhere. Just little islands of life dotted here and there.

It was possible, she thought, that Hanna had met a man but unlikely. Hanna hadn't had a boyfriend, not one, ever. Someone had once mooted the theory that Hanna felt too guilty to have a boyfriend because her

little sister would never have one. The same theory could also be applied to her miserable flat and non-existent social life.

Laurel knew simultaneously that she was over-reacting and also that she was not overreacting. When you are the parent of child who walked out of the house one morning with a rucksack full of books to study at a library a fifteen-minute walk away and then never came home again then there is no such thing as overreacting. The fact that she was standing in her adult daughter's kitchen picturing her dead in a ditch because she hadn't left a cereal bowl in the sink was perfectly sane and reasonable in the context of her own experience.

She typed the name of Hanna's company into a search engine and pressed the link to the phone number. The switchboard put her through to Hanna's extension and Laurel held her breath.

'Hanna Mack speaking.'

There it was, her daughter's voice, brusque and characterless.

Laurel didn't say anything, just touched the off button on her screen and put her phone back into her bag. She opened Hanna's dishwasher and began unstacking it.

Two

What had Laurel's life been like, ten years ago, when she'd had three children and not two? Had she woken up every morning suffused with existential joy? No, she had not. Laurel had always been a glass-half-empty type of person. She could find much to complain about in even the most pleasant of scenarios and could condense the joy of good news into a short-lived moment, quickly curtailed by some new bothersome concern. So she had woken up every morning convinced that she had slept badly, even when she hadn't, worrying that her stomach was too fat, that her hair was either too long or too short, that her house was too big, too small, that her bank account was too empty, her husband too lazy, her children too loud or too

quiet, that they would leave home, that they would never leave home. She'd wake up noticing the pale cat fur smeared across the black skirt she'd left hanging on the back of her bedroom chair, the missing slipper, the bags under Hanna's eyes, the pile of dry cleaning that she'd been meaning to take up the road for almost a month, the rip in the wallpaper in the hallway, the terrible pubescent boil on Jake's chin, the smell of cat food left out too long and the bin that everyone seemed intent on not emptying, contents pressed down into its bowels by the lazy, flat-palmed hands of her family.

That was how she'd once viewed her perfect life: as a series of bad smells and unfulfilled duties, petty worries and late bills.

And then one morning, her girl, her golden girl, her lastborn, her baby, her soulmate, her pride and her joy, had left the house and not come back.

And how had she felt during those first few excruciatingly unfolding hours? What had filled her brain, her heart, to replace all those petty concerns? Terror. Despair. Grief. Horror. Agony. Turmoil. Heartbreak. Fear. All those words, all so melodramatic, yet all so insufficient.

'She'll be at Theo's,' Paul had said. 'Why don't you give his mum a ring?'

She'd known already that she wouldn't be at Theo's. Her daughter's last words to her had been:

'I'll be back in time for lunch. Is there any of that lasagne left?'

'Enough for one.'

'Don't let Hanna have it! Or Jake! Promise!'

'I promise.'

And then there'd been the click of the front door, the sudden dip in volume with one person less in the house, a dishwasher to load, a phone call to make, a Lemsip to take upstairs to Paul, who had a cold that had previously seemed like the most irksome thing in her life.

'Paul's got a cold.'

How many people had she said that to in the preceding day or so? A weary sigh, a roll of the eyes. 'Paul's got a cold.' *My burden. My life. Pity me.*

But she'd called Theo's mum anyway.

'No,' said Becky Goodman, 'no, I'm really sorry. Theo's been here all day and we haven't heard anything from Ellie at all. Let me know if there's anything I can do . . . ?'

As the afternoon had turned to early evening, after she'd phoned each of Ellie's friends in turn, after she'd visited the library, who'd let her see their CCTV footage – Ellie had definitely not been to the library that day – after the sun had begun to set and the house plunged into a cool darkness punctuated every few moments by blasts of white light as a silent electrical storm played out overhead, she'd finally given in to

the nagging dread that had been growing inside her all day and she'd called the police.

That was the first time she'd hated Paul, that evening, in his dressing gown, barefoot, smelling of bed sheets and snot, sniffing, sniffing, sniffing, then blowing his nose, the terrible gurgle of it in his nostrils, the thickness of his mouth-breathing that sounded like the death throes of a monster to her hyper-sensitive ears.

'Get dressed,' she snapped. 'Please.'

He'd acquiesced, like a browbeaten child, and come downstairs a few minutes later wearing a summer holiday outfit of combat shorts and a bright T-shirt. All wrong. Wrong wrong wrong.

'And blow your nose,' she'd said. 'Properly. So there's nothing left.'

Again, he'd followed her instruction. She'd watched him with disdain, watched him fold the tissue into a ball and stalk pitifully across the kitchen to dispose of it in the bin.

And then the police had arrived.

And then the thing began.

The thing that had never ended.

She occasionally wondered whether if Paul hadn't had a cold that day, if he'd rushed back from work at her first call, rumpled in smart clothes, full of vim and urgency, if he'd sat upright by her side, his hand

clasped around hers, if he hadn't been mouth-breathing and sniffing and looking a fright, would everything have been different? Would they have made it through? Or would it have been something else that made her hate him?

The police had left at eight thirty. Hanna had appeared at the kitchen door shortly afterwards.

'Mum,' she'd said in an apologetic voice, 'I'm hungry.'

'Sorry,' said Laurel, glancing across the kitchen at the clock. 'Christ, yes, you must be starving.' She pulled herself heavily to her feet, blindly examined the contents of the fridge with her daughter.

'This?' said Hanna, pulling out the Tupperware box with the last portion of lasagne in it.

'No.' She'd snatched it back, too hard. Hanna had blinked at her.

'Why not?'

'Just, no,' she said, softer this time.

She'd made her beans on toast, sat and watched her eat it. Hanna. Her middle child. The difficult one. The tiring one. The one she wouldn't want to be stranded on a desert island with. And a terrible thought shot through her, so fast she barely registered it.

It should be you missing and Ellie eating beans on toast.

She touched Hanna's cheek, gently, with the palm of her hand and then left the room.