

Compulsively readable and deeply heartfelt, Twisting Legacy casts a poignant, illuminating light on the scourge of a fatal genetic disease and its impact on three generations of a family. Despite deception by the protagonist, challenges, and sacrifices, courage prevails, love endures, and hope remains.

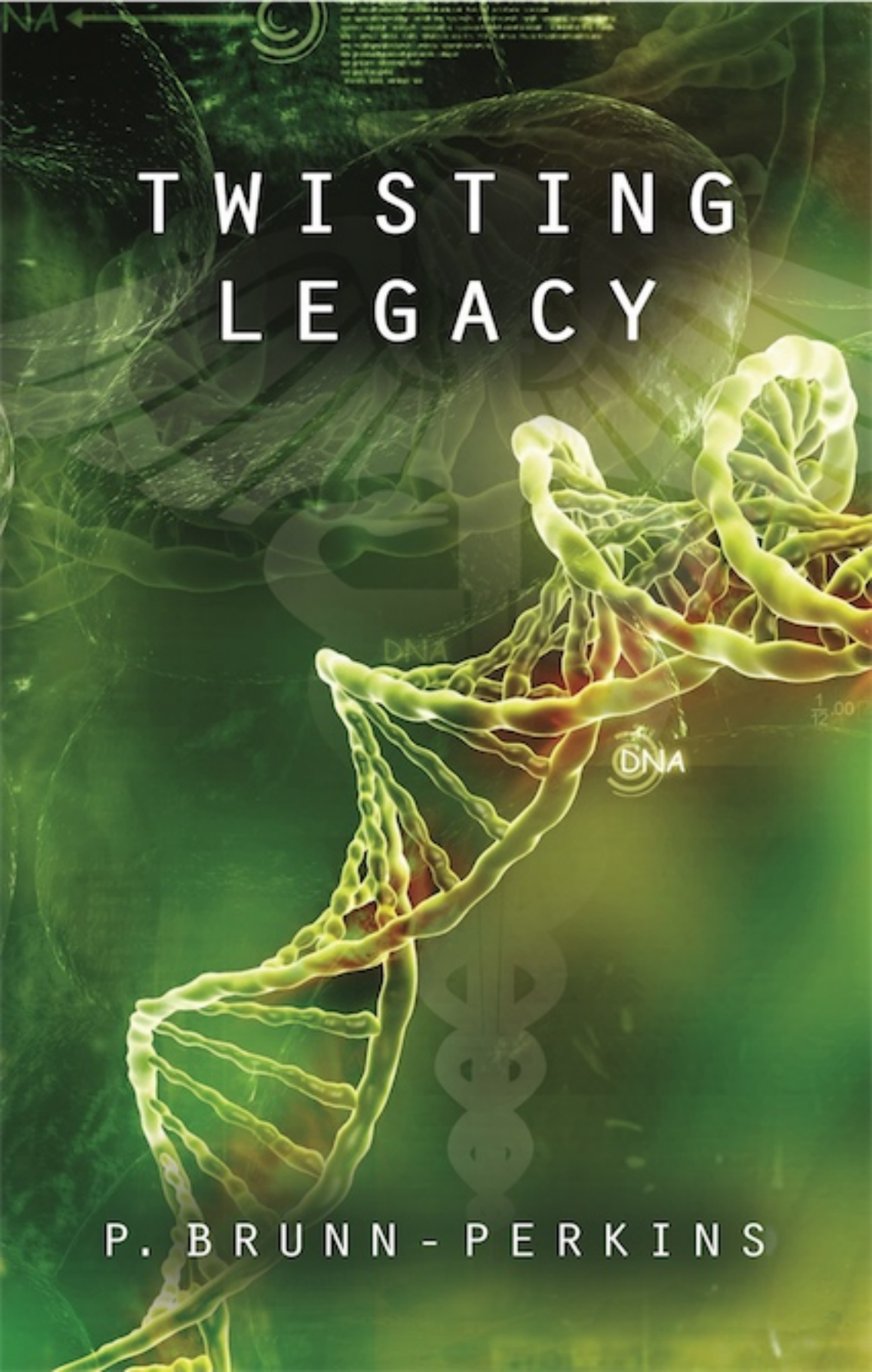
Twisting Legacy

by P. Brunn-Perkins

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TWISTING LEGACY

P. BRUNN - PERKINS

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1948
**Chapter 1 – St. Joseph’s Orphanage,
Tampa, Florida**

The windshield wipers slapped out a rhythmic counterpoint to the moaning wind and the rumbling thunder. Isabella could not make out the details of the landscape through the fogged up windows of her car. In the face of the storm, the blur of buildings, road signs, houses, and trees formed a seamless union with the pewter sky and the flat horizon.

