



BARBARA ALICE

a novel by

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CHAPTER ONE

The final hours of that ordinary Thursday were made memorable by what my fiancée came to refer to as "the incident."

The evening began pleasantly enough. Pamela and I had dinner at Maury's, the Italian restaurant where we had met, and where I had recently proposed. After a leisurely meal, we decided against taking a cab home, even though our Lakeshore Drive apartment was several blocks away.

Pam wasn't intimidated by the distance involved. She loved to go for long walks – especially when the weather was warm and breezy.

The wind picked up as we made our way towards Michigan Avenue. We smelled the unmistakable scent of Swami's popular curry dishes long before we reached his exotic little eatery. As we were passing by on the opposite side of the street, Swami came out and began sweeping off the sidewalk, preparing to close up. He waved when he caught sight of us, his face erupting into a toothy grin. Swami always recognized his regular customers.

We weren't far from Michigan Avenue when we came upon a large section of sidewalk that was being repaired. We were forced to choose a different route, one that took us into unfamiliar territory.

The streets were narrower, the alleys darker. There were few lights or cars, and even fewer people. A homeless man stood on the corner behind us, talking and gesturing to a figment of his imagination. The couple up ahead was in the throes of a heated argument. The man appeared to be losing.

Not many words passed between Pam and I on our walks. We knew each other so well we could communicate without them.

We thought we knew the big Windy City, too. We had cornered our dreams here, leaving behind a small town in Iowa and a farm in Kentucky to do so.

Instead of being trampled by the teeming crowds, we had blended in and adjusted to the hectic pace of our new lives. We had found success. Then we had found each other.

Pam and I were quite compatible, unlike the man and woman walking ahead of us. They entered a dingy old apartment building, still arguing.

The playful breeze disappeared next, followed by the August moon. Without the loud, unhappy couple, the now deserted street seemed unnaturally quiet.

We continued to walk in silence, and a feeling of discomfort stole over me so gradually that at first I didn't recognize what it was.

I glanced back over my shoulder and saw nothing but shadows. They danced eerily around as a streetlight flickered on and off.

I moved a little closer to Pamela, hoping to strike up a conversation to relieve my paranoia. But the preoccupied look on her face stopped me from trying.

She was twirling a strand of her straight blond hair, which was further proof that something was distracting her. That something was probably the guest list for our wedding. It grew longer by the minute.

We were now just a block away from the intersection where we would pick up our familiar route.

If it hadn't been for a wailing siren, and the tune I was whistling off-key, I may have heard the footsteps sooner.

Before I had time to react, Pamela was dragged backwards into an alley. Her muffled screams reached out to me from the darkness.

And everything stopped: My heart, my breathing, my reasoning. Time seemed to stand still. I could neither move nor speak.

"Come here, boyfriend."

The young voice sounded as cold as I felt.

"Don't got all night."

Pamela's whimper was more effective than a slap across the face. I fought the crippling fear that held me prisoner, and broke free of it.

Walking into the dark alley was like walking into a bad dream. My brain was saying, "Go ahead, it's all right. You'll wake up soon and it'll all be over."

There were two of them, their features disguised by the faintness of the light from the street. The shorter one gripped Pamela around the waist. His hand covered her mouth.

The other man stood a few feet away from them with his gun pointed at my chest. I assumed he was the one in charge.

"There's no reason to hurt us," I said to him, with as much coolness as I could muster. "You can take whatever it is you want."

He waved the gun at the brick wall on my left.

"Stand over there."

I moved without taking my eyes off him. Pam's ragged breathing filled my ears, and I wanted to believe in God again.

"Turn around, face it."

I wanted to pray and not feel alone.

He walked over and shoved the gun into my back.

**"Empty your pockets." He held a knapsack out in front of me with his free hand.
"Put that watch in here, too."**

I almost dropped it on the ground.

He stepped away. "Sit with your back against the wall. Stay put."

Feeling helpless, I sat down amidst the piles of garbage littering the alleyway. The stench from it enveloped me.

The gunman picked Pamela's purse up off the ground and emptied it. Then he held the knapsack out to her.

"I want the ring. Now."

Pam was still being held by the shorter man, but she managed to get the diamond off and into the sack.

"Your boyfriend looks lonely. You can join him, but keep your mouth shut. Got it?" Pamela nodded tearfully, and the silent thief released her.

The gunman pushed her roughly onto my lap.

