

‘Brilliant . . . I was gripped’
Peter James

A missing child returns.
But who took him?



found

erin kinsley

found

Erin Kinsley is a full-time writer.
She grew up in Yorkshire and currently lives
in East Anglia.

Praise for Found:

‘This is brilliant, utterly compelling, heart-wrenching
writing. I was gripped and loved it.’

Peter James

‘An unputdownable thriller that is also a mesmerising
study of a family facing their worst nightmare and realising
that it is only the beginning. The characters and events
will stay with you for a very long time.’

Elly Griffiths

‘A gripping blend of police procedural and psychological
thriller. Well-paced writing, finely drawn characters and
a suspenseful plot make this novel a compulsive read.

Once started, impossible to put down!’

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‘Found is one of those rare finds – a page turner that is
equally remarkable for the beauty and consideration given
to the writing. It will suck you in and take you on a
journey that stays with you.’

Jo Spain

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For all those not found, and those who miss them

‘It is tact that is golden, not silence.’

– *Samuel Butler*

‘Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass
the world is too full to talk about.’

– *Rumi*

Your Worst Nightmare

ONE

11 October

Berkshire

There are so many ifs, and so many if onlys. If only rugby practice hadn't over-run. If only Evan hadn't gone and lost a boot. If only he'd decided to bypass the newsagent's and had caught the earlier bus, the one he missed by just twenty seconds.

If only we could all sleep soundly at night, knowing we were safe from wicked people.

The Under-Twelves First Fifteen haven't played well, and there's a match against All Saints on Saturday. Mr Griffiths likes the school teams to succeed, so he makes the boys stay an extra five minutes, practising their passing in the rain. In the changing rooms, the boys pull off their muddy boots and socks, dropping their filthy shorts and shirts on the tiled floor as they run into the showers. The water, for once, is hotter than lukewarm, and Evan and Stewie linger under the jets, bringing feeling back to their cold-reddened hands and white-numb toes. By the time they're out and dressed, the other boys are

gone. Mr Griffiths is in the staffroom, drinking the day's last mug of tea before he drives home.

Evan has lost a boot. Stewie doesn't help him look for it but leans impatiently against a stand of coat-pegs urging Evan to get a move on, while Evan lies down on the floor to search under the boot-racks, dirtying his trousers and his blazer. He finds the boot under someone's forgotten shorts, hangs the shorts up on a peg and stuffs the boot into his kitbag.

It's a little after five. As they head for the front doors, Stewie and Evan's voices echo in deserted corridors lined with cabinets of shields and silver trophies. In the photographs on the walls, the faces of past generations stare mutely through the glass, the bright youths of recent decades in lifelike colour, their predecessors in monochrome and sepia.

By the main entrance, Mr Prentice the caretaker is waiting to lock up, clinking an impatient rhythm on his thigh with a hoop of keys. He tells the boys to hurry up, and they do. The staff car park is all but empty, though Mr Griffiths' old Subaru is still there, as is the headmaster's Passat. The boys head down the drive towards the open gates, chattering about homework, about Xbox games and Saturday's coming match.

There's a van parked on the forecourt of the newsagent's on Belmont Avenue, and Mr Jadoon is watching a young Asian man carry cases of wine to the storeroom round the back. The boys search their pockets for coins, and Mr Jadoon leads them inside before going to stand sentinel by the CCTV monitor. Evan and Stewie dither over their choices, until Evan settles on a can of Fanta and Stewie chooses salt and vinegar crisps. By the time they reach the counter, there's another customer

ahead of them; when he reaches out to pay for his milk, Stewie notices his tattoo, a red-and-black snake twisting on the back of his hand. Catching him admiring his artwork, the man gives Stewie a wink as he picks up his change.

As the boys go outside, the tattooed man is walking away from them, down Ruskin Road. The boys' route is along Belmont Avenue. Evan pops the tab of his Fanta and Stewie offers him a couple of his crisps. Their schoolbags – one for sports kit, one for books – are heavy, and, since he's small for his age, Evan's slow him down. There's a bus approaching, but Evan doesn't run to catch it because he hasn't finished his drink, and the driver won't let him on unless he dumps it. No one is waiting at the stop, and the bus sails by.

