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SHARI LAPENA

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE COUPLE NEXT DOOR

EVERYONE HERE IS LYING

A NOVEL

ALSO BY SHARI LAPENA

The Couple Next Door

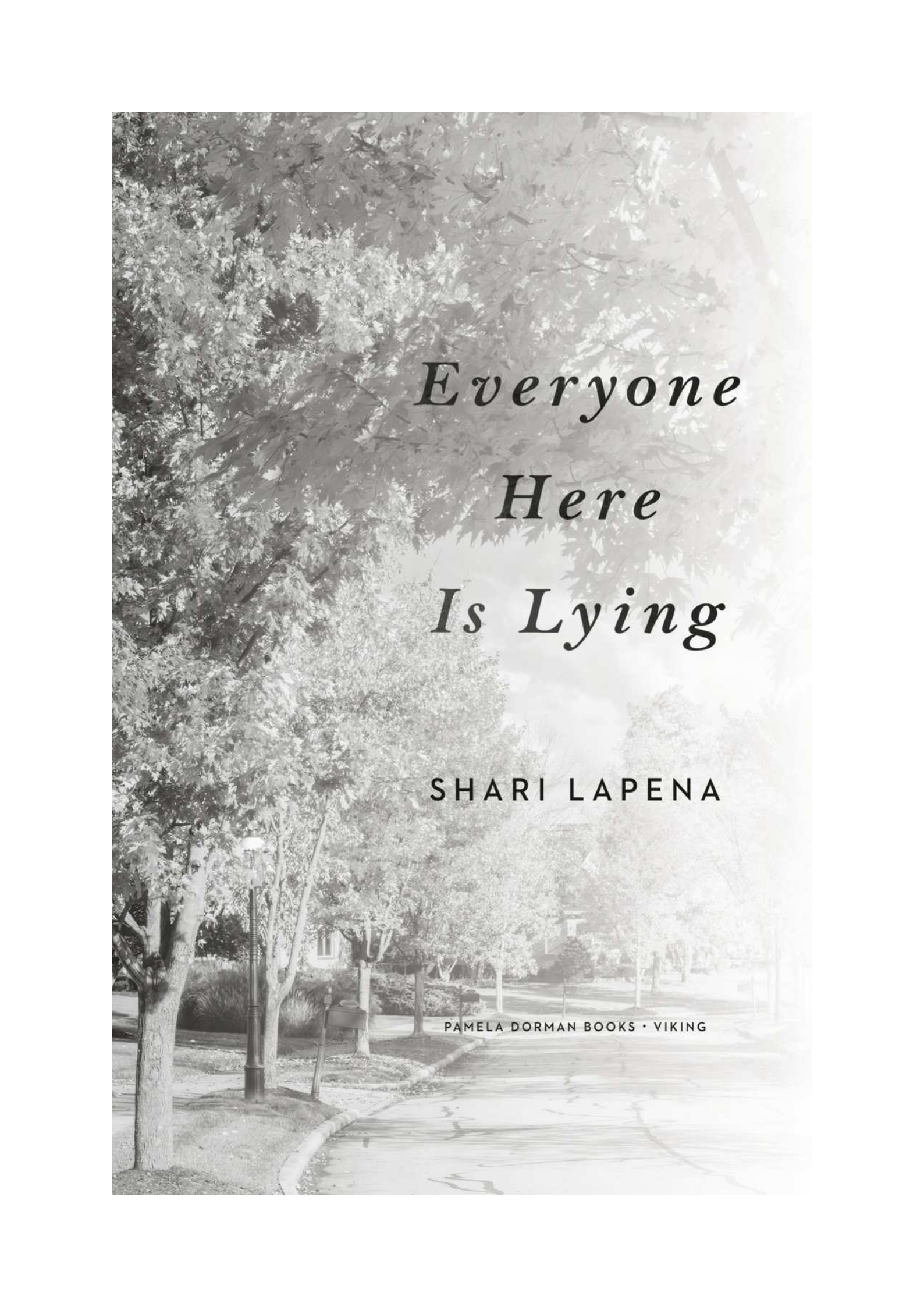
A Stranger in the House

An Unwanted Guest

Someone We Know

The End of Her

Not a Happy Family



*Everyone
Here
Is Lying*

SHARI LAPENA

PAMELA DORMAN BOOKS • VIKING

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About the Author

144314086

To Julia

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One

They don't speak as William walks her to her car parked behind the motel; they never leave their cars out front, where they might be recognized. No one will ever know they were here. At least, this is what they tell themselves, what they have told themselves every time over the last few months as their affair kindled, burned brightly. But now it has been abruptly snuffed out. By her. He didn't see it coming.

