

CHAPTER FIVE

of

BARBARA ALICE

"And here I thought I was the only early bird in this house," Caroline said, waving a spatula. "I heard Pam in the music room a while ago, and I thought I'd get a head start on breakfast. She certainly likes to practice earlier than she used to. Is she still down here?"

I blinked and stammered and gestured, and finally came out with, "She's upstairs. Do you need some help with breakfast?"

"No, not a bit. Pancakes practically make themselves. Are you going up now?"

I nodded emphatically.

"Good. You can tell Pamela to wake her father up in fifteen minutes."

Caroline disappeared down the dark hallway to the left of the stairs. I waited until I could no longer hear the swish of her satin robe, then I raced up the steps and into the master bedroom.

Pam was not amused. Like me, she could hardly be called a morning person.

"I don't believe this," she muttered. "The first thing we're going to do when we get back from the airport today is call a locksmith." Her yawn sounded painful. "What if this prowler has managed to get hold of a key to our house? That would explain why there's no sign of any forced entry."

She threw back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "Where's my robe?"

She had accidentally buried it underneath the blankets.

I dug the bathrobe out and handed it to her. "Maybe this person, or persons, is a relative of Beth's who didn't want her to sell the Manor."

"Then why are they bothering us? They could have bought it from her before we did."

I followed her into the bathroom.

"We could've offered her a better price. Maybe they think if they annoy us to death, we'll put it back on the market – cheap."

Pamela poured some mouthwash into a paper cup. "We're not selling this house – to anyone – ever."

She flung her head back and gargled noisily.

"Of course not. But it may take some time to convince the enemy we're not leaving."

My frazzled fiancée pulled her hair back and leaned over the sink.

"The battle could escalate into a war if we're not careful," I said.

Pam wiped her face with a hand-towel and then turned to frown at me. "Do you really think it could come to that?"

I shrugged. "Who knows? But let's look on the bright side."

"Which is?"

We walked back into the bedroom and Pam took a seat at the dressing table.

"That may not be what's happening here at all. These strange visits could be the work of one disturbed woman who has no connection with this house or Beth's family."

"You mean Babe?"

I moved up behind her. "Uh-huh."

Our eyes met in the mirror.

"I think that scares me more than the other scenario," she said.

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We tiptoed around the truth more than once during breakfast that morning. Doing so made us uncomfortable, but we got through it by rationalizing.

Caroline had a tendency to worry a lot about her offspring, and whenever she worried too much, Matt became concerned about her. Considering all this, not telling the truth seemed the wisest thing to do.

After breakfast, I went upstairs to help Matt bring the luggage down. Caroline ran from room to room taking last-minute photographs. She snapped quite a few pictures of the ballroom and its views of the lake and valley.

When she was finished, we loaded up Pam's car and headed for the airport. We thought we would get there long before their flight was scheduled to depart.

But then we merged onto the expressway, which had been transformed into a parking lot.

The four of us heaved a collective sigh.

I turned on the radio. "Shout," by the Isley Brothers, blared forth from the speakers.

"Shouting is exactly what I feel like doing right now," said Pamela. She changed the station and found a news broadcast.

A semi-truck had jack-knifed; blocking both of the west bound lanes.

I knew that if she were able, Pam would be saying some very unladylike things. But I had never heard her swear in front of her parents. Even I had never sworn in front of them. They were a good influence on the both of us.

"Do either of you have any suggestions?" asked Matt.

I did, and it was our only option.

"We can drive on the shoulder up to the next exit, and then go the long way around."

"I say let's do it," said Caroline. "It beats sitting here."

We arrived at the airport a half an hour before their flight was due to take off. They whizzed through the short line at the ticket counter, and then we rushed off together to find the right gate. It was, of course, at the far end of the terminal.

We were all out of breath by the time we got there.

It was not a melancholy parting. Everyone was relieved that we had made it to the airport on time. And we knew we would be seeing each other again soon. The wedding was less than three months away.

When it was time to say goodbye, Matt gave his daughter a bear hug. Caroline kissed Pam's cheek, and took hold of her free hand.

"Listen, dear," she said, "I know we made light of that little episode at dinner yesterday, but I want you to promise me you'll take care of yourself. Planning one's wedding can be even more stressful than moving to another state. If you need any help, you know your father and I would like to do more than just show up and walk you down the aisle."

"Your mother's right," said Matt. "You call us if you need anything, okay?"

"I will, don't worry." Pam put her arm around her mother's shoulders. "I'm sure our lives will become a lot more hectic in the near future, but I'm an optimist. Everything will work out exactly the way it's supposed to when the big day arrives. You'll see."

Murphy's Law flashed through my mind, and I crossed my fingers, hoping she hadn't just jinxed us.

Before they left, Matt gave my hand a firm shake and Caroline squeezed me tightly around the middle.

"Alex, you take care," she said. "Otherwise, that cold will come back stronger than ever."

