

## **Among Her Late Husband's Things**

Jacqui Garcia

“Devoted husband and dedicated father” is how the inscription read. Below it, “James P. Marshall, 1923-1987.”

Annie looked at the simple, common words—exactly like the man they described—and sighed. It had been only a week since the granite tombstone had been placed into the damp earth above her husband of thirty-nine years. His death had been sudden. Her anguish, like water set to boil, her anguish had been tepid and was only now at a feverish churn.

She placed the bundled flowers on his grave, noting that the daffodils, his favorites, would never last till the following Sunday. She sighed a second time, deeper than the one before, then took the first of the nine hundred and eighty-six steps that would lead her back to their blue Victorian with the broken porch swing.

James, a fine God-fearing Christian, left Annie nearly nothing upon his death. Having been a traveling salesman, he had earned enough to provide for his family while alive, but not enough to provide for a wife turned widow. Of course, the idea of moving in with either of their two children had entered Annie's mind, but, like a wet dog that had snuck in out of the rain, it had been quickly and efficiently scooted out—an unwelcomed interloper in a mind already bursting with equally unwelcomed thoughts. As she

walked, Annie recalled the brief conversation she'd had with their lawyer about a "supposed" life insurance policy.

"He does so have one, Annie," John had said to her after the funeral, a finger sandwich mere centimeters from his mouth. "He told me."

And so, though Annie had not once in forty-nine years gone through the papers in her husband's den, the fear of losing their home gave her the boldness to do so. Her only concern was whether James would've minded.

Once back in the unsmiling warmth of her house, Annie pinned her silver hair back, as she always did when at home, and went straight to her husband's den. It was the one room she could not bring herself to enter since his death. Before that, however, she had gone in every evening, either to bring her husband a cup of coffee or, those nights he was away, to pretend to.

As she began to search through his desk, Annie started to uncover bits and pieces of his life as a salesman. She found receipts of where he had stayed and what he had eaten, shaking her head sadly at the steak and egg breakfasts that were no doubt accomplices in his premature death. Despite her search, however, nothing she found even remotely resembled a life insurance policy. It was at that point that Annie remembered the file cabinet deep in the den's closet. A file cabinet she should not have known was even there.

Incredibly enough, for the whole of their marriage, James had succeeded at keeping the file cabinet's existence a secret. In fact, had Annie not been looking to see if any of his hunting clothes needed mending one day, her husband would have been completely successful in keeping his wife in the dark, much like the cabinet itself. And while any other wife would have questioned her husband about such a curious thing, Annie did not. The reason being, quite simply, that Annie was entirely unlike any other wife.

She walked to the closet, opened the door, and pushed the hunting coats aside to reveal the file cabinet. The sudden smell of cologne in the enclosed space briefly made her wonder if Michael, a hunter like his father, would want them. She set aside the idea, filing it away in her own mental file cabinet of sorts under “to do” and resumed her search.

Annie reached for the handle of the top drawer with nervous hesitation, as if she were a child and it the forbidden cookie jar. One tug and Annie discovered that it was, not surprisingly, locked. Had she seen a key in the desk? No.

She stepped back into the cool of the den. *Where could it be*, she thought to herself as she scanned the room slowly. After a moment, her gaze settled on an old rusty chewing tobacco tin, a habit James quit the day Michael, at age six, was found gagging on a mouthful of chew.

Annie walked over, picked it up, and removed the lid. There, among paper clips and pennies, was the key. As she grabbed it between her fingers, she smiled triumphantly. Not because she had found it, but because she knew—had known—her husband so very, very well.

She walked back to the cabinet, inserted the key, and opened the top drawer. The heat inside the closet, no doubt made worse by the stifling mass of wool coats, made Annie feel faint. The fact that she was also staring at a drawer full of guns probably didn’t help. Six, she counted. Six handguns that she had never heard her husband speak of, let alone handle. Rifles, yes—guns intended for taking down a buck. These, however, were not. Her throat dry and her head spinning, she decided she needed a glass of cold water.

Annie went to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator door, and stared at the eggs for several minutes.

“Why would James have six handguns?” she finally asked herself, the eggs, and an untouched tuna casserole.

