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SPHERE

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Prologue



The story starts with a scandal that I thought would end my life. Fortunately, *my* scandal didn't kill anyone. In fact, it pales in comparison with what I went on to discover at Rose Hall.

Thus far, the way I see it, in any good life you need to die several times to really lead a life worth living. There are little deaths and there are big deaths. My tale has both – and the real tragedy would be if this story were to die with me.

I was lying when I swore I would take this secret to my grave. I had no right to promise that.

*Granger's Bookbinders,
143 Long Millgate,
Manchester*

*Rose Hall,
Lancashire,
20th November, 1896*

Dear Mr Granger,

I trust this note finds you in good health and that business is as steady as when last we met some years ago.

I write to you with an unusual commission. I will not trouble you here with the details of my current circumstances. Since the untimely death of my beloved wife, Lady Persephone, it seems the fates are in conspiracy against me. Suffice it to say that I find myself now in need of your excellent services and on a far grander scale than before.

The library at Rose Hall is, as you are aware, extensive. I am proud of the rarity and quality of the books it now houses, a collection that I have painstakingly curated over many years. I now find myself in the unhappy position of seeking a buyer for my collection. Many of the books, due to their age and mishandling by less cautious owners, are badly in need of restoration. There are perhaps some two hundred such artifacts. The nature of my circumstances make it necessary that this work be carried out to the highest quality and with the greatest rapidity. Since no bookbinder in the North West possesses skills equal to yours, I thought of you at once.

*Please inform me as soon as you are able whether it
is within your means to accept such a commission.*

*Your obliged and affectionate friend,
Lord F. Belfield*

Chapter One



I fell in love with the feel of the cotton before I fell in love with the books. Leather felt too masculine and reptilian. Cloth was so much warmer and didn't slip out of my hands as easily. As a child I played underneath the tables and made toy families from the scraps that fell at my father's boots.

He would never talk to me about where the cloth we used came from, nor the contents of the books we worked on. There were a lot of things my father wouldn't tell me, and rather than keeping me ignorant, his silence made me more curious. And fortunately, I was surrounded by the means to nourish that curiosity.

Most of the time we spent together as I grew up was in silence, folding, bevelling and smoothing. I sometimes wished my fingers could be as thick as his; he didn't grimace when schooling leather and cloth into precise lines under his digital

tutelage. I tried to be like my father, but all the books he left lying around gave me opinions.

I arrived at the front door of Rose Hall looking more ragged than I would have liked. My breath was far from fresh, and the hair pins and clips I had used to imprison the frizzier strands had been loosened by the bumps of the rickety carriage. I had been dropped at the top of a tree-lined drive that was at least a quarter mile long, if not more. The December mists obscured my vision, and I could only just make out the shape of a grand house, the likes of which I had only really seen on biscuit tins in the windows of Manchester's new department store, though I had imagined them as I read Brontë, Austen and Radcliffe. Even with the curls of mist in the air, I could tell this was a very English dwelling. As I approached it my feet slipped and shifted on the gravel, unused to navigating such terrain after only walking on cobbled streets and across wooden floors.

Lord Francis Belfield of Rose Hall had been my father's long-standing customer. He was the only man I'd ever seen look luxurious without any air of pomposity. The men of Manchester were not known for wearing velvet, so the sheen of his jackets always marked him out as distinguished. It felt completely fitting that Rose Hall was an ode to symmetry and a more tasteful example of the grandiosity of the mid-eighteenth century. It was an early Georgian home of Lancashire sandstone. Even though my father hadn't mentioned it, the period of the building's erection and the mercantile success of Lord Francis Belfield were all I needed to know to deduce that the building and its grounds had been purchased with plantation wealth.

I knocked on the forest-green door and left my suitcases on the ground, hoping that looked more elegant than being strained down by the weight of my clothes, books and binding tools. In my pocket, my fingers found the folds of Lord Belfield's letter. I inhaled, recalling once more the story I had so carefully rehearsed.

The door opened and a pair of prominent blue eyes glared at me through the crack. 'Well?'

'Miss Florence Granger for Lord Francis Belfield, please.'

I took in the lines, too many for the face of someone who was still clearly a young man. The hand holding the door open was rough and calloused.

'He is expecting me,' I added.

'No 'e is not.'

I blinked, having not expected resistance this soon.

'I assure you I arrive here at the request of Lord Belfield himself. I am from Granger's of Manchester.'

The door widened and there stood a long-limbed boy of no more than twenty. His movements were almost feline. The way he handled the door without effort despite its apparent heaviness was quite a marvel.

