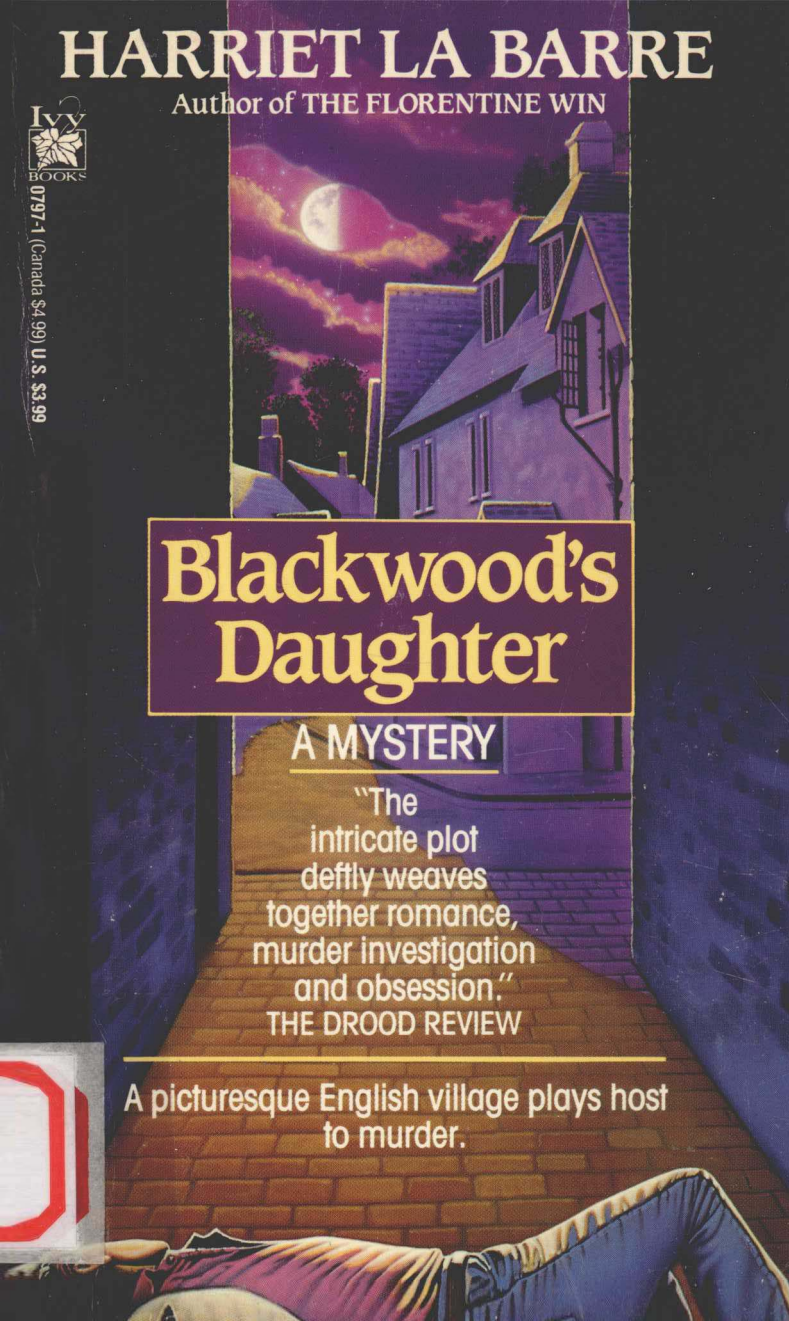


HARRIET LA BARRE

Author of THE FLORENTINE WIN



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It was no good, she was going . . . leaving in the morning, driving up beyond a village called East Upton. She sounded so happy, almost like someone in love.

Dully he put down the phone. *Don't go, Faron, don't go!* Like him, she had only glimpsed that man in the wheelchair across the ballroom. But the man's gesture, that familiar gesture!—the impatient jerk of his head, lifting a shoulder.

