

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Of

Barbara Alice

At dusk, from our hilltop vantage point, we watched the white Cadillac glide to a stop in front of Willowhaven's portico.

"Don't get your hopes up." Pamela nudged Delilah forward. "Remember, we've got no proof. You can make all the accusations you want tomorrow night, but don't expect her to admit anything. She's pretended to be Bethany for so long now that she may have convinced herself the lie is true."

I hadn't thought of that. What if she was mentally disturbed?

Samson was becoming restless. I pulled back on his reins.

The driver of the Caddy, a tall, older gentleman in a dark suit, climbed out and went around to the other side of the car. He was distinguished looking, even from a distance.

"That must be her son," Pam whispered. It was as if she was afraid they might hear.

The man opened the front passenger door, and from the shadowy depths of the car, she emerged – a frail, elderly woman in black.

"Barbara Alice, in the flesh," I said softly.

Pam heard me, and replied, "It's a shame we have to ruin her birthday party."

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Writer Jane Austen once said, "I do not want people to be very agreeable, as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal."

That was the way I felt about Barbara Alice when we finally met. Some of the diary entries I had read about her had invoked feelings of sympathy in me, but I didn't expect her to be so likable and friendly. And charmingly funny.

It was strange to see Beth's features in the guise of an old woman. Barbara Alice's snow-white hair had been braided and arranged in a thick neat bun, like a crown, atop her head. Her face was lined and wrinkled, but I could still see evidence of the beauty she had possessed in youth.

She had remarked upon my resemblance to James immediately.

"You favor my husband more than Jim does," she said to me, with a soft, southern drawl.

Barbara Alice doted on her only son, a widower with two grown daughters. The heir to the Hunt fortune was still handsome by anyone's standards. He had his mother's striking emerald green eyes, and a golden tan that was set off by a full head of iron-gray hair.

For the party, he had dressed in a stylish, and expensive-looking, dark green suit, similar to the one Barbara Alice was wearing.

Our group enjoyed an hour of animated conversation before the dinner bell rang.

We dined off delftware in the midst of voluptuous bouquets of fruits and flowers, all carefully arranged in towering crystal vases. After inhaling Maggie's pot roast, and a triple layer birthday cake, the eight of us moved back to the Green Parlor with the bottle of sherry Pam and I had brought.

I needed a large dose of courage from somewhere to get through the rest of the evening.

"Tom, please tell Edith we were sorry to hear about her fall," said Barbara Alice. "We requested prayer for her at church last week."

"Mother will be grateful to hear that."

"Sherry, anyone?" I filled my glass to the brim before passing the bottle over to Joshua.

"Even though her hip was broken, it could have been so much worse," Maggie said. "Falling down all those steps, why she could have been paralyzed, or killed."

"Edith's a strong lady," said Nina. "She won't let this keep her down for long."

"Then she's just like my own dear mother." Jim handed Barbara Alice a glass of sherry. "She's been in and out of the hospital all year because of her heart. The doctors didn't think she'd pull through the last bad episode, but she proved them all wrong."

Barbara Alice chuckled softly. "Doctors don't know everything, do they?"

"That's what I've been sayin' for years." Josh grinned at her.

"I'd like to propose a toast," said Jim, raising his glass. "To my mother, happy ninetieth birthday. You've had many admirers through the years, but I hope you realize that the person who admires and respects you the most is me, your loving son."

Pam clinked her glass against mine, a stricken look on her face.

I understood how she felt: We heathens were getting ready to persecute Mother Teresa.

As Jim sat next to her on the loveseat, Barbara Alice grabbed hold of his hand and kissed it.

"Well, I'm just so happy everyone here knows how special I am," she said dryly.

We laughed, but none of us failed to notice the tears in her eyes.

"I've been blessed with a long, full life," she continued. "And I feel fortunate to have such a wonderful family - such amazing friends as all of you - to share it with."

"We didn't think you realized just how hard it's been for us." Josh tried to sound serious. "It sure feels good to know you appreciate all our efforts."

Barbara Alice laughed out loud. "Indeed I do, Joshua."

