

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# Jodi Picoult

where there's  
smoke

A  
SHORT STORY

WHERE  
THERE'S  
SMOKE

*A Short Story*



JODI  
PICOULT



BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

*Where There's Smoke* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

2014 Ballantine eBook Edition

Copyright © 2014 by Jodi Picoult

Excerpt of *Leaving Time* copyright © 2014 by Jodi Picoult.

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Random House LLC, a Penguin Random House Company, New York.

BALLANTINE and the HOUSE colophon are registered trademarks of Random House LLC.

This eBook contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Leaving Time* by Jodi Picoult. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

eBook ISBN: 978-0-8041-8079-5

[www.ballantinebooks.com](http://www.ballantinebooks.com)

v3.1\_r1

# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Where There's Smoke*

*Other Books by This Author*

*About the Author*

*Excerpt from Leaving Time*

## SERENITY, 1993



When I was four years old, I kept telling my mother that the little boy in our house was stealing things. I should preface this by saying I was an only child—a precocious one at that. I also said I was going to live on the moon, invent glow-in-the-dark hair extensions, and marry Donny Osmond—so I understand why my mother didn’t believe me when I blamed an imaginary kid for my missing Barbie doll or the enamel snuffbox she’d inherited from her grandfather, which had up and vanished. As I recall, I may even have gotten a spanking for telling tales, when I knew damn well what I was saying was true.

Which was why, one day, when I peeked into my room and saw the boy—rifling through my bureau this time, his back to me—I tiptoed down the hall and dragged my mother to see with her own eyes.

I pointed through the open doorway at the boy. He was maybe six or seven, and he wasn’t dressed like me or any other kid I knew. He wore pants that ended at the knees and that seemed to be made out of the same black velvet as our Elvis painting in the living room; he had a lacy collar around his neck that would have gotten him teased for being a sissy if he set foot in my preschool class. “Hey,” I cried out, just as he pulled from the drawer a headband with pink daisies glued onto it, which happened to be my favorite.

His head whipped around. He looked me right in the eye. And then, when I blinked, he was gone.

“I *told* you so,” I said to my mother, but she wasn’t looking at the spot where the little boy had been. She was staring, wide-eyed, at me.

If this had been today, not the early seventies, I would probably have been shuttled off to a child psychiatrist and given some kick-ass medication. But my mother, who had the psychic ability God gave a sea cucumber, still was able to recognize what she had witnessed before in her own great-grandma, an Iroquois healer who had predicted the date and manner of death for every man she had ever courted. “Serenity,” she said, grasping my shoulders. “That boy’s not real.”

I just laughed at her. “He is to *me*,” I said.

That is how I sum up my career as a psychic. Just because you can’t see something doesn’t mean *I* don’t. I can’t explain it, I can’t understand it, and I can’t deny it.

So I sure as hell am not going to fight it.



I never meet the guests before the show. I have producers who make sure that they are comfortable, in greenrooms with elaborate fruit trays and a mini-fridge full of soda and fruit juice and mugs with the SERENITY! logo on the side, that they can take home as souvenirs. But I want the first interaction between us to be as undiluted as possible. This way, when I grasp the guest’s hand I get that first swirl of energy, that connection, and nothing else gets in the way.

Today, it is Bethany—the assistant to the assistant director’s assistant or some BS title like that—who knocks and sticks her head into my dressing room. She is small, mousy, and overwhelmed by everything from the line producer to the latte machine. She got this job through an uncle who’s an industry executive. When she opens the door, I can hear the buzz of the small studio audience. Unlike most talk shows, we do not just try to fill seats with the vagrants from Hollywood Boulevard.

We give members of our audience Breathalyzer tests to make sure they're sober; we do background checks. It's the only way I could possibly do televised readings; the link to the paranormal world is all about energy, and if the energy in a studio audience is messed up because of drugs or alcohol, it's harder for me to hear the spirits. Yet in spite of the hoops they must jump through to get in, we have a three-year waiting list of people who are dying to come to the show.

Not to mention a long list of those who are *already* dead.

"Sorry to interrupt, Serenity," she says. "We're five minutes away from filming."

I glance at her reflection in the full-length mirror, where I am taking stock of my signature pink hair, piled onto my head (the higher the hair, the closer to Jesus), my matching shantung suit jacket, and my Louboutin spike-heeled platforms. "Bethany," I ask. "What do you think of these shoes?"

I'm pretty sure they cost as much as her rent. "They're epic," she says.

"You don't think the red on the bottom clashes?"

"No one's going to see it," Bethany says, blushing. She's right about that. But *I'll* know. I'll also remember how, after my dad killed himself, my mother would have to declare Campbell's weeks, when all we ate was canned soup, until she could get her next paycheck. I'll remember that, and look at these shoes, and think of how fitting it is that this sixth sense I have is sometimes called a Gift.

I can feel Lucinda, one of my spirit guides, give me a psychic nudge, and I roll my eyes. "Bethany," I say and—although I rarely do this—read unbidden. "You're about to meet someone. He's from Finland ... Sweden ... somewhere up there where it's cold and there are

herrings and stuff. It's going to happen on a bus. When he asks you if you need help, even if you don't—say yes."

"I don't take the bus," Bethany says.

"Maybe you should," I suggest. "And maybe between stops you can think about how it's rude to look gift horses in the mouth."

Bethany gapes at me. Then she swallows and backs out of the room.

*Temper, child*, Lucinda says. She's a refined, elderly African-American woman.

My other guide is Desmond, a fierce, feisty gay man. I can hear him, too, laughing in the back recesses of my mind. *Someone woke up on the wrong side of the broom this morning.*

His thoughts immediately take me down a notch, which is—as usual—exactly what I need. He and Lucinda are my gatekeepers. I trust them to be guards, just like I pay Felix—who is roughly the size of Mount Everest—to be one here on earth. They're psychic sentinels, so if a spirit comes up and says, *I need to talk to Serenity*, they can say, *She's not in*. Without that, I'd have requests coming from both directions—this world and the next—24/7. I am willing to walk that dotted line between two metaphysical planes, but I need a filter. I don't want spirits popping through walls all day long and saying, "Ooh, there's my grandbaby, say hello for me."

I believe everyone has spirit guides—but not everyone bothers to start a conversation with them. Spirit guides have lived as humans. They have a soul level that's very evolved and have learned a lot of life lessons. (That's the goal, you know—keep graduating to the next level, until you have a soul that is as pure as it can be.) Anyway, spirit guides are entrusted to help those of us on earth—



not to tell us how to lead our lives, but to facilitate things between this world and the next. Desmond tells me all the time it's not his job to advise me on whether or not I should do a prime-time special; he's just here to pick me up when I'm thrown from the bucking bronco of life.

Desmond and Lucinda are the last people I speak to before I leave my dressing room to begin each show. "Let's do this," I challenge, the same thing I've said before every reading I've ever done—even way back when I was sitting in a tent in Old Orchard Beach, or accepting a call as a phone-in psychic on MetaphysiGals.com. Yes, now I have the second largest cable talk show in syndication; yes, now my mother lives in a bungalow not far from my own Malibu home and can eat caviar if she wants to instead of tomato soup; yes, now I am recognized on the street and asked for autographs, but really, I'm still the same girl who told a little ghost boy to stop raiding her drawers.