Isabella was close to her destination after driving for six nerve-racking hours. The pounding rain made the journey tedious; the hair-raising lightning and shifting wind made it dangerous. Fatigue tugged at her body and mind. Despite wanting to rest, she resisted to concentrate on the task ahead. Her objective, planned down to the last detail, left no room for failure.

The dark day was turning toward evening. Isabella was running out of daylight and time. Leaning forward in the driver’s seat, she peered through the windshield at the morass of grayness ahead and searched for familiar objects to establish her bearings. After the long drive and the months of planning, she did not want to miss the left turn to the orphanage. If her memory was correct, it was on the far side of the canal.

Isabella, a native Floridian, was not a stranger to storms. She had often witnessed the

devastating power of Mother Nature when her wrath was unleashed on mere mortals. That day, desperation forced her to venture into the angry storm. From experience, Isabella knew to be prepared for surprises, since no two storms were alike. With readiness in mind, she kept an eye on the battered palms swaying and bending back and forth in the fickle wind blowing from several directions at once.

Keeping her old yellow Buick on the road in the furious gale was a struggle. She swerved around fallen coconuts, dodged tree limbs and palm fronds, and avoided flooded areas for fear of hydroplaning. She hunched over the steering wheel to see through the windshield, wishing she could see more than the road in front of her.

A streak of jagged lightning split the black cloud above, reminding her that Mother Nature's temper was as hazardous as it was awesome. Even though Isabella enjoyed an occasional storm from the safety of her home, she thought it intimidating to be out in the thick of one. She told herself to stay calm and realized, with a twinge of regret, there would be no more storms on her horizon.

Several days before, she had accepted, without sorrow or fear, the impending end of her life. For the first time, she found herself detached from her death, an odd estrangement she supposed was a blessing. Nevertheless, taking her life by her own hand was not turning out to be as easy as she expected. She did not lack the courage; she worried God might not forgive her weakness. Perspiration dotted her brow. She hoped he would

be merciful in his judgment. She had endured as long as she dared.

Fearful of lessening her resolve, Isabella pushed thoughts of God from her mind. She reviewed her options, concluded the path she had chosen was sensible, and recommitted to following through with her plan. If she wanted her precious cargo delivered into safe hands, she needed to do it that day. She could not change her mind in the final moments, as she had on other occasions. Her worsening melancholy, memory, and coordination were constant reminders that procrastination was risky. She was terrified and relieved, terrified an unforeseen event might derail her plan and relieved the end was in sight. She was out of time.

Isabella had plotted the route and followed the weather for weeks, waiting for bad weather to carry out her plan. A stormy day, she reasoned, would obscure her actions and keep drivers and pedestrians at home. Aware she could ill afford to attract notice, she drove cautiously to avoid an accident or a breakdown. Camouflaged by the storm, Isabella's indistinctive car pushed forward on the gray road under the gray sky toward the gray horizon. She would succeed. Failure was not an option.

Through the gloom, Isabella spotted the gates of the orphanage ahead. They were open. "Thank you, God," she whispered, as her muscles relaxed and returned to her voluntary control.

Isabella had driven by the gates many times on those days when desperation nagged at her to find a practical solution to her predicament.

Although the gates were open each time, they were variables over which she had no control. If they were closed and locked, her plan would fail. To her relief, they stood wide open and welcoming like a warm embrace.

She stopped in front of the gates to consider the significance of the moment and at the same time, glanced around to see if anyone was watching. No cars or people were in view. With no one to intercede, she could proceed as intended. She drove through the gates and picked her way along the serpentine road toward the mission-style structure barely discernible in the distance. As she drew nearer, she was able to make out the edges of the building in the dim light. Perched on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico, the orphanage looked as if it were rising from the water like a breaching whale.

Isabella focused her attention on the road, keeping to the center to avoid the sandy washouts on either side. Gusts of wind threw torrents of rain at her windshield. Even with the wipers on high, the visibility was close to zero and the going slow. She braked with a delicate touch to avoid a large washout that had pulled rivers of sand across the gravel. Through the driver's side window, she took note of the canal beside the road. As she had anticipated, its swollen waters rushed toward the outlet into the agitated Gulf. The pieces of her plan were coming together.

