

CHAPTER THREE

of

BARBARA ALICE

I stood there, openmouthed, staring at the place she had been standing a moment earlier. It was nearly a twenty-foot drop to the water below. I expected her to scream, but the only sound I heard was a hollow splash.

I couldn't believe it. First I almost run her over, and now this. Even if the girl knew how to swim, she could have injured herself in the fall.

I rushed over to where she had fallen. I saw no sign of her anywhere. Pacing back and forth, I leaned over both sides of the bridge to see if she had surfaced somewhere underneath it.

A full minute had passed since her disappearance.

This country boy was a lousy swimmer. If I went in after her I'd probably end up drowning the both of us, especially if she panicked. But I knew I had no choice. There was no time to go for help.

I kicked off my loafers and positioned myself on the edge of the bridge, wishing I could tell exactly how deep the narrow channel was.

"I reckon it's about eight to ten feet."

I did a wild dance, trying to regain my balance so I wouldn't go tumbling into the lake. I'd been so absorbed in dealing with my dilemma that I hadn't realized I was muttering to myself, or that there was someone around to hear me.

Having avoided a painful belly flop, I turned around to see who had nearly caused my already overtaxed heart to stop beating.

The first thing I noticed about the man was the pair of bright yellow suspenders he had on. The smile he wore under his droopy, white mustache was wide and friendly.

"Fine day for a swim, ain't it?" His light blue eyes were sparkling with amusement. "I'm your neighbor, Joshua Davenport."

Instead of shaking his outstretched hand, I shoved my car keys into it and blurted out the reason for my upcoming jump off the bridge. I told him to take my convertible if he needed to and go call for help.

Without waiting for his response, I turned my back on him and jumped feet first into the lake. I suffered another shock when I hit the ice-cold water.

The old man had been right. The water was at least ten feet deep through the channel and I did not hit the bottom.

I surfaced quickly for air before beginning my search along the sandy floor. There was a good chance the lady's skirts had become entangled in some reeds or heavy branches, preventing her from floating to the surface.

The cold water was having a sluggish effect on my movements. It took me several minutes to skim the floor and the rocky banks of the channel.

I was exhausted and I still had found no trace of the woman. With a sinking feeling I realized that even if I found her now, this very instant, she probably wouldn't live.

Shivering, I pulled myself up onto an embankment and leaned back against the rocks to rest, hoping to hear the blessed sound of sirens any minute.

"You about finished lookin' around down there?"

Joshua was sitting on the edge of the bridge with his legs dangling, calmly smoking a pipe.

I got the distinct impression he had been sitting up there ever since my dramatic exit off the bridge. I hoped for his sake he knew something that I didn't know, because a beautiful young woman was as good as dead.

The desperate anger I was feeling heated up my insides faster than a shower of warm sunshine. He met me at the top of the steep embankment. Sensing I was about to batter him with questions, he held up a hand to silence me.

"Now, don't fly off on a tangent and run for help. You'd just be wastin' more of your time."

I wasn't reassured – I was confused. He hadn't gone for help and he sounded totally unconcerned. Did he think trying to save someone's life was a waste of time?

"No, sir," Joshua paused long enough to take a draw off his pipe, then stated matter-of-factly, "There's nobody here that needs savin'."

I blinked. The old geezer was obviously senile, and if that was the case there was no point in arguing with him. The authorities had to be called. I walked off, barefoot and dripping, towards my convertible.

I was afraid I was going to be sick.

"Mister," he shook the car keys at me when I turned around, "you'll need these."

I trudged back.

"Best wait awhile before you go drivin' that fancy sports car. You're as white as a ghost."

I grabbed the keys out of his hand and stalked past him to retrieve my shoes. He followed me.

"The damsel that's causin' you all this distress is on her way back home, wherever that might be."

I stopped in the middle of the bridge and turned to face him.

"She climbed up the bank at the other end of the channel and went 'round the hill. Just like she did the last time."

"Excuse me?" I gritted my teeth.

"You've been fooled, son, but you needn't feel bad about it. Babe – that's what I call her – pulled this exact same stunt on me. She's famous around these parts for dressin' up and actin' out make-believe tragedies. It's all a game to her. She pretends to be in trouble, gets everybody riled up, and then she disappears. Nobody knows where she sneaks off to. You're the latest gent who's been unlucky enough to cross paths with her."

The theme music from The Twilight Zone began to play loudly in my head. If I were lucky, Rod Serling would step out from behind a tree and end this episode before I began foaming at the mouth.

"You could have told me all this a helluva lot sooner." I stripped off my soggy T-shirt and wrung out the excess water, my shaky hands making the task difficult.

He shrugged and blew a smoke ring into the air. "You seemed pretty fired-up to me. I figured you'd be a little more apt to listen if you wore yourself out first."

