

THEN
SHE
WAS
GONE

A NOVEL

LISA JEWELL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THEN SHE WAS GONE



A Novel



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PROLOGUE



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 time line, 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 backward 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



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 onto.

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 postdivorce 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 makeup mirror on the windowsill. 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, dialed 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 toward 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 nonexistent social life.

Laurel knew simultaneously that she was overreacting and also that she was not overreacting. When you are the parent of a 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.



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 soul mate, 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 lasagna 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 bedsheets 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 hypersensitive 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, ruffled 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 afterward.

"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 lasagna 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.



THEN

The first thing that Ellie shouldn't have done was get a bad grade in maths. If she'd worked harder, been cleverer, if she hadn't been so tired the day of the test, hadn't felt so unfocused, hadn't spent more time yawning than concentrating, if she'd got an A instead of a B+, then none of it would have happened. But going further back, before the bad maths test, if she hadn't fallen in love with Theo, if instead she'd fallen in love with a boy who was rubbish at maths, a boy who didn't care about maths or test results, a boy with no ambitions, or better still no boy at all, then she wouldn't have felt that she needed to be as good as him or better, she'd have been happy with a B+ and she wouldn't have gone home that evening and begged her mum for a maths tutor.

So, that's where it was. The first kink in the time line. Right there, at four thirty or thereabouts on a Wednesday afternoon in January.

She'd come home in a temper. She often came home in a temper. She never expected to do it. It just happened. The minute she saw her mum or heard her mum's voice, she'd just feel irrationally annoyed and then all the stuff she hadn't been able to say or do all day at school—because at school she was known as a Nice Person and once you had a reputation for being nice you couldn't mess with it—came spitting out of her.

"My maths teacher is shit," she said, dropping her bag on the settle in the hallway. "Just so shit. I hate him." She did not hate him. She hated herself for failing. But she couldn't say that.

Her mum replied from the kitchen sink, "What's happened, love?"

“I just told you!” She hadn’t, but that didn’t matter. “My maths teacher is so bad. I’m going to fail my GCSE. I need a tutor. Like, really, really need a tutor.”

She flounced into the kitchen and flopped dramatically into a chair.

“We can’t afford a tutor,” her mum said. “Why don’t you just join the after-school maths club?”

There was the next kink. If she hadn’t been such a spoiled brat, if she hadn’t been expecting her mum to wave a magic wand and solve all her problems for her, if she’d had even the vaguest idea about the reality of her parents’ finances, if she’d cared at all about anything other than herself, the conversation would have ended there. She would have said, *OK. I understand. That’s what I’ll do.*

But she had not done that. She had pushed and pushed and pushed. She’d offered to pay for it out of her own money. She’d brought up examples of people in her class who were *way* poorer than them who had private tuition.

“What about asking someone at school?” her mum suggested. “Someone in the sixth form? Someone who’ll do it for a few quid and a slice of cake?”

“What! No way! Oh God, that would be so embarrassing!”

And there it went, slipping away like a slippery thing, another chance to save herself. Gone. And she didn’t even know it.



Between the day in May 2005 that Ellie had failed to come home and exactly two minutes ago there had been not one substantial lead regarding her disappearance. Not one.

The last sighting of Ellie had been caught on CCTV on Stroud Green Road at ten forty-three, showing her stopping briefly to check her reflection in a car window (for a while there'd been a theory that she had stopped to look at someone in the car, or to say something to the driver, but they'd traced the car's owner and proved that he'd been on holiday at the time of Ellie's disappearance and that his car had been parked there for the duration). And that was that. Her recorded journey had ended there.

They'd done a house-to-house search of the immediate vicinity, brought in known pedophiles for questioning, taken CCTV footage from each and every shopkeeper on Stroud Green Road, wheeled out Laurel and Paul to be filmed for a television appeal that had been seen by roughly eight million people, but nothing had ever taken them further than that last sighting of Ellie looking at her reflection at ten forty-three.

The fact that Ellie had been wearing a black T-shirt and jeans had been a problem for the police. The fact that her lovely gold-streaked hair had been pulled back into a scruffy ponytail. The fact that her rucksack was navy blue. That her trainers were bog-standard supermarket trainers in white. It was almost as though she'd deliberately made herself invisible.

Ellie's bedroom had been expertly rifled through for four hours by two DIs with their shirtsleeves rolled up. Ellie, it seemed, had taken nothing out of the ordinary. It was possible she might have taken underwear but there was no way for Laurel to know if there was anything missing from her

drawers. It was possible she might have taken a change of clothing, but Ellie, like most fifteen-year-old girls, had way too many clothes, far too many for Lauren to keep an inventory. But her piggy bank still contained the few tightly folded ten-pound notes she forced into it after every birthday. Her toothbrush was still in the bathroom, her deodorant, too. Ellie had never been on a sleepover without her toothbrush and deodorant.

