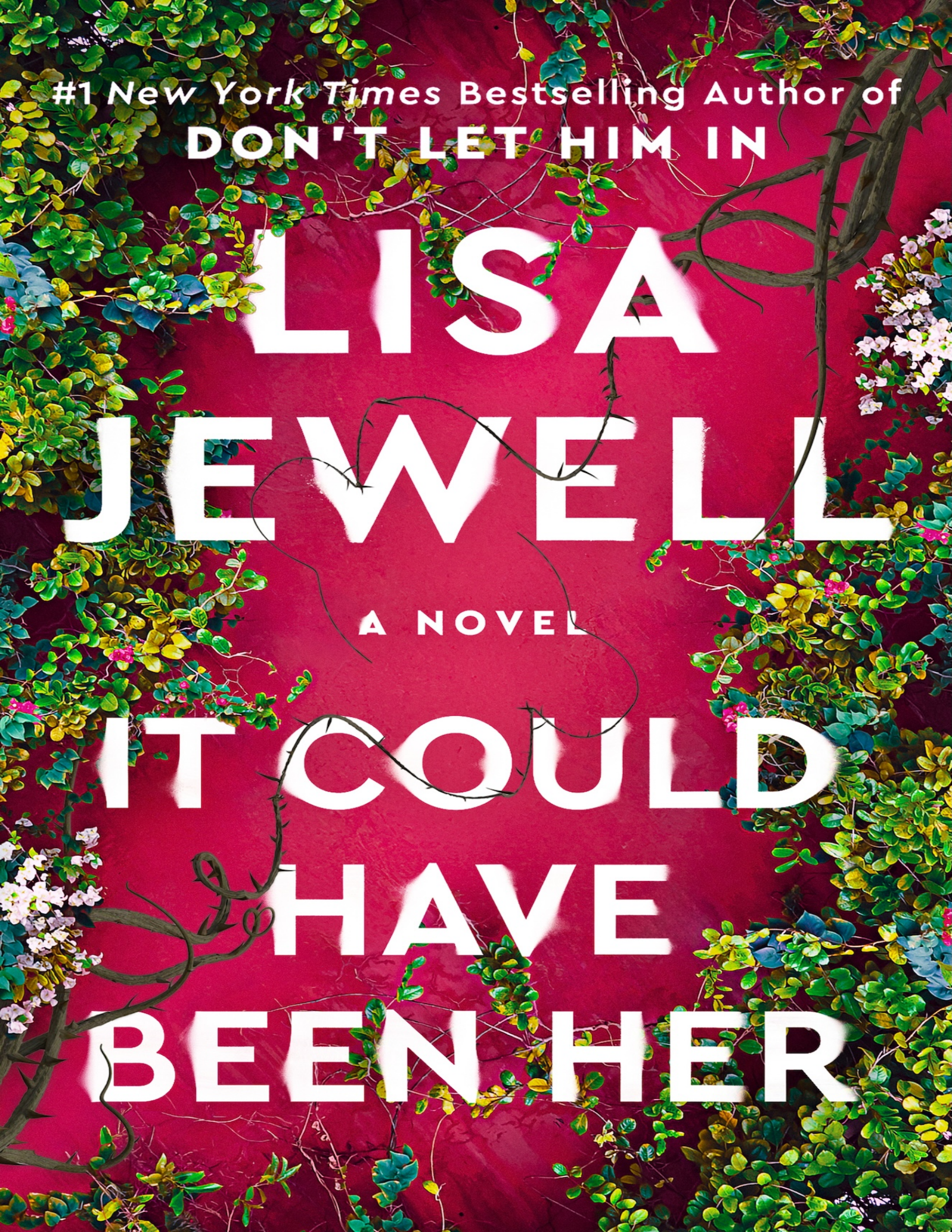




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DON'T LET HIM IN

LISA JEWELL

A NOVEL

IT COULD HAVE BEEN HER

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IT COULD HAVE BEEN HER

LISA JEWELL

ATRIA BOOKS

NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON
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*This book is dedicated to the memory of Madeleine Wickham; a brilliant writer; a
gracious and unforgettable friend.*

prologue

JUNE 4, 2005

I liked the girl. She had a nice smile. She was friendly. I could tell she liked us. She was asking loads of questions about the house, about how long we'd lived here, how old it was, wanted to know if we knew anything about the history of it. Daddy was very nice to her. He was always like that with new people. Mummy of course was rude, as she always was with everyone. My older sister just stared at her as though she'd never seen anyone like her before. I did the opposite, looking all around her but not at her, because it made me feel weird when I looked at her and I didn't want her to think I was weird.

