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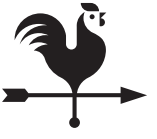

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To Julia

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Chapter 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

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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. Afterwards, 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 any more.

'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 blonde 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 any more. 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.

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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 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 a loose end, 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

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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 further 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

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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 cancelled?' 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

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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

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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.

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Chapter 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.

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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. William's 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

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play today. In the changing 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

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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

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be on the floor. Worried now, he walks through the ground floor of the house, looking for her. 'Shit,' he mutters. Then, raising his voice, 'Avery, where are you?' He mounts the stairs to the first 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 on to the patio and calls her name in the backyard. But no one answers. He goes further into the backyard towards the back fence and turns around and looks up at the roof. She's climbed on to 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 closes her eyes as she listens to her son. A moment later, she's making her way as fast as she can towards the office's exit. She'd mouthed *family emergency* to her boss and got the

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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 behaviour. 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. Erin's pulling into the driveway when her cell rings. She picks it up quickly.

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'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 wardrobes, 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.'

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Chapter Three

WILLIAM ARRIVES HOME at 5:40, after the call from Erin. He'd heard the distress in her voice, although it was clear that she was trying to keep a lid on it in front of Michael. *Avery is missing*, she'd told him. *I'm going to call the police*. There is a police cruiser parked on the street outside their house. He feels his stomach lurch at the sight of it.

He parks his car in the garage and takes a deep breath. He must keep it together. He must be the rock in a crisis that everyone expects him to be. He's the man of the family, a doctor. He must call on his training – he can't let himself fall apart. His wife's strained voice echoes in his mind. *Avery is missing. I'm going to call the police.*

When he gets inside, he finds his wife and son sitting in the living room at the front of the house with two uniformed police officers. The female cop is older, and the male police officer – he seems impossibly young, barely out of his teens – is taking notes.

Erin looks up at him, her face drawn. And it hits him, what's

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happening. It hits him so hard he can't breathe. His wife doesn't get up and come to him for a hug. Nor does he go to her.

The female officer rises and says, 'Mr Wooler?'

'It's Dr Wooler,' he manages.

She nods. 'I'm Officer Hollis, and this is Officer Rosales. Your wife reported your daughter missing a few minutes ago. We just got here. We'll take particulars and get a search started. The detectives will be here shortly.'

He nods and sits down in an armchair. He watches the sudden rain hammering against the glass doors of the dining room that look out on to the backyard. It's been such a strange day.

'Do you have any recent photographs of Avery?' Hollis asks.

'They're all on my phone,' Erin says. She reaches for it and thumbs through and shows her photos of Avery. Her hand is shaking.

Hollis says, 'May I?' and tags and sends several of them to her own cell. 'Blonde, blue eyes,' Hollis says, studying the photos. 'Height? Weight?'

Erin answers. 'She's four foot two, maybe sixty pounds.'

'What was she wearing today?'

It's as if William isn't there. Erin seems to think for a moment. 'Jeans – dark blue, they were fairly new. Pink running shoes. A white T-shirt with daisies on the front. She was wearing her jean jacket and her backpack is navy blue.'

'Any distinguishing marks? Scars?'

Erin shakes her head, then looks at him. William shakes his head too.

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'You say no one has seen Avery since she left choir practice,' Hollis says, speaking to Erin. 'What time was that?'

William can't find his voice; it's as if he's paralysed. The opportunity passes.

Erin turns to Michael. 'I don't know,' Michael says nervously. 'She was kicked out of practice. I don't know when, exactly.' He adds, 'It starts after school, at three thirty and goes until four thirty.'

Hollis glances at the young cop beside her. 'We need to talk to the teacher.'

'It's Ms Burke,' Michael tells them.

Hollis nods. 'So she left school, and we don't know where she went. She never made it home?'

Erin shakes her head. 'Her backpack isn't here. She doesn't have her own key either, because she's not supposed to walk home by herself.'

