

*The Harlot of St.
Cecelia's*

DARCY GRAVES



The Harlot of St. Cecelia's

Copyright © 2026 by Darcy Graves

All rights reserved.

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

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Printed in the United States of America

Chapter One

These violent delights have violent ends.

- William Shakespeare,

Romeo and Juliet, II, vi, 9

There was very nearly a murder in the Library that Thursday afternoon.

To be fair, there was nearly a murder at St. Cecelia's Library every Thursday afternoon. Or any other day that the play-reading circle was meeting. It all depended, thought Eden with a sigh, on whom Lady Elizabeth had chosen for her latest victim.

On this particular Thursday, it was Mr Edelson – who had lost his place in the text for the fourth time in an hour. Lady Elizabeth, still miffed that she had not been chosen for the part of Juliet, had begun snapping at him for his clumsiness, which really only made things worse. To top it off, the rest of the group was starting to grumble unhappily in solidarity with

him. Mrs Dora Gresham, last week's victim, was already clucking under her breath.

Heaven help us if those two start up again, Eden thought with a wince, Romeo and Juliet might well offer up one last casualty.

Mr Edelson fumbled with his pince-nez and the tattered script, trying to ignore the daggers Lady Elizabeth was throwing with her eyes as Eden leaned over and gently directed him to the page.

'Ah, yes! Thank you, my dear. "*A right good mark man*—"' The papers fluttered. 'Eh, oh dear me.'

'Mr Edelson—' said Lady Elizabeth.

'Lady Elizabeth—' Mrs Gresham cut in.

Oh, here it comes. Eden braced herself.

'If you are not prepared to take this seriously,' Lady Elizabeth spun to address the group, already quite pink, and her cloud of grey hair shaking dangerously. 'I shall certainly not be returning next week!'

'If only,' someone murmured nastily from the back.

If she heard the remark, Lady Elizabeth ignored it. 'To fumble and dodder one's way through the lead roles is simply disrespectful to the Bard.'

This proved the snapping point. Mrs Gresham's eyes blazed and several voices began to pipe up in Mr Edelson's defence, which, in turn sparked a heated debate on what, precisely was disrespectful, and whether or not it was disrespectful to pick at innocent old men simply because they were clumsy with their spectacles.

Sitting quietly in the midst of the outcry, Eden wondered – not for the first time – if a play reading circle had really been such a clever idea. Surely there were less trying activities she could organise for the Library? Painting, or flower arranging, perhaps. She was giving her imagination full rein in this regard when the grandfather clock chimed.

'Right. It's two o'clock,' she announced a bit too quickly, rising to her feet. 'Shall we meet again next Thursday, then?'

Once they had composed themselves and begun to straggle out, Eden sought serenity in the comparable quiet of the front desk. She breathed a strangled sigh of relief. Please let the rest of the day be pleasant, she offered a silent prayer to the echoing walls of the foyer, or at least very, very dull.

Her wish seemed likely to be fulfilled. On her left, a pile of blissfully quiet books waited for their returns to be recorded. Books, Eden reflected, rarely had temper tantrums. Unless one counted Herr Nietzsche.

She picked up the nearest stack and got started, letting the minutes tick sweetly by. She had efficiently worked halfway through the pile when she picked up an oldish, leather-bound volume and a stray fragment of paper fell from the stack to the floor.

Eden caught sight of the flash of yellow fluttering under her chair and pulled off her specs as she reached for it.

'Excuse me, Miss?' said a voice above her.

She straightened up too quickly, banging her head neatly on the underside of the polished mahogany desk. Black patches danced across her vision.

'Oh, I say!' said the voice, 'Terribly sorry, my dear. Are you quite all right?' The grey-haired gentleman on the other side of the assistance desk turned a mild shade of pink under his mustache.

She rubbed the back of her head, set the yellow paper on her blotter, and nodded. After all, it was hardly his fault. 'Can I help you with something?'

'You're an American, what?'

'Yes, I am – was there something special?'

'How's that?'

'That you were looking for?' she clarified.

‘Oh, yes.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Yes... that is, I was looking for....’

Midway through the sentence, his stuttered syllables faltered again... distracted by a young man who materialised from behind the bust of Samuel Johnson.

‘Pardon. Just looking for... ah!’

Before she could re-focus, the newcomer had reached over her desk and removed a battered copy of Dante’s *Purgatorio* from her pile of overdue.

