

# PERFECT CUSTODY

PAULIUS KAJOKAS

A Novel

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# **PART I**

## **Observation**



## CHAPTER 1: Playground Optics

Claire packed for Maple Glen Park the way she packed for everything: like preparation could buy her silence.

Apple slices in two containers so one could be “for later” without sounding like a bargain. Crackers. Three juice boxes. A water bottle with a silicone sleeve that wouldn’t sweat onto school papers. A zip pouch of wipes labeled in block letters—HANDS, FACE, MULTI-SURFACE—because she trusted labels more than she trusted luck.

Everything fit. The tote matched her shoes, and the shoes matched the version of herself she kept visible in public: calm, capable, hard to read.

Maple Glen Park looked newly approved by the county—rubberized ground, fresh swings, clean signage about rules and hours. A metal plaque near the entrance listed donors in polished font. Claire paused long enough to read it, then hated herself for noticing. Names on metal meant someone cared enough to be seen caring.

The afternoon smelled like cut grass and sun-warmed plastic. Kids moved in bursts—climb, slip, laugh, try again—while adults maintained the soft rule of public spaces: don’t look worried. Worry invited opinions. Opinions became stories.

Eli didn’t run.

She sat on the end of a bench with her sketchbook open across her knees, pencil moving in fast, sure lines. Her feet swung above the ground without touching it. She angled her shoulders away from the main play structure, like the shouting belonged somewhere else. She didn’t look at the other kids. She didn’t look at Claire.

Claire sat beside her, close enough to intervene and far enough to signal restraint. Eli liked space. Eli also liked knowing where Claire was.

“You wanted the swings,” Claire said, because saying something ordinary mattered.

Eli’s pencil kept going. “Later.”

“Okay.” Claire made the word light. She reached into the tote and pulled out a wipe, holding it up without drama. “Hands.”

Eli sighed—small, contained—then held out her palms without lifting her eyes. Claire wiped carefully and then wiped her own hands too. A matching gesture. Balanced. Unremarkable.

Across the mulch border, Adam stood a few yards away, half in shade, half in sun, phone angled in front of his chest. Even here, he looked put together in the way brochures sold: straight back, shoulders relaxed, posture that said he didn't need anything from anyone.

A toddler on the climbing steps missed a foothold and went down hard—knees, hands, then a stunned pause before the sound came.

Before the child's mother reached her, Adam was already moving.

He stepped in, quick and smooth, crouched, and lifted the toddler with both hands like he'd done it a hundred times. "Hey, hey," he said, voice warm, not rushed. He checked the knee, brushed mulch off little fingers, murmured something that made the child hiccup and then inhale.

The mother arrived breathless and relieved. "Oh my God—thank you."

Adam smiled, handed the toddler back, and patted the child's back once, gentle. "She's okay," he said. "Just startled."

Two parents nearby watched and smiled. A dad with a coffee cup leaned toward his partner and said, not quietly, "He's great with kids."

Claire heard it. Of course she did.

She watched Adam stand, calm and unhurried, and return to his spot as if he'd only adjusted his stance. He looked like the kind of person people trusted on sight.

For a second—only a second—Claire felt her own certainty wobble. The thought came clean and sharp: Maybe it's me. Maybe I do make everything heavy.

Eli's pencil scratched faster. Claire forced her gaze back to the sketchbook and the steady rhythm of it. She didn't ask what Eli was drawing. Asking invited shutting down. She'd learned that the hard way.

"Snack?" Claire asked instead.

Eli shook her head once.

Claire opened the container anyway and set the apple slices between them on the bench. Refusal didn't last. Readiness did.

A child ran past laughing and clipped the bench with a shoulder. The apple container jostled. Claire's hand shot out on instinct and steadied it.

“Sorry!” the child’s mother called, already halfway across the rubber ground.

“It’s fine,” Claire called back, a little too bright, then immediately lowered her voice on the next breath. The adjustment happened before she chose it. That bothered her more than the collision.

Eli glanced toward the play structure where three girls climbed the ladder in a loose line, trading places without words. One of them looked back at Eli, eyes flicking to the sketchbook, then away. A quick decision: not including, not inviting, not even acknowledging long enough to be kind.

Eli dropped her gaze to the page and kept drawing.

