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Midge Raymond

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INFINITE REGRESS

Midge Raymond

Olivia had been missing for a week when the police found a body in the desert that they thought resembled hers. Billie was out doing the grocery shopping, after taking the boys to a friend's house, when her mother called, and she abandoned her nearly full cart in the middle of Trader Joe's and sped to the hospital.

When Olivia disappeared, Billie had flown home from Seattle—San Diego was still home because her mother and Olivia lived there—even though she knew there was little she could do. At the airport, she rented a car and drove to Liv's house in Mission Hills, passing streets already adorned with MISSING posters on trees and power poles. Billie had been jarred by the sight of her own face peering out at her—she and Liv were twins, but they were so different Billie often forgot they were identical.

A couple of blocks from Liv's house, she stopped at a traffic signal and stared at one of the posters, duct-taped to a lamp post. Her face—Liv's face—bent wide as the paper curved around the post. Billie recognized the photograph—one that she herself had taken on Christmas four years ago, with Ollie in the throes of his terrible twos and the grown-ups all drunk by noon. The photo wasn't flattering, with Liv's eyes narrowed against the winter sun, her shoulders curved inward, her face etched with weariness. Why had they used this one?

But then, Billie realized, they probably didn't have much to choose from; Liv was the photographer of the family, but she didn't like being photographed herself. They had hundreds of photos of Billie and her mother, of Matt and the boys, but so few of Liv. As if she'd been erasing herself for years before she actually disappeared.

When Billie got to the hospital, she found her mother and Matt in the morgue, waiting for the detective.

"Carter and Ollie?" Matt asked.

"Play date until four," Billie said, looking at her watch, remembering the groceries. She had not walked easily into Olivia's life—she couldn't, obviously, take over Liv's job at the clinic, but she'd discovered she could barely take over her role at home either. Two boys, six and eight; a husband who worked long hours at his start-up advertising agency; piles of bills and lists of chores—the lists alone gave Billie a headache; play dates, lessons, groceries, laundry, birthday parties, gifts. Nothing at all that resembled Billie's life in Seattle, where she lived in her boyfriend's apartment and commuted six blocks to her art studio. Where she had a few not-so-close friends with whom she shared happy hours. A few art colleagues with whom she shared gallery openings and art fairs. And Finn, the boyfriend, with whom she'd only recently begun sharing a home and still wasn't sure whether she'd moved in for the right reasons.

Olivia had been an artist once, too, but then she'd gotten what her mother called a *real life*—a master's degree, a husband, two kids, and the job in social work she'd recently returned to after time off for the kids. Liv didn't paint much anymore—and the way she never asked about Billie's work left them with little in common. At the time Liv disappeared, they hadn't talked in months.

Billie had been working in her studio when her mother called to tell her Olivia was missing. That morning, Billie had pushed open the metal door to the industrial arts building and walked up the stairs, her footsteps echoing off steel steps and cement walls, her ears tuned for the classical music she hoped to hear from the studio across the hall from hers. As she passed Alex's studio, its door slightly ajar, she didn't stop, as much as she wanted to. But she did leave her own door open—not to invite him in, she told herself, but to absorb the extra light coming in from the sky-lit hallway.

She'd met Alex right after she'd moved into the studio; she'd paused in his doorway, out of curiosity and also as a way to put off the inevitable: going to her own space, getting to work. She saw a man leaning over a table scattered with junk, and for a few minutes she stood there watching him work. Then she walked in, around to the other side of the table. He was completely absorbed with a small sculpture, a complex tangle of wires and metals, and he looked up only after tightening a loose wire. *Hey*, he said, as if they'd known each other for years, as if she wasn't some stranger who'd wandered into his space. When their eyes met, her first thought was how difficult Alex's eyes would be to paint—a pellucid, almost sparkling hazel, a color she'd really have to work at to achieve.

