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Hannah Bonam-Young

Author of *Out on a Limb*

Next of Kin

A Novel



Next of Kin

a novel

Hannah Bonam-Young



DELL BOOKS
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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-one](#)

[Chapter Thirty-two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-one](#)

[Chapter Forty-two](#)

Epilogue

Bonus Epilogue

Dedication

Acknowledgments

Excerpt from Next to You

By Hannah Bonam-Young.

About the Author

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up *Next of Kin*! I wanted to include a list of content and themes throughout the book that may be distressing to some readers.

Content Warnings:

- Foster care and adoption
- Past parental neglect and abandonment
- Past death of a parent (drug overdose)
- Drug and alcohol consumption
- Descriptive sex scenes
- Anxiety, PTSD, and anger management issues
- Medically fragile infant in NICU (fetal alcohol syndrome)
- References to ableism

Chloe and Warren were both in foster care growing up. Chloe was eventually adopted but Warren and his younger brother, Luke, were not. The topics of foster care and adoption were written with the utmost care. I, with the employment of sensitivity readers, worked diligently to portray this subject in a balanced, honest manner.

Luke, Warren's teenage brother, is Deaf. He communicates exclusively in American Sign Language (ASL). I'm very grateful to the sensitivity readers from the Deaf community who partnered with me to portray Luke's experience accurately.

I hope you enjoy Chloe and Warren's love story.

Wishing you peace,

HANNAH BONAM-YOUNG

ONE



MY PHONE RINGS, FLASHING A number that immediately sends a chill down my spine. I follow my instincts, ditching my cart and spot in the checkout line to find quiet in the grocery store's bathroom, which, thankfully, is empty.

"Hello, this is Chloe." My voice is already shaking.

"Hi, Chloe, this is Rachel Feroux calling from Child Protective Services. Is this a good time to talk?"

I close the toilet stall and lock it behind me as an all-too-familiar feeling of dread creeps into my chest. I paw at my collarbone with my free hand. A nervous rash is most likely already spreading. "Sure." *Connie...it has to be Connie.* She's hurt, or worse. Why else would CPS call? I haven't heard from a social worker in over six years.

"Okay, great." Rachel clears her throat, then seems to brace herself with a loud inhale. "In your file, it states that you're open to your birth mother contacting you. Is that still accurate?"

Do I want to know? "Yes..."

"It is sort of an unusual call, I suppose. Your mother...sorry, Constance. Constance has put in an urgent request that you visit her. She's at the hospital."

My body goes entirely still, and the blood pumps slower in my veins. As much as I have tried to distance myself from her, the need for Connie to be

okay still sits lodged in my throat.

“She has just, entirely unexpectedly, given birth.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I fight for my next breath.

“Your mother had a baby.” My palm hits the stall’s wall before my back does, and I slide down to sit on the floor. *I’ll burn these clothes later.*

“No. That—but—*what?*”

“I understand that it must be a lot to process. I wish there was a way for me to deliver this news that wouldn’t give such a shock. I know that it’s been over ten years since you have seen or heard from your mother.”

That is not *entirely* true. There were plenty of times in high school when she showed up without my adoptive parents’ permission, and I never told.

“Is she— Is Connie okay?”

“Yes, she’s fine. A colleague of mine is with her right now. The baby was premature. The doctor who called us earlier said they will make a full recovery, probably after a two- or three-month NICU stay. The baby...will not be placed with your mother. We are looking into different care options.”

Colleague. Placed. Care. Social workers are all over this—why would Connie want to see me? Wouldn’t she understand how messed up that is? To need me while she sends another kid into foster care? *No, not just another kid...my sibling.*

She clears her throat. “Constance has listed you as a possible caregiver. She’s willing to sign over her parental rights to you. If not, the baby, after making a full recovery, will be placed in foster care.”

I pull the phone away from my face and stare blankly at the screen for a moment. I must have a bad signal or be imagining this entirely. A possible caregiver? For a baby. *Me?*

“But...I’m twenty-four.” I’m not sure why that’s the thought that escapes when there are about two thousand others bouncing around in my head, but for whatever reason, it’s what comes out. Twenty-four, recently graduated, no idea what I’m doing...Hell, I had been crossing my fingers that my bank card wouldn’t be declined for my groceries.