In one corner of the room, next to a window, there sat a square, Civil War era piano. Maggie took Pamela by the arm and pulled her over to it.

"Beth, dear, we've already told you that Alex is a famous writer, but did you know his lovely fiancée here is quite the successful pianist?"

My heart did a flip-flop when I heard Maggie use Beth's name.

"How exciting." Barbara Alice clapped her hands together. "I hope this means we're going to be entertained."

If she only knew.

"Oh, yes," Maggie said gleefully. "Pam and Nina have put together a little musical program for us to enjoy. Go ahead, girls."

As Pamela played, Nina sang an upbeat hymn and several old standards.

When they finished "A Bird in a Gilded Cage," Pam handed Nina another sheet of lyrics, which she had copied down earlier that day.

I watched Barbara Alice's reaction as they performed her sister's secret love song. Her face showed no sign of recognition, which convinced me further that our ghost was telling the truth.

I received looks of mild surprise from Josh and Maggie, who were probably reliving the night of the séance.

"My Heart Sings" was the last song the ladies performed. The rest of us gave them a generous round of applause as they took their bows.

The evening was getting old, and I still hadn't found a way to confront Barbara Alice without an audience.

"That was just delightful, girls," Maggie said. "Both of you have such talent. There was a time, in my youth, when I had aspirations of becoming a singer. But I guess it wasn't meant to be."

"Nonsense, Maggie, darling," scoffed Barbara Alice. "Aren't you still a member of the church choir?"

"Yes, well, that's a little different. I'm only one voice among many."

"Why don't you and Mother sing a song together?" Jim suggested.

"Oh, do you mind, girls?" Maggie looked like a kid on Christmas morning.

"Of course not," said Pam, with an echo from Nina. "Just tell me what to play."

Josh requested "In the Good Old Summertime," and Barbara Alice joined Pam and Maggie at the piano. Nina took a seat next to Tom.

I think all of us cringed at some of the off-key notes Maggie hit. I could barely hear Barbara Alice's singing. When it was over we gave them a standing ovation, and I tried to think of a way to talk to the birthday girl alone.

"My heavens, I am completely out of breath," said Barbara Alice, leaning against the piano. "But it was so much fun. Why can't we do this more often?"

"That reminds me, Uncle Josh, Aunt Maggie." Jim looked at them reproachfully. "When are the two of you going to make it back down to Charlotte?"

Josh grinned. "Just as soon as we get another invite."

"Now Joshua Davenport," Barbara Alice said, pointing an accusing finger at him, "you know good and well you're welcome in our home anytime. My granddaughters still talk about your last visit. They'd love for you to come see us again."

"We promise we'll plan another trip this year," Maggie said, patting her on the arm.

Barbara Alice took a faltering step away from the piano.

"Jim, dear, would you please fetch my cane? I believe I left it in the car."

Joshua tagged along with Jim, undoubtedly to have a smoke.

I stared at Pam until she got the message. Maggie helped her engage Tom and Nina in conversation while I seized my opportunity.

"Let me help you over to your seat," I said, taking hold of Barbara Alice's arm. She was wearing lavender perfume.

"Oh, how thoughtful, Alex. Thank you ever so much."

I knew I was about to do the right thing, but I felt like a complete jerk.

"You're very welcome . . . Babe."

She stumbled, but I kept her from falling. I only hoped she wasn't about to have a heart attack.

She eased herself down onto the loveseat, and without looking at me, asked for more sherry. I filled her glass with an amazingly steady hand, and then sat beside her.

A tremor ran through her body as she raised the glass to her lips.

"Why did you call me that, just now?" she asked faintly.

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

She took a deep breath. "I believe in heaven, young man, and I believe in hell."

"Beth's spirit isn't in either of those places. She's trapped between two worlds, and only the truth can set her free. Your sister needs your help."

Her face got paler. "I don't know if I understand what you're trying to say."

"I'm not accusing you of murder, Barbara Alice, but I've talked to Beth, and she led me to her diary. You were in love with her fiancé. There's no doubt in my mind that it was she who died that day at the bridge. You've been living a lie for seventy years. Isn't it time the masquerade ended?"

Jim and Joshua walked back into the room, chatting amiably. Babe put her glass down and stood up slowly.

