

CALL ME ELIZABETH LARK

by Melissa Colasanti

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

MYRA

Herb says Myra has drowned herself with Charlotte, where the beach is rocky and the tide tinged gray-yellow, its crest effervescent. At the inn, wind batters the wooden shingles like the ocean thrumming the shore at high tide. The squall sends sand whipping through the air. The pier empties of people, except for the lone fishermen who wear rubber boots and heavy yellow raincoats, casting their lines in turbid water. Myra and Herb are ensconced in the inn, wrapped in sweaters and crocheted afghan blankets. Occasional guests trickle in, but not often. People visit the Oregon coast during summer.

Myra doesn't take vacations during the off season, no matter how many empty winters pass. Charlotte knows her mother is waiting. She lived for the scent of the ocean, for the lacquer of salt on her skin. The crabs hidden under mounds of sand and the starfish in the tide pools enchanted Myra's youngest child. Myra supposes this is why Charlotte was so attracted to the mystery of the deep, dark sea. The waves sweep away an entire pool of living things, but with the next tide, they begin again.

And so Myra is not particularly surprised when her dead daughter walks in the door.

Myra studies the sawdust-covered floor of the musty inn, thinking they should sweep it and install shiny new wood. She spends her free time leafing through the glossy pages of decorating magazines, considering all the possibilities for the place. It should be more modern, like the bigger hotels in Rocky Shores. There are bed and breakfasts with assorted coffees and fresh baked goods; there are vacation rental homes and cabins, some of which come equipped with pools and fitness centers. And the Barkley Inn is an entire mile from the open shore.

When Myra's parents were alive, people shuffled in wearing flip-flops and shorts in the summer, eager for slabs of marbled steak served for cheap on Fridays. Peanut shells and loose sand scattered the floor. Back then, poets read their work on Saturday afternoons. Musicians strummed their guitars and sang with their husky, melodic voices on Saturday nights. Candle- filled Mason jars adorned the tables. Ripples of lavender incense hung sweet and thick in the air.

They have personal touches that have gone back decades—luxurious bath towels, chocolates on the pillows, chilled champagne in the honeymoon suite. But the curtains are a drab shade of olive-green, and antique topaz candelabras cast dim light over the lobby. In the sixties, they were eclectic; now they're just creepy. Perhaps Myra could get one of those latte machines people like nowadays.

On this particular afternoon, Herb hovers behind her as she considers the flooring. She pretends not to notice his wry smile, how he watches her. Age spots dot his thin skin; his eyes are set beneath deep wrinkles, but they glow with a tenderness that has never changed. He will always be her Herb.

“Whatcha up to, honey?”

“Do you think we should get rid of the sawdust? I'm thinking deep mahogany floors.”

He says with a playful smile, “Does it really matter what I want?”

Myra rolls her eyes. “I'm just thinking of ideas to spruce the place up—”

A vehicle brakes hard, its screech penetrating the thick storm windows.

Herb cringes. “Good lord. Someone needs a brake job.”

Myra peers around the curtains. Headlights dip and rise over bumps in the gravel. Rain has streaked the windows, leaving tracks through the winter grime.

“A guest?” she says, thinking: no one has stopped by in weeks. Who wants to go to the bayside town and get drenched? Perhaps someone is traveling through. Maybe they need directions.

A rusty pickup truck with Washington state plates jerks into a spot.

“Great,” mutters Herb. “Here comes trouble.”

A stranger with inky hair climbs out of the car. It falls in thick, unkempt chunks around her face. “This one's gonna have a fake ID,” she tells Herb. “A really fake one.” Myra isn't one to turn away a guest. Everyone has a story—and if they've got information about Charlotte, they might not be exactly on the right side of the law. They don't give *every* guest a room. But they've got a reputation for turning a blind eye to a fake ID, for accepting cash without a credit card as collateral. The dyed hair, the ancient truck. This is a woman running from a man. Myra has seen it before. She could never turn a woman out on the street because she doesn't have a credit card, or she's changed her name. Besides,

it's a bed and breakfast—rich folks with good credit tend to stay at five-star resorts. They can't be overly picky.

Herb says, "Shoulda dumped that vehicle a thousand miles ago."