“Chloe, I understand that this is a lot to ask of you. Especially considering your...distant relationship with your birth mother. However, it’s only appropriate that we follow up with each possible contact she provides. You have every right to say no, and there could be visitation options with your sibling if you were to want that.”

I gasp softly as an undeniable rush of joy curves my lips into a smile, another thought breaking through the heavy silence. *I have a sibling.* I’d have given anything for a sibling growing up, someone familiar and known. Someone to love and be loved by unconditionally. “Would I even be allowed?” I ask hesitantly. “If I wanted to?”

“That would require a much larger conversation...one that may be best to have at my office.”

“Yeah...okay.”

“There would be lots to discuss. I think, right now, we should just digest this news.” Rachel’s voice remains cool yet determined.

“Right.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. My eyes are closed, but the room keeps spinning.

“Constance is asking to see you regardless.”

“Okay.” I don’t know if it’s the prospect of seeing Connie or the thought that she chose not to reach out before now that causes my lips to tremble, but either way, they do.

“But to be perfectly clear, the choice is ultimately yours.” Rachel’s gentle confidence reassures me somewhat.

“Yeah...”

“How about I give you the phone number of my colleague who is with Constance now? If you decide you want to see her, you can get the information from her. Then we can go from there, whatever you decide.”

My head aches and pounds, feeling like it would on a relentlessly humid day before a thunderstorm.

After Rachel gives me her colleague’s details, I hang up the phone and press it into the space between my eyes. Focusing on that spot of slight discomfort, one I’m choosing to cause and not receive unwillingly, seems to

help. I think of Connie, or at least the latest version of her I have in memory, and transfer that image to a hospital bed.

Sympathy swells despite my impulse to shut my emotions down and get out of this bathroom without causing a scene. I imagine the similarities between where she is now and the picture that used to sit on her bedside table. Our first photo together, taken as she lay in a different hospital bed almost twenty-five years ago. She had been alone then too and only seventeen.

My thoughts hold on my birth mother until an unwelcome memory rises to the top of the pile. I was four years old, waiting on an empty school bus that had already made a second loop back to my street. Sitting alone with the bus driver and my kindergarten teacher, I remember thinking that they both looked at me with the same expression my mom had when I'd fallen out of a tree a few days before. I asked myself why they did that—I wasn't hurt.

"Mommy didn't mention any plans she had for today?" Ms. Brown had asked me.

"Nope," little me answered.

"Do you know your grandma's phone number? Or where she might work?"

"I don't have a grandma. I have an uncle, but he lives on a big boat."

"And your...dad? Do you know your dad's name, sweetie?" Ms. Brown was making me nervous, and I wanted my mom. Mostly so I could show her the artwork I'd made and ask if I had a dad like my friend Sara did. Sara's dad seemed nice. Maybe, I had thought, he could be my dad too.

"Nope," I answered.

"Okay, all right. Well, I think you and I are going to go on a little adventure today! Would you like to see where Ms. Brown lives?"

"Don't you have a dog?" I asked.

"Uh...yes, I do."

"I don't like dogs. They're stinky."

"Well, how about we put him outside and the two of us can play inside?"

Ms. Brown had taken me back to her house for two hours before CPS workers arrived and placed me in emergency care.

I've read in my file since—the one I was “gifted” on my eighteenth birthday—that the police tracked Connie down a few days later. She was high, drunk, and angry to have been found. I bounced around foster care for a year until my mom proved successful enough in her sobriety that I was able to move back in with her. I knew she had worked hard for that. Counselors, social workers, and teachers—they'd all told me how much my mom had worked to get me back.

I've never understood why they needed to tell me that, as if any five-year-old should be grateful to be with their own mother. As if I was a sobriety chip and not a human.

When Connie relapsed ten months later, my head was so filled up with forced gratitude that I felt worse for her than for myself. I should have been told I didn't deserve to eat nothing but dry Froot Loops for three days straight—but I wasn't. Instead, I felt sad for her. I still do.

