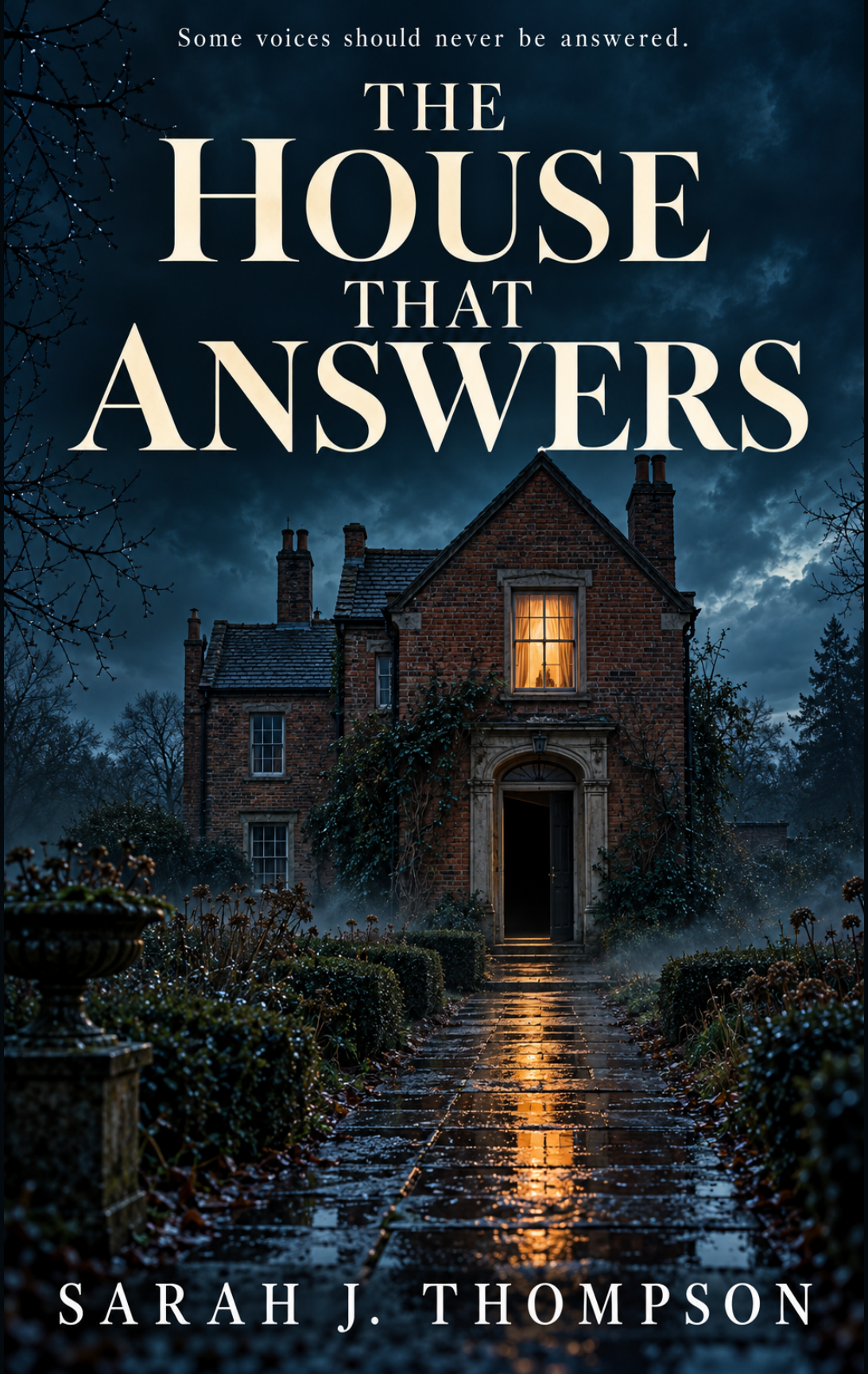
Some voices should never be answered.

THE HOUSE THAT ANSWERS



SARAH J. THOMPSON

THE HOUSE THAT ANSWERS

A supernatural suspense novel

Sarah J. Thompson

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Content note: bereavement, coercion, drowning peril and disturbing supernatural experiences.

Chapter One

Her mother had been dead for eleven years when Helen learned there were still things she could make worse.

The message arrived while she was buying bin bags.

