



THE
KEEPER
OF
HAPPY
ENDINGS

BARBARA DAVIS

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE LAST OF THE MOON GIRLS*

PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF BARBARA DAVIS

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

—*Booklist*

“*The Last of the Moon Girls* is reminiscent of two of my all-time favorites, Sarah Addison Allen’s *Garden Spells* [and] Alice Hoffman’s *Practical Magic*, because it’s witchy, full of plant magic, and painfully human.”

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“Davis has a gift for developing flawed characters and their emotionally wrenching dilemmas . . . A very satisfying tale.”

—Historical Novel Society

“A beautifully layered story.”

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

**THE
KEEPER
OF
HAPPY
ENDINGS**

OTHER BOOKS BY BARBARA DAVIS

The Last of the Moon Girls

When Never Comes

Love, Alice

Summer at Hideaway Key

The Wishing Tide

The Secrets She Carried

**THE
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OF
HAPPY
ENDINGS**

BARBARA DAVIS

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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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*This book is dedicated to the millions of health-care workers around the
world
who have risked their own personal safety
to care for our loved ones in 2020 and beyond—heroes, each and every one.*

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There are all sorts of heroes, and almost none of them will ever have something shiny pinned to their chests.

—Soline Roussel, the Keeper of Happy Endings

We are the chosen, handmaids of La Mère Divine, descended from an ancient line, called upon to further the cause of love and true happiness. We are les tisseuses de sorts . . . the Spell Weavers.

—Esmée Roussel, the Dress Witch

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Though this story features historical events, this is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, events, dates, and incidents are products of my imagination or used fictitiously.

PROLOGUE

SOLINE

Faith is the essential ingredient. If one loses faith in la magie, one has lost everything.

—Esmée Roussel, the Dress Witch

13 September 1976—Boston

I have always grieved the ends of things. The final notes of a song as they ebb into silence. The curtain falling at the end of a play. The last snowflake. Goodbyes.

So many goodbyes.

They all seem so long ago now, and yet the collective rawness still chafes. I've had too much wine tonight, I think. It has made me morose. Or perhaps I've simply had too much life, too much sadness—too many scars. Still, I find myself drawn to those scars, a map of wounds that takes me neither forward nor back.

I've brought the box down from the closet again and laid it on the bed. It isn't heavy in the physical sense, but the memories inside carry a different kind of weight, the kind that sits heavily on the heart.

It's made of sturdy stuff, thick gray cardboard with metal fittings at the corners and a heavy cord threaded through as a handle. I hold my breath as I lift the lid and fold back layers of crumpled tissue to gaze at the dress within. It has aged over the years—like me. The packet of letters is there too—most in French, a few in English—tied with a length of ribbon. These I will read later, as I often do on nights like this, when the empty places in my life stretch like shadows all around me. There is an order to this ritual of mine, a sequence I never vary. When so much has been uprooted—so many things lost—one must seek comfort in rituals. Even the sad ones.

I lift out the dress and hold it in my arms, the way one holds a baby or a promise—close and perhaps a little too fiercely. I step to the mirror, and for an instant she looks back at me, the girl I was before Hitler came to Paris, full of hope and naive dreams. But an instant later, she's gone. In her place is the woman I've become. Worn and alone. Dreamless. My gaze slides back to the box, to the brown leather case lying at the bottom, and I feel my heart squeeze, remembering the first time I saw it. *For safekeeping*, he said as he pressed it into my hands on that last morning.

I unzip the case for the hundredth time, running my fingers over the tortoiseshell comb and matching shoehorn, the shaving brush and razor. Such personal things. And he'd given them to me. I remove the cut-glass flask from its band of brown elastic—long since empty—and unscrew the cap, yearning for a whiff of the bright, clean scent I've engraved on my memory. A blend of seawater and the peel of fresh limes.

Anson.

Only this time, for the first time, there is no hint of him. For thirty years I've been lifting this empty bottle to my nose, taking comfort in the only thing of him left to me—his scent. And now even that is gone.

I wait for tears, but none come. I suppose I'm beyond them now. Emptied. And perhaps it's just as well. I return the flask and zip the case closed. My eyes stray to the packet of letters, usually the final step in my sorry little ritual. I will not read them tonight. Or ever again, I think.

It's time to let go. Time to let it *all* go.

I return the shaving case to the box, then fold the dress and lay it inside, arranging the sleeves tenderly across the bodice—the way I've seen bodies laid out at funerals. Fitting, I suppose. I caress the fabric one last time, then fold the tissue over it all and lower the lid.

Adieu, Anson, mon amour. C'est la fin.

ONE

RORY

May 26, 1985—Boston

It couldn't be Sunday. Not already.

Rory smacked the snooze button and fell back onto her pillow, wishing the day away, but five minutes later the alarm shrilled again, which could mean only one thing. Somehow, another week had been swallowed whole, gone in a blur of takeout and old movies, interminable nights immersed in other people's happy endings.

A pulpy paperback thumped to the floor as she threw back the covers and put her feet on the floor. Kathleen Woodiwiss's *A Rose in Winter*, finished last night around 4:00 a.m. She stared at it, splayed open at her feet like a felled bird. She'd never been a fan of romance novels. Now she couldn't devour them fast enough, a guilty pleasure that made her vaguely ashamed, like gambling or a porn addiction.

She scooped up the novel and tossed it into a wicker basket filled with a dozen more just like it, waiting to be taken to Goodwill. There was another box by the front door and a third in her trunk. *Junk food for the brain*, her mother called them. But her eyes were already sliding to the stack of new titles on the nightstand. Tonight, Johanna Lindsey's latest awaited.