"Maybe she couldn't," Myra says, watching.

The stranger ushers a little boy out of the backseat. She begins to trudge toward them, a duffel bag tossed over her shoulder, clutching the child's hand. The woman stops sharply and turns back to the vehicle. She swipes the underside of the wheel with her palm.

Herb fixes his gaze on Myra. "Don't go soft on me, honey. That girl's running from something, and it's probably trouble."

"Can't be too experienced." She nods to the truck. The girl won't find a tracking device stuck in a wheel well. It's on the damn GPS.

Herb shakes his head, placing his thick knuckled hand on hers. She shoves it away, breath caught in her throat. Hanging his head, he shuffles toward the office. Myra knows what he is thinking. She could climb inside Herb's chest and feel the rhythm of his heart. As much as anyone can know another person, Myra knows Herb.

As the sound of his footsteps recedes, she looks back to the window. The girl is too far away for Myra to make out her features. She slips into her vinyl chair and waits for their nebulous figures to sharpen. Leaning on her elbows, Myra breathes slowly, listening to the rain drum on the roof, run down the metal storm drain, and trickle onto the ground. The damp inn is cozy compared to the biting Pacific Northwest rain.

The bells on the door jingle as the woman pushes it open, water dripping from her clothing. The noxious scent of her fresh dye job wafts inside. She leans over the boy and whispers in his ear. He shoves his thumb in his mouth and looks back at his mother questioningly, and she nudges him toward the front desk. "It's okay," she says. "Let's go up to the nice lady."

The woman's voice is eerily familiar. Myra can't quite place it. Has she come through town before?

Myra glances at the stranger's face as inconspicuously as possible, but she notices how this woman moves, the tilt of her chin, the cadence of her voice as she speaks to the boy—it is so familiar that a guttural pain shoots through her bones, her gut, every last piece of her. The hair may be black, but the eyes are the same. Her breath quickens; the room spins. She leans against the counter, reeling. "My god." The words swirl off her tongue before she can catch them.

“Yes?” says the woman, who is not exactly a stranger, yet somehow strange. She backs toward the door. “I’m sorry. I guess you’re full—”

“No,” says Myra. “You look like a girl I once knew, that’s all.”

“We need a room. But if you’re full, we can keep driving.” She pulls the boy closer.

Myra realizes how bizarre she must sound. She ducks beneath the counter. The woman looks just like Charlotte. Those eyes.

Is she Charlotte?

No. Not again.

Herb is already convinced she’s insane. He’s probably right in his assessment.

She emerges from beneath the desk and tosses a hand towel to the woman. “You’re soaked to the bone. So is your son.”

“I’m sorry if I sounded stressed. I’m traveling alone with Theo.” The stranger’s voice wavers. Rain beads on the boy’s apple-shaped cheeks like teardrops. His threadbare pants graze his ankles.

“What’s your name?”

The woman hesitates, dropping her driver’s license on the counter. “Elizabeth Lark.”

“That’s a beautiful name,” she murmurs. Myra likes it when people choose lovely, poetic false identities for themselves. The lark is such a lyrical bird. Sometimes people come in with names like Moonstone or Pippin. *Too much*, she thinks. Unique is not what you’re going for when you are on the run.

Myra studies the driver’s license as she boots up the computer. It’s well done as far as fake IDs go. The little wheel on the computer whirls to the beat of her heart. “I’m sorry. It’s thinking.”

Elizabeth pulls her wet jacket around her thin frame, shivering. Her skin is a milky-gray color, and her lips, pale blue.

“You are about the same age as our daughter.” Her voice grows husky. She clears her throat and types the information into the computer. “We lost her years ago.”

Elizabeth avoids Myra’s eyes. The girl already knows. Maybe she has come to see about Charlotte’s ghost. Myra’s chest is raw and tender. A snake coils in her stomach, lithe and threatening to escape.

“Anyway, it’s done thinking.”

Elizabeth purses her lips and reaches for her driver’s license, knocking over Myra’s glass of water. The contents of her purse tumble behind the desk.

“Dammit, I’m sorry.” Elizabeth rushes toward the counter, stuffing papers and cards and cash back into the tattered bag.

That’s when Myra sees it.

