



# One Last Breath (The Governess #3)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Seasoned governess Mary Wilcox is no stranger to family mysteries, but beneath the charm of Southern gentility, she senses a labyrinth of hidden agendas.

In the sultry whispers of Georgia, Mary arrives at the grand estate of the Greenwoods, holding within its walls a legacy steeped in shadows.

When Mary uncovers a clandestine garden, the sanctuary of Mrs. Greenwood, she witnesses secret conversations.

And before long, someone is killed.

As echoes from yesteryear blur reality, Mary finds herself tangled in a web of illusions.

What truths lie buried in the heart of Savannah? And will Mary discern them before they consume her whole?

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

I feel a stab of guilt as I board my flight home. I have gone a week without thinking about my sister. The last time I thought about Annie was when the Tyler twins walked onto the stage to receive their diplomas.

“All right, Miss Mary Wilcox. You’re all set. Seat 14C.”

I thank the gate agent, then turn my thoughts deliberately back to the Tyler’s to avoid thinking of Annie.

The Tyler twins are fifteen and geniuses by most standard measures. They were also utterly out of control before their parents hired me. I worked with them through their last semester of school prior to university. It’s challenging work, but at least the Tylers don’t have skeletons in their closet like the Ashfords and the Carltons, the two families I work for prior to the Tylers.

Cecilia Ashford murdered her husband, and Eliza Carlton murdered a rival lover. Both managed to conceal their guilt until I brought the disappearances of both victims to light.

I have yet to bring Annie’s disappearance to light. She disappeared just before my graduation from university twenty-nine years ago. I have yet to learn what happened to her,

and now, the guilt weighs heavily on me. Niall, the Carlton’s groundskeeper, gives me the number of a private detective so I can have help in case I stumble on any more dangerous secrets in my line of work. He doesn’t know about Annie, but I do, and I choose not to use this resource to find her.

So much for not thinking of Annie.

It occurs to me for the first time that a part of me doesn't want answers. A part of me is content to leave Annie's memory in the past. A part of me has grown comfortable simply ignoring the mystery and living my own life.

So, I feel guilty, but instead of taking action to alleviate my guilt, I bury it and focus on the job ahead.

I am flying directly to Savannah, Georgia. This job is an unconventional post for me. The Greenwood children are both grown, so I will be working as governess for those children for the three days they're not in school. When I am not working as a governess, I will assist in housekeeping. I have to admit I'm somewhat intrigued by this. I've never taken a housekeeping job. Maybe this will be good for me. Maybe by focusing on mundane work, I can avoid the urge to make this family's scandals my own. And perhaps, by avoiding the scandals that plague the lives of others, I can allow myself some closure from the scandal that plagues my own life.

That resolve lasts for all of ten seconds. Then I catch a glimpse of the man sitting across the aisle in the row just ahead of me. He's watching one of the flight attendants, a young woman in her mid-twenties with an excellent figure to go along with striking blue eyes and the naturally blonde hair that so many gentlemen still prefer.

This man clearly prefers it. So much that he slips his wedding ring off and slides it into his pocket.

It's none of my business, of course, but I can't stand dishonesty. I can't stand secrets. To lie to someone who loves you, someone you claim to love, is among the lowest acts a person can commit.

I bite my tongue when the flight attendant turns around, and the man begins his attempt to charm her. A rather feeble attempt if you ask me, but I'm a fifty-one-year-old woman who's seen almost everything. The twenty-five-year-old flight attendant is taken in, and when I see her blush and smile coyly in response to his flirtation, I can't control myself anymore.

I say, loudly enough that the entire cabin can hear me, "Goodness, that was a lovely wedding ring!"

The man jumps and stares at me in shock. "Excuse me?"

As if there could ever be an excuse for you, I manage not to say. Instead, I say, "The ring you slid into your pocket for safekeeping. It looked lovely. I assume you put it away so you wouldn't risk losing it on the flight. If I had a wedding ring so beautiful, I'm sure I would do the same. How long have you been married?"

The man tries to stumble through a denial of his marital status, but the damage is done. The flight attendant's mood instantly becomes frosty. She straightens, and her smile fades. The man looks at her almost desperately, but he's smart enough to realize he's lost his chance. He gives her a perfunctory smile and says, "Have a nice flight."

"You too, sir," she says in a voice just as frosty as her stare.

She gives me a grateful look as she passes. Her would-be lover fixes me with a glare that I return with the sweetest smile I can manage. He reddens and mutters something about a "meddling bitch," then looks ahead to enjoy—or perhaps endure—his flight. Alone.

I keep my smile as I look ahead. Without endangering myself or anyone else, I've prevented a liar from betraying his wife and seducing an innocent woman. I only

wish all problems were so easy to solve.

As the plane lifts off from Heathrow, and I bid England farewell, my thoughts turn back to my sister. Annie, so beautiful, so proud, so alive. I hate that I don't know what happened to her.

The police view is, of course, that she was attacked, assaulted, and then murdered. The lack of evidence to support this is tragic, but unfortunately not unheard of in cases of kidnappings.

The other possibility is that she may simply have left. In the weeks before her disappearance, she talked to me about running away, abandoning our life in Boston, abandoning our parents, abandoning our predetermined futures and building a life on her own terms somewhere far away. I'd like to think this is what truly occurred.

But she never contacted me, and I can't believe that she would have left me behind as well as our parents. Not when we were so close. Something happened, and not knowing kills me.

But it also drives me, and as I notice the lines in my face deepening, I am less and less able to escape the urge to find answers while I still can.

Annie is not in my thoughts often during the past six months, but I am certain she will occupy a great deal of them in the months to come.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

As I approach the Greenwood estate, my mind conjures up fanciful images - workers tending to fields, men in straw hats, women in gingham dresses fanning themselves while sipping sweet tea from the porch.

As I draw closer, these illusions are shattered. The wall surrounding the estate is just a modern stack of gray concrete blocks. The road leading to the house is paved with asphalt and it is not a horse-drawn carriage that conveys me to the house, but a modern luxury sedan with a gasoline engine that purrs quietly with more power than any team of horses.

And there it is - the house itself. The country home may not be the largest mansion I've worked at, but from the little I see on the short drive from the gate to the house, the grounds are certainly grander than any before. I'm told the plantation is fifteen hundred acres, although of course it no longer grows cotton.

The main house, though modest in size compared to the behemoth palaces I work in before, is lovely. The home was actually built some years after the American Civil War, but its massive pillars, spacious porch and grand windows call to mind the great manors of the antebellum South. I can't help but wonder if the past it hides is as hideous as those of the antebellum South.

I brush the unkind and unnecessary thought from my mind. The house was built after slavery fell, and while the estate may have existed before the Civil War, it has clearly shed any sign of the more despicable aspects of its history. The cotton fields are now oak glens. The bungalows have given way to gardens. This is nothing more than a quaint home on a beautiful estate.

The driver, a dignified and impeccably dressed man of around forty who gives his name as Wharton, pulls to a stop in front of a short walk that leads to the home. The house itself is set a few dozen yards back from the drive behind a stand of beautiful sugar maples and a courtyard dominated by a massive marble fountain depicting Moses calling forth water from a stone.

The artwork is stunning, but as I approach closer, the work takes on a more sinister meaning. The story of Moses calling water from the rock contains two parts. In the initial miracle, God commands Moses to strike the rock, and He will give water to the Israelites to slake their thirst as they wander through the desert. Moses complies, but the Israelites soon find themselves in need of more water. They complain to Moses, who once more intervenes on the Israelites behalf.

This time, God instructs Moses to speak to the rock, and it will bring forth its lifegiving water. Moses, however, is furious with the Israelites for continuing to tempt God and challenge his authority. So, rather than follow God's commandment, he strikes the rock again.

God keeps His promise and provides the nation of Israel with the water he needs but punishes Moses by barring him from the promised land He has reserved for His people. Moses will lead the nation of Israel to the river Jordan, but he will not cross the river into the land of Canaan.

It's clear as I draw near the fountain that the Moses depicted here is not the benevolent leader performing a miracle on God's behalf but the angry prophet who wishes not to aid Israel but to teach them a lesson. His staff is not raised to bless the nation but to strike the rock in wrath. His face shows no compassion but only fury that he should have to suffer the faithless Israelites.

I shiver as I regard the massive marble work. It's an odd theme for a country plantation. It would seem more at home in a Gothic cathedral when God was a

jealous God and not a compassionate one, a God of wrath and not of love, the Lord of Hosts raining fire and brimstone on the sinners of Earth and not the Shepherd welcoming little children into His arms.

I am too old to ascribe some sort of esoteric meaning to the family's architectural choices, but I can't help but wonder if this is a sign of things to come. The Tylers were a welcome reprieve from the darkness of my first two families, but perhaps they are the exception and not the rule.

"Welcome!" an exuberant voice calls to me. "Mary Wilcox! I am delighted to meet you."

I turn toward the voice and see an elegant woman perhaps a few years older than I descending the porch steps and approaching with her hands lifted in greeting. Her smile appears genuinely kind, and much of the trepidation I feel a moment ago melts away. Perhaps the patriarch who commissioned the Wrathful Moses was a tyrant of evil disposition, but this woman appears as far from that as the sun from the moon.

I smile and accept the hand extended to me. "Mrs. Greenwood, I presume?"

"Yes, but please, call me Elizabeth. And please join me on the porch for some sweet tea. Wharton will carry your luggage to your room."

I smile gratefully at Wharton and am pleased to see a genuine smile on his face. In my short service career, I've come to see that one can tell much about the wealthy by how they interact with their servants. Seeing Wharton's affection for Elizabeth further eases my worries.

Elizabeth leads me onto the porch, and I sigh with relief as the heat of the day cools. She notices my relief and comments, "If I have one complaint about Georgia, it has to be the weather. The summers are hot and muggy, and the winters are stormy and just



as muggy. And the mosquitoes..." she slaps such an offending creature away and sighs. "Well, I suppose that's the price one pays for beauty."

She speaks with an elegant Georgian accent that is too polished to be a drawl but not so haughty as to be aristocratic. In my experience, first impressions rarely tell one the full story about a person, but I like my first impression of Elizabeth.

She sits across from me on the porch table. I notice that the tea has already been poured for both of us. Did Elizabeth anticipate that I would join her on the porch, or is it some sort of hallmark of Southern hospitality to have tea poured for guests?

I sigh inwardly. Why must I question everything? Why can't I simply enjoy my tea?

"The rest of the family is away," Elizabeth explains, "but they'll return this afternoon. Today is Tuesday, so you'll be free of governess work for the first few days. That should give you time to familiarize yourself with the estate and with the rest of your duties. They'll be rather light. We have a housekeeper, of course. You'll only be helping with the guest rooms and a few of the bedrooms." She smiles at me. "I'm sorry. Look at me jumping right into work when I've only just met you. Tell me about yourself. You were once a schoolteacher, yes?"

"Yes," I reply, sipping the tea.

I am sure it is perfectly made, and the coolness of it is delightful in the summer heat, but while I have lived nearly all of my life on the west side of the pond, I am an Englishwoman at heart, and sweetening tea to such a cloying degree is sacrilegious to me. I manage to keep my shock hidden though and continue.

"I was a schoolteacher for twenty-five years before taking a position as governess a year and a half ago."

"Ah, yes. With the Ashfords."

I don't quite manage to control my shock this time. "You knew them?"

Elizabeth laughs and flips her hand. "Of course not. Yankees and Southerners rarely mix, even in this day and age. I knew of them, but James fortunately never found a need to do business with them. A tragedy what happened, though. Those poor children."

I recall the Ashford children, and my shoulders stiffen a little. Their mother murdered their father, and in the span of a few weeks, they lost both of their parents. I was able to expose her and bring her to justice, but while justice was served, it was served quite coldly for the children. I call them from time to time, but they are, understandably, quite willing to put anything that reminds them of that ordeal, and we aren't close.

"Yes," I agree. "It was tragic."

"Well, you won't have to worry about any scandals like that here," she assures me. "Even our ancient past is clean. This home may appear antebellum, but it was built a decade after that unpleasantness with the slaves ended."

The flippant way she says that unsettles me. Of course, I don't blame her for actions her ancestors may or may not have committed, but to dismiss the Civil War as "unpleasantness with the slaves?"

My initial impression of Elizabeth sours considerably. "Thank you for the tea," I tell her. "It's quite delicious. However, it has been a long journey, and if you don't mind, I'd like a chance to settle in before meeting the rest of the family."

"Of course, of course!" she says, leaping to her feet with far more spryness than a

woman of her age should have. “Come. I’ll show you to your room. We’ve given you one upstairs rather than in the basement with the rest of the servants.”

How kind of you , I think drily.

Fortunately, I manage to limit my visible response to a smile. As I follow Elizabeth into the house, I cast one last glance back at Moses. He stares down at the invisible nation of Israel with cold fury, and I shiver again before walking inside.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

"Mary!" Elizabeth calls from downstairs, "Come meet the family!"

I feel refreshed after a shower and a moment to clear my mind. I've managed to process my feelings about the unusual introduction I have and I'm ready to endure whatever other awkwardness these other meetings will entail.

I head downstairs, and Elizabeth greets me with a smile. "Come with me. The rest of the family has returned, and I can't wait to introduce you."

"I would be delighted."

Elizabeth beams and leads me to the rear of the house. I can't tell if the smile on her face is genuine. There's a vacancy in her eyes that I don't notice in our first meeting. She exhibits the Southern charm form requires, but I wonder how much of her charm is natural and how much is learned. She certainly plays the role to perfection.

I don't really want to meet anyone else in the family. I want to meet the servants and their children, but I don't see any value in meeting the family members unrelated to my job. To them, I am nothing more than a housekeeper, and I'd rather keep it that way.

It's not them I'm worried about, of course. It's myself. Already I am analyzing and deconstructing Elizabeth's behavior, and I've known the woman for all of an hour or two. With the Tylers, I am able to keep my relationship strictly business without feeling a need to know every facet of their history and personalities. I suppose the unpleasantness with the Carltons and the weeks spent in fear for my life deaden me enough that I can quell that side of me, but it has risen again in full force.

It's Annie. I know it is. That's the reason for my inquisitiveness. With the Tylers, I don't think about Annie at all, and so I'm able to mind my own business, do my job and leave the family's skeletons—if any exist—to the family.

But Annie is back in my thoughts, and so is this almost supernatural urge to know. If I'm not careful, I'll land myself in trouble again, and I can't count on always being able to find a way out of trouble.

Elizabeth leads me through the back door to a porch that if anything, is even more elegant than the front. The table certainly is larger, with room for six rather than the four of the front table. I feel a twitch of irritation that a detail even that small should matter to me.

Then, my attention is pulled to the four occupied chairs. Three of the occupants stand to greet me. One remains in her chair, eyeing me distrustfully.

Elizabeth addresses the older man of the group. "James, this is Miss Mary Wilcox, our new housekeeper."

James smiles and takes my hand. He brings it to his lips and says with charm that seems far more genuine than his wife's, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mary. I'm delighted to have you in our home."

His charm seems genuine, and I can't deny that I feel a slight fluttering in my chest when the tall, handsome James kisses my hand. Still, there's a hardness behind his blue eyes, and it's not simply his charm that makes my voice breathless when I say, "The pleasure is all mine."

He releases my hand, and Elizabeth gestures to the two younger adults. "This is our son, Christopher, and our daughter Annabelle."

Annabelle smiles and briefly touches her fingers to mine. She is clearly irritated by her mother, but I don't believe it has anything to do with me. I see in her eyes the same rebellious nature I see in my sister's eyes, the same chafing under the weight of family expectations, the same desire for freedom. I know that is a lot to deduce about someone I've only just met, but I am confident in my assessment, premature though it may be.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mary," she says.

Her tone is tolerant and somewhat apologetic, confirming that she isn't upset by my presence but by the charade her mother insists upon. I don't blame her. I find this whole game rather uncomfortable myself.

Christopher takes my hand with a smile as charming as his father's. Thankfully, his eyes don't show the same hardness. Just as thankfully, he chooses to shake my hand rather than kiss it. "It's wonderful to meet you," he says. "I do hope you enjoy your employment with us."

"Oh, Christopher," Elizabeth says, flipping her hand. "You and your business terms." She looks at me and says, "Ever since he received his business degree from Harvard, everything must be talked about as though it's in a boardroom."

A touch of irritation crosses Christopher's face. "Employment isn't a term for MBAs mother, and there's no need to bring up my degree to everyone who talks to you."

"Your mother is only proud of you," James interjects. "As am I. Still, perhaps Harvard is a subject we can reserve for another day."

"Yes, you're quite right, dear," Elizabeth says. She gestures to the older woman of the group, the only one still sitting. "Mary, this is my mother, Violet."

I smile and bow slightly. “How do you do, Violet?”

Violet gives me a sour frown. “What’s happened to Leah?”

“Nothing’s happened to Leah, mother,” Elizabeth replies patiently. “Miss Mary is here to help her.”

Violet scoffs. “What you should do is hire someone to look after those damned children.”

Annabelle covers her face in a poor attempt to hide her laughter. Christopher shifts his feet uncomfortably. James just looks tired.

Elizabeth looks even more uncomfortable than Christopher. “She’s here to look after the children too, mother.” Then, pleadingly, as though willing her mother to behave politely without forcing Elizabeth to demand it, “She’s come all the way from England.”

Violet scoffs again. “Dreary place. You’ll like it better here. No fog rolling in at all hours of the day, and no singing fools stumbling home from the bars at all hours of the night.”

“Mother!” Elizabeth squeaks.

The family is clearly embarrassed by their brash and possibly senile grandmother. Oddly, though, I find the scene refreshing. It's decidedly normal, and seeing them behave like ordinary people and not aristocrats relieves much of my trepidation.

“I surely won’t miss the drunkenness,” I tell Violet. “One would think that grown men would learn to control themselves around whiskey, but sadly, that is a lesson few appreciate.”

Violet looks me up and down. Her scowl deepens, but her shoulder relaxes. I can tell I'm passing whatever test she's putting me through. "You don't sound quite English," she says. "Where are you from?"

"I was born in England," I inform her, "but I was raised in Boston."

She scoffs once more. I get the impression that is her typical expression. "Even more dreary than England," she opines, "but there, the drunks are violent."

"Thank you, mother," Elizabeth says, finally unable to take more of the old woman's vitriol. "And thank you, Mary. I'm sure we all look forward to getting to know you better."

I take the hint and bow once more. "It was lovely meeting you all. Thank you for inviting me into your home."

I walk inside, leaving the family to enjoy their afternoon. If they can, anyway. I hear footsteps follow me, however, and turn to see Christopher following me. He gives me an apologetic smile and says, "Sorry about Grandmother. She's grown more unpleasant with age, I'm afraid."

"Aging is rarely pleasant," I reply. "Be grateful for your youth. It flees far faster than is comfortable." It occurs to me that he probably isn't looking for sage wisdom from me, so I quickly add, "And don't worry about your grandmother. I didn't take any offense."

He smiles and inclines his head. "I'm glad to hear it. I really do hope you'll enjoy it here. This place has its idiosyncrasies, but it really is lovely."

"Thank you. I'm sure I'll be quite happy."



He bows again, then returns to his family. I head back to my room, where I intend to spend the rest of the evening digesting what I've just experienced.

My room is, as promised, upstairs. I believe it was a guest bedroom before being converted into the governess's suite, but a guest bedroom in a southern country home is often as opulent as a suite in a five-star hotel, and this one is no exception. The bed is a queen with a plush mattress, silk sheets and a quilted comforter. The furniture is all of dark maple, polished to a shine and far more expensive than anything I'm used to so far.

The bathroom is new, not for me, but for the house. Its modernity clashes somewhat with the timeless elegance of the room, but then, it's a bathroom not a parlor. I am not of the opinion that every single room in a house needs to be palatial.

Still, it includes a full shower and a clawfoot tub, along with a curtained bay window that overlooks the gardens. I find it a little silly to have a window in a bathroom—I am not an exhibitionist, after all—but perhaps I can watch the stars from here one of these evenings.

As I've already showered, I spend the rest of the evening unpacking. That is how I come across a chest and a suitcase in the small walk-in closet attached to the room.

The chest and suitcase are embossed with the name Lila Benson. I open the chest and the first thing I see is a lesson book. The book is worn and the dust cover is somewhat frayed. I open the cover and see the name Annabelle in flowing cursive on the first page. It seems this Lila Benson was once the Greenwoods' governess.

I feel an urge to look through the rest but close the dresser before I can succumb to that urge. I am not here to involve myself in anyone else's business. Tomorrow, I'll alert Elizabeth that Miss Benson left some of her belongings behind, and she can choose how to dispose of it.

I retire early that evening, but my best intentions don't bring sleep to me any more easily. I spend several hours staring at the ceiling and wondering if I've walked unwittingly into another mystery.

I'm being foolish. Nothing I've experienced today hints at a scandal. Still, before sleep finally takes me, it leaves me haunted by the vacancy in Elizabeth's eyes and the hardness in James's.

"It's not my business," I whisper. "Leave it alone, Mary."

If only I were good at following advice.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

I wander through the estate, breathing deeply of the richly scented air. I have been on the estate for just over a week now, and I am still amazed at its beauty. The lawns are a rich, vibrant green, and the hedges are perfectly trimmed. The gardens are filled with colorful flowers of all sorts: tulips, roses, marigolds, and daisies. A central dais hosts brilliant yellow sunflowers, and I realize the intent is to represent the actual sun with the rows of colors arranged like the different beams of light the sun emits.

I wonder if James designed the landscape itself or if he hired a gardener to manage it. Of course, he has a full team of landscapers who maintain the massive estate, but is the layout his brainchild or that of the gardener? The Carlton estate that I work at before I work for the Tyler family is a similar work of art, and it is the gardener who is responsible in that case.

My smile fades slightly as I remember Niall, or more specifically, the card he gives me. I have yet to call upon the private investigator whose number he provides me, but the card still sits in my handbag. Perhaps that is why I push Annie from my mind. I've finally been given the resources to determine what happened to her, but I fear I won't like the answers I find.

These thoughts are the same that plague me while I my flight, so I push them from my mind. I am here to do a job. The past is better off left in the past.

Whoever is responsible for the design of this estate is a genius, whether it's James himself or the gardener. Gates and arbors formed of tall shrubs provide a sense of organization and structure. The statuary is particularly striking, following a Roman theme that adds an air of elegance to the already stunning estate.

The Roman theme to the statuary clashes with the Gothic Moses in the courtyard. It is elegant, but somehow less visceral than the fury in the prophet's face. The sagacity of their faces seems almost bland compared to the fire of the upraised staff poised to strike the rock.

I sigh and try once more to pull my thoughts back to the present. I am determined not to become embroiled in melancholy here. I am done with that.

I focus on the flowers again, noticing different color schemes at play in the various flower beds, all as carefully planned and executed as the sunburst theme in the central garden. A burst of orange flowers catches my eye, and I approach to get a closer look. The vine they belong to also has deep green leaves and grows over a brick wall constructed to display the flowers. As I get closer, I am greeted with a delightful scent - honeysuckle. I draw in deep breaths, savoring the sweet aroma and letting it drive away the disconcerting image of Moses. Really, who commissioned that fountain, anyway? If the same person responsible for this beauty is responsible for that harsh gargoyle in the courtyard, then perhaps they are not the genius I think them to be.

I follow the hedge to an archway, but as I reach for the wrought iron gate, I hear whispering coming from within. I pause, unsure if I should continue on or turn back.

I should turn back. I'm not really unsure of that. I should turn back and quickly before I find myself confronted with yet another family's secret.

I stand with my hand resting on the handle of the gate and wrestle with my own mind.

This is foolish. I did well with the Tylers. For the first time since becoming a governess, I was able to simply do my job and avoid entanglements. I accomplished this by being steadfast in my commitment. If I heard anything suspicious, I ignored it. If I caught a look in someone's eye that suggested suppressed emotions, I minded my

own business. I politely declined to take meals with the family, and when lessons were finished for the day, I allowed the Tyler twins to pursue their own activities without hovering over them like a hawk or trying to become some sort of surrogate aunt.

Yet here I stand with my hand on the gate, wondering if I should eavesdrop on a conversation I'm obviously not meant to hear or do the sensible thing and leave it alone.

Annie's memory—her beautiful, terrible, persistent memory—worms its way into my thoughts.

“Do you ever wonder about mother?”

“About mother? No, why should I?”

Annie shrugs and looks out over the Atlantic. The setting sun lights her hair on fire and bathes her face in shadow. “I just mean, do you wonder about her?”

I sigh. Annie has a tendency to ask broad questions like this that could have thousands of meanings. “I wonder if she's remembering to take her medicine on occasion. I wonder if she'd prefer the blue slippers or the teal ones when I buy her a fresh pair every winter. I assume that's not the question you're asking, though, so perhaps you can clarify.”

Annie rolls her eyes. “Why are you always so literal, Mary?”

I frown, a little miffed. “Why are you always so vague?”

She shrugs again. “I don't mean to be vague. I just... not all questions are railroads to a definite answer. I only wanted to know if you ever wondered about her.”

I lift my hands and let them drop irritably to my side, then try to make a guess as to her meaning. “Do you mean to ask if I wonder about her health? Yes, I wonder if she takes her medicine. As for her sanity? Well, she’s a mean old witch, but I’m afraid she’s as sharp as she ever was.”

“Relax, Mary,” Annie says. “I was only asking.”

“I don’t know what you were asking, though,” I snap. “You do this all the time. You ask questions for which there are no answers.”

“So what?”

“So what? So, what’s the point of a question that has no answer?”

“What’s the point of needing answers to every question?”

I stand and brush the soil from my skirt. “I’m going home to start on dinner. Try to be back before it’s dark this time.”

Ordinarily, Annie would apologize for upsetting me and plead to walk me home. I would resist for a moment, then relent, and by the time we reached home, we’d be friends again.

This time, though, she only looks back out over the sea, the shadows deepening over her face. I wait for her to say something to me, and when it becomes clear she won’t, I sigh again and stalk away.

“Please,” she calls after me. “I know you know where they are. I know you can show me. I’m begging you.”

I frown. This isn’t right. She doesn’t say anything to me this evening. That’s why I

wonder for years if this was when she decided to exclude me from her plan to escape.

“Please,” the voice calls again.

I gasp, and the movement causes the gate to shake, sending a low clanging tone echoing across the garden. It hits me that it’s not my sister’s voice in my I hear, but Elizabeth’s very real and very present voice speaking now.

That voice goes silent when the gate rattles. A moment later, Elizabeth pokes her head out from behind a tall ivy hedge and looks at me with stunned embarrassment.

Heat climbs my cheeks, and I manage to stammer, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“No, no!” she cries quickly. “No need to apologize. Come, join me!”

She is cheerful, perhaps a little too cheerful. She beams at me, but her smile is that of a wolf baring its teeth. She beckons me forward, and the wolf turns into a crocodile, luring its prey into its yawning mouth.

“The geraniums are in bloom,” she says. “They really are lovely.”

I take a deep breath and put a smile on my own face. I can only hope it looks more genuine than hers. “Thank you.”

I turn the handle, and the gate swings easily. I expect a creak and a groan, and the silence of the swinging iron edifice unnerves me further. I can’t help but feel a little as though I’m walking to my doom.

When I round the hedge and see nothing but an ordinary stand of geraniums, these ones the brilliant purple variety known as cut-leaved crane’s-bill, I relax. Elizabeth is

simply enjoying a peaceful afternoon in her private garden.

She confirms that conclusion a moment later. “I planted these so I could have something beautiful to look at that was all my own.” Her smile fades a little. “But even a beautiful secret is a burden I find difficult to bear at times.”

I can feel the familiar pull stirring in my breast, and I make one last heroic mental effort to stay out of this, whatever “this” might be.

Then Elizabeth speaks again. “I’m sorry if I startled you with what I was saying. I sometimes act the scenes I read in books aloud. James always says that I’ll make people think I’m insane if I don’t control myself.” She grins at me, and I’m reminded once more of an animal, but this time a frightened dog more than a predator. “I hope you don’t think I’m crazy.”

“Of course not,” I assure her. “I often act out fantasies. To be honest, it’s a relief knowing I’m not the only one.”

It’s a thin lie, but when one is grasping at straws, one ignores such things. Elizabeth sighs with relief and takes the proffered line. “Indeed. Well, I should get back to the house, however. We have guests this evening, and I’ll be expected to primp myself up. Please feel free to stay as long as you like. This garden is concealed but not off-limits.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you later.”

She gives me one last smile, then hurries off, clearly relieved to be free of the awkward encounter. My own smile fades the moment she disappears.