When they reach the bus shelter, the boys part company casually, expecting to be talking online in a while. Stewie walks on alone towards Church Road, and home. Evan lays his bags down on the pavement.

Seven minutes later, the next bus arrives, but Evan is no longer waiting at the stop. He and his bags are gone, but his can of pop is lying on its side, seeping sticky liquid into the gutter.

Evan's mum Claire has tea ready at six o'clock, but Evan isn't home. At quarter past, more annoyed than worried, she calls Stewie, who tells her what he can – which isn't much – and Claire thanks him. As she ends the call, the first tendrils of worry tighten in her stomach. When the door slams at six-thirty, her eyes close in relief, but it isn't Evan who comes into the kitchen, but Matt. He tells her not to worry, and she starts making more calls. By seven, they're both beginning to

panic, though Matt's hiding his fear with confident bluster. At eight, they ring the police. By the time they're taken seriously, it's gone eleven.

And by that time, Evan's in a very bad place indeed.

TWO

Stewie's mother Vicky switches on the bedside light and checks the time: 1.42 a.m. Someone's hammering at the front door, firing up a long-held dread of uniforms and bad news, but Paul's there in bed beside her, and Stewie and George are in their rooms. For a moment, Vicky doubts these certainties, and reaches out to touch Paul's back. His breathing changes, becoming quicker and shallower than the slow rhythms of deep sleep, and she knows he's at least half awake.

'There's someone at the door.'

She feels him tensing as he listens, but there's nothing to hear.

'You're dreaming,' he says. 'For God's sake, turn that light off.'

The hammering comes again. Now Paul's wide awake.

'Who the hell is that?' He squints towards the clock, but without his glasses, he can't read the face. 'What time is it?'

'Nearly two.' Vicky gets out of bed and puts on the pink dressing gown hanging behind the bedroom door. The room is cold; the heating won't come on for hours. As she opens the door, Paul moves to follow her. No one brings good news at this time of night, and he's thinking of his mother and father. Or maybe his brother, but wouldn't they just phone?

Vicky turns on the landing light. As she goes downstairs, the creaking of the treads seems loud. She switches on the hall light and the outside light over the front door, and through the frosted glass she sees two people. She decides to wait for Paul. The strangers at the door don't knock again, but stand and wait in silence.

Paul pulls on a pair of jeans and yesterday's T-shirt and finds his glasses. The anxiety for his mum and dad has solidified, and he comes downstairs at a run, not caring if he wakes the boys. He sees the figures at the door and glances at Vicky, who's standing back so he can be in charge. He picks up the keys from the hall table, then hesitates.

These people might be anyone.

He calls through the door.

'Who is it?'

'Police.'

Vicky's hand goes to her mouth, and Paul's head feels suddenly light. He fits the key to the lock and opens the door. The night air is dank, and the sodium-orange of the streetlights is hazy through fog. There's a car parked across the driveway, a dark-coloured Peugeot. A man and a woman are standing on the step, both wearing suits as if it were the middle of the day. The man holds up a wallet with a badge.

'Mr and Mrs Wareham?' His manner is polite, but he's not smiling. He closes the wallet in a practised movement, and slips it into his trouser pocket. 'I'm Detective Sergeant Hagen, this is DI Naylor. Can we come in?'

There's a moment's silence. Paul fears the worst; for the first time in his life, he knows what people mean by going weak at the knees. Vicky is more composed. Her mother's in a home,

with severe dementia. Her passing would never warrant a visit from the police.

‘What’s this about?’ asks Paul.

‘If we could talk inside,’ says Hagen.

Vicky leads the way to the living room, wishing she’d tidied round before she went to bed. Last night’s wine glasses are on the coffee table, and the basket of ironing she never got to is on a chair. She picks up the basket and carries it out to the hall.

