



SUSAN M. BAGANZ

She Has a Deadly Secret.
If she only knew what it was.

**MADI'S
SECRET**

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Susan M. Baganz

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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Publishing History

Prism Edition, 2021

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9893-6

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Alissa P.

May God use you for His glory
in the fight against human trafficking.

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Madi's Secret

1

I should have stayed in Chicago.

Madi checked her rearview mirror for the umpteenth time. There had been several clicks and dial tones on her home and cell phones during the past few weeks. Fear tickled the back of her neck whenever she came and left work. Was it possible to develop late-onset paranoid schizophrenia at age thirty-five? *Please Lord, but for the grace of God go I.* Her palms grew clammy inside her gloves. Her heart raced. Heavy traffic hemmed her in as she cruised north on Highway 41.

Madi tried to shake off the shiver that coursed through her and focused on driving on the freshly plowed roads. Wipers *swished, swished, swished* the still falling snow out of her line of vision. Only a few more miles until her exit.

A thud and corresponding crunch from her left rear bumper pushed her car's back end to the right. She tried to correct with her steering as her old minivan fought against her. Without warning, she lost control as the car spun and time crawled. She clutched the wheel as her vehicle missed hitting other cars near her on the busy highway. *Is this how it ends, Lord?*

The western sun radiated off the snow and

blinded her vision as her vehicle headed for the ditch. The car tipped as it hit the edge of the road. Another smack reversed her spin, shot the car forward, and pitched it into a roll. An explosion slammed her back into her headrest, and she choked on white powder from the air bag. She hung upside down, pinned to her seat by her shoulder belt. The sound of scraping metal, snow, gravel, and weeds reverberated through the roof above as the old car careened down the slope and settled with a soft *thud*.

Madi took her foot off the brake and peeled icy-cold fingers from the steering wheel. The engine still ran. She put the car in park and removed her shattered sunglasses. She winced at the pain along the bridge of her nose and under her left eye where the metal had dug in. How long would she be stuck here? Her bottom wasn't touching the seat and her knees fell down to land on the underside of the dashboard. Her pulse pounded in her ears as the blood rushed to her head. She searched for her phone. It was out of reach on the ceiling.

The slow-motion time during the accident now ceased all together.

Car motors rumbled off in the distance as they sailed by on the highway. Would anyone call for help? She glanced out the side windows to see dirty snow. Perhaps she was hidden from the road. Would there even be a rescue? She sighed at her negative thoughts. The car would be warm as long as she had gas. *Lord, help me!* Deep, bone-shattering shivers overtook her. She closed her eyes to shut out everything. *Maybe this is*

all a horrible nightmare, and I can wake up soon.

~*~

Parker gripped the door handle of the ambulance as they navigated through the traffic on the iced concrete. Another car accident. How many more of these tonight? His shift ended soon but that didn't mean he'd get off work. If this kind of demand kept up, they'd never return to the station. His stomach growled in protest at another missed meal. The sun was setting. His muscles tensed. Nighttime rescues contained many unseen dangers.

"There it is." Rick, his partner, slowed to pull over. The fire engine followed behind them, and the police had already closed down one lane of traffic, worsening the infamous gapers-block from those coming out of Milwaukee.

Parker leapt out of the ambulance before it had stopped rolling, grabbed a box of emergency supplies, and side-stepped down the embankment toward the flipped minivan. The firefighters dismounted and followed. He peered in the driver's side window to the still running car with its wheels in the air. There was no gas odor. No sign of fire. Small mercies.

He banged on the driver's side window and yelled above the roar of the traffic. "Hey, are you OK?" The upside-down woman didn't respond. His gaze searched beyond her. No other passengers. Since that door was blocked by the incline, he slid around to the passenger side, set down the kit he carried, and pulled

open the passenger door. It opened a crack, halted only by snow. He kicked a groove in the frozen obstacle as a fireman came with a shovel to assist. He landed on his backside twice. He'd be stiff in the morning.

Undaunted, he pulled at the door. It barely moved. The fireman helped him and together they got it fully open. At least he wasn't forced to go in the window. Parker crawled in on the ceiling of the car and reached over to the woman. "I'm Parker, a paramedic. We're here to help you." No response. He found her pulse steady. The only noticeable bleeding was the gash on her cheek and on the bridge of her nose. He pulled out the neck brace and secured it as a precaution. Aiming his flashlight, he tilted his head to view her better.