They'd met at their usual motel on the outskirts of town, where no one knows them. It's on the main highway. They had to be discreet. They couldn't meet in their own homes because they're both married, and she, apparently, wants to stay that way. Until half an hour ago, he hadn't really had to think about it. He feels like he's had a rug pulled out from beneath his feet, and he still hasn't regained his balance.

They stop at her vehicle, and he leans in to kiss her. She averts her face. Despair and desperation take hold, the realization that she really means it. He turns quickly and walks away, leaving her standing there, keys in her hand. When he gets to his car, he looks across to her, but she is already starting the engine and driving away in a burst of speed, as if making a point.

He stands there, bereft, watching her go. Something had seemed different about her today. He always arrived at the motel first, checked in, paid in cash, got the key, and texted her the unit number. Today, when she knocked and stepped inside, she'd pulled him close and kissed him more hungrily than usual. There were no words. They tore off each other's clothes the same as always, made love the same as always. Afterward, she usually lay with her head on his chest, *listening to his heart*, she'd say. But today she sat up against the headboard and stared straight ahead, looking at the two of them in the bureau mirror. She'd pulled the white sheets up to cover her breasts. Also unlike her.

She wasn't listening to his heart anymore.

"We have to end this," she said.

"What?" He looked up at her, startled, then pulled himself up to sit beside her. "What are you talking about?" He studied her—such a beautiful woman. The bone structure, smooth blond hair, and natural glamour reminiscent of an old-fashioned film star. He felt a surge of alarm.

She turned her head and looked at him then. "William, I can't do this anymore. I have a family, kids to think of."

"I have kids too."

"You're not a mother. It's not the same."

"It didn't stop you before," he pointed out. "It didn't stop you today."

She looked angry then. "You don't have to throw it in my face," she answered.

He softened, reached for her, but she shrugged him away. "Nora, you know I love you." He added, "And I know you love me."

"It doesn't matter." There were tears in her lovely blue eyes.

"Of course it matters!" He was panicking. "It's all that matters! I'll divorce Erin. You can leave Al. We'll get married. The kids will adjust. It will be fine. People do it all the time."

She looked at him for a moment, as if surprised he suggested it. They'd never spoken about the future; they'd been living in the moment. In their pleasure and unexpected happiness. Finally, she shook her head and brushed the tears from her face. "No, I can't. I can't be that selfish. It would destroy Al, and I can't do that to my kids. They'd hate me. I'm sorry."

Then she'd risen from the bed and quickly started putting her clothes back on, while he watched her in disbelief. That things could change so quickly, so fundamentally, without warning—it was disorienting. She was reaching for the door when he cried, "Wait," and hurriedly began to dress. "I'll walk you to your car."

And that was it.

Now he gets into his car to drive down the highway back to Stanhope. It's 3:45 in the afternoon. He's too upset to go back to his medical practice offices or to the hospital. He has no patients scheduled. It's Tuesday; he always reserves the afternoon for her. At loose ends, he decides to go

home for a bit instead. The house will be empty. Michael will be at basketball practice, and Avery has choir after school. His wife will be at work. He'll have the house to himself, pour a much-needed drink. Then he'll leave again before anyone gets home.

Their house is at the top of Connaught, a long, pleasant residential street that ends in a cul-de-sac. He's still thinking about Nora as he uses the button on the car's visor to open the garage door. He drives in and presses another button to close the door behind him. She'll be home by now, in her own house farther down the same street, maybe already regretting her decision. But she hadn't looked as if she would change her mind. He wonders now if she has had other affairs. He'd never asked. He'd assumed he was the only one. He realizes he doesn't really know her at all, even though he thought he did—even though he loves her—because he'd been taken completely off guard.

He puts the key in the lock of the side door leading from the garage into the kitchen. He thinks he hears a sound and pauses. There's someone in the kitchen. He opens the door and finds himself looking at his nine-year-old daughter, Avery, who is supposed to be at choir practice.

She turns and stares at him; she'd been reaching for the cookies on the counter.

For fuck's sake, he thinks, *can he never get a moment to himself?* He doesn't want to deal with his difficult daughter right now.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice, but it's hard. It's been a shitty day. He's just lost the woman he loves, and it feels like he's lost everything.