When she comes back, Naylor invites Paul and Vicky to take seats on the sofa, as if this is her house now. Naylor takes the armchair. She’s the kind of woman Paul might find attractive under other circumstances, the suit jacket hiding the kind of curves he likes, dark hair pinned up in a messy French twist. Hagen helps himself to a dining chair, placing it at the centre of the room. He sits down, his legs spread, leaning forward on to his thighs, taking up space. He looks long and hard at Paul, and then at Vicky, while Paul is wishing he would just deliver the blow.

‘I expect you’re wondering why we’re here,’ says Hagen. He speaks with a Geordie burr which evokes the mean streets of Newcastle, but Hagen never denies his suburban origins. ‘We apologise for disturbing you at this hour, but I’m sure you appreciate that sometimes we deal with events where time is of the essence and we have to act quickly. Unfortunately, we’re involved in such an incident tonight. A young boy has gone missing.’

Paul feels a huge sense of relief, and lets go the breath he didn’t realise he was holding. Not his disaster, then, but someone else’s. Immediately, he feels ashamed of his selfishness.

‘Who?’ asks Vicky.

‘Evan Ferrers.’

‘Evan? Really? Oh my God.’ Vicky is baffled. ‘But when can he possibly . . . What’s going on?’

‘Evan didn’t come home from school yesterday,’ says Naylor. Her tone is careful, and Paul suspects the script’s rehearsed. ‘Mrs Ferrers thinks he was with your son yesterday afternoon. Stewie, is it?’

‘Stewie, yes. He and Evan were at rugby practice. I assume they left together. They usually do.’

‘Did Mrs Ferrers phone here at all?’

‘Well, yes,’ says Vicky. ‘She said she didn’t know where Evan was and asked to speak to Stewie. I don’t think he was much help, but she didn’t ring again, so I just assumed Evan had come home. I never thought for one moment he’d still be missing. Oh God, I should have called her, shouldn’t I? Poor Claire! How is she?’

‘What time did Mrs Ferrers call?’

Mentally running through the evening’s banal structure, Vicky shakes her head.

‘I don’t know. About six, six-thirty, I suppose.’

‘I wonder if we could speak to Stewie, Mrs Wareham?’

The request feels polite, but from Hagen’s face, Vicky knows the politeness is all veneer.

‘But it’s the middle of the night,’ she objects. ‘He’s got school tomorrow.’

Paul, Hagen and Naylor all look at her, and Vicky blushes.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘I’ll go and wake him.’

*

Stewie's dreams have taken a nightmarish turn. A stealthy sniper lies in wait for him in a network of dark rooms. As she pushes open his bedroom door, Vicky is pointlessly quiet, conditioned by years of parenting. The light from the landing forms a triangle on the carpet, acute at first, and as she opens the door wider, obtuse. It's geometry of the kind Stewie struggles with, but these days the more Paul tries to help him, the more Stewie becomes stubborn and shuts down.

His room smells unmistakably of him, a smell that's changed in recent months from the bubble-bath sweetness of little boyhood to supermarket deodorant and a base note of musk which permeates his sheets and all his clothes. The hoody and joggers he wore after school are heaped on the floor, and yesterday's uniform trousers hang from a belt-loop on a chair. There are posters on the walls – *The Walking Dead*, a Bugatti Veyron, the psychedelic masks of CamelPhat, whose music Vicky actually likes – and everywhere there's the clutter of Stewie's pastimes, DVDs and game CDs in and out of boxes, his skateboard, gloves and knee pads, the bike helmet he refuses to wear.

And in the midst of the chaos, there's Stewie, safe in this room where he should be, and Vicky believes she can imagine how Claire feels, how it would be to be standing in this doorway with Stewie missing, gone. Even the thought of it stirs her stomach, and her heart contracts as if a malicious hand has squeezed it, and her mind flashes up an image of herself, demented with grief.

She shuts the image down. Not me. Her.

The gratitude she feels is shameful, but even though she knows how base it is, the gratitude's still there.

Stewie's moving restlessly in his sleep, tormented by his

Xbox hangover. In a loud whisper, she says his name, not wanting to startle him by waking him suddenly, forgetting that often these days it's difficult to wake him at all. But something in Stewie's subconscious is anxious to escape the sniper, and in the triangle of light from the landing, she sees his eyes blinking and bright.

