

A  
SPARK  
of  
LIGHT

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*Also by Jodi Picoult*

Songs of the Humpback Whale

Harvesting the Heart

Picture Perfect

Mercy

The Pact

Keeping Faith

Plain Truth

Salem Falls

Perfect Match

Second Glance

My Sister's Keeper

Vanishing Acts

The Tenth Circle

Nineteen Minutes

Change of Heart

Handle with Care

House Rules

Sing You Home

Lone Wolf

The Storyteller

Leaving Time

Small Great Things

*Jodi Picoult and Samantha van Leer*

Between the Lines

Off the Page

JODI PICOULT

A  
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STOUGHTON

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Scripture quote “The Lord brings death and makes alive” on p. 148 is from  
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*For Jennifer Hershey and Susan Corcoran  
If you're lucky, you wind up with colleagues you love.  
If you're luckier, they feel like sisters.*

XOX

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The question is not whether we will be extremists,  
but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists  
for hate or for love?

—REVEREND DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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*Five p.m.*

The Center squatted on the corner of Juniper and Montfort behind a wrought-iron gate, like an old bulldog used to guarding its territory. At one point, there had been many like it in Mississippi—nondescript, unassuming buildings where services were provided and needs were met. Then came the restrictions that were designed to make these places go away: The halls had to be wide enough to accommodate two passing gurneys; any clinic where that wasn't the case had to shut down or spend thousands on reconstruction. The doctors had to have admitting privileges at local hospitals—even though most were from out of state and couldn't secure them—or the clinics where they practiced risked closing, too. One by one the clinics shuttered their windows and boarded up their doors. Now, the Center was a unicorn—a small rectangle of a structure painted a fluorescent, flagrant orange, like a flag to those who had traveled hundreds of miles to find it. It was the color of safety; the color of warning. It said: *I'm here if you need me.* It said, *Do what you want to me; I'm not going.*

The Center had suffered scars from the cuts of politicians and the barbs of protesters. It had licked its wounds and healed. At one point it had been called the Center for Women and Reproductive Health. But there were those who believed if you do not name a thing, it ceases to exist, and so its title was amputated, like a war injury. But still, it survived. First it became the Center for Women. And then, just: the Center.

The label fit. The Center was the calm in the middle of a

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storm of ideology. It was the sun of a universe of women who had run out of time and had run out of choices, who needed a beacon to look up to.

And like other things that shine so hot, it had a magnetic pull. Those in need found it the lodestone for their navigation. Those who despised it could not look away.

Today, Wren McElroy thought, was not a good day to die. She knew that other fifteen-year-old girls romanticized the idea of dying for love, but Wren had read *Romeo and Juliet* last year in eighth-grade English and didn't see the magic in waking up in a crypt beside your boyfriend, and then plunging his dagger into your own ribs. And *Twilight*—forget it. She had listened to teachers paint the stories of heroes whose tragic deaths somehow enlarged their lives rather than shrinking them. When Wren was six, her grandmother had died in her sleep. Strangers had said over and over that dying in your sleep was a blessing, but as she stared at her nana, waxen white in the open coffin, she didn't understand why it was a gift. What if her grandmother had gone to bed the night before thinking, *In the morning, I'll water that orchid. In the morning, I'll read the rest of that novel. I'll call my son.* So much left unfinished. No, there was just no way dying could be spun into a good thing.

Her grandmother was the only dead person Wren had ever seen, until two hours ago. Now, she could tell you what dying looked like, as opposed to just dead. One minute, Olive had been there, staring so fierce at Wren—as if she could hold on to the world if her eyes stayed open—and then, in a beat, those eyes stopped being windows and became mirrors, and Wren saw only a reflection of her own panic.

She didn't want to look at Olive anymore, but she did. The dead woman was lying down like she was taking a nap, a couch

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cushion under her head. Olive's shirt was soaked with blood, but had ridden up on the side, revealing her ribs and waist. Her skin was pale on top and then lavender, with a thin line of deep violet where her back met the floor. Wren realized that was because Olive's blood was settling inside, just two hours after she'd passed. For a second, Wren thought she was going to throw up.

She didn't want to die like Olive, either.

Which, given the circumstances, made Wren a horrible person.

