

The background of the cover is a photograph of a woman in a long, elegant red dress standing in a grand, ornate library. She is holding several books and looking out towards a large window. The architecture features intricate carvings and a vaulted ceiling with a mural of a woman holding a book. The overall tone is historical and sophisticated.

The

PERSONAL LIBRARIAN

A Novel

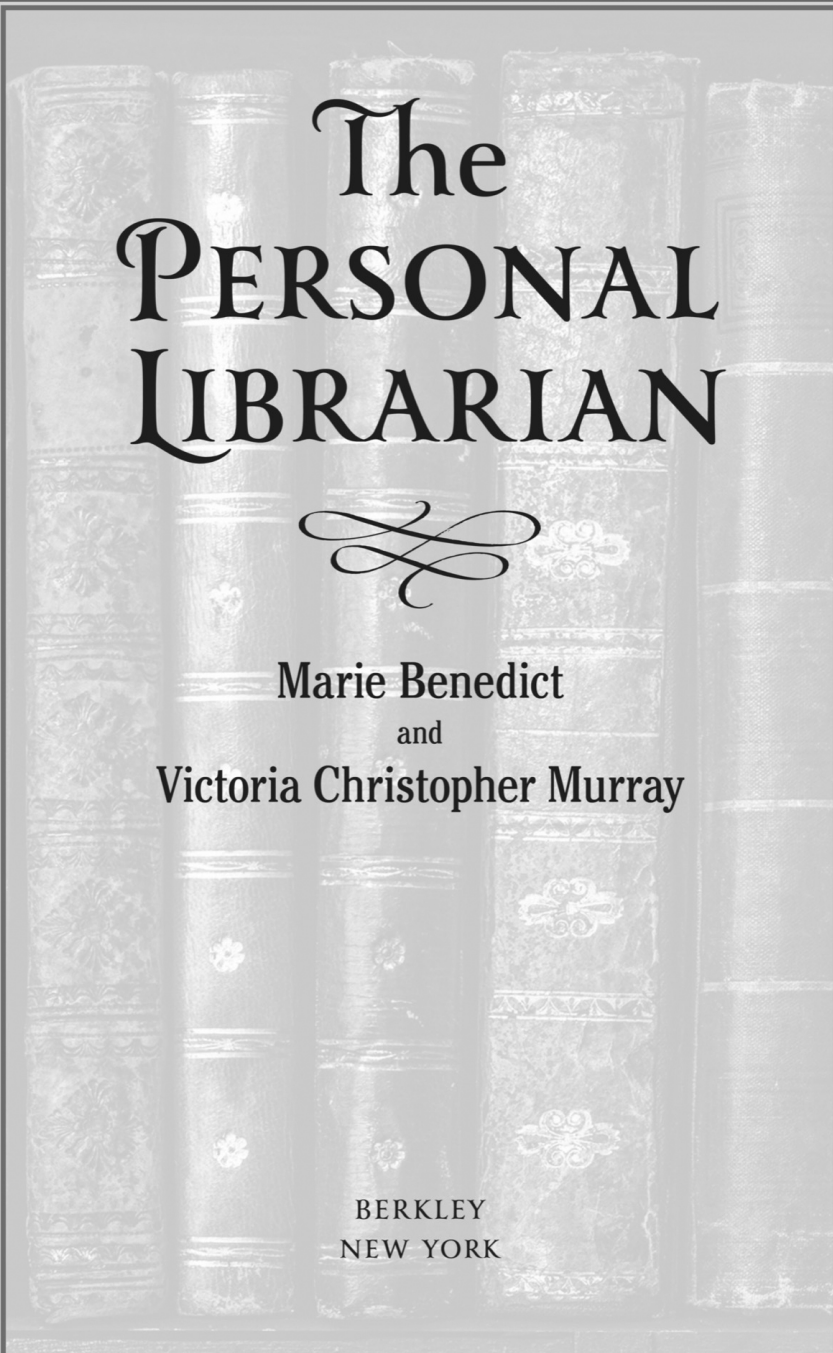
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MARIE BENEDICT

**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*



The PERSONAL LIBRARIAN



Marie Benedict
and
Victoria Christopher Murray

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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 Sweynheim and Pannartz copy of Virgil, the rarest of all the books. German clerics Conrad Sweynheim 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."