

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KAREN KINGSBURY

FORGIVING PARIS



a novel

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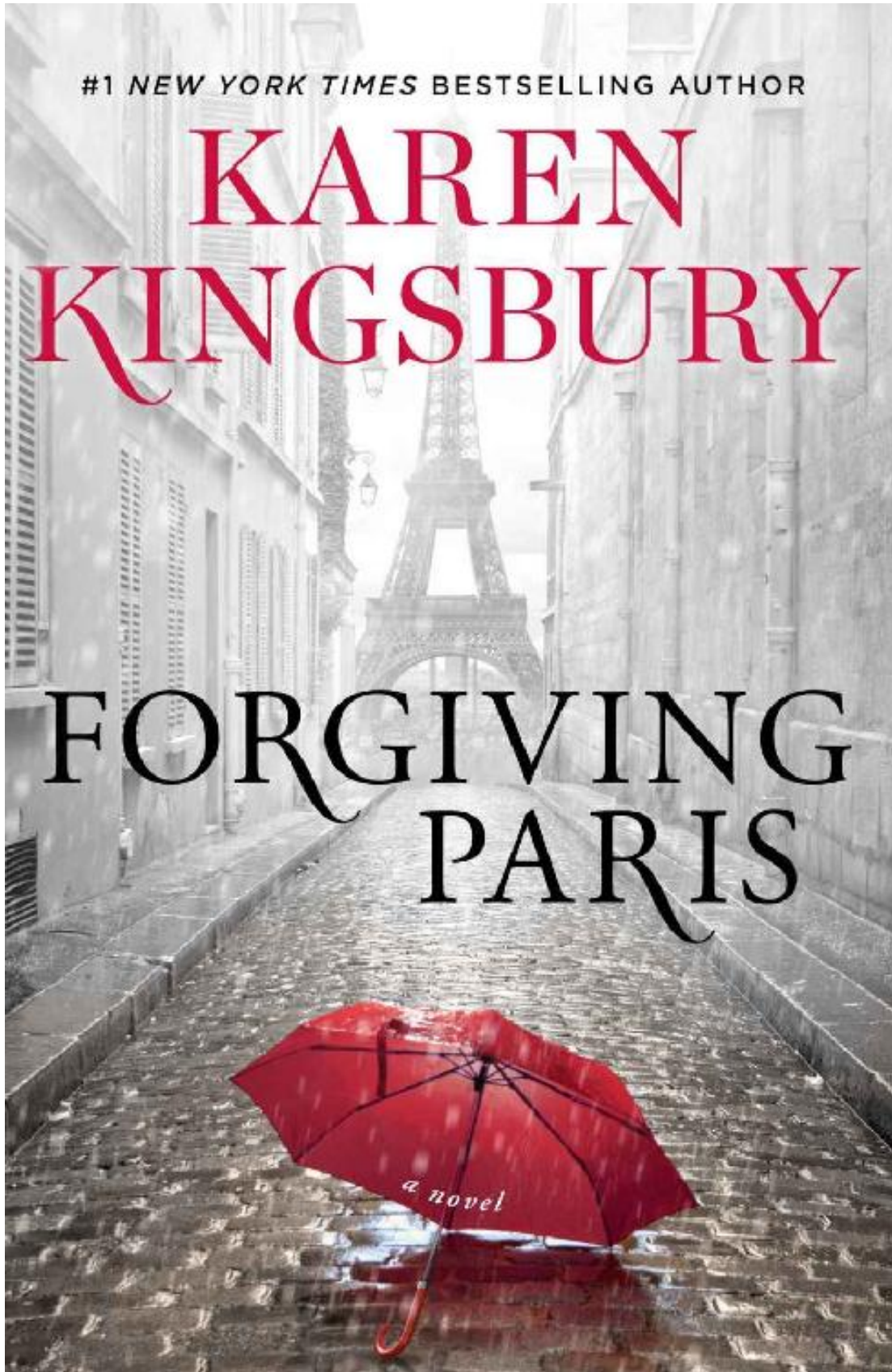


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Dedicated to Donald, the love of my life, my husband of 33 years, and to our beautiful children and grandchildren. The journey of life is breathtaking surrounded by each of you, and each minute together is time borrowed from eternity. I love you with every breath, every heartbeat. And to God, Almighty, who has—for now—blessed me with these.

1998

1



The incessant pounding rattled the living room window and shook the walls in the small Parisian flat where Marie Michel was trying to sleep. She folded the pillow over her head and squeezed her eyes shut. She was a terrible mother. How could she have raised a daughter who ran with drug dealers? An addict who had stolen from Marie... from her own mother.

