

She's Not Sorry

By Mary Kubica

PROLOGUE

My phone starts to ring as I open the door to walk into the store. It's buried in the deepest depths of my bag and is difficult to find. I shove aside a wallet and a cosmetic bag, knowing the search is likely futile. I will never get to it in time.

My fingers make contact on the third or fourth ring. I fish it out of the bag, but as soon as I do, the phone goes quiet. I'm too late. A missed call notification from Sienna appears on the screen. I'm taken aback. I physically stop in the open doorway and stare down at her number on the display. Doubt and confusion fill my thoughts because it's just after ten o'clock in the morning and Sienna is at school, or rather, she should be. Sienna texts from school sometimes, sneaking her phone when the teacher isn't paying attention – *Can I hang out with Gianna today? I lost my water bottle. Did u buy tampons? My stupid calculator won't work.* – but she doesn't call. My mind goes in a million different directions thinking how, if she was sick, the nurse would call and, if she got in trouble at school for something, then the dean would call. Sienna wouldn't ever be the one to call.

I don't have a chance to call her back. Almost immediately the phone in my hand starts to ring again and I jump, from the unexpected sound of it. It's Sienna, calling me back.

My thumb swipes immediately across the screen, beneath a picture of Sienna from a few years ago when she didn't object to having her picture taken, as she does now. "Sienna? What's wrong?" I ask, pressing the phone to my ear. I step fully inside the store, letting the door drift closed to muffle the street noise outside, the sound of cars passing by and people on their phones, having conversations of their own. I hear the shrill, unmistakable panic in my voice, and I think how, in the next instant, Sienna is going to ride me for overreacting, for freaking out about nothing. *Geez Mom. Relax. I'm fine*, she'll say, drawing that last word out for emphasis.

That's not what happens.

It's quiet at first. I just barely make out the sound of something slight like movement or wind. It goes on a few seconds so that I decide this must be a pocket dial. Sienna didn't mean to call me. The phone is in her pocket or her backpack and she called me by mistake. She doesn't even know she's called me twice. I listen, trying to decipher where she is, but it's more of the same. Nothing telling. Nothing revelatory.

But then, a man's voice cuts through the quiet, his words cold and sparing, his voice altered as if speaking through a voice changer. "If you ever want to see your daughter again, you will do exactly as I say."

I gasp. My eyes gape. I lose my footing, falling backwards into the closed door. A hand rises to my mouth, pressing hard. I can't breathe all of a sudden. I can't think; my mind can't process what's happening at first. I pull the phone away from my ear, looking down at the display to see if I'm mistaken, if it's not Sienna's number that called but someone else. A wrong number. Because this can't be right, this can't be happening. This can't be happening to me.

But it is right. Sienna's number stares back at me from the display.

"Who is this," I ask, pressing the phone back to my ear, "and why do you have my daughter's phone?"

And then, in the background, I hear Sienna's piercing scream.

"Mommy!" she bellows. It's high-pitched, frenzied, desperate, and that's when I know that this man doesn't only have Sienna's phone. He has Sienna.

Pure terror courses through my veins. Sienna hasn't called me Mommy in at least ten years. I can't stop thinking what horrible thing must be happening for her to lapse back into her childhood and call me Mommy. I'm completely powerless. I don't know where she is. I don't know how to get to her, how to help her, how to make this stop.

"Go away," Sienna commands. Her voice trembles, so that she doesn't sound like herself, who is usually so defiant, so sure. There is no mistaking her fear. "Leave me alone," she demands, crying now. Sienna falters on the words, her voice cracking, so that the execution doesn't carry the same weight as the words themselves.

Sienna is terrified and so am I.

"Sienna baby!" I shriek. There is the sound of commotion, of muffled noises in the background, this man, I imagine, subduing Sienna, forcing a gag into her mouth so that she can't speak or scream, and Sienna fighting back from the sound of it, resisting him.

I realize that I'm not blinking. I'm not breathing. I'm holding my breath.