Now, she's brought another kid into this mess.

Determination fills my chest, and I open my eyes, bringing myself back into the fluorescent-lit bathroom and into my adult body that shakes as waves of nausea cause goosebumps to spread. I know that I need to go see my mother. I won't let my sibling go through what I did. I can't.

TWO



I STEP OUT OF THE toilet stall and wash my hands. Once I'm positive I have scrubbed every last piece of public bathroom off me, I bring some cold water to my face. The water droplets run down into the neck of my T-shirt as I lean over the sink, bracing myself with a firm grip on either side. *Do not throw up in a grocery store bathroom.* I look at my reflection in the clouded mirror resting above the basin.

My mother's eyes look back at me. Deep green with amber flecks. Thick, dark eyelashes and even thicker eyebrows. The women in our family were built to battle the elements, carry children on our backs, live through famine—survive. *Strong brows, strong noses, strong bodies, strong hearts.* Connie has written that on each of my birthday cards—the years she remembered.

I always thought it was a batshit crazy thing to write, but now the familiar sentiment is sort of nice. I became far less insecure about my soft-edged figure when I realized my body had evolved to hold weight and strength because of what my Polish lineage—on Connie's side—had to survive.

My chestnut-brown hair is getting far too long, falling almost to the ends of my fingertips, but I like it that way. Mostly because my adoptive mother would hate it—it's not practical. I tie it up now to allow my neck to breathe. Everything feels too close to my skin.

Outside the grocery store bathroom, crowds of shoppers go about their day. Announcements on the overhead speaker include a promotion on paper

towels. The beeps of the cash registers are steady and jarring. The smiles of the cashiers plastered and polite. A woman uses a coupon on cat litter that gets her a whole twenty cents off. The world hasn't turned upside down for anyone else.

I abandon my cart of groceries and make a mental note to never return to this store in case I was spotted doing so. There is frozen stuff in the cart, after all.

I pass by a picture-perfect family entering the store as I leave. Two parents, two kids. They're giggling with one another. The dad makes a silly face at the little girl balancing on the end of the cart, holding on for dear life. I push down the resentment that threatens to burn its way up my throat and turn into tears. I envy them, deeply, in my gut.

Finally outside, I lean on the concrete wall of the building and take a much-needed breath of the mid-June air. When I woke up this morning, my to-do list consisted of buying groceries, watching a documentary my father recommended, and possibly getting tipsy enough on wine to download yet another dating app. Now, bigger things to tackle.

I pull out my phone to call Rachel's colleague.

"Hello, this is Odette."

"Hi, Odette, it's Chloe, Connie's...daughter."

"Oh, yes!" Odette sings out. "Hi, hon. Good to hear from you." Her tone is so warm it builds an ache in my chest. The longing to be comforted by her is outweighed by my need to keep this day progressing forward at top speed. I need to remain a moving target.

"I was wondering if you could tell me where Connie is and how to see her."

"Of course. Is this a mobile number? It may be best to text the details to you. Is that okay?"

"That would be great, thanks."

"Okay, hon, talk soon," Odette says softly.

I copy the address of the hospital from Odette's text and paste it into the GPS on my phone. There is no way I'm paying for a cab ride across the city,

but I also don't have any change for the bus. I'd go inside and use the ATM, but they could be waiting for the owner of the abandoned grocery cart to return or beginning to hang wanted posters, so I won't be doing that.

I do have my expired student bus pass, however, given to me by my alma mater. It's only been one month since graduation. That has to count for something. Perhaps the pass is sort of like expired yogurt: You can still try it if you're too broke to afford more—which I am.

The bus driver waves me on without reading the fine print—*thank god*—and I take a seat toward the back next to a window. I shut down thoughts of where I'm headed, hoping to not add “cried on public transport” to today's list of achievements.

The ride passes far too quickly. The back doors open to a crowded stop filled with scrub-wearing folks clamoring to get on. I make my way through them and up the ramp to the visitor entrance of the hospital.

As I get into the empty elevator, it dawns on me that, prior to ninety minutes ago, I hadn't thought of Connie in a few weeks. Not since Mother's Day. The guilt comes in an unexpected and tsunami-sized wave.