'Are you awake, Stewie?'

His mother's presence in his room, in the dark, signals something's going on, and Stewie sits up.

'What's the matter? Is everyone OK?'

'You need to come downstairs.' Vicky's still whispering, thinking of George. 'The police are here.' Stewie's face, half in shadow, shows he's startled, and she realises she's scared him, despite her best intentions. 'You haven't done anything wrong. They want to talk to you about Evan.'

'What about Evan?'

She hasn't thought what words to use, but actually, it doesn't matter.

'He didn't come home from school.'

'Yes, he did.' Stewie frowns. 'I saw him get on the bus.'

'Did you, Stewie?'

He considers.

'Not actually get on it.' He's climbing from the bed, wearing the look of puzzlement which was habitual to him when he was small. On his developing features, it's still endearing.

She reaches behind the door for the dressing gown he rarely wears, a present from his grandmother.

'Better put this on. The heating went off hours ago.'

For once, he puts on the dressing gown without argument.

*

In the kitchen, Paul's making tea, looking out as the kettle heats at the backs of the neighbours' houses. All are in darkness but one, where the downstairs lights are blazing. For a mad moment, Paul wonders if it's Evan's house, but they live two miles away. He finds the rarely used sugar bowl in the cupboard, and puts it on the tray with the best mugs, realising how much of his mother's training has rubbed off now he's confronted with authority. The kettle boils, and he makes four teas, adding milk. Finding four matching teaspoons in the cutlery drawer, he picks up the tray. *So much for me the rebel*, he thinks as he carries it through to the living room. So much for the years of student protests and sit-ins, for the baiting of the pigs. Now they're here, and he's bringing out matching teaspoons. Times change.

In the living room, he finds the seating arrangements have changed too. Stewie and Vicky are on the sofa, and Naylor and Hagen both have dining chairs. The scene looks cramped, unnatural, like a Christmas visit from distant relatives, except that Stewie and Vicky look self-consciously vulnerable in their night-clothes. Stewie is swamped by that dressing gown he never wears; it makes him look small, and Paul feels suddenly protective towards them both. Vicky's hair is a pillow-ruffled mess, and he knows when she looks in a mirror she'll be mortified, especially since the policewoman's casual up-do is designed to look smart come hell or high water, a style which could never be out of place.

He puts the tray down on the coffee table, and channelling his mother again, wonders if he ought to have brought biscuits. Stewie might have appreciated them. Then he glances at his son and realises the boy is scared. The last thing he'll be thinking of is biscuits.

‘Help yourselves,’ says Paul, and bypasses the armchair to sit next to Stewie on the sofa. Stewie seems to want him close, and immediately moves over to make room.

Hagen is smiling at Stewie, but his smile looks contrived as a warm-up technique, a ploy to facilitate a quick pick of Stewie’s brain. Naylor takes a mug, spoons in sugar and stirs. She seems very interested in her tea and uninterested in Stewie, but Paul knows that’s an act to take the pressure off his son.

Naylor lays the teaspoon back on the tray and sips her drink.

‘So we just need you to tell us exactly what happened when you left school,’ Hagen is saying. ‘Do you know what time it was when you left?’

No chance, thinks Paul.

‘Not really,’ says Stewie.

‘About what time do you think it was, Stewie?’ puts in Naylor. ‘What would you guess?’

‘After rugby practice.’

‘They usually finish about five,’ says Vicky.

‘So is that what time it was?’ asks Naylor. ‘You finished rugby practice at the usual sort of time?’

Stewie shrugs.

‘Who takes rugby practice?’ asks Hagen. ‘Which teacher?’

‘Mr Griffiths.’

Hagen produces a notebook and pen. He writes something down and leaves his notebook open on his knee, positioned so he’s the only one who can read it.

‘What did you do when you finished practice?’ asks Naylor.

Painstakingly, she prises the minutiae of twenty-five minutes

from Stewie: the lost boot, the newsagent's and what they bought, the goodbye at the bus stop.

'Did you see anyone you know?'

'No.'

'Did anyone speak to you?'

'The shopkeeper.'