Tears sting my eyes. "What are you doing to her? Who is this?" I demand of this man, screaming into the phone so that everyone in the store stops what they're doing to look at me, to stare, some gasping and

pressing hands to their own mouths in shock, as if this nightmare is somehow collective. “What have you done with my daughter? What do you want from me?”

“Listen to me,” the man says back, his modulated voice unshaken and sedate, unlike mine. I still hear Sienna’s desperate cry in the background, a keening, weeping wail, though it’s stilted. The sound of it is enough to bring me to my knees, and yet I don’t know what’s worse: the sound of Sienna’s cry or the sound of it as it grows distant and then fades completely away.

“Where is she? What have you done to her? Why can’t I hear her anymore?”

“You need to do exactly as I say. Exactly. Do you understand?”

“I want to talk to my daughter. Let me talk to my daughter. I need to know that she’s okay. What have you done to her?”

“I have nothing to lose,” the man says. “You’re the only one with something to lose, Ms. Michaels. Now you need to shut up and listen to me because I don’t care one way or the other if your daughter lives or dies. What happens to her is entirely up to you.”

ONE

The first time I see her in the hospital is in the ICU, shortly after she's come out of surgery. I stand at the sliding glass door, looking in on her lying on the hospital bed, hooked up to a central line, an ET tube, an ICP monitor, a Nasogastric tube, more. IV lines run into her veins, pumping her with fluids, with medicine like diuretics, anticonvulsants and morphine probably. Her head is wrapped with gauze. Beneath the gauze, just hours ago, I've been told, pieces of her skull were removed to relieve pressure on the brain. There isn't much to see of her face because her eyes are closed and she's all gauze and tubes, but what I can see of her is swollen and bruised.

She's not my patient. Another nurse, Bridget, stands in the room with her, tending to her, getting her settled, and yet I felt sick to my stomach when I first saw her lying there on the bed through the glass. I'd heard the mumble of voices already, the hushed tones whispering of what people say happened to her, of what brought her here.

I'm assigned to a few other patients today. We have thirty ICU beds at the hospital. We're broken down into pods, with ten beds in each and a nurses' station at the center of them. The nurse to patient ratio depends on how critical a patient is. Patients on ventilators or that are critically ill have a patient to nurse ratio of two to one, but with lower acuity patients, we might have as many as four. It's a lot to manage. It means that, despite our best efforts, errors sometimes get made, like last week when one of the nurses gave a patient someone else's morning meds

by mistake. She realized what she'd done right after she did it, told the doctor and everything was fine, thank God. It doesn't always work out that way.

Bridget catches a glimpse of me over her shoulder. She stops what she's doing and steps out of the room to come stand beside me at the sliding glass door.

"Hey," she says as the doors drift closed. "Did you hear?" she asks, leaning in like she always does to gossip.

"Hear what?" I ask, and my heart kicks it up a notch as if in preparation for what she's about to say. I was late to work today. I had a doctor's appointment this morning and didn't get in until noon. I should have been here sooner—the appointment was over by nine thirty—but after what happened, I walked the city for miles, considering taking the whole day and letting someone else cover for me, even though I only had shift coverage for a few hours. In the end, I came to work. I had to talk myself into it, but it was what I needed to do. I needed to act like nothing was wrong because if I didn't, there would be questions. Everyone would want to know where I was and why I didn't come in and besides, I thought work would be a welcome distraction. I was wrong.

"She jumped," Bridget says. "From a pedestrian bridge."

My breath hitches. It's all anyone is talking about, the woman who dropped over twenty feet from a bridge and just nominally survived. "I know. I did hear that. How awful. What's her name?" "Caitlin," she says, and I muse over the name, becoming accustomed to it.

"Caitlin what?"

"Beckett. Caitlin Beckett."