The odds were highly unlikely, but if Wren had to choose, she would die in a black hole. It would be instant and it would be epic. Like, literally, you'd be ripped apart at the atomic level. You'd become stardust.

Wren's father had taught her that. He bought her her first telescope, when she was five. He was the reason she'd wanted to be an astronaut when she was little, and an astrophysicist as soon as she learned what one was. He himself had had dreams of commanding a space shuttle that explored every corner of the universe, until he got a girl pregnant. Instead of going to grad school, he had married Wren's mom and become a cop and then a detective and had explored every corner of Jackson, Mississippi, instead. He told Wren that working for NASA was the best thing that never happened to him.

When they were driving back from her grandmother's funeral, it had snowed. Wren—a child who'd never seen weather like that in Mississippi before—had been terrified by the way the world swirled, unmoored. Her father had started talking to her: *Mission Specialist McElroy, activate the thrusters*. When she wouldn't stop crying, he began punching random buttons: the air-conditioning, the four-way flashers, the cruise control. They lit up red and blue like a command center at Mission Control. *Mission Specialist McElroy, her father said, prepare for hyperspace*. Then he flicked on his brights, so that the snow became

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a tunnel of speeding stars, and Wren was so amazed she forgot to be scared.

She wished she could flick a switch now, and travel back in time.

She wished she had told her dad she was coming here.

She wished she had let him talk her out of it.

She wished she hadn't asked her aunt to bring her.

Aunt Bex might even now be lying in a morgue, like Olive, her body becoming a rainbow. And it was all Wren's fault.

*You*, said the man with a gun, his voice dragging Wren back to the here and now. He had a name, but she didn't want to even think of it. It made him human and he wasn't human; he was a monster. While she'd been lost in thought, he'd come to stand in front of her. Now, he jerked the pistol at her. *Get up.*

The others held their breath with her. They had, in the past few hours, become a single organism. Wren's thoughts moved in and out of the other women's minds. Her fear stank on their skin.

Blood still bloomed from the bandage the man had wrapped around his hand. It was the tiniest of triumphs. It was the reason Wren could stand up, even though her legs were jelly.

She shouldn't have come to the Center.

She should have stayed a little girl.

Because now she might not live to become anything else.

Wren heard the hammer click and closed her eyes. All she could picture was her father's face—the blue-jean eyes, the gentle bend of his smile—as he looked up at the night sky.

When George Goddard was five years old, his mama tried to set his daddy on fire. His father had been passed out on the couch when his mother poured the lighter fluid over his dirty laundry, lit a match, and dumped the flaming bin on top of him. The big man reared up, screaming, batting at the flames with his ham

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hands. George's mama stood a distance away with a glass of water. *Mabel*, his daddy screamed. *Mabel!* But his mama calmly drank every last drop, sparing none to extinguish the flames. When George's father ran out of the house to roll in the dirt like a hog, his mama turned to him. *Let that be a lesson to you*, she said.

He had not wanted to grow up like his daddy, but in the way that an apple seed can't help but become an apple tree, he had not become the best of husbands. He knew that now. It was why he had resolved to be the best of fathers. It was why, this morning, he had driven all this way to the Center, the last standing abortion clinic in the state of Mississippi.

What they'd taken away from his daughter she would never get back, whether she realized it now or not. But that didn't mean he couldn't exact a price.

He looked around the waiting room. Three women were huddled on a line of seats, and at their feet was the nurse, who was checking the bandage of the doctor. George scoffed. Doctor, my ass. What he did wasn't healing, not by any stretch of the imagination. He should have killed the guy—*would* have killed the guy—if he hadn't been interrupted when he first arrived and started firing.

He thought about his daughter sitting in one of those chairs. He wondered how she'd gotten here. If she had taken a bus. If a friend had driven her or (he could not even stand to think of it) the boy who'd gotten her in trouble. He imagined himself in an alternate universe, bursting through the door with his gun, seeing her in the chair next to the pamphlets about how to recognize an STD. He would have grabbed her hand and pulled her out of there.

What would she think of him, now that he was a killer?

How could he go back to her?

How could he go back, period?

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Eight hours ago this had seemed like a holy crusade—an eye for an eye, a life for a life.

His wound had a heartbeat. George tried to adjust the binding of the gauze around it with his teeth, but it was unraveling. It should have been tied off better, but who here was going to help him?