Isabella wanted to ask God for help. Under the circumstances, she thought it wrong. Instead, she prayed to him for the protection of her daughter,

for his understanding and mercy, and the forgiveness of her sins.

“I am not abandoning you, my dearest, Avalita. I do it out of love,” she whispered to her sleeping baby.

Struck by the reality that the next few minutes would be the last shared with her daughter, a gut-wrenching sorrow seized her. She had prepared for their parting, but in that instant, she understood the disparity between intense sadness and grief. Although they sprang from the same well, grief felt sharper, deeper, and more final than the sadness with which she lived each day.

As she drove, she grieved for her precious baby and herself, assaulted by the thought she would not be able to mother her child as she grew up. Who would protect little Ava from harm and soothe her fears? She longed to tuck her darling child into bed with a bedtime story, kiss her boo-boos after a fall, and teach her about love, values, and morals, but fate had other plans for Isabella.

Fate had another plan for baby Ava as well. Someone else would send her off to her first dance, attend her wedding, and babysit for the grandchildren. Isabella choked back a sob from the depths of her soul.

Tears pooled in her eyes, spilled over, and streamed down her cheeks. She batted the wetness away with angry swipes. She was tired of crying and trying to clear her mind and sick of her detestable twisted body. As she neared the end of the driveway, she recognized with stunning clarity

that her life was also close to its end. A sense of calm replaced her former anger.

She steered the Buick to one side of the sprawling mission, shut off the headlights, and parked her car out of sight. Drawing a deep breath, she reached over the seat to adjust the card pinned to her baby's chest and to tuck back into place a loosened edge of the oilcloth wrapping her baby's basket. Next, she lowered the front windows and then the rear ones, tasks she had rehearsed in her mind a million times. The wind whipped the rain into her face. She accepted the stinging discomfort as punishment for having failed her baby.

A sudden spasticity seized her arms and legs, the involuntary contractions pulling her muscles into painful knots. Isabella, rigid and immobile, waited for her brain to release the captive muscles. When the spasms abated, she sprang into action, extricating the basket and her sleeping baby from the back seat. She clutched the precious bundle to her chest and struggled with her choreic limbs to move forward, one leg at a time. Oblivious to the pummeling rain and swirling wind, she trudged to the shelter of the arched mission entrance.

The alcove by the windowless doors—twice her height and as thick as two ordinary doors put together—was deep enough to be wind free and dry. While she caught her breath, she stared at the double doors. Sturdy enough to protect the orphans and their caretakers within, they were equipped with robust wrought iron handles and

studded with round-headed nails similar to those found in castle gates. Isabella regarded the doors as her baby's gates to heaven and, quite possibly, hers to hell. She shuddered.

Isabella lowered the basket to the stone floor in front of the doors. Bending down, she loosened the oilcloth from around her baby's head for ventilation and then righted herself with difficulty. As she raised a shaky hand to the massive knocker, she spotted the door chimes. She depressed the button, hoping the storm would not drown out their call.

Turning away from the doors, she almost stumbled over her own feet. The message to walk was slow in getting from her brain to her legs. She took a moment to regroup and when she regained control, gave it another try. On the second attempt, her legs cooperated. With painstaking effort, she maneuvered her body around the side of the building to stand next to the stone wall beside her car. She could not leave until someone answered her summons.

In the gathering darkness, Isabella concentrated on the massive mission doors as her slight body swayed in the strong wind and hammering rain. She groped for the rosary nestled inside her pocket, slid it between her fingers, and prayed to God for strength and the protection of her baby. She ended her prayer with, "Most of all, God, thank you for letting me share in the first six months of my precious baby's life, a blessed gift."

Despite a bout of trembling, she kept her attention riveted on the imposing doors that were

hard to see in the dim light. *Will they open?* She dropped her gaze to the basket. She yearned to see the face of her sweet baby one last time. She choked back a sob, shivered, and waited, vaguely conscious of the binding heaviness of her rain-soaked clothes.

She had not worked out a backup plan if no one responded to her summons. *How could I be so stupid?* The seconds passed in slow motion, and when no one opened the door, she labored to stave off her rising panic. With pounding heart, she corralled her energy to stay upright, when she felt her knees wobble. The task required the muscles she could control to work harder than usual to make up for those that ignored her bidding.