“Do you want me to ask if you could join them?” Claire asked.

Eli’s mouth tightened. “No.”

Claire nodded and didn’t press. Pressing would be visible. Visible would be interpreted.

Adam’s phone buzzed. He glanced down, thumb moving, and then he walked toward the bench with the easy confidence of someone who believed every space had been made for him.

He stopped beside Claire without looking down at her right away. His eyes went to the playground. His face stayed pleasant.

“You brought the wipe arsenal,” he said, tone light enough to pass as a joke.

Claire didn’t smile. She kept her expression neutral. “Kids touched everything.”

“They always do.” Adam’s shrug was small, practiced.

Claire watched Eli’s pencil and said, quietly, “Mrs. Monroe talked to you last week.”

Adam’s brows lifted a fraction. “About what?”

“You tell me,” Claire said.

He paused just long enough to make it seem like Claire was the one creating drama. Then he said, “She mentioned Eli was bright but... elsewhere.”

The word landed clean. Elsewhere. Claire felt it go into her like a tag.

“What exactly did she say?” Claire asked, careful. Not accusatory. Precise.

Adam glanced toward the play structure again. He kept his voice low. “That Eli drifted into stories during group discussion. That she was withdrawn sometimes. It was a second-grade comment, Claire.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Adam finally looked at her. The concern on his face was believable. That was part of the problem.

“Because I knew you’d grip it too hard,” he said. One sentence. One needle.

Claire opened her mouth and then shut it again. She could feel the argument forming—the right to know, the way teachers didn’t choose words casually, the way drifted could become a label.

She swallowed it.

Not because she agreed. Because they were on a bench in a public park, with other parents close enough to overhear fragments. Because if she raised her voice, she would look like the unstable half of a calm couple. Because she’d just heard someone call Adam “great with kids,” and she could already predict the shape of the story if she pushed.

Instead, she turned to Eli, kept her voice soft. “Hey,” she said. “Your pencil okay?”

Eli didn’t answer, but she pressed harder, shading a corner of the page. Claire caught a glimpse before Eli’s elbow blocked it—two simple houses, side by side, with a line between them. Road or seam.

Adam’s gaze flicked to the sketchbook. “What is she drawing?”

Eli’s hand froze. The sketchbook angled closer to her lap.

Claire answered for her. “Just drawings.”

Just slid into her sentence without permission. She hated that.

Adam didn’t push. He didn’t need to. He let the moment sit, then stepped back toward his phone, leaving the unease behind like a dropped object he didn’t bother to pick up.

Eli reached for an apple slice. Claire saw it from the corner of her eye and pretended she didn’t.

The pencil snapped.

It was a small sound. It still made Claire flinch.

Eli stared at the broken graphite, then glanced up at Claire for a fraction of a second—eyes hovering near her face and then veering away, like looking directly took too much.

“It’s okay,” Claire said softly.

She reached into the tote and pulled out a spare pencil, because of course she carried spares. She handed it over without comment. Eli took it and

started drawing again, a little too hard, as if she tried to carve the lines into the page.

Claire slid the broken pencil into the zip pouch, her hands moving with quiet competence. Competence used to feel like armor. Now it felt like something that could be framed as a symptom.

A voice behind them said, “Claire?”

Claire turned.

Mrs. Monroe approached along the path that cut through the park, tote bag on her shoulder with the stitched school logo. Navy cardigan. Hair clipped back. Her smile was friendly in the practiced way that never quite reached the eyes.

“Hi,” Claire said, standing. She made her face open. Not too eager. Not too stiff. “Hi, Mrs. Monroe.”

Mrs. Monroe’s gaze moved to Eli and then to Adam. “Oh—Adam, too,” she said, as if she’d stumbled into them by coincidence. “Hello.”

Adam stepped in with effortless charm, offered his hand. “Nice to see you.”

Mrs. Monroe shook it. “Likewise. Eli is such a delight.”

Delight softened the air for half a second. Then Mrs. Monroe angled her body toward Claire again, voice still light, words tightening.

“I wanted to check in,” she said. “Just briefly.”

Claire nodded. “Okay.”

Mrs. Monroe lowered her voice a touch, the way people did when they wanted to sound helpful and end up sounding serious. “Eli’s been very quiet in class lately. Quiet can be normal. But I’ve noticed she drifts into stories during group discussion.”