"What's with the...?" She was pointing at my T-shirt. It was my favorite top; Mummy and Daddy bought it for me for my birthday. It had a red nose printed on the front and a huge blue mouth and pinned onto the front pocket was a plastic flower with a bulb at the bottom that filled with water and you asked people to smell it and then you squeezed the bulb, which was usually hidden in your pocket, and the flower squirted water in their face. Except it didn't have any water in it because I wasn't expecting a visitor. I would have filled it if I'd known. But actually, I don't think I'd have used it anyway because the girl was too pretty and I didn't want to upset her if she didn't think it was funny.

"Oh," I said, trying to sound relaxed. "It's my clown T-shirt. I collect everything to do with clowns." I told her about the circus that came to the Heath every summer, how it was my favorite time of the year. Then I showed her how the squeezey trick worked and she smiled and said, "Cool."

She told us that she was a graduate, just finished her degree in music technology, wanted to be a sound engineer. Daddy said something about how unusual that was, that

it was quite a man's world, and the girl said that wasn't going to put her off, and Daddy laughed, and Mummy just sort of sighed as if it was all really boring.

The girl said she could play the guitar and my sister said she was learning and then the girl and my sister had a conversation about that for a while, and I spent that time looking at the girl and feeling things. There was too much blood in my lap area; I felt hot down there, hot and tingly and like I needed to be touched.

Then the girl looked at her watch. She said she needed to go. She was meant to be meeting some friends in a pub up the road for drinks and she was already so late.

I saw Daddy throw Mummy a look. Even though I was only a kid, I knew what that look meant.

"Are you sure we can't tempt you to stay a little longer?" Daddy said to the girl. "Annie has a cheesecake in the fridge."

"What type?" the girl asked, a playful twinkle in her eye.

Daddy looked at Mummy again. Mummy said, "Strawberry."

The girl smiled. She said, "My friends probably aren't even expecting me to turn up anyway, to be honest. They call me 'No-show Claire.'"

The girl stayed.

chapter one

On the eighth day of May 2026, Jane Trevally does something terrifying.

She invites an estate agent into her home.

Jane's home is a ramshackle Georgian pile called Rosebery Hall left to her by her mother and father, who both died of alcohol-related illnesses within eight months of each other when Jane was just nineteen. Her younger brother died ten years later of a drug-induced stroke and now Jane Trevally is the sole owner of this sprawling, ridiculous country pile that needs a million pounds to be spent on it just to keep it from falling down.

The main house itself has ten bedrooms upstairs and, downstairs, eight huge rooms all linked together so you could, in theory, roller-skate from one end of the ground floor to the other if there weren't so many ratty Persian rugs strewn all over the ageing floorboards. At the back of the property there is a row of three small cottages that Jane has been planning to turn into Airbnbs for years but that are currently mouldering and on the verge of becoming tumbledown, and there is land, too, five acres of lawns and woods, and a wild meadow, which, when Jane was a child, had been home to five donkeys and three llamas. She'd never got around to replacing them after they died, and now the meadow is overgrown and tangled up with blackberry and hawthorn.

She must sell it all, cash it in, let someone with time and love and money bring it back to its former glory. Her parents started the downward spiral of the property by not spending a penny on it, plugging leaks and filling gaps and covering things over with cheap wallpaper and cheap rugs, but Jane has done little to reverse the spiral.

Over the past three decades Jane has entered and left two marriages to two wealthy men who had already had their families, both of whom made her sign prenuptial

agreements, and she has spent most of the settlements from both of those ill-fated marriages, given it to dog sanctuaries and builders and scaffolders and roofers and now, this pile of bricks and mortar and memories and damp and piss-stained mattresses and cheap Persian rugs, this little corner of Dorset, is all that is truly hers. This, and her dogs.

Jane's heart beats hard under her ribs as a glamorous young woman called Chloe Flint walks around the house that Jane hates and loves in equal measure and talks of different types of buyers, talks of other, similar places she has sold, talks of Crittall windows and holiday lets and the perfect spot in the lawn for a swimming pool, and Jane nods and smiles, is utterly charming, lets the nice girl believe that she really, really does intend to sell this place, that she really is quite, quite normal thank you very much, every bit as normal and as lovely as she looks, a normal woman selling a scruffy house that is no longer what she wants or needs, when all the while she is silently screaming, *Leave, now, please please leave*, and her heart races and her breath hurts and the moment that Chloe departs the house with more cheery talk of valuations and emails and I'll-be-in-touches, Jane shuts the door behind her and cries.

