

CHAPTER SEVEN

of

BARBARA ALICE

At that particular moment I was grateful to be sitting down. The storm raging outside was nothing compared to the chaos inside my head. Unfortunately, I did not have an overactive imagination. The paranormal incident I had experienced in the music room early Tuesday morning had really happened.

"Those two had to postpone their wedding when Barbara Alice died," said Nina. "They finally got married on New Year's Day in 1901."

Pam was gazing intently at the third picture, James and Bethany's wedding portrait. "Alex and James look a lot alike. Don't you think so, Nina?" The redhead leaned over Pamela's shoulder to get a closer look.

"You aren't kidding. They could have been brothers."

My face turned an even lighter shade of gray, but no one seemed to notice. Ruby conveniently walked by with a tray of champagne glasses, and I quickly plucked off two full ones before she was out of range.

Then I took another look at the first photograph. The cameo pinned to Rachel's high-necked dress was probably the same one I had seen on Barbara Alice's chain that day at the bridge.

Pam and Nina continued to chatter away at one another, while I sat there in quiet distress. I kept staring at the twins, wondering which one of them was Babe. Which one had just shaken up my normal, orderly existence by proving my skepticism wrong?

I looked up and easily spotted Joshua across the room. His electric-blue suspenders made him stand out in the crowd. At the moment, he was too busy sharing anecdotes with Reverend Claxton to feel my accusing eyes on his back.

I thought about the day we'd met. Our conversation at the bridge now held new meaning for me.

I had suspected he knew more about Babe than he was willing to say, but I had put off pursuing the matter. Tonight I was going to get a full confession.

Maggie abandoned the dessert table and pulled up a chair to see what the three of us were looking at. She made a few smiling comments about Nathan, and then I held up the picture of the twins for her to see.

"Well, my goodness, it's ---- " her voice trailed off weakly.

"Bethany Anne and Barbara Alice." Nina finished Maggie's sentence and the older woman smiled nervously.

"Oh, dear. It certainly is, isn't it?"

She cast a worried glance in Joshua's direction, and then looked warily over at me. I gave her a wry smile before downing my second glass of champagne.

Wanda stopped by to refill Pam and Nina's drinks.

"So, tell me, Maggie," I leaned toward her, speaking quietly, "Have you run into Babe anywhere lately?"

"Babe, did you say?" She cleared her throat when I nodded. "No, actually, we haven't ever, uh, met."

Maggie was visibly relieved when Pamela interrupted our conversation by showing her the wedding portrait. She agreed that the likeness between James and myself was striking. When she had finished looking at the picture, I stood up and offered her my more comfortable seat on the couch.

"Ladies, if you'll excuse me, I think I know someone else who might like to see these." Ignoring Maggie's anxious look, I collected the other two photographs and strode off purposefully in Joshua's direction.

I waited patiently until he had finished his story and the Reverend had walked off to join his wife, then I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Guess who I saw a little while ago?" I asked nonchalantly.

He rubbed his chin and stared wordlessly at the floor for several seconds. Then he knocked the casual look off my face with his reply.

"Wasn't Babe, was it?"

It could have been a lucky guess, but I knew by the tone of his voice that, unlike the other guests, he had seen her too. I thrust the photograph of the twins into his hands.

"You lied to me."

His gaze shifted from the picture to my face, and he sighed. Reaching into his trouser pocket, he pulled out his pipe and pointed it at the window behind me.

"Looks like the storm's moved on already. I think I'll wander on out to the garden and have a smoke, if you'd care to join me."

I was right behind him.

The storm had left the night air moist and deliciously cool. We walked to the outer edge of the garden where our conversation could remain private. He had the photograph tucked under his arm and, after lighting his pipe, he rested against one of the garden's new lampposts to examine the picture more closely.

Finally, he looked up and handed the photograph back to me with a question.

"You ever meet Beth?"

I shook my head. She had been recovering from an illness when we had first bought the house.

"She's always been quiet and ladylike, but Barbara Alice had her daddy's stubborn streak. She was a tomboy for most of her short life. I expect that's why James took a fancy to Beth instead.

"Broke Babe's heart. He's the one who gave her that nickname. She did her best to outgrow it, but it didn't make a bit of difference to James how she looked or acted. He thought of her as Nathan's tag along little sister and that was that.

"Course, that didn't keep Babe from pullin' some mighty foolish stunts to get his attention." His laugh turned into an embarrassed cough. "That Damsel in Distress tale I told you did have some truth to it. I just neglected to mention it happened long before you was born. I knew you'd find out the rest of the story sooner or later."

We moved away from the lamppost and each took a damp seat on the cast-iron benches, facing one another. I wanted to find out if Barbara Alice had died the way I suspected, but before I could form the question, he asked me if he could see the other two photographs.

His eyes kept darting back and forth from my face to James' picture.

"I never noticed it before," he said, scratching his head, "but ---"

"I know, I know." For some reason I was annoyed. "I look just like your dear departed brother."

"It ain't no insult," Josh snorted. "James, Jr. was the good lookin' one in our family. Hell, he was prettier than both our sisters."

I could feel my face beginning to redden. It was time we got back on the subject of Barbara Alice. I was sure her appearance at the bridge had something to do with her death.

"Babe drowned, didn't she?"

He nodded silently.

"Was it really an accident, or did one of her stunts backfire?"

"Could have been both, for all we know. I remember the day she died. It was the eighteenth of June, my mother and father's silver anniversary. Naturally, the Hunts had been invited to the party. The twins got there late, right before Mother sent me to find James.

"He was holdin' Beth out on the back porch, and let me tell you, they were kissin' up a storm. I said to myself, 'It's a good thing the weddin's only two days away.' I was about to tell'em it was time to eat when I looked over and saw Babe standin' in the yard."