Bridget speaks then as if giving me the change of shift report, though she's not my patient and it's not a shift change. She says that the patient is thirty-two years old, that she came to our ICU from surgery, though she arrived at the hospital through the emergency room before having a decompressive craniectomy for cerebral edema caused by a traumatic brain injury. In other words, swelling around the brain was putting pressure on the brain. They had to relieve that or she would be dead by now.

Bridget goes on, saying more. At some point, I stop listening because I can't take my eyes off this woman. Caitlin Beckett. My mind gets trapped on the fact that she's only thirty-two. It's so young. I shake my head, feeling really appalled when I think about it. I am forty. The age difference is considerable, though when I was thirty-two, I was just coming into my own. At the time, I thought it was one of the best years of my life. I was married, with a child. I had more confidence than I'd ever had in my whole life. I knew who I was and I didn't have to worry about trying to impress people anymore.

Caitlin lies in an ordinary hospital gown—starch white with stars on it—beneath a blanket, her arms placed unnaturally at her sides. I feel sick inside, though I've seen everything there is to see working as an ICU nurse. This patient shouldn't upset me any more than every other patient, but she does, for different reasons.

"Do you think she will make it?" I ask Bridget.

"Who knows," she says, looking around to make sure we're alone before she does. Hope is paramount to being a nurse. As nurses, we should believe that all our patients will live, though the survival rate for someone

like this is generally poor. Most don't survive. Even if she was to survive, the odds of her having a good quality of life are not great.

"Is her family here?" I ask, putting stock in the likelihood that she will either die or come out of the coma as a shell of her former self.

"Not yet. They're still trying to find a next of kin."

I stare through the glass wall at her face. She looks peaceful, sleeping. She isn't. The bed she lies on is angled upward, so that her head and upper body are inclined. Beneath the gauze, her hair, at least some of it, would have been shaved in preparation for the craniectomy. I imagine her bald. Her lips form around the endotracheal tube, which keeps the airways open so that air from the ventilator can get into her lungs. Her coloring is off. It's waxy and wan where it isn't bruised purple. Her injuries look horrific. A fractured hip, a broken leg, broken arms and ribs, more.

Bridget asks, "She's pretty isn't she?"

I frown. "How can you tell?" She's unrecognizable. It's impossible for Bridget to know what she looks like with the swelling, the bruising and the gauze.

"I don't know," she says. "I just can. It's terrible what happened."

I swallow. It takes effort because my saliva is thick and ropy.
"Tragic."

"What makes a person do something like that?" Bridget asks, and I can't believe she's going on like this, to me of all people. But she doesn't know my story. She doesn't know what happened before. She doesn't know how much this upsets me.

When I don't answer fast enough, she says, "You know, jump from a bridge, kill themselves?"

I shudder at the thought, shaking my head. I feel her eyes on my face, searching it, and feel my cheeks and ears go red. “I don’t know.”

“Of all the ways to go, why that?” Bridget asks. I wish she would drop it, but she doesn’t. She goes on, driving the point home, saying in a low voice so that no one passing by in the hall can hear, “What about carbon monoxide or a lethal dose of morphine? Wouldn’t that be easier, less painful?”

She isn’t trying to be insensitive. Not everyone knows my family’s history with suicide.

I blanch. I say nothing because I don’t have an answer and because I can’t stop thinking about what it would have been like for her to fall, to slam into the earth from the height of the bridge. There is a metallic tang in my mouth all of a sudden. I press my fingers to my lips, willing it away. I can’t stop wondering things like if she lost consciousness during the fall or if she was wide-awake when she hit the ground. Did she feel her stomach float up into her chest, her organs moving freely around her insides like on an amusement park ride, or did she feel nothing but the searing pain of impact?

Bridget excuses herself. She slips back through the sliding glass door to attend to the patient. For a minute longer, I stand there watching as Bridget shows something like affection in the way she rearranges the other woman’s hands on her abdomen, setting her fingers just so, letting her own hand linger on hers. I read her lips as she leans over her and asks, “What did you do, baby girl? What did you do?”

I can think only one thing in that moment: It’s a wonder she survived this long.

