

CHAPTER FOUR

of

BARBARA ALICE

by Debbie Kuhn

Matt went golfing every Saturday -- come hell or high water -- so I knew where I would be spending the afternoon.

Caroline usually played golf with her husband, but Pam had convinced her, rather easily I think, to go shopping instead. The ladies set off, prepared to search through all the vintage clothing stores in Louisville. Shortly after we had moved into the house, Pam had found a turn-of-the-century fashion book in the library. Ever since then, she had had her heart set on finding a vintage dress to wear on our wedding day.

Matt and I were to meet the girls for dinner that evening at the Crestview Country Club, which was adjacent to the golf course.

Some golfers must have their own fairy godmothers. And if this was true, I was one player who didn't. It would explain why I always played a miserable game of golf, and why Matt could play expertly time after time on any course in the country. But he had another explanation. He pointed out that he had had many more years to practice the art of golfing. He assured me that by the time I was his age, I'd probably be an expert.

Yeah, right.

We were playing the sixteenth hole when it began to rain. The sudden spring shower didn't last long, but by the time it was over we were soaked to the skin. Going home to change clothes would make us late for dinner, so we decided to join a group of other drowned golfers at the club who had taken tables on the glass-enclosed patio. The sun was shining brightly once more, but I didn't feel any of its warmth. The place was air-conditioned.

By the time my clam chowder arrived, my teeth were chattering so violently I could barely eat it. Matt didn't seem fazed by the cold at all, and he had gotten just as wet as I had. His blasted fairy godmother must have been waving her magic wand around his chair.

That evening, before sunset, the four of us gathered in the solarium and had hot tea with honey. It felt good going down. My throat was so sore I couldn't eat any of the leftover scones Pam had made for breakfast that morning.

Matt said he felt just fine, and Caroline said it was because they both took ample doses of Vitamin C everyday, which is what Pam and I should have been doing. Actually, we had several bottles of the stuff upstairs in our medicine cabinet. Caroline gave us a bottle every time we saw her.

Despite feeling ill, I found that I was enjoying myself. We sat around the low table in our overstuffed wingchairs, sipping our tea and talking about the day's events. The solarium was even more cheerful now that Pam had filled it with potted palms and hanging vines. She had moved the wooden birdcage closer to the windows, and had placed a large fern inside.

Caroline had bought us an aloe vera plant that day. She wanted Pam to have one close at hand in case she ever burned herself while working around the stove. With this in mind, Pam had set it on the window sill above the kitchen sink. Caroline had also gotten us a decorative, cinnamon-scented broom, which I was too congested to smell. I had hung it above the entry to the breakfast nook.

The girls had arrived home later than expected from their shopping expedition. Pam had waltzed through the front doors empty-handed, but her dreamy smile told me she had bought something special. The details spilled forth from the two women almost simultaneously.

The wedding dress had not been found in any of the Louisville shops. On their way back home, while passing through the nearby town of La Grange, they had spotted a little vintage clothing store. The ivory lace dress that was displayed in the window was Edwardian. And Pam had fallen instantly in love with it. She had purchased it without hesitation, leaving it there to be altered.

Since we wouldn't be following tradition by spending the night before our wedding apart, Pamela had decided that I shouldn't see the dress until she walked down the aisle.

She knew very well that I love surprises. Pleasant ones only, please.

On the way over to the solarium, Caroline had stopped by the library to choose a book of poetry. There were scores of them, but they were easy to browse through. Someone had arranged them all in alphabetical order by the authors' last names.

Caroline was looking for Emily Dickinson, but she ended up choosing a poet I had never heard of. Her name was Eliza Cook.

When the conversation started to lag, Caroline picked the book up off the table in front of us and began leafing through it.

"There's an inscription here on the first page," she said. "'To Bethany Anne on your sixteenth birthday; Love and prayers, Aunt Tabitha.'"

"Bethany Anne," repeated Matt. "Wasn't it Beth who sold you the house?"

"Yeah, her older brother died and left it to her." My voice sounded like two pieces of sandpaper rubbing together. "Our agent said Beth moved away after she was married."

"I can see why," said Pamela. "Her mother died in childbirth here, and then her twin sister died when they were both still young. She must have some painful memories."

"Yes, I expect she would," Caroline said, without looking up. She was carefully turning the yellowed pages of the leather-bound book. "I think every old house I know of has seen its share of tragedy."

The sun was slipping away, leaving behind blood-red streaks in the darkening sky. The room felt cooler.