After two years, they'd downgraded the search. Laurel knew what they thought; they thought Ellie was a runaway.

How could they have thought that Ellie was a runaway when there was no CCTV footage of her at any train station, at any bus stop, walking down any road anywhere apart from the one from which she'd disappeared? The downgrade of the search was devastating.

Even more devastating was Paul's response to this pronouncement.

"It's a sort of closure, I guess."

There, right there—the final nail in the dry box of bones of their marriage.

The children meanwhile were shuffling along, like trains on a track, keeping to schedule. Hanna took her A levels. Jake graduated from university in the West Country where he'd been studying to be a chartered surveyor. And Paul was busy asking for promotions at work, buying himself new suits, talking about upgrading the car, showing her hotels and resorts on the Internet that had special deals that summer. Paul was not a bad man. Paul was a good man. She had married a good man, just as she'd always planned to do. But the way he'd dealt with the violent hole ripped into their lives by Ellie's disappearance had shown her that he wasn't big enough, he wasn't strong enough—he wasn't *insane* enough.

The disappointment she felt in him was such a tiny part of everything else she'd been feeling that she barely registered it. When he moved out a year later it was nothing, a small blip in her existence. Looking back on it now, she could remember very little about it. All she could remember from that time was the raw need to keep the search going.

"Can we not just do one more house-to-house?" she'd pleaded with the police. "It's been a year since we did one. That's long enough, surely, to turn

up something we didn't find before?"

The detective had smiled. "We have talked about it," she said. "We decided that it was not a good use of resources. Not at this time. Maybe in a year or so. Maybe."

But then suddenly this January, out of the blue, the police had called and said that *Crimewatch* wanted to do a ten-year anniversary appeal. Another reconstruction. It was broadcast on 26 May. It brought no fresh evidence. No new sightings.

It changed nothing.

Until now.



The detective on the phone had sounded cautious. "It could be nothing. But we'd like you to come in anyway."

"What have you found?" Laurel said. "Is it a body? What is it?"

"Please just come in, Mrs. Mack."

Ten years of nothing. And now there was something.

She grabbed her handbag and left the house.



THEN

Someone from up the street had recommended her. Noelle Donnelly was her name. Ellie stood up at the chime of the doorbell and peered down the hallway as her mum opened the door. She was quite old, forty maybe, something like that, and she had an accent, Irish or Scottish.

“Ellie!” her mum called. “Ellie, come and meet Noelle.”

She had pale red hair, twisted up at the back and clipped into place. She smiled down at Ellie and said, “Good afternoon, Ellie. I hope you’ve got your brain switched on?”

Ellie couldn’t tell if she was being funny or not, so she didn’t smile back, just nodded.

“Good,” said Noelle.

They’d set up a corner of the dining room for Ellie’s first lesson, brought an extra lamp down from her room, cleared the clutter, laid out two glasses, a water jug, and Ellie’s pencil case with the black and red polka dots.

Laurel disappeared to the kitchen to make Noelle a cup of tea. Noelle stopped at the sight of the family cat, sitting on the piano stool.

“Well,” she said, “he’s a big lad. What’s he called?”

“Teddy,” she said. “Teddy *Bear*. But Teddy for short.”

Her first words to Noelle. She would never forget.

“Well, I can see why you call him that. He does look like a big hairy bear!”

Had she liked her then? She couldn’t remember. She just smiled at her, put her hand upon her cat, and squeezed his woolly fur inside her fist. She loved her cat and was glad that he was there, a buffer between her and this stranger.

Noelle Donnelly smelled of cooking oil and unwashed hair. She wore jeans and a bobbly camel-colored jumper, a Timex watch on a freckled wrist, scuffed brown boots and reading glasses on a green cord around her neck. Her shoulders were particularly wide and her neck slightly stooped with a kind of hump at the back and her legs were very long and thin. She looked as though she'd spent her life in a room with a very low ceiling.

"Well now," she said, putting on the reading glasses and feeling inside a brown-leather briefcase. "I've brought along some old GCSE papers. We'll start you on one of these in a moment, get to the bottom of your strengths and weaknesses. But first of all, maybe you could tell me, in your own words, what your concerns are. In particular."

Mum walked in then with a mug of tea and some chocolate chip cookies on a saucer that she slid onto the table silently and speedily. She was acting as though Ellie and Noelle Donnelly were on a date or having a top secret meeting. Ellie wanted to say, *Stay, Mum. Stay with me. I'm not ready to be alone with this stranger.*

She bored her eyes into the back of her mother's head as Laurel stealthily left the room, closing the door very quietly behind her: the soft, apologetic *click* of it.

Noelle Donnelly turned to Ellie and smiled. She had very small teeth. "Well, now," she said, sliding the glasses back up to her narrow-bridged nose, "where were we?"