

CHAPTER SIX

of

BARBARA ALICE

by Debbie Kuhn

I froze as we made eye contact.

The dog was lying beside the trail at the edge of the grove. If the wind had been blowing in his direction, he probably would have known I was coming.

But I had surprised him. And worse, I had interrupted his meal. His muzzle was stained with the blood of a young grouse.

He rose to a crouching position, growling deep in his throat. I stared at his powerful jaws, wanting to run but forcing myself to remain still.

I'd forgotten how enormous he was. The creature looked like a cross between a Newfoundland and a Rottweiler.

He bared his teeth at me and snarled, the fur standing up on the scruff of his neck.

My I.Q. seemed to drop suddenly, and I had the crazy urge to laugh. All the sympathetic things Pam had said to make me feel sorry for the beast ran through my mind as he moved onto the trail in front of me.

"Nice doggie," I said softly, taking a slow step backwards. "Don't worry. I'm leaving now, okay?"

It was not okay. He lunged.

Just before I turned and ran, I saw Billy walk through the rear doorway of the barn. Poor kid. He would no doubt be the first person to find my mangled body.

I tripped over a tree root and went sprawling. My left arm landed on a thick oak branch that had fallen next to the trail. I grabbed it and rolled over.

The monster was in the air. I swung the stick like a baseball bat, striking the side of his huge head.

The blow was hard enough to knock him to the ground, but he had fallen without so much as a whimper.

Before he could recover, I was up and running again, the branch still in my hand. I knew I would soon have to turn and fight him. The house was too far away for me to reach it in time.

I was almost out of the grove when I heard the enraged animal thundering up behind me. And then, straight ahead, I saw a little miracle standing beside the trail: an oak tree with low hanging limbs, perfect for climbing.

I ran full-tilt towards it, feeling like I had the Devil himself snapping at my heels. I dropped my weapon and jumped, grabbing hold of the lowest limb and swinging my legs up to rest on the next closest branch. I was eight feet off the ground. If I could move my arms and shoulders up so that both limbs supported my body, I'd be able to stand. And then I would be safe.

But the devil was closer than I thought. Before I could move, his teeth latched on to the tail of my leather coat.

I held on for dear life.

Each pull was vicious, and I knew I wasn't going to win. He would drag me down and that would be the end of it. Game over.

My grip loosened. Then all at once he let go.

I pulled myself back up over the limbs, expecting him to latch on to me again. Miraculously, he didn't – and I didn't look to see why. I scrambled upwards, managing to stand on the lowest branch. Weak with relief, I leaned against the tree trunk and took several long, deep breaths.

The dog growled beneath me. I looked down and saw that he was staring in the direction of the house. Something had stolen his attention.

Whatever it was, I'd be eternally grateful.

I inched forward along the branch in order to get a glimpse of what he was looking at.

I couldn't see anything at first, but then it slowly came into view.

The column of swirling white mist was moving steadily down the path towards us. I gulped in more air.

What was causing it?

I told myself that there was a scientific explanation of some sort. I just wasn't smart enough to figure it out.

And the brute below me couldn't either. He had even begun to retreat from it.

I stayed where I was, watching and waiting.

The column was becoming taller and wider as it advanced, rotating like a silent tornado. It was at least fifteen feet in height by the time it reached the tree I was standing in.

As it passed by me, I was hit with wave after wave of arctic air, which seemed to emanate from the mass. I had an eerie feeling that I was in the presence of an intelligent life form, a being with a mission.

Strangely enough, I wasn't afraid. But it was all too much for the dog. He jumped off the path and disappeared into the woods.

What next?

The wall of swirling mist stopped twenty feet away from me, and then slowly began to rise straight up in the air. I got down out of the tree and watched until it vanished from sight.

Whatever the thing was, whether it was some rare, natural phenomenon or a creature from another planet, it was definitely a friend of mine.

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I finally made it over to the barn to meet Billy. I told him the whole story of my great escape, saying that I thought the mysterious column of mist was simply another one of Mother Nature's unexpected miracles – one that had resulted in a happy ending for yours truly.

The soft-spoken teenager hung on my every word. He couldn't believe he had been so close to the action without realizing it. I turned around and showed him the grapefruit-sized holes the beast had inflicted on my leather jacket. Billy flipped back his shaggy brown bangs and gaped at the damage.

He wondered why I hadn't yelled for help when I saw him leaving the barn. I told him I hadn't had time to think clearly. But the truth was, I didn't yell because I was afraid the kid would get hurt – or worse – killed.

I returned to the house after cutting Billy's workday short.

Pamela was on the phone with the SPCA before I had even finished telling her what had happened. Animal Control would be on the lookout for the dog from now on.

Due to the fact that our housewarming party was the very next night, Pam and I had little time to dwell on my scary ordeal. The house had been cleaned from the rafters to the cellar that day. And the garden only lacked a few finishing touches. Details that Cliff and Eddie would be helping Pam with on Saturday morning.

Pamela also intended to make all the food for the party herself. No simple task. She started preparing many of the desserts two days in advance.

And so it was that, while I was in the woods fighting for my life, she had baked a pineapple upside-down cake – my favorite cake in the whole world.

I ate a piece that night after dinner.

And then I went upstairs and hung my shredded leather jacket in the bedroom closet. It was now just a gruesome souvenir.

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The party was in full swing by eight o'clock Saturday evening. Pam had chosen to wear the crimson velvet, off-the-shoulder dress I had given her the previous Christmas, and I had put on my usual party attire: a black silk shirt and my nicest pair of Levis.

