

**MOTHER
KNOWS
BEST**

ALSO AVAILABLE BY KIRA PEIKOFF

Die Again Tomorrow

No Time to Die

Living Proof

**MOTHER
KNOWS
BEST**

A Novel of Suspense

KIRA PEIKOFF

**CROOKED
LANE**



NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real or actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For Zachary,
who made me a mother

*Now you are mine
From your feet to your hair so golden and fine,
And your crumpled finger-tips . . . mine completely,
Wholly and sweetly;
Mine with kisses deep to smother,
No one so near to you now as your mother!
Others may hear your words of beauty,
But your precious silence is mine alone;
Here in my arms I have enrolled you,
Away from the grasping world I fold you,
Flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone!*

—Lucy Maud Montgomery, *The Mother*

PART ONE

CLAIRE

An hour into our drive, Abby's announcement startles us.

"I have a surprise for you, Mommy."

"Oh?" I crane my neck to see her grinning in the back seat. She has the same coy dimple as Colton, the brother she never met. "What kind of surprise?"

"A *big* one." Her cell vibrates then, sucking her attention into its dragnet. For once, I'm thankful; she doesn't notice my sharp inhale.

But my husband does. He takes one hand off the wheel to rest it on my thigh. As we speed down the West Side Highway, I stare out the window at the gloomy gray Hudson. I despise nothing more than surprises, but my daughter is a black box of mischief, brimming with secrets and delight.

While she's lost in her phone, I peek again at her face. Her eyes are cool blue, like glacier ice; her nose is spattered with freckles; her creamy skin is not yet pimpled by puberty. It's impossible to tell that my beautiful girl is the first of her kind.

Even she doesn't know.

The only thorn in the comfort of her appearance is her hair. It's the color of a shiny penny, though no one in the family is a redhead. I'll never forget the time a stranger joked, *Are you sure she's yours?*

She catches me staring and closes her phone. "How much longer?"

"Five minutes," Michael says, turning off at 79th Street and Riverside Drive.

We exchange puzzled looks. This trip to the Natural History Museum, our annual ritual on her brother's birthday, means little to her. He passed away a few years before she was born.

Michael never met Colton either, but he savors my tradition because it's the one day each year we allow ourselves to act like the regular family we've never been. Once a year, I'm willing to take the risk. The odds of disaster are so low.

The rest of the time we avoid the city. God forbid we wind up caught on camera, then splashed across social media. I view the outdoors the way others view blizzards—as dicey exposure to the elements, requiring us to cover up. Better to hunker down and lie low.

But someone out there will never give up searching. Someone who's long out of prison, whose name I can't bear to utter or think.

J looms over every school pickup and drop-off, as I stay behind the wheel of my Accord, declining to chat with the other moms. If one recognizes me and the media pick up the scent, the police will come knocking—

And J won't be far behind.

As we cross Broadway toward the museum, J lives in the recesses of my brain like a bloody knife buried deep underground.

Abby knows nothing about J. One day, we'll have to sit down with her. Tell her the truth. But not on Colton's birthday. Today he would have been twenty-one.

Michael parallel parks on a side street near the museum, and my throat constricts. Visiting my son's favorite place brings me so much closer to him than visiting his grave.

As soon as the car stops, Abby jumps out.

"Wait!" I yell, but she's already zipping past a row of yellow tulips planted along the sidewalk.

"Hurry up!" She beckons me impatiently. "It's almost time!"

"Time for what?" I ask Michael.

He shrugs. "No idea."

As we step out of the car into the cool spring morning, I tug the

brim of my baseball cap down low over my eyes. It's a Yankees hat I ordered online to blend in with the city people, even though I couldn't name a single player on the team.

The city's energy is a jolt after our rural town upstate. Pedestrians, joggers, and dog-walkers vie for sidewalk space between rows of half-bare trees. Across the street, a group of protesters is huddled in front of a grocery store holding signs that read SAY NO TO GMOs and QUIT TRYING TO GET IN MY GENES. A few yards ahead of us, Abby pauses to ogle them—not much activism happens in our sleepy town—and Michael quickly shuttles me past.

"It's okay," he mutters. "No one's looking."

