

## CHAPTER EIGHT

of

Barbara Alice

The hairs rose on the back of my neck. My body began tingling all over, as though the air in the room had become charged with electricity. I wanted to turn around, to see if she was standing behind me, but I couldn't move. I couldn't even blink.

She thought I was James.

I could feel her longing as if it were a tangible thing. It wrapped around me like a warm embrace as I inhaled the sweet, familiar scent of her perfume.

"No, I'm sorry." The words trembled off my tongue. I needed to say more, to make her understand, but I was so choked with emotion I could no longer speak.

I felt what she felt.

Confusion. Anger. Loneliness. Grief.

Her feelings overwhelmed me. I wanted to run and hide.

*Trapped. No escape.*

Were those her thoughts or mine?

The emotional assault ended as suddenly as it had begun. A cold chill swept through me.

And I knew she was gone.

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After leaving Barbara Alice's room, I had returned downstairs and polished off what was left of the chilled wine. So at first I thought the pounding was in my head, that I was waking up with one of those "I-swear-I'll-never-do-this-again" hangovers.

I rolled over onto my back and pulled Pamela's pillow over my head. This seemed to help. The pounding wasn't nearly as annoying as before.

**Pamela. I reached out with my left arm to see if she was beside me.**

**She wasn't.**

**I lifted a corner of the pillow and looked over at the brass alarm clock on the nightstand. If my blurred vision was correct, it was about 10:53 A.M. I sat up groggily and looked around the empty room.**

**My head wasn't hurting as bad as I thought it would. I stretched and yawned just as the pounding started up again, louder than before. It wasn't in my head after all.**

**"Alex, wake up!"**

**Pam was outside, below the balcony, banging on the doors to the music room.**

**I struggled to free myself from the tangle of sheets and blankets. After falling out of the king-sized bed, I stumbled over to the French doors and flung them open. I leaned over the railing of the balcony and met Pamela's upturned, exasperated gaze.**

**"Somehow or other, I've managed to lock myself out, and my keys are in the kitchen."**

**I was still wearing the clothes I had put on for the party, but at least I had taken my shoes off. I pulled my keys out of the front pocket of my jeans and dangled them over her head.**

**"Ready?"**

**She nodded and I let go. They landed in the bag of groceries sitting next to her feet.**

**"Gee, thanks a lot."**

**I blew her a kiss, and left as she began digging through the fruit and vegetables.**

**Ten minutes later I was in ecstasy. I had turned the shower on full blast, letting the stream of hot water pommel my neck and shoulders. The fog lifted from my brain, the tension left my body - I was hidden away in a safe, steamy cocoon where no disturbing thoughts could intrude.**

**And then Pamela walked into the bathroom humming Barbara Alice's favorite tune. The spell was broken.**

**Groaning, I turned off the water and reached for a towel on the rack outside the shower door. There wasn't one.**

**"Hand me a towel, would ya, hon?" I swept back the hair that was plastered to my face. "Of all the songs you know, why did you have to come in here humming that one?"**

**"Because it's been haunting me since last night. I can't seem to get it out of my head." She flung a jumbo-sized towel over the top of the shower door. I caught it and began vigorously drying my body.**

**"I wonder if our bold intruder was at the party last night," she said. "Whoever it was would have been too tired to show up at daybreak, and I don't think they did, do you?"**

**When I stepped out of the shower she was rearranging the cupboard and putting away the bottles of shampoo and mouthwash she had bought at the store. Wrapping the towel around my waist, I walked over to the medicine cabinet and took out the shaving cream.**

**"I didn't hear anything. I passed out as soon as my head hit the pillow."**

**"I tried to find out as much as I could about all the guests. Maggie was a big help. Unless someone was lying, the only person I met who could play a piano was that elderly church organist who wears a patch over one of her eyes." Pamela closed the cupboard door. "And I don't think she could see well enough to pick any of our locks.**

**"By the way," she leaned over the bathtub to put a new Ivory bar in the soap dish, "what was that long story you promised to tell me last night?"**

