

EXCERPT FROM

A Slaying in Savannah

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY, COMING IN OCTOBER 2008

Jessica Fletcher is in Savannah, Georgia, at the home of the late Tillie Mortelaine, and site of the murder 40 years earlier of Tillie's fiancé Wanamaker Jones. Jessica is talking with Tillie's longtime housekeeper Emanuela Goodall.

"I guess I can set a spell," Mrs. Goodall said, lowering herself into a side chair. She picked up a silver bowl, pulled a cloth from the pocket of her apron and began wiping the bowl's side. "Supper's already made. Just needs heating."

"I understand Tillie was ninety-one," I asked. "Was she in failing health?"

"Never say so. She was strong as an ox, that one." Mrs. Goodall smiled at the memory. "Never sick a day. And her brain was sharp as a knife, too. No one could put anything by her. She rush around from here to there. She get swimmy-headed from time to time. The doc said it's not unusual at her age. But Miss Tillie, she didn't want to act her age. Maybe that's the problem. I come in one morning and find her at the bottom of the stairs, all curled up."

"That must have been awful for you."

"I left at seven-thirty the night before. Them people in the guest house told the police that they went back to their rooms right after supper. Miss Tillie shooed them outta the house. Said she had a headache and was goin' right upstairs. She should've stayed up there. She tripped on the rug at the top."

"Oh, my."

She nodded. "Found her slipper up there. Blue with gold embroidery. Brand new, too. A gift from Miss O'Neill. When the box come, Miss Tillie run upstairs to open it. First time she ever wore them, and look what happens. I kept warning her that rug was

dangerous. Too worn, it was, with the threads showing and all. It needed to be replaced, but she wouldn't let me."

"If it was dangerous, why wouldn't she let you have the rug fixed?"

"Oh, it was passed down from her great grandfather, who brought it back from some country he visited on his honeymoon. She'd say, 'You mind that rug with the vacuum, Emanuela. We don't want to tear a piece of history.' And I clean it by hand. Don't let no machine pass over it." She shook her head. "I hate to think what she was feelin', falling down all them stairs. But there was no breath in her when I find her. And she was cold. I feel so bad. Maybe if I didn't go to church that night, she'd still be here."

"You must not blame yourself," I said. "The rug was worn. She was wearing new slippers. You know how the soles of new shoes can be slippery. It was probably dark and she didn't see clearly. These kinds of accidents can happen, especially with elderly people who might be unsteady on their feet."

"She was careful though. Kept a light on at the top all night long. 'Wasting power,' I said, but she insisted. Now I'm glad she did. She probably would have fallen sooner."

"Why do you suppose she wanted to come back downstairs that night?" I asked.

Mrs. Goodall sighed. "Sometimes, she have trouble sleeping. When I'm here, I bring her up a glass of warm milk."

"So you think perhaps she wanted to heat some milk for herself? Would she do that?"

"Couldn't say." She replaced the silver bowl on the table and took a long time to fold her polishing cloth into a tiny square, her brow similarly creased.

“Have I made you uncomfortable, Mrs. Goodall? If so, I apologize. I only meant to ask if there was there something else that might have prompted Tillie to come downstairs.”

“This is an old house, Mrs. Fletcher,” she said, her eyes still on the polishing cloth, “with a lot of memories and a lot of noises. Creaking boards and such. Miss Tillie, she was convinced we have ghosts, said she saw them, heard them wandering in the night. They always bothered her. I used to see her all the time talking to herself. Come to find out she was talking to them.”

“So she may have heard a noise and gone to investigate?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time. That pair in the guest house churn her up. They been testing the air, bringing in Geiger counters or some such. Tell her when the needle moves, that means a spirit is here. Had her believin’ Mr. Jones is haunting the house. Could be others, too, they say.”

“That would be Wanamaker Jones, the man who was killed here?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I take it you don’t believe in ghosts, Mrs. Goodall.”

“I’m not saying yes and I’m not saying no,” she replied. “I seen some strangeness from time to time. I don’t pay it no mind.”

Mrs. Goodall’s daughter Melanie poked her head in the door. “I have to leave for school, Mama,” she said.

Mrs. Goodall’s frown eased into a smile. She pressed her palms on her knees, rocked forward and rose from the chair. “I put some cookies in a sack for you.”

“Don’t get up. I got ’em,” Melanie said, waving the paper bag. “Bye, Mrs. Fletcher. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” I called after her.

“I got work to do anyway,” Mrs. Goodall said, brushing off the chair in which she’d been sitting.

Melanie’s interruption clearly had been a relief for her mother. The topic of ghosts and haunting didn’t seem to be one she was happy to discuss and I didn’t want to press her. She’d already been generous with her time.

“Thank you so much for your company, Mrs. Goodall, and for this wonderful snack. It was delicious.”

“No bother at all, Mrs. Fletcher. You just leave the tray when you’re finished. I’ll come collect it. Your room is the first door on the right, top of the stairs, across from Miss Tillie’s room. I made it up fresh this morning.”

“I think I’ll go up now and unpack.”

“Supper’s at six.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“And, Mrs. Fletcher?”

“Yes, Mrs. Goodall.”

“Please mind the rug.”