

SHARI LAPENA

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE COUPLE NEXT DOOR

A NOVEL

SHE DIDN'T SEE IT COMING

"STUNNING...WITH WHIPLASH TWISTS AND TURNS."

—LUCY FOLEY

About the Author

Shari Lapena is the internationally multi-million-copy bestselling author of the thrillers *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* and *What Have You Done?*, which have all been *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* bestsellers. Her books have been sold in forty territories around the world. She lives in Toronto.

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Also by Shari Lapena

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WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

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To public libraries everywhere, and to those who
support them

Prologue

Six weeks ago

BRYDEN FROST IS running late. She has to pick up her daughter, Clara, from day care within the next few minutes or she will get a reprimand and a lateness fee. She doesn't care about the fee, it's the reprimand she wants to avoid. She knows to expect traffic at five o'clock on a Tuesday in late January, in Albany, New York, a city of about one hundred thousand, but today it's worse than usual. It's stop and start. She glances down at her cell phone in the coffee cup holder to her right, anxious that it will light up with a call from the day care. Or a text. Why do they text her when they must know she's in the car, on her way?

She fumes behind a large truck that blocks her view so that she can't see what's going on ahead. What the hell is the problem? She thinks of adorable little Clara, the light of her life, waiting for her at the day care. Is she the only one left? No, she can't be. Some kids and staff stay later, kids whose parents work longer hours. At three, is she old enough to realize her mother is late to pick her up? To feel sad, forgotten? Have they put her in her little pink corduroy jacket already? And is her little heart falling as all the other children are swooped into eager arms? Or is she distracted by some kind childcare worker – Hilda perhaps, who is so caring and adept at addressing any potential hurts before they happen? That woman is worth her weight in gold. But if it's Sandy, she will be looking at her phone, thinking about her own plans, not caring about Clara's feelings. And Clara is such a sensitive thing. Her little orchid child.

'For fuck's sake!' Bryden mutters in exasperation at the delay. It's now 5:04 p.m. and she was meant to pick up Clara by 5:00. She should ask if she

can work from home more. It would make things easier. Traffic begins to move again, and she spots an opening to her right. She nips in quickly, hoping to get out from behind the tall truck and to make up time. An intersection is just ahead of her, and she prays the light won't turn red before she gets through. There's a sleek black Tesla in front of her. She hears the ping of a text and automatically glances down at her phone. She sees the name *Dandylion Day Care*, and then she is thrown forward against her seat belt, assaulted by a horrific screeching noise.

She feels the crash, the shock of it, the extraordinary sound of it, even at only twenty miles per hour. She looks up in disbelief and realizes that she has ploughed into the Tesla in front of her, which has come to a halt in front of a yellow light that turns red as she looks ahead of her. *Fuck!*

She sits there for a moment, dazed, both hands on the steering wheel, staring straight ahead, telling herself surely it can't be that bad. The airbags haven't deployed, and it probably sounded and felt worse than it was. Her heart is racing and she realizes her breathing has become quite shallow and quick. The person she hit is driving a fancy car, just her luck, and as she hesitates, she sees a tall man in a dark suit under an open wool coat get slowly out of the Tesla and close his door. He looks toward her, and his eyes meet hers behind her windshield. Then he walks slowly toward the back of his car, toward her.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. She can't tell yet if he's angry or not. What strikes her most as he approaches is how good-looking he is, like a character in a film. She scrambles awkwardly out of her own car, an older Volvo, built like a tank – it's probably crumpled the entire back end of that Tesla. She narrowly avoids getting hit by a passing car while she does it as the traffic has now started to move forward again. They're holding up the cars behind them in the busy intersection. She takes a deep breath and faces him.

He doesn't look angry. He looks – civil. Like he's prepared to be reasonable. Thank God. She doesn't think she could take another driver's rage right now. She will be apologetic. She will pay whatever it costs. It will be fine.

'Oops,' he says to her. And for a moment she can't read him at all. She's too struck by his looks. He's tall and well built and wears his good suit and coat with ease. He's got thick black hair, blue eyes, a slight stubble on his face. His appearance makes her wonder what he does for a living. There's something edgy about him, like maybe he's pissed off after all, but he's

trying not to let it show. Of course he's pissed off, she thinks – his car looks brand new. It's so clean; hers is filthy with January grime. And he's probably late getting to where he's going just like she is.