*That's what you think*, Desmond snarks, and then it's my cue to go onstage.



Today's guest is a woman from California named Betsey Rycroft. Her husband, a decorated war hero in the 3rd Infantry Division, had died in Karbala, Iraq, during the initial invasion of the war. The same day, Betsey had learned that she was pregnant. Now, several months later, Betsey is in the studio with her son—Jason Junior—in her arms and a desperate wish to reconnect with her late husband. America is feeling patriotic right now, and Marcy—my executive producer—believes a military-themed show will be a ratings booster for November sweeps.

The gospel choir that serves as the musical component of the show—six phenomenal ladies we call the Psy-Chicks—begins to harmonize the theme song, which is basically my name sung over and over. The audience

claps wildly. I step into the studio—which always looks so much smaller than it does on television—and do my signature backwards boogie. Then I smooth my hair and settle onto the white silk brocade couch. “Today’s guest,” I read from the teleprompter, “is a young mother whose husband, a national hero, sacrificed his life for the good of the country. Can I get everyone in this world and the next to welcome Betsey Rycroft?”

The widow looks too young to be a widow. Hell, she looks too young to be a *mother*. Her face makes me want to cut the crusts off a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for her, but she is here in a simple red jersey dress, holding Jason Junior. On the baby’s swaddling blanket, she has pinned her husband’s Purple Heart medal.

“Betsey,” I say, “I’m so sorry we’re meeting under these circumstances.”

Then I shake her hand.

I don’t need to touch someone to read them. I have had clients who live half a world away; I have done readings on the phone and even via email. In a way, I prefer those, because I’m not prejudging the client on the basis of what I see before my eyes.

As soon as I touch Betsey, I feel like my skin is being pelted with tiny arrows. I feel a roar of energy settling over my chest, making it hard to breathe.

That’s how I know I’ll have no problem at all contacting Betsey’s husband.

There are two types of spirits. One makes the transition to the spirit realm and goes on to whatever comes next. They can still come back to connect with people who are alive, but it’s like dropping by for a visit, and then they go back to whatever it is they were happily doing in the next life. On the other hand, earthbound spirits—ghosts—are folks who pass but still have unfinished business. They feel like they’re going to

be judged for something they did wrong; or they don't know they are dead; or they are angry about being dead and not getting to finish something. They have been cheated out of life. They stay on a plane that's closer to the plane of earth, and that's why they're always at the corners of our vision and the edges of our dreams. Once they complete the process and resign themselves to the fact that their time on earth is finished and they've done what they can do, they can move to the next level.

I'm willing to bet that Lieutenant Jason Rycroft hasn't strayed too far from this world.

I go through the motions: cooing over Jason Junior, asking Betsey to tell us how she met her husband, and what she hopes to get from today's reading. All the while, I feel like I'm swimming through a sea of broken glass.

My producers have put together a reel on Rycroft. While the audience is watching, I silently summon Desmond and Lucinda. *This is some weird shit*, Desmond mutters, and Lucinda agrees. *He won't talk to us*.

Well, but he's *there*, and that's a start. Besides, I have done readings for the families of dozens of servicemen who've died in the line of fire. When your life is cut short abruptly, there's an anger that swells, a bitter appetizer to any subsequent feeling. Jason Rycroft is such a strong, furious presence that I find myself tapping my foot to keep from bursting out with the message he has for his wife.

"Betsey," I say, "your husband is with me now."

The Psy-Chicks sing: *Hallelujah! Nooowwww!*

Betsey sits up a little straighter. "Is he ... how does he look?"

I can't tell you how often I get asked this—especially from the parents of kids who die in horrific car accidents, or those who saw someone waste away from

cancer. They just want to know that, in the afterlife, their loved one isn't walking around with a steering column through his chest or still hooked up to morphine. It's a strange question for me, because I don't always *see* the spirit; I just feel the presence and hear the voice. Now, though, there is so much pressure in my eardrums I think they might burst. He's yelling, if a spirit can yell.

*Calm the fuck down*, I say silently to Jason Rycroft. *Tell her something so she knows it's you.*

Usually when spirits come to connect with a loved one, they try to give me a picture of a memory they both have, as if to say, *See, I'm still me and I'm real.* (Because honestly, isn't that what we *all* want? To be real to someone?) They'll show me a roach and say, *It popped out of the sink once, and my wife nearly peed her pants.* Or they'll ask why she didn't wear the red jeans that make her butt look so sweet. Sometimes a spirit has a negative message: *Why are you fucking your life up with drugs? Why are you with a guy who doesn't treat you well?* But when people are hurting bad, whatever comes through me for them—however that connection happens—is positive.

"Does he know we have a son?" Betsey asks shyly.

*I should be there.*

The words are steeped with pain, so heavy that they fall like stones in my mind. It's a thought I didn't have, that has landed on the tip of my tongue all the same. That's what hearing a spirit feels like: an involuntary reflux. A hiccup. It's just there, and you can't make it go away.

"He says he should be here."

"I wish he was," Betsey replies. There are tears in her eyes. I don't have to look at Marcy dancing in the wings

to know that this is ratings gold. “How do I tell him I love him?” she asks.

“You just did,” I say.

I wait to see if I hear it back. I know that’s what Betsey’s waiting for. But sometimes, a client says “I love you” and I don’t hear a response. If that’s the case, I don’t lie.

Looks like Jason isn’t the type to express his feelings on national TV. He doesn’t say he loves his wife. He doesn’t say anything at all. Instead, those pricks of heat against my skin intensify, as if I’m being pelted. My throat is so scratchy that I can hardly breathe. I blink, and when I open my eyes, I see a tornado made of sand.

*This is how I died.*

“Your husband wants you to know how he passed away,” I repeat. “I think there was sand?”

All of a sudden I see a flash of lightning and hear thunder.

“A sandstorm,” I correct.

“Yes ... there was a battle during a sandstorm. The army told me he saved his whole platoon by holding off rebel fighters.” Betsey fingers the Purple Heart pinned to her baby’s blanket.

Jason isn’t speaking to me anymore. He’s madder than a one-legged lady at an IHOP, and he’s bombarding me with images: a desert dry as bone, sand whipping in a cyclone around him. The shouts and screams of soldiers, who are barely visible in their camouflage, as the storm rages. The sight of the enemy, getting not closer but more distant. The hoarse message, ripped from his own throat, that the Iraqis are retreating. The gun barrel that suddenly glinted in front of him. The blood that bloomed on his chest, and the pain of his arm being

ripped away. The man who leaned over him; the strip of fabric on his uniform that read FERREIRA.

I don't realize I've said that last bit out loud until Betsey interrupts. "Captain Ferreira?" she repeats. "That was Jason's CO. He carried Jason's body back to safety. He wrote me a letter and told me how Jason had died a hero."

