

CHAPTER TEN

of

Barbara Alice

By Debbie Kuhn

Samson's muscular body began to shake all over. He and Delilah pranced backwards and then sideways, jostling each other.

I leaned forward, my face between his twitching ears, and spoke in a soothing voice, hoping to calm him.

"Shh." Pam put her hand on my arm. "Listen."

I looked around. "What? I don't hear anything."

"Exactly."

Then I understood what she meant. Less than a minute before, an airplane had been buzzing around overhead. Now we couldn't see or hear it. The breeze we had been enjoying had died down, and all the cheerful birds had suddenly stopped singing.

"I think the horses are trying to tell us something," Pam whispered.

I agreed. "Let's go the long way around."

We tried to coax the frightened animals back towards the main road, but for some reason they didn't want to go. We exchanged helpless looks before dismounting and pulling on their reins. The horses planted their feet firmly on the pavement, not budging an inch. The four of us were going nowhere.

Pamela dropped Delilah's reins and placed her hands on her hips. "Fine. So what do we do now?"

I shrugged, thinking it really didn't matter. Whatever was about to happen was unpreventable. The wheels had been set in motion and whether we liked it or not, we were along for the ride. The subdued horses seemed to sense this.

Did Pamela?

Aloud, I said, "We can sit under that willow tree and wait for them to get their wits together, or we can leave them here and walk back to the main road. Maybe they'll follow us."

"I wish we'd brought along some apples or sugar cubes. We could have used them to -- "

She was cut off in mid-sentence by a woman's piercing scream. It had come from the direction of the bridge, thirty feet away.

Samson's reins were torn from my hands as he and Delilah bolted for the road. But we forgot about the horses when another desperate sound reached our ears.

Someone was struggling in the waters of the channel. We could hear the person choking and gasping for air, fighting to stay afloat.

Pamela looked at me, white-faced.

"Babe." There was a hint of anger in her voice. She sprinted towards the bridge, heading straight for the truth while I trailed reluctantly behind.

I watched her run back and forth above the channel, scanning the calm waters for a victim who was already dead. We were like time travelers, she and I, forced to relive the past without being able to change it.

The strangled cries were growing weaker and weaker.

Frustrated, Pamela whirled around to face me.

"Alex, help me look for her. She's in real trouble this time."

"She was," I said simply. "And then she drowned. There's nothing we can do to change that."

"What are you talking about?"

I reached out for her. It was time to explain everything. She would believe me now.

"Barbara Alice!"

Both of us jumped, startled by the name, the agonized plea, that echoed around us. No more sounds from the water could be heard. The struggling had ceased.

I took Pamela in my arms, and we stood locked together in the middle of the bridge, surrounded by a hopeless silence. It felt permanent – final – like death was supposed to be.

Neither one of us spoke.

A few long minutes passed before the stillness lifted. The birds began to chirp and sing again. To the north, an airplane made lazy circles in the sea-blue sky.

Pam's soft hair blew against my face, tickling my cheek. I turned my head away, and then pointed towards the eastern shore of the lake.

"Look. The horses are back."

Pamela's pale face had lost all expression.

"Good," she said quietly. "I want to go home."

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I rummaged through the overcrowded shelves, vainly searching for the rectangular, gold-colored box.

Pamela got up from the kitchen table and peered into the dimly lit pantry.

"It's on the top shelf," she said. "I put it there so it would be harder for me to reach."

Her preferred therapy for shock was a little different than mine. I usually treated myself to a couple of stiff drinks after crises. Pam's idea of the perfect remedy was a box of Godiva chocolates.

"Eureka! I've found it."

I climbed down off the stepladder and handed her the prize. She walked back to the table and sat down.

"Could you make me a glass of iced water? Please."

I fixed the drink and sat across from her, my elbows resting on the oak tabletop.

She consumed a half a dozen chocolates, one right after the other. And then, after drinking every drop of the iced water, she set the glass down with a decisive thud and leaned back in her chair.

"Okay," she said, looking me straight in the eyes. "I feel better now. Talk to me."

I explained who "Babe" really was. And I told her about the other ghostly encounters I'd had. I told her everything I knew, and when I had finished, she folded her arms and gave me a reproachful look.

