

Twist

A Novel

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For Mom—

Who would do anything for her children and is always my
number one fan.

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Part One

Chapter 1



I'D SEEN HIM AT SCHOOL before, the kid who came in with Mr. Drake. I didn't know his name was Lucas. When he brushed his blond hair away from his forehead and his blue eyes met mine, my insides liquefied. I thought I saw a flicker of recognition on his face, but how would he know me?

"Do you go to Sage Creek High?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, as I looked down at my tennis shoes and wished I'd dressed better. But I didn't know a cute boy would be standing in front of me tonight.

"I thought so," he said. "Aren't you new?"

"Yes."

We were at Aunt Charlotte and Uncle George's house, me sitting in the living room and the boy hanging around the threshold.

Only a few seconds earlier, my uncle's plumber, Mr. Drake, had said, "Stay here, Lucas. Talk to Beatrice for a minute while I work on George's sink." And then he followed my uncle into the kitchen.

"Did you hear me?" Lucas said.

"What?" I answered.

A tiny chuckle puffed off of his lips. "I didn't think you were listening. Call me Luke."

His voice was so smooth my belly did backflips. “Bea,” I said, because a single syllable was all I could manage under the gaze of such a magnificent creature as Luke.

“So, Bea.” His eyes wandered around the living room and stopped on me. “What’s your story? Where you been hiding?”

I stared at his perfectly straight, white teeth and froze.

“Dad makes me tag along on some of his jobs,” Luke said, as he sat down on the edge of the couch. “I’ve been to this house a lot, but I’ve never seen you here.”

“You weren’t here last week when the kitchen flooded.” I flicked a piece of lint off of my leg, acting disinterested. “I’m staying with my aunt and uncle for a while”—and then I stopped short, before the darkness of the last twelve months could creep into our conversation. I picked up the remote and channel surfed, looking for something he could grab on to instead of me.

“Where’d that frown come from?” he asked. Then when I didn’t answer, after a pause, he posed another question. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

And that was all I needed to hear. I lost interest. He was way too nosy, and far too comfortable asking me about my personal life. I kept my eyes on the TV and said, “Do you always talk so much?”

“Hey, a cute girl shows up at school and I want to know.”

“Now you’re way too flirty.”

“I like the tomboy thing you’re rocking. What can I say?”

In my peripheral vision I saw him wink at me. That was so cheesy, I thought I was being played. “Really?” I rolled my eyes.

“I’m just being friendly. Geez, Beatrice.”

And the timber of his voice, mixed with a playful tone, hit the right note—it softened me. “Call me, Bea,” I said.

“Can’t anyone be nice to you?” he asked.

When his lower lip protruded, exaggerating a pout, I must have been like a swinging mood tree because my entire being thawed. “Yeah, I’m just having a bad day,” I said.

More like a bad year.

We stared at each other and he smiled again, so I smiled, too.

“See,” Luke said. “I knew you had it in you.”

He moved closer to me on the couch and put his hand on mine. “My official name is Lucas Drake.” With that, he squeezed my fingers, lifted my hand, and kissed my knuckles.

An unfamiliar feeling of warmth ran down my spine and into my toes. I jerked my arm away and stood up in a curtsy. “Beatrice Malcolm.” I plopped down again, tucking my right leg under my butt.

Luke glided even closer and whispered, “I’m glad you moved to Cali. I think you’re cute.”

I wondered if his head had begun to swirl, the way mine had. I’d never experienced anything like this before, ever. But suddenly, Uncle George and Luke’s dad were standing at the front door, about fifteen feet from where we sat. And thank goodness Mr. Drake broke the spell with his gruff voice. “Lucas, let’s go!”

Luke seemed to become abruptly aware of his surroundings and even looked puzzled when he saw how close we were sitting. He flexed his hand and wiggled his fingers—I ran my thumb across my knuckles and glanced at him. We both blushed and quickly looked away. I was relieved to stand up and walk the few steps to the entryway with Lucas Drake behind me.

Uncle George shuffled a bit while his hand automatically searched the pocket where he used to keep his cigarettes.

Mr. Drake said, “George, I still can’t believe you quit smoking after all these years.”

“Shut up, Kyle. It makes me want one real bad when you talk about it.” My uncle clapped Mr. Drake on the head, and they must have seen the look on my face because they both burst out laughing.

