

A woman in a vibrant red dress and a dark headscarf stands in profile on a stone staircase in a grand, vaulted library. She is holding a book. The background features high ceilings with intricate frescoes and rows of bookshelves filled with books. The lighting is warm and dramatic, highlighting the architectural details.

The

PERSONAL LIBRARIAN

A Novel

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MARIE BENEDICT

**VICTORIA
CHRISTOPHER MURRAY**

"That Belle denied her true identity in order to protect herself and her family from racial persecution speaks not only to her time but also to ours....
This is a compelling and important story."

—THERESE ANNE FOWLER, *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Good Neighborhood*

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For the two sides of Belle:
Belle da Costa Greene
and
Belle Marion Greener

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Chapter 1

NOVEMBER 28, 1905

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

The Old North bell tolls the hour, and I realize that I'll be late. I long to break into a sprint, my voluminous skirts lifted, my legs flying along the Princeton University pathways. But just as I gather the heavy material, I hear Mama's voice: *Belle, be a lady at all times*. I sigh; a lady would never run.

I release the fabric and slow down as I weave through Princeton's leafy Gothic landscape, designed to look like Cambridge and Oxford. I know I must do nothing to draw any kind of extra attention. By the time I pass Blair Arch, my stride is quick but acceptable for a lady.

It's been five years since I left our New York City apartment for this sleepy New Jersey college town, and the quiet is still unnerving. On the weekends, I wish I could return to the energy of New York, but the sixty cents for a train ticket is outside our family's budget. So, I send money home instead.

As I duck under a crenellated tower, I moderate my pace so I won't be breathless when I arrive. *You are at Princeton University. You must take extra care working at that all-male institution. Be cautious, never do anything to stand out*. Even though she's nearly sixty miles away, Mama insinuates herself into my thoughts.

Pushing the heavy oak door slowly to minimize its loud creak, I pad as quietly as my calfskin boots allow, across the marble foyer before I sidle into the office I share with two other librarians. The room is empty, and I exhale in relief. If sweet-natured Miss McKenna saw me arrive late, it would have been of no import, but with hood-eyed, nosy Miss Adams, I could never be certain she wouldn't mention my offense at some future time to our superior.

I remove my coat and hat, careful to smooth my rebellious curly hair back into place. Tucking my somber navy skirt beneath me, I slide onto my chair. Within minutes, the office door flies open, slamming against the wood-paneled wall, and I jump. It is my only dear friend, fellow librarian, and housemate, Gertrude Hyde. As the niece of the esteemed head of purchasing for the library, Charlotte Martins, she can breach the quiet of the library's hallowed halls without fear of repercussions. An ebullient twenty-three-year-old with ginger hair and bright eyes, no one makes me laugh as she does.

“Sorry to make you jump, dear Belle. I guess I owe you two apologies now, instead of the single one I’d intended. First, we abandoned you this morning, which undoubtedly led to your lateness,” she says with a mischievous smile and a glance at the wall clock, “and now, I’ve given you a fright.”

“Don’t be silly. The fault is mine. I should have put aside that letter to my mother and walked to campus with you and Charlotte. Miss Martins, I mean,” I correct myself.

Most days, Charlotte, Gertrude, and I walk together from their large family home on University Drive, where I have a room and share meals with Charlotte, Gertrude, and the rest of their family who live in the house as well. From the first, Charlotte and Gertrude have welcomed me into their home and social circles with warmth and generosity and have provided me with abundant guidance at work. I cannot imagine what my time in Princeton would have been like without them.

“Belle, why are you fussing about what to call Aunt Charlotte? There’s nobody in here but you and me,” Gertrude mock scolds me.

I don’t say what I’m thinking. That Gertrude doesn’t need to assess every single moment of every single day against societal standards to ensure her behavior passes muster. She has no need to analyze her words, her walk, her manner, but I do. Even with Gertrude, I must act with care, particularly given the heightened scrutiny in this university town, which operates as if it lies in the segregated South rather than in the supposedly more progressive North.

