



THE  
LAST  
OF THE  
MOON  
GIRLS

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**BARBARA DAVIS**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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*For the women . . .  
Healers of hearts,  
Workers of light,  
Makers of magick.*

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*Love works magic.  
It is the final purpose  
Of the world story,  
The Amen of the universe.*

—*Novalis*

# PROLOGUE

*A body that's been submerged in water undergoes a different kind of decomposition: harsher in some ways, kinder in others—or so I've been told. We Moons wouldn't know about that. We choose fire when our time comes, and scatter our ashes on land that has been in our family for more than two centuries. Mine are there now too, mingled with the dust of my ancestors.*

*Can it really be only weeks that I've been gone? Weeks hovering between worlds, unable to stay, unwilling to go, tethered by regret and unfinished business. The separation feels longer, somehow. But it is not my death I dwell on today but the deaths of two young girls—Darcy and Heather Gilman—more than eight years ago now. They'd been missing nearly three weeks when their bodies were finally pulled from the water. It was a ghastly thing to watch, but watch I did. They were dragging my pond, you see, convinced they would find what they were looking for. And why not, when the whole town was looking in my direction? Because of who I was—and what I was. Or at least what they imagined me to be.*

*Memory, it seems, does not die along with the body. It's been years since that terrible day at the pond, and yet I remember every detail, replaying them again and again, an endless, merciless loop. The police chief in his waders, his men with their boat. The ME's van looming nearby, its back doors yawning wide in anticipation of new cargo. The bone-white face of a mother waiting to learn the fate of her girls. Whispers hissing through the crowd like electric current. And then, the telling shrill of a whistle.*

*A hush settles over us, the kind that carries a weight of its own—the weight of the dead. No one moves as the first body appears, the glimpse of an arm in a muddy brown coat, water pouring from the sleeve as the sodden*

*form is dragged up onto the bank. A bloated, blackened face, partly obscured by hanks of sopping dark hair.*

*They're careful with her, handling her with a tenderness that's gruesome somehow, and agonizing to watch. They're preserving the evidence, I realize, and a cold lick goes down my spine. So they can make their case. Against me.*

*A short time later a second body appears, and there comes a broken wail, a mother's heart breaking for her darlings.*

*And that's how it all unraveled, the awful day that set up all the rest. The end of the farm. And, perhaps, the end of the Moons.*

# ONE

*July 16*

Althea Moon was dead.

That was the gist of the letter. Dead in her bed on a Sunday morning. Dead of a long and wasting illness. Dead and already cremated, her ashes scattered at the rise of the full moon, as laid out in her will.

The room blurred as Lizzy scanned the letter through a film of tears, the terse lines smearing on the page. *With your mother's whereabouts currently unknown, you have been deeded sole possession of Moon Girl Farm. I am forwarding this parcel in accordance with your grandmother's final wishes.*

There was a signature at the bottom. *Evangeline Broussard*. The name wasn't familiar, but it was clear that the woman—whoever she was—knew more about Althea's last days than she did. She hadn't even known her grandmother was sick.

Lizzy swallowed past the bite of tears, the mingled tastes of guilt and grief salty on her tongue as she reached for the parcel that had accompanied the letter. It was wrapped in brown paper, and somewhat worse for wear. She stared at the words stamped across the package in red ink: RETURN TO SENDER . Apparently it had been mailed to her old apartment, returned by the new tenants, and then re-sent to her office.

She'd meant to send Althea one of those change of address cards, but like so much of late, it had fallen through the cracks. She held her breath as she tore away the wrapping, then exhaled sharply when she caught a glimpse of heavily tooled black leather. She knew the book well. It was the



journal Althea had given her on her sixteenth birthday—the journal *all* Moon girls received on their sixteenth birthday.

Her fingers quivered as she ran them over the cover, the ribbed spine, the pages with their coarse deckle edges, knowing the feel of them by heart. There were eight more just like it back in Salem Creek, locked away in a bookcase in her grandmother's reading room, each named for the author who had penned it. *The Book of Sabine* . *The Book of Dorothee* . *The Book of Aurore* . On down through the generations. Presumably, the ninth—*The Book of Althea* —had now taken its place among them.

They were a tradition in the Moon family, a rite of passage as each member committed to the Path. Painstakingly penned volumes of remedies and recipes, sacred blessings and scraps of womanly wisdom, carefully preserved for future generations. And here was hers, turned up again like the proverbial bad penny, as blank as the day she'd received it.

She opened it gingerly, staring at the inscription. *To Elzibeth—It's Time to write your story.*

Not Elizabeth. *Elzibeth*. She couldn't even have a normal name.

At sixteen, she'd wanted no part of the tradition—or any other part of her family's strange legacy. She'd wanted to be normal, like *other* people. And so she'd put the journal in a drawer and ignored it.