‘Wait!’ She jumped to her feet. ‘I’m sorry, sir, but you can’t have that – it’s not checked in, yet.’

The young man, a blond fellow who on second glance looked to be in his later twenties, looked at her in a way that made her suddenly conscious of her mussed hair and plain frock. ‘Yes, I know,’ he smiled easily. ‘It was mine, you see. I’d meant to keep it longer. I was just getting to the really grisly bits. Hellfire and damnation and all that. Very bracing.’

Eden recognised him. He was one of a group of young men who spent their mornings in the Reading Room. They sprawled in the leather armchairs, frequently asleep, and just as frequently smelling of gin and dressed in what she could only imagine were their clothes from the night before. Hiding from disapproving mothers, no doubt, or wives.

Not that she blamed them. The Reading Room at St. Cecelia’s was the perfect retreat: a perfectly round two-story domed room, all dappled light and leather and stained glass. There was a conglomeration of sofas and chairs to the centre left and to the right a glossy round reading table large enough to serve as 1923’s answer to King Arthur’s Round Table. In all, it was quite private and soundproof, the ideal spot for sleeping off last evening’s excesses. But all things considered, she found their polished looks and moneyed manners a little intimidating. This young man was much older than the others, but probably the best looking of the bunch.

He seemed to read her discomfort, and his eyes sparkled with amusement. His gaze quickly scanned her figure before smiling into her eyes. The grin widened, and Eden felt a blush staining her cheeks.

'It's overdue,' she said lamely.

'Unsurprising,' he answered. 'Don't worry. I'm good for the fines.'

And before she could reply, he had tucked the offending book under one arm and disappeared out the door.

Completely flustered, Eden turned back toward the old gentleman, who, evidently feeling he had her full attention, took this as his cue to launch into a renewed and detailed explanation of his needs. It took a moment for her to refocus on him.

'...Maps would do nicely.' The old man was looking at her expectantly.

Eden blinked.

'Of that part of Egypt?' He soldiered on, pulling at his moustache. 'Or just the Near East and North Africa and such. Something one could borrow. I do know where the reference maps are. I assume you have got them, yes?'

'Of Egypt?' Eden focused on him. 'Yes. Yes, of course. In the resource room, second floor, at the back. They are in the glass cases.' She directed him toward the stairs tucked into the alcove behind her and he cast her one last worried look before he headed toward them.

Once he was gone, Eden pulled her jumper off the back of the heavy mahogany chair and wrapped herself up in it, settling back down into the chair. *Purgatorio*. It was an appropriate theme for the day. In fact, she sometimes felt that was where her life had settled since the War. England. Purgatory. If it wasn't for St. Cecelia's, she might have packed it in long ago, and gone back to Boston. But the fact was, this was the only real connexion

she had to anything, anymore, and she was loath to lose it.

She breathed in the musty smell of the wool, out of place somehow in the cool polished stillness of St. Cecelia's. The building seemed quiet now, almost empty, though Eden knew better.

The layout of the Library was so complex and twisted, that even on a busy day, it could look entirely empty. Not that it was slow... she thought, her fingers fiddling with the yellow slip of paper. In fact, the Library was quite full for a bright Thursday.

Eden tossed the paper into the pile of overdue slips. On second thought, she opened her ledger book and began to stack the slips neatly between the pages; she could figure the overdue fines in the park while she had her dinner. Then she wouldn't be interrupted and she wouldn't have to feel guilty about a walk in the warm sunshine of late afternoon and early spring.

A perfect compromise.

She scooped up the ledger and her leather satchel, and with one backward glance at the grandfather clock in the foyer, went to find Susannah.



'I've rescued it.' Simon Cross tossed the battered copy of *Purgatorio* onto the glossy marble table top. 'That ought to put me out of the fire. No thanks to you.'

'Yes, darling.' Margaret snatched an embroidered pillow out of his way as he threw himself into the velvet armchair. She tucked it behind her, smiled at him briefly and resumed reading her magazine.

'Is that all you have to say?'

'What would you like me to say, dearest?' She eyed him over the top of Vanity Fair. 'I'm sorry I returned your library book? How was I to know Arthur was reading it?'

'It wasn't mine.'

'So you've both said. But it had your name in it, so there you are.'

She drew the magazine back up to eye level, and he was treated to a life-sized and colourful advertisement for Sharp's Super-kreem toffee. '*Keep a store in your home,*' said the squirrel in the advert, '*I do.*'

'Nevertheless...' Simon persisted.