The distinctive clip of Miss Adams’s shoes sounds in the hallway outside my office door, and Gertrude’s skirt rustles as she moves to leave. She has as much fondness for my office mate as I do, and she’ll skedaddle before she can get locked into a conversation.

Before she exits the office altogether, she turns back to me, whispering, “Are you still free for the philosophy lecture tonight?”

Since Woodrow Wilson assumed the presidency of Princeton University three years ago and instituted all sorts of scholastic reform, the number of lectures open to staff and members of the community has increased. While Gertrude and I revel in being included in the academic life of the campus, I loathe certain of Wilson’s other decisions, such as maintaining Princeton as a whites-only university when all the other Ivy League schools have admitted colored folks. But I would never voice aloud these views.

Instead, I say, “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”



The quiet of the stacks wraps around me like a soft blanket. I relax into the subdued hush of patrons turning pages and the scent of leather bindings. My long days spent in the company of medieval manuscripts and early printed books calm and delight me. Imagining the labors of the first printing press users as they memorialized the English language and broadly disseminated its literature through the meticulous work of placing the type letter by letter, transforming empty pages into beautiful text to inspire worshippers and readers, transports me beyond the limitations of this time and place, just as Papa always believed. To him, the written word could act as an invitation to free thought and the broader world, and nowhere was that more true than in the dawn of the printed word, where—for the first time—that invitation could be made to the masses instead of a select few.

“Miss Greene.” I hear a soft voice from beyond the stacks.

Two simple words, but my visitor’s modulated tone and distinctive accent give him away, and anyway, I’ve been waiting for him.

“Good day, Mr. Morgan,” I reply, turning in his direction.

Even though I’m talking softly, Miss Scott glances up from the circulation desk with a disapproving scowl. It isn’t so much the volume of my speech as the pleasantness of my relationship with the fellow librarian and collection benefactor that vexes her.

While Mr. Junius Morgan is ostensibly a banker, he has generously donated dozens of ancient and medieval manuscripts to the university, which is why he also holds the titular position of associate head librarian. I’m convinced that Miss Scott thinks any sort of relationship between us—even the cordial, professional one we share—is beneath him.

A slight man, with wispy brown hair and a kindly expression behind his circular glasses, materializes. “How are you today, Miss Greene?”

“Well, sir. And yourself?” My tone is professional and reserved. He’s twenty minutes later than the time we’d mentioned, and I’d begun to think he’d forgotten about our appointment. But I would never dare mention his tardiness.

“I was going to take a gander at the Virgils, as we discussed yesterday. I wonder if you’d still care to accompany me. Assuming your duties and your interest permit, of course.”

Mr. Morgan, whom I think of as Junius in the privacy of my thoughts, knows that my zeal for the library’s most valuable collection is nearly as intense as his own and that none of my other tasks will stand in the way of the private viewing he has promised.

We share a passion for the ancient Roman poet Virgil. The library

houses fifty-two volumes of his poetry. My discussions with Junius about the dark voyages in *The Aeneid* and *The Odyssey* are some of the brightest moments in my days. While Junius admires Odysseus, I identify always with Aeneas, the Trojan refugee who desperately tries to fulfill his destiny in a world that holds no place for him. Aeneas was driven by duty, sacrificing for the good of others.

“I have cleared my schedule, sir.” I smile.

“Wonderful. If you’ll follow me.”

My skirts swish the oak floor as I follow Junius to the small, elegant room where the Virgils are housed. I have to inhale and restrain my foot from tapping as I wait for him to fish out a heavy key ring from his pocket.

Finally, he pushes the door open to reveal the glass cases holding the precious collection of rare books. There are only about one hundred and fifty printed books of Virgil’s poetry in existence. These volumes were all printed in the fifteenth century. Most of them have been donated by Junius.

I’ve seen these books only a few times before, while in the company of the restoration team. This is a holy moment.