At the desk, Oliver put his head in his hands. A man's body lay buried in a graveyard on that Massachusetts coast near Duxbury. A body he had identified to the police as that of John Blackwood.

And now, *now!* Was he crazily imaginative? Or were the ghosts finally rising to mock him, a stirring in the ground, something breaking through . . . ?

Also by Harriet La Barre:

THE FLORENTINE WIN*
STRANGER IN VIENNA

**Published by Ivy Books*

To Abby and Holly, the best of the best

❖ 1 ❖

IN A SQUALID SOHO FLAT, A MILE ACROSS LONDON FROM Grosvenor House, the police finished up and departed.

The slashed body was in the morgue. The man's miserable personal effects already lay on a table at New Scotland Yard: a few pieces of shoddy clothing and some drawing materials—Conté crayon, charcoal, fixative, paper. There was a worn-looking wallet with the owner's expired driver's license and a tattered batch of cartoons, some of them well known, all signed with the same black scrawl.

"Holy holies!" a police sergeant exclaimed. "Remember him? That cartoonist! The American! Stamm! Mendelssohn Stamm. That's *him*, that got his throat cut!"

There was nothing else among the dead man's belongings except a news item torn from the *London Times*. It reported that Faron Blackwood, daughter of the late John Blackwood, the American novelist, was arriving in London to give her series of lectures on her father's novels, so long out of print, now so popular. She would be staying at Grosvenor House. Last week, in an interview with the *Times*, Oliver Cardiff, the American literary agent and lawyer who managed the John Blackwood estate, had stated that the five Blackwood novels were now earning record amounts, not including the income from the TV miniseries and the movies made from two of the novels.

The sergeant carefully put the news item in a blue folder.

It was Monday and two-thirty in the afternoon on a bright, sunny day in London. At Grosvenor House, across from Hyde

Park, the sun slanted through the tall windows of the drawing room of a suite that faced the park. It was a beautiful room, with soft chairs and sofas and exquisite eighteenth-century pieces of furniture, including a delicate rosewood desk.

Faron Blackwood, seated on one of the sofas, knees crossed, looked pleasantly across at the journalist from the *Times* and stifled a yawn.

"Jet lag," she apologized. It wasn't that this pallid young man on the opposite sofa bored her. He'd been interviewing her about her father for the last half-hour, and she loved talking about her father. It was only that she'd arrived in London barely two hours before, and she felt a momentary drowsiness. Oliver had met her at Heathrow with a limousine, and now here she was, not even unpacked. It wasn't this newspaperman's fault that they'd been stuck in a horrific traffic jam on the way in from Heathrow. Oliver had promised him a two o'clock interview with her, and there hadn't been time to change it. Oliver himself now sat patiently nearby, in one of the antique chairs.

"So . . ." The pallid young man, whose name was Potter, tapped a pencil on his notebook, just as though he didn't also have his cassette recorder on the coffee table recording the interview, "So, let's see. That about winds it up." He scanned his notes, checking them off, murmuring half aloud, ". . . book sales within Britain alone; the BBC Blackwood documentary; your early lectures on your father . . ." He raised his head and looked at Faron. "You've been lecturing six years now, so that means you were eighteen when you started?"

"Yes, just barely."

"Hardly ten years after your father's death, that would make it. Is that right?"

In the chair near Faron, Oliver shifted and gave a sharp little cough and looked at his watch. But Potter did not seem to notice. He only tapped his pencil again on his notebook, looking at Faron, waiting; and when she nodded, he said sympathetically, "It must've been traumatic, Miss Blackwood, your father's death when you were a child. I believe

you were living with him at the time, just the two of you in that seaside house? Isn't that right? But I'm a bit hazy as to the actual tragic incident. I gather you were on the scene that night; but can you clarify for me— Did you actually see your father drown?"

Faron stared at him. *The drowning.* The one subject she couldn't handle. With the question in her ears, her heart began to hammer. She broke out in perspiration, her throat tightened, she felt dizzy. Then she wailed, an injured cat's wail, a strange, bewildered crying out.

