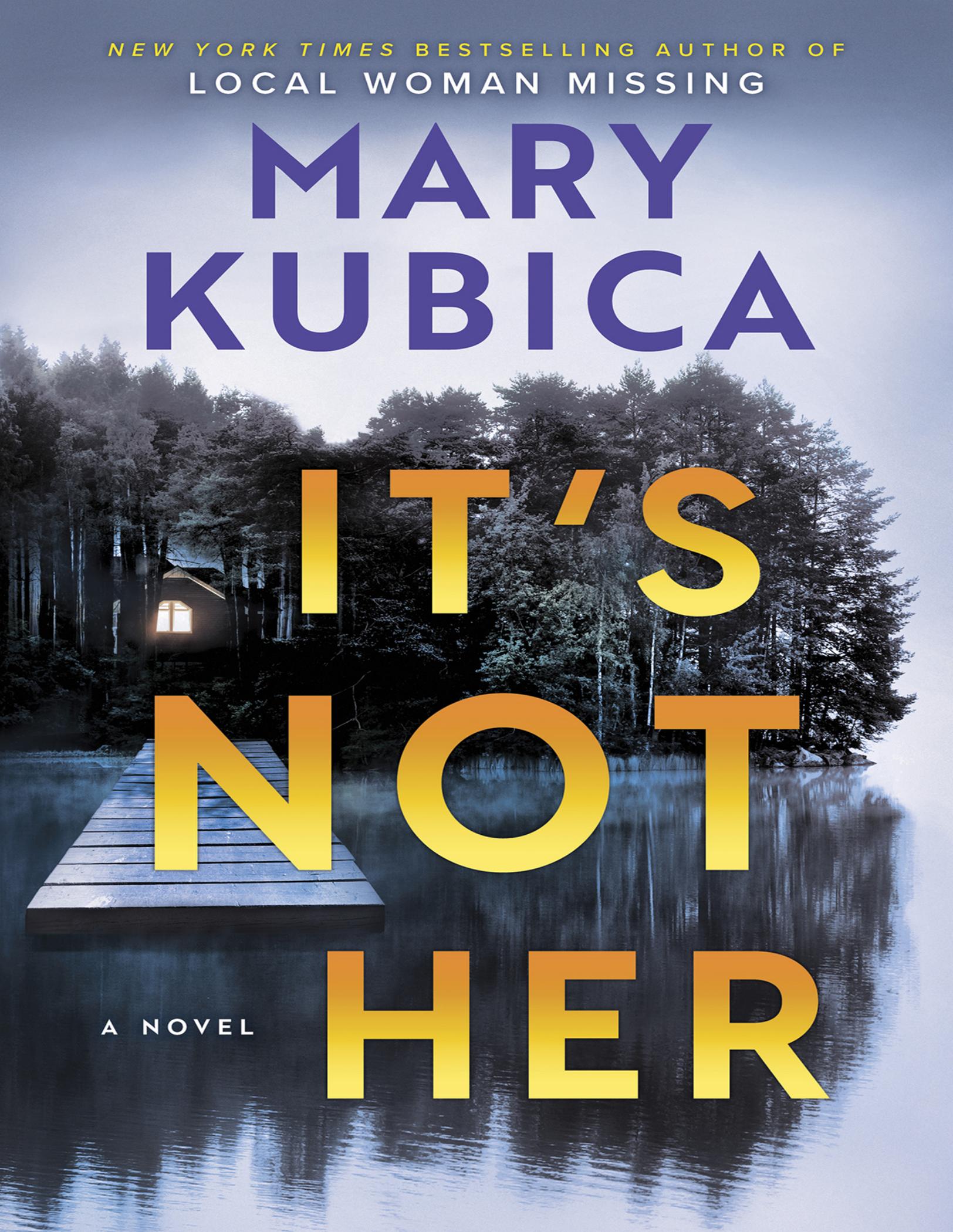


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
LOCAL WOMAN MISSING

MARY  
KUBICA

IT'S  
NOT  
HER

A NOVEL



# IT'S NOT HER

MARY KUBICA



# **Dedication**

*To anyone who's ever felt alone*

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*#BookTok is raving about It's Not Her!*

*Also by Mary Kubica*

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# Courtney

**I**'m standing at the kitchen sink, washing dishes, when I hear her scream.

My knees lock and I go suddenly upright, drawing in a sharp breath. I glance swiftly up from the hot, soapy water in the sink, losing my grip on a plate that slips from my wet hands and into the basin. Water splashes.