Claire let the phrase land and didn’t interrupt.

Drifts into stories.

She repeated it silently, storing it as words, not emotion.

Mrs. Monroe continued, “She also said something that made me want to make sure she has support if she needs it.”

“What did she say?” Claire asked.

Mrs. Monroe’s smile stayed in place. “She mentioned that home feels loud sometimes,” she said. “That she wishes everyone whispered.”

Claire felt her stomach dip. Loud. Whispered. She took a slow breath through her nose and kept her face calm.

Home feels loud sometimes. Wishes everyone whispered.

She locked the phrases in her mind, the way she locked down details at work when something started to smell like a future problem.

Adam laughed lightly, the sound warm and dismissive. “She watches cartoons where everyone yells,” he said. “She says stuff.”

Mrs. Monroe nodded as if she accepted the explanation. “Yes, it could be nothing,” she said quickly. “I didn’t want you to worry. I just want to keep communication open.”

Claire didn’t correct Adam. She didn’t argue about “says stuff.” She could feel the fight rising and chose not to feed it in public.

Instead she asked, calmly, “Was she upset when she said it?”

“No,” Mrs. Monroe said. “No tears. She was calm. She just... seemed elsewhere.” Mrs. Monroe’s eyes flicked toward Eli, who still didn’t look up. “And I want to make sure she has safe adults she can talk to if she’s anxious.”

Safe adults. Support. The words were gentle. They didn’t feel gentle.

Mrs. Monroe lifted her tote strap and kept her tone airy, like she was offering a small favor. “Could you stop by Student Services after pickup on Monday? Just for a quick check-in. Nothing formal. I’d like you to meet Ms. Givens.”

Claire nodded once. She made herself answer in the same tone. “Yes. I can.”

“Wonderful,” Mrs. Monroe said. “Thank you.” She smiled at Eli. “Keep drawing, sweetheart.”

Eli’s pencil kept moving. She didn’t look up.

Mrs. Monroe gave a final nod to Adam and walked away, her posture composed, her exit clean.

Claire sat back down slowly, as if speed might reveal panic.

Adam leaned in and spoke once, low and smooth. “Don’t turn this into something,” he said.

Claire didn’t respond. Not with words.

She stared at Eli’s page. Two houses. The line between them darker now, pressed in with extra weight.

Eli tore a small corner off a scrap sheet and folded it fast, sliding it under her thigh.

Claire saw it. She pretended she didn’t.

The park stayed bright and ordinary. Parents laughed. Kids yelled names across the rubber ground. Leaves rattled overhead, dry and papery. Normal life, doing its normal thing.

Claire sat on the bench with her tote at her feet and Mrs. Monroe's phrases stacked in her head like index cards.

Drifts into stories.

Home feels loud sometimes.

Wishes everyone whispered.

Student Services. Ms. Givens. Monday after pickup.

She didn't need to dramatize it to know it mattered.

On Monday, Claire would walk into Student Services and keep her voice calm and her face open—because that was how you survived the first step.

She still didn't know Eli had already been inside.

## CHAPTER 2: Student Services

The pickup line at Pinecrest Elementary moved in small, irritated increments. Claire inched forward behind a minivan with a cracked bumper sticker and a rear window crowded with fundraiser decals. The afternoon sun hit the windshields at a hard angle and turned the lot into glare and heat.

She checked the clock once. She stopped herself from checking again. She needed her face to stay neutral when Eli reached the curb. Neutral kept other parents from leaning in with opinions that came dressed as concern.

The side doors opened and children spilled out in uneven waves. Some ran straight into waiting arms as if distance itself was a prize. Some walked in clusters, already talking, already practicing the social rules that made adults relax.

Eli emerged late, drifting rather than walking, head down. Her backpack straps were pulled tight. Her sketchbook pressed against her ribs as if she carried something breakable. She didn't scan for Claire right away. She moved along the curb with the same careful pace she used in crowds.

Claire stepped out, smoothed her shirt without thinking, and crouched as Eli reached her.

“Hey,” Claire said. “How was it?”

“Fine.” Eli's voice stayed small. Her eyes stayed on the sidewalk.

