

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE OTHER MRS.

MARY KUBICA

LOCAL

WOMAN

MISSING

A NOVEL

Praise for
Local Woman Missing

“I’m shamelessly addicted to Mary Kubica’s juicy, unpredictable reads, as much for her well-rounded, fully human, flawed characters as her sizzling plots—and she just keeps getting better. *Local Woman Missing* is a propulsive journey through a winding maze of secrets, leading to a jaw-dropping twist that I never saw coming. Loved every minute.”

—Joshilyn Jackson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Never Have I Ever*

“Dark and twisty, with all the white-knuckle tension and jaw-dropping surprises readers have come to expect from Mary Kubica.”

—Riley Sager, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Home Before Dark*

“Complex, richly atmospheric and thoroughly riveting, *Local Woman Missing* is a thoughtful look at how even the most innocuous secrets between happy couples and beloved friends in tightly knit neighborhoods can sometimes turn so unexpectedly and terrifyingly deadly.”

—Kimberly McCreight, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Reconstructing Amelia* and *A Good Marriage*

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The Good Girl

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The Other Mrs.

Local Woman Missing

Mary Kubica



For Addison and Aidan

Mary Kubica is the *New York Times* bestselling author of several thrillers, including *The Other Mrs.* and *The Good Girl*, which has now sold over one million copies. She holds a BA in history and American literature from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. She lives outside Chicago with her husband and two children, and enjoys photography, gardening and caring for the animals at a local shelter.

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Acknowledgments

PROLOGUE

11 Years Before

There's a smudge of lipstick on the collar of his shirt. She sees it. She says nothing about it. Instead, she stands there, bobbing the crying baby up and down like the needle of a sewing machine piercing fabric. She listens to his lame lies, his same, dispassionate *Sorry I'm late, but*s he reels off almost every night. He must have an arsenal of them amassed, and he uses them in rotation: a bottleneck on the expressway, a coworker with car trouble, getting stuck on the phone with some apoplectic policyholder whose house fire wasn't covered because of insufficient documentation of the damage. The more specific he is, the more sure she is of his betrayal. Still, she says nothing. If she presses him on it, he gets mad. He turns it around on her. *Are you calling me a liar?* For this reason, she lets it go. And also because it would be a double standard for her to make a big deal of the lipstick.

"It's fine," she says, taking her eyes off the lipstick.

They eat dinner together. They watch some TV.

Later that night, she puts the baby to bed, feeding her at the last minute so that she won't wake hungry while she's gone.

She tells him she's going for a run. "Now?" he asks. It's after ten o'clock when she steps from the bedroom in running clothes and shoes.

"Why not?" she asks.

He stares at her too long, his expression unclear. "When people do dumb shit like this, they always wind up dead."

She's not sure what to make of his words, whether he means running alone late at night or cheating on one's husband. She convinces herself it's the first one.

She swallows. Her saliva is thick. She's been anticipating this all day. Her mind is made up. "When else do you expect me to go?"

All day long, she's home alone with their baby. She has no time to herself.

He shrugs. "Suit yourself." He rises from the sofa and stretches. He's going to bed.

She goes out the front door, leaving it unlocked so she doesn't have to carry keys. She runs only the first block so that if he's watching out the bedroom window, he sees.

At the corner, she stops and sends a text: **On my way.**

The reply: **See you there.**

She deletes the conversation from her phone. Is she as transparent as her husband? Is what she's doing as obvious as the lipstick on his shirt? She doesn't think so. Her husband is hot-blooded. If he had any idea she was sneaking out to hook up with some guy in his parked car on 4th Avenue, where the street dead-ends a hundred feet from the last house, he'd have beaten her to within an inch of her life by now.

She walks along the street. The night is quiet. It's the only time of day she looks forward to, lost in the anticipation of some guy she hardly knows indulging her for a while, making her feel good.

He isn't the first man she's cheated on her husband with. He won't be the last.

After the baby was born, she tried to quit, to be faithful, but it wasn't worth the effort.