My nervous side glances have become a tic. But he's right. Nobody sees us, nobody cares. Do people still remember scandals over a decade old? To be safe, we walk faster and stare forward like normal people who aren't living in fear.

Today is about Colton, I remind myself.

I wonder whether Abby's surprise involves a tribute to him. After all these years of her whining about the long drive to the city and the "boring" museum, maybe she's decided to finally participate in honoring his memory. But I have no idea what her gesture might be, or why it would involve a schedule.

What was she typing into her phone?

When I catch up to ask her, she smiles. "You'll see."

Then she skips ahead. The museum looms large, its magnificent glass and steel dominating the entire city block. Walking the path reminds me of the final month of Colton's life, when I pushed his wheelchair from our apartment to the museum for the last time. I try to tamp down the guilt, but it still twists knots in my stomach.

Michael telegraphs his support by squeezing my hand: *It wasn't your fault*.

When we reach the bottom of the museum's legendary steps, my eyes are stinging. I lean against the railing.

"I just need a minute."

Abby hops up beside me.

“So Mom, remember when we did that spit test in biology a few months ago?” She rises onto her tiptoes with a strange excitement.

“Not right now, honey.”

“Okay, but you do remember?”

I sigh. “Of course.” The entire fifth-grade class participated in a genetic experiment through the company MapMyDNA. All the kids spit into a tube and received a report of their inherited traits, like whether they had detached earlobes or could taste bitter flavors. We felt cornered into letting her participate. It was easier than answering the questions that would follow, but the test came and went without a hitch.

“What about it?” I ask.

“Well, me and my friends created profiles so we could compare our reports.”

“You never told me that!”

My sudden harshness makes her scowl.

“It’s not that big a deal, *jeez*. But guess what, I have two hundred and thirteen distant cousins!”

My back stiffens. In the corner of my eye, I notice Michael frown.

“So get this,” she continues, oblivious. “I got a message from someone who shares thirty-seven genes with me, and we started talking, and it turns out she’s a cousin you lost touch with!”

I grip the railing to keep my balance. “Did you say thirty-seven?”

“Mom doesn’t have any long-lost cousins,” Michael snaps. “And since when do you have permission to talk to strangers online?”

“Yes, you do,” Abby says to me, ignoring him. She jumps off the railing to look me in the eye. “I know for a *fact*, ‘cause DNA doesn’t lie!”

My knees turn liquid. Michael’s arm shoots out behind me.

“Mom’s not feeling so hot,” he says. “Maybe we should go.”

“But I promised her she could meet us today! It was going to be a family reunion in Colton’s honor.”

I hear myself gasp. “What? Where?”

She points up the dozens of stairs to the museum’s glass doors.

The time it takes me to turn my head stretches out to the length of her lifetime, all eleven years flattened down to one irrevocable glance.

All the way up on the top step, a young woman with sleek red hair stands watching us. She's wearing a skintight black dress that shows off her cleavage and her confidence. Anyone else might call her beautiful, but all I can see is the hardness in her gaze, the smile that is both triumphant and chilling.

It is J.

Noises cease. Hours unfold in the space of seconds.

For some indeterminate period, I simply stare. I'm capable of nothing else. My mind is on lockdown, my reflexes on standby. I'm trapped in her gaze as though she has me by the neck.

Though she's at least fifty steps away, I can sense the victory in her smirk:

Gotcha.

In this numb state, I am severed from time and space. I find myself tumbling back years, to the last time we saw each other. It was at a wine bar only a few blocks away, the meeting that set our lives on a collision course. Back then, her beauty evoked Renoir—the ginger curls tumbling over her large breasts, the fair skin, the full pout. But unlike the soft eyes of those painted women, hers were weapons; their intelligence cut through you like an act of violence, an intrusion into your soul.

They hook me again now. It's how I recognize her, because she has transformed. Gone are her long curls, her round cheeks, her ample curves. She's still young, still fifteen years younger than me, but her body has grown hard and lean. Her hair is cut close to her chin, and her face, despite her smile, projects a bitterness that terrifies me.

Over the years, I've fantasized about fighting her if she ever came near Abby—pushing her off a cliff, drowning her in our pool. But now I see that's a joke. If I punched her in the stomach, my knuckles would probably bruise.

