

# THE PROTECTORS OF THE WOOD

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## Episode #92: A Conference in the Dark of Night

Opening lines of Reach for Me

After drinking the strong black tea, Abby felt ready for her midnight adventure. She kept checking her pocket for the key to the ancient back door of the churchyard, a key she had discovered through persistent detective work.

Abby: Oh, I hope Phoebe isn't badly injured! And is there any chance she could be arrested for defending me, and breaking Bob Bentley's arm? Dr. Bear said he'd been admitted to the hospital. And why do people think George is in danger? It must have something to do with him using his journalism job to spy on the Milton Morphy crew, always hanging around the newspaper office, and those benches out front.

Narrator: The minutes ticked by. Abby was fairly certain someone would still be watching from the bench across the street. She climbed out the back window, and was just a dark shadow obscured by the row of apple trees. The moon was sending a silvery glow to the earth below that glimmered on the branches and the high churchyard wall. The night was still, the song of the crickets the only sound. She crawled between the hedge and the wall, pushed up through the leaves, and crossed the mulch pile to Tiny's path along the wall. In a moment, she entered the secret place. The owl called hello to her, soft but clear.

Abby: This owl is my friend already. Everything is okay.

Narrator: She slipped her key into the lock, turned it with a faint click, and then leaned against the wall, listening patiently. Faint animal noises, and the breeze in the leaves, made a kind of music. And then she heard steps, the faint crunching of shoes on dirt and leaves.

Abby: It's more than one person! I should have left the door locked!

Narrator: She moved back a few steps, ready to run. The steps came closer, and then stopped. Seconds ticked by.

Phoebe (whispering): Abby? Abby... are you there?

Abby: It's Phoebe's voice!

Narrator: She opened the door, and Phoebe burst in with George on her heels, colliding with Abby in the dark. All three wore black, and could hardly see each other.

Abby: (whispering) Phoebe! George!

George: (whispering) Abby! Abby!

Sound: group whispering: Oh, is it really you? Is everything ok? Where do we go now? How is it working out here? Oh... I'm so happy, I'm so happy!

Abby: It's all fine. Everything's good. Be quiet...

Narrator: She locked the door, and signaled for them to follow. Up the path they went in single file. Abby held the thorny branches out of the way, looking back to see Phoebe limping slowly up the dark and uneven ground, her right leg stiff at the knee. George followed close behind. As they entered the mulch pile the sky opened up and the moonlight glowed on their faces. Abby led them to a flat, dry surface of leaves near the door of their little fort. They sat down cross-legged, making a small triangle, and looked at each other.

Sound: Very quiet except rare bird calls.

Abby: (whisper) Phoebe, you saved my life last night. I want you to know how much I owe you. It was all my fault. I'll always remember the... the way you...

Narrator: Abby couldn't find the words. Phoebe embraced her and whispered in her ear.

Phoebe: It's okay. I wanted to do it. I would do it again.

Narrator: Phoebe pulled her head back, looked Abby in the eyes.

Phoebe: You saved my life in a different way. I was lost, and now I've got a path to follow if I don't mess it up.

Abby: I'm your friend forever.

Narrator: Abby became aware of George, looking on at this emotional scene, and shifting back away as if he were an intruder. On almost every occasion they met Abby's heart went out to him. She could instantly sympathize with his identity as an unwanted outsider, always on the margin of his friendships and loves. It was Abby's identity too, and they recognized each other. She turned and pulled him closer by the shoulders, and then held his hands.

Abby: (whisper): George... I'm so happy to see you. But aren't you taking a big risk coming here... with this business of being a spy? They'll take revenge, like they've tried with me.

Narrator: George stared at Abby as if hypnotized. Phoebe leaned forward and whispered,

Phoebe: That's one big reason we're here. Something unexpected happened. George, you tell it.

Abby: Don't start talking normally. It's so quiet. Our voices will carry.

George: Okay...

Narrator: He shook off the magic of the situation and collected his wits.

George: I'll make this as short as I can. But you should know from the start, we've got to make decisions. Tonight.

Narrator: Abby saw George's confidence come back as he spoke.

Abby: Go for it.

George: Well, this morning on my way out of church Jerome Peabody was waiting on the sidewalk and immediately came up to me, saying we needed to talk about what he called, 'a very sensitive job'.

Narrator: George took a deep breath.

George: So... we crossed the street to his office and he walked me into the back room. And who should be sitting there but Milton Morphy, the great robber baron himself! We shook hands and Peabody pulled up a chair for me, and said something about a problem, and Morphy just goes off with that angry voice, saying...

Morphy: You betrayed me. You sold my photos to the enemy. You can't be trusted. I'll soon deal with you... accordingly...

George: I told them I had the photos they asked for right there in my camera. I had given Freddy Baez a different set of photos. Morphy said in that scary voice:

Morphy: THAT was a big mistake... A mistake you'll regret for a LONG time...

Music: First verse of Dark Vision

George: At that point I got angry and told him that I'm not under any exclusive contract, and I'd earned ten times more money from Freddy Baez in an hour than I'd made from their newspaper over the last three months. I said I'm not interested in being a cashier at a supermarket my whole life. I want to be a musician and a photographer. I want to afford my own place to live. 'And frankly,' I told him, 'working for the Middletown Standard isn't helping me much. So if you prefer, we'll just part ways.' And I stood up.... Jerome Peabody got all frantic and said...