'We are bookbinders. I've been sent to care for your master's collection.' I retrieved the letter from the pocket of my coat and held it out.

He made no move to take it, but instead chewed his bottom lip, realising there was truth to my words but clearly unconvinced by me. A female tradesperson at the door to Rose Hall was probably not a common occurrence.

'Young man, I excuse you of your impertinence, but I have

been travelling for some hours and would like to rest,' I told him, trying a sterner approach. 'Please fetch your master.'

'E don't rise before midday most days anymore. You can wait in the kitchens, if you like.'

Now it was my turn to falter. I had no way of assessing how appropriate this was. Should I be seated in the parlour? If I allowed myself to be taken to the kitchens, was I aligning myself with the downstairs staff? I was an artisan, not a servant. But a sharp ripple through my stomach made the decision for me.

'Very well, so long as your offer comes with a cup of tea.' I sighed and crouched down to pick up my suitcases.

'No, m'lady. I'll tek those.'

He ushered me into the reception hall, lifting my bags up to his sides as if they weighed nothing at all. The door chuffed itself closed behind us with a low groan. The darkness of the perimeter indicated that there was no draught coming through, nor a single sliver of light. A curtain hung to the right of it and the man gave it a sharp tug. It concealed the entrance entirely once pulled across, an odd choice. It gave the sense of being sealed into the house somehow – not being able to see where one could escape.

Stepping into the hall, I was compelled to look up. It was a huge atrium, with dark green textured walls and candles placed at regular intervals which gave the illusion of a warm, close space. He led me over a black-tiled floor, underneath a vast yet delicate brass chandelier aglow with coppery bulbs. At the back of the hall, under the bifurcated staircase, he opened a hidden door which led down to the kitchen. Before I had reached the bottom the herbaceous and deeply woody

smells of the kitchen came wafting up to greet me. It was divine. But when we reached the flagstoned room I saw there was nothing on the stove; I could only imagine that months of cooking in a room with such small windows had baked the scent into the walls.

I was seated at a wooden table facing an array of copper pans and white jugs with the high windows behind me. It was clearly a kitchen intended for many staff, but there was none of the expected bustle. Where was everyone? I shifted uncomfortably as I cast about for something to say, before realising that I didn't know the young man's name.

'What is your name?'

'Wesley.'

'Wesley what?'

He gave me a strange look. 'Bacchus. Wesley Bacchus. I'm the footman.'

He was telling me that as a footman, his surname did not matter. Of course there was no reason that I, as a crafts-woman, should know the intricacies of these hierarchies, but I sat in silence, not wanting to betray myself further by speaking again.

I was grateful when the cook came in some minutes later – from a pantry, I imagined – but she barely looked in my direction, merely banging a pan of water onto the stove. My stomach growled something fierce when she entered, almost as if my belly knew that I was meeting the person in charge of feeding the house.

I waited for her to acknowledge me, while Wesley continued to look on with a smile playing about his lips. But she only retrieved a mug and a caddy, before placing a steaming tea

in front of me with a snort. My shoulders slumped. I hadn't expected to be treated as a lady, but had hoped for at least some respect. Would my father have received such a poor greeting? I sipped the tea, grateful for its sweetness and warmth as the cook clattered about with her back to me. As I finished, she returned to the table with a thick slice of ham sandwiched between two slices of bread. There was also a large apple on the plate and in her other hand was a pewter cup of water. She'd clearly heard my stomach. But her face showed no compassion as she laid the blessed offering on the table.

With one last assessing glance at me, Wesley left, and the cook returned to the stove, making it clear she had no intention of speaking to me. I decided I could forget my manners just as she had hers, and devoured the most delicious meal I'd had in weeks. Salty ham on pillowy bread, with a delightfully sour apple and water that tasted like it came from the purest spring to cleanse my palate. After greedily wiping the crumbs off the plate with one of my fingers, I took out *A Christmas Carol* from my coat pocket and started reading until the words on the page began to blur. The beast of a carriage I had travelled in overnight had creaked with the strain of being drawn up even the slightest incline. Combined with the cold that jolted me from slumber, I had only been able to sleep in fits and bursts.

I awoke, suddenly, with my head on my crossed arms in front of me and my wrist soaking wet from my dribble. The plate and pewter cup had been taken away and Wesley was standing above me, a mocking smile about his thickish lips.

'I'm sorry to wake you, Miss. Lord Belfield says he'll see you now.'