"Mom!" Abby cries, breaking my trance. "Are you okay?"

I pull her instinctively against my chest, the way I used to when she was a baby and the world was still actively searching for us.

Michael folds us both into his arms. He's blocking us from her sight, protecting us however he can. His eyes are wide. His shock compounds mine.

Abby squirms away from us. "What's *wrong*?"

I've never felt more unprepared to answer her. I'm about to open my mouth when something at the edge of my vision catches my eye.

A little boy is playing on the top step amid all the tourists who are waiting in line. I shift to get a better look at him, and immediately sink to the cold concrete; a scream erupts from my throat.

He's Colton in the flesh.

I am gripped by a panic and longing so intense I can't move. Michael tries to lift me off the ground, Abby says a few words I don't hear.

He's eight years old again, the age he died, but now he's smiling and skipping in circles around a group of other children—I know that straw-colored hair, that perky nose, the shape of those eyes, almond like mine. I have missed him, dreamed of him, ached for him for thirteen years, bargained with a God I don't believe in, if I could only see him one more time . . .

My sight goes opaque behind a curtain of tears, and just like that, he's gone. I claw at my eyes, but it's no use. He's vanished. I lunge toward the stairs, I will find him—*to hell with J*—but Michael yanks me back, shouting, "What are you doing?"

"Let me go!" I smack his chest, but he's stronger, he holds me down, and I whiplash back in time again to the dark days when my son's silhouette teased me in the shadows.

Michael's voice obliterates the memory. "You're hyperventilating. Breathe."

My head is throbbing. A sour liquid climbs up my throat.

"Did you see him?" I choke out. "Over there?"

"Him?" Michael peers up at the stairs in confusion. J is still there, smirking at us beside a stone column, but I blank her out, searching for my boy.

“Colton.” As soon as I say his name, I know I’m losing it. Michael’s horror tells me as much.

“But he was right there . . .” I trail off, staring at the spot where he was laughing and running like the healthiest boy in the world. Of course it wasn’t really him. Colton could never run. Colton is *dead*. The word still shatters me.

Abby backs away from me. “Mom, you’re freaking out.”

“I swear to God I saw him.” The tears are falling fast. “That boy . . .”

“Honey,” Michael says gently, “you’re having a panic attack. Let’s get out of here.”

He ushers me and Abby away from the museum, away from J’s disturbing stare. I want to argue, negotiate, plead with him to believe me, but I know he never will. The worst part is, I know he never should.

“We just got here!” Abby stops. “What about your cousin?”

“There is no cousin,” he retorts. “We’re going home. Your mother needs to lie down.”

“But I talked to someone who knew her.”

“You talked to a *stranger* who tried to meet you,” he says, as we march down the sidewalk toward our car. My legs cooperate somehow, even though my mind is back on the steps, on that boy—my boy.

“From now on,” Michael is telling her, “you’re forbidden from talking to anyone on that website. I’m canceling your profile as soon as we get home.”

“But she shared my DNA!”

“So what? Don’t you have over two hundred ‘cousins’?”

“Well, yeah . . .”

“It means nothing. Understood?” He says it to me as much as to her. My eyes have rebelled against my mind. It’s not the first time.

“It means nothing,” he repeats, in my direction.

“I heard you before,” Abby grumbles.

“Then let it go.”

Our car is in sight a block away. He peeks over his shoulder, walking briskly, though no one is following us. I check, too. She’s not there. He

unlocks the car with the key fob. Its horn beeps, the headlights flicker. We're going to get away scot-free. Like nothing even happened.

He takes me by the hand. "Okay?"

I slide into the passenger seat, dazed. Abby climbs in the back seat. He slams his door and peels away from the curb. I pick up on his nervous energy, the speed with which he swerves onto the street.

I press my nose to the window, as if my late son is about to come waltzing around the block. Michael puts his hand on my thigh.

"Did you bring your Xanax?"

His question is rhetorical; I always carry a bottle in my purse for emergencies. I scoop out a little white pill and stick it under my tongue for fast relief. Sure enough, within a few minutes, my pulse begins to slow.

He clears his throat. "So no one was there, right?"

After a brief hesitation, I nod.