He was a sculptor with a part-time day job, which meant he spent two days a week at the studio, plus nights and weekends. That first day, after he turned back to his work, Billie allowed herself to study his face, thinking that if she were a sculptor herself, she would render him in steel—the best medium to capture his long, squarish face, the strong forehead and chin. She observed then that his bold features were softened by a twitch, a movement of the left eye that she noticed more after she got to know him. She wondered whether this meant that on some level she made him nervous—then realized all it meant was that she'd been watching his face far too closely for a woman who was living with somebody else.

But she and Alex became friends, bringing each other coffee as they came and went, taking lunch breaks on the grass overlooking the bay, opening a bottle of cheap wine with delivered pizza after a long day. She spent too much time with Alex and she knew it—but Finn was so busy with his job, and she felt connected to Alex in a completely different way, not only as a fellow artist but as somebody who got it—somebody who would listen to her, just listen, without trying to solve everything the way Finn always did.

But on that morning, Alex hadn't showed, and the hall, which Billie knew was for the best; she actually did need to work. She had a show coming up, her first solo show, and she only had one painting finished—the painting that had gotten her work into the gallery downtown. A portrait of Olivia.

Billie wasn't a portrait artist, not that she hadn't tried. Her work was abstract, especially her portraits—the faces empty, washed out; heads turned away from the viewer, clothing and limbs flowing and meandering. She wondered if perhaps she'd been letting colors bleed, letting figures take on new forms, because it seemed to match the sort of slipping from life she'd felt lately: friends getting hitched and drifting away, while she half-heartedly moved in with Finn and became far too interested in Alex.

Besides, she wasn't inspired by people. She couldn't very well paint a father she barely remembered, who'd left when she and Olivia were in third grade and never returned. She didn't dare attempt to capture her mother's personality on canvas—oils can only do so much—because the woman's psyche was virtually impenetrable. In fact, when her mother called to tell her about Olivia, it took Billie a few minutes even to understand what had happened—not because her mother was hysterical, or even upset, really, but because Billie had to squint through the lens of her mother's oversized ego to realize that Olivia was gone. "I don't have time to look after the boys," her mother complained. "You need to get down here." It was a miracle, Billie thought sometimes, that she and Olivia had turned out at all functional. Which was actually still debatable.

When Billie demanded the details, her mother provided what they knew so far: Olivia had left for work the day before. She'd never gotten there, had never come home. The next morning, a patrol officer found her car, locked, with her purse and the keys inside, in a strip-mall parking lot. There were no signs of struggle, no apparent violence, no activity on Olivia's credit cards. She had simply and completely vanished.

When Billie hung up the phone, she looked at the canvas she'd set up, which she now knew would remain blank for a very long time.

At the morgue, Matt had agreed to go through the identification process, but when the detective arrived, he didn't move. Billie watched him go completely still, frozen and immobile as a sculpture, as the detective stood by silently. Billie finally said, "Jesus Christ, I'll go then."

She walked with the detective down a corridor with sickly fluorescent light. He led her into a dim examination room, where a thick, sweet odor hung on the air, making her instantly nauseous. She held her breath as the detective brought her to a narrow metal table, where the body was sealed in a black plastic bag. A woman in a white lab coat reached over and unzipped the top, revealing the head, then the shoulders.

Billie had to look away, still afraid to breathe. Most of the experience she had of bodies—other than those of whomever she was sleeping with—was from life drawing: strong, healthy bodies; living bodies, round and beautiful. Not like what she was seeing now.

First she studied the hair: dark, pulled back, matted down. Billie leaned over, let her eyes travel down the bloodless forehead, the closed eyes, the nose and mouth, the chin. Unlike nearly everyone else, she didn't see herself as identical to her sister; she saw the differences no one else did, which she supposed Olivia saw, too. Billie had freckles splashed across her nose, and her eyes were wider; Olivia had a more pronounced widow's peak and a narrower chin. Billie's hands were small, with bitten fingernails, while Olivia's were long and elegant and neatly trimmed. Little things that no one noticed because the two of them were, to the untrained eye, mirror images of each other.

