

CHAPTER TWELVE

Of

Barbara Alice

An earthshaking clap of thunder brought me back to the present. Rain now fell in sheets against the windows. Groaning, I sat up on the sofa and put my head in my hands.

"You okay, man?" Victor was sitting on the edge of his seat, his expression a mixture of excitement and concern.

"I will be, as soon as this colossal headache goes away." I watched him flip backwards through the pages of the little notebook. "I hope you took good notes, because I'm *not* going through that again."

"I wrote down every incredible detail that came out of your mouth." He leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette.

"I don't understand why I couldn't remember it all before."

"Stress - mental *and* physical. Your mind and your body went on one hell of a trip together."

"Why? How?"

"If I knew the answer to those questions I'd be King of the Universe. The experience you had would be too much for anyone to handle, let alone understand."

He started to say something else, but stopped himself.

I stared at him. "I'm probably going to regret asking this, but what's on your mind right now?"

He smiled. "I was thinking of another possibility we haven't considered yet. You look like James, and Barbara Alice thinks that's exactly who you are. So what if the resemblance isn't a coincidence?"

"Meaning?"

"Maybe you really are James Davenport. Or were, in a previous life."

"Reincarnation?" I gave him a hard look. "Don't even start with that. I've had no memories, no dreams, no déjà-vu experiences. And even if I had, I still wouldn't buy it."

"Somehow I suspected you'd feel that way."

The phone started to ring just as another thunderbolt shook the house.

Victor laid the notebook on an end table.

"Relax. I'll grab it." He cupped a hand underneath his burning cigarette and rose carefully. "I need to find an ashtray anyhow."

"Your tin cup is in the kitchen sink."

"Gotcha."

I reached over and turned off the frosted lamp. When Victor returned, I was stretched out on the sofa once again.

"Your beloved is in the middle of an ice storm. Her flight's been cancelled 'til tomorrow."

"How much did you tell her?"

"I told her you had a migraine. And then I told her the tale of woe that brought me here."

"Was she sympathetic?"

"The news seemed to cheer her up considerably."

I chuckled, despite my pain. "She probably thinks you deserve some heartbreak."

Victor sighed tragically. "If only she knew the real me." He picked up the notebook and reclaimed his chair, setting the tin cup at his feet.

We didn't say anything to each other for several minutes.

I put an arm over my eyes, hoping the darkness would ease my headache. The storm was almost over. The sound of the rain's gentle patter was lulling me to sleep.

"Alex, we should see if it's really there."

"Hmm?"

"The secret drawer. We should look for it."

"Of course."

"I'm talking soon. Tonight."

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It took two or three hard pulls to dislodge the drawer from its hiding place. It screeched a little as I pulled it slowly towards me.

Victor knelt on the floor to get a closer look at the contents.

I lifted a dusty black book out first and wiped it off on my jeans. It was bound in leather, and on the front cover, embossed in gold, were the initials "B.A.H."

I felt a little chill run up my spine.

"Looks like You-Know-Who kept a diary," Victor said.

I opened the book and gingerly leafed through it. Did it contain the answers I was looking for? Ink blots had caused a few of the pages to stick together. I pried them apart with my fingernail and then turned back to the first entry.

It had been written on New Year's Day, 1900. The last entry was dated the seventeenth of June, in the same year.

"Let's see what else is in here." Victor peered into the drawer for a few seconds and then lifted out several pieces of yellowed paper.

"Sheets of music, all handwritten." He blew the dust off the letter-sized pages and then handed them to me.

I put the journal on the floor and looked at each sheet. Neither one of us could read music, but it didn't matter. We knew Barbara Alice had written the song, and I knew it was the same music she had been playing on our piano at dawn.

I retrieved the diary and stood up.

Victor closed the empty drawer, and gave me a slap on the back as we walked out of the room.

"Everything happens for a reason, my friend," he said. "You were meant to find this stuff. Now maybe you can find out what that pretty little ghost of yours really wants."

"I'm not giving up until I do."

We parted company in the hallway. Victor went into the guest-room, and I carried the secret treasures over to the master bedroom.

It was late. I was physically tired and mentally drained.

But sleep was the farthest thing from my mind.

