

CHAPTER NINE

of

BARBARA ALICE

When I fell asleep that night I dreamt I was back at the cemetery, alone, standing in front of the wrought-iron gate.

Slowly, it creaked open, and I entered the City of the Dead.

It was dawn. The clouds hanging on the eastern horizon resembled giant wads of pink cotton candy. They looked good enough to eat.

I started down the path that led to Barbara Alice's grave. A meadowlark was singing a sad, sweet song, accompanied only by the sound of leaves rustling gently in the breeze.

It seemed as though I had been walking forever when the grave finally came into view. It was covered with a blanket of long-stemmed roses. Their delicious scent hung thickly in the warm air.

Standing next to Barbara Alice's tombstone was a woman in a long white dress. I couldn't see her face, but she looked oddly familiar. Her lustrous dark hair was piled high on top of her head.

She appeared to be staring at the grave, so lost in thought that she didn't even notice my approach. Gracefully, she leaned over and picked up one of the roses.

I moved closer, and she must have heard me, for she turned and looked directly into my eyes.

My breath caught in my throat.

Smiling, she reached out and offered me the blood red rose.

Tears welled up in my eyes.

The woman was my mother.

* * * * *

I awoke from the strange dream with a lump in my throat the size of a golf ball. Sleep proved impossible. I lay in bed with my eyes wide open, thinking that maybe I

should get an early start on the outline for my new book. What else was there to do at four in the morning?

I got up quietly and went downstairs.

It had been a long time since I'd had a dream about my mother – and in this dream, for the first time I had been an adult instead of a four-year-old child.

I ended up in the library.

Standing in the middle of the Persian rug, I listened to the steady ticking of the organ clock, and stared at the uncluttered desk across the room. My old typewriter sat there, at rest now for nearly two months. I hadn't been in the mood to write lately. And it was still too soon. I usually thought about a story for several weeks, mixing various plots and characters together, and then letting the mixture ferment until it was ready to use. When it was just right, it would pour out of me, quickly and smoothly.

I walked over and sat down at the desk. Since I was here already, I should at least try and get the creative juices flowing.

After racking my brains for over two hours, I was able to put together a rough outline for the first chapter. But that's as far as I got. My mind kept wandering back to the dream I'd had earlier that morning.

Maybe it wasn't so strange after all.

Midnight had come and gone. It was on this date twenty-five years ago that I became an orphan.

Wasn't it only natural that I would dream about my mother at this time of year? My subconscious was reminding me of the most traumatic event in my life. And, in the process, it had resurrected something that I had buried long ago. A memory, disguised as a dream.

* * * * *

It happened on the sixth of April 1945, on my mother and father's tenth wedding anniversary. The two of them wanted to celebrate by spending the night alone, so I was cheerfully handed over to my grandparents before dinner that Friday evening.

I looked forward to staying on the farm. To an energetic four-year-old the place seemed more like an amusement park. Scaring the milk cows, throwing feed at the chickens, riding my pony and Grandpa's green tractor – none of these activities ever bored me.

But the most exciting diversions were forbidden. Evading punishment was part of the fun.

I would play hide-and-seek in the cornfield with Trudie the Retriever, and jump out of the barn loft into the haystacks with Dickens, a kitten who never seemed to enjoy the experience the way I did.

The one thing I didn't enjoy doing when I spent the night on the farm was going to bed on time. Sleep was the enemy. There were too many marvelous ways to keep busy, so I had no interest in going to bed early.

On that particular evening my attitude was no different. I couldn't keep the promise I had made to my parents.

I took my bath, put on my pajamas, and brushed my teeth without complaint. But then it was time to put the cat out. That meant bedtime was just around the corner. I stalled for a while by chasing Dickens around the house, trying my best not to catch her. She soon tired of the game.

I picked her up and she had her usual revenge: I suffered a violent sneezing attack. Grandma took her from me before I could drop her and headed for the kitchen door. I tagged along, pleading for mercy between sneezes.