She threw her arms around me with a strangled sob as the two men raced off down the alley. A car horn blared an angry warning as they vanished into the night.

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"Alex, did you hear what I just said?"

"Hmm?" I lowered the Sunday paper I was reading and eyed Pamela curiously.

"I want a house in the country."

"Yeah, I know. We'll look for one after we're married."

"No." She set her coffee mug down so hard I expected the glass tabletop to crack. "The wedding's too far away. I don't want to wait that long."

I didn't ask her why she was suddenly in a hurry to move because I already knew the reason. It had only been three days since our run-in with the thieves. The harrowing encounter was still fresh in my mind, too. I would never forget the fear I'd felt in that alley. Fear for her. Fear for the both of us.

The muggers had gotten away, of course. We had replaced the watch and the ring the very next day, but they had also taken our identification along with our credit cards. That meant they had to know where we lived. I didn't think there was any cause for concern, but I'd heard Pamela bring up the subject a few times already with close friends.

"Okay." I folded the paper and laid it aside. "How soon do you want to start looking? Next spring? This fall?"

"Tomorrow."

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The fall foliage was spectacular. If it hadn't been for a concert Pam was scheduled to give in Chicago on Sunday, we would have driven down to Louisville instead of taking a Saturday morning flight.

As soon as we arrived, we rented a car at the airport and headed east out of Jefferson County. Our destination was a twenty-two acre estate located thirty miles outside the city. The real estate agent had given us lengthy directions, and Pamela read them to me as we sped through the gently rolling countryside.

The landscape strongly resembled the rural community near Lexington where I had grown up. The surrounding hills were dotted with farmhouses, and each of the brightly painted barns was nestled near a sloping bluegrass pasture. Beyond white plank fences, Kentucky thoroughbreds grazed peacefully in the late October sunshine.

We took Route Fifty-Three, a scenic highway that was flanked by fields of blooming goldenrod. About a mile past a Gothic-looking Presbyterian church, we caught a glimpse of shimmering blue between a row of weeping willows. Pamela reminded me to take a left at the first road past Willow Lake, and I turned onto the paved driveway, immediately slowing down to give a noisy family of ducks the right of way.

We followed the road across a narrow strip of land that divided the six-acre lake in half. Both sides of the strip were lined with willow trees. The rows ended near the south shore, where a channel connected the two bodies of water. The passage was

spanned by a wooden bridge, and on the other side the driveway curved sharply to the left, hugging the lofty bank of the shore.

Ahead of us the road gradually became steeper until we reached the crest of a hill. I heard Pamela gasp.



"Oh, Alex. It's . . . breathtaking!"

She couldn't have chosen a better adjective to describe the three-story Victorian structure. The mansion looked like it belonged in a fairy tale. It was situated on the edge of a clearing, and was set back against a grove of gigantic oak trees, all of which were ablaze in autumn splendor.

There was a domed turret on the southwest corner of the house, and as we came closer we noticed the intricate fish-scale pattern of the slate roof. Most of the frame exterior was pale yellow, but the doors, windows and corners of the house were trimmed in dark red. The gingerbread that decorated the porch and gables was painted a deep shade of green.

At the end of the driveway was a three-car garage. The real estate agent – a petite, red-haired woman – was waiting for us when we drove up. She walked toward us, smiling, as we got out of the rented Buick.

"Mr. Rowe, Miss Jordan – I'm Nina Claxton," she said, with the slight southern accent I had lost years before. "Welcome to Rosewood Manor."

After shaking hands, we climbed the wide steps up to the veranda and waited for her to unlock the oval stained-glass doors. To the right of the double doors was a set of dark green wicker furniture.

"Well, what do you folks think of the place so far?"

Pam and I looked at each other and laughed, and I said that it was certainly big enough for the two of us.

It had more space than we would ever need – unless we decided to have a large family. I knew better than to voice this possibility in front of Pamela, however.

When we stepped into the main foyer, it was as though we had somehow stepped backwards into the previous century. The house had twelve-foot ceilings and parquet floors, and the spotless interior smelled of pine cleaner and polished wood.

Nina, who was standing behind us, called our attention to the lacy fretwork that framed the vestibule. She told us that Brazilian rosewood had been used for the elaborate woodwork on the inside, including the elegant staircase that curved upward along the wall opposite the front doors.

"And, if you haven't already guessed," she said, walking between us into the entry, "that's how the Manor got its name."

