

A red book with a decorative key on top, resting on a lace fabric. The key is ornate and appears to be made of brass or gold. The book is placed on a piece of light-colored lace fabric with intricate patterns. The background is a plain white surface.

# Temple Secrets

SUSAN GABRIEL

# Temple Secrets

Susan Gabriel

Wild Lily Arts

Temple Secrets

Copyright © 2015 by Susan Gabriel

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-0-9835882-7-6

Cover design by Lizzie Gardiner, [lizziegardiner.co.uk](http://lizziegardiner.co.uk)

Wild Lily Arts

Printed in the United States of America.

# Chapter 1

## *Queenie*

Iris Temple has been threatening to die for three decades, and most of the people in Savannah who know her want her to get on with it. Queenie looks up from the crime novel she's hidden within the pages of *Southern Living* magazine and takes in the figure of her half-sister, Iris Temple, across the sunroom. Everything about Iris speaks of privilege: the posture, the clothes, the understated jewels. Not to mention a level of entitlement that makes Queenie's head ache. An exasperated moan slips from her mouth before she can catch it.

Iris's gaze shifts to Queenie. Her eyes narrow, the adjoining crow's feet forming a close-knit flock. The look delivers the message that even though Queenie is solidly middle-aged, she is to be *seen and not heard* like a child.

As Iris Temple's companion for the last thirty-five years, Queenie lives the lifestyle of a Temple instead of a Temple servant like her black mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. With the precision of a Swiss clock, Queenie is reminded daily that she is not a *true* Temple—though they share the same father—any more than Sunny Delight orange drink is considered *real* orange juice. She is simply a watered-down Temple—albeit several shades darker.

As she does every morning, Iris studies the local newspaper from headlines to classifieds in the lavish sunroom facing the

prominent Savannah square. Wicker furniture with rich fabrics mingles with antiques and tropical plants, as gold elephants the size of laundry baskets offer their polished backs to hold Iris's porcelain teacup.

Focused on the society section, Iris licks her lips as though relishing the fact that the Temple family is one of the elite families of Savannah. Their photographs appear in the newspaper with a regularity that Iris's constitution rarely achieves. As if on cue, Iris's stomach rumbles, and she fidgets in her chair. If treated more kindly, Queenie might feel sorry for Iris's discomfort and offer to make her life easier in some way.

For years, Iris Temple's unpredictable illnesses, usually of a gastrointestinal nature, have manipulated everyone around her. Just last week, a stomachache canceled a Daughters of the Confederacy charity event, and gas pains dismantled a family reunion planned for over a decade. Other social events Iris deemed unworthy of her time were aborted by attacks of acid reflux. To what does Iris Temple attribute these ailments? Gullah voodoo.

Within seconds, Iris's stomach rumbles again. Yet her attention has not left the newspaper.

"Oh my word, listen to this," Iris says.

Queenie exhales as Iris begins to read.

"*Miss Iris Temple, of the Savannah Temples, will be hosting the 20th annual charity bazaar for the Junior League this coming Saturday. The grand matriarch, also known as Savannah's grandmother—*" Iris balks and looks as though she's swallowed something bitter. "Savannah's grandmother? Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Oh, I'm sure it is, Iris," Queenie answers, all the while thinking, *Savannah's grandmother, indeed. Never mind that you're eighty years*

*old and have one grandchild who you've never even met. Or that you don't have a nurturing bone in your body.*

Queenie anticipates what will follow: Iris's angry letter to the newspaper on embossed Temple stationery that will insist that the reporter be dismissed and Queenie called upon to hand deliver the bad news.

Voodoo or not, most people—including Queenie—consider Iris Temple to be a first-class fake. What she blames on folk magic is merely an excuse to bring the fancy families and institutions of Savannah under her control.

*And if that doesn't work, there's always that damn ledger, kept in a safe at the bank, documenting secrets about rich and powerful Savannah families.* Secrets, Queenie has been told, that their great-grandfather began collecting before the Civil War and that every Temple has contributed to since.

*Well, not every Temple. Iris has never asked my thoughts on anything, never mind what I'd like to put in that "secret" book.*

It's true. Iris has noted every affair of prominent men, their illegitimate children, mental illnesses of wives, and any dishonest money dealings she's ever become privy to. According to Iris, two entire pages are devoted to Queenie. Given the Temple family's inclination to lie if it benefits them, Queenie questions how many of those so-called "secrets" are true. But she does have one that could do some serious harm if it got out.