Maybe I should have had a stiff drink after all.

"You knew our house was haunted and you didn't say anything. You just waited around for me to find out the hard way. Didn't you think I had a right to know the truth?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, remembering the way I had confronted Joshua at the party. I had been as upset with his duplicity as Pamela now was with mine.

"I was afraid you wouldn't believe me," I said, finally.

"And why not?"

I made a rude noise in the back of my throat.

"Do the words 'overactive imagination' mean anything to you?"

She looked away for a moment. "I see your point, in this case, maybe. But your imagination really does run wild sometimes." She paused briefly. "My mother was right again, only this time she didn't realize it."

"What do you mean?"

"She tried to cheer me up the night before she left, after I caused that scene during supper. She told me to blame everything on the ghost."

I slumped backwards in my chair. "You're kidding."

"I thought we were. We had a good laugh about it. She said it must have been a mischievous spirit who put my ring in the dessert. And maybe our solarium had been turned into a deep freeze because the ghost didn't care for Eliza Cook's poetry."

"It all makes sense. Scary, isn't it? Do you think she really believed that, deep down?"

Pam sighed heavily. "I don't know. I didn't take any of it seriously. Not that I'm close-minded or anything, but I guess you were right. I needed to have proof first."

"If it makes you feel any better, so did I. Where the paranormal's concerned, I'm a bigger skeptic than you are."

"You mean you WERE, oh, dear Enlightened One." Her smile faded quickly. "The question is, now that we both know the truth, what are we going to do about it?"

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Pamela had been locked out of the house twice in two days, and we were beginning to think that Barbara Alice was responsible.

It was Friday evening, and Mr. Brady had just confirmed our suspicions. There was nothing wrong with any of the new door locks. After all, they had been installed properly by his own experienced self. And, no, there was no sign of any tampering.

We knew what he was probably thinking as he drove away: "A couple of paranoid city slickers, for sure."

Pamela closed the front doors.

"Why me?" she asked dismally. "From now on, I'll have to carry my house key around wherever I go."

"If Barbara Alice still thinks I'm James, then maybe she's jealous of you."

She paused on the stairs and turned to look at me. "Oh, terrific. We're not even married yet, and already I have to worry about 'The Other Woman.'"

I grinned. "Can I help you finish packing?"

"I'm not so sure I ought to leave you here unchaperoned. Barbara Alice may be a ghost, but she's still beautiful and mysterious. Guys love that combination."

I moved slowly up the steps towards her. "Yeah, but I prefer hot-blooded, fun-loving blonds, remember?"

"Mmm, maybe I need to be reminded in a more interesting way."

"You're in luck, then. I've completely forgotten how to behave like a gentleman."

We were at eye level now, and in her gaze I saw an offer I couldn't refuse.

She rested her hands on my shoulders, and we shared a deep, long, satisfying kiss. I had hopes of sharing more, but just as things were getting passionate, the telephone began to ring.

And it wouldn't stop.

We tore ourselves apart.

"Damn. Somebody has bad timing." I glared at the annoying invention on the hall table below as Pamela went to answer it.

"It's probably Toshi," she said, picking up the receiver. "Hello. Hello? Is anyone there?"

She hung up the phone. "Wrong number, I guess. Now, where were we?"

The bedroom was our next destination, and I didn't want to spoil the mood by telling her what I was thinking. Was the timing of the call a coincidence, the caller someone who had simply misdialled? Or had Barbara Alice found a convenient way to interrupt our romantic interlude?

The phone started to ring again as soon as we entered the bedroom. But when Pamela answered it, this time Toshi Kimm, her future Matron of Honor, was on the other end of the line. Pam moved her closet-sized suitcase out of the way and sat on the bed to talk to the violinist.

Toshi would also be performing at the benefit concert that weekend in New York. The two friends would be staying in the Big Apple until Tuesday, taking in the sights and doing some serious shopping. Pamela wanted to find apple-green bridesmaid dresses for Melanie, Lisa and Stephanie.

I took a seat in front of the fireplace while Pam and Toshi made their plans. I was trying to be patient.