To the left and right of the staircase were doorways flanked by wooden pillars. The passages beyond looked dark and mysterious. Half-jokingly, I pointed this out to Pam and Nina and they smiled at one another.

"I hate to disappoint you," Nina said, "but there aren't any hidden rooms or secret panels."

"You'll have to excuse Alex," Pam said, shaking her head. "He's a mystery writer, you know."

"Yes, I do know." Nina smiled at me and hugged herself. "I ended up reading the last few chapters of 'The Other Woman' one night during a storm. Big mistake. My husband was away at the time and I didn't get a wink of sleep."

"Thanks," I said, grinning smugly. "I consider that a compliment."

We followed her into the airy front parlor on our right.

Four long windows with drapes of rose-colored brocade overlooked the veranda. The Queen Anne sofas and chairs were covered in the same material.

Nina saw me admiring what looked like a genuine Tiffany lamp.

"Except for the third floor, the house is chock-full of antiques," she said, from the middle of the room.

She pointed out the decorative tile work around the fireplace.

"Most of the twenty-four rooms have wood-burning fireplaces like this one, but you wouldn't have to use them. Central heating and air were installed years ago."

Good. No seasonal suffering required.

On the south end of the parlor was a beveled-glass door. It led to a circular solarium, which, in turn, provided access to a part of the veranda that wrapped around the side of the house.

The solarium had window seats and a hand-painted ceiling. Overhead was a blue sky scattered with white, fluffy clouds.

A three-foot tall wooden birdcage sat on a low table in the center of the room. Pamela sank down on a nearby window seat to examine it.

My future wife had a tiny smile on her face, a dream in her hazel eyes. She was partial to Victorian homes, having been raised in one, so it wasn't hard for me to guess what was going on in that sentimental mind of hers.

It had been my idea to look for a place in Kentucky. I had often dreamed about finding success and returning to my home state, even though I had no family left. All that remained of my past were memories from what seemed like a whole other lifetime.

Pamela grabbed my hand as I walked by and pulled herself up off the window seat. We left the cheerful solarium and Nina led us back through the parlor and across the entry to the dining room. Sunlight poured in through a big bay window, casting a fiery glow over the cherry dining room suite.

We walked around the long, gleaming table and Nina pushed open a heavy swinging door to show us the butler's pantry. There was a dumbwaiter in the wall on our right, and Nina offered to demonstrate it for us.

"I love to play with these things," said the agent, a little sheepishly. She pushed a button and the dumbwaiter hummed its way to the top of the house.

We walked forward into the black and white country kitchen. The room had three ceiling fans, one of which hung in the sunny breakfast nook to our left. The kitchen was quaint, yet it had all the modern conveniences.

Pamela loved it. Preparing complicated gourmet dishes was her favorite pastime. My favorite hobby was consuming them.

At the back of the kitchen was an arched doorway leading to a hall that ran north to south. It connected with the two east-west corridors I had noticed from the foyer. Off this back hallway was a rear exit, a formal breakfast room, a half-bath and a laundry room. An enclosed staircase led to the wine cellar, as well as to the second and third floors.

"The house has had electricity since the late 1890's," said Nina. "But there's no need to worry about the wiring, it's all been updated."

The windowless back stairwell was located in the northeast corner of the house. Nina switched on a light and motioned us up the steps ahead of her.

"High heels and steep stairways don't go well together," she said, laughing. "But I'll catch up."

We waited for her in the corridor beyond the second floor landing. The hall ran the full length of the house from front to back.

When Nina joined us again, we walked up the corridor and were shown a full bath and four bedrooms with names such as "The Oriental Room," "The Turkish Room," "The Eastlake Room," and "The Rose Room."

Near the front of the house the corridor passed in front of the grand staircase. One could look over the banister and see the entryway below, but Pamela's fear of heights prevented her from doing this.

Off the main corridor, on either side of the open stairwell, were two shorter passages.

"The master bedroom is at the end of that hall," Nina said, indicating the passage to the left of the stairs. "But I think I'll show you the guest room first."

We followed Nina down the hall to the right of the stairwell. At the end of the short passage, just left of the guest room, a second flight of steps wound up to the third floor.

Because of its French furnishings, the tower guest room was known as the Louis XVI suite. It had its own full bath, and was tastefully decorated in three different shades of green. There was a cozy sitting area in the turret section, located directly above the solarium.

On our way over to the master bedroom we passed an eight-foot tall grandfather clock that stood facing the top of the main staircase. Its mellow chimes sounded the half hour, and I felt a twinge of sad nostalgia.

