

Finding THE Forger

A BIANCA BALDUCCI MYSTERY

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An Edgar Finalist for Best YA Mystery 2004



Baltimore, MD

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Published by Bancroft Press (“Books that enlighten”)
P.O. Box 65360, Baltimore, MD 21209
800-637-7377
410-764-1967 (fax)
www.bancroftpress.com

ISBN 1-890862-32-0 cloth
LCCN

ISBN 1-890862-37-1 paper
LCCN 2002109266

Cover and interior design by Tammy Sneath Grimes, www.tsgcrescent.com, 814.941.7447
Author photo by Beltrami Studio, Rutland, VT



To Mary Ann...down by the seashore, sifting sand

Chapter One

 DID YOU KNOW you can sing the words of “Amazing Grace” to the tune of the “Gilligan’s Island” theme song? Try it. I’ll wait.

The “Amazing Grace” trick is one of the things I learned recently in Mr. Baker’s music class at St. John’s High School, where I, Bianca Balducci, am a sophomore.

Mr. Baker is small and balding. Because of that, and his quick, darting movements, he reminds me of a bird. A bird with a bow tie. He has about a kajillion bow ties—in red, plaid, green (for St. Patrick’s Day), polka-dot, blue, and even one that lights up and plays “Silent Night” for Christmas. I bet he wears a bow tie to bed.

Anyway, Baker had to take over from Mrs. Williston in early November, right after we did “The Mikado,” because Williston, without her glasses on, took an on-stage bow, and tumbled into the orchestra pit, breaking her leg. Hey—don’t look at me. I was nowhere near her!

Baker usually comes in part-time only to accompany rehearsals, but with Williston out, he was brought on full-time. He taught us the “Amazing Grace” trick to illustrate what hymn “meter” is and how in the back of hymnals, the tunes are usually arranged by meter as well as by title, so you can switch words with

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different tunes.

When he finished his explanation and we all giggled our way through “Amazing Grace” sung to the Gilligan theme, he pursed his lips together and said, “Now, I know that in your *Roman* tradition, you don’t sing many metered *hymns*, but it’s an important part of an understanding of *music*, particularly religious music outside of the *Latin* milieu.”

That’s when it dawned on me. Since Baker is an organist at one of Baltimore’s Episcopalian churches, he probably figured all of us St. John’s students were Catholics (*Roman* Catholics) and that we chanted away the hours in Latin at the crack of a nun’s ruler on our knuckles.

Talk about false assumptions. In reality, only about three nuns work at St. John’s, and one’s the principal. And about half (or more) of the student body probably checked “other” on the part of the entrance app that asks whether you’re a Catholic. Poor old Mr. Baker was working with outdated stereotypes of parochial schools and the “Roman” faith in general. But we don’t disabuse him of his myths. We think it’s kind of cute the way he calls all the women teachers “Sister.”

And that brings me to this story, which is really about false assumptions and how my friend Sarah’s crush almost landed in jail, how my other best friend, Kerrie, almost ended up hating me, and how I almost ended up without a boyfriend just after I’d landed one.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

It was the Monday right after Thanksgiving and I was sitting on a hard, cold bench outside the City Art Museum waiting with my friend Sarah. Sarah, a senior, who first came to our school calling herself Sadie, was doing an after-school internship at the

Museum, and she'd asked me to go with her that day so we could plan a surprise birthday party for our mutual friend Kerrie. Since we arrived fifteen minutes before her internship began and she had to go in, we were snarfing a quick snack and "planning."

I was in a glum mood after a crappy day. In fact, my mood matched the weather—gray, overcast, and ready to spit something. Not only had Mr. Baker singled me out for ridicule during chorus ("Miss Balducci, is that the alto line you're singing or a frog croaking?"), but Kerrie and Sarah had squabbled at lunch like parents in a bad custody case. And I had been in the middle. Oh, it hadn't been an out-and-out fight. That's boy stuff. It was one of those subtle girl spats where you need a United Nations translator murmuring in the background to tell you what's really being said. Example:

Me (*as Kerrie plops her books on cafeteria table at lunch*): What's the matter?

Kerrie (*shrugging*): Nothing. (*Translation: everything*)

Sarah: Are we getting together this afternoon, Bianca? (*Translation: you're not doing anything with Kerrie, are you?*)

Kerrie: Hey, Bianca, I thought you and I were getting together so I could show you what to do with your hair for the dance. (*Translation: so you've betrayed me again, have you?*)

Sarah: She has to go over some math with me (*Translation: tongue sticking out*)

Kerrie: That's crazy—Bianca doesn't need help in math. Right, Bianca? (*Translation: choose wisely, girl*)

So you can see why I was in a crappy mood. Oh, and did I forget to mention that my boyfriend Doug had walked by after lunch to ask if I wanted to get together after school? And I had to say I couldn't because I was being pulled in two directions by two girl-

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friends, and getting together with them was going to be so much more fun than spending time with him?