I stand there, rooted to the earth, listening in vain for the anguished sound to come again, or for there to be something else, something that explains it, like tires skidding, the squeal of car brakes, the resident German shepherd (the one that Cass and Mae are both afraid of) barking, or Emily's voice calling out to see if Mae is okay. But there's nothing, only silence, which worries me as much as the scream.

Just moments ago, my niece Mae was here, at our little rental cottage. She and Cass had a sleepover last night, sleeping on the double bed under the slanted eaves of the loft, staying up too late watching Disney movies on DVD and gabbing about whatever ten-year-olds gab about. I fell asleep before they did, waking around three in the morning to check on them and finding them both asleep with the TV still on.

Before Mae left to go back to her own cottage, they stood at the front door, giggling and saying goodbye with their sticky, syrupy faces and hands. I stood in the adjoining kitchen, staring out at them, admiring their friendship. Cass and Mae are much more than

cousins; they're best friends, like sisters even. After Mae was gone, I got busy cleaning the small kitchen, asking Cass to go straighten up from their sleepover, and she had, disappearing to the upstairs loft, where the sound of Mae's scream doesn't reach.

I'm the only one in the cottage to hear it, and I thank God, because the sound is tortured, carrying across the property, coming in through the open windows, leaving me feeling shaken and eviscerated though I don't know why, except I've never heard Mae scream like that before.

I reach for the faucet handle and turn the water off, drying my hands on a towel as I hurry toward the front door. I see Mae through the open window first, and my heart catches because she's dashing down the hill and through the trees, back toward us, faster than her small legs can go. Her arms windmill, her hair in her eyes because the wind is pushing from behind. Halfway to me, she trips over something, her feet lifting up from the ground, sending her momentarily airborne before she falls, crashing hard onto the earth. It's not a soft fall. The ground isn't grass, but a bed of pine needles and dirt. It looks painful, though Mae doesn't lie there crying as I would expect her to do, as Cass might do. Instead, she gets back up just as quickly as she went down, glancing over a shoulder in the direction of her own cottage before turning again and running to me.

I step outside, letting the screen door fall closed. Mae comes crashing into me, her arms locking around my waist. "What is it, Mae? What's wrong?" I ask as she buries her face into my abdomen, sobbing, her hands around my back, holding tight as if wanting to disappear inside of me. My eyes sweep the property, searching for signs of something off—a car (a child predator?) pulling away or the mean German shepherd running loose again—but there's nothing that I can see. The cottage where we're vacationing is in the Northwoods of Wisconsin, over five hours north of home. It's on a lake and is one of eight little cottages situated in hundreds of acres of woods. The lake is peaceful this morning; the only people awake besides the girls and me are fishermen in canoes, like Elliott, my

husband, who woke up early this morning and left before any of us were awake, hoping to catch something to put on the grill for dinner.

I hear the slow rasp of the screen door behind me. "What happened?" Cass asks, and I turn to see her coming hesitantly out, standing unsure on the deck behind me as I hold Mae in my arms.

"I don't know," I say. "What happened, Mae?" I coax, bending my knees to lower myself to her height, but Mae says nothing, clinging to me, her sticky hands clasped around my neck now, tugging without meaning to on my hair, and it's only when I peel them off with effort and hold her at an arm's length that I see her hands have blood on them.

"What's this? Did this happen when you fell?" I ask, thinking of the way she went down just moments ago. She must have fallen on a rock or a tree root. I take her hands into mine, briefly examining them for an open wound before moving a strand of hair out of her eyes. But Mae only shakes her head, wiping her runny nose on a pajama sleeve before looking back at her cottage for a second time and then lowering herself to the ground, hugging her knees into her chest, rocking.

I lift my gaze. I let my eyes go to Emily and Nolan's cottage next door, which is hard to see through the thick trees. When we arrived at the lake a few days ago, I envied their cottage. Not only had Emily rented the largest one on the property—which came as no surprise, considering she has three kids, two of whom are teenagers and would rather die before sharing a bed with a sibling—but hers was more private than the rest. Once the resort's main house, it's set off at a distance so she can sit on her deck with her coffee and stare out at the placid lake without having a stranger in another cottage at an arm's reach, watching her, listening in on her conversations.