“Your niece is looking at me like I have three eyes,” Mr. Drake said, and then he snorted, which caused Luke to laugh. “Darling, your uncle and I go way back. In fact”—he faked a punch at Luke’s stomach—“he was there when this one was born.”

Standing a few inches over five feet, I was a midget next to these men—including Luke. So when all three of them looked down at me with grins of epic proportions on their faces—the proverbial cats that swallowed the canary—I barked at them. “What?”

“She sure reminds me of Grace,” Mr. Drake said softly.

“I can hear you,” I said.

“It’s a compliment, dear . . .” For a split second I thought he was going to cry. “Grace was something else . . .”

As they moved down the steps, my uncle and I waved goodbye, and I heard Luke say to his dad, “Who’s Grace?”

“Beatrice’s mother,” Mr. Drake answered.

Then Uncle George quickly shut the door and smacked his hands together real loud. “Kitchen’s working again. I hope Aunt Charlotte doesn’t cook tonight.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“What?” he said. “You know it’s true. She’s not a good cook.”

Chapter 2



I WOKE UP EARLY THE next day and fixed myself a bowl of oatmeal. A few minutes after I sat down, Aunt Charlotte entered the kitchen and made my lunch. I felt silly carrying a paper sack to school at my age, but she insisted. “The starchy food in the cafeteria isn’t healthy,” she said as she handed me the bag. This was the same thing she’d said almost every morning for the two weeks that I’d been living there. And Uncle George usually shoved a five-dollar bill in my hand when Aunt Charlotte wasn’t looking.

“I was thinking about taking you shopping.” My aunt’s eyes skimmed my clothes and stopped at the rip in my jeans. She lifted her chin toward my layered T-shirts and the boy’s army surplus jacket I’d bought at the Goodwill. Then, with a scowl on her face, Aunt Charlotte took me over to the mirror. “You’re so beautiful.” Her hands lifted my thick, brown hair from inside my collar. “You’re striking, Bea . . . You’ve got your father’s dimples and your mother’s blue eyes.” She squeezed my shoulders, and neither of us spoke.

The mere thought of my mom was the rhinoceros in the room that quieted everyone, including Mr. Drake the night before.

“It’s okay,” I said. “We can talk about her if you want to.”

“I . . . It’s too soon.” A tear hung in the corner of her eye.

Sometimes I forgot that she’d lost her sister. “Maybe later, then. I need to go to school anyway.”

Aunt Charlotte tapped at her eye with her fingertip, a delicate procedure she had mastered and used frequently over the last few weeks. I assumed it was her way of smoothing out her sadness without smearing her makeup. “I can drop you on my way to work,” she said.

I balanced three books and the lunch sack in my arms. “Okay.”

“Honey, why didn’t you say something? I’m sure we have a bag for all of that stuff.”

And just like that, she perked up. And I acquired a new-to-me vintage book bag that was totally cool and had once belonged to Uncle George—canvas with snarls and a long strap so I could wear it sidesaddle across my body.

On the way to school, Aunt Charlotte asked, “Have you made any friends yet?”

“A few,” I said.

“You can invite them over if you want. Our house is your house.”

I nodded.

Aunt Charlotte looked at me while she was driving. “Bea, it’s okay to ask for things. We want to take care of you.”

A car horn sounded and she reacted too quickly, slamming the brakes and causing us both to jerk forward in our seats. The driver waved his hand in anger.

She chuckled. "I bet there's no road rage in Seattle."

"Are you kidding? The worst kind. Ever drive with my mom?" We both laughed for a second and then we had another rhino moment; and for the rest of the ride, we were absolutely quiet.

Aunt Charlotte dropped me at the main entrance, and right after she drove off, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I spun around and there was Luke. His eyes widened as if to say, *Well, here I am*. But then he scrunched his face together. "What's with that sad look again?"

And instantly, I felt better—simply because Luke wanted to be near me.

But who was this guy, and why did he have this effect on me?

As we walked, I listed to one side, dragged down by the weight of the book bag. "Let me carry that for you," he said. When he touched my shoulder, I felt a thousand magical chords resonate through my body. My cheeks turned to fire, and I thought my hair would melt off my head.