Dark gray eyes flickered open behind the curtain of hair, and she met his gaze. "Parker? You are not quite the answer to my prayers I expected." Her voice was soft.

"What's your name?" He couldn't make out her face, but the voice...it couldn't be.

"Madi. Madeline Baxter," she said.

Madi? Parker blinked. "Nice to see you too, Madi. Help me out. Can you squeeze my hands?" He grasped both her hands. She gave him a weak grip. "Good. We'll get you out of here." He turned the keys to stop the engine, called to his partner to retrieve a short board to put behind her, and crawled out to confer with the firemen on how best to extract her.

It took longer than he liked with the cold now overtaking the interior of the car, but they pulled her

out and wrapped her in a warming blanket. He grabbed her cell phone and tucked it in her hand under the blanket.

Madi grabbed his gloved hand. "Don't leave me," she whispered. She made no complaint even though her shoulder appeared dislocated and her collarbone was possibly broken.

He suspected bruises formed where the seatbelt had dug into her neck as it held her in place. "I'll be with you on the way to the emergency room." Parker jumped into the ambulance alongside the stretcher and once secured, he clasped her hand again. Of all the women he would meet—why this one? Why now? As the adrenaline discharged from his body and his pulse slowed, a blanket of darkness smothered his soul with the memories of Madi from seventeen years past. She had taken his heart when she left him.

Even bruised and injured, she appeared as beautiful as he remembered. Her shoulder length strawberry-blonde hair was still stick straight. Something she had always hated, but he had loved. Those silky tresses brought back memories better left buried.

"Matthew. Please take care of Matthew. He's my son. I don't want him alone. He'll be worried." Tears appeared in the corner of her eyes. Eyes that mesmerized him once upon a time.

He nodded. "I'll call Matthew and let him know." He wrote the number down on the report. "Anyone else we should contact?"

She frowned. "No. Matthew will take care of that.

Go to him. Please. Don't tell him on the phone."

Parker swallowed and nodded. Could he ever refuse her anything? "I'll see what I can do." So, she had a son. Why should that bother him? She hadn't mentioned a husband, wore no wedding band, and still used her maiden name. He had a daughter of his own, all of fourteen now. Life had moved on for both of them.

They reached Community Memorial Hospital in Menomonee Falls. When Rick opened the doors, Parker kicked into work mode. Once they released her to the hospital's care, he leaned back against a wall, closed his eyes, and expelled a long breath of air as he dropped his head forward. *Lord, heal Madi, please? Even if I never see her again.*

Rick came up and put a hand on his shoulder. "You OK, dude?"

"She was my high school sweetheart."

"The woman we brought in?"

"Yup." He swallowed the pain.

"You want to stay?"

Did he? *Heck, yeah.* Should he? "Let's finish this shift. I can return later."

"OK, let's head out. I've finished the paperwork here. We can head back to the station, and pray the next shift is ready to relieve us. The past forty-seven hours have been brutal."

Parker snorted. "Tell me about it. I can't wait to crawl into my own bed tonight, but I'll probably hear alarms going off in my sleep."

"Me, too. Come on."

They zippered up their jackets, headed into the cold ambulance, and returned to the station. Parker and Rick's shift ended with no more calls.

Parker scraped the snow and ice off his sport utility vehicle. *Madi*. He thought he would never see her again. He'd given up hope and stopped praying for her years ago assuming she was dead. Not that she hadn't haunted his dreams. With a sigh, he threw his scraper in the truck, turned on the lights, and left work.

He drove to Mulberry Lane in Menomonee Falls. He took his time on the slick roads. In spite of its danger, he enjoyed the beauty of the falling snow. He pulled into a driveway where a young man shoveled piles of the white stuff.

The boy stopped to watch Parker get out of the car.

"Hey. You Matthew Baxter?"

"Yeah. Who wants to know?" Matthew asked.

Parker still wore his paramedic jacket even though he had changed into street clothes. "Parker Allen, Menomonee Falls, paramedic." He reached out a gloved hand as he neared the boy who stood as tall as Parker.

The young man shook his hand but narrowed his eyes. "Paramedic?"

"Yeah, hey, can we go inside to talk? It's important. Your mom asked me to stop by."

The cheeks red from the cold drained of all color. "Is she OK?"

"She'll be fine. Can we talk inside?"