Josh let out a low whistle.

"I still remember the look on her face. She was madder than a hornet. Didn't say anythin', though -- just took off runnin'. It was plain to me she wasn't over bein' jealous."

I asked him if she had been alone when the accident occurred. His expression became solemn.

"No. Beth seen her run off. She whispered somethin' to James and, after he went inside, she followed her. Babe ended up in the channel a short while later. I don't know if she fell on purpose, but that time she wasn't pretendin' to be in trouble. Hit her head on somethin', I reckon.

"When she was a little girl, she made Nathan show her how to swim, but Beth never learned. Anyhow, poor Beth seen her sister was a drownin' and couldn't do a darned thing about it."

He shook his head in sympathy. "She never was quite the same after that."

Neither was Barbara Alice, I thought sadly.

"All of us heard Beth screamin' before she even reached the house. When we got to the bridge, Nathan jumped in and pulled Babe out, but it was already too late. A couple of days later, our church down the road here was full of people and flowers, but we weren't there for a weddin'."

Laughter from the music room drifted out over the still garden. We sat there quietly for a few minutes, both of us lost in our own thoughts of the past.

What I had seen on the bridge had been a reenactment of Barbara Alice's death. She hadn't been reacting to me at all, but to her sister Beth on a tragic day long ago.

When I expressed this to Joshua, he informed me that he and James had witnessed it on more than one occasion. So had Adrian and Nathan. Babe had drowned on a Monday, around 5:30 in the afternoon. The men had noticed that this was when the reenactment always took place.

When Joshua told me this I realized that I had only heard the mysterious piano music on Monday mornings. This realization led to another question I needed to ask, but for the time being I decided to remain silent and let Josh do the talking.

"Babe always did make up her own rules, though, and she still does. Not everybody can see her. Maggie never has. Maybe you wouldn't have either if you didn't favor James so much."

His last statement made me feel queasy.

He went on to tell me that Babe's ghost was the reason his Cocker Spaniel avoided my property – especially the wooden bridge. Maggie had almost let this information slip out on their first visit.

His confession made me flash back to the previous day in the grove. The strange column of mist that appeared and saved me from the wild dog – could it have been Babe's doing?

"Son, let me ask you somethin'." Josh leaned back and crossed his legs, grinning wisely. "If I'd told you the truth on the day we met, would you have believed me?"

I squirmed around on my bench. I wouldn't have believed a word he said, but I still hated being lied to.

"No," I admitted reluctantly. "I would have thought you were a crazy old fool."

"That's right. Besides," he continued, with obvious sincerity, "scarin' off our new neighbors was the last thing me and Mag wanted to do."

I had to smile.

Pam and Maggie were probably beginning to wonder what had happened to us, but there was one more question I had been meaning to ask.

"Can you remember if Babe knew how to play a piano?"

He thought hard a minute.

"I don't recollect ever seein' her play, but all the girls I knew back then took lessons." He emptied out his pipe, then put his hands behind his head and yawned loudly.

"Ridin' horses was what Babe was good at. She had a black stallion named Handsome Rogue. Many a time I seen'em jump fences so high, why, I figured sure they'd break their necks."

Maggie came out of the house. The aqua-colored layers of her chiffon dress billowed upwards as she bustled over to where we were sitting. She must have known by the looks on our faces that the secret was out and we were all still friends. She wagged a finger at us in mock reproach.

"What have you boys been up to, hmm?"

Her straight face dissolved into giggles when Josh pulled her onto his lap.

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It was well after midnight when the last few guests took their leave. Our party had been a success. On my way up to bed, I was thinking that even Rachel Hunt would have been impressed. For all I knew, she could have presided, unseen, over the entire event as Rosewood Manor's original hostess.

I didn't find the thought too comforting.

Pamela had gone to bed without asking to hear the long story I had promised to tell her earlier that evening. It would have been an understatement to say I wasn't looking forward to telling her about our haunted dream house. I didn't know which would be worse: having our old argument about my overactive imagination, or having a new argument about whose idea it was to buy the mansion in the first place.

By the time I reached the top of the stairs, I had convinced myself that it would be best to wait awhile before having a talk with Pamela. When it came to religion and mysticism, she was definitely more open-minded than anyone I knew, but I still didn't think she was ready to hear the truth about our unusual houseguest. I had made Josh and Maggie promise not to mention the matter in front of her.

I started down the hall toward the master suite. I had almost reached it when it finally registered on my weary brain that I had seen a light shining from the doorway of the Rose Room. I turned around and retraced my steps, thinking that perhaps Pamela had forgotten to turn the light off after showing the guests around upstairs.

The glow was from a reading lamp that was sitting on top of an antique secretary. It was the same lamp Ruby had advised me not to use.

I turned the overhead light on before entering what Pam and I preferred to call the Indoor Garden. Stepping into this bedroom, in the northwest corner of the house, was like stumbling unexpectedly into a rose garden. The walls, and even the ceiling, were decorated with paper covered in pink cabbage roses. The curtains that framed the windows were a perfect match, and so was the handmade quilt on the four-poster bed.

I walked a little farther into the room, and something made me stop. I felt like an intruder. The room was filled with a feminine presence. I didn't have to guess whose.

This was Barbara Alice's room.

Feeling uneasy, I crossed the room and turned the switch on the reading lamp. It didn't work, so I reached behind the secretary and tugged on the electrical cord.

I kept pulling. The end – the plug – emerged from behind the secretary. I stared at it. Then, forgetting how to breathe, I stared at the impossible glowing lamp.

Taking a hasty step backwards, I flung the cord away from me as though it were a poisonous snake. The dim light gradually began to fade.

And that's when I heard it.

A single word – a name - breathed like a sigh of relief.

"James."