Then he smiles, and it transforms his face. As if he's decided to let bygones be bygones, he's forgiven her, he's going to be charming, and he's not going to make her life more difficult. She's grateful. Her husband might be more annoyed when he sees the bill.

'I'm *so* sorry,' she says, flustered. She's never been in an accident before. 'I'm late picking up my daughter from day care,' she babbles, attempting to explain, 'and they texted, and that distracted me – I'm so sorry, it's entirely my fault.' Any hope of getting to Clara quickly has completely died away, of course. She must call them and tell them she's been in a minor traffic accident. They can't hold that against her, can they?

He continues to look intently at her, and she feels herself blushing. She brushes her hair away from her face, suddenly self-conscious. She wonders what he's thinking. She's a mom now, and usually forgets that men find her attractive. For no reason at all, she finds herself glancing at his left hand and sees a gold wedding band on his ring finger. That reassures her that he's not flirting, he's just listening.

'Let's check the damage, shall we?' he says easily, then turns away from her and looks at the back end of his car. He bends down and studies it.

The bumper is crushed in. It looks so unsightly on his beautiful car; it looks as if he just picked it up off the lot. She fervently hopes that's not the case. Her car hasn't been washed for as long as she can remember, and she doesn't even think to look at it for damage – she's watching him touching his damaged car. It's almost tender, the way he runs his hand along the surface of the bumper. He glances up at her, the smile is gone now. He looks at her car and she does too. 'Yours looks fine,' he says. 'Mine, however ...'

She's grateful that he's not yelling and swearing at her for destroying the back end of his car. 'I'm sorry,' she repeats. 'Will it be expensive to fix?' And then she feels stupid for asking. Of course it will be expensive to fix. He winces at her and she says, 'Excuse me, I have to call the day care.' And then she turns away and calls Gwen, Dandy Lion's director, and explains why she will be late, and to just charge her for the extra time and please reassure Clara that everything is fine, and she will be there as soon as she can. 'Can you have Hilda tell her, please?'

‘Of course,’ Gwen says.

Gwen knows that Bryden likes the way Hilda interacts with her daughter – all the parents love Hilda. ‘Thank you,’ Bryden says warmly, and turns back to the matter at hand. He’s waiting for her to finish her call.

‘Do you want to do this through insurance, or would you prefer not?’ he asks.

She doesn’t know. ‘I’m not sure. I’ve never had a car accident before. I don’t know how it works. I’ll have to speak to my husband about it,’ she says.

He nods. ‘Okay. We’d better exchange information.’ He gives her his name, address, phone number, and car insurance information via his cell phone. She does the same.

‘I’ll take the car in tomorrow and get an estimate for the repair,’ he says. ‘Then I’ll get back to you and we will figure things out.’

‘Yes, okay,’ she answers. ‘I’m really sorry,’ she repeats. He smiles, again, and she finds herself charmed.

‘These things happen,’ he says. Then he gets gracefully back into his damaged Tesla and drives away.

She climbs into her own car and drives more carefully the rest of the way to the day care, thinking now about how much the repair will cost. It’s not the end of the world, they can afford it, but it will make a dent.

Then she tries to put it out of her mind in the happy anticipation of seeing her daughter.

CHAPTER 1

Now

BRYDEN ENCOURAGES CLARA to eat her breakfast of Cheerios and a banana. She needs to get Clara ready for day care. She's working from home today, Tuesday, at their condo in Buckingham Lake, because she has a lot to do, and she gets more done at home, away from distractions, than she does at the office. She's an accountant with a busy midsize firm on North Pearl, downtown, and they don't have a problem with it.

Her husband, Sam, enters the kitchen dressed for work, tightening his patterned silk tie. He kisses her on the cheek and heads for the coffee maker. He has his back to her, pouring out his coffee, when he asks, 'What's on for today? You working from home?'

'Yes, I told you last night, remember?'

'Right.' He turns around to face her and smiles. 'And you're in your work-from-home outfit.'

