

Bestselling author of *The Keeper of Happy Endings*  
and *The Last of the Moon Girls*

BARBARA DAVIS

the

ECHO

of

OLD

BOOKS

A NOVEL



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## PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF BARBARA DAVIS

“This intriguing novel is magically woven together with sorrow, surprises, and happiness, just like the wedding gowns of ‘The Dress Witch.’”

—Historical Novel Society

“Historically sound with a thread of supernatural intrigue, this exploration of shared experiences, learned adaptations, and the power of trust is a book that fans of Catherine Ryan Hyde, Erica Bauermeister, and Lucinda Riley will fall in love with.”

—Booklist

“Fans of Tana French, Alena Dillon, and Hannah Mary McKinnon will adore Davis’s multilayered tale of intrigue, romance, and long-held biases set straight.”

—Booklist

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—Historical Novel Society

“A beautifully layered story.”

—Karen White, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Flight Patterns*

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## OTHER BOOKS BY BARBARA DAVIS

*The Keeper of Happy Endings*

*The Last of the Moon Girls*

*When Never Comes*

*Love, Alice*

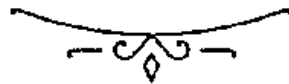
*Summer at Hideaway Key*

*The Wishing Tide*

*The Secrets She Carried*

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A NOVEL



BARBARA DAVIS

LAKE UNION  
PUBLISHING

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First edition



*This book is dedicated to the librarians and the booksellers*

...

*Custodians of imagination, feeders of hungry hearts,  
matchmakers of the written word.*

*Where would we be without your labors of love?*

# CONTENTS

[START READING](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[ONE ASHLYN](#)

[TWO ASHLYN](#)

[Regretting Belle \(pgs. 1–13\)](#)

[THREE ASHLYN](#)

[Regretting Belle \(pgs. 14–29\)](#)

[FOUR ASHLYN](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 1–6\)](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 7–10\)](#)

[FIVE ASHLYN](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 11–28\)](#)

[Regretting Belle \(pgs. 30–39\)](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 29–36\)](#)

[SIX ASHLYN](#)

[Regretting Belle \(pgs. 40–47\)](#)

[Regretting Belle \(pgs. 48–54\)](#)

[SEVEN ASHLYN](#)

[EIGHT ASHLYN](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 37–44\)](#)

[Regretting Belle \(pgs. 55–65\)](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 45–49\)](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 50–56\)](#)

[NINE ASHLYN](#)

[TEN ASHLYN](#)

[Regretting Belle \(pgs. 66–72\)](#)

[Regretting Belle \(pgs. 73–86\)](#)

[ELEVEN ASHLYN](#)

[TWELVE ASHLYN](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 57–69\)](#)

[Regretting Belle \(pgs. 87–92\)](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 70–76\)](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 77–80\)](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 81–83\)](#)

[Regretting Belle \(pgs. 93–95\)](#)

[THIRTEEN ASHLYN](#)

[FOURTEEN ASHLYN](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 84–85\)](#)

[Forever, and Other Lies \(pgs. 86–99\)](#)

[FIFTEEN ASHLYN](#)

[SIXTEEN ASHLYN](#)

[SEVENTEEN ASHLYN](#)

[EIGHTEEN ASHLYN](#)

[NINETEEN ASHLYN](#)

[TWENTY MARIAN](#)

[TWENTY-ONE MARIAN](#)

[TWENTY-TWO MARIAN](#)

[TWENTY-THREE MARIAN](#)

[EPILOGUE ASHLYN](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[DISCUSSION QUESTIONS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

*Seated in my library at night, and looking on the silent faces of my books, I am occasionally visited by a strange sense of the supernatural.*

*—Alexander Smith*

## PROLOGUE

*July 21, 1954*

*Marblehead, Massachusetts*

It arrives on a bright summer day.

A large manila envelope with the word PRIORITY stamped in two places across the front in red ink. I stare at it, lying atop the scarred leather blotter along with the rest of the day's mail. The writing on the front is familiar, as is the name of the sender.

I drop into my chair, breathe in, let it out. Even now, with so many years gone, the memories are tricky. Like the ache of a phantom limb, the source of the pain may be gone, but the reminder of what's been lost, so sudden and so keen, takes me unaware. I sit with that pain a moment, waiting for it to fade.

Afternoon sun spills through the blinds of my study, painting slats of buttery light on the carpet and walls, shelves lined with books and awards, bits of this and that collected over the years. My sanctuary. But today, it seems my past has found me.

I open the envelope and spill the contents onto the desktop. A rectangular parcel in plain brown paper and a small envelope with a note paper-clipped to the outside.