Mr. Morgan’s voice worms its way into the sanctity of my thoughts. “Would you care to hold my favorite?”

Junius is carrying the Sweynheym and Pannartz copy of Virgil, the rarest of all the books. German clerics Conrad Sweynheym and Arnold Pannartz were two of the first users of the printing press in the fifteenth century, and the book he’s proffering is one of their press’s very first editions.

“May I?” I ask, incredulous at this opportunity.

“Of course.” His eyes are bright behind his spectacles. I suspect it’s a thrill for him to share his prize with one who cares equally about it.

I slide the proffered white gloves onto my hands. The book is heavier than I expected. I sit before its open pages. *How Papa would have relished this moment.* I think of my father, who introduced me to the rarefied world of art and manuscripts when I was only a girl.

One day, the beauty of your mind and the beauty of art will be as one, Papa had said once.

The memory of Papa’s words makes me smile as I turn the yellowed pages. I examine the hand-detailed letter *T* that marks the beginning of a page, marveling at the luster of its gold leaf. I am oblivious to Junius’s presence near me until he begins talking.

“I saw my uncle last evening.”

Junius doesn’t need to identify who his uncle is. Everyone at the library knows he is the nephew of the infamous financier J. P. Morgan,

which is exactly why I never mention him. I want Junius to understand that I appreciate him for his erudition alone.

“Ah?” I answer politely, never moving my eyes from the page.

“Yes, at the Grolier Club.”

I know the club he speaks of, by reputation anyway. Founded about twenty years ago, in 1884, the private club consists of moneyed bibliophiles whose main aim is to promote the scholarship and collection of books. I would adore a peek behind the closed doors of its Romanesque town house on East Thirty-Second Street. But as a woman, I’d never be admitted, and to those men, my gender would not be my only sin.

“Were you attending an interesting lecture?” I attempt to continue making small talk.

“Actually, Miss Greene, it wasn’t the lecture that was interesting.” Junius’s tone contains a quality unusual for him, bordering on playful.

Curious, I turn away from the Virgil. Junius’s placid face, always pleasant but always serious, has cracked open wide with a smile. It is a bit disconcerting, and as I lean away a little, I wonder what on earth is going on.

“No?” I ask. “The lecture wasn’t good?”

“The lecture was fine, but the most fascinating discussion of the evening was with my uncle about his personal art and manuscript collection. I advise him about it from time to time, as well as the new library he’s constructing for it right next door to his home in New York City.”

“Oh, yes,” I say with a small nod. “Is he considering an intriguing new acquisition?”

Junius pauses for a moment before he answers. “In a manner of speaking, I suppose he is in search of a new acquisition,” he says with a knowing chuckle. “I have recommended that he interview you for his newly created post of personal librarian.”

Chapter 2

DECEMBER 7, 1905

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

As the Broadway line trolley lurches its way uptown and nighttime New York City unfolds around me, I'm almost happy that Mr. Richardson's late-afternoon appearance in my office forced me to delay my train departure to seven o'clock. The sky is a moonless midnight blue, and yet New York City is bright and alive. I watch nattily dressed couples with linked arms saunter down the streets alongside young male students returning from the library or heading to the pubs, and newsboys calling out headlines as they try to sell their papers. Although I should be inured to the nighttime bustle after living in the city for over ten years before decamping to drowsy Princeton, the nocturnal vividness surprises me every time I return home.

Home. That word stops all of my thoughts. Is New York City really my home? I've lived here since I was eight years old, but it is the place that I remember before our relocation to New York that fills me with the warmest memories.

As the trolley chugs up Broadway, I fall back into the past, smiling at the little girl I see in my mind. I imagine my younger self on the front lawn of my family's two-story row house on T Street NW in Washington, DC. On either side of our house lived Mama's family. Gramma Fleet to the right, who lived with Uncle James and Uncle Bellini, and to the left, Uncle Mozart, his wife, and their son. There, I always felt safe, good, even whole.