Wesley led me back upstairs, and down a corridor. As we passed a tall, gilded mirror, I stopped, horrified by my reflection. My hair, after only days left to its own devices, was now once again completely untamed. My eyes were bloodshot with fatigue and my skin was pale, making my freckles stand out. Hastily, I tried to force my frizzed hair back beneath its pins as Wesley stopped too. He watched me with amusement until I had done the best I could, and we continued on our way.

I thought back to the last time I had seen Lord Francis Belfield. His best features were his long fingers, which were always encased in tight kid gloves that he never took off. Oh, and the smell of him! Rich pepper with a botanical soapy undertone, which always impressed me. Not in a way that would make me swoon. He's not the kind of man a girl like me is meant to fall in love with. No, what I felt was awe. A man of his fortune had surely seen more of the world than most. He'd have tales of St Petersburg, Constantinople and Siam. If only I could ask him. The need to convince him of my employability made doing so inappropriate.

The door opened onto the parlour, and immediately I could see that the man I remembered from our shop was very different from the man who sat in front of me. He was wearing a turmeric-coloured silk waistcoat embroidered with indigo plants, paired with dark trousers. He had clearly dressed hastily, and a thread towards the bottom of his trousers was loose and trailing on the floor by his feet. I inhaled deeply but could not catch the spiced vegetal scent that usually accompanied his presence. He was much thinner than when I had last seen him, and his eyes drooped as if he had suffered many a sleepless night. He stood up from his seat to shake my

hand but returned to it quickly as if he couldn't bear to hold himself up for too long.

'My name is Florence Granger, sir,' I began, but he waved a hand.

'Yes, yes, I remember you. But why has your father sent you all this way without an escort? It must have been a frightful journey.'

'Oh, no, Lord Belfield. The journey was fine.' I cleared my throat to make space for the bigger lie. 'My father sent me to complete the work on your collection that you requested.'

He looked at me aggrieved. Offended, even. The way his forehead crumpled made me more aware of the thinning hair at his temples. Even dishevelled, he was no less handsome. However, I pondered whether he might feel a sense of loss for the way he used to look. On my previous viewings of him, he looked like someone who was used to being seen and spoken of as a very handsome 'young' man. Although he wasn't superbly weathered, he now had the face of a man who had endured. A sad wisdom brought the tops of his eyelids a little lower. His jawline was a bit less tenderly set because his teeth were more used to being gritted together from stress. I supposed it was grief. He had lost his wife less than a year before, after all, leaving him with only his son.

'Why on earth would he do that? This hasn't even been discussed. Had he accepted the commission, I would have had the books sent to Manchester.'

Ah. This I had not considered. I remembered the words on the letter. I was sure that it was an invitation to stay and restore the library. My mouth was dry as I prepared my next lie.

'Lord Belfield, you are one of our best customers. We would like to come to you as it will save you the transportation of the works back and forth. If I have any need for extra materials, they can be quickly sent here without any trouble.'

His brow furrowed and he clenched and unclenched his right fist.

'Miss Granger. It's inappropriate for a young woman to be sent to work in the house of a recently widowed gentleman. It just won't do, I'm afraid. It's . . . I must decline. I'm sorry for your having been sent all this way but I will of course arrange for your transportation back to Manchester.'

I was stunned that he stood up to shake my hand. Considering he was rejecting me and, unbeknownst to him, casting me back into sure-fire destitution, I would have expected more of a gruff dismissal than this tender farewell. Before I had time to choke them back, tears began freely flowing down my face. If I could have stopped myself from crying, I would have.

'My dear. Honestly, what's the matter? It's not more than a day's travel to get back to Manchester, surely. Please do not be so distressed. I will send the books on after you. Here, take a seat. I'll have more tea sent up.'

I shook my head as I sat in the chair beside his, declining his offer of tea I feared I could not keep down.

'What? You must tell me, what troubles you so?'

I hadn't prepared for this. I thought he might resist a woman working to restore his collection alone, and request my father come and join me. I never expected a refusal to even entertain the notion of my staying.

'Lord Belfield, I came here because my father was too proud

to ask you for this arrangement himself. His eyesight is failing him, and he knows not how long he can continue working.'

I was still able to tell the story I had prepared, albeit a more rambled version, and emotion brought my accent out more strongly.

'Sending more than two hundred books back and forth could take up to a year. We were hoping that if I came and worked up here the task could be completed more efficiently.' My voice broke, but his gaze on me had softened so I continued.