"I'm sorry, everyone. I think I'm going to have to go upstairs now. I'm so tired. A weak spell came over me all of a sudden."

"Are you all right, Mother?" Jim handed her the cane. "You look ill."

"I'll be perfectly fine, dear. All I need is a good night's rest."

Pamela looked at me with a question in her eyes I couldn't answer. I didn't know what was going to happen next.

A short time later we took our leave. We were at the end of the brick walkway when the urge struck me. I turned around and looked up.

Her silhouette filled the window above. The filmy curtains parted, but only for a brief moment. She stepped backwards to avoid my stare.

"Sweet dreams," I whispered.

I felt her eyes follow us as we drove away.

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I opened the library door and winced. Pam had the radio on in the kitchen, and it was tuned to a country-western station. If I hadn't been in need of refreshment I would have avoided that wing of the house altogether.

She was singing along to a Hank Williams classic when I got there.

I opened the refrigerator and examined the contents. Nothing looked good.

Pam turned the volume down on the radio. "How long do you plan to stand there with the door open?"

I sighed.

"I'm making fresh-squeezed lemonade. Will that hit the spot?"

"Maybe." I closed the refrigerator door and joined her at the table. She was halving lemons on a cutting board.

"Making progress on the book?"

"Sort of." My outline was history, and I had ruthlessly tossed four chapters' worth of hard work into the trash.

"I just got off the phone with Melanie. She finally told Mom and Dad about Richard."

"How'd they take it?"

"They insisted on meeting him. His being a surgeon helps, but the verdict isn't in yet."

The verdict. There couldn't be one without a confession. At least in Barbara Alice's case.

It had been two days since I had confronted her at Josh and Maggie's. Two days of waiting.

"Did you find out when Babe is leaving?"

"Jim's taking her home tomorrow," Pam said.

"Time is running out." I got up and paced around the kitchen. "I can't help Beth unless Babe admits the truth."

"We've done all we can do. After keeping this awful secret for so many years, did you think she was going to stand up in front of all of us, including her devoted son, and confess the truth without a second thought?"

"I don't know. That's the way it happens in the movies."

"Here," she handed me two halves of a lemon, "sit down and squeeze the juice out of those. It's therapeutic."

I did as I was told.

"At least we reached Beth and cleared up some of her confusion," she went on.

"Did we?"

"Think about it. I haven't been locked in or out of the house since the séance."

The sudden trilling of the phone made us both jump.

"I'll get it." I licked my sticky fingers on the way.

It was Maggie, and she sounded worried. Was "Beth" at my house, by chance? Jim thought she was taking a nap, but when he went to check on her she was gone. They hadn't been able to find her anywhere and Jim and Josh were still out looking. To make things more complicated, Tom Claxton had just shown up at Willowhaven. At church the previous day, "Beth" had asked him to come visit her on an important matter.

I told Maggie I would join the search.

Pamela wanted to come with me. I glanced at my watch as we were heading out the door, and suddenly I felt like I'd been hit between the eyes with a hammer.

It was twenty minutes past five o'clock, and I knew exactly where Babe was.

After asking Pam to notify Maggie, I tore off in my Mustang towards the wooden bridge. For some reason I felt the need to hurry.

As soon as I drove over the hill I saw her there, a fragile-looking figure in a beaded black dress. She was at the very edge, leaning on her father's silver-handled cane.

I stopped my car just short of the bridge and approached her cautiously. She was gazing into the water.

"Babe?"

She didn't answer, so I took her by the arm.

"Please, step back some, away from the edge."

A tired, brittle laugh escaped her lips, but she did as I asked.

"Did you think I was going to jump off the bridge and drown myself? Or were you afraid my sister's ghost might push me?" She pulled her arm away. "Justice would have been served in either case, don't you agree?"

I didn't know how to respond to that, and luckily I didn't have to.

"Mother, why did you sneak off like that?" Jim came running up the driveway with Joshua close behind. "Is anything wrong? Are you feeling ill again?"

"My dear boy, you know I'm dying. There's no point in you fussing over my health so."