William swallows and still says nothing. He feels dizzy, as if he's standing at the top of a tall building and leaning over, looking below. He knows that Avery was home today after school. She used the key under the front doormat to get in. He talked to her. He hit her. He's a monster and a liar. He feels sicker by the minute; he's afraid he might throw up. But he must not. He swallows down the bile, clears his throat and suggests, 'Maybe she ran away.'

His wife turns to him. 'Why would she do that?'

He averts his eyes. 'Maybe she was angry for being punished at choir practice; you know how she gets.' He immediately wishes he could take that back.

Hollis says gently, 'How does she get? What's Avery like?'

Erin sighs heavily and says, 'She's complicated. She's a

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lovely nine-year-old girl. Very bright – gifted, actually. But she's challenging. She has a learning disability and ADHD. She also has behavioural problems.'

Hollis looks at the two of them. 'What do you mean, exactly?'

William lets his wife speak for them.

'She's smart but she struggles in school. She's easily frustrated. She's impulsive. She often acts without thinking. She's wilful, defiant of authority. She does what she wants, basically. We're doing our best.'

Erin doesn't seem to mind telling them this, but William knows that when a child goes missing, the parents are regarded with suspicion. Now they will think they've done something to her. He wishes she hadn't told them.

But Hollis just nods. 'Okay. Has she ever run away before?' She looks at him now.

William can feel himself colouring slightly and says, 'No.'

Hollis studies him more closely and asks, 'Everything all right at home? Any problems we should know about?'

William meets her eyes and says, 'Of course not. Everything's fine.' Erin says nothing. Michael is staring down at his lap.

'All right.' She turns to Erin. 'Thank you for the photos.' She stands up and says, 'If you don't mind, we'd like to look around the house. Could be she's hiding somewhere. You'd be surprised how often that happens; they hide and then fall asleep.'

'We've already looked everywhere,' Erin says impatiently.

But William knows what they're thinking. They're suspects, of course they are. Maybe there's something to find in the

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house. 'Sure, go ahead,' William says. 'But please hurry,' he urges, his voice breaking. 'You have to find her.'

Erin frets while a search gets underway for Avery. Her photo and a description of her and what she is wearing are being circulated to all police and media. Patrol cars are looking for her, police officers are already knocking on doors, talking to people who live between Ellesmere Elementary School and the Wooler residence, and going up and down Connaught Street, where they live. Maybe someone has seen her. Erin knows something is terribly wrong – Avery would have come home in time for supper if she was able.

It has just made the local evening news at seven o'clock. *Breaking news . . . A nine-year-old girl has gone missing while walking home alone after school in the town of Stanhope, New York . . .* Her photograph appeared on the screen. It's all unbelievable. Erin feels as if she's living inside a ghastly dream, the kind brought on by a fever.

A local ground search is being hastily organized, led by police officers and using volunteers, despite the increasingly heavy rain. It's October, it will soon be dark and it's getting cold; time is of the essence. But Erin is trapped in the house, like a fly in amber, unable to go anywhere, unable to look for her daughter. She must stay inside and speak to the detectives, answer their questions. William is here, too, sitting by her side on the living-room couch, sometimes getting up restlessly and looking out the large picture window as if he might see Avery coming up the driveway, as if she had somehow avoided all those out there looking for her and made it home, oblivious. They haven't let Michael join the search either. They are

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keeping him in the kitchen, with a female officer, so they can speak to the parents alone.

The two detectives arrived just as the first police officers, having found nothing in their search of the house, were on their way to track down the music teacher. Detective Bledsoe is Caucasian, in his mid-forties, an average-looking man wearing a serviceable grey suit. You wouldn't notice him in a crowd. Erin hopes he's sharper than he looks. Stanhope is a fairly small town, and how much experience can they have had with this kind of thing? She can't remember a child ever going missing here. Bledsoe's partner, Detective Gully, a Black woman maybe ten years younger than Bledsoe, with close-cropped hair and a smart trouser suit, is the one that Erin connects with. Perhaps because she is a woman. Perhaps because her eyes are more lively and her expression more sympathetic than her partner's.