*Forwarding to you, per the enclosed letter.*

There's no mistaking Dickey's careful hand.

My nephew.

We rarely speak these days—the years have made conversation awkward—though we still send cards at the holidays and on birthdays. What would he be sending me?

I tease the single sheet of stationery from its envelope, laying it open on the blotter. Not Dickey's handwriting here but another's. Also familiar. Sharp, angular letters, heavily slanted. Letters penned by a ghost.



Dickey,

After all that has passed between myself and your family, you will no doubt think me bold in contacting you. I am keenly aware of the fallout resulting from my connection with your family and am reluctant to put you in the middle once again, only I find there are matters that, after so many years, require clarification. And so I must beg one last favor. I ask that you forward the enclosed package to your aunt, whose whereabouts I have lost track of over the years. I assume the two of you are still in contact, as you were always her favorite, and I recall her entrusting you, on one particular occasion, with a communication of some delicacy. It is this memory that emboldens me to enlist your help now. It is my wish that the package be sent on undisturbed, as the contents are of a private nature, meant for your aunt's eyes only.

With deepest regards and gratitude,

—H

The room feels small suddenly, airless and close, as I eye the neatly wrapped package. Thirteen years without a word and now, out of nowhere, a clandestine parcel sent via our old go-between. Why now? Why at *all*?

My hands are clammy as I tear the coarse brown paper. An embossed leather spine appears. A marbled blue cover. A book. The title, lettered in gold, hits me like a fist.

*Regretting Belle.*

I swallow the ache in my throat, the jagged sensation so fresh it steals my breath. I've been numb for so long, so careful not to remember, that I've forgotten what it feels like to be sliced open, to bleed. I brace myself as I flip back the cover, then press a hand to my mouth, gulping down a sob. Of course there's an inscription. You never could pass up the chance to have the last word. What I haven't prepared for is your voice filling my head as I read the words you've scribbled on the title page—a dart aimed squarely at my conscience.

*How, Belle? After everything . . . how could you do it?*

# ONE

## ASHLYN

*There is nothing quite so alive as a book that has been well loved.*

—Ashlyn Greer, *The Care & Feeding of Old Books*

***September 23, 1984***  
***Portsmouth, New Hampshire***

As was often the case on Sunday afternoons, Ashlyn Greer was on the hunt. This time in the messy back room of a vintage boutique situated two blocks from An Unlikely Story, the rare bookstore she'd owned and operated for nearly four years.

She'd received a call yesterday from Kevin Petri, the boutique's owner, alerting her that a guy from Rye had brought in several cartons of books and he didn't have room to stock them. Did she want to come take a look?

It wasn't the first time she'd spent her lone day off digging through boxes for lost treasure. More often than not, she came away empty-handed—but not always. Once she'd scored a first printing of *All Creatures Great and Small*, unread as far as she could tell. Another time she had rescued a first-edition *Lost Horizon* from a carton of old cookbooks. It had been badly neglected, but after an extensive rehab, she netted a tidy profit. Such finds didn't happen often—in fact, they almost never did—but on the rare occasions when they did, the thrill made all the digging worth it.

Unfortunately, today's boxes weren't looking particularly promising. Most of the books were hardbacks, recent bestsellers by Danielle Steel, Diane Chamberlain, and the much-lauded king of “ugly cry” novels, Hugh Garret. Esteemed authors, to be sure, but hardly rare. The second carton offered a more eclectic mix, including several health and nutrition books, one guaranteeing a flat tummy in thirty days, another touting the benefits

of a macrobiotic diet.

She worked quickly, careful not to hold on to any of the books for too long, but it was hard not to pick up subtle vibrations as she returned them to the carton. They had belonged to someone who was sick and afraid, someone worried about running out of time. A woman, she was almost certain.

It was a *thing* she had, a gift, like perfect pitch or a perfumer's nose. The ability to *read* the echoes that attached themselves to certain inanimate objects—books, to be precise. She had no idea how it worked. She only knew it had started when she was twelve.

Her parents had been having one of their knock-down-drag-outs and she'd slipped out the back door and hopped on her bike, pedaling furiously until she reached the cramped little bookshop on Market Street. Her safe place, as she'd come to think of it—and still thought of it.

Frank Atwater, the store's owner, had greeted her with one of his taciturn nods. He knew what it was like for her at home—everyone in town knew—but he never once broached the subject, opting instead to offer a refuge when things between her parents became unbearable. It was a kindness she'd never forgotten.