This guy says his name is Sam. She's not sure she believes it. She's been seeing him off and on for months, whenever he or she gets the urge. She met him when she was pregnant of all things. To some guys, it's a turn-on. He made her feel sexy, despite the extra weight, which is far more than she could say for her husband.

Like her, Sam is married. And he isn't the only guy she's been seeing on the side.

The few times they've been together, "Sam" takes his ring off and leaves it on the dashboard, as if that somehow mitigates what he's doing. She doesn't do the same. She isn't one for feeling guilty. She's made herself believe that it's her husband's fault she does what she does. Turnabout is fair play.

The sky is full of stars. She stares at them awhile, finding Venus. The night is cold and her arms are covered with goose bumps. She's thinking about his car, how warm it will be once she gets inside it.

She's looking up at the stars when she hears something coming at her from behind. She spins around, eyes searching the street but coming up empty in the darkness. She chalks it up to some wild animal rummaging through trash, but she doesn't know. She turns back, goes back to walking,

picking up her pace. She's not one to get scared, but she starts thinking of what-ifs. What if her husband is on to her, what if he is following her, what if he *knows*?

She tells herself he doesn't know. He couldn't know. She's a very good liar; she's learned how to silence her tells.

But what if the wife knows?

She isn't sure what "Sam" tells his wife when he leaves. They don't talk about things like that. They don't talk much at all except for a few preliminary words to kick things off.

Don't you look pretty.

I've been waiting for this all day.

They're not in love. No one is leaving their spouse anytime soon. It's nothing like that. For her, it's a form of escapism, release, revenge.

Another noise comes. She turns and looks again—truly scared this time—but finds nothing. She's jittery. She can't shake the feeling of eyes on her.

She starts to jog, but soon trips over an untied shoe. She's uncoordinated and nervous, wanting to be in the car with him, and not alone on the street. The street is dark, far too dark for her liking.

She senses movement out of the corner of her eye. Is something there? Is *someone* there? She asks, "Who's there?"

The night is quiet. No one speaks.

She tries to distract herself with thoughts of him, of his warm, gentle hands on her.

She bends over to tie the shoe. Another noise comes from behind. This time when she looks, car lights surface on the horizon, going way too fast. There's no time to hide.

PART ONE

DELILAH

NOW

I hear footsteps. They move across the ceiling above my head. My eyes follow the sound, but there ain't nothing to see 'cause it's just footsteps. That don't matter none, though, because the sound of them alone is enough to make my heart race, my legs shake, to make something inside my neck thump like a heartbeat.

It's the lady coming, I know, 'cause hers are the bare feet while the man always wears shoes. There's something more light about her footsteps than his. They don't pound on the floor like the man's do. His footsteps are loud and low, like a rumble of thunder at night.

The man is upstairs now, too, 'cause I hear the lady talking to him. I hear her ugly, huffy voice say that it's time to give us some food. She says it like she's teed off about something we've done, though we've done nothing, not so far as I can tell.

At the top of the stairs, the latch unlocks. The door jerks suddenly open, revealing a scrap of light that hurts my eyes. I squint, see her standing there in her ugly robe and her ugly slippers, her skinny legs knobby-kneed and bruised. Her hair is mussed up. There's a scowl on her face. She's sore 'cause she's got to feed Gus and me.

The lady bends at the waist, drops something to the floor with a clang. If she sees me hiding in the shadows, she don't look at me.

This place where they keep us is shaped like a box. There's four walls with a staircase that runs up the dead center of them. I know 'cause I've felt every inch of them rough, ruddy walls with my bare hands, looking for a way out. I've counted the steps from corner to corner. There's fifteen, give or take a few, depending on the size of my steps and if my feet have been growing or not. My feet have, in fact, been growing 'cause those shoes I came with no longer fit right. They stopped fitting a long time ago. I can barely get my big toe in them now. I don't wear no shoes down here anymore 'cause I stopped wearing those ones when they hurt. I got one pair of clothes. I don't know where they came from but they ain't the same clothes I was wearing when I got to this place. Those stopped fitting a long

time ago and then the lady went and got me new ones. She was put out about it, same as she's put out about having to feed Gus and me.