*LIAR.*

I learned a long time ago not to edit the material I've been given, and I'm not accountable for the reaction it causes. "Your husband wants you to know that Captain Ferreira is a liar," I say flatly.

Understandably, Betsey looks confused. So am I. In my mind Jason is throwing up images of his bleeding chest, and Ferreira's name tag, and a rifle. Over and over.

*You stupid bitch, I hear.*

I am trying to decide if this is a message for me or for Betsey when something so different pops into my head—and onto my taste buds—that I freeze in place. If my senses are right, Jason Rycroft is trying to get me to think of a Fribble.

"Am I getting this right? Do Fribbles mean something to you?" I ask Betsey.

"Fribbles? Like the milk shake they have at Friendly's?"

"Exactly ..."

She bites her lip. "I don't even eat ice cream," she says. "I'm lactose intolerant...."

Just then, a light in the studio blows and the glove of one of the grips goes up in flames.

Alarms go off. Someone grabs a fire extinguisher and sprays the grip, who has dropped his equipment and is

rolling on the floor, shrieking in pain. People in the studio audience start screaming, and the baby wakes up and does the same. The Psy-Chicks kick off their heels and run. Marcy races onstage to shepherd Betsey to safety as Bethany appears out of nowhere and grabs my arm, trying to drag me along with them.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, in spite of all this horror, I think: *It's good TV.*

That's what I'm still thinking when I keep Betsey's shoulder in a death grip and deliver the message I have for her before the cameras stop rolling.

"Friendly fire," I say. "Your husband wants you to know he was killed by his own captain."



By the time the fire department has cleared the building and we've gotten rid of the news cameras and Cliff, the grip, has been treated for second-degree burns on his hand, it is nighttime. Marcy is nowhere to be found—the producer has gone to talk to Cliff's family, or give him a huge bonus, or a trip to Disney World or something to keep him from suing us. My bodyguard, Felix, drives me home and walks me into my house. "Can I get you anything, Miz S?" he asks. "You've had a pretty tough day."

I shake my head. All I want right now is a big old glass of Cabernet Sauvignon and to put the last twenty-four hours behind me.

He disappears into the woodwork, like my housekeeper and my landscapers (they are so good at it, in fact, that I've sometimes wondered if I've mistakenly hired ghosts instead of humans. If I hadn't seen Felix once flatten a crazy-ass stalker who thought she was my long-lost sister and was willing to jump me to tell me so, I would still have my doubts.) Then I light a magnolia-scented candle, pour myself some wine, kick off my

heels, and put my feet up on the kitchen table—a handmade piece from Tuscany carved of olive wood.

“Well,” I say out loud to Desmond and Lucinda. “You two are being awfully quiet.”

*You made that reading about you, not about her,* Desmond answers.

I scoff. “I was doing my job.”

*You were trying to get ratings,* he replies.

“I didn’t set that damn fire,” I point out.

Lucinda, who is always the peacemaker, steps forward. *I think Desmond is just reminding you to ask yourself why you’ve been given a Gift.*

*FYI, the answer isn’t “So I can buy a château in France,”* Desmond snipes.

I’ve had just about enough of them for the night. “Why don’t you two get lost?” I snap.

Just like that, they’re gone. I can feel it in my chest—a lightness, as if I’ve just hung up a Gone Fishing sign and I’m no longer responsible for anyone else’s problems. I take a long drink of my wine and try to taste the flavors that *Wine Spectator* raved about and that made it score so high (and cost so damn much). Oak and chocolate and filigree (is that even a flavor?) and woodsmoke.

I think I can taste the chocolate in the wine, and I definitely smell the woodsmoke. But that’s because the bottom of my kitchen table is on fire.

I jump up so fast that my glass of wine shatters on the floor. The commotion brings Felix running into the kitchen, his gun drawn. When he sees the flames licking their way down the legs of the table, he grabs a fire extinguisher from a spot near the oven and hoses down the entire piece of furniture.



“You okay, Miz S?” he asks.

I check myself over, but I already know I’m fine. “Just a little shaken, Felix,” I tell him. “Must have been the candle.”

He nods and picks up the entire table as if it is a stick of kindling. “I’ll just put this out in the yard so’s it don’t stink up the house.”

“Thank you,” I tell him.

I consider cleaning up the broken glass but decide to leave it for the housekeeper in the morning. Instead, I walk to the master suite, strip off my clothes, and run the shower as hot as I can. It’s a cavernous shower, tiled with pearly marble. I stick a plastic cap over my hair and step inside.

The hot water loosens the knots in my shoulders, and gradually I start to let the day’s stress sluice down the drain. I close my eyes, replaying what happened in the studio today, wondering if we will be on the *E! News* broadcast tonight.

As if I’m back in the moment, I can feel the heat from the flames that burst from the broken studio light. But then I realize that the wall of fire is right here with me, in the shower. The two Turkish towels, hung within reach, are blazing.

Instinctively, I yank them off their hooks into the spray of the water. They fall on the floor, flames extinguished, smoking under my feet.

A realization comes to me, quicker than a bee-stung mare.

There are certain earthbound spirits that have no way to expend their energy or anger. They are often associated with teenage girls, who are formed of pure drama, or with those who’ve died in vain. They have been known to manipulate the elements of the earth—water, fire, wind, dust—to make their presence known.

Just my goddamn luck: Lieutenant Jason Rycroft is a poltergeist.



That night, I don't get a lot of sleep, because I'm convinced that my quilt will combust and I'll get toasted like a pig in a blanket. So I wear my sunglasses to the studio the next morning and don't take them off, not even when I am told that Betsey Rycroft has left six phone messages or when Marcy comes at me, furious, with a stack of morning newspapers.

They all show the debacle in the studio yesterday. The headlines accuse me of being antiwar, anti-American, a traitor.

I smile feebly at my producer. "All press is good press, right?"

She crosses her arms. "It's not funny, Serenity. Cliff's out on disability and I'm buttering his family up one side and down the other, because Warner Brothers has strongly informed me they don't want their lawyers to have to get involved. And if that isn't enough, I got a call from the freaking head of the House Judiciary Committee."

"The what?"

"*House* as in the *House of Representatives*," Marcy continues. "They used to be called the House Committee on Un-American Activities and they investigated citizens who seemed to be doing subversive things. They wanted to know why you burned a bra your junior year in college."

"It wasn't because I was protesting a war," I say. "There wasn't even one to protest!" I whip off my sunglasses and wince at the light. "Marcy, I support our troops!"

"Well, that's not the way it looked yesterday. The government's invading a country and you go spouting

off about friendly fire—”

“And today everyone and his brother is talking about the *Serenity!* show,” I interrupt. “Remind me *why* this is a bad thing?” I look down at the pink slips in my hand. “Betsey Rycroft is calling.”

“Well, for God’s sake, don’t call her back. The last thing we need is for her to go on *Entertainment Tonight* saying you’re going to help her unveil some military scandal.” Marcy is pacing. Today her beautiful braids are piled high on her head; she’s the one who takes me to get my hair done at the same place she’s gone to for years. I’m the sole white girl in the salon when I go, and I love it. Odalie, my stylist, custom-blends my signature shade of pink. “What you need to do is a show that glorifies an American hero,” Marcy murmurs. “Something that will take the heat off this episode.”