"Is your mom there, Mae? In the cottage?" I ask about my sister-in-law, Emily, and this time, she nods. "Come sit with Mae," I say to Cass, glancing back over my shoulder at her. "Stay here until I come back. I want to make sure everything is okay."

Cass nods as she takes my spot sitting beside her cousin, her hand on Mae's back in a very grown-up way that belies her ten

years.

As I start making my way through the trees and toward Emily and Nolan's cottage, quickening my pace by instinct, I feel a wave of unease come over me, though I hold it back, telling myself nothing is seriously wrong, that Mae probably just walked in on them arguing again and got scared or upset. She overreacted. Things haven't been the best between Emily and Nolan of late. Nolan's been out of work for almost six months, and it's taken a toll—on him, their finances and their marriage. He's in the tech industry, where it's almost impossible to find a job these days; companies are laying off in record numbers. Nolan has compared it to something out of *The Hunger Games*. Recently, Emily and Nolan have had conversations about if they need to sell their house (their dream home, the one they planned to retire in) and downsize, which they can't agree on because they can't agree on anything anymore. They fight all the time, but had hoped a couple weeks in the woods with family and away from all the pressures of everyday life would remedy that, though I heard them going at it just yesterday afternoon, and from the way it sounded, things were far from fixed.

As I make my way through the pine trees, the cottage comes into view, looking perfectly peaceful at the top of a small hill—giving it the best view of the lake, another thing for me to envy—with their beach towels draped over the deck rail, drying, though the front door is open, which it never is because Emily is fastidious about not letting the mosquitoes inside.

This far north into Wisconsin, the temperatures drop into the low fifties at night, only ever reaching the mid-seventies during the day. At this time of day, it's barely fifty-five or sixty degrees. I climb the small hill in my robe, which blows open in the cool morning breeze, before I reach for the belt to tie it. Beneath the robe, I have on a pair of thin cotton pajama pants and a camisole. I haven't been awake long enough to shower, put on a bra or run a brush through my hair, but just long enough to rise reluctantly from bed when Cass appeared at the foot of it about an hour ago, asking if I could make pancakes. At the time, I spied Mae, hovering just outside the

bedroom door, her hopeful face partially visible from around the edge of the doorframe, and I knew I couldn't say no.

It's unlike Emily to leave the front door open. Even if she and Nolan were arguing, she would have closed the door, and she would have gone after Mae if she knew that Mae was upset. I pick up my pace again, wondering now if something even worse than that has happened, if someone in the cottage is hurt or sick.

I think of Reese, their oldest, who is seventeen. She's been moody and reserved the whole trip. Emily got a hold of Reese's phone the other day because she was worried about her. She read her texts when Reese wasn't looking. I wanna KMS, Reese said in a text to a friend. I didn't know what it meant, but Emily told me as we stood on the deck outside, her face grave, her fear acute, and my heart practically stopped, thinking of ten-year-old Cass and how I wasn't prepared to deal with all the anxiety and uncertainty of the teenage years. *Kill myself.*

*Do you think she means it or is she just saying it for attention?* I'd asked, trying to soothe Emily, to make light of it for Emily's sake, but now I regret that I was dismissive. What I should have done instead was suggest Reese talk to someone when they get back home, like a therapist. I should have seen if my own therapist was available for a telehealth session that same day, not that it necessarily would have worked up here with the internet connection as capricious as it is.

I climb the deck steps and let myself inside the cottage, calling for Emily, who doesn't answer. I leave the front door open behind me, entering the great room, which is a combination of the family room, dining room and kitchen. Like our cottage, theirs is rustic and dated, with limp plaid furniture and knotty pine paneling all over the walls. Theirs, however, is twice as large with a screened-in porch and a second floor instead of a small loft like we have, accessible only by a ladder—which is great for Cass but not very practical for Elliott or me, who can't step foot in the loft without hitting our heads on the low, sloped ceiling.