The body before her didn't look like Olivia—there was something shrunken about the face—but Billie examined it the way she'd examine the subject of a portrait. She studied every feature, every bone, every inch of skin—everything that could make this woman Olivia and not somebody else. Then she straightened and shook her head. She followed the detective back down the hall on legs shaking so badly she could hardly walk.

The jolt was hard and quick and nearly lifted her off her feet, and as she grabbed the kitchen counter to steady herself, she heard a loud crack. What was it: a window? the foundation of the house? Then she remembered the boys and felt a moment of panic because she didn't know where they were.

Outside—they were playing outside. She'd been watching them earlier, Ollie trying out Carter's skateboard, while Carter stood back offering instructions. Ollie was unable to balance on it as his older brother could, which frustrated him. When a sun-bleached curl fell out of his helmet, he shoved it out of his eye with his fist.

Now, she turned to go out and check on them but found them standing in the doorway. "What was that noise?" Ollie asked.

"I told you, an earthquake," Carter said. "Felt like a seven-point-eight."

"It wasn't a seven-point-eight," Billie said. "If it was, we wouldn't have walls left."

Ollie got a terrified look on his face, and Billie inwardly cursed and knelt down. Until now she'd never spent much time with the boys; she didn't know how to be an aunt, let alone a mother. She had to remember how different they were: Carter was the fearless kid, the one who, if an event wasn't thrilling enough, launched into exaggeration mode, taking great delight in frightening his little brother. Ollie was as sweet and guileless as his brother was crafty.

"Ollie, it was just a little shake, not to worry," she said, pushing that stubborn lock of hair out of his face. She sent them back outside, reassuring them that everything was fine.

She watched them in the yard for a few minutes, then let her gaze drift beyond, to the trees and the rooftops. In this neighborhood, just north of downtown, there were hundreds of faults. The San Andreas and the San Jacinto got most of the attention in California, but maybe, Billie thought, people ought to pay more attention to the lesser-known faults, the ones they didn't even know to be afraid of. Her mother used to say that the little rattlers were a good thing, that the small quakes helped release the stress forming between the plates. It was a coping mechanism, probably, an attempt to feel safe living on a major fault line—an attempt to make sense of a fractured life. But Billie knew better, especially now that she lived in Seattle, on the edge of the Cascadia subduction zone, one of the world's most hazardous. Despite all the new technology, despite seismologists' attempts to calculate probability based on fault slip rates and recent activity, earthquakes couldn't truly be predicted, despite the claims of ShakeAlert. And besides, what good was a warning when you were given only a few seconds?

Then again, Billie had to admit, a few seconds could mean everything. She thought of Olivia's abandoned car, what might have happened in the moments before she disappeared from their lives. Weeks later, they were no closer to learning what happened. Her disappearance was as sharp and sudden and fleeting as the shifting of plates under the earth, and even more mysterious.

Billie stopped loading the dishwasher to hug Carter and Ollie before Matt left for work. Matt was dropping them off at day camp, where Billie would pick them up later that afternoon. Matt had told the boys nothing about Olivia other than that she'd gone away—for work, he said, which he seemed to hope would explain why she hadn't called them. Matt was in a tougher spot than any of them, Billie knew; despite being the one to report Olivia missing, he'd been relentlessly questioned by detectives, about his alibi—a busy workday, verified by more than a dozen colleagues—and about his and Liv's marriage. And then he had to deal with his confused, motherless children, who Billie could tell were missing their mom. She wasn't sure either kid was buying Matt's story, but both of them seemed to know not to ask questions. She wished she could be honest with them, tell them the truth—but they weren't her kids.

Besides, she had another problem—how to tell them all that she had to go back to Seattle.

By now she'd been living in the guest room for a month, and there was still no sign of Olivia. With the art show six weeks away and her paintings nowhere near finished, Billie needed to get back to work, not to mention to Finn. (And definitely not to mention Alex.) Yet she also found that she didn't want to leave the boys; as much as she'd struggled with stepping into Olivia's life, she did love the kids. Which only made Olivia's absence more troubling.