Jim looked taken aback by her frank comments. "I can't help it, Mother. I'm your son and I love you. I'd like for you to live forever if it were possible."

"I've already lived longer than I should have. Too long, in my opinion."

Josh smiled at me as Jim let out an exasperated sigh.

"Mother, listen, you're obviously not yourself today. It must be another one of those weak spells. I think it's time we took you back up to the house."

"Maggie knows we're here," I said. "Tom Claxton dropped by, and I think he'll be coming over to pick you up in a few minutes."

"Good. We'll find some shade and wait for him. Come along, Mother."

Barbara Alice refused to move. She was staring into the channel once again, but this time the expression I saw on her face was different. Horror and fascination had blended together, turning her face chalk-white.

"Mother, darling, what's the matter? Is it your heart?"

I felt the change sweep over us in an instant. It was like the day Pam and I had tried to ride our horses over the bridge, and the past had intruded, stopping us in our tracks.

There were no clouds, no hint of a breeze, but the air seemed cooler. At first, the only sound that could be heard was Barbara Alice's labored breathing.

But then the water below us began to churn, and gradually Beth's struggling form appeared. She was drowning, right in front of our eyes.

Jim went pale beneath his tan. Josh merely looked sad, weary.

Beth flailed her arms around wildly, trying to keep her head above water. Her pale face showed the terror she was feeling – and the disbelief. I could read her thoughts.

She was getting weak. Her body felt so tired and heavy. She didn't want to die this soon. How could this be happening? She was going to marry James. They were going to grow old together in a house filled with beautiful sons and daughters.

Beth's pleading eyes fell on her sister.

"Barbara Alice!" She was crying, choking. "Help me. Please don't....let me....die."

Babe's guilt was written in every line of her tear-streaked face. "Forgive me," she whispered. "God forgive me."

The truth hit Jim and Joshua hard. I could see it in their eyes, on their taut, white faces.

Beth went under, barely struggling. I thought it was for the last time, but she came up again, gasping.

"Please." Her voice was so weak I could hardly hear it.

She slipped underneath the churning water, and was gone.

Barbara Alice let go of her cane and collapsed into her son's arms.

The channel suddenly grew calm. I could hear the sound of an approaching car engine.

Tom's Thunderbird was coming up the driveway. And he had Maggie with him.

Jim had lost the ability to speak. He sat on the bridge holding his mother, while Josh and I worked to revive her.

She came to just as Tom and Maggie reached us.

When she saw the minister's face, she smiled. "So glad. So glad you came."

"Beth, honey, you're going to be all right," said Tom, kneeling beside her. "We're going to take you straight to the hospital."

"No. Must go home. To the Manor."

Maggie looked at me and shook her head. "Poor thing's confused, that's all." She patted Babe's hand. "There, now, you just relax. We know what to do."

"Please, listen to me." She tried to sit up, but Jim wouldn't let her. "You must take me . . . to Rosewood Manor. I need to make things right."

"Beth, what is it that's troubling you?" Tom asked. "Why did you want me to come over here today?"

Joshua spoke up before Babe could answer.

"She wants to see her childhood home again before she dies. She has unfinished business up there, and I think we ought to let her do whatever it is she needs to do."

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Pamela heard us coming and opened the front doors. When she saw the expression on my face, she knew the moment of truth had arrived at last.

Jim carried Barbara Alice into the parlor and laid her gently on the long sofa. The shock he had been suffering from had apparently worn off.

"Mother, whatever it is you're planning on doing here, please do it quickly. I need to take you to the hospital." He propped two pillows behind her so she could sit up comfortably.

Babe was calmer now, and breathing easier. She had recovered enough to speak without difficulty.

"Thank you for bringing me home again. I haven't been in this house since my father died."

She took a long, deep breath.

"Jim, dear, sit down on the sofa with me, there's still room. All of you have a seat, please. I have a story to tell, or perhaps I should say I have a confession to make."

"I don't think this is a good idea, Mother, you're not well. Surely it can wait."

"No, son, it can't. Please don't interrupt me. This is going to be the hardest thing I've ever had to do, and knowing that I don't have long to live is the only thing that makes it easier for me. In the past, I couldn't bring myself to tell the truth. I knew that if I did, from then on, I would have to see the hurt, the disgust that people felt for me. People I loved."