Finally, my grandmother offered to let me sleep in the "giant marshmallow" bed upstairs, even though it was a mild spring night. Grandpa bribed me further with a piggyback ride up the squeaky steps.

He carried me into the front bedroom and tossed me out into the middle of the overstuffed mattress. As I landed, tiny feathers exploded from a hole in the seam, and I sank with a squeal of delight.

"Your grandma says she's fixin' biscuits and gravy for us in the mornin', first thing, so don't forget to say your prayers tonight." He swatted a feather away from his face. I watched it land gently on the braided rug. "You remember what to ask Him for?"

"Uh-huh." I rolled over and sat up with my knees buried in the soft mattress. I clasped my hands together and bowed my head. "Please God, don't let Grandma burn the biscuits."

"Amen." Grandpa ruffled my damp, wavy hair. "You want a blanket?"

I shook my head and he reached for the light switch.

"Don't forget the nightlight, Grandpa."

He stepped over to the highboy. The white plastic angel was right where it was supposed to be. He bent over and plugged it into an outlet near the door.

"There you go." His back made a cracking sound as he straightened it. "Good night, sleep tight." He turned off the overhead light and my angel glowed reassuringly at his feet.

"Don't let the bedbugs bite." I dived back into the downy depths of my make-believe giant marshmallow.

My grandpa's heavy footsteps faded into the living room below. The hall went dark, and the clock at the foot of the stairs struck eight.

I could be anywhere in the house and hear the sound of that clock striking. It was louder than all the others. Some of the clocks here were only silent visitors. They came and went, but every room had at least one that worked.

There was a clock hanging on the wall across from my bed. It's rhythmic ticking filled the room, and I knew that if I listened to the sound long enough I would fall asleep.

And I didn't want to. Not just yet.

When I was at home, instead of reading bedtime stories out of a book like my father did, my mother would make them up. She always let me help. Sometimes I would begin the story for her and other times I would finish it.

Tonight I would try and think up a whole one by myself.

I lay on my side and stared out the window at the big oak tree in the front yard. The wind played in its branches. My father had played there, too, when he was young. He'd fallen from one of the higher limbs and broken his wrist.

I rolled over onto my other side and yawned.

I decided my story would be about a boy who lived in a tree house. One day, as he is climbing down the ladder, the wind blows so hard that he falls off. His arm is broken. He can't climb the ladder anymore, and there is no one around to help him. He was in real trouble – just like the baby bird I had saved that week.

Unfortunately for the little boy, I fell asleep before he was rescued.

It must have been the wind that woke me up two hours later. It sounded like a woman screaming as it tore around the corners of the house, whipping the sheer white curtains at my window into a frenzy.

I put my hands over my ears to block out the noise. The ghostly curtains made wild shadows on the wall. I squeezed my eyes shut.

I'm not sure how long I stayed this way, but when I opened my eyes again the curtains were still, the wind had died. I turned over onto my back and stretched my whole body.

A few minutes passed, and I was about to doze off when a movement in the hall pulled me back to wakefulness.

My mother appeared in the doorway. I sat up as she stepped into the white light given off by my angel.

She was smiling, but I thought she looked sad somehow – sad but pretty. And she was still wearing my father's favorite blue dress. Her hair was no longer pinned up like it had been earlier that day. It fell past her shoulders in dark, shining waves.

I wondered why she was here.

"We love you, Alexander." I didn't think I saw her lips move, but I heard the words anyway.

"I love you, too, Mommy."

She turned then, and stepped back into the darkness of the hallway.

She must have been checking on me to see how I was, to see if I was sleeping all right. She did that every night at our house. But she usually didn't call me Alexander unless she was mad.

I lay down and went straight back to sleep.

Trudie's barking woke me up again later that night. Someone was knocking on the front door.

I sat up and looked out the window. The sheriff's car was in the driveway, but he didn't have his red lights flashing. I was disappointed.

One of my grandparents answered the door and let the sheriff into the house.

I climbed out of bed and scampered down the hall as quietly as I could. I paused at the top of the stairs and peered down into the living room.