My sour expression made him grin. I didn't know whether to hug him with relief or hang him by his suspenders from the side of the bridge.

I did neither: I walked a few feet away and slipped on my loafers.

"Babe's damned convincin' all right," Josh said, chuckling. "Who'd think a dainty lookin' miss like that could dive off such a high bridge and swim away like a fish?"

I didn't find his observation humorous. Her behavior went beyond eccentric. The young lady needed some serious help in my opinion, and I said so.

His smile faded. He turned away slightly to stare out over the eastern half of the lake.

"I'm inclined to agree with you on that."

"Why do you call her Babe, anyway? Why not Jane Doe, or the Lady in White?"

He started walking and I fell into step beside him.

"She reminds me of a girl I used to know. Her nickname was Babe."

We were on our way back down the driveway when I remembered the bizarre events that had taken place twelve hours earlier. Maybe I was going to be lucky enough to solve two mysteries in one day.

"Babe wouldn't be in the habit of breaking into houses at the crack of dawn, would she?" I asked, sounding hopeful.

He lifted a bushy eyebrow. "That I couldn't tell you," he said slowly. A few moments later he couldn't resist asking me why I wanted to know.

I gave him a brief account of the strange goings-on up at the Manor. When I had finished he turned to me as if he were going to say something, then he seemed to change his mind.

I wanted to question him further, but for now it would have to wait.

A woman was leaning her plump figure against the front end of my convertible. She was balancing a small covered tray on one arm, and fanning herself with a broad-brimmed hat. When she saw us approaching, she plopped the straw hat back on top of her silver curls to wave in our direction.

Josh waved back. "Yonder's my wife Maggie."

My third introduction of the day, and hopefully my first normal one. I slung my wet T-shirt over my shoulder and braced myself.

Joshua's wife stepped away from my car and smoothed the wrinkles out of her floral skirt.

I formally introduced myself to both of them, and Maggie politely ignored my untidy appearance.

"We simply couldn't wait to meet our new neighbors," she said warmly.

"We're not the only neighbors he's seen today, Mag." Josh said, rather cryptically. "Babe's struck again."

Maggie put a hand to her throat. "Oh, dear, isn't that a shame? I feel so sorry for that poor soul."

I didn't say so aloud, but if I ever ran into the girl again Maggie would have good reason to feel sorry for her.

"It's a good thing it's warm out." Josh pulled a white handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiped his brow. "This time last week you'd have felt like an icicle in those wet clothes."

"Even so, Joshua, he must be anxious to get home. We don't want to hold him up any longer than we have to." Maggie turned to me with a motherly smile.

"Josh and I like to take walks around the lake every now and then, and since it was such a pretty day we thought we'd walk on up the hill and give you two young sweethearts a proper welcome."

She let me have a look underneath the cover of the round silver platter and I saw a chocolate layer cake.

I expressed my appreciation for the kind gesture, and, although what I really wanted to do was go home and have a solitary drink on my veranda, I knew what was expected of me.

I drove the three of us up to Rosewood Manor – while Maggie, huddled in the back seat with the cake on her lap, held on to her flapping sunbonnet with both hands.

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Pamela was amazed, and sometimes amused, by the story of my unexpected dip in the lake. After beginning the tale, I let Joshua finish it while I escaped upstairs to change. I was hoping to be in a more sociable mood by the time I returned.

Pamela must have read my mind. When I joined the three of them on the front porch, she had a Manhattan ready and waiting for me. Everyone else had chosen to drink iced tea.

It didn't take Maggie long to find out our life stories. Neither she nor Joshua seemed bothered by the fact that Pam and I were living together in sin. Perhaps it was because we were officially engaged.

Pamela's parents had been ecstatic when we'd told them the good news. I could read her father's thoughts four hundred miles away: "It's about time you made an honest woman out of my little girl."

Maggie and Pam hit it off so well that Josh and I barely said a word until the subject of worthy vineyards came up, and his passion for winemaking was revealed. He vowed to let me have a bottle of his homemade brew.

"I plan to start dinner soon," Pamela said. "Why don't the two of you stay and eat with us? We'll have chocolate cake for dessert."

"It's kind of you to offer, dear," said Maggie, as she and Josh stood up to leave, "but we don't want to wear out our welcome. Anyway, we really should be getting home. Our little girl gets upset if we leave her alone for too long."

Pam gave Maggie a questioning look. "Little girl?"

"Well, Josh and I think of her that way. Phoebe has no idea she's a Cocker Spaniel. She acts just like a child."

"Alex and I love animals. He's allergic to cats, but dogs aren't a problem. Why don't you bring Phoebe with you the next time you visit? That way you can stay as long as you like."