Fortunately, the conversation lasted less than five minutes.

"It's all settled," Pam said, hanging up the phone. "We'll both be staying at the Hyatt. I wrote down the hotel's number in case anything should happen while I'm gone."

She sat on my lap and wrapped her arms around my neck.

"What could possibly happen?" I asked innocently.

Before she could think of an answer, I kissed her soundly on the lips.

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Two evenings later I was sitting in the library feeling so disgusted with myself that I wanted to beat my head against the desk. I had dropped Pam off at the airport on Saturday morning and returned home, determined to finish my novel's outline before the weekend was over. But here it was, almost Monday already, and I still hadn't made any progress.

I stared numbly at the blank sheet of paper in my typewriter. Lack of motivation was my problem. It was hard for me to think up a mystery when there was a real one in my life that needed solving. How did one lay a troubled spirit to rest?

The organ clock above my desk came to life, interrupting my thoughts. It played an old German melody each time the hour hand reached the six and the twelve. And now it was telling me it was time for supper. Grateful for the reminder, I fled the library and made my way over to the kitchen.

The smell of the cinnamon broom always made me want a fattening dessert instead of a nutritious dinner. But, since my skills as a cook were minimal, there was no chance of me whipping up an elaborate confection to satisfy my cravings. I would be fixing myself the same simple meal I had made the night before: A grilled cheese sandwich, along with a can of tomato soup.

Just as I was taking the soup off the stove, Maggie called. She knew that Pamela had gone to New York and left me all by my lonesome. Wasn't I dying for company? And dessert, too, maybe?

As I was carrying my tray of food out of the kitchen, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the oven door's window. If my genteel neighbors had dropped by unannounced, they would have been appalled. My face was covered with three days worth of stubble, and my hair was sticking up in all directions. The grungy jeans and tank top I was wearing would have to go.

I had agreed to visit the Davenports that evening around half past eight, which gave me less than two hours to make myself presentable.

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Before I reached Willowhaven's wide portico, Maggie opened the mansion's front door, eager to invite me in. The frilly dress she was wearing complemented her peaches and cream complexion. In it, she looked every bit the southern belle.

"Madame, if I may say so, you are looking especially lovely tonight." I kissed her perfumed hand, and then presented her with a bouquet of lilies I had picked at the last minute. They were tied together with one of Pam's yellow hair ribbons.

"Why, Alexander," Maggie let out a girlish giggle, "you are the sweetest gentleman. Do come in."

She moved aside and I entered the great hall.

The mansion had two front parlors. Directly in front of me was a sweeping staircase that branched off to the left and right. Fortunately, I noticed the hardwood floor's dangerous gleam, and proceeded carefully.

"We'll be having dessert in the Blue Parlor, on our left," said Maggie, leading the way. The long strands of her pearl necklace clattered together as she walked. "We just got back from church, but I've already got the coffee on to brew. It won't take long."

She ushered me into a high-ceilinged room that had crown moldings and painted woodwork. The striped fabric on the Chippendale furniture was blue and white, as were the knickknacks that covered the fireplace mantle.

The only modern piece of furniture in the room was a blue recliner, which Maggie's husband presently occupied. He put down the Reader's Digest he was holding and gave me a nod.

"Joshua, look what Alex gave me. Aren't they pretty?"

"That was an awful nice thing to do, wasn't it? Best put'em in some water before they wilt."

"I'll go do that right now. And I'll bring us back some pie and coffee."

"You're in for a real treat, Alex," said Josh, sitting up. "Maggie's butterscotch pies are famous around these parts."

"Well, now, not too many people make them anymore," said Maggie modestly. "The recipe I have is quite old, you see, and it's very difficult to make."

"Then it must be good. I can't wait to try it."

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable. I'll be right back." Maggie disappeared through a door at the back of the room, and I sank into an armchair across from Joshua.

"How are things over your way, Alex?"

"Not nearly as boring as I'd like them to be."

"Is that so? That wouldn't be Babe's fault, now would it?"

"She's been active all right. So active that Pamela finally found out the truth last week. And she wasn't too happy when she learned I already knew what was going on."