Holding it now, after so many years, felt like an indictment, a reminder that in spurning this sacred family custom, she had turned her back on everything her grandmother had lived, taught, and believed. She could have pretended for Althea's sake, gone along with what was expected of her and filled the journal with silly scribblings. Even normal girls kept diaries—pink things with hearts on the cover and flimsy brass locks to keep snoopers at bay. But she'd been too stubborn to go along, determined to break with the Moon tradition and map her own future. She'd done it too, if the shiny new plaque on her office door was any indication—from freshman at Dickerson to intern at Worldwide to creative director of Chenier Fragrances, Ltd., all in the space of eight years.

But six months after her coveted promotion, she was still trying to wrap her arms around the new position and the recent flurry of changes in her life. There hadn't been time to tell Althea—at least that's what she'd been telling herself. The truth was their communication had grown increasingly spotty over the years. Not out of laziness, but out of guilt. It felt wrong to crow about her success when her grandmother had been

forced to watch her own life's work—her beloved farm—wither and die. Instead, she'd convinced herself the checks she sent from time to time would atone for an eight-year absence, for letters that went unanswered and phone calls that came only rarely. They didn't, of course. Nothing could. And now it was too late to tell Althea anything.

She tried to digest it—a world without Althea Moon—but couldn't manage it somehow. How could such a woman, so rich in wisdom, life, and love, who seemed to have sprung from the very soil she loved and tended, ever be gone?

She'd never mentioned being sick. Not once in all her long, newsy letters. Yet Evangeline Broussard's letter had mentioned a prolonged illness. Why would Althea have kept such a thing from her?

“Ah, you're here—finally.”

Lizzy blinked back a fresh sting of tears, dismayed to find Luc Chenier hovering in her office doorway. He'd just had a haircut, and looked even more devastating than usual in his ubertailored black Brioni. He knew it too, which used to annoy her when they were seeing each other, but didn't anymore.

She sniffed away the remnants of her tears. The last thing she needed was to be caught crying at her desk by the man who'd just green-lighted her promotion—or to be peppered with uncomfortable questions, which she would be if he thought for a minute that she was holding something back. She glanced up at him, hoping to appear unruffled as she swept the journal into her lap and out of sight.

“Did you need something?”

He turned on the smile, recently whitened by the look of it. “I came looking for you at lunchtime, but they said you had a meeting.”

“I was with marketing, trying to nail down the concepts for the new print campaign. We're not quite there yet, but we should have—”

Luc cut her off with the wave of a hand. “Come out with me after work. I was going to take you to lunch, but dinner's better, don't you think?”

No, she didn't think, though it didn't surprise her that he did. He was used to getting his way. And why wouldn't he be? The man positively oozed charm. It didn't hurt that he looked like Johnny Depp without the eyeliner, or that he'd retained a hint of his mother's French accent. But those things had quickly lost their appeal.

They'd done their best to keep things quiet. No office flirtations or public displays of affection. No lunches that didn't include a spreadsheet or a PowerPoint handout. But the night her promotion was announced they'd gone to Daniel to celebrate, and run smack into Reynold Ackerman, an attorney from legal, who happened to be there with his wife, celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary. That was when she knew she had a choice to make—end things or become the office cliché.

She'd ended it the next day. Luc had taken it well enough, perhaps because they'd established ground rules early on. When the time came, either party could walk away. No tears. No recriminations. But lately, he'd been signaling that maybe they should pick up where they'd left off. A nonstarter, as far as she was concerned.

"So tonight, then?" he prompted from the doorway. "We can do Italian."

"I can't. I'm sorry."

"I'll book us a table at Scarpetta. The cannoli alone—"

"My grandmother died," she blurted. "I just got the letter."

Luc had the good grace to drop the smile. He stepped into the office and closed the door behind him. "I'm sorry. I didn't know she was sick."

"Neither did I." The words stung more than Lizzy expected, and she found herself having to look away. Crying on each other's shoulders hadn't been part of their arrangement, and she wasn't about to start now. "Apparently, she'd been keeping it from me."

"I don't remember you talking about her much. Or any of your family, for that matter. Were you close?"

"We were," she said evenly. "She basically raised me."

"Tough break."

Lizzy stared up at him from her desk chair. *Tough break? That's what you say to someone when a person they love dies?* And yet she shouldn't be surprised. She'd seen him deal with death before.

They'd been seeing each other on the quiet for several months when Luc's mother, and Lizzy's mentor in the world of fragrance, finally lost her battle with cervical cancer. Lizzy had watched him at the funeral, shaking hands and accepting condolences, playing the dutiful son. But as the afternoon wore on, she couldn't help thinking that that was precisely what he was doing—playing a role. Initially, she had attributed the lack of grief to the lingering nature of his mother's illness. He'd had time to prepare, to

make his peace and say goodbye. Now she wondered if she'd given him too much credit.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said finally, reaching across the desk to lay a hand over hers. "You'll want to go home, of course, for the funeral."