"Did you call the restaurant about tomorrow night?" Iris asks.

Queenie looks up from her crime novel and gives the expected response. "Yes, Iris, it's all been arranged." And then thinks: *Only you, Iris, would counteract a voodoo curse by following a strict diet that consists*

*of no sauces, no spices, and no intermingling of foods. You might as well be eating the Temple Book of Secrets!*

Part of Queenie's job as Iris's assistant is to make certain that chefs in downtown establishments follow these strict dietary restrictions. Chefs hate being told what to do. But if any fail to meet her requirements, Iris will make sure that they never work in Savannah again.

"And did you tell them about my special condition?" Iris asks, turning to the classifieds. "You know how delicate I am," she adds. "Fragrances make me nauseous."

"Yes, Iris. I made them aware," she says, thinking that Iris is about as *delicate* as a piranha.

Fragrances include perfumes and scented body powders, soaps, shampoos, and detergents. Every maître d' in town has been alerted not to sit Iris next to anyone who might fall under the scrutiny of her superior olfactory system.

"What about the Catholic charities meeting tomorrow?" Iris asks. She takes a sip of tea, the sunlight bouncing off the gold inlay of the cup.

"I'll see to it, Iris." Queenie resists rolling her eyes. *It would be more of a charity for Savannah if Iris didn't show up.*

For the privilege of living in the big house and being Iris Temple's companion, Queenie pays a steep price. Among other things, she is required to arrive thirty minutes early to every meeting of the Junior League, the Daughters of the Confederacy, and any other event that Iris Temple is scheduled to attend to ensure that they are fragrance-free. It's on these days that Queenie feels like little more than a trained bloodhound, sniffing at the heels of Sa-

vannah's elite. More than once, she has had to approach a prominent Savannah resident and request she go to the restroom and scrub off expensive fragrances dabbed behind her ears and on her wrists. This seldom goes over well, leaving Queenie to feel blacker than she already is.

Queenie knows how the rich women of Savannah feel about her. She has overheard their whispers, their cutting remarks about her color, her place. No matter what she does, they—like Iris—will never see her as legitimate. They never see her for the woman she is and never think of the burden Queenie carries because of Iris's insistence that she play Prissy to her Scarlett O'Hara to have a decent life.

Yet deep down, Queenie knows that she's more real than any of them and is as entitled to her life as Iris is. She is well aware of what their daddy left behind when he passed over. Not that she's seen a penny of it. Yet Iris has promised to leave her the house when she finally passes to the Great Beyond. And for that, Queenie will tolerate just about anything.

"I smelled one of those horrible dryer sheets, yesterday," Iris begins again, her nose upturned.

Queenie sighs, thinking of her periodic sleuth for scents while strolling the beautiful Savannah square where the Temple house stands. During this surveillance, Queenie must ascertain whether any housekeepers in the area are using scented dryer sheets. If so, said housekeepers risk losing their jobs, and their employers risk having their secrets revealed. Secrets Iris has told them are stored in the bank vault.

As a result, most of Savannah—regardless of race, class, gender, or age—is waiting on Iris Temple to die. If for no other reason, so that life can return to scented bliss. Fantasies of Iris’s demise have indeed graced Queenie’s thoughts many times. It is time for Iris to step aside so Queenie can head the Temple clan. She looks around the room, thinking of how she might redecorate, adding more color.

“I know it doesn’t bother you to smell the dryer sheets,” Iris concedes. “But if you were a *true* Temple, you’d understand. You just don’t have our level of sophistication.”

*There it is, Queenie thinks, as predictable as Old Faithful, and just as full of toxic vapors.*

To distract herself from doing Iris harm, Queenie thinks back to when she came to live with her thirty-five years ago in 1965. She was twenty-two years old when she made this fateful choice. Iris was forty-five. It was Mister Oscar’s idea—Iris Temple’s husband—that Queenie join the staff because of a particular fondness he had for her. A fondness which extended to the bedroom.

Queenie lifts an eyebrow and studies Iris. *Did she really never know what Oscar was up to right under her nose?*

The Temples are one of the richest families in Savannah, Georgia. Iris’s father—also Queenie’s father—made a fortune in the invention and production of prosthetics. A generation after his father, a surgeon in the Civil War, removed thousands of limbs that his son seemed destined to replace.