"Why are you looking at me that way?" he asked, with a grin as wide as the Arctic.

"Just . . . Thank you," I said, barely audible.

"I don't know what it is about you, Bea." He lifted the book bag as if it were light as air. "Mancha."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. My word for best wave ever."

"You surf?"

"Of course," he said. "Mancha."

I had a silly grin on my face when we headed toward my first class, and within seconds Luke's friends surrounded us. One of them, a boy with curly black hair wearing perfectly ironed

corduroy pants, smacked Luke on the chest with the back of his hand. “Did you read that science crap? I fell asleep in the middle of the chapter.”

“Like it matters, genius,” Luke said, and then he looked at me. “Bea, this is Simon, he’s super smart. Don’t listen to him when he acts like he’s always behind on his homework.” “Stop,” Simon said, with a touch of modesty.

“No, really. Simon, Tate, and Murphy.” Luke snickered. “My dad says they sound like a law firm.” He took a breath. “Meet, Bea. Also known as Beatrice Malcolm.”

“I didn’t know you went to our school,” Simon said.

The warm fuzzies inside of me abruptly vanished and a blanket of dread took over, because I knew what was coming next.

“I’ve seen your picture on the news, right? Isn’t your dad Teddy Malcolm?” Simon asked.

“Audacious,” Tate said. He was the one kid in the group who looked so average I’d never be able to pick him out of a sea of students if it wasn’t for the braces that took over his face. “That guy is still on the FBI’s Most Wanted list, isn’t he?”

All four boys stared at me, waiting. I wanted to run. Instead I said, “I can’t talk about that. Can I have my bag? I’m going to class.”

I reached for the strap and my hand touched Luke’s. He took hold of my fingers, against my wishes—or so said my mind, but not my body. “I’ll walk you,” he whispered, and then he turned to his friends and said, “Later, brainless douche bags. Next time show a little tact.”

A boy who defended me—that made my insides sing, and if only for a nanosecond, I felt like I was in Heaven.

Chapter 3



AT MY LAST SCHOOL, A few boys had followed me around and wanted to do stuff for me, too. But I never felt this glowing awesomeness, or even a bit of delight over their attention, not the way I did with Luke.

My only girlfriend, Amilee, had said, “Maybe you’re a lesbian.”

“Not that it matters, but no, I’m not,” I’d answered. “Just because I don’t priss up like you do, doesn’t mean I like the ladies.”

“It’s okay if you are,” she said. I swear she’d batted her eyes at me, flirting! “I mean, the way you like to be one of the guys.”

I’d ignored her. What she didn’t understand was these boys had chased me as if they were in some kind of a *trance*.

But I hadn’t really talked to Amilee since Mom died. I thought I’d call her later on. Making girlfriends was so hard for me.

“Is this your class?” Luke handed me the book bag when I stopped in front of my homeroom. As I grabbed the strap, he hugged me. “I’m sorry about my sometimes brainless friends.”

I breathed in hard and sharp when I smelled the wonderful soapy aroma that came off of his skin. Before I could even think about it, my arms reached around his waist and I reciprocated with a squeeze. There we were—two strangers hugging as if we'd never see each other again.

When we separated, Luke had a bewildered look on his face. "I don't know what it is about you, but I'm"—he shook his head and finished with a word that I suspected wasn't his first choice—"speechless."

"Thank you." I didn't know what else to say.

"So polite!" He burst out laughing and said, "Lunch—are you early or late?"

"Late."

He picked me up and twirled me around, bumping me into a few kids. One guy nudged us in passing. "Watch it, Drake!"

When he set me down by the door, a girl with stringy blonde hair and a sucker in her hand glared at us as she passed. Luke's smile disappeared, but his attention quickly returned to me.

"Okay," I said. "I'll see you later."

"Wait, wait," he said. Maybe it was the blue shirt combined with his tan skin and shaggy hair that made his eyes sparkle or just his *way*, but something about his essence had captured me.

When he leaned in and kissed me, his mustache stubble tickled my skin. We kept going until his lips parted slightly and he nibbled on my lower lip, causing a mini explosion in my chest. But then Mr. Cooper, my history teacher interrupted, practically pushing us out of the way so he could get into the classroom.