It's settled, then: I've reconciled with reality, and we will not be telling Abby about J. She's still too young, her universe too innocent. Her experience of danger is limited to falling off a horse.

In an hour and a half, we will arrive at our house in the woods and attempt to burrow back into our inconspicuous life, where Michael makes blueberry pancakes on Sundays, Abby rides her bike down our empty street, and I keep counting my lucky stars for another day, another month, another year of peace from the world.

But after today, I know this much: nothing will ever be the same.

ABBY

ONE MONTH LATER

My mom has been acting super weird lately. I mean, don't get me wrong, she's always been weird. She stays in the house most of the time, except for school drop-off and pickup, and she doesn't come to stuff that all the other moms go to, like bake sales and soccer games. It sucks when people ask where she is. I usually pretend she's sick or out of town. This year, I started telling everyone she has a rare disease that makes her allergic to sunlight. But I know the other kids don't believe me. They still talk behind my back, especially this one mean girl named Sydney. According to my best friend Riley, they have all these theories, like that she's a witch or a secret agent. I wish it was something that exciting.

The truth is kind of embarrassing: she has serious anxiety issues. My dad told me it's called agoraphobia, and it's extremely hard to cure. I don't get what's so scary about going outside. I hate when she misses my games, even though she makes us go all the way into the city once a year for Colton's birthday. The one exception is for him. *Never* for me. But this year was such a bust that I don't know if we will ever go to the city again. Ever since that day of her meltdown, she's been acting even weirder than usual.

Before, she kept busy around the house while I was at school and Dad was at work. She would go swimming in our pool, and garden in our backyard, which is this big meadow surrounded by trees. Our veggie patch has kale, zucchini, red peppers, snap peas, cucumbers,

and cherry tomatoes. Every day after school, we would go out to pick stuff for salads. Then, while I did my homework at the kitchen counter, she made dinner—lasagna or tacos or coconut chicken soup. When Dad was finished with his work, we would all eat together. Life at home was pretty normal, except for her not going anywhere.

But since that day at the museum, she's been acting different. We've started eating frozen dinners or ordering in because she doesn't feel like cooking. The flowers are wilting and the vegetable garden is drying up. When she picks me up from school, her hair is all frizzy and she's wearing sweatpants and a hoodie, with the hood up. Even though it's May and the weather is perfect, her pretty dresses are stuck in her closet.

I keep asking if she's okay, and she always tells me she is *fine, just tired*, or that she's coming down with something. She's been staying in bed a lot, and it freaks me out. I don't know what's wrong, but it feels bigger than a cold.

Tonight, after we all take our seats around our dining room table, I try to pretend everything is normal. Our pizza has just been delivered, and I help myself to a slice of pepperoni while talking about the sleepover Riley invited me to this weekend.

"We're going to watch an R-rated movie," I announce proudly. "The scary one with the clown."

I wait for them to flip, but instead, they barely seem to hear me.

Mom is sticking her fork into a garden salad made of white iceberg lettuce, which she never eats because it has "no nutritional value." Dad is silently watching her.

"The clown that eats kids," I add. "When Riley's brother saw it, he slept on their parents' floor for a week."

Dad sighs. "Abs, you know you're not allowed to watch that stuff."

"But Riley is!" I shove my pizza in my mouth, and the hot cheesy oil drips down my chin. "Her parents are *cool*."

"Well, you're stuck with us squares." He hands me a napkin.

I wipe my lips. "Squares?"

"Old-people slang for nerds."

I give him a sassy smile. "Only squares say *square*."

“Touché.”

Dad and I often tease each other, and Mom is our audience. But tonight, she’s staring down at her plate as she eats the yucky lettuce. It’s no use asking if she’s okay. Her answer is always the same.

Dad clears his throat. He catches my eye, and we trade a glance that she doesn’t see. The way his lips press together, it seems like an apology.

“I have an idea,” he says. “Let’s each share one good thing about our day. Honey,” he says to her, “do you want to go first?”

Her face is pale. “Well, I got to take a nice nap earlier.”

“Anything else?”

“Oh, just stuff around the house.” She shrugs as though we can’t see right through her. “The usual.”

“Right.”

She touches her neck. “I might be getting a sore throat.”

