

## CHAPTER TWO

of

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We finished moving in on a rainy Sunday in early March, but the bad weather did not dispel our good humor. There were so many things to keep us entertained indoors that we never missed the sunshine absent on the outside.

Although I wasn't planning to begin work on another mystery novel until later that spring, the first thing I managed to do was transform a corner of the library into an office. I unpacked "Old Faithful," the typewriter I had bought at a pawnshop when I had first entered college. My grandfather's organ clock found a new home on the shelf above my desk.

Pamela was taking some extended time off from her touring schedule. She had hopes of restoring the rose garden to its former beauty, with the help of the former caretakers who were now our gardeners. She was also busy planning our June wedding. The gazebo in the backyard was where the ceremony would take place.

We had already decided to have a housewarming party the first Saturday in April. It was a perfect way to meet our new neighbors and, at the same time, it would give us an opportunity to show off in a manner that Rachel Hunt undoubtedly would have approved.

Late that evening, Pam and I stretched out in front of our bedroom fireplace with a bottle of Moët et Chandon, a gift from Victor and Angie. We were exhausted, but exhilarated as well, and we couldn't help but feel that everything we had been through in the last year had happened for a reason. Perhaps this special house would remain in our family forever.

We could only hope that it was meant to be.

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A dream woke me just before sunrise. Someone had been playing a lively, unfamiliar song on a piano.

No, wait a minute. There it was again – that same romantic melody.

**I sat up and listened carefully. The muted tones of a piano were drifting up from the music room directly below.**

**Pamela was curled up beside me fast asleep, and I decided not to wake her. It was highly unlikely that a burglar would take the time to practice his piano lessons while he was in the middle of robbing someone's house.**

**I eased out of bed and grabbed my robe on my way out the door. After turning on the light above the stairwell, I stood at the top of the steps and waited for a reaction from the intruder.**

**The piano played on.**

**I was more curious than worried. If we had still been living in Chicago I probably would have been wielding a knife and a gun.**

**At the bottom of the stairs I entered the hallway on my left. The light in the foyer provided enough illumination for me to see all the way to the other end. The song continued as I padded silently down the carpeted hall in my bare feet, pausing when I reached the doorway of the music room.**

**A familiar, pleasing scent wafted out to greet me. It smelled like the rosewater perfume my grandmother used to wear.**

**My uninvited guest apparently preferred practicing in the dark. I leaned against the doorjamb and fumbled for the light switch, telling myself that it was anticipation – not apprehension – that was making my heart beat faster.**

**"Alex?" said a female voice from behind me.**

**I let out a startled yelp. The music ceased abruptly.**

**"Alex, what's going on?"**

**My fingers found the light switch.**

**\* \* \* \* \***

**I once thought Pamela was having an affair with a mutual friend. After overhearing a suspicious phone conversation and finding out she had lied about her whereabouts, I was convinced they were planning an intimate rendezvous. What they were planning was a surprise party to celebrate the sale of my first novel, which I discovered after an embarrassing confrontation. Ever since then, because of that one little misunderstanding -- which occurred during an insecure period in my life – Pamela has accused me of having an overactive imagination.**

**When I flipped on the light and found the music room empty, I wished I were still in bed dreaming. Pamela always believes everything I tell her in my dreams. I was more than a little relieved when she admitted she had heard the mysterious music and had smelled the rosewater scent.**

**Nothing turned up missing during our thorough examination of the rooms downstairs. The French doors were standing wide open, but the lock had not been forced. All of the other doors and windows had not been disturbed. The lid had been opened on the Steinway, which filled a corner of the room near the French doors. The scent of roses had quickly faded away.**

**There was only one logical explanation we could come up with: We had been the victims of a practical joke, and whoever was responsible had a strange sense of humor. Since no real harm had been done, and because we had no desire to wait around for the deputy to show up and give us our own explanation, we hurried back to bed without bothering to notify the police.**

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**The following morning was far too glorious for us to remain indoors. Luckily, the activities we had planned would keep us outside for most of the day.**

**The gardeners, brothers Cliff and Eddie Randall, showed up exactly on time. Pamela spent most of the morning with them planning the layout and content of the new garden. In the meantime, I headed for the stables.**

**Pam and I had been riding horses since we were children. We were so anxious to own a gelding and a filly that we had decided to have the stables repaired right away.**

**I followed the winding path that cut through the grove of oak trees. It ended behind the stables.**

**A gravel driveway led from the barn to the main road. To my surprise, when I walked around to the front of the stables I saw one of the workmen running back down the driveway. He was swinging his hammer at a humongous brown and black dog.**

**The beast was retreating slowly, occasionally turning his head to snarl at his pursuer, showing off an impressive pair of canines as he did so.**

**"Way to go, Ron!" shouted the others, as the dog finally disappeared behind a row of bushes.**

**Ron waved the hammer above his head triumphantly.**

**"That mutt thought he owned the place," said a worker named Bo.**

**"Yeah," Ron said, joining us. "He came charging out of the barn to defend his territory. Took us by surprise."**

**"I've never seen him around before," I said, staring at the bushes where the dog had disappeared. "I hope he's gone for good."**