'What did he say?'

'He told us how much to pay.'

'That's all?'

Stewie nods.

'Was there anyone else in the shop?'

'There was a man with tattoos. He was bald.'

'What kind of tattoos were they? Can you describe them?'

'He had a snake on the back of his hand.'

'And on the way to the bus stop, did you see any cars you recognised? Any friends or neighbours going by?'

Stewie thinks, and shakes his head.

'Thanks, Stewie,' says Naylor. 'You've been a real help. Just one last question, for now. Did Evan seem OK to you? Was anything bothering him, any trouble at school, anything like that?'

The living room door opens, and there, blinking away sleep in his dinosaur onesie, is George. He looks around in bewilderment, then frowns at his mother.

'Mum, what's going on?'

Vicky jumps up and grabs his hand.

'Back to bed, Georgie,' she says. 'This is a grown-up thing.'

'But Stewie's here.'

'He's older than you. Excuse us.'

She leads him from the room. As they go up the stairs, George is still protesting his exclusion.

Naylor smiles at Stewie.

‘So, you were telling us about Evan. Does he have any worries? Any trouble with bullies, anyone who’s been picking on him, maybe?’

Paul is pleased she’s using the present tense.

Stewie pulls a face and shrugs.

‘I don’t think so,’ he says.

There seems no more to be said. From upstairs, they hear Vicky and George begin to argue.

Naylor reaches forward, picks up her mug of almost-cold tea and drinks down what’s left.

Hagen puts away his notebook.

‘I think that’s it for now, Mr Wareham,’ he says.

Naylor finds a business card, and hands it to Paul.

‘We’ll need Stewie to come into the station and make a statement,’ she says, ‘especially a description of the tattoos. We have specially trained staff to interview minors, and you can stay with him. It’s all low-key, nothing to worry about, but as soon as possible, if you don’t mind.’

As the police officers stand to leave, Stewie puts the question Paul didn’t dare ask.

‘Where’s Evan? What’s happened to him?’

Naylor smiles.

‘I don’t think he’s far away,’ she says. ‘We’ve got lots of people looking for him. Try not to worry.’

Paul closes the door behind them. As he follows Stewie upstairs, the Peugeot’s engine starts, and the car drives away. With the streets deserted, they hear it for a surprisingly long time.

Paul watches his son discard the despised dressing gown and

climb back into bed. He kisses Stewie's forehead and strokes his hair, feeling, for some reason, close to tears.

'Night night, son.'

As he's about to close the bedroom door, Stewie says, 'Dad.'

'What's up?'

'I think I should have waited with Evan to make sure he got on the bus.'

Paul hesitates.

'Don't worry about it,' he says. 'Don't go thinking anything's your fault. Probably someone gave him a lift.'

He wants to unsay the words the moment they're out. As Paul shuts Stewie into the darkness of his bedroom, both father and son are considering the same uncomfortable thought. Maybe someone did offer Evan a lift, but what if it was an offer Evan wasn't allowed to refuse?

Hagen's observing the speed limits, even though they're alone on the suburban streets. Naylor watches the needle on the speedometer, and never sees it rise above 33 mph.

She isn't keen to return to Evan's family home. The mother's distress is harrowing.

Hagen flicks on the indicator to turn right. Rules are rules, and it doesn't matter to him that it's not necessary, that there's no one to see it. The radio on the dashboard crackles and falls silent.

'So what do you think?' asks Hagen. 'If you were the betting kind, where would you be putting your money?'

Naylor glances across at him.

'Do you mean, based on my years of experience?'

'Based on past outcomes.'

‘Decent family, no history of running away, no known problems at school. Put two and two together, I’d say we have reason to worry.’

They’re turning into the Ferrerses’ cul-de-sac, all post-war semis, the front gardens mostly sacrificed for block-paved parking. Outside Evan’s house, the vehicles are all police-owned, but that will soon change, when the media arrive.

Hagen pulls in behind a patrol car. There’s a uniformed policewoman standing under the Ferrerses’ porch-light.

‘Goes without saying, that stays between you and me,’ says Naylor, getting out of the car.