An hour later, once she has pulled herself back together, Jane takes the dogs for a walk through the last of the spring bluebells. Overhead the sun shines crisply through a green canopy of leaves, and her dogs run on the path ahead of her. Jane has four dogs, they are all boys, and in the absence of any children of her own, they are the center of her universe—though she suspects they would still have been even if she'd got around to having children. She has enough stepchildren—five, plus a grand-stepchild—to be aware of the gulf between the pure, unconditional love of a dog and the messy, ever-changing, often brutal love between a parent and a child.

She pulls her phone out of her pocket and turns it to camera, wanting to capture the glory of the contrast between the dark dying bluebells, the black soil, the green leaves, and the rich rust of the coat of Brian, her fox-red Labrador. "Brian!" she calls to her dog. "Look at me!" Brian turns just once to face the camera, Jane gets the shot, and then Brian is gone again, catching up with the others.

Jane puts her AirPods in and finds the podcast she was listening to earlier—true crime, always true crime—and follows the muted rustle and thump of her dogs' paws on the path before her. But a moment later she presses pause and pulls out her AirPods at the sound of one of the dogs barking—Bluto? She catches up with the dogs and is surprised to see in their midst a small white dog. Her dogs are all large and earthy colors and the small white dog at the center of the group looks like an unexpected blast of light.

The dog seems comfortable in the heart of the band of bigger dogs, looks as if he wants to play, but Jane knows that Reggie, her oldest and best dog, won't take kindly to the suggestion, so she calls them all away and crouches by the small dog.

"Well then, who the hell are you?" she asks, feeling its collar for a tag and not finding one. She sniffs the dog's fur, trying to discern the scent of a warm and loving home, but she gets a hit of damp earth. She feels his ribs and his belly, looking for his last meal, but his belly is empty, his ribs slightly pronounced.

He looks like a West Highland terrier—not the sort of dog that you would normally find lost in the countryside, and he is incredibly friendly and lick.

Jane stands up and turns 360 degrees, looking for the owner of this sweet errant dog.

"Hello!" she calls out. "Person with small white dog! I have him here!"

She waits a moment for her calls to reach somebody, but all around is silent, in the way that this place is always so silent. It's one of the reasons why she is still here, fifty-five years after she was born in that huge, awful, beautiful, cold house, in her parents' bed, a private midwife on hand, her birth leaving a bloodstain on the mattress that is still there to this day. It's this—this silence. And she knows already that there is nobody else in the bluebell woods with her today; she knows that this dog has not eaten for at least a day, maybe longer; she knows that this dog is now her responsibility. She sighs and pulls a spare lead from her pocket and clips it to the dog's collar.

"Well," she says, leaning down to scratch him behind his ears, "I guess we need to take you home and get some food in you."

She enters through the side door into the boot room, where she takes off all the dogs' harnesses and leads, pulls off her own Wellingtons and puffa coat, pulls on the thick, fur-

lined thermal socks she wears around the house, and then lets the dogs lead her into the kitchen, toward their bowls, which she fills from vats of incredibly expensive raw sludge she has delivered every month and stores in the freezer. She finds a smaller bowl for the new arrival, fills it with a few biscuits, and sets it down around the corner so that he is not disturbed.

She watches him eat and she looks at the time. Three fifty-eight. Still time to take him to the vet, find out if he's chipped, find out who is missing him.

An old person, she imagines, maybe an old person who has died and nobody is aware. But she knows all the elderly people in the nearest village—and more than that, she knows all the dogs, and she has definitely never seen this dog before.

The local vet is called Hester. She is, uncharacteristically for a country vet, very sentimental about animals, and now she puts her nose up against the white dog's snout and ruffles his ear.

"Poor baby," she whispers up his nostrils. "Poor, poor stinky baby."

Then she takes her scanner and runs it over his scrawny body and says, "Aha, bingo."

On the screen of her computer, the dog's details pop up.

"Well, hello, Hugo!"

"Hugo?" says Jane.

"Yes. Hugo Tucker to be precise. Of..." She scrolls through the details with a mouse. "Well, according to this, Hugo Tucker belongs to a Mr. Tucker who lives in London NW3."

"Really?"

"Yes," says Hester. "What on earth are you doing bang, slap in the middle of nowhere, Mr. Hugo Tucker?"

"Maybe he's been stolen?"