“No pun intended,” I say.

But she isn’t listening. Over my head, she’s staring at the television in my dressing room, which is tuned to *Good Morning America*. Joan Lunden has on Senator John McCoy and his wife, Ginny, and they are talking about their son, Henry, a seven-year-old who was kidnapped brazenly from the playground of his private school in Bethesda a week ago.

I look at the senator—a golden boy whose name’s been swirling around as a Democratic Party presidential candidate. He has good hair, straight teeth, a pretty wife, and a cute kid—everything you need to get elected in this country. But all that and a trust fund couldn’t get him his baby back. The FBI had taken the case over from the local cops, and seven days had gone by with not a trace of the boy or a single ransom note. Someone who didn’t know how to read people as carefully as I do might not notice how brittle Ginny McCoy’s features had become; how the senator had to process Joan Lunden’s

questions for an extra beat, as if he were a foreigner who did not speak this language.

“Now that,” I muse, “is a tragedy. What happened yesterday, by comparison, is just a little speed bump.” I don’t often trouble Marcy with my personal life, but I lean forward. “You’re not going to believe what happened to my kitchen table last—”

“That’s it,” Marcy says, snapping her fingers. “You’re going to find the senator’s son. And then you’ll be America’s favorite psychic again.”

I don’t like forensic work, even though I’ve done it before. I used to put on the booties and walk into a blood-spattered room and open myself up to get an action that might have gone on in there, a movement or sight or sound or smell or impression, or even which way a perp entered the room. But now, even if I get an impression about a missing kid, I don’t call investigators to tell them so. A lot of pseudo-psychics do that, but it’s not about the kid. It’s about the psychic getting fame. I just don’t have a dog in that fight.

I hear a snort, and I know immediately it is Desmond.

I am sick of his attitude, and I want to show him who’s boss. So I turn to Marcy. “Justine Fawker,” I say. “You remember her, don’t you?”

Marcy’s eyes light up. “The only time we beat Cleo in the ratings.”

This is true, and it was quite an upset, since Cleo was the one who gave me my own show. She was a TV personality with a higher international Q Score than the Pope and the President combined. When Cleo was photographed in *US Weekly* reading a book, it sold out in bookstores. When Cleo invited an unknown singer on her talk show, her single flew up the *Billboard* charts. I’d been invited to do a reading for her, and the episode won her an Emmy. In return, she gave me a spin-off.

Justine Fawker had been a cold case—a little girl who'd been abducted when she was eleven, and who'd long been presumed dead. After having her mother on my show, and getting a very firm response from the spirit world that Justine was not among them, we scheduled a live episode where, with Desmond's and Lucinda's help, I led the police to the home of a postal worker who had a secret soundproof cell in his basement—and had kept Justine caged in it for eight years.

“You swore to me you'd never go live again,” Marcy says. “You said it gave you hives in unmentionable places.”

“This is true,” I tell her. “But I'd do anything to help the McCoy's find their boy.”

I do want to help that poor family, truly I do. However, it's also occurred to me that this might potentially land me my own Emmy.

Marcy taps her pen against her teeth. “He's not going to want to come on a show like ours,” she muses. “He's more of a *Larry King Live* kind of guy.”

I hadn't considered this. Asking a dignified politician to come on a daytime talk show about ghosts is hopeless. But then I remember that the woman who'd introduced me to Cleo in the first place was a politician's wife I'd met in Maine. I'd diagnosed her daughter's cancer before doctors could, and she was forever grateful. I still get Christmas cards from her and the governor, and she still writes on them, *If there's ever anything I can do for you*.

I tell Marcy my plan. If this woman makes a call to Ginny McCoy, maybe she can convince her husband to come on my show.

Marcy, I can tell, is impressed by the way my brain works. “It's a small world,” she says.

“Yes indeed,” I reply, “but I still wouldn’t want to paint it.”

By the time Marcy leaves my dressing room, I know she’s not even thinking of Jason Rycroft anymore. But I am, because just as she closes the door behind herself, my curling iron shorts out with a shower of sparks.



We are all psychic to a degree. How many times do you walk into a room and just *know* there’s tension in there? How many times have you thought about an old friend, and then she calls? Or had a dream about your grandma and you wake up and find the lost earring you inherited from her? It’s like making a psychic telephone call: you send energy into the universe, and it comes back to you.

I get asked all the time what it’s like in the next world. Well, it’s the same, and it’s not the same. For one thing, it’s less dense. You might find yourself still living in your apartment with the same creaky door and dripping faucet, for example—we tend to settle in the reality we know. But once you’re a spirit, there’s no physical resistance. You won’t be able to turn off the leaky faucet; you can swim through the creaky door without making a sound. There is no three-dimensional plane; there is no sense of time. You want to be somewhere? Bam, you’re there. You need to do something next Tuesday? Bam, it’s Tuesday.

Yes, spirits have sex, and no, I’m not telling you how. But even in the spirit world there are emotions and free will. The same things that trip you up as a human will tie you in knots as a spirit, if you don’t let go and let God.

Speaking of God, He’s real and He’s there, too. And don’t ask what He looks like because you wouldn’t understand even if I told you.

There’s just some things none of us are supposed to know, until it’s our time.



By the time that Senator and Ginny McCoy come to my show, Betsey Rycroft has left seven more messages for me, and Jason Rycroft has burned the curtains in my living room, my grilled cheese sandwich, and a big fat hole in the butt of my favorite pink dress. I attempt to contact him, but Desmond and Lucinda are clearly trying to teach me a lesson and they've gone AWOL.

“If you can hear me,” I say out loud to the poltergeist that has literally consumed my life for the past two days, “it would be lovely if you could take a break for a while.”

Bethany comes in to give me my five-minute warning as I am wondering if my St. John jacket is flammable. “You might want to have a fire hose on standby,” I tell her.

“Oh, buildings and grounds checked all the wiring,” she assures me. “We are a hundred percent safe.”

*Sure, I think. As long as you don't figure in a spirit with a chip on his shoulder.*

This show we are doing without a studio audience, a request from the McCoy camp out of deference to their status and their suffering. But really, it doesn't matter. It's a tiny snippet that will be played before we go live wherever the spirits tell me Henry McCoy can be found.

I notice absently that my new couch is purple; the white one must have been stained by the fire extinguisher. I also notice that the McCoys are already sitting when I come onstage. But even before I get close enough to see their faces, I know something isn't right.

The link between the spirit world and our world is made of collusions of energy. If you do a reading at an event and the energy is all discombobulated, it can affect the connection, so to speak. It's why we screen our studio audience as if they're applying for

government jobs, and it's why there's never any alcohol on the set.

But right now, there is, and it's swimming through the bloodstream of Senator John McCoy. And not to be outdone, his wife seems so doped up on antianxiety meds she probably couldn't find her face with her own two hands.

*Let's do this*, I say to Desmond and Lucinda, and all I hear in my head is the chirp of crickets.

