

# TO THE MOON AND BACK

**KRISTIN KISSKA**

Don't worry, Katelynn sweetheart. That was our last pit stop. Next time we stop, we'll be in South Carolina. I promise! Are you comfortable back there? Seatbelt buckled? I know you prefer riding in the front seat, but you should rest. We have a long drive tonight, but it'll be worth it.

Aren't road trips exciting? It's been a few years, but we had such fun exploring when you were little. The beach. Hiking trails. Museums. Especially the planetarium.

August 21<sup>st</sup> has been my favorite day of the year, ever since you came into my life. I can hardly believe you're turning thirteen in a few short hours. Oh, these years have flown by much too quickly! Mama's taking you someplace exciting for your birthday tomorrow. You'll see.

I hope you like this car. Did you notice it's blue? Just like your eyes, maybe a shade or two darker. Blue has always been your favorite color. Even as a toddler, you insisted on wearing blue every day. Your hair was so short I fashioned a big blue bow headband to ensure no one would mistake you for a little boy. Such independence! I always loved that about you. I've cherished every moment in my heart. How you would decorate any frosted-over window with your hand print and finger drawings—I framed a picture of the infinity sign you once left on my car window. How you would mimic me applying makeup and perfume at my vanity. How you would help me make dinner by stirring the ingredients with your very own spatula. Blue, of course.

The crowbar? Oh, don't mind that. I should've left it behind, silly me. Let's not bicker, not on our special adventure.

Check out that beautiful moon. It's following us, you know.

You were probably too little to remember, but when you were a preschooler, you used to sit on my lap every night, and we'd read bedtime stories in the rocking chair. We'd rock back and forth, back and forth. But no matter how many books we read, you always saved our favorite story for last. The one about the bunny arguing with its parent about who loves the other

more. After turning the last page, you'd snuggle into my neck and repeat the last line, "I love you to the moon and back, Mama." Do you remember that, sweet Katelynn?

Even in kindergarten, you insisted I read that board book aloud to your class when it was my turn to be the parent *book buddy*. Those were good days. Good memories. Weren't they?

Trust me you had your sour moments. You could throw a tantrum with the best of them. I left many a half-full grocery cart inside the store so that you could work through your meltdown without shattering the eardrums of the other shoppers. And I'll never forget that time we transitioned from bottles to sippy cups. Lordy, you had lungs! Sometimes I worried the neighbors would alert social services.

Goodness me, my fingernails are in tatters. How did I let them become so chipped and dirty? You don't mind, do you, sweetheart? You never minded any of my little faults. We've always had a bond.

Oh, I never regretted not going back to work after you were born. Not for a minute. No one could've pried my little miss *Katelynn Anne Jameson* from my arms, thank you very much. And I certainly wouldn't have paid someone for the privilege of watching you when that's exactly what I wanted to be doing. We'd endured way too many years of fertility treatments and miscarriages before you came along. You were my miracle baby. From the moment my obstetrician first amplified your heartbeat, you were mine. All mine. No one could've cared for you as well as I could. I craved every precious moment I spent with you, holding you, inhaling your fresh newborn scent, memorizing your fingers, your toes, the dimple in your left cheek, the exact shade of your gray-blue eyes with flecks of sea green.

You're not saying much, sweetheart. That's okay. Tired? Why don't you lie down and rest while I drive? Almost-thirteen year olds need their sleep. Especially you. Don't you worry about a thing. Mama's got a plan. We're going to drive straight through the night and get to Greenville by lunchtime tomorrow. We should arrive with time to spare.

I just love that gorgeous moon—*La Bella Luna!*

She's got a big show for us tomorrow. On your birthday! The total solar eclipse will be visible from our old South Carolina home just after two p.m. I've been waiting to take you back there for a while now, but I wanted to surprise you. The lunar shadow will completely cover us as the moon passes in front of the sun. At that moment, heaven will touch Earth. Everything will be okay again. Like magic. You'll be just like you used to be.

Remember your long, wavy hair? I have a picture of you right here in my wallet. Oh, my word! I must have forgotten my purse back in Virginia.

Silly me. Not to worry, Mama's got it all under control. Anyway, back to your hair. So golden. And thick. And shiny. I used to brush it for hours.

Forgive me, I shouldn't have brought up your hair. Thoughtless mistake. Believe me, it crushed me when we had to cut it off, too. But, you see, it started falling out. What else could we do? Watch fistfuls of strands fall out every day? No. We had to nip the problem in the bud. Even at ten years old, you were strong. Thinking of others before yourself. You insisted on donating your beautiful locks so some other child who'd lost their hair could have a wig. The hairdresser came into your hospital room and snipped off those two precious ponytails while you sobbed into your pillow.