As the bell sounded, Luke squeezed my hand and took off. He got about a classroom away, then turned around, and running backward through the hall he yelled, "Meet me at the oak tree for lunch, Beatrice!" He pumped his fist as he exited the building.

On my way to a seat by the window, Mr. Cooper said, “Beatrice, I see you’re getting along well at”—he held his fingers up and made quotes—“the Sage.”

A splash of heat filled my face. I’d never hugged and kissed a boy like that, especially one I hardly knew, and never in front of a teacher. “I’m sorry, Mr. Cooper.” I didn’t know what else to say so I spilled out the truth. “I got caught up in the moment.”

Mr. Cooper’s face relaxed and he looked at me with compassionate eyes—not with a pitying look, but in a genuine way. “Well, just be careful.” And then he paced the front of the room while he taught the class about socialism and Karl Marx.

I was almost interested when he began talking about how the U.S. government, or, in his words, “the powers that be,” believe democracy is for everyone. “We always want to flex our muscles, but what happens to these countries when we pull out?”

I was thinking about Luke, so I didn’t hear all of the countries Mr. Cooper mentioned, but he said something about Vietnam and Iran that eventually led to a conversation about nine-eleven.

When the class ended, Mr. Cooper said, “If you need anything, Beatrice, don’t hesitate to ask.”

I thanked him, but as I walked away I couldn’t help wondering if he had it, too. Was he susceptible to that unnameable trance thing that I didn’t want to call a “spell”? That power I seemed to have over boys at times?

Don’t be silly. Mr. Cooper’s just being nice.

Right then, sucker girl slammed into me. Only she didn’t have that candy in her hand anymore. She whipped her hair around and it caught me in the eye. I moved away and she stayed on me—literally in my space. “What do you want?” I asked.

“I want you to go back to where you came from, granola girl,” she hissed in my ear.

I turned in the opposite direction and she followed me.

I stopped and asked again, "What do you want?"

"Stay away from my boyfriend," she said.

But when she put her hand on my arm, I jerked away from her. "Don't touch me. What's your problem?"

"Right now, you are," she said.

Just then, a girl with a huge barrette in her hair came up behind her. "I have your back, Erica."

"What, you can't handle your own business?" I snapped. I stepped so close to her that my nose was less than a quarter of an inch away from *her* nose. Something my dad taught me years ago: never back down.

"Look at Miss Skinny Bones. She's got spunk," the barrette head yelled.

A group of kids surrounded us. "Leave her alone, Erica," a guy said.

"Yeah, that's not cool. She's new," another kid yelled. And within seconds the entire group, which was mostly boys, turned on Erica.

"This isn't over, waif." Erica spun on her toes and her jewelry clanked as she stomped away.

"She's such a drama queen," someone said.

And then Murphy pulled me along as the crowd disbursed. "Ignore her. She's always had a thing for Luke. He doesn't even talk to her anymore."

I started to respond but he stepped up his pace and left me standing there. "Talk to you later. I can't be late for Biology." Within seconds the bell sounded and everyone but me hurried to class.

Chapter 4



MY NEXT TEACHER, MRS. EVANS didn't even care that I was late for English and I was so not into Shakespeare, so I mentally slipped away and attended my own little pity party.

Why did Dad leave when Mom got sick? I needed him.

Why didn't I spend more time with Mom during her two years of bliss? She needed me.

Poor Aunt Charlotte, she only saw her sister during the worst time. No bliss, period.

Why didn't Mom tell me she was going to die and that the two years was only a pause? I think she knew.

What did Dad really do to make the FBI Most Wanted list?

Why haven't they caught him?

Will I ever see Dad again? I hope he's careful. He's not a bad person. He just made some bad decisions.

I hate—

"Ms. Malcolm?" my teacher said and the sudden silence seemed awfully loud.

"Yes?" I responded vaguely.

“Answer the question,” Mrs. Evans’ hand rested on the white board and the entire class stared at me.

At my other school I’d gotten excellent grades and would have never responded as I did to Mrs. Evans: “I don’t know.”

I guess my honesty paid off because Mrs. Evans moved on to the next student, who said something about Shakespeare and male actors playing women’s roles during that era. But I couldn’t pay attention, instead I thought about lunch, and how long it would take me to find that oak tree. I definitely needed to call Amilee and tell her about Luke. She wasn’t going to believe me.