Josh smiled. "Walkin' in my shoes is a mite uncomfortable, ain't it?"

"Quite."

Maggie soon returned with a tray in her hands and a companion at her feet. She set our pie and coffee down on a table, and then pulled a dog treat out of the pocket of her lacy apron.

Phoebe had wavy blue-black hair and hostile brown eyes. When she sidled up to check me out, Maggie slipped me the doggie biscuit for good luck. But the Cocker Spaniel refused to be won over. She snapped at me.

"Phoebe!" Maggie got between us. "You bad girl. Go lay down at once."

Their "little girl" didn't look at all sorry, but she did as she was told. She lay down on a hooked rug in front of the fireplace, and promptly forgot about my existence.

"I just don't know what got into her," Maggie said, for the umpteenth time. "She's never done that before in her life."

"She must be gettin' old and crotchety, like me," said Josh.

"Don't worry, Maggie, there was no harm done. All my fingers are still intact." I wiggled them at her to prove my point. "I don't know about the two of you, but I'm dying to have a piece of that pie."

The slice Maggie handed me had two inches of meringue on top. And it tasted heavenly, just as Joshua had promised. His wife smiled radiantly when I praised her work of art.

Later, as we were having another round of dessert and coffee, I told them about the recent incident at the bridge.

"It's just the saddest thing," said Maggie, shaking her head. "That poor young girl drowning, with no one to save her. I can see why you both were so distraught, going through a nerve-wracking experience like that. It's a shame Pamela had to find out about it that way."

"That's what she said."

"Does Pam want to sell the place now?" asked Josh.

"No, and neither do I. But it's not going to be easy to stay there with Barbara Alice disrupting our lives. I think she may be jealous of Pam, which makes things even more complicated."

I swallowed a mouthful of pie, and continued. "What we both want to do is find a way to help Barbara Alice's spirit move on. I have a feeling that the way she died, and her infatuation with James, aren't the only reasons she's haunting Rosewood Manor. I need to find out for sure, though, and I don't know how."

Josh looked at me thoughtfully. "Why don't you just come right out and ask her?"

I stared at him.

"Joshua may be right, Alex." Maggie's face brightened. "You could have a séance."

"Wouldn't I need to hire a psychic for that?"

She shook her head. "Not at all. Anybody can have a séance. All it takes is a few believers who are willing to seek the truth. Now, I've never had one myself, but a friend of mine did. She was able to contact her brother, and he told her exactly where to find his will. She'd been searching for it for two years straight, and had almost given up hope."

"I'll have to sleep on it, Maggie. I'm not sure what Pam's going to think of the idea."

Josh said, "There is somebody else you could talk to, and that's Beth. Her son Jim's drivin' her up here from North Carolina on the twenty-ninth of May."

"Beth refuses to fly," said Maggie, "which is perfectly understandable, seeing as how her husband died in a plane crash. Although, it wouldn't have happened, mind you, if the Germans hadn't attacked the poor fellow."

Josh put his coffee cup back on the tray. "Convincin' Beth to talk about her sister might take some effort on your part, but it'll be worth the trouble if she has the answers you're lookin' for."

"Amen to that."

I glanced over at an anniversary clock that sat on a table between two long windows. It was a quarter to ten.

When I got to my feet, Phoebe lifted her head off the rug and gave me a cold stare.

"Must you leave so soon?" Maggie asked.

"Afraid so. I don't want to keep you up past your bedtime."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Me and Josh are a couple of old night owls."

"I have been too, lately. I've been staying up late to work on my book and, to be honest, I'm feeling rather tired."

I thanked them both for their gracious hospitality, and Maggie's luscious dessert. Before I left, my hostess wrapped up the last few pieces of the butterscotch pie for me to take home.

Josh came outside with me to smoke his pipe. He leaned against one of the tall, white porch columns, and as I headed over to my car, he said, "It would be a wonderful thing if you could help Babe find peace after all these years. A wonderful thing indeed."

I waved, and sent him a hopeful smile before driving off in my Mustang.

I took my time getting back to the Manor. When I reached the crest of the hill, I saw something that made me want to turn around and race back to Willowhaven.

A light was shining in the window of the Rose Room.

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