"Quite likely. They do like nicking people's dogs in London, don't they? I keep reading about it. Or he's been adopted, and the new owner didn't reregister the chip? Anyway, let me give them a call."

The call rings out after a while and Hester sighs and presses end. “Ah well,” she says. “I guess one of us will be taking him home tonight.”

“Wait,” says Jane. “My stepson Dexter lives near Hampstead. Let me take Hugo. I can go and see him while I’m there.”

“Well,” Hester says. “If you’re sure that’s OK?”

Jane nods.

Hester writes the address on a piece of paper and hands it to Jane, who puts it straight into her pocket without looking at it. “I’ll give him some fluids,” Hester says, “and then he should be good to go. Just keep me posted, will you?”

That night Hugo Tucker shares Jane’s bed with her. He settles quickly and neatly, squashed between Reggie and Bluto. It’s as if, Jane thinks, he’s always been here, and she decides that if she can’t find Mr. Tucker tomorrow in Hampstead, then Hugo can stay with her forever.

chapter two

The following morning, in leafy Belsize Park, Jane's favorite stepchild, Dexter, opens the door to his apartment. His white-blond hair is scraped back off his face with a wide Lycra band and he is wearing an oversized sweatshirt, tiny shorts, and huge slippers in the form of a pair of sausage dogs. His face crumples at the sight of Hugo on the floor at Jane's feet and he immediately drops to his haunches to greet him.

"Oh my God," he says to the dog. "You are so beautiful!" He looks up at Jane with gentle eyes. "He's so lovely! Don't give him back!"

"I don't want to," says Jane. "But we have to. Shall I come in then?"

Dexter lives with his best friend in a high-ceilinged one-and-a-half-bedroom apartment paid for by his father, who is Jane's second ex-husband, Tony. Dexter is Tony's eldest child, just turned twenty-three, and despite a life of extreme privilege he is one of the sweetest, purest people that Jane has ever known. He was just eight when Jane married his father, a knock-kneed, skinny, scruffy boy with terrible eczema and a shock of wild white hair. They bonded over the family pet, a pug called Garibaldi that nobody else seemed to like, and have been close ever since.

The apartment is a tip; evidence of the night before lies everywhere. Empty shot glasses, makeup mirrors, stained tissues, a vodka bottle, a half-drunk bottle of prosecco, a sticky cocktail glass, and a carton of corner-shop pineapple juice.

"Let me just throw some clothes on," says Dexter. "I won't be long."

Jane eyes the disarray and resists the urge to tidy it away. "What time did you get to bed last night?" she calls out to Dexter.

"Three. Four. I think."

It's currently 11 a.m. and Jane is impressed that Dexter was able even to get to the door, let alone appear fresh-faced and raring to go. He returns a moment later in the same sweatshirt, with a pair of oversized jeans and a baseball cap, and says, "Let's go."

The address on the piece of paper that Hester the vet gave her sounds familiar: "Thornwood, The Vale of Health, NW3."

It brings a kind of flickering image to Jane's mind—a strange house at night, a Victorian streetlight, a sense of dread—but she can't put the image into any kind of context. It's only as she and Dexter head through Hampstead Village and down into the Vale of Health that she starts to remember.

"Oh," she says, as they descend into the Vale, toward the hamlet. "I think I—"

She stops, her breath held.

"What?" says Dexter.

"Nothing," says Jane.

A man. A tall man. A bar in Soho.

Jane was twenty-nine. It was the year 2000 and she'd just left her first husband, the Viscount. She'd been single and heartbroken and a bit desperate. She was very thin, she remembers, had barely eaten for weeks, and she was, she is sure, very drunk and possibly crying. He was older than her, the man, probably in his mid-forties and looked like a character from a black-and-white movie.

"You look like you should be called Horace," she'd said, "or Cecil."

He hadn't told her his real name, merely smiled and bought her another drink. "Why are you so sad?" he'd asked her, and she'd told him about the Viscount, who'd turned out to be a huge disappointment, more interested in his old school friends than in Jane and his young, motherless children. "And now," she'd said, "it's just me again, a tragic orphan rattling around this big old world with nobody to hold on to."

"You're very pretty," he'd said. "And utterly charming. It won't be too long before you're snapped up again."

She'd clocked his wedding ring then and asked him about it. "Ah," he'd said. "Yes. Very happily married. For nearly ten years."

"So why are you talking to me?"

"Because you looked like you needed a friend."