"I live here," she says sarcastically. And she turns away from him and reaches for the cookies, opening the package with a crinkly sound and plunging her hand in.

"I mean, aren't you supposed to be at choir practice?" he asks, reminding himself to breathe. To not get upset. She's not being deliberately obnoxious, he tells himself, she can't help it. That's just the way she is. She's not wired like other people.

"They sent me home," she says.

She's not allowed to walk home from school alone. She's supposed to be picked up by her older brother; basketball practice and choir end at the

same time, at 4:30. He sees the time on the stove clock—4:08.

“Why didn’t you wait for your brother?”

She’s stuffing Oreos into her mouth. “Didn’t want to.”

“It’s not always about what *you* want,” he tells her crossly. She eyes him warily, as if sensing his darkening mood. “How did you get in the house?”

“I know about the key under the front mat.”

She says it as if she thinks he’s stupid. He tries to control his growing temper. “Why did they send you home? Was choir canceled?” She shakes her head. “So what happened?” He finds himself wishing that Erin were here, so that she could handle this. She’s much better at it than he is. He feels a familiar pain starting between his eyes, and he pinches the bridge of his nose and begins moving restlessly around the kitchen, tidying, putting things away. He doesn’t want to look at her because the disrespect in her expression infuriates him. He thinks of his own father: *I’ll wipe that smirk off your face.*

“I got in trouble.”

Not today, he thinks. *I can’t deal with this shit right now.* “For what?” he asks, looking at her now. She just stares at him, stuffing her face. And he can’t help it, he feels that familiar spurt of anger at his daughter. She’s always getting into trouble, and he’s had enough. When he was a kid, his father smacked him when he misbehaved, and he turned out fine. But it’s different nowadays. They have coddled her. Because the experts say she needs patience and support. What they’ve done, he thinks, is enabled her to become a spoiled brat who doesn’t understand limits.

“Tell me what happened,” he says, a warning in his voice now.

“No.” And it’s that defiance in her voice, as if she holds all the cards, as if he’s nothing and has no authority over her at all, that sets him off. In three long strides he’s across the kitchen, in a blind rage. Something inside him has snapped. It happens so fast, faster than conscious thought. He strikes her across the side of the head, harder than he meant to. She goes down like a stone, the expression of defiance wiped from her face, replaced by shock and then vacancy, and for a fraction of a second, he feels satisfaction.

But it's short-lived. He stands over her, horrified at what he's just done. He's shocked, too, that he could do this. His hand is stinging with pain. He'd only meant to slap her, he tells himself now, to slap some sense into her. He hadn't meant to *strike* her. He bends down over his daughter, where she is slumped across the floor; she cringes away from him. He quickly but gently pulls her up to a sitting position, with her legs out in front of her and her back against the kitchen cupboards. "I'm sorry, honey! Avery, I didn't mean it! I'm so sorry." The words come in a rush. He's blinking back tears.

She looks back at him blankly, not mouthy now. He's sickened by what he's done. He's a decent man. A doctor, not a brute. He's not his father. And he loves his daughter, he does. How could he have lost it like that? "I'm so sorry. I'll make it up to you, Avery, I promise. I shouldn't have done that. It's just, I lost my temper—I've had a very bad day. I know that's no excuse. You know I love you, sweetie. I love you more than anything."

Her eyes are a bit glassy, but otherwise she seems fine. She looks away from him then, won't meet his eyes.

His voice is pleading, and he hates the sound of it. "Look, I'm sorry. I know it's unforgivable, but let's not tell your mother. She has a lot on her plate right now." Avery doesn't answer; she won't speak to him. He pauses and says, "And we won't tell her you came home by yourself, because that will get her upset, and you know she will have to give you consequences. You can say you walked home with a friend."

She ignores him, staring sullenly straight ahead. He thinks she'll tell, and it's what he deserves. There's going to be a bruise. He supposes he could try to deny it; there's no predicting who Erin will believe. His daughter has a history of telling lies. He does, too, but his wife doesn't know that.

He stands up and backs away from Avery. He has to get out of here, away from the sight of what he's just done. He's filled with self-loathing. He can feel his little girl's reproach, imagines her calculating. She has something to use against him now. One more nail in the coffin of his marriage. He turns around and heads back out to the garage.

But when he gets to the car and reaches for his keys, he hesitates.