Bledsoe's cell vibrates against the coffee table, making Erin jump. Her heart freezes, terrified of bad news. He has a short conversation and disconnects. He puts his cell back down on the table between them and leans forward in the armchair that he has pulled closer to the coffee table. 'That was Hollis,' he says. 'They spoke to Ms Burke. She says that Avery began acting up as soon as choir began. She reprimanded her, but she says she had to dismiss her at about three forty-five.'

'Is she allowed to do that?' Erin asks, her voice shrill. 'Can a teacher send a child in third grade home by herself like that?' For the first time it occurs to her that someone is to blame.

'Let's not focus on that right now,' Bledsoe says. 'But we now know that she left the school at approximately three forty-five.'

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'Unless she didn't,' Gully says.

Erin turns to Gully. She's stated what should have been perfectly obvious. Bledsoe had assumed that something happened to Avery on the way home from school. They had all assumed.

Bledsoe bites his lip, looks at Gully almost as if he's annoyed at her for speaking out, but maybe he's annoyed at himself. He takes a deep breath, pushes it out. Then he nods. 'We have to search the school,' he acknowledges. He picks his cell up off the coffee table and walks to the dining room, where he can have a bit of privacy, but they can all hear him giving instructions for the school to be searched from top to bottom.

Erin closes her eyes, thinking of all the places you could hide a little girl in that sprawling school. The storage cupboards, the lockers, the basement, the roof. She could have been dragged into an empty classroom at that time of day, with no one to see it, and anything might have happened to her. At the thought, Erin feels off balance. She grips the edge of the sofa until the feeling passes. When she recovers, she opens her eyes and leans towards Detective Gully, who she thinks is smarter than Bledsoe. She says, 'Promise me you'll find her.'

'I'll do everything in my power, I promise you that,' Gully says.

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Chapter Four

NORA BLANCHARD IS glued to the evening news, the shock of it displacing her own puny concerns. They are all seated around the television in the living room – her, Al, Ryan and Faith. William's daughter is missing. It's too awful to contemplate.

She thinks about earlier that afternoon, how she'd ended her relationship with William, and regrets the timing of it. How rudderless he must feel. She tries to imagine what he must be going through. Her heart breaks for him, and she wishes she could comfort him. His wife can't comfort him. There is no love left between them – he's told her that – and she must be hurting even more than he is. She's the mother, after all. Nora can't begin to imagine the anxiety William's wife must be feeling. Nora's own daughter, Faith, is only two years older than Avery, two grades higher at school. *What if it was Faith who had gone missing?* Faith, at eleven, is very athletic, wears her hair short, and can still be mistaken for a boy. But not for much longer.

But Nora can't go to William and comfort and support him.

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Their relationship is a secret. His family will be under a microscope and she can't reach out to him. The only way she can contact him is by phone. Her dirty little secret – her second phone, which she uses sometimes to communicate with him. He has one, too, just for her.

It occurs to her now, with sudden dismay, that if Avery isn't found quickly, the police might find out about his second phone, the one his wife doesn't know about, and her heart seems to stop.

They will be found out. He will have to tell them what it's for. He will have to tell them the truth. She can feel the blood drain from her face.

'Hey,' her daughter says, reaching out to pat her shoulder, 'they'll find her.'

She jumps when Faith touches her. She turns away from the television to look at her family. All three of them are watching her in concern. She realizes that she's been crying and wipes the tears away with her fingers.

'Sorry,' she says, trying to smile. 'You know how emotional I get. That poor family.'

Al shakes his head. 'I can't believe anything could have happened to her on the way home from school. Faith walks home from school every day. We live on the same street. This is a safe community. I'm sure they'll find her.'

That's just like her husband, Nora thinks, looking at him. He has no imagination. Head in the sand. Everything is fine. Even when it isn't; even when it's right under your nose.

'She'll turn up, Mom,' Faith says. 'She's probably doing it on purpose. Everybody knows what she's like.'

'What do you mean?' Nora asks her daughter. William has

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never said anything about Avery to her; they speak very little about their families when they're together.

