

*Who Murdered
Mr. Malone?*

Garden Girls Series Book 1

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FIRST EDITION

<http://hopecallaghan.com>

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Chapter 1

Gloria Rutherford eased Annabelle, her 1989 Mercury Grand Marquis, into the post office parking lot. After a couple slick maneuvers, she squeezed into an empty spot. She shut off the car, grabbed her purse and pushed the door open. *Thump!* An angry scowl crossed her face. She'd done it again! These stupid parking spots were getting smaller by the day.

She wiggled her thin frame through the barely-wide-enough crack of the driver side door. After a furtive glance around the bustling parking lot, she leaned over and inspected the teeny, tiny mark Annabelle left on the car beside her. She squinted her eyes as she studied the offensive spot. With a lick of her fingertip and a quick rub, the spot vanished.

Certain that her small mishap had gone unnoticed, Gloria straightened her shoulders before heading for the front door, the scowl still firmly fixed on her face.

Gloria was in a slump. Not the I-don't-know-how-I'll-ever-get-out-of-this kind of slump. It was more of an I-have-no-purpose-in-life-anymore

slump. And if she was honest with herself, what it really boiled down to was she was just plain bored.

“Well, well, well, who do we have here?”

Ruth, Gloria’s friend and the head postmaster of Belhaven, studied Gloria over the rim of her reading glasses.

Gloria shuffled over to the counter and dropped her purse on top as she reached inside to pull out a stack of stamped envelopes.

She slid them across the counter towards Ruth. “Been pretty busy these days. Haven’t had much of a chance to get out and about lately.”

Ruth studied her skeptically. “Margaret was in here not more than an hour ago. Said she stopped by your place yesterday and that you were in some kind of funk.”

Gloria’s head snapped up. “Now why on earth would she say something crazy like that?” she huffed.

Ruth wasn’t about to go there. Instead she changed the subject. “Tomorrow’s Saturday. You want to get together with the girls for coffee in the morning?”

Gloria perked up, just a little. “Where? Over at Dot’s place?” Dot was one of their closest friends. One of the “girls.” She also happened to own Dot’s Kitchen, the only eating establishment in their tiny town.

“Yeah. I haven’t had a chance to talk to Lucy yet. Haven’t seen her in a couple days, either.”

Gloria sniffed. “She’s probably too busy with that new beau of hers. What was his name...”

“Bill. His name is Bill.”

Gloria waved her hand in the air dismissively. “Whatever. Well, I’ll stop by her place on my way home. Maybe she can squeeze us into her busy schedule,” she added, just a hint of sarcasm edging her voice.

Gloria finished her business inside and headed back to her car. Ruth had pretty much hit the nail on the head. The truth was a bitter pill to swallow.

So preoccupied with her current state-of-mind and more than a little irritated at Ruth’s words, Gloria was nearly oblivious to the police car and crime scene van parked out in front of the old elementary school.

The flashing lights finally grabbed her attention as she slowed the car to a crawl. Someone was way out back, wandering around in the woods at the far corner of the school.

She pulled into the small parking lot and sat for a moment as she watched two uniformed police officers stretch a long roll of yellow crime scene tape around some towering pine trees near the edge of the woods.

What were the police doing back in the woods? She hesitated for a fraction of a second before hopping out of the car. She walked down to the end of the sidewalk and stopped. From her vantage point, she could see a white cloth draped over a large lump on the ground. She took another step closer. *What if there was a body under the white sheet?*

One of the two people at the bottom noticed Gloria hovering at the top of the hill. He swung around. It was Officer Joe. He gave a small wave and turned back to the job at hand. She was dying to head down there – find out what was going on but didn't have the guts.

She turned on her heel as she headed back in the direction she'd just come from. With one last curious glance, she slid into her car and backed out of the lot. News spread like wildfire in their little town. It would only be a matter of hours before she would inevitably find out what was going on.

Minutes later, Gloria pulled in next to Lucy's cozy ranch-style home. She was relieved to see the familiar bright red Mustang convertible was the only vehicle parked in the garage. *Good, Bob's not here,* she thought.