It was blue, your pillow. I made sure the hospital room was decorated for my Katelynn Anne. Everything had to be cozy, cheerful, and blue. Blankets. Window curtains. Stuffed animals. Pictures. A display of handmade "Katelynn Strong" get well cards and posters from your school classmates and ballet friends covered every inch of wall space. I draped light blue organza fabric over the privacy curtain separating you from your roommate. I even knit matching downy soft blue caps for you and me to wear to protect our bald heads from the cold.

Oh yes, I cut my hair off, too. The same day you did. Do you remember that? As long as you couldn't have hair, I wouldn't either. I couldn't let my baby girl suffer alone. I kept my promise. I still haven't grown back my hair, although sometimes I have a hard time finding scissors these days to keep it that way.

Why is my neck so itchy?

I wear blue every day. Just for you.

Because I love you to the moon and back, sweetheart!

Not like those doctors. They lied. All of them. Even my doctor. *Especially* my doctor. After all this time, I thought she—also a mother—understood me. Lies.

Who would've thought your silly little headaches could be such a problem? A dose of pain reliever always cleared it up. Your dad and I shouldn't have waited to take you in to see someone. But your first seizure—watching you writhe and thrash on the floor—well, my world collapsed in that moment. Second, third, fourth opinions. What good were they? Every last specialist we consulted said your tumor was inoperable. But chemotherapy? Overkill. I didn't believe them then, and I certainly don't now. There *had* to be some other way. You can't tell me it's reasonable to drip poison through the veins of a child for months on end, and she'll recover. Oh, hell no.

Poison is poison is poison.

Did it stop the doctors? No.

I will never forget that day. Your father and I stood by your bed as you napped. The doctor handed your father the clipboard before retreating from your hospital room like...like the coward he was. It hovered between us, that death sentence. I couldn't read the forms through my tears, but I knew what they said. Authorization for chemotherapy treatment.

How could I sign that form? As you lay sleeping next to me, your skin was so smooth, your breathing so sweet, your face so angelic. So peaceful, so precious. It was my responsibility as your parent—your mother—to advocate for you in any way I could.

So I snatched that clipboard away from your father and ran out into the hallway.

Give it to me. That's all your father said. Again and again like some warped recording on repeat. Give it to me.

Instead, I ripped the papers into confetti and threw the pieces in the air. They fluttered to the ground silently. Do you remember that snowfall when I woke you up to come outside and see the flakes? Just like those! It was a magical moment.

But when I handed your father the empty clipboard, he slapped me. For trying to protect you!

Your goddamned father believed those doctors and signed a fresh set of papers. I never forgave him, you know. I tried to stop them. I even sued the hospital, but it didn't work. Amazing that the judge ruled that *not* treating a child with chemotherapy is considered endangerment. I'm not sure I ever shared that with you. I only wanted you to feel our love.

So the doctors prescribed their cocktail of poison. And it corroded you from the inside out.

What did those oncologists care? It wasn't their child lost among the tangle of tubes connected to her. They never watched their daughter's body wither away into a skeleton covered in orange-tinted skin. They never had to push the IV stand twice daily behind their daughter as she exercised by using a walker to hobble down the hospital hallway, the same daughter who only months before had *grand jeté*d and *pirouetted en pointe* at her spring ballet recital. They never sat next to a hospital bed begging their child to eat just one more spoonful of broth and then hold a bucket for her to vomit her dinner. They never sat up night after night crying and bargaining with God to let them have cancer in lieu of their child.

God didn't listen to me.

But you've never suffered alone, sweetheart. I moved into the hospital with you. I never had an uninterrupted night of sleep either. Any time a nurse jabbed you with a needle, I stuck myself with a safety pin. I made myself throw

up anytime you did. I even scraped the underside of my nose until I had the same chafing you did from your oxygen tube.

Jeez, I wish my arm would stop itching. Oh, wait—where did this blood come from? Am I bleeding? I must've scratched too much.

Never mind.

Don't you worry, Katelynn. Your pain is all in the past. Like I said before, Mama has a plan. The total solar eclipse will make everything right again. I promise. We're making a pilgrimage. God owes it to us. You'll get healthy. Maybe we'll even move back to South Carolina someday soon. Just you and me, Katelynn Anne. You'll see. We'll be just like we were before your diagnosis. Happy, healthy, and carefree.

Do you like the color of the car I borrowed? Oh, I forgot. I asked you that before. It's a nice one with leather seats. The only trouble is my dress. Did you notice the flowers on it are also blue? For you. Always for you! But the ties in the back of the gown don't help over much with coverage. My legs keep sticking to the seat in all this humidity. That's the only problem with August in the south. The humidity is unbearable. But for your birthday road trip, we can endure anything, right? Even the noise in the trunk.