Matthew nodded and led the way up the sidewalk

to the front porch. He set the shovel against the house, opened the door, and motioned for Parker to follow. The boy pulled a blue hat off his head revealing brown wavy hair. He threw his coat to a chair by the door and walked to the kitchen leaving a wet path.

Parker followed.

The young man pulled out a chair at a round table and sat motioning to one adjacent. Parker sat. Matthew jumped up. "Would you like some hot chocolate? I'm no good at making coffee."

Parker waved him off. "No. I'm fine, but help yourself."

The boy returned to his seat. "My mom?" His knees bounced.

"Your mom was in a car accident. She's at Community Memorial. She may need shoulder surgery. She's banged up, but she'll be OK. She didn't want you to get the news from a phone call."

The boy slumped. "I'll have to call her work and let them know." He looked up and brown eyes met brown. "Can I see her?"

"Would you like me to drive you over? I planned to check up on her again myself so it's no trouble."

Matthew smiled, and he resembled Madi in that moment. "Great! I should pack some things for her. What do you think she'll want?"

"Does she have any books or magazines she likes to read? She'll need new clothes to wear home, but you could get those later."

Matthew nodded. He jumped to his feet and scurried about throwing things in a bag.

Parker rose and watched the boy's activity as he took in the cozy one-story home. He presumed there were at least two bedrooms and a bath off the hallway. The living room connected to the kitchen and dining area in open concept. The kitchen was small. There were breadcrumbs on the counter next to a plate nearby. An empty coffee mug was beside the sink. Patio doors allowed a view to the small backyard with a tiny patio and a small round grill. He had already noted the one car-garage. Madi was not living large, but she made a cozy home for her family.

The boy entered the room with a bag. He set it by the door to grab his coat and then shoved the blue hat back on his head. "I'm ready."

Parker couldn't help but smile. Matthew seemed like a good kid.

They exited the house.

Matthew made sure the door was locked. He turned and glanced out at the driveway and slumped. "The snow! I forgot I need to get the shoveling done."

Parker patted the boy on the back. "How about I give you a hand with that after we check on your mom?"

"You would do that?" Matthew's jaw hung open.

Parker nodded and opened the door to the truck. "Absolutely."

As they drove to the hospital, Matthew broke the silence. "So, you rescued my mom?"

Parker nodded. "My last call tonight."

"Thanks for taking care of her and for coming to tell me. Even I know that's not the normal way it's

done.”

Parker grinned. “I was a friend of your mom years ago. I agreed for the sake of an old friendship.”

“You knew her in high school?”

Parker couldn’t hide the grin. It was so long ago, yet all those emotions from way back when erupted as strong tonight when he saw her. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“Did you date her?”

“Yeah.”

The boy sighed. “I wish she never left here.”

“Why?”

“She doesn’t date. She’s sad much of the time although she tries not to let me see it. She went to school, worked hard, and raised me by herself. It hasn’t been easy.”

“What about your father?”

“What about him? All he is to me is a sperm donor. He’s never been a part of my life. He disgusts me, but mom won’t say a bad thing about him.”

Parker glanced over at the boy. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen. My birthday was last week.”

Parker silently counted back the years. He swallowed hard. She left him at the end of August. They had been intimate a few times. He glanced again at the profile of the young man who sat across the car from him. Was there a resemblance? His own hair was dark and wavy, but he kept it cut short. The color was the same, as were the brown eyes. No. Madi would never do that to him. He’d wanted to marry her. She

wouldn't have kept a child secret from him. Would she?

He frowned as suspicion wormed its way into his mind. He tried to set his questions aside as he pulled into the parking lot at the hospital. The two of them walked side by side, stride for stride, to the information desk. Matthew stood shoulder to shoulder with Parker. Parker's nerves twitched. They took the elevator to the appropriate floor and found the room. Parker let Matthew walk in first, following a few steps behind.

"Mom!" The young man hurried to the side of the bed where Madi rested. He reached down and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled. "Matthew. Parker found you?"

"Yeah, Mom. He brought me." The young man glanced over at Parker who had stayed at the end of the bed.

"Thank you, Parker. I knew you wouldn't let me down." Her eyes glowed as she looked at him. She blinked and turned back to her son. "Did he tell you he was the paramedic who rescued me?"

"Yeah, and I thanked him. He also mentioned he knew you in high school. I wondered how you came to send him over."

"Who else could I send?"