She laughs and looks down at her sweatshirt and yoga pants. 'It's nice not to have to dress up for work once in a while.'

He makes himself some toast and eats it sitting beside their daughter at the kitchen table, entertaining her with silly faces, making her laugh, while Bryden gathers everything together to get Clara ready.

Sam leaves the condo first. He's a portfolio manager with Kleinberg Wealth, and he's got an early meeting. Bryden picks up Clara and they have a group hug in the front foyer, and Sam and Bryden kiss each other goodbye before he puts on his coat. Bryden and Clara wave from the doorway as they watch him walk down the corridor and enter the elevator to

go down to the underground parking garage, where he'll get in his car and make the fourteen-minute drive to his office downtown.

A few minutes later, Bryden gets in the elevator with Clara, descends to the parking garage, and buckles her daughter into her car seat in the Volvo to drive her to day care.

That afternoon, Sam Frost is in a meeting with a high-net-worth client. They're sitting at a long table in front of glass windows with a panoramic view of the city, when Sam gets a signal through the glass wall from Connie that he's wanted on the phone. He shakes his head at her. He turns his cell phone off during meetings for a reason. But she's insistent, making faces and gesticulating at him. He excuses himself and leaves the room.

'What is so important that you have to interrupt my meeting?' he asks her.

'It's your daughter's day care.'

'Is she all right?' he asks quickly.

'Yes, she's fine, but your wife hasn't picked her up.'

He glances at his watch. It's 5:30. Bryden always picks Clara up at 5:00. 'Seriously?'

'You'd better talk to them.'

He follows her to reception and picks up the phone. 'Sam Frost,' he says.

'Mr Frost, sorry to bother you, but Bryden hasn't been in to pick up Clara, and she's not answering her phone or texts.'

'She's probably in her car on the way,' he says. 'Can you wait a little longer?'

'We're here for late pick-up till six thirty. But someone must come get her by then.'

He makes a mental calculation. 'Look, if Bryden doesn't arrive there by six, I'll come get Clara. It's only a few minutes from here. But I'm sure she will get there any minute. I'll try to contact her.'

'Thank you, Mr Frost.'

He hangs up the phone. Connie is looking at him.

'Everything all right?' she asks.

'I'm sure everything's fine,' he says. 'Something must have held Bryden up.' He texts her. *You okay?* He watches his phone for a moment, but there's no reply. He calls her, but it goes directly to voicemail. 'She must be in the car, running late,' he says to Connie. He returns to his meeting, which soon

comes to an end. When he hasn't been able to reach Bryden by six o'clock, he phones the day care. The director, Gwen, answers.

'We were just about to call you, Mr Frost. Bryden still isn't here. I hope she's okay.'

'I don't know what's happened to her,' he says, allowing worry to creep into his voice. 'But I'm leaving now. I'll be there soon.'

He turns to Connie, who is hovering. 'This is really odd. I've called and texted her, and the day care has too, and she's not answering. She should have got there by now.' For good measure, he calls Bryden again while Connie stands by, but again, there's no answer. He leaves another message. 'I'm really worried now, Bryden. Can you please get in touch? I'm going to pick up Clara.'

Sam quickly leaves the office and drives as fast as he dares to the day care, which is located about midway between downtown and their condo in the northwest part of the small city. The first thing he does when he arrives is gather Clara up in his arms and smother her tearstained face with kisses until she giggles. Then he turns to Gwen, who has been waiting, and says, 'I'm sorry, I don't know what's happened to Bryden. I'm sure there will be some simple explanation.' Nothing like this has ever happened before. He puts his daughter down and takes her by the hand. 'Let's go find Mommy, shall we?' They walk out of the day care as if nothing is wrong at all. It's important to act as normally as possible in front of his daughter, he thinks, even if things aren't normal at all.

They arrive home via the underground parking garage, and the first thing Sam sees is his wife's car sitting in its usual spot. He parks beside it. 'Look. Mommy's car is here,' he says to Clara. His voice sounds fake, with a forced optimism. He gets out of the car and glances quickly through the windows of his wife's Volvo, but the car is empty. Then he helps Clara out of her car seat.

