

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Of

Barbara Alice

We argued most of the way home. Victor's warning had caused Pamela to have serious doubts about the séance. But her opinion changed after I revealed the amazing events that had occurred in her absence.

"I leave for four days and look what happens," she said, as I turned onto the driveway. "It's too bad the diary isn't Babe's."

"It's still worth reading. The last entry was written the day before Barbara Alice died, but Beth may have noticed something, some detail, that could help us figure out another piece of the puzzle."

"I think you should wait."

"Why?"

"We'll be meeting Beth in a few weeks. You'll be able to ask her all the questions you want. And you may not have to if this séance of yours works."

"So? I can read the journal anyway and cover all the bases."

"Listen, reading someone's diary after they're dead is one thing, but when the person's still alive, it's like an invasion of privacy."

"Do you really think Beth cares? She left the journal here seventy years ago."

"She left it hidden. And she probably didn't write in it anymore because she was grief-stricken over her sister's death. The diary was a gift from Babe, remember?"

I pulled up in front of the house and cut off the engine.

"In that case," I turned to look at her, "there's no reason to give the journal back to Beth, if that's what you're thinking we should do. If we returned it, she'd never

believe we hadn't read it, no matter what we said. And most people would read it, under these circumstances."

She lifted her chin. "We're not most people."

Before I could say another word, she got out of the car with her overnight bag and headed for the house.

I grabbed her suitcase out of the back seat, and wondered suddenly why there were no shopping bags or boxes to worry about.

I caught up to her in our bedroom, where she had already begun to unpack.

"How'd the concert go?" I set the suitcase down by the bed.

"Beautifully – without a hitch."

"And the shopping expedition?"

"Another great success. Toshi's advice made it easier for me to decide. I'm having everything I ordered for the wedding shipped here next month."

I had placed the sheets of music in the top drawer of the nightstand, but I had left the diary out. When Pam stepped away from the dresser, it caught her eye. She picked the journal up off the nightstand and turned it over. I watched as she traced each of the gold initials with a delicate finger.

"It was a different world back then," she said quietly.

I moved in front of her and sat on the bed.

"Aren't you the least bit curious about what's in there?" I gestured towards the little black book.

"Of course I am. I just respect Beth's privacy, her right to have secrets from the rest of the world."

She laid the journal back on the nightstand and sat next to me, her leg touching mine.

"When I was in high school, I had a diary I wrote in almost every night. I kept it hidden under my mattress, but one day my nosy little sister found it. She took it to school and read it out loud to all her friends. I noticed it was missing before she could put it back, and when I found out what she'd done to me, all hell broke loose. I felt totally humiliated and betrayed."

**I put my arm around her shoulders. "Jeez, you sure know how to make a guy feel guilty. And I haven't even done anything yet – at least not deliberately."**

**She smiled. "Why don't we wait and see what happens, all right? We'll have the séance as soon as we can arrange it. After that, we might not need the diary. All our problems may be solved."**

**She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.**

**\* \* \* \* \***

**I spent most of Thursday in my library, pouring over the stack of books I'd left on my desk. They all offered advice on communicating with the spirit world.**

**It seemed relatively simple. All one needed in order to have a successful séance was a medium – or a person who had experienced the paranormal – and a willing ghost who was eager to communicate.**

**No problem.**

**One book suggested having the séance completely in the dark. Another advised the reader to use white candles, and a few even recommended having the event during the daylight hours.**

**All of the authors agreed with each other when it came to explaining why some spirits choose to hang around. There were various reasons for a haunting. Some restless souls had unfinished business that needed taking care of. And the spirits of those who died violently usually remained earthbound, tied to the location of their deaths. This was especially true of murder victims and suicides. If a person dies suddenly and unexpectedly, sometimes they'll become confused on the other side. They simply won't realize that they're dead.**

**Encountering a ghost with one or more of these problems was good cause for having a séance. One's goal should be to communicate with the spirits who needed help and guidance. Sometimes acknowledging their presence was enough to send them on their way. And sometimes not.**

**Some hauntings defied all explanation. Some ghosts refused to be helped.**

**The sun was going down by the time I finished reading. I switched on a light in the darkening room and, one by one, I returned each book to its rightful place on the shelves.**

**I would soon find out if we were doing the right thing.**

**That morning, Pamela had found herself locked in the bathroom after getting out of the tub. The skeleton key had disappeared from the lock, and it had taken me half an hour to find a spare.**