She paused and took another deep breath. Jim was staring at her, and I could tell he was afraid of what she was going to say next.

Tom was in the chair across from me, stroking his sandy beard uneasily. Josh had been leaning on Barbara Alice's cane, but once she had begun to speak, he had sat next to Maggie, whose face now wore a bemused expression.

Pam was sitting on the chaise longue by the windows, quietly waiting for the drama to unfold.

After a moment's rest Babe was ready to continue.

"I'm not Bethany, I'm Barbara Alice. I stole my sister's identity on the day she died."

A heavy silence followed her stunning announcement.

Tom loosened his tie, his face flushed. Maggie seemed close to having a fainting spell. Joshua took her by the hand.

"It was an impulsive, unforgivable act. I wonder, just as you do, how it ever could have happened. I never thought of myself as wicked before then. I had suffered from guilt because my mother had died in childbirth. And when my father announced my sister's engagement, I felt guilty because I realized I was in love with James too. I couldn't stand for Beth to show me any kindness or understanding. As their wedding approached, I became more and more unhappy. It filled me with despair, seeing them together and knowing that, as Maid of Honor, I would soon have to witness their marriage. James would never know how I felt.

"I suppose I became desperate. I tried to be more like Beth. I made a fool of myself, trying to get his attention in any outlandish way I could. But nothing I did worked. On the night before Beth died, I watched her dancing and laughing with James in the garden, and I finally accepted the inevitable. They were so much in love. I saw that the feelings they had for one another were so deep and true, no one could ever come between them."

She sighed, and closed her eyes tightly as if to shut out the memory.

"The next day, Joshua's parents had an anniversary celebration, which my whole family planned to attend. It was such a warm day, Beth and I put on our white lawn dresses. Just before we left the house, she came into my room and offered to let me wear our mother's cameo. Papa had given it to her on our birthday. I think Beth knew I loved James, and she felt sorry for me. I didn't want her pity, but I wore the necklace to humor her.

"We were the last ones to arrive at the party. I drove us there in one of our carriages, and as we came up the driveway at Willowhaven, the wind picked up so fiercely that Beth's hat blew off across the yard. It was a new one, a gift from Mrs. Davenport, so she went after it. I walked around to the back of the house and found James on the porch. When he saw me, he assumed I was Beth. Maybe it was the longing in my eyes that fooled him, or the cameo I had never worn before, but he took me in his arms and kissed me. I should have said something, but I couldn't. It

happened so fast, and I wanted to pretend for just a little while that it was me he loved.

"When we broke apart, Beth was standing in the yard nearby, in shock. She had seen us kiss, and I guess she thought the worst. For one long moment, she reminded me of a statue, empty and frozen. Before I could do or say anything, she dropped her hat and ran away in tears.

"I didn't tell James he had made a mistake. I let him think it was me who had run off in a fit of jealousy. He understood when I went after Beth. I caught up to her not far from the bridge. I tried to explain what had happened, but she wouldn't listen. I had never seen her that hurt, that angry. She demanded that I take off the necklace, right then, and give it back to her. And that's what I did."

Tears were rolling down Babe's face. None of us made a sound as she struggled with her emotions. When she spoke again, her voice was small and distant.

"She said I didn't deserve to wear the cameo. If it hadn't been for me, our mother would still be alive. Doctor Rutledge had said so, and he had told everyone. Everyone knew it was my fault she was dead. It would have been better if I'd never been born."

Babe wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I believed every word that she said. I think, deep down, I had always believed it. I always felt unworthy of my family. I just knew that Papa loved Beth more than he loved me. Beth was so much like Mother. And I was the one who had taken Mother away from him.

"I followed Beth for awhile, after she said all those terrible things to me. I couldn't go back to the party, and I didn't want to go home. I felt numb. I didn't want to exist anymore.

"Beth was running away from me when it happened. The necklace came undone when she was crossing the bridge, and she tried to save it. It was lost forever when she fell into the channel.

