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books

**LISA
JEWELL**

**IT
COULD
HAVE
BEEN HER**

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CENTURY

Prologue

4 June 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 top. It was my favourite T-shirt; 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 on to 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 favourite 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.

1

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 which 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 lawned garden 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 centre 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 colours and the small white dog at the centre 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 lickable.

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, towards 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. 3.58. 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 Dexter 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.

2

The following morning, in leafy Belsize Park, Jane's favourite stepchild Dexter opens the door to his flat. 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 flat paid for by his father, who is Jane's