He'd told her he worked at a department store in the West End. He'd told her that they were hiring staff; he could, he told her, get her an interview as a shop-floor assistant.

"I'm not sure I'm a shop-floor kind of a person," she'd said. "I'd get complaints and be sacked in a week."

He'd looked at her with wry amusement and then said, "You know, our au pair girl just left, went back to Brazil. You said you've been living with small children?"

Jane nodded.

"I have two small children, and a lovely home and wife who doesn't really like housework. What would you think about maybe being some kind of housekeeper? Or nanny?"

Jane laughed. But then stopped. "Seriously?" she asked.

"Yes, seriously," he replied. "Why don't you come home with me? You can meet my wife, look at the house, see what you think."

Jane had felt a pulse of something wrong then, a distant siren in her consciousness warning her of something she could not quite put her finger on. But also, she remembers, a little thrill of something—something dark and self-destructive, a sense of throwing it all away because she remembers feeling entirely worthless in that moment. There was no future back then that she could picture or hold on to. There was no mother, no father, no brother, no husband, no job, no sense of what on earth she even was. She remembers the feeling of her self-esteem lurking somewhere out of sight, too far away for her to grab hold of it in that moment and think: What am I doing? And so she and this tall, charming, nameless man, whom she insisted on calling Cecil all night long, sat silently together in the back of a taxi, and she remembers vividly the strange sensation of leaving the heart of loud, high-octane Friday-night London, full of vodka and recreational drugs, and finding herself twenty minutes later in a sleepy Dickensian hamlet formed of tiny lamplit alleyways and rows of mismatched houses, seemingly cut off from the rest of the world.

"Where are we?" she'd asked.

“Hampstead,” he’d said.

“This isn’t Hampstead,” she’d said, thinking of the brightly lit urban village full of bars, pubs, and boutiques.

He’d told her that the Vale of Health had been annexed from the main village in the eighteenth century as a sanctuary from the plague. The hamlet had once been peopled by the most fashionable writers and artists of the time, but now it was a quiet backwater, surrounded on all sides by the wilds of Hampstead Heath.

“How long have you lived here?”

“Fifteen years,” he replied. “It belonged to my mother-in-law. She just passed away a few months ago, and now it belongs to my wife, and me.”

She remembers her spinning head, the vertiginous mix of alcohol, excitement, and fear as the taxi crept slowly down the tiny lane, almost vanishing into the blackness.

As they slowed to a halt, Jane saw ahead of them a wooden fence that followed the curve of the Heath. Beyond that was nothing.

“Wow,” Jane had said. “It looks like the last house in the world.”

“Sometimes,” the man had said, “it feels like maybe it is.”

They walked through a green gate and onto a small driveway just big enough for the open-backed army jeep parked across it. Jane’s father once had an old jeep, similar to this one, and, like this one, it had sat outside their house for years rusting into a grotesque eyesore.

A woman had come to the window at the sound of their footsteps, a pretty woman with black hair in a feathered bob, dark eyes watching warily. At the sight of her, Jane had begun to sober up. As they approached the front door she could hear the rumble of the taxi making its way out of the hamlet, and suddenly she’d wanted to turn and run, flag it down, beat on its doors, ask it to take her home. But then the man with no name touched her elbow gently and said, “Here, let me introduce you,” and Jane had found herself, as she had so often over the course of her stupid, mismanaged life, being dragged along into someone else’s narrative, because she had never had one of her own, and so she had followed him, that tall, imposing man, into his house, and been introduced to his wife and made awkward small talk with her while the man with no name mixed her a martini, and her memories are hazy now, splashes of color, a detail or two: a brown cabinet housing a home computer, photographs of a boy and girl, both around eight or nine, a

gray cat, a Liberty-print lampshade. Her image of the woman is hazy too, but she remembers a large engagement ring, a pursed mouth, and she remembers the sudden blinding, deafening realization she should not be there, that she had taken the wrong fork in the road, and then as the man passed her the martini there was a scream and a thud from upstairs that made her jump so hard she knocked the glass out of the man's hand.

"Fuck," he'd said, angrily, under his breath.

"I'm really sorry," she'd said.

The woman jumped to her feet. "The children," she'd said.

Neither made a move upstairs; there was no sound of a weeping child.

"I'll make you another one," he'd said.

"You know, actually, I think I'll probably skip the drink. I think—"

"Nonsense," he'd said, with enough force to make Jane flinch. "I'll make you another."

He'd gone to the cabinet again and she had smiled nervously at the wife, who had given her some kind of warning glance; Jane couldn't tell if it was friendly or unfriendly, but there had been a long silence, she remembers that, and inside that silence she made her plan.