She saw the startled face of the journalist, then his alert, greedy look. "Well, exactly—" he began, but already Oliver had leaped to his feet and shoved the cassette recorder into the man's hand and was shouldering him out of the drawing room and down the hall. Faron heard the door close behind him.

A moment later, Oliver was back. He stood with a hand resting on the back of a chair, looking at her, a forbearing expression on his plump face.

Faron looked back at him, her heart still pounding. She said miserably, "Oh, damn it!" She gave a hopeless little laugh. "I did it again, didn't I?"

"Yes." Oliver smoothed his silvery gray hair. "Let's hope that he won't squeeze a trashy psychological story out of it."

"I couldn't help it."

Oliver said wearily, "It was sixteen years ago, that drowning, you were only eight. I'd have thought by this time . . ." He spread his fingers in an empty gesture.

The drawing room was cool, but Faron could feel perspiration sliding down between her breasts under her shirt.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"You have to think about *now*, and how talented your father was. Not that . . ." Oliver sighed.

"Yes." She looked appealingly at Oliver. She'd known him since babyhood. He'd been more than her father's literary agent: he'd been her father's closest friend. Back then, when her father had been a drunken has-been, a once famous writer who'd fallen out of fashion, Oliver had remained loyal.

She was happy that Oliver was now profiting so richly through his share in her father's novels.

She was still trembling. She bit her lips. Damn, *damn*.

Oliver said, "You're all right now?"

She nodded.

"Good. Now about this suite, I got it for you because I thought a couple of parties, publishers, the press—you know. I'm on the floor below. I've had a busy week here, I always do have, but I've given you the rough of your schedule. Four o'clock tomorrow at Ridgeway House in Mayfair, the first lecture . . ."

"Yes." But she hardly listened. She knew it would take a while before she'd relax. Her father's drowning. Again she smelled the sea, saw the miserable old house on the boardwalk, heard the tide and the rain. Drunk, a drunken accident. All those times when Oliver, so rich, would come down from Boston and urge her father, "Start a new novel, I'll get you an advance." But her father, gaunt, hollow-cheeked, shaky from his drinking, would lead Oliver down to Jolly's Bar, and there, among the fishermen, he'd get falling-down drunk.

And finally—

"I've got a meeting with a publisher at three o'clock," Oliver was saying. His portly figure was silhouetted against one of the tall windows; behind him was the greenery of Hyde Park. "Can you manage alone now?"

"Of course."

"I'll call you around seven. I'll give you the final schedule at dinner tonight."

"Fine." She went with him through the spacious hall and at the door kissed him goodbye on the cheek, smelling his expensive cologne.

Coming back, passing the hall table, she saw the envelope that had been delivered before her arrival; the desk clerk had handed it to her when she'd registered, and she'd left it on the table when she'd come in.

She picked it up. It was a manila envelope, frayed and a little dirty. *For Faron Blackwood* was scrawled in pencil

across the top. The writing had been done with a soft pencil and was already smudged.

In the drawing room, she dropped the envelope on a desk beside one of the tall windows and stood looking out. Across was the park, below was the busy street. London was out there, waiting: the shops, the theaters, the people, the excitement.

She should unpack, shower, and go out.

But . . .

She realized that her arms were stiffly at her sides, her hands clenched into fists. *Relax*. That *Times* journalist's stupid question. No, not his question, that was innocent enough. It was her response that was so stupid, so irrational. But *was* it irrational? There had to be a reason for her frightening reaction to any mention of her father's drowning, a reason for the strange hysteria it called up in her.

She shook her head: it wasn't that her father had died; she had loved him, mourned him and accepted the loss of him. So she knew that wasn't the reason. It was something else, something elusive that gave her a dreadful, sinking feeling that something was wrong.

Oh, forget it! *Forget it!*

She turned from the window. Her arm brushed the desk and something slid to the floor.

She picked it up. The manila envelope. She'd forgotten it.