The last time he had felt like this, like the walls were closing in on him, he had taken his infant daughter—red and screaming with a fever he didn't know she had and wouldn't have known how to treat—and gone looking for help. He had driven until his truck ran out of gas—it was past one A.M., but he started walking—and continued until he found the only building with a light on inside, and an unlocked door. It was flat-roofed and unremarkable—he hadn't known it was a church until he stepped inside and saw the benches and the wooden relief of Jesus on the cross. The lights he had seen outside were candles, flickering on an altar. *Come back*, he had said out loud to his wife, who was probably halfway across the country by now. Maybe he was tired, maybe he was delusional, but he very clearly heard a reply: *I'm already with you*. The voice whispered from the wooden Jesus and at the same time from the darkness all around him.

George's conversion had been that simple, and that enveloping. Somehow, he and his girl had fallen asleep on the carpeted floor. In the morning, Pastor Mike was shaking him awake. The pastor's wife was cooing at his baby. There was a groaning table of food, and a miraculously spare room. Back then, George hadn't been a religious man. It wasn't Jesus that entered his heart that day. It was hope.

Hugh McElroy, the hostage negotiator George had been talking to for hours, said George's daughter would know he had been trying to protect her. He'd promised that if George cooperated, this could still end well, even though George knew that outside

this building were men with rifles trained on the door just waiting for him to emerge.

George wanted this to be over. Really, he did. He was exhausted mentally and physically and it was hard to figure out an endgame. He was sick of the crying. He wanted to skip ahead to the part where he was sitting by his daughter again, and she was looking up at him with wonder, the way she used to.

But George also knew Hugh would say anything to get him to surrender to the police. It wasn't even just his job. Hugh McElroy needed him to release the hostages for the same reason that George had taken them in the first place—to save the day.

That's when George figured out what he was going to do. He pulled back the hammer on the gun. "Get up. You," he said, pointing to the girl with the name of a bird, the one who had stabbed him. The one he would use to teach Hugh McElroy a lesson.

Here was the primary rule of hostage negotiation: Don't fuck it up.

When Hugh had first joined the regional team, that's what the instructors said. Don't take a bad situation and make it worse. Don't argue with the hostage taker. Don't tell him, *I get it*, because you probably don't. Communicate in a way that soothes or minimizes the threat; and understand that sometimes the best communication is not speaking at all. Active listening can get you a lot farther than spouting off.

There were different kinds of hostage takers. There were those who were out of their head with drugs, alcohol, grief. There were those on a political mission. There were those who fanned an ember of revenge, until it flared up and burned them alive. Then there were the sociopaths—the ones who had no empathy to appeal to. And yet sometimes they were the easiest

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to deal with, because they understood the concept of who's in control. If you could make the sociopath believe that you were not going to cede the upper hand, you'd actually gotten somewhere. You could say, *We've been at this for two hours* (or six, or sixteen) *and I get what's on your mind. But it's time to do something new. Because there is a group of men out here who think time's up and want to address this with force.* Sociopaths understood force.

On the other hand, that approach would fail miserably with someone depressed enough to kill himself and take others with him.

The point of establishing a relationship with a hostage taker was to make sure that you were the only source of information, and to give you the time to find out critical information of your own. What kind of hostage taker were you facing? What had precipitated the standoff, the shoot-out, the point of no return? You might start trying to build a relationship with innocuous conversation about sports, weather, TV. You'd gradually find out his likes and dislikes, what mattered to him. Did he love his kids? His wife? His mom? Why?

If you could find the *why*, you could determine what could be done to disarm the situation.

Hugh knew that the best hostage negotiators called the job a ballet, a tightrope walk, a delicate dance.

He also knew that was bullshit.

No one ever interviewed the negotiators whose situations ended in a bloodbath. It was only the ones with successful outcomes who got microphones stuck in their faces, and who felt obligated to describe their work as some kind of mystical art. In reality, it was a crapshoot. Dumb luck.

Hugh McElroy was afraid his luck was about to run out.

