

Synopsis

Martha Dobie (Shirley MacLaine) and Karen Wright (Audrey Hepburn) have built a modestly sized venture: a school for girls, located somewhere in a small town on the east coast of the US. Formerly college classmates, the two spend their days managing the school, problematic students, and family members who hang around a bit too long; in the latter category is Martha's meddling aunt Lily (Miriam Hopkins, who played Martha in the 1936 version). Karen is in a relationship with Joe Cardin (James Garner), the local pediatrician, who is keen for the relationship to progress and to at last marry Karen. An opening scene shows Karen and Joe finally setting a date for their wedding, which Karen announces to Martha upon returning to the house. Martha expresses concern that Karen will leave the school when she marries Joe, which Karen swiftly denies: "my marriage to Joe won't mean anything for the school." The somewhat heated discussion is viewed surreptitiously by Mary Tilford (Karen Balkin), the school rat and granddaughter of the influential great lady of the area, Mrs Tilford (Fay Bainter).

The next day, Mary is again in the spotlight when she arrives late to class and concocts a lie about the cause of her delay – which lie is identified by Karen, who demands Mary set the record straight. Mary refuses and her grandmother is sent to pick her up. Before departing, Mary is depicted in a room with classmate Rosalie (Veronica Cartwright). Rosalie has a penchant for petty thievery, and when her theft of the bracelet of another child, Helen

Burton, is discovered by Mary, Mary forces Rosalie to swear allegiance. The pact between the girls will become significant later in the movie.

After spending time with her grandmother, Mary is due to be returned to school and is travelling with the older lady in a car. Desperate and in a panic about having to go back to school, she tries to think of something that might be used to delay her return. Mary tries to get the older woman's attention, but her grandmother takes no notice. Mary mentions the "unnatural" nature of Karen and Martha's relationship and volunteers that she has heard "funny noises" coming from one of the rooms when the women are together at night. Finally, Mrs Tilford demands Mary get to the point, and, as the entrance to the school comes into view, Mary leans over and whispers something into Mrs Tilford's ear. Although audiences can't hear what Mary has communicated, they see the look of shock appearing on the grandmother's face. Horrified by what she has heard, she demands that the driver stop the car and turn around. Mary does not have to go back to the school, and Mrs Tilford takes steps to contact the other parents. The school is soon emptied of its pupils, and Karen and Martha have no idea why.

The next morning the trio of Karen, Martha, and Joe head to Mrs Tilford's, demanding an explanation. Karen reveals that one of the parents told her the reason for the children's removal: that she and Martha, in the words of the child's father, have "been lovers." When this is denied, Mrs Tilford remains firm in her accusation and calls Mary down to vouch for the truthfulness of the story. Under pressure, Mary finally admits she hasn't herself seen Karen and Martha together but claims that Rosalie has. Rosalie is called in to back up Mary's story, which she does, on account of being blackmailed by Mary about the stolen bracelet. Karen, Martha, and Joe leave, promising a libel suit.

The following scene shows Karen and Martha sitting quietly in the now abandoned school several months later, after the outcome of the trial, which they have lost. There is evidence that they are subject to harassment and hate from the community, as leering men drive past in a truck, which slows down to allow the men to stare in the direction of the house. The experience is re-

peated in the following scene, when a delivery man moves slowly through the house, mouth gaping open, also staring. Joe arrives and asks Karen if she and Martha have ever been lovers. She breaks up with him and he leaves, apparently never to return. At last Mrs Tilford comes to the house, full of contrition. The blackmailing of Rosalie has been revealed, Mary's lie has been shown to be a fabrication, and Mrs Tilford begs Karen and Martha for forgiveness. After she leaves, Martha confesses that she has always had feelings for Karen, essentially validating Mary's lie. In the next to last scene in the movie, Karen rushes upstairs to the locked door of Martha's bedroom and bashes it open, as the camera reveals the shadow of Martha's swinging feet. The very final scene shows Martha's funeral. Karen is alone at the graveside, while other mourners stand at a distance. As Karen strides forth from the cemetery, she keeps her gaze focused straight ahead, not returning the look of any of the other mourners.

