

THE
PARIS
LIBRARIAN

ALSO BY MARK PRYOR

The Bookseller

The Crypt Thief

The Blood Promise

The Button Man

The Reluctant Matador

Hollow Man

A Hugo Marston Novel

THE
PARIS
LIBRARIAN

MARK PRYOR



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*This book is dedicated to my beautiful sister,
Catherine Eleanor, aka “Caci/Cat.”
I know we’re too far away from each other, but remember
we share so much more than just a birthday.
Your unwavering support for and delight in my writing career
mean more than you can know. I love you, super sis.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As ever, I have tried to be faithful to the geography, traditions, and cuisine of the beautiful city of Paris, and any distortions or failings are my own, as are any exaggerations. However, to those who fear I've been too fanciful with my fictional American Library in Paris I feel compelled to point out that the real one does, indeed, have a secret door as well as a small, basement room that staff call the *atelier*. More than that, I cannot say . . .

CHAPTER ONE

The note sat beside his coffeemaker, the elegant handwriting unmistakable.

*Café Laruns at 8:30 this morning.
Come alone and unarmed. Tell no one.*

Hugo Marston read the note twice and sighed. Despite Tom Green's rough demeanor, hard-drinking ways, and sailor's vocabulary, his friend and current roommate had an artistic side that very occasionally revealed itself in his appreciation of classical music, several styles of painting, and, less occasionally, in his own handwriting.

The clock on the kitchen wall read eight, and Hugo considered the possibilities. Either Tom was back working for the CIA and needed his help with an undercover operation, or his friend was screwing with him. Given the tone of the note, Hugo was prepared to put his money on the latter. Even so, a trip to Café Laruns was welcome enough on a lazy Sunday morning, especially since the coffeemaker propping up Tom's note turned out either sludge or drain water depending on its mood. The decision was made easier when a quick check of the fridge showed that *someone* had eaten the last of the eggs and bread.

The only thing that gave Hugo pause was the time of the requested rendezvous. Rare enough for Tom to be out of bed by nine, let alone eight, on a weekend—or any day come to that—and also be in decent-enough shape to leave the apartment for a meeting.

Hugo opened the window to check on the temperature, the cool of the early morning already giving way to a mugginess that had clogged Paris for most of August. Half a dozen times that month the city had been battered by afternoon thunderstorms, rain pounding the pavements and the streets, turning them into little rivers as the sky crackled and snapped with lightning, thunder rolling angrily above. August was vacation month in France, and traditionally Hugo, along with many other employees at the US Embassy, was given the chance to work from home when he was able. Several afternoons he'd watched from his fifth-floor apartment as the tourists on Rue Jacob scurried for cover, filling the nearby cafés and bistros. The stores selling cheap umbrellas and plastic ponchos filled their coffers, too, opening their doors wide every time the sky darkened or a few heavy raindrops hit the sidewalk.

Hugo showered and dressed quickly. He ran a comb through his hair and frowned when he spotted a few more greys. *Time to stop looking too closely*, he thought.

He trotted down the stairs and waved at Dimitrios, the concierge for the apartment building. The Greek wasn't supposed to work weekends, but he lived three streets away in a tiny apartment with his wife and four children, and his comfy chair and sturdy desk were the perfect place to find peace and quiet, and to read a good book. He looked up and spoke as Hugo passed.

"*Bonjour*, Monsieur Marston, did the young lady find you?"

Hugo stopped. "Young lady'?"

"She was here yesterday. You were at work. Don't worry, I didn't tell her anything about you, not where you work or your schedule or anything."

"I appreciate the discretion, Dimitrios, but I don't know who you're talking about. Not Claudia?"

"*Non, non*, of course not. She was younger, this one." His eyes brightened at the memory and he gave Hugo a mischievous wink. "Very pretty, though. I won't mention her to Mademoiselle Claudia, I promise."

Hugo shrugged. "I still don't know who you're talking about, I'm

afraid. Claudia's the only woman I've dated in a long time. Perhaps one of Monsieur Green's friends?"

"*Non, certainement pas.*" Dimitrios shook his head. *Definitely not.* "This one was . . . she was dressed a little strangely, all in black but she seemed sweet, a nice girl. Not his type."

Hugo laughed. "You are an observant man. If she comes back, ask for her name and phone number. I'm curious now."

"*Oui, monsieur,* I will." The conspiratorial wink again. "And not a word to Mademoiselle Claudia."

Hugo chuckled and stepped out onto Rue Jacob, turning right and starting a slow stroll toward Café Laruns. He had no plans for the day other than a desire to peruse the stalls along the River Seine that offered mostly tourist items but also the occasional collectible book, which is where Hugo's interest lay. Since the disappearance of his *bouquiniste* friend Max, Hugo had subconsciously put a hold on his slow but regular book buying, stalling the gradual trickle of first and rare editions that he'd gathered for years. He owned almost a hundred, some in his bedroom but most in a locked glass cabinet in the main room of his apartment. Their colorful spines were a special display to Hugo, a touchable and re-arrangeable work of art more permanent than flowers but just as beautiful. And they were more than just trophies to admire. Hugo had read every single one, convinced that even rare and delicate books deserved the fulfilment of their purpose before being transformed into collectors' items, treasures that were no longer cherished for the words between the covers but for the covers themselves and the name printed on the front.