He surveyed the scene he had spearheaded for the past few hours. His command center was an event tent the department



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had used a few weeks ago at a community fair to promote safe child fingerprinting. Beat cops were posted along the building's perimeter like a string of blue beads. The press had been corralled behind a police barricade. (You'd think they'd be smart enough to get further out of the range of a madman with a gun, but no, the lure of ratings was apparently too high.) Littered on the sidewalk like empty threats were placards with giant pictures of babies in utero, or hand-drawn slogans: ADOPTION, NOT ABORTION! ONE HALF OF PATIENTS WHO ENTER AN ABORTION CLINIC DO NOT COME OUT ALIVE!

Ambulances hunkered, manned by EMTs with foil blankets and portable IVs and hydration. The SWAT team was in position waiting for a signal. Their commander, Captain Quandt, had tried to boot Hugh off the case (who could blame him?) and take the shooter by force. But Hugh knew Quandt could do neither of these things in good conscience, not if Hugh was on the verge of getting George Goddard to surrender.

This was exactly what Hugh had been banking on when he broke the second rule of hostage negotiation five hours ago, screaming onto the scene in his unmarked car, barking orders to the two street cops who'd been first responders.

The secondary rule of hostage negotiation was: Don't forget that this is a job.

Hostage negotiation is not a test of your manhood. It is not a chance to be a knight in shining armor, or a way to get your fifteen minutes of fame. It may go your way and it may not, no matter how textbook your responses are. Don't take it personally.

But Hugh had known from the get-go that was never going to be possible, not today, not this time, because this was a different situation altogether. There were God knew how many dead bodies in that clinic, plus five hostages who were still alive. And one of them was his kid.

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The SWAT commander was suddenly standing in front of him. “We’re going in now,” Quandt said. “I’m telling you as a courtesy.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Hugh replied. “I’m telling you as a courtesy.”

Quandt turned away and started to speak into the walkie-talkie at his shoulder. “We’re a go in five . . . four . . .” Suddenly his voice broke. “Stand down! I repeat—*abort!*”

It was the word that had started this disaster. Hugh’s head flew up, and he saw the same thing Quandt had noticed.

The front door of the clinic had suddenly opened, and two women were stepping outside.

When Wren’s mother still lived with them, she’d had a spider plant that she kept on top of a bookcase in the living room. After she left, neither Wren nor her father ever remembered to water it, but that spider plant seemed to defy death. It began to spill over its container and grow in a strange verdant comb-over toward a window, without playing by the rules of logic or gravity.

Wren felt like that now, swaying on her feet toward the light every time the door opened, drawn to where her father stood in the parking lot outside.

But it wasn’t Wren who was walking out of the building. She had no idea what it was that her father had said to George during their last phone conversation, but it had worked. George had pulled back the trigger and told her to move the couch that he had used to buttress the door. Although the hostages couldn’t talk freely without George hearing, a current had passed among them. When he instructed Wren to open the lock, she had even begun to think she might get out of here in one piece.

Joy and Janine had left first. Then George told Izzy to push

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out Dr. Ward in the wheelchair. Wren had thought that she'd be released then, too, but George had grabbed her by her hair and yanked her back. Izzy had turned at the threshold, her face dark, but Wren had given a small shake of her head. This might be Dr. Ward's only chance to get out, and he was hurt. She had to take him. She was a nurse; she knew. "Wren—" Izzy said, but then George slammed the door behind her and drove home the metal bolt. He released Wren long enough to have her shove the couch in front of the doorway again.

Wren felt panic rise in her throat. Maybe this was George's way of getting back at her for what she'd done to him. She was alone in here now, with this animal. Well, not quite—her eyes slid along the floor to Olive's body.

Maybe Aunt Bex was with Olive, wherever you go when you die. Maybe they were both waiting for Wren.

George sank down on the couch in front of the door, burying his face in his hands. He was still holding the gun. It winked at her.

"Are you going to shoot me?" she blurted.

George glanced up as if he was surprised she would even ask that question. She forced herself to meet his gaze. One of his eyes pulled the tiniest bit to the right, not so much that he looked weird, but enough that it was hard to focus on his face. She wondered if he had to consciously pick which view he took in. He rubbed his bandaged hand across his cheek.

When Wren was little, she used to hold her hands to her father's face to feel his stubble. It made a rasping sound. He'd smile, while she played his jaw like an instrument.

"Am I going to shoot you?" George leaned back on the cushions. "That depends."