Two

Nora arrives home about a quarter to five. She'd run a few errands after leaving William at the motel, so that she'd have something to show for her absence. Faith is at soccer practice and should be home soon. Ryan must have gone out; his car is gone from the driveway. Her husband, Al, won't be home till around six. She doesn't have time for a shower, to lather away the smell of William. The smell of what they did together. How would she explain a shower in the afternoon if Ryan suddenly arrives home? Instead, she washes herself with a cloth at the bathroom sink.

She lets herself cry. It had to be done. Her own feelings don't matter, she tells herself. She must live with the choices she's made. She's strong and she must get over him. But it won't be easy—she's in love with William. She knows now that she'd never been in love with her husband, even in the beginning. She and Al had loved each other once, but there had never been true passion there. Not like there is with William. Was.

She's only forty-two. She still has her figure, her good looks. She's not as stunning as she was twenty years ago, but she still turns heads when she enters a room. She can't help it that she's fallen for William, a handsome and charming doctor, that she still wants to be desired. But she can change her actions. She can stop seeing him. It's too risky. She's been selfish. Too many people will be hurt if they are found out: Her husband and children. His wife and their children. She doesn't want to cause all that damage. She will have to stop volunteering at the hospital. She won't be able to bear it, seeing him there, after this.

William's impulsive suggestion that they leave their respective spouses and marry each other had come as a shock. Did he mean it? It had never occurred to her as even a possibility, but even if he did, it's out of the

question. Her kids, Faith and Ryan, would never forgive her, and they mean the world to her. No, she can't risk losing them.

It's right that she ended it. It's a wonder they weren't caught. No one must ever know. She's been so worried that it shows—that she's been feeling younger, prettier, happier, more alive these last few months. She has tried to hide it. She had to end things now, before someone noticed. Before Al noticed—if he hasn't already. He's been quieter than usual lately, more detached. But maybe something is going on at work. How could he know about her and William? They've been so careful.

• • •

MICHAEL IS SWEATING after basketball practice. The coach is clearly pleased with him today, and it makes him glow. He wants to tell his mom and dad what the coach said about his play today. In the locker room, he wipes himself down with the towel from his gym bag. He slips off his basketball shorts and pulls on the sweatpants and sweatshirt in his bag. It's almost mid-October, and it's cool outside. He says a reluctant goodbye to his friends, who head out of the school in a pack, wishing he could go with them and enjoy being part of the team a little longer. Instead, he turns away and follows the halls to the music room at the other end of the school to pick up his little sister. He resents having to do this every Tuesday. Why can't his mother get off work early one day a week and pick up Avery herself? She's such a little pain in the ass, he thinks. He's twelve now, in sixth grade, and he wants to hang out with his friends. There's nothing cool about walking home with your little sister. He wonders what his friends are saying, what he's missing.

He rounds the last corner to the hall with the music room. His sister isn't sitting in her usual spot on the bench along the wall, with her backpack on her shoulder and impatiently scuffing her feet against the floor, waiting for him. He pokes his head inside the room and then enters. The music teacher, Ms. Burke, looks up and smiles at him. She remembers him—he was in choir, too, until he got to quit for sports instead. He glances around the room, but Avery's not there.

“Are you looking for your sister?” Ms. Burke asks.

He nods. “Yeah.”

“I’m afraid I had to send her home. She was being disruptive.”

Michael’s heart sinks. Not again. When Avery gets in trouble, his parents usually argue. Avery sucks up all their energy; they seem to barely notice him. Lately, Michael has to do something spectacular to get their attention. All Avery has to do is misbehave, which she does all the time—while he quietly gets good grades and makes the basketball team and mows the lawn without argument. It’s not fair. “She’s not supposed to walk home by herself,” he tells the music teacher.

Concern flickers across Ms. Burke’s face. “She should have waited for you,” she says, “if that is your arrangement.”

Michael leaves the music room and retraces his steps through the empty school corridors. His mood drops further; the glow from the coach’s praise has disappeared. Now Avery’s really going to be in trouble. His parents won’t like it that she went home on her own. What was he supposed to do? He was at basketball practice. He didn’t know. Now he’s angry at her too.

He walks home alone, hurrying, head down, knowing that everyone is going to be in a bad mood tonight. No one will care that the coach thought he was playing great. It’s usually a twenty-minute walk with Avery, but he does it in fifteen. When he gets home, the front door is locked, which is unexpected. He uses his key and throws open the door. His mother will be home soon, at about 5:30. It occurs to him then that he and Avery can say they came home together. Or just say nothing at all. His mom doesn’t have to know that Avery got in trouble and that she walked home without him. It’s tempting. But what if Ms. Burke calls his mother? Should he risk it? They’d be furious if they found out and he hadn’t told them. He’s never lied to them before.