This is none of my business. This is not my concern. Whatever is or isn’t or might be happening with this family has nothing to do with me.



I repeat that thought until the pull subsides, and I'm able to convince myself that I'm not going to snoop into another family's secrets.

But in the back of my mind, I know it's already too late to turn back.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

The next morning is Thursday, my day off. I choose to take a break from the grounds, hoping that by separating myself from the estate, I can relieve some of the tension that hovers in the back of my mind after my encounter with Elizabeth in the garden the day before.

I don't feel up to the hustle and bustle of the city, so I head instead to the historic district. The horse-drawn carriages and cobblestone streets call to mind the elegance of the pre-war South. Unfortunately, that thought only reminds me of the rot that often lies underneath beauty.

I sigh and press on, determined to enjoy a peaceful and relaxing day. I walk through the historic district and find more to admire in the antiquated buildings and charming parks with their bubbling brooks and peaceful ponds. I deliberately give the center of the district a wide berth. I know from my research into Savannah that the center of the historic district is dominated by the Cathedral Basilica of Saint John the Baptist. Considering my poor relationship with the statue of the Wrathful Moses, I am not enthused by the idea of a trip through a Gothic-Revival cathedral.

My detour deposits me in a quaint farmer's market that dominates the edge of one of the district's parks. I wander through the charming little market and marvel at how this rural market could exist, surrounded by the wealth of Savannah. A closer look tells me that the wealth is not so far away as I think at first. The vendors all wear clothing that, while casual, is clearly of excellent quality and quite expensive. I catch quite a few labels from designers far posher than seems appropriate for clothing such as blue jeans and khakis.

Must everything be fake? Can nothing simply be what it seems to be and nothing

else? Why am I always surrounded by mystery? Just once, I'd like to go through a day encountering nothing but what's supposed to be there.

A voice in my head reminds me that I've just spent several months in such a sensible environment while working through the Tylers. I purse my lips at the thought. Well, why can't life always be like that? Why can't that be the normal and not this ever-present charade?

Still determined to enjoy myself, I decided to make some purchases. I buy a few jars of honey from different flowers and home-canned tomatoes. I stop at a flower stall and ask if there are any live plants I can purchase.

The florist gives me a defensive frown and replies, "All of my flowers were picked this morning."

"And they're lovely," I reply. "I was just hoping to have a plant for my room that would last through the summer."

The florist's frown deepens. "Summer will be over in a couple of months. And anyway, if you want a plant, you should get one from the garden. The Greenwoods have plenty to spare, I'm sure. We sell cut flowers here. Not so fancy as potted plants, but they liven some people's day."

I have no interest in arguing with someone over the quality of their flowers, so I only smile and bid them good day. I am a little disturbed that they recognize me as an employee of the Greenwoods. I have been recognized as an employee of wealthy families before, but Savannah is a large city. There are nearly one hundred fifty thousand people here. How could the Greenwoods be known well enough that I would be recognized as their new housekeeper?

I suppose that I haven't gone far enough. The Greenwood Estate is close to the

historic district, close enough that I walk from the house to the park. Perhaps that florist is a neighbor.

Somewhat relieved by that, I decide I've explored enough for the day and begin the journey home. Almost immediately, I am accosted by a woman in her mid-sixties who waves energetically to me as though I were some long-lost relative.

"Hello!" she cries, crossing one of the cobblestone walkways to approach me. "You must be Mary Wilcox."

I nod warily. "And you are?"

She extends a hand. "Clara Beaumont. You and I are neighbors now."

I take the hand because manners dictate that I do, but I remain wary. "Are we?"

"Of course we are!" she says, as though it's ridiculous that I don't already know that. "The Beaumont Estate is just west of the Greenwood Estate."

"I see. Well, it's nice to meet you, Miss Beaumont."

"Oh please, call me Clara."

She takes my hand and leads me with her. Politeness doesn't necessarily dictate that I allow her to do this, but if the woman is a neighbor, then I'd rather not have her complaining about my rudeness to the Greenwoods, even if she is the one being rude here.

I suppose I'm being unkind. Aggressive neighborliness may be annoying, but it's not rudeness.

“I must confess,” I say, “I’m surprised to be so well-known after only a week spent in their service. Or at all, really. Is it common for people to interest themselves in the household staff here?”

“All people are interesting,” Clara replies, “whether they believe to be so or not. And the Greenwoods, of course, are the most interesting of all.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh yes. Especially since that poor girl died.”

I feel the pull again, so strong that I physically stiffen. My mind pleads with me to ignore the feeling, but I can’t. “What girl?”

Clara grins triumphantly at me. I get the sense the woman lives for gossip, and I understand now why she’s latched onto me. I am a new arrival, and better yet, I am an employee of her neighbors. I am a fresh ear for the tales she has to tell, and possibly a source of new tantalizing information to quench her thirst.

“Oh yes,” she says. “Deirdre McCoy. A lovely girl, but quite silly. She was one of those Southern belles who are praised for their beauty by people who don’t value anything but. Unfortunately, she was too foolish to realize the jealousy that would provoke in certain people.”

My heartbeat quickens. It occurs to me rather unpleasantly that I am no better than Clara. Perhaps my “thirst for justice” is nothing more than an old woman’s love of other people’s business.

Still, I can’t resist asking, “Annabelle Greenwood?”

She laughs, a tittering sound that is neither harsh nor grating but is still somehow

unpleasant. "No, of course not! This was long before she was born."

"Elizabeth then?"

"No." She grins conspiratorially at me as though she is about to reveal the secrets of the ancients. "Violet."

"Violet?"

"Yes. This would have been... let's see. I was in the tenth grade, so that would be... fifty-two years ago."

The pull weakens considerably. She's relating a scandal to me that took place decades ago, perhaps even before I was born. I might fancy myself an occasional champion of justice, but I'm not going to harass an old woman over a conspiracy from fifty years ago related to me by a nosy neighbor.

"I see," I reply noncommittally.

"Deirdre was just beautiful, just beautiful! When I tell you that you have to have seen her to understand, believe me. Hers was the kind of beauty that comes along once a generation. All of the men in town wanted her. Poor little thing."

"Yes, that sounds terrible." I hope she doesn't pick up on the sarcasm in my voice.

"Now Violet was... well she was pretty too, of course, and her family had money to make her look even prettier, what with fancy silks from Europe and makeup from Japan and all of that, but she wasn't the sort of beauty that Deirdre was. No one was.

"Violet, however, was smart. I'll give her that much. She was smart as a whip, and I'm afraid to say that intelligence did little to raise her stock among the traditionally

minded men of Savannah. She was forced to watch all of those men fawn over vapid, gorgeous little Deirdre while ignoring her. Now me? I was never very pretty or very smart, so I just accepted that I would have to trap some poor unsuspecting man from outside of Savannah. I didn't need to be jealous, or else I'd have to be jealous of the whole city.

"But Violet... Violet was jealous. She befriended Deirdre, and the poor little thing was too foolish to see that Violet was only manipulating her. We all saw it, but of course, no one expected her to disappear."

I still have no intention of harassing the senile Violet over an alleged event from before I was born, but my eyes widen in surprise nonetheless. "Violet killed her?"

"You didn't hear that from me," Clara insists. "But let's just say that had Violet not been engaged to Johnathan Henrickson, they would have asked far more questions than they did."

"About what?"

Clara's smile widens. "Well, Johnathan was engaged to Violet, but quite a few people observed the lovely Deirdre giving Johnathan some... shall we say, attention?"

"Goodness!"

"To quote a famous thespian, goodness had nothing to do with it. It seems that they weren't particularly careful with the affair. Let's just say..."

She stops herself here, and this time instead of waiting for me to probe further, her smile fades, and her eyes widen, as though she's realized that this time, she really has gone too far.

“Anyway, I should let you walk the rest of the way. I’m welcome at the Greenwood Estate, but it’s best I only come when invited so they have a chance to keep Violet out of the way.”

I look up and realize that we’ve walked all the way back to the estate. I blink in surprise. I wasn’t aware she had talked for that long.

“Oh, and if you don’t mind, please keep this to yourself. Violet gets confused these days. She probably doesn’t even remember poor Deirdre.”

I manage a smile. “Of course. Thank you for the conversation.”

She gives me a shark-toothed grin and replies. “Thank you . I’ll see you around, Mary.”

“I’ll see you, Clara.”

I head up to the house and try to make sense of my thoughts. Clara is almost certainly lying. Violet is senile, but senility tends to reach such memories as the murder of a classmate last. Violet would be more likely to reveal her guilt than to conceal it, were she guilty at all, which I very much doubt.

And anyway, if her mind is compromised, there’s no justice for me to pursue. She won’t fully understand why she’s being punished if she’s punished now. There’s no mystery for me to solve.

Still, as I walk hurriedly past the vengeful eyes of Moses, I can’t help but wonder if the existence of that secret is a sign that others lurk in the dark corners of the Greenwood estate. Perhaps I should look a little more closely at the secrets this family hides. Perhaps Moses’ wrath isn’t for my meddling but for the victims buried under his gaze who have yet to receive justice.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

I consider myself to be a practical woman. I don't believe in fate, and I don't believe that spiritual powers manipulate Earthly events to bring about some predetermined end. I believe that people—whether they realize it or not—are fully responsible for everything that happens in this world.

But there are moments when I can't help but wonder if something beyond myself has decreed that I will be unable to escape the mysteries that surround me. Perhaps I truly am doomed to pull the thread of every scandal I stumble across until I either solve those mysteries or finally encounter a foe I can't overcome.

I experience one of those moments the evening after meeting Clara. I am in my room preparing for bed after a long day of work when I notice a corner of paper sticking out from underneath my bedroom's dresser. I pick it up, and when I unfold it, a chill comes over me.

There is something odd about Elizabeth. Not madness. Something more sinister than that. Something rotten hides in the shadows here.

The handwriting on the note appears familiar. It takes me a moment to place it, but then I recall the lesson books I discover in the chest in my closet. I hurry to the chest and compare the handwriting to that on the front page of the book.

It matches. Lila Benson wrote this note.

I close the chest carefully, my heart pounding. I look at the note again and wrestle with what to do.

Annabelle has not needed a governess in four years. Lila Benson would have been gone from the family at least that long. Whatever scandal Lila thought she sniffed, it can't possibly be anything I can help with today.

I make several other excuses like this, but I am too tired to pretend I won't try to get to the bottom of this mystery. Not for the first time, I am reminded of the story of Cain and Abel. God asked Cain where Abel was, and Cain feigned ignorance of his brother's fate. God then revealed to Cain that he knew exactly where Abel was and what had happened to him.

"Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." I believe that's what the verse said.

I felt that same cry for justice when I investigated the murder of Johnathan Ashford. I felt it again when I looked into the disappearance of Minerva Montclair. I feel it here, and it's that feeling that makes me question whether there may indeed be something to spiritualism and religion.

Perhaps it is Deirdre McCoy's ghost that calls to me. Perhaps she called to Lila as well. Talking to Clara Beaumont earlier, I was able to convince myself that I was uninterested in solving a decades-old mystery that could only implicate a senile old woman in a crime she probably didn't commit. I was able to dismiss Clara's gossip as a fabrication.

Now, though...

Maybe it isn't Deirdre McCoy's ghost. Maybe it's the same ghost with whom Elizabeth pleaded in her secret garden. Elizabeth said the ghost knew where they were.

What are they? Or is the proper question who are they? And why would Elizabeth

travel to a secret garden to ask that question? Why would she be so desperate for an answer that she would turn to phantoms?

The practical woman in me can't ignore the possibility that Elizabeth is simply experiencing an earlier onset of the dementia that plagues her mother. Perhaps she isn't entirely aware of herself during these episodes.

In any case, this is none of my business. Unfortunately, I'm past the point where realizing this is going to stop me.

So, rather than slipping into my nightgown, I slip into my boots and pull a sweater over my dress. I head downstairs quietly, not wanting to wake anyone, then just as quietly slip outside.

I am lucky to have a full moon to guide me. I don't want to use a light because I don't want to alarm anyone. The wrathful Moses stares accusingly at me as I pass, but I ignore him and proceed anyway. Perhaps I am as rebellious as the Israelites.

I follow the path toward the garden and soon disappear behind the walls of honeysuckle that ring the gardens deeper portions. The vibrant colors are muted by the pale light of the moon. They seem ominous to me now, not bright and lively as they do under the sun. With the house hidden by the vines and the only sound that of my feet softly crunching into the dirt, it's not hard at all to imagine this place as a sanctuary for haunts and spirits.

The night is warm, and I wear my sweater, but the chill within me spreads to my limbs, and I begin to tremble.

I reach the wrought iron gate and pause once more with my hand on the handle. I hear nothing beyond. No whispers. No prayers. No insects either.

It strikes me that I haven't seen or heard a single insect since leaving the house. Not a single cricket plays its fiddle. No moths flit through the moonlight, and no fireflies flicker over the flowers. The place is silent as a tomb.

I shiver and think longingly of my bed, but I've come this far. I might as well see this through.

I push the handle down, and as before, the gate swings open soundlessly. I step through, and the sound seems more muted than before somehow, as though the world has been covered by a felt cloth.

The moon seems both to dim and brighten at the same time. No, that's not quite right. The moon brightens, but the world dims. It's as though the moon sucks the light away from the Earth rather than shining down on it.

I step forward, my feet seeming to move of their own accord. The hedges extend above me, looming like the walls of a dungeon. I look for the geraniums I remember from my first foray into this secret garden, but I don't find any. Did I have to walk this far the last time? I thought that when I first entered this place, I found Elizabeth and her flowers right away.

There's a glow ahead of me. Someone else is out here. I need to flee before I'm seen and questioned.

I try to turn, but my feet don't allow me. I hear the soft crunch of each footfall as I am compelled inexorably forward. How is it that I have such little control over my own faculties? Am I so desperate to solve this mystery that I am willing to risk putting my position, perhaps even my life, in jeopardy?

Apparently so, because as the glow brightens, I hear whispers, and even those are not enough to stop me.

“I know you know where they are. You’ve always known. Why are you hiding them from me?”

The voice speaks too softly for me to identify it, but it must be Elizabeth. Who else would be out here at this hour, pleading to a patch of geraniums for guidance?

“Tell me where they are. Tell me quickly, or it will be too late.”

Too late? Too late for what?

I round a corner and see Elizabeth. She wears a cotton nightgown, and her long blonde hair falls straight down her back. She is barefoot. She kneels in front of the geraniums, and I see that it’s the flowers that release the glow I see. Perhaps she has placed a flashlight among them, or perhaps there are lights embedded in the soil.

I don’t think she notices me. She continues to kneel and whisper without turning.

“She’s looking for them too. If she finds them, it’ll be too late.”

Another chill runs through me. Does she know that I’m looking into the family’s secrets? And what is she worried about? If I find them, it’ll be too late for what? And what are they? Who are they?

“We have to stop her. We have to turn her away, or she’ll fall with them.”

Now I am truly frightened. I wish to flee, but I can’t move, can’t even cry out for help. I know it’s not my own will that keeps me here because every fiber of my being screams at me to run, to return to the house, to lock my room, to resign my position first thing in the morning and fly anywhere else.

Why did I even become a governess? Why didn’t I remain a schoolteacher? I was

happy then. Why at fifty years old did I decide to embroil myself in the secret lives of others when I had spent my entire adult life content to worry only about myself?

“But you weren’t content. Not really. You’ve only just begun to admit that to yourself.”

It takes me a moment to realize that the voice that has spoken is not that of my conscious, but that of the woman kneeling in front of the geraniums. Elizabeth.

I try to apologize for my intrusion, to promise that I’ll never return here again, but my lips are as untethered from my will as the rest of me. I can only stand mutely and listen.

“You were happy because you were hiding. But there are some things you can’t hide from, and as age deepens the lines in your forehead, you realize that dying without answers is unacceptable.”

She lifts her head, and I open my mouth to cry out, why I’m not sure. No sound comes out. The only sound is her voice, and the only light is from the harsh moon and the ghostly flowerbed in front of me.

“You still hide, though. You surround yourself with little mysteries because they convince you you’re a good person, but you can’t run forever. The voice of your sister’s blood cries out to you from the ground, and eventually, you will return to that ground if for no other reason than to stop her incessant shrieking.”

What is this? What is she talking about? How does she know about Annie?

God damn it, why can’t I move?

Elizabeth turns her head.

It's not Elizabeth. It's Annie. Not the sister I knew and loved, though. The image that stares at me is that of the ghost I first encounter in the Ashford home. It is my sister, but she is pale, nearly translucent. Her lips are gray and bloodless, and in place of eyes, there are only two gaping holes, darker than night, emptier than death.

She opens her mouth and screams.

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I sit up, screaming at the wall.

I am in my bed in my room. Light filters in through the curtains of my bedroom window. I look at my door and see that it is locked. I am shaking with terror, but I am safe.

I had a nightmare. A bad one. I try to recall what it was, but the images are fading rapidly. I can only remember the harsh light of the moon and the wrought iron gate that separates Elizabeth's geraniums from the rest of the estate opening soundlessly at my touch.

I release a heavy sigh and run my hands through my hair. It's been some time since I had a night terror that bad. I still have some of the sleeping pills prescribed to me during my time with the Carltons. Perhaps I should take one tonight.

Oh well. Whatever haunted me in my dreams, it's not here now. It was never there in the first place. It's only my mind playing tricks on me.

I throw open the covers and step onto the floor. That's when I see that I am not in my nightgown. I am in my dress from the day before, a thick woolen sweater pulled over it. On my feet are my walking boots, and a muddy trail of prints leads from the doorway to the bed.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

The weekend keeps me busy enough that I don't have time to dwell on any mysteries—real or otherwise. There are nine children on the estate ranging in age from three to eight years old. It takes all of my energy to keep up with them, and since they are in school the other four days of the week, they aren't interested in lessons. I do love children, especially those still small enough to believe that all of life is beautiful and bad things only happen in movies, so I don't dislike the work, but it is work.

In any case, I'm grateful for it because when Monday arrives, I am sufficiently removed from the events of the prior week to leave them in the background of my mind. I feel a somewhat inflated sense of pride at that, as though I have gained some triumph by keeping my nose out of the Greenwood family's business.

Well, it is an accomplishment for me. I have a track record of sticking my face where it doesn't belong, and I really do hope to avoid the urge to do the same here.

When my chores are done for the day, I explore the Glens, the nine-hundred-acre oak forest that comprises the bulk of the estate. The Glens are less flamboyant than the gardens, since they are dominated by one species, but they are peaceful. The spreading canopy shields me from the harshest of the sun's rays, and the scent that fills the air isn't cloyingly sweet or fragrant but hearty and earthy and as close to natural as a manicured landscape can be. Even the birds here seem calmer, as though taking advantage of the shade to engage in gentle conversation rather than their typical enthusiastic chorus.

This peace, as is unfortunately the case more often than not with me, is short-lived. I hear footsteps approaching from the right, and when I turn toward the sound, I see a



man in a polo shirt and khakis over stained work boots approaching.

He stops when he sees me and says, "Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't expect anyone to be here. The family is usually all working, and the servants tend to stay in the house."

I take a quick measure of the man. He is tall, perhaps six-foot-one or -two, and handsome in a rugged sort of way with dark curly hair, gentle brown eyes and a rough stubble on his chin. He's in his early thirties, which sadly makes him too young for me, but just because I can't order doesn't mean I can't peruse the menu. I smile at him and say, "No need to apologize. Unless, of course, you're going to tell me you're a thief hoping to rob the estate."

He laughs, a hearty sound that has no doubt won him many a heart among the younger women of Savannah. "No, definitely not. I'm Nathaniel Pierce, the gardener."

He extends a hand, and I am not too proud to say I blush when I take it. I've grown accustomed to the life of a spinster, but there are moments when I wonder what could have been.

Ah well. Life had different plans for me.

"So you're the one I have to thank for those lovely gardens."

He brightens, lending a boyish quality to his expression that only makes him more handsome. "You like them?"

"I do. They're lovely. I particularly like how you used hedges and vines to give a sense of separation from the modern world and also to make the gardens appear even larger."

He grins. “Yeah, I really wanted to pull people away from the architecture. Not that the buildings here aren’t beautiful, but there’s a purity to nature that architecture just can’t match. I guess that’s a little hypocritical. It’s not like I don’t alter the natural appearance of things. You won’t find a sunburst pattern of flowers in orderly rows in a meadow, after all.”

“No, I suppose not,” I reply, “but it’s gorgeous, nonetheless. And it does pull one away from the human side of things. I’ve always believed that one should try to escape the walls of civilization as often as possible. It’s claustrophobic to be stuck inside of the memories of the dead.”

I realize what I’ve just said and blush furiously. “I don’t know why I said that. I suppose these lovely woods have me feeling romantic and maybe a touch melancholy.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” he says with another charming smile. “I actually like the way you said that. Stuck inside the memories of the dead: that’s what these old estates are, isn’t it? Just a home for ghosts. It’s nice to be able to take some of that and focus on life rather than death.”

I think of Elizabeth in her secret garden the week before. She claimed she was simply acting out a passage from a book, but I’m not a fool. She had no book with her when I met her, and no matter how fanciful our imaginations, women in their fifties don’t sneak off to play pretend.

Could she have been talking to ghosts?

A memory from the Carlton job comes to mind. The young boy under my care, Lucas, catches me staring at a portrait of a young woman who went missing on their estate the year prior to my arrival. He informs me in a blood-chilling way that the young woman is still present on their estate.

She hides in the walls. If you stare at her for too long, she'll haunt you too.

He was right, of course. Sure, there was no literal specter hiding in the timbers of the Carlton house, but the memory of Minerva Montclair hung over the estate like a fog over the moors. I stared at her for too long, and she haunted me until I brought her killers to justice.

I wonder who haunts Elizabeth Greenwood?

"I quite liked the secret garden as well."

His brow furrows. "Secret garden? What do you mean?"

"With the geraniums. The purple ones."

He cocks his head. "I'm not sure what that is."

"Behind the iron gate. The wrought iron one overgrown with ivy."

His smile fades a little, and I notice a slight tension in his shoulders. He's uncomfortable with this. Why?

"I don't think I'm aware of that part of the garden," he says. "Some of the family members cultivate little plots set aside from the main landscaping. Perhaps you found one of those."

His tone is stiff now, formal, where before it was easygoing and cheerful. What have I asked him to make him so anxious?

"Yes, it was," I agree. "Elizabeth's, in fact. I found her there. She says she goes there to act out scenes from her storybooks."

“It’s a little rude of you to intrude on the mistress of the house, isn’t it?”

I’m taken aback by his reproof, and to be honest, a little offended. “I was invited to join her,” I tell him, “I would never intrude upon anyone.”

He sighs and purses his lips. His shoulders are stiff as boards now. “All right. I apologize.”

“Why are you suddenly so upset?” I challenge. “I only meant to compliment you. If you didn’t plant the geranium garden, that’s all right, but there’s no need to be rude to me.”

He lifts his hands placatingly. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I just...”

He looks around as though checking to see if anyone’s eavesdropping. When he looks back at me, he even steps closer and lowers his voice. “I don’t know anything about any secret gardens anywhere on the estate. And you should forget about whatever it is you think you saw.”

The pull returns again, stronger than ever. There is a secret here. There are ghosts on this estate, and Elizabeth Greenwood was communing with them.

Nathaniel leaves without waiting for a response from me. I watch him walk away until he disappears among the Glens. He doesn’t look back once.

This isn’t the first time a gardener has warned me against prying into a family’s secrets. At the Carlton Estate, their gardener, Niall, warns me that digging up dirt on a family like the Carlton’s is an easy way to get myself killed.

Nathaniel’s warning isn’t as blunt as Niall’s, but there’s no mistaking the subtext. It’s not healthy for me to pry into this family’s past.

But now that I know this family has a secret, one dark enough that it frightens Nathaniel into willful ignorance, the pull is too strong for me to ignore. I must know what ghosts Elizabeth communed with in her secret garden. Maybe I'm only avoiding the ghosts that haunt my own past, but whether I'm searching for answers to this new mystery or avoiding answers to the old, I know that I can't simply turn my back on the situation the way Nathaniel has.

Once more, I am locked into a path that leads into the mist. The only way out is to follow it to the end.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

In my room that evening, I take a more thorough inventory of Lila Benson's old belongings. It occurs to me that I've neglected to tell Elizabeth about the chest and suitcase. I think even then I knew that I would eventually be drawn into the mystery surrounding this estate and kept these relics around in anticipation of that event.

Most of the chest is filled with lesson books. As nearly as I can tell, she was Annabelle's governess through high school. There is a lesson book with Christopher's name on it as well, but it is sparsely filled. It seems the elder Greenwood child had little need for a tutor.

Aside from the lesson plans, there are receipts for her pay, a rather modest number, I must say. I'm being paid considerably more without the obligation to tutor anyone. Perhaps the family considers the housekeeping work I do worthy of more compensation than the education of their children.

I'm not here to judge the family's priorities in that regard, however, and while I have a comfortable estate of my own, I am certainly not going to turn my nose up at the generous paycheck the Greenwoods are giving me, so I set aside Lila's meager sum and look through the rest of the belongings.

The suitcase contains clothing, of course. Fortunately, no underwear. I don't know Lila Benson, and it's almost certain I never will, but I have no interest in perusing another person's undergarments, known to me or not. There are skirts and blouses and one modest but elegant floral print dress.

The clothing is all a near perfect fit for me, or at least appears to be. Obviously, I don't try the outfits on. Still, it's interesting to note that their last governess was

almost my exact size and build.

I have a laugh at myself for that. I'm five-foot-three and of average build. It's not as though I'm a unique body type. There are probably more women my size than there are women of other sizes. I'm chasing phantoms because I'm eager to find answers to...

To what? Why am I doing this?

I stop with the contents of Lila Benson's suitcase spread across the floor around me. There's no murder here. Clara alleges one from fifty years ago, but there are holes everywhere in her story, and I've already decided that even if some nefarious event occurred, Violet is too far gone to understand that.

There's no satisfying victory for me to obtain here. I'm chasing nothing more than a phantom, nothing more than a ghost.

So why is this so important to me?

"Why is this so important to you?" I demand. "You know how Mother is. Why do you fight for her to see reason when you know she's not capable of it."

"Because she must!" Annie insists, stamping her foot in a manner that was pretty when she was thirteen but is just exasperating now. "There has to be..." she searches for the word but doesn't find it, instead settling on, "something."

I sigh. "Annie, you're not going to get Mother to admit she's wrong. Not about anything. That woman will go to the grave snarling in your face that she was right about everything, even as Christ Himself tells her she was wrong."

"Don't blaspheme," Annie says.

“Now you’re just being ridiculous,” I scold. “Just... why can’t you learn to live without this? I have, and I’m fine with Mother.”

“I don’t want to be ‘fine with Mother,’ she says, spitting the name out like a curse. “I want Mom to lose. ”

She hisses that last word, and the intensity of that emotion shocks both of us into silence. She stares at the floor for a long moment while I try to think of something to say to cheer her up.

“Annie—”

“It’s all right,” she says tersely. “Forget about it.”

“Annie!”

She walks out of the apartment then. She won’t be back for another three days. During that time, I am worried sick, enough that I am actually dialing nine-one-one when she walks through the door of our apartment, as cheerful and breezy as though she hadn’t just disappeared for half a week. When I confront her about her behavior, she brushes it off and refuses to talk about it.

Three months later, she’s gone for good.

I stare at the remnants of another life, this one belonging to a woman I don’t know, and realize that I’m doing this, all of this, for Annie. Her disappearance has fueled this need in me to find closure, to find answers when others are content to sweep things under the rug.

Bullshit, Annie’s voice counters in my head. You’re doing this for yourself.



My lower lip trembles for a long moment. Then I take a deep breath and continue looking through the suitcase.

I nearly give up on finding anything useful when my hands close over a paper in one of the pockets. I pull them out of the suitcase and find that I'm holding a handwritten letter. The paper is yellowed but only slightly. It is years old but not decades. I'm not sure why this is important to me.

When I unfold the letter, the signature at the bottom jumps out at me right away.

It's from Elizabeth.

My eyes widen, and I release a sound that's almost embarrassingly gleeful. I am reminded of Clara's look of triumph, and heat climbs to my cheeks.

But I'm not like Clara. I don't want gossip for gossip's sake. I only want to know that those who deserve justice receive it.

I read the letter. The handwriting is elegant and flowing, but the words written are confusing. In the letter, Elizabeth says that she is trying hard to appease them, but they still won't talk to her. They won't answer any of her questions, and she still doesn't know where they are.