I recall a too-warm summer day where I found welcome shade in a cherished spot under the elm tree. Long ago, I'd claimed the elm as mine, and no one dared deny it to the grandchild most beloved and cosseted by Gramma, the family matriarch. On that day, I leaned back against the tree trunk and flipped open a page of my sketch pad to draw the tree's intricate web of leaves. The roots were in Gramma's front yard, but the branches stretched far across our yard toward Uncle Mozart's house. But before I had the chance to sketch more than a few lines, I heard Mama, calling me to come inside for dinner.

I ignored the summons twice before I dropped my sketch pad and pencil on the lawn and scurried inside. Even at my age—five or six back then—I knew that if Mama had to call a third time, I would have broken one of the rules that governed the behavior of the Fleet family: never were

we to raise our voices, and never were we to do anything that would make any of the adults have to raise *their* voices at us. That was just one of the many tenets that we lived by. To be a Fleet was to be well educated (all of my aunts and uncles had gone to college) and hardworking (the women were all teachers and the men, all engineers). Fleets were understated in dress and presentation, connected to the community, mannerly in demeanor, and always dignified, no matter what treatment we encountered outside the bubble of our small world.

“There’s my baby,” Gramma said when she saw me, as always. She opened her arms and wrapped me inside her embrace. With my nose pressed against her apron, I smelled the delicious aroma of the yeast rolls that always lingered in the cloth. The way Gramma held me, I could have stayed in her arms forever.

“Now, go take your seat,” she said and pointed to the table.

I sat down and relished this special time of the day, especially since Papa was home, a rarity because he was always so busy with things that I didn’t understand. Once we settled at the two tables—one that sat ten for the adults and a smaller one that I shared with my sisters, Louise and Ethel; my brother, Russell; and our cousin, Clafton, Uncle Mozart’s son—Papa said grace, and then, with his glass raised high, he stood.

“To the Fleets, may you always know prosperity and peace in our little Eden. To my dearly beloved, Genevieve, who has been my constant source of strength and forgives me for my eagerness to save the world, may you always know how much I love you. To my dear children, who will never be able to understand how much they are loved, may each of you thank the good man above for his bounty and for his sometimes capricious ways.”

Everyone laughed and I did, too, even though I had no idea what was so funny. But then, Papa leaned over and kissed Mama, which he did at any and every opportunity. I giggled and covered my eyes, even though the way they held hands and kissed made me feel warm all over.

A rumble of the trolley jolts me out of my reveries, and I sigh. Almost two decades have passed since that time, and though we returned occasionally for holidays in the beginning, it has been ten years since our last visit. Now, my only connection to Washington, DC, is the birthday cards we all receive from Gramma Fleet and an occasional letter from Uncle Mozart. Mama’s brother used to visit us when we first moved to New York. He and Papa were good friends, and Mozart had even introduced my parents. But he hasn’t made the journey in a long time, and all I have now are my memories. Although these recollections are old and a little blurry around the edges, I cherish each day that I remember, and I

know DC will always be home.

The streetcar jerks, and I glance out of the window. This is my stop. After I disembark from the trolley, I still have to walk four blocks to my family's apartment as the winter wind whirls and wraps around me. With the temperature hovering around freezing, a carriage from Grand Central Station would have been welcome, but given the unplanned nature of this trip, the family finances cannot accommodate it.

I try to pick up my pace, but my satchel, packed with my finest gray work dress and my newest lace-up shoes, the ones with the heels, is heavy. Turning off Broadway onto West 113th Street and working with frozen fingertips, I try to unlock the front door to the brownstone bearing the number 507. But when the lock doesn't click, I realize that it is broken again and the key isn't necessary. I wish that we could move someplace where everything worked.

Inside, I rub my gloved hands together, then start up the stairs to the first-floor landing. A single globe-shaped light fixture dangles above me; at least the broken light has been replaced. Mercifully, the key slides into the doorknob with ease, and I slip into my family's apartment.