"Her screaming, I could hear it, but it didn't mean anything to me. I knew I could save her, but I just stayed where I was, listening and waiting. My twin sister was drowning, begging me for help, and I felt no emotion. When I finally walked over to the edge of the bridge and looked down, she was already slipping away for the last time. It was too late.

"It was when she disappeared that the numbness left me, and I realized what I'd done. What I'd lost, forever. How could I tell James and Papa, and everyone else, that their beloved Beth was gone, and I had let her die?"

"I never should have been born. Her words came back to me, then, so plain, and I knew what I had to do. If I told the truth, their grief would be so much worse, so why not tell everyone that it was me, Barbara Alice, who had died? I would become Bethany.

"I told everyone that I had followed my sister after she had become upset, and hoping to cheer her, I had given her the cameo to wear. She had tripped and fallen into the water unconscious. I couldn't swim. I couldn't save her.

"It was so strange, at first, being dead. And seeing everyone's reaction. My poor brother. I knew he would grieve the most over my death. When he pulled Beth from the water, thinking she was me, and saw that it was too late, he cradled her in his arms and sobbed until Papa finally forced him away. I had never seen Nathan cry before.

"James was deeply saddened, but he held me close, and whispered that he was so thankful it wasn't 'me' who had drowned. Beth was buried on their wedding day, in the dress I was supposed to wear as Maid of Honor. And no one, not even James, suspected the truth.

"It was easy in the beginning. I knew Beth so well. I gave up my own habits, likes and dislikes, and adopted hers. I buried myself in the role. And when 'Beth' gave up painting, and neglected her piano, well, it was due to grief. In some ways 'Beth' would never be the same because of her loss. Everyone understood this. Everyone was sympathetic.

"I had six months to mourn, and to prepare for my wedding. I needed to know James the way Beth had known him. I searched for her diary, hoping the secrets inside would help me with my masquerade. But I never found it."

Babe looked at me with a little smile. I saw the irony of her situation. She had given the journal as a gift to her sister, and decades later, a stranger had found proof of her guilt because of it.

"Walking the path I had chosen would become more difficult as the months and years went by. Being someone else, giving up one's own identity forever, is like being locked in a prison from which there is no escape. Eventually I came to consider it a form of punishment, and it helped me rationalize - justify - my silence from that day forward.

"No one ever discovered my secret. I think that late in his life, Nathan came to suspect the truth, but he didn't want to believe it. He could never bring himself to ask me about that day.

"If only I could go backwards in time and live just a few precious moments over again, bring Bethany back to us." Her lips trembled. "I'd give my own life in

exchange if it were possible. But it isn't, and I don't expect to be forgiven. I can't even forgive myself."

Babe's voice fell to a whisper. "Pray for me, Tom. Pray for my soul, if it isn't too late."

Josh offered Maggie his handkerchief, and she used it to stifle a sob.

The minister slid out of his chair and knelt in front of Babe. Taking both her hands in his, he said, "If you're truly sorry, it's never too late to ask for God's forgiveness. He sees inside all our hearts. We can never hide the truth from Him."

Tom looked around at our solemn faces, at Jim's bowed head, and then he smiled.

"Yes, we'll all pray for you. We'll pray for as long as it takes . . . Barbara Alice."

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She was buried beside her husband's memorial. It was a small ceremony, only seven of us were witness to it. Quietly, on that same sunny day, Beth's tombstone was replaced.

Things were finally as they should be.

I knew Beth was at peace now, and I knew that she had forgiven Barbara Alice. The story Jim had told us about his mother's death in the hospital had convinced me I was right.

Shortly after midnight, on the third of June, Jim fell asleep in a chair beside Barbara Alice's bed. He awoke at dawn, and when he checked on his mother he found that she had passed away in her sleep. As he sat on the bed, holding her hand, he began to notice the sweet scent that hung in the air. The room smelled strongly of roses, but he couldn't find a single flower.

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I stapled the pages of my new outline together and laid them on top of my untitled manuscript. I had completed Chapter Seven the previous night, ending it with a

bang - literally. The love triangle my twin brothers were involved in had turned deadly. The plot was about as thick as it was going to get.

