

Savannah Secrets

The Hidden Gate



Marlene Chase



THE HIDDEN GATE

by Marlene Chase

“Do you think Flannery O’Connor really taught a chicken to walk backward?”

Meredith Bellefontaine stopped in midbreath. Captivated as she had been with the fragrance of camellias drifting in through the open window of her car, Julia’s question had the effect of a sudden blast of cold air. She gave her old friend a quick glance. “What?”

Julia Foley leaned forward and rolled her eyes at Meredith. A lock of silver hair fell over her forehead. “Well, do you think she did?”

“It’s spring,” Meredith said. “The camellias and dogwoods are blooming everywhere, and you’re asking me about chickens!”

Julia sat back and folded her arms over her soft cotton blouse. She’d tossed her suit jacket into the back of Meredith’s SUV. Meredith had picked her up this morning so she could leave her car at the shop for an oil change. “We just drove past her childhood home and museum. Call me curious. What can I say?”

“Well, to answer your question, she did,” Meredith said, feeling a bubble of laughter rise. “She wrote an essay about it back in 1961. She called it ‘Living with a Peacock.’”

Any historian living in Savannah had to know about Flannery O’Connor, who wrote about Southern people who experience transformations of character. Meredith had often told visitors to Savannah about O’Connor’s 19th-century Greek revival townhouse that was even now undergoing major renovations. The living room on the parlor-level floor was open to the public. The walled garden in the backyard, where the five-year-old O’Connor was said to have taught a chicken to walk backward, was added in 1993.

“Well, I guess you would know,” Julia said.

Meredith could tell Julia was digesting her brief historical sketch, eyebrows raised in her high forehead. Analyzing it, no

doubt, as someone with the legal mind and experience of a retired court judge would. Meredith waited, glad for the company of her friend and now business partner.

They'd roomed together their senior year in college and later kept in touch, over the miles, with Christmas cards and occasional notes. After University of Virginia Law School, Julia had practiced in Atlanta. However, when she returned to Savannah fifteen years ago to become a presiding judge in Chatham County's Juvenile Court, they had quickly renewed their close friendship. They had become a foursome—Julia and Beau, Meredith and her husband, Ron, sharing life and supporting each other. But four had become three when Ron died in September almost two years ago.

Meredith had been content with her work as head of Savannah's Historical Society. Well, content was a relative term. Some things weren't easy to dismiss. Maybe a complete change was in order—especially after her own scary heart attack on the first anniversary of Ron's death had made her reexamine her priorities. Reopening her husband's detective agency and serving the community certainly qualified as a complete change. And Julia's critical thinking and experience made her the perfect choice for a partner.

"Still wearing your historian's hat," Julia said warmly, giving Meredith's arm an affectionate nudge. "Fits you well, but so does your new one. And I love being back in the day-to-day grind with you." She leaned forward again and said, "Let's take the long way. It's a drop-dead gorgeous day." She sighed. "No time to sit back and let life happen around us. Beau is happy as a clam with a nine-iron or a fishing pole in his hand. Goodness knows he's earned a rest after those years championing the new children's wing at the hospital. But retirement's not for me."

Beau, better known as Beauregard Eugene Foley, expressed no qualms about his wife joining Meredith to reopen the detective agency. But was her old college friend being set up to fail? Meredith felt a twinge of the old fear nudging at the back of her mind. She'd always been interested in what Ron was doing—she'd even gotten her PI license so she could assist him by gathering historical background for his cases, but what did she really know

about the day-to-day ins and outs of the detective business?

“You sure about this, Mom?” her oldest son, Carter, had asked when she told him her plans. He’d run a hand through thick chestnut hair that was so like his father’s and jingled the keys in the pocket of his pleated Chinos. He was skeptical about her decision, though he tried not to show it. But Meredith recognized the gesture—the jingling keys that always signaled some inner conflict. Ron had done the same.