My grandfather, in his bathrobe and slippers, walked past the bottom of the stairs with the sheriff at his heels.

I scooted down the steps on my bottom, staying close to the wall so the boards wouldn't squeak. I stopped where the wall ended and the railing began. I could see most of the living room now.

My grandparents were sitting next to each other on the couch. Grandma's hair hung down her back in a single, fat braid.

The sheriff had taken his hat off and was holding it with both hands. He sat across from them on the edge of his seat, talking soft and slow.

He was saying he was sorry. Sorry for what?

Then I heard the words "car wreck." My grandmother started to cry, and Grandpa put his arm around her.

I slipped down a few more steps without being noticed.

"When did it happen?" My grandpa's voice sounded strange.

"About an hour ago. Around 10:15," said the sheriff quietly. "Julia was killed instantly, and your son died right after they got him to the hospital."

"Jack." Grandma kept saying my father's name over and over.

"Do you need me to go with you?" Grandpa asked, hugging my grandma closer.

The sheriff nodded.

No, Grandpa shouldn't have to go anywhere. Something wasn't right. The sheriff had made a mistake.

My sudden appearance startled the two men. I ran past them to my grandmother, and pulled her hands away from her face.

"It's okay, Grandma." She leaned forward and crushed me to her chest with a terrible moan. "Mommy was just here. She's not hurt. Daddy's not either, you'll see."

* * * * *

They tried to explain to me that my parents were dead and gone. I would never see them again, and I hadn't seen my mother that night. It had only been a dream, or a product of my vivid imagination.

As the months went by I realized my parents really weren't coming back. I held on desperately to my memories of them, not wanting to forget a single moment we had shared.

But the memory of seeing my mother on the night she died had not remained the same. It changed over the years, slipping farther and farther away from me as I grew.

Whenever my adult mind happened to recall it, it was remembered as simply a comforting dream I'd had as a child.

Now, thanks to Barbara Alice, I could believe that it had really happened.

My mother's spirit had visited me on the night of the accident. She had come back because she and my father had loved me too much to leave without saying goodbye.

In my dream about the cemetery, I had cried when I realized who the mystery woman was. Maybe it was because I had known, subconsciously, that I could have the closure denied to me for so many years. I could allow myself to feel comforted.

My mother's spirit had moved on after our brief encounter. To where, I didn't know. But wherever she was, I felt certain my father was by her side.

I got up and stretched, eyeing the leather settee a few feet away. I was soon sprawled all over it, feeling relaxed and more than a little sleepy.

But my brain still refused to shut down. My thoughts turned to Barbara Alice.

Her death had been violent and unexpected, like the deaths of my mother and father. However, my parents had not lingered behind as she had done. They were obviously at peace.

Why couldn't Barbara Alice's spirit rest? What was keeping her here?

As if on cue, the piano in the next room began to play.

It was dawn – for real this time.

I sat up on the small sofa and rubbed my arms to make the goose bumps disappear. Now I knew what I was hearing, what I was listening to. No human – no living person – was responsible for the otherworldly song.

If I ran over to the music room, would I see Barbara Alice there, seated at the piano? Would she continue to play her joyous tune, acknowledging my presence?

My curiosity did not get the better of me. I was afraid she would only think I was James, and I was too emotionally drained already to confront her with the truth. I stayed where I was, letting her play undisturbed.

The song went on for another two minutes before I heard the soft, sweet sound of the final note. It died an achingly slow death, swallowed whole by the vast stillness of the Manor.

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The gods had granted me another reprieve that morning: Pamela had not shown up during, or after, Barbara Alice's little recital.

At the time, I hadn't worried about her waking up. It would have been a relief, in a way, if she had come downstairs to investigate. I could have told her the truth and gotten it over with.

I yawned.

Pam pulled our thermos out of the picnic basket and unscrewed the silver cap. Steam poured out of the heavy container, filling the car with the irresistible aroma of coffee.

"Want some more?"

"Mmm, thanks." I held out my insulated mug and she filled it carefully with the addictive brown liquid.