They take the elevator from parking level 1B directly up to the eighth floor. The doors slide open, and Sam walks down the quiet corridor holding his daughter's hand. Their feet make no sound on the carpet; he can feel the thudding of his own heart.

When Sam opens the door, he spots Bryden's handbag on the small side table in the foyer beneath the mirror. It looks so familiar, so normal. He calls out her name as he closes the door behind them.

'Bryden?' There's no answer.

The foyer and short hall give way to the living room, a large, open space, with the dining room to the left. He sees his wife's computer sitting open on the dining-room table, where she likes to work. Her cell phone is resting beside it. He makes a hurried check of all the rooms, while three-year-old Clara follows him like an eager puppy. He pops his head in the kitchen, then checks the master bedroom and en suite bath, then Clara's room, the den, the other bathroom. Everything is undisturbed, just as it should be. The apartment is tidy, as it usually is. But there is no sign of Bryden. He rushes back to the dining room. His wife's computer is on but has gone into sleep mode. It looks like she's just stepped out for a moment.

Then he goes through the apartment again, more carefully. There's no note left on the fridge, or anywhere else. Clara is beginning to realize that something is really wrong.

'Where's Mommy?' she asks, her lower lip trembling, on the verge of tears.

'I don't know, sweetie, but I'm sure she'll be back soon. She probably had an appointment and I forgot I was supposed to pick you up. Silly Daddy. We will find her, I promise.'

He scoops the little girl up in his arms and leaves the apartment and knocks on the door of unit 808, two doors down. He realizes he's practically hammering on the door and tells himself to calm down.

Angela Romano opens the door with a look of surprise. She takes in the sight of him with Clara in his arms, the troubled look on his face. 'Sam, what is it?'

'Do you know where Bryden is?' he asks quickly.

'No. I got home about an hour ago. I haven't seen her.'

'She didn't show up at the day care to get Clara. She's not home. I don't know where she is.'

Clara begins to cry.

Now Angela looks concerned. She reaches out automatically for Clara and takes her in her arms.

'Clara, do you want to say hi to Savannah? She's in the living room.' She puts her down and gives her a little pat on the bum to send her off. The two little girls are best friends; Clara and Bryden spend a lot of time with Angela and her daughter.

Once Clara is out of earshot, he doesn't have to try to pretend that everything is okay.

‘Her purse and phone are in the apartment, and her car is here,’ Sam says. Angela glances at her watch. Sam knows it’s almost 6:30. ‘She was supposed to pick Clara up at five. Where the fuck can she be?’

‘I don’t know,’ Angela says, her voice low but tense. ‘Leave Clara with me for a bit. Text me when you find her, okay? Let me know what’s happening.’ He can tell she’s trying to be calm for him, but she’s clearly worried.

‘Okay. Thanks.’ He hurries back to his own apartment and calls Bryden’s sister, Lizzie, who lives not far away, in the centre of town.

‘What?’ Lizzie says, when he tells her that he doesn’t know where Bryden is.

‘Have you heard from her today?’ Sam asks.

‘No, I haven’t. When was the last time you spoke to her?’

‘This morning when I left for work. Her phone is here, and her purse, but she’s not here.’ Anxiety has taken hold of him; he lets it infect his voice. He paces the apartment. In the dining room, while he’s talking to Lizzie, he picks up Bryden’s cell phone and scrolls quickly through it. He knows the password for her phone, and she knows his. He sees the messages and texts from the day care and from him – she hasn’t responded to any of them – but nothing to indicate where she might have gone. ‘What should I do?’

‘Have you called Paige?’ Lizzie asks. ‘Try her and call me right back.’ She disconnects.

Sam calls Paige Mason, Bryden’s best friend; it goes to voicemail. He sends her a text: *Is Bryden with you?* But he doesn’t get an immediate answer. He calls Lizzie back.

‘There’s no way she wouldn’t pick up Clara, unless something was really wrong,’ Lizzie says uneasily.

Sam swallows. ‘I know.’

‘I think you should call the police.’

‘I’ll call them now.’

‘Okay. I’m coming over.’

‘Yes, please come,’ Sam says.