

## The Black Notebooks

Before I went looking for Louisa—spent more than a year running all over the country after her—there had only been one time I'd considered that she might be dead. Perhaps all children consider their parents immortal to some degree, I know that I never gave much thought to my dad winding up in a car wreck or succumbing to some kind of cancer caused by all the cigarettes he smoked or something at the food processing plant where he worked, but since my mother was missing, many people in Carlisle presumed she was dead and expected that my father and I did as well. In their eyes, if a woman goes off to roam the country, something bad is bound to happen—worst case scenario, a brutal roadside murder, best case scenario, a suicide after she's overcome with remorse for abandoning her family. But my thoughts of Louisa never turned in that direction; to me she was a goddess, distant and untouchable, doing things that the common person could only dream of, and surely dying was not one of those things.

I didn't think about death much at all until I reached the ripe age of twelve—when most girls start to think about it thanks to competition with catty girls, rejection from vicious boys, and the inexplicable hatred of what they see when they look in the mirror. Of course, while I was affected by these things to some degree, my new interest in death stemmed from something else: Marissa got Regan a Ouija board for her twelfth birthday.

We used it in my attic bedroom, which seemed to have the most suitable atmosphere. It was easily darkened when the curtains on the one wide window at the front were pulled, and something about the sharp angles of the ceiling and the old wood floors added to the ambiance, not to mention we were as close to the heavens as we could

get in either of our houses. So though the board was technically Regan's, we stored it under my bed.

As our rituals became more serious, Regan stole pieces of black lace and velvet from the fabric store to spread out on the floor and put the Ouija Board on top of. We always sat with it in between us, surrounded by a ring of candles and salt for protection. Regan read about doing that in a book on witchcraft she had found at Walmart, of all places. I pointed out that considering where she had gotten it, the book might not be the most reliable of resources, but she swore by it. She also religiously recorded what we learned from consulting ghosts with our trusty Ouija Board in a black, spiral notebook.

We mostly tried to call on dead rock stars. We talked to Janis, Jimi, Elvis, Robert Johnson, Sid Vicious. Sid was pretty boring, though. He just spelled out 'F-U-C-K' over and over again. After a few months, we were running out of spirits to talk to.

"Maybe we could try Jim Morrison again," Regan suggested, carefully placing the pointer in the center of the board and putting the very tips of the first two fingers on it.

Every time we tried to contact Jim, we got Satan or Hitler or some silly ghost pretending to be one of those two. My eyes flitted up to a photograph of my mother sitting on a stereo speaker—all the pictures we had of my mother seemed to be kept on stereo speakers. This one was a black-and-white my father had taken of her. She had his guitar in her lap gently resting against her pregnant belly. A smile lifted her lips, but her eyes seemed haunted. It was like the intense photograph they always put on the cover of *Rolling Stone* when a rock star dies. As I set my fingers down beside Regan's, the words tumbled out of my mouth unexpectedly. "Let's ask for my mom."

Regan's hand shot away from the pointer. "What! Your mom's not dead."

“How do we know she’s not? No one knows where she is. Maybe she is dead.”

Seeing the need in my eyes, Regan agreed, “Ok,” with a sigh. “But nothing’s gonna happen, ‘cause she isn’t dead.”

I waited for her to call my mom forth because she was the one who always did the summoning. When she didn’t say anything, I gave it a go in my deepest voice. “We are trying to contact the spirit of Louisa Carson-Black. Louisa, come speak with us!”

The pointer stirred and spelled out, ‘H-I.’

My heart dropped into my stomach. Could I actually be talking to my mother? “Is this Louisa Carson-Black?” I asked and the pointer darted up to ‘Yes.’

“My mother?” I clarified, in case there were other Louisa Carson-Blacks. The pointer moved over ‘Yes’ again. The flickering candles seemed to dim, making the room even darker than usual.

“Whoa,” I breathed, not knowing if I really wanted this to happen. I wanted to talk to my mom, but if she was really....

“Emily, it could be a faker. Like the Jim Morrison thing,” Regan said hastily, but the pointer flew to ‘No.’

“Ask her something, something kind of obscure, not like your birthday or anything,” Regan urged.

“Ok,” I pondered it briefly. “What was the name of my dad’s band?”

‘I-N-K-W-E-L-L’

“Inkwell, that’s right,” I murmured.

The blood drained from Regan’s face. She was scared, and this stuff never scared her. She responded the way we both always did when we were frightened, she got pissed

and lashed out. “You pushed it, Emily! I know you did. You just want it to be her so bad, and I don’t know why ‘cause this means she’s dead and you’ll never meet her.”