“Change the locks,” the police officer had told her last time it happened. “You’re not helping by giving her a way to keep using.”

More pounding.

Marie’s heartbeat skipped and jumped and raced inside her chest. It was after midnight. What was her daughter thinking? Why wouldn’t she get help? Marie threw the pillow on the floor and swung herself out of bed.

As she did, the pounding stopped. Marie held her breath. Ten seconds.... Fifteen. Still nothing. Silence. Marie exhaled. Alice must’ve moved on, scurried off through the dark of night to find the place where she slept—under some bridge or in a shelter in the most dank and undesirable part of Paris. Wherever the drugs were easy.

Marie lay back down and stared at the ceiling. *Baby girl, I’m sorry... I never wanted it to come to this.* A chill ran down her arms and she pulled the blanket over her thin body. She hadn’t paid her gas bill again and this was the coldest night in May.

Life was eroding like the beach at high tide.

If her own mother were still alive, Marie knew what the woman would say. *Pray, Marie. Pray. God has all the wisdom in the world. Talk to Him... ask Him. He loves you, Marie.*

But what would it matter, praying to God now? Alice had been gone long before tonight. Marie's precious baby girl was eighteen and a child of the streets, running with derelicts and drug dealers. Marie wasn't even sure when she'd lost Alice. Three years ago, maybe. Sometime between shifts, when Marie was out working two jobs to keep food on the table. They would've been better off starving.

Then she might still have Alice.

Marie leaned over and clicked on the lamp by her bedside. A yellow haze filled the cramped room. Marie let her eyes adjust. She stood and pushed herself to the dresser by the window. Every step stirred the ache in her bones, the ache that always came with twelve hours of cleaning hospital floors.

Don't look at it, she told herself. You need to sleep. Morning comes quickly.

But her hands had a mind of their own.

They pulled open the second drawer and there, sitting atop a heap of worn T-shirts, was the photo album. The one Marie had put together for Alice's sixteenth birthday. An attempt to win her back and pull her from the seedy world she'd fallen into.

The effort failed, but the photo book remained. Proof that their time together hadn't been all bad. Marie picked it up and ran her thumb over the cheap cloth cover. At the center was a photo of Marie and Alice, cheek to cheek. In the picture, her precious girl was maybe ten or eleven. Before the streets had gotten her.

Marie stared at the image. "What happened to you, baby girl? Why aren't you here? Down the hall?" Her voice fell. "Your mama still loves you, Alice." A rush of tears came and Marie shut her eyes again. "I'll always love you, Alice."

Sleep wasn't going to come anyway. Marie took the album to the edge of her bed and settled in.

The first few pages were full of baby Alice, as if she'd come into the world like any other child. Alice on her blanket and in her crib, crying in her first bath and laughing at her favorite toy bunny. And Marie, a much younger version of herself holding baby Alice and walking her along the streets of Paris in the pram Alice's grandmother had given her.

But there were other moments the pages didn't show. Her mother's warning in the beginning, when Marie came home pregnant after her first

year of college.

“You’ll keep the baby, of course.” M’man had pulled her into a hug. “I will help you.” Then she had stepped back and looked deep into Marie’s eyes. “But mark my words, Marie. Being a single mother will be the hardest job you’ve ever had. I should know.”

Marie’s father had left when she was six. That was the year her mother refused to go along with her father’s affairs. “It’s a Parisian thing,” Marie could still hear him saying. “French men need more than one woman.”

Finally, her mother had sent him on his way. “You can have all the women you want,” she had told him. “Just not this one.”

Whenever Marie had asked about her father, her mama would stand a little straighter and her eyes would cool. “We don’t need him, Marie. We have each other... that’s enough.”

And it was. For Marie’s mother.

But no one ever asked Marie if having only a mother was enough for *her*. She remembered her first day of third grade and her classmates talking about their fathers. *My papa works in sanitation. Mine works at the hospital.... My papa is taking me to Normandy.... My papa is taking me to the Seine.*

She could hear their voices, feel herself shrinking toward the back of the classroom. “What about you, Marie?” her best friend had asked. “What does your daddy do?”

“He’s a soldier.” The answer was out before Marie could stop herself. And that’s what she told herself every day after that. Right up until high school, when her mother told her it wasn’t nice to lie.

“Your father wasn’t a good man.” Her mama had put her hand on Marie’s shoulder. “Stop calling him a soldier.”

And so, Marie was left with the truth. Her daddy had done just one thing in his role as a father—he had gotten her mother pregnant. After that he had disappeared.

Even now Marie missed the imaginary soldier father she had created. But as she worked her way through high school, and as she met friends like her with single mothers, Marie promised herself one thing—she wouldn’t repeat her mother’s mistakes. Not ever. When she fell in love it would be for life and the children she bore would know what it meant to have a father.