Wise, compassionate Ron with his hardheaded determination and acute sense of justice. He’d joined the police force right out of college, but he hadn’t been satisfied with his vocation. He’d wanted something more, some way to bring hope to those lost in the struggle of living with no one to fight for them.

A wave of sadness washed over her with such force that for a moment she thought she might drown. The surprise of it left her winded. She had worked through all that—moved ahead with her life—hadn’t she?

“You all right?” Julia asked softly.

Meredith drew in a breath, embarrassed by her own reflections. And chastened too. She’d gotten through those difficult first days, her faith holding her up like virtual wings. And she had been sure—well, most of the time—that she was attuned to God’s leading in reopening the agency. Still, she couldn’t tamp the doubts all the way down, even with the help of Julia who was clearly a stabilizing force.

Meredith glanced at her watch. “Maybe we should head to the office instead of meandering through country roads smelling the oleander. Suppose there are clients waiting?” She grinned wryly. *Sure. Like they’re beating down our doors clamoring for us to solve their dilemmas!*

Julia snatched her new iPhone from her lap, put it on SPEAKER mode, and pressed the number that would undoubtedly summon Carmen Lopez.

They really couldn’t afford a receptionist, but they had to at least look like they were successful. Meredith hadn’t been left without means, but they’d sunk a lot of money into the agency. Julia was happily contributing to the renovation too. She had

worked hard cleaning up the back garden where charred items had been thrown after a fire in Ron's office shortly after his death.

The fire had been attributed to faulty wiring and was quickly extinguished, but a credenza, a reading lamp, and several cardboard file boxes had been lost. Before it was all hauled away, they had picked painstakingly through everything.

While clearing away leaves and grass in the back garden, Julia had found a key—a small, outdated, unimpressive bit of metal, which despite numerous tries had fit nothing in the agency. Nor did it match the lock in the burned credenza. They had put the key away safely but not before making up mysterious stories, each one more outlandish than the last, over a pot of Earl Grey tea.

Inside, renovations were still in progress. They had decided to update the reception area and two of the offices, leaving Ron's old office, which required extensive drywall work, and the kitchen, for later.

"It's long past time that the place had a face-lift," Julia had said. "This floral wallpaper went out of style years ago."

Julia had also recommended the hiring of Carmen Lopez, citing her remarkable intuitive sense where people were concerned. Now Julia's voice rose over the phone she had placed on **SPEAKER**. "That you, Carmen?"

"Uh, just a minute. I'll check," came the mellow voice, tinged with her usual good-natured irony. Who else would be answering the phone?

"Cute," Julia said dryly into her phone. She rolled her gray eyes at Meredith as she continued her conversation with Carmen. "We'll be along pretty soon. Anything going on?"

"No, just the demolition derby giving me the *dolor de cabeza*."

Carmen was bilingual, and she liked throwing in the occasional Spanish phrase. Meredith couldn't restrain a laugh picturing the wily receptionist with hand to brow feigning a headache.

Julia clicked off and dropped the phone in her lap. "She's a trip, but ya gotta love her, right? Actually, she's come a long way since showing up in my court a few years ago." Julia pursed her lips in thought. "Petty thefts, disorderly conduct—that sort of thing. It's a wonder she turned out so well considering the start

she had in life.”

That was vintage Julia. A heart attuned to others.

Julia’s voice broke into Meredith’s reverie. “Let’s go by the old Besset plantation. Since the news about Geoffrey Besset, I haven’t been able to get that place off my mind.”

The wealthy plantation owner turned lawyer had practiced in Charleston, South Carolina, but the *Savannah Tribune* had carried the obituary three days ago. At the age of eighty-two, Geoffrey Philpott Besset was dead.

Under his great-grandfather’s control, the plantation had been one of the richest in Savannah. The property was nothing now but overgrown trees, a crumbling antebellum mansion, and a terrible secret. Geoffrey’s twelve-year-old sister, Harriet, had disappeared almost sixty-five years ago. She was presumed to have been killed, but her body was never found.