Michael automatically heads to the kitchen, calling for his sister. “Avery! Where are you?” He stops inside the kitchen, but there’s no sign of her. If Avery was home, her backpack would be on the floor. Worried now, he walks through the first floor of the house, looking for her. “Shit,” he mutters. Then, raising his voice, “Avery, where are you?” He mounts the stairs to the second floor two at a time and looks in her bedroom. She’s not there. He looks in his own room—she’s been known to snoop through his things—but she’s not there either. He’s really starting to worry. She’s not in his parents’ bedroom, the office, or either of the bathrooms, or in the

empty garage either. She's not in the basement. Now his heart is pounding from rushing around the house and from fear. He's responsible for her, and he doesn't know where she is. He opens the back sliding doors off the dining room onto the patio and calls her name in the backyard. But no one answers. He goes farther into the backyard toward the back fence and turns around and looks up at the roof. She's climbed onto the roof before. But he doesn't see her. He's scared now. She didn't come home. Where the hell is she? She could be playing in the woods behind the house. She could be anywhere.

He pulls his cell phone out of the pocket of his sweats. Avery is only nine, she doesn't have a cell phone. He calls his mother.

"Yes, honey, what is it?" His mother sounds like she's busy. When isn't she?

He swallows. "Um, Avery's not here."

"What do you mean she's not there?" His mother's voice is sharp. "Where are you?"

He has to tell her the truth now.

• • •

ERIN WOOLER CLOSSES her eyes as she listens to her son. A moment later, she's making her way as fast as she can toward the office's exit. She'd mouthed *family emergency* to her boss and got the nod that it was okay to leave. "Let's not panic," she says to her twelve-year-old. "She's probably gone to Jenna's. I'm on my way home. Can you go to Jenna's house and see if she's there? Call me as soon as you find her. I'll be home in fifteen minutes."

She makes her way to the parking lot, gets into her car, and puts the phone down on the console where she can reach for it quickly. She's worried, naturally, but she's not afraid, not yet. She loves her daughter, but Avery is a challenge. Always pushing the boundaries. *Why can't she just do what she's told?* Erin thinks, in frustration more than fear. When they find her, they will have to decide how to handle it. How can they get Avery to learn from this rather than becoming more oppositional? That's what usually happens when they try to rein her in.

Erin thinks of her son, Michael, and the quiver in his voice just now. He's such a good kid. He's going to feel responsible; she will have to reassure him that this is Avery, not him—that he is not to blame for his sister's behavior. He's so sensitive, so worried about displeasing anyone, especially his parents. She drives a little faster. No one ever tells you how complicated it is being a parent. How much energy it sucks out of you. The toll it takes on a marriage. Somehow simply growing up in a family isn't such great preparation for having your own.

As Erin drives, it begins to rain. She keeps glancing at her cell phone, expecting a call any minute, that he's found her. She's at her friend Jenna's, across the street, she must be. But then she remembers that Jenna is in choir, too, and she didn't get sent home. The woods then. Avery likes to play in the woods behind their house, in that tree house. She's pulling into the driveway when her cell rings. She picks it up quickly.

"No one answered the door at Jenna's. I'm at the tree house, and she's not here either," Michael says.

He's obviously thinking along the same lines that she is. Her son is breathing heavily, and she can hear the alarm in his voice. It immediately infects her with panic too. But she's the adult, she must remain calm. "Okay, Michael, come home. Wherever she is, she'll probably show up now that it's raining. If not, we'll search for her. I'll call your father." She disconnects and gets out of the car.

The front door has been left unlocked, and she hurries into the house. She kicks off her pumps by the door and quickly searches, calling Avery's name; maybe she came home while Michael was out looking for her. She runs up and down stairs, fans out around the house. Maybe Avery's hiding, playing a trick on them. She searches under beds and behind clothes in the closets, everywhere she can think of. Avery isn't here. She shouts her name again and again. No answer.

As she returns to the kitchen, Michael comes down the hall from the front door and meets her. He's drenched, and he looks shaken, his face pale even though he's obviously been running.

"I'm going to call your father," she says. "And then I'm going to call the police."