

THE
BLEECKER STREET INQUIRY AGENCY

To Disguise the Truth



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USA Today BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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For Tammy Dawson Bizzarri

Because rooming with me in college and surviving to tell
the tale was quite the feat, and that type of friend definitely
deserves to have a book dedicated to her!
Thank you for all the fabulous memories!
What a special time we had together.

Love you!

Jen



CHAPTER One

SEPTEMBER 1887

NEW YORK CITY

Considering she'd once shot the man sitting across from her, Eunice Holbrooke was beginning to get the sneaking suspicion her past had finally caught up with her.

Breathing a silent sigh of relief that she'd had the presence of mind to throw on not one but three weeping veils that morning, Eunice peered through the dark crape of the veils at the few notes she'd taken before she lifted her head.

"From what I understand," she began, speaking in a breathy voice that was not her usual voice at all, "you're here because you'd like to hire the Bleecker Street Inquiry Agency to locate a missing person. Is that right so far, Mr. . . . what did you say your name was again?"

"Arthur, Arthur Livingston."

Hearing him speak a name that had plagued her for seven long years sent a frisson of something best left un contemplated down Eunice's spine as she wrote his name in the notepad, not that there

was the slightest chance she'd ever forget it, seeing as how she'd put a bullet through his arm. Granted, she hadn't been intending on killing the man, but . . . still. One didn't forget the name of a man one shot.

"My apologies, Mr. Livingston. I was preoccupied with another case and missed your name when you were first ushered into my office."

Arthur leaned back in the dainty chair, his large frame obviously behind the squeak of protest from the chair in return. It was rare for the agency to see many men, which was why Eunice had outfitted her office with feminine furniture, each piece chosen to put the distraught women who came seeking their services at ease. Eunice did keep larger chairs at the ready, but since she'd not had advance warning that Arthur was going to appear in her office, she hadn't had an opportunity to switch out the chairs.

Not that she would have agreed to see Arthur in the first place if she'd been given a choice in the matter. Frankly, he was the last person she'd ever wanted to see again, and not only because she'd once shot the man.

Arthur Livingston posed a danger to her that wasn't to be taken lightly—a danger that revolved around the missing person he was determined to locate. A person she had no intention of helping him find, not when it wasn't in her best interest to do so.

"There's no need to apologize, Mrs. Holbrooke," Arthur said, interrupting her thoughts. "I did arrive without an appointment. Frankly, I was surprised when Miss Judith Donovan didn't hesitate to escort me into your office. I'd been warned it's difficult to secure an appointment with this agency on the spot."

Eunice rolled her eyes, an action that went unseen because of her many veils. "Your arrival into my office was a surprise for me as well. Judith isn't normally the person responsible for manning the front reception room. However, our regular doorman is currently unavailable, which is why she was pressed into service today. I imagine she's at a critical point with her current painting and didn't appreciate the interruption of a potential client breez-

ing through the door. I also imagine she wanted to speed up the interruption by passing you along to me.”

Arthur raked a hand through midnight black hair, leaving it decidedly rumped. “That explains why Miss Donovan greeted me at the front door with a scowl and a paintbrush. Curiously enough, her scowl disappeared when her attention settled on my face. She then smiled at me, said something about my bone structure, and questioned whether I’d consider sitting for an up-and-coming artist.”

“Oh . . . no,” Eunice muttered, praying Arthur hadn’t agreed to sit for Judith because that would definitely complicate her life.

Arthur smiled an easy smile, which seemed completely out of character for the man she’d once known. “No need to worry that I was put out over Miss Donovan’s query. Yes, it’s unusual for me to find myself confronted by up-and-coming artists, but after I told her I’m only in the city for a few days—a week at the most—and thus have no time to sit for a portrait, Miss Donovan hustled me right into your office.”

“I wouldn’t relax your guard on the way out. Judith possesses a tenacious attitude when it comes to her work. If she has your bone structure in her sights, she’ll probably try to convince you to sit for her again.”

“Perhaps I’ll use the back door.”

“A prudent decision on your part.”