A strand of silver is coiled against the green carpet. It could have been any silver necklace, really. But Myra would recognize the cracked edges of the half heart anywhere. Best Friends Forever. It was a gift from Charlotte to her sister, Gwen, the year before she disappeared. Myra picks up the necklace, locking eyes with the stranger, who holds the boy’s hand so hard her bony knuckles turn white. Myra turns it over and traces the initials with her finger.

CB. Charlotte Barkley.

“Where did you get this?” She steadies her voice.

The woman pulls herself to her feet, eyes wide. She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. “It’s mine.”

Myra’s heart flutters. The snake is ready to pounce. Elizabeth Lark is not leaving, not until she explains the necklace. “Yours?”

“From long ago, yes.”

The world slows. Myra catches Elizabeth’s eyes. They are sapphire-blue, and the closer she looks, she more she is certain. They are Charlotte’s. Her little girl face has gone, and it is replaced by sharp cheekbones and an angular jaw. Elizabeth looks similar to Myra’s oldest daughter, Gwen. Her limbs go numb. The necklace slips from Myra’s fingers, landing in a soft pile on the floor.

“My daughter.” The word sticks to her tongue. “Charlotte.” Charlotte does not move. She is stuck in a different time. At this moment, Herb pads back into the lobby.

“What’s going on out here? Are you checking in?” He lifts his chin toward Charlotte.

“I don’t have any idea what she’s talking about.” The stranger’s face flushes.

Myra closes her eyes. Toddler Charlotte lays on her chest, knees curled up like a prawn, the light sweat from her cheek dewy and warm. Charlotte’s squeals as she races her wooden fire truck along the windowsills. Both of her girls would trample in and out, dripping sand and water all over the floor, covered in sticky treats from the ice-cream truck.

“Don’t track that water in the house, girls. Stop bringing that sticky stuff inside. Wash your hands!” She hears her own words and wishes she could swallow them. Take them back.

Twenty summers missed. Twenty summers of eclipsed sunshine, of icy heat. These guests wander in with nothing but their fake identities to cover secrets they cannot face, to investigate rumors

of a haunted inn. Twenty years of drifters washed up from the frothy shores, looking for a room, dirty and chafed by the combination of sand and rain and heartbreak.

“My god, I have loved you. I have been here, waiting. I never stopped waiting.”

Charlotte grips Theo’s hand.

Herb takes Myra’s shoulders, meets her eyes. He whispers, “This is not Charlotte.”

Of course he says this. This has happened before. But this time it’s true.

“Look at her, Herb. She looks just like Gwen.”

Charlotte stares at them. “I have no idea what to say.”

Herb releases her shoulders. He knows when to recede. Myra and Herb dance like this, intricate and poised. They know when to dip forward, when to swing sideways. He knows where he can touch her and what is too tender. And they move gently because their breakable parts have shifted throughout the years, like plates of the earth, scraping against one another deep beneath the surface.

She presses the necklace in Herb’s palm. “Look at the initials, honey.”

Herb clenches his jaw. His eyes glisten. The jowls on his neck shiver. “Where did you get this?” His voice thickens with emotion.

The wind howls and bristles the door; the tick of the clock over the fireplace throbs in her mind. Warmth spreads through Myra’s chest. It relaxes in her stomach, heavy but silent.

“Charlotte’s home. This time she really is.”

Myra has a million questions. What has happened to her daughter? Who has had her all these years? And how did she find her way home?

Charlotte was only eight. Just a baby, really. And now, she stands before her mother, tears catching in her sunken cheeks.

Sweat beads on Myra’s forehead. Tentacles grip her neck. She is drowning, deep in the ocean, where they said Charlotte died. Except Charlotte is here, right in front of them.

Herb steps closer to their daughter, scanning her from head to toe. He turns back to Myra, breathless.

Charlotte is alive. Wondrously, exquisitely alive.