Claire kissed her hair. It smelled faintly of crayons and cafeteria pizza. She took Eli's hand because holding hands still worked most days, and because it kept Eli anchored in the noise of the pickup line.

They turned toward the parking lot—toward home, dinner, the ordinary rhythm Claire kept trying to protect.

“Claire.”

Mrs. Monroe's voice carried from near the doors, pleasant in the way teachers kept it pleasant even when they delivered something sharp.

Claire stopped. She put her smile on. She kept it light, not eager. Eager looked anxious.

Mrs. Monroe approached with her tote bag hooked on one shoulder, cardigan neat, hair clipped back. Teachers didn't do panic. Teachers didn't do accusation. They did concern dressed as professionalism.

“Could you step into Student Services for just a minute?” Mrs. Monroe asked.

Claire’s stomach tightened. She didn’t let it reach her face. She didn’t ask why in the middle of the curb lane with other parents watching the flow of children.

“Sure,” she said.

“It won’t take long,” Mrs. Monroe added, already turning, already leading.

Claire followed. Eli’s hand stayed small in hers. The hallway smelled of floor cleaner and dry erase markers, with a stale underlayer of cafeteria and wet jackets. Bulletin boards lined the walls with bright paper shapes and tidy captions. They looked cheerful from a distance and relentless up close.

A poster near the corner read:

SAFE KIDS

SAFE ADULTS

SAFE SCHOOLS

SAFE sat in bold block letters, too large to be comforting. Claire kept her face calm anyway. She filed the poster away as a detail, the way she did at work when someone tried to normalize a boundary by printing it on paper.

Student Services sat behind a frosted glass door with a narrow window strip. Claire saw movement inside, blurred shapes shifting when she tried to focus. Mrs. Monroe opened the door and gestured them in with an encouraging tilt of her hand.

The office was arranged to feel soothing. A low table held fidget toys placed like a display. A shelf of children’s books carried titles about feelings, bravery, big changes. A diffuser pushed lavender into the air, sweet enough to cover something antiseptic underneath. A paper sign listed office hours and a reminder about confidentiality.

Behind a desk, a woman Claire didn’t recognize stood slowly. Plain cardigan. Hair pulled back. A badge lanyard resting against her blouse like a quiet warning.

“Claire Bishop?” the woman asked.

“Yes.”

The woman lifted her badge long enough for Claire to register a logo and a photo, then lowered it again. Identification as a formality, not an invitation.

“Denise Rourke,” she said. “North River Family Services. Thank you for meeting with me.”

For a moment, the words landed without meaning. North River Family Services belonged to pamphlets at pediatric offices and community websites. A net that existed somewhere outside Claire's life.

Then her mouth went dry.

Mrs. Monroe had already stepped back, posture angled toward the door as if her part was finished. She gave Claire a look that tried to reassure and landed as distance.

Eli's grip tightened on Claire's hand.

Claire kept her voice even. "Why are you here?"

Denise's smile softened, sympathetic in a way that felt trained. "This was a routine response to an anonymous report," she said. "My role was to complete an assessment and ensure Eli had support."

Claire heard the phrasing and didn't argue with it. Arguing in this room would become a feature, not a reaction.

Anonymous report. Routine response. Assessment.

Her gaze slid to the inner office door, the one that led deeper into Student Services. It stood slightly ajar. She thought she heard a chair scrape, then stillness.

"Was Eli in there?" Claire asked.

Denise didn't flinch. "Eli spoke briefly with the school counselor," she said. "That was standard when a report involved a child at school."

Claire felt the word briefly register as a lie. Briefly could hold anything.

"Without me," Claire said.

Denise nodded once. "Yes. The goal was to reduce pressure."

Claire looked down at Eli. Eli pressed closer to Claire's leg, shoulder against her thigh. Claire rested her free hand lightly on Eli's back, steady and neutral. She didn't want it to look like she held Eli in place. She didn't want it to look like she didn't.

Mrs. Monroe cleared her throat softly. "Claire, I only wanted you to meet with Denise," she said. "I wanted to keep everything coordinated."

Coordinated sounded helpful. It acted like control.

"I needed to get back," Mrs. Monroe added. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She left. The door closed with a soft click that sounded too final.

The room tightened around the three of them. Lavender. fidget toys. a badge lanyard. Eli's sketchbook pressed to her ribs like armor.