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Monday, 1 January 1900

A new century has begun. What does the future hold in store for us? I can't help but feel wonder and excitement when I think about the years to come. Soon, my life will change forever. The happiness I feel is almost overwhelming. I have never been able to put my emotions down on paper before, but with this new journal, a gift from my own dear sister, I plan to try. I will record the events in my life, in this very special year, and when I am old I will have them all to look back on. I will be able to relive each sad and happy moment, and remember how it all began.

Thursday, 4 January 1900

I am looking forward to this weekend with all my heart, but the glorious anticipation I feel is mixed with dread. Tomorrow night, all of us will be attending the annual Twelfthnight Ball at Mr. Conrad Houston's mansion in Louisville. It's an event no one ever wants to miss, if one is lucky enough to be invited. Mr. Houston's house is so unusual and romantic, almost like a castle, and his parties are always so magical and entertaining. Every year there are dozens of eligible bachelors and debutantes in attendance. Couples dance into the wee hours of the morning. How I wish I could dance the entire night away in the arms of my darling James. I don't want to share him with anyone. I don't want to dance with anyone else. I know I am being selfish, but to my eyes there is no one more dashing or handsome than he. He has to leave us on Saturday. He must return to West Point to finish his studies. I hope I can say goodbye without bursting into tears. His graduation in June is only five months away. But without him, those five months will feel like an eternity.

Saturday, 6 January 1900

I don't know which emotion to express first. It has rained all day. A cold January rain that makes one forget there is such a thing as spring. Sis seemed just as depressed as I was. We said goodbye to James today. I didn't cry until I was alone in my room. Papa hates such scenes. He can't abide a woman's tears. I have tried to cheer myself up with thoughts of the Twelfthnight Ball. It was a glorious night, just as I envisioned it would be. Mr. Houston's daughter, Stella, stayed at my brother's side through the entire evening. She has given Nathan reason, now, to pursue her with hope. He has been completely smitten with Stella ever since our Snowflake Ball over a year ago. It is easy to see why. She is blonde and statuesque, and while her regal looks and manner can intimidate other women, to the opposite sex she is most intriguing. One would think she was of royal blood. I am afraid Nathan's heart may be leading him astray, but it is already too late to sow seeds of doubt into his mind. Since her coming out ball Stella has had no end of suitors. She is sought after not only for her beauty, but for the vast fortune she will one day inherit. It worries me when I hear certain people talk about the numerous hearts she has cheerfully broken. I can only hope that my brother's heart will not be next. As for my own heart, it has been given to the most honorable and trustworthy soul on earth. I love James with every fiber of my being. And now the world knows. They know I am to be his wife. Papa made the announcement last night at the ball. We were besieged with well-wishers immediately afterwards, and Mr. Davenport proposed a toast in our honor. Along with my green velvet dress, I wore the emerald necklace, bracelet and earrings James had given me for our engagement. They had belonged to his grandmother. I was nervous about wearing the exquisite gems. What if they should be lost or stolen? His family would never forgive me. But luck was on my side. It was a perfect evening, the second happiest moment of my life. The first, of course, happened on Christmas Eve, when James proposed to me in the garden. At that moment, when he asked the question I had been longing to hear, my heart -- my entire body -- felt so light from joy that I thought I would float straight up to heaven on a cloud of sheer happiness. I know I will feel the same way when Papa walks me down the aisle.

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I sat straight up in bed and dropped the journal on my lap. I had been reading Bethany's diary, not Barbara Alice's. It had taken a few minutes for this fact to sink into my tired brain.

The musical composition belonged to Babe. I was certain of that. Had the twins shared the secret drawer? Or had Bethany discovered it after Babe's death? If so, why had she kept the diary and the music hidden?

The journal still might have some of the answers I was looking for, but I was too exhausted and confused to read any further. I had to get some rest.

I laid the diary on the nightstand and turned off the lamp. Despite all the questions that filled my aching mind, I fell asleep in a matter of minutes.

But it wasn't a restful sleep.

I dreamed I was four years old again and my parents were still alive. It was a sunny day. Dad was at work, and my mother and I were playing hide and seek at the park near our house. It was my turn to be "it." I closed my eyes and counted to ten. "Ready or not, here I come." I looked for her everywhere. Behind big trees, under tables and slides, inside the shelter house. I searched and searched, but I couldn't find her. She was gone. And I knew she was never coming back. Giving up, I lay down in the tall grass by the lake and cried myself to sleep. Darkness came, and as I slept, a woman knelt beside me. She stroked my forehead with a cool, soft hand, and hummed a soothing lullaby into my ear.