**I nearly cut myself with the razor.**

**"Um, let me think a minute. My memory's a bit cloudy."**

**After staring for more than a minute at the guilty looking face in the mirror, I decided to follow Joshua's example and tell her half the truth – less than half, actually.**

**My story ended with Babe disappearing into the storm.**

**Pamela straightened up and looked at me wide-eyed.**

**"I'd love to meet this girl. Too bad I didn't notice her before she ran away." She tossed my discarded clothes down the laundry chute. "You should put her in one of your books. She'd make an interesting character."**

**"Yeah, maybe."**

The thought had crossed my mind, but that was before I knew she was dead. I believed in ghosts, but that didn't mean I was willing to put them in my fiction. Living with one was bad enough.

I finished shaving and wiped my face off with a warm, wet washcloth.

"You know, you might be right about Babe being our mysterious pianist." Pam came up behind me and addressed my reflection in the mirror. "She's the type of person who would think up a weird prank like that."

"You should know, sweetheart." From the look on her face, I knew I had succeeded in changing the subject.

She snatched the wet towel from around my waist and jumped backwards.

Before she could whack me on the rear with it, I turned around and fixed her with my most intimidating stare.

"Do it, and I'll have you over my knee in no time flat."

"Promises, promises. If I weren't so hungry I'd put you to the test." She hung the towel on a rack to dry and walked into the bedroom. "I'm fixing lunch. Can you eat some Eggs Mornay?"

"Lots." If she had asked me earlier my answer would have been no, but now my stomach was beginning to roar.

"Oh, before I forget," Pamela reappeared in the doorway, "Nina's husband is the pastor at that Presbyterian church down the road from us. We were talking last night and I told him I was a backsliding Methodist and you were an Orthodox Pagan, but he wasn't discouraged. We're invited to this evening's service. I didn't want to be rude, so I told him we'd try to be there."

I was thinking half-seriously about asking the Reverend to pay us a visit after church to perform an exorcism. Or was it only priests who did that sort of thing?

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Each Sunday, as a little boy, I would sit scrunched between my grandparents in a little clapboard church, never seeing much of the Pentecostal preacher I was forced to listen to. Quite often he would strike the Holy Bible with his hand to make a point. The sound would ricochet around the room like a shotgun blast, causing me to flinch every time.

I didn't complain about being too short to see what was going on, though. The preacher's booming voice scared me. His fire and brimstone lectures scared me even more. I was afraid of both God and the Devil.

Until I stopped believing in Them.

But now I believed in spirits, the eternal souls of dead people. Which meant I now believed in life after death. Could I believe in the existence of an afterlife and not believe in God and the Devil, heaven and hell?

Pamela jabbed me in the side with her elbow. The congregation was standing.

The air inside the stone building was hot and heavy. My polo shirt clung damply to my back. I was glad I hadn't worn a suit. I stood silently while everyone sang "Abide With Me," a hymn I vaguely remembered. I tried to remember what the sermon had been about, but I couldn't recall a single word.

At least Tom was not a long-winded preacher. The service was over in an hour.

The century-old church was crammed with worshippers. Instead of fighting our way through the slow-moving throng, Pam and I stayed in our seats and watched the Davenports mingle. Five minutes later they managed to work their way over to the pew in front of ours.

"I'm just about ready to melt," moaned Maggie, dabbing at her face with a lace hanky, "and it's only April. You can't imagine how hot it gets in here in the summertime."

She tried to find a way to sit comfortably on the straight-backed bench while facing us, but was unsuccessful. She got up again and stood next to her husband. Josh was dressed a little more formally than usual: Along with his customary white shirt and gray trousers, he had donned a pair of black suspenders.

"Y'all know how to put on a real nice party," he said. "Everybody here's been telling me how much they enjoyed it."

"Wonderful," Pam said. "We plan to have a lot more of them."

"But they won't be as interesting as the first one," I murmured. Josh had sharp ears. He gave me an amused look before turning away to hide a smile.

"Guess what popped into my head a little while ago?" Maggie asked, adjusting her pink straw hat. Before we had a chance to say anything, she gave us the answer triumphantly. "The perfect names for those Arabian horses of yours: Samson and Delilah."