'She's always getting in trouble. She does whatever she wants. The teachers always send her to the office because they can't deal with her.'

Her son, Ryan, announces abruptly, 'They want volunteers. I'm going to help look for her.'

'That's a good idea,' Nora says. She's glad that her son wants to help, though she'd looked forward to having him around tonight; his evening shift at the plant had been cancelled. He's not usually home for supper. He stands up, a tall, well-built, good-looking boy of eighteen. So much potential, and yet he has caused her so much anxiety this past year.

'I'll join you,' Al says, surprising her. Maybe he's not so sanguine about the neighbourhood after all.

'Can I come?' Faith asks.

Nora shakes her head. 'No. You're too young. You stay home with me.'

Al and Ryan put on their hiking boots and jackets and rain gear, and scramble for flashlights, while Nora and her daughter return to the kitchen and start clearing the dishes. Nora stops to watch them go, and soon dismisses Faith to go do her homework. She wants to be alone with her thoughts. She imagines her husband and her son out there in the deepening dark, in the pouring rain, searching the woods between the town and the river, looking for William's daughter. She hopes they find her soon, safe and sound. They have to.

Time ticks by, all too quickly. Detective Gully knows that when a child goes missing, every minute counts. There's a team now

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inside the school conducting a thorough search. So far, no results from the door-to-door; it seems no one saw Avery walking home. But that doesn't mean she didn't leave the school – she might simply have gone unnoticed. If she isn't found soon, they will start looking into all the staff and volunteers in the school that day. They're already going through all the registered sex offenders in the area. They have a large group of volunteer searchers fanning out in the empty, undeveloped fields to the north of the Woolers' house and the woods behind the Woolers' street, towards the river. They have flashlights, but it will be completely dark by eight o'clock and visibility will be poor. If the girl isn't found, they will have to cover the same ground again in the morning. They will look in the river, too, drag it if they have to. They will do a television appeal and set up a tip line. They will leave no stone unturned. It could be that Avery hopped on a bus and they'll find her in Manhattan. Stranger things have happened. But Gully doesn't like the feel of this one. There's an uneasiness in the pit of her stomach. She loves her job. What she does is important, necessary. But it takes a toll.

She has worked missing child cases before, in Chicago, before relocating to Stanhope. She doesn't think Bledsoe has ever run an investigation like this. Not here. He's a bit defensive, and she's younger, and a woman. He'll take her suggestions, at least; he doesn't shut her down. He's not that bad. She's seen worse.

She studies the two parents sitting across from her. They've answered all the questions put to them, about Avery, about her routines, who she knows, who the family knows, where they think she might have gone. They know that she likes to play in the woods and that there's a tree house there that she

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often goes to. Her brother has already been there to look for her, but even so, they have sent a team to take a closer look.

Avery's parents have been frank about her behaviuoral issues, describing a girl who is hard to manage and quite oppositional. For example, Avery is not on any medication for her ADHD because she refuses to take it. They're on the edge of a precipice, waiting for news. The mother has been distraught but stoic, making an obvious effort to keep it together. The father interests her more. There's something about him, something off. She doesn't like to think it, but she does. It's not her first rodeo. He seems to be hiding something. She senses that his frequent trips to look out the window for Avery are a show put on for their benefit. The mother doesn't do anything like that. She simply looks terrified.

The uniformed policewoman who's been in the kitchen with the son pops into the living room to say, 'Michael's just helped me put on a pot of coffee. Anybody want some?'

The two parents shake their heads in unison.

'Yes, please,' Gully says gratefully; it's going to be a long night.

'Yes, great, thanks,' Bledsoe says.

Bledsoe turns back to the parents and asks, 'Do you know of anyone who might have a grudge against you? Is there anyone you can think of who might want to harm Avery?'

Erin and William look at him in surprise. 'Of course not,' Erin says.

William answers. 'No. We're just normal people. There's no reason for anyone to harm our daughter.'

An uncomfortable silence falls because they all know the most likely reason someone might take a little girl.

'You're a doctor?' Bledsoe says to William.

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