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People are capable of
almost anything

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STYLIST

THE COUPLE NEXT DOOR

Shari Lapena

'A twisty, utterly riveting tale.' TESS GERRITSEN

About the Book

You never know what's happening on the other side of the wall.

Your neighbour told you that she didn't want your six-month-old daughter at the dinner party. Nothing personal, she just couldn't stand her crying.

Your husband said it would be fine. After all, you only live next door. You'd have the baby monitor and you'd take it in turns to go back every half-hour.

Your daughter was sleeping when you checked on her last. But now, as you race up the stairs in your deathly quiet house, your worst fears are realized. She's gone.

You've never had to call the police before. But now they're in your home, and who knows what they'll find there . . .

What would *you* be capable of, when pushed past your limit?

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THE COUPLE NEXT DOOR

Shari Lapena

To Helen Heller, the most thrilling agent of all

Chapter One

ANNE CAN FEEL the acid churning in her stomach and creeping up her throat; her head is swimming. She's had too much to drink. Cynthia has been topping her up all night. Anne had meant to keep herself to a limit, but she'd let things slide – she didn't know how else she was supposed to get through the evening. Now she has no idea how much wine she's drunk over the course of this interminable dinner party. She'll have to pump and dump her breast milk in the morning.

Anne wilts in the heat of the summer night and watches her hostess with narrowed eyes. Cynthia is flirting openly with Anne's husband, Marco. Why does Anne put up with it? Why does Cynthia's husband, Graham, allow it? Anne is angry but powerless; she doesn't know how to put a stop to it without looking pathetic and ridiculous. They are all a little tanked. So she ignores it, quietly seething, and sips at the chilled wine. Anne wasn't brought up to create a scene, isn't one to draw attention to herself.

Cynthia, on the other hand . . .

All three of them – Anne, Marco, and Cynthia's mild-mannered husband, Graham – are watching her, as if fascinated. Marco in particular can't seem to take his eyes off Cynthia. She leans in a little too close to Marco as she bends over and fills his glass, her clingy top cut so low that Marco's practically rubbing his nose in her cleavage.

Anne reminds herself that Cynthia flirts with everyone. Cynthia has such outrageous good looks that she can't seem to help herself.

But the longer Anne watches, the more she wonders if there could actually be something going on between Marco and Cynthia. Anne has never had such suspicions before. Perhaps the alcohol is making her paranoid.

No, she decides – they wouldn't be carrying on like this if they had anything to hide. Cynthia is flirting more than Marco is; he is the flattered recipient of her attentions. Marco is almost too good-looking himself – with his tousled dark hair, hazel eyes, and charming smile, he's always attracted attention. They make a striking couple, Cynthia and Marco. Anne tells herself to stop it. Tells herself that of course Marco is faithful to her. She

knows he is completely committed to his family. She and the baby are everything to him. He will stand by her no matter what – she takes another gulp of wine – no matter how bad things get.

But watching Cynthia drape herself over Marco, Anne's husband, Anne is becoming more and more anxious and upset. She is still more than twenty pounds overweight from her pregnancy, six months after having the baby. She thought she'd be back to her pre-pregnancy figure by now, but apparently it takes at least a year. She must stop looking at the tabloids at the grocery-store checkout and comparing herself to all those celebrity moms with their personal trainers who look terrific after mere weeks.

But even at her best, Anne could never compete with the likes of Cynthia, her taller, shapelier neighbor – with her long legs, nipped-in waist, and big breasts, her porcelain skin and tumbling jet-black hair. And Cynthia is always dressed to kill, in high heels and sexy clothes – even for a dinner party at home with one other couple.

Anne can't focus on the conversation around her. She tunes it out and stares at the carved marble fireplace, exactly like the one in her own living-dining room, on the other side of the common wall that Anne and Marco share with Cynthia and Graham; they live in attached brick row houses, typical of this city in upstate New York, solidly built in the late nineteenth century. All the houses in the row are similar – Italianate, restored, expensive – except that Anne and Marco's is at the end of the row and each reflects slight differences in decoration and taste; each one is a small masterpiece.