TWO

My shift ends at seven. I leave the hospital that night, heading east down Wellington for Halsted, trying to leave patients behind, to not take thoughts of them with me when I go. It's easier said than done. No matter how hard I try, some still come with me. As nurses, we're supposed to compartmentalize, to be detached, to mentally separate our professional lives from our personal lives, like sorting medication into a pill sorter, clearly divided with thick plastic tabs. We were taught this in nursing school, though it's not that easy and it's not something that can be taught—to care for and about our patients, but to not let ourselves get emotionally attached because attachment, they say, leads to burnout, which causes nurses to leave an already hemorrhaging profession. It's hard because as nurses, it's in our nature to be compassionate, and these two things—detachment and compassion—are at odds with one another.

The sun set hours ago. This time of year, night comes early and fast. On the days that I work, I hardly ever get to see the sun. It's dark when I leave for work in the morning and it's dark when I go home.

I text Sienna as I walk, reminding her that I'll be late, and she replies with a quick, K. I ask if she remembered to close the front door and she texts back, Yes. These last few days, the door to our apartment has not been latching properly. It doesn't always stay closed. It would be just an inconvenience, except that there have been a string of break-ins in the neighborhood lately. Crime, in general, has been on the rise citywide. Carjackings. Armed robberies. Just last week, a woman was followed into

her apartment building on Fremont. She was attacked, beaten and robbed in the stairwell. The assailant left her with a broken nose and a broken arm; he took her purse with everything inside, all her money, her debit and credit cards. She's lucky to be alive.

The police are still looking for who did it, which has me on edge. I can't stop thinking that there's this man out there somewhere, attacking women, and I wonder if he's had his fill for now or if he's already on the hunt for his next victim. The thought of it keeps me up some nights. It doesn't help that Fremont is only two blocks from where Sienna and I live. I've asked the landlord twice already to fix the door, but he's busy. He says he will but he still hasn't.

Did you lock it? I text Sienna about the door.

Yes, she says again, and I want to ask if she's sure, to tell her to double-check that the door is locked, but I don't want to come across as paranoid or give her a reason to feel scared, and so I let it go.

I say goodbye and slip my phone into my bag. At Halsted I turn left, making my way toward Belmont. Halsted is alive tonight, full of people heading home on the evening commute, so that the air is electric, buzzing with the sounds of voices and cars.

Outside it's begun to snow, a sudden blitz of big, fat snowflakes. The temperatures aren't abysmally cold because of the snow, but still I pull my hood over my head to stay dry, tuck my chin into the coat, plunge my hands into my pockets and walk faster.

The church sits on the north side of Belmont, looking dignified and majestic in this weather. It's picturesque with the snow coming down as it is, like something straight out of a Thomas Kinkade painting. When I come to Belmont, I wait for the 77 bus to pass and then jog across the

street for the church. The building is Tudor Gothic style with towers and steep concrete stairs that lead to three sets of solid, arched wooden doorways, which are surrounded by stained glass windows. The church connects to the parochial school, so that the whole campus takes up almost an entire city block.

I climb the steps, pull open the heavy wooden doors and let myself inside, grateful when the doors drift closed and the city slips away behind me. The inside of the church is worlds apart from the outside. It's quiet and warm, the lights are dimmed and the mood is calm and atmospheric. Up ahead, through another set of doors, sits the church's nave, where there are rows and rows of empty pews and ethereal stained glass windows.

Just before me, a woman stands alone in the narthex. She wears a white, thigh-length winter coat and a black winter hat, looking very put together while I'm in my gym shoes and scrubs from work. The scrubs are slate blue, soft and ridiculously comfortable, but not exactly on fleek. Sienna would never let me hear the end of it if she knew I was wearing my scrubs out in public again.

"You look lost," I say, smiling as I dry my shoes on the mat and come further in.