Two more classes until Luke time, now that was something I could wrap my mind around. Finally, the bell sounded, and I was the first one out the door, wishing my next class would hold my interest. But that wasn’t to be; more torture, of the mathematical kind this time. Tick, tick, tick . . .

Aha—the oak tree, right outside the cafeteria. Sweet beautiful Luke stood there with his friends. I dug a fingernail into my skin to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.

“Hey,” I said.

“Want to go off campus with us for lunch?” he asked.

“Sure,” I answered, as my insides bubbled.

Luke grabbed my hand and led me to Simon’s car and I felt as if we’d always been together—all of us. I sat in the middle of the back seat, leaning on Luke, who had his arm around me. The boys chatted about kids at school and treated me as if they’d known me forever.

“Let’s blow off the day,” Luke suggested. “I only have two more classes and one of them is study hall.”

Simon said, “I have a chemistry test next period. You can use my car, but you need to remember to come back and pick me up this time.” He wagged his finger at Luke.

“You’re on your own, dude.” Murphy and Tate both shook their heads.

Luke turned to me.

“Absolutely, I’m in,” I said. “My classes are boring. Let’s go do something fun.”

After we ate greasy tacos—everyone laughed when I threw out the nearly shredded lunch bag of kale salad that I’d been carrying around all morning—Luke and I dropped the boys off at school and headed to the beach.

“Tell me about you,” I said, as we headed down the coast.

“What do you want to know?” Luke asked.

“Anything.” I leaned my head against his arm and then I popped up and said, “No, wait! Tell me something nobody else knows. Something unique.”

He gave me a mischievous look from the corner of his eye. “I’m almost seventeen and about to graduate from high school early. I have one of the highest IQs in the district, but nobody knows that.”

“Really?”

He laughed. “You asked me. Now you question my answer?”

“Because you’re so handsome. IQ and looks don’t go together,” I said. “Besides, I get the feeling that somebody else knows that.”

“You’re right! More than just looks, ladies and gentlemen, Beatrice has brains, too.”

He pulled into a lot near the pier and parked the car facing the ocean. We stared at the water and I could have sat there forever, mesmerized by the waves—and by him.

“My parents, teachers, and the counselor know,” he said. “Some of my friends suspect I’m a brainiac. But that’s about it.”

“Lucas Drake, tell me something nobody knows,” I insisted.

His eyes rolled up, as if he was searching his brain for a trinket of information. “I can’t tell you everything. But I can tell you that I’m a horrible sleeper. I stay up late and wake up early. I’m addicted to a news show called *Greed*, and I think I snore.”

“You don’t know if you snore?”

“No.”

“Well, why don’t you test it?”

“Because I don’t care if I snore.”

I laughed. “I think I get it.”

“Get what?”

“You!” I said.

“Your turn.” He leaned into me and touched the tip of my nose with his own. “Fess up! What’s your biggest secret?”

“Well, that’s different than things people don’t know about me.”

“How so?” he asked.

“Because it’s a secret, and I can’t share that yet,” I teased.

“I bet this happens to you a lot.” He looked out at the rolling waves, but he had a big smile on his face.

“What happens to me a lot?”

“Boys liking you. There’s something about you, Bea. I know I said it before, but it’s true.”

I grabbed his face, turned him to me, and we kissed. He stroked my cheeks with his warm hands and his lips tickled my neck. Tingles zipped through my stomach and shimmied across my skin. “I’ve never done this,” I said breathlessly.

“Done what?” he mumbled as he kissed my earlobe and all over my face. After some awkward shuffling, he pulled me into the backseat on top of him.

“We just met,” I said.

“I know,” he responded. “I’m crazy about you, Bea.”

“You don’t know me,” I said as he pulled my jacket and then my T-shirts off and lightly touched my skin. My entire body got goose bumps, even on the inside!

But suddenly, he stopped, and his eyes met mine. “I feel like I’ve known you forever. How can that be?”

“Something you say to all your girls . . .” I answered in a playful way, though it was hard to keep my voice steady.

“No, this is like a force. Beatrice Malcolm, force of *one!*”

I put my face into his neck and he put his arms around me. I didn’t want this moment to end. I’d never felt more alive in my life. Together we pulled his shirt off, bumping against the window and front seat. But once my bare body touched his warm chest, the cells across my skin ignited and my heart sang.