Arthur shifted in the chair, causing Eunice to wince when the chair gave a touch of a shudder. “May I assume Miss Donovan doesn’t concentrate all her efforts on portraits? I glimpsed an unfinished painting as she was hurrying me down the hallway, and to my untrained eye, it appeared to be a medley of fruit.”

Finding it beyond peculiar that Arthur seemed content to engage in idle chitchat, something he’d never done in their past, Eunice tapped her pencil against her notepad. “Judith used to concentrate her artistic efforts strictly on fruit. She’s now dipped her toe into the portrait world, although she’s chosen abstract portraits as her latest obsession, having been influenced by a specific

female artist whose work Judith admires. I believe the painting you saw was the beginning of a portrait of another one of our agents, Daphne Beekman Henderson.”

“If what I saw is a portrait of Daphne Beekman Henderson, I would definitely describe it as abstract. Is this the same Daphne who was recently revealed to be the author behind the Montague Moreland books?”

“Indeed she is.”

“I’m a great admirer of Montague Moreland books,” Arthur continued. “I must admit, though, that I was taken aback when the news broke about Daphne Beekman being the author behind those riveting reads. I could have sworn, given the complexity of the Montague Moreland plots, that they’d been penned by a man.”

Any lingering remorse she’d been feeling about shooting the man disappeared in a heartbeat because clearly, lurking underneath the charming demeanor he’d displayed to her thus far, remained a most annoying gentleman. “How disheartening to learn you’re still one of those less-than-progressive gentlemen who believe women are incapable of great accomplishments such as penning complex, and need I add, best-selling novels. That makes me wonder why you’d seek out the services of an inquiry agency that’s owned and operated by the feminine set.”

Arthur’s brown eyes narrowed. “What did you mean by *still*?”

It had been inevitable that her jangled nerves would have her slipping at some point, but she hadn’t expected that to happen quite so quickly. Eunice readjusted one of her veils. “I simply meant that given your age, which I’m going to estimate to be around thirty, you would have outgrown such an attitude.”

“I’m thirty-three, but my age aside, tell me this. Do you make a habit of insulting your clients, Mrs. Holbrooke? Pointing out that I’m not progressive is hardly good for business. I imagine your late husband, Mr. Holbrooke—and allow me to extend my deepest condolences over the loss of him—would have encouraged you to refrain from saying anything controversial that might offend your clientele.”

Her fingers itched to pull her pistol from the top drawer of her desk, an itch she staunchly ignored. “Mr. Holbrooke would have never taken it upon himself to school me on matters of business.”

“Ah, he was a progressive sort, was he?”

Truthfully, Eunice had no idea if Mr. Richard Holbrooke was progressive because she didn’t actually *know* a Richard Holbrooke. She’d only chosen that name for her fictitious late husband after reading a lovely account of a Richard Holbrooke’s life she’d seen in the *New York World*, one that had listed his last address as London, far removed from the States. She’d needed a surname that began with an *H* because all of her luggage, which she was loath to part with because it had been a gift from her mother, was stamped *EH*. That was also why she’d chosen the name Eunice for her new first name, believing Eunice to be one of those unassuming names, and unassuming was exactly what she’d needed.

“May I presume that after your husband died,” Arthur continued, pulling her from thoughts that were definitely distracting her, “you found yourself in dire straits, which was a mitigating factor in opening up a business that usually isn’t run by the feminine set?”

Eunice’s lips thinned. “While the state of my finances at the time of my, ah, husband’s death is none of your concern, I’ve never been left in dire straits, and this agency came about years after he, erm, died.”

“If Mr. Holbrooke died years ago, may I be so bold as to inquire why you’re still garbed in deep mourning attire? I was under the belief that’s worn by widows for a year and a day, at which time they can adopt a lavender shade and abandon their veils. You must realize that potential clients find your appearance disconcerting because sitting across from a woman whose face is not revealed is quite a novel and, frankly, unnerving experience.”