"Eliza Cook must have known a lot of sadness," Caroline went on. "Most of her poetry seems to be about death and dying and losing loved ones."

"That's understandable," Matt said. He set his empty tea cup down on the table. "One's life expectancy wasn't very high in those days."

"Can we please change the subject?" I ended the question with a sneeze. "Having a cold is depressing enough."

Pamela laughed. "I agree with Alex. This is supposed to be the most cheerful room in the house."

"Very well." Caroline propped her stocking-clad feet up on the table. "Beth earmarked some of the pages. How 'bout I read a few of her favorite poems?" She looked over at me and smiled. "The ones that aren't sad."

She skipped "The Only Daughter" and "The Ship and The Maiden," and read "A Spring Sketch" and "The Gipsy Child." The next poem she chose was the most entertaining, perhaps because it was so macabre.

"The Sacrilegious Gamesters" was about three thieves who dig up their dead comrade late one night and break into a church. The four of them end up sitting around the communion table, where the three pals begin drinking and playing

cards. Of course, they are caught in the act by a few of the pious villagers. But not before one of the thieves is seemingly struck dead by the hand of God.

Interesting subject matter for a poem, considering the fact that the author was a prim and proper Victorian lady.

Caroline began reading "The Trysting Place." Sprawled in my comfortable chair, I sat listening to the melodious sound of her voice and watched the fog gather outside the windows.

The room was even cooler now. Writhing tendrils of mist moved over the glass like pale ghostly fingers searching for a way in. I shivered.

Whoa, Alex. You'll be hallucinating next.

Caroline finished the poem she was reading and laid the book on her lap. She rubbed her hands together.

"Is it just me, or is it freezing in here?" she asked.

"It has gotten a bit uncomfortable," said Matt.

I was surprised he had even noticed.

"I'm cold too." Pamela stood and stretched. "I'll go turn the heat back on."

She was only gone for a few minutes.

"The rest of the house feels warm," she said. "Why don't we move over to the music room? I have a benefit concert coming up and I need to practice my Rachmaninoff selections anyway."

"Ah, music I can appreciate," Matt said, rising from his chair.

I was the last one out of the solarium. When I got to the door, I paused and looked back at the row of fog-shrouded windows. I expected to see someone standing there, watching me. But there was no one.

It must have been the cold mist that spooked me. It seemed to have a life of its own.

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I had a good excuse for not going to church the next morning: My cold was worse. Pam and her parents attended Easter services at the Methodist church over in La Grange. I stayed in bed, enveloped in an antihistamine haze.

When they returned, I pulled on a pair of faded blue sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt and felt my way down the back stairs. I joined the three of them in the kitchen.

Pam was making coffee. She had on a long, rather tight-fitting gray skirt and a pale pink sweater, along with a single strand of pearls. I thought she looked like a sexy Sunday School teacher.

"Feeling any better?" she asked.

"A little." I leaned against the counter, right next to her. "My tongue feels like it's been wrapped in cotton."

"Poor baby." She reached up and patted me on the cheek. "I think your temperature is going down. Don't forget to take your medicine, though."

"Pamela," said Caroline, who was on the phone, "come talk to your sister for a few minutes so I can change clothes. This wool suit is itching me to death. I don't know how you can stand to wear it."

"We are so delicate these days, aren't we?" cracked Pam, taking the receiver.

If I hadn't already known where Melanie was, I would have been able to tell she was at Gabe and Stephanie's house by all the noise I heard in the background. Pam had to hold the receiver away from her ear.

Kyle and Amanda, her young niece and nephew, were running around shrieking like banshees after overdosing on Easter candy. It was an annual occurrence. Next year it would all take place at Andy and Lisa's house. It would be their turn to play host and hostess, and by that time they might have a baby of their own. They were definitely trying hard enough.

Matt had walked into the room just as Caroline had walked out. He was wearing the brown cardigan that his wife had made for him several birthdays ago. She had had to mend it over and over again because he wore it constantly throughout the fall, winter and spring seasons.

"Feel up to an afternoon excursion?" he asked. "We were thinking about taking a tour of Old Louisville. There's one mansion in particular we wanted to see. It's called the Conrad Houston house. Maybe you've heard of it."

I nodded. Conrad Houston had been a prominent Louisville citizen. His mansion was unlike all the other grandiose Victorians in the old section of town. Its architecture was that of a lesser known, late-nineteenth century style called Richardsonian Romanesque.