This is where Mama and my siblings moved over two years ago when my older brother, Russell, started an engineering graduate program at Columbia University. Before that, my family lived farther downtown in the West Nineties in a pleasant middle-class neighborhood chock-full of carpenters, police officers, bookkeepers, and shopkeepers, if they were men, and seamstresses, clerks, and teachers, if they were women, mostly of German, Irish, and Scandinavian descent. This new neighborhood brims with students, professors, and workers of all backgrounds that service the university, and we were able to find an apartment in one of the least expensive buildings that is a mere three blocks away from Columbia. There, my brother pursues multiple graduate degrees in mining, electrical engineering, and steam engineering, an endeavor that will bolster the economic wherewithal of my entire family. We are unreasonably proud of him.

I expect the apartment to be dark, with the two bedroom doors shut for the evening and Russell asleep on the sofa, since they all have to rise early: Louise and Ethel for their work as teachers, Russell for his classes, and my youngest sister, Theodora, for her own school day. Instead, I find Mama sitting in the parlor, in her rocking chair next to a tiny table lamp. She looks like nothing less than a bouquet of hothouse flowers, perfectly arranged, with her ankles crossed and her hands folded and resting on her lap. Like a flower, her features are delicate and lovely: high cheekbones, a

straight, narrow nose of which I've always been jealous, and rosebud-shaped lips. Only the streaks of gray in her dark brown hair hint at her fifty years of age. As usual, she wears her embroidered silk robe, a gift to her from Papa from before I was born.

"Evening, Mama," I whisper. I don't want to waken Russell.

Her hazel eyes flutter open, and it takes a moment for her to register my presence. "Ah, Belle Marion," she answers sleepily, though her voice is as low as mine, "you're finally home."

I must have awoken Mama from the deepest of sleeps for her to call me by my first and middle name, the name often used in my childhood. She has forbidden anyone in our family to use Marion since I moved to Princeton. I must *be* Belle da Costa Greene, she is wont to remind me.

I give her a gentle kiss on her cheek. "You shouldn't have waited up for me, Mama. It's late." I glance at my brother, though he hasn't stirred.

"Not too late to greet my daughter." Mama pulls out her pocket watch and says, "My goodness, it's after eleven o'clock. I hate to think of you out alone on the city streets at this hour."

"I had hoped to arrive earlier. On that five o'clock train. But I had to finish an assignment before I could leave."

"I'm just happy to see your beautiful face now, Belle. You've got a big day tomorrow." Even in the low light, her eyes glimmer. It's an important day for my entire family. What benefits one of us, benefits us all.

Mama stands, and I follow her across the room to the kitchen. As quietly as she can, she pulls back a chair from the table, and I squeeze into one next to her. Even with just the two of us, the kitchen is crowded. The table, which seats six, is squeezed in front of a cupboard that barely fits between the icebox and the stove. The entire two-bedroom apartment feels crammed. It is too small for the five of them, but it is all we can afford. My sisters' teacher's salaries and the little bit that Mama earns offering hourly violin lessons to schoolchildren is just enough to cover the bills and pay for Russell's education. I send home what I can, but because I have to pay my own room and board in Princeton, it isn't much.

"So." Mama is all seriousness. "Tell me about your preparations for the interview."

I'd been so happy to see Mama, but now I am annoyed. Her question and tone imply I may not have properly readied myself. Even though I publicly subtract several years from my age, I am, in fact, twenty-six years old with a successful professional career—despite the fact that librarians don't make as much as teachers—and yet Mama insists on speaking to me as if I were nineteen. But we were raised in the language of respect, and I

would not consider expressing my irritation.

“Junius—” I correct myself. “Mr. Morgan.” Mama wouldn’t approve of the familiar use of his name. “Mr. Morgan, the younger, has helped, of course. He’s given me a list of Mr. Morgan’s collection, and I’ve done research on his artwork, books, and artifacts, with an eye not only to cataloging it properly but also to cohesively adding to it. And I’ve been studying the architectural drawings of the new library, so I can offer suggestions as to how he might display and store his collection.”