CHAPTER TWO

ELIZABETH

Washington State—One Week Ago

The necklace slips through Elizabeth's fingers and lands in her palm. She inspects the cracked edges of the half heart and turns it over, focusing on the initials carved into the metal. She drops it into her purse

The cabin reeks of dank mold. Elizabeth peeks out the window, hoping no one will see her, though there is no logical reason for her fear. The cabin is situated in a thicket of deep wood, where lime-green lichen weeps from the trees like gnome hats. Tufts of moss unfurl through the walls where the wood has rotted, while the foundation crumbles precariously beneath their feet. It is as tiny as a dollhouse dropped amid the lush, expansive forest, surrounded by frozen creeks and giant boulders. The moonlight seeps through a lattice of soft fir branches, and the cabin casts a shadow onto the snow. It is swallowed by the forest ahead. On each side of the shadow, crystals of snow glitter like a smattering of diamonds.

No one could find this cabin. No one away from the forest knows they are alive.

"Elizabeth?" Her husband's gravelly voice startles her.

She turns back to her son, who snuggles with his blue blanket and stuffed giraffe on the couch, fast asleep. Elizabeth smiles at Theo and clicks off the television. She slides to the boy's level and perches on the balls of her feet, tucking the blanket under his chin. The cold mountain air seeps into the poorly insulated cabin. His hair tumbles over his eyes, but she won't cut it. A memory of Peter shaving her son's luscious ringlets churns inside her. Elizabeth pushes her fist into her stomach and twirls Theo's stray hair.

"Are you coming, or what?" Peter yells.

She steels herself for the next few moments.

"Coming." She speaks just loud enough for him to hear her. This is the last time her voice will be low. She squeezes her hands into tight fists.

"Honey, my back is aching. Can you bring me a drink and my pills?"

This is the moment she has waited for. The man doesn't pay the heating bill while he's out of town. And now he wants to be taken care of.

Elizabeth can arrange this.

She swings open the hollow-core door softly, taking care not to let it bang against the wall. He lays in bed, quiet and vulnerable, covered with the only heavy comforter in the house. The curtains are drawn tight. “I’ll have your drink and pills in a second. You want food?”

“No. Just the pills. Please, honey.”

She hates the word, so thick and sweet off his tongue. She shudders, remembering the tang of his hot breath against her neck.

“I’m sorry about yesterday.” He groans in pain. “I can’t believe how slippery that ice is. It’s like someone dumped water all over the porch.”

Her lips curl into a smile. She pours three fingers of Jack Daniels into a tumbler—funny they can afford this, and his Vicodin, when she and Theo haven’t been to the doctor, not ever. They haven’t left this cabin in years, except to exchange pleasantries with the homesteaders who have cleared trees and built little farms that sprawl down the mountain. They have their own peculiarities, she thinks, because they aren’t alarmed that Elizabeth lives in this falling down shack with a five-year-old.

Still, Peter says to be friendly.

“But don’t get too close. I’m watching you.”

The threat hides beneath his words, like a rat scratching in a dark cabinet.

She drops a pill into the amber liquor, watching it billow into a thick, hazy cloud. And another. It is hypnotic. Venom fills her blood, lurid and dangerous. She swirls it with a tea-spoon, and it clinks against the glass like the tick of a clock. She is numb, devoid of emotion, but she depends on this emptiness to survive. Pure instinct drives her down the crumbling hall. Holding her posture straight, she enters the bedroom.

“Here you go, babe.” Elizabeth helps him to a seated position. His warm body is sticky with sweat.

“Ahh, thank you. You are a goddess,” he says with a light smile.

Don’t believe him, don’t believe him. He will turn this on you and eventually kill you with his lies.

The whisky sloshes in the glass as she hands it to him. “Drink up.” She feigns cheer, but her voice shakes.

“Please don’t be afraid of me. I’m your husband. I’m sorry.” His eyes are pleading. And pathetic. “Is your arm okay?” Her flesh is mottled with purple finger marks.

She nods with a smile.

“I just don’t want to lose you.”

She and Theo have been trying to escape. And Peter's relentless surveillance prevented them from contacting the nearby homesteaders without his looming presence. However, on one of his work trips, she and Theo walked a mile or so from the log cabin, until they came upon a farm. She got more than fresh eggs and a free-range chicken at the Hart's place.

Mrs. Hart let her use the internet.