'Whoever's it was,' she said wearily, her hand fluttering in the air, 'it was just lying there on the hall table.'

'Well, I didn't put it there.'

'Yes, darling, I know.' Her gaze met his over the pages. 'But Arthur was terrifically angry when he found it had gone back. He needed it for a lecture or some sort. He said not to bother, but I'm sure he'll be quite pleased to find it back again. I should mention that he was rather peeved to find you'd been in his study, as well. I gather you left it in a bit of a mess.'

Simon scowled. 'For the love of Pete. I borrowed his typewriter to write to the solicitor – correspondence that you asked me to write, I might remind you. I can't seem to move a step in any direction, lately, without sticking my foot in it.'

He propped his feet up on the table, as if to make his point. 'There's no blood on my hands from the book, at any rate. I didn't move it. I didn't even open it. All I did was pick the damned thing up for him from the Library last week. It's overdue, by the way.'

'Well, that'll teach you to do favours.'

'It's a mistake I don't mean to repeat. Along,' he added, 'with borrowing typewriting machines from brothers-in-law.'

'You needn't fret about that,' she said. 'He said something this afternoon about never lending you anything again.'

'I've posted the letter anyhow, so I shan't need the dratted contraption.'

‘Don’t be so short-sighted, darling. It’s not as if you’ll never write another letter. And take your shoes off of the table.’

Simon raised himself up a little and glared at her.

‘You might at least thank me for retrieving it. I had to snatch it from the jaws of a fire-breathing librarian. And now I think I owe her sixpence.’

‘Take it out of the household accounts,’ she murmured over her magazine.

He picked several silver spoons from the tea cart, slouched back into the chair, and began tossing them into the air.

‘I might have been killed. Or catalogued. And all for you, my lovely sister.’

‘How’s that?’ Margaret lifted a brow.

‘It’s you Arthur is really in such a lather with.’

‘Probably, yes.’

‘He’s terribly fussed about his office, don’t you think? I found him rooting through my room last week for something or another and you don’t see me getting into a twist about it.’

‘Well, you don’t care about anything.’ She laid the magazine down with a sigh and ran a hand wearily over her elegantly coiffured blonde hair. ‘He should be home any moment. You did recall that he wants a word with you, don’t you darling?’

‘Wants advice on the horses, does he?’

‘It’s not funny, Simon. He was terribly cross at luncheon. One of the law professors saw you at the Athenæum this morning. He said he thought you’d been drinking.’

‘Rather astute of him, I’d say.’ He had managed to get two of the spoons into the air at once.

‘Simon! You know that’s not what he wants to hear.’

‘Alright then, I hadn’t been.’

‘Oh, don’t be a beast. And don’t be unkind about Arthur. He might be a bit difficult, but it isn’t a joke, really. He is only worried for you. He promised the doctors he’d look after you, and he takes his responsibilities very seriously.’

A muscle tightened in Simon's cheek, but his tone remained vague. 'I suppose there is no point in reminding you both that I'm very nearly thirty?' He hated it when she got worried like this. It didn't suit her, for one thing.

Besides, he frowned, what was wrong with staying out at night? He rather liked the set he ran with. Most of them were three or four years younger than he was: too young to have fought in the war. They were simple young men, spoilt younger sons of lords and rich tycoons, and not a lick of responsibility among them. They suited him perfectly.

Meg was regarding him with a quiet, troubled expression, and he reached to touch her arm.

'Honestly, darling, I'm fine,' he said. 'Do stop fussing, won't you? I'm not in the nursery anymore, and—'

'...And it would certainly be nice if you would start acting like it,' said a voice from the doorway.

Simon looked up and flashed an overly bland smile at his brother-in-law. 'Hello, Arthur, old chap,' he said, slouching back into the chair and tossing up a spoon. 'We were just talking about you.'

'Would you mind not juggling my silver as though you were auditioning for a carnival side show?'

Drake pulled off his gloves and scarf and poured himself a bourbon from the decanter on the sideboard. Meg threw her brother a warning look and he reluctantly deposited the spoons on the coffee table.

'I'm very glad you're here, Simon. I suppose your sister told you I wanted a word with you?'

He added another splash of seltzer to his drink before crossing deliberately to them and sitting in the velvet armchair nearest to Meg.