Speaking of fun, do you see the irony here? Sarah was bickering with Kerrie about spending time with me so she could plan a surprise birthday party for the aforementioned Kerrie. No wonder guys have such a hard time understanding girls. I'm a girl and I don't understand them!

The museum was closed to visitors on Mondays, so the place was shut up tight and quiet as a tomb.

"The problem is going to be getting Kerrie out of the house while we get ready," Sarah said, grabbing another cookie from the cellophane wrapper. She hugged her navy blue blazer closer. Even though Baltimore usually doesn't get super cold in December, the air was damp and chilly, and clouds kept the sun from warming our shoulders. Everything was as colorless as the museum's stone walls.

I chewed on a Fig Newton and said nothing.

Sarah lives with Kerrie's family. She'd been living with them for about a month, in fact, ever since Kerrie's dad, a lawyer, helped Sarah out of a big mess. While Kerrie had thought it a grand idea at the time, she soon discovered that having a live-in sibling wasn't just an eternal sleepover, with hours of gossip and sharing and giggling fun. It was more like a purgatory of minor annoyances. I know. I have two siblings—my sister Connie (who's a private investigator) and my brother Tony (who's a college student).

One of the points of tension between Kerrie and Sarah was the fact that Kerrie was no longer the center of attention in her household. In fact, Sarah was pretty high-maintenance right now. She had been spending virtually every weekend looking at colleges with Mr. and Mrs. Daniels. And because Sarah was smack up

against deadlines, they were helping her with her college apps, too, which didn't leave a lot of time left over for Kerrie.

"Listen," Sarah continued, "you're not coming up with suggestions—how will we get Kerrie to the party and keep it a surprise?"

"I could invite her over to my house," I volunteered. "She could do my hair!" I looked at my watch. Speaking of hair, I was going to have to hurry if I wanted to be on time at Kerrie's for today's hair appointment. And I suspected Kerrie would be annoyed if I was late.

Sarah shrugged. "What if she won't go? You know how she sometimes turns an invite out into one over to the house?" Sarah still wasn't used to thinking of the Daniels family as her family, even in a temporary sense. So she always referred to their home as "the home" or "the house"—never "my home," or "our house."

"She's interested in Russell Cooper, isn't she? Maybe I can say he's there or something."

"Bianca, how in the world would you get Russell Cooper to your house? Does Doug know him?"

"Well, only a little." Russell and Doug moved in different circles. While Doug was an average guy, Russell was on the debate team, taking AP Physics, AP Calculus, *and* AP English, and applying to Harvard and Yale next year. "But he's a guy. Guys can ask guys to do things that girls can't."

Sarah let out an exasperated sigh. "That's not the only problem. Getting the food and stuff in without Kerrie's seeing is going to be a major hassle. And the invites and the music—I thought it would be neat to find any song we could with 'sixteen' in it and play it."

"That would really embarrass her," I said. "Good idea."

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Embarrassing your friends is, after all, a symbol of your deep affection for them.

“You need to do the invite list,” Sarah added. “I don’t have a handle on all her friends.”

“Okay,” I said, cringing. Putting together the invitation list would be a bear. Our school had a rule—no invitations given out at school unless the whole class is getting one. That meant I’d have to actually find addresses for people and send cards to their homes.

Hmmm . . . maybe this was something Doug and I could do together. Images of a cozy afternoon sitting at my kitchen table, hot chocolate in hand, music on the CD, family members secured in closets so they wouldn’t embarrass us, ran through my head. Could be fun. “I’d love to do it!” I finally said.

“The biggest challenge is going to be finding a day to do this,” Sarah said, crumpling the now-empty cellophane wrapper in her hand. She strode to a nearby trash bin and tossed the paper in. “Every time I suggest doing something lately, Kerrie backs off.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“She’s doing it to you, too?”

“Well, not exactly.” Actually, not at all. I sensed Sarah was nudging up to a heart-to-heart about Kerrie, which made me a little uncomfortable. Then again, the last time I’d turned a deaf ear to a friend’s problem had almost ended disastrously, so I stepped up to the plate and dived in, to mix metaphors. “I think she’s just a little grumpy because things aren’t the way they used to be.”

“But she was the one who insisted I stay with them!” Sarah straightened and stared into the distance. Sitting on her hands, she turned to me, her eyes shining with the unshed tears of the falsely accused. “She had to convince *me!*”

“Life is funny, isn’t it?” I said. Would I make a great counselor

or what?