"I know where that is." I reached into the cabinet behind me for a coffee cup. "You can count me in, I guess. Staying home and feeling sorry for myself isn't much fun."

"The fresh air and sunshine will do you good," said Caroline. She had returned already, looking far more comfortable in a white cotton top and denim skirt.

Pam was now talking to Derek, her sixteen-year-old brother. He was also known as the "Little Accident." If it hadn't been for him, Matt and Caroline would have been empty nesters a long time ago. But it wouldn't be long, now, before Derek flew away.

He was telling Pamela about his brand new driver's license, and how his parents had allowed him to drive their car up to Gabe and Stephanie's house by himself. From Fairfield, it took less than two hours to reach the northern suburbs of Des Moines, but for Derek that was like taking a cross-country trip.

Pam could hardly get a word in edgewise.

"Don't hang up," Caroline whispered loudly. "I want to talk to him."

Before the call was over, each of us had the privilege of speaking to Derek.

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Pam made me change clothes before we left on our afternoon outing. She thought sweats were too unflattering to wear in public, so I threw on one of my khaki outfits. I looked like I was going on safari, but, alas, Kenya would have to wait.

It was the perfect day for an open carriage ride through Old Louisville. The elderly guide and his frisky young mare took us around Central Park and up one stately tree-lined street after another, passing fountains, statues, and spring flower beds along the way.

If we hadn't been the owners of one of the most impressive Victorian mansions in the state, we would have been awestruck by the splendid old homes we saw. Our favorite was the Conrad Houston house, located on the corner of Fifth and Magnolia.

We drove by the Romanesque mansion slowly. Bob, our friendly guide, pointed out the architectural details that made the three-story structure unusual. It had masonry walls with squared stonework, imposing towers, arched windows, and short, thick columns under Syrian-like archways.

Bob stopped the carriage at one point so Pam's father could take a picture. I felt certain that if Matt hadn't become a doctor, he would have ended up an architect like his son Andrew.

I couldn't stop yawning during our sightseeing excursion, but it wasn't from boredom. The potent cold medication I had taken was making me drowsy. I did my best to fight off the effects.

Bob had made the tour interesting as well as informative. It was plain to all of us that he enjoyed his work. When the tour ended, I handed him a sizable tip as I climbed down from the carriage. I hoped it would make up for all the worry my yawning had caused him.

I ended up falling asleep on the way home. Luckily, Pam was driving.

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I had skipped breakfast that morning and had eaten a light lunch early in the day, so when we arrived at the Manor and I awoke, the first thing I thought about was Easter supper.

As soon as we entered the house, Pamela rolled up her sleeves and headed for the kitchen. Matt was hot on her heels. I had soon discovered that Pam's interest in gourmet cooking had been nurtured by her father, not her mother.

Caroline went to work in the dining room, using the antique lace tablecloth she had found. She covered it with rose-patterned plates, cups and saucers, and put a sparkling crystal glass next to each setting. After finding out we had invited Josh and Maggie to join us for the Sunday feast, she had stayed up late the night before to clean the delicate set of English bone china and Waterford crystal that had belonged to Rachel Hunt.

Pamela had stayed up late as well. She had made the corn pudding and the green bean casserole ahead of time. Now she and Matt were tackling the rack of lamb - and the dessert.

After Caroline shooed me out of the dining room, I went into the kitchen to watch the master chefs at work. Talking wasn't part of my plan. Whenever Pam and her father cooked a meal together, they preferred to keep the conversation to a minimum. This was to avoid what Pamela called her "blond moments." Like the time she poured cayenne pepper into the Christmas cookie dough. The recipe called for cloves.

I pulled a chair out of the breakfast nook and sat out of their way with a glass of orange juice. This time I was able to smell the spicy scent of the cinnamon broom that hung above my head. And that's probably what caused my sudden sneezing fit.

Matt banished me to the farthest corner of the kitchen.

Instead of cornbread or rolls, Pamela wanted to fix a loaf of homemade bread for dinner. She put the seasoned rack of lamb in the oven, and while Matt prepared the crème brûlée, she began kneading the freshly made dough. It was a good thing we had a double oven.

I finished my glass of orange juice and watched Matt fill six ramekins with the crème brûlée, a custard-like dessert. He arranged them all on a tray to cool.

Pam put the dough in a loaf pan and walked over to the kitchen sink to wash her gooey hands. After drying them with a dish-towel, she said, "That's funny. I thought I laid my diamond on the counter over there. Have you seen it, Dad?"