In her last year of lyc ee, Marie attended a dance at the community center and met a real-life soldier. Philippe promised to marry her and show her the world. Three months later Marie was pregnant, and Philippe had shipped out. Never to be seen again.

Marie stared at a photo of her younger self holding baby Alice. That was the main thing missing from the photographs: Alice's father.

Tears stung her eyes. Years had passed since she'd cried about her own story, the way she'd repeated her mother's mistakes and become a single mom to Alice.

The next page of the book showed her and Alice at a Paris playground, side by side grinning from the swings. Despite her watery eyes, a slight smile tugged at Marie's lips. Before Alice started using heroin, Marie had felt proud of the work she'd done as a single mom. She didn't believe in God back then, not really. But often she felt like she had some sort of invisible help. Maybe because of the things her own mother would constantly tell her.

"You're never alone, Marie. Alice isn't alone, either. Your Heavenly Father is only a whisper away," she would say. "Who could ask for more than that?"

Her mother had felt that way right up until her death last year from cancer. Peace had filled her face even as she took her last breath, off to meet the One who had carried her all her life. But Marie had none of that assurance.

She turned the next page and the next. More pictures of her and Alice, making a life for themselves. *I didn't see it coming, baby girl. How could I have seen it coming?*

The change in Alice happened midway through her first year of secondary school. That's when students were allowed to have cell phones in school. Overnight it seemed Alice was different. She ran with a wilder crowd and lied about where she'd been. Months later Marie was rummaging through Alice's room, looking for signs of trouble, when she found tiny bits of balloons and other plastic pieces, along with miniature fragments of tinfoil and short sections of string.

Her heart in her throat, Marie moved to her bedroom telephone. A quick call to a drug counseling office and she had the truth. Alice was doing heroin. The man who spoke with her said addiction could happen the first

time a person tried the drug. Before long, heroin was all a person knew, and buying and using became a full-time obsession.

Cold chills had run down Marie's arms. She confronted Alice that day and after a spate of lies, her daughter left in the dark of night and didn't come home for a week. When she did, her clothes hung on her shrinking body and her eyes were sullen, framed by dark circles. Alice tried to run past Marie toward her bedroom down the hall. But Marie grabbed her daughter's arm. "Where are you going?" *Stay calm*, she had told herself. *Alice won't talk to you if you're hysterical.*

"To my room." Alice glared at her. "Leave me alone."

"No." Marie's grip tightened. "We need to talk."

"There's nothing to talk about." Alice jerked her arm free and that's when Marie saw the marks. Needle tracks up and down the inside of her daughter's left arm. Alice must've realized what her mother had seen because she ran to her room and slammed the door.

Marie didn't give up. She followed Alice and tried to open the door, but Alice must've been sitting against it because it barely budged. "Move, Alice! Let me in!"

"No. I said leave me alone!" Alice's voice was muffled.

"I know about the heroin." Marie's voice had grown louder. "I want to help you."

"It's my life." Alice started crying. "I don't want help."

And so it went for five minutes until Marie had no choice but to wait it out. She returned to the kitchen and an hour passed. When it was long after dark, Marie tried again. This time when she pushed her way into her daughter's room there was no resistance. Alice was passed out on her bed, still in her dirty clothes, her stringy hair strewn across her beautiful face.

Marie wasn't sure if she should wake her daughter up and finish the discussion. For several minutes she stood there and watched her sleep. Just staring at her precious Alice. *Baby girl, how did this happen? Why would you do heroin? She barely noticed the tears falling onto her face. Didn't I give you what you needed? Wasn't this life enough for you?* In that moment a thought had occurred to Marie. Something else her mother had always told her. Without God, life would only be a series of meaningless efforts and irredeemable failures. *You need Him, Marie. Alice needs Him. This life is empty otherwise.*

Marie had always figured—then and now—that if God were real, she would've had a father. Alice would have one, too. She and Alice wouldn't struggle to pay the bills and keep food on the table, the way her mother had also struggled. Every day of their lives.

If He loved them, where was He when Alice took her first hit of heroin?

Marie ran her finger over the next photo. Alice grinning from the second row at her middle school graduation. She was so beautiful, so full of light and love. Friends surrounded her in the photograph, the way they always had back then. Marie held the book a little higher so she could look deep into her daughter's eyes. The eyes of a child with all of life ahead of her. *I have no answers, Alice.* Marie sighed and lowered the book again. *None. Why would you throw your life away?*

That night in her daughter's room, despite Marie's best efforts to stay quiet and motionless, Alice opened her eyes. Not like when she was a little girl. Sleepy and slow with a smile that gradually lit up the room. Back then she would hold out both arms and call for her. "Maman... hold me."