Afraid of losing her balance, she groped for a chink in the nearby stone wall. When she located a crevice, she worked her quivering fingers between the wet, mossy stones and held on for dear life, as a sudden attack of spasticity threatened to twist her legs out from under her.

Open the door, open the door, open the door. What is taking so long?

To keep her wits together, she focused her mind on the next step in her plan. Each person's death should matter to someone, she thought. Hers would matter to no one, a stark reality which further reinforced her determination. Since she was already half-dead, keeping the other half alive was pointless.

After what seemed like an eternity to Isabella, one of the heavy doors opened. A black-robed figure emerged. Isabella watched gentle hands

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reach for the basket and lift its cover. Assured of her baby's safety, she uttered a sob before turning away and staggering the several steps to her still-running car. She manipulated her twisted body into position behind the wheel, gunned the engine, and drove at high speed into the turbulent canal rushing to meet the Gulf. Her last words were "Thank you, God."

1980

**Chapter 2 – Pelican View and the Office
of Dr. Marquis, Naples, Florida**

The morning, sunny and breezy, was a typical one for Naples, Florida. Ava Skinner took no notice. She was in a hurry to dress and escape from the Gulf Shore mansion she shared with her husband Langdon before he returned from his early-morning jog. By avoiding him, she would not have to explain she was keeping an appointment with their family physician. Until Dr. Marquist identified the cause of her unusual symptoms, Ava saw no point in worrying Langdon prematurely. The less he knew, the better.

Even though she was confident something was amiss and nervous about what Dr. Marquist might say, she comforted herself with the thought that she was only thirty-two years old. How grave could it be?

She selected a jacket from a closet in her dressing room and hurried across the expansive house to the kitchen where she found Rosa, the family's housekeeper, bent over the dishwasher unloading its contents.

“Good morning, Rosa.” Ava smiled at the motherly Hispanic woman whose coal-black eyes missed little.

Rosa startled. “Oh, Miss Ava, it's you.” Placing the bowl she was holding on the countertop, Rosa unfolded her body to its full stature, smoothed her

apron with one hand, and smiled back at Ava. "Are you ready for breakfast?"

"No, thank you, Rosa, I am meeting a friend for breakfast." A *lie*, Ava thought to herself. "On second thought, Rosa," Ava said, "your coffee cake smells delicious. I'll take a small piece with me. I'll get it. Go on with what you were doing." She cut a thin slice of cake from the end of the loaf and cradled it in a napkin. "Langdon hasn't returned from his jog yet, has he?"

"No, Miss Ava."

"When he returns, please tell him where I'm going. I don't want him to worry. I won't be away long. Thank you, Rosa. I'll see you later."

Ava scurried from the kitchen through the south gallery to the front door, thinking how lucky she was to have such a loyal, competent, and sympathetic housekeeper.

While barreling across the courtyard and looking over her shoulder for Langdon at the same time, she bumped sideways into David. "Oh goodness, David, I am sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going." She greeted the family's faithful chauffeur with a warm smile.

"No, my fault, Miss Ava, I had my head in this car accessory catalog." He flipped it closed and tucked it under his arm.

"I guess we were both distracted," Ava said. "Are you going to the house to see Langdon?"

"That I am, Miss Ava. Buck's Rolls needs a new visor." David was referring to the 1955 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud belonging to Langdon's father,

William Buckminster Skinner, or Buck, as the townsfolk called him.

Ava was aware of the pride with which David tended to the Cloud. He kept it in tiptop shape, polished to a high shine, and ready to go at a moment's notice. With the elder Skinner battling a worsening kidney disease, however, it was a rare day when the Cloud left the barn.

"Langdon is out on his jog. He should be back soon," Ava said.

David stared at her handbag. "May I drive you somewhere, Miss Ava? What with your purse and all, you look like you're going out." His tone was hopeful.

"No, thank you, David, I'll take my car. I'm not going far."

"I'll back your car out then, Miss Ava. If you want to wait, I'll bring it around." His words were flat, unenthusiastic. He fiddled with the leather brim of his hat, rubbing it with his thumb and forefinger.

David's downhearted expression made her feel bad. She had no choice; she had to take her car. By driving herself, she would eliminate the possibility of Langdon's discovering her destination through David. Hiding anything from the man she loved and respected most in the world made her feel sneaky. She told herself it was for Langdon's own good. With Buck's health already a concern, she did not want to add to Langdon's burdens.