Oh no! We're getting low on gas. Why couldn't she have filled the tank before I left? So inconsiderate. Not to worry. I'll figure something out. We'll still make it to Greenville by lunchtime, plenty of time before the eclipse happens. We must. I'm sticking to the back roads, rather than the interstate highway because there's less traffic. And I'm not turning on my headlights so that we can see the full moon better. *La Bella Luna* casts all the light we need.

Trust me, sweetheart. Mama will take care of everything.

I can't wait to see the look on those doctors' faces when I prove to them that my treatment plan for you worked, while their poison didn't. Doctors used to take an oath to uphold ethical standards. To try to *help* their patients. Times have changed! Nowadays, a medical degree, a white lab coat, and a stethoscope amount to a license to kill.

But Dr. Moretti was different. She convinced me that she understood me.

Yesterday, my therapy session started just like any other. And we've had hundreds! As usual, Dr. Moretti sat behind her pristine desk and took notes. She nodded with her sympathetic smile and asked me warm, thoughtful questions about you. I trusted her. But when I noticed the framed photo of her two little children—it was the only personal decoration in the entire office!—I knew we had a connection.

Motherhood.

I thought I'd finally found someone who could intervene on our behalf. So I told her my plan. I'd never told another soul. Did I mention that already?

I mean, how often does a total solar eclipse happen? Almost never. And this one will occur on August 21<sup>st</sup>, your birthday. In our old hometown. It's more than a coincidence. It's a sign to us from God. It was all meant to be. Heaven will touch Earth, and God will make everything all better again. Normal. His gift to us. His apology for ignoring my prayers before. But then Dr. Moretti called for an orderly. She tricked me.

All lies.

She was no better than any of the other doctors. We won't ever have to depend on the likes of those monsters again. Not after this trip. Not to worry.

And as for your goddamned father? I've asked for—no, demanded—a divorce so many times, I've lost count. I'm so sorry to share that news, sweetheart. Especially on your birthday. But trust me, it's for the best. Your cancer came from *his* blood line, not mine. No one told me about his family's medical history until after you were diagnosed. I never would've knowingly put your life at risk. You believe me, right sweetheart? But even after discovering he was the source of your cancer, he should've scoured the world for alternative treatments, but no! He subscribed to the whole poison plan and thwarted my every attempt to protect you. If I'd have known back then...well, I would have started with a better gene pool.

Blue!

Can you see the blue lights out the back window, Katelynn? How pretty! They remind me of the string of blinking blue lights decorating the mini Christmas tree next to your hospital bed. It was one of the rare times when your face relaxed in pure delight at the hospital. You were able to be an innocent, pain-free child again, for a few blissful moments. Do you remember that?

I just wish these flashing blue lights weren't quite so bright in my rear view mirror. The glare makes it hard to see the lines on the road.

Oh, look! It's the police. They must be here to escort us to see the total eclipse, just like that time the fire department paraded you home after one of your long hospital stays. Do you remember? All our neighbors lined the streets waving their "Welcome home, Katelynn" posters. A police escort is lovely, but they really shouldn't have bothered. We're doing just fine by ourselves. Aren't we? Now don't get concerned, sweetheart. You lie down and rest. Not much longer to Greenville. Let Mama take care of everything.

My, my, my, we are really getting the royal treatment. Two police patrol cars. One just passed us and maneuvered in front of us. The other is behind us. With the lights flashing, people might mistake us as part of the president's motorcade. But why are they slowing down?

No, don't slow down! That's not part of my plan. We have to get to Greenville in time to see the eclipse. We'll never make it if we slow down. If they're going to escort us, they should speed up.

It's getting a bit hot in here. Are you over-warm, sweetheart?

Flashing red lights, too? An ambulance is racing up behind us with its sirens blaring. Oh, I get it. The police are slowing so it can pass us quickly. We don't want to be in their way. Someone must be in trouble. Emergency victims need a quick response. You know, we had to call 911 for you when you had your first seizure. You had just gotten home from school when you fell and started convulsing on the kitchen floor. The EMTs took you straight to the emergency room. Do you remember riding in the ambulance? They let me ride in the back with you. I held your hand the entire way to the hospital, which wasn't easy because the paramedics had strapped your head and hands to the gurney in case you convulsed again. Your dad met us at the ER. I was terrified for you, assuming the worst case scenario was that you might have diabetes. In retrospect, that would have been a blessing! I had no idea what we were in store for at the time. They took a scan of your head. That's when we first found out you had a tumor.

Why are the police cars stopping? This isn't right. Keep going! The ambulance can fly by us while we're driving.

Wait a minute, one of the troopers just stepped out of the patrol car and is coming toward us, talking into his walkie-talkie. Was I speeding? I forgot my purse, so I don't have my license. Damn, that won't help get us out of here fast, but not to worry. Mama will take care of everything.

Oh, no. Why isn't the ambulance passing us? It's stopping, too, blocking our car. Don't wedge us into a corner. Move it, people! You're in our way. We'll never make the eclipse if we don't go.

