

EXCERPT 1

Then She Was Gone 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.

EXCERPT 2

Then She Was Gone 1

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.

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