Given that there was no possibility she could remove her veils in front of Arthur, which would complicate an already complicated situation, Eunice struggled for an appropriate response, smiling when it sprang to mind. “I apologize if my veils unnerve you, Mr. Livingston, but you see, I’m still, even after all these years, grieving

the loss of my dear Mr. Holbrooke. I've been known to descend into spontaneous bouts of weeping because of my grief, and, believe me, you as well as other clients would find that weeping far more unnerving than the sight of my veils."

"The sight of a lady weeping has never unnerved me."

"I'm sure that's only because you're accustomed to a certain type of weeping. I assure you, I'm not a dainty weeper. Besides, I've chosen to remain in deep mourning for a reason—that being my deep and abiding love for Mr. Holbrooke. Surely you don't want to encourage me to abandon something that lends me comfort, do you?"

"Of course not. But I've heard that weeping veils have been responsible for widows suffering ill health, occasionally even death." He frowned. "I hope that you're not also continuing to wear deep mourning because you long to join your Mr. Holbrooke in the hereafter."

"I don't have a death wish, for pity's sake, and to ease your concerns, know that I've modified the veils to include a layer of netting, which allows me to breathe easier."

Curiosity flickered through his eyes. "But if you never abandon your mourning attire, you'll never have an opportunity to meet another gentleman and marry again, something I understand most widows are keen to do."

Her pencil began beating a rapid tattoo against the notepad. "Forgive me, Mr. Livingston, but I find myself wondering if you often make it a point to offer unsolicited business advice as well as unsolicited personal opinions to women you've just met."

"In all honesty, no, that's not a frequent habit of mine."

"Then why are you making that a habit with me? Do I strike you as a woman who longs to accept such advice and opinions from unknown gentlemen? Or, better yet, do I strike you as a woman who would tolerate what I can only describe as a condescending attitude toward me on your part?"

"I wasn't being condescending."

"You didn't just try to school me regarding insulting my clients?"

“I don’t know why you’d consider my response to that condescending, considering you did insult me.”

She winced. “I may have been somewhat short with you, but I assure you, Mr. Livingston, I don’t make it a point to insult any of our clients.”

“I seem to be the exception to that point.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Eunice admitted. “Nevertheless, allow me to apologize. I certainly didn’t mean to offend you. Perhaps if you could refrain from offering any business or personal suggestions from this point forward, I could then refrain from insulting you further.”

Arthur’s gaze suddenly sharpened on her. “What I’m about to say next isn’t a personal suggestion, more along the lines of an observation, but I find myself curious why your voice is changing the longer I converse with you. When I first arrived, you were speaking in dulcet tones, but now you’re speaking in a more direct manner with what is clearly a hint of exasperation in your voice.”

Calling herself every sort of ridiculous for allowing Arthur to get under her skin to such an extent that she’d completely forgotten to disguise her voice, even though the veils did a somewhat sufficient job of that, Eunice tried to gather her thoughts into some semblance of order, something she rarely had to do since she wasn’t a lady predisposed to scattered and errant thoughts to begin with.

It was maddening the way Arthur was currently rattling her, especially when she’d once been adept at holding her own with him. Her thoughts had not gone whizzing every which way during their past encounters, not even when Arthur had taken to pointing out what he felt were flaws in her character, all of which revolved around behavior he believed was less than acceptable for a young lady.

He’d frowned upon her riding astride, took umbrage over the fact she’d preferred wearing trousers over skirts, and certainly hadn’t approved of her being armed at all times.

His intolerable attitude had been baffling to say the least because there wasn’t a logical reason for him to take issue with her

less-than-ladylike behavior, given the casual relationship between them. Arthur had merely come to her home state of Montana at the request of her grandfather, concerning matters of business. However, not long after arriving at Mason Manor, the grand estate she shared with her grandfather, he began taking it upon himself to encourage her to abandon what he'd called unconventional ways.

She was not a lady fond of being taken to task regarding her behavior, which was exactly why she'd abandoned every etiquette lesson her numerous governesses had imparted to her, instead throwing herself wholeheartedly into heated debates with the man.