Anne reaches clumsily for her cell phone on the dining table and checks the time. It is almost one o'clock in the morning. She'd checked on the baby at midnight. Marco had gone to check on her at twelve thirty. Then he'd gone out for a cigarette on the back patio with Cynthia, while Anne and Graham sat rather awkwardly at the littered dining table, making stilted conversation. She should have gone out to the backyard with them; there might have been a breeze. But she hadn't, because Graham didn't like to be around cigarette smoke, and it would have been rude, or at least inconsiderate, to leave Graham there all alone at his own dinner party. So for reasons of propriety, she had stayed. Graham, a WASP like herself, is impeccably polite. Why he married a tart like Cynthia is a mystery. Cynthia and Marco had come back in from the patio a few minutes ago, and Anne desperately wants to leave, even if everyone else is still having fun.

She glances at the baby monitor sitting at the end of the table, its small red light glowing like the tip of a cigarette. The video screen is smashed – she’d dropped it a couple of days ago and Marco hadn’t gotten around to replacing it yet – but the audio is still working. Suddenly she has doubts, feels the wrongness of it all. Who goes to a dinner party next door and leaves her baby alone in the house? What kind of mother does such a thing? She feels the familiar agony set in – *she is not a good mother*.

So what if the sitter canceled? They should have brought Cora with them, put her in her portable playpen. But Cynthia had said no children. It was to be an adult evening, for Graham’s birthday. Which is another reason Anne has come to dislike Cynthia, who was once a good friend – Cynthia is not baby-friendly. Who says that a six-month-old baby isn’t welcome at a dinner party? How had Anne ever let Marco persuade her that it was okay? It was irresponsible. She wonders what the other mothers in her moms’ group would think if she ever told them. *We left our six-month-old baby home alone and went to a party next door*. She imagines all their jaws dropping in shock, the uncomfortable silence. But she will never tell them. She’d be shunned.

She and Marco had argued about it before the party. When the sitter called and canceled, Anne had offered to stay home with the baby – she hadn’t wanted to go to the dinner anyway. But Marco was having none of it.

‘You can’t just stay home,’ he insisted when they argued about it in their kitchen.

‘I’m fine staying home,’ she said, her voice lowered. She didn’t want Cynthia to hear them through the shared wall, arguing about going to her party.

‘It will be good for you to get out,’ Marco countered, lowering his own voice. And then he’d added, ‘You know what the doctor said.’

All night long she’s been trying to decide whether that last comment was mean-spirited or self-interested or whether he was simply trying to help. Finally she’d given in. Marco persuaded her that with the monitor on next door they could hear the baby anytime she stirred or woke. They would check on her every half hour. Nothing bad would happen.

It is one o’clock. Should she check on Cora now or just try to get Marco to leave? She wants to go home to bed. She wants this night to end.

She pulls her husband’s arm. ‘Marco,’ she urges, ‘we should leave. It’s one o’clock.’

‘Oh, don’t go yet,’ Cynthia says. ‘It’s not that late!’ She obviously doesn’t want the party to be over. She doesn’t want Marco to leave. She wouldn’t mind at all if Anne left, though, Anne is pretty sure.

‘Maybe not for you,’ Anne says, and she manages to sound a little stiff, even though she’s drunk, ‘but I have to be up early to feed the baby.’

‘Poor you,’ Cynthia says, and for some reason this infuriates Anne. Cynthia has no children, nor has she ever wanted any. She and Graham are childless by choice.

Getting Marco to leave the party is difficult. He seems determined to stay. He’s having too much fun, but Anne is growing anxious.

‘Just one more,’ Marco says to Cynthia, holding up his glass, avoiding his wife’s eyes.

He is in a strangely boisterous mood tonight – it seems almost forced. Anne wonders why. He’s been quiet lately, at home. Distracted, even moody. But tonight, with Cynthia, he’s the life of the party. For some time now, Anne has sensed that something is wrong, if only he would tell her what it is. He isn’t telling her much of anything these days. He’s shutting her out. Or maybe he’s withdrawing from her because of her depression, her ‘baby blues’. He’s disappointed in her. Who isn’t? Tonight he clearly prefers the beautiful, bubbly, sparkly Cynthia.