Don't be scared, Katelynn. Just lie down and rest. I don't want you to fret and get sick again. Not when we're so close to making you all better.

I can't seem to stop scratching my leg.

We don't have time for this! We can't miss the eclipse. It's my plan. It's how I'm going to save my Katelynn.

Please move the police car out of the way. We need to go. Now! Don't make us miss the eclipse. Please. I'm begging. I thought the police were going to escort us.

Officer, could you please turn those sirens off! They're hurting my daughter's ears, and I can't hear you.

Thank you.

No, I won't get out of my car. Here, I'll crack the window, but I'm keeping our doors locked. Driver's license? Well, um, I accidentally left my purse at home, so I don't have it. The registration must be in the glove compartment somewhere. Give me a moment to look.

Blood? What blood? Oh, that's nothing. That's just from my skin. You see, I've been scratching.

Stop! You can't just haul me out of the car like that! I have rights. I haven't done anything wrong. I'll report you!

Wait, how do you know my name? Did my husband send you? Tell him to go to hell and then call my divorce lawyer.

Take these handcuffs off me!

Under arrest? For what? I don't care a whit what my rights are. I didn't steal Dr. Moretti's car. I *borrowed* it. She gave me the keys. See? They're right here! It's not a crime to take my daughter for a drive.

Yes, my *daughter*. She's in the back seat of the car. We're driving to South Carolina to see the total eclipse at 2:38 p.m. tomorrow. Now if you don't mind, we still have a long way to go.

Stay away from my daughter! Don't lay a hand on her. I'm her mother. If you touch her, I'll sue for child endangerment. Abuse. She's in my custody, and she's getting better. Leave my daughter alone. You'll scare her!

No, the back seat is *not* empty. I know you can see her, plain as day.

Passed away? You're lying!

Don't listen to them, Katelynn. They're lying to us. Big, ugly lies.

Why does everyone try to convince me that Katelynn is dead? My daughter did *not* die two years ago! See how peacefully she's resting in the back seat? How content she is? Look, she's wearing her favorite light blue sundress and the cap I knitted for her.

The crowbar? I brought it along for protection. Two women traveling alone in a car aren't safe. What if we were stopped by an axe murderer?

I already told you. The blood is from my neck, my arms.

A stretcher—is that really necessary? No one here needs a stretcher. Everyone's fine. And if we can get to Greenville, then by this time tomorrow, Katelynn will be in the moon's shadow. She'll recover, and everything will return to normal. She'll be cured.

Don't take me away from my daughter! I can't leave my child alone in a car.

Stop!

Don't open the trunk!

No, Katelynn is lying down on the *back seat*, not the trunk. Get away from the trunk—

Oh, God.

Wait. What?

A woman's head?

It's not what you think. You don't understand.

You see, I...I didn't...I didn't mean to...it's wasn't my fault...it's just that Dr. Moretti wouldn't listen...and I thought she was one of the good ones. She made me believe we had a connection. Mother-to-mother.

Killing her wasn't part of my plan!

But Dr. Moretti was going to stop me from saving my daughter...I told her my plan to see the eclipse...I'd organized the whole trip so carefully...but she tried to lock me back up in that psych ward...if I was admitted to the hospital, how could I get Katelynn to the eclipse? It was Dr. Moretti's fault, not mine. I had to save my daughter. What choice did I have? Any mother would do as much to save her child! I failed my daughter once, I couldn't fail her again.

The rest of Dr. Moretti's body? I don't remember. Virginia. North Carolina. Different places. My last stop was about half an hour ago.

No! Not a syringe. No more needles. We're done with all the poison! Get these restraints off of me. We have to go. We're running out of time. The needles will make me too drowsy to drive.

No!

I'm so sorry, Katelynn Anne.

I ruined your birthday. We almost made it to the eclipse. Please forgive me, sweetheart. There won't be another total solar eclipse for seven years. But not to worry. We'll make you better. Somehow! We'll be together again. Soon. Mama will figure something else out.

I love you to the moon and back.

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Kristin Kisska used to be a finance geek, complete with MBA and Wall Street pedigree. A member of the International Thriller Writers, James River Writers, and Sisters in Crime, Kristin is now a self-proclaimed *fictionista*. Kristin contributed short mystery stories to the Anthony Award-winning anthology, *MURDER UNDER THE OAKS* (2015), *VIRGINIA IS FOR MYSTERIES—VOLUME II* (2016), and *FIFTY SHADES OF CABERNET* (2017). When not writing suspense novels and historical thrillers, she can be found on her website—[www.KristinKisska.com](http://www.KristinKisska.com), on Facebook @KristinKisskaAuthor, and Tweeting @KKMHOO. Kristin lives in Virginia with her husband and three children.