**"I don't think we'll be able to top those. Do you, Alex?"**

**"Nuh-uh. Samson and Delilah it is."**

**Pam and I followed the Davenports out of the Gothic-style church. We were the last two couples left in line. Tom and Nina were standing just beyond the massive wooden door, shaking hands with everyone who filed past.**

**"Another fine sermon, Reverend," Josh beamed a smile over to Nina as he shook Tom's hand. "And if that wife of yours sang any sweeter, she'd be an angel."**

**I saw Tom give Nina a wink as Josh turned and ambled off towards the parking lot.**

**As she walked by him, Maggie laid a hand on the minister's arm and said, in a loud whisper, "He only dozed off once this time, Thomas."**

**"Much better than last week, wouldn't you say?"**

**"Oh, my goodness, yes." Maggie rolled her eyes heavenward.**

**She reached out and put a slip of white paper into Nina's hand. "Here's that butterscotch pie recipe I promised to give you, dear. Now, remember, don't let the filling boil more than a minute or two, or it'll turn too thick and sugary. Give me a call if you have any trouble."**

**"Thanks, Maggie, I'll do that." Nina gave her a hug.**

**"How's our Samuel tonight?"**

**"A little better, I think. He's home in bed – or he should be. Sometimes he gives the babysitter a rough time about turning in when he's supposed to."**

**I remembered how that was.**

**"Poor thing," Maggie said. "You tell him to hurry up and get better so he can come visit Josh and me again. I'll make him something special."**

**"Oh, he'll like that, I'm sure," said Nina.**

**When Maggie spied a churchgoer who was showing off a new grandchild, she uttered a hasty goodbye and hurried over to join in the fun.**

**"Alex and Pamela -- glad you could make it." Tom looked surprised to see us. "I hope you found the service more stimulating than some members of my flock," he said with a grin, giving a nod in Joshua's direction.**

"Didn't fall asleep once," I said, my expression serious.

Pamela smiled sweetly. "Thanks to my trusty little elbow."

Nina giggled. "I believe Maggie uses that very same method."

"Then Joshua's sides must stay pretty sore," observed Tom ruefully.

"You can blame Alex and me for any naps taken during this evening's service," Pam said. "We kept half the congregation up late last night."

"Speaking of last night, Tom and I wanted to thank you for inviting us. We had a marvelous time."

"Yes," Tom added, "and I want you to know it wasn't my fault we were late."

Nina poked her tall, lanky husband in the ribs.

"Punctuality is his most irritating virtue."

"Which reminds me," Tom glanced at his watch, "I'm supposed to take the babysitter home in half an hour."

We said our goodbyes and Tom and Nina went back into the building to collect their things before locking up.

A graveyard lay behind the church. I had noticed it when Pam and I had first pulled into the parking lot, and I was sure that Barbara Alice's mortal remains lay beyond the wrought-iron fence. I felt compelled to visit her not-so-final resting place.

Pam would be willing to accompany me. She thought old cemeteries were fascinating.

"Are you sure this isn't just morbid curiosity on your part?" she asked, when I told her I wanted to find the graves of the Hunt family.

"Not completely." We were weaving in and out among the parked cars. "Don't you think we should pay our respects? If it weren't for the Hunts, we wouldn't be living in the house of your dreams."

"This is true. But it's a fairly big graveyard. Wouldn't it be easier if we asked someone what section the Hunt family's in?"

Just then I spotted that "someone."

**"Good idea." I steered Pam away from my convertible and pointed her in Joshua's direction. "I know exactly who we should ask."**

**Josh was standing next to his shiny gray Lincoln, patiently waiting for his wife to join him. His pipe seemed to be an effective pacifier. He looked content enough to stand there and puff away all night, if necessary. And maybe it would be. His wife still wasn't ready to give back the baby she was holding.**

**When we asked Josh if he would like to play the role of tour guide, he was more than happy to oblige. We let him lead the way over to the well-kept cemetery. The wrought-iron gate swung silently open.**

**We walked single file around the graves and monuments. Shade trees were abundant, and dozens of healthy shrubs and flowers were scattered throughout the grounds.**