'Please, Lord Belfield. I beseech you to reconsider. I will work for a reduced fee, and in half the time if you let me stay.' This line was delivered with a very slow blink, knowing it would emphasise the tears that still clung to my lashes. He leaned back in his chair and reached for his pipe on the side table.

'I have the utmost respect for your father, but how do I know you would be as capable a binder?' He inhaled his pipe deeply, considering me. I wasn't afraid of being appraised carnally, but I realised that was not what he was doing. He was assessing my skill. Looking to see whether I had inherited my father's thick, leather-accustomed fingers or if I would be too dainty to wield the tools necessary to restore an entire collection to a condition worthy of sale.

'The usual place for a book to break is along the joint – the working part of the book. When this happens, the book needs re-backing.' I spotted a book on a side table and strode over to it, berating myself for my boldness but knowing this was the last attempt I could make to secure my place here. 'May I?'

His eyes narrowed but he made no moves to stop me, so I

lifted the book into the air and continued. 'This is in desperate need of attention. You see how the book components are at risk of separation? For this I would recommend lifting the old cloth of the spine and rebinding the back of the book in a matching material.'

'It is a very old book, and well thumbed. But the spine has an inscription, a priceless one, and I would not want it replaced.'

'Of course, I would trim the original spine to fit the new one in a way that none of the information is lost.' I reached into my pocket. 'I did a similar restoration on this book, for my father's mother before she passed. It was only a copy of *A Christmas Carol*, but she loved it so and couldn't bear to lose it after it fell in a bucket of water as she mopped the floors. It is important that the new spine be created from non-perishable materials for the sake of preservation, and though I have carried it with me since her death, the spine is no more worn.'

He took the book from me and examined it. I could barely draw breath as he opened the first page, then the last, and turned a few pages with excruciating gradualness.

'How long will the restoration take you?'

'No more than six months Lord Belfield,' I said meekly.

'Make it three.'

Three months was scarcely enough time to get back on my feet, let alone complete what was sure to be the biggest task I had undertaken on my own. I took in his demeanour, his steeled look and set jaw, and I knew that this was it; he would not be negotiated with. The offer was a three-month stay or a carriage back to destitution tonight. I nodded.

'I will pay you half the rate I originally offered, but you will have board and food while you complete the task at hand. Wesley will arrange you a room in the attic, with the other servants.'

'That's perfectly appropriate.'

He gave me a small smile and stood, indicating I was being dismissed. 'I will personally let you into the library every morning barring Sunday. You'll be wanting to go to the parish church?'

'Yes, my lord. Of course. Thank you.'

'Wesley will take you tomorrow. I've not attended since my wife passed.'

So grief was the reason for the change in him. I had never met Lady Persephone, but I had wondered about her after meeting Lord Belfield. Was she as beautiful as the woman of the Greek myth, who found herself caught between two worlds? What would it have been like to be married to a man with the whole world at his feet? Did she read the contents of his grand collection, and did they discuss the books together as my father would never deign to with me? And how did she die? I was curious about her, but all I said was:

'I'm sorry for your loss, my lord.'

He waved away my sympathy as he pulled a cord beside the door.

'Monday morning. Seven a.m. sharp.'

Wesley glided in, regarding me with narrowed eyes before gesturing that he would be escorting me to my room. I couldn't tell if this expression meant he was displeased or intrigued at my success.

As we mounted the staircase I noticed how tall and slight

Wesley was. His jacket was pulled taut with the strain of carrying my bags, revealing the tiniest hole at the shoulder seam. The butlers in the novels I read were always sticklers for such things as having one's uniform pressed and immediately mended when necessary. If there were a butler in the house, then I was sure Wesley would have been admonished for the tear.

By the middle of the staircase I was beginning to lose my composure and get a bit breathless. As I got to the top step, I was lagging behind by quite a few paces and I paused to take in the majesty of the entryway from above. As it was daytime, with light sources coming from different directions, the dark colours of the walls and carpets were far from gloomy. Such a large space, but so little echo because of the padding that came from the green carpets and heavy dark curtains. Textures upon textures, so that the atrium had the real feeling of welcoming you into a cosseted space of snug homeliness, even though this was one of the hugest private spaces I had ever been in. Moments later we had left that behind for the labyrinthine custard-coloured corridors that led to my bedroom on the upper levels.

Wesley was still expressionless as we entered my dim sanctuary. After everything I had endured recently, the last thing I needed was a new enemy; so I smiled widely at him, thanking him profusely as he set my things down and left me in the small attic room. The space was quite bare, with low-hanging wooden beams, but it was clean, dry, and for now, mine.