She doesn't say who she's trying to appease, what she's looking for, or what questions they won't answer. She doesn't address the letter to anyone, and when I examine the other side, there's no name to indicate who it might be meant for.

I look through the suitcase and chest again but find nothing else of interest. This letter is the only thing that indicates the presence of any sort of mystery.

But that mystery didn't leave with Lila. Elizabeth was pleading with someone in her

garden the other day. She was begging them to tell her where they were. I have no idea who she thought she was talking with or what she was looking for, but I know that this letter refers to the same individuals and the same items.

This mystery revolves around Elizabeth.

I place the letter back into the top pocket of the suitcase, then replace all of her other belongings. It occurs to me for the first time to wonder why Lila Benson left without her clothes and lesson books. Perhaps the lesson books aren't important since they were created for Annabelle and Christopher, but the clothing? None of it is particularly expensive, but people don't just leave their clothing behind for no reason.

Could she have had no choice but to leave them behind?

Could she have left them behind against their will?

I think back to Nathaniel's statement about ghosts. I wonder if Lila Benson's Ghost haunts this estate.

A loud rapping noise startles me. I gasp and jump to my feet. I'm grateful for my petite stature because otherwise I would surely have bumped my head on the coat rack otherwise.

There's another rapping noise, and I realize that someone is knocking on my bedroom door. "One moment!" I call.

I push the chest and the suitcase back into the closet and close the closet door. After checking myself quickly in the bathroom mirror, I run back to the door and answer it.

It's Annabelle. She gives me a slightly exasperated smile and says, "We'd be pleased if you joined us for dinner."

“Oh. Of course.” I remember to smile, then say, “Let me change into something more appropriate, and I’ll be right down.”

She nods with slightly exaggerated politeness and says, “Take your time. Knowing mother, the soup will be cold by the time she graces us with her presence anyway.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I only smile. That seems to be enough for Annabelle. She leaves without another word.

I close the door to my bedroom and try to calm the pounding in my heart. I feel a powerful urge to simply forget what I’ve read and go back to believing that there are no mysteries on this estate, none that require my attention anyway.

But the pull to find answers is stronger than my anxiety.

What is Elizabeth looking for? Who was she talking to in her garden the other day? Why did Lila Benson have a letter from her, and why did she leave in such a hurry that she forgot a suitcase full of clothing for which she never returned?

I change for dinner and head downstairs, sure of only one thing: before I leave this estate, I will have answers to all of those questions.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

Dinner is, of course, as grand as the estate. If there's one thing all wealthy families have in common, it's a love of fine food. I am fortunate that the family chooses to serve itself because I can take small portions of each course and leave room for the next. It wouldn't do to refuse to eat part of the meal, even if it's because I'm too full to eat anymore.

There is a fresh green salad followed by a warm tomato bisque. For appetizers, we have spinach puffs with gorgeous, perfectly flaky puff pastry and just enough cream to lend the spinach filling a delectable texture. The main course is roasted lamb tender enough to fall off the bone, served with potatoes au gratin and baked green beans. By the time we reach dessert, a decadent peach cobbler, my efforts at moderation are barely enough to allow me a taste.

The conversation is somewhat less wonderful than the food. There is a palpable tension between James and Elizabeth that I can't quite put my finger on. They smile affectionately at each other. James tells a joke, and Elizabeth laughs. He kisses her cheek, and she places her hand in his, but it's all an act. Their shoulders are stiff, and were it not for her lipstick, Elizabeth's lips would be colorless for how tightly they're pressed together.

James' eyes are as hard as diamonds, but it's not the calculating hardness I see the day we met. Instead, there's an almost defensive quality to his expression, as though he intends his walls of stoicism to protect him from some unseen foe that threatens to tear open his shell. There are a thousand innocuous explanations for this, but now that I've stumbled across proof of a mystery, I can't help but wonder if the tension between the couple is somehow related.

I also wonder why I'm invited to this dinner. I've been here for nearly two weeks, and this is the first meal I've taken with them. Why now? Is this façade of affection for my benefit? It seems ludicrous to think so, but I don't believe in coincidence, and if I must accept its existence, then I must accept a great deal of coincidence right now.

The children make an effort to include me in the dinner, asking questions about my past as a teacher and as a governess. I really shouldn't call them children. They are twenty-five and twenty-two, grown adults for years now. Still, I share the fault of all middle-aged people in that I view anyone much younger than me as a child. I'm sure that to Violet, I must look the same.

Violet. I realize all at once that she's not here.

"Is your mother all right?" I ask Elizabeth.

The conversation stops. The children look nervously at one another. James continues to eat stoically, but his forkfuls are only an obstinate refusal to acknowledge a problem. Elizabeth gives me a plastic smile for several seconds before responding, "Fine. She rarely dines this late. She retires early most days."

"I see," I reply meekly. "Well, give her my best wishes when you see her next."

"Of course," Elizabeth says, her words as brittle as glass.

The conversation moves to other subjects, but the change in demeanor when it comes to Violet isn't lost on me. I begin to wonder if Violet may have more ghosts in her past than Deirdre McCoy.

Violet and Elizabeth. Mother and daughter. A senile old woman and a middle-aged daughter who talks to people who aren't there. A cynical part of me wonders if the

“secrets” of the Greenwood family are nothing more than generational mental illness.

What has become of my life that such an explanation would be a letdown to me?

After dinner, I head to the balcony for some fresh air. The balcony extends the entire length of the back porch and provides a stunning view of the Glens, the gardens and the city to the east. The view is breathtaking, but it’s the calm I seek right now. My head reels from dinner, and I hope to take a moment to collect my thoughts.

That moment is short. Less than five minutes after I walk outside, the door to another room along the balcony opens, and Annabelle walks outside. She smiles at me and approaches. This is the first time she’s looked at me without some sort of irritation on her face. None of that irritation is ever directed at me, but it’s nice to see that she isn’t always frustrated.

“I’m sorry about dinner,” she says. “I was afraid something like that would happen.”

“Something like what?” I ask.

“Oh.” She reddens slightly. “Something with Grandma. Mom’s very protective of her, but you had no way of knowing her condition, so it isn’t fair of anyone to expect you to know that Mom doesn’t like talking about it.”

I decide it’s prudent to feign ignorance in this case. “Her condition?”

“Senility,” she replies. “That’s the polite word for it. The correct word is dementia, but I advise you to forget that word exists when you’re speaking to my mother. Come to think of it, forget the word senility too. In fact, it might be best for you to just not talk about Grandma.” She smiles at me. “I’m sorry. I guess this is a sore subject for me too.”

“It’s very difficult to watch a loved one suffer.”

Her lips thin a little. She looks out over the grounds without responding. I wonder whether it’s her mother or her grandmother she doesn’t consider a loved one? Maybe it’s unfair of me to jump to that conclusion. Some people handle grief by withdrawing from the person for whom they’re grieving.

Some people seem like they look up every typical, documented response to grief and then do something else. Some people keep their grief all internal, never really understanding how much it manifests to the rest of the world. Others refuse to acknowledge it and move on stoically, adamantly refusing to accept that they can be affected by so unworthy an emotion as grief.

I want to press further, but it’s clear that Annabelle’s no more willing to talk about Violet than Elizabeth is. I move to another topic.

“I understand you had a governess before me?”

She looks at me quizzically. “For the servants? No, you’re the first.”

“For the servants, yes, but you had a governess yourself, right? You and Christopher.”

She frowns slightly. “Oh. You mean Lila.”

“Yes. Did you enjoy having her?”

She shrugs. I can’t tell if she’s entirely disinterested or just careful about how she responds. “She wasn’t a bad person at all, but she wasn’t really...” She considers a moment, then says, “She was just boring.”

I smile wryly. "I'm sure she didn't intend to be. Schoolwork is hardly the most exciting pastime for a child."

She scoffs. "Believe me, I'm an expert in boring. Boring is what my mom wants me to be, what she wants Charlie to be. She wants us to be vacant and vacuous, boring rich kids."

I've heard this complaint before as well. The school district where I teach for twenty-five years is very affluent, and many of my students chafe at the expectations that come with wealth. My teacher and governess side takes over and I give the response I always give in such cases. "Mothers want what's best for their children, but they don't always express it well."

Annabelle chuckles bitterly. "Well, I didn't say she doesn't think it's best for us but it's still boring. Dad wants us to be boring, too. He just doesn't want us vacant, vacuous, and rich. He wants us vacant, vacuous, rich, and salt of the Earth."

I wrestle a moment with how to proceed. I want to know more about her parents, but I don't want to let it be known yet that I'm snooping into Elizabeth's behavior. I decide to focus on Lila. Annabelle might have useful information that will help me know where to go from here. "And how was Lila boring?"

"Excuse me?"

"You said she was boring. What kind of boring was she?"

Annabelle smiles. "The same kind of boring as you." Not a particularly kind sentiment, but it seems more playful than biting. "To be fair, I haven't decided if you're boring yet. But she was... proper like you. Always concerned with being polite and sensible and correct."



I smile at that. "I see. I suppose it's the old Englishwoman in me that causes me to behave that way."

"Well, she wasn't English, so she doesn't have an excuse."

I laugh. "I guess you didn't keep in touch, then."

Annabelle's face snaps toward mine. "Keep in touch? I have no idea where she ran off to. Nobody does."

The irritation surprises me, but not as much as the way she phrases her defensive reply. "Ran off?"

"You didn't know? She just left one day. I mean, nobody knows why or where she went."

"Really? She didn't leave after you completed high school?"

"No. She left before my final semester. It was quite a shock. One day, she's here, and the next day, she's gone. Like a ghost."

My blood grows cold when she says that. "And no one thought to check on her?"

"Why would we check on her? She was a servant. If she wasn't satisfied with her employment, then it's really not up to us to hunt her down and beg her to return."

My shock must show in my face, because she catches herself and looks down. "I'm sorry. You must think me a horrible person."

"Of course not," I reply. The lie comes easily enough. "You're not obligated to be friends with your staff."

That part is not a lie, but still, for someone to disappear and for no one to wonder where she went. It's almost unbelievable.

In fact, it's completely unbelievable.

“Well, I should turn in,” Annabelle says. “It’s been a long day, and I think it’s clear I’m not up to conversation right now.” She gives me a smile, and this time, there’s no doubt the irritation behind it is directed at me. “Good night, Mary. And don’t worry. Something tells me you’re not nearly as boring as Lila was.”

She leaves me to wonder if that’s a good thing or if I’ve only placed myself in danger by choosing to be exciting. Maybe Lila wasn’t so boring as Annabelle claims. Maybe that was what got her “disappeared.”

I stay on the balcony long enough not to raise suspicion, but the calm I hoped to find is gone.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

Today marks two weeks that I have been in the Greenwoods' employ. That milestone means nothing, but I take note of it anyway. It's long enough that my first impressions can coalesce into more thorough impressions of the family. Perhaps not quite understandings yet but more than suspicions.

I take inventory of those impressions as I clean the family's bedrooms. That is normally Leah's responsibility, but she has taken the week off to visit her family in Maine, so I am handling more of the housekeeping duties in the meantime.

I straighten Christopher's room. It requires very little work. The oldest Greenwood child is very organized, and his room is sparsely decorated.

That is a rather excellent way to describe his character, I think. Efficient, organized, and free of embellishment. What you see with him is what you get. To be fair, I haven't interacted much with him, so perhaps there is more to him than the career-minded young man he appears to be.

Annabelle, on the other hand, is close to the opposite of her brother. Her room is messy, almost like that of a teenager's. The mess appears to be calculated, much like the air of ennui and sarcasm she tries to project. She is angry at her parents, and by treating things as unimportant, she rebels against them. It reminds me a lot of my sister growing up, but Annabelle is already a grown adult.

She mentions expectations. I wonder if those expectations have repressed her somehow, as though she sees maturing as surrendering to the role her parents have created for her.

I move to the parent's room, and it occurs to me that James is almost as much of a blank slate as Christopher. He and I rarely interact, and when we do, he is polite and even cordial, but it's clear that I am his employee and not his friend. I can tell that he is heavily invested in his work and brings little of himself home. This is where he eats and sleeps and not much more. Perhaps that is why Elizabeth resents him.

And she does resent him. The dinner we share the night before demonstrates that. She resents him, and she resents her mother as well.

Actually, I think it's more complex when it comes to her mother. She resents her, but I can't tell if it's her illness she resents or if there's something more behind it.

And then there are her excursions to her garden, her whispers to people who aren't there. She seems perfectly well-adjusted at home, but few who succumb to insanity do so visibly. Perhaps James' stoic denial, Christopher's withdrawal and Annabelle's rebellion are their way of preparing for that event.

And then there's Violet. I've only seen her once, so I have only the first impression she gives and Annabelle's claim of dementia to go off of. I don't see anything to indicate that she isn't senile, so I have no trouble taking them at their word.

Certainly what I saw is not enough to suggest that either Violet's or Elizabeth's mental health is failing, but considering my own brush with insanity, it's a possibility I can't ignore.

I have no memory of my stay in the mental hospital, but I have checked the record several times, and it is indisputably there. For three months beginning from the day after the police close my sister's case, I was involuntarily committed for—according to the records—paranoid delusions, severe emotional instability, dissociation and...

And more that I don't wish to talk about. The point is that I can't be sure that what

I've seen or remembered about the family is entirely real.

But I also have Clara's tale of mystery and murder. Why do I dismiss that so easily out of hand? At the time, I think the mystery is too old and the perpetrator too senile to be worth my time, but those seem like arbitrary reasons to avoid looking into the old woman's past. Is it my dislike of Clara that leads me to dismiss her claims out of hand, or is there some other reason I refrain from digging further into this mystery?

Well, the past is the past. I can't change what I've done, only what I do going forward. I think it's time I got to the truth behind Clara's rumors. In a worst-case scenario, I'll only discover I was right to dismiss them all along. In a best-case scenario, I might finally find the answers I seek.

"What are you doing in here?"

I shriek and spin around. Violet is standing in the doorway of the room, frowning darkly at me. "This isn't any of your business. Who said you could snoop into our family?"

For a horrifying moment, I wonder if I've been speaking my thoughts out loud. "Snooping?"

"This isn't your room. This is Elizabeth's room. You shouldn't be snooping through the mistress's bedroom."

Oh. That's what she's talking about. I sigh with relief and explain, "I'm tidying up the bedroom while Leah's away."

"Leah's gone? Why is Leah gone?"

"She's not gone. She's only away for the week to visit family."

“Hmph.” Violet frowns at me for a moment before her eyes shift to take in the room.  
“This room is messy.”

I didn’t think the room was in particularly poor shape, but I feel it’s best to humor the old woman. “Yes, I suppose it is. Don’t worry though, ma’am. I’ll have it tidied up in no time.”

She scoffs. “You think you can sweep all of their messes under the rug?”

The way she phrases that intrigues me. I want her to talk more about that, but I don’t know how to probe a woman who’s not right in the head. Then again, if she’s not right in the head, how can I trust anything she says?

I have to say something, though, so I say, “I don’t plan on sweeping anything under the rug. I plan on cleaning the room.”

She scoffs again. “Can’t clean every stain. Some of ‘em linger. Best to throw out the article in that case.”

She’s wandering. My hope to learn something useful is fading. “Well, I’ll make sure to dispose of any stained articles properly. Would you like me to help you to your room first? Or perhaps you’d like some iced tea on the porch? I could sit with you for a while and return to cleaning later.”

She shakes her head, a rapid, darting side-to-side flick. “It’s sitting that’s the problem. Burying it, planting flowers over it, and then ignoring it for years that causes it to fester.”

Now I’m very intrigued. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that Elizabeth and James need to face facts,” Violet explains. “They made a

mistake. A bad one. It's time for them to own up to it. The longer you wait, the longer they rot."

"Who? Who rots?"

I'm no longer concerned with subtlety. Violet's mind may be failing her, but some memories remain longer than others. If she knows something about the secrets this family is hiding, then I want to hear them before her mind wanders away. I have no way of knowing if it will ever wander back.

She mutters something under her breath, and I ask, "What? What are you trying to tell me, Violet? Who's rotting?"

Her eyes snap back to me and wander up and down. "Who are you? Where's Leah?"

"Grandma!"

Annabelle rushes into the room and puts her arm around Violet. "Grandma, let's get you outside for some fresh air. Then I think it'll be time for your nap, all right?"

Violet looks at Annabelle and grimaces. "You looked better before you put on weight, Deirdre."

Annabelle sighs and gives me an exasperated smile. I return a hesitant one of my own and try to hide my disappointment at the interruption.

"Come on, Grandma," Annabelle says.

She leads Violet from the room. The old woman casts a shrewd look back at me just before she disappears from view, and I am left to wonder if she is simply unsure what happened to Leah, or if there's more behind those eyes than she chooses to show.

Oh, what a fool I am. Thinking about this with any sort of rationality should make it clear to me that she's not well. Best to forget everything she said. It's probably all nonsense.

But she spoke of burying things and planting flowers on top of them. Stains that couldn't be washed away.

It could be nothing. Or it could be symbolic. It could refer to Violet's own alleged scandal with Deirdre.

Or perhaps Lila Benson lies buried underneath Elizabeth's geraniums, and it's her that the mistress of the house pleads with on her daily excursions.

I know you know where they are.

I wonder what Lila found that frightened her so much she fled this house never to be seen again. Or maybe the question I should ask is, what did she find that frightened the Greenwoods so much they made sure she was never seen again?



*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

When Thursday comes again, I decide to pay Clara Beaumont a visit. I learn from Wharton that the Beaumont estate can be accessed from the same private road that leads to the Greenwood estate.

“Most of the plantations in this quarter can be reached that way,” he says as he navigates the gravel pathway. I insist on walking, but he ignores my protests with the good-natured cheer of a man whose spent a lifetime in service and refuses to do things any way other than the “way they’re done.”

In this case, that means not permitting a lady to walk unescorted outside of the property when there are perfectly good automobiles that can convey her in comfort. I really don’t want Wharton to intrude on the conversation I intend to have with Clara, but I can’t think of a polite way to insist any more firmly than I have. So, I relent and allow him to drive me the half-mile to the entrance to her estate, thinking ruefully along the way that Annabelle was right about my unfailing commitment to politeness. I don’t mind snooping into a family’s private history, but I can’t refuse a gentleman’s offer to drive me. Odd how some social niceties take on great importance while other, more serious ones can be bent at will.

I catch a break when Wharton stops outside the gate to the Beaumont estate and explains apologetically, “I’m afraid I’ll have to leave you here. The Beaumonts and the Greenwoods aren’t on the best of terms. I’m sure the family won’t mind if you visit Miss Clara, but it would be better if I didn’t ferry you all the way to her door.”

Again, what a wonder it is that some social rules are inviolable while others are almost meaningless. In any case, I preferred to visit her alone, so I say, “That’s quite all right, Wharton. I shouldn’t be long.” Then, before he can offer to wait for me, I

say, “I can walk home too, if you don’t mind. I am used to daily constitutionals, and I’m afraid I can be quite irritable when I don’t have the chance to walk through nature for at least a few moments in the day.”

“Of course, Miss Mary,” he says. “If you change your mind, give the house a ring, and I’ll come pick you up.”

I thank him, then wait until the car turns around before reaching for the call box. The gate begins to open before I press the button. Clara must have been waiting for Wharton to leave before letting me inside.

I walk up the drive and can’t help but compare the Beaumont estate with the Greenwood plantation. It is every bit as elegant as the Greenwood plantation, but far simpler in design. The tall oak trees of the Glens—visible to my left behind the Beaumont estate—are replaced here with rolling hills with carefully manicured lawns. The sprawling gardens with their Romanesque statuary are replaced with simpler flowerbeds arranged in a typical rectangular design with no hedge mazes or statuary to obscure any part of them from view. The courtyard has a fountain, but it contains no Gothic statues of angry prophets.

The home is in the same antebellum design, but like the estate, it appears sleeker and more modern. The pillars are a simple Doric design and not the more embellished Ionic design of the Greenwood house. They, and the home, are painted in white that lacks the yellow tint of the Greenwood home. The overall effect is to make the house appear newer, while the Greenwood home strives for timelessness.

It’s refreshing but at the same time it’s disconcerting. Refreshing because the estate doesn’t appear designed to conceal. Disconcerting because it makes the sense of concealment given by the place of my employment all the more obvious.

I climb the steps to the front door and reach for the knocker, but once more, the door

opens before I can announce my presence. I expect a butler or a valet, but instead, Clara Beaumont herself greets me.

“Welcome to my home, Mary,” she says, smiling broadly. “I had a feeling you’d turn up sooner or later.”

“Oh. You did?”

“Of course. You and I are far more alike than you care to admit.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, but thankfully, Clara takes my arm and leads me inside before I need to think of an answer. She takes me to the back of the house with little time to observe the interior of her home, but the brief glimpse I do catch shows a thoroughly modern living space with granite tile flooring, stainless steel appliances, and a living room dominated by a massive flatscreen TV. If it weren’t for the neighborhood, I could easily believe myself in a coastal home in Southern California.

When we step outside, I see that she, like the Greenwoods, enjoys taking her tea—iced, of course—outside as well. She gestures to the chair across from hers and pours me some.

“Are you alone here?” I ask.

Not a polite question. I guess my selective sense of manners has decided to abandon me once more.

“Today, I am. I would like to claim that I am Bohemian enough to do away with servants, but I’m afraid at my age, I can’t handle the demands of this house on my own. I keep Thursdays and Sundays to myself, though.”

“I see. Well, thank you for seeing me.”

“Of course,” she replies, giving me a smile that reminds me of the shark-toothed grin she gets the first time we speak. “I’m sure you’ve picked up on the fact that I enjoy gossip.”

“Well... we all enjoy a spot of good tea,” I reply, lifting my glass.

She throws her head back and laughs briefly before exclaiming.

So, are you here to ask me about Violet or one of the Greenwoods?”

I hesitate. I wonder if I should feign ignorance and claim that I only wanted to visit my new neighbor. But that seems like a pointless exercise, so I choose honesty instead. “Well, all of them, I suppose. To be honest, I’m not sure. It’s only... This is entirely inappropriate of me, but it seems like there are dark secrets haunting that house.”

“Dark secrets haunt most homes,” Clara observes. “But it’s true the secrets that haunt the Greenwoods are darker than most. Have you looked into Deirdre McCoy?”

“No. To be honest, when you first told me about her, I... well, I didn’t exactly believe you.”

She smiles wryly. “You thought I was spinning a yarn.”

“I didn’t think you were lying,” I assure her, “but I wasn’t sure your information was accurate.”

She laughs and sips more of her tea, sighing with evident relish. “To be fair, I don’t have any information. Only rumors. Rumors are very easy to come by here. Information? Now that’s to die for.”

I don't particularly care for that pronouncement, nor do I care for the return of her sharklike grin when she says that. "I can assure you I have no interest in dying here. However, I would like to know if I'm sharing my house with a murderer."

"It would be an interesting case study to find out how many people have unwittingly shared their homes with murderers. But I'll stop teasing you. Frankly, I don't know what happened to Deirdre. I know that she was pregnant. I know that the father wasn't known, but that most believed—myself included—that the father was Johnathan Hendrickson."

My eyes widen. "Well, that thickens the plot."

"It does," Clara agreed. She sips her tea again before continuing. "I know that she was last seen leaving the Greenwood Plantation, but no one knows where she went or what happened to her after that. I personally believe that Violet had a hand in her disappearance, but I don't know that with any certainty. Either way, it doesn't matter at this point. Violet is in her seventies now, and her mind is hanging on by a thread. I don't think it would be worth trying to dig up that scandal."

"Those are my thoughts exactly," I agree. "Only..."

She lifts an eyebrow. "Only?"

"Only lately, I've begun to wonder if there are more disappearances that can't be explained."

Clara lifts her other eyebrow. "Do tell."

I sip more of my iced tea. "It's just that Elizabeth has been acting strangely, and I've discovered that the governess before me disappeared. According to Annabelle, it came as a surprise. She just disappeared one day."

“Interesting. Elizabeth told me she had taken a more lucrative position in California.”

“That’s just it,” I say. “I can’t tell what the truth is. The whole family seems to be hiding something. The other day, I came across Elizabeth in a secret garden on the estate. She was talking to someone who wasn’t there.”

“The Secret Keeper.” I stare blankly and Clara laughs. “I feel bad. I think you came to me hoping I would have gossip for you, but I’m afraid I’m going to make this seem very mundane.”

“You know about her garden?”

“No, I don’t, but I know that she believes in the Secret Keeper.”

“What’s the Secret Keeper?”

“It’s an old legend, very old. Supposedly, the Secret Keeper was a deaf-mute soldier in the Continental Army who was entrusted with the most important secrets of the revolution. As he was a deaf-mute, it was believed that he couldn’t be tortured into revealing any information should he be captured by the British. He could only communicate by writing things down.

“After the war, he settled here in Savannah, and continued to serve as a Secret Keeper, although his role now was more that of a priest hearing confessions than an intelligence agent. People would tell him all of their darkest secrets, and he, of course, would keep all of them. Supposedly, when he was finally taken to Heaven, he was told to give an account for himself, but he wouldn’t for fear of breaking the confidence of his neighbors. So, he was denied entry and cursed to walk the Earth to witness every horrible thing his neighbors and their descendants committed without being able to stop any of it. Supposedly, those who harbor guilt in their hearts see him from time to time as a ghostly figure wandering through their property. A few of the

more active imaginations in our town believe that if they confess their secret to him, he'll reveal the answer to another secret, whatever the secret giver most desires to know. It's a silly rumor, but rumors like that do tend to persist, don't they?"

I absorb this information and try to reconcile it with Elizabeth's behavior. "But what secret could Elizabeth have shared in exchange for an answer?"

"Alas," Clara says with a dramatic sigh. "But consider this: if the Secret Keeper still refuses to answer Elizabeth, did she truly confess her darkest secret?"

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I spend another hour with Clara making small talk about other gossip in town. She asks a lot of questions about me, which I deflect as much as possible. The last thing I need is for her to spread rumors that could jeopardize my position here.

Eventually, I decide enough time has passed for me to leave politely, so I bid her adieu and walk home. I head straight to my room and pull out Lila Benson's chest and suitcase, then go through everything again.

I rifle through the pockets of her clothing and check the lining of every pouch in her suitcase, looking for more hidden notes like the one I find under my dresser. I leaf through every lesson book in the chest in case another note is tucked within the pages of those books. When I find nothing, I begin to skim through the books, looking for Lila's handwriting. Perhaps she's written something in a margin that can be useful.

I find her handwriting frequently, of course, but nothing that seems out of the ordinary, nothing, in fact, other than notes on Annabelle's schoolwork. Were it not for the note I find under my dresser and the letter I find in her suitcase, I would think her a perfectly normal governess.

But there is a note, there is a letter, and she did disappear, seemingly without a trace. She was investigating something, and she, like me, suspected Elizabeth and Violet of being at the center of it.

But what was it? I can't believe that the only records of Lila's suspicion would fail to mention what that suspicion was. There must be something among these belongings that will help me understand what Lila thought she saw.



There's a knock on my door, and I jump, tossing a lesson book over my shoulder. I sigh and press my hands to my temples. I don't think anyone's knocked on that door without frightening me half to death. I get to my feet and force the irritability away before answering the door.

Christopher stands in front of me. He wears a dark blue long sleeve button down above olive green khakis and brown Oxford loafers. It strikes me as a somewhat odd combination, but he wears it well.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

He smiles slightly at me, and I notice that his eyes are just as blue and piercing as his father's. "I thought I'd invite you to join me for a stroll through the Glens. You keep to yourself a lot. I don't want you to feel unwelcome here."

"Oh, it's quite all right," I say. "I mean, I've been socializing with others. It's just that you've been busy. I mean... I'm sorry. I'm afraid you've caught me a little out of sorts."

His smile widens and takes on an arrogant slant that suggests he's used to having this effect on women. Well, if he thinks that's the reason I'm out of sorts, he's greatly mistaken. But I'd rather he thinks that's the reason for my discomfiture than suspect—

"What is all of that?"

I realize that he's frowning and looking over my shoulder at the mess. I close the door halfway and say defensively, "I'm going through some things. Don't worry, I'll tidy it up when I'm done."

"Are those Lila's belongings?"

This is exactly what I don't want him to suspect. I think of denying him, but the frown on his face tells me he knows the answer to his question already. Lying will only make things worse."

"Yes," I reply. "I was looking through her lesson plans for some ideas for the children. I'm afraid I'm drawing a bit of a blank with the older ones."

Christopher calls my bluff. "The oldest child here is eight years old. What could you possibly hope to learn from Lila Benson's high school lessons that could help you with grade school children?"