"How much farther?" she asked, pouring herself another cup.

"Fifteen minutes, tops."

We had just reached the city limits of Lexington. I was going home for the first time in ten years. Our first stop would be Cumberland Park, where we would eat our picnic lunch and then continue our tour. I was finally ready to show Pamela my old neighborhoods, and revive the memories of my youth.

As we neared our destination, my stomach began to feel like there were scores of frantic butterflies inside, all trying to escape. But when I saw my first familiar landmark, the moon bridge that arched over the Little Mill Creek, my nervous anxiety vanished completely.

West Cumberland High School was half a mile away.

My grandma once told me that teenage hearts had been broken from the ninth grade to the twelfth when my father, then a popular young math teacher, had

become engaged to Miss Thompson, the school's equally admired librarian. Nevertheless, at least half of the student body, along with every member of the school's faculty, had attended the ceremony and reception.

I told Pamela this story as we drove past Cumberland High. She loathed paperback romances, but true love stories never failed to capture her attention.

The park was only a block over from the school. I pulled into the gravel lot and was lucky enough to find a shaded parking space.

Pam made a beeline for the public restrooms, while I walked over to the picnic area. I picked a grassy spot close to the artificial lake, and spread out the multi-colored Navaho blanket we kept in the trunk of my car.

When Pamela joined me, we ate our lunch of cold chicken and potato salad, and watched the ducks glide back and forth on the placid water. There was a playground on the other side of the lake. The swing sets and monkey bars overflowed with laughing, carefree children.

I remembered going there with my mother when I was small. After I was born, she had quit her job to stay home and look after me. We had lived in a subdivision located between the school and the park, and every sunny afternoon my mother and I would walk to the playground.

Occasionally I would have to wait for a turn at the swings, and we would pass the time by feeding popcorn to the numerous ducks and geese. I would never forget Goliath, the black-headed goose who had chased me one day when my food supply ran out. Thanks to him, I had gotten over my fear of climbing the eight-foot slide.

I finished my soft drink. Pam cleared the food away, disposing of our used paper plates. Then we folded the blanket and locked it, and the picnic basket, into the trunk of the car.

"Are we ready?" she asked.

"Let's go."

Holding hands, we walked around the lake and entered the subdivision just north of the park.

We found Cherry Ridge Drive without any trouble. It was still part of a quiet neighborhood. Sycamores lined both sides of the street, their branches forming a picturesque canopy overhead.

All the homes were modest-looking brick ranches with fenced backyards. But right away I recognized the house my parents had owned: eleven fifty-three Cherry

Ridge. It was still decorated with the white wooden shutters and window boxes my mother had liked so much.

There was no one about, so we were free to stand and stare.

I let the memories wash over me: my fourth birthday party, our last Christmas, the big snowball fight Mom had started on Valentine's Day. Pam stood beside me, saying nothing, while I relived each special day.

Several minutes later I let go of her hand and strolled around the side of the house to look in the backyard.

My father had built a deluxe sandbox beside the patio when I was three. When I turned four, he began teaching me how to play catch with an oversized plastic ball. Unlike him, I was never a star player on anybody's team. I grew up hating sports.

An old woman came out of the house next door and began watering the flowers around her back porch. She kept giving me suspicious looks, as though she thought I meant to rob the place.

I turned around and smiled openly at her.

"I used to live here when I was a little boy. Just wanted to see if it had changed any."

She responded to my explanation with a nod and a faint smile before I walked away.

On the trek back, I bought three long-stemmed roses, as well as three carnations, from a street vendor near the park. One of the flowers, the red rose, was for Pamela. The rest I would take to the cemetery, our last stop on the tour.

We left Lexington and drove south for twenty miles before exiting the highway. I had to slow down considerably. The road we were traveling on was riddled with potholes, and had one hairpin turn after another.

We would pass my grandparents' farmhouse before we reached the graveyard – if the home was still there.

