

BEYOND

— THE —

GROVE

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ONE



THE WOMAN WITH THE GREEN pulsing scepter did not belong in a library. She did, however, peek my devilishly bored mind into a semblance of curiosity.

She leaned against the library shelf, one arm propped against a row of books and one leg cocked against the foot of the bookshelf. She read a strange book titled *Hearthwood Grove*, which to my wonder, I had not set eyes on until that day. I had memorized every book carried by that dull hunk of brick where I spent most of my waking hours, floating from one dusty aisle to another dusty aisle, trying not to sneeze on the fumes of idle work and undo pay.

The book looked ancient. I smelled mold seeping from its bind from the end of the aisle where I paused to admire her strangeness. I felt very much that she had transpired from the book she read, so I went up to her and I said,

“Hello, can I be of service?”

Her velvet hat tilted over one side of her sharp nose. She tipped her chin and looked at my mouth in

a way that made me feel quite uncomfortable, yet quite flattered in the same pitter-pat. Her green eyes dazzled like a far-off planet.

“Actually,” she said, “I am late for an appointment.” She snapped the book closed. “I lost track of the time. Libraries do get the better of me.”

I placed an arm on the bookshelf, blocking her exit in a most forward stance unbecoming of a lady. I felt an urge to make her stay. “Did you wander the aisle on popular fiction?”

She shelved the book. “I am not a popular fiction sort of girl. I enjoy the philosophers.”

“Enchiridion, perhaps? We have an entire section on Ancient Greek scholars.”

“I prefer Mary Astell.”

“Oh, Astell. My—”

“Truly, I must be off.”

She snatched her scepter, tugged her hat a good day and trotted around my failed attempt to hold her captive. As she left, one hand fluttered out in a mystical way, touching the binding of every book she passed. She flashed a smile over her shoulder right before turning the corner and disappearing, and I slumped against the bookshelf, hand on my rattling chest.

Who is she? I wondered.

I resigned myself to never finding out. Women of such caliber and mystery rarely traipsed into the confines of a most unfortunate, falling apart library being held up by one cranky old man and his resistant librarian assistant.

Sighing, I straightened the books on the shelf where she had just leaned.

My said employer, Mr. Dalt, darted down the aisle with his beady eyes and his receding hairline. His shoulders stooped from years of sitting in his great office chair and reading the latest while I organized his shelves and helped his guests.

“Miss Watts,” he said, “Are you busy?”

“Not at the moment, Mr. Dalt.”

“Excellent. I advise you make use of your time by alphabetizing the volumes on the histories of the Greek.”

I noted where the mysterious woman had placed *Hearthwood Grove*. It knew a very old binding, indeed—a forest green with gold lines, curling up at the edges of the cover. Written

by—the author’s name had been scratched out. I was curious about it. How had it come to be in the possession of Mr. Dalt and the claws of a library in the midst of London? It was not the sort of book Mr. Dalt was known to acquire.

“Miss Watts,” he snapped at me. “Have you gone into one of your dazes?”

I managed a frail, tired smile. “Why, I just organized those volumes last week.”

He blew into his hanky. “Do it again, will you? There were children playing in that aisle just this morning. I should hope nothing is misplaced.”

Mr. Dalt hated children.

As I reluctantly carried out my employer’s instructions by disorganizing the volumes on Greece only to reorganize them, I found myself tracing little details about my brief encounter with the woman. Her sharp eyes. Her strange scepter. Her preference of Mary Astell—a philosopher whose position on good society was dear to my

sister Lily and me. As I worked in the gray of the dimly lit library, I hummed a little tune.

*The spider crawled under the bed
under the bed it found a door
under the door it turned to smoke
and never was seen again
never was seen again.*

I spent the rest of the day wondering where she might have come from, and if I might ever cross paths with her again.

TWO



THAT NIGHT, I SULKED home with an umbrella under arm, my pace equivalent to a slug. London purred around me in her sultry, persuasive attitude. She strolled up to a group of rowdy gents, in her saucy luxurious stride, and asked them to share the jingle in their pockets, and they trailed behind her like sick pups into the nearest tavern. She whistled to and fro the streets, restless and curvaceously attractive, splashing me with the jargon of her horse-drawn carriages and the slop of Londoners shouting back and forth, selling London to fellow Londoners, selling newspapers, selling music, selling affluence and propriety and lavish affairs in decedent apartments. She strummed with pretty parties and private balls and invite-only events because London adored shiny things.

As I turned onto my sliver of a street—complete with overhung trees and decrepit apartments—a shadow crossed the intersection directly in front of me. The presence of it shifted with speed and little form, leaving a permanent tremor in my legs. Fear caught in my chest, and my fingers involuntarily curled around my umbrel-