Denise gestured to two chairs across from her desk. “Could we sit?” she asked. “I tried to keep this brief.”

Claire sat because standing turned into posture, and posture turned into tone. She kept Eli beside her rather than across the room. Denise registered it with a glance and didn’t comment.

Denise set her pen on the folder. The folder stayed angled toward her, not toward Claire.

“I couldn’t share reporter information,” Denise said. “I could summarize concerns and ask a few questions.”

“What concerns?” Claire asked.

Denise opened the folder and glanced down. Claire saw typed paragraphs and a few highlighted lines. Paper that looked official tended to become true by repetition.

“The report mentioned alcohol use in the home and conflict that could impact a child’s emotional safety,” Denise said. “The school also observed withdrawal.”

Alcohol.

Claire didn’t move. She kept her face steady because the fastest way to be framed as defensive was to look like you were bracing.

“That wasn’t accurate,” Claire said.

Denise nodded as if she expected it. “That was why I clarified,” she said. “This stage wasn’t conclusions.”

Claire heard the careful language and the fact inside it: Denise didn’t need proof to proceed. Denise needed a concern.

Claire looked down at Eli again. “Did you talk to Denise?” she asked gently.

Eli shook her head quickly. She didn’t look at Denise. Her eyes stayed on the rubber ball on the low table, covered in tiny spikes that looked soft and wrong.

Denise addressed Eli in the same calm tone she used with adults. “Hi, Eli,” she said. “You did a brave job talking to Ms. Givens.”

Eli’s shoulders rose in a small shrug and fell. Her fingers tightened around the sketchbook’s edge.

Claire’s pulse thudded once in her throat. She kept her voice controlled. “Why did the counselor talk to her without me present?”

Denise’s expression stayed soft. “To reduce influence,” she said.

Claire memorized the phrase. Reduce influence. It sounded reasonable. It was also an explanation that closed a door.

Denise's pen moved once, a small tap against the folder. "I needed some basic information," she said. "Who lived in the home? Any caregivers? Any stressors?"

Claire answered cleanly. "Me. My husband, Adam. Eli."

Denise wrote.

"No other adults in the home?" Denise asked.

"No."

Denise's questions continued in a steady rhythm—routines, school drop-off, bedtime. Claire answered without embellishment. She kept her sentences short enough that they couldn't be quoted out of context and long enough that she didn't sound evasive.

Denise moved through the checklist in the same gentle tone. House. routine. support people. discipline. The questions landed lightly and still felt like a net.

Claire let most of it compress in her memory as a block: Denise's pen scratching, Denise's eyes lifting, Denise's calm voice stepping from category to category as if she built a profile in real time.

Then Denise asked the first question that mattered in a way Claire couldn't talk herself out of.

"Any yelling in the home?" Denise asked.

Claire kept her face still. "Arguments happened," she said. "Not directed at Eli."

Denise's pen moved.

Denise asked the second question with the same mild tone, as if she asked about allergies.

"Any alcohol use that affected supervision?"

Claire held still. "Wine sometimes," she said. "After Eli went to bed."

Denise didn't react. She didn't need to. She wrote.

Claire watched the pen. She felt the urge to qualify—how often, how little, how controlled. She swallowed it. Qualifications sounded like bargaining.

Denise asked the third question and the room shifted, not because she raised her voice, but because she lowered it slightly, as if kindness made the line easier to cross.

"Did Eli feel safe at home?" Denise asked.

Claire's spine stiffened. She kept her voice neutral. "Yes."

Denise nodded as if she accepted the answer, and then she did something Claire couldn't correct.

She turned her attention to Eli.

Denise crouched just enough to meet Eli's height without fully kneeling. Her face stayed soft. Her tone stayed warm.

"Eli," Denise said, "did you feel safe at home?"

Eli stared at the carpet.

Claire held her breath without meaning to. She felt the weight of the question settle into the room like a tool set down on a table.

Eli shrugged.

Denise waited, patient. "Sometimes it was hard to answer," she said. "You could say yes, or no, or you could say sometimes."

Sometimes arrived already offered. Already shaped.

Denise continued, "Did things get loud at home?"

Eli's fingers curled around the sketchbook like a handle. Her eyes stayed down.