Finding no answer in the cold, cavernous space, she closed the door and returned to the den, completely forgetting about the water and all things quenching.

Once back in front of the file cabinet, Annie closed the top drawer and opened the one below it, this time much more cautiously. To her relief, it contained only files.

Annie did then what she was so good at doing: she made herself forget that she had ever seen a thing. Why make a stink over something that was probably nothing at all? James was on the road a lot, she rationalized. He probably carried one or two for protection. He didn't tell me because he didn't want me to worry. And that was all Annie B. Marshall, devoted wife and dedicated mother, needed to believe.

She took several files from the drawer and carried them to the desk. But soon after she started looking through them, Annie stopped caring about the life insurance policy altogether and began wondering why there were so many bank receipts from so many different banks, some showing transactions of thousands of dollars. After a brief moment of bewilderment, Annie quickly gathered up the receipts and put them back in the file marked "miscellaneous."

"It's nothing," she said to herself, although she felt in her heart it was very much something.

Again, a thirst gripped her throat, this time much tighter than the one before. Instinctively, her hand reached up to massage her neck, as if the gesture alone could take the place of a cold drink.

It did not.

Annie rose from her husband's desk and returned to the kitchen. And although she walked back to the refrigerator, her hand did not reach out for the handle. Instead, it rose above her head and carefully took hold of a bottle she had held many times before, if only to dust.

Annie lifted a clean glass from the dish rack and poured herself a drink that she had never before tasted nor wanted. She then sat down at the table and took her first sip, allowing the liquid to linger on her lips, a reminder of her husband and the New Year's kisses that were always bathed in that whiskey. Then she took a full drink. Her eyes teared as her throat convulsed from the whiskey's sting, and yet, for some reason, Annie took another drink. Then another. And another. Until what remained of the night was nothing more than a foggy memory to sift through, like baking flour, the next day.

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To her horror and profound embarrassment, Annie awoke. It should be noted that it wasn't how she awoke that distressed her, but that she had awoken at all. The pain in her head was quite unlike anything she had ever experienced before. The only good thing about her current circumstance was the fact that she was, at least, already lying down. It didn't matter that it happened to be on the kitchen floor.

As she lay there, Annie slowly began to process the events of the evening before. At first she forgot what it was that had made her take a drink when so many other events in her life had not. Then, with a piercing pain to both her head and heart, she remembered her dead husband and the puzzling bank receipts.

Annie could try to ignore the whole thing, but she knew it would be a futile task, as useless as trying to forget the filth she could clearly see beneath the refrigerator—it too would have to be dealt with. She thought about the guns that should not have been there and the bank receipts that should not have existed at all. The whole situation made her feel profoundly nauseous.

“I’ll just stay here a little longer,” she murmured to herself as she closed her eyes, her cheek pressed against the coolness of the linoleum. “A little more rest and I’ll be fine.”

Were it not for the knocking on the front door, Annie probably would have stayed where she was for hours. Since shouting to whoever was there to go away was out of the question, she would have to move.

Using a chair for support, Annie slowly lifted herself up. It wasn’t until she was standing perfectly straight that she could see who was at the door. As she walked, she tried to tidy herself up as best she could. If she looked as hideous as she felt, the poor delivery boy would drop the huge vase of flowers he was holding and run, screaming, into the streets.

Annie fixed her hair, adjusted her dress, and with what fleeting energy she had, opened the door.

“Hello, Mrs. Marshall. I have a delivery for you,” he said loudly.

“Thank you, Christopher,” she replied softly as she took the flowers.

“I’m sorry about Mr. Marshall. He was a nice man,” he said and bowed his head.

“Yes, he was. Thank you. And thank your mother for the wonderful tuna casserole. Let her know I’ll be getting the pan back to her this week.”

“I will, Mrs. Marshall. Good-bye.”

She walked the flowers into the parlor and set them on the coffee table. Although lovely, they were entirely unexpected. Anyone who would’ve sent flowers already had. As Annie sat down, she took the tiny card nestled amidst the delphinium.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” she read aloud, the words themselves written among hyacinths and buttercups. “He was a great guy.”

It was signed “Henry.”