During the long winter months I had often seen my grandfather sitting at our kitchen table, head bent, meticulously repairing the worn and fragile gears of clocks of every age and description. The organ clock he had built the year before his death had won first prize at the Kentucky State Fair. That clock had been one of the few things I hadn't left behind when I moved to Chicago.

The blue master bedroom was called the Peacock Suite. It was the largest room on the second floor. The full bath had a claw-foot tub and a separate shower, and the walk-in closet also had a dressing area. French doors led to a balcony that overlooked a terrace.

In an oil painting above the fireplace, a male peacock haughtily displayed his striking blue and green plumage. Pamela immediately became infatuated with him.

"The original owner raised peacocks, and that proud fellow was painted by his wife," Nina explained. "The tower room on the third floor used to be her studio."

Nina followed me out onto the balcony, while acrophobic Pam remained in the doorway.

I leaned forward against the wrought-iron railing, breathing in the sweet scent of the freshly mowed grass that lay beyond the courtyard. I asked Nina to tell us more about the previous owners of Rosewood Manor.

It was a subject she was happy to talk about.

Nina had become acquainted with the present owner, Beth Davenport, due to that lady's long-lasting friendship with the Claxton family. Mrs. Davenport had remained in North Carolina after the death of her husband, James, during the First World War. She now lived in Charlotte with their only son.

"The Manor was designed and built by Beth's father, Adrian Hunt, and took over two years to construct. It was completed in the fall of 1872. Two years before, Adrian had married a debutante named Rachel Compton, the daughter of a Louisville banker. He promised to build her a mansion that would make all her friends and relatives turn pea-green.

"Thanks to his land developing business, and the family's horse farm, he could afford to do it." Nina removed her navy blue blazer and folded it over her arm. "In fact, both businesses are still going strong today. Derby winners have been born and raised over on the Hunt Farm."

"I suppose Rachel was the Peacock Lady," I said, surveying the sweeping lawn before me. I could easily imagine those colorful creatures parading around out there.

"Uh-huh. The peacocks were famous. Visitors loved to feed them, and believe me, there were lots of visitors. Rachel spent gobs of money decorating this place, and she gave quite a few lavish parties in order to show it off. For years she was the most popular hostess in Oldham County.

"But," Nina let out a sigh, "ten years after Adrian married Rachel she had twin daughters, Bethany Anne and Barbara Alice. The births were difficult. The babies survived but Rachel didn't, and Adrian never remarried."

The autumn breeze suddenly felt uncomfortably cool. We left the balcony and headed for the third floor.

Pamela wanted to know if Bethany's sister was alive.

Nina shook her head. "She died young. Beth never talks about the details, but it was some sort of freak accident that killed her."

I was born with an inordinate amount of curiosity, which, for a writer, is always a useful thing to have. How, exactly, did Barbara Alice die? My imagination went to work on all the gruesome possibilities as we climbed the second flight of steps.

A ballroom occupied the entire northern half of the top floor. It was separated from the main corridor and the open stairwell by a row of twelve-foot pillars. Two enormous crystal chandeliers hung from the fifteen foot vaulted ceiling, and were duplicated many times over by the mirrored walls on each end of the room.

I was drawn at once to the tall windows that faced the colonnade.

The views from this level were mesmerizing. Endless waves of scarlet hills rolled off into the distance. The lake was shining like twin mirrors in the afternoon sun.

"Can you imagine the kind of parties that were given here?" Pam's voice echoed around us with a hint of awe.

"Old-fashioned, expensive ones," Nina said bluntly.

Besides the ballroom and Rachel's studio, the third floor had two maid's rooms and a full bath.

I was beginning to feel a little overwhelmed by the place. I followed Pam and Nina downstairs, wondering what my grandparents would have thought about the Manor. Never in all their lives had they stepped foot in a house like this. They probably would have thought it pretentious of me to even consider buying it, no matter how successful I was.

After descending the main staircase, we passed through the pillared doorway closest to the parlor. The first room on our right was the library.

"Personally, I think this is the most masculine room in the house," Nina said.

After looking around, I had to agree with her.

Instead of flowered wallpaper the walls were covered with walnut paneling. A black marble fireplace dominated the far end of the room, and the windows on either side of it had velvet drapes the color of port wine. Resting on a Persian rug in the center of the room was a leather burgundy-colored settee and two matching armchairs. A sturdy oak desk sat in one corner.