Simon groaned inwardly. Drake was clearly in one of his Country Vicar moods: gearing up for a sermon on the evils of a wayward life and the glories of industry and piety.

Drake confirmed his suspicions.

'I'll come right to the point, then – it's about your behaviour, Simon. The late hours and carrying on. I expect it is posh to act this way in the city, and unfashionable for me to disapprove. But the fact remains that we are not in London now. Not really. This university is a small town, where people take note.'

Meg picked up her magazine and shot Simon another look. If Drake noticed, he didn't show it. Instead, he set his drink precisely on a leather coaster and ran a hand over thinning brown hair, as if wondering where he'd left off. Simon still had not replied.

'More to the point, it is upsetting to your sister, and it isn't healthy for you. We both know the state you were in when I found you in Paris three years ago....' He squinted at Simon, meaningfully. 'You, of all people, should know the dangers of excess, Simon.'

'I don't think we need to dredge all that up, Arthur,' Meg interrupted. She glanced quickly at her brother, but Simon showed no reaction.

'You do remember, don't you, Simon?'

'Arthur, please,' Meg's eyes moved back and forth between them. 'That's really not the point.'

'I think it's precisely Arthur's point.' Simon's tone was deceptively mild. 'Yes, I remember.'

A muscle worked in his jaw. 'Is that all you wanted to know, Arthur? Because if I'm honest, there are several things from Paris I'd rather not revisit, and I'd be perfectly willing to talk about none of them.'

'Don't be glib,' Drake replied, frowning. 'You've thrown away every chance you've been given.'

Drake rose to his feet, ignoring his wife's anxious look. 'What you do reflects on us, Simon. On me. I have a reputation to protect. As don of this college, how can I be considered a

role model for my students if I can't even control my own brother-in law, who should be old enough to know better!?'

'The fact is,' he began, his voice taking on an odd cast. He paused and glanced from Simon to Meg and back again. 'The fact is, I've made arrangements for you to go abroad. In one week, in fact. You'll have time to get your affairs in order, such as they are. And until then I'd prefer that you stay away from the university grounds. Beginning to-day.'

'Arthur, you can't be serious!'

'I am, Margaret. I've given this a lot of thought, and I've made my decision.'

'Your decision?'

'Yes,' he said, not meeting her look. Perhaps not realizing he should. 'We discussed all of this.'

'Did you, now.' Simon made it a statement, not a question.

'No, we did not.' Meg set her magazine down on the table in front of her, and stood. 'This is my home as well, Arthur. I appreciate your attempts to be firm, but where I live, my brother is always welcome. Nothing will change that.'

Drake blinked. 'I didn't mean it that way, Margaret, you know that. We've discussed this last month, and I've just spoken with David Trundle. He is departing for South America in a week. His assistant has taken ill, and he'd be willing to take on Simon. It is a perfect solution... I'm only thinking of you, dear.' Drake's tone was reasonable but the look he received in return was hard glass.

Simon felt almost sorry for him. Four years of marriage, and his sister's husband didn't seem to know her at all. She was staring at her husband in disbelief... a stormy expression in her eyes.

Simon got to his feet. 'Arthur's right of course, Meg,' he said lightly. It was all right if he made a senseless botch of his own life; but he didn't want to drag Meg into the maelstrom. 'There's no sense in breaking into a family rumpus over it; and

if I've been worrying you, I'm sorry. I'll try and behave myself, turn over a new leaf, and all that.'

He grinned boyishly at her. 'Perhaps I'll join the church choir.'

Simon wondered if his brother-in-law hadn't actually hit on a good idea. Perhaps it was time he went off on his own. Not to South America, of course, but perhaps he might lease one of those block flats in St. James. Meg would protest, but he thought it might be easier for her if he were out of the way and things in the Drake house settled back into dull routine.

'And now, old thing, I have a crushing blow. I'm afraid I won't be here for tea.'

'Where are you going?' Drake asked sharply.

'I have an engagement with my tailors. For which...' He pulled his pocket watch from his waistcoat. 'I am already late.'

'Don't forget what I said about staying in to-night, Simon. Be back by suppertime.'

Simon faced him. 'I fetched your library book back from St. Cecelia's, Drake. It's on the hall table. You needn't bother to thank me.'

Drake's face turned pink, and he began to speak, but Simon ignored him. He fetched Meg a quick wink, picked his hat up from the table where he'd left it, and was gone.