Two things confused Annie. First, she didn’t know anyone named Henry. Second, she knew of no one who would refer to her husband as a “great guy.” A good man, yes, but not a “great guy.” Not to say that such a statement was untrue, only that it didn’t fit. James had never been a “great guy” type of person. He simply didn’t have the personality or clothes for it.

As she looked at the card, Annie noticed something only a former English teacher would have. Though kind and undoubtedly sincere, the sentiment was written in the sloppiest handwriting she had ever seen.

“Well, they’re still lovely,” she said as she pinched off a bruised blossom.

Whatever thinking she’d do about who Henry was would have to wait until after she took several aspirin and drank lots of coffee, both of which she proceeded to go do.

As she walked in the kitchen, Annie said something that she had felt many times before, but only now found the voice with which to say it, “I have spent too much time in this room.”

No doubt what she said was not only true of the last day, but most of her life, too much of it spent with apron strings tied tightly around her waist.

Of course, it was no fault of the kitchen’s, or Annie’s, that she had passed out. That credit belonged to a very empty bottle of whiskey that lay on its side, as if in a posture of repose. Annie grabbed a dishtowel and threw it over the thing, unable to bear the sight of it. She then began making a very, very strong pot of coffee. The aspirin she found in the drawer left of the sink. As she reached for the small bottle, she noticed one of James’s fishing lures, or fish-a-ma-jigs, as she called them.

My dear Mr. Marshall, she thought as she popped three aspirin into her mouth, then fumbled for the glass of water she didn't have waiting.

As the coffee brewed, Annie began to think about the very thing she didn't want to think about: her life. More specifically, the life she had packed carefully away along with her late husband's well-worn suits. What would she do now with her days? Who would she be if not a wife?

The instant the coffeemaker began to sputter, Annie rose from the chair she had been sitting uncomfortably in. She grabbed her coffee mug from its hook and poured herself a threateningly full cup, thinking of James as she did.

The first time she had made her husband coffee, he insisted that she brew a full pot, certain that anything less would not taste nearly as good. Unfortunately, that led to a considerable amount of waste. So Annie, an avid tea drinker, decided that it would be a much less painful task to pour the remaining coffee into her cup than it would be to pour it down the sink. Thus begun her one and only vice.

As she sat at the table, Annie thought about the flowers in the parlor and the man who had sent them. She turned her head in the direction of where they were, even though from where she sat she could not see them. All she could guess was that Henry was someone James had worked with.

"I have to call John," she said to herself as she took a sobering sip. "I have to call him about James's pension."

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It took John the lawyer three whole days before he could get back to Annie. Apparently, finding any information about the

Binder Import Company was extremely difficult. Impossible, actually, for there was no longer a Binder Import Company.

“But I have papers, John. Recent letters with the name right on it,” she said as she stood in the den, twice dusted since she had spoken with him last.

“I know, Annie. I know. Gosh, Annie...”

“What is it, John?”

“I found something. Actually, a private investigator friend of mine found something,” he said, not wanting to say any more than he had to. “Look, Annie, we need to talk. How about if we come over this afternoon?”

“John, you’re making me nervous.”

“We’ll see you around three o’clock.”

At four minutes after three, two men were sitting in Annie B. Marshall’s parlor. One of the men, Mr. Philip Paul, she had only just met. The two men sat quietly while Annie prepared coffee for them. They hadn’t wanted any, but she had insisted. Not so much because she was a good hostess, though she was, but because she needed to put as much distance between her and John’s news as she could.

“May I get you gentlemen anything else?” she asked as she set down the tray loaded with cream and sugar, also things the men did not want. “Mr. Paul, may I pour you a cup?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Marshall. Not just yet,” he said politely.

Annie poured some for herself and sat down on the blue velvet chair her mother had willed to her.

“Annie,” John began, “this will be very difficult for you to hear.”

“Please, John. You can tell me anything. I’m not as brittle as you might think,” she said, though more for her own sake than theirs.

“Fine, then,” he said and took an unnaturally deep breath. “James did have a sales job at the Binder Import Company, but only until 1981. That’s when the company went bankrupt.”

“Bankrupt?” she said, the blood in her veins cooling like the coffee in her cup. “You mean it went out of business?”

“Yes, Annie.”