I wear these same clothes every day. I don't know what exactly they look like 'cause of how dark it is down here. But I do know that it's baggy pants and a shirt that's too short in the sleeves 'cause I'm forever trying to pull them down when I'm cold. When my stink reaches the lady's nose, she makes me stand cold and naked in front of Gus while she washes my pants and shirt. She's got words for me when she does. *Ungrateful little bitch*, 'cause then she's sore she's got to clean my clothes.

It's pitch-black where we are. The kind of black your eyes can't ever get used to because it's so dang black. Every now and again, I run my hand in front of my eyes. I look for movement but there ain't none. If I didn't know better, I'd think my hand was gone, that it up and left my body, that it somehow tore itself off of me. But that would've hurt and there would have been blood. Not that I would have seen the blood on account of how black it is down here, but I would have felt the wetness of it. I would have felt the pain of my hand getting tore from my body.

Gus and I play chicken with ourselves sometimes. We walk from wall to wall in the darkness, see if we'll chicken out before we run face-first into the wall. Rules are we got to keep our hands at our sides. It's cheating if we feel with our hands first.

The lady calls down from the top of the stairs, her voice prickly like thorns on rosebushes. "This ain't no restaurant and I ain't no waitress. If you wanna eat, you've got to come get it for yourself," she says.

The door slams shut. A lock clicks and there are the footsteps again, drawing away.

The lady wouldn't bother feeding Gus and me but the man makes her do it 'cause he *ain't gonna have no blood on his hands*. I've heard him say that before. For a long while, I tried to make myself not eat, but I turned dizzy and weak because of it. Then the pain in my belly got to be so bad that I had to eat. I figured there had to be a better way to die than starving myself to death. That hurt too much.

But all that was before Gus came. Because after he did, I didn't want to die no more, 'cause if I did, then Gus would be alone. And I didn't want Gus to wind up in this place all alone.

I push myself up off the floor now. The floor is rock hard and cold. It's so hard that if I sit in the same spot long enough, it makes it so I can't feel my

rear end. The whole darn thing goes numb, and then after numb, it tingles. My legs are worn out, which don't make no sense 'cause they don't do much of anything except sit still. They've got no reason to be tired, but I think that's why they're so tired. They've plumb forgotten how to walk and to run.

I slog to the top of the stairs, one step at a time. There ain't no light coming into this place where they keep Gus and me. We're underground. There's no windows here, and that crack of light that should be at the bottom of the door ain't there. The man and the lady that live upstairs are keeping the light all to themselves, sharing none with Gus and me.

I feel my way up the stairs. I've done it so many times I know what I'm doing. I don't need to see. I count the steps. There's twelve of them. They're made of wood so rough sometimes I get splinters in my feet just from walking on them. I don't ever see the splinters but I feel the sting of them. I know that they're there. Momma used to pull splinters out of my hands and feet with the tweezers. I think of these splinters living in my skin forever and it makes me wonder if they fall out all on their own, or if they stay where they're at, turning me little by little into a porcupine.

There's a dog bowl waiting at the top of the steps for Gus and me to share. I don't see it, either, but I feel it in my hands, the smooth round finish of the dish. There was a dog in this house once. But not no more. Now the dog's gone. I used to hear it barking. I used to hear the scratch of nails on the ceiling above me, and would make believe the dog was gonna open the door one day and set me free. Either that or eat me alive 'cause it was a big mean dog, from the sound of it.

The lady didn't like it when the dog barked. She'd tell the man to shut it up—*either you shut it up or I will*—and then one day the barking and the scratching disappeared just like that, and now the dog's gone. I never did lay eyes on that dog, but I imagined it was a dog like Clifford, big and red, on account of the gigantic bark.