Simon was late. He hadn't planned to be, but when he had left the tailor's house it had only been four o'clock and he'd had time to kill.

He hadn't wanted to go back to his sister's, and could hardly have spent three hours sitting on the steps of Sobaretti & Son, where he might have been picked up for vagrancy.

He'd decided the only responsible thing to do was get off

the street, and opted for the Heron and Crane Club. They usually had a game going at that time of day, and plenty of gin.

It was the gin that had made up Simon's mind. Gin always took off the edge; and even after a few hours being fitted for coats, the scene in his sister's house had left him with an edge that sorely needed taking off.

He checked his watch now as the taxi stopped in front of St. Cecelia's. It was getting dark and he was late. The game had gone on longer than he'd thought; it was already a quarter to eight. He paid the taxicab driver and opened the wrought iron gate.

He hoped she was still there.



Eden could hear them bickering on the stairwell long before she saw them.

'But Mr Matteus gave you clear instructions—'

'He gave the key to you.'

'Indeed, but he intended it for you, Miss Firth.'

'Why should he give you the key when I was right there the whole time?'

'I have no window to look into another man's heart, Miss Firth.'

'Fair enough, then I'll just ask Miss Brior.' Susannah emerged from the stairwell behind the main desk. For someone so waif-like in form she stalked remarkably well.

Mr Dawson was furiously close on her heels.

'There's no need, I tell you. Mr Matteus intended you to do them. He knew I had a lecture to attend. He nev—'

'And I have an engagement, Mr Dawson.'

They were both readying to leave. Susannah was making the most of the slightly warmer weather; wearing a flashy shawl of pink and yellow art-silk with matching gloves. Her face was

decorated with the extra layer of rouge she added before an important night out, and the fashionable Dutch boy hairstyle sported a band made from yellow canary feathers. The entire effect made Eden think of a carefully groomed parakeet.

In contrast, Mr Dawson was colourless. He stood stiffly behind Susannah, his gloves in his hands and a long grey muffler wrapped several times around his neck.

‘Thank you, Miss Brior,’ his tone was definitive, ‘but we–’

‘Eden!’ Susannah stepped in front of him. ‘I say, Eden, who’s supposed to do those returns from Queen’s College that are in the office, did Mr Matteus tell you?’ She ignored Mr Dawson’s black eyes as they attempted unsuccessfully to bore a hole into the back of her colourful skull.

‘No.’ Eden answered.

‘Well, do you know who was supposed to close up tonight?’

Eden knew Scylla and Charybdis when she saw them. She hesitated before responding. ‘Who did Mr Matteus give the key to?’

‘Mr. Dawson!’ Susannah shot the accused a triumphant look.

‘And who did he tell about the returns?’

‘Well, he did mention them to me, in passing, but I–’

‘Then perhaps he meant for you both to do it?’

‘That might be true,’ Mr Dawson’s lips barely moved, ‘if I hadn’t already told him I had a lecture to attend.’

‘And I told him I had an engagement,’ Susannah said stubbornly. ‘So, it seems as if the return won’t get done and we’ll both get the sack. Unless....’ Her eyes slid to Eden.

Mr. Dawson shook his head. ‘I am certain Mr Matteus intended you to do it, Miss Firth.’

‘Well, I’m not certain, Mr Dawson, and you can’t make me stay.’ Her jaw was set defiantly.

Eden decided she had better put a stop to this now. To-

morrow was her day off and the last thing she needed was for Mr Matteus to come in the morning and find one of them splayed out dead on the floor.

'I'll do them,' she said. Mr Dawson opened his mouth to protest, but she continued. 'I don't mind staying, really.'

'Oh Eden, you're an absolute brick! You've no idea how splendid you are!' Susannah's anger evaporated and she kissed Eden gratefully. 'Ta ever so. I'll be your slave forever!'

Eden waved her away with a smile. She had some paper-work she wanted to finish up anyway she said, and some manuscripts to put away.

Realizing he was beaten, Mr Dawson thanked Eden stiffly and went to fetch his overcoat. He fetched Susannah a dark look as he passed her, but now that she had gotten her own way, Susannah was the very model of graciousness. She smiled back at him and offered to watch the front desk while Eden gave people the twenty minute warning.

Eden moved toward the pile of re-shelves. She might as well put these back as she went. Now, if she could find that manuscript she needed to return... ah, there it was by the blotter.