The woman is about my same age if not younger, a brunette with dark eyes and olive skin that complement the white coat. On her lower half are skinny jeans, tucked into the tall shaft of a pair of serious, rubber-soled winter boots with a fuzzy cuff, and I regret the gym shoes on a night like this, knowing that by the time I make my way home, the snow may be deep enough that it gets into my shoes.

The woman laughs to herself—at herself—a nervous laugh like a titter. "I think I am," she says, letting her eyes go around the room, where

there are no signs, nothing and no one to tell her where to go. “I don’t know if this is where I’m supposed to be.”

“Are you here for the divorce support group?”

Another nervous, this time self-deprecating laugh. “Is it that obvious?”

I’m quick to reply, “No, of course not. It’s just that I’m headed there myself, and I don’t know of any other meetings in the building tonight. It’s usually just our group.” I take a breath, my tone changing. “You don’t need to be nervous,” I say, hoping I’m not overstepping but interpreting her posture, her body language. “I mean, it’s okay to be. Everyone gets nervous their first time here, but there really is no reason to be. I’m Meghan,” I say, stepping close enough to reach out a hand that she takes into hers, which is somehow warm despite the weather outside, and I wonder how long she’s been standing in the narthex, waiting for someone to come and help her. “Meghan Michaels.”

The woman’s expression changes. Her head lifts and her eyebrows draw together, a look of something like disbelief washing over her face. Her eyes widen as if to take me fully in. “Meghan Michaels? Barrington High School, class of 2002?” she asks, and I nod dimly, my brain trying to catch up, to make the connection. I did go to Barrington High School, though that was a long time ago. It’s about an hour from where I live now, but my parents left the suburban town a year after I graduated and I haven’t been back much since, nor have I been good about keeping up with high school friends. “It really is you,” she says, as if seeing the resemblance between me and my teenage self. “It’s me,” she says, her hand going to her chest. “Nat Cohen. Natalie. We went to high school together.”

“Oh my God,” I say, happy but shocked. Natalie Cohen. Nat. I haven’t heard that name in over twenty years. She looks different, but then again we all do. Her face has thinned, becoming less round, and her hair is longer than I ever remember it being. She used to wear it in this short blunt bob for as long as I knew her, and I wonder when she made the decision to let it grow out. It looks gorgeous long. She is gorgeous. Nat was always pretty, but in high school, there was a tomboyishness about her that has since disappeared. She’s aged incredibly well. There are no lines on her skin like mine, and shallowly I wonder if she gets Botox, fillers or other injections, or if she was blessed with good genes. Nat and I were in the same graduating class. We played tennis together, though she was always so much better than me.

I open my arms and wrap them around her, conscious of how nice it feels to be this close to something from my past. I soak it in; I hold on for a minute too long. Memories of high school surface, of simpler, happier times that make me nostalgic. As I release her, I say, “I can’t believe it’s really you. How have you been? Where are you living? Are you still playing tennis?” I can’t stop myself from asking so much. I want to ask even more, but how do you catch up on twenty years, especially when we have only a few minutes before the meeting begins?

“I’ve been better,” she says.

“God, of course. That was a dumb question,” I say feeling insensitive, if not stupid, because here we are, headed into a divorce meeting. No one that attends these meetings is living their best life. We’re all in limbo, trying to find ways to move on and be happy.

“You’ve let your hair grow out,” I say because, even with a hat on, her long locks come inches below her collarbone. “I love it. It suits you.”

“Thanks,” she says. “That old shaggy bob had to go.”

“You look amazing. Truly. How long have you been standing here waiting?”

“Ten or fifteen minutes. The truth is,” she says, visibly relaxing now that she’s with me, “I don’t know that I should be here. I don’t know that I want to be here.”

I say, “No, I get it. You’re not alone. My first time, I didn’t even come in. I made it as far as the building but then, somewhere just outside, changed my mind. I got cold feet, turned around and went home. I was sure everyone would be insufferable, and we wouldn’t have anything in common other than that we were all divorced. I came back, a few weeks later, and that time I stayed and I liked it and the people very much. They’re not insufferable at all but friendly and kind. You’ll like them, I think. It’s this way,” I say, taking a step toward the stairs so that she’ll follow. “Come with me, and we can catch up after the meeting, when we have more time. There’s so much I want to ask you.”