I am at a loss for words. "I... I... well, I wasn't..."

He narrows his eyes slightly. "Mary, snooping isn't a good look for you. What if there's sensitive information in those books?"

That's exactly what I hoped to find, I don't say. Instead, I say, "I... I'm sorry. I figured that since it had been so long, there'd be no harm in looking."

"For what?"

"For..." Damn it, Mary, think! "For... recipes."

He lifts an eyebrow. "Recipes?"

"Yes. I thought that it might be nice to surprise the children with a homemade pie or cake, but I'm afraid I'm a mediocre baker. I thought that Lila might have notes somewhere. I know plenty of women who carry family recipes with them among their belongings. I thought I might find something among Lila's."

I can't blame Christopher for not believing me. I don't really believe myself.

Recipes? Really Mary?

“I’ll talk to Chef Bronstein about giving you some pointers. In the meantime, it’s really bad form to comb through someone else’s things. Why don’t you pack the chest and suitcase up and leave them outside of your room? I’ll have Wharton dispose of them tomorrow.”

“Of course, sir. I apologize for intruding.”

“You don’t need to apologize to me,” he said. “Or to Liza, I suppose. Still, I think you should know better than to snoop through another person’s things, don’t you?”

My cheeks burn with embarrassment. “Quite right. I’m sorry, Christopher.”

His amused smile returns. “Well, I’ll leave you to clean up. I suppose our walk will have to wait.”

“Yes, of course, I’m sorry again.”

“No need to apologize,” he says, amused now rather than angry. “Just remember what curiosity did to a certain cat.”

He leaves me to ponder the meaning behind his warning. Curiosity, of course, killed the cat, but what does he expect me to find in Lila Benson’s belongings that could endanger me? Could he know what actually happened to Lila? He would have been at Harvard at the time, but if it happened on holiday, he might have been at the estate.

I play his words back in my head and gasp when I realize he mentions a suitcase and a chest. The suitcase and chest are inside the walk-in closet, out of view from the front door. Yet he knew that her belongings consisted of those two containers.

That raises a whole host of questions. If he knew that Lila left behind a chest and a suitcase, then why did he leave them in my room? Why did the family place me into Lila's old room? Perhaps Elizabeth wasn't aware of the leftover belongings, but it seems that Christopher did. Yet he says nothing about the leftover possessions until now. Did he expect me to simply ignore them? He might have expected that I would tell someone about them and have them removed, but it's been two weeks, and I haven't done so.

Maybe that's why he came to the room. Maybe he wondered why he hadn't heard anything about Lila's belongings, and he came to see if they were still in the room. He made up a story about wanting to walk with me, but as soon as he discovered that the suitcase and chest—along with their contents—was still in my room, he abandoned the walk.

Could Christopher have something to do with Lila's disappearance?

All at once, I'm glad I didn't end up alone in the Glens with him. I shiver and go back through Lila's belongings as I pack the suitcase and chest again.

I'm almost desperate. I'm convinced that I'm missing something, that something in those possessions has an answer to the mystery surrounding this family. This is my last chance to find something before it's all taken from me. I dare not take any of the belongings from the containers for fear Christopher is familiar with the contents and will know if something is missing.

I'm about to give into my despair when I come across Christopher's lesson book, the only one among the many lesson books in the chest. In a last-ditch effort to learn something of value, I skim through the pages of that book.

I find something on the rear dust cover of the book. A note, handwritten by Lila says, He may know too. Perhaps he's protecting his mother. How far will he go? How far

will they both go?

This phrase raises many questions of its own, but it does give me one crucial answer. Christopher is embroiled in the same mystery as Elizabeth, the mystery that intrigued Lila Benson so and possibly led to her demise.

I can't help but grin as I take a picture of the note with my cell phone, then replace the lesson book into the chest.

Christopher may be right that curiosity killed the cat, but he has forgotten that satisfaction brought her back.

I take the suitcase and chest outside, leaving both just outside my door. I think I will poke my head outside and see if it's Wharton who comes for them or if Christopher returns to finish the job he started.

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I head downstairs, intending to take some tea—hot and appropriately sweetened with cream or possibly a single lump of sugar rather than the monstrous iced brew of the American South—on the front porch. I think it’s a good idea for me to be seen outside of my room and not snooping. There’s little more I can do today, anyway, and I’d rather not be alone on the grounds with Christopher the only family member home.

I make it down the stairs and run straight into a priest. Sincerely, a priest. The man who jumps back, startled as I am at the near collision, wears the dark clothing and white collar of a Catholic priest. “Oh!” he cries. “I’m so sorry. Are you all right?”

His voice is mellow and smooth, a trait seemingly shared by all priests. Do they train to speak like that, I wonder? The rest of him is just as stereotypical. He has well-combed silver hair and kindly eyes that sit behind wire-rimmed glasses. He looks at me with the benevolent expression of one who has dedicated his life to the Church. That expression is a lie just as often as it’s the truth, but it will take more than just a first impression to know how truthful this man’s benevolence is.

“I’m quite all right, Father,” I assure him. “I assume you’re here to visit with the family?”

“Yes. I typically hear their confessions on the third Tuesday of every month.” He smiles wryly. “I should say, I typically arrive to hear their confessions on the third Tuesday of every month. Whether they happen to be here to keep their appointment is a surprise every month.”

I laugh politely at that and say, “Christopher is here, or at least he was a half hour

ago. As for the others, I'm not sure. I rarely leave my room."

He blinks, and his eyes widen. "Oh, I'm so sorry. How rude of me not to introduce myself. I'm Father Jacob Doyle."

"No need to apologize, Father," I reply. "I was too startled to introduce myself either. I'm Mary Wilcox, the new housekeeper and part-time governess."

"Ah yes," he says, taking my hand. Fortunately, he is a shaker like Christopher and not a kisser like James. "I recall Elizabeth mentioning that she was going to hire more help. How are you enjoying it here, Miss Wilcox?"

"Please, call me Mary," I reply. "As to your question, I am enjoying it well enough, I suppose."

He lifts an eyebrow. "You suppose?"

"Well... every new position is an adjustment. This is my first time as a housekeeper. I've done cleaning work before, but never as part of the contract. It's quite a bit of work. Not that I don't enjoy it. It's just an adjustment."

I wonder why I am so clumsy when I lie to men. It's been quite some time since I've been plagued by the whimsical fantasies of girlhood, and anyway, he's a priest. Even if I were the sort of woman he'd be attracted to, he wouldn't. I suppose some weaknesses never disappear.

Needless to say, he sees straight through my deception. "Perhaps while I wait for the family, you'd like to confess."

"Oh, no," I reply quickly. "I'm afraid I'm quite a lapsed Catholic."

The truth is that I'm a Catholic who's been an atheist for the past thirty-two years, but I think it would strain the limits of propriety if I tell the father that.

"Even lapsed Catholics need confession," Father Doyle presses. "In fact, one could argue they need it more than the devout."

I am about to refuse again, but then the curious kitten inside me realizes that Father Doyle, perhaps more than anyone else, could hold answers to the secrets this family possesses. He can't share them with me, of course, but if I ask the right questions, he might give enough of an answer to allow me to find the rest on my own.

So, I smile and say, "Well, why not? Perhaps I'll feel better if the burden on my soul is a little lighter."

"I am quite certain you will."

He falls silent and looks at me expectantly. When I don't say anything after a moment, he starts a little. "Oh, of course. You wouldn't know where the chapel is if you're a lapsed Catholic."

"They have a chapel on the grounds?"

"They have a chapel in the house. It's quite unusual in a Southern home, but the original owners of this estate were Catholic. Savannah is unusual among Southern cities in that it hosts a cathedral, which, I suppose, makes this home somewhat less unusual. Anyway, I'll lead the way."

He leads me to the stairs, but this time, rather than heading up, he opens the door leading down to the basement. I hesitate on the landing. I don't quite know how to explain what I feel other than that a certain hostility seems to emanate from the lower floor of the Greenwood home.



Father Doyle makes it halfway down the stairs before realizing I'm not following him. "Don't worry," he assures me. "There's nothing down here that can hurt you. Only ghosts and old secrets."

I think of reminding the father that ghosts and secrets very much can hurt me, but something in his voice calms me. And anyway, I need the answers I seek. I smile and follow him down.

He flips a switch at the bottom of the landing, and a series of lights flicker on. They are strong compact fluorescent bulbs, and the strong light combined with the fact that the basement is clean eases much of my worry. It is windowless, which gives the place a rather hospital-like feel, but the hostility I feel at first is gone.

We reach a small room that is little more than a confession booth and a bench with a statuette of the Virgin to serve as an altar. Father Doyle enters the priest's cloister and says, "I know it's been a while since your last confession. Don't worry so much about the formality. Just tell me what's on your mind."

I take a moment to think about what exactly is on my mind. Rather, I try to decide which of the many things on my mind I wish to share at the moment.

When the words finally leave my mouth, they feel almost pulled from me, as though an unseen force were guiding my actions and not my own will. It's not a comfortable feeling at all.

"I feel as though I am surrounded by ghosts here, Father. They all accuse me of being the reason they are denied justice, but I'm only one woman. How am I supposed to help all of those who have been wronged? How am I supposed to seek vengeance for others when I can't seek vengeance for myself?"

I fall into shocked silence at that. What on Earth am I talking about?

Father Doyle shifts position, and the bench creaks. I can only see a faint silhouette through the grating of the booth, but I can imagine the confusion on his face.

Perhaps it's only my imagination, though. When he speaks, he doesn't sound confused at all. "It is God who seeks vengeance, my child."

"Well, He's not very thorough on the job, is He?" I protest. "Some deserve His intervention, and others disappear, and no one cares."

"Of course He does. People often confuse justice with righteousness, but Jesus made it clear that an eye for an eye was a poor system and one designed for a people who didn't have the Holy Spirit to guide them."

"Yes, yes, I know," I snap. "We're to love those who persecute us and pray for those who spite us. But are we to just accept that the wicked go unpunished?"

"The wicked are punished, my child."

"Oh yes, in a lake of fire and brimstone, right? And we must accept at face value that such a place exists?"

"The wicked are punished on this Earth, Mary, long before they reach their eternal torment. We may not see their punishment, but sin tortures the evildoers. It follows them like a specter and haunts them everywhere they go."

I've just about had it with these allusions to ghosts. "I've done with specters, Father. I'm tired of seeing through a glass darkly. I am lied to by those who should love me. I am asked for answers I can't give. I am accused of abandoning those I love when they are the ones who abandoned me. I am so tired of feeling guilty. I'm so tired of feeling responsible for the actions other people take. When am I to think of myself? When does my pain start to matter and that of others stop?"

I close my mouth and stare ahead at the wall of the booth. How did this happen? I came here to find answers about the Greenwoods, not to unload my personal trials. I am not Catholic. I haven't been for more than half my life. I didn't come here to confess, so why is that exactly what I'm doing?

"The wicked flee when no man pursues," Father Doyle replies. His calm is both soothing and infuriating. "But the righteous are as bold as a lion. Understand I don't mean to accuse you, Mary. I only wonder, is it truly the actions of others that cause you to feel persecuted, or is the guilt you carry your own?"

I don't reply. It seems I've finally regained enough self-control to keep from blurting out any more dark secrets.

After a long moment, Father Doyle suggests, "Why don't you come to Mass this Sunday? There is a daycare at the Church for the younger children and a Sunday School for the older children. The servants here are all parishioners. They won't mind if you take their children to Mass, even if they don't attend as often as I like. Perhaps you'll join me in the booth at the Church, and we can talk a little more about what truly concerns you. Or perhaps you won't. Either way, I think you would benefit from knowing that at least one Ghost truly loves you and wants what's best for you. In the meantime, I'll leave you with this thought: guilt can consume you if you're not careful. But if you give guilt nothing to consume, it will waste away."

I hear more shuffling, and a moment later, the door opens. I take a breath and open my own door. Father Doyle is kind enough not to stare at me as I walk out of the chapel and hurry to the stairs and out of the suffocating basement.

I don't understand what happened to me down there. I am not the sort of person who loses self-control like that.

But there's no denying that I was under the spell of forces greater than myself. It

remains to be seen whether those voices intend good for me as the father suggests, or whether the hostility I feel when the basement door opened was more genuine than any love the Church ascribes to God.

Either way, do I really want to surrender my will to a Ghost, Holy or otherwise?

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The next two days pass in a fog. I don't suffer any more nightmares, but my waking hours feel dreamlike. I smile and laugh and play along with the children, but even my interactions with them feel... off, somehow.

I feel like I'm floating through a fantasy world. I'm not dissociated. I know that I wake and shower and eat and work and play and talk. I know that I am on the Greenwood Plantation in Savannah, Georgia. I know there is a summer thunderstorm on Friday that gives way to boiling sunshine on Saturday. I am aware that all of these things are real and not fabricated, but they all seem blunted, almost like I'm under the influence of a very powerful painkiller that mutes my nerves so I can't quite feel anything fully.

The last time I recall feeling this way is in the months following Annie's disappearance. For several weeks, I urge police to look for her, but eventually, they convince me to let her go. For some time after that, things feel as they do now, blunted and muted and not entirely real.

According to my medical record, I spent three of those months committed.

I decide I will visit for Mass, even if it's only to remind myself that a world exists beyond these walls. Father Doyle's church is in Avondale, a modest, though not poor neighborhood a few miles southeast of the estate. I'm surprised that the Greenwoods select this as their home church and not the Cathedral Basilica, but that fits with their secretive nature. They'd rather not rub shoulders with the other wealthy families of Savannah.

The children aren't enthused about going to Mass, but I lure them with the promise of

ice cream after the service. Wharton offers to help me with the children today and seems quite pleased that I've chosen to attend Mass. Evidently, he is quite devout.

"I do hope you'll enjoy it, Miss Mary. Father Doyle is a wonderful priest, and the people there are kind and accepting of everyone. And don't worry about the children. They're perfectly well-behaved in the house of God."

"You're sure of this?"

"Oh yes. Lila and I used to take the older ones when they were little, and sometimes I still take them when their families aren't able to go." He grins. "They scammed you into that promise of ice cream, I'm afraid to say."

I smiled wryly. "Well, I suppose they deserve to reap the rewards of their hard work."

We take the bus to Mass since none of the Greenwoods' cars have seating for eleven. As promised, the children are gentle as lambs. Father Doyle beams when he notices my presence, and the sermon he delivers is no doubt intended for my ears as it is entirely about casting all of your cares upon Christ.

It's a good sermon, but I'm here to speak to Father Doyle privately. I want a chance to ask all of the questions I failed to ask on Thursday.

I get the chance to ask my questions, but not from Father Doyle. After the parishioners are dismissed, I see Wharton talking with a pretty blonde girl around Annabelle's age. As Wharton is in his forties and a perfect gentleman, I can't imagine he is flirting with a girl young enough to be his daughter. But perhaps he knows her through Annabelle.

My suspicion turns out to be correct. When I approach, Wharton smiles at me and says to his companion, "Miss Sylvia, this is Miss Mary Wilcox. She's our new

housekeeper.”

Sylvia smiles at me and says, “Oh yes, Annabelle’s told me all about you.”

The fog lifts, and once again, I am firmly grounded in reality. I smile at her and say, “It’s wonderful to meet you, Sylvia.”

“Wharton tells me you’re taking the children for ice cream,” she says. “You must allow me to treat you. I know their favorite shop.”

“You’re very kind,” I tell her, “but I can’t allow you to buy ice cream for eleven people.”

“Oh please,” she says, as I know she will. “I insist.”

I smile. “Well, if you insist.”

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The shop she takes us to is in one of the parks adjoining the historic district. The children finish their ice cream quickly, and a surprising amount of it reaches their mouths before melting onto their clothing. When they finish, they convince Wharton to take them to the playground thirty yards distant. As that’s close enough for me and Sylvia to see all of them as well, he relents.

While they play, I take my chance to learn what I can from Sylvia. “So how long have you and Annabelle known each other.”

“Oh, our whole lives. We were in school together all the way from kindergarten through middle school.”

"Ah, yes. Then she was tutored through high school, correct?"

Sylvia's lips thin a little. "That's right. Her parents believed she would benefit from a personalized education. Her father's a real stickler for upbringing."

She puts a slight emphasis on that last word, but what surprises me more is that it's James and not Elizabeth she mentions. "Her father?"

"That's what she told me, anyway. The Greenwoods aren't old money."

That surprises me. "They aren't? But their estate is a century and a half old!"

"The property is, yes, but James is the first Greenwood to own it. Prior to that, it was owned by a family called the Blythes. A lot of the more established families in town still call it the Blythe Estate. Not that I or anyone else under the age of fifty cares about that."

"But James does?"

"So Annabelle says. She told me that he wants desperately to be a member of the aristocracy. When he bought the plantation, he imagined himself as the Southern Rockefeller. This is all what she said, mind you."

That's the third time she's insisted that she's only repeating Annabelle's words. I wonder if she doesn't trust her friend's claims. "How did Annabelle get on with her governess?"

Sylvia scoffs. "She hated her. Didn't listen to a word the poor woman told her to do."

"Really?"



That contrasts with the dismissive attitude Annabelle shows earlier but fits very well with the defensiveness that comes when I ask what happened to her. I wonder if Annabelle might know more than she tells me.

“Really,” Sylvia confirms. “She was so cruel to her. Lila, I think her name was. She seemed a nice enough woman. I only saw her a few times when I’d come to visit, but I never thought she deserved the hate Annabelle gave her.”

“What did she do?”

"Oh, typical teenage nonsense," Sylvia said with a shrug. "Telling her she hated her, that she was stupid and worthless and better off dead. One time, she even threatened to do it herself."

“What?”

"Yes. She said... I can't remember exactly what, but something like, 'If you don't stop harassing me about homework, I'll use you to fertilize the garden.' I remember that last part about fertilizing the garden. I just don't remember if it was homework that prompted it or something else. I feel bad because I could tell Lila was really upset by it, but I laughed. I mean, it was ridiculous. Use her to fertilize the garden? Like Annabelle was some mob boss or something." She sighed. "Children can be cruel. It was all in fun, though. At least for Annabelle. She didn't really understand what she was saying."

I don't correct Sylvia, but I don't believe her either. Not about the last part. A fifteen-year-old child might not understand everything about the world, but they can understand that threatening to murder someone isn't funny.

And the way she threatened her. Using her to fertilize the garden.

It all fits. Violet's distrustful behavior and her own dark past. Elizabeth's oddness and her obsession over a plot of geraniums. Her almost pleading conversations with people who aren't there, perhaps the Secret Keeper, perhaps the ghost of Deirdre McCoy.

Or perhaps the very real body of Lila Benson.

And Annabelle hated her enough to threaten to kill her. Did she hate her enough to follow through?

"Anyway, it all worked out in the end," Sylvia continued. "Lila moved away the winter before she finished high school. She attended private lessons at the school after that, then went away to Georgia State and got her bachelor's degree. Now, she's fighting with her parents over whether or not it makes any sense for her to get an MFA or if she can just start publishing her own works. Between you and me, I think she just needs to move away and turn her phone off for a while. She's too concerned with what everyone thinks. I think she needs some time to figure herself out, you know?"

I nod in agreement, but the truth is I'm no longer really present. The mystery I'm solving is finally clear: the disappearance of Lila Benson.

And the prime suspect is no longer Elizabeth but her daughter Annabelle.

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When we return to the estate, the family is waiting for us. Well, not exactly waiting for us, of course, but they are all sitting on the front porch when we return. The children all quiet immediately, no doubt instructed by their parents to never bother the masters of the home. Wharton is perfectly professional as always, but for the first time, I detect a not of tension in his greeting.

“Afternoon, sir, ma’am,” he says, directing his salutation to the elder Greenwoods.

James inclines his head in response, but Elizabeth isn't content with that. "Come from Mass?" Her tone of voice indicates that it is not an innocent question.

Wharton tenses a little but replies without hesitation, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Ah. And Mary, you went as well?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I reply. “It’s been some years since I attended Mass, and I wanted to do something different with the children.”

“And? Was it everything you hoped it would be?”

“It was rather predictable,” I reply. That is an honest, if an incomplete answer. “But it was nice to take the children out. We had ice cream in the park, and I met a friend of Annabelle’s. Sylvia Harper.”

“Oh, you met Sylvia?” Annabelle says, brightening. “That’s wonderful! She’s basically my sister.”

Violet sniffs. “If God really wants to talk to me, He can come down here and do it Himself instead of making me sit and listen to Jacob Doyle rant all morning.”

Christopher tries and fails to hide laughter at that. James notices Wharton’s discomfort and suggests, “Perhaps you should take the children inside.”

“Yes,” I agree. “Enjoy your afternoon.”

We walk inside, and Wharton smiles wanly. “How rarely the rich enter the Kingdom of Heaven,” he remarks to me.

I smile encouragingly at him. “Thank you for escorting me this morning, Wharton. And for helping with the children.”

The children pipe up with their own thank yous, and the smallest even give him hugs. He brightens considerably at their affection and leaves us with a more genuine smile on his face.

I spend the afternoon letting the children run themselves to exhaustion in the fields next to the gardens. I return them to their parents washed for dinner, and they all thank me very sweetly for the ice cream while their parents thank me for taking them to Mass.

I endure all of this with good grace, but after talking to Sylvia, I am burning to talk to Annabelle. I am convinced more than ever now that Lila's disappearance was no accident, and I'm beginning to grow convinced that Lila never actually left the estate.

I get my chance after dinner when Annabelle eagerly pulls me aside and asks, “So what did you think of Sylvia?”

“She’s a charming young woman,” I reply, which is true. “I can see why the two of

you are fast friends.”

Annabelle blushes. “She is charming. I don’t know what she sees in me at all.”

I wonder if perhaps there is another reason why she thinks so highly of Sylvia. Not only is that none of my business, but it’s not relevant to my investigation, at least not at the moment. Still, it sheds more light into Annabelle’s character. She chafes under her parents’ expectations, and if she feels compelled to hide even more of her true self than I thought at first, then it could explain why she’s so angry behind her forced smile.

“Well, we had a lovely conversation about you,” I say.

She blushes further. “About me?”

“Yes. She was telling me all about you in high school.”

The color drains from Annabelle’s face. “Me in high school?”

“Yes. It seems that you weren’t happy to leave her behind.”

That’s not exactly what Sylvia says, but I’m making an educated guess why Annabelle might have been upset to have Lila tutoring her instead of attending high school, and perhaps why her parents chose to finish her education at home.

It seems I’m not far off the mark.

"No," Annabelle admits. "I wasn't." She bites her lip, and some of the color returns. "I... well, I missed my friends. Not just Sylvia but mostly Sylvia. It's hard. It's really hard to find people who truly understand you."

She looks down a moment, then says, “Would you join me on the balcony? I think I need some fresh air.”

“I think she needs some space from listening ears, but that’s fine with me too. “Of course. I would love some fresh air myself. I still haven’t gotten used to the humidity down here.”

“Oh, you’ll never get used to that,” she says. “I’ve lived here my whole life, and I’m still not used to it. At least the mosquitoes don’t love you as much as they love me.”

“It’s only because you’re so sweet,” I reply.

She laughs, and I feel a pang of guilt because that laugh is genuine, and the look she gives me after is so earnest. Whatever mistakes she may have made, she is only a very young woman after all, and she has no one to look up to who she can trust.

But if one of those mistakes was the murder of Lila Benson, then I can’t allow myself to feel sorry for her. Or at least, I can’t allow my compassion to blind my sense of justice.

I try to keep that in mind as I join her on the balcony. She produces a flask out of nowhere and offers it to me. “I’ll let you take the first belt if you’d like.”

There’s a hardness to her voice again. I shake my head and say, “Oh, no thank you. I try to avoid drink when I can. I’m afraid I get quite silly.”

She shrugs and takes a healthy draw from the flask. “Good for you. I try to avoid it too, but I don’t think I’m as good at that as you.”

“Just try not to make it a habit, dear. It’s an easy one to fall into when you’re young and a very difficult one to break when you’re older.”

“Do you think that we really change when we grow older?” she asks. “I wonder sometimes if people are always who they were meant to be, and the idea of growing as a person is just more bullshit they feed to you so you’ll work harder and complain less.”

“There are some things that never change,” I allow, “but there are many things that change whether we want them to or not.”

She shrugs. “I’ll take your word for it.” She takes another sip from the flask and puts it back in her pocket. Her face grows pensive, and she hesitates a moment before saying, “I lied to you the other night. I told you that Lila was boring the other night, but that wasn’t the truth.”

“What’s the truth?”

“I hated Lila.”

That’s the admission I expect, but the fact that it comes so bluntly and so immediately still leaves me stunned. Annabelle notices my shock and says, “I know it’s not the kindest thing in the world to say, but it’s the truth. I fucking hated that bitch.”

The venom in her voice shocks me, and I still can’t come up with a response. Annabelle reaches for the flask again, thinks better of it, and continues.

“She was... the word I’m thinking of is Victorian, but I don’t know if that’s right either. She was just so... so certain all the time.”

“Certain?”

“Like...” Annabelle sighs, frustrated at not being able to express herself precisely. “She always knew what was right. Or what she thought was right. There was always

The Right Thing to Do, and there was never any other thing to do. It didn't matter what you thought, what you felt, what you liked or what you hated. You had to do the Right Thing. I fucking hate that."

She's growing angrier. I think the prudent thing to do right now is to stay silent, so I do.

"Like, how can the right thing always be just one thing all the time? I mean, sometimes it should matter how it makes you feel, right? Like, are you supposed to feel like shit all the time just so you can do what your parents want you to do? Are you supposed to go to school, get your degree, find a career, marry a rich man and have two perfect children just because that's what 'good girls' do? What if that doesn't make me happy? What if I'd rather run away with someone I actually love and live a simple life in a van or an apartment somewhere? Why do I have to care so fucking much about the 'family name' and 'opportunities' and being a 'good girl'?"

I notice the point of view shift as she grows angrier. She's confessing to me right now.

I don't like that confessing is the word I choose.

"You don't," I say firmly. "You can be whoever you want to be. All you need is to be honest and kind to others. Beyond that, the right thing is different for everyone."

"Honest and kind to others," she repeats. "Even when they're not kind to you."

"Kindness doesn't mean weakness," I clarify. "You can choose a career that your parents disapprove of without flaunting it in their faces and telling them to deal with the fact that you don't want to fit their mold. As an example."

"It must be so easy for you," she sneers.



The alcohol must be affecting her for her mood to swing so suddenly. A moment ago, she was confiding in me like I was a friend. Now she's staring hatefully at me. She's clearly projecting her anger onto me because I'm the most visible older adult right now.

I decide it's time for me to leave this conversation. "No, it isn't. My mother spared no expense making me feel worthless for my choices in life. I punished her for this by being as emotionally distant as I possibly could. It's one of my life's greatest regrets.

Or, instead of leaving the conversation, I could share one of my deepest secrets with an angry drunk. There must be something in the air here that prevents me from making a good decision.

"Well, I don't plan on being emotionally distant," she says. "I plan on disappearing."

I'm sure she doesn't intend to shock me the way she does, but I am struck speechless regardless of her intent. She sounds so much like Annie right now that it terrifies me.

She sees that terror and smiles with more than a little contempt. "I think I'll turn in. Thank you for the conversation, Mary."

She leaves without waiting for a response, which is wonderful because I don't have any.

I stare out at nothing and wait for the pounding in my heart to subside.

"Have you ever thought about running away, Mary? Just leaving everything behind and disappearing?"

What if that's what Annie did? What if no harm befell her, and she just decided that she didn't want her life anymore? If that's what really happened to her, a part of me

would hurt worse than if I discovered she was killed. If the choice to remove herself from my life was hers and not a tragic accident or a vicious evil perpetrated on her by another, I don't know if I can handle it.

So I won't think about Annie right now. I'll focus on Lila Benson. I can deal with Annie later.

It's a familiar thought, and the guilt that follows is equally familiar.

It's an unavoidable thought, and the guilt is just as unavoidable.

Do we really make our own choices? Or are we always who we're meant to be and the idea of free will is nothing more than bullshit fed to us so we don't ask too many questions and find answers we don't really want?

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

Leah returns from vacation tomorrow. When she does, I'll have no reason to be in anyone's bedroom again. If I am to gain any information from their rooms, it will have to be today.

I'm not sure what I expect to find, if anything. Part of me thinks I'm just desperate for answers.

And that's not untrue. I have two different mysteries: Deirdre McCoy's and Lila Benson's. I've chosen to focus on Lila, but there's a good chance that Lila became a mystery because she was digging into Deirdre McCoy.