I'm here for you, darling. Don't cry. Everything will be all right.

She continued to stroke my brow, and I could feel each caress as if it were really happening. Who was this gentle woman? The darkness hid her face.

I woke up in a cold sweat, shivering. All the sheets had fallen onto the floor. And in the air, all around my bed, I smelled the sweet perfume of a hundred blooming roses.

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At breakfast the next morning I filled Victor in on my discovery about the diary's ownership.

"That's interesting." He mumbled the lie while staring at the phone. The omelet I had made for him lay untouched on his plate.

It wasn't because I was a bad cook. The previous morning, Victor's preoccupation with his love life, or lack thereof, had made it much easier for me to win our game of billiards. I had never seen this side of my friend before.

"Why don't you see if you can get in touch with her?"

"Huh?" He put his fork down and looked at me.

"I'm talking about Angie, Victor. Do you think she's gone to work yet?"

"No, she's at home. She doesn't have to be at the beauty parlor until eleven o'clock."

"Then go for it. Give it another try."

"Yeah, okay. What have I got to lose?"

Victor got up from the table and called Angie. Her line was busy at first, but he kept trying until he got through.

While he was on the phone, I scraped off the breakfast dishes and loaded the dishwasher, trying not to eavesdrop on their conversation.

Soon my thoughts were on other matters. Bethany's journal, Barbara Alice's secrets. The answers were eluding me so far. I needed to talk to both the twins. And if the diary couldn't help me, then maybe having a séance would. I only hoped Pamela would be willing to go along with the idea.

"Alex, talk to Angie, will ya?" Victor held the receiver out to me. "Tell her where I was last night. I'll explain why later."

I made it a practice never to interfere in other people's love affairs, especially when the people involved were close friends. But after seeing the look of hope on Victor's face, I couldn't bring myself to refuse his request. I was the one who suggested he make the call in the first place.

I crossed the kitchen and took the receiver out of his hand.

"Hi, Angie. Look, um, Victor's been here at Rosewood Manor since Monday afternoon."

"Alex, is that really true?" Angie was crying.

"Do you think I'd lie for this caveman? Pamela would kill me." I heard strained laughter on the other end of the line. "I swear it's the truth."

"Thanks, Alex. You're a good friend." She let out a shaky sigh. "Can I talk to the caveman again?"

Victor's look of gratitude made my efforts worthwhile. And all I had to do this time was tell the truth.

He hung up the phone a few minutes later and let out a wild whoop of joy.

"She believes me, man. Everything's cool now."

"I don't get it."

"It's very sweet and simple." He leaned against the marble countertop and lit a cigarette. "Angie called my office this morning and that little so-and-so who answered the phone told her we spent the night together. Thank God I made the trip down here. Now Angie knows the screwy kid's a liar."

"A happy ending after all."

"Chicago here I come. Can you give me a lift to the airport?"

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Victor was with me a short time later when I met Pamela's flight. The first few minutes of our reunion were spent ignoring him. She dropped her overnight bag on the floor, barely missing his foot, and threw herself into my waiting arms.

We rained kisses on each other for a short eternity, and then she asked the inevitable question.

"Did you miss me?"

"I was a mess." This was true in more ways than one.

"Ah, witnessing such tender love scenes never fails to warm the cockles of my heart," Victor crooned.

"Why are you in such a good mood?" Pam asked, sending him a frosty look. "I thought you got dumped."

"Unfortunately. But I've since managed to redeem myself in the eyes of my lover, and I'm going home. Thanks, in part, to your loyal fiancé here. He's the best friend a guy could ever have."

I winced. "Cut it out. I don't like to blush in public."

"You didn't lie for him, did you?" Pam picked up her bag and offered it to me.

"Didn't have to. Not that I would ever do such a thing."

"Uh-huh." She took my free hand and the three of us headed off to find Victor's gate.

Just before he boarded his plane, Victor turned to me with a serious look on his face and said, "If you decide to go ahead with the séance, I just want you to remember one thing."

Pamela's gaze shifted from Victor's face to mine. "What séance?"

I looked away.

Victor ignored the question as well, and placed his hand on my shoulder. "Some people are good liars, man, even after they're dead."

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