Theo played with the Hart woman's children as she typed "domestic violence help" in the search engine. Alice Johnson's name popped up first. She'd apparently been helping abuse victims for decades. Elizabeth sent her an email, wrote down her phone number. But before Alice could respond, Peter rang the doorbell. She heard his voice booming from the front room and slammed the laptop shut. Trembling, she ushered Theo toward the foyer. He put his arm around her, patted Theo's head, and said a sickeningly sweet goodbye to Mrs. Hart. "I was in the area," he said. "I thought you'd appreciate a ride home."

Once they got outside, he transformed back to the Peter she knew. With a sneer, he'd grabbed her by her thin shirt, digging his knuckles into her clavicle. He said, in a cool, measured tone, "Mrs. Hart seems nice."

It took a month for Elizabeth to get another cell phone and make the call. And for weeks after that, they meticulously plotted their escape.

Peter cuts the water supply when he will be gone for more than forty-eight hours. She and Alice planned to wait for the faucet to shudder and spout, till only copper silt would vomit into the stained sink. But he's become even less predictable. His back injury is an opportunity, perhaps the only one. They can't wait for an out-of-town trip. One might never happen. She cannot predict what electrical line will short circuit within her husband next. There is nothing she can do right when it comes to Peter, because what is right one moment is wrong the next. Every breath she takes is so cold it's hot.

They have one shot.

I'm not the one who should be afraid. Not anymore, darling.

He slings back the drink with another pill. "Damn, that's some strong shit."

"You'll feel better soon. Get some sleep."

Peter leans back on the pillow, his eyes fluttering shut. How lovely it must be to be safe.

Safety is merely an illusion, a trick of the mind. It is never guaranteed.

She rushes back to her son and shoves the last six years of her life into a single duffel bag. Before waking Theo, she creeps back to the bedroom to make sure Peter is knocked out. He's asleep, for

sure. But his face is pasty. His olive complexion has turned yellowish, especially around his eyes. His lips are a bluish-gray color. Did she give him too much?

She tiptoes quietly toward him, afraid he'll sit up in bed and pounce on her. He looks really bad. Elizabeth needed to immobilize him for an hour or two, not kill the man. Peter's chest rises, ever so slightly. His neck rolls to the side with a labored breath.

Holy shit. Elizabeth runs to the living room, tears springing to her eyes. She shakes Theo awake. He looks at her, drowsy and confused.

"We're taking our adventure today, remember? I packed our things. Daddy isn't coming."

"Are you sure?" He chews his fingernail.

She pats his head and smiles. "He's not coming."

Theo glances toward the bedroom door.

"Don't worry." Elizabeth takes his cheeks in her palms. "He's sleeping. We are going on an adventure together, just you and me." She forces herself to smile, heart beating wildly in her chest. "Okay?"

A dubious look crawls across Theo's face.

"He's sleeping. I promise. But we must go now."

"What if he wakes up?" Theo whispers.

"He won't," she replies.

"What if he finds us?"

"He won't. Not this time. Let's go."

"Did you pack my card games, my checkers?"

"Yes. I wouldn't forget those. Come on, now."

"Are you *sure* he won't wake up?"

"Pretty sure." She taps his shoulder. "Enough questions." Peter might never wake up again. She shoves her hand under the couch cushions, looking for his phone, but he keeps it hidden from her. Maybe she should go back in the bedroom and make sure he's okay. She isn't a murderer. Lord, what has she done?

Maybe Theo won't remember this moment. He is five years old. Maybe he won't remember Peter at all. Peter will wake up, confused as hell, once they are gone, she hopes. He can't possibly be dead. She covers her face with her hands, trying not to cry. Theo has watched Peter hit her, has watched television shows where people aren't typically living in a cabin without heat, and with little food. He's five, and his understanding of the world is expanding, ballooning within their captivity. It's

getting harder to hide the truth from him. He asks questions; he's curious about life outside the forest. And she finds herself snapping at him because she can't give him what he needs.

They need to get down this mountain.

Although, deep within the folds of her brain, she realizes that Peter will never let them go. As long as he lives, she is beholden to him. Even once they escape, change their identities, and move far, far away, Peter will be somewhere.

Safety is merely an illusion, a trick of the mind. He will hunt them till his last breath. Maybe it's best he take his last breath now. But still . . . She takes a tentative step toward the bedroom. Oh, shit. Should she check on him again? He could be dying. Should she call someone? They'd help her; they would save Peter.