I was in the mood for a celebration.

The last traces of my cold had disappeared, although now I had scratches and bruises to contend with. They were all in places my guests couldn't see, so at least I wouldn't be forced to talk about the nightmarish incident over and over again.

Josh and Maggie had done their job well. Around twenty people had shown up, all of differing ages and occupations. Not many of them had ever seen the inside of Rosewood Manor, and when they requested that we give them a grand tour of the mansion, I took the downstairs and Pamela guided them through the upper floors. Afterwards, the music room became the favored gathering place.

The storm that had been predicted to dampen our spirits still had not arrived, so Ruby and Wanda were kept busy running back and forth between the music room and the rose garden, making certain everyone's glass stayed filled. At one point, Ruby interrupted my game of billiards and ordered me down into the dark cellar to fetch more bottles of red wine.

By the time I returned from my trip to the basement, Maggie and Joshua had persuaded my fiancée to show off her skills on the piano, and before long she was even taking requests.

Nina showed up late with a blond, bearded man who turned out to be her husband, the Reverend Tom Claxton. They walked in while a bunch of us were singing a somewhat boisterous rendition of "My Old Kentucky Home."

An hour later, feeling rather warm from the abundance of wine and song, I worked my way through the small crowd surrounding the piano and headed for the rose garden to savor a breath of fresh air. At the sight of the tempting buffet, I took a detour past the hors d'oeuvre trays to grab a few more tasty morsels.

I turned around with my mouth full and nearly choked. Babe was standing inside the open doorway to the garden.

She was wearing what appeared to be the same white dress I had seen her in before, but this time the cameo necklace was missing. She was watching me with serious, unwavering eyes, her sober expression a sharp contrast to the happier faces around us.

Maybe it wasn't her fault she had a screw loose somewhere, but I was still angry with her for making a fool of me. She had a lot of nerve showing up at my party after what she had put me through. It was too bad I didn't have a giant butterfly net handy.

Coldly, I returned her stare.

She seemed to know what I was thinking, and her eyes begged for sympathy. She looked lonely and vulnerable.

I tried to hold on to my anger, but the longer I stared into her pleading eyes, the harder it became. I finally gave in and let the rest of my animosity melt away. It was replaced by a desire to know more about her.

Determined to find out who she really was, I set my plate of food down on the buffet table and continued crossing the room.

No one else had acknowledged her presence so far, a fact that I found curious. I had expected her unusual appearance to attract quite a bit of attention.

Thunder rolled in the distance.

The few guests still remaining outside took the sound as a warning and began filing in, two at a time, through the French doors. They walked right past her without giving her a second glance. We lost eye contact when some of them stepped between

us, and then my progress was impeded temporarily by Mr. Huggins, a neighbor who sold life insurance.

The next time I caught sight of Babe she was on her way out to the garden. I made it outside just as she rounded the corner of the house.

Lightning lit up the night sky and a few heavy drops of rain began to fall, signaling the storm's late arrival. I ran into the backyard, hoping to catch a glimpse of her before the skies opened up.

"She's bound to turn back now." As I whispered the words with satisfaction, another bolt of lightning illuminated the clearing, along with its border of oak trees and the empty gazebo.

She was nowhere to be seen.

I was disappointed, but not too surprised. Getting caught in raging thunderstorms was probably the disturbed woman's other favorite pastime.

I barely made it inside before the storm hit with full force. A gust of strong wind almost caused me to lose my grip on the French doors as I fought to close them.

I hoped Babe was enjoying herself.

Pamela was taking a well-deserved break from the piano. She was lounging on the Victorian sofa next to Nina, who was holding a gift-wrapped box on her lap. When Pamela saw me, her puzzled frown turned into a provocative smile.

"Hi, tall, dark and handsome. Where've you been?" She moved over to make room for me on the couch.

"Long story – tell ya later," I leaned over and planted a kiss on her forehead before sitting down. "What's that?" I gestured toward the box in Nina's lap.

"It's a housewarming gift from Tom and I." Nina's answer sounded apologetic. "I know you told us not to bring anything, but last week I was helping my mother-in-law clean out her attic, and I came across some things I thought you might be interested in." She handed the box over to Pamela and insisted that we open it.

Inside were three old photographs, each displayed in an antique silver frame.

The one on top showed a stern-faced Adrian seated in a wicker chair, with a cane resting across his lap. Beth, who now possessed her father's cane, had told Nina that his limp was the result of a Civil War injury.

Rachel was standing behind Adrian with her hands folded neatly on the back of the chair. Her pose and expression were demure, but the mischievous glint in her eyes told another story. To Adrian's left stood four-year-old Nathan. The boy favored his attractive mother.

Pamela uncovered the next picture.

"Ah, it's the twins."

"How'd you guess?" joked Nina. "Tom's mother believes this was taken on their twentieth birthday, not long before Barbara Alice died, but she can't tell the two girls apart. There's no information written on the back of the photo, either."

"They're standing on the steps of our veranda, aren't they?"

"Sure enough," Nina said. "What about those outrageous hats they're wearing?"

"They're beautiful, but I can't believe women actually wore them everywhere," Pamela said, handing me the picture of the twins. "They must've weighed a ton."

As soon as I looked down at their identical features, my brain went into denial. I rubbed my eyes to make sure who I thought I was seeing was really there.

She was. The blood drained rapidly out of my face.

Babe was Barbara Alice. Barbara Alice was dead.

I had seen a ghost twice without even knowing it.

Look for Chapter Seven of "Barbara Alice" in mid-January.

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