


# A Spark of Light: A Novel

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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER  The author of Small Great Things returns with a powerful and provocative new novel about ordinary lives that intersect during a heart-stopping crisis.

"Picoult at her fearless best . . . Timely, balanced and certain to inspire debate."-The Washington Post

The warm fall day starts like any other at the Center-a women's reproductive health services clinic-its staff offering care to anyone who passes through its doors. Then, in late morning, a desperate and distraught gunman bursts in and opens fire, taking all inside hostage.

After rushing to the scene, Hugh McElroy, a police hostage negotiator, sets up a perimeter and begins making a plan to communicate with the gunman. As his phone vibrates with incoming text messages he glances at it and, to his horror, finds out that his fifteen-year-old daughter, Wren, is inside the clinic.

But Wren is not alone. She will share the next and tensest few hours of her young life with a cast of unforgettable characters: A nurse who calms her own panic in order to save the life of a wounded woman. A doctor who does his work not in spite of his faith but because of it, and who will find that faith tested as never before. A pro-life protester, disguised as a patient, who now stands in the crosshairs of the same rage she herself has felt. A young woman who has come to terminate her pregnancy. And the disturbed individual himself, vowing to be heard.

Told in a daring and enthralling narrative structure that counts backward through the hours of the standoff, this is a story that traces its way back to what brought each of these very different individuals to the same place on this fateful day.

One of the most fearless writers of our time, Jodi Picoult tackles a complicated issue in this gripping and nuanced novel. How do we balance the rights of pregnant women with the rights of the unborn they carry? What does it mean to be a good parent? A Spark of Light will inspire debate, conversation . . . and, hopefully, understanding.

Look in the back of the book for reader's discussion questions and a conversation with Jodi Picoult.

Praise for A Spark of Light

"This is Jodi Picoult at her best: tackling an emotional hot-button issue and putting a human face on it."-People

"Told backward and hour by hour, Jodi Picoult's compelling narrative deftly explores controversial social issues."-Us Weekly

Jodi Picoult is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of twenty-three novels, including Small Great Things, Leaving Time, The Storyteller, Lone Wolf, Sing You Home, House Rules,

Handle with Care, Change of Heart, Nineteen Minutes, and My Sister's Keeper. She is also the author, with daughter Samantha van Leer, of two young adult novels, Between the Lines and Off the Page. Picoult lives in New Hampshire. 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 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 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 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 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? 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.

#### Other Books

A Spark Unseen, Sharon Cameron, award-winning author of ROOK and THE DARK UNWINDING, weaves a thrillingly dark mystery brimming with intrigue and romance, in which things are not always what they seem to be. When Katharine Tulman wakes in the middle of the night and accidentally foils a kidnapping attempt on her uncle, she realizes Stranwyne Keep is no longer safe for Uncle Tully and his genius inventions. She flees to Paris, where she hopes to remain undetected and also find the mysterious and handsome Lane, who is suspected to be dead. But the search for Lane is not easy, and Katharine soon finds herself embroiled in a labyrinth of political intrigue. And with unexpected enemies and allies at every turn, Katharine will have to figure out whom she can trust--if anyone--to protect her uncle from danger once and for all. Filled with deadly twists, whispering romance, and heart-stopping suspense, this sequel to THE DARK UNWINDING

whisks readers off on another thrilling adventure.

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ . From a New York Times-bestselling author, a historical suspense featuring a young woman who flees to Paris seeking the man she loves and suspects is dead."