**"Well, if he isn't, we'll be ready for him next time." Ron lifted his hammer.**

**We joked about what else might be lurking in the barn, and then our thoughts turned to the work that had to be done. The stables weren't in bad shape, really. After looking around the place, Ron told me that he and his workers could have the job done before the week was through. Then it could be painted to match the mansion and garage.**

**Ron knew a few local painters he was willing to recommend. It seemed as though the stables would be ready to use in no time.**

**Before I left the workers to their task, I found out from Bo that a horse auction was being held that same afternoon at the Hunt Farm a few miles away. I decided to go, even though I wasn't ready to make any bids.**

**I walked back to the Manor and found Pam in the kitchen making tuna salad sandwiches. Cliff and Eddie would be having lunch with us.**

**The brothers were loyal fans of the Cincinnati Reds, but I noticed that they quickly removed their baseball caps upon entering the house. After washing up, we ate our food in the breakfast nook while Cliff and Eddie talked sports. When I was certain that the "little lady" had had enough, I livened up the conversation by warning them all about the beast from hell.**

**I wasn't surprised when Pamela expressed sympathy for the animal. She thought the stray dog had most likely been a victim of physical abuse and neglect, so no wonder he wasn't a "happy camper."**

**When she had finished her speech, the Randall brothers and I left the house feeling just as sorry for the creature as she did.**

**Cliff and Eddie went back to work in the garden, and I took off in my red Mustang convertible towards the Hunt Farm.**

**Nina had told us that the Hunts owned the biggest farm in the county. When I arrived, it was swarming with several different breeds of horses – and people. A group of senior citizens was taking a tour of the grounds, and an entire high school**

class was there on a field trip. If they liked horse farms, they would not be disappointed with the Hunt place.

At least thirty buildings were scattered around the premises. They were painted green and white and had spires on their roofs that made me think of Churchill Downs.

The barn where the auction was being held was the largest I had ever seen. It had been the first structure Adrian Hunt had built on the property, and today would cost a king's ransom to reproduce.

I sat on a wooden bench and watched a steady stream of horses parade by. The auctioneer's voice rattled on incessantly as the people in attendance bid their hearts and wallets out.

Pam and I were partial to Arabians. I saw a few handsome specimens being auctioned off, and I couldn't wait for the stables to be repaired so we could do some serious bidding.

I was in a lighthearted mood on the way home. Thoughts of the strange intruder and the beastly stray dog failed to enter my mind. I had put the top down on my convertible, and now an unseasonably warm sun beat down on me, erasing all memories of the long, harsh winter. I drank in the picturesque scenery, the refreshing wind, and when I passed Willow Lake, I felt sorry the ride hadn't lasted longer.

I started up the long driveway with the evening sun shining painfully in my eyes. Half-blinded, I didn't notice the young woman standing in the middle of the road until I was almost upon her.

I slammed on the brakes and swerved off the pavement. My convertible jerked to a halt underneath the bare limbs of a tall willow.

Through force of habit, I removed my keys from the ignition before opening my car door. I intended to apologize and make sure the lady had not been hurt, but the weakness in my knees caught me off-guard. I sat down again, hard, on the edge of my seat.

The woman was now walking briskly away from me toward the wooden bridge, apparently unharmed. She was throwing frequent angry looks over her shoulder as she marched along, while the train of her white gown billowed out behind her slender form like a sail in the breeze.

The vintage dress she was wearing wasn't the only thing odd about her appearance.

Her skin looked like alabaster, and she had her thick, chestnut-brown hair swept up in an old-fashioned Gibson Girl bun. Despite its unrelenting frown, I couldn't help noticing that her face was exceedingly pretty.

Because of her unusual dress, it occurred to me that she might be an historic home tour guide, like Nina, or better yet, a local eccentric. Whoever she was, I expected our conversation would be interesting.

The weakness in my knees subsided and I began following her, quickening my pace in order to catch up. Our previous encounter had not been the friendly sort, but I hoped an apology and a proper introduction would improve her disposition. She hadn't spoken a single word, so I decided to break the ice first.

"Hello, there!" I aimed the greeting at her back.

The words had barely left my mouth when she picked up her skirts and broke into a run. I tried to figure out if she was shy or just unsociable. Either trait was normally hard to find in a southerner. More than likely she was unaware that I was the new owner of Rosewood Manor.

She was halfway across the bridge when she suddenly dropped to her knees. The necklace she was wearing had come undone and had landed precariously close to the edge. I saw her reach out frantically to grasp the chain as I approached.

She seemed to sense I was getting closer, and when she turned her head to look at me I was surprised to see a tear slide down her pale cheek.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," I said, without coming any nearer.

The young woman clutched the cameo necklace to her breast and rose hurriedly to her feet – too hurriedly.

She stepped on the hem of her gown, losing her balance. There was no railing to break her fall, and I watched helplessly as she pitched forward over the side of the bridge and disappeared from sight.