Denise's voice stayed gentle. "Did things feel scary when grown-ups got mad?"

Claire's hand tightened on Eli's without intending to. She loosened her grip immediately. Tightness looked like control. Control looked like influence. Influence had already been named.

Eli swallowed. Her mouth opened slightly and closed again. She shifted closer to Claire's leg, shoulder pressing into it.

Denise's pen was in her hand again. Claire noticed that. She couldn't stop noticing it.

Eli's voice came out thin and quiet.

"Sometimes," Eli whispered.

Denise's pen didn't stop.

The scratch of it sounded too loud in the lavender air.

"Thank you," Denise said. "That helped."

Claire didn't speak. Any sound she made in that moment would come out wrong. She watched Eli's face instead—blank, careful, as if she'd learned that blank was the safest expression when adults asked questions with friendly voices.

Denise rose back to her chair. She didn't apologize. She didn't explain. She continued as if this were the normal sequence of a normal meeting.

Claire kept her voice steady by force. "What did she mean by that?" she asked.

Denise looked up with the same sympathetic expression that gave nothing concrete. "Children answer globally," she said. "Sometimes could mean a lot of things. It didn't automatically mean danger."

Claire stored the phrase too. Didn't automatically mean danger. It sounded like reassurance. It still carried forward the word danger.

Denise tapped the folder once with her pen. "I also needed to speak with the other parent," she said.

Claire's stomach tightened. "Adam."

Denise nodded. "Yes."

Claire forced herself to ask the question that mattered in the direction she didn't want it to go. "Did you already talk to him?"

Denise's expression stayed calm. "He was contacted by email," she said. "He responded cooperatively."

Cooperative.

Claire felt the word settle into place like a label applied to Adam before Claire entered the room. The label carried a shadow: if Adam was cooperative, what did that make Claire?

Claire didn't ask it. She kept her face neutral.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She ignored it. Denise's eyes flicked to the movement anyway, quick and quiet, then returned to Claire's face.

The phone buzzed again.

Claire forced a small smile. "I needed to check that," she said. "Work."

Denise nodded. "Of course."

Claire pulled out the phone. Adam's name filled the screen. The message sat there in short lines.

### **Text Message – Adam**

*Monday, 3:18 PM*

Stay calm.

Cooperate.

The period at the end of Cooperate made it feel like an order, not advice. Claire slid the phone back into her pocket and looked up. “It was fine,” she said.

Denise continued as if the interruption had been a test Claire passed.

She asked a few more questions—fast, clean, procedural—then compressed the rest of the checklist into a soft montage of categories that blurred together: routines, meals, bedtime, school, discipline, support people. Claire answered in the same controlled voice, short sentences, no extra information, no visible irritation.

Eli stayed quiet beside her. Her legs swung slightly beneath the chair. She picked at the edge of her sketchbook cover until cardboard fibers lifted.

Denise’s gaze flicked to Eli’s hands once, then back to Claire. “I wanted to be clear about next steps,” she said.

Claire held still.

Denise spoke without raising her voice. “I scheduled a home visit within forty-eight hours,” she said. “It helps us confirm environment and routine.”

Claire heard the escalation as a single stair step, clean and final: Eli had already spoken. Adam had already been contacted and labeled cooperative. Now the process moved into Claire’s house.

“What time?” Claire asked.

“Tomorrow evening or Wednesday morning,” Denise said.

Claire did the math in her head. Tomorrow meant a night of cleaning and staging. Wednesday morning meant missing work and looking uncooperative if she hesitated.

“Tomorrow evening,” Claire said. “After six.”

Denise wrote it down. The pen scratched once, steady and permanent.

Denise looked up. “I needed to confirm Mr. Bishop’s best phone number for the file,” she said, tone still kind. “And I asked that you didn’t contact school staff outside coordination while assessment was ongoing. It kept things clean.”

Kept things clean.

Claire memorized it the way she memorized everything now: as exact words, not feelings.

She reached into her wallet, pulled out a small notepad card, and wrote Adam’s number down with careful digits. She handed it across the desk.

Denise took it and placed it inside the folder without looking at it for long. The motion was casual. The effect was not.

Denise stood and angled her body toward the door, practiced courtesy that also guided the exit.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “six o’clock. Home visit.”