Matt was putting the dessert tray into the refrigerator. "No. I didn't even know you had taken it off."

Caroline came into the kitchen a minute later and found Pamela on her knees. She put the loaf of bread into the lower oven, and then the three of us helped Pam search the room from top to bottom.

We couldn't find it. The ring was good and lost.

"I'm beginning to think the diamond we picked out has a jinx on it," said Pam, looking dejected -- and cute. She was sitting cross-legged on the black and white floor, her face streaked with flour.

"If we don't find this one soon, I'll replace it with an entirely different kind of ring -- just to be safe." I picked up a dish-towel and wiped both her cheeks.

"Are you sure it didn't fall into the sink, and down the drain?" asked Matt.

Pam stood and dusted off the seat of her jeans. "I'm positive. I had the drain covered, and I didn't lay it down anywhere near the sink in the first place."

"We're trying too hard to find it, that's all," said Caroline. "It'll turn up eventually. And probably in some unexpected place."

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"If nobody minds, I believe I'd like some more of that corn puddin'."

Matt handed the bowl across the table to Joshua, who, after his last serving, had finally had to loosen his yellow suspenders.

I ate the rest of the garlic whipped potatoes, and poured myself another glass of Joshua's homemade Alden grape wine. He had brought a bottle of cherry wine for

Pamela. She and Caroline preferred its sweet flavor to that of the dry wine Matt and I were enjoying.

Methodists weren't supposed to drink alcoholic beverages, but Matt and Caroline saw nothing wrong with having an occasional glass of wine. They believed it could even be beneficial to one's health, if used in moderation.

"So, Alex," Caroline picked up the bread knife and cut another slice off the fresh loaf, "what's your next book going to be about?"

Matt took the bottle of wine from me and refilled his glass. He was seated to my left, Maggie was on my right, and Pamela was sitting at the other end of the table, facing me.

"I plan to start work on the outline in a few weeks, but I haven't really figured out all the plot details yet."

"One thing's for sure," said Pamela, "it'll be another nail-biting mystery of some sort."

"You can count on it," I said, grinning broadly.

"Well, I just can't get over the fact that we live right next door to a famous writer." Maggie sighed. "I wish I could read all those novels of yours, but I'm so nervous and sensitive, every time I try I have the most awful dreams."

"You're not the only one," said Caroline, with a shudder.

"Perhaps you ladies should play it safe and stick to reading romances." Matt took a sip of his wine.

"Not me," Pam said, grimacing. "Those kinds of books are way too predictable. I'd rather read an edge-of-your-seat suspense story any day."

"I prefer a good western myself." Josh picked up a cloth napkin and dabbed at the corners of his whiskered mouth. "Zane Grey could write'em better than anybody."

Matt challenged his assertion. "Ah, but what about Louis L'Amour?"

I wanted to change the subject, but the topic I needed to discuss was off limits as long as Pam's parents were around.

Any further information that Josh might have on Babe, I was interested in hearing. The woman Pam had heard singing in the garden could have been our neighborhood's infamous young bridge jumper. If it was Babe, she was getting too close, and too bold, for comfort.

We finished eating and continued to talk about our favorite books. My new novel was a hot topic. Matt and Caroline tried to make me reveal more details about it than I knew, and Maggie modestly offered to help me come up with a title.

"I can't remember the last time I had such a delightful meal," she said, finally.

It was the hundredth compliment Maggie had given us that evening. Before we sat down to dinner, she had fluttered around the table in her vivid yellow sun dress--reminding me of a canary with a caffeine buzz--praising everything from the china and the tablecloth to the antique silverware.

Joshua pushed his plate away. "Alex, I think you're about to marry the finest cook in the county. Aside from my wife, of course."

"Now, Joshua," Maggie scolded. "You know I hardly ever cook anymore. I'm bound to be out of practice."

"You flatter me, sir." Pam affected a convincing southern accent. "I have to be honest and say I had help this time. Mom and Dad chipped in." She looked over at her parents. "It's too bad you didn't get to have any of the chocolate cake Maggie made for us. I would have eaten the whole thing if Alex hadn't stopped me."

"That I can believe," Caroline said with a laugh. "When you were a child, I had to keep all the sweets under lock and key. Especially the chocolate ones. You were such a determined little piglet."

"Thank you, Mother, for sharing that with everyone."