**The incident spurred us into action.**

**We got in touch with Josh and Maggie and they agreed to meet with us at nine o'clock that night. For better or for worse, we were having ourselves a séance.**

**\* \* \* \* \***

**The flames of a dozen white candles set the music room aglow. Half were on the piano, held by a candelabra. Several others were scattered around us on end tables and shelves, with a few resting on the fireplace mantle.**

**The four of us were sitting at a card table in the middle of the room. A short, thick candle burned brightly in the center of the table. More light spilled into the room through the French doors. The garden was drenched in pure moonshine.**

**It had been gusty earlier that day, but the winds had died with the setting sun. The night was calm and quiet.**

**"I believe we should all hold hands," said Maggie, almost whispering. She was on my right, facing the French doors, and Josh was seated directly across from me.**

**We joined hands around the table and right away my nose began to itch. I tried to ignore it.**

**"To begin with, let's close our eyes and concentrate on Barbara Alice," Maggie said, taking charge. "Call out to her telepathically. We have to let her know we're trying to communicate."**

**We sat there in silence for what seemed like several minutes. I kept my eyes shut and said Babe's name over and over again in my head. My concentration didn't break until someone's folding chair squeaked. That's when I noticed that my nose had stopped itching and my palms were beginning to sweat.**

**We opened our eyes when Joshua cleared his throat.**

**"Alex, I think you ought to do the talkin' from here on out," he said. "From what you've told us, it seems to me that Babe wants to communicate with you more than anybody else."**

**I had told Josh and Maggie about finding Babe's musical composition. But Pam and I had both decided to keep my discovery of Beth's diary a secret. At least for the time being.**

**"Do you feel her presence yet, Alex?" Maggie asked, glancing around the room. She looked like a medium in her flowing black taffeta dress.**

**"No."**

**I didn't know exactly how to proceed without looking foolish, but I swallowed my pride and plunged into the lead.**

**"Barbara Alice, please listen to us." I had remembered – just in time – that Babe didn't care for the nickname James had saddled her with. "We want to help you, but you have to help us first. Help us understand what's keeping you here. We want to set you free."**

**I fell silent and everyone looked at me, waiting expectantly. My palms continued to sweat.**

**Another several minutes passed. Nothing was happening.**

**Pamela sighed. "Should we try my idea now?"**

**I nodded. "Couldn't hurt."**

**Everyone dropped hands as Pamela got up from the table. She went over and sat at the piano, where the pages of Babe's musical composition now rested, waiting to be played.**

**I rubbed my damp palms on the legs of my jeans.**

**The song had a strange effect on us all. As soon as Pamela began to play, goose bumps popped up all over my body. Maggie began to shiver. Josh was staring straight up, like he expected to see Babe's ghost materialize on the ceiling.**

**Pam was biting her lip. She was hoping to get Babe's attention by playing the music back to her, but she seemed anxious to get it over with. I could tell she was playing the song a little faster than she was supposed to.**

**When she finished, the silence in the room seemed deafening. It was while she was walking back to the table that I first noticed the change in the temperature.**

**It dropped suddenly, and as Pamela took her seat, every candle flame in the room was extinguished at once.**

**Maggie let out a little gasp of surprise. We were all surprised. The doors and windows were closed.**

**I felt a current of cold, clammy air rush past me, and smelled the unmistakable scent of fear...and death.**

**It was then that I cursed the full moon's brightness.**

**"Oh, my dear Lord." Maggie covered her mouth with both hands.**

**When Pamela looked behind her to see what had caused Maggie's reaction, she sucked in her breath and grabbed hold of my hand. Her fingernails dug into my flesh, but I hardly noticed the pain.**

**The French doors began to open slowly by themselves. Beyond them, in the center of the moonlit garden, Barbara Alice waited. The doors swung silently out onto the terrace, as far as they could go, beckoning her to enter.**

**She began moving towards us, taking step after slow step.**

**I had never seen her appear this way before. It was a pitiful, horrifying sight.**

**Water streamed from her long white dress, forming silver pools on the terrace as she walked. Her wet hair looked black in the moonlight. It clung heavily to her face and neck, making her pale skin look translucent.**

**The mass of icy, damp air still surrounded us. To me it felt like an entity, like the angel of death was paying us a visit.**

**She stopped just inside the doorway.**

**Terror. I sensed it. Sorrowful terror. That's the only way I can describe the expression on her face.**

**She lifted her arms out to us, her palms turned up in a pleading gesture. Her mouth moved. She was struggling to form words, but we couldn't hear what she was trying to say. The place was as silent as a tomb.**