Drawing in my breath, I walk to the couch and shake hands with the politician. His grip is firm and solid; his blond hair with just a hint of silver threaded through is smooth; his smile does not reach his eyes. His wife's handshake, however, is not a shake but rather a limp press, as if she has already made the colossal effort to get out of bed and this is truly the best she can do. "I'm so sorry for your suffering," I say, and I mean it. No one should ever have to go through what they have. "Are you ready to get started?"

"Wait," Ginny McCoy says. "We're not on camera yet, are we?"

I shake my head.

"My parents lived by themselves until they died in their nineties. Every night at ten P.M. exactly, my dad would turn off the television, and they'd go to bed. After my dad passed, I went to stay with my mom for a few weeks, to help her adjust. A few days after the funeral, we were sitting and watching TV when suddenly it shut off, at ten P.M. on the dot. I tried fussing with the remote and with the buttons on the TV itself, but I couldn't get that thing to turn back on no matter what. The next morning, it was working just like normal again."

"Ginny." Senator McCoy sighs, and she cuts him a look that could slice a diamond.



“I tell you this,” she says fiercely, “because I want you to know that I believe in what you do. I believe it’s possible. In case that makes a difference, I thought you should know.”

I look her in the eye, and nod. *Desmond*, I think. *Lucinda? Don’t let me hang this poor couple out to dry.*

The Psy-Chicks sing the theme song, and then a little clip rolls that I pretaped, explaining the disappearance of Henry McCoy. The camera closes in on me. “We’re here today with Senator McCoy and his wife, Ginny. Welcome.”

They both murmur something appropriate.

“It’s been a week since your son disappeared,” I say. “Yet there haven’t been any leads?”

“If there were,” McCoy says, “would I be here?”

Ginny grabs his hand and squeezes it, a warning. “We’re grateful to anyone and anything that can bring Henry home,” she corrects.

“And I’m hoping to be that person,” I say.

I open my heart and my head to the universe, and wait for a sign. I am listening with every fiber of my being for Desmond’s and Lucinda’s voices. I see Marcy waiting in the wings, holding her breath in anticipation of whatever I’m about to say. When nothing comes at first, she makes eye contact with me and signals with her hand: *Hurry, already.*

People who don’t have the Gift don’t realize you can’t turn it on and off like a tap. It’s hard, all the time, even when we make it look easy. But getting agitated isn’t going to help me clear the space I need to get a feeling from the other side.

I know that what the McCoy’s want to hear is that their son is alive, although after the Justine Fawker case I would be the first to tell you there are monsters in this

world who make that option less than optimal. If Henry McCoy is alive, God only knows what he's suffered. But if I cannot give them that peace of mind, I hope to at least let them talk to their little boy, if he's crossed over. To let them know he wasn't alone when he went.

It's true that when it's time to go, someone will be waiting for you. It might be a relative or a loved one, but not always. It could be a dog, hanging out with a tennis ball and ready to play again. Sometimes, when children die, they don't know any of their relatives who are on the other side, so they'll have an angel or even maybe a cartoon character or Santa Claus waiting to pull them across that bridge. It's just a manifestation of energy saying, "Come on, baby, it's okay."

I try to determine if Henry might have transitioned that way. Then I ask, silently, for Henry to come talk to his mother. Usually, I don't have to try too hard to connect with child spirits—they've been looking all over the place for their parents and are thrilled to step up to the metaphorical microphone. They are desperate to say, *I chose you to be my mom, and I couldn't have made a better decision. Or I'm sorry I had to leave the way I did. Or I died, and you didn't, so you have to go on living.*

I'll tell you, those kinds of readings are the ones that break my heart.

But I do not hear a peep from Henry on the other side, and I do not hear anything from Desmond or Lucinda suggesting his whereabouts.

I have prided myself all my life on not being a swamp witch—the kind of faux psychic who does cold readings not through any paranormal connection but by reading the expressions and body language of her client. There's the Barnum effect—where you say something that would apply to everyone on the planet: *You suffered a great loss as a child. Or You're conflicted about an important decision in your life.* Most of the time, the client

will hurry to explain what you've said. Give them the rope, and let them hang themselves. There's shotgunning, where you just spit out a stream of things and see what resonates with the client: *I'm getting a B, maybe an H, I think it's a man, someone in your family who died of cancer?* Again, people who come to psychics are desperate. They'll hang meaning on a statement if you give them the tiniest hook on which to do it. There's what I call the flimflam, where you make a statement with the opposite included: *You're usually a very confident person, but something has you rattled.* Either way, then, you're right.

I take a deep breath and look at Ginny McCoy. "You and your son were especially close."

She nods, teary, and immediately I feel like a charlatan. I mean, what mother of a missing child would admit to anything less?

"I'm getting a C, or an S—it's the name of someone close to Henry. A playmate, maybe, or a teacher?"

"Could it be a G?" she asks. "His teacher is Mrs. Gottfried."

And the poor woman is probably now under investigation by the FBI, thanks to me. I shift in my seat.

Then suddenly I hear Lucinda whisper, *Ocala. Bus—*

*Shut up,* Desmond reprimands her. *She told us to get lost.*

But you can't unring a bell. I turn to the McCoy's with a dazzling smile. "Senator McCoy," I say, "I have had a *vision.*"

The Psy-Chicks sing the word with a hundred extra syllables, a gospel hallelujah.

Ginny's face has gone white as paper. "Is he—"

"A vision of your little boy ... alive and well," I tell her. "He's in Ocala."

She collapses into her husband's arms and starts to cry so hard she cannot catch her breath.

Senator McCoy looks absolutely stunned. "What—what happens now?"

"We go to Florida," I say.

"That's a wrap," my director says, and I stand up.

Marcy comes over, clapping, drawing me away from the McCoy's. "Amazing. This is going to be incredible."

I hesitate, wondering if I should tell her that things were not calibrated the way they usually are when I have a paranormal experience. The energy was off, because of the substances the McCoy's were taking. Hell's bells, the energy was off because my spirit guides were madder than a wet cat. At the very least, I should let her know that calling my vision a vision is a stretch of the word. But Marcy is a model of efficiency, barking orders and directives. She has already arranged for a skeleton crew to follow us, reality-TV style, to Florida. McCoy has called over his chief of staff and is telling him to get the private jet ready. (Of course he has a private jet. But then, maybe after this airs, I'll have one, too.)

"When do we leave?" I ask Marcy.

"Now," she says. "Go get what you need."

All I need is Desmond and Lucinda, but if they don't want to join me on this journey, there's nothing I can do to make them. I can only hope that's not the case.

So I walk down the hall to pick up my purse and my coat, Felix stalking me like a shadow, and when I'm in the dressing room wiping the stage makeup off my face, I say, "I'm sorry, all right? I didn't mean it. I need you two."

Before they can answer, however, my cell phone rings with a call from a blocked number. "This is Serenity," I

say.

“I know.” There’s a beat of silence. “Why didn’t you take my calls?”

“Betsey?” I guess correctly. “Where did you get this number?”