I have four different suspects: Elizabeth remains a strong contender with a grasp on reality that seems tenuous at best and a paranoid and obsessive personality. Christopher has hinted at a remarkable capacity for manipulation, and he is easily the most physically dangerous person on the estate. If Lila met a violent end, he is the one who would have the easiest time facilitating that end.

Violet seems unlikely. She is old and rapidly growing frail. Unless Lila was infirm or disabled in some way, it's not likely Violet could have overpowered her.

But she could overpower even Christopher if she had a gun. And she is the most likely subject of Lila's investigation. If she killed Deirdre McCoy, then that's proof of her capacity for violence, and while she might be succumbing to dementia now, that doesn't mean she was incoherent four years ago.

Still, I have a hard time seeing Violet as the reason the governess disappeared.

Annabelle, however, is starting to look really “good for it,” as they say in detective novels. She bears a great deal of resentment and anger in general and resentment and anger toward Lila in particular. I have seen firsthand how that anger can boil over, sometimes in an instant.

Annabelle is a simmering kettle with a lid clamped tightly over her. From time to time, some steam escapes through a pressure valve, but what happens when the steam forms faster than the valve can release it? What happens when someone closes the valve?

I don’t think Annabelle would plot to murder Lila. She’s not a cold-blooded killer. I do, however, believe that in a fit of anger, she could very well explode and do something without thinking.

And today, I hope to find evidence of that. Or evidence that exonerates her.

Or hey, maybe I’ll get lucky and find an in-depth chronology of every single event as it happened and not need to investigate anything else.

I chuckle at that as I rifle through Annabelle’s drawers. I don’t feel wonderful about this, but I need answers, and this could be my last chance to find one. In my first mystery while working with the Ashford family in New York, I come across the answer to the case by digging through a box in my employer’s closet and finding evidence that she covered up the cause of her husband’s death. I’m hoping for similarly damning proof here.

But I’ve gone through every corner I can think of and found nothing. Annebelle’s closet contains only shoes and clothing. Her bathroom contains nothing more secretive than the items normally found in a young woman’s restroom. Her drawers contain clothing and jewelry, but the only letters I find stashed are love letters from middle school addressed to a boy named Jimmy.

So much for my hypothesis about her and Sylvia.

That's not the mystery I want solved though. I need to know what happened to Lila Benson.

It doesn't appear that I'll learn it from Annabelle's room though. I sigh and prepare to admit defeat when I try one final location.

I chuckle as I get down on my hands and knees and look under Annabelle's bed. It would serve me right if she were to return home now and catch me like this. A fifty-one-year-old woman with her bottom in the air, staring under her bed like a child checking for monsters. Part of me almost hopes I'm caught so I can receive the scolding I deserve and come to my senses.

But as fate would have it, I find the smoking gun I'm looking for. There's a letter taped to the underside of Annabelle's mattress. I carefully remove it, and when I see Lila's handwriting, I nearly shout for joy.

When I read Lila's handwriting, the joy is replaced with shock.

She knows I know now. She's caught me snooping. She didn't say anything, but I know she caught me. Now she watches me, and her eyes are so cold.

I didn't believe Clara about Deirdre McCoy. It sounded too much like a soap opera for me to give it credence, but now I believe it. Those eyes are colder than ice and darker than night.

I think I'll take my leave of this place soon. I can only hope that when I leave it's of my own free will and to a destination of my choosing.

I read the letter twice more just to convince myself that what I've read is real and not

something I've simply imagined. When I am convinced that there are no figments in this letter, I replace it, carefully matching the edges of the tape to the dust-formed outlines that indicate their original placement. I have no idea if Annabelle ever looks under here, but in my experience, Violet isn't the only one in this family with eyes as cold as ice and as dark as night.

I leave Annabelle's room and head straight to my own. Then, because it's barely midday, and I don't want to be seen as a hermit and raise suspicion, I head downstairs and make myself tea, then drink it on the porch.

I still have chores to complete, and it would be better for me to complete them before the family returns from their various jobs, but I need to finish my tea first. What I've discovered rattles me more than I care to admit.

It doesn't seem real. It's absurd to think that a woman in her seventies with dementia could somehow be a vicious killer.

At the same time, though, she can't have had dementia fifty-two years ago when Deirdre McCoy went missing. She likely didn't have dementia four years ago when Lila Benson went missing, or if she did, it would be far less advanced than it is now.

But it is advanced now, right? Surely I'm in no danger from her. She is watched by her family most of the day, and I'm sure that if there are any guns in the house, they're locked away where she can't get to them.

I need to calm my nerves. My mind is running away with itself. I sip my tea and take deep, steady breaths.

This is nothing I haven't dealt with before. In fact, objectively speaking, this is far less dangerous than what I've dealt with before. I've faced a disgruntled ex-wife who did have access to a gun and a scorned lover who would rather have her rivals killed

than share the man she wanted. Compared to Cecilia Ashford and Eliza Carlton, Violet is nothing. A senile old woman who might once have been a murderer but who is now a shadow of her former self in every way.

I'll be all right. It's not myself I have to worry about. This is not a fight for safety but a fight for justice. Perhaps Violet won't fully understand if she is punished for her sins, but the ghosts of Deirdre McCoy and Lila Benson will rest more easily knowing that their killer didn't go gently into that good night.

I finish my tea and head inside to complete my chores. My nerves are far steadier now, and I'm able to finish my tasks calmly.

Upstairs rests a woman who is likely a murderer. I only need indisputable evidence of her crimes, and I can ease the pull inside me and perhaps release the tension that drives me inexorably to madness.

Or, at the very least, I can prepare myself to answer the voice of my own sister's blood.

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I find it far easier to be patient now that I am certain of the culprit. I even manage to interact with Violet without letting on that I know of her secret. I know the truth now. It is only a matter of time before I have what I need to act on it.

I suppose part of my calm is due to the fact that my suspect is less dangerous than any I've had so far. Violet is not a threat to me, and she's not a flight risk either. The estate is kept locked at all times, and the only way to exit is to use a keycard. Violet doesn't have a keycard, and I am certain no one in the family would allow her to leave the estate. I know that people with dementia are prone to wandering, but there is nowhere for Violet to wander.

I can be more prudent this time. With Cecilia and Eliza, I had to accuse them directly. In Cecilia's case, that accusation nearly got me killed, and it was only the miraculous intervention of her lover—who happened to be a police detective and unaware of Cecilia's crimes—that saved me. In Eliza's, I had to concoct a scenario and manipulate a confession to be recorded by Scotland Yard investigators.

Both were rather shoddy pieces of detective work that succeeded more by chance than anything else. I don't intend to leave anything to chance here. I am quite sure that all the evidence I need to make a compelling, even an airtight, case against Violet exists on this estate. I only need to find it.

The first order of business is to discover what's hidden in the secret garden Elizabeth frequents. Now that I'm aware of her mother's violent history, I suspect that Elizabeth's fascination with the garden has nothing to do with some mythical Secret Keeper.



But I dare not risk disturbing the flower bed. If I find the evidence I seek there, it might be worth it, but if I don't, or if what I find isn't enough to bring the case to the police, then I will paint a giant target on my back, and that could indeed prove dangerous. The other Greenwoods are clearly very protective of Violet. Even Annabelle, who seems to hate her family, hasn't told anyone that she knows of Violet's criminal past. If the choice came down to me or her grandmother, I'm under no illusion which choice she would make. I need to find out what secrets that garden holds, but I need to do it without raising the family's suspicions.

I have no idea how to do that, however.

Thursday arrives again, day twenty-three of my employment at Greenwood Plantation. It is also the first day of August, not that the milestone means anything other than to alert me that the weather will remain hot and humid for several more weeks. I am told that August is the wettest month and that the rain will bring the opposite of relief from the humidity.

The weather is the least of my concerns, though. I don't want to linger too long without an answer. I am patient, but not that patient.

I decide I'll have to risk a visit to the secret garden after all. If I am questioned about it, I can simply deny I was there. I'll disturb my footprints and clean my boots in the fountain before I return to the house. No doubt Moses will be quite displeased with me, but I've already accepted that I'll never reach the promised land, so Sir Moses will simply have to deal with it.

I take my journey an hour after breakfast when the rest of the servants will be busy working and the family will be off the estate. I suppose Violet could see me from her window if she chose, but the hedges will hide my destination, and it's not a crime for me to walk through the grounds on my day off.

I reach the garden, determined to accomplish my mission. Today, I will find out what that garden hides.

When I reach the honeysuckle hedges that separate the inner gardens from the outer ones, I feel an odd trepidation. An image flits across my mind of a towering hedge maze, an otherworldly glow and a pale woman under a harsh moon.

I reach for the image, but it disappears before I can identify it. I sigh and press forward.

I make it halfway to the wrought iron gate that separates the garden when I hear footsteps. I freeze, but before I can determine the direction of the sound and hide, Christopher walks into view. He stops and stares at me a moment, then reddens. “Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t think anyone could hear me.”

I blink, confused. “Hear you?”

“Yes. I was... Well, I thought I was being loud. That’s why I came out here. You couldn’t hear me yelling?”

“No. The first I heard of you was your footprints.”

He sighs. “That’s a relief. Well, I won’t disturb you any further. Good day, Mary.”

“Wait. What were you yelling about?”

I’m not sure why I ask him this. Perhaps it’s only a hunch.

Well, it’s a hunch that fails me because the reason he gives has nothing to do with my investigation. “Oh, I...” He chuckles bitterly. “Between you and me, Mary, I wish to Christ I’d never gone to Harvard.”

That is sufficiently surprising that I forget about the garden for the moment. “Really? You regret an education at the finest school in America?”

He sneers. “Harvard is only the finest school in America if you want to be a lawyer or a professor.”

“That can’t be true,” I reply. “Harvard Medical is renowned worldwide, and Harvard Business School has produced some of the finest leaders American industry has ever seen.”

"And many thousands more dipshits who only find work because the Alumni Association takes pity on them. You realize that's why the school is so renowned, right? Harvard graduates have a network of former graduates whose sole purpose is to get them jobs so the school can keep acting like it's the greatest thing since the creation of shoelaces."

“Surely it can’t have been that bad. There’s nothing wrong with taking advantage of a network, and if that network is as effective as you say, then there must be a reason for it.”

He sighs. “You’re probably right. It’s true that Harvard was once the premier school of the Western Hemisphere. I’m sure it’s still a fine school, it’s just...” he purses his lips. “I don’t know shit, Mary. Pardon my Tagalog, but I really don’t know shit. I’m a Regional Director of Operations for a major grocery chain, and I have to ask Assistant Managers how to tell if a store’s profit margin is acceptable. I make five hundred fifty-three thousand dollars a year, and I have to ask people making seventy-five a year how to do the most basic aspects of my job.”

“Everyone needs to start somewhere,” I reassure him. “You’ll learn.”

“I will, but I’ll learn in this role. I’ll learn making it clear to everyone that I’m

unqualified. I'll limp along. I'll do well enough to keep my job, but it's going to take me twenty years to earn enough of a reputation to find the same job at another company where I can spend another ten years proving I'm good enough to be an executive. Then I can crawl my way up that ladder for another ten years so I can retire as an Executive Vice President of the Department of Placeholders for People who Aren't Quite Good Enough."

I understand his frustration, but really, is this worth complaining about? I keep my tone gentle, but he needs a bit of a scolding. "There are plenty of people who work far harder and never get as far."

It turns out that I've mistaken the reason for his complaint. "That's my point. I don't deserve this. I'll make money, but I won't earn money." He shakes his head. "I could have gone to a state college. I could have taken correspondence courses while gaining actual work experience. I'd probably only just be completing my bachelor's degree, and I'd probably be only a store manager or a senior assistant, but I'd be a good one. I'd be worth my paycheck. It might take another ten years to get to regional director, but by then, I'll be damned good. Twenty years from that, I'll be a COO, and I'll be damned good at that. Because I'll have learned the actual job and not some bullshit, stuffy academic bullshit that mattered back when Dad was a teenager."

He catches himself and reddens. "Anyway, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make that your problem. I just..." His brow furrows. "Why are you out here? It's hotter than Hell, and I didn't think you cared much for the summer weather out here."

"Oh, it's not so bad," I lie. "I was just heading to the geranium garden."

"The what?"

He feigns surprise, but the way he stiffens and pales tells me he knows exactly what I'm talking about. I risk pressing a little.

“Your mother’s geranium garden. She told me I was welcome there anytime.”

“She did?” he says incredulously. Then he catches himself again. “I mean... I really don’t know of any geranium garden. Perhaps you were misinformed.”

“I’m certain I saw it. It’s past the wrought iron gate a few dozen yards that way.”

He snaps his head the way I point. Then he reddens a little. “Well, I can’t stop you from going where you want, but I think you’ll be happier if you take a walk through the Glens. The oaks will provide shade, and you won’t find what you’re looking for behind any wrought gate. You might find our gardener, Nathaniel, out in the Glens too. He might know what this geranium garden you’re talking about is.”

I nearly protest that I’ll make my own way, but I remember that I don’t want a target on my back.

Besides, Nathaniel seemed just as nervous as Christopher when I questioned him about the gate. And since Nathaniel is a servant like me, I can press him a little harder when I talk to him. Maybe I can find answers without digging up the actual dirt after all.

I smile at Christopher and say, “You know what? I think I will visit the Glens. Thank you.”

Christopher looks very relieved. “Of course. And... It goes without saying, but please keep my little rant about Harvard between us.”

“I would never dream of releasing your secret,” I reply.

He gives me another relieved smile and nods. “Have a good day, Mary.”

“You too, Christopher.”

He walks past me to the house, and I change course for the Glens. My confidence remains unshaken. Whether by talking to Nathaniel or digging up the flowerbed myself, I will have answers today.

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*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

My confidence is somewhat shaken when I reach the Glens and remember that they consist of over a square mile of forest. It truly was chance that allowed me to run into Nathaniel the last time I was here. I could spend all day running in circles and not see him.

As the day wears on, I wonder if I should abandon the search for Nathaniel and follow my original plan of heading to the garden myself. Elizabeth did give me permission to be there, after all. True, she was only being polite and would most certainly prefer I not take advantage of that permission, but I would be acting within the letter of the law by journeying past the wrought iron gate toward the secrets inside.

On the other hand, Christopher knows of my intention. He is clearly disturbed by the idea of my following through. He could have told his mother, and she could have locked the gate so I can't enter. Even if she didn't, there's a chance she could be there now, or one of the other family members. I don't want to be seen, especially if I do need to dig and...

And I can't dig. Not now. I can't feign ignorance anymore. Christopher saw me. I told him I was heading to the garden. Why did I do that? I could have lied. I could have told him I was going anywhere else. Why did I tell him exactly where I was going?

I suppose in my arrogance, I thought I could learn something from his reaction. I'm not wrong about that, but all I've learned is that he's uncomfortable with the idea. I don't know why, and even if my assumption is correct, that there lies proof of foul play in Lila's disappearance, there's now no way for me to obtain that proof without

putting myself in harm's way.

Of course, if the proof is conclusive enough, I can simply walk through the gate and head to the city. I can place a phone call to the police and not have to return to the estate until I can do so with a police escort.

But if the proof isn't conclusive enough, or if it isn't there at all, I put myself in grave danger. I could still flee, but who knows how far the Greenwoods will go to stop me?

If only I had thought this through before.

"So you've come back to visit the Glens."

Nathaniel's voice fills me with relief. I might accomplish something today after all. I turn to him and smile. "I've come back to visit you."

He gives me a smile of his own, but there's a hint of trepidation in his look. Perhaps he knows what I'm here for already. "I'm flattered. To what do I owe this honor?"

"You know something," I reply.

His smile vanishes. "I know many things. Whether I choose to share what I know depends on what you want to know and why."

I have him on the back foot, and I intend to keep him there. It's a gamble to be more insistent with him. He could tell the family I'm prying. But by doing so, he'd be admitting that he knows there's something to pry into, and I'm willing to bet he won't put himself in danger to do that.

"I want to know what happened to Lila Benson."



He sighs and shakes his head. “She left. That happens sometimes when people complete the job they were hired to do.”

“But she didn’t complete the job. Annabelle had a semester of school left when Lila disappeared.”

“She didn’t disappear. She left.”

“Suddenly. With no warning.”

“That happens to. Look, Lila and Annabelle... they didn’t exactly get along, okay?”

“Annabelle hated Lila.”

“Did she say that?”

“Yes.”

“Then you already know the situation. Lila stayed because the pay was good, and—”

“The pay wasn’t that good. Not good enough to justify staying here to tutor a girl who hated her.”

Nathaniel’s eyes narrow. “Okay. I’ll avoid asking how you know that, but the point stands. Annabelle hated her, and eventually it became too much. Annabelle was about to graduate, so if there was any kind of contract involved, they either considered it fulfilled or decided it wasn’t worth pursuing legal action.”

“Or they solved the problem a different way.”

He frowns, and his tone grows cold. “We’re not having that conversation.”

"Oh, yes, we are."

"No, we aren't. Because it's bullshit. You're making things more complicated than they need to be. Lila worked here. Then she left. And the family didn't follow up because she was a servant. Like you are a servant. Like I am a servant. Let's say I decided to leave today. Do you think Elizabeth and James are going to bend over backwards to keep track of me just because I've worked here for thirteen years? Or will they just shake my hand, give me my last paycheck and hire another gardener, then proceed to forget all about me? I'll give you a hint. It's option two."

"Then why did Lila leave her belongings here? Her clothing and her lesson books?"

He rolls his eyes. "Because she was brutally murdered. Is that what you want to hear? The Greenwoods are secretly Satanist cannibals. They sacrificed her to Molech and scattered the remains they didn't consume all over the gardens."

My self-control snaps. "Maybe you can joke about this," I shout at him, "but I take this seriously. I think she was murdered. I think she was hidden somewhere on this property. I think she's either buried under the geraniums in the garden you pretend not to know about, or some proof is there that will implicate the Greenwoods in her murder. And I'm not going to turn a blind eye to it just because it's more convenient to everyone else to pretend it didn't happen!"

"Why?"

I stare at him in shock. "Because that's not right! Just because someone is wealthy and powerful doesn't mean they should have someone killed!"

He sighs and rubs his temples. "I mean, why would they kill her?"

"Because she was investigating the murder of Deirdre McCoy."

“Who’s Deirdre McCoy?”

“The woman Violet killed fifty-two years ago.”

“Violet? Elizabeth’s mother Violet?”

“Yes.”

Nathaniel rubs his temples again. “Jesus, Mary.”

“Stop acting like I’m crazy!” I spit. “Families like this abhor scandal. They would absolutely make someone disappear to cover it up.”

“By creating another scandal?”

"No. Because they think they can get away with it. You might think it's ludicrous, but to the wealthy, it isn't. I've seen it before, Nathaniel. They believe they can kill someone hide the body and no one will look for fear of what they'll do. Too often, they're right."

“So twenty-five years before Violet even lived on this estate, she was rumored to have killed a girl, and Lila was going to what? Convince the police to open a cold case and implicate a woman with dementia in a murder from a half-century ago? And rather than let Lila make herself look like a fucking idiot and letting everyone scoff at her, they decided to endanger themselves by killing her? Think about what you’re saying.”

“I’ve seen it happen before.”

“And you’re going to stubbornly cling to that belief in the face of all evidence to the contrary? I believe that you’ve seen shady things. I even believe that you’ve seen

murders. But the details matter. Have you seen a few bits of evidence that a former governess might have been murdered because she was investigating a murder a senile grandmother might have committed fifty years ago? Because that's a little different than covering up the year-old murder of the third member of a love triangle planned by a dirty old man who's screwing your unstable daughter." He notices my look of surprise and says, "Yes, I know about the Carltons. The Greenwoods vetted you before they brought you here, and word gets around.

"So think about that. The Greenwoods know who you are. They know you got two different people arrested for murder, but they still hired you and brought you here to work for them. You really think that they're covering up two murders but still brought the Great Detective here to clean their house?"

"Yes," I insist. "Yes." Tears are coming to my eyes. I hate them, but I can't stop them. "Lila Benson deserves justice. No one should just be allowed to disappear like... like they never existed. Like they never met anything to anybody."

He stares at me incredulously, no doubt amazed at the amount of emotion I feel over this. "Did you know Lila?"

"No." I wipe tears from my eyes. "I don't have to know someone to want justice for them."

He shakes his head slowly. "This isn't about justice. This is personal to you." When I don't respond, he says, "I'm going to leave you with two thoughts: One, Lila Benson isn't whoever it was close to you who was murdered, so stop projecting."

"Fuck you!"

The sound of those words leaving my mouth shocks me. I can't recall the last time I've used such a vulgar epithet. It concerns me that my self-control is so tenuous.

Nathaniel doesn't seem bothered by it in the least. "Two, if what you're saying is true, and considering that what I'm saying is definitely true, you should seriously think about letting this go so you don't become the second governess to disappear."

He walks away without waiting for a response from me. I stand there for a long time, long enough that I can feel the sun moving through the sky. My hands are balled into fists, and my body trembles with emotion.

He's right. Of course, I'm projecting. I'm upset that justice was never found for my sister, and I'm finding justice for others as a surrogate for Annie.

But I'm also avoiding. Before I was a schoolteacher, I was studying psychology. I know enough about the subject to know that I'm projecting so I can avoid confronting the real mystery.

I have everything I need to look into my sister's murder, but I'm not. Instead, the business card Niall gave me sits unused in my handbag while I embroil myself once more in another family's tragedy.

But I can't stop. I have to know. I have to find justice for Lila. And once more, Annie will have to wait.

I bury my head in my hands and weep.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

The weekend arrives, and as before, the children keep me occupied enough that I can't do any more snooping. I take them to Mass again on Sunday, mostly so I can get out of the house and breathe for a moment. Father Doyle tries to speak to me again after the service, but I beg off, claiming that I must hurry back to the estate to take care of some pressing business. It's a thin lie, and I'm certain he sees right through it, but he doesn't press me.

Monday arrives, and the children are in school. My light work as housekeeper begins anew, but I find my resolve has weakened considerably. Despite my bravado the week before, Nathaniel's warning does shake me. I am convinced the Greenwoods are guilty of Lila's murder, but if they knew who I was and what I did to the Carltons and the Ashfords and still hired me, then they must be confident they can handle me if I get too nosy.

And I have been nosy.

It occurs to me on Tuesday that Elizabeth even mentions the Ashfords to me on my first day of employment. It's as though she's warning me that they already know who I am, and I can't expect to sneak around with them the way I do with my previous employers. Yet I remain oblivious to that possibility until Nathaniel warns me.

I've been a fool. Christopher and Annabelle both know I'm looking into Lila's disappearance, and I have to hope Violet really has dementia, or she knows as well. I've been fortunate, I believe, that Elizabeth and James don't know so far, but what if they do? What if they're only waiting for the right opportunity?

I avoid going into the grounds after that. I try to stay near the other servants when I'm

doing my chores, and when I'm not doing chores, I either stay in my locked room or I sit on the back porch in full view of the groundskeepers. I could simply be paranoid, but I've nearly been killed once already by Cecilia Ashford, and if I intend to continue playing the "Great Detective," chances are good someone will succeed eventually.

By Wednesday, I am a nervous wreck. Every noise causes me to jump, and I barely sleep that night for fear the nightmare I wake to will be worse than whatever haunts me as I sleep.

I woke on Thursday exhausted and bedraggled. It's time for this to end. I can no longer do this on my own.

I shower and dress, spending more time with my makeup than I have in decades, not because I'm trying to look attractive but because I want to hide the effects of my paranoia. I manage to be presentable, and I think that's probably the best I can expect right now.

I leave before breakfast. I rarely dine with the family, so I don't believe anyone will wonder why I'm not present. I walk into the historic district and from there take a bus to my destination. The Savannah Police Department has several locations within walking distance of the house, but I don't want to risk being seen by anyone who knows the Greenwoods. If someone sees me boarding the bus, I can claim I was visiting the Wildlife Refuge on Skidaway Island.

I take the bus to the Chatham County Police Department in Vernonburg, the suburb just south of Savannah. If they want to contact the city police and let them handle the case, then they can do that. I'll express to them my desire to remain anonymous and hope they'll respect it.

My heart pounds as I leave the bus and walk into the headquarters building. I haven't

been inside of a police building since Annie disappeared. I can only hope I have more success with these detectives than I did with those who handled Annie's case.

I tell the desk officer that I'd like to report a murder. The bored expression in her eyes doesn't change one bit as she takes my information and then tells me to take a seat in the lobby and wait.

I stare blankly at her a moment, stunned that such an admission can elicit nothing from her. Has the world gone mad? Are we so inundated with violence that its existence in our own backyards changes nothing?

She sighs and repeats. "Please take a seat. Detective Donnelly will be with you shortly."

Wordlessly, I take the offered chair. I wait for the detective for nearly an hour and a half. What could he possibly be doing that is so important he can't investigate a murder? Is he investigating another murder? Is Savannah so violent that all of their detectives are occupied full time hunting killers?

I take a breath and try to calm myself by repeating nursery rhymes in my head. It's a trick that works well when managing a classroom full of unruly children, but it doesn't help me now.

Finally, the receptionist beckons me forward. I stand and approach, but before I reach her, she says, "Second floor, third office on the right."

Somewhat reluctantly, I wish her a good day and head upstairs.

Detective Marcus Donnelly is a graying man of around forty who may once have been athletic but who now sports a healthy ring of fat around his middle. He stands to greet me, then gestures to a seat in front of his desk.



"All right," he says, sighing with relief as he takes his own seat again. "You say you want to report a murder."

"Yes."

"Did you see the crime occur?"

"No."

"Did you see the victim after the crime was committed?"

"No."

He holds my gaze for a moment. "Who do you believe was killed?"

"A woman named Lila Benson. She was the former governess for my employers, the Greenwoods."

He stares at me another moment. Then he leans back in his chair. "The Greenwoods of Greenwood Plantation?"

"Yes."

After another pause, he asks, "When did you last contact Miss Benson?"

"Oh, I've never contacted her."

A rush of something that looks like relief crosses his face. He hides it fairly well, but not before I pick up on the odd reaction. He pulls out a notebook and a pen and begins to scrawl notes. "How can you be sure she's dead?"

“Because she was investigating the murder of Deirdre McCoy. I believe that the family realized Lila was snooping on their past and that one or more of them conspired to have her killed.”

“Uh huh. Who is Deirdre McCoy?”

“She was a friend of the grandmother, Violet.”

“And when did Miss McCoy die?”

“Fifty-two years ago.”

He looks up from his notepad and asks, "And what makes you believe that Miss Benson was threatening the family by investigating a half-century-old cold case?"

“I found letters Lila had written. Notes to herself. She says in these notes that she feared for her life. She believed the family knew that she was snooping and that they would retaliate against her for it.”

“Did she mention this Deirdre McCoy?”

“No, but I am certain that’s what she was investigating.”

“Why?”

“Because... well, that’s the big family scandal.”

“According to whom?”

I blink. I can feel my cheeks heating as I start to realize how foolish I must sound.

“Their... their neighbor, Miss Clara Beaumont.”

“And how does Miss Beaumont claim to have this information?”

“She was friends with Violet and Deirdre. Or... perhaps not friends, as she was in high school, and they would have graduated college or nearly so. But she knew them. And she says that Deirdre was last seen with Violet before she disappeared.”

“Did she say why she didn’t go to the police?”

“Well...” my cheeks are burning now. “No.”

Donnelly sighs and puts his pad down. In desperation, I say, "Please, Detective, I know they’re hiding something. I found letters in the daughter’s room from Lila that state she fears for her life. I have an admission from that same daughter that she hated Lila. The mother, Elizabeth, acts oddly. She visits her garden and talks to people who aren’t there, and the servants are all afraid to speak up.”

"None of what you've just told me suggests that anyone has been murdered."

“What about the letter? The one where Lila claimed she feared for her life.”

“Is that what the letter said? Exactly?”

“I...” my cheeks burn. “Well, no.”

“What did she say exactly?”

“That she... she wanted to take her leave soon, and she only hoped that it was of her own free will and to a destination of her choosing.”

Donnelly sighs again and begins to rub the bridge of his nose.

“It’s true! I’m telling the truth!”

“Thank you for your concern, Miss Wilcox.”

“No!” I shout, standing and slamming the desk with my palm. “You will not simply dismiss me like I’m some foolish child! A woman was murdered on that estate, and someone must do justice!”