“But that’s impossible...”

“I know, but it’s true,” John said as Mr. Paul shook his head. “And Annie, as far as we can tell, that was his last job.”

“That makes no sense, John. If James wasn’t working, then what was he doing for the past six years?”

John shrugged at the question he had obviously asked himself, probably more than once.

“I have no idea, Annie. None. All we know is that the last paycheck James received from that company, or any other, was in April of 1981. A month later, the place was chained shut. And, Annie, there’s something else...”

“Mrs. Marshall,” Mr. Paul picked up reluctantly, “The reason the company went bankrupt is because someone had embezzled tens of thousands of dollars from the company.”

“Annie, we believe James may have had something to do with that,” John said softly.

Annie remained motionless. The only thing that indicated she was still alive was the slight rise and fall of her blue ruffled blouse. Neither man was truly prepared for what happened next. Both had seen women have nervous breakdowns, but not quite like this. Because while tears did flow from Annie’s eyes, they were also accompanied by guttural laughter.

“Oh, Mr. Paul! John!” she finally managed to say, “That’s insane! He was only a salesman!”

She continued to laugh, and the men continued to feel uneasy. Mostly because it was entirely possible, and they would have to work that much harder to convince her of it.

“I know this seems unbelievable, Annie, but it makes sense...,” John said. “Annie!”

Annie stopped and looked at them, the smile on her face slowly slipping away like a balloon in the hands of a child, soon gone, leaving in its place an expression of desperate loss.

“Annie, I know this is difficult, but you have to listen. It’s very possible, if not probable. I’ve found some evidence to confirm what Philip told me. Annie, how else could James have supported you all these years? He had no income.”

“How could he have done such a thing?” she asked, for the first time beginning to believe them.

“We’re not sure. James may have forged order forms. We don’t know yet,” he said, responding to the question differently than she had intended.

Annie didn’t want to know the logistics of it, of how James could’ve managed to do it, but how he could have found it in his person to do such a thing at all.

“Oh, my,” she said, quickly picturing the deposit slips in the file cabinet, feeling foolish for not having remembered them sooner.

She put her hand over her mouth and ran to the washroom next to the kitchen. The last time Annie had vomited, she had been pregnant with Sharon. Afterward, she patted some cool water on her face but avoided looking at her reflection in the mirror. She was too ashamed.

“Annie?” John said as he tapped lightly on the door. “Are you all right? Annie?”

She opened the door slowly, hoping the crimson color that had settled on her face would go unnoticed or, at the very least, without comment.

“I’m so embarrassed,” she said, her right hand skimming her gray hair, making sure the hairpins were still in place.

“Nonsense!” he said lightly. “You okay? Can I get you something?”

“No, I’m fine. I’d just like to know the truth. Whatever it is, I need to know.”

John led Annie back to the parlor where Mr. Paul would share with her all he had found out. It seems that, like all the employees in the company, James had been questioned about the stolen money, but he was never investigated. Everyone simply assumed the company’s president had done it, particularly since the man left the country soon after the missing money was detected, never to be seen or heard from again. That is, until Philip tracked him down in Jamaica, where he discovered that, for a supposedly wealthy criminal, Mr. Johnston was living a painfully modest life. He then put two and two together.

After hearing all they had to say, there was very little Annie could say herself.

“So that’s it, then,” she said as she looked down at her wedding band. “That’s what my husband did, who he was. My God!”

“Listen, Annie. No one knows what Philip and I know. At least we don’t think so. We’re still trying to figure quite a few things out, like where the money is.”

“He might’ve buried it, or hidden it somewhere in the house,” Mr. Paul said, visually inspecting the room for the first time.

“Regardless of where it is, James did a great job of never drawing attention to it,” John said, hoping the next few words would comfort her. “Of course, Annie, we’re just guessing at all this. We haven’t found any tangible proof to back any of this up. There is a possibility that we’re very wrong.”

But, they weren't wrong and Annie knew it.

"Mrs. Marshall, I'd like to look around your husband's office, try and find anything that could provide us with leads as to where the money is, or if it exists at all."

"Would that be all right with you, Annie? Can Philip go through James's papers?"

She nodded as best she could.