'*The Weatherby Report of 1896*' was a three-thousand page treatise on the national landmarks of Kent that belonged in the case in the Reading Room. It was large and yellowed and thoroughly horrible. What on earth had made someone pull it out in the first place? She was browsing through it, trying to determine the appeal when he came in.

'Coo, will you look at that bloke?' Susannah whispered, tugging at Eden's sleeve. 'He looks just like the Prince of Wales!'

It took a moment for Eden to realise where Susannah was pointing. When she did, her eyes narrowed. Standing by the front door was the book-thief from this afternoon.

His resemblance to the Prince was only passing at best. The

tousled blonde hair was like his, maybe, and maybe something about the mouth, but the physical similarity ended there. They did share that graceful casualness... but then the playboy didn't look quite so casual this evening. She saw a shadow play over the striking features that seemed almost anxious. He appeared to be scanning the foyer for something. Some kind of trouble, no doubt.

'Ahh... the divine comedian,' Eden murmured to herself, making a mental note to keep an eye on the inventory. He moved into the nave with his hat and a moment later returned, his eyes scanning the foyer.

'What's wrong Eden? Do you know him?'

'Not at all.'

'Well, that's a good job anyhow, because it looks like he's found what he's come for.' She nodded as a woman emerged from the washroom and crossed the lobby to greet him.

'So, it does.'

'And I knew it!' Susannah confided giddily. 'The moment I saw him I figured that's what she come for. I put her coat away just now. She's French. Don't you think she looks like a film star?'

And an appropriate counterpart for him, Eden noted drily. The woman was dazzling, and made little attempt to hide it. Her hair and hemline were both fashionably short; the gown a clinging silver that showed off shapely calves and ankles, and hair a shade of black that glittered like jet in the gaslight.

The young man seemed to know her. He smiled thinly as she approached and kissed the pale cheeks. She was probably as young as he, but even at this distance Eden saw that her eye cosmetics were heavy in the style that had become so popular lately. He opened the door for her, into the Reading Room.

'Did you see that gown?' Susannah's eyes were shining. 'Those are silver bugle beads.'

'Really.'

"Really," she says. Have you any idea what those things cost? I'd give my eye teeth for a frock like that, or hair like that, for that matter.' She tugged at an unruly curl.

'Ah, it's no use. Well, go on then, I haven't got all night. I've got to shove off, or I'll miss the train to Hammersmith. My Clive'll think I've run off with some other bloke.' She hopped off the stool and gave a wistful look toward the Reading Room.

'Aren't they handsome though?'

'Quite,' Eden murmured. She picked up the stack of books and headed into the nave.

There turned out to be only a few people at the study tables. Two elderly ladies thanked her and said they would leave momentarily. A distracted man in very thick-rimmed spectacles glanced up at the clock and slipped across the lobby and through the Reading Room door, careful to stay clear of the couple. The old man who had been standing in the foyer told her he was waiting for Mr Dawson.

She stopped long enough to grab the *Weatherby Report* from the desk and then paused before the glass Reading Room doors. Through them she could see the couple in deep conversation. The woman stood by the divan near the back centre of the room, partially obscured by the shelves. Her companion fiddled with a cigarette case as he leaned casually against the mantelpiece. It was only when an elderly woman opened the doors to creep out nervously that Eden realised their voices were raised in anger.

'Do not be flippant with me, Simon!'

'Flippant? I'm wounded, old thing. I've been hanging on your every word. Why wouldn't I, after all?'

'You must please just help me. I only ask this one thing, and then everything will be alright.'

'Will it?'

'Yes.' She spoke in lightly accented English. 'When the play is a success, we can go to New York.'

‘How lovely for you.’

‘I assure you. It is quite serious,’ she said.

‘Oh, that I don’t dispute. Quite serious, indeed. Got a millionaire on tenterhooks, have you?’

‘Do not be absurd. If you had had more discretion, it would not be so urgent.’

‘How do you figure that?’

She hesitated and shook her head. ‘No. I have said too much already.’

His tone grew carelessly hard. ‘Oh, don’t be opaque, Isabelle darling. It doesn’t at all suit you. Your charm has always been in your obviousness.’

‘I will think you would be glad to see me finished,’ she said, her voice trembling just the slightest bit, with some unspoken emotion. ‘You left me in Paris, Simon. I did not drive you out.’

‘Yes, of course. That must have been you on the dock, waving at me to stay.’