I was so swept up in being near Luke and the wonderment of his touch, that I closed my eyes and felt my body moving in unison with his. When we melded together as one it hurt for a few seconds so I clung to him closer than I’d ever been to anyone. Once the pain faded, a thousand fireflies fluttered from the center of my being and spiraled throughout my body. I felt as if I were releasing this incredible feeling to Luke through our connection that went far beyond the physical sensation of the moment. Then our fleshly appetites grew with such intensity that I didn’t realize we’d moved to a position where my face and breasts were mashed up against the window until we were finished. I was grateful no one was around.

Luke squeezed me as if he’d never let me go and held me gently in his lap. Lightly running his hands up and down my body.

But what had gotten into me? I’d never even gone past first base before and here I was making love to a boy I’d just met.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I didn’t want to open my mouth and answer for fear this would never happen again. “You’re my firs—”

“Shh.” He put his finger on my lips. “I know. It’s okay. You were wonderful.”

“You seem so experienced for a high school boy . . .” I couldn’t *believe* what I’d just done with a guy I barely knew. “I’ve never experienced anything like that in my life.”

“Well, it can be our little secret,” he said.

My mood shifted to what I’d begun to call my “dark cloud” moments. I was having one.

Had he just manipulated me? Was he ever going to talk to me again? Or would I just be his booty call? No dating. No getting to know you—nothing. This wasn’t love at first sight. I let him have his way with me, and yet I was an active participant! I pulled away from him and began sifting through our clothes. Within minutes, we were sitting in the backseat, fully dressed. When he put his arm around me, I leaned away.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. We should just get back to school. We’ll be late.”

“Late for what? We’re not going back, remember?” He rubbed my shoulders and leaned over to kiss me. I turned my head. “What’s wrong?” he asked again.

“I’m thinking we did this backward. Shouldn’t we . . . date or something?”

“Come here.” Luke held me close. “That was beautiful. Beatrice Malcolm, don’t *get distant* on me now!” He tried to tickle me. “No pouting in my car.”

“Your car?” I chuckled.

“See, you’re in there, I knew it. Come back to me, little Bea. Where are you?” he asked in a goofy voice. And once he made me laugh, I felt better. We got out of the car and walked on the sand near the edge of the water, daring the waves to move closer.

“You make me feel so alive,” he said.

And I responded by grabbing his hand. We spoke very little, but my mind was whirling—a dark blizzard of thoughts. Eventually, he led us toward the parking lot, and he kissed me as he opened the car door.

I wasn’t sure if I’d see Luke again, and then gradually, *not* seeing him became my desire. I didn’t want to see Lucas Drake *ever* again. My dark swinging mood tree was on a rampage. I was grateful when we delivered the car to Simon at precisely 3:10 p.m. and Uncle George showed up—out of nowhere—to give me a ride home.

Luke hugged me when we said good-bye and I hardly responded—just a light pat on his back. I didn’t even wave as I got into Uncle George’s car and we drove away.

Chapter 5



I TRIED MY BEST TO forget about what I'd just done with Luke and how rude I had been when I left him standing on the curb. But my focus switched to Uncle George. He'd never picked me up at school. How odd that he chose that moment to show up?

"You don't have to watch over me," I said.

Uncle George didn't say anything as he drove. We'd been on the road a while when I realized we were in a neighborhood I'd never seen before.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I have to run a quick errand."

I could tell he didn't want to talk. His lips were closed in a tight line and he shifted his eyes around. So I played with the radio and tried to relax. I thought maybe Luke did want to be my boyfriend . . . Maybe I should have been nicer to him.

When we merged onto the highway, Uncle George looked even more stressed, but he drove on without saying a word. And then after what felt like an eternity, he parked in front of a dumpy diner. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Not really."

“I need a cup of coffee. C’mon.”

He found a table in the corner and ordered a slice of pie with his java. When the server left, he whispered, “Go down that hall toward the restroom. Don’t question me, just do it.” He sat back and then tilted his head in that direction. “Now,” he said, with an air of finality.