Ava put Langdon out of her mind to return to her conversation with David. "I'll walk to the

carriage barn with you,” she said to him. “It’s such a beautiful morning.” She hoped to cheer him up and get out of sight at the same time.

Ava was fond of David, a lanky Englishman who emigrated at the age of thirty. He was devoted to Buck. When Ava first met David, she found him hard to know. He seldom expressed his thoughts or feelings unless asked, and when addressed, his responses were always diplomatic. David preferred to straddle two sides of an issue than express a preference for one. Buck, a man of strong opinions, teased David, calling him a mugwump for his dithering. In turn, David replied having no opinion was better than having the wrong one. Over the years, their relationship had lost its employee-employer flavor. David was part of the family.

On the way to the carriage barn, David, in his clipped English, let slip a lament. “What with the older folks aging and the younger generation driving themselves, it won’t be long before no one requires the services of a chauffeur,” he clucked.

Ava was surprised to hear David offer an opinion, something he would do only if he thought an issue important. He is worried about his job, Ava thought. “David, you will have employment with us for as long as you want,” she said. She patted his arm and smiled.

“Thank you, Miss Ava,” he replied, “One does want to be useful, though.” He ran his hand over the top of his graying brush cut.

“Yes, of course, you’re right. If your services become impractical in the future, perhaps we can find something else you might prefer to do.”

With Buck in a declining state, Ava understood David’s anxiety over his future employment. She felt thoughtless for not recognizing his concerns sooner and reminded herself to follow up later on their conversation.

David backed her car from the carriage barn and opened the car door for her. She thanked him, settled herself behind the wheel, and drove away with a little wave.

On her way to the doctor’s office, Ava’s thoughts returned to David. Many service workers, like David, depended on the largesse—or the extravagance, as some countered—of the wealthy for employment. Tending to the needs and delights of the rich was a considerable business in Naples.

Ava often thought about the many workers who relied on her family for employment. The jobs Enterprises provided softened to a degree the unease her wealth provoked. Nonetheless, it bothered her to think David viewed her independence as a threat to his occupation. His observation was valid, however. Each time she drove herself, she endangered his livelihood.

Marquist’s office, one of several professional workplaces in a rectangular, two-story building, was in downtown Old Naples, minutes from Ava’s home. In short order, she was in his waiting room trying to make herself comfortable in a fake leather barrel-backed chair flanked by an end table stacked with magazines. Since there were

only two other patients in the room, she did not think she would have a long wait.

Ava hoped Dr. Marquist would have a simple explanation for her unsettling symptoms, and then she could share her concerns with Langdon. Through seven years of marriage, they had never kept secrets from each other. Even under the stress of failing to have what they wanted most in the world, a baby, their marriage remained strong and their love passionate. They were true soul mates who respected, even cherished, each other's silly quirks and foibles. She could not imagine being happier and would not change a thing.

Twenty minutes later, Ava heard her name. She looked up to see a young nurse with fading acne scars and light brown hair, fastened by a clip at the nape of her neck, beckoning to her. Ava followed the young woman into an examining room. The nurse took Ava's vital signs and asked her to step onto the scale. As the nurse slid the weight across its metal bar, she remarked how rare it was to weigh an adult as light as one hundred pounds.

When her tasks were completed, the nurse showed Ava into Marquist's office, seated her in a chair, and left the room. A few minutes later, Dr. Marquist appeared. Portly and big-boned, he reminded Ava of a giant teddy bear. He was kind and comforting with gray-blue eyes that sparkled, especially after telling one of his own jokes, and he had a talent for not making his patients feel uncomfortable when they imposed on his time. In return, few patients, if any, complained about

waiting a half hour or more to see him. They knew, when their turn came, Marquist would allow them the time they needed. An attentive listener, Marquist treated each patient as important, no matter how minor his or her afflictions. As he settled himself behind his desk across from her, Ava glanced with affection at the silver strands of his graying hair. She thought him a gift to the medical profession.

After a cordial conversation, Marquist asked about her symptoms. She described them as best she could.

Ava was surprised when he did not offer her an explanation as she had expected; instead, he asked for her family's medical history, a request she had not anticipated.

"Bill, you know I am an orphan. Can't you determine the diagnosis without a family history?" she asked.

"Yes, in time, however, a medical history might give us a trail to follow. An accurate diagnosis requires a measure of detective work sometimes."