"Oh, that silly girl won't go anywhere near –

"Margaret," said Josh suddenly, taking her by the arm, "if we don't hurry we'll miss Gunsmoke."

Maggie looked like her husband had just pulled her back from the edge of a crumbling cliff. Her reaction was something else for me to ponder. I was dying to know what she had been about to say before Josh interrupted her.

"Yes, well, we'd better be on our way." Her fingers tortured the brim of the straw hat she was holding. "I hope you enjoy the cake."

"Oh, no need to worry about that," said Pamela. "I'm addicted to chocolate, and I don't feel guilty about it, either. As far as I'm concerned, the world could use a few more thoughtful neighbors like yourselves."

Maggie's face flushed with the compliment. "It was so nice meeting the both of you. We'll have to get together again soon."

We invited the old couple to our housewarming party, which was three weeks away. They readily accepted the invitation and promised to spread word of the forthcoming event to the other neighbors in our area.

I offered to drive them home.

"Preciate it," said Joshua, "but I don't reckon we'll need a ride this time." He guided Maggie down the veranda steps and into the yard, where they lingered long enough for Josh to light up his pipe again. "It's cooled off some, and we'll be walkin' downhill most of the way."

Pam said goodbye and they waved to us briefly. I saluted them with my empty glass, and then promptly sat down again in the rocker Josh had vacated.

As the two of them walked off hand-in-hand down the driveway, Pamela hopped up onto the porch railing and watched until they disappeared over the hill.

"What a sweet pair they make," she said wistfully. "Do you think we'll be like that when we're their age?"

"No. We'll probably be worse."

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The following two weeks would pass by quickly in a flurry of activity, proving that time flies even when you're not having fun. The remainder of the unpacking was accomplished with a large amount of grumbling and complaining.

On Maggie's advice, we had hired two middle-aged cousins, Ruby and Wanda, to help with the housekeeping every Friday. Our goal was to be settled in and have the house in order by the time Easter weekend rolled around, when Pamela's parents were expected to arrive for a holiday visit. We wouldn't be seeing her sister and three brothers again until the wedding.

Pam was happy with the progress the gardeners were making in the rose garden, and the renovations on the stables had been completed even more quickly than Ray had promised. The painters had finished their job in only three days.

We decided to wait until after the holiday weekend to begin our search for a pair of Arabians. There were simply too many other things that needed to be done before Pam's parents arrived, and we were still working on the final preparations for our housewarming party.

Thankfully, we had no further visits from the wild dog and the weird pianist.

We stayed so busy that Good Friday sneaked up on us before we knew it. At our request, Ruby and Wanda got an early start that morning so they could be finished before Pam and I left for the airport.

Pamela went out to the garden to sweep off the terrace and water the new plants and shrubs. I went from room to room with my newspaper and cup of coffee, trying to stay out of the way while the two cousins cleaned.

Ruby could be intimidating. Her stout frame was almost equal to mine in height, and her flat, round face hardly ever wore a smile. She stormed through the house barking orders like a general; orders her tiny, bird-boned cousin obeyed without question.

Two hours later, Pam went upstairs to take a bath. I was back in the kitchen pouring myself another cup of coffee when Ruby yelled at me from the foyer.

"We're leaving now, Mr. Rowe."

"Be right there." My checkbook was in the library. I jogged down the back corridor and into the south wing of the house.

"Wanda," said Ruby a little later, as I entered the foyer, "you forgot to turn that lamp off in the Rose Room again."

Wanda pushed her round spectacles back up her pointed nose. With an offended look at her cousin, she said, "No, I'm sure I did this time, Ruby."

"Humph, well, it came on again somehow."

I handed them their paychecks and Ruby said, "I couldn't get the switch to work on that reading lamp, Mr. Rowe. Maybe there's a short somewhere. I'd be careful about using it, if I were you."

I nodded. "Right. Thanks, Ruby."

I watched from the vestibule as the two women walked over to Ruby's black pickup. Wanda practically had to run to keep up with her cousin. Ruby climbed into the truck first, and then leaned across the front seat to give Wanda a helping hand.

I closed the front doors when Ruby started the engine. Her pickup was in sore need of a new muffler.

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That afternoon, we drove Pamela's roomy Olds Cutlass to Louisville and picked up her parents at the airport.

After witnessing the exuberant display of affection between Pamela and my future in-laws, the onlookers at the terminal must have thought it had been years since they'd seen one other, when actually it had only been two months.

When it came to looks, Pam's parents, who were both in their mid-fifties, reminded me of Gary Cooper and Doris Day.

Dr. Matthew Jordan had a calm, self-assured demeanor, and was openly affectionate with his wife and children. He had a quiet, soothing voice, and a slow way of talking. When he said something it was straight and to the point.