**The others were staring at her, their faces and their tongues frozen from shock.**

**Somehow I found the courage to speak.**

**"Barbara Alice, I'm not who you think I am. James is dead. He died a long time ago."**

**She began to fade away.**

**"Please, don't go yet. We're trying to help you. Tell us what you want."**

**A word was carried to me on the frightful breeze, so faint I almost didn't hear it. It seemed to come from someplace far off.**

**"Sister."**

**She was gone in a matter of seconds. And the cold, clammy air went with her.**

**None of us moved or said a word for at least a full minute after she disappeared.**

**Josh was the first to speak.**

**"Well, I believe I'll turn the lights back on." He stood up, straightened his pin-striped suspenders, and pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket. After wiping his brow and the back of his neck, he walked over to the light switch near the hall door and flipped it on.**

**I put a hand over my eyes as the bright overhead light illuminated the room. When I looked up, Josh was out on the terrace.**

**"So that's what it's like, having a séance." Pam let go of my left hand and propped her elbows on the table.**

**"What a shame it wasn't more successful," said Maggie, rubbing her arms. "Although, I must confess, I don't think my poor heart could have taken any more excitement."**

**"Did you hear what she said, just before she vanished?"**

**The women gave me blank looks.**

**"I heard the word 'sister.'"**

**"I didn't hear a thing," said Pam. "But I was in serious shock."**

**"I didn't hear anything, either," Maggie said.**

**I wondered if I'd imagined it.**

**"I'll be right back." I got up from the table and joined Joshua in the garden.**

As I expected, he was smoking his pipe. He was also staring down at the stone terrace.

"She looked awful real, didn't she?" he asked, without looking up.

"She looked awful, period."

He nodded. "Like she'd just been drowned. I half expected to find a puddle of water out here." He stared up at the brilliant moon.

"Both Pam and Maggie saw her, too – for the first time."

"And they won't be forgettin' about it anytime soon. Babe knows how to make a grand entrance. That one sure left a big impression on me."

"She said something before she went away. Did you hear it?"

He stared at me through the curling pipe smoke, his eyes narrowed.

"Don't remember if I did. What was it you heard?"

I told him, and he looked intrigued.

"Maybe she wants Beth to come here. Maybe her sister's the only one who can help her."

What he said made sense. But only if my mind hadn't been playing tricks on me earlier. From where I stood now, things looked even more perplexing.

A half an hour later, Josh and a frazzled Maggie left for Willowhaven. I stayed on the porch until their Lincoln dropped over the hill. Something told me I was in for another sleepless night.

Pamela had already gone up to bed. Since I was wide awake, I decided to make myself useful. I headed for the music room to put up the candles and clear away the card table and chairs.

I was almost there when the grandfather clock upstairs began to strike the hour. It was ten o'clock. I couldn't believe it had only been an hour since the séance began. It seemed like a million years ago.

I stopped in the hallway, in front of the library door.

The organ clock had just finished playing its German tune, and was striking the hour. But it definitely wasn't supposed to. My grandfather's clock was unique. To



cut down on all the noise from the scores of clocks that filled his house, he had designed it to strike only when the hands were on the six and the twelve.

Was I about to have another "episode," another blackout?

I knew I was supposed to go into the library. Something was trying to get my attention.

My mouth went dry and my palms started to sweat again. I turned on the light and stood in the doorway, hesitating. No one was in there. No one I could see, anyway.

The clocks were silent now.

I stepped into the room and glanced around. Nothing. Not a thing out of place.

My legs still wanted to run the other way. I forced them in the opposite direction, crossing the room and stopping in front of my desk. The organ clock sat innocently on the shelf above me. It didn't look any different.

I was about to turn away, relieved, when there came a high-pitched moaning sound from the chimney. A swirling gust of cold air swept through the library. The door behind me slammed shut. Papers blew around on my desk. I leaned over my typewriter, grabbing at the loose pages of my neglected novel.

I'm not sure why I noticed it. I suppose I was meant to.

The weekend before, after my muse had abandoned me, I had stormed off and left a blank sheet of paper in the typewriter.

But now there was a sentence at the top of the page. All of the letters had been typed in lowercase, without any spaces between the words.

I sat down at the desk, my head swimming, and read the sentence again.

"iambethany"

"I am Bethany."

The answer – the truth – was more terrible than I had imagined.