‘I did not want you to go.’

‘Considering the state you were in, my dear, I doubt very much you even noticed I had gone.’

‘How can you say such a thing?’

‘I know you.’

This seemed to touch a nerve, for the woman stared at him as if she had been struck. The brittle expression faltered, and she dropped to the divan with a muffled sort of whimper, bringing a hand up to cover her eyes. After what seemed like a very long moment, the man crushed out his cigarette with a muffled oath, and Eden saw him cross to kneel beside her. Their voices dropped.

With their attention elsewhere, she slid past the reading area and moved to the display case against the west wall. A glance back told her they had not noticed her. He had taken the woman’s hand, and they were speaking in low tones. The woman was nodding and talking in earnest.

Eden set the heavy manuscript down on the bookshelf, trying not to eavesdrop any more. There was a small ring of keys hanging from a cord around her neck, and she began sorting through it for the case key, which she then inserted into the top of the glass case. She was lifting the top frame when the voices erupted again into the quiet.

'Christ, Isabelle! You can't be bloody serious.' the man's voice broke loudly into the room, causing a startled Eden to nearly drop the glass lid on her hand. He had gone quite stark, Eden saw, as she peered cautiously back around the corner.

'Be quiet!' the woman hissed. 'Please, Simon! You must help me. You must.'

'Why? You're the one who's tunneled your way into it! Dig yourself out.'

He had walked away from the woman, and stopped to stand against the armchair nearest Eden. Before she could duck back again, his eyes met hers around the side of the bookshelf. Eden felt rather than saw the flash of recognition, and she quickly turned back to the case.

The woman had also risen by now, and commanded his attention back with an entreaty. 'Yes, I was foolish. Simon, I know you will not believe me, but I am very sorry for this. For all of it.'

'Are you?' He seemed to have forgotten Eden's presence as soon as he'd registered it. 'Well, thanks awfully. Now I can sleep nights.'

The woman's voice lowered in anger. 'Then if you will not grant me forgiveness, at least grant me an answer. I have not got all the evening to waste, Simon. I am late as it is, and that is your fault.'

'You shouldn't have come here, Isabelle.'

Eden had just realised with dawning horror that there was no room in the case for the manuscript she held. Across the room by the windows, the man with the thick-rimmed specta-

cles was keeping his head down, as well. She was bitterly regretting having come in to the Reading Room at all. She peeked around the corner again, making up her mind to retreat past them when the Frenchwoman noticed her.

‘Who is that?’ she demanded through the bookshelves, then stepped forward to view Eden more clearly. ‘Come out of there. What do you want?’ The eyes were chillingly light and piercing, like an animal’s. Her delicate nostrils, too, flared with emotion.

Eden cast about for something to say, both arms pulling the *Weatherby Report* tightly to her chest. ‘Yes. I—I’m sorry to interrupt, but I did want you to know the Library will be closing in ten minutes....’

‘Yes. Now you have told us.’ The words were hard and dismissive. ‘You may go.’

Even such an unkind dismissal was welcome to Eden’s ears. She considered herself lucky to escape and was moving quickly for the door when the man touched her arm.

‘Wait,’ he said, looking at his companion. His mouth twisted in a bitter sort of amusement. ‘Don’t you want a witness, old thing?’

‘For what?’ the brunette snapped.

‘My decision. Isn’t that how these things are done? A signed affidavit and a witness? I seem to recall having them once before.’

The woman was silent for a moment, her silver gown rippling in the gas light, her cheeks high with colour and her eyes simmering. Eden instinctively shrank back as one fine eyebrow lifted.

‘Are you trying to be amusing, Simon?’

‘Do I look amused?’ he shook his head and dropped his hand from Eden’s arm. ‘Oh, never mind, Isabelle. I’m too caught up in the old habits. The truth is, I don’t really care who you open your legs for, now. I wonder if I ever did.’

There was an ominous, surreal moment of silence, which was broken by the sound of a slap. When it produced no real reaction, the woman slapped him again.

His expression didn't change.

He ran a hand across his mouth; there was blood where Isabelle's ring had cut his lip. 'Right,' he said, tonelessly.

For a moment, all Eden could register was the red smear marring the blue stone and glinting gold of Isabelle's ring. Then the spell broke, and she fled into the foyer.

Susannah was waiting for her on the other side of the glass. 'I say, Eden. Are you all right?'