“It’s not important,” she replies. “What you said the other day, about Jason and how he died—”

“Look, I’m sorry,” I interrupt. “But I gave you the message. That’s my job. I’m not supposed to go burn a flag in front of the White House or force the military to look into what happened—”

“That’s just it,” Betsey says. “The army, they keep calling me. They want to sit down and just have a little chat.”

“Well, that seems to be what Jason wanted.”

“*What about what I want?*” she cries. “I came to you because I needed to know that he loved me. That he was with me the day I gave birth to JJ. That he died thinking of my face. That he died a *hero*, not because of some *accident*.” She spits out that last word like it is poison. “I lost my husband. I should get to hold on to my memories of him, don’t you think?”

I am taken aback. “I ... I don’t know what you want me to say.” I’d just told her what her husband wanted her to know.

“How about that you’re sorry,” Betsey says. “For ruining my life.”

I hang up the phone, my hand shaking. I don’t have to turn around to know that behind me, the wastebasket full of tissues I’d used when I was taking off my makeup has caught on fire.

I take a vase full of lilies, yank out the flowers, and pour the water into the trash receptacle just as Felix knocks. I open the door to find him sniffing at the smoke

and hand him my cell phone. “Get me a new unlisted number,” I say, and I walk down the hallway to the limo that will take me to Senator McCoy’s plane.



The number one question I’m asked is if a person will reunite with a loved one, after death.

Well, I hate to pee in your Cheerios, but it doesn’t work that way. The afterlife is all about overlapping planes. We all live in the same physical space, but on different metaphysical levels, and someone who’s passed before you might have reached a consciousness you haven’t yet. Take Romeo and Juliet, for example. The sad truth is, they’re probably not together in the afterlife. Romeo dies because of someone else’s initial mistake—Friar Lawrence relying on the Verona postal service, when we all know they’re freaking government employees and delivery’s not guaranteed. Juliet, though, stabs herself, in the hope that she can be with Romeo again. Clearly, she messed up in this life. She’s going to have to deal with that in the soul world, and because of this, she is far more likely to bump into Friar Lawrence—who’s got his own mess to atone for—than into Romeo.

Trust me. Before that big sweeping romantic reunion, Juliet has to figure out what she did wrong.



Dealing with the paranormal is like wading into a dark, murky swamp. You may get bit in the ass by an alligator. But you’re going to go in there like you’re a crocodile hunter and do it anyway.

That’s what I’m thinking as I sweat through my pantsuit in the bus terminal in Ocala, Florida, hoping that Desmond or Lucinda will offer me a morsel of direction.

I begin to make bargains.

*If you let me find Henry, I will never think of anyone but my clients again.*

*If you let me find Henry, I will never disrespect you.*

*If you let me find Henry, I will let any spirit who has a message speak through me without setting any parameters. Any time of day or night.*

All this time I'd bitched and moaned about setting limits so that the paranormal chatter didn't overtake my life, and it turns out that the only thing more terrifying than endless cacophony is absolute and utter silence from the other side.

The cameras are rolling. Later, we would find out that we'd had over a 7.6 Nielsen syndicated rating—higher than *Cleo!*, higher even than *Wheel of Fortune*—more than twenty million people had gathered to watch this episode's live feed. Also, because this is an open police case, we are accompanied by some of Ocala's finest and a police dog. "He's here," I say, when we reach the bus station. "I can feel it."

This is a bald lie.

With the McCoys in tow, I start walking, my hand held out before me like a divining rod. But really, I'm just doing that so that the police dog sniffs at my fingers, and maybe tracks a scent I can then follow. I turn a corner, and then another and another, until we are standing right back where we started.

*Please, I beg silently. Let me find the boy.*

I start out again tentatively, turning down a hallway I haven't yet treaded. The cameras, and the McCoys, follow.

At the end of the hallway is the men's room. Beside me, the dog pulls on its leash. "This way," I cry.

I cannot believe I'm doing cold readings on a dog.

"The bathroom?" Ginny cries. "Is he in there? Henry?"

She starts to run, but before she can, the dog breaks free on its leash. It runs to the entrance of the bathroom and feints to the left, sniffing at a bank of lockers.

The first one the dog touched was number 341. I point to it and turn to a cop. "Break the lock," I say, and as soon as they do we all fall back from the stink of decaying flesh.

My field of vision narrows, and stars burst at the edges. Everything is going black as I lean down, brace my hands on my knees, and vomit.

What happens next explodes like fireworks before my eyes: The locker door opens. The stained suitcase is revealed, still seeping blood. The police dog's tail is wagging madly. The way Ginny slumps to the ground and no one notices; the cameraman stumbling forward; the senator screaming in slow motion for him to turn the fucking camera off and the brawl that ensues.

I walk away from the fray, from the body of that poor boy and his grieving parents. People grab at my sleeve as I go, and I hear Felix call out my name, but I move blindly through the crowd searching for air. I find it by ducking into a stairwell and running up to the roof of the building, where I stand under the splintered sun and sob.

I am crying so hard I almost don't hear it.

Desmond's voice, a whisper.

*Be careful what you wish for.*



My show is put on hiatus, but I am not the only one in free fall. Senator McCoy gets pulled over for drunk driving and assaults a cop. Ginny is found unconscious in the bathtub, and although everything is hush-hush, Page Six reports a whopping combo of sedatives and alcohol in her system. I am a punch line on Letterman's top ten list, when, just a year ago, I told him he needed



to beef up his security and a week later two men were arrested trying to break into his house.

I ask Felix to drive me in to the studio to get something in my dressing room, but in reality, I am going to clear it out. I don't have to talk to Marcy to know that my show—and my career—is over.

I take a box, and I am in the process of stuffing all my personal items into it when Bethany comes in. "I'm not here," I tell her. "You never saw me."

She is beaming. "I just had to tell you. Last week? When ... everything ... happened and Marcy sent us all home early, my car died. It was, like, the worst day of my life. I had to take the bus home ... and this lady bumped into me with her kid's stroller and she knocked my computer bag over and all my stuff fell out. And I was trying to keep all my stuff from rolling down the aisle and I was really pissed off at that lady, who didn't even say I'm sorry, when this guy started gathering my pens and my sunglasses and everything. I was mortified." She hesitates. "His name is Charles. He wasn't from Finland or Norway. But he *was* eating a cheese Danish, and we talked the whole way home."

I force a smile. "I'm happy for you." I pick up the box and walk around her.

"I just wanted you to know that," Bethany says, to my back. "I wanted you to know I totally believe in you."

I don't turn around. "That means a lot to me," I murmur, and I wonder how long it will be before the world is divided into those who remember when I had a Gift, and those who know categorically that I don't.



When I get home the fire department is in front of my house, hosing down the bushes that line my driveway, which are blazing. Felix shakes his head. "Miz S," he says. "The Big Guy up there needs to cut you a break."

At this point, I'm practically expecting things to burst into flame around me. Don't think I haven't noticed the irony, either, of a psychic who's lost her mojo yet is haunted by a poltergeist. I get out of the car and talk to one of the firemen. He's old, older than me, with weathered brown skin that looks like he's spent too much time being toasted by blazes like this one. "It's the drought," he tells me, as his colleagues spray a wall of water, destroying the landscaping that cost as much as a sedan. "Your lawn isn't the first to go up in flames."