Lizzy slid her hand free, tucking it in her lap and out of reach. "There isn't going to be a funeral. They've already scattered her ashes."

Luc's brows shot up. "What—without you?"

Lizzy nodded, unwilling to say more. When it came to family, she preferred to keep the details to a minimum. If you wanted to be taken seriously—and she did—there were places you just didn't go.

"We don't make a fuss in my family," she said, blinking back a rush of tears. *Unless you consider having your ashes scattered in a lavender field on the first full moon after your death making a fuss.* "Besides, it was my fault. I forgot to send a change of address when I moved, so there was a mix-up with the letter. She died two months ago. When I didn't respond, the funeral home must have gone ahead and taken care of her ashes."

Luc nodded, as if it all made perfect sense, then frowned suddenly. "Still a bit odd, though, right? Moving ahead without you?"

Lizzy avoided his gaze. "It's sort of a family tradition. There's . . . timing involved. Anyway, it's done."

"Just as well, if you ask me. I've never been big on funerals. All that grief in one place." He paused, feigning a shudder. "It's a wasted emotion when you get right down to it. The person who died has no idea you're grieving, because, well, they're dead. And everyone else is just standing around mumbling platitudes and eating deviled eggs. And then there's family, which is a whole other can of worms. Always messy—or as my mother liked to say . . . *compliqué*."

*Compliqué.*

Lizzy nodded. It was the perfect descriptor for the Moons. "Yes. We're quite . . . messy."

"How long since you've been back?"

"Never. I left eight years ago and never went back."

Luc whistled softly. "That's a long time, even by my standards. Your mother's gone?"

Lizzy knew what he was asking—was her mother *dead*? The truth was she had no idea. No one did. And that was almost the same thing. "Yes. She's gone. Everyone's gone."

Luc stepped around to her side of the desk, propping a hip on the corner. “My poor little orphan,” he said softly. “You’re not alone, you know. My mother loved you—so much that she made me promise to look after you. She said, *Luc, Lizzy is going to be brilliant one day, and I want you to take care of her.* It’s as if in leaving me this company, she left me you too.”

Lizzy resisted the temptation to roll her eyes. “You can’t leave a person in a will, Luc. And I’ve been on my own for a pretty long time.”

He stood, and moved to the window. “How long will you need? Three days? Four?”

She frowned. “For what?”

“I don’t know. Bereavement, I guess. Whatever you need to do. I’m guessing there’s financial stuff to handle, a house to sell.”

“It’s a farm, actually. An herb farm. But I don’t need to go back. I can handle everything from here.”

“Seriously?” He smiled, as if pleasantly surprised. “And here I was thinking you were the sentimental type.”

Lizzy shook her head, desperate to end the conversation before she said something that raised Luc’s carefully groomed brows again. “It’s just . . . a lot of stuff. Memories I’d rather not dredge up. Like you said, it’s . . . *compliqué*.”

His smile widened, straddling the line between arrogance and condescension. “My mother was the sentimental type. She used to say we all need to go home from time to time, to remind us where we came from. I think she was half-right. We do need to go home from time to time, but only to remind us why we left in the first place, so we can get clear on what we *do* want. Because in the long run, that’s all that matters—what we want from life and what we’re willing to do to get it. Maybe that’s what you need, Lizzy, to go spend some time with your memories. Things might look different when you do.”

*Time with her memories.*

Lizzy dropped her eyes to her lap, unwilling to meet his gaze. He had no idea what he was asking. Not that he should. How could anyone imagine the kind of memories they were really talking about?

“It’s fine, really. I’m fine. I can make it work long-distance.”

Luc eyed her skeptically. “Suit yourself, but you don’t sound fine. Maybe there’s something to be said for processing your loss, putting a period to things, as they say. I could go with you, make things easier.”

And there it was, the real motive behind his sudden concern. “We’ve been over for months, Luc.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then why make the suggestion?”

“Would you believe I was being noble?”

“No.”

Luc dropped the smile, apparently accepting defeat. “Still a crummy time to be alone. At least let me take you to dinner. I promise to stick to business, if that’s how you want it.”

“Thanks. But I think I just need to be by myself.”

Lizzy watched him go, pretty sure he was miffed. But he’d been right about one thing. She *did* need time to process, to digest the fact that she was suddenly alone in the world, and what that meant. Althea was dead, and her mother had apparently fallen off the face of the earth—either literally or figuratively. And there’d be no more Moons after Elzibeth—of that she was certain. For all intents and purposes, she had just become the last Moon girl.