"I don't think I understand your point. How is diagnosing an illness similar to detective work? I thought symptoms, physical findings, and test results would be enough to determine a diagnosis." Her facial muscles tensed.

Marquist crossed his legs and rocked his chair backward. "Ava, I want to find out the cause of your trouble without resorting to every test in the book," he said in his calming voice. "Yes, I could order a barrage of tests, but why go through all that, unless there is no alternative?"

“I don’t know if the orphanage ever had a medical record for me,” Ava replied. “St. Joseph’s is a convent now and no longer in operation as a home for children. If you think it would be helpful ...” She trailed off, realizing she was thinking aloud.

Ava doubted the sisters had retained records from as far back as 1948, the year of her birth. In those days, many mothers, after losing husbands in the war, were unable to care for their children and surrendered them for adoption. Orphanages were overflowing.

“The late nineteen forties and early fifties were secretive times,” she said, meeting the doctor’s gaze. “Years ago when I asked who my parents were, I was told the sisters didn’t share the records of their charges with either the residents attaining majority age or parents wanting to adopt. Even if an authority agrees to release my record, rounding it up from the depths of a cloistered convent could be difficult, never mind finding within it useful information. My record might be lost altogether, if I even have one.” She heaved a sigh. “Again, are you saying you must have a family history?” She scrunched an edge of her jacket between her fingers.

Marquist leaned forward in his chair, his bright blue eyes and composed demeanor reminding her of Sophie, the fat, good-natured cat at the orphanage. “No, Ava, a family medical history is not a must. Just the same, should you find one, it could provide helpful clues,” he said. “Many diseases present with similar symptoms and test

results, so figuring out a diagnosis can entail ruling out three or four other possibilities. I liken it to detective work because the process is similar to the methods used by police in solving crimes.”

Ava wished Marquist would tell her what was on his short list of possibilities. Knowing he was a deliberative sort who would not be bullied or cajoled into disclosing information until he was ready, she refrained from asking. To press the issue was futile. She chewed her lip, and another layer of her patience peeled away.

Ava fidgeted in her seat and addressed the doctor. “Do you think I should visit St. Joseph’s to see what I can find out, even though it is no longer an orphanage?” She knew his answer before he replied.

Chapter 3 – Pelican View, Naples, Florida

Several weeks after her appointment with Dr. Marquist, Ava set off on a bright sunny day to visit the orphanage in Tampa. Her objective was to find out what she could about her family, and visit her surrogate mother, Sister Teresa Claire.

Ava turned her car toward the ornate gates that opened onto Gulf Shore Drive and negotiated the long cobblestone driveway to the halfway point. She paused there to cast a loving glance back at her home, a graceful Mediterranean-revival mansion.

As breathtaking as the colorful gardens were against the backdrop of the blue Gulf waters, nothing tickled her fancy more than the whimsical four-tiered fountain decorated with cherubs. The cascading water in which they splashed sparkled in the sun as if it were liquid silver.

Buck and his wife, Millie, built the mansion and its outbuildings over a number of years, adding additions and new structures as the need arose. The Skinners named their home Pelican View because Millie loved the silly birds and rarely missed an opportunity to watch them at feeding time.

Langdon told Ava of the many meetings between his parents and the architect, Robert Meachum, before the 1955 construction began. “In those days, Meachum came to dinner at least several times a week,” he explained. “I was ten and remember being dismissed after dinner to allow

the adults to get down to the business of poring over architectural plans and drawings. Meachum was a funny guy, wore a bow tie and had a sharp pencil behind his ear. The way he blinked his eyes and jerked his head reminded me of a falcon.”

The history of the house fascinated Ava. She prodded Langdon for more details.

“When my parents and Meachum weren’t discussing courtyards, balconies, or columns, they were throwing out words like parapets, pediments, grillwork, and arches. Most of the terms were unfamiliar to me,” he said.

“I bet it was exciting to watch it go up,” she said, a dreamy look on her face. “You were lucky to see it happen from beginning to end.”

“I guess, but we were always under construction. Mother carped that Dad would keep building until he dropped dead. She said we could expect to live in mayhem forever.

“Each holiday when I returned home from boarding school, I discovered a new building had appeared in my absence. My parents built the main house first and then the carriage barn and house, the gatekeeper’s cottage, the guesthouse, and the pool house. After that, Dad added onto each end of the main house. ‘A room for every purpose’ was his often-stated goal.”