He stares coldly at me. “Take a breath, Miss Wilcox. You’ve told me that you found a letter indicating that Lila Benson was dissatisfied with her employment. You’ve shared that Annabelle Greenwood didn’t like her teacher and that Elizabeth Greenwood talks to herself. You’ve repeated a rumor from a neighbor that Violet Hendrickson may have murdered someone a half-century ago, a rumor that your informant declined to provide to our police department at any point during those fifty years, and all of this, you insist, means that the Greenwood family conspired to have her killed.”

“Well, where is she then?” I challenge. “If she wasn’t killed, then why did she disappear? Why has no one heard of her?”

“Because she’s a grown adult who left her employers, not a treasured aunt who disappeared from her family home. You’ve let your imagination run dangerously wild, Miss Wilcox. If you are that convinced that your employers are murderers, I suggest you leave their employ and find work elsewhere. In any case, the Chatham County Police Department has actual work to attend to. We don’t have time to humor the fantasies of paranoid governesses.”

I stiffen in shock, but Donnelly maintains his cold stare. I feel my lower lip begin to tremble, and before I allow myself the humiliation of shedding tears in front of him, I rush from his office. I don’t stop until I’m at the bus stop again. I tremble with humiliation, rage and grief.

But mostly, I tremble with fear. Fear that I may have been wrong this whole time. Fear that my suspicions really are as absurd as they sound, and that I'm only concocting them so that I don't have to face the mystery I wish to avoid.

The bus arrives, and I manage to control myself enough to avoid acting a fool in front of the driver and other passengers. I head back to the estate, unsure of everything I thought was true.

Maybe Donnelly is right. Maybe I should find other employment. God knows this job has brought me nothing but stress and uncertainty. Perhaps I should return to teaching, to a safe, comfortable life that protects me from the dangers of my own mind.

Perhaps it's time to let the ghosts rest in peace.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

I reach the estate at quarter to two. I typically lunge around noon, and the trembling in my hands is caused by more than emotional distress. I'll make myself some food and some tea—chamomile this time—and spend a soothing afternoon on the back porch until the edge comes off. Perhaps in a more centered frame of mind, I'll be able to make a better decision when it comes to what to do next.

My relaxation is not to be. When I pass the wrathful Moses, I see the family gathered on the front porch of the house, talking to a stranger. I try to walk past them with nothing but a perfunctory greeting, but Elizabeth accosts me.

“Oh, Mary! Do join us. I'd like you to meet our friend, George Baumann.”

I have no interest in meeting this George Baumann or in joining the family, but I can't refuse an invitation from Elizabeth. I see they have fruit and cheese on the table, so at least I'll get to eat. The tea is the abhorrent iced concoction they love so much, but it's better than nothing.

I smile and say, “Thank you, Elizabeth. You're very kind.”

She beams gratefully at me, a rather odd reaction. “Thank you , Mary.”

She turns around and addresses a short, pudgy, bespectacled man of around my age with thin, balding hair that he, unfortunately, chooses to wear in a combover that only exacerbates its loss. "George, this is our new governess, Miss Mary Wilcox."

The pudgy man gives me a smile that looks like he's smelled something awful, but that could just be the shape of his face through the filter of my own irritability. The

voice, I am quite sure, would be annoying no matter how irritated I was. It's a high-pitched nasal whine that reminds me of a weed trimmer's motor. "How do you do, Mary?"

"Mary," Elizabeth continues. "This is our dear friend, Dr. George Baumann."

The way she emphasizes dear tells me that George is not dear, nor is he their friend. Why have I been asked to meet him? Why is he welcome in their house if they despise him so?

"George," she insists. "Mary is an absolute lover of history. Aren't you, dear?"

Before I can respond, Annabelle says, "Oh yes. She and I had such a lovely conversation about antebellum architecture, didn't we, Mary?"

She gives me a pleading look, and I understand why I've been shanghaied now. I restrain a sigh and say, "Oh yes. I find the style quite becoming."

"Well, you're in luck!" the weed trimmer voice exclaims. George puffs his chest and announces importantly, "I am the premier expert of antebellum architecture in the Greater Savannah area. I can answer any questions you have about pre-war design. And , I'm a fair expert in the immediate postbellum trend of..." he gestures to the house and finishes with, "shall we say, embellished Greek Revival designs?"

The family all laughs as though he's said the most hilarious thing the world has ever heard. I smile, but I don't try to fake laughter. I sincerely doubt I could pull it off.

"Well, I'm afraid we must be off now," Elizabeth says when her fake laughter subsides. "But I'm sure Mary would love to keep you company for as long as you'd like to stay. Do come visit us another time when we're not previously engaged."

George frowns. “Must you leave so soon? I was really hoping to discuss business with you.”

“I know, dear, but it really can’t be avoided. Can it, James?”

“No, unfortunately not,” James agrees. He stands, and the children take their cue and stand as well. “I’m afraid we’ve made too many promises to Elizabeth’s sister, and if we break another, they’ll never speak to us again.”

“But it will only take—”

“Thank you so much for visiting us, George,” Elizabeth interrupts. She turns to me, hiding her face from George and mouths, thank you.

I return a smile that I hope isn’t too irritated. Then the family rushes down the stairs. George watches them leave, making no attempt to hide his own irritation. I wait until the family has piled into James’s car, then say to George. “George, I am more than willing to entertain you, but it’ll have to be on the back porch. I’m going to make myself a sandwich and some tea that is hot and not seventy percent sugar.”

He gives me a frank look. “You’re not really interested in antebellum architecture, are you?”

I weigh the chances that George will confront the Greenwoods with my admission and decide to risk the truth. “No, I’m afraid not.”

He sighs forlornly. “I thought not.” He shakes his head. “The Greenwoods are lovely people, but they just don’t understand... well, that’s nothing you need to concern yourself with.” He flips his hand and says, “I appreciate your kindness, Mary, but I really only came here for business. Since the Greenwoods don’t seem interested in conducting business with me, I don’t think I’ll stay.”



“What sort of business, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I don’t mind you asking, but I’m afraid I can’t say. It’s crucial that it remains confidential. However, you may impress upon them that it is very much in their best interests not to keep testing my patience.” His expression darkens. “They act like they’re untouchable, like they’re English lords or something.” He looks back at me and reddens slightly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be insulting. There’s nothing wrong with the English. I only mean the Greenwoods act self-important and—”

“It’s all right,” I say. “I understand.”

He scoffs. “I’m sure you do. You have to live with them.”

I wonder if George might have some information I can use. It’s a shot in the dark, but those are the only shots I have right now. I probe very gently. “They are a rather private family. Very secretive.”

He chuckles bitterly. “You can say that again. They seem to forget that some secrets aren’t meant to be kept. They stick their heads out regardless of how hard we try to bottle them in.”

I probe a little further. “This secret isn’t something... concerning, is it?”

“Not for you,” he says dismissively. “Just stay out of their way, and you’ll be all right.”

“Stay out of their way? What do you mean by that?”

“I only mean it’s nothing that concerns you. You’re...” he stops himself and says, “I apologize. I don’t mean to seem rude. I only mean that their business with me isn’t something that concerns the household staff. I know that sounds horribly judgmental.

I don't mean it to be."

"It's quite all right," I reply. "I understand." I try one more time. "I only hope that you don't get yourself into any trouble with them."

He laughs, then turns gleaming eyes to me. I shiver when I see the coldness in those eyes. "Trust me, Miss Mary. It's they who should worry about getting into trouble with me."

He nods his head, then says, "Good day. It was a pleasure to meet you."

Then he walks off the porch and gets into his own car, much smaller and less luxurious than the Greenwoods' car. I watch him drive away, unsure of how I feel.

It could simply be paranoia, but there was something in George's eyes just now that makes me wonder if he knows something about Lila Benson. Perhaps Lila's disappearance involves more than just the Greenwood family.

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The family returns an hour later, just as I return inside from my lunch. Elizabeth swoops me into her arms and says, “Oh, thank you, Mary. I’m so sorry to do that to you. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

“She definitely deserves a bonus after putting up with that windbag,” Christopher remarks. “How long did he stick around talking your ear off?”

“Oh, not long,” I reply. “He had another engagement.”

“I’m sure you learned plenty about columns and balustrades and Greek Revival versus Romanesque versus the hair on his ass,” James grouches.

“Oh, James, enough,” Elizabeth says. “Mary’s dealt with enough today without having to hear your foul mouth.”

You don’t know the half of it , I think to myself. "It was no trouble, really. I taught middle school for a year once. Believe me, there is no man on Earth as annoying as two dozen thirteen-year-olds."

Annabelle laughs. “Was it the girls or the boys who were more annoying?”

“Yes.”

They all laugh at that. “Still,” Elizabeth says. “I think I will pay you that bonus. God knows I would have to be paid to listen to George Baumann quack.”

“Oh, please, ma’am,” I protest. “There’s no need for that.”

“It’s done!” Elizabeth says breezily. “James, take care of it for me.”

“Of course, my love.”

I smile. “Thank you.”

“Thank you ,” Elizabeth insists. “You have truly saved our lives.” She beams and says, “Would you like to join us? We’re going for a picnic on Hutchinson Island across the river.”

“Actually,” Annabelle says. “I was hoping I could steal Mary for the afternoon. I’m not feeling very well, so I think I’d like to stay home.”

Elizabeth’s expression changes instantly to one of concern. “Oh no, Annabelle! Are you all right? Is it your stomach?”

“It’s nothing, Mom,” she says. “I’m just a little queasy. I’ll drink some tea and get some sun. I’ll be okay. I’m sure Mary has some wonderful home remedies for nausea.”

“Peppermint tea,” I say, “It’ll soothe her straightaway.”

I feel a little nervous about being left alone with Annabelle, considering the temper I’ve seen, but most of the staff is here at this time of the day, and I don’t think she could dispatch me before I could scream for help. Anyway, now that George has presented himself as a threat to the family, I begin to wonder if the Greenwoods might be innocent after all. If nothing else, Annabelle may be willing to share more about the feud that seems to exist between George and the family.

“Well, if you insist, dear,” Elizabeth relents. “But I expect you to rest. No traipsing about the gardens.”

“Oh dear Mother, how will I ever resist,” Annabelle asks drily.

“I think Mom forgets that children grow up,” Christopher jibes.

“I’m only trying to take care of you,” Elizabeth says, wounded.

“I’ll keep an eye on her, ma’am,” I say. I fix Annabelle with a playfully stern look and say, “There will be no frolicking or roughhousing on my watch.

Annabelle giggles and smiles gratefully at me. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, I’m glad to know you respect someone ,” Elizabeth says, not quite playfully.

Annabelle tenses a little but maintains her smile. “Everyone but you.”

“What’s all the noise down here?” Violet calls.

I turn to see her descending the staircase. She stops when she sees me, and her eyes narrow. “Why are you still here? Isn’t Leah back already?”

“Leah’s back, Mom, but Mary is still employed,” Elizabeth explains tiredly. “She’s another staff member, she wasn’t covering for Leah.”

“Hmm... I don’t trust her.”

“Mom!”

“She was snooping through your things.”

“I’m sure that wasn’t what she was doing,” Elizabeth assures her mother.

“She was probably cleaning our room while Leah was away,” James offers.

“Yes,” Christopher confirms. “That’s exactly what happened. Grandma walked in on her and thought she was snooping.”

“You can never trust Irishwomen,” Violet insists. Their paws are stickier than syrup.”

“Mom, enough!” Elizabeth snaps. “Mary is English, and even if she were Irish, she’s an honest woman. Christopher, will you take her to the car, please?”

Christopher hurries to Violet and escorts the protesting old woman away. Elizabeth sighs and presses her fingers to her temples. I can see her lips tremble, and I start to assure her that everything is all right, but James wraps his arm around her shoulders and says, “It’s all right, dear. She’s only having a moment.” He looks at me and nods, and I take the hint and say, “Enjoy your outing, ma’am,” before heading to the kitchen.

Annabelle follows me, and as soon as the door closes behind her parents, she sighs. “I’m sorry. Grandma’s gotten really bad lately. She should be put in a home, but Mom won’t do it. I guess I understand.”

“It’s very hard to watch loved ones suffer,” I reply.

Her lips thin, and I recall our conversation on the balcony the other night that is almost precisely the same as this one. “Would it be horrible of me to say I wouldn’t do the same thing?” she says. “For my mother, I mean?”

“No, it wouldn’t,” I say. “But perhaps we should have this conversation after you’ve drunk some peppermint tea.”

“Oh, I was lying about that,” she said. “My stomach, I mean. It’s fine. I just...” she

hangs her head and chuckles ruefully. “Actually, I wanted to apologize to you for what I said the other night. About Lila. I wanted to tell you that I didn’t hate her. Now I’m telling you that I hate my own mother, so boy, I really am horrible, aren’t I?”

Her lip trembles in an unconscious imitation of her mother earlier. I feel a rush of compassion for her. I know that seems odd. Only hours before, I believed she was conspiring with others to have Lila killed. If I’m being objective, I have to admit that it’s still possible she’s involved. She does have that letter from Lila hidden underneath her mattress, so she certainly knows more than she’s letting on.

But I feel strongly now that she isn’t a killer. She is only a young woman struggling with a grandmother who has dementia, a mother whose grasp on reality is tenuous herself, and a father whose expectations stifle her. That, on top of the secrets she undoubtedly holds regarding Lila, must be weighing heavily on her.

Perhaps I can relieve her of some of that burden.

“You’re not horrible,” I tell her. “And I don’t think you hate your mother.”

“I don’t,” she says, “I just... Both of them, Mom and Dad... Appearances matter more than anything. They want to be so much like English lords. Sorry, no offense.”

“None taken,” I reply sincerely. “I’ve had my fair share of problems with English lords.”

She sniffs. “Right. Mom mentioned something about that. She said you handled yourself really well.”

“How much did she tell you?”

“Not much. Just that one of your employers in England murdered someone too. Just like the Ashfords.” She gives me a sympathetic look. “You poor woman. You’ve had bad luck with bosses, huh?”

“You could say that. I’m fortunate to be working for your family now.”

Annabelle chuckles with more than a hint of bitterness. “I wish everyone could say that.” Her smile fades. “Poor Lila. She didn’t deserve what happened to her.”

I stifle the surge of emotion that runs through me and try to keep my voice nonchalant. “What happened to her?”

Annabelle doesn’t answer. She looks out the window and says, “I think I will take some tea after all.”

I am no longer interested in waiting for tea to brew, but it won’t do to press her, so I say, “Of course dear. Peppermint, or something else?”

“Something else. What do you like to drink?”

“I suppose I’m a stereotype for this,” I say, “but I absolutely love a Darjeeling or an Earl Grey in the afternoon.”

“Let’s go with Earl Grey. Then we can experience an aristocrat who isn’t a pompous asshole.”

“Hear, hear!”

She giggles and heads upstairs to change while I make the tea. I sigh, a little exasperated at having to wait, but mostly excited at finally getting an answer to the mystery I’ve been trying to solve for weeks. I prepare the tea with cream and sugar



on the side in a traditional service, and somewhat absurdly feel gratified that I can finally enjoy tea the way it's meant to be enjoyed.

I carry the service outside, and a moment later, Annabelle meets me. She's wearing a light green sundress that looks absolutely stunning on her. The man who finally wins her heart will be lucky indeed.

She sits across from me and sips her tea, free of cream or sugar. She closes her eyes and sighs as the warmth pervades her, and I remark, perhaps a little smugly, "That is the way tea was meant to be taken."

"I can see why you like it," she says. "It's like instant calm. Is this why you're so even-tempered all the time?"

If only that were true. "It certainly helps."

She takes another sip, then takes a deep breath and releases it slowly. "I didn't hate Lila."

My shock this time isn't as great as my shock the last time we spoke, but it's hard for me to understand Annabelle. More to the point, the abrupt switch between indifference to hatred and now back to... whatever she's feeling now... is too much for me to adjust to.

So, I don't respond, and after a moment, Annabelle continues.

"I treated her like I did, though. She was boring, but it was the schoolwork that was boring more than Lila. I hated being here away from my friends, and I hated feeling like some sort of cloistered princess. I hated my life, and I took it out on her." She looks at me. "Did I say this the last time?"

“Yes, or nearly that,” I confirm. “And I believe I chose to defend your parents rather than sympathize with you. I’m sorry for that.”

She waves my apology away. “Don’t be sorry. I get that older people want what’s best for us. I just wish my parents weren’t so concerned with everyone else’s opinion. I wonder sometimes if that’s why Lila had a falling out with them.”

My ears perk up. “Falling out?”

“Yeah. Lila was nosy. She always wanted to know about the family’s business. It got worse when she kept asking about our past, especially Grandma’s past.”

“Oh,” I say. “I’m sorry to hear that.” I sip my tea and say, “I hope you don’t think I’m nosy.”

She shakes her head. “Not the same way she was nosy. You’re curious, but that’s fine. Mom and Dad don’t mind when people are curious. Like the garden. Mom doesn’t really share the garden with people, but she isn’t going to get bent out of shape because you happened to wonder what it was. It’s when people start asking about scandals and secrets and skeletons that it gets annoying. Mom and Dad figured out that she was asking me a bunch of questions about the family, and the next thing you know, she’s gone.”

I struggle to contain my reaction. “You don’t say? Do you think she was fired?”

“Well, yeah,” she replies. “Mom and Dad told me she just left, but she wouldn’t just leave without saying goodbye. I don’t think she liked me any more than I liked her, but she would have said goodbye just to be polite. She didn’t, and she left in a hurry because her stuff was in your room, so whatever Mom and Dad said, it was bad enough that they wanted her gone now.”

“Do you have any idea what could have made them so angry?”

“No idea. But they were really angry. They wouldn’t talk about her anymore. When I asked what happened, they just said she was gone and not to worry about it.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, though. They like you.”

“That’s good to hear,” I say and mean it.

“Yeah, you’re all right. Like I said, you’re curious, but you know when to stop. Lila never did.” She sips more of her tea and says, “But enough about us. Tell me about yourself.”

Judging caution to be the better part of valor, I allow the conversation to turn away from Lila. I share anecdotes of my teaching years with Annabelle but avoid talking about my childhood or my sister. I have my own secrets I’d rather not reveal.

I am convinced now that Annabelle is innocent. Her parents, however, are squarely in the middle of my radar once more.

I have to be careful, though. Lila made the mistake of showing her hand. If I am to find justice for her, I must keep mine close until the proper moment.

But I will find justice for her. Lila was only trying to do the same for Deirdre. She didn’t deserve to have her life taken from her. Someone must pay for her death.

And I will be the one to ensure that they do.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

I chafe the entire weekend with this new information in my hand. I want desperately to find answers now, but with nine young children under my care, I simply don't have time. In my previous positions, I have dealt with one really young child, the eight-year-old Samuel Ashford. However, he is a relatively calm child, and I have his older brother and sister to help me.

The children on the Greenwood estate are not calm, and the oldest among them are both eight, so, unfortunately, I am forced to do my actual job Friday, Saturday and Sunday and leave the sleuthing for the week.

I don't mind the job, of course. The children are sweet, and I enjoy playing with them and caring for them. It's just hard to be patient when I have such a solid lead.

The positive side of this is that I have time to think about how I can approach this mystery. I can't very well ask the elder Greenwoods directly. I'd be making the same mistake Lila did. I can't risk harming the trust I have with Annabelle now, so I can't press her for more information. She might not even have any for me. It's perfectly reasonable to assume that the Greenwoods didn't want to involve their seventeen-year-old daughter in the murder of her governess, so she may have given me all the information she has.

I don't think approaching Christopher would be wise either. He didn't seem happy with my interest in his mother's secret geranium garden. I can't imagine he'd be happy with me prying into the circumstances of Lila's departure. Violet is not an option for obvious reasons. Nathaniel knows something, I am sure, but he is far too afraid of the Greenwoods to help me.

The answer lies in the garden. I am sure of it. I have to visit that garden and find the secrets it holds.

I'll have to visit sometime when the family is all out of the house, though. That means waiting until Monday after breakfast. They all work, and it seems the servants never visit the gardens. The groundskeepers do, of course, but they seem to avoid the area near the geranium garden as much as they can, so I should be able to get in and out without being seen.

I'll have to be careful with the plants. I can't leave the garden torn up, or suspicion will undoubtedly fall on me. If I need to dig, I'll need to dig the plants carefully without slicing through their roots and replace them one at a time.

That will be painstaking work. I may even have to split it up over several days if I don't find anything right away.

But it will pay off in the end. I am sure of it. Everything leads back to Elizabeth and James, and Elizabeth leads back to the garden. I am quite sure that Lila never left this estate, and if she or any proof of her fate is here, it must be there.

Monday finally arrives. I experience a moment of frustration when it occurs to me that there are no gardening tools in the house, but I improvise by taking an aluminum stirring spoon from the kitchen. It won't be as helpful as an actual trowel, but it'll do well enough.

I hide it inside of my sleeve as I make my way to the garden. My heart pounds in my chest, and each noise I hear on my journey causes me to jump. What I'm about to do might put me in mortal danger.

But I have to do it. The voice of Lila's blood cries to me from the ground. I carry enough guilt. If I add to it the guilt of leaving Lila's murder unsolved, I will be driven

mad.

Don't you mean mad again?

I shake that thought away and approach the wrought iron gate. I lift my hand to the handle and pause for only a moment before turning it and walking inside.

I take three steps when Elizabeth's voice speaks clearly, "If you don't tell me where it is, we'll be ruined. Please. I know you can help me. For my children's sake, if not for mine, please tell me where I can find it. Tell me before he finds it."

Why is she here? Why isn't she at work? I was supposed to be alone. Damn it, what do I do?

I start to back away, careful to make as little noise as—

A branch snaps under my foot, and Elizabeth stops abruptly. The blood drains from my face, and I wonder if I should flee or act like I haven't heard anything.

Too late. Elizabeth rounds the corner, and when she sees me, she sighs and presses her hands to her face. Sweat beads on my forehead, and my mind scrambles desperately for something to say that can rescue me from this predicament.

Finally, she looks at me and says, "You can't tell anyone. Please. You can't tell anyone you heard me. They'll think I'm crazy."

I swallow. "I don't think you're crazy."

She nods and brings a hand to her mouth. She bites her nails absently, and her eyes dart back and forth. She is absolutely crazy.

“I know it’s strange,” she says. She laughs, a shrill, brittle sound like a wineglass shattering. “Maybe I am crazy.”

“I’m so sorry to intrude,” I say. “I’ll leave you alone.”

“I’m talking to the Secret Keeper.”

She blurts that out so suddenly that I’m stunned into silence. She sees my face and gives another shrill laugh. “You do think I’m crazy.”

“No, I don’t. I don’t think you’re crazy at all.”

Elizabeth doesn’t seem to hear me.

“You can’t tell anyone!” Elizabeth cries.

I stiffen and say, “No, ma’am. Of course not, ma’am.”

“I mean it. Please don’t tell anyone I told you this!”

Her eyes are wild and crazy, and my heart begins to pound again. “I won’t. I swear it.”

She takes a deep breath and releases it in a heavy sigh. “Thank you.” She smiles at me, then says something that is somehow more chilling than anything I’ve witnessed so far. “You’re a good woman, Mary. Please be safe.”

“Safe? What do you mean?”

Elizabeth’s lip trembles. Then she smiles at me much the same way she did when I asked about Violet over dinner. “Nothing. Never mind.” She releases another brittle

laugh. “I’m just flustered that you caught my little secret. Just...” she flips her hand. “Forget about it. And don’t worry about your pay, James’ company handles that. Our money troubles don’t affect... anything really. It’s just my own little problem. I’ll see you later, Mary.”

She stares at me, and I take the hint. “Right. I’ll see you later, ma’am.”

It’s all I can do not to break into a run when I leave the garden.

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An hour later, the family leaves to enjoy a picnic lunch in the park by the river. They take Violet with them, so I am alone in the house save for the servants. They’re all working, and the housekeeping falls to me today, so I can count on being left to my own devices for the next several hours.

I head immediately to the Greenwood’s bedroom. In past houses, the room of the master and mistress of the house held clues that ultimately led to the solving of the mysteries those families concealed. Perhaps I’ll come across something equally revealing here.

Elizabeth’s mental state seems tenuous, but I believe there’s a reason for it. I don’t think she’s delusional; I think she’s desperate. I hope to discover why.

I start in the closet, but I find nothing there besides clothing and shoes. I look next in the drawers of the two dressers in the room, then in the cabinets of the desk. I find nothing in the dressers, and at first, I find nothing in the desk.

But the bottom right cabinet is locked. Locks are typically used to protect valuable things, but they’re often used to hide things that the owners wish to remain hidden. Things such as secrets.



I head to the bathroom and collect the tools I need, a bobby pin and a nail file. I return to the desk and kneel in front of the cabinet. I've only done this once before, but that was with a door lock, not a cabinet lock. I imagine this will be easier to defeat.

And thankfully, I am correct. The lock contains only three tumblers, and after a few minutes of work, I am able to defeat it and slide open the cabinet.

It contains several unlabeled manila folders. With no label to guide my search, I start with the most recent documents and scan them, looking for anything that might shed light on Elizabeth's fear and what, if anything, it has to do with Lila's disappearance.

I don't find anything related to Lila at first, but what I find is telling.

The Greenwoods are not rich. In fact, they are in debt. It's not crippling yet, but the trends these files reveal are not encouraging. I know little of finance, so I don't know how long it will be before these trends become irreversible, but I can't imagine it will be long.

Debt is a common motive for murder, but why Lila's murder? And what is Elizabeth looking for that she is so desperate to find? Does she believe that there's something here that can rescue her family from debt?

I find the answer to that question in the very last document in the cabinet. It's an appraisal from an auction house that specializes in the sale of antiques. It concerns a surrender document rumored to be on the Greenwood Estate.

Since the document is only rumored to be here and the auction house didn't have the genuine article to review, the value of the document ranges widely. At its lowest valuation, it's worth sixty thousand dollars. At its highest, it's worth well over two hundred thousand.

I recall the note I find from Lila that implicates Christopher. He may know, too. Could it be that he knows about this document? Perhaps not. At the moment, I don't find that likely.

But Elizabeth?

She knows. And she's been visiting her garden to ask the ghost of Lila Benson where it is.

I put the document back and close the cabinet. There is still much more I must learn before I can become certain of exactly what happened to Lila, but I am certain of one thing now.

She was murdered, and her murder was almost certainly committed by someone who knows of this document.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

As I complete my chores, I think about what I discover the day in the Greenwoods' bedroom.

I am no longer sure if this has anything to do with Lila. Surely, the family is in dire financial straits, but the earlier certainty I feel has faded. There's not enough evidence to suggest that Lila was concerned with any artifacts. If anything, she was more concerned with Violet's past than with any Civil War documents, and that concern would be more than enough reason for the family to murder her.

And there's no way that document is worth eighty thousand dollars. That auction house can't be reputable. I research the Second Battle of Fort McAllister, and it's barely a footnote. Who would pay the equivalent of my annual salary to own a scrap of paper where a garrison commander of a minor fort surrenders to the Union Army? If it were Lee's surrender to Grant, I might believe it, but Major... I can't even remember his name. Anderson? Andrews? It's preposterous.

Either way, the fact that she catches me snooping in her garden puts me in danger. James cares about appearances, and no doubt he doesn't want the world to know that his wife is one bad day away from being committed. If it gets back to him that I'm aware of his wife's condition, then I'm in serious trouble.

Could that be what led to Lila's demise? Annabelle thinks it was because of her snooping into the family's past, but maybe it's simpler than that. What if, like me, she caught Elizabeth having an episode in the middle of her snooping?

I need to be careful. More so than I have been. No more snooping through the gardens. No more rifling through papers. No more digging for information on

Elizabeth.

But what do I do then? If I can't talk to Elizabeth, who do I turn to for information? Annabelle's given me all she has. Christopher is protective of his mother, and James is obviously not someone I can probe for knowledge. Nathaniel is likely avoiding me, and if I find him again, his anxiety might cause him to tell on me after all, and that could prove fatal.

I think it might be time for me to talk to Clara Beaumont again. I don't know that I trust her, but she seems to have an idea of what happened to Deirdre McCoy if nothing else.

That might be my path to an answer. The avenues to information Lila Benson's murder are closing fast, but maybe I can sneak around the back, so to speak. If I can learn exactly what happened to Deirdre, then I might be able to put pressure on the Greenwoods. If I can generate official interest in Deirdre's case, then maybe someone will reveal something I can use to find an answer for Lila.

Maybe.

It's so frustrating to have to walk on my tiptoes. It's like the answer is on an island in the middle of a lake that's filled with crocodiles. It's there. It's within reach, but the only way to it is to risk being eaten alive.

I wonder if Lila felt a similar frustration. Was she close to her own answer only to find that the path to knowledge was lined with pitfalls and traps?