"Yes, but not today, please. Not today. I really need to rest now. Could you come back tomorrow afternoon, Mr. Paul?"

"That would be fine."

"Of course," John said as he stood up. "Are you certain you're going to be all right? I can stay..."

"Nonsense. You go. I have a million things to do around the house."

"I'll give you a call tomorrow, Mrs. Marshall."

"That would be fine, Mr. Paul. Thank you."

She escorted the two men out. As she opened the door, John said what she already knew, what Mr. Paul would've said himself had he not gone back into the parlor to retrieve his sunglasses.

"Listen, Annie, don't mention this to anyone. We still don't know what we're really dealing with here."

"I won't say a word. Besides, who could I possibly tell?" she said, just as Mr. Paul returned.

"Found them. They were under a pillow," he informed them needlessly.

"Thank you for all your hard work, Mr. Paul," Annie said as she held out her hand, "I may not like the results, but I do appreciate your efforts."

"My pleasure, Mrs. Marshall, and please call me Philip. I'll give you a call tomorrow, then. Good-bye."

As the men walked down the steps, Annie had an overwhelming urge to stop them. She wanted to shout at them,

“But what was he doing all those years? Why would he leave me if he didn’t need to?”

Instead, she closed the door. While she had been able to take in some of what had just happened, she was slowly beginning to realize the magnitude of what they had told her. Aside from confusion, all Annie could feel was the fear that she had not known her husband as well as she had thought.

“I have to rest,” she said to herself as she returned to the parlor.

She lay down on the sofa and closed her eyes. Yet, try as she might, Annie could not swat away the thought that was circling her mind like a vulture would a wounded animal—that perhaps she had not known her husband at all.

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The next day, Mr. Paul called to say he would be there at three, which was extremely good considering Annie had slept in most of the morning. The night before, unable to rest, Annie had gone into her husband’s den. At first, she didn’t know why, then she began poring over his papers, determined to piece together the past six years of her husband’s life. As she did, Annie began to see that despite having such supposed wealth at his disposal, James continued to stay at inexpensive hotels and eat inexpensive meals. The only example of extravagant living, she discovered, was a handful of receipts, each for a surf and turf dinner, nothing more. Her husband simply continued to live the life of a salesman for the Binder Import Company. The fact that he wasn’t was, apparently, a mere detail.

A little after one, the doorbell rang. Annie went to the door, assuming that Mr. Paul had arrived terribly early. He had not.

“May I help you?” Annie asked the man at the door.

“Hello, Mrs. Marshall. My name’s Jerry Moore. I was a friend of your husband’s.”

“Oh?” she responded cautiously. “I’m sorry, Mr. Moore. My husband never mentioned you. You say you were friends?”

The man grinned at the welcome mat that so far had proven itself a liar.

“Well, I’d like to think we were,” he said thoughtfully.

Annie remained unsure. Still, the man looked nice enough. In fact, had she seen him walking down the street, she would have taken notice of his handsome suit and nicely polished shoes.

“Mrs. Marshall,” he said, deciding to be more direct, “I met your husband during an investigation in 1981 regarding the Binder Import Company.”

Annie’s heart, however strong her doctor had told her it was, proved itself then and there.

“May I come in, please? I promise I won’t be long.”

“Yes, certainly,” she said, forcing a smile to her face. “Come in.”

The man wiped his feet on the doormat, a gesture that made Annie feel surprisingly at ease. After all, if his intentions were to do her harm he wouldn’t have cared much about soiling the carpets.

“Would you like something to drink, Mr. Moore? Coffee, perhaps?” she asked, thinking of the pot she’d just made.

“No, thank you. I don’t touch the stuff anymore,” he said with a smile as he sat down. “Drank too much of it while I was on the force.”

“You’ll excuse me, then, if I get a cup for myself? I didn’t sleep well last night and I’m in terrible need.”

“Oh, no. Please, go right ahead. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll only be a moment,” she said and left.

Now, any other widow in her position would’ve called her lawyer. Annie did not. Instead, she did exactly what she told Mr.

Moore she would do and returned in less than a minute with a full cup of coffee. Mr. Moore had barely enough time to remove his coat.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t offer to take your coat...”