"Is it OK if I go outside?" she'd said. "To smoke a cigarette?"

She remembers not waiting for permission, she remembers the solid feel of the strap of her handbag held inside her fist, she remembers the pulse of adrenaline that pushed her heart up hard against her rib cage. She remembers the tall man coming toward her, a fresh martini in his hand, and staring at her. "Stay," he'd said, holding it out to her. "Drink your martini."

"I won't be long," she'd said lightly. "I can't drink gin without nicotine, you know what it's—"

"Stay," he'd said again, and she remembers the feel of his other hand on her wrist, the sense of being tugged, and she remembers the wife putting herself between them.

"Let her go," she'd said to the man. "The children are awake."

Jane had felt the tension drop, his grip soften and then loosen entirely.

Her hands shook as she lit her cigarette outside the front door. She'd looked up at the dark windows above, wondering about the scream and the bang, but all was dark, all was quiet. And then, with a driving sense of urgency, she'd tiptoed across the crunchy gravel,

quietly unhooked the inside latch of the gate, and then, and only then, had held her bag tight to her stomach and run and run and run.

Now as she watches the dot on her phone app moving through the Vale toward the house called Thornwood, she feels it in her gut, even before they get there: *It's the same house.*

chapter three

There's a wooden sign nailed to the fence with the word "Thornwood" painted on it, which Jane doesn't remember from that long-ago night, and there is a plastic button attached to a post by the gate that Jane presses. She hears the faint tinkle of an old-fashioned electric bell-chime from inside the house and notices Hugo react to it, look around expectantly, the beginnings of a low growl forming in the back of his throat.

There is the sound of a door being opened, and then a male voice calling from the other side of the beaten-up jeep, which is still there.

Jane feels her breath catch at the sight of it. If the jeep is still there then the man must also still be there.

"Yes?" comes a male voice.

Dexter and Jane exchange a look. "Oh," Jane calls back. "Hello. Have you lost a dog?"

There is a brief silence and the sound of large feet on gravel. Then a man pulls the gate open and stares at them.

Jane braces herself for the man from that chilling night all those years ago but it is not that man. It is a very different man indeed.

He is fiftyish, average height, and scruffy-looking with long salt-and-pepper hair, thinning on top, and pulled back into a ponytail. He wears a faded Ramones T-shirt, black combat trousers, and worn black trainers, and holds a mug of something in a tattooed hand. His gaze goes down to Hugo.

"Fucking hell," he says, resting his mug on a wall and crouching down to the dog. "Where the fuck have you been?"

Hugo looks pleased to see the man and nuzzles against his hands, his tail whipping back and forth. But Jane can also read a slight confusion in the dog's body language, a

sense that he doesn't quite know what's happening.

"What's his name?" she asks the man pointedly.

"Hugo," says the man, going back to standing. "He disappeared a few days ago. Thought he'd been nicked. Where d'you find him?"

"Near my house," she says primly. "On the coast."

The man looks surprised. "The...?" he starts, but then stops and shakes his head. "Whereabouts, exactly?"

"Brighton," she says sharply. "Just outside."

She senses Dexter throwing her a confused look and ignores it.

"Well," says the man. "Thank you for bringing him back. Is he OK?"

Jane nods. "I took him to the vet. He was a little dehydrated but, apart from that, in good condition."

"Do I owe you any money?" he asks, a hand going absent-mindedly to his trouser pocket. "For the vet?"

Jane shakes her head. "No," she says. "It's fine."

He takes his hand away from his pocket and nods. "Well, cheers anyway. I appreciate it." He leans down with a sigh. "Come on, mate," he says to the dog. "Let's get you inside."

"My name is Jane, by the way. And this is my stepson Dexter; he only lives up the road, so if you ever need anyone to look after the dog, take care of him, I know he'd be more than happy."

Dexter nods enthusiastically, but the man is already backing away, his hand on the gate, preparing to close it again.

"Sure," he says, "thanks. Like I say. I appreciate it."

"How long have you lived here?" she asks.

He shrugs. "Ten years? Or so?"

"The jeep? Is it yours?"

"Nah. Belonged to my landlady's ex-husband. Why? Do you want to buy it? It's up for sale."

"Oh," she says. "God. No. Thank you. I just, er... I just recognized it, that's all. My dad had one like it. When I was little."

He nods at her, and then he turns, the gate closes, and the man and his dog disappear from sight.