They parked on the street in front of the mansion, and Julia climbed out of the car, that can’t-wait look turning her cheeks pink. Meredith knew something about the place through her work with the historical society. She had learned that Geoffrey Besset left the plantation shortly after his father’s death, posting a prominent notice of non-admittance on the door of the mansion.

“Now that we’re in the business of solving crimes, maybe we’ll crack that old case,” Julia said, grinning as they approached the pitted driveway.

Meredith sighed, wondering what cracking the six-and-a-half-decades-old case might mean. “Once we have some time on our hands, of course,” she responded wryly, because they had nothing but time on their hands. They walked among arching cypress and live oak trees dripping with Spanish moss. The dangling moss was considered picturesque and charming in most settings. But here Meredith felt a chill, like being transported to an ancient cemetery with names no one knew anymore or wanted to know. She shivered.

In the distance loomed the remains of the mansion, forlorn in the May sunshine. It had once been magnificent with its huge pillars, a handsome balcony running along the outside edge of the house, large windows, and big center entrances at the front and

rear. Meredith paused, surveying the overgrown grounds. "Let's just walk a little and enjoy the beauty of this splendid day." She stepped into a narrow path, where a yellow pine warbler twittered on a tangle of low pine scrub.

Julia followed, pushing branches and weeds aside. "Good thing I wore my flats today," she said, laughing. She seldom wore anything else. She was tall, slender, straight, and even more imposing in her judge's robe.

Meredith glanced at her friend and offered, "Just a bit farther, and then let's take our weary selves back to civilization."

"I'm with you, girlfriend. Guess we're not going to learn anything about that old mystery this way." Julia tucked her arm through Meredith's, and the twinkle was back in her eye. "So, what do you suppose it was like for folks who worked here back in the 1950s?"

"I was just a child then," Meredith said. "Maybe you can tell me."

Julia laughed. "Yes, you're a whole eight-and-a-half months younger than me." She sobered. "We know that things were far from restful. People fought against racial discrimination for centuries, but during the '50s, the struggle entered the mainstream of American life."

"Even for a child of privilege like Harriet Besset those years could have been tumultuous," Meredith added. "When I was a girl—"

"Ouch!" Julia, who had dropped Meredith's arm when the path grew narrower and was now in the rear, tripped, knocking Meredith to her knees into a bed of pine needles along the path.

There in front of her, just beyond a cluster of loblolly pines, Meredith saw the broken-down remains of a gate, some of its iron bars still welded into the stone gateposts. Most of the overhead arch had fallen in, but the posts rose in a tangled mass of woody vines and black gum branches. Just beyond the crumbling gate was a partial stone structure with a low wall.

"It looks like it could be what's left of an old summerhouse." She stood unsteadily, feeling her heart pound triple time. With a little gasp, she bent to creep under a rusted bar.

"I wonder why this wasn't demolished with the rest of the

old shacks and outbuildings,” Julia said in a whisper. “I can just imagine young Harriet stealing away from the heat and bustle of the house and coming here. Maybe meeting someone.”

“Or maybe she just wanted the solitude of a place like this.” Meredith sat down on the low wall, feeling a strange hush. “I remember a place like this at my grandmother’s house. She had a gazebo painted white with wild roses twining through the slats. I’d take my Diet-Rite cola and curl up on the seat to read. I can still feel the prickles from the rosebushes that kept poking in. But *Heidi*, *Winnie the Pooh*, and *Anne of Green Gables* took me away.”

“I used to love *Little Women*,” Julia breathed.

Meredith tented her fingers at her lips. Why were they whispering? The silence was deep, yet it seemed to echo so loudly around them. Was it just the crackling of small creatures stirring in the brush or the warble of a bird launching itself into the brittle air? Or was someone there, peering through taut branches ready to snap? “It feels like someone is watching,” she whispered. “Watching or waiting for something—or someone.”

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