Ava remembered every detail of their conversation. She would never forget how Langdon had pulled her into his arms and teased her with his comment. “You can imagine my childhood, a very dusty one. It’s a wonder I didn’t die from clogged lungs.”

“Poor baby,” she responded in mock sympathy and laughed. “Poor little rich boy growing up in a mansion. It must have been horrible for you.” As if soothing a troubled child, she stroked his sun-streaked hair back from his face.

“More, more,” Langdon demanded. “Your sympathy is most enjoyable.” He peered into her dark-brown eyes. “I swear, Ava, those studious eyes of yours can see deep into my soul.”

He pulled her closer. “Ava, when you’re born into money, you don’t think of yourself as special, because you have no frame of reference. You don’t realize the difference between rich and the poor until others point at you for being lucky or hate you for having money. I was pretty much a regular kid.”

“You still are,” she joked, poking him in the ribs, keeping the conversation light.

“You think?”

“A kid, yes, except you’re anything but regular. In fact, in those ratty-tatty jeans, you could be mistaken for a beachcomber,” she replied, feigning disapproval and scooping her long, chestnut-colored hair back from her face.

“Hey, I do my best investing in these jeans, thank you,” he said. “These are my lucky pants.” He stood, twirled, and feigned a ballerina’s pose. “When I wear them, I pretend I’m outdoors instead of shuffling papers and fielding phone calls day in and day out in my stuffy old office.”

“My, my, aren’t we full of self-pity?” She smiled and wagged a finger at him. “Buck is lucky to have you, and I am, too.” She pecked him on the cheek.

“Yeah, poor Dad, he would prefer to run the company and do the investing himself, if he could. I shouldn’t complain about having to take over. So if I’m stuck in the office, I’ll just have to experience my outdoor life through our four children, or was it six?” He grinned and with a mischievous look, grabbed her in a bear hug. “Want to squeeze in a little practice?”

Ava wriggled out of his grasp. “First Langdon Buckminster Skinner, I’ll have you know an expert needs no practice, and secondly—”

“I know, you don’t want your perfect figure ruined,” he teased, giving her a lusty look and reaching for her again.

“You are very wrong, Papa Langdon. I can’t wait to spend the next decade of my life resembling a joyous elephant.” She knew Langdon was joking, but her longing for a child made her heart ache.

“Great, because I will direct, mold, and harangue each child into becoming an outdoorsman. Isn’t that what fathers are for? Beachcomber-surfer is a good start. We could follow with an oil rig worker, a forester, and a rancher.” He raised his eyebrows at her. “Hey, maybe a kid for each business?”

“What, four he-men or women?” she retorted. “Where’s my ballerina?”

That particular conversation took place years earlier. As she dawdled in the driveway gazing at Pelican View and reminiscing, she felt an urgency to dig up her memories and hold them close for fear of forgetting them.

In her seven years as Mrs. Langdon Skinner, neither the nuptial glow she carried down the aisle nor the wide-eyed wonder she felt over her good fortune had diminished in the slightest. *I am incredibly happy*, she thought. *I don't want my life to change.*

Her most cherished memories were from the days when she met Langdon for the first time and afterward during his courting. Remembering his pursuit brought a smile to her face. Langdon's courting style was assertive and confident, not at all timid or reserved, as she had expected. His idea of getting her attention was to bombard her with his, and his passion for the chase so intense she laughingly referred to him as her stalker instead of her suitor.

Ava was twenty-five, and on a concert tour that included one performance in Naples, when she met Langdon at a pre-concert dinner party arranged by her teacher, Agnes Turner, and a benefactor, Margaret Spencer, a wrinkled patron of the arts and wife of a retired industrialist. The picturesque location was the rear loggia of the Spencer's Port Royal home.

Beneath an arched portico adjacent to an extensive lanai, damask-covered tables groaned under the weight of fine china, silver, and crystal. The tables, arranged to catch the February sunset, allowed guests to dine while viewing the pink and orange ribbons of light playing off the bay. In the center of each table was a lavish arrangement of colorful blossoms whose vividness complemented the tropical atmosphere intrinsic to Naples.

Twinkling lanterns directed guests to the several fountains, and flaming torches outlined the dock where the Spencers' yacht creaked against its moorings. No detail was left to chance. The grandeur dazzled Ava.

On that memorable evening, Ava freed herself during the cocktail hour to admire the impressive view and observe the people with whom she would be dining. She strolled around the grounds, taking in the beauty of the gardens and watching the elegant guests as they smiled, chatted, and glided with ease between groups.