I can’t help rolling my eyes, but she doesn’t notice. It’s like she doesn’t even see me. I put my elbow on the table and reach across her to grab another slice out of the cardboard box. She doesn’t bother to scold my bad manners.

“My turn,” I say.

Dad gives me his attention. “Let’s hear it.”

“We got a cool new art teacher.” Mom and I love arts and crafts projects, so I expect this to interest her.

“That’s nice,” she says, looking both at me and through me. It gives me the creeps.

“What are you working on?” Dad asks.

“She’s going to show us how to make mandalas.” I turn to Mom hopefully. “I could bring one home for us to do together.”

I see the twitch in the corner of her mouth—the effort to show delight. “Sure.”

“I remember making those once,” Dad says quickly. “My dad showed me how.”

His dad is long gone, same as my other three grandparents. I’m sad I never got to meet any of them. The Burke family line ends with me. Sometimes I get jealous of the other kids who go visit their

relatives over summer break and play with their cousins. Riley thinks it's strange that I have no family besides my parents. I guess it is. I don't know anyone else with such a small family. More than anything else, I wish I had a brother or sister, but Mom won't have another kid no matter how much I beg her.

I squint at her. "Why did you become such a freaking zombie?"

"Abigail!" Dad snaps his fingers. "That's not how you speak to your mother!"

I expect her to come down on me too, but she sighs like she can't be bothered, which pisses me off more.

"What is *wrong* with you?" I demand. "Are you, like, dead inside?"

Dad jumps to his feet, pointing at the stairs. "Go to your room right now."

I bite off a huge mouthful of pizza. "I'm not done."

"You certainly are." He comes around the table and yanks my chair out.

"But I'm the only one being honest!" I glare at her. "Ever since that day in the city, you've been different and I'm sick of it."

She sighs again. "I already told you, I get panic attacks around Colton's birthday. It's a hard time of year."

"But it's been almost a month!"

"Enough." Dad puts his hand on my shoulder and steers me toward the stairs. "Go to your room."

"Wait," she calls. We both turn around.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know I haven't been myself." Her eyes glaze over and I feel my heart squeeze. I want to run and hug her, but I don't. She usually gets sad for a few days or a week around Colton's birthday. Not for this long. She also gets spooked at the littlest things these days—a dog barking, me opening her door. I feel like there's something bigger going on, something she won't admit.

I know what's bothering me and I can't let it go.

"What about your cousin?" I ask. "Was she there that day or not?"

Her whole face darkens. "How many times do I have to tell you? I don't have any cousins."

"But—"

“No buts!” Dad interrupts. “You were chatted up by a sicko. A stranger. This is exactly why you’re not allowed on social media!”

“There’s no one your family lost touch with?” I ask, ignoring him.

“No!” she shouts. “I’m not going to answer this again.”

“*Fine, jeez.*” I’m never going to get anywhere, so I stomp up the stairs and slam my door. I’ve given her enough chances, and she shuts me down every time.

When my parents canceled my profile on the MapMyDNA site, they made it impossible for me to contact the mysterious woman who shares my genes. But I still remember our messages because I took a screenshot of the whole conversation and emailed it to Riley with the headline *OMG get this. . . .*

A few weeks before the museum, a random chat bubble popped up from someone whose screen name was JH0502: Hi, you showed up as a close relative. Want to connect?

I accepted out of curiosity, and we exchanged DNA maps so we could see how we were related. The site said we shared thirty-seven genes and that we were connected through our “maternal haplogroups” or something like that. We talked in the chat window for a bit. She told me she was a distant cousin of my mom who fell out of touch, and she asked if I had a brother. I explained about Colton and told her we were driving to the city from Garrison to honor his upcoming birthday. When she said she lived in NYC, I invited her to meet up with us. We agreed it would be fun to make it a surprise family reunion.

But then my mom’s panic attack ruined the whole thing, and we never got to meet her, and now I can’t even message her anymore.

I sit at my desk, thinking of the one line of our conversation that still bothers me:

Do you by any chance have a brother?

If mom doesn’t have a long-lost cousin, how could the stranger have known?

My heart is racing as I open my laptop.

I know my mother is lying. And I’m not going to let her get away with it.