It all happened so fast. One minute Janine Deguerre was a hostage, and the next she was in a medical tent, being checked

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over by EMTs. She looked around, trying to find Joy, but the other hostage with whom she had walked outside was nowhere to be seen.

“Ma’am,” one of the first responders said, “can you follow the light?”

Janine snapped her attention back to the kid, who in fact probably wasn’t much younger than she was—twenty-four. She blinked at him as he waved a little flashlight back and forth in front of her face.

She was shivering. Not because she was cold, but because she was in shock. She’d been pistol-whipped earlier across the temple, and her head was still throbbing. The EMT wrapped a silver metallic blanket around her shoulders, the kind given to marathon runners at the finish. Well, maybe she had run a marathon, metaphorically. Certainly she had crossed a line.

The sun was low, making shadows come to life, so that it was hard to tell what was real and what was a trick of her eyes. Five minutes ago Janine had arguably been in the worst danger of her life, and yet it was here underneath a plastic tent surrounded by police and medical professionals that she felt isolated. The mere act of walking past that threshold had put her back where she had started: on the other side.

She craned her neck, looking for Joy again. Maybe they had taken her to the hospital, like Dr. Ward. Or maybe Joy had said, as soon as Janine was out of earshot: *Get that bitch away from me.*

“I think we should keep you for observation,” the paramedic said.

“I’m okay,” Janine insisted. “Really. I just want to go home.”

He frowned. “Is there someone who can stay with you tonight? Just in case?”

“Yes,” she lied.

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A cop crouched down beside her. “If you’re feeling up to it,” he said, “we’re going to take you back to the station first. We need a statement.”

Janine panicked. Did they know about her? Did she have to tell them? Was it like going to court, and swearing on a Bible? Or could she just be, for a little longer, someone who deserved sympathy?

She nodded and got to her feet. With the policeman’s hand gently guiding her, she began to walk out of the tent. She held her metallic blanket around her like an ermine cloak. “Wait,” she said. “What about everyone else?”

“We’ll be bringing in the others as soon as they’re able,” he assured her.

“The girl,” Janine said. “What about the girl? Did she come out?”

“Don’t you worry, ma’am,” he said.

A surge of reporters called to her, shouting questions that tangled together. The cop stepped between her and the media, a shield. He led her to a waiting police car. When the door closed, it was suffocatingly hot. She stared out the window as the policeman drove.

They passed a billboard on the way to the station. Janine recognized it because she had helped raise money to erect it. It was a picture of two smiling, gummy-mouthed babies—one Black, one white. DID YOU KNOW, it read, MY HEART BEAT EIGHTEEN DAYS FROM CONCEPTION?

Janine knew a lot of facts like that. She also knew how various religions and cultures looked at personhood. Catholics believed in life at conception. Muslims believed that it took forty-two days after conception for Allah to send an angel to transform sperm and egg into something alive. Thomas Aquinas had said that abortion was homicide after forty days for a male embryo and eighty days for a female one. There were the

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outliers, too—the ancient Greeks, who said that a fetus had a “vegetable” soul, and the Jews, who said that the soul came at birth. Janine knew how to consciously steer away from those opinions in a discussion.

Still, it didn’t really make sense, did it? How could the moment that life began differ so much, depending on the point of view? How could the law in Mississippi say that an embryo was a human being, but the law in Massachusetts disagree? Wasn’t the baby the same baby, no matter whether it was conceived on a bed in Jackson, or on a beach in Nantucket?

It made Janine’s head hurt. But then, so did everything right now.

Soon it would be getting dark. Wren sat on the floor cross-legged, keeping an eye on George as he hunched forward on the couch, elbows balanced on his knees, and the gun held loosely in his right hand. She tore open the last packet of Fig Newtons—all that was left of the basket of snacks taken from the recovery room. Her stomach growled.

She used to be afraid of the dark. She’d make her dad come in with his gun in his holster and check out the whole of her bedroom—beneath the bed, under the mattress, on the high shelves above her dresser. Sometimes she woke up crying in the middle of the night, convinced she had seen something fanged and terrible sitting at the foot of her bed, watching her with its yellow eyes.

Now she knew: monsters *were* real.

Wren swallowed. “Your daughter,” she asked. “What’s her name?”

George glanced up. “Shut your mouth,” he said.