("Failing every grade?" No problem, I'd advise—life is funny.)

("Parents getting divorced?" No sweat—life is funny.)

Squaring my shoulders, I continued. "I mean, I have a feeling Kerrie didn't really know what she wanted. And now . . ." Way to go, Bianca. How to finish that phrase—"And now, Sarah, she's stuck with you."

"What I mean," I said after clearing my throat, "is Kerrie probably didn't realize that sharing her home with a friend actually means sharing. She probably expected everything to stay the way it was. For example, the computer." I was getting into this. Feeling like a schoolteacher, I stood in front of Sarah. "The computer used to be just Kerrie's—in her room for her personal use. Mr. Daniels had his own computer in his study. Now where's Kerrie's computer?" I knew the answer to this, but when teaching, it's important for the student to say the answer out loud.

"In a corner of the dining room."

"Right. So you *both* can use it for homework. And what about the TV?"

"Well, there's a TV in the living room and one in Kerrie's room."

"And Kerrie has to share it with you, right?"

"Right, but I hardly ever ask to watch anything special. The only times I watch in there are when she invites me to watch something with her." Sarah looked frustrated and annoyed, curling the strap of her backpack around her finger over and over again. She looked at her watch, and I knew she was thinking of going into work early just to get away from this uncomfortable discussion, so I sped up.

"Exactly. She's asking you to watch with her because she feels

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it's the right thing to do, but she's probably remembering those glorious days when she was Empress of the Remote all by herself and didn't need to think of anyone else's feelings."

"Well, if that's all it is, I can use the computers at school, and I just won't watch TV with her at all," Sarah said with a "harrumph" in her voice.

That wasn't all there was, though, but I didn't feel comfortable delving into the deep recesses of a kid's relationship with her parents. Kerrie probably didn't like sharing attention with her folks, especially her father, whom she adored. It was one thing for Kerrie to give up TV and computer privileges for the sake of family harmony, but quite another for her to sacrifice a parental relationship when she really needed one. Besides, Sarah would be off at college in less than a year and Kerrie would be back in single-child heaven. As much as I loved Kerrie, I thought she needed to do a little more giving in this regard.

To get away from this uncomfortable topic, I changed the subject.

"How's the internship going?" I asked, nodding toward the hulking museum.

She shrugged. "It's okay. But there's some weird stuff going on. Like my boss—Fawn Dexter—is on the phone a lot."

"So?"

"So she closes the door whenever she sees me or somebody else coming. And she talks low, in a whisper, like she doesn't want us to hear."

"Maybe it's confidential museum stuff."

"No, I think it's something personal. I can hear her laughing and kind of flirting, if you know what I mean."

Ah yes—the old flirt voice, recognizable to any woman over

the age of twelve. That little hush, that mellow giggle, that smooth whisper. So what if Sarah's boss was using it?

Speaking of the flirt voice, that's exactly what Sarah used when a stranger started approaching us. Dressed in tan slacks and dark blazer, he was dark-skinned, dark-haired, and pretty darn good-looking. When Sarah saw him, she stood and smoothed her uniform skirt the way you do when you want to make sure you look your best. Not that her skirt needed smoothing. She was like a bird preening. I got the picture. She liked this fellow.

"Hector!" she called out in this throaty, come-hither tone. "I was just getting ready to start work."

"Me, too," he said, joining us.

"Bianca, this is Hector Gonzalez. He goes to UMBC and works part-time here as a security guard." Sarah turned to me. "Hector, this is Bianca Balducci, my friend. We go to school together."

"I gathered," he said, looking at our uniforms and smiling. He had a nice warm smile that showed off even teeth. "Come on, you're going to be late. Don't want to create a bad impression."

"Hey, my brother goes to UMBC!" I said. "Economics major. Tony Balducci. Ever run into him?"

"Nope. But it's a big campus," Hector said, then reached out his arm and touched Sarah on the elbow as a signal it was time they got going.

Was it my imagination or was Sarah blushing? She looked down at her feet and picked up her backpack. I made a mental note to add Hector Gonzalez to the invitation list for Kerrie's party, which we'd probably schedule sometime after the first of the year.

As they say in those old novels, I made ready to leave. But as I walked away, the quiet of the old museum was broken by several cars screeching into the little parking lot like they were just finish-

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ing a car race. Hector turned and looked at them, narrowing his eyes as he figured out who they were.

“Police,” he said to Sarah. Then he checked a pager on his belt. “Silent alarm went off. You stay put. I’ll see what’s up.”

As Hector walked away, Sarah looked at me kind of wild-eyed. “I might give Connie a call later, if that’s okay,” she said.