Behind us just then, the heavy church doors open again and I turn at the sudden onslaught of city noises infiltrating the quiet church. It’s Lewis, another of the group’s members, coming in. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nat startle at the sound of him, her reaction disproportionate to the noise. I let my gaze go to her, though her own eyes are fixed to Lewis, watching as he stomps his heavy boots on the mat, snow clinging fast to him and reminding us of the storm outside. It’s only when he removes the hood and she gets a better look at him—at his round, babyish face and benevolent eyes that belie his large size—that she settles, her body slackening, her fisted hands slowly uncurling.

We're supposed to get something like four inches tonight, though it's always so imprecise. It could be one inch or it could be ten.

"Beautiful night," Lewis says, stepping past us, and I can't tell if he's being facetious or not, though it is truly beautiful. There's something magical about the first snowfall of the season.

My eyes go back to Nat's as he disappears down the stairs. "That's just Lewis," I say, wondering what about his arrival made her so scared. "Sweet guy. His wife left him for some other guy when he quit his high paying corporate job to do something he found more fulfilling. Turns out she loved his money more than she loved him. What do you think?" I ask, nodding toward the steps. "You want to give it a try? You don't even have to talk. You can just listen," I say. Faye, the leader, is a therapist but, like the rest of us, is divorced. Her mantra is that this is a safe place to listen to one another, to offer support, to empower one another and to feel less isolated by our divorces.

That said, my first time here I was reluctant to open up. I came in planning to just listen and observe. I remember how I sat in my chair, looking out at the circle of faces around me, which were warm, open and receptive. It settled my anxious nerves and, when Faye asked that night if anyone wanted to share their story with the group, I felt my hand raise by instinct.

"I'm divorced," I'd said, hearing a small tremor in my voice, wondering if anyone could hear it but me. "Though I guess you know that already, because why else would I be here if I wasn't divorced?" I'd laughed at myself then. Others had laughed too—with me, not at me—and I'd found it to be encouraging. The words came more freely after that, and I was able to tell them how it had been months since I'd filed for divorce.

“To say I’ve been having a hard time with it is an understatement, even though I’m the one who left him. I asked for this, in a sense. This was my doing.” I took a breath, noticing that the tremor had gone away. “I think the thing that makes it so hard is that I don’t know anyone who’s divorced. It’s strange, because something like 50 percent of marriages end in divorce, right? So how is it possible that it’s never happened to anyone I know? It makes me feel like some kind of anomaly. No one knows on a personal level what I’m going through. I have great friends who are incredibly sympathetic, but I’ve felt myself pull away from them over the last few months. We just don’t have as much in common anymore. Going through a divorce, there is so much to deal with, like raising a child alone, custody and visitation rights, changing my will, my name, getting rid of the joint bank account, trying to build my own credit because everything we shared was in Ben’s name and so I don’t have much credit history myself. I can’t talk to anyone in my life about this.”

I remembered how I’d stopped there and inhaled a sharp breath, feeling self-conscious because I’d said far more than I meant to say, but also finding it was cathartic. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say so much.”

“No,” Faye said. “Don’t be sorry. Don’t ever apologize, Meghan. This is why we’re here, to listen and support one another. Everyone in this room is dealing with these same issues too.”

All around me, the circle of heads was nodding.