She sank down on the big, soft sofa and slid a finger under the envelope's flap. She pulled out a letter clipped to a sheet of heavier paper.

"Dear Faron," the letter began, the writing a black, angular scrawl. "Come away with me for a hot fudge sundae at the Dream Delight Shoppe on Beauchamp Place, down the street from Harrods. At three o'clock, luv. I will be wearing my funny old face."

There was no signature. Faron lifted the letter and looked at the sheet beneath it.

A cartoon.

It was a cartoon with herself as a child in it: there was her pointed chin and her dark hair brushed back and held in a

circlet, and her flat little ears that he'd always teased her were like a faun's. She sat gazing at the cartoon with widening eyes. Mendelssohn Stamm! Mendelssohn Stamm, out of her childhood, her father's friend, the cartoonist. Here in London! But yes, she'd heard years ago that he was living in London. And now, just like when he used to visit her father and take her for ice cream! She laughed out loud. The room seemed brighter, flooded with sunlight.

A half-hour later, showered and changed, wearing flat shoes and a soft skirt and jacket and with some new British pounds in her wallet, she was ready to go. She realized she was smiling, finally relaxed. A hot fudge sundae with Mendelssohn Stamm!

Before leaving the suite, she picked up the cartoon. She slid it back into the manila envelope and slipped the envelope into her suede shoulder bag.

Harrison Jones was an American, a landscape architect with no love for ice cream. But this ice cream shop was where Nigel Braceway of Dodds and Braceway was picking him up in his Carrera at three o'clock. It would take an hour to get to the Aylesbury landscaping site for the meeting with Dodds, Nigel Braceway's senior associate.

"We don't want to be late," Nigel had said. "To Dodds, I'm only his partner's half-assed son, a lackey. He's the kind of bastard who'll chew me out if we're not on the button. For you, of course, he'll lay out a velvet carpet."

It was already three-thirty. But that made Harrison happy. He could not stop looking at the young woman who for the last half-hour had sat perched on one of the round yellow leatherette stools. She had arrived just after he had, walking in a surefooted way that made him think of the deer in the forests near where he'd grown up in northern Maine.

Now, two stools away, she was pretending to sip a Coke. Every couple of minutes she would turn her head and look expectantly toward the glass door. She wore a blue-green skirt and jacket and a white shirt. Her dark hair was pushed

off her face, and there were little gold button earrings in her delicate ears.

Harrison, at first seeing her only in profile, had automatically assumed she was English. But then she turned her head and he saw her face: the faintly slanted gray eyes, the wide forehead, the shape of her mouth.

He'd known then, of course, that she was not an English girl at all. She was Faron Blackwood. He'd seen her picture several times, had seen it again this morning in the *Times*.

At once he'd looked more keenly at her. A *Newsweek* profile had described her as obsessed with her father. She'd been seventeen when there'd been a slight wave of reawakened interest in John Blackwood's novels. Immediately, she'd switched her college courses to acting and lecturing and she'd taken voice lessons, lessons in publicity and promotion. She'd had fliers made promoting herself as "John Blackwood's daughter."

In the mirror behind the soda clerk, Harrison studied her. Nervy, brave, determined—she'd lectured without a fee at high schools and on college campuses, taking trains, buses, planes. She'd driven in rented cars across the country, she'd slept in cheap motels. In a run-down hotel in Nashville, she'd been robbed and had barely escaped rape.

Yet the *Newsweek* article had suggested that the John Blackwood revival would have happened without her, that John Blackwood's appeal had caught on anyway: a nostalgia for his novels and the period in which they were set had gripped the public's imagination.

Faron Blackwood. She was now twenty-four and very rich.

But still obsessed. She could not seem to stop. He wondered if money alone could be driving her.

In the half-hour that had passed, she had twisted around a dozen times on the yellow stool to look out the plate-glass door. She'd begun to look less like an independent rich young woman and more like a weebegone child.