**A magnificent elm tree stood in the center of the cemetery. The graves of the Hunt family surrounded it, forming a broken circle around its base.**

**"They buried Barbara Alice right next to her mama," Josh said.**

**He knew whose grave I was most interested in seeing.**

**When I read the words that were chiseled into Babe's granite tombstone, my sympathy for her grew even stronger.**

**"Beloved Daughter, Cherished Sister, Loyal Friend."**

**Through a cruel twist of fate, she had been torn away from the people she loved while she was still young and beautiful and full of life. It all seemed so unfair.**

**"Do you know how she died? Nina said it was a freak accident."**

**Josh would have to answer my fiancée's question carefully.**

**"Maybe. She was a real good swimmer, but somehow she ended up drowned in the lake. We'll probably never know exactly what happened."**

**"They must have missed her terribly," said Pamela, reading my thoughts.  
"Especially Beth. Losing one's twin has to be a devastating experience."**

**"It changed her, no doubt about that," Josh said quietly. "She stays with me and Maggie whenever she comes back. Every May, her son brings her here to visit her family's graves. Her birthday's the thirtieth, same day as Memorial Day, and we always have a little celebration for her before she goes home."**



**Josh put his pipe away, then led us a little farther around the tree.**

**Rachel's white marble monument towered over those of the other family members. An angel draped in flowing robes stood atop the pedestal, with head bowed and wings outspread. The inscription on the base of the stone read, "Thus passes the glory of the world."**

**And so it must have seemed, to Adrian.**

**Rachel had died the day after giving birth to her daughters – the first cruel blow to strike the Hunt family.**

**"It was true love for those two," Pam said, sighing. "If it wasn't, Adrian would have married again, at least for the sake of the children."**

**"If it hadn't been for Tabitha, his sister, he probably would've had to," said Joshua. "She helped raise those young'uns. Never did get married herself. That's why she was laid to rest right here with her brother."**

**Aunt Tabitha. She had given Beth that book of poetry Caroline had found in the library. I wondered if she had sacrificed her own life to fill Rachel's shoes. Caring for a widower with three young children would not have been an easy thing to do.**

**Adrian's grave lay between those of his wife and sister. His tombstone also bore an inscription, a verse by William Butler Yeats: "Think where man's glory most begins and ends, and say my glory was I had such friends."**

**"Adrian died in the influenza epidemic of 1918," Josh stated. "That same year, my brother James was shot down over France."**

**"Your brother must have been a brave man," I said. "To fly one of those old planes back then took some daring."**

**"Yes, sir. Nobody can say he was short on courage. He wasn't afraid to take chances."**

**Joshua moved on to the last grave. It was Nathan's.**

**"Didn't Nathan ever marry?" Pam asked.**

**"He almost did. He was engaged to Conrad Houston's daughter, Stella. They'd planned to have a big Fourth of July weddin', with fireworks and a brass band to entertain all the guests. Well, there turned out to be plenty of fireworks, all right – but that's because the bride was nowhere to be found."**

**"What happened?" Pamela beat me to the question.**

"She eloped with somebody else. An English Duke. Met him at a party a few days before the weddin'. He needed her money, and she decided she needed to be a Duchess, so off they went to England."

"Leaving Nathan alone at the altar." I could well imagine the scandal that followed.

"How awful," Pam grumbled. "Didn't anybody in this family live happily ever after?"

Josh chuckled. "Mighty doubtful."

Daylight was slipping away. Before we left the cemetery, Josh took us by the graves of his mother and father, Elizabeth and James, Sr., and showed us the bronze plaque they had erected in memory of their oldest son.

The lights had come on in the parking lot by the time we returned. Maggie was already waiting for Joshua in their car.

I let Pamela drive home. I was too distracted by all the thoughts racing around in my head. Josh had thrown a lot of information at us, and I felt I now had a deeper understanding of the Hunts and their numerous tragedies. I was an unwilling witness, and participant, in Babe's tragic story.

I hadn't felt her presence in the graveyard – but then I really hadn't expected to. She wasn't there, and she never had been.

She was at home, waiting for me.

Waiting for James.