"Yes, ma'am."

We waved to them as they disappeared down the gangway.

Our drive back to the house was uneventful. No traffic jams or detours slowed us down. Pam and I were silent most of the way home. I was going over a list I had made in my head of all the things I needed to do that week. Calling a locksmith was the first item on my agenda.

An hour later, while Pam was taking a nap, I thumbed through the Yellow Pages and found a locksmith located in La Grange. I gave Mr. Brady a call, explaining that I needed the locks changed on every door in the Manor that led outside. He agreed to come over the following afternoon.

The intruder seemed to be playing a game with us. But it was time to get serious.

That night I decided to sleep in the music room. If anyone broke in, this time they would be on the receiving end of a big surprise.

I fell asleep on the uncomfortably short Victorian sofa after several hours of lying there wide awake, straining to hear the slightest sound. The noise that finally drove me up off the couch, ready to do battle at first light, was not the sound of a piano.

Behind me, on a corner table, the nineteenth century Regina music box was playing one of its oversized metal disks. I recognized the song. It was "Oh, Promise Me."

The previous evening, Pam had picked the disk out of a dozen or so that were stacked on a shelf beneath the table. She had put it on to amuse our dinner guests, and we had all danced to the ballad more than once.

I had to wait until the disk had finished one complete revolution before I could switch the music box off. During that minute and a half my rapid breathing returned to normal and I concluded that my overnight vigil had been for nothing.

The doors and windows were still closed and locked, and there was no way anyone could have gotten in and out again so quickly without my knowing about it.

As for the music box playing by itself, there had to be a reasonable explanation. Maybe we had mice. Maybe one of them had been curious enough to investigate the interesting contraption, and had accidentally moved the switch to the "on" position.

My theory sounded perfectly feasible to me.

I bent over to turn the music box off. As I did so, something icy caressed the back of my neck, sending shock waves down my spine. I whirled around, and was kissed in the face by a cool, sweet breeze from nowhere. It left me awash in the scent of blooming roses.

I stood there for a long time in the deafening silence, while all of my hastily constructed theories crashed down around my head. I couldn't think of a single logical explanation for what had just happened to me.

Somewhere in the back of my closed mind a door began to open.

The early morning concerts, the visitor who always escaped unseen, and the lingering scent of roses where there were none – all of these occurrences did have an explanation that made sense, but the explanation was far from logical: My house was haunted.

I laughed out loud.

Pamela was right after all. I really did have an overactive imagination – tremendously overactive.

I decided to keep the music box incident to myself.

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Mr. Brady turned out to be a no-nonsense, taciturn sort of man who wasted no time in getting down to business. He started in the music room and worked his way up to the master bedroom, where I asked him to examine the lock on the French doors leading to the balcony.

"I can't find a thing wrong with it," he said, when I joined him. "You sure you want to change this one?"

"I think we should." Pam came in behind me, just as the phone on the nightstand began to ring. She went over to answer it.

I stepped around Brady's battered toolbox and walked out onto the balcony. My black T-shirt soaked up the rays from the noonday sun.

"You can change it," I said to him. "That way we only have to keep up with one house key."

Brady nodded and knelt down in front of the lock.

Pamela soon appeared and leaned against the other door. "That was Cliff Randall's son. He wants to be our stable boy, when the time comes for us to hire someone."

"Billy?" asked the locksmith.

"Yes," Pam said. "Do you know him?"

"Pretty well. He used to run errands for me around town. Seemed like a good kid."

"He said he has references, and he can work after school and on weekends."

"That's fine with me," I said. "How old is he?"

Pam grinned. "When I asked him, he said, 'A responsible fifteen, ma'am.'"

"I can vouch for the boy," Brady said, standing up. "He was dependable when he worked for me."

"We may need him around here sooner than he thinks." I turned and looked eastward. I could just see the top of the barn through the trees. "We're going to that auction tomorrow. We could have our horses before the end of the week."

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By Thursday, we were the proud owners of a pair of two-year-old Arabians. We had attended three Oldham County auctions in two days, finding my black gelding first at the Hunt's place, and Pam's white filly last at Seton Acres.

Billy Randall filled our barn's stalls with hay, and helped me carry the new riding equipment into the tack room. The horses settled into their new home with very little fuss.

On Friday, around half past three, I threw on my leather jacket and left the house to meet Billy at the barn. He was coming over directly from school, eager to begin his new job.

I had been a stable boy at his age, but if I remembered right, I hadn't been too thrilled with some of the duties it entailed.

I entered the grove. The sky was overcast, and the stark, bare trees looming over me made the chilly day seem even more somber.

I tried to think up some interesting names for the horses as I followed the twists and turns of the path. My fertile imagination conjured up a foreign sounding name that I thought would suit my gelding. But what I saw when I walked around the last bend in the trail drove the name clean out of my mind.

The beast from hell had returned.

Coming in December – Chapter Six of Barbara Alice

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