Despite being identical to her sister, despite having left the same womb fewer than ten minutes after Olivia, Billie had never felt like a twin. She never felt that irrepressible connection twins were supposed to have; she never felt pain when Olivia stubbed a toe, or instinctively knew where Olivia was at any given time. They hadn't been close growing up, not really—they shared a room and clothing when they were young, until they no longer wanted to do either. Despite being raised together for their first thirty-five weeks, they'd spent the next thirty-five years growing apart.

Billie assumed that Olivia felt the same way; they never talked about it. The best time it was uncomfortable was when people saw them together and assumed that because they were twins, they were best friends, loved all the same things, could read each other's thoughts. Billie had heard all the stories of twins who were separated and met later in life, discovering that they dressed the same way, had the same jobs and the same breed of pet, spouses with the same names. Yet in everything but their DNA, Billie and Olivia were different: Billie wore dark clothing, ripped jeans and T-shirts; Olivia looked sleek and polished in brighter colors. Billie was an introvert and a loner, Olivia outgoing and social. Though they were both artistic as kids, Billie became a single working artist, Olivia a married working mom.

Or, if she looked at it another way, Billie was the fuck-up, Olivia the perfect child. The one who had a career and a family—a *grown-up*, as their mother would say—while Billie had inconsiderately deprived her mother of a proper son-in-law, grandchildren, a job that was brag-worthy to her circle of friends and real-estate colleagues.

As the Billie shut the dishwasher and turned it on, she remembered a moment with Finn earlier that year, when they'd been at the science museum and found themselves in front of an infinity mirror. He'd stood behind her, his arms around her waist, his cheek scruffy against hers. His millions of eyes caught her own as they both looked into the mirror, and he murmured something she didn't hear. When she asked, he repeated: "Infinite regress. It refers to a theory that suggests one thing but is based on the assumption of that very thing to make sense. Like the chicken and the egg conundrum—you get eggs from chickens, but how do you get chickens? From eggs."

It was typical Finn, wrapped up in all sorts of knowledge, from the philosophical to the technical, that she could never find enough enthusiasm for. He was quiet and intense, more comfortable in front of a computer screen than in front of another human being—more comfortable gazing at her through innumerable reflections than into her two actual eyes. Billie had learned that getting to know Finn came the way his texts did: in short bursts, bits of information that required reading between the lines. He was a puzzle, and she was still putting him together, discovering where all the pieces fit—and sometimes she wasn't sure they ever would. She'd looked into the mirror, at the infinite Finns, the never-ending two of them together, and it felt all wrong.

And now, as the dishwasher hummed in her sister's empty house, she found herself thinking of Olivia, how maybe they had been caught in a similar conundrum, an infinite regress in which it wasn't clear where Olivia ended and she herself began. Maybe Billie turned out artsy and lacking a so-called "normal" life because Olivia was so good at it that Billie couldn't compete. And maybe Olivia stopped painting because Billie had embraced it so completely Liv didn't see the point.

She wondered who she might become if Olivia didn't return, if she no longer lived in relation to her sister. Maybe she needed Olivia more than she believed. Maybe, in fact, each of them were nothing without the other.

That night, as Matt put the boys to bed, Billie finished cleaning up the dinner mess. A bottle of wine was still open on the kitchen table, and she sat down and refilled her glass. When Matt walked in, she pushed the bottle toward him. She'd already told him they needed to talk, and she suspected he knew about what.

"You need to leave, I know," he said, and she was grateful he truly could make her say it. She'd always liked Matt, though they had never been close; much like her and Olivia, they'd never truly connected. But he was, she knew, a good man. And she hated to leave him in such a bad situation.

"I wish I could stay as long as you needed," she said. If it weren't for the art show, she would. She wasn't eager to get back to Finn, whom she'd thought of far too seldom, or to a studio of unfinished work. To the temptation of Alex down the hall.

"I know you can't stay here indefinitely," Matt said.

"I'll come back as soon as I can," she added. "If—" She stopped, unable to say it. *If we don't find Olivia.*

He seemed to understand her unspoken thought. As she looked at him, his eyes somehow followed her. She watched his mouth flatten into a tight line. He looked as if he'd aged ten years in a month, his face thinner, exposing new lines. She could barely hear him when he said, his voice low, "I wish I'd been better. Maybe this wouldn't have happened."

"What are you talking about?"

"She hasn't been home," Matt said. "Not for a while. She didn't want to go back to work, you know—she kept putting it off. She said she'd go when Ollie started preschool. Then it was when he started kindergarten. I was—the one who pushed her into it—I said, he's in first grade now, what are you waiting for, high school?" He sighed. "But you know all this."

She didn't, actually. She had no idea Liv was reluctant to go back to work. Or that she was anything other than perfectly happy with her perfect life.

"She was only back at work a few months," he said. "And now this."

And then Billie had another unspoken thought: *Maybe Olivia ran away from home.*

She wasn't sure Matt knew she'd done it once before, when she was about Carter's age. It was a blur now, but Billie remembered Olivia being gone a whole day, sending their parents into a panic. Neighbors were alerted; police were called. Just as it was growing dark, just as a massive search was about to get under way, Olivia had reappeared. She wouldn't say where she'd been, what she'd done, whether she'd heard everyone calling for her.

Later, when they were in their beds, Billie had whispered a question into the dark and heard back: *I just needed some time to myself.*

Even back then, Olivia was taking on everyone's problems—trying to keep peace between their parents, trying to keep her scattered younger twin from getting into trouble. Billie couldn't count how many times she'd looked up from her sketchbook to find her side of the room tidied, or Liv walking in with the dog when Billie was supposed to have taken him out for a walk. Had she ever thanked Liv? She couldn't remember.

Maybe it was no wonder Liv didn't want to go back to her job, to the constant care of others at the expense of herself. As she once told Billie, *No one ever calls their social worker when they're having a good day.*

"I'm confused, Matt," Billie said slowly. "Are you saying you think she disappeared—on purpose?"

Matt's eyes were bloodshot-red but empty, and he shook his head. "No. I can't even imagine that. She'd never do that. To the boys." He cleared his throat. "But what the hell happened? Where is she?"

Billie couldn't answer and didn't bother with platitudes. Perhaps Liv's life with Matt wasn't as ideal as everyone assumed. Still, Matt had given her a strange hope that Olivia may have been in charge of her vanishing. Billie would rather consider anything than the thought of something violent and terrible happening to her. It didn't make sense that Olivia could leave her family, especially her children, without a word, without a trace—but then, maybe she could. Maybe Billie didn't know her sister at all.

A month later, back in Seattle, Billie stood in front of the two unfinished paintings in her studio that had to be completed within the next day so they could dry, so she could hang them by midweek.

She'd managed to accomplish more than she thought, but this was only because working made it easy to avoid Finn. On the night she returned, he'd worked late, as usual, and she didn't wait up. When he joined her in bed, she woke, and they had quiet sex in the dark, and the next morning at breakfast she felt as though they were strangers. He'd offered to take the day off, to be with her, but she told him she needed to get to the studio.

It occurred to her, as she studied her nearly finished painting of Alex, that she'd vanished in almost the same way Olivia had—suddenly, with hardly a word—and even now that she was back, she was still absent from their shared life.

Her painting of Alex wasn't a portrait, exactly—she'd taken his photo one day while visiting his studio, after teasing him for never bothering to look up when she spoke to him. When she saw him smile down at his workbench, she'd raised her phone. In the photo—and the portrait she'd created from it—Alex was bent over his latest project, hair falling across his forehead, hands on a new sculpture, part of a series based on polar expeditions: a ship immobilized by sheets of metallic ice, an albatross made of, it seemed, every scrap he could find: coins, nails, bolts, pine cones, computer chips. She'd stepped forward and stood on the far side of his workbench, rummaging through the messy piles of scraps. Rubber, tile, aluminum. Linoleum, felt, glass. Copper, bronze, plastic. The painting had come easily, thanks to the photo, the myriad textures she loved to paint. Thanks to the fact that she didn't have to paint his eyes, lowered down toward his work.

It was the final portrait for the show that she was troubling with. She'd decided to paint the woman at the morgue, the woman whose face was not Olivia's but was etched on her memory anyhow, a face that had haunted her since the day she saw it. She didn't know her family, especially her children, without a word, without a trace—but then, maybe she could. Maybe Billie didn't know her sister at all.

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Yet she wasn't used to creating life where none existed; she'd never created features from memory, or imagination—and this painting required both.

The background, a steely gray, was the only thing she knew so far, but of course, she wouldn't replicate the shiny table in her studio; she'd make it a stormy sea instead.

She closed her eyes, and she could see the woman's face clearly—almost more clearly than she could envision her sister's face. Yet when she opened her eyes and faced the canvas, nothing came.

Turning, she left her studio and walked across the hall. Alex was bent over his workbench, as usual, and Billie kept her distance, stopping at another table near the door, where he placed his more recently found objects. Nails and copper wire. Sea glass and abandoned barrettes. Bottle caps and driftwood.

Billie picked up a handful of beads and let them slip from her fingers back into the box; her ears tuned to the sound of falling glass. "I'm starting to wonder if we'll ever learn what happened to Olivia."

Alex looked up, and their eyes met briefly before Billie turned hers back to the table. She'd avoided talking to Finn about this, even though he'd tried to ask her about it. He'd have too many questions, too much advice. Do this, he'd say. Did you try that? he'd ask.

She picked up a handful of nails. "I need to go back home. After the show's done," she said. "It's just—the kids. I'm not their mother, but I'm better than nothing." The rust from the nails was flaking off, leaving coppery silt in her hand.

Alex straightened. "You hungry?"

They walked to a food truck for falafel and then over to the sculpture park, where they sat in bright orange chairs near Western Avenue.

"My brother," Alex said, "died in a single-car crash."

It took a moment for his words to register. Billie had been focused on the way his wrap was coming apart in his hands, the tahini sauce dripping down his index finger, her fleeting desire to lick it off.

She felt something inside her seize up. She put down her wrap and waited.

"My parents," he continued, "are adamant to this day that it was an accident. But the weather wasn't bad, there were no tire marks, no one else was involved—it was obvious enough to me. And it wasn't like they didn't know about his issues—depression, rehab, years of all that, but it didn't matter. The only person who could tell us what happened was gone, so they believe what they want."

"I'm sorry, Alex. I had no idea."

"It's hard to move on without answers," he said. "It changes the way you live." He put down his falafel and picked up a napkin, then looked at her. "Do you want to go back?"

"I don't know."

"Would knowing what happened make a difference?"

"Maybe," she said, "though I'm not sure why."

A gust of wind whipped the napkin from Alex's hands, and he jumped up to chase it down. The sky began spitting rain, and they headed back to the art building.

When they reached their floor, Billie said, "Can I get your advice on a painting? I've been staring at it for too long and don't know how to finish it."

In her studio, on the small table next to the easel, the paint was still wet on the palette. The portrait seemed to be waiting, as if expecting her.

A loud thunderclap shook the windows, and Alex walked over to where Billie stood in front of the canvas. She felt crazy for thinking this would work—even the idea of it was gruesome and ghostly and morbid—but it was the only way she knew how to purge all that was roiling inside her.

"I think I have this weird idea," Billie said, "that if I can finish this portrait, make her whole, bring her back to life, it'll bring Olivia back. Or something."

"Maybe that's what's making it so hard to finish."