She poked through the jumble of unopened mail beside the bed, including the master's program course catalog she'd been doing her best to avoid, finally locating the steel-and-gold Rolex her mother had given her when she finished undergrad. As expected, it had stopped running, the date in the little magnifying bubble off by three days. She reset the time and slid

it onto her wrist, then set her sights on a mug of strong coffee. No way was she facing today without caffeine.

In the kitchen, she eyed her surroundings with a creeping sense of overwhelm; the sink full of dishes, the brimming trash can, the remnants of last night's takeout from Eastern Paradise still sitting on the counter. She'd meant to tidy up after dinner, but then *Random Harvest* came on and she hadn't been able to tear herself away until Greer Garson and Ronald Colman were finally reunited. By the time she stopped blubbering, she'd forgotten about the kitchen. And now there wasn't time if she was going to make it across town by eleven.

She toyed with calling to cancel as she splashed half-and-half into her mug—a sore throat or a migraine, a messy case of food poisoning—but she'd already bailed twice this month, which meant she had to do this.

In the shower, she rehearsed for the grilling she knew was coming: questions about her studies, her hobbies, her plans for the future. The questions never changed, and it was getting harder and harder to pretend she cared about any of it. The truth was, she had no hobbies to speak of, dreaded the idea of returning to school, and her plans for the future were in serious doubt. But she would put on a brave face and say the right things, because that's what was expected of her. And because the alternative—a deep dive into the black hole that had become her life—was simply too exhausting to contemplate.

She padded to the bedroom, toweling her hair as she went, doing her best to resist the familiar pull from her nightstand. It was a ritual she'd begun of late, starting each day with one or two of Hux's letters, but there wasn't time this morning. And yet she found herself opening the bottom drawer, lifting out the box she kept there. Forty-three envelopes addressed in his thin, sprawling script, a lifeline tethering her to him, keeping her from hitting bottom.

The first had arrived in her mailbox just five hours after his flight left Logan. He'd sent it overnight delivery, to make sure it arrived on the right day. He'd written another while sitting at the gate and one more while on the plane. They'd come nearly every day at first before leveling off to one or two a week. And then they'd simply stopped coming.

She glanced at the photo beside the bed, taken at a restaurant on the cape the weekend after he'd proposed. Dr. Matthew Edward Huxley—Hux to everyone who knew him. She missed his face, his laugh, his silly jokes

and off-key singing, his love of all things trivia and his perfect scrambled eggs.

They'd met at a charity event for Tufts' new neonatal intensive-care wing. His smile had made her go weak at the knees, but it was who he was underneath that smile that actually sealed the deal.

The child of two special needs teachers, he had learned the value of service early on and by example. But during his freshman year at UNC, a logging truck had jumped the median on I-40 and hit his parents' car head-on. He quit school after the funeral, rudderless and bitter, and spent a summer on the Outer Banks, playing beach bum with a pack of surfers and numbing himself with Captain Morgan.

Eventually, he'd pulled himself together, returning to UNC, then going on to medical school. His plan had been to specialize in internal medicine, but after one week of pediatric rounds, those plans had changed. When his residency was over, he had signed with Doctors Without Borders to provide care to children in South Sudan, as a way of honoring his parents' memory.

It was one of the things she loved most about him. His story was far from perfect; no trust fund or country-club upbringing for Matthew Huxley. He'd gone through some things—things that had rocked him to the core—but he'd found his footing and a way to give back. It was hard to see him off when the time came, but she was proud of the work he had committed to doing, even if his letters were difficult to read.

In one he'd admitted to taking up smoking. *Everyone here smokes like a fiend. Maybe to keep their hands from shaking. We're all so incredibly tired.* In another, he'd written about a journalist named Teresa who was there doing a story for the BBC and how she kept him connected to the outside world. He wrote about the work too, about endless days in makeshift surgeries, children maimed, orphaned, terrified. It was worse than he'd ever imagined, but it was making him a better doctor—tougher but more compassionate.

The pace was grueling, the emotional trauma more than he could adequately express on paper. *We're so spoiled in the US. We can't comprehend the sheer scope of lawlessness and barbarity, the gut-wrenching need that exists in other places. The lack of basic humanity. What we do, me, all of us, it's a drop in the bucket when you see what's happening here.*

That was the last one.

One week, two, a third passing with her own letters unanswered. And then one day she was listening to NPR and the reason became clear. The US was confirming that a band of armed rebels had abducted three workers in an early-morning raid in South Sudan, including an American physician, a nurse from New Zealand, and a British journalist on assignment for the BBC and *World* magazine.

It had taken several days to confirm what she already knew—that Hux was the captured American—but there were no leads. Nothing on the truck witnesses saw driving away. No description of the men who'd forced them out of the clinic at gunpoint. And not a word from anyone claiming responsibility, which typically happened in the first forty-eight hours. They had simply vanished.

Five months later, she was still waiting. According to the State Department, every resource was being brought to bear, every lead being followed, not that there'd been many. A late-night raid had been carried out on an abandoned shack in Libya eight weeks ago, after someone reported seeing a woman fitting the description of the missing journalist, but by the time they went in, the shack was empty, the occupants long gone.

The official line from the State Department was that they were *continuing to work with various humanitarian agencies to locate all personnel and secure their safe return*, but the truth was that information had dried up, meaning prospects for a positive outcome were growing more and more doubtful.

Rory stared at the box, longing to lift out one or two letters and crawl back into bed, but she had somewhere to be. Two somewheres, actually, if she counted her promise to meet Lisette this afternoon at Sugar Kisses.

Twenty minutes later, she grabbed her purse and keys, checking her reflection one last time. White slacks and a sleeveless button-down in pale peach silk. Damp hair scraped into a ponytail. A single coat of mascara, another of lip gloss, and simple diamond studs. Far from up to standard, but when it came to her mother, nothing ever was.