"Well, dear, some things have changed since then. You have an absolutely darling figure." Caroline's gray eyes sparkled mischievously. "Right, Alex?"

I gave my fiancée a wicked grin. "It's flawless, as far as I can tell."

Pam was wearing a cream-colored silk pantsuit that clung to her body in a most enticing manner.

"Stop teasing the child, both of you." Maggie gave Pamela's bright pink face a sympathetic gaze. "You'll give the poor thing indigestion."

"Would anyone care for dessert?" asked Pam, in a squeaky high voice.

Everyone did, and we laughed as she jumped up and escaped into the kitchen.

"I suppose I should make up for my ornery behavior by helping my daughter prepare the crême brulé," said Caroline, rising from the table.

"That's the least you can do," Matt said. "And please don't forget to make a pot of coffee. The dessert wouldn't be nearly as good without it."

It was at least fifteen minutes before the ladies reemerged through the swinging door, each carrying a silver tray. Caroline's held the coffee pot and the cream and sugar. While her mother poured the gourmet coffee, Pamela began passing out the little bowls of crème brûlée. Each dessert was now covered with a thin layer of caramelized brown sugar.

"Everyone be careful," said Pamela. "These bowls just came out of the broiler a minute ago."

The room was soon filled with appreciative sounds, as each one of us enjoyed our own unique, and heavenly, culinary experience. I suffered instant gratification, but my dignity remained intact.

Matt's didn't. He suddenly made a loud gurgling sound, as though he were trying to swallow a mouthful of dessert that refused to go down. His face wore an expression of surprised enlightenment.

"Darling, what's the matter?" Caroline thumped him on the back.

Matt coughed and spluttered into his napkin, his face beet-red.

At last he was able to talk to us.

"I believe I've found Pamela's ring."

Caroline's mouth dropped open.

"You've got to be joking," said Pamela.

"See for yourself." Matt spread the napkin open and exposed the three karat diamond. Six pairs of eyes scrutinized it.

"You're lucky you didn't choke to death," Josh said.

"Or swallow it," I added cheerfully.

"How could this possibly have happened?" Pam's question was directed more at herself than the rest of us, so no one bothered to come up with an answer.

Matt cleaned the diamond off and gave it to Caroline, who then returned it to their bewildered daughter.

Pam held the ring in the palm of her hand and stared at it without saying a word.

"There, didn't I tell you it would show up?" Caroline patted Pamela's arm. "And no damage done, as far as I can see."

"I'm not so sure about that." Matt rubbed his jaw. "I may have to pay our dentist a visit when we get home."

"I'll believe that when I see it," said Caroline. "You'd have to be in excruciating pain before you'd dare to darken his doorstep."

Matt cleared his throat. "I want everyone here to realize that my wife does exaggerate from time to time."

"You know," Maggie said dreamily, "this reminds me of the Halloween parties I used to go to back when I was a young girl. My friends and I would make these little custard pies with objects hidden in them for everyone to find. It was like a fortune telling game."

It sounded more like Russian Roulette to me. I looked over at Matt, whose complexion had faded back to its normal shade. He was now eating his dessert with gusto.

"What a cute idea," said Caroline. "What kind of objects would you hide in them?"

"Let's see," Maggie pursed her lips, "if I remember right, finding a ring meant the person would marry soon, a thimble stood for spinsterhood, and a coin signified wealth and prosperity."

"And which did you find?" Caroline asked.

"Oh, I never found anything, but that was all right with me." Maggie's face softened as she looked over at Joshua. "I knew who I was going to marry by the time I was fourteen."

"She had her mind made up, that's for sure," Josh said mournfully, his eyes twinkling like stars. "And sooner or later a fella has to stop runnin'. I finally just got so tired I had to give in."

Maggie slapped him playfully on the arm.

"So did I," said Matt, taking his wife's hand. "But I think we both made a wise choice by doing so."

Caroline smiled up at him. "What a sweet thing to say. Although it was really I who gave in to you."

Everyone laughed at Matt's defeated expression. Everyone, that is, except Pamela.

She was still holding the ring, but she wasn't looking at it. She was staring straight at me -- or through me. I couldn't tell which.

"You are right about one thing, dear," Caroline continued. "When it comes to choosing a partner, you and Josh have excellent taste. And so does Alex."

Maggie turned to me. "Have the two of you set a date yet?"

"The twentieth of June. We're having the ceremony here, and we'll be disappointed if you and Josh don't come."