Anne notices the time and loses all patience. ‘I’m going to go. I was supposed to check on the baby at one.’ She looks at Marco. ‘You stay as late as you like,’ she adds, her voice tight. Marco looks sharply at her, his eyes glittering. Suddenly Anne thinks he doesn’t seem that drunk at all, but she feels dizzy. Are they going to argue about this? In front of the neighbors? Really? Anne begins to glance around for her purse, gathers up the baby monitor, realizes then that it’s plugged into the wall, and bends over to unplug it, aware of everyone at the table silently staring at her fat ass. Well, let them. She feels like they’re ganging up on her, seeing her as a spoilsport. Tears start to burn, and she fights them back. She does not want to burst into tears in front of everyone. Cynthia and Graham don’t know about her postpartum depression. They wouldn’t understand. Anne and Marco haven’t told anyone, with the exception of Anne’s mother. Anne has recently confided in her. She knows that her mother won’t tell anyone, not even her father. Anne doesn’t want anyone else to know, and she suspects Marco doesn’t either, although he hasn’t said as much. But pretending all the time is exhausting.

While her back is turned, she hears Marco's change of heart in the tone of his voice.

'You're right. It's late, we should go,' he says. She hears him set his wineglass on the table behind her.

Anne turns around, brushing the hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand. She desperately needs a haircut. She gives a fake smile and says, 'Next time it's our turn to host.' And adds silently, *You can come to our house, where our child lives with us, and I hope she cries all night and spoils your evening. I'll be sure to invite you when she's teething.*

They leave quickly after that. They have no baby gear to gather up, just themselves, Anne's purse and the baby monitor, which she shoves into it. Cynthia looks annoyed at their swift departure – Graham is neutral – and they make their way out the impressively heavy front door and down the steps. Anne grabs hold of the elaborately carved handrail to help her keep her balance. It is just a few short paces along the sidewalk until they are at their own front steps, with a similar handrail and an equally impressive front door. Anne is walking slightly ahead of Marco, not speaking. She may not speak to him for the rest of the night. She marches up the steps and stops dead.

'What?' Marco says, coming up behind her, his voice tense.

Anne is staring. The front door is ajar; it is open about three inches.

'I know I locked it!' Anne says, her voice shrill.

Marco says tersely, 'Maybe you forgot. You've had a lot to drink.'

But Anne isn't listening. She's inside and running up the staircase and down the hall to the baby's room, with Marco right at her heels.

When she gets to the baby's room and sees the empty crib, she screams.

Chapter Two

ANNE FEELS HER scream inside her own head and reverberating off the walls – her scream is everywhere. Then she falls silent and stands in front of the empty crib, rigid, her hand to her mouth. Marco fumbles with the light switch. They both stare at the empty crib where their baby should be. It is impossible that she not be there. There is no way Cora could have gotten out of the crib by herself. She is barely six months old.

‘Call the police,’ Anne whispers, then throws up, the vomit cascading over her fingers and onto the hardwood floor as she bends over. The baby’s room, painted a soft butter yellow with stencils of baby lambs frolicking on the walls, immediately fills with the smell of bile and panic.

Marco doesn’t move. Anne looks up at him. He is paralyzed, in shock, staring at the empty crib, as if he can’t believe it. Anne sees the fear and guilt in his eyes and starts to wail – a horrible keening sound, like an animal in pain.

Marco still doesn’t budge. Anne bolts across the hall to their bedroom, grabs the phone off the bedside table, and dials 911, her hands shaking, getting vomit all over the phone. Marco finally snaps out of it. She can hear him walking rapidly around the second floor of the house while she stares across the hall at the empty crib. He checks the bathroom, at the top of the stairs, then passes quickly by her on his way to search the spare bedroom and then the last room down the hall, the one they have turned into an office. But even as he does, Anne wonders in a detached way why he is looking there. It’s as if part of her mind has split off and is thinking logically. It’s not like their baby is mobile on her own. She is not in the bathroom, or the spare bedroom, or the office.

Someone has taken her.

When the emergency operator answers, Anne cries, ‘Someone has taken our baby!’ She is barely able to calm herself enough to answer the operator’s questions.

‘I understand, ma’am. Try to stay calm. The police are on their way,’ the operator assures her.

Anne hangs up the phone. Her whole body is trembling. She feels like she is going to be sick again. It occurs to her how it will look. They'd left the baby alone in the house. Was that illegal? It must be. How will they explain it?

Marco appears at the bedroom door, pale and sick-looking.

'This is your fault!' Anne screams, wild-eyed, and pushes past him. She rushes into the bathroom at the top of the stairs and throws up again, this time into the pedestal sink, then washes the mess from her shaking hands and rinses her mouth. She catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Marco is standing right behind her. Their eyes meet in the mirror.

'I'm sorry,' he whispers. 'I'm so sorry. It's my fault.'

And he is sorry, she can tell. Even so, Anne brings her hand up and smashes at the reflection of his face in the mirror. The mirror shatters, and she breaks down, sobbing. He tries to take her in his arms, but she pushes him away and runs downstairs. Her hand is bleeding, leaving a trail of blood along the banister.

An air of unreality permeates everything that happens next. Anne and Marco's comfortable home immediately becomes a crime scene.

Anne is sitting on the sofa in the living room. Someone has placed a blanket around her shoulders, but she's still trembling. She is in shock. Police cars are parked on the street outside the house, their red lights flashing, pulsing through the front window and circling the pale walls. Anne sits immobile on the sofa and stares ahead as if hypnotized by them.

Marco, his voice breaking, has given the police a quick description of the baby – six months old, blond, blue eyes, about sixteen pounds, wearing a disposable diaper and a plain, pale-pink onesie. A light summer baby blanket, solid white, is also missing from the crib.

The house is swarming with uniformed police officers. They fan out and methodically begin to search the house. Some of them wear latex gloves and carry evidence kits. Anne and Marco's fast, frantic race through the house in the short minutes before the police arrived had turned up nothing. The forensic team is moving slowly. Clearly they are not looking for Cora; they are looking for evidence. The baby is already gone.

Marco sits down on the sofa next to Anne and puts his arm around her, holds her close. She wants to pull away, but she doesn't. She lets his arm

stay there. How would it look if she pulled away? She can smell that he's been drinking.

Anne now blames herself. It's her fault. She wants to blame Marco, but she agreed to leave the baby alone. She should have stayed home. No – she should have brought Cora with them next door, to hell with Cynthia. She doubts Cynthia would have actually thrown them out and had no party for Graham at all. This realization comes too late.

They will be judged, by the police and by everybody else. Serves them right, leaving their baby alone. She would think that, too, if it had happened to someone else. She knows how judgmental mothers are, how good it feels to sit in judgment of someone else. She thinks of her own mothers' group, meeting with their babies once a week in one another's homes for coffee and gossip, what they will say about her.

Someone else has arrived – a composed man in a well-cut dark suit. The uniformed officers treat him with deference. Anne looks up, meets his piercing blue eyes, and wonders who he is.

He approaches and sits down in one of the armchairs across from Anne and Marco and introduces himself as Detective Rasbach. Then he leans forward. 'Tell me what happened.'

Anne immediately forgets the detective's name, or rather it hasn't registered at all. She only catches 'Detective'. She looks at him, encouraged by the frank intelligence behind his eyes. He will help them. He will help them get Cora back. She tries to think. But she can't think. She is frantic and numb at the same time. She simply stares into the detective's sharp eyes and lets Marco do the talking.

'We were next door,' Marco begins, clearly agitated. 'At the neighbors'.' Then he stops.

'Yes?' the detective says.

Marco hesitates.

'Where was the baby?' the detective asks.

Marco doesn't answer. He doesn't want to say.

Anne, pulling herself together, answers for him, the tears spilling down her face. 'We left her here, in her crib, with the monitor on.' She watches the detective for his reaction – *What awful parents* – but he betrays nothing. 'We had the monitor on over there, and we checked on her constantly. Every half hour.' She glances at Marco. 'We never thought . . .' but she can't finish. Her hand goes to her mouth, her fingers press against her lips.

‘When was the last time you checked on her?’ the detective asks, taking a small notebook from the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

‘I checked on her at midnight,’ Anne says. ‘I remember the time. We were checking on her every half hour, and it was my turn. She was fine. She was sleeping.’

‘I checked on her again at twelve thirty,’ Marco says.

‘You’re absolutely certain of the time?’ the detective asks. Marco nods; he is staring at his feet. ‘And that was the last time anyone checked on her, before you came home?’

‘Yes,’ Marco says, looking up at the detective, running a nervous hand through his dark hair. ‘I went to check on her at twelve thirty. It was my turn. We were keeping to a schedule.’

Anne nods.

‘How much have you had to drink tonight?’ the detective asks Marco.

Marco flushes. ‘They were having a small dinner party, next door. I had a few,’ he admits.

The detective turns to Anne. ‘Have you had anything to drink tonight, Mrs Conti?’

Her face burns. Nursing mothers aren’t supposed to drink. She wants to lie. ‘I had some wine, with dinner. I don’t know how much exactly,’ she says. ‘It was a dinner party.’ She wonders how drunk she looks, what this detective must think of her. She feels like he can see right through her. She remembers the vomit upstairs in the baby’s room. Can he smell drink on her the way she can smell it on Marco? She remembers the shattered mirror in the upstairs bathroom, her bloodied hand, now wrapped in a clean dish towel. She’s ashamed of how they must look to him, drunken parents who abandoned their six-month-old daughter. She wonders if they will be charged with anything.

‘How is that even relevant?’ Marco says to the detective.

‘It might affect the reliability of your observations,’ the detective says evenly. He is not judgmental. He is merely after the facts, it seems. ‘What time did you leave the party?’ he asks.

‘It was almost one thirty,’ Anne answers. ‘I kept checking the time on my cell. I wanted to go. I . . . I should have checked on her at one – it was my turn – but I thought we’d be leaving any minute, and I was trying to get Marco to hurry up.’ She feels agonizingly guilty. If she had checked on her

daughter at one o'clock, would she be gone now? But then there were so many ways this could have been prevented.

'You placed the call to 911 at one twenty-seven,' the detective says.

'The front door was open,' Anne says, remembering.

'The front door was open?' the detective repeats.

'It was open three or four inches. I'm sure I locked it behind me when I checked on her at midnight,' Anne says.

'How sure?'

Anne thinks about it. *Was* she sure? She had been positive, when she saw the open front door, that she'd locked it. But now, with what has happened, how can she be sure of anything? She turns to her husband. 'Are you sure you didn't leave the door open?'

'I'm sure,' he says curtly. 'I never used the front door. I was going through the back to check on her, remember?'

'You used the back door,' the detective repeats.

'I may not have locked it every time,' Marco admits, and covers his face with his hands.

Detective Rasbach observes the couple closely. A baby is missing. Taken from her crib – if the parents, Marco and Anne Conti, are to be believed – between approximately 12:30 a.m. and 1:27 a.m., by a person or persons unknown, while the parents were at a party next door. The front door had been found partly open. The back door might have been left unlocked by the father – it had in fact been found closed but unlocked when the police arrived. There is no denying the distress of the mother. And of the father, who looks badly shaken. But the whole situation doesn't feel right. Rasbach wonders what is really going on.

Detective Jennings waves him over silently. 'Excuse me,' Detective Rasbach says, and leaves the stricken parents for a moment.

'What is it?' Rasbach asks quietly.

Jennings holds up a small vial of pills. 'Found these in the bathroom cabinet,' he says.

Rasbach takes the clear plastic container from Jennings and studies the label: ANNE CONTI, SERTRALINE, 50 MG. Sertraline, Rasbach knows, is a powerful antidepressant.

'The bathroom mirror upstairs is smashed,' Jennings tells him.

Rasbach nods. He hasn't been upstairs yet. 'Anything else?'

Jennings shakes his head. 'Nothing so far. House looks clean. Nothing else taken, apparently. We'll know more from forensics in a few hours.'

'Okay,' Rasbach says, handing the vial of pills back to Jennings.

He returns to the couple on the sofa and resumes his questioning. He looks at the husband. 'Marco – is it okay if I call you Marco? – what did you do after you checked on the baby at twelve thirty?'