The vehemence of his words made her scoot back a few feet, but as she did, her leg brushed something cold and rigid. She knew right away what it was—*who* it was—and swallowed her

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scream. Wren willed herself to inch forward again, curling her arms around her bent knees. “I bet your daughter wants to see you.”

The shooter’s profile looked ragged and inhospitable. “You don’t know anything.”

“I bet she wants to see you,” Wren repeated. *I know*, she thought, *because it’s all I want*.

She lied.

Janine sat in the police station, across from the detective who was recording her statement, and lied. “What brought you to the Center this morning?” he had asked gently.

“A Pap smear,” Janine had said.

The rest that she had told him was true, and sounded like a horror film: the sound of gunfire, the sudden weight of the clinic employee slamming into her and knocking her to the floor. Janine had changed into a clean T-shirt that the paramedics had given her, but she could still feel the woman’s hot blood (so much blood) seeping into her dress. Even now, looking down at her hands, she expected to see it.

“Then what happened?”

She found she could not remember in sequence. Instead of linked moments, there were only flashes: her body shaking uncontrollably as she ran; her hands pressed against the bullet wound of an injured woman. The shooter jerking his pistol at Janine, while Izzy stood next to him with a heap of supplies in her arms. The phone ringing, as they all froze like mannequins.

Janine felt like she was watching a movie, one she was obligated to sit through even though she had never wanted to see it.

When she got to the part where the shooter smacked her with the gun, she left out why. A lie of omission, that’s what they used to call it when she was a little girl going to confession. It was a

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sin, too, but of a different degree. Still, sometimes you lied to protect people. Sometimes you lied to protect yourself.

What was one more lie to add to the others?

She was crying as she spoke. She didn't even realize it until the detective leaned forward with a box of tissues.

"Can I ask *you* a question?" she said.

"Of course."

She swallowed. "Do you think that people get what's coming to them?"

The detective looked at her for a long moment. "I don't think anyone deserves a day like today," he said.

Janine nodded. She blew her nose and balled the tissue into her hand.

Suddenly the door opened, and a uniformed officer stuck his head inside. "There's a gentleman out here who says he knows you . . . ?"

Behind him, Janine could see Allen—his florid cheeks and broad belly, the one that made him joke that he knew what it was like to be pregnant. Allen was the leader of the local Right to Life group. "Janine!" he cried, and he pushed past the cop so that he could fold her into his arms. "Sweet Jesus," he sighed. "Honey, we've been praying for you."

She knew they prayed for every woman who walked through the doors of the Center. This, though, was different. Allen would not have been able to make peace with himself if anything had happened to her, because he had been the one to send her inside as a spy.

Maybe God had been listening, because she had been released. But so had Joy, and Izzy, and Dr. Ward. And what about those who didn't make it out alive? What kind of capricious God would roll the dice like that?

"Let me take you home and get you settled," Allen said. And to the detective, "I'm sure Miz Deguerre needs a little rest."



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The detective looked directly at Janine, as if to see whether she was okay with Allen calling the shots. And why shouldn't she be? She had done what he wanted from the moment she arrived in town, intent to serve his mission any way she could. And she knew that he meant well. "We're more than happy to give you a ride wherever you need to go," the detective said to her.

He was offering her a choice; and it felt heady and powerful.

"I have to use the restroom," she blurted, another lie.

"Of course." The detective gestured down the hallway. "Left at the end, and then third door on the right."

Janine started walking, still clutching her foil blanket around her shoulders. She just needed space, for a second.

At the end of the hallway was another interrogation room, much like the one she had been in. What had been a mirror on the inside was, from this vantage point, a window. Joy sat at a table with a female detective.

Before she realized what she was doing, Janine was knocking at the window. It must have made a sound, because Joy turned in her direction, even if she couldn't see Janine's face. The interrogation room door swung open, and a moment later a female detective looked at her. "Is there a problem?"

Through the open doorway, she met Joy's gaze.

"We know each other," Janine said.

After a moment, Joy nodded.

"I just wanted to . . . I wanted to see . . ." Janine hesitated. "I thought you might need help."

The detective folded her arms. "We'll make sure she gets whatever she needs."

"I know but—" Janine looked at Joy. "You shouldn't be alone tonight."

She felt Joy's eyes flicker to the bandage at her temple. "Neither should you," Joy said.

\* \* \*