By the time she was out of her car and headed down the sidewalk, Lucy was already on the porch, meeting her halfway. "Hey Gloria. Nice to see that you're out and about. I was talking to Dot earlier and she said you seemed depressed."

Gloria stopped in her tracks. *Did everyone in the whole stinkin' town think she was depressed?*

"I'm NOT depressed," Gloria snapped.

Lucy ignored the comment. "Dot said we're all meeting in the morning for coffee at her place?"

“That’s what Ruth told me,” Gloria grumbled. “I thought you hadn’t heard so I wanted to stop by and tell you myself.”

Lucy tugged on her wild red hair and laughed. “There’s nothing in this town that everyone doesn’t know.”

And that was the honest truth. Nothing was a secret in the small community of Belhaven, Michigan. With a grand total of maybe 990 residents on a good day, the town was so small, everyone knew everyone else’s business. And not in a necessarily good way.

That’s where Gloria’s recent slump came in. There was no action. No excitement. No adventure. No oomph!!

She turned to go. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning then.” She glanced around before sliding back into the driver’s seat. “Where’s Bob?”

Lucy stuck her hand on her hip. “It’s Bill. His name is Bill.” She gazed out towards the road. “He’s on his way over. It’s so nice out, we thought we’d take a spin on his motorcycle.”

Gloria shook her head. “Aren’t you afraid of getting on that contraption?”

Lucy shrugged. “You only live once.”

Lucy was absolutely right. You only live once.

On the drive back to her house, Gloria pondered the purpose of her life. She’d been doing that a lot lately. Although she was deeply involved in her church, she still had a lot of free time on her hands. Too much, in fact. With the kids grown and gone, she felt like a floundering fish. Her beloved James had passed away over a year ago. Money wasn’t a concern. James made sure of that. She just needed something worthwhile to do!

Hours later, Gloria was swaying back and forth on the old porch rocker, a cold glass of iced tea in her hand. She gazed thoughtfully at the fiery-red ball of fire as it started to set beside the faded gray barn across the street. The blues, pinks and purples painted across the sky were extra-vivid tonight.

She stared down at her wrinkled, worn hands. Her eyes closed as she whispered a little prayer. *God, please help me find purpose in my life again. Show me your will. Thank you, God. Amen.*

She lifted her head and stared out at the last little sliver of sun as it disappeared below the open

corn field. It was so peaceful out here. So calm and quiet. It was home. Even if she was all alone.

Minutes later, she rose from the porch chair and made her way back inside.

Chapter 2

The restaurant was busy. Gloria counted her blessings when she found an ample sized parking spot right out front. A quick glance around and she realized she was the last to arrive, even though she was at least ten minutes early.

As she made her way into the restaurant, she spied Ruth's hand waving from back in the corner.

Margaret scooted over to make room at the table as Gloria slid her chair in. "I heard you were down in the dumps," she said.

Gloria's face reddened. "I'm not down in the dumps or depressed or anything else!" she insisted.

The girls at the table were silent. The five of them had been friends for more years than they cared to count. And they knew Gloria well enough to know their friend was most certainly troubled by something.

Dot grabbed a fresh pot of coffee from one of the burners and poured a cup for Gloria. She dropped a fresh plate of sugary treats on the table before sitting back down.

Something about Dot dropping the plate of goodies on the table reminded Gloria of the incident at the school the day before. She swung around to face her friend, Ruth. “Did you hear anything about some kind of crime over at the old elementary school?”

Ruth’s mouth dropped open. She carefully set the sticky apple strudel on her plate. “What crime at the school?”

Apparently not. “I drove by the school on my way to Lucy’s yesterday. There was a police car and crime scene van out front,” Gloria explained.

Lucy’s hand flew to her lips. “You never mentioned it to me...”

Gloria shook her head. “For some reason, it slipped my mind until just now.” She went on. “I saw a large white sheet on the ground and it was covering something up. I made it as far as the end of the sidewalk before chickening out and heading back to the car.”

“You couldn’t tell what it was?” Ruth demanded.