“Good, good, I’m glad to hear you’re prepared to discuss his new building and holdings. Assuming he doesn’t find that presumptuous, of course, since he hasn’t hired you yet. But that’s not all he’s going to ask you. You know that, Belle,” Mama says. Her normally slight Southern lilt intensifies, a signal that she’s in earnest.

“What do you mean?”

“What are you going to tell this Mr. J. P. Morgan when he asks you about your education? He has his pick of librarians, most of whom hold mightily impressive degrees, I’m guessing. You’re going to have to prove yourself.” Mama’s right eyebrow lifts as it always does when she’s anxious or skeptical.

I hate to admit it, but Mama has an uncanny ability to point out a key item I’ve overlooked. I hadn’t considered how best to present my formal instruction, because no specific education is required to become a librarian, and no one has asked me about my schooling in the five years I’ve worked at Princeton. “I did attend Teachers’ College.”

“Are you applying for a teacher’s position?” Mama folds her arms as if she’s the one interviewing me.

“No, of course not.” I struggle to hide my irritation, knowing she’s preparing me for every eventuality, but her tone reminds me of the conversations we had six years ago. Mama argued that I should take the same safe path that my demure sisters Louise and Ethel had taken. *You need a career like teaching that you can pick up at any time, no matter what setbacks you face*, she had said. But when a classmate mentioned that there was an opening at the Princeton University Library, I couldn’t be dissuaded from interviewing for it. After I got the job, Mama was far more conciliatory.

“So if you’re not applying for a teacher’s position, what might you say instead?”

My mind is blank, but then an idea comes to me. “I know exactly what I’ll say—my time at Princeton has been the best education in the world.”

Mama laughs in delight, then presses her fingers against her lips as

“From the moment you chose this neighborhood and misled the landlord to get this apartment, I should have known.”

“Everything I’ve done, I’ve done for our children and for you and me.” My mother’s voice, normally a cultivated note just above a whisper, was almost as loud as my father’s.

It was shocking to hear them this way. Of course, I’d noticed that with each passing year, there were fewer loving gazes, less hand-holding, and an absence of stolen kisses. The tension between my parents had mounted, but I assumed it was because my father was often away fundraising for the Grant Monument Association and giving speeches in support of equal rights. But I’d never heard them raise their voices. Fleets didn’t yell.

I froze. Until Teddy shifted in her chair. When I glanced across the table, my ten-year-old sister was shaking. She rested her elbows on the table and covered her ears. I gave her a quick hug and then made my way across the hall to the dining room so I could hear my parents more clearly.

“Next, it was the children’s schools,” my father continued. “You only wanted them in all-white schools.”

“Because I want the best for them,” she cried.

“No, Genevieve, this was all about you. This is the life you’ve always wanted.”

“How can you say that to me?” Her voice quivered with distress. “This is not what I’ve wanted. This is what I had to do. I am a Fleet; I’m proud of my heritage.”

My father’s laughter was bitter. “*Your* heritage! Ah yes, you are a daughter of the great Fleets, while I am just the lowly grandson of a slave. You married a Greener, a man far below your station in life.”

“Richard, please don’t say that. You know how much I love you.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, I do. And I know you love me. That’s why I want you to understand. You’re accusing me of walking away from who I am, and that’s not what I’m doing.”

“Yes, you are.” I heard the rustling of papers, and then my father shouted, “The evidence is right here. You reported our race to the census workers as white.”

My father was furious, but I didn’t understand his anger. What difference did it make how Mama had reported us to the census since our skin was as fair as everyone who lived in our neighborhood? And we were quite a bit fairer than the newly arrived immigrants I’d seen in lower Manhattan, those of Italian and Mediterranean descent who were presumed to be white, although a low sort of white. I was sure that Papa didn’t want