As he neared the end of Rue Jacob, his phone rang and the name Paul Rogers showed up on the screen. Rogers was the director of the American Library in Paris, on Rue du Général Camou, in the Seventh Arrondissement. Hugo had worked several functions there for the ambassador, and Rogers was his point of contact. He was in his late fifties, balding, and quiet but always ready with a smile—and ruthlessly efficient.

Hugo also knew that there was a little more to the man than his gentle demeanor suggested. As a matter of course Hugo was required

to look into Rogers's background, and in doing so had unearthed a past that, in days gone by, would have been labeled "colorful." The librarian's interest in books was preceded by a career in film, making short movies that catered to a small but enthusiastic group of adults whose nocturnal activities were harmless, other than being potential fodder for the tabloids should a politician or movie star be found in their midst. Hugo and Ambassador Taylor had enjoyed a chuckle over some of the imaginative titles, but they quickly decided that his lack of criminal record, his bachelor's in English literature and master's degree in library science, and the trust of his young but highly cultured fiancée, Sarah Gregory, were better ways to judge the man.

Without hesitation they'd agreed that Paul Rogers was no security concern, and over their dozen or so interactions he'd proved himself devoted to his books, his girlfriend, and helping the diplomats and other guests of the American embassy enjoy the delights of the largest English-language lending library on the European continent. The library sold books, too, twice a month, and Hugo had asked Rogers to call him when he noticed something special up for grabs.

"Paul, how are you?" Hugo said, slowing his walk.

"Great. Just wanted to let you know about a little sale we're having."

"Oh yes?"

"Not just the usual fundraising thing. We have some older books we don't really have space for any more, and some others we don't want to spend the money restoring. Two or three hundred books—I'm sure you could find something."

"Any particular theme?"

"No, we have a little of everything. The big moneymaker will likely be a six-volume set of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*."

"Surely not a first-edition set?" asked Hugo.

"It most certainly is." A note of humor entered Rogers's voice. "Care to guess how much we're selling it for?"

Hugo stopped and leaned against the stone wall of a boutique clothing store. He could picture the books in his mind but couldn't

even imagine owning a set like that. Or reading it. “Well out of my league, I’m sure. Twenty grand?”

“Thirty-five, in US dollars.”

“That’ll pay your salary for a couple of years.”

“I wish you were joking,” Rogers said lightly.

“You’re worth every penny. Any stocking stuffers I might be able to afford?”

“You like the literature side of things, if I recall. As opposed to photography, religion, and philosophy, I mean. Couple of good travel books, too, if that’s your thing.”

“It is in theory, but I have to focus my collection. Until you mistakenly sell me a first-edition Jack London or H. G. Wells for a couple hundred bucks.”

“Lord, I’d lose my job for that.” Rogers laughed. “Let me think. We have a first-edition of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* for a few hundred dollars.”

“I prefer something a little older. Signed, too, if possible,” Hugo added. “Almost all the ones in my tiny collection are signed.”

“Nothing springs to mind, I’d have to look and see which ones are,” Rogers said. “Oh, wait. How about a Truman Capote? *In Cold Blood*. I know it’s a first edition and I think it has his autograph in it, too.”

“How much?”

“Three thousand, I think. Let me pull it up on my computer.”

“For that price, it better be signed.”

“Here we go. Yep, three-and-a-half thousand, and it’s signed. Want me to put it aside?”

“Let me think about it. That’s still pretty expensive—I’m just a lowly government employee, you know.”

Rogers laughed. “I know, Hugo, I know. The sale starts tomorrow, so I’ll hold it for you until you get here, does that work?”

“Perfect. I’ll take the morning off and be there by ten.”

“Do me a favor. Bring your buddy Tom, he’s a blast. And I like the way he spends your money.”

“I’ll think about it.”

As soon as Hugo hung up, his phone rang again.

“You coming or not?” Tom asked.

“I’m on my way, five minutes at the most. What’s going on?”

“It’s a secret.”

“Yes, one that I’ll find out in five minutes. Why can’t you just tell me now?” Hugo waited for a response. “Tom. Hello?” The screen on his phone was dark. “Typical,” Hugo muttered to himself, and resumed his walk.

It took him ten minutes, and he breathed in deeply as he pushed open the door to Café Laruns, the aromas of coffee and freshly baked bread welcoming him into the large, cool room. He saw Tom at the back of the café, sitting with two people, a young lady he didn’t recognize and another slight figure who was sitting with her back to him. He started toward them and waved when Tom looked up.

He was ten yards from their table when the young lady with her back to him turned around. Hugo stopped in his tracks, a smile of surprise and delight spreading across his face. She smiled, too, then sprang up and ran over, wrapping her arms around him and squeezing tight.

“Well, now, what are you doing here?” he asked, hugging her back.

She looked up and grinned. “I’m pretty sure you said I could visit anytime I liked.”

“I’m sure I did,” Hugo said. “But we have phones here; you’re allowed to call in advance.”

“Ha!” She released him, tucking her arm through his and leading him to the table. “Don’t you remember our trip to the cemetery? The party we went to?”

“How could I forget?” Hugo grimaced playfully. “Ah yes, that’s right. You’re one for surprises, no doubt about that.”

She squeezed his arm. “Especially where you’re concerned.”

They stopped beside her empty chair and Hugo looked into those clear, almond-shaped eyes. “It’s good to see you again, Merlyn, it really is.”