Peabody: You shouldn't talk to Mr. Morphy that way! It could ruin me forever!

George: But Morphy waved him off and said,

Morphy: No, no, Jerome... I understand. The boy has ambitions. He wants to make money.

George: Well... to rush over this long conversation, Morphy came to what was really on his mind. He wants me to do a job that he said would take skill and earn more money than I'd ever dreamed of. First he warned me that one of his colleagues had been hospitalized with a serious injury, and he knew that Phoebe had hit him with a club and broke his arm. The man needs an operation to set the bone. Morphy said:

Morphy: Some believe she deserves to be charged with assault and go to prison. But I realized there were people in our town who got a little hysterical... So, she might have thought she was defending herself. Plus, she was hit in the face the day before. So, I'm willing to be generous, give her the benefit of the doubt, and leave the situation alone.

Narrator: George paused, and then whispered:

George: Are you getting all this? Does this make any sense?

Abby: (raising her voice, excited) Yes! Yes!

George: So Morphy goes on to say that the police are trying to identify the people who became hysterical – the people who thought magic had caused the car accidents and the blocking of the street, and the storm, and most of all, the people who went to the abandoned house in search of a witch. So, Morphy said...

Morphy: I'd be willing to make an informal agreement. I'll overlook the incident entirely... IF Phoebe and anyone else involved – Abby, Jeremy, Reverend Tuck, Dr. Bear – will also agree to do the same.

George: And then he said...

Morphy: Nothing written, mind you! And if you're so foolish as to tell anyone except the parties concerned, or mention my name at all, you'll be VERY sorry. I can promise you that.

George: It was really tense. I couldn't come up with a word to say. And Morphy just stares at me and says,

Morphy: Well... I'm waiting.

George: Finally I had an idea... I realized that without saying it outright, he wanted me to act as a go-between in this conflict. So I told him that I'm not a lawyer, but I do try to behave as a friend in an honorable way. And while I won't accept any money for the job, I'll do it as a favor to help everyone involved. He replied that this could be a big step up for me, and wanted a report by tonight. I said it was impossible, but maybe tomorrow afternoon, and he agreed as if that were a big concession. But I began to think of some problems, and had the nerve to ask how anyone could be sure the others would stick with the agreement. And here Morphy told me something interesting. He said...

Morphy: I've pondered that issue, and realized that both sides could more easily defend against an accusation than be successful as the accuser. Don't forget, it would have to be PROVEN beyond the shadow of a doubt.

George: He also said that any trial would badly hurt both sides no matter what the outcome. And since he believes we're too naïve to have thought of these things by ourselves, he's doing us a favor by letting us know.

Narrator: George stopped and looked at Abby.

Abby: (loud whisper) That's such a relief! I agree with anything that keeps Phoebe out of court.

Narrator: Phoebe hugged her.

Phoebe: There's another part you should hear. Remember, George? You asked if this is a sort of general truce, or just an agreement not to go to court?

George: Oh, yes. Morphy got friendly and said...

Morphy: You're smarter than I thought. We CAN work together, you and I...

George: He pointed out that we have common ground right now to let this problem blow over, but disagreements will of course arise again further down the road. And then he opened his hands and said,

Morphy: But I do wish to demonstrate my good will... So, I'll allow the toy store and the coffee shop to reopen, just to help heal these wounds more... easily.

Abby (around this point they start talking almost normal, too loud): Now, what do you make of that? Can we trust him? I mean, we know what his big plan is, and he's not going to stop.

Phoebe (muttering) That's what I say.

George: I've thought it over word by word. Of course he hasn't changed his plan. He's cold as ice and not giving an inch out of good will. I bet the Department of Health is letting the stores reopen anyway. But Morphy's a lawyer and super-successful businessman, rich beyond anything we can conceive of. He didn't get there by beating his head against a brick wall. He can adjust his plans, and retreat when he needs to. It's clear he sees this situation as a mistake and wants to retreat. If he thought there was anything to gain by attacking us, he would have done so. Our only question is this: Will we also lose by attacking? Morphy can tell the truth when it's to his advantage.

Abby: (words burst out) You know, Geraldine gave me the same advice a few hours ago. Do we want to spend the next couple of years tied up in court, and probably accomplish nothing? A lot of people will get hurt. And I should tell both of you that this Youth Council event the day after tomorrow has got me thinking. I spent the first ten years of my life in Rivergate. I remember Pastor Banks. And you may not know that many of the people in Rivergate are descendants of families driven out of Hidden Valley at the time the cabins and the old Georgi house were burned.

Phoebe: Ah... I'm beginning to understand.

Narrator: Abby leaned forward.

Abby (voice louder): Now, another important piece of history. The haunted house where I was living used to be a Georgi house, a place where the family stayed during the winter to be near town. Do we want all this coming out in a trial? Given our mission as it stands, I don't think we do, not at all.

Narrator: Suddenly they heard an unmistakable snap, the sound of a breaking stick. The noise came from the other side of the churchyard wall. They all froze, listening.

Sound: steps crunching dry leaves and sticks.

Phoebe: (whisper) What was that?

Song: Reach for Me

Outro: