

LITTLE SECRETS

Marin used to have it all. Married to the love of her life, she owns a chain of upscale hair salons, and Derek runs his own company. They're admired in their community and are a loving family - until their world falls apart the day their son Sebastian is taken.

A year later, Marin is a shadow of herself. The FBI search has gone cold. The publicity has faded. She and her husband rarely speak. With her sanity ebbing, Marin hires a private investigator to pick up where the police left off.

But instead of finding Sebastian, she learns that Derek is having an affair with a much younger woman. This discovery sparks Marin back to life. She's lost her son; she's not about to lose her husband. Derek's mistress is an enemy with a face, which means this is a problem Marin can fix. Permanently.

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JENNIFER HILLIER



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For Darren and Mox
Everything that broke me brought me here
and I would do it all again
and
For Lori Cossetto
I couldn't have gotten through it without you
and I am forever grateful

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LITTLE SECRETS

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Chapter 1

Pike Place Market is a tourist trap on a regular day. Combine it with last-minute holiday shopping and an extremely mild, sunny weekend—almost unheard of in December—and you were in the busiest nine acres on a Saturday afternoon in Seattle.

Sebastian's jacket is shoved into one of Marin's shopping totes, but still, he's sweaty. His little hand keeps slipping out of hers every time he yanks too hard, trying to pull them in the direction he's determined to go.

"Mommy, I want a lollipop," he says for the second time. He's tired, and getting cranky, and what he really needs is a nap. But Marin has one final present to buy. She prides herself on giving thoughtful, personal gifts. Her four-year-old son couldn't care less about Christmas shopping. Sebastian believes Santa is going to bring all his presents, so in this moment, sugar is the only thing he's interested in.

"Bash, please, five more minutes," she says, exasperated. "And then we'll get your treat. But you have to be good. Deal?"

It's a fair negotiation, and he stops whining. There's a candy store in the market. They know it well; they've been many times. It's unapologetically high-brow, and while the store makes all kinds of sweet things, it's best known for its "bean-to-chocolate handmade

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artisanal French crème truffles.” The storefront is painted Tiffany blue, its pretentious name stenciled in elegant gold cursive across the windows: *La Parisienne Doux*. No item inside costs less than four bucks, and the oversize lollipop Sebastian wants—the one with the rainbow swirls—is five dollars.

Yes, five whole dollars for a lollipop. Marin is well aware of how insane that is. In Sebastian’s defense, he wouldn’t even know such a thing existed if on previous trips she hadn’t dragged him into the candy store for the chocolates, which, in all honesty, are a god-damned delight. She tells herself that it’s okay to spoil him once in a while, and anyway, everything at *La Parisienne Doux* is made with pure organic cane sugar and locally sourced honey. Derek, on the other hand, refuses to buy into his wife’s reasoning. He thinks she’s trying to justify turning their little boy into an uppity eater, same as she is.

But Derek’s not here. Derek’s somewhere on First Avenue, enjoying a beer in a sports pub and watching the Huskies play, while Marin handles the last of the shopping with their rapidly tiring four-year-old.

Her pocket vibrates. The market is too loud for her to hear her phone, but she can feel it, and she lets go of her son’s hand to reach for it. Maybe it’s Derek and the game’s over already. She checks the call display; it’s not her husband. The last thing she wants to do is chat, but it’s Sal. She can’t not pick up.

“Bash, stay close,” she tells her son as she hits Accept on her phone. “Hey there.”

She cradles the phone between her shoulder and ear, thinking about how great it would be to have AirPods for moments like this, then remembers she doesn’t want to be one of those asshole moms walking around wearing AirPods.

“Everything okay? How’s your mother?” She grabs Sebastian’s hand again, listening as her oldest friend recounts his stressful morn-

ing. Sal's mother is recovering from hip surgery. Someone bumps into her, knocking her purse and tote bag off her shoulder. She gives their back a dirty look as they pass without apologizing. Tourists.

"Mommy, stop talking." Sebastian tugs her hand, his voice whiny again. "You said *lollipop*. The *big* one. With the *swirls*."

"Bash, what did I say? You have to wait. We have other things to do first." To her phone, Marin says, "Sal, sorry, can I call you back a bit later? We're at the market and it's insane in here."

She sticks the phone back in her pocket and reminds Sebastian again of their deal. The deal thing is relatively new for both of them, having begun when he started refusing baths a couple of months ago. "If you take a bath, we'll read an extra book at bedtime," she'd said, and the negotiation worked like a charm. It ended up being a win for both of them. Bath times now go more smoothly, and afterward, with his sweet-scented hair resting against her cheek, she reads aloud favorites from her own childhood. *Curious George* and *Goodnight Moon* are always in the rotation. The bedtime ritual is her favorite, and she's dreading the day when cuddles will be refused and her son will prefer to read his own books in bed by himself.

For now, though, Sebastian is quiet when she suggests he might not get a lollipop at all if he whines one more time. She's as tired and hot as Bash is, and also hungry and severely undercaffeinated. Sugar—and coffee—will have to wait. They're meeting Derek at the world's oldest Starbucks, which is right beside the candy store, but there are no treats for either of them until the last of the shopping is done.

The last gift on her list is for Sadie, the manager of Marin's downtown salon. She's six months pregnant and hinting that she might quit work to be a stay-at-home mom. While Marin respects any woman's choice to do what's best for herself and her family, she would really hate to lose her. Sadie had mentioned seeing a first edition of Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* in the vintage

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bookstore on the market's lower level. If it's still there, Marin will buy it for her. She's been a valuable employee for ten years, and she deserves something extra special. Also, maybe it will remind Sadie how much she loves her boss—and her job—and she'll choose to come back after her maternity leave.

Sebastian yanks again, but Marin holds on firmly to his hand and directs him into the bookstore, where she's relieved to learn they still have the Potter first edition. She manages to slip a couple of Franklin the Turtle books onto the counter as she's paying. As they head back to the upper level, her phone vibrates again. A text, this time.

Game's over. It's Derek, thank God. She could use the extra hands. Heading your way. Where you guys at?

She feels Sebastian's sticky little hand slip out of hers. It's okay; she needs both hands to text back. In any case, her little boy is right beside her, keeping up with her brisk stride for once, his arm pressing against her leg as they head at a decidedly quicker pace out onto the street toward the candy store. A promise is a promise, though she can admit that the thought of a chocolate raspberry truffle melting in her mouth makes it easier to make good on her word.

Heading to the fancy candy store, she texts back. And then Starbucks. Want anything?

Tacos, her husband replies. I'm starving. Meet you at the food trucks instead?

Marin grimaces. She's not a fan of those food truck tacos, or street food of any kind. Last time she ate a taco here, she got sick.

No bueno, she types. Why don't we stop at Fénix and grab a couple of pulled pork sandwiches on the way home? Much better meat.

Hungry NOW, Derek replies. Need something to tide me over. And baby, I'll give you better meat later tonight, if you're good.

She rolls her eyes. She has friends who complain their husbands never flirt with them anymore. Hers never stops. *Fine. Get your greasy taco, but you owe me, big guy.*

Okay good because I'm already in line. His reply comes with a winking emoji. *Meet you in a few. I'll get Bash a churro.*

She's about to veto the fried dessert when it occurs to her that she can no longer feel Sebastian against her leg. She looks up from her phone, adjusting the bag that's getting heavier by the minute. Then she looks down again, and around. "Bash? Sebastian?"

He's nowhere near her. On reflex she stops walking, causing someone to run into her from behind.

"I hate it when people just stop," the man mutters to his companion, making his way around her with a huff louder than it needs to be.

She doesn't care. She can't see her son anymore, and she's entering panic mode. Craning her neck, she peers through the throngs of locals and tourists, who all seem to be moving through the market in packs. Sebastian can't have gone far. Her eyes dart everywhere, searching for any glimpse of her little boy with his dark hair, so similar in color and texture to her own. He's wearing a brown-and-white reindeer sweater, a handknit gift from a longtime client of the salon, which Sebastian loves so much he's insisted on wearing it nearly every day this past week. It looks adorable on him, with cute little ears made of faux fur that stick out above the buttons for the eyes and nose.

She can't spot him anywhere. No reindeer. No Sebastian.

She pushes more aggressively through the crowd, spinning in different directions, feeling weighed down by her purse and their coats and the overstuffed shopping tote. She calls out his name. "Sebastian! *Sebastian!*"

Other market patrons are beginning to notice, but most don't do anything other than offer a quick glance in her direction as they continue on their way. The market is extra crowded, so loud she can barely hear herself think. She unwittingly migrates toward the seafood counter, where three burly fishermen dressed in bloodstained overalls are bantering back and forth to the delight of the crowd

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gathered to watch them toss fresh salmon at each other like footballs.

“Sebastian!” She’s reached full-blown panic. In her hand, her phone vibrates. It’s Derek with another text; he’s about to order at the food truck, and he wants to know one final time if she wants anything. The text is unreasonably annoying. She doesn’t want a fucking taco, she wants her son.

“Sebastian!” she shrieks at the top of her lungs. She’s gone way past panic mode and is nearing hysteria, and she’s sure she’s starting to look crazy because people are now watching her with equal parts concern and fear.

An older woman with coiffed silver hair approaches her. “Ma’am, can I help you? Did you lose your child?”

“Yes, he’s four and he’s this tall with brown hair wearing a reindeer sweater his name is Sebastian.” It all comes out in one breathy gasp, and Marin needs to calm down, to breathe, because hysteria isn’t going to help. It’s probably silly to be panicking at all. They’re in a fancy, touristy farmers’ market, with security guards, and it’s nearly Christmas, and certainly nobody would take a child right before Christmas. Sebastian’s just wandered a bit, and in a minute someone will bring him back to her and she’ll sheepishly say thank you and then fiercely hug her kid. And then she’ll bend down and lecture him sternly about *always staying where he can see her*, because *if she can’t see him then he can’t see her*, and his little round face will crumple, because he always gets upset whenever she’s upset, no matter the reason. Then she’ll pepper his face with kisses and explain that he always needs to stay close to her in public places, because it’s important to *stay safe*. She’ll reassure him again that everything’s fine, and there’ll be more kisses, and of course the lollipop, because she promised. And then later, when she recounts the story to Derek in the safety of their home, with Sebastian tucked into bed and sleeping, she’ll tell Derek how terrified—how utterly fucking terrified—she

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was for the few minutes she didn't know where their son was. And then it will be her husband's turn to reassure her, and he'll remind her that everything turned out okay.

Because it *will* be okay. Because they'll find him. Of course they will.

She punches her phone and calls Derek. The minute her husband picks up, she loses it. "Sebastian's gone." Her voice is three times louder and a half octave higher than it normally is. "I've lost him."

Derek knows all her volumes, and he knows immediately that she isn't joking. "*What?*"

"I can't find Sebastian!"

"Where are you?" he asks, and she looks around, only to realize she's migrated again, all the way past the fishermen. She's now standing near the main entrance under the iconic neon-lit *Public Market* sign.

"I'm by the pig," she says, knowing he'll understand her reference to the popular sculpture.

"Don't move, I'll be right there."

The older lady who's helping her has turned into three concerned ladies of various ages, along with a man—someone's husband—who's been sent to notify security. Derek shows up a couple of minutes later, out of breath because he ran all the way from the other side of the market. He takes one look at his wife, sans Sebastian, and his face freezes. It's almost as if he expected that everything would be resolved by the time he got there, and that his only job would be to comfort a scared, relieved wife and a scared, crying child, because comforting is something Derek is good at. But there's no crying kid, and no relieved wife, and he's momentarily paralyzed as to how to handle it.

"What the *hell*, Marin?" her husband blurts. "What did you do?"

It's a poor choice of words that comes out sounding more accusing than he probably meant. His voice jabs, and she winces; she knows that question will haunt her forever.

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What did she do? She lost their son, that's what she did. And she's prepared to take all the blame and apologize to everyone a thousand times once they find him, because they *will* find him, they *have to* find him, and once they do, once he's back and safe in her arms, she'll feel like a prize idiot.

She is desperately looking forward to feeling like an idiot.

"He was just here, I let go of his hand to text you, and the next thing I know, he's gone." She's all the way hysterical now, and people aren't just staring, they're stopping, offering help, asking for a description of the little boy who's wandered away from his mother.

Two security guards dressed in dark gray uniforms approach with the helpful husband, who's already explained that they're looking for a small boy in a fox sweater.

"Not *fox*," Marin snaps angrily, but nobody seems to mind. "*Reindeer*. It's a reindeer sweater, brown and white, with black buttons for the eyes—"

"Do you have a picture of your son wearing it?" one of the security guards asks, and it's all she can do not to shriek at him, because the question is so stupid. One, how many four-year-olds can there be in this market right now with the exact same handknit sweater? And two, *of course* she has a picture of her son, because it's her *son*, and her phone is filled with them.

They take the picture, forward it around.

But they don't find him.

Ten minutes later, the police show up.

The cops don't find him, either.

Two hours later, after Seattle PD has combed through all the security footage, she and Derek watch a computer monitor in shock and disbelief as a little boy dressed in a reindeer sweater is shown exiting the market holding the hand of somebody whose face is obscured. They disappear through the doors closest to the underground parking lot, but that doesn't mean they went *to* the parking lot. Their

son is holding a lollipop in his free hand, and it's swirly and colorful, the exact same lollipop his mother would have bought for him if she'd had the chance. The person who gave it to him is dressed head to toe in a Santa Claus costume, right down to the black boots, bushy eyebrows, and white beard. The camera angle makes it impossible to get a clear glimpse of the face. Nor is it possible to tell if it's a man or a woman.

Marin can't process what she's looking at, and she asks them to replay it, over and over again, squinting at the monitor as if by doing so she'll be able to see more than what is actually there. The playback is jerky, staccato, more like a series of grainy stills playing in sequence than a video recording. Each time she sees it, the moment Sebastian disappears from view is terrifying. One second he's there, his foot crossing over the threshold of the doorway. And then, in the very next frame, he's gone.

There. Gone. Rewind. There. Gone.

Behind her, Derek paces, speaking in heated tones to the security guards and the police, but she only catches certain words—*kidnapped, stolen, AMBER Alert, FBI*—above the noise of her own internal screaming. She can't seem to accept that this really happened. It seems like it's happening to someone else. It seems like something out of a movie.

Someone dressed as Santa Claus took her son. Deliberately. Purposefully.

While the security footage is black-and-white and fuzzy, it's clear Sebastian wasn't coerced. He didn't seem frightened. His face was just fine, because he had a five-dollar lollipop in one hand and Santa in the other. The ladies working at La Parisienne Doux checked their computer and confirmed they'd sold seven lollipops that day, but they don't remember any customers dressed as Santa, and there are no security cameras inside their tiny store. There's only one CCTV camera across the street from the underground parking garage that Sebastian

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and his captor are thought to have entered, but because of the angle, the camera only catches a distant side view of the cars exiting the garage; no license plates are visible. Fifty-four vehicles exited in the hour after Sebastian was taken, and the police can't trace any of them.

The time stamp on the video footage they do have shows that Sebastian and his kidnapper exited the market a mere four minutes after his mother realized he was no longer with her. The Pike Place security guards hadn't even been notified at that point.

Four minutes. That's all it took to steal a child.

A lollipop, a Santa suit, and two hundred forty seconds.

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PART ONE

sixteen months later

Listen, are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life?

—MARY OLIVER

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Chapter 2

They say if a missing child Sebastian's age isn't found within twenty-four hours of his disappearance, chances are he never will be.

This is the first coherent thought Marin Machado has every morning when she wakes up.

The second thought is whether this will be the day she'll kill herself.

Sometimes the thoughts dissipate by the time she's out of bed and in the shower, obliterated by the steaming water bursting out of the showerhead. Sometimes they dissipate by the time she's finished her coffee and is driving to work. But sometimes they stay with her all day, like whispering, ominous clouds in the background of her mind, a soundtrack she can't shut off. On those days, she might pass as normal from the outside, just a regular person having regular conversations with the people around her. Internally, there's a whole other dialogue going on.

This happened just the other morning, for instance. Marin showed up at her downtown salon wearing a pink Chanel shift dress she'd found at the back of her closet, still in its dry-cleaning plastic. She was looking pretty fabulous when she walked into work, and her receptionist, a young blonde with an impeccable sense of style, noticed.

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“Good morning, Marin,” Veronique called out with a bright smile. “Look at you, rocking that dress. You look like a million bucks.”

Marin returned the receptionist’s smile as she walked through the elegant waiting room to her private office in the back of the salon. “Thanks, V. Forgot I had it. How’s the schedule looking?”

“Fully booked,” Veronique said in a singsong voice, the same one all morning people seemed to have.

Marin nodded and smiled again, heading to her office, all the while thinking, *Maybe today is the day. I’ll take the shears—not the new ones I used on Scarlett Johansson last summer, but the old ones I used on J.Lo five years ago, the ones that have always felt best in my hand—and I’ll stab them into my neck, right where I can see my pulse. I’ll do it in front of the mirror in the bathroom, so that I don’t screw it up. Yes, definitely the bathroom, it’s the easiest place for them to clean up; the tile is slate, the grout is dark, and the bloodstains won’t show.*

She didn’t do it. Clearly.

But she thought about it. She *thinks* about it. Every morning. Most evenings. Occasional afternoons.

Today, thankfully, is starting out as a better day, and the thoughts that attacked her when Marin first woke up are beginning to fade. They’re fully gone by the time her alarm goes off. She switches the beside lamp on, grimacing at the foul taste in her mouth from the entire bottle of red wine she drank the night before. She takes a long sip of water from the glass she keeps by the bed, swishing it around her dry mouth, then unplugs her phone from the charger.

One new message. *You alive?*

It’s Sal, of course, and it’s his usual text, the one he sends every morning if he hasn’t already heard from her. To anyone else, a text like this might be considered insensitive. But it’s Sal. They go back a long way and share the same dark sense of humor, and she’s thankful she still has one person in her life who doesn’t feel the need to tiptoe

around her precious feelings. She's also fairly certain that Sal's the only person in the world who doesn't secretly think she's a piece of shit.

She replies with numb fingers, eyes still bleary, head pounding from the hangover. *Barely*, she texts back. It's her usual response, brief, but it's all he needs. He'll check on her again around bedtime. Sal knows bedtimes and mornings are the worst for her, when she's least able to deal with the reality that is now her life.

Beside her, the bed is empty. The pillow is still perfect and the sheets are still flat. Derek didn't sleep here last night. He's out of town on business, again. She has no idea when he's coming back. He forgot to tell her yesterday when he left, and she forgot to ask.

It's been four hundred eighty-five days since she lost Sebastian.

This means she's had four hundred eighty-five evenings where she hasn't bathed her son, put him in clean pajamas, tucked him into bed, and read him *Goodnight Moon*. She's had four hundred eighty-five mornings of waking up to a quiet house devoid of laughter and stomping feet, and no calls of "Mommy, wipe!" emanating from the hallway bathroom, because while he was fully potty trained, he was only four, still learning how to handle his own basic hygiene.

Four hundred eighty-five days of this nightmare.

Panic sets in. She takes a minute and does the deep-breathing exercises her therapist taught her until the worst of it passes and she can function. Nothing about anything feels normal anymore, but she's better at faking it than she used to be. For the most part, she's stopped scaring people. She's been back at work for four months now. The routine of work has been good for her; it gets her out of the house, gives structure to her day, and gives her something to think about other than Sebastian.

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she winces as a sharp pain stabs her in the temple. She downs her Lexapro and a multivitamin with what's left of her lukewarm water, and is in the shower

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within five minutes. Forty-five minutes later, she's out of the bathroom, fully dressed, makeup on, hair clean and styled. She feels better. Not great—her child is still missing and it's still totally her fault—but she does have moments when she doesn't feel like she's dangling by a rapidly unraveling thread. This is one of them. She counts it as a win.

The day passes quickly. Four haircuts, a double process, a balayage, and a staff meeting, which she attends but Sadie leads. She promoted Sadie to general manager with a huge salary bump right after she had the baby, and Sadie now runs the day-to-day operations for all three salons. Marin could hardly stand to lose Sadie before everything happened with Sebastian; afterward, the thought was unfathomable. Marin needed to stay home and fall apart, which she did, for months, until Derek and her therapist suggested it was time to come back to work.

She still oversees everything—the company is, after all, Marin's—but mainly she's moved back to the salon floor, cutting and coloring hair for a select group of longtime clients known internally as VIPs. They're all absurdly wealthy. More than a few are minor celebrities, and they pay six hundred dollars an hour to have their hair done personally by Marin Machado of Marin Machado Salon & Spa.

Because once upon a time, she was *somebody*. Her work has been featured in *Vogue*, *Allure*, *Marie Claire*. It used to be cool to be Marin Machado. You could google her name and photos of the three biggest celebrity Jennifers—Lopez, Lawrence, and Aniston—would come up, all women she's worked on personally—but now articles about her work take a back seat to news reports about Sebastian's disappearance. The massive search that went nowhere. Complaints about the special treatment she and Derek received from the cops because Derek is a somebody, too, and they're an affluent couple with connections, a friendship with the chief of police (which was vastly overstated—they barely know the woman outside of seeing her at a

few charity events over the years), and rumors that Marin tried to kill herself.

Now she's a cautionary tale.

It was Sadie's idea to put her back on the floor. Doing hair is good for Marin. It's something she enjoys, and there's no place she feels more herself than behind the chair, mixing colors and painting strands and wielding shears. Hairstyling is the perfect blend of craft and chemistry, and she's good at it.

In her chair right now is woman named Aurora, a longtime client who's married to a retired Seattle Mariner. Her naturally brunette hair is going gray, and she's been transitioning to blond for the past few appointments. Aurora is requesting face-framing platinum blond highlights that look "beachy," but her hair is dry, fine, and aging. Marin decides to hand-paint the highlights in with a low-strength bleach mixed with bond rebuilder. When the woman's hair lightens to a shade of pale yellow similar to the inside of a banana peel—a processing time that can take anywhere from ten to twenty-five minutes, depending on a hundred different factors—Marin rinses and applies a violet toner, which she leaves on for no more than three minutes, to create that perfect white-blond look the client is hoping for.

This process is complicated, but it's something Marin can control. It's extremely important for her to do things with predictable outcomes. Her first week back to work, she realized she'd have been better off coming back to the salon sooner, rather than spend all that time in therapy.

"So? What do you think?" she asks Aurora now, moving a few locks of her client's hair around before misting the strands with a flexible-hold hairspray.

"It's perfect, as usual." It's what Aurora always says, because she never seems to know what to say to Marin anymore. In the past, Aurora was very vocal about what she liked and didn't like about her

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hair. But since Marin's returned to work, Aurora has only showered her stylist with compliments.

Marin watches her client closely for signs of displeasure, but Aurora seems genuinely pleased, turning her head this way and that so she can see the highlights from different angles. She gives Marin a satisfied smile in the mirror. "I love it. Great job."

Marin accepts the praise with a nod and a smile, removes the woman's cape, and walks her over to the reception desk where Veronique is waiting to cash her out. She offers Aurora a brief hug, and the woman accepts, grasping her a little too tightly.