"Emily?" I say again, as I start to make my way further inside. I listen for them. The first floor is empty, the TV off. There is a strange odor in the air, which I try to place but can't. It's quiet at first, but

then, from upstairs, I just barely make out the sound of something faint and indistinct, like the sagging of a mattress from someone rolling over in bed. I stop, feeling uncomfortable all of a sudden, imagining my brother Nolan getting out of bed, coming downstairs half asleep in his boxer shorts and finding me standing in the great room. I think of Mae and how scared she was when she came running back to our place, but whatever scared her might have happened before she ever got to the cottage.

The wildlife around here is abundant. There have been reports of bear sightings in the woods not far from here. The other day, when we were out walking, we noticed what we thought were coyote prints in the dirt. If Mae saw something like a coyote on her way home, it would have scared her—and that means Emily, Nolan and the other kids could still be asleep.

I sink a hand into the pocket of my robe for my phone to try calling Emily, which I should have done first before letting myself into their cottage. I glance at the phone; the cell signal around here is weak though, miraculously, I have two bars. I find Emily's name in my contacts while the signal lasts and click on it, pressing the phone to my ear.

It doesn't take long, split seconds before I hear it: the sound of a phone coming to me from the adjoining screened-in porch, the door of which, I see now, is ajar.

Emily's phone, if not Emily, is out there.

I lower my own phone from my ear. Slowly, I cross the room for the porch, reaching for the handle and pulling the door all the way open.

It's as I step through the doorway and onto the porch that I see it. I reel back, though it takes a second for my mind to make sense of what I'm seeing and for me to realize what it is. The blood is so dark that it blends into the wood paneling and I have to look twice to realize that what I'm looking at is not knotholes in the wood, but blood. It's on the bed that it becomes most evident, where blood streaks the white quilt like paint flicked onto a canvas from the end of an artist's brush.

My breath leaves me. Shock holds me in place, some part of me still trying to reconcile what I'm seeing—to make myself believe that someone has cut themselves with a corkscrew or knife and that they've gone to the hospital, leaving quickly, which explains the open front door—despite the amount of blood on the walls and bed.

The nearest hospital has to be ten or twenty miles away. I wonder if Nolan and Emily would have left for the hospital without telling us. I wonder if they planned to call on the way, but then Emily forgot her phone and Nolan couldn't get a signal.

But then I see it through the porch screens, one flapping loose in the wind: Emily and Nolan's dusty black Volkswagen parked just outside on the drive. The car is still here, which means they haven't gone anywhere.

They're still in the cottage.

My throat tightens. It's hard to breathe as my eyes move around the room. At first glance, the porch is empty, but then I just barely make out bare feet stretched on the floor, overhanging the end of the bed, and I realize the porch is not empty like I thought.

My heart starts to beat faster. A hand rises to my mouth as I feel myself shift closer rather than away by instinct, seeing that the skin on the feet is discolored, the pigment far different than healthy feet. It's purpling, the skin tone now nearly the same as the mauve toenail polish, which I know, before I ever see her face, is Emily's because we went for pedicures together before we left on the trip and I helped her pick out the polish, which matches mine.

I come slowly around the edge of the bed, thinking unrealistically that I can help her, that I can still save her. "Emily?" I ask, the word slipping out of me, weightless and insubstantial until I see her and my knees give, and I have to hold on to the bed frame to keep myself upright.

Emily is dead. The blood beneath her is telling. No one could lose that amount of blood and survive. She's completely motionless, lying on the floor of the screened-in porch on the far side of the bed as if caught trying to escape or to hide. There is no rise and fall of her chest to say that she's breathing, that she's still alive. Her face is turned slightly to the side—her neck not at all angled right—so that I

bear witness to the grayness of her face and a cloudy, half-opened eye. One of her arms is bent at an impossible angle too, the shoulder jutting out of place, and her mouth gapes open from a last breath or a final scream. Her phone lies just out of reach, a missed call from me on the screen.

I'm frozen in shock, in fear. Though my every instinct tells me to run, to go back to our cottage, lock the door and call the police, I can't get myself to move.

I hesitate for only seconds. But even that is too much. It's too late.

Before I can get myself to go, there's the sudden, very cerebral sensation of not being alone anymore. A movement in my peripheral vision maybe, or the soft, slow creak of a floorboard.