Built-in bookcases stretched from the floor to the ceiling along two of the library's walls. They were filled with books on every subject, and many of them were older than the house.

The music room was next to the library, and was actually two rooms divided by a set of pocket doors. In the back, beyond the center doorway, I found a turn-of-the-century pool table – a real beauty.

I was extremely fond of billiards. It was the one game I was consistently good at – much to the annoyance of the other regulars down at McGuffy's Corner Pub.

There was an antique baby grand in the front room. The Steinway's mahogany surface and ivory keys were in excellent condition. Nina mentioned that it had recently been tuned, and I could tell Pamela's fingers were itching to try it out.

"Do either of you play?" Nina watched as Pamela ran her hand lovingly along the closed lid.

"Pamela," I said emphatically, "is a professional."

"Really?" Nina looked impressed.

"My mother insisted I take piano lessons," Pam answered casually.

"So did my mother," Nina said, grimacing. "She, and everyone else, soon realized I had a lot of patience and absolutely no talent." She walked over to the piano and opened the lid. "If you'd like to show off in front of me, go ahead. I can take it."

Pamela needed no further coaxing. She sat down on the slippery mahogany bench and played the fast-paced Rondo Alla Turca from Mozart's Sonata Number 11.

I had taken a seat on the gold Victorian sofa as she began, but the music sounded so rich and vibrant I couldn't sit still. I wandered around the spacious rooms once again, admiring the Irish lace curtains, the ornate mirrors, and the elaborately carved rosewood furniture. It really was an inviting, perfectly romantic room to spend time in.

Nina's enthusiastic applause brought an end to my daydreaming. Pamela gave us an exaggerated curtsy before we exited the house through the music room's French doors.

We found ourselves in the trellised courtyard we had first glimpsed from the balcony above our heads. According to Nina, it had once been the home of an award-winning rose garden. Now only a few scraggly bushes remained, along with two cast-iron benches that sat naked in the center of the garden.

There was a flagstone path that led from the terrace to a rustic gazebo in the backyard. We chose another path that branched off to the left and circled the house. As we strolled along behind the mansion, Nina talked about Rosewood Manor's nearest neighbors, the Davenports.

Adrian Hunt and Beth's father-in-law, James Davenport, Sr., had been best friends and business partners. They had co-founded the Hunt-Davenport Land Development Company. Like Adrian, James had another occupation as well. Instead of horses, he had raised tobacco.

"It's easier to see in the winter, but if you look between those two clumps of trees there," Nina pointed to a wooded hilltop on the north side of the lake, "you might be able to see Willowhaven's south portico. Beth's brother-in-law lives there. Josh and his wife never had any children, so when he retired, he sold the family's tobacco farm.

"Quite frankly, I think Josh and Maggie are lonely. This house hasn't been occupied since Beth's brother died four years ago, and every time they see me here with a potential new owner they get all excited.

"Occasionally I let Sam, my eight-year-old, come over for a visit. He adores them. Josh takes him fishing on the lake and, afterwards, he gets to pig out on Maggie's homemade chocolate chip cookies."

My mouth watered as I remembered the taste of my grandmother's chocolate chip brownies. As long as she wasn't distracted by something, which would result in us having to dispose of a batch of unrecognizable charred remains, she was the greatest cook this side of the Mason-Dixon line.

Each year from Halloween to Christmas, her Fridays were set aside for baking a wide assortment of pies, cakes and breads. I used to pick up the scent of their heavenly aromas as soon as I stepped off the school bus. Blindfolded, I could have walked up the dirt road and found our kitchen door, simply by following my nose.

We finished circling the impressive house and returned to the driveway, where Pam and I complimented Nina on her incredible wealth of knowledge about the property's history.

"Being an historic home tour guide helps," she replied. "I've given many tours of this place, usually around Christmas. Of course, most of my information comes straight from Beth. I hope you'll have a chance to meet her one day. The woman will be ninety years old next spring and her memory amazes me. If I live to be her age, I'll feel grateful if I'm able to remember my own name."

She gave us a quick tour of the garage, which had once been a carriage house. It had been painted to match the color scheme of the Manor, and was almost fancy enough to live in.

Running late for her next appointment, Nina handed me her business card and urged us to get in touch with her as soon as we made a decision. She told us how to get to the stables, which were behind the grove of oak trees, in case we wanted to look around by ourselves.

After she had gone, Pam and I stood next to each other in silence for a few minutes, staring up at the charming facade of the old mansion and inhaling the crisp, clean country air.