No, she decides, it is not safe for her child here. There was no other choice but to incapacitate him. Right?

F***. They head for the door.

Elizabeth ushers Theo to the truck, dragging the duffel bag behind her. "Hurry," she urges. "But don't slip." The frigid air whips against her skin. Gripping his hand tightly, she instructs Theo to dig the heels of his boots into the ice as he walks. The ground is slick; jagged rocks shine in the moonlight. She clicks the seatbelt over her son's waist, hands trembling, and tosses the bag in the back. Her own seat is awkward.

It has been years since she has driven a vehicle.

She turns the key in the ignition, hits the gas. They slide on the ice, over thick tree roots, into swathes of evergreen trees. The metal truck scrapes against branches, and she hits every gear wrong. But she gathers her bearings. They travel down the mountain, past the Harts', past more pockets of homesteaders with chickens and goats, and away from their captor—her husband, his father. She squirts the windshield with fluid and wipes away a layer of dried mud.

Elizabeth inhales deeply when they hit the main mountain road.

When Peter wakes, they will be long gone. She conjures images of all the possible states Alice might take her to. Someplace sunny, like California. Or a tiny Midwestern town with a big yard for Theo.

What if Peter *doesn't* wake up? She remembers the odd angle of his neck, his shallow breaths. Is she running from Peter—or the police? Could she be charged with murder?

The thought speeds her own heartbeat up. Blood rushes through her capillaries like a broken dam.

Her son looks out the window, enthralled with the road ahead of them. The sunrise spreads over the mountain, clear and wide. Theo points out the window. “Beautiful,” he says.

“Beautiful,” she agrees.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re stopping at a friend’s house.” She has no cell phone, no GPS to direct her. Only this rusted old truck. She will ditch it when they arrive at Alice’s, get on a bus. Elizabeth laughs, deep and throaty. They turn off the main road, crunching through gravel, and up a windy hill to a little blue house.

Her chest bursts with excitement. “C’mon Theo. Let’s go meet Alice.”

She drags him a little too quickly, and the boy’s feet slip on the ice. “Whoops.” He giggles as she catches him by the back of his threadbare coat.

Alice is a stout woman, with copper-colored skin and graystreaked hair. Her smile is empathetic and kind. Several women linger around the breakfast table, holding mugs of steaming hot coffee, the rich scent wafting through the air. A couple of children play in the living room. The space is tight, but it exudes warmth and compassion. A pang of sadness hits her in the chest. She and Theo cannot stay here. It is too dangerous. He could find her among these women. The house is too close to the cabin. Does Peter have friends? He must. What if someone she doesn’t recognize tries to find them? He could trail them, set a trap. Theo and Elizabeth must disappear.

And if she’s killed him—oh god, she hopes she hasn’t killed him—that’s murder, right? She didn’t technically *need* that dosage to knock him into oblivion. Her brain spins.

“All right girl, come in the back.” Alice turns to Theo. “Why don’t you play Legos with the other kids?”

He crouches around the box of red and blue and green blocks. A blonde-haired girl helps him stack them into a little building. She takes a deep breath, hope blossoming through her body.

Elizabeth follows Alice down a dark, narrow hallway and into a tiny room with a neatly made twin-sized bed. She rests on the soft blue bedspread as Alice rifles through the closet.

“All right. Here’s the plan. You’re gonna leave the truck and take one of mine.”

Elizabeth opens her mouth to protest. Alice holds a hand up. “Look, girl. You can’t take off in the man’s truck. They’ll find you. And even if you tell the cops what’s happened, Peter will kill you and Theo before they can prosecute him. I’ve seen it before.”

Elizabeth decides not to mention that Peter’s body might be turning cold as they speak. “But what about you? He’ll find the truck—”

Someone will find the truck anyway.

“I’m gonna get in the truck and ditch it twenty miles from here. But don’t you worry about that. You take my vehicle.” She tosses a key ring onto the bed.

“Alice, I can’t take a car from you.” She sighs, rubbing her aching forehead.