On that fateful day, she had made a beeline for her favorite corner, where the children's books were stocked. She knew every title and author by heart, as well as the precise order in which they were shelved. She'd read them all at least once. But that day, three new books had appeared. She ran her fingers along the unfamiliar spines. *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, *The Mystery of the Ivory Charm*, and *The Water-Babies*. She pulled *The Water-Babies* from the shelf.

That's when it happened. A zingy little shock running along her arms and into her chest. And so much sadness, she suddenly couldn't breathe. She dropped the book. It landed at her feet, splayed open on the carpet like a felled bird.

Had she imagined it?

No. She'd *felt* it. Physically. A pain so real, so raw, that for an instant, tears had sprung to her eyes. But how?

Wary, she retrieved the book from the floor. This time, she let the feelings come. A throat scorched with tears. Shoulders racked with loss. The kind that showed no mercy and had no bottom. Back then, she'd had no frame of reference for that kind of anguish, the kind that imprinted itself on the body, etched itself into the soul. She simply sat there, trying to make sense of it—whatever *it* was.

Eventually, the anguish ebbed, losing some of its sharpness. Either

she'd grown used to the sensation or the emotions had simply bled themselves out. She wasn't sure which. All these years later, she still wasn't sure. Could a book change its echoes, or were the emotions she registered of a more indelible nature, forever fixed in time?

The next day, she asked Frank where the new books had come from. He told her they'd been brought in by the sister of a woman whose son had been killed in a car crash. Finally, she understood. The suffocating sadness, the crushing sensation beneath her ribs, was grief. A mother's grief. But the *how* still eluded her. Was it really possible to register the emotions of another person simply by touching an object that had belonged to them?

Over the next few weeks, she attempted to re-create the sensation, plucking titles from the shelves at random, waiting expectantly for another peculiar jolt of emotion. Day after day, nothing came. Then one afternoon, she picked up a battered copy of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and a fierce surge of joy rippled through her fingers, like the rush of cool water, light and bubbly but startling in its intensity.

Then came a third book. A volume of poems by Ella Wheeler Wilcox called *The Kingdom of Love*. But the book's stale masculine energy felt strangely at odds with its romantic title, proof that a book's echoes had little to do with genre or subject matter. Rather, a book's energy seemed to be a reflection of its owner.

Eventually, she got up the nerve to tell Frank about the echoes. She was afraid he'd tell her she'd been reading too many fairy tales. Instead, he listened intently as she poured it all out, and then he surprised her with his response.

"Books are like people, Ashlyn. They absorb what's in the air around them. Smoke. Grease. Mold spores. Why *not* feelings? They're as real as all those other things. There's nothing more personal than a book, especially one that's become an important part of someone's life."

Her eyes had gone wide. "Books have feelings?"

"Books *are* feelings," he replied simply. "They *exist* to make us feel. To connect us to what's inside, sometimes to things we don't even know are there. It only makes sense that some of what we feel when we're reading would . . . rub off."

"Can you do it? Feel what's rubbed off, I mean?"

"No. But that doesn't mean others can't. I doubt very much that you're the first. Or that you'll be the last."

"So I shouldn't be scared when it happens?"

"I don't think so, no." He scrubbed at his chin a moment. "What

you're describing is a kind of gift. And gifts are meant to be used. Otherwise, why have 'em? If I were you, I'd figure out how to get better at it, practice at it, so you know how it works. That way, you won't be scared when it happens."

And so she had practiced. She'd also done a bit of sleuthing. With Frank's help, she had discovered that there was an actual name for what she'd experienced. *Psychometry*. The term had been coined in 1842 by physician Joseph Rodes Buchanan, and in 1863 a geologist named Denton had published a book entitled *The Soul of Things*. In short, she was a kind of empath, but for books.

Frank had been right. Books *were* like people. Each carried its own unique energy, like a signature or fingerprint, and sometimes that energy rubbed off. Ashlyn scrubbed her palms along the thighs of her jeans now, trying to erase the sadness that had leached into her fingers from the box of discarded cookbooks. It was the downside of her so-called gift. Not all echoes were happy. Like humans, books experienced their share of heartache—and like humans, they remembered.

Over the years, she had learned to limit her exposure to books imbued with negative echoes and to shun certain books entirely. But on days like today, avoidance wasn't possible. All she could do was work quickly.

The final box contained more novels, all in great shape, but nothing she could use at the shop. Then, as she neared the bottom of the carton, she came across a paperback edition of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*.

It was nothing special. In fact, it was rather shabby, its pages yellowed almost to brown, its spine deeply creased. But its echo was impossible to ignore. Intrigued, she laid the book in her lap, pressing her palm against the cover. It was a game she played sometimes, trying to guess whether a book contained an inscription and, if so, what it might say.

She loved imagining how a particular volume had found its way into a reader's hands—and why. Why that book especially, and for what occasion? A birthday or graduation? A promotion?

She'd read a lot of inscriptions over the years, some sweet, some funny, some so poignant they'd brought tears to her eyes. There was something deliciously intimate about opening a book and finding those few scribbled lines on the flyleaf, like being given a glimpse into its emotional life, which had nothing to do with its author and everything to do with its reader.

Without a reader, a book was a blank slate, an object with no breath



or pulse of its own. But once a book became part of someone's world, it came to life, with a past and a present—and, if properly cared for, a future. That life force remained with a book always, an energetic signature that matched its owner's.

Some books carried mingled signatures and were harder to read, usually in the case of multiple owners. That was the vibe she was getting from the copy of *The Remains of the Day*. Lots of layers. Very intense. The kind of book that almost always had an inscription. And as she flipped back the cover, she saw that this one did.

*Dearest,  
Honor isn't about blood or a name.  
It's about being brave and standing up for what's  
right. You, my love, have always chosen honorably.  
Of that, you may always be proud,  
just as I am proud of the man I married.  
—Catherine*

It felt like a reassurance of some kind, words of comfort offered to a troubled heart, but the energy the book gave off, a dank, weighty sensation that felt like doubt, along with threads of guilt and regret, hinted that *Dearest*—whoever he was—had been less than convinced.

Ashlyn closed the book, placing it firmly on the *no* pile, then reached for the final book in the carton. Her belly did a little flip as she lifted it out, the kind that meant she may finally have discovered something worthwhile. It was a small volume but quite beautiful. Three-quarter Moroccan leather, ribbed spine, marbled blue boards—and, unless she missed her guess, hand-bound.

She held her breath as she examined it. Little to no shelf wear. Binding tight and square. Text block yellowed but otherwise solid. She peered at the embossed gold lettering on the spine. *Regretting Belle*. Not a title she was familiar with. She frowned as she continued to study the book. There was no sign of an author's name. No publisher's name either. Odd, but not unheard of. But something was *off*.

The book was strangely quiet. Silent, in fact. The way a new book felt before an owner's echo rubbed off. An unwanted gift, perhaps, that had gone unread? The thought made her sad. Books given as gifts should *always* be read. She turned back the cover, hunting for the copyright page. There wasn't one. There was, however, an inscription.

*How, Belle? After everything . . . how could you do it?*

Ashlyn stared at the single line. The script was jagged, the shard-like words intended to cut, to wound. But there was sadness, too, in the spaces between, woven through the ellipses, the desolation of a question unanswered. The inscription was neither signed nor dated, implying that the recipient would have required neither. An intimate acquaintance, then. A lover perhaps, or spouse. *Belle*. The name leapt off the page. Might the book's recipient have also been its namesake? The giver its author?

Intrigued, she began flipping pages, on the lookout for an author's name, a publisher's imprint. But there was nothing. No trace of how this strange and beautiful book had come into the world.

The absence of a copyright page suggested the book might be in the public domain, meaning it would have to have been written before 1923. If so, it was in amazing condition. But there was another possibility, one that seemed more likely. The book may have been rebound at some point and the binder had been unable to include the original copyright page.

Some of the pages may have been damaged or lost. It certainly happened. She'd been tasked with rebinding books that came into the shop in grocery bags, loose pages held together with twine or rubber bands, warped boards left to mold in damp basements, attic finds whose pages were so dry they crumbled when touched. But never had she come across a book missing *all* traces of its origins.

People rehabbed old books for all sorts of reasons, but those reasons almost always fell into one of two categories: sentiment or collector value. In either case, preserving the author's name would be critical. Why would someone go to the trouble and expense of having the book rebound and then omit such important details? Unless the omission had been intentional. But why?

Lured by the promise of a literary mystery, Ashlyn laid the book open. She had just turned to the first chapter when a jolt of what felt like current surged through her fingers. Startled, she jerked her hand back. What had just happened? A moment ago, the book had been silent—pulseless—until she opened it and roused whatever lay within, like the flashover that occurs when a door is suddenly thrown open and a small fire erupts into a fully involved blaze. This was a new experience, and one she definitely intended to explore.

Breath held, she placed the flats of both hands against the open pages, bracing for what she now knew was coming. Every book presented differently. Most registered as a subtle physical sensation. A humming in her jaw, a sudden flutter in her belly. Other times, the echoes were more intense. A ringing in her ears or a stinging sensation in her cheeks, as if