I finish my chores and decide to pay Clara a visit before the day ends. The family will be home soon, but if I'm questioned, I see no reason to be dishonest. So far as I know, they have no reason to think that Clara could be working against them. If anything, I can profess ignorance and simply say we met in the park one day and she

asked me to dinner.

I wash up and dress to go out and head downstairs.

Where I walk right into a fight between the Greenwoods and George Baumann.

“That document belongs to posterity!” he thunders. “You have no right to save it for monetary gain!”

“What document?” Elizabeth shouts. “If it even exists , I haven’t found it. And if I find it in my own house, I am welcome to do what I please with it.”

“Even if it means denying our descendants a piece of history?”

Well, so much for all of my hypotheses. Evidently, that document is valuable. And Elizabeth might not be crazy. And Lila might have even been killed because she was trying to steal the document for herself. Or maybe she wasn’t even killed at all, and she was simply fired and whisked away on the threat of being charged with theft.

Hell, maybe she even has the document and is now enjoying the last laugh somewhere far away.

“The history will exist with or without a piece of paper, George,” Christopher scoffs.

“Oh, sure,” George says, rolling his eyes. “So let’s just shrug our shoulders and bite our thumbs at every item of historical consequence. Forget about the pyramids, we’ll just turn them into a resort hotel, right?”

“They’d make money that way,” James says with a trace of amusement.

“Because that’s what matters,” George thunders. “Money.”

“No one’s ever paid their tuition with trinkets,” Annabelle says.

“Trinkets? Trinkets? ” George laughs. “Trinkets. The sacred remnants of our nation’s history, and you call them trinkets.”

“Oh, for God's sake," Elizabeth says. "It's not the blood of Christ, George. It's a fucking formality that someone signed and some other fools are willing to pay through the nose for."

“Why don’t you buy it?” Christopher offers. “When we find it, why don’t you buy it from us? We’ll give you a fair price.”

George turns a shade of deep red. “You know I don’t have that kind of money.”

“Oh, we know,” Annabelle says. “That’s why we’re not even talking about letting you have it.”

“Why you—”

He takes a step toward Annabelle as he does this. That’s a mistake. Christopher flinches toward him, but James reaches him first. He plants a hand on George’s chest and shoves backwards. George stumbles back, saved from falling on his backside by the front door. He stares aghast at James, but it’s clear he realizes the danger he’s in.

Just in case, James makes it clear. “It’s time for you to go, George. You’re dangerously close to hurting yourself.”

George’s lip trembles with fear and fury. He draws himself up to his full, unimpressive height and says, “You’re making a big mistake. All of you. I’ll see you ruined.”

He throws open the door and rushes outside. Elizabeth bursts into tears, and the others move to comfort her. Annabelle looks up and sees me. She meets my eyes and shakes her head.

I take the hint and return upstairs. My visit with Clara is suddenly much less important.

So the artifact is valuable. And both George Baumann and Elizabeth Greenwood are desperate for it. The question is, which of them is desperate enough to kill for it?

Perhaps instead of visiting with Clara, I'll see what secrets George Baumann is hiding.

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I look George up and learn that he is an antique dealer and amateur historian who runs a shop near the historic district. I'm not able to find out much more than that. I come across a few articles he wrote for a Civil War blog some years ago where he talks about how the war shaped Savannah's future. They're not particularly well-written, but they're not terrible.

What he is definitely not is the premier expert on antebellum architecture. I find his name nowhere among lists of such experts, not that I'm surprised. I know the moment I meet him that he's a narcissist who sees himself as far more important than he actually is.

None of this tells me why he's so obsessed with the document that's allegedly on the property. He's an antique dealer, not a museum curator or a professor.

Upon further reflection, that tells me exactly why he's interested in the document. He only claims to care about posterity. What he really wants is the money.

And he admits to Clara that he doesn't have the money to buy the item. Then Annabelle taunts him, and he sees red. I can't help but wonder what would have happened if Christopher and James weren't there.

What I'm missing is the connection to Lila. The few notes I find from Lila all say she knows. That either means that Violet knew that Lila was looking into Deirdre McCoy, or—as I now feel is more likely—that Elizabeth knew that Lila was looking into the surrender document.

But how does that lead to Lila's murder? And does it involve George at all, or is



George simply another irritant?

And if the document is somewhere on the property, why not just hire someone to look for it? Why not look for it themselves? I've been here for over a month, and George and Father Doyle are the only strangers the family has entertained. If they tear up the gardens and Glens looking for the document, who will see it but the servants? Are they worried, perhaps, that one of the servants will find it and keep it for themselves?

Maybe my mistake is that I'm trying to find logic in their actions. Maybe there is no logic. Perhaps the madness that afflicts Violet and Elizabeth is shared by all of them in some way. Maybe it's not even that complicated. Greed can drive even the sanest of us mad.

In any case, I need to find out if there's any connection between George and Lila. The first step is to find out when George first came to the family's attention. If he showed up within the past four years, then he couldn't have known Lila. On the other hand, if he's been a thorn in their side for a while, then it's possible that he and Lila encountered each other. It's even possible that Lila was working with George. That could explain the hatred between George and the family. She may have been on the verge of discovering where the surrender document was when she was caught by Elizabeth and James and either asked to leave or made to disappear. Or, she was working for herself and George killed her to get her out of the way but can't risk such a drastic action against the wealthy, connected Greenwoods.

I wait patiently for my chance. Well, I wait chafing with impatience, but what can I do about it? Annabelle is the only member of the family I can talk to about George since she is the only one who knows I witnessed the fight the day before. I need to get her alone, and that opportunity doesn't come until the next night.

I take my dinner in my room. Not surprisingly, the family isn't looking for company right now. But after dinner, I head to the balcony, banking on the chance that

Annabelle will need fresh air as she usually does.

My gamble pays off. Ten minutes after I step outside, the door to Annebelle's room opens, and she steps into the night. She smiles and approaches me. "Hey, Mary."

"Hello, dear. Are you all right?"

She shrugs. "I'm all right. I'm more worried about Mom than anything. She's been so... fragile lately."

"Because of Baumann?"

She sighs. "Because of a lot of things. But George definitely isn't helping."

"Yes. I'm sorry for what happened last night. I can't believe he actually threatened you."

Annabelle laughs. "Oh please, I could take him in a fight if I needed to. If he was a real threat, Dad would have killed him before he had a chance to beg for forgiveness."

Was Lila a real threat, I wonder? "Has he been like this for long? George, I mean?"

Annabelle sighs again. "I think he has. Mom insists he was a good man once. They've been friends for a while, you know."

"Really?"

"Surprising, right? Yeah, they met at some Civil War convention in the historic district. Mom has a minor fascination with history, so they struck up a conversation. Since it's not possible to have a conversation with someone here without inviting

them to dinner, Mom invited him to dinner. Thus began a warm and lasting friendship.”

She delivers the last sentence with a great deal of sarcasm. “When was this?”

“The dinner? Um... I think... like eight, nine years ago? It was just before we hired Lila, so something like that.”

My ears perk up at that. That lends some credence to the hypothesis that Lila and George may have worked together. At the very least, they definitely knew of each other.

“It didn’t get bad until a few years ago,” Annabelle says. “George found out about the document that Mom’s looking for and he insisted that the right thing to do was to turn it over to him for safekeeping. Mom refused, and he’s been gradually getting more and more insistent about it. It’s now progressed to... well, to last night. Needless to say, they aren’t friends anymore.”

“Why is he still allowed here?” I ask. “I mean, surely she doesn’t have to put up with him.”

Annabelle sighs. “Mom wanted to believe that he was going to come around. She really liked him for some reason. As a friend, of course. Definitely no romance there.”

“Not from her side, of course,” I agree. “Perhaps from his?”

She cocks her head. “I don’t think so. Mom’s a good-looking woman for her age, but I don’t think George is into that. Not that I care what he’s into, but I get the impression that sex is low on his list of priorities in life. Anyway, no, I think Mom just liked talking to him. Dad’s a good husband to her, but he’s hard to talk to

sometimes. He's very rigid in his opinions."

I recall the tension between the couple during my first dinner with them. That tension isn't always there, but it lingers more often than not. I can't help but wonder if their marriage is weaker than Annabelle believes it to be. I very much doubt George has anything to do with that tension, though. Unless perhaps James warned her about him early on, and she didn't believe him.

I decide to follow up on that. "Did your father ever think of banning George from the property before?"

"No. None of us saw that coming. That was... scary..." She bites her lip and looks pensively out at the stars. She catches herself after a moment and says, "I still don't think he could have done anything to me, but still... anyway, no. Dad tolerated their friendship because he knew Mom valued it and obviously she wasn't going to cheat on him with George or anything stupid. But yeah, after last night, I think it's safe to say George is done."

We fall silent for a while. I want desperately to ask if Lila knew anything about George or if that might have been why she "disappeared," but Annabelle's made it clear that there's a line between nosiness and curiosity, and I don't want her to think I'm too interested in what happened to Lila. I am certain Annabelle had nothing to do with it, but word might get around to someone who did, and that would leave me in terrible danger.

I need to find out if George was connected to Lila, but I'll need to learn that another way. I think it's time I returned to Detective Donnelly. If I can convince him to look into this case, then he might be able to learn something without alerting either George or the Greenwoods to his investigation.

It's a long shot. He was clearly reticent about investigating the Greenwoods for any

crime. But the answer lies on an island surrounded by crocodiles, and I don't have a boat. Donnelly does.

Annabelle sighs and smiles at me. "Thank you for talking to me. I know you were probably hoping not to get embroiled in another family's drama again, but I really appreciate you having a listening ear. I can't really talk to anyone else about all this. Dad doesn't know how to listen, and Christopher just gets stressed. I talk to Grandma sometimes, but I don't know how much she understands. Mom... well, Mom's hanging by a thread. Between you and me, I kind of hope we find this document and it turns out to be worthless just so she can let this whole thing go."

"How long has she been looking for it?"

Annabelle scoffs. "Years. Since I was in high school. Almost as long as she's known George. I think he was the one who told her about it. I think that's part of why he thinks it should be his. He feels like she owes him or something. Anyway, she figured out somehow that it's supposed to be here on the property."

"Why doesn't she just dig for it? Is she worried about ruining the landscaping?"

"I think she's worried about people stealing it. I'm kind of surprised she told you about it to be honest." She smiles at me. "She trusts you."

"That's good to hear."

"Well, you're a good person."

I feel a pang when she says that. "Not always. But I try."

"That's all we can do, right? Don't worry too much about it. Mom'll be okay. She just needs some... separation... from all of this. Maybe she should go on vacation.

I'll talk to Dad. He's always talked about taking her on a cruise somewhere. Maybe he should follow through on that. And don't worry about George. He'll never set foot on this property again."

"I certainly hope you're right about that," I say.

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It is time for me to take a stand. I have spent too much time waffling between my commitment to stay out of the family's affairs and my desire to seek justice for Lila. I've been thoroughly unsuccessful in staying out of the family's affairs, so I decide to throw myself wholly into solving this case.

I am convinced that this case hinges on George and Violet. Violet is a known murderer, and George has a clear violent streak and an even clearer motive.

The connection between Violet and Lila is thin, but the connection between George and Lila is far more tangible. Perhaps Lila knew where the surrender document is. Perhaps she had it on her when she was killed, then George should have seen it, but it's possible that he had to move too quickly to think to look. Perhaps she lied to him and said that she burned it. Perhaps she did burn it.

Either way, he is my primary suspect, so I decide I have to learn more about him. With that in mind, I decide to take a trip to his antique store the next day to see what I can deduce about the man.

When I head downstairs, however, I see Violet dressed in shoes and a shawl with a cane in her hand. She's dressed to go out.

I still want to visit George, but this is an opportunity I can't pass up. Violet may be senile, but she's murdered and disposed of a body before. Even if she didn't commit this murder, the odds are better than even that she knows where Lila is buried.

I wait for her to leave the house before descending the stairs. Then I watch through the window and remain in the house until I see her reach the gate. I follow quickly

but take care not to make too much noise. The old woman's nose is sharp, and I don't want to risk her learning that she's being followed.

I reach the gate and see her proceeding not down the road but into the forested area beyond the estate. There are a few acres not claimed by any of the residents in the neighborhood, and it's into this plot she walks.

I follow, keeping a distance and obscuring myself behind trees as much as possible. My heart pounds with excitement, but as she continues to walk and mutter to herself, my excitement wanes. Perhaps she really is just a senile old woman who has wandered off.

But perhaps this is where Lila is truly buried, and perhaps I'm about to discover the answers I've been searching for all this time.

I follow her for another hundred yards or so but stop when I see another figure walk from behind a tree and stride toward her. My eyes widen when I recognize the figure of George Baumann!

A lot of pieces fall into place in my mind, but a lot of questions reveal themselves as well. How are the two of them connected? Have they been working together? Does Violet know that George murdered Lila and is blackmailing him? Perhaps Violet murdered Lila and George is blackmailing her?

I creep closer, keeping behind trees. When I'm within twenty yards or so, I can hear

George Baumann's voice. "Cut the crap, Violet. We both know you're only faking it."

Violet scoffs. "Quit acting tough, George. You might be Irish, but that doesn't make you a fighter."



“Wrong race, Violet. And again, cut the fucking crap. We’re going to have a conversation right now. A real one. Because I’m pretty sure you’re the only person in this family smart enough to realize that pissing me off is a really bad idea.”

Violet takes a step back, and when she says, “I’ll call the police!” I catch a trace of real fear in her voice.

There’s an awareness behind that fear as well. It’s not just fear for her safety. It’s fear of exposure. Guilt.

“Sure thing,” George says breezily. “Here. Use my cell phone. Get them out here to question me so I can tell them all about what happened to Deirdre McCoy.”

Silence. Then, “That was fifty years ago.”

“And you’ll still hang for it. Or fry. Or... Do they use lethal injection now? Anyway, you get my point.”

“I don’t give a shit what happens to me,” Violet says. “But you stay the fuck away from my daughter.”

The confusion in Violet’s voice is gone. So she’s faked her dementia after all.

George lifts his chin and takes a step closer to her. “Or what? You’re a little old to be killing people.”

“I didn’t murder her. You know that.”

“I know you did .”

“It was an accident,” she protests.

“Yes, you accidentally pushed her down a well.”

“It’s the truth.” Violet sounds like she’s near tears.

“Maybe it is. But here’s what’s also the truth. Deirdre McCoy was pregnant with Johnathan Hendrickson’s child. Your husband’s child.”

My eyes widen. So George knows about Deirdre’s affair.

“I’ll be honest, Vi. Maybe the police won’t care about the murder. After all, it’ll be damned hard to prove. I’m sure they could dig up the ground where the well used to be and find her bones, but proving that you pushed her will be next to impossible. But I’ll bet you that Elizabeth believes it. I’ll bet she has some feelings about the fact that you killed her half-sister or half-brother. She wasn’t your number one fan growing up, was she?”

Silence from Violet.

“Right. So maybe we don’t give her a real reason to wish Dad had married Deirdre instead of you.”

“Fuck you.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I’ll pass. What I won’t do is let Elizabeth steal my damned money. I told her about that document. It’s mine. You’re going to help me find it.”

“I’m not going to do shit.”

“Then I’ll bury you right next to Lila Benson.”

I cover my mouth to stifle my gasp. So I was right. George is the killer, after all.

“You’re an evil man for what you did to her. She wasn’t going to hurt anyone.”

“She was going to steal the artifacts for herself. Do you think she was going to share one dime with your daughter? No, that was going to be her severance package.”

“That doesn’t mean she deserved to die.”

“But Deirdre McCoy did?”

Violet hesitates. “It was an accident.”

George chuckles. “Sure it was. But you didn’t shed any tears, did you? I’m asking honestly. I wasn’t born when it happened. I’m just wondering if you wept at her funeral, or if you just laughed inside and then went home to be a frigid bitch to Johnathan and Elizabeth for the next fifty-two years to punish them.”

“Stay away from my family.”

“No. You’re going to help me find that fucking document. It’s mine. I’ve earned it.”

“How? How have you earned it?”

“Because...” His face reddens. “Damn it, Lila and Elizabeth wouldn’t know it existed without me! They owe me!”

“We don’t owe you shit,” Violet sneers. “And Lila didn’t either.”

George narrows his eyes. When he speaks again, his voice is low and deadly. I have to strain to hear it. “You know, Lila started talking big, too, and I put her in her place.

Do I have to put you in your place too?"

Violet's momentary bravado fades. In its place is a plaintive fear. "What do you expect me to do? I'm seventy-four years old. I can't go digging through the gardens looking for a piece of damned paper. Even if I could, they'd ship me off to a nursing home the moment they caught me. Elizabeth only barely tolerates me as it is."

"You can listen," George replied. "They'll find it eventually. James is a stubborn asshole, but he'll run out of room eventually, and then he'll tear the whole estate apart to find it."

"For eighty thousand? You're delusional. Eighty thousand isn't even a drop in the bucket."

"It's enough to pay for a bankruptcy attorney that will keep him out of jail. He can drink himself to death with cheap vodka instead of toilet wine. More to the point, it's enough to pay enough of my debt that I can finally pull my head above water."

"For what? Two more years? You're in the wrong business, George. You and James are two sides of the same stupid coin."

George's hand moves like a blur. Violet falls to the ground, and I flinch toward her to come to her aid.

I stop myself and quickly return behind my tree. Annabelle might feel herself a match for George, but I don't share her confidence. If I reveal myself now, George will probably kill both of us.

So instead, I listen as George berates the weeping Violet.

"Keep your judgment to yourself. Unless you'd rather end up as the subject of a true

crime special. Could be as the murderer, could be as the victim. Hell, why not both?” His voice hardens. “Find me that document, Violet.”

He spins on his heel and vanishes into the trees. For a while, I remain frozen to the spot. It’s not until I see Violet get to her feet that I leave.

I feel bad for leaving her to her own devices. She may be responsible for Deirdre McCoy’s death, but she’s only an old woman now.

But I can’t risk Violet learning that I know the truth. I don’t know how she’ll react. She could tell George that I stole the document in an attempt to protect herself. I still need to bring Lila to justice, and the best way to do that right now is on my own.

So, I rush to the kitchen. The door opens just as I enter it, and I busy myself making tea, just in case Violet sees me when she walks inside..

She doesn’t, and by the time the tea is ready, I’m relaxed enough to think about what to do next.

I want to bring George to justice, but I have no proof other than what I’ve overheard. I highly doubt Violet will risk having her own secret exposed, so I can’t risk asking her to corroborate what I know. If I knew exactly where Lila was buried, it would be as easy as digging her up and telling the police where to find her.

My thoughts return to the geranium garden. Everything seems to return to that spot. Elizabeth claims she’s talking to the Secret Keeper, but maybe she’s talking to Lila’s ghost instead. Lila was looking for the document. George is still looking for the document. It’s not outside of the realm of possibility that they both happened to be snooping on the grounds at the same time. Perhaps George killed her and buried her here.

That would implicate the Greenwoods too. They've been jealously guarding whatever secret lies behind that gate. I still don't know why they would do that and not report the murder to George. I suppose they would do that to protect Violet, but at some point, they won't be willing to risk the repercussions that come with hiding her past. Maybe that's why George is so desperate. Maybe he knows he's on borrowed time.

I should go to the police. Donnelly might fear that Greenwoods, but their power is, apparently, a sham. Surely the entire police department doesn't fear them enough to ignore me if I reveal what I've overheard.

But what if I'm wrong? I thought I had compelling evidence against the Greenwoods when I first went to the police, but Donnelly tore apart my reasoning like it was papier-mache. Of course, I was wrong then, or at least not entirely right. I am right this time.

But I don't have proof. What if Donnelly decides I'm being paranoid once more? I can't risk that. I need real evidence.

I have to dig up those flowers. Whatever the risk, I must uncover the smoking gun that will solve this mystery once and for all.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

The next day is Tuesday. I have been with the Greenwoods for six weeks. It hits me that I've worked for them longer than the Ashfords or Carltons. I was with the Ashfords for about three weeks and the Carltons for just over a month. I don't know why that seems important to me.

I think it's because I was with the Tylers for five months. The boring Tylers. The safe Tylers. The Tylers who, despite being wealthy, were a perfectly well-adjusted family whose twins just happened to be geniuses. Not evil geniuses either. Just garden variety academically gifted children. I worked for them longer than for the other three families combined, yet my time with them is just a footnote in my mind.

In contrast, the few weeks I spend with the Ashfords is a turning point in my life, the fork where I choose the road less traveled and forsake the quiet, comfortable life I've led for twenty-five years prior. The month with the Carltons is a reckoning where I accept the fact that my sister's memory haunts me and drives me to find justice for those who have had it denied.

And my time with the Greenwoods has been the mirror through which I examine myself and realize that there's no avoiding who I am now. My time with the children here is little more than a footnote, just as the Tylers were. I do like the children, but my weekends spent watching them have felt like interruptions in the mystery I consider my true purpose. I am here to find justice for Lila Benson, a woman who was murdered by an evil man and whose murder was covered up by a wealthy family selfishly seeking to protect one of their own, who is also a murderer.

I spend the first days of each of my jobs trying to convince myself that I want only to do my work as a governess or housekeeper. Each time, I eventually succumb to the

thirst for justice that motivates me.

I don't think I'll lie to myself anymore. I can't be sure of that, because if there's one thing everyone is capable of, it's lying, especially to themselves.

But I don't think I'll succeed at that anymore. And I won't let fear control me. I've been waiting for an opportunity to act, but what I've really been doing is avoiding the risks I need to take if I'm to fulfil my purpose here and bring Lila to justice.

So, after the family leaves for work, I leave the estate and head to town. There's a hardware store a few miles away. I walk there and purchase a shovel. I don't intend to be careful with the flowers. Once I find what's buried underneath those geraniums, it won't matter if I'm caught.

I take the bus back to the estate, so I don't have to carry the shovel the entire way. I arrive at eleven-thirty in the morning. The groundskeepers will be working in the Glens today, so I should have the gardens to myself.

I pass the wrathful Moses, staff upraised to strike the rock. His visage frightens me when I first arrive, but now it motivates me. In his furrowed brow and bared teeth, I see the same strength that moves me. He is forced to fetch water out of a rock for the rebellious Israelites. It now falls to me to dig justice out of the ground in spite of the murderous wealthy.

I make my way through the gardens. As I suspect, I am alone. I walk through the solar garden with its orderly rays of red and orange and gold radiating from the bright yellow plat of sunflowers in the center. The heads of the sunflowers hang low, staring at me like the eyes of an ophanim.

I walk past the hedges of honeysuckle. Their cloying odor seems sickly to me now. The Romanesque statuary gazes impassively, mute witnesses to who knows how



many crimes. Perhaps they are the rebellious Israelites, too foolish to know their crime, too shortsighted to foresee the wrath they've provoked.

The ground crunches softly under my feet, the gravel walkways a quiet alarm to the world around that vengeance walks among them. My sister's voice laughs somewhere in the back of my mind, but I don't heed her taunts, nor do I pay any thought to the image of her ghost with its blackened voids in place of eyes. I am here to right a wrong, and I won't allow myself to be stopped.

I reach the wrought iron gate and grasp the handle boldly.

It doesn't move.

I turn again, more firmly. It remains wedged in place. When I look down, I see a padlock slid through the bars of the gate and around the handle. It's this lock that prevents the handle from turning.

I stare at that lock, my heartbeat quickening with frustration. It's a strong lock, heavy and thick. It gleams dully, a quiet resistance to my defiance.

My hand tightens around the handle of the shovel, and I focus on my breathing to keep from shouting with rage. I should have seen this coming. Of course they would lock the gate. Behind it lies the most destructive secret their family possesses. The only mystery is why they haven't locked it before.

I lift the shovel, thinking to break the lock with the edge, but I lower it without even attempting. This lock is massive, the sort used to secure warehouses, not the simple lock people purchase for jewelry boxes. I would need a pair of sturdy bolt cutters, and even then, I would be better off cutting the bars of the gate themselves rather than the lock.

I will have to find another way in. I can't just throw my hands up in defeat. I can't find help from anyone else. I have no guarantee that doing so wouldn't work against me. The only thing I know for sure is that behind this gate lies proof of George's crime. I must see that proof, document it, and then call the police to show them the irrefutable evidence that will put George Baumann behind bars where he deserves.

I walk around the hedge that surrounds the garden, testing it every few yards. I learn this way that the fence surrounds the entire garden. By the time I return to the gate, it is nearly one o'clock. I still have at least two hours before anyone returns home, and four hours before Elizabeth arrives. I try to tell myself that's enough time to find an answer, but deep down I know I'm lying to myself.

I can't allow myself to be defeated, though. Not when I'm so close. There must be a way in.

I look up at the hedge. It's perhaps fifteen feet tall. I don't know how far up the fence extends. The gate is thirteen feet tall, but I don't know if it's taller than the fence, shorter or the same height. If I climb the fence and something goes wrong, I could injure myself severely. I could even fall to my death and join the ghosts haunting this property.

But I must get in. I can't wait anymore. George Baumann is growing more aggressive, and the Greenwoods are going more desperate. The powder keg lying underneath this estate is ready to explode, and when it does, Lila's chance at justice will disappear with it.

I take a deep breath and toss the shovel up toward the top of the hedge. It lifts nine feet into the air, then falls down. I shriek and dive out of the way just before the metal head buries itself into the ground where I was standing a moment ago.

Cheeks burning, I get to my feet and grab the shovel. I don't know what I was

thinking. I am not a superhero.

Instead of trying to throw the shovel over the hedge, I walk back to the gate and slide it through the bars. It occurs to me at that time, that I won't have to wonder how tall the fence is if I climb over the one part of the fence that isn't covered by ivy.

I sigh and shake my head. Sometimes, I am more of a fool than anyone.

I grab the fence in my hands and try to pull myself up. I manage to lift myself onto my tiptoes only.

I stare at the fence, rage filling me once more. All of this, and I'm too weak to pull myself up?

I press my feet against the vertical bars of the fence and try to use that leverage to lift myself. It works! I pull myself up a foot or so off the ground.

Then I try to lift my feet higher on the bars, and as soon as I lift my right leg, my left slides down. I fall, crying out as my hands slide down the bars. When I hit the ground, I nearly fall, but I hold onto the bars with a death grip, so instead of falling onto my back, I slam my head forward against the gate.

Pain rockets through me, and I release the gate and sit in front of it, shaking with the pain and the rage that comes with it.

If the fence had horizontal cross bars, I could do this. If the hedge was stronger and the vines were thick enough to support my weight, I could climb it. Not easily, perhaps, but I could do it.

But I can't do this. That stupid padlock has locked me out of the answers I need to bring an end to all of this madness. I have failed.

I lower my head to cry, but before the tears can fall, I hear footsteps behind me. I stiffen and listen. I hear a voice muttering with the footsteps. I can't tell what the voice is saying or who it belongs to, but I can hear that it's approaching.

I get quickly to my feet and dash for cover behind a nearby bush. I make it three steps then remember the shovel. I curse and run back, then grab the shovel and pull it out of the fence. It clangs against the iron bars, and I curse again, then sprint away. I diver behind the bush just before the shadow of the approaching individual comes into view.

I still and force my breathing to calm. I watch the gate, and a moment later, I stifle a gasp when George Baumann comes into view.

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*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

George Baumann stops in front of the gate. He wears a long leather coat and sweats profusely in the summer sun. His face is beet red, and I'm amazed that he hasn't fainted from heat exhaustion.

He opens the coat, and I realize the purpose for the attire when I see a pair of sturdy bolt cutters. He mutters something, and this time, I understand what he says. "Thought you'd lock me out of here, huh? Well, this is what you get, bitch."

The vulgarity is disquieting, even if it's not particularly surprising. George lifts the bolt cutters to the lock and strains as he tried to break through the steel.

The handles of the bolt cutters move slowly toward each other, then stop. George strains until his red face turns purple, then stops, gasping and shaking. He stares in amazement at the lock and mutters, "What the hell?" then tries again.

This time, when his face turns purple, he bares his teeth and growls, continuing to squeeze the bolt cutter. The handles still, then slowly approach each other again.

Then, with a loud snap, the handles crash together. George pitches forward, hitting his head on the bars. He hisses with pain and drops the bolt cutters, backing up and pressing his palm to his forehead as he bobs up and down in an effort to endure the injury without shouting. The effect is hilarious, but I can't judge him since I was in an equally comical situation only a moment ago.

Well, I can't judge him for that , anyway.

After a long moment, he shakes his coat off and tosses it angrily away. It lands on the

bush I'm hiding behind, and the acrid odor of sweat stings my nostrils. Thank God the soiled coat didn't land on me.