“But I could talk to her every night on this!” I countered. “I’m not pushing it, Regan! We swore we’d never do that, and I don’t break promises. I’ll take my fingers off and you ask her something.”

She looked flabbergasted at my suggestion. “You know it’s against the rules to do it with one person!”

I did know that, though I didn’t know where the “rules” really came from, and if it was my mom, I would break them and talk to her alone every night. But, huffing in annoyance so my bangs blew off my forehead, I decided to appease Regan. “Ok, ask her something I wouldn’t know, like something about your mom.”

“Ok, let me think for a minute. I don’t know what you don’t know... Oh wait. I don’t think you know this, but be honest if you do. What was the record you brought back for my mom from London?”

“My mom went to London?” I asked, impressed.

“Yeah, when she was, like, fifteen or sixteen. You didn’t know that?”

I shook my head as the pointer moved to ‘1-5.’ Then it moved up to the letters spelling out, ‘B-O-W-I-E M-A-N W-H-O S-’

“Bowie, Man Who Sold the World,” Regan finished, awed. “That’s right. My sister’s been trying to get my mom to give it to her, but she won’t, ‘cause—”

“OK!” I interrupted. “I didn’t know that, you didn’t push it, so we are agreed, it’s my mom.”

Shadows from the candlelight lapped at the board. Regan got solemn again.

“Yeah, I guess.”

I decided to ask the most pressing question, the question you usually ask spirits first. “How did you die?”

‘M-U-R-D-E-R’

What little color my fair skin had melted away. “What? Where?” I stammered.

‘C-H-I-C-A-G-O’

Tears welled up in my eyes. “But you left us in Chicago. Did you die right after you left?”

Yes.

“Did you go anywhere? See anything? What about following punk rock?”

No.

I cried out like the pointer had gashed me, pushed it off the board, and leapt out of the circle onto my bed.

Regan’s eyes fluttered shut momentarily, probably doing a rush job of “closing the circle,” so Louisa’s soul couldn’t follow me out.

She sat down beside me. I had my face buried in my pillow, trying my damndest not to cry in front of her.

“Emily, it was probably just a trick like the Jim Morrison thing. I didn’t believe it at all.”

I knew she was lying. I had seen the look on her face, an expression as horrified as mine. But when she suggested we go downstairs and watch TV, I went along with it. However, after she fell asleep on the couch, I went back up to my room, tossed the Ouija

Board in its box, and shoved it into a far corner. I was done with the occult. I would make Regan take the board back to her house the next day and refuse to use it ever again. I pulled out that black notebook she recorded our ghostly encounters in and shredded all the pages she had written. Then, I started writing like I was in a trance.

*Dear Louisa, If you're dead, I really, really hate you! How could you leave me and Dad just to die? You are supposed to be doing glamorous things like discovering all the newest bands and knowing the lead singers personally, stuff that's so cool I can understand why you don't want to be here in stupid Carlisle being a mom. But if you're dead, if you died before even having an adventure, I'll never forgive you.*

When I wrote that last line, I screamed uncontrollably at the top of my lungs. My father came running. His hair was ruffled in every direction, but he looked wide awake.

“Emily, what’s wrong?” he asked, throwing his arms around me.

“Mom’s dead!” I wailed.

His eyes grew wider still, and his skin seemed to be tinted green. “Who told you that? Did someone call?”

“No,” I hiccupped. “Ouija board told me.”

His normal olive hue returned. “Oh, baby, it’s just a game.”

“But the spirit knew what your band was called and what record Louisa gave Molly when she came back from London.”

“But you and Regan knew those things,” he said calmly, smoothing down my sweaty hair.

“We weren’t pushing it!” I screeched.

“Emily, honey, if something happened to your mom, we’d know. Someone would call us. We’re her next-of-kin.”

“But it happened a long time ago. She was murdered in Chicago right after she left us.”

“Well, then I know it’s a lie. Your mother came back here to see Molly, and then she left for Detroit. You can ask Molly that. She told Molly that was where she was going. She wouldn’t have gone back to Chicago. She’d made up her mind. She’s very stubborn. That’s where you get it.” He smirked at me, but I didn’t smile back. “You wanna come sleep in my bed, kiddo? So you’re not scared?”

“I’m not scared,” I denied, but I really was, so I went with him.

As he pulled the covers over us, he said, “Just forget it about it, ok, baby? Your mom’s fine. *I* would know if something was wrong, so just trust me.”

Of course, I did trust him, so slowly but surely I forgot my concerns. I kept that notebook, though, and wrote letters to Louisa in it whenever I was upset. And I was very upset when I found myself in New Orleans mid-summer of 1996, still on her trail, which had gotten cold yet again.