She was alone in the garden allée, between the fountain and the pool, when Langdon came upon her. He introduced himself and engaged her in conversation, taking her by surprise with his flirtatious manner. She remembered his startling remark: "Decorum be damned. I offer no apologies for trying to charm the most beautiful woman here."

Although she was flattered, she gave his comment little serious consideration. She attributed his loosened tongue to the frivolity of the evening and the generous quantities of champagne passed by the uniformed waiters. After a brief conversation, she excused herself to mingle with the other guests.

When the dinner bell rang, she thought it a pleasant surprise to find Langdon seated on her right. "Hello again." She smiled down at him.

He rose to help her with her chair.

"What a coincidence," she said.

He winked at her. “Not true, I switched the place cards. Sometimes one has to take matters into one’s own hands.”

She laughed aloud at the recollection. No doubt about it, she thought, Langdon had an audacious streak. In time, Ava came to learn Langdon eschewed the niceties of proper etiquette, silly rules, or political trends if they rang hollow. He tended to poke fun—in a polite way—at self-promoting stuffed shirts that he considered arrogant. In a courteous manner, he popped their puffed-up facades with a careful blend of flattery and criticism, leaving them to wonder if they had been complimented or insulted. The narcissists, blinded by self-importance, were so eager to bask in Langdon’s praise they took no notice of his criticism, but those who knew Langdon well understood the meaning of his comments.

Langdon’s no-nonsense candor was an example of the boldness he manifested from time to time. Ava suspected he developed the quality in Beaumont Texas where he went to wildcat for oil, as soon as he graduated from college. His choice was a disappointment to Buck, who was frustrated his son had declined law school to work the oil rigs.

Langdon told her he spent many sleepless nights worrying about disregarding his father’s wishes. Nevertheless, he said he was eager to put his newly-earned engineering degree into practice. The chance to work in Beaumont, where his grandfather had brought in the first Skinner well, was something he had wanted to do for years.

Grandpa Skinner's tales of wildcatters and oil companies, battling over land leases and purchase rights for the privilege of drilling the earth and bringing in big gushers, fascinated him as a boy. Ava understood his longing.

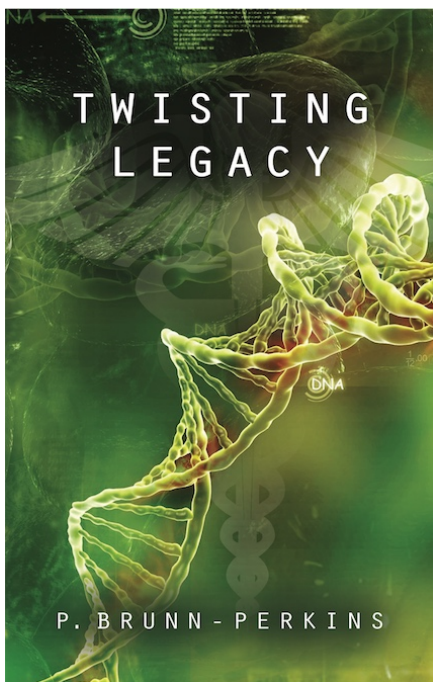
"I know it sounds silly, but I felt compelled to go as if a primeval urge had beckoned me to the wilds," he told her.

By the time Langdon got to Beaumont, the city had changed. It made no difference, he said, because retracing his grandfather's footsteps had grounded him. He compared it to a pilgrimage.

"My time in Texas was like a hajj, Ava, a spiritual trek back to my roots. When I returned home, I felt centered, as if I had regained my balance."

Ava paid careful attention to each detail of his story, happy he came away from his adventure with inner peace. She understood his desire to connect with the past. At the same time, she was envious. She yearned for a past, a history of any sort. Not a day went by without her wondering who her parents were and why they gave her away.

Rebuking herself for wasting time, Ava took a last look at her beautiful home, inhaled a deep breath, and drove through the iron gates of Pelican View. "Maybe I'll discover my roots at the convent," she said aloud as if the canopy of palms swaying above could compel it to happen.



Compulsively readable and deeply heartfelt, Twisting Legacy casts a poignant, illuminating light on the scourge of a fatal genetic disease and its impact on three generations of a family. Despite deception by the protagonist, challenges, and sacrifices, courage prevails, love endures, and hope remains.

Twisting Legacy

by P. Brunn-Perkins

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