Was it a lover who kept her waiting? Now she was frowning; now she bit a fingernail, then another fingernail. Now she pulled a manila envelope from her shoulder purse and

slid out a sheet of paper. Harrison glimpsed a sketch. Faron Blackwood looked at the sketch, then once more toward the glass door.

"Oh, *no!*" But the broad-hipped woman who had rushed past with a loaded shopping bag that knocked the sketch from Faron Blackwood's hand did not even look back. The sketch floated down and landed on a blob of orange sherbet on the tiled floor.

"Oh, *damn* it!" She bent down to pick it up. But Harrison got there first.

"Watch my magic hands." He flicked the back of the sketch with his thumbnail and the sherbet flew off in an orange spatter. A couple of careful dabs with a paper napkin, and—"Pristine again," he said. "I'm expert at this. Half my work is always belly down in coffee carton rings on my desk."

"Thank you." She held out her hand for the sketch. But Harrison did not give it back. He stood gazing down at it, mesmerized. "A Stamm!" he said softly; he was startled. "For God's sake! A Stamm. A Mendelssohn Stamm cartoon!"

"Yes."

He looked up from the sketch, looked fully at Faron Blackwood. "That child's face in the sketch—it looks like you."

She nodded. "Mr. Stamm was a friend of my father's. He'd sometimes do a cartoon with my face in it, just for fun. He called it a 'Faron-face.' That's my name, Faron."

"Faron Blackwood," Harrison said. "I recognized you. I'm Harrison Jones, recognizable so far only to a favored few: my parents and three or four friends. But there's always the future."

He still held the cartoon. He didn't want to relinquish it because, he realized, he didn't want to relinquish Faron Blackwood, whom he had known for almost five minutes. "I'm coming to your first lecture," he said abruptly. "Tomorrow, around two o'clock, isn't it?" In his mind he quickly shuffled his tomorrow afternoon business plans into different time slots.

"No. *Four* o'clock. At Ridgeway House in Mayfair. Lord Ridgeway's place."

"Four, that's right, four." He reshuffled again, smiling down into the gray eyes. Outside the ice cream shop, a car horn gave two quick blasts. Harrison barely heard.

"You've still got my cartoon."

"Oh . . . Yes." He handed it back. He said sincerely, with a feeling of regret, "I've always admired Mendelssohn Stamm's work. I would have liked to meet him."

"You can," Faron said smiling. "He's meeting me here. For ice cream."

He stood there, staring down into her upturned smiling face, feeling first shock, then incredulity, and finally, pity. "Look—" he began, then stopped himself. He wasn't sure; he could be wrong. So, better not.

"Jones! For Christ's sake!" From the street the horn blared and blared. "Jones!" He turned. Nigel Braceway's furious face, red, exasperated, the Carrera door hanging open. Behind it, a line of halted cars, an approaching bobby. "Jones!"

"Goodbye!" Faron Blackwood said, laughing, and she turned away, tucking the sketch into its manila envelope.

In the car, crawling up the street, "Thought you'd gone deaf," Braceway said, still red in the face. "Now I'll get bloody hell if I don't get you there fast. Old cranky-ass Dodds has high respect for you and your work—'genius quality' he says, but as for *me*— What're you doing?"

Harrison was fiddling with the radio. The 3:55 BBC news. The newscast he'd caught the tail end of this morning, shaving: ". . . Stamm, no weapon found." Not having heard the whole thing, could he have been mistaken? He hoped he was.

❖ 2 ❖

"DELICIOUS," THE BRITISH PUBLISHER SAID, FORKING UP chateaubriand. Crystal sparkled, silver buckets gleamed, waiters moved soundlessly among the tables.

"Especially with the burgundy," Oliver said.

It was eight-thirty and Faron was dining at Grosvenor House's Ninety Park Lane with Oliver and a British publisher who was an expert on the sale of book rights in Europe and Asia.