I had sold the dairy farm right after my grandfather Caleb's death. He had passed away when I was a sophomore at the University of Chicago. My grandmother, Virginia, had died two years before, barely a month after my high school graduation. She had wanted me to follow in my father's footsteps. So had my grandpa. They never found out about my dream of becoming a writer.

I let out a sigh of relief when the white farmhouse came into view. The two-story home's outward appearance had not changed since my last visit. And the bright red barn was still standing behind it.

The driveway was accessed by a dirt road that serviced a few other families in the area. I decided to use it in order to get a better look at the farm.

I drove by slowly.

The oak tree stood like a sentinel in the front yard, bigger and stronger than ever. Underneath it, a young boy and girl frolicked with a litter of squirming pups. A pretty brunette, whom I assumed was their mother, occupied the porch swing. The smiling lady watched the kids roll and tumble.

"Oh, look. Aren't they adorable?" Pam broke her silence.

"The kids or the puppies?"

"Both, of course."

She was right. The little group reminded me of a Norman Rockwell painting. It was a scene most pleasing to behold.

I drove to the end of the dirt road and turned around.

The Crescent Springs Cemetery was three miles past the farm. Our tour was almost over.

When we arrived, I realized we were probably going to end up getting lost. The graveyard covered a hundred acres, most of which I didn't remember. So we picked up a map at the caretaker's office and continued on our way.

My grandparents had buried my mother and father next to their own two plots. The four of them lay side by side on top of a small hill. To the east, a tiny chapel and reflecting pool added to the peaceful ambience.

I was happy to see that their graves had been well looked after. Many times I had thought about making the trip down to visit them. I had even gone as far as packing my bags, but at the last minute I would always change my mind. I was afraid I would end up feeling guilty and depressed.

Before we left, I laid two of the red carnations on the graves of my father and grandfather. The yellow rose I had picked out was for Grandma Ginny.

Now there were two flowers left.

I lifted the fragrant white rose to my face, letting its silky petals brush against my lips before placing it gently on my mother's grave.

Pamela waited at the bottom of the hill while I said my silent goodbyes. She linked arms with me when I was through and walked me back to the car.

"Aren't your mother's parents buried here?" she asked.

"No. They lived in Tennessee, but I can't remember the name of the town. They both died before I was born."

On the way out, we managed to locate my Uncle Paul, and I placed the remaining carnation on his grave. He had been my mother's only sibling, and twelve years her senior. I had no memories of him, but I had heard countless stories about his wild antics. He had died under mysterious circumstances, according to my grandma. But she would never tell me any more than that. Obviously, my mother had idolized him, and that was all I needed to know.

We headed home.

The journey had had a healing effect on me. I had faced the past and dealt with my memories. Now it was time to go forward.

There was a problem waiting at home that I needed to solve. Namely, Barbara Alice.

Her unrequited love for James could be the reason she was unable to let go. But was it the only one? To end her imprisonment I would have to find out.

I wanted to give her peace. I wanted us both to have comfort. And if the task proved impossible, at least I would know I had tried my best to set her free.

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Aside from Billy's obsession with psychedelic T-shirts, we could find no fault with him. He was doing an excellent job of caring for Samson and Delilah. And we had no complaints about his maintenance of the barn, either.

He was constantly on the lookout for the wild dog. So far the beast had not been back, and I felt sure we would never be bothered by it again. Not as long as there was a ghost on the premises.

On Wednesday afternoon, Billy saddled up the horses and Pam and I took them out for a brisk ride over to the lake.

It was a cloudless day, the warmest we had seen so far. We let Samson and Delilah gallop to their hearts content, even racing each other from the main road to the

barn and back. We circled the lake a few times, allowing the horses to quench their thirst along its low northern banks.

An hour passed, and we were ready to head back to the stables. Instead of riding around the eastern half of the lake, we decided to return via the driveway.

We let the tired horses move at a slow and easy pace.

It was when we approached the wooden bridge that the trouble started.

First, the horses became jittery, and the closer we got to the channel the more nervous they became. They finally stopped walking and refused to go any farther.

Pamela was baffled.

And I had a powerful feeling that things were about to get worse.

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