"You're doing great, honey, keep hanging in there," Aurora whispers, and automatically Marin feels claustrophobic. She murmurs a *thank you* in return, and is relieved when the woman finally lets go.

"Taking off?" her receptionist asks her a few minutes later, when she sees Marin come out of the office with her coat and purse.

Marin peeks at the receptionist's computer to check the next day's bookings. Only three appointments in the afternoon, which, after her therapy appointment in the morning, leaves a couple of hours before lunch for administrative stuff. She doesn't technically have to do any of it, but she feels bad for dumping so much of it on Sadie.

"Tell Sadie I'll be here in the morning," Marin says, checking her phone. "Have a good night, V."

She heads to her car, and is starting the ignition when a text from Sal comes in. These days, he seems to be the only person who can coax a smile out of her that doesn't make her feel like she's doing it out of politeness or obligation.

Come by the bar, he texts. I'm all alone with a bunch of college shits who don't realize there are beers other than Budweiser.

Can't, she replies. On my way to group.

Fine, Sal texts. Then come by when you're done self-flagellating. I miss your face.

She's tempted to say yes, because she misses him, too, but she's

always drained after group. *Maybe*, she types, not wanting to say no. *You know how tired I get. I'll let you know.*

Fair enough, he writes back. *But I invented a new cocktail I want you to try—mojito with a splash of grenadine and pineapple. I'm calling it the Hawaii 5-0.*

Sounds disgusting, she texts back, smiling. She's rewarded with a GIF of a man giving her the middle finger, which makes her snort.

Sal doesn't ask where Derek is tonight. He never does.

It's a fifteen-minute drive to SoDo, the area of Seattle known as "south of downtown." By the time she pulls into the parking lot of the dilapidated plaza where group takes place, she's sad again. Which is fine, because this is probably the one place in the entire world where she can feel as miserable as she needs to, without feeling the need to apologize for it, while still not necessarily being the most miserable person in the room. Not even therapy is like that. Therapy is a safe space, certainly, but there's still judgment involved, and an unspoken expectation that she's there to get better.

This meeting tonight, on the other hand, forces no such pretense. The Support Group for Parents of Missing Children—Greater Seattle is a fancy name for a bunch of people with one terrible thing in common: they all have missing kids. Sal described going to group as an act of self-flagellation. He isn't wrong. Some nights, that's exactly what it is, which is exactly what she needs.

One year, three months, and twenty-two days ago was the worst day of her life, when Marin did the worst thing she will ever do. It was nobody's fault but hers; she has nobody to blame but herself.

If she hadn't been texting, if she hadn't let go of Sebastian's hand, if they'd gone to the candy store earlier, if she hadn't dragged him to the bookstore, if she had looked up from her phone sooner, *if if if if if*. . .

Her therapist says she has to stop fixating on that day, that it's not helpful to replay every second again and again in her head, as if some

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new detail will magically present itself. He says she needs to find a way to process what happened and move through it, which doesn't mean she's letting Sebastian go. It would mean she'd be living a productive life despite what happened, despite the thing she *let* happen, despite what she's done.

Marin thinks he's full of shit. Which is why she doesn't want to see him anymore. *All* she wants to do is fixate on it. She *wants* to continue picking at the wound. She doesn't want it to heal, because if it heals, that means it's over, and her little boy is lost forever. It boggles her mind that nobody seems to understand that.

Except for the people at group.

She stares up at the aging yellow sign of the donut shop, which is a shade somewhere between mustard and lemon. It's always lit. If someone had told her last year that she'd be here once a month to spend time with a group of people she hadn't even met yet, she wouldn't have believed it.

There are a lot of things she wouldn't have believed.

Her keys slip out of her hands, and she manages to catch them before they land in a dirty parking lot puddle. And that's what life is these days, isn't it? A series of slips and catches, mistakes and remorse, a constant juggling act of pretending to feel okay when all she wants to do is fall apart.

One day, all those balls will drop, and they won't just break.

They'll shatter.

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