“That’s all right,” he said as he threw it over the sofa’s armrest. “It’s not that kind of coat.”

His comment made her smile.

“So, Mr. Moore, you were a police officer?” Annie asked calmly.

“Yep. I was a detective when I met Jimmy. Liked him right off the bat. I’m not surprised he never mentioned me, what with how we met and all.”

The man paused, not knowing how he was going to tell Annie what he wanted to tell her. Still, the truth was better than having the woman live like a pauper. All Annie could think of was that he had called her husband “Jimmy.”

“Mrs. Marshall, it’s no coincidence I’m here. A few days ago, a buddy of mine who’s still on the force told me that a private investigator had been asking about the Binder case. I gotta say, it surprised the heck out of me. Don’t know who he’s working for, but I guessed you had hired him.”

Annie pondered what she should do. Obviously, the former detective had a specific reason for being there. She decided to be honest.

“Mr. Moore, the private investigator was hired by my lawyer. I didn’t have anything to do with it. He’s actually due here at three o’clock to look through my husband’s paperwork. There’s a life insurance policy that’s gone missing.”

“Oh, I see. Not that it matters to me if you did hire him, of course. It’s none of my business. Hasn’t been since I put on this gold watch,” he said pointing to his wrist and an inscription pressed

against it that probably read something like “For thirty years of dedicated service.”

The man paused for a moment. Annie wondered if he was also deciding how honest he should be.

“Mrs. Marshall, I don’t know what it is you know about your husband, but over the years, Jimmy told me enough to make me realize that I should’ve been a bit tougher on him during his interview back then. I think you may know what I’m talking about, but you sure don’t have to tell me,” he said although he looked for a reaction, not that he would get one—Annie could barely breathe, let alone look suspicious.

“The only thing I ever uncovered,” he continued as he produced a small piece of paper from his breast pocket, “was this bank account number. The bank’s in Nevada, I think. Don’t know what you’ll find there, if anything. I never investigated it. I should have, but I didn’t. Don’t know why. I guess I just liked him too damn much.”

As Mr. Moore handed the slip to Annie, he reached for his coat.

“Well, that’s all I needed to say, all I came here to do,” he said, his visit informative and efficient. “I should also mention that you don’t have to worry. As far as anyone in the department’s concerned, this case is ancient history.”

Annie was amazed at his compassionate actions, those of the day and those long since done. As she walked him out, he expressed a sentiment that helped explain one of the many unresolved things that week.

He said, “Yeah, that Jimmy. He was a great guy.”

The words resonated in her mind, remembering as she did the flowers, the card with the poor handwriting, and the name she had misread as “Henry.”

She reached for his hand. “Thank you, Mr. Moore, for all you’ve done. And thank you for the lovely flowers. I almost forgot.”

“Oh, sure. Sorry I didn’t send them sooner. I wanted to write the card myself. It’s something my mom taught me. Well, you take care, Mrs. Marshall.”

“You too, Mr. Moore. Good-bye, and thank you.”

Annie closed the door and stood for a moment, entranced by what life can bring and what death can reveal. She looked over at the mantle clock. It was one-twenty. Just enough time, she thought, to take a nap before Mr. Paul arrives.

And when he arrived, what would she do? Would she tell him about Mr. Moore’s visit? The answer, simply, was “no.” Annie would say nothing because, as she saw it, there was nothing to say.

As she climbed the steps to the bedroom, the slip of paper tight in her fist, she took great satisfaction in knowing that Mr. Paul would find no evidence of any kind among her late husband’s things. Particularly since, the night before, she had spent hours hiding every last scrap of paper and handgun inside several shoeboxes buried deep within her own closet.

No one, aside from Mr. Moore, would ever know of her late husband’s business, including the so-called life insurance policy. The money itself, which she had so far calculated to be in the neighborhood of \$193,479, would stay where it was. Like her husband, Annie would take only what she needed to live the way she had always lived. Perhaps she would withdraw enough to buy a new hat and coat, maybe even to fix the swing on the front porch.

As she reached the top step, she remembered the words inscribed in stone, “devoted husband and dedicated father.” And for the first time in weeks, Annie felt good and smiled. Her husband was, after all, exactly the man she had known him to be.