Inside the dog bowl is something mushy like oatmeal. I take it back downstairs. I sit on the cold, hard floor, lean against a concrete wall. I offer some to Gus but he says no. He says he ain't hungry. I try and eat, but the mush is nasty. My insides feel like they might hurl it all back up. I keep eating, anyway, but with each bite, it gets harder to swallow. I have to force myself to do it. I do it only so that my belly don't hurt later on, 'cause there's no telling when the lady will bring us more food. My mouth

salivates, and not in a good way. Rather, it salivates in that way it does right before you're about to throw up. I gag on the mush, vomit into my mouth and then swallow it back down. I try to make Gus eat some, but still he won't. I can't blame him. Sometimes starving is better than having to eat that lady's food.

They've got a little toilet down here for Gus and me. It's where we do our business in the dark, hoping and praying the man and the lady don't come down when we're on the pot. Gus and I have an agreement. When he goes, I go in the other corner and hum so I can't hear nothing. When I go, he does the same. There ain't no toilet paper in this place. There's no place to wash our hands, or any other part of us for that matter. We're dirty as all get-out, but things like that don't matter no more, except for when our filth makes the lady mad.

We don't get to take no real bath in this place. But every now and again a bucket of soapy cold water arrives and we're expected to strip down naked, to use our hands to scrub ourselves clean, to stand there cold and wet while we air-dry.

It's damp down here where they keep us, a cold, sticky wet like sweat, the kind that don't ever go away. The water oozes through the walls and trickles down sometimes, when it's raining hard outside. The rainwater pools on the floor beside me, making puddles. I walk in them puddles with my bare feet.

In the dark, I hear something else splashing in them puddles sometimes. I hear something scratching its tiny claws on the floor and walls. I know that something is there, something I can't see. I got ideas, but I don't know for sure what it is.

I do know for sure that there are spiders and silverfish down here. I don't ever see them, either, but sometimes, when I try and sleep, I feel their stealth legs slink across my skin. I could scream, but it wouldn't do any good. I leave them be. I'm sure they don't want to be here any more than me.

I'm not alone down here, not since Gus came. It makes it better, knowing I'm not ever alone and that someone is here to bear witness to all the things the lady does to me. It's usually the lady doing the hurting, 'cause she don't got an ounce of goodness in her. The man has maybe an ounce 'cause sometimes when the lady ain't home he'll bring down a special treat, like a

hard candy or something. Gus and I are always grateful, but in the back of my mind I can't help but wonder why he's being kind.

I don't know how old I am. I don't know how long they've been keeping me here.

All the time I'm cold. But the lady upstairs couldn't give two hoots about that. I told her once that I was cold and she got angry, called me things like *ornery* and *ingrate*, words that I didn't know what they mean.

She calls me many things. If I didn't know any better, I'd think my name was just as easily *Retard* or *Dipshit* as it is Delilah.

Come get your dinner, Dipshit.

Stop your whining, you little retard.

The man went and brought me a blanket. He let me sleep with it one night but then he went and took it away again so that the lady didn't find out what he'd done.

I don't know the difference between daytime and nighttime anymore. Long ago, light meant day and dark meant night, but not down here it don't. Now it's just all dark all the time. I sleep as much as I can because what else is there to do with my time than talk to Gus and play chicken with the walls? Sometimes I can't even talk to Gus 'cause that lady gets mad at us. She screams down the stairs at me to stop my yammering before she shuts me up for good. Gus only ever whispers 'cause he's scared of getting in trouble. Gus is a fraidy-cat, not that I can blame him. Gus is the good one. I'm the one who's bad. I'm the one always getting into trouble.

I tried to keep track of how many days I'd been down here. But there was no way of doing that seeing as I couldn't tell my daytimes from my nights. I gave that up long ago.

The sounds upstairs are my best measure of time. The man and the lady are loud now, trash talk mostly 'cause they ain't ever nice to each other. I like it better when they're loud, 'cause when they're quarreling with each other, then nobody's paying any attention to Gus and me. It's when they're quiet that I'm scared most of all.

I set the dog bowl aside. I did the best that I could. If I try and eat any more I will vomit. I offer some more to Gus but he says no. I'm not sure how Gus has made it this long on account of how little he eats. I never get a good look at him in the darkness, but I imagine he's all skin and bones. I've caught glimpses of him when the door opens upstairs and we get a quick

scrap of light. He's got brown hair. He's taller than me. I think he'd have a nice smile but Gus probably don't ever smile. Neither do I.