And then she’d asked me to tell the group a little bit about Ben. I wasn’t sure at first how to describe him. When we met, Ben was a dream. We were in high school at the time, back when things like a career and children were so far in the future we didn’t think about them. They didn’t exist, even in our wildest imaginations. Fast forward over twenty years. I

wasn't happy. Ben wasn't happy. Sienna, by default, wasn't happy. Ben and I fought all the time. He was so focused on work, and it upset him when I asked him to make family a priority too, because he read that as me being insensitive, as not supporting him or his career, which wasn't my intent. I just wanted Ben to pay more attention to Sienna and me. I started thinking then, more and more often, about how I'd be better off without him, because being alone and lonely was better than feeling neglected and ignored. But for years, fear of the unknown kept me from leaving him. The reason I finally did wasn't for me but for Sienna, because I didn't want ours to be the model of a marriage she saw. I wanted her to know that a marriage could be full of love, happiness and mutual respect too. I say to Nat now, "Until I started coming, I could think of few things worse than walking into a roomful of strangers and imparting the details of one of the most painful experiences in my life. But now I've realized that what is worse is going through it alone." I pause to let my words sink in, and then I ask, nodding again toward the steps, "What do you think? You want to give it a try?"

"Okay," she says, giving in.

We head down the steps together to the parish hall, where the large round tables have been pushed out of the way to make space for a circle of black folding chairs in the center of the room. Faye has already gotten the meeting started when we arrive, and so we slip into the last two chairs, which are on opposite sides of the circle, and I watch from afar as Nat shimmies out of her coat and sets it on the back of the chair. She's quiet during the meeting. She listens, but she doesn't speak and I don't blame her.

At some point she takes her hat off, and it's then, when she sweeps a hand through her hair, pushing pieces back from her eyes, that I spy a bruise along the upper forehead, beneath the hairline. I do a double take when I see it, taken aback by the size of the bruise and by its bright red color as if fresh. Whatever happened, happened recently, maybe today. I stare at it longer than I should, wondering how the bruise came to be there. I've done my fair share of dumb, clumsy things before and maybe that's all this is.

But maybe there's more to it too.

Nat glances up just then. Our eyes meet. I swallow and force a guilty smile, feeling self-conscious for getting caught staring. By instinct, her hand rises up to the bruise. She feels it, running her fingers over the tender bump, and then plucks pieces of hair down to cover it. And then, as if worried that's not enough, she puts her winter hat back on.

I look away. I try and listen as others speak, but my eyes keep going back to Nat. The bruise is gone but not forgotten.

When the meeting is through, I grab my coat and start making my way toward Nat, but before I reach her, another woman, Melinda, sidles up next to me and says, "Hey, Meghan, do you have a minute?" She doesn't wait for an answer, and I watch as Nat steals a glance at me before slipping her arms into her coat and making her way toward the stairs. "I wanted to ask you about the school where your daughter goes, specifically what the admissions process and entrance exam are like. My oldest will be going to high school soon, and we've just begun looking into private schools in the area. It's overwhelming to say the least."

By the time I finally make it upstairs, Nat has made her way to the entrance. She's too far away to catch, and so I can only watch as she

pushes the heavy wooden doors open to the barrage of snow, which falls sideways and in. Just outside, she stops, taking in the faces of people passing by. She pulls up her hood and lets go of the door, which floats slowly toward closed, but before it shuts I see Nat merge with a group of passersby.

Later, I walk out of the church, back into the cold and the snow alone, my breath coming out like clouds when I breathe, wondering if I'll see Nat again and if she'll be back.

I think about the bruise as I walk, though not so much the bruise itself but the way Nat was so quick to hide it. I find myself worrying about her, wondering where she's going and who she's going home to.

The snow has built up significantly in the last hour or so, collecting on the sidewalks and streets. Cars and buses move slowly past. There will be a parking ban on some streets overnight, so that the city can plow before morning rush hour.

I take the Red Line home from the church, heading north. It's getting close to nine o'clock now and I feel uneasy, out at this time of night, worried about myself and worried about Sienna at home alone. I've never been afraid in this city, not until the recent spate of robberies and attacks, which has the whole neighborhood on edge.

I get off the Red Line at Sheridan and power walk from there, wanting nothing more than to get home, to be home and to see with my own eyes that the door to our apartment is shut and locked and that Sienna is okay.