Though Queenie has seen none of the Temple money except for a meager monthly allowance, she and Iris live in a large Victorian house listed on the national registry of historic homes. A house used at the end of the Civil War by Union officers reveling

in their victory during General Sherman's March to the Sea. As the story goes, these Union soldiers were told to burn the mansion to the ground, but they refused to do any damage to it, given its rare beauty. The extinguished torch is now encased in the Temple foyer, where it was left all those many years ago. It is also the house where the present-day Junior League conducts annual house tours to raise money for orphans in a country many of them cannot pronounce, and none would ever dream of visiting.

An oil portrait of Edward Temple, Iris and Oscar's only son, glares at Queenie from across the room. Their daughter Rose's portrait was taken down and stored in the attic twenty-five years before, replaced now by an original Audubon. Queenie keeps in touch with Iris's estranged daughter, Rose, who lives on a horse and cattle ranch outside Cheyenne, Wyoming. Rose has one child, Katie, who graduated from college and now works in Chicago and is Iris's only grandchild, whom she has never met. Queenie pulls a photograph from her pocket that arrived in the morning mail of Rose and Katie in Chicago. She smiles.

"What are you looking at?" Iris asks.

"Nothing, Iris," Queenie says. She slides the picture back into her pocket. Of all the Temples, Queenie likes Rose best. Yet Iris has forbidden Queenie to ever speak of her. Rose's existence has been totally erased. No photographs. No memories. Nothing.

Rose was ten years old when Queenie came to live here, and Edward was seventeen and away at boarding school. Queenie's mother—fondly called Old Sally by everyone who knows her—was still working for the Temples then but would be replaced by Violet in 1980. Violet, Old Sally's granddaughter, spent a lot of

time at the Temple house when she was growing up and was Rose Temple's best friend.

Queenie glances at her watch and then at Iris's empty teacup. She always calls her mother after Iris finishes her tea and retires to her bedroom for her morning constitutional—a ritual that easily lasts until noon. Queenie would never call her mother in front of Iris unless she wanted to aggravate her half-sister for the rest of the day. The two women are like fried okra and a dainty water-cress sandwich and do not mix.

At one hundred years of age, Queenie's mother, Old Sally, lives on the coast of southernmost South Carolina in a house she has lived in her entire life. She was born in the year 1900 and has seen a century's worth of change. Yet Old Sally still practices the family trade of root doctoring and folk magic in the way her Gullah ancestors did. Just yesterday, she got a call from someone in New York City who is flying to Savannah to have her work her spells and cure their environmental illness. This kind of thing happens all the time. Queenie has never practiced the family trade. Perhaps it is the Temple blood in her that refuses to participate. But her mother is quite versed in it.

Seconds later, Iris screams, and Queenie bolts upright, her book and magazine flying, as Iris's teacup crashes to pieces on the marbled floor. Queenie has never heard Iris screech and has to admit it is an interesting change from the silent roar of her half-sister's delicate constitution.

“What is it Iris, what's wrong?”

Iris's mouth gapes as though she is reading her own obituary. She points a boney, bejeweled finger at a section in the classifieds, her hand shaking.

Queenie comes to Iris's side and leans in to read:

***FOUND. One Book of Temple Secrets.  
First Secret to be revealed tomorrow.***

“Sweet Jesus,” Queenie mutters under her breath. “The shit has just hit the fan.”

Iris's stomach gurgles in ready agreement.

≈≈≈≈≈≈

What readers are saying about *Temple Secrets*...

“When some people have far too much time, wealth and power and not enough humanness and courage? Oh, the answers Gabriel provides are as delicious as Violet's peach turnovers, and twice as addicting! I highly recommend this novel.” - T.T. Thomas

“I love books about the South and this one did not disappoint! I hope to see more by this author.” - J. Haag

“It was difficult to put this book down. I can't wait to read another one of her books!” - Elizabeth McClellan

“Loved loved loved this book. The characters were lovable and hilarious. The only bad thing I can say is that it had to end...hopefully she'll write a sequel.” - Jumi

“I could not put the book down! Loved it!” - Julia Cato

"The plot keeps you guessing, and it is a book that everyone in my book club enjoyed. If you like Southern Fiction, and mysteries, this one will engage you." - Rosie Place

Buy *Temple Secrets* and start unlocking the mysteries today!

Available in paperback, ebook and audiobook.

[Get an autographed paperback here.](#)

[Amazon/Kindle](#)

[Barnes & Noble/Nook](#)

[iBooks](#)

[Kobo](#)

[Google](#)

[Audible](#)