His reaction to her blunt responses to his suggestions had been downright amusing at first since Arthur evidently hadn't been accustomed to women speaking their minds. He'd rallied quickly, though, voicing his irritating opinions about her behavior with increasing frequency.

She'd never gotten rattled with him during their heated exchanges, but that had evidently changed, probably because the sight of him in her office had left her yearning to flee from the agency as fast as her black leather boots could carry her.

Leaning across her desk, she lowered her voice to almost a whisper. "Being in charge of an inquiry agency does occasionally require me to speak firmly with clients, especially when some of them become overwrought due to their circumstances. I've found that maintaining a dulcet tone is not always advisable."

"I'm not feeling overwrought in the least, nor do I imagine I appear overwrought, which suggests you have an alternative reason for speaking firmly to me."

"Well, quite."

"You might need to expand on that because 'well, quite' doesn't explain why you're obviously exasperated with me. I don't normally incur such a response from ladies."

Unable to help but wonder how the conversation had managed to get away from her so quickly, Eunice drew in a steadying breath. "I was being purposefully vague just now because I was hoping to avoid insulting you again, but if you must know, I spoke firmly

to you because *you* insulted my dear friend Daphne Beekman Henderson, which then left *me* in a foul mood.”

“I did no such thing.”

“Did you or did you not state that you were incredulous to discover Daphne is the author behind the Montague Moreland mysteries?”

“I don’t know if I used the word *incredulous*.”

She gave an airy wave of her hand. “Perhaps you said you were taken aback, which amounts to the same thing. Nevertheless, I took that as a grave affront to Daphne that then, I’m afraid, resulted in a brief lapse into temper on my part, which escalated when you questioned the reasoning behind why I’m an inquiry agent.”

“I would think you’d take my incredulity or my being taken aback regarding Daphne’s books as a compliment, since I believe her talent rivals most gentlemen writers.”

“There’s nothing complimentary about that sort of drivel,” Eunice shot back, wincing when she realized she was once again speaking in less-than-dulcet tones. She immediately returned to her notes, attempting to get a temper that didn’t seem to want to cooperate in check. “But since we’re unlikely to agree on your position on whether you complimented Daphne or not, why don’t you explain to me why, when you evidently have such a dismal view of women, you’ve decided to seek out the services of this agency, a question I recently voiced, but one you have yet to answer.”

“I don’t have a dismal view of women.”

“Allow us to respectfully disagree about that.”

Arthur began drumming his fingers against the arm of the chair. “Obviously you and I are suffering from a misunderstanding regarding my views of women, but to answer your question, my younger brother Chase encouraged me to seek out your agency. He’s been keeping abreast of your success through the local newspapers. When I told him how urgent it was to locate the missing person I mentioned to you, he suggested I have your agency look into the matter.”

“Why not use the Pinkertons? They’re an agency that employs

mostly men. You'd probably have more confidence in male agents solving your case over female ones."

"I hired the Pinkertons years ago to look into this matter. They were unsuccessful."

She stilled. "Are they still on the case?"

"I'm afraid not. They ran out of leads years ago."

Her lips began to curve. "How . . . unfortunate."

"Indeed, but I'm hoping your agency will be more successful. From what my brother told me, the Bleecker Street Inquiry Agency has seen success where the Pinkertons have not."

Realizing there was nothing to do but get Arthur out of her office as quickly as possible, especially when it was becoming abundantly clear he was determined to hire her agency to solve his case—something that wasn't going to be a possibility—Eunice cleared her throat and hoped Arthur would be reasonable about what she was about to say. "While it is true that we've solved many cases since we opened our doors, I'm afraid your case doesn't sound as if it would be a good fit for this particular agency."

"Why not?"

"Because it's been cold for years. It's highly unlikely we'll be able to uncover any new leads regarding this missing person of yours. With that said, I believe now is where I bid you adieu and wish you well in your quest." She rose to her feet. "If you'll follow me, I'll see you to the door, and the back door at that, which will allow you to get on your way without being waylaid by Judith and her desire to sketch your prominent cheekbones."