I opened my mouth, but before I could ask him for a reason, he shook his head *no* and glared at me. The inside of my skull felt as though it were being raked. He’d never remotely acted this way before. So I headed in the direction Uncle George told me to go. I tapped on the door to the women’s room, and then I heard a whistle from outside the back door. My heart nearly stopped when a man wearing a hoodie popped his head into the restaurant.

“Dad?”

“Shh.” My father put his finger up to his lips.

I hugged him and cried. Then in one swift move, he pushed me away, holding me at arm’s length and looking at me as if I might evaporate. He pointed toward a black SUV behind the diner, grabbed hold of my hand, and led me outside. We jumped in the back and the car immediately jerked forward, toppling us into each other. Dad reacted quicker than me when he pulled the seatbelt around my body and snapped it in place.

The guy in the front passenger seat held a phone up to his ear. “All clear. Package delivered, we’re out.” Then he snapped the phone shut and turned to my Dad. “Ted, flawless extraction.”

Dad gestured with his head and a window between the driver’s seat and the backseat slowly rose, leaving the two of us in privacy. I hadn’t seen him for months. Where he’d once had a dusting of gray, his whole head now was covered with it.

I was about to say something about the short beard and nicely trimmed mustache when he pulled the fake hair off of his face!

“We don’t have much time,” he said. He threw off his hoodie and revealed a black suit jacket and tie. “Before I leave, I want to talk to you about Lucas Drake.”

“What?”

Luke was the last thing I thought my dad would even know about. “Dad, where have you been? And what’s going on with the FBI? And this disguise, you—”

“I’m being sought by every law enforcement agency in the country, but I can’t explain it all in the few minutes we have.” He took hold of my hands.

“What are you talking about? Just take me with you,” I said.

“It’s far too dangerous. You’re safer with George and Charlotte.” He tapped on the window and the guy in the front tapped back.

“What’s going on, Dad?” I heard a shrill tone in my voice that didn’t sound like me.

“When your mom got sick, I couldn’t just let her die. I made a deal with the government.”

“What? What kind of deal?”

The window slid down a fraction and the passenger-seat man said, “Two minutes out.” Then the window went up again.

“What does the government have to do with Mom’s sickness?” I asked.

He sighed. “Let’s just say they withheld access to a potential cure.”

“You don’t make sense.” I felt tears coming. “You didn’t even go to her funeral. You’re a criminal!” I shrieked. “Why didn’t you just steal the cure?”

“That’s what they claim I did.” He clamped his fists together in his lap.

The vehicle came to a stop in a rural area. Dad said, “This kid who claims to be Lucas Drake. What do you know about him?”

“What does he have to do with this?” I asked.

Dad frowned.

“Dad, you have to tell me more!”

“I’m not sure if he has anything to do with this. I don’t like him being near my little girl.”

“Are you watching me?” My heart fell to my toes, and a splatter of bright red mortification lit up my body. “You’re putting yourself in jeopardy because I like a boy?”

“No, I did what I did to save your mother, and that’s all I can tell you right now.” He put his face in his hands and mumbled, “I need to keep you safe.”

“Dad, I don’t understand a word you’re saying. I want to go with you.”

“I’m a patriot . . . I was a patriot,” he said.

“You’re talking in circles.”

“Stay away from Lucas Drake . . . and all boys, for a while.”

“What if I like Luke?”

“One more reason to stay away from him.” Dad opened the door just as a helicopter landed in the field adjacent to the road. I pulled him back into the car.

“What is all this? Dad, who are you?”

“Bea, I promise you’re better off with George and Charlotte, and you’ll hear from me real soon. Just keep a distance from this boy, until I can fix this.” He kissed me on the cheek and then ran toward the helicopter.

The window between the seats opened all the way and the man in the passenger seat handed me an old-fashioned tape recorder. “Give this to the FBI when they arrive. It’s a recording of this conversation—for proof that you were taken against your will and not complicit. Also, your Uncle George called the police and told them you were kidnapped. Follow that story and you’ll be fine. Be smart.”

The driver and the guy in the front passenger seat followed Dad to the helicopter. A big gust of wind swirled around and blew dirt into the SUV as they flew off.

I shuddered.

What in the hell was going on? Wasn’t it enough that Mom was dead?

I walked toward the highway, sobbing. Within a few minutes, a black SUV that looked exactly like the one Dad and his friends were driving and several police cars surrounded me.