She wore a sleeveless black dress and dangling diamond earrings. The British publisher and Oliver wore dinner jackets. The publisher was tall and skinny and shaggy with the face of a benevolent bloodhound. Oliver was round and five feet seven inches tall; he was pink, shining, brushed, polished. His silvery gray hair was expensively singed. Faron always thought of Oliver as small-and-dapper, the words hitched together. He was invariably beautifully tailored, his handkerchiefs monogrammed, his cufflinks malachite or red Italian gold, his watchbands custom-made. Oliver's hazel eyes were shrewd. But his eyelids these last years had become heavy. Here at the dinner table, he turned a bright face to the publisher. But Faron long ago had become aware of an underlying unease in Oliver, some dark heaviness, like a weight.

"On the positive side," the publisher said, giving a stab in the air with his fork, "China is sure to open up again one of these days. Paperbacks particularly."

Faron smiled at the publisher but offered no comment, asked no question. Oliver was head of a highly successful literary agency, respected in the publishing world. She her-

self was a publicist, and only of her father's books. Hers was another kind of success.

She knew, in a coolly practical way, that her success was partly due to being John Blackwood's daughter. Her father's daughter, keeping his memory alive.

"More wine, Faron?" It was Oliver; she was drifting too far away, he'd noticed—he was always on the watch.

"Yes, thanks." She gave him a little smile. She'd depended on him from the first. That frightened little eight-year-old, in shock. But Oliver, Oliver had been there: he'd seen to all the legalities about her father's life insurance. Accidental death. Two hundred thousand dollars. He'd set up a trust for her. He'd sold the decrepit old house by the sea. And Oliver and Nancy Cardiff had taken her in. The Cardiff property in Lincoln was big, quiet, beautiful. Nancy Cardiff was childless and social; in an absentminded way she was kind to Faron and bought her expensive clothes, ordered over the phone.

"*Faron.*" Again, Oliver's warning, "pay attention" voice. But now there was a sharp anxiety in the look he bent on her. She knew it was because of that disaster at the interview, her wailing like a demented woman, an injured cat.

She wet her dry lips and reached for her wineglass. Jet lag always left her so disoriented, it could be partly that, not just the interview that had thrown her back into the confused, foggy memory of that rainy terrible night and something she could not quite remember. All she ever remembered was the rain-swept porch, the dark sea, Oliver's dead-white face, his voice: "Your father . . . at the end of the pier . . . fell . . . drowned," and a figure bulking up behind Oliver, a policeman, his broad face looking at her with compassion.

She sipped the burgundy and put down the glass. She took an enormous breath. Jet lag. The driving rain, the two white faces looming in the dark, the blast of rain driven against her face. "The pier . . . the rocks . . . the sharp old pilings." She smelled the sea, for an instant the beam from the light-house blazed across the porch, and in that blaze, something, for the wink of an eye, glimpsed.

". . . depending on the royalties," the publisher was saying.

She closed her eyes, then opened them. Muted elegance, soft lighting, a Chinese tapestry on the wall behind the wine steward. Oliver was looking at her. She tipped her head, a reassuring little nod.

Jet lag.

And then, this other thing. Merely a disappointment. Childish, letting it bother her so. It had to be a mix-up of some kind. But still, somehow disturbing.

"Excuse me." She got up.

In the lobby she went to the phones. One last attempt. Perhaps she hadn't read the phone book right. Or hadn't inquired correctly from information. She would try again.

But, no; there was no listing for a Mendelssohn Stamm. Neither could information help her.

How could she have missed him at the Dream Delight? She had waited over an hour.

And he hadn't phoned.

She'd mentioned her disappointment to Oliver.

"Stamm?" Oliver had said vaguely. "Yes, I remember, friend of your father's. Never met him, though. What's that about ice cream?"

Silly to let it disturb her. Stupid. Jet lag. He'd probably show up tomorrow at Ridgeway House. He wouldn't want to miss her lecture.



PROFESSOR HENRY OGILVIE, RETIRED PROFESSOR OF LITERATURE at Essex University, putt-putted on his motorbike up the driveway of Ramblings.