Without pausing, I frantically search the collection of buttons on the wall and push the emergency stop button. The elevator immediately halts. I place my hands around the base of my neck, apply pressure with my forearms against my chest—as my adoptive parents taught me when I was experiencing anxiety, or what they affectionately called *nerves*.

I haven't seen Connie for six years. I hadn't known if she was alive, though I always suspected I would feel it if she passed. What do I say to her? Call her? Should I have stopped at the lobby gift shop first? Do you get flowers for the new mother who will be leaving alone?

“Hello, is something wrong?” A muffled male voice comes through the elevator's speaker. *Shit*.

“Oh no, sorry, I pressed it accidentally,” I stammer.

“No problem.” The elevator hums and starts back up.

Two floors later, I step off and follow the purple arrows on the floor to the maternity ward, per Odette's instruction. There is a phone hanging on the

wall outside the entrance of locked double doors. A sticker next to it reads INFORM THE CHARGE NURSE WHO YOU ARE HERE TO VISIT AND WAIT FOR THE DOORS TO OPEN. I pick it up, and it trills a few times before a rather crabby-sounding woman answers.

“Hi. I’m here to see Constance Walden.” I haven’t said my preadoption surname out loud in a long time.

“One moment, please.” The line clicks, and the doors open slowly with a hum. I walk in and nod at the nurse at the front desk. She barely looks up as she points over her shoulder toward, presumably, Connie’s room.

“End of the hall on your left,” another, kinder nurse chimes in from behind, offering me a sympathetic grin.

“Thanks.” At this point, to keep me upright, my feet have to keep moving faster than my fears can grow.

I knock three times, shifting my weight from one foot to the other, before a towering woman steps out. She is probably in her midsixties, dressed in purple from head to toe, and has dreadlocks that rest past her shoulders. She has dark skin, painted-on red cheeks, and kind eyes that she uses to look me up and down adoringly.

“Oh, Miss Chloe...look at you.” She clasps her hands in front of her face. “I’m sure you don’t remember me, but I have known your mother for a long time. We met when you were only five years old.” She lowers her hands and holds one palm out for me to take, which I do willingly. “It’s so nice to see you again, my dear. Though I wish it was under different circumstances.” We both let go.

I do remember her, or her kind eyes at least, and I feel a little safer for it. “It’s nice to see you again, Odette.” I force out a smile, and she puts one hand on my shoulder, the comfort of which almost sends me into a fit of tears. I resist.

“How are you holding up?”

“Weird morning.” My voice, despite my efforts, has no ease to it.

“Mmm, I can believe that,” she says. “Well, hon, I’m here to be your mama’s friend right now. Is it okay if I call her your mama?”

I shrug, but before I speak, she continues, “Connie and I have kept in touch over the years...when she’s doing well. I’ve helped her with rehabilitation programs, a sponsorship group, things like that. Mostly, I try to be a listening ear. Before last night, when she asked me here, I hadn’t heard from her in two years. The hospital staff had been less than friendly. She hadn’t even seen the baby before I got here this morning. Connie—”

She stops speaking, exhales, and rubs her eye with a closed fist. “Connie had gone into the ER, complaining of stomach pains. She was...drunk. They discovered she was in active labor, and they performed a C-section. She hadn’t known she was pregnant.” Odette’s face turns solemn. “I’m a children’s support worker, but the hat I’m wearing through this door is Connie’s friend first. I want to be clear, sweet girl, that I know she has made many mistakes. I know they have impacted you greatly. But she is having a hard time, and we need to be as compassionate as we can be right now.”

Guilt wraps tightly around my heart as it beats a little faster. “Understood.” I swallow thickly.

“Okay, hon. You ready to go in?”

I hesitate to ask, but I have to know before my feet will move me. “Is...is the baby in there?”

“No. She’s in the neonatal intensive care unit. She’s safe.”

I have a sister. “Can I see her?” I ask with trepidation. “After?”

Odette’s expression clouds, and she nods a few times. “Sure, hon.”

I press my mouth into a hard line and adjust myself to stand straighter, inhaling deeply. “Okay. I’m ready.”