He tells me that I really shouldn't go into the house until it's been cleared as safe. Felix asks me if I'd like to drive around the block a few times or go out to dinner, but I shake my head. Instead, I wander through the gate to the backyard, where I have a little tranquillity pool and a rock garden that are meant to be all Buddhist and soothing but that, in reality, I am way too busy to enjoy. In the middle of it, on an expanse of smooth white pebbles, is the charred kitchen table that Felix removed last week.

I sit down on a wrought-iron chair and stare at it.

It's funny, how fast life changes. One minute you are present, and the next, you might find yourself futilely trying to get back to the world you were once part of. You might find yourself looking for people who can no longer hear you. You are in the world, but not of it.

I might as well be a ghost.

Last week, I was famous.

This week, if I speak, no one will listen.

Last week, I was rich.

This week, I'd trade everything I own for one genuine psychic thought.

I have spent a lifetime telling the living to appreciate the people you love, because you run out of time sooner than you think. I have made a career, in fact, out of

providing five more minutes for those who didn't listen to me. And now, I understand intimately how you don't realize what you have until you lose it. Maybe holding something precious at a distance is the only way to measure its value.

The fireman I have been speaking to opens the gate and takes a seat beside me. He smells of creosote and char. When he smiles, his face pleats over and over, laugh lines like origami. "Miz Jones," he says. "Could I ask you a few questions?"

"So you know who I am," I murmur.

"Right now *everyone* knows who you are," he says bluntly. "But I knew before. I used to watch your show when I was on disability for a bad back last year." He clasps his hands between his knees. "Twenty-something years ago I got a phone call one night from my son. We'd been estranged for a while—he'd gotten messed up with a bad gang in L.A. The line was scratchy, I could barely hear him. He said he wanted me to know he loved me, and he was sorry for screwing up his life."

"That's considerate."

"No, it was terrifying. Because my son had been murdered three days earlier in a drug deal gone bad. We'd buried him that afternoon."

"You sure it was your son?"

He gives me a look. "I don't have to convince *you*, do I?"

*Do you?* I wonder.

"I'm just saying, if you've had contact with a spirit, you believe. If you don't, one day you will. You know what I mean?"

"Yes. Skeptics keep the rest of us honest."

The fireman nods, considering this. "You smoke?"

“No.”

“Any of your household staff smoke?”

“No.”

“Anyone got a grudge against you?”

“Um,” I say. “The entire Democratic Party?”

He laughs. “I don’t know if they’d try to burn your house down.”

“You think this was arson?”

He shakes his head. “I think it was bad luck, and dry conditions. But I have to do my due diligence and ask.” The fireman notices the kitchen table, its blackened legs and scarred top. “What happened there?”

I smile faintly. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

“I think I have a poltergeist in my house. A really angry ghost who likes to make his presence known by burning things. He used to be a lieutenant in the army, and he was killed by friendly fire, but the story was changed to make him look like a hero rather than give another soldier a bad rap.”

The fireman looks up at the sky, which is the color of a bruise, with stars just beginning to wink back at us. “Hey, listen,” he says, and I realize he is addressing my poltergeist. “I’m a vet, too. Nam. So I get it. The things that happen over there are things that don’t belong in this world *or* the next. Sometimes life isn’t fair. And I guess sometimes the afterlife isn’t, either. But don’t blame this nice lady.”

We both sit for a moment. I don’t know what we’re waiting for. A sign, maybe? A hint that those words might make the difference mine couldn’t. “Well,” the fireman says. “I don’t know if that helped.”

“Couldn’t hurt,” I reply.

He grins. “You have a nice, uneventful night, Ms. Jones.” He holds out his hand.

“Thank you ... um, Officer ...” I hesitate, realizing I do not know this man’s name, or his title.

“Captain,” he says, his grasp warm and strong. “Captain Ferreira.”



Although my home is now officially safe, I don’t go inside. Instead I take a mink throw from the couch and wrap it around my shoulders; I carry my open bottle of red wine out to the backyard and drink directly from it. I sit in the wrought-iron chair as night whispers in my ear and binds my wrists and ankles.

Sometimes, the universe gives you a sign. Like when a spirit only wants you to tell the truth about his death, and you finally do, and the guy you confess to has the same name as his murderer. That’s a synchronicity I can’t ignore, and I know it was meant to tell me something. Once, I might have been able to read the message clearly. Now, it’s just chicken scratch on the wall of the cosmos.

“Let’s do this,” I whisper shortly after two in the morning. My call to arms, my invitation to the spirits. But there is only the echo of my own doubt, and then nothing.

Because of the utter silence, this time I am able to hear its inception: the tiniest lick and crackle, the splinter of wood as the moisture inside it heats to force a fissure. The table burns like a bonfire, like something primeval and sacred. But this time, I don’t run for water. I don’t try to put it out.

Sometimes, all you can do is watch things burn, and wait for the ash to settle.

ALSO BY JODI PICOULT

*The Storyteller*

*Lone Wolf*

*Sing You Home*

*House Rules*

*Handle with Care*

*Change of Heart*

*Nineteen Minutes*

*The Tenth Circle*

*Vanishing Acts*

*My Sister's Keeper*

*Second Glance*

*Perfect Match*

*Salem Falls*

*Plain Truth*

*Keeping Faith*

*The Pact*

*Mercy*

*Picture Perfect*

*Harvesting the Heart*

*Songs of the Humpback Whale*

FOR YOUNG ADULTS

*Between the Lines*

AND FOR THE STAGE

*Over the Moon: An Original Musical for Teens*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jodi Picoult is the author of twenty-one novels, including the #1 *New York Times* bestsellers *Lone Wolf*, *Between the Lines*, *Sing You Home*, *House Rules*, *Handle with Care*, *Change of Heart*, *Nineteen Minutes*, and *My Sister's Keeper*. She lives in New Hampshire with her husband and three children.

If you enjoyed meeting Serenity in *Where There's Smoke ...* you won't want to miss her appearance in Jodi Picoult's new novel

*Leaving Time.*

Coming in hardcover and eBook in October 2014

For more than a decade, Jenna Metcalf has never stopped thinking about her mother, Alice, who mysteriously disappeared in the wake of a tragic accident. Refusing to believe that she would be abandoned as a young child, Jenna searches for her mother regularly online and pores over the pages of Alice's old journals. A scientist who studied grief among elephants, Alice wrote mostly of her research among the animals she loved, yet Jenna hopes the entries will provide a clue to her mother's whereabouts. As Jenna's memories dovetail with the events in her mother's journals, the story races to a mesmerizing finish. A deeply moving, gripping, and intelligent page-turner, *Leaving Time* is Jodi Picoult at the height of her powers.

Read on for an excerpt ...