No, that child was gone forever. Instead, that terrible night Alice's eyes had flown open. Unnaturally wide and panicked. She breathed fast and hard. "Go away!" Her words were a shrill scream. "Go! Now!"

Marie had felt her anger rise. Forget being calm. If this were a fight for Alice's life, Marie was going to start swinging. "You will *not* talk to me like that, young lady. Do you hear me?"

And Alice was on her feet. Her breaths came in jagged gasps and she raked her trembling fingers through her hair. Then she faced Marie and screamed again. "Get away from me!"

"Alice, you're not yourself." Marie was no longer crying. She was too terrified for tears. "You don't want this... this life."

"You don't know what I want." She tried to push past, but Marie stood her ground, blocking the doorway. Alice's face grew red. "Move! You don't own me!"

"If I have to get locks for your bedroom door, I'll do it," Marie had shouted. "I will not let you leave this house for a life on the streets. That isn't who you are, Alice. Get back in bed."

A switch had seemed to flip in Alice's heart at that, and suddenly the fight left her. Slowly, like the sick child she was, she returned to her mattress and slipped beneath her blanket. She buried her head in her pillow

and turned her back to Marie. Just one word came from her before she fell asleep again.

“Go.”

That was the last word Marie heard from Alice for a month. In the morning when Marie went back to her daughter’s room, the girl was gone. So were her bedsheets and pillow and most of her clothes.

And life had been like that ever since. For two years. Marie had no idea who Alice had been living with or what she was doing to survive. She didn’t want to think about it.

Then a few months ago, Alice began stopping by the flat, acting like she was interested in changing, like she wanted a relationship with Marie again. But each time she left, Marie found money and valuables missing.

Whatever little Marie had, Alice found a way to take it.

The local authorities knew about the situation, but the least of their troubles was a teenager strung out on heroin and stealing money from home. They had promised to bring her back to Marie if they found her, but Alice didn’t have a driver’s license or ID. So how would police know if it was her or not? Alice was an adult, yes, but she was also Marie’s daughter. Stealing from a parent was more domestic disturbance than theft.

Which was why Marie had changed the locks. So that Alice couldn’t come through the front door looking for money and items to steal. So she couldn’t use Marie to stay in her wretched addiction. But now that Alice’s key didn’t work, Marie wondered if maybe this was worse. Hearing Alice pound on the door, listening to her cry out for Marie to let her in, let her have what she wanted.

Marie shuddered. She felt sick. The echoes of her daughter’s desperate voice still played in her heart and mind. Would Alice come back tomorrow, pounding on the door and wanting only to find something to steal?

It was late, hours from sunrise. Marie dried her cheeks. Time to put the photo book back where it belonged. Once more she stood and pushed through the ache in her muscles. When the pictures were back in the drawer, out of sight, she returned to her bed. But before she dropped to the sheets, she stopped.

Through it all, through every heartbreaking day knowing Alice was a drug addict living on the streets, Marie had never done the one thing her mother had asked her to do. She had never prayed to Jesus about Alice.

Marie didn't believe like her mother believed. Alice didn't, either. What had God ever done for them? And why should she believe He was even real?

But here, now... Marie was out of options.

The gravity of the situation pulled her to her knees in a way she was helpless to stop. And there, she buried her face in her hands and did the one thing she swore she'd never do.

"God... if You're there... help Alice." Her voice was tired, desperate. "Please, I beg You. Help Alice."

Then she struggled to her feet and crawled back into bed. There. She had followed her mother's wishes. Not so much because she believed. Not because she really thought some Almighty Heavenly Father would hear her prayers.

But because she had nowhere else to turn.

1998

2



Death was calling for Alice Michel.

In a hissing sort of whisper, it called her name, threatening her, taunting her, clawing at her. And it never stopped. Not ever. Like a living, breathing being of darkness, death wrapped its tentacles around her, dragging her into ever deeper levels of hell.

Until she hardly knew if she were dead or alive. Even her mother had rejected her. Alice didn't blame her.

How could you change the locks, Maman? Alice trudged down the cold, indifferent allée—four blocks from what used to be her home. She clenched her jaw. *I'm not your daughter. I never will be again.* The thought weighed on her and worked its way into the vast cavern where her heart used to be. She wouldn't go home ever. There was no turning back.

Alice shivered and ran her fingers over her right arm, then her left. They felt heavy and cold. Like the arms of a corpse.