The boy stared his feet. "I don't know, Mom. We don't have many friends here yet."

"You've only recently moved back to the Falls?" Parker asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, I got an opportunity to move back here from the Chicago area. I thought this would be a better place for Matthew to grow up."

Parker nodded. "I'll give you some time together. I'll go down to the waiting room. I need to make a phone call."

~*~

"Mom?"

Madi reluctantly moved her gaze back to her son. Parker was just as she always thought he would be. A bit older, perhaps, but so was she. He'd aged well. He had filled out more in his chest and his shoulders seemed broader. He was strong and confident. He had wrangled her out of that wreck. She looked at Matthew. "What?"

"He said you used to date."

She couldn't help the smile that came over her face. "Yeah. I was head-over-heels in love with him."

"So, why'd you move away? Why keep me from my father?"

Her gaze snapped to her son's. "Your father? What do you mean?"

"His last name is Allen. Same as my middle. I've done the math, mom. He's my dad, isn't he?"

Madi closed her eyes. She anticipated this conversation would come one day, but she wasn't up to it right now. "It's not that simple, son. There's so much you don't know, and I can't tell."

~*~

"You messed up," the older man paced the room.

"You said you didn't want her killed. So why are you angry?" The younger man sitting in a chair puffed on a cigarette.

The older man turned, seething. "It was too public. The game only works if she doesn't contact the authorities."

"Why do you even bother keeping her alive?" Ash fell to the floor leaving a burn mark on the wood.

"We tortured her seventeen years ago. I don't know why, but I had a soft spot for her. In a weak moment, I decided we'd let her go but threatened her. Forced her to leave the state. Why am I explaining this to you? I didn't want to kill her. She didn't even know why we'd grabbed her. So now, I just want her to leave, and then I won't need to eliminate her. It would have been easier to get away with that seventeen years ago, but now with the Internet, she'd be really missed, and we can't afford the risk right now."

"She doesn't know it's us, does she?"

"She might but doesn't have names. She was too drugged to remember faces or for her testimony to be valid."

"She was that good, huh?" the young man grinned.

"Leave it alone. She's too high class for you."

"Not after you got through with her."

The older man backhanded his accomplice. "Shut. Up. Do the job I asked you to do."

2

"Yeah, honey, I'm sorry." Parker paced the small waiting room as he talked to his daughter. He'd moved back in with his parents three years ago after his wife, Wendy, passed away. The loss was sudden and devastating. With his work schedule he couldn't be home for days at a time to care for his eleven-year-old daughter. Now she was fourteen, starting to discover boys, and missing her dad.

"Dad? When are you coming home?" Courtney asked.

"I'll be home later, and tomorrow I'll take you shopping like I promised."

"You'll get me that new dress?"

"Sure. If that's what you want."

"Since you'll be home late, can I spend the night at Kimmy's?"

"Yes, you have my permission. I can pick you up in the morning, and we can head to Mayfair Mall from there."

"Love you, Dad." She made a long kissing sound on the phone.

"I love you too, sweetheart." He hung up and stared at the phone. She was still so young in some ways, and he hoped she never lost her sweet

innocence. Parker slumped into a chair and thought of Madi a few doors down.

Years ago, he'd failed at his attempts to locate her after she'd disappeared. He'd eventually married, but never experienced the same intensity of love as he had with Madeline. Wendy was a friend, a loving wife, and a great mother. Sadly, she was a consolation prize in many ways. She was far too good for the likes of him, but she married him anyway. He was grateful for the gift of his daughter, Courtney, although sad she was an only child. Now he wondered if she had a half-brother. Could Matthew be his son?

He bought a soda from the vending machine, took a sip, and shivered as the cold liquid trickled down his throat. Fatigue weighed him down and he still had a driveway to shovel. Who would be with Matthew tonight? The kid was sixteen and seemed responsible, but it wasn't right for the boy to be in that house by himself. Parker frowned and gulped down the rest of the soda. He bit his lip, tossed the can in the recycling bin, and headed back down the hallway. He entered the room with a slight knock.

Madi smiled, and Matthew frowned.

"So, Parker, do paramedics often visit their patients in the hospital and make house visits to the family?" she asked.

Heat rose in his cheeks. He stuck his hands in his jacket pockets. "Um, no. Police typically contact next of kin. On rare occasions, we've been known to visit, but usually those are children who have requested it. Why?"