She had chosen the heavy black ones, suitable for broken glass and garden waste. There would be a great deal to throw away at the house. Andrew had asked her not to call it rubbish, so she had stopped using the word when they spoke.

Her phone vibrated against the basket.

One new voicemail.

No missed call.

She put the bags down beside a display of washing powder and pressed play.

For a moment, she heard only movement: a faint scrape, then the soft double knock of something touching the telephone.

Her mother used to do that with her wedding ring.

Helen stopped breathing before the voice began.

“Listen to the whole message, Helen.”

Not a recording she remembered. Not a phrase borrowed from an old birthday video.

Her mother sounded tired.

“You’ll want to ring your brother. Do that afterwards. I haven’t got long enough to explain twice.”

A trolley squeaked behind Helen. Someone said excuse me. She stepped aside without looking.

“Come to the house tomorrow. Bring Andrew with you.”

Helen pressed the phone harder against her ear.

“And if you hear yourself speaking from a room you haven’t entered, don’t go in.”

There was a sound beneath the words. Helen could not place it until her mother went quiet.

Water running into a sink.

The kitchen tap at the house had always shuddered before the water settled. Her father had replaced the washer twice. Her mother said she liked knowing when someone was making tea.

“Helen?”

The voice was closer now.

“Are you listening?”

She nearly answered.

Her mouth had already opened when the message ended.

For several seconds she stood with the phone against her face.

Then she took it away and looked at the screen.

Twenty-nine seconds.

She played it again.

This time she watched the progress bar, as though the small moving line might expose a trick. Her mother’s voice was a little thinner than she remembered, but the impatience was right. The careful way she said Andrew’s name was right. Even the breath before the last question belonged to her.

Helen listened a third time.

Then she called her brother.

He answered on the first ring.

“Did you get it?”

She put her free hand against the shelf.

“You got one too?”

“About ten minutes ago.”

“Send it to me.”

“Why?”

“So I can hear it.”

“It’s Mum.”

“Andrew. Send me the message.”

He was quiet long enough for her to hear a television in the background.

“Don’t start doing that,” he said.

“Doing what?”

“Talking to me like I’m about to have an episode.”

“I haven’t said that.”

“You haven’t had to for years.”

She closed her eyes.

At the other end, a door shut. The television became muffled.

“Mine’s different,” he said.

“What does yours say?”

“That you’re coming tomorrow.”

A child nearby was asking his father for chocolate. The father said no twice, then yes. Helen watched them walk towards the tills.

“What else?”

Andrew drew breath.

“That I should let her explain.”

“Explain what?”

“She didn’t say.”

“Where are you?”

“At home.”

She waited.

“My home,” he added. “Not hers.”

“Good. Stay there.”

“Helen—”

“I’m going to find out what this is.”

She expected him to argue. Instead, he asked a question so quietly that she almost missed it.

“Did she sound all right in yours?”

Helen looked down at the bin bags.

“No,” she said.

Andrew made a small sound. It might have been relief.

“Good. In mine she sounded frightened.”

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She paid for the bags because she could not think what else to do with them.

In the car, she checked the number. Withheld.

She searched her inbox for the solicitor's email. Tomorrow at eleven, Clare Bennett would meet her at the house with a locksmith. Andrew had lost his key. Helen still had hers, but the front door had swollen in the frame and neither of them had been able to turn the lock during their last visit.

They had left without going inside.

That had been six months ago.

She called the solicitor's office. A recorded voice told her it was closed for the weekend.

Then she opened the voicemail again.

There had to be a source. An old recording. Something Andrew had found. Something somebody had taken from his phone.

Helen preserved sound for a living. In the archive where she worked, she had brought voices back from tapes furred with mould, from broken reels, from a cylinder somebody had kept in a tobacco tin. People cried when she played them the results. She always left the room before they did.

She listened through the car speakers.

"Listen to the whole message, Helen."

She could hear the room around the voice more clearly now. The water. A clock. A distant vibration that might have been a lorry passing the house.

And, just before her mother said her name for the last time, another sound.

A woman laughing.

Helen dragged the progress bar backwards.

Played it.

Again.

It was only a brief laugh, half suppressed, as if someone had covered her mouth.

Helen knew that laugh.

She had heard it that morning when Andrew sent her a photograph of his dog asleep with its head inside a shopping bag.

She turned off the car speakers.

Then she deleted the message.

A moment later, the phone vibrated in her hand.

One new voicemail.