'Yes, I'm fine.' She heard the woman's angry, accented voice swell again, behind her.

'Are you quite sure, dear?' One of the elderly ladies from the study area touched her on the sleeve.

'Yes, yes, it was nothing at all.' Eden replied, backing distractedly toward the desk. 'Everyone can go now. Please.'

'So, you do know him!'

'I don't know anyone, Susannah.'

'I saw him talking to you, Eden— he held your hand!'

'Susannah! I told you—'

'Miss Brior, what is it? Miss Firth?' Mr Dawson had emerged from the stairwell with his coat. 'Has something happened?'

'I should say something has happened,' Susannah's tone was jubilant, 'Eden's been hiding a paramour and his jealous mistress!'

Eden stared at her.

'A paramour?' Mr Dawson questioned absently. He beckoned to his friend.

'Susannah, he's not my—'

But Mr Dawson wasn't listening; he pointed at her hands. 'Are those the Weatherby papers?'

She realised she was still carrying the heavy manuscript under one arm. ‘Yes, I was just returning them—’

‘To the Reading Room?’

‘Yes, Mr Dawson,’ she replied edgily.

‘Well, they don’t belong in there, anymore. They’re part of the Shrewsbury collection, now. They belong downstairs in the bookvault.’

‘I know where they’re kept,’ she replied tightly. But he was right; they did belong in the vault, now. The voices from the Reading Room had faded again and there was a dull ache behind her eyes.

‘If you’ll excuse me, I’m just going to get a glass of water. I’ll be right back.’

She left them staring after her.



It took her fifteen minutes to drink the water and gather her wits. By the time she climbed back up the stairs, he was on his way down with his friend in tow.

‘Oh, there you are, Miss Brior. This is my colleague, Mr Markey.’

They exchanged greetings and Mr Dawson told her he had left the keys on the front desk. ‘I’ve locked everything. All that’s left is the returns to do.’

‘Has everyone gone?’

‘Yes, I believe so. Susannah had a last look before she left. Oh, yes – and I opened the vault for you to refile that report. Don’t forget to close it, will you? It’ll lock behind you. Come along, Mr Markey. Goodnight Miss Brior’ They passed her on the narrow stairs and disappeared.

She glanced at the cart of returns in the hallway. There was rather a pile to be got through. When she got back to the dark-

ened foyer, she sat at the desk and put her head in her hands. Her head still ached but at least she was alone.

'Excuse me.'

She jerked her head up. It was him.

'How did you get in here?' she nearly demanded.

'Initially?' Simon replied, his voice echoing in the foyer. 'I walked in the front door.'

'But, we're closed.'

'Yes, I'd gathered,' He shrugged a shoulder toward the lavatory. 'I was just washing up,' He touched his lip and a shadow of discomfort crossed his face at last. There was a long awkward pause before he continued.

'Look here, I did want to say... that is... I didn't mean to involve you in...' 'His discomfiture should have made Eden feel better, but didn't. Somehow, it only made her more anxious than before.

She cut him off as quickly as she could. 'Forget it, please. It's none of my business.'

'No, I suppose not...' He seemed about to speak again; but apparently thought better of it and turned toward the door. He tried the handle.

He tried it again, then looked back at her. 'It's locked.'

She wanted to crawl under the desk. From first to last this day had been dismal, and each passing minute was only making it infinitely worse. She placed her fountain pen on the blotter and struggled to keep her tone calmly professional.

'Yes, you'll have to go out the back, then.'

She rose and gathered up the Weatherby manuscript. 'I was just going to bring this thing down to the bookvault, so if you come with me, I can show you the way out.'

He followed her to the stairs, then stopped.

'Look, I am sorry about my behaviour in there. I was trying to make a point with her – it was a dashed ugly scene, and I shouldn't have involved you.'

He looked so genuinely contrite that Eden felt herself thawing a bit.

‘It’s alright,’ she said.

He offered his hand. ‘I’m Simon Cross.’

Eden nodded. ‘Eden Brior.’

‘Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Brior.’

‘Well, let’s not exaggerate, Mr Cross,’ she murmured. But she did give him a small smile in return, which seemed to restore his good humour.

‘That looks heavy,’ he said. ‘May I?’

Over her protest, he insisted on helping her carry the papers down the stairs to the bookvault. She was showing him where they went, on shelves at the far side, when the door slammed shut behind them.

Eden didn’t need to check the door to know.

They were locked in.