Suddenly Billie felt irreparably and hopelessly stuck, and a surge of grief—or was it fury?—rose within her at the thought of never finishing this painting, never seeing Olivia again. "What a waste," she muttered. "I don't know why I bother." She dipped her brush and, in one quick motion, flung a splatter of thick black paint over the outline of the woman's face. A dark, ugly splotch began oozing down the canvas.

Alex was quiet, and Billie hurled another brushful of paint, then swirled her brush through the palette and lifted it again.

This time, Alex put a hand on her arm. "Stop. You'll ruin it."

"It's already ruined."

He reached for the brush and palette, and Billie surrendered them. For a moment she thought he was going to start working on the painting himself, but he merely stood looking at the canvas.

"I think this'll work," he said finally. "You just have to reset the bones. Take what you thought you knew and start over."

Billie felt an unexpected lightness, as if his words in the air had caused the very laws of gravity to suspend their rules, and without thinking she leaned forward and kissed him. Their bodies weren't touching, and the space between them felt vast and unreachable, until she felt his hand on her face, drawing her closer.

Then he broke off the kiss and stepped back, and she knew it would never happen again.

She turned toward the window and saw that the wind was soaring inland, ruffling up whitecaps, swaying trees bow and sway. In the distance, thin rays of light peeked through the parting of clouds, washed out an instant later by flashes of lightning. Thunder rattled the glass.

They stood silently, near each other but not touching, for a long time, as the sky's colors deepened and the silhouettes of buildings and trees emerged. The sinking sun created a ghostlike, otherworldly light, reflected in the wet streets, dark and light at the same time, and Billie couldn't stop watching the sky, hoping that maybe the answers would appear in front of her, and that, like seeing a rainbow or a shooting star, it was only a matter of waiting, watching, getting lucky.

Then Alex handed the brush and palette back to her. "Better fix it while it's still wet," he said.

Billie opened the last crate and began to take out the paintings. To create her new studio, Matt had hired a contractor to insulate the detached garage and have an HVAC unit installed. The two of them parked tandem in the driveway, or on the street.

It had been eight months since Olivia vanished. A few weeks after the art show in Seattle, Billie had packed up, left Finn, and moved to San Diego and into the guest room. Despite everything—the loss of Olivia, the end of her relationship, a new role in a family she was still getting to know—the move felt inevitable, somehow, the type of earthquake that feels like a gentle rolling rather than a hard, sudden shake.

Though they'd learned nothing new about Olivia, Billie kept returning to the idea of her sister running away—an unthinkable notion but less so than any alternative she could come up with. She wanted to imagine Olivia living the life she wanted—she imagined her painting; she imagined her free; she imagined her looking into a mirror and seeing all her own infinite regresses: her life, with everything in it, all that she wanted and couldn't keep, and all that she wanted and couldn't have.

Billie unwrapped the last paintings and lined them up against the wall, next to the others. Alex. The woman in the morgue. Olivia.

She knelt next to the portrait of Olivia. Just before the gallery opening, she'd stuck a sold sticker on the label, knowing she'd never be able to part with it.

What no one knew was that the painting had begun as a self-portrait, a piece Billie re-worked over again and again, hating every version of herself. Yet for some reason, she never quite gave up on it, and one day, when one of those fierce afternoon storms turned day into night, she caught her reflection in the window, which had become a mirror. She took in her tense, cheerless smile; the weary bitterness that had nestled into her features. And, after months of being unable to finish the painting, just like that, her face became Olivia's.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Midge Raymond is the author of the novel *My Last Continent* and the award-winning short-story collection *Forgetting English*. Her writing has appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *American Literary Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, the *Los Angeles Times* magazine, the *Catholic Tribune*, *Poets & Writers*, and other publications. Midge received a certificate in private investigation from the University of Washington in 2022, and her suspense novel *DEVILS ISLAND*, co-authored with John Yunker, is forthcoming from Oceanview Publishing in 2024. Her new novel, *Floreena*, is forthcoming from Little A in 2025. Learn more at www.MidgeRaymond.com.