Back in Fairfield, Iowa, Matt and his wife, Caroline, worked side-by-side at the private practice he had owned since Pamela was a baby.

Whenever I talk about Caroline, I invariably end up using the following cliché to describe her: She has a personality as bubbly as champagne, and just like that sparkling beverage, she never fails to lift the spirits of the people around her.

Caroline thought her duties as a registered nurse were similar to those of motherhood. She nurtured both her children and her patients, and she cherished the relationship she had with each one. The role of caregiver suited her perfectly.

Pamela's close-knit family had caused me to have many envious moments when I first met them. I had loved my grandparents, but they had not been able to take the place of my mother and father. I used to dream about what it would be like to have a brother or sister.

Caroline had treated me like a member of her family almost from the very beginning. Whenever the Jordan clan celebrated a holiday or a special event, I was invited - and she refused to take no for an answer.

When I finally got up the nerve to propose to Pamela, she swore I was only marrying her for her family.

On the way home from the airport, we stopped at a Chinese restaurant for take out. I had suggested that we eat at The Terrace, a popular French restaurant, but Matt and Caroline weren't in the mood for a three-hour meal; they were more interested in seeing Rosewood Manor.

When the mansion came into view, Caroline's first reaction was the same as Pamela's had been: She gasped.

"I can't wait to see the inside. It's beautiful, isn't it, Matt?"

She leaned against the backseat so her husband could have a better look.

"Eye-catching, I would say," he said.

"I can see why the two of you fell in love with it," Caroline said. "Especially you, Alex, with your gothic imagination."

I wasn't sure if I should be flattered or insulted by the remark, so I just smiled back at her and said nothing.

When we arrived at the house, we left their luggage piled up at the foot of the stairs and headed for the kitchen to eat our Chinese food. The Kung Pao Chicken and Szechuan Pork disappeared rapidly, despite the fact that we were also engaged in a lively conversation about Pam's siblings. Caroline filled us in on all the latest news about their families and careers.

At least that's what she thought she was doing. We knew more about what was happening to Melanie, Pam's younger sister, than Matt and Caroline did. We talked to her every weekend. Obviously, Mel hadn't gotten around to telling her parents that Richard, her new boyfriend, was forty-seven years old.

And they sure weren't going to hear about it from us.

We finished eating and cleared off the table in the breakfast nook. Pam put some coffee on to brew while I started the grand tour her parents had been waiting for.

Matt and I hauled their luggage up to the Louis XVI guest suite.

"How wonderful," said Caroline, who came in behind us. "We get to sleep in one of the tower rooms." She walked over to the sitting area, which was surrounded by long windows. "Matt, come see."

Matt walked over to get a look at the view. He stood behind his wife with his arms wrapped around her and his chin resting on her head.

"Impressive."

Caroline leaned sideways and looked up at him. "Remind me to take lots of pictures before we leave."

"Wait 'til you see the view from the third floor ballroom," I said. "It's even better."

We'd just started to climb the second flight of steps when we heard a sharp explosion of sound. The noise had come from the direction of the master bedroom.

"That was probably a door slamming somewhere," I said. "Go on up. I'll just be a minute."

When I walked into the master bedroom I saw Pamela standing on the balcony. The French doors were closed, and she was trying her frantic best to open them.

"Step back a little," I said loudly. She did so reluctantly. To my surprise, both knobs turned easily in my hands. I opened the doors wide enough for her to slip inside.

"Thank God you showed up," she said, her voice shaking. "One more minute out there and I would've become hysterical."

"What happened? I thought I heard a door slam."

"You did." She collapsed onto the brass bed. "I was on my way up to join you guys when I looked in here and noticed the French doors were open. Then – as clear as a bell – I hear a woman singing in the garden. She stopped when I walked into the room. I went out onto the balcony, just far enough to see the terrace, and then, I don't know, I guess a gust of wind blew the doors shut. When I tried turning the knobs, they wouldn't budge."

I stepped out onto the balcony. The knobs appeared to be working fine now. I moved closer to the railing and looked out over the terrace. Whoever it was had gone.

I came inside and closed the doors. "There might be something wrong with the locks. I'll take a look at them later. Did you see anyone in the garden?"

"No, but I wasn't looking very hard."

"Maybe it was my elusive friend Babe. Or our mysterious piano player." I walked over and sat on the foot of the bed, next to her. "Should we tell your parents about all that...and this?"

She sighed. "It's too bizarre. I don't want to upset them."

"Then we won't. They're leaving Monday morning anyway. Chances are, we won't have to worry about any more strange visitations between now and then."

I don't know how or why, but as soon as I said it, I knew it was wishful thinking.

Chapter Four coming in October.

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