My fiancée looked up at me with a knowing grin as we turned to go.

"We'll definitely need fire insurance," she said, quite happily.

* * * * *

The farewell party that was thrown for us upstairs at Maury's was Victor Panziaka's idea. He was an old friend from my newspaper days. We had met each other when I was still a fledgling writer for the Chicago Tribune.

We were roughly the same age, but even back then Victor was an intrepid, seasoned reporter. He was bold, brash, opinionated and nosy. In other words, he was a wildly successful journalist.

For some reason I had liked the guy right off. Pamela, on the other hand, had hated him on sight. Victor pretended not to notice Pam's aversion to him, which irritated her further. Other women referred to him as "The Greek God," but Pam insisted he was a "chauvinist" and a "cretin." She couldn't understand what his endless string of lovers saw in him.

After all, he had the habit of introducing each new love interest as his "current girlfriend." His fear of commitment was no secret. As soon as a woman mentioned the "C" word, he was off and running.

Which is why Pam and I were surprised to see him with Angie DeLuca at our going away party. He and the curvaceous bleached blond had been together for six months – a record for Victor. And then, last week, he had dropped by Angie's place unexpectedly and had caught her looking at bride magazines.

Goodbye, Angela. Or so we had thought. But here they were at the party, arm-in-arm and cheek-to-cheek.

Pamela hoped it was a sign. If Victor could change, then so could all of mankind. I noticed that she actually flashed him a genuine smile that evening when he told her she looked "fantabulous."

I had never seen Victor when he wasn't wearing a gold chain around his neck and a gold loop in his left ear. That was his idea of "dressing up." He usually allowed his jet-black, curly hair to remain loose, just brushing the tops of his shoulders. But that night he had pulled it all back into a ponytail, which gave him a neater, more formal appearance.

When Pamela graciously returned the compliment he had given her – surprising everyone within earshot – I decided right away to take advantage of her unusual display of civility towards him: I brought up the question I knew she didn't want me to ask.

"Best man? You can't be serious! I'd have to wear a suit and tie, right?"

Angie glared at him. "Tell him you'd be honored, Vic, or else!"

Victor burst out laughing as Angie threatened to stomp his foot with one of her stiletto heels.

"Hey, man, I just decided you're worth the trouble after all. Haven't taken a trip down south for a long time. Anyhow, Angela's never been to Kentucky before, have ya, kid?"

"No, but I'd love to go." Angie was all smiles. The wedding was still four months away, which meant Victor was making some sort of commitment by offering to take her along.

"I've always wanted to see what blue grass really looks like," she gushed, "and Churchill Downs and all those beautiful horses they have down there. I'd just love to!"

"See?" Victor gave Angela's ruby-red lips a smack. "How could I deny my little woman such a unique cultural experience, huh?"

Pamela cringed, but she kept her tone of voice friendly when she said, "Of course Angie's invited. We're having both the wedding and the reception at the new house. My family will be spending several nights there to look after things while Alex and I are in Hawaii. You and Angie are welcome to stay over as well. We have more than enough room."

I stared at Pam in amazement. Her offer sounded sincere.

"Sounds like a good deal to me," said Victor. He squashed out his Marlboro in a nearby ashtray. "Sleeping in a mansion instead of a motel – who wouldn't go for that?"

His shrill whistle gained the attention of every guest in the room.

"Okay, people. The time has come to drink a toast to the perfect couple – Ken and Barbie, uh, I mean Alex and Pamela."

People actually found the tired joke funny. When the laughter died down, he continued.

"Seriously, folks, we're here to wish them both a fond farewell. Their mission is a dangerous one: They must attempt to live happily ever after away from all the glamour and excitement that comes with residing in our big, beautiful city.

"They must learn to live without us, their dearest, closest friends. They've also gotta learn how to breathe invisible, odorless air, and deal with the boredom of clean, country living." There was more laughter from the partygoers. "Now, tell them, are we envious?"

Most of the crowd yelled "No!"

"Liars!" Victor yelled back. "Are we the kind of friends who would wish them the best of luck anyway?"

The answer from the crowd this time was "Yes!"

"Here's to Pam and Alex, and their mansion on the hill." Victor raised his champagne glass. "May they live happy and secure within its walls, with all the peace and quiet and harmony they can stand."

A few months later I would remember Victor's toast, and think how ironic it was that what was happening was the opposite of what he had wished for us.