Gloria shook her head. “No. But if I had to guess, I’d say it was probably a body.”

Margaret clutched at her stomach and pushed the half eaten Raspberry twist across the table. “I just lost my appetite.”

“Did you recognize the cops?” Dot wondered.

Gloria nodded. “One of them was Officer Joe. I’m not sure how many more there were but I’m certain there were at least two people.”

“Well, that adds a little drama to our peaceful little town.” Dot looked thoughtfully around the table at her dear friends. “You know, I’ve been thinking. Sometimes this place can be so boring...”

Gloria couldn’t agree more. “Ain’t that the truth!” she muttered.

Lucy took a huge bite of Cheese Danish. “I’m not bored,” she murmured between chews, a thick chunk of cream cheese smeared across her upper lip.

Ruth rolled her eyes. “We know *you’re* not bored. At least not now that you have what’s-his-name to keep you busy.”

Lucy began licking the sticky frosting from her fingers. “Bill. His name is Bill!”

Dot interrupted. “I’ve been tossing around an idea - what do you girls think about forming a club? You know – kind of like the Red Hat Society but with our own twist.”

Dot had piqued their interest. She quickly went on. “We could call it the Garden Girls Club or Garden Club Society...”

Gloria liked it. She liked it a lot! “Yeah! Seeing how we all have green thumbs and gardens. I think it’s the perfect name.”

The more she thought about it, the more excited she got. “We could visit people around town who can’t get out. You know, bring them fresh fruits and vegetables from our own gardens!”

Lucy grabbed a second treat. The chocolate covered donut was halfway to her mouth when she paused. “We could meet as an official group once a month and plan some cool activities during our meeting. You know, like afternoon movie matinees, luncheons, shopping...”

Margaret sniffed. “Well, we need to keep it exclusive. Just the five of us, right?”

Gloria shook her head. Margaret could be such a snob! Her husband recently retired as vice president of the local bank. They weren’t rich – more like very comfortable going into retirement. They owned a lovely home overlooking Lake Terrace and Margaret had it crammed full of priceless antiques from all over the world. Stuff she’d picked up on their travels to some very exotic locales.

“Let’s not even worry about that right now, Margaret. First we need to get the club formed.” Dot glanced around the table. “All in favor of starting The Garden Girls Club – raise your hand.”

All five hands shot up in the air at once. It was unanimous.

And that’s how the Garden Girls Club was formed. Right then and there, they decided to log onto the restaurant’s computer and research some on-line stores where they could order their one-of-a-kind hats. The group had a lot of fun picking out some crazy designs. The first official meeting would

be held a week later, after all the girls had their hats in hand – or in this case – on their heads.

As Gloria slowly drove back to the farm, she was happier than she'd been in a long time. Maybe this was the answer. Helping others and having purpose again.



Gloria was up bright and early the next morning as she set a fresh cup of coffee on the table and stepped outside to grab the morning paper off the porch. She glanced down at the front page as she made her way back into the kitchen.

She reached over to pick up her coffee when the morning's headline caught her attention:

***Unidentified Man's Body Found in
Nearby Belhaven***

Gloria snatched her reading glasses off the table and quickly slipped them on. She sipped her coffee, completely mesmerized by the horrifying story.

Thursday afternoon, an area resident was on a morning stroll when he stumbled on the decomposing body of an unidentified man in a wooded area behind Belhaven Elementary School. Details are slowly being released but it appears the unfortunate victim was stabbed multiple times.

Police are not releasing any further information pending investigation and positive identification.

Gloria dropped down in the kitchen chair with a heavy thud. So it *was* a body underneath the sheet the other day.

This ought to get the whole town buzzing. No one ever died in Belhaven. Well, that wasn't necessarily true. Lots of people from Belhaven died. After all, more than half the population was past retirement age. But murdered? Gloria couldn't recall a murder ever taking place in their sleepy little village.

Her chair scraped against the hard linoleum floor as she got up and made her way over to the coffee pot for another shot of caffeine. Not surprisingly, her house phone began to ring. News

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