He leans against the fence, shaking with exhaustion and breathing out curse words. His portly belly squeezes like a bellow as his body tries to recover from what is probably the most exercise he's had in decades.

Finally, he takes a deep breath and looks at the padlock. He turns the base, and when it slides away from the severed ring of hardened steel that loops around the iron bars, he crows with joy. He catches himself a moment later and freezes, looking around anxiously. When he realizes no one is rushing to find out who made that noise, he relaxes and picks up the bolt cutter.

It comes apart in his hands, and he stares stupidly as one half falls to the ground. After a moment, he chuckles and says, "Should've just cut the damned bars. Would've been easier."

He removes the padlock and opens the gate. He walks two steps, then stops. "Fuck! A shovel. I forgot a fucking shovel!"

He sighs and leans against the open gate, breathing heavily. He looks up at the sky as though begging it for an answer to why he's so unprepared for the most important day of his life.

Finally, he sighs again and pushes from the gate. He shakes his head, sighs a final time, then heads into the garden. Apparently, he's decided he'll just have to forgo the shovel.

I check my phone. It's now one-thirty. I presume he knows when the family typically returns from work and feels confident he can dig up what he needs before they arrive.

I have to act now.

I intend to do this after I uncover whatever's under the geraniums, but there's no guarantee I'll have time to do that. In fact, I have to admit to myself that there's no guarantee I'll live long enough to tell anyone what's under those flowers if I confront George.

And I will confront George. I have to. I can't risk that he'll destroy the evidence and escape justice.

So, I send a text to nine-one-one. It's my understanding that most cities in America support that function for cases where a complainant is unable to make a voice call. I provide the address and report an intruder. I give directions to the geranium garden from the gate as clearly as I can, then snap a picture of the broken padlock and open gate and send that with the text.

I wait until I receive a response. As I suspect, the dispatcher asks if they can call me. I reply, No. My life is in danger. Then I put my phone on silent, just in case. This will have to be enough.

I stand and walk toward the open gate, gripping the shovel tightly. If I'm lucky, I'll reach George and knock him out before he sees me.

I can hear sounds of digging as I walk through the short, hedged corridor that leads from the gate to the geraniums. George continues to mutter and curse as he digs, mostly complaints that he's on his hands and knees digging through dirt and promises to ruin the Greenwoods as soon as he possibly can for not just giving him the damned document in the first place.

I round the corner just when George says, "Finally! Got you, you bitch!"

There are certain things in life that are too horrible to put into words. The sight of Lila Benson's body as George drags it out of the ground is one of those things. The sound of her bones cracking and her clothing tearing as he forces the corpse out of the small hole he's dug is another, and that is far worse than the sight.

I stand and watch the scene, too stunned to act. I have the shovel upraised, prepared to strike George with it, but I don't swing it. I suppose this is a blessing in disguise. I may be a petite middle aged woman, but a strike to the back of a middle aged man's head with a cast iron shovel requires little force to kill.

My mind shouts at me to move, to do something other than stand there and watch as George digs through the body, snarling, "Where is it? Where the hell is it? Damn it, I know you know where it is!"

Greed has driven him mad, just as it has driven Elizabeth mad. Perhaps in her case, it's desperation rather than greed. I wonder if any part of him realizes what he looks like now, if any part of him cares that this is what he's become.

Unless, of course, this is who he always was.

He curses again, then drops the body and starts digging through the grave. My stomach turns, and I force my eyes to remain on George and not the corpse.

"Where is it? Damn it, you have to know something! Where is that document? I know it's here!"

This is when it occurs to me that I can't just attack George. If I kill him, then I'll be a murderer myself. I can moralize all I want about the fact that George deserved to die, but that won't hold up in a court.

I've called the police already. The right thing to do is wait until they arrive.



My phone! God, I'm a fool! I could have recorded all of this!

I carefully lower the shovel and pull my phone out of my pocket. I open the camera and am about to record when George shouts. "God damn it!"

The sudden noise startles me. I flinch, and my foot comes down on a branch. It snaps, and George whips around to look at me. We stare at each other in shock for a moment. Then his eyes narrow.

He lunges for one half of the bolt cutter, and I shriek and pick up the shovel, dropping my phone in the process. "Stay back!" I cry out, holding the shovel in front of me.

He lunges toward me, and I swing the shovel wildly. It catches the bolt cutter and knocks it out of George's hands. I grab it, but he grabs the other end. After a brief struggle, he tears it from my hand.

I shriek again and grab the shovel. It has a longer reach than the bolt cutter, which is probably the only reason I'm still alive.

"The police are coming!" I cry.

My voice is trembling and thready. Rather than sounding intimidating, I sound terrified. Well, I am terrified.

"You called the police?" He seems genuinely shocked, as though it would never occur to him that someone would involve the authorities in this.

"Yes! They're on their way! They know you're here, and they know you broke into the garden. If you kill me, they'll know it was you."

George glances at Lila's body. He reddens and glares at me. "They'll already know it

was me, idiot!”

"You can say it was the Greenwoods!" I argue, desperate to keep him at bay until the police arrive. "You can say you just wanted the document and that you had nothing to do with the body."

“Oh, sure,” he says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “So that’s what? Trespassing, abusing a corpse, burglary, and maybe they won’t think I’m a murderer? That’s at least five years in prison, maybe ten, and while that happens, I just end up in more and more debt so I can declare bankruptcy when I’m out and end up homeless. Sounds damned wonderful, doesn’t it?”

“It’s either that or you get life in prison. Or the death penalty.”

“Or, I kill you, take what I need and buy myself a new life somewhere else. Yeah, I think I’ll take that option.”

He rushes forward, murder in his eyes. I swing the shovel again, but this time, he anticipates the strike. He sidesteps and lunges with the bolt cutter. I barely avoid the blow and swing again with the shovel. He reaches for it, but I manage to pull away and maintain control of the shovel.

I’m fighting for my life right now. I open my mouth to scream, but he lunges again, and instead of calling for help, I gasp, backpedaling and nearly falling. He presses his advantage, stabbing and slashing with the tool.

I swing the shovel and catch him on the face. It’s a glancing blow and not enough to knock him out, but it stops him and gives me time to regain my feet.

He clamps one hand to his jaw and glares at me. “You bitch! Oh, you bitch!”

He pulls his hand away, and I see that I've opened a cut in his cheek. Blood trickles down his chin in rivulets, and when he sees the blood in his hand, his eyes widen.

He looks up at me, and then his eyes narrow again. "I'll kill you!"

He runs toward me, and I swing the shovel with all of my might. He catches it with one hand and, with the other, thrusts the bolt cutter toward me. I release the shovel and jump back. The blade doesn't pierce my chest, but as I trip and fall backward, it slices a ragged line through my dress. The fabric falls open, but I don't have time to be concerned with my modesty.

I scramble backwards, but before I can get to my feet, he lifts the bolt cutters high and with a roar brings them down. I roll over and feel the blade tear into my dress again. I get to my feet, the fabric tearing further.

"Help!" I cry out. "Someone help! He's trying to kill me!"

His fist moves like a blur. I feel it crash into my temple like a club, and the world goes dark for a moment.

Light returns when I hit the dirt. I gasp and roll onto my back. My vision swims, and my head feels fuzzy. I see George pull the bolt cutter from the ground and try to call for help, but no sound comes out. I try to move, but it's all I can do to stay conscious.

He lifts the bolt cutter, and time slows to a crawl. This is the end, I fear. I have finally come across an opponent I can't bring to justice. The knowledge that the killer is nothing more than a greedy failure galls me, but what I feel more than anything is guilt.

I'll never know what happened to my sister. I'll never know if she was killed or if she's still alive. I'll never know if she suffered. I'll never know if she ran away or

was taken or changed her name and appearance and hid in plain sight.

I had a chance. I could have investigated her death, and I chose not to. Now that chance is lost to me forever.

I'm sorry, Annie. I'm so sorry.

The bolt cutter descends.

“Hey!”

The bolt cutter freezes. I frown and blink to clear my vision.

George stands over me, his eyes wide with shock. He doesn't look at me, though. Instead, he looks over at the gate.

I turn to see Detective Donnelly approaching, gun drawn. Behind him are several uniformed officers, all with guns drawn as well.

“Back away from her now!” Donnelly commands. “Or I will shoot, and I promise you I will aim to kill.”

George continues to stare stupidly at the detective for another moment, but when Donnelly pulls the hammer back on his gun and aims it at his forehead, he backs away. He tosses the bolt cutter and raises his hands, glaring hatefully at me as he does.

“On your knees!” Donnelly shouts. “Jarvis, take him.”

One of the officers holsters his weapon and rushes forward to handcuff the kneeling George. Donnelly holsters his weapon and looks at me. “Are you all right?”

My head still swims. I manage only one more word. “Lila.”

He frowns, and I point a trembling hand toward the geranium bed. He turns toward it, and when he sees Lila’s body, he gasps. “Oh, shit.”

The other officers release similar exclamations of surprise. A few retches at the sight and one, a poor boy who can’t be any older than Annabelle, actually vomits.

I sigh and allow my eyes to close. Donnelly calls my name, but I don’t answer. I’m sure I’ll live, but right now, I need rest. I’ve done my duty. I’ve brought justice for Lila. Everything will be all right now.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

I wake up in a hospital bed. I have been cleaned and bandaged and dressed in a gown. My head still feels furry but far less so than before, and judging by the slight euphoria that accompanies it, I believe it's the painkillers and not any injury that causes me to feel this way.

I lift my head and find Detective Donnelly standing at the window, looking out across the city. He's talking to someone on his phone. "They were able to find the artifacts Lila Benson referred to in her notes. It turns out there was a hidden compartment in the fountain in the courtyard, inside the rock." He chuckles. "Yeah, the angry Moses fountain." After a pause, he says, "Hell if I know. He was probably just eccentric. A lot of these rich people aren't right in the head."

I stir, and Donnelly turns to me. "Hold on, she's waking up. I'll call you back." He hangs up and comes to me, sitting next to my bed and smiling tenderly as he takes my hand. "Hey there, Miss Wilcox. How are you feeling?"

"I've been worse."

He chuckles. "Yeah, I guess you have. That was a brave thing you did back there. I feel obligated to tell you it was also a stupid thing, but it was brave too."

"Those two things go together a lot, don't they," I remark.

He laughs again. "So they do. I have to ask, though. Why didn't you come to us first?"

"I did."

His smile fades, and his eyes move away from mine. "Yeah. You did."

He hesitates, and I can see him weighing whether or not to explain to me why they didn't have enough to act on the first time. In the end, he decides only to say, "I'm sorry for that. Still, if you find yourself in a position like this again, you need to go to the authorities. Actually, you need to remove yourself from the situation, then go to the authorities."

I sigh and push myself to a sitting position. He quickly helps me, and when I'm settled, he offers me some water. I sip it gratefully, then meet his eyes. "I don't mean to disparage you or your profession, Detective, but that doesn't always work."

"It almost always works better than vigilantism."

Almost always isn't good enough, I think, but don't say. It's not nearly good enough.

I don't want to argue that point right now, though. It's not a debate I'll win with a veteran law enforcement officer. Instead, I ask, "Will the family face justice for concealing her death? Will they be punished for their crimes?"

He sighs. "I don't think there are any crimes we can charge them with."

I stare at him in shock. "You must be joking! They covered up a murder on their estate!"

"Elizabeth did," he replies, "and probably James. Annabelle clearly knew nothing about the murder, and I doubt the son did either. As for the parents, the pudding is in the proof, and we don't have any. We can probably convince a jury that Elizabeth covered the murder, but even a public defender would be able to sell a jury on not guilty by insanity."

“So she’ll be committed, at least?”

He chuckles bitterly. “Yeah, for a few months in a resort that calls itself a mental hospital where everyone will express their deepest sympathies at the trauma she’s endured.”

“But that’s not fair!”

He shrugs. "Yeah, I know, but what can you do? They might be in debt, but they're still rich. Don't ask me how that works. Here's something interesting, though. Baumann's claiming that the grandmother killed a woman fifty years ago. Deirdre McCoy. I looked it up in records. I guess there was a rumor she was pregnant with Violet's husband's kid. Baumann says she pushed her down a well in retaliation."

“Can we pursue charges against Violet, then?”

He gives me a stern look. “First of all, you can press no charges. Your involvement in this matter is done. You may pat yourself on the back for your detective work, but you got incredibly lucky, and not just because you survived. You’ve crossed beyond the limits of the law more than once during this case, and had things worked out just a little differently, you would not only have put yourself at risk but also have made it impossible for us to prosecute this case. Can we the People of the State of Georgia press charges, probably not. That well’s a parking lot now. No one’s making noise about her except Baumann, and he’s got all the reason to lie. I can’t see the city risking lawsuits by tearing up a parking lot to find fifty-year-old bones. And what if we do find her? How do we prove Violet did it? No, we’ll get Baumann for Lila Benson, but that’s about it.”

“But James and Elizabeth knew for years where Lila was buried,” I protest, “and they kept it a secret! Violet knew that George killed Lila, and she didn’t come forward.”



He frowned. “She knew?”

“Yes. George was blackmailing her to stay silent. I overheard him threaten her yester—what day is it?”

“Still Tuesday. You were only out for a few hours.”

“Then yesterday.”

“She has dementia, though. The family has medical records to prove it.”

“I’m sure they do. As you said, they might be in debt, but they’re still rich. They’re protecting her. They know she killed Deirdre McCoy, and when George learned of it, they fabricated her dementia, or allowed her to fabricate it. They hid Lila’s body and made sure no one could find out what had happened to her.”

“And you know all of this for sure.”

“I heard her confess. She claims it was an accident. Maybe she didn’t kill Deirdre in cold blood, but she’s guilty of her death. It’s involuntary manslaughter at the very least.”

“But we can’t prove it,” he says gently, “and we can’t prove that anyone but Baumann was involved in Lila Benson’s murder or in the coverup of that murder.”

“But I know they did it!”

Desperation has raised the pitch of my voice. I hate hearing myself so emotional, but damn it, it’s the truth! I know it is!”

“But do you?” Donnelly asks.

I open my mouth to reply, but I don't reply. I don't reply because the fact is that I don't know. I feel very strongly that they did, but my feeling is based on hearing a possibly unstable woman talk to herself and the suspicion that if they helped conceal Violet's past they would also conceal Lila's murder. I have no evidence to prove it, and even I can't insist that my feeling—no matter how true I believe it to be—is enough to prove their guilt.

But... "It's not fair."

"Life isn't fair."

I hate that response so much. I hate that dismissive, flippant, cop-out refusal so much! If life isn't fair, make it fair! Punish the ones who make it unfair! Damn it, why are people so content to allow evil to exist?

When I don't respond right away, Donnelly stands and informs me, "The family has left for Europe. All but Annabelle, and as I said, we think she's innocent."

"I think so too. But we both know the Greenwoods aren't, right detective?"

He nods. "We do."

"And it won't matter," I say tersely. "Lila Benson will see justice served, but Deirdre McCoy never will. Will she?"

He meets my eyes for a moment, then lowers them and shakes his head again. I let that admission linger for a moment, then say, "The authorities can only do so much. And often, they choose to do even less than that. I appreciate what you're telling me, but I can't promise that I'll never put myself in danger again."

"Why?" he asks. "Why all of this effort for people you don't even know?"

Not for people I don't know. For Annie.

A colder voice in my head replies, Not for Annie. For yourself. So you can keep running from Annie.

Out loud, I say, "Because someone has to. It has to matter to someone that innocent people are murdered and never see justice because their killers are too wealthy or powerful to suffer. I don't take positions intending to be a detective. But if I learn that some poor soul has been taken from this world, and there's something I can do to right the wrong done to them, I must do it."

He looks at me for a while, considering. Eventually, he folds his arms across his chest and says, "I still don't understand. Why now? I did some research on you, Miss Wilcox. You were a schoolteacher for twenty-five years before leaving abruptly and entering into service with wealthy families as a governess and occasional housekeeper. In that time, you've worked for four families. Three of them have had murders exposed. You say that you don't take positions intending to be a detective, but three out of four families within the past year is too much to be a coincidence."

He falls silent, and I don't reply. I know I'm not suspected of a crime, but I feel the way a criminal must feel sitting across the table from a detective. He's getting uncomfortably close to my own secret, and I very much don't want to share it with him.

He probes further. "You had a sister, Annemarie Wilcox."

I feel my lower lip tremble but stay silent.

"She went missing twenty-nine years ago. According to Boston Police records, they turned up no sign of her for eight weeks before closing the case. Shortly after, you changed your major from clinical psychology to education."

“I don’t see what this has to do with anything,” I say, somewhat sharply.

“Well, I understand the teaching bit. It’s clear you believe your sister was kidnapped or murdered. I know a little bit about the minds of killers, and it’s enough to make me far too friendly with a bottle and far too broken to stay married for longer than a few years at a time. I can’t imagine what it would be like to truly understand how evil those people are. So you dropped psych and went to education where you can work on molding minds instead of seeing into the dark corners of the attic.

“What I don’t understand is why, after nearly thirty years, you’ve started playing detective. And don’t tell me it’s unintentional, because I don’t buy that. You’re trying to make up for your sister. But why now? What changed?”

I don’t answer. Donnelly holds my eyes with an expression that appears slightly bored but that I recognize as shrewdly observant. I try to think of an answer, but the truth is that I don’t know. I suppose my mother’s death six years ago gave me the freedom to devote more time to Annie’s disappearance, but why do I wait so long? And why, when I do act, do I act for other people and not for Annie?

It’s been many years since I’ve studied psychology, but once more, the answer becomes clear despite my mind’s fervent attempts to avoid it.

I don’t want to know. My whole life from the moment I told Detective Huxley she could close Annie’s case up until now has been an attempt to avoid confronting the mystery of her disappearance. Donnelly is right. I changed my major because I didn’t want to understand evil. I took care of our ailing mother because I wanted to be tied down. I didn’t love Mother. It’s horrible to say, but she was a cruel woman who I believe is responsible in part for the decisions Annie made that led to her disappearance. I only took care of her because it was easy to hide behind duty and say that I had done the right thing leaving Annie’s case unexamined.

Then she died, and I tried to keep my head down, but the nightmares began again, and I knew that if I didn't do something, I would go mad as I had once before.

And now? Now I'm hunting for secrets to feel good about myself so that the madness remains at bay.

But something has to give. Eventually, I need to admit that I'm hiding and solve the mystery of Annie's loss, or I'll collapse fully into madness. This time, I doubt I'll recover.

Donnelly holds my eyes for a long time. Eventually, he sighs. "I'm going to need a statement from you before you're discharged. There's a chance you'll be subpoenaed when the case goes to trial, but it's not likely. Considering what George has said and what we walked into, this is pretty open and shut."

He grabs his jacket and heads for the door. Just before he leaves, he nods at me and says, "Take care of yourself, Miss Wilcox."

He leaves the room, and I stare up at the ceiling. Images flit through my head, of Annie, of Mother, of the various families I've worked for, the perpetrators and victims among them.

I am reaching the end of this road I've chosen. I can't run for much longer. Soon, I'll have to face the ghost that's been haunting me for nearly thirty years.

Or I'll have to let the guilt consume me.

## Page 29

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

The discharge nurse informs me that my belongings can be retrieved from the police station. I am relieved to find that Donnelly isn't in the office today. I don't think I can handle another conversation with him like the last one.

I perform a cursory check of my things. There's only one item I truly care about, and when I find it still in its place in my handbag, I breathe a sigh of relief.

I head outside and try to plan my next move. I don't have another position at the moment, so I'm at liberty for now. I don't know for sure what I'll do, but for today, I only want to rest.

Not here, though. I don't want to spend another night in Savannah. It's a shame. The town is beautiful, and I believe I could quite enjoy a vacation here, but it holds too many bad memories for me.

So, I decided to head to the airport. I don't know where I'll go yet. I'll decide later.

I walk to the bus stop, but before I reach it, I hear a voice call my name.

"Mary! Mary, wait!"

I turn to see Annabelle hurrying over to me. I turn warily to her and glance back at the police station. I'm not sure how she feels about me now that I've gotten her entire family into legal trouble.

When she reaches me, she smiles sadly and says, "Don't worry, I'm not angry at you. I'm angry, but not at you."

“Oh. Um, h did you...”

“I’m the one who brought your stuff here. I just came to say goodbye before you left. I hope that’s all right.”

I meet her eyes and see only the guilt-ridden young woman who confides in me when she has no one else to talk to. My trepidation melts away, and I return her smile. “Of course, dear. I’m glad you caught me.”

“Yeah, me too. Do you want to grab some tea? I know a place nearby that has some good stuff.”

“That sounds lovely.”

She beams and waves at a car parked across the street. When it pulls up next to us, I recognize Wharton in the driver’s seat. The butler gives me a sad smile similar to Annabelle’s, but his tone is genuine when he says, “I’m glad you’re all right, Mary.”

He drives us to a strip mall near the police station. During the drive, Annabelle makes small talk, asking about my health and sharing her well-wishes. I think she’s waiting until we can talk privately to get to what’s really on her mind.

My suspicions are confirmed a few minutes later when Wharton drops us off at the tea house and Annabelle and I sit with steaming cups of Darjeeling. She sips hers, perhaps a little too quickly, and I see her shoulders first tense, then relax as the heat of the brew melts into soothing warmth.

She gives me a smile that is probably as close to a genuine one as the poor girl will be capable of for a while. “I wanted to thank you,” she begins, “for finding justice for Lila. And for putting George Baumann behind bars. Who knew he was such an asshole, huh?”

“Well, that much was obvious,” I reply.

She laughs, and nearly spills her tea. To avoid an accident, she sets it on the counter and says, “Yeah, I guess so. Well, thank you for all of that. I’m glad someone did something about it.” Her smile fades. “I can’t believe I didn’t know. I mean, I was... close might not be the right word, but I knew her better than anyone in the family did. I never even thought that she could have been hurt. I believed my parents when they said she just left.”

“Of course you did. It is in one’s nature to trust her parents.” Usually.

“Yeah, but...” she shakes her head. “I mean, why would they lie?”

I consider my response carefully. I don’t know if Annabelle is aware of the accusations against her grandmother. If not, I don’t want to be the one who breaks that news to her. After a moment, I say, “They were trying to protect the people they loved.” It’s not exactly a lie.

“Were they?” she looks over my shoulder for a moment. “They wanted me to go with them. To Europe. They tried to tell me it was just a spur of the moment vacation to get away from all the unpleasantness with George.” She meets my eyes again. “That’s not what it is, though, is it?”

“Not entirely,” I admit.

She sighs and sips more of her tea. “Did they have something to do with it? With Lila?”

"No. Not that I know of. They are closely associated with George, however, and her body was found on your property. They're no doubt waiting for advice from their lawyer before they return."



She laughs without humor. “Yeah, I figured. They were pissed at me when I said I was staying here. Christopher finally took me aside and explained that they were going to be questioned, and they wanted me with them so we could stand as a family. I told him that I was done standing with them. Anyway, long story short, we fought. They said some things. I said some things. Eventually, we’ll probably apologize for a lot of it, but...” She looks away again. “I’m moving to California. I already talked to the police, and they said I’m not a suspect. I asked them if anyone else in my family was, and they wouldn’t answer. Which means they answered. Anyway, I’m going to take advantage of the fact that the rest of them are caught up to get my stuff and get out of here.” She sighs. “God, I feel horrible saying that.”

“Don’t,” I insist, gently but firmly. “You must do what’s right for yourself. You will mend the bridges between you and your family, but if you do so from a distance, you’ll be able to decide how many of those bridges you mend and where they lead to. If I were you, I would look for a source of income other than the family coffers so they have no pull over you.”

She laughs genuinely at that. “We don’t have family coffers. Not anymore. Dad’s up to his ears in debt, and Mom and Christopher are definitely fired. They’ll raise a stink, but they’re going to have to sell the estate and a lot of what’s inside of it to pay for their defense already. They might stay out of jail, but they’ll be ruined.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I’m not really sorry, but it seems the polite thing to say.

Annabelle is less circumspect. “I’m not. I hated being rich. That was our entire family personality. ‘Hi, we’re the Greenwoods. We’re rich.’ I’m over that. I’m going to get a job and rent an apartment and buy a nice cheap car. I’ll go hiking and swimming in the beach, and once a month, I’ll go to the movies or order pizza or something. If I end up making a lot of money, I’ll give it to charity. But I’m not going to be rich again.” She sighs. “I don’t know, maybe it works for other people, but I’m sick of it.”

“I don’t blame you, dear. As you say, wealth can consume a person’s identity until they are nothing more than their pocketbook. But don’t make any rash decisions yet. Find your independence. Become who you want to be. Then any wealth you gain will be a tool to serve you, not a god you worship.”

She nods. “Yeah. We’ll see.” She sips more of her tea, then says, “I feel bad for the staff. This all blindsided them, obviously.”

“Yes. It’s very unfortunate. But that isn’t your fault. In my limited experience, they seem like hard workers. I’m sure they’ll find other employment.”

She nods again. “Yeah, Nathaniel’s going to start his own landscaping company and hire the groundskeepers. I’ll talk to Clara and see if she can take any of the household staff. Wharton used to work for a limo company, and he’s got some money saved up, so he’ll be fine until he finds another job. Still, it sucks to see how many people are affected by the selfishness of a few.”

We fall silent for a moment. I can think of many things to say, but they all seem trite to my ears. Eventually, Annabelle asks, "What are you going to do?"

“I haven’t decided,” I say. “For now, I’m going to fly somewhere and take a few days to rest. After that, we’ll see.”

She smiles wryly. “I know what you’re going to say, but I have to ask. Do you need some money to help tide you over?”

"Oh, no, thank you, dear. I have a tidy sum saved away. I wouldn't say I'm especially wealthy, but I work by choice."

“Really? Why don’t you retire?”

“I like to keep busy. I don’t think I could handle being alone and idle all the time.”

“Why are you alone? I know it’s none of my business, but you’re a beautiful woman. You’ve never thought about finding a beautiful man?”

I laugh at that, and she joins me a moment later. When I recover, I say, “Well, thank you, dear. That’s very kind of you to say. I suppose... well, I don’t know if I have a good answer for that. I suppose marriage isn’t something I’ve ever prioritized.”

“Who said anything about marriage? Guys are good for more than a ring, you know.”

I laugh again, and then say, “Well, I suppose that hasn’t been much of a priority either. But who knows what the future will bring?”

“Whatever it brings,” she replies, “I hope it brings you happiness. You deserve it.”

I squeeze her hand and say, “So do you.”

We finish our tea, and Wharton drives me to the airport. I take my leave of them with a final embrace, then walk into the terminal.

I purchase a one-way ticket to Boston, Massachusetts. I know what I intend to do next.

It’s time to stop running.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:49 am*

I stare at the card as the clock on the desk ticks the seconds softly by. It doesn't, of course. It's a digital clock, and the seconds pass without any indication other than the occasional flicker of light as the number displayed changes with each minute. The noise is in my own mind.

It's a truly incredible phenomenon how people so easily avoid confronting trauma. The mind creates very sophisticated structures for hiding from what it fears and clings stubbornly to those structures even as they're whittled away to nothing.

When I board the flight to Boston, I am fully committed to pursuing an investigation into my sister's disappearance, but by the time I arrive, the old reticence returns.

When I land, I tell myself I'm too tired to call the number tonight, and I'll do so in the morning. When I wake, I tell myself I must purchase supplies to last myself while I stay here, so I spend the day shopping for clothing I don't need and food that I do but not right away. When I'm finished, I tell myself that I deserve a treat after the stress I've endured, so I go to a theater and see a truly terrible movie that seems to have been created as a political statement rather than as entertainment and features bland actors half my age who are just pretty enough that I suppose it makes up for their lack of talent. When the movie ends, I tell myself that it's so awful that I must treat myself a different way, so I enjoy a late dinner at a fine restaurant near my hotel. The night comes again, and I tell myself that Mr. O'Connell is surely asleep, as it is now early morning in England.

It's morning again, and after breakfast and a shower, I am finally out of excuses. But still, I sit and stare at the card for over an hour, trying desperately to think of another reason not to face my fear.

But I must. I've hidden for far too long.

So, finally, I take a deep breath and dial the number. I hope desperately that there will be no answer, but on the third ring, a voice replies, "Sean O'Connell's office. How may I help you?"

I take a deep breath and say, "Is Mr. O'Connell in?"

"This is he. Harriet has the day off, but she insists I answer the phone that way regardless. What can I do for you, ma'am?"

I take another deep breath, then say, "I need you to help me find my sister."