“You can pay me back someday. Till then, your life is at stake. Don’t think about the cheap-ass car I’m about to give you. It’s not registered in my name or anything.” She rolls her eyes. “Still, you need to ditch it once you cross into Oregon. You’ll be conspicuous with out-of-state plates.”

“Whose car is it, then?”

“Never mind that. Doesn’t matter. All that matters is that the cops can’t trace it to you *or* me. Just don’t get pulled over.”

Elizabeth is bone-tired. “All I care about is getting away from here.”

Alice plops on the bed beside Elizabeth. Her eyes are dark brown, and her lipstick reminds Elizabeth of a ripe plum. Alice takes her hands and squeezes them tightly. Teardrops drip down Elizabeth’s nose.

“It’s going to be okay,” she says.

“Promise?” says Elizabeth, feeling very young.

Alice smiles warmly. “I can’t promise anything. But you’re gonna do your best. I have a good feeling about you.”

She clears her throat. Back to business. Alice shuffles through a box of cards, takes a few, and tosses them on the bed. “I made these with the pictures you sent me from the Hart woman’s computer. You did what I told you about, wiping your search history, right? And you cleared the photos from the webcam?” “Yes. But you said a computer can never be fully wiped. That all the information is stored on the hard drive.” What if the police discover she contacted Alice on the internet? Her hands begin to shake. If he’s looking for her, the first place he’ll go is the Hart place.

“Oh sweetheart. All we want is to keep the Hart woman from snooping around. Do you really think Peter is going to report you missing? Let the cops search that dump he’s been keeping you in?”

Elizabeth nods. The log cabin is essentially a prison.

It is a prison.

“Where do you think you’ll go, Liza? As far as anyone is concerned, you don’t exist,” Peter had said, with a nonchalant shrug.

Elizabeth’s conviction grows. She will leave; she will take her boy far away, where he will never find them.

Unless she's killed him. Then the police will search everywhere, including the Hart's computer. Dammit! Why did she give him all those pills?

"All right. We've got three IDs here. One Oregon State driver's license. One Social Security card, which is essentially worthless for applying for credit or a job. It's just for show if someone doesn't buy the driver's license. Same with the passports," she says, laughing. "That ain't gonna get you out of the country if you plan to return. And I hear Tijuana isn't a fun place to live."

Elizabeth shoves the cards in her purse, beside the necklace.

"You've gotta be careful with fake IDs. Lots of people think giving a person a new first name is safest. To my mind, it's risky. You've been called Elizabeth your entire life. You could not respond to a strange first name. Hell, I've heard of a woman who started to sign the wrong name on a job application. How do you turn back from that? 'Sorry, it seems I've signed the wrong name?' Nah."

"Technically, I've been called Liza. A nickname my mom gave me because she loved Liza Minnelli . . . but I get a new last name?"

"Yup. You are no longer Elizabeth Briggs. Now, you are Elizabeth Lark."

"I love it," she says, smiling.

"Don't get too attached. My work isn't that authentic. We may have to change it again, if he comes after you, or someone else finds out." Alice purses her lips, thinking. "For now, aim for jobs at small companies. Family owned. It's not so much the name, as the Social Security number, which is completely fabricated. Make sure you avoid companies that are gonna do a damn background check." She shakes her head. "That, we do not need."

Elizabeth considers this. "Isn't it strange that this pile of false IDs is no more fake than I am?"

Alice ignores the existential musing. "Next is the hair." Alice reaches into a chest of drawers filled with boxes of hair dye, combs, and scissors. She points to the adjacent bathroom. "Welcome to my spa."

Elizabeth settles into the chair, inspecting her gaunt face in the mirror. Alice works methodically, chopping her long, sand-colored hair to her shoulders. Elizabeth watches it land in chunks on the ceramic tile.

"I'm not trained in this," she says. "But I have a lot of practice. My handiwork will have to do." Alice puts her hands on her hips, squinting a little. "I think we need to go darker."

They turn the chair and Elizabeth leans her head back, letting her hair tumble into the sink. Her neck digs into the cold ceramic. Alice pours a pitcher of warm water over her hair, greasy from lack of a decent shampoo. She massages Elizabeth's temples and scalp with a dollop of Suave.