I couldn't wait to see the satisfied smile on Gordon's face. He would be arriving that afternoon, just in time for the wedding.

Controlled chaos existed outside the library. I had taken refuge here to preserve my sanity, and this had given Pamela the time she needed to smuggle her Edwardian wedding gown up to the guest room.

I took a deep breath and jumped back into the fray.

Pam's towheaded niece and nephew had flown out with Matt and Caroline the day before, and had instantly befriended Sam Claxton. Now the three of them were taking turns riding up and down in the dumbwaiter.

"Derek, PLEASE take the children outside," Pam said, as I walked by the kitchen. She was on the phone, trying to give her friend Toshi directions to the Manor.

Her brother had disappeared, so I herded the kids out the back door. They charged towards the lily pond, screaming at the top of their lungs.

Nina and Caroline were decorating the gazebo with hanging bells and crepe-paper streamers. Matt stood in the shade nearby, nursing a cold drink and supervising their efforts.

I was trying to decide how to make myself appear useful when Derek popped out from behind a bush and snapped my picture.

"Hey, be sure and save some of that film for the good stuff, will ya?"

He ran back into the house, snickering.

The rest of Pam's siblings were on their way. We had just found out from Matt and Caroline that Andy's wife Lisa was expecting. Except for "extended bouts" of morning sickness, which we hoped didn't interfere with the ceremony, she was giddily happy and in tip-top shape.

I was helping Matt supervise the ladies at the gazebo when Tom pulled up in a moving van. He had borrowed fifty wooden chairs from his church's recreation room.

For the next half hour I actually had to work. We arranged the chairs in rows to the left and right of the gazebo. Tom would be conducting a "quickie" rehearsal there for us just as soon as all the members of our wedding party and mini-orchestra were assembled.

When the five of us had finished our chores, Caroline asked, "Did anyone see where the children ran off to?"

No one had.

"I guess I'll search the house first. Nina can help me. Alex, why don't you look down by the lake, just in case."

I stumbled onto Pam in the garden. She was cutting pink and white roses to use as centerpieces at the reception.

"Oh," she glanced up when she heard me, "Victor called. Angie had to work this morning after all, so they're taking a later flight."

"One best man accounted for. Now if I can just track down the ring bearers and the flower girl."

She straightened, looking past me into the backyard. "Ready or not, here they come."

The children came running into the garden, breathless and smiling. Kyle was holding a gold-colored Godiva chocolate box.

"We've got a wedding present for you, Aunt Pam," he said.

Amanda hopped from one foot to the other, unable to contain her excitement.

"It's a necklace!" she squealed.

"Mandy, you weren't supposed to tell!" Kyle glared at his sister.

Amanda giggled unashamedly.

"Wow, a necklace?" Pam looked at me as Kyle handed her the gift. "How sweet of you guys. Where'd you get it?"

"We found it in the rock pile under the bridge," Sam said.

That I could believe. His mop of strawberry-blond hair looked even more unruly than usual, and there was a smudge of dirt on his freckled nose.

"But don't worry," he added quickly, "we cleaned it off. Now it's almost good as new."

"The lady showed us where to look," Kyle said.

"What lady?" Pam took the lid off the box and began working her way through a dozen layers of paper towel.

"It was the lady that used to live here," Sam answered. "She said she lost her necklace a long time ago, and if we found it, it could be our present to the bride."

"That's you, Aunt Pam," Amanda piped up.

"What did she look like?" Even though I knew the answer, asking the question proved irresistible.

"She had a funny looking hairdo," Sam said.

Kyle nodded. "Yeah, she was kinda weird."

"She was not!" Amanda's big blue eyes flashed in anger. "She looked like a princess. Her dress was long and white, and it had big, puffy sleeves." She grabbed hold of imaginary skirts with both hands and twirled herself around. "One day I'm going to have a dress just like that."

Pamela finally uncovered the long-lost heirloom and held it up to the morning sun.

"Isn't it pretty, Aunt Pam?" Amanda reached out and touched the glittering necklace.

"Yes, sweetie. It's just perfect."

Pam smiled at me.

Suspended from the golden chain, swinging gently to and fro, was a delicately carved white shell cameo.