## JENNA



When it comes to memory, I'm kind of a pro. I may only be thirteen, but I've studied it the way other kids my age devour fashion magazines. There's the kind of memory you have about the world, like knowing that stoves are hot and that if you don't wear shoes outside in the winter you'll get frostbite. There's the kind you get from your senses—that staring at the sun makes you squint and that worms aren't the best choice of meal. There are the dates you can recall from history class and spew back on your final exam, because they matter (or so I'm told) in the grand scheme of the universe. And there are personal details you remember, like the high spikes on a graph of your own life, which matter to nobody but yourself. Last year at school, my science teacher let me do a whole independent study on memory. Most of my teachers let me do independent studies, because they know I get bored in class and, frankly, I think they're a little scared that I know more than they do and they don't want to have to admit it.

My first memory is white at the edges, like a photo taken with too bright a flash. My mother is holding spun sugar on a cone, cotton candy. She raises her finger to her lips—*This is our secret*—and then tears off a tiny piece. When she touches it to my lips, the sugar dissolves. My tongue curls around her finger and sucks hard. *Iswidi*, she tells me. *Sweet*. This is not my bottle; it's not a taste I know, but it's a good one. Then she leans down and kisses my forehead. *Uswidi*, she says. *Sweetheart*.

I can't be more than nine months old.

This is pretty amazing, really, because most kids trace their first memories to somewhere between the ages of two and five. That doesn't mean that babies are little amnesiacs—they have memories long before they have language but, weirdly, can't access them once they start talking. Maybe the reason I remember the cotton candy episode is because my mother was speaking Xhosa, which isn't our language but one she picked up when she was working on her doctorate in South Africa. Or maybe the reason I have this random memory is as a trade-off my brain made—because I *can't* remember what I desperately wish I could: details of the night my mother disappeared.

My mother was a scientist, and for a span of time, she even studied memory. It was part of her work on the post-traumatic stress and elephants. You know the old adage that elephants never forget? Well, it's fact. I could give you all my mother's data, if you want the proof. I've practically got it memorized, no pun intended. Her official published findings were that memory is linked to strong emotion, and that negative moments are like scribbling with permanent marker on the wall of the brain. But there's a fine line between a negative moment and a traumatic one. Negative moments get remembered. Traumatic ones get forgotten, or so warped that they are unrecognizable, or else they turn into the big, bleak, white *nothing* I get in my head when I try to focus on that night.

Here's what I know:

1. I was three.
2. My mother was found on the sanctuary property, unconscious, about a mile south of a dead body. This was in the police reports. She was taken to the hospital.

3. I am not mentioned in the police reports. Afterward, my grandmother took me to stay at her place, because my father was frantically dealing with a dead elephant caregiver and a wife who had been knocked out cold.

4. Sometime before dawn, my mother regained consciousness and vanished from the hospital without any staff seeing her go.

5. I never saw her again.

Sometimes I think of my life as two train cars hitched together at the moment of my mom's disappearance—but when I try to see how they connect there's a jarring on the track that jerks my head back around. I know that I used to be a girl whose hair was strawberry blond, who ran around like a wild thing while my mother took endless notes about the elephants. Now I'm a kid who is too serious for her age and too smart for her own good. And yet as impressive as I am with scientific statistics, I fail miserably when it comes to real-life facts, like knowing that Wanelo is a website and not a hot new band. If eighth grade is a microcosm of the social hierarchy of the human adolescent (and to my mother, it certainly would have been), then reciting fifty named elephant herds in the Tuli Block of Botswana cannot compete with identifying all the members of One Direction.

It's not like I don't fit in at school because I'm the only kid without a mother. There are lots of kids missing parents, or kids who don't talk about their parents, or kids whose parents are now living with new spouses and new kids. Still, I don't really have friends at school. I sit at the lunch table on the far end, eating whatever my grandmother's packed me, while the cool girls—who, I swear to God, call themselves the Icicles—chatter about how they are going to grow up and work for OPI and make up nail-polish color names based on famous movies: Magent-lemen Prefer Blondes; A Fuchsia Good

Men. Maybe I've tried to join the conversation once or twice, but when I do, they usually look at me as if they've smelled something bad coming from my direction, their little button noses wrinkled, and then go back to whatever they were talking about. I can't say I'm devastated by the way I'm ignored. I guess I have more important things on my mind.

The memories on the other side of my mother's disappearance are just as spotty. I can tell you about my new bedroom at my grandma's place, which had a big-girl bed—my first. There was a little woven basket on the nightstand, which was inexplicably filled with pink packets of Sweet'n Low, although there was no coffeemaker around. Every night, even before I could count, I'd peek inside to make sure they were still there. I still do.

I can tell you about visiting my father, at the beginning. The halls at Hartwick House smelled like ammonia and pee, and even when my grandma urged me to talk to him and I climbed up on the bed, shivering at the thought of being so close to someone I recognized and didn't know at all, he didn't speak or move. I can describe how tears leaked out of his eyes as if it were a natural and expected phenomenon, the way a cold can of soda sweats on a summer day.

I remember the nightmares I had, which weren't really nightmares, but just me being awakened from a dead sleep by Maura's loud trumpeting. Even after my grandma came running into my room and explained to me that the matriarch elephant lived hundreds of miles away now, in a new sanctuary in Tennessee, I had this nagging sense that Maura was trying to tell me something, and that if I only spoke her language as well as my mother had, I'd understand.

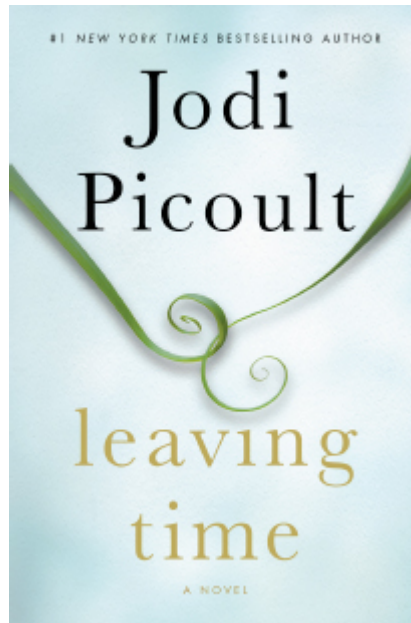
All I have left of my mother is her research. I pore over her journals, because I know one day the words will rearrange themselves on a page and point me

toward her. She taught me, even in absentia, that all good science starts with a hypothesis, which is just a hunch dressed up in fancy vocabulary. And my hunch is this: She would never have left me behind, not willingly.

If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to prove it.

# LEAVING TIME

Coming October 14, 2014



Connect with Jodi Picoult!



Sign up for Jodi's newsletter at [JodiPicoult.com](http://JodiPicoult.com)



[Facebook.com/JodiPicoult](https://www.facebook.com/JodiPicoult)



[Twitter.com/JodiPicoult](https://twitter.com/JodiPicoult)

Text JODI to 72636 for regular mobile alerts!\*

Two messages monthly. Message and Data Rates May Apply. Text STOP to 72636 to cancel. For additional information, text HELP to 72636 or email us. Part of the Random House Alerts program. Program Terms and Conditions. Privacy Policy.



Penguin  
Random  
House

## ***What's next on your reading list?***

Discover your next  
great read!

---

Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news about this author.

Sign up now.