“You normally wait to wash the hair after applying the dye, but you really needed the wash first.” Alice squeezes out the excess water with a towel.

Alice rubs the dye through her hair. The smell of ammonia settles heavily in the stuffy bathroom, stinging Elizabeth’s nose. She is woozy from the cocktail of chemicals. Alice peels her rubber gloves off and cracks the window. A shiver runs down her neck. It’s funny to think how a whole new life begins with her hair.

“So, how did you end up there?” She tucks cotton around Elizabeth’s scalp and behind her ears, then covers her head with a plastic cap.

“Stupidity. Pure stupidity.”

Alice perches on the fluffy pink toilet seat. “Tell me about it. Out of all the stories I’ve heard—”

Elizabeth shakes her head. Alice cannot know. No one can.

Thirty minutes later, her hair is the color of a moonless night. Alice packs her bag with burner phones and rushes them out the door.

“Be careful now.” She takes Elizabeth’s cheeks into her palms, looking at her with intense, shiny eyes. “You get across the border, into Oregon, and stop for the night. Go someplace that takes cash. Then call me. I’ll arrange a bus ticket in my name to your next destination. Keep your head down. Try to be unmemorable.”

Elizabeth takes a shaky breath and waves before they pile into the truck. They drive down the forested road in silence, leaving Washington for good.

“Where are we going, Mommy?”

Elizabeth cracks the window and lets some of the noxious smell from her damp hair out of the truck. She takes a deep breath.

“I’m not sure, baby.”

But the road takes her toward the seashore, almost against her will, and definitely against her better judgment.

She is going home.

CHAPTER THREE

ELIZABETH

Charlotte Barkley is a legend throughout the country, but for the residents of the small town on the Oregon Coast, she is everyone's daughter. The Barkley Inn is nestled across the highway from a tiny, hidden pier outside of Tillamook County. The marina is weathered gray, with a few boats that seem perpetually docked there. There is a surf shop with an ocean mural painted on its door, an old-fashioned candy store needing a coat of paint, and a fish-and-chips restaurant. Rocky Shores is so sleepy it is swallowed by the lush, endless forest.

Rocky Shores was never a well-known town, not until Charlotte's disappearance. Now, the tourists stop by the bayside for a piece of a secret. Elizabeth wonders what the Barkleys think about this—how they feel about the influx of business their private tragedy has brought. Some of the kids at school whispered that the Barkleys knew what happened to the little girl. Others said that Myra Barkley's obsession bordered on insane, that she would wait at that inn for Charlotte till the end of time.

She kisses Theo on the forehead and tucks a blanket around him. It is the thickest blanket he's ever had. His lips turn up in his sleep, and she wonders what he dreams of.

Myra Barkley doesn't strike Elizabeth as all that odd. She would wait for Theo too.

Elizabeth redirects her thoughts to the plan she must adhere to if they want to escape. She unzips her duffel bag and rifles through it, retrieving the three burner phones Alice purchased from different Walmarts, and the stack of different identification cards.

Don't **** this up, she thinks.

She holds the phone in her palm. Should she call Alice yet?

No, not until she is sure they are safe. She knows one thing— they can't stay here.

Elizabeth runs her fingers along the silver necklace and squeezes her eyes shut. How will she get out of this one?

Her breath quickens. Elizabeth poisoned the man. She could be guilty of murder. Or maybe it would be considered self-defense. Elizabeth is no lawyer. She's got no experience with cops, and there's no one she can think of to ask without sounding suspicious as hell.

Elizabeth cannot spend one more day incarcerated.

As soon as Myra and Herb retreat to the house, she will gather Theo and sneak out to the truck. Her eyelids are heavy; sleep threatens to overtake her. Even her muscles have gone soft from the hot bath Myra had drawn for her that afternoon. She decides to lie down, just for a few minutes. It is better to wait till deep in the night. She cannot head to the police with Herb and Myra in the morning. Run. That's what she is supposed to do. What she was told to do. Everyone from Rocky Shores is haunted by Charlotte Barkley. The old case will resurface. When the truth comes out, Elizabeth and her son will be filleted by the media. Imposter takes advantage of grieving mother. Her chest aches as she lies beside Theo.

Elizabeth Lark is no one's daughter.