'I went back to the party,' Marco says. 'I had a cigarette in the neighbors' backyard.'

'Were you alone when you had your cigarette?'

'No. Cynthia came out with me.' Marco flushes; Rasbach notices. 'She's the neighbor who had us over for dinner.'

Rasbach turns his attention to the wife. She's an attractive woman, with fine features and glossy brown hair, but right now she looks colorless. 'You don't smoke, Mrs Conti?'

'No, I don't. But Cynthia does,' Anne says. 'I was sitting at the dining-room table with Graham, her husband. He hates cigarette smoke, and it was his birthday, and I thought it would be rude to leave him alone inside.' And then, inexplicably, she volunteers, 'Cynthia had been flirting with Marco all evening, and I felt bad for Graham.'

'I see,' Rasbach says. He studies the husband, who looks utterly miserable. He also looks nervous and guilty. Rasbach turns to him. 'So you were outside in the backyard next door shortly after twelve thirty. Any idea how long you were out there?'

Marco shakes his head helplessly. 'Maybe fifteen minutes, give or take?'

'Did you see anything or hear anything?'

'What do you mean?' The husband seems to be in some kind of shock. He is slurring his words slightly. Rasbach wonders just how much alcohol he's had.

Rasbach spells it out for him. 'Someone apparently took your baby sometime between twelve thirty and one twenty-seven. You were outside in the backyard next door for a few minutes shortly after twelve thirty.' He watches the husband, waits for him to put it together. 'To my mind it's unlikely that anyone would carry a baby out your front door in the middle of the night.'

'But the front door was open,' Anne says.

'I didn't see anything,' Marco says.

‘There’s a lane running behind the houses on this side of the street,’ Detective Rasbach says. Marco nods. ‘Did you notice anyone using the lane at that time? Did you hear anything, a car?’

‘I . . . I don’t think so,’ Marco says. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t see or hear anything.’ He covers his face with his hands again. ‘I wasn’t paying attention.’

Detective Rasbach had already checked out the area quickly before coming inside and interviewing the parents. He thinks it unlikely – but not impossible – that a stranger would carry a sleeping child out the front door of a house on a street like this one and risk being seen. The houses are attached row houses set close to the sidewalk. The street is well lit, and there is a fair bit of vehicular and foot traffic, even late at night. So it is odd – perhaps he’s being deliberately misled? – that the front door was open. The forensics team is dusting it for fingerprints now, but somehow Rasbach doesn’t think they’ll find anything.

The back holds more potential. Most of the houses, including the Contis’, have a single detached garage opening onto the lane – behind the house. The backyards are long and narrow, fenced in between, and most, including the Contis’, have trees and shrubs and gardens. It is relatively dark back there; there are no streetlights as there are in the front. It’s a dark night, with no moon. Whoever has taken the child, if he had come out the Contis’ back door, would only have had to walk across the backyard to the garage, with access from there to the lane. The chances of being seen carrying an abducted child out the back door to a waiting vehicle are much less than the chances of being seen carrying an abducted child out the front door.

The house, yard, and garage are being thoroughly searched by Rasbach’s team. So far they have found no sign of the missing baby. The Contis’ garage is empty, and the garage door has been left wide open to the lane. It’s possible that even if someone had been sitting out back on the patio next door, he or she might not have noticed anything. But not likely. Which narrows the window of the abduction to between approximately 12:45 and 1:27a.m.

‘Are you aware that your motion detector isn’t working?’ Rasbach asks.

‘What?’ the husband says, startled.

‘You have a motion detector on your back door, a light that should go on when someone approaches it. Are you aware that it isn’t working?’

‘No,’ the wife whispers.

The husband shakes his head vigorously. ‘No, I . . . it was working when I checked on her. What’s wrong with it?’

‘The bulb has been loosened.’ Detective Rasbach watches the parents carefully. He pauses. ‘It leads me to believe that the child was taken out the back, to the garage, and away, probably in a vehicle, via the lane.’ He waits, but neither the husband nor the wife says anything. The wife is shaking, he notices.

‘Where is your car?’ Rasbach asks, leaning forward.

‘Our car?’ Anne echoes.