The spoon chimes against the bowl. I reach down and take ahold of it in my hand. For whatever reason, I get to thinking of the way that lady comes downstairs sometimes. I don't like that none. She only comes when she's hopping mad and looking for someone to take her anger out on.

Gus must hear the jingle of the spoon. He asks what I'm doing with it. Sometimes I think Gus can read my mind.

"I'm keeping it," I say.

Gus tells me that a round spoon isn't going to do nothing to hurt no one, if that's what I've got my mind set on, which it is.

"You're just gonna get yourself in trouble for not giving the lady back her spoon," he says. I can't ever see the expression on his face, but I imagine he's worrying about what I'm gonna do. Gus always worries.

I tell him, "If I can figure out a way to make it sharp, it'll hurt."

I'm banking on that lady being so soft in the head she'll forget all about the spoon when she comes to get her bowl. I put the rest of the mush down the toilet so she don't get angry and call us names for not finishing her food that she made. I put the empty bowl at the top of them steps and start thinking on how I'm going to make this round spoon sharp as a spear.

* * *

There ain't much to work with in this place where they've got us kept. The man and the lady don't give Gus and me no stuff. We've got no clothes other than the ones we're wearing, no blankets, no pillows, no nothing. The only thing we have aside from the floor and the walls is each other and that icky toilet on the other end of the pitch-black room.

It's only after I try to sharpen my spoon on the walls and the floor that I decide to give the toilet a go.

I don't know a thing about toilets other than that's where I do my business and that ours has never once been cleaned. The darkness is a blessing when it comes down to the toilet 'cause I don't want to see the inside of it, not after all this time that we've been crapping in there and no one's been cleaning it. The foul smell alone is enough to make me gag.

"Where you going?" Gus asks as I take my spoon to the toilet. Gus and I have a way of knowing what the other is doing without ever really seeing

what the other is doing. That comes from living down here long enough and getting to know each other's habits.

"You'll see," I tell him. Gus and I speak in whispers. I'm pretty sure the man and the lady who live upstairs aren't home right now 'cause I heard the doors opening and closing not too long ago. I heard their loud footsteps go suddenly quiet. There's no one up there talking now, no one screaming, no noise from the TV.

But I can't be sure. 'Cause if they are here, I don't want them listening in on Gus and me and knowing what I'm doing with my filched spoon. I'd get a whipping if they did—or worse. I ain't ever tried to run away before or make myself a weapon, but common sense says that's gotta be a worse punishment than not finishing the lady's nasty dinner or telling her I'm cold.

I let my hands float over the toilet awhile. I feel it up for a sharp spot. But the toilet is smooth as a baby's bottom. I almost give up, not thinking I'm going to find a spot to sharpen my spoon here. It's all one part, except for the top of it, the lid, which I discover by accident comes off. I hoist it up in my arms. It's heavier than I thought it'd be, all dead weight. I almost drop it.

"What's the matter?" Gus asks, panicked over some noise I make. I think that Gus is younger than me, on account of how chicken he is, even if he is taller. But anyone can be a chicken, no matter what their age or size.

"Nothing's wrong," I tell him, not wanting to think what would have happened if I did drop the lid. I set it gently upside down on the floor. I tell Gus, "Don't worry about it. Ain't nothing the matter. Everything's fine."

Gus is a worrywart. I wonder if he's always been that way or if the man and the lady have done that to him. I wonder what kind of boy Gus was before he got here. The kind who climbed trees and caught frogs and played ghosts in the graveyard at night, or the kind who read books and was afraid of the dark. We tried talking about it once, but then I got sad and wound up telling Gus I didn't want to talk about it no more. 'Cause most of my earliest memories have that man and that lady in them, and in them, they're doing wicked things to me, things that I don't like.

That man and the lady saved the newspaper from when I went missing. The lady read those stories out loud to me, telling me what happened to my momma, showing me pictures of my daddy standing in front of our big, blue house, crying. She told me how the police was looking for me. But