There was only one place to go now, back to the underpass alongside the Seine. Cops hated that homeless people shuffled along the river. But the shelters were full and in the homeless camps around Paris, drugs ran the day. Indeed, Alice wasn't sure how long the prison of heroin had held her. Two years, three? Time stopped under the haze of heroin.

She shook harder now. The dull ache in her arms worked its way up through her bony shoulders and along her collarbones. Her legs hurt, too. Streaky pain from her hips to her knees and her knees to her ankles. A few more steps and the headache set in. Alice knew what this was. The feeling was as familiar as her name. *Drug sick.* She was drug sick.

Faster, she told herself. *Move your feet.*

And she did, as fast as she could until the group of tents came into view. Dirty, dilapidated, rain-beaten and sun-bleached. Yes. She was almost home. The only home she knew these days.

Already she could imagine the relief, sense the way her body was about to come to life again. Because someone would have the drug for her. The people of the underpass shared. Last week she'd bought the junk, so today her tent friends would step up. They all swapped needles, so Alice didn't need one of those, either.

She'd take the hit anyway she could get it.

Anything to feel alive again—normal... even for a few hours.

Alice carried a bag with her, a crocheted bag with a long strap that once was the colors of the rainbow. Now it was the color of dirt, like everything about her existence.

Push, she told herself. *Get to the tent*. Just... a few... more... steps. Alice pushed herself until she dropped to the mouth of a crowded tent. Three girls were passed out near the back. Another two—a married couple—were nodding, succumbing to the rescue of their latest dose of heroin.

"I need it." Alice's entire body convulsed now. She pulled her knees to her chin and rocked. "Please, someone. Hit me up."

Needles lay scattered on the torn tent floor. Tonight, sweet, handsome Benji was the most alert of the group. "I got you." He grabbed a needle from a filthy bowl and grabbed Alice's hand. "Hold out your arm, Alice."

It was all she could do to obey. Her muscles were tense, cramping. Benji looked a little high, and he wobbled as he crawled to her with the needle. But the sharp silver point found its mark, somewhere along the tracks of heroin memories that made up her arm.

"There, Alice, baby." The minute the needle was out of Alice's skin, Benji used the syringe to fill the vial again. "My turn."

With every heartbeat, heroin flooded Alice's veins and pumped through her body. And as it did, the aching stopped. Her arms fell to her sides, no longer shaking, and her legs stretched out in front of her. "More, Benji." She closed her eyes. "Give me more."

"No." He leaned back against the tent pole. The drug was working for him, too.

"I need it." Alice leaned closer and put her hand on Benji's arm. "The sick... it's worse today."

Benji shook his head. “This is strong stuff, baby. That’s enough.” Benji used to be a med student with a dream of being a surgeon. The druggies in the camp trusted him.

“It’s not that strong.” Alice stared at the man. He was twenty-five, maybe thirty. No telling with heroin. Addicts aged a decade overnight. Alice had asked him once, but Benji said he didn’t know. “Too many years.” That’s what he had told her. Too many since he’d checked out of life and given himself to the drug. Everything about his old self was gone. All he had these days was the needle.

By now Alice’s headache should’ve let up. But instead her temples pounded. She stood on her knees and looped her arms around Benji’s neck. The two of them had found solace in each other’s arms more than once. When they were sober. When they weren’t sick or high. She kissed his dry lips and stared into his droopy eyes. “I need it, Benji. Give it to me.”

If he were sober, Benji never would’ve agreed. He knew when a batch of heroin was strong, and he knew when it was maybe laced with fentanyl. *Peppered*, he called it. But tonight, in this moment, Benji was too high to care. He returned the kiss and worked his hands into her hair. “You’re beautiful, baby.” His words were slurred. “You know that?”

“Give me more.” She pressed herself against him. “Please, Benji.”

And then, as if he was as intoxicated by her presence as he was by the drug, Benji did as she asked. He leaned back and felt around for the still half-full syringe. She helped him stay steady long enough to find her arm, to find a vein strong enough to take the jab.

“I’ll do more, too. We can find the high together.” Benji kissed her cheek and aimed the needle. And just like that he was feeling the same euphoria she was feeling. She knew because she could see it on his face.

In a rush the second hit overtook her, warming her and offering a peace she only knew after a hit. Her headache faded and she fell against Benji’s chest.

“You okay, baby?” He ran his hand over her matted hair. “You okay?”

Suddenly a sense of panic came over her. Because she couldn’t make her mouth work, couldn’t find the words. And something else. She couldn’t draw a breath. “Ben... Ben...”

He was up on his knees now, taking her by the shoulders. “I told you... not to, Alice!” His voice was loud, frightened. “This stuff is peppered. It’s too strong.”