"We wouldn't miss it for the world, would we Joshua?"

"Nope. That would be downright unsociable."

"It's going to be an outdoor wedding, you know," said Caroline. "Unless it rains. Then we'll just have to have it upstairs in the ballroom."

"But if that happens, at least we'll have an excuse to use the dumbwaiter," I said with a laugh. My eyes rested once more on Pamela's blank face. Why was she in such a strange mood?

"Oh, even if the weather's bad, it'll still be a beautiful day." Maggie sighed. "Weddings are so special."

"Well, this one certainly will be. Pamela's dress is adorable. An Edwardian hat with a long veil would go perfectly with it. Or maybe even a simple garland of flowers." Caroline looked at her daughter. "What do you think, Pam?"

Her daughter's response was to burst into tears. The rest of us sat in awkward silence as Pam excused herself and ran into the kitchen.

Caroline's distress showed plainly on her face. "Alex, I hope it wasn't something I said. Should I go talk to her?"

"No, let me." I gave Caroline's shoulder a little squeeze as I walked by.

Pamela hated scenes. Her emotional outburst was probably causing her a great deal of embarrassment already.

I found her standing at the kitchen sink, alternately wiping her eyes and her sticky diamond ring with a damp paper towel. She raised her head when I came in, but refused to turn around.

"I'm sorry," she said, sniffing.

"What was that all about?" I tried to sound amused.

"I'm not really sure. I was trying to figure out how my diamond ended up in the dessert. Dad's the one who fixed the crème brûlée." She threw away the paper towel and slid the diamond back onto her ring finger. "I must have had a major blond moment for that to have happened."

She stared out the window.

"It doesn't matter." I came up behind her and gently massaged her drooping shoulders. "No one was hurt. And now we don't have to replace the ring . . . again."

"I know. I can't explain why, but for some silly reason, I felt so tragic all of a sudden." She leaned back against my chest. "I don't know what I'm going to say to my parents. And Josh and Maggie must think I'm ridiculous."

"They're worried about you. Your mom thinks it was all her fault."

"Great." She turned around in my arms. "I've ruined everybody's evening."

"You're a middle child. According to the experts, you're supposed to be a basket case. You can say you're just now feeling overwhelmed and confused by the fact."

She looked up at me then, and I was relieved to see a smile on her face, weak though it was.

"Look, whatever you tell them, I'm sure they'll understand. Just go back in there and apologize, and then act like nothing happened. They'll be happy to play along."

She took my advice and our guests behaved exactly as I had predicted. Peace and levity were restored.

We moved our party to the music room, where I sincerely hoped there would be no further surprises. Not even the pleasant kind.

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I felt so tired that night that I fell into bed without taking another dose of my cold medication. If I had, I probably wouldn't have been awakened at dawn by the return of the practical joker.

Floating around me were the lilting strains of the same romantic melody we had heard the first night in the Manor. The pianist was good, but why couldn't she, or he, have waited until my future in-laws were on their way home? Matt and Caroline would be leaving to catch a plane in just a few hours.

I was grateful for the fact that Pam was a heavy sleeper. This time I made sure I left the bedroom without waking her.

I flew down the stairs intending to catch Babe, or whoever it was, in the act. But the piano fell silent before I reached the foyer. Once again the music room was empty and the French doors were standing wide open. I was certain I had locked them. The scent of roses in the house was stronger than it had been the last time.

I went out into the dew-covered garden to look around. The rose bushes were not yet in bloom, but dozens of daffodils and tulips glistened in the early morning light. I could see that I was alone.

There was a small lily pond behind the gazebo, and the frogs inhabiting it were singing a chorus loud enough to wake the dead. Somewhere in the garden a lonely whippoorwill joined in with all its might.

So much for all the peace and quiet my friend Victor thought I'd have in the country. During the fifteen years I had lived on my grandparent's farm, I never noticed how noisy nature could be, and I know I never had to worry about practical jokers breaking into my house.

I decided I would let Pamela know about this latest little adventure after her parents had left, but I didn't see what good it would do to tell the sheriff. Not unless we wanted his deputy to start watching the place, and I wasn't ready to go that far. On the other hand, installing an alarm system might become necessary.

I followed the flagstone path around the house to check for any open doors or windows. There were none.

I returned to the garden and reentered the house, closing and locking the French doors behind me. Everything appeared to be in its place. At least we hadn't been robbed.

When I left the music room, I crept silently down the hall to the foyer – and ran straight into Caroline.