

# **THE JACQ OF SPADES**

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## The Letter

A domed city, split by four rivers, an island at its center. In the southeast quadrant, a taxi-carriage pulled up to a shop on 2nd Street. In the gutter lay a card:

BRIDGES: 500 YEARS OF CULTURE  
THE JEWEL OF THE GREAT PLAINS

The postcard depicting an elegant couple crossing a golden bridge lay in horse manure. A carriage-track ran through it.

I stepped over the scene as I climbed from the taxi-carriage, my borrowed boots grating on the rough concrete sidewalk. Trash flew past in the wind. The air smelled of rain, clouds hanging dark in the afternoon sky. "How much to wait?"

The clocks chimed half past two. The driver, in his sixties, pushed his goggles up on his forehead. His horse tossed its head and shifted. "Here? Penny now, penny when you done," he paused, leering, "cause I like you." He made no attempt to hide his survey of my person.

Unimpressed, I handed him the penny, entering the white wooden storefront as large drops fell.

The floorboards squeaked. The front room, lit by a bulb hanging from the ceiling, smelled of mildew. Grayish-green paint flaked off the walls.

The woman behind the counter, pale with graying brown hair, wore widow's brown. "Welcome to Bryce Fabrics. How can I help you?"

Eleanora. When I last saw her ten years ago, she screamed curses and wept. How could she be here? What would she do? I felt an urge to run.

I took a deep breath. A child changed more in ten years than a woman. Her face held no recognition. "You sent for assistance?"

"Oh! Yes!" She grabbed my hand, her relief plain. "I'm Eleanora Bryce. I'm so glad you came."

She led me behind the counter and into their back room. Three beds and a rickety desk lined the walls. A small table with two stools sat in the center. A rusty hat-rack stood in the corner close by: three thin, battered coats hung there.

A tall, thin adolescent with dark hair sat on a stool in the far left corner. He pointed when I entered the room. "That's her!"

He was six when last I saw him. How did he recognize me?

He held up the newspaper with my portrait (among others) on the front page. Emblazoned across the top, it read:

GRAND BALL EXTRAVAGANZA!

Bridges Family Meeting Countdown!

Mrs. Bryce grabbed the paper from his hand, then peered at me. "Herbert, you're right, it is her!"

Mrs. Bryce appeared astonished to see me in my disguise: a shop maid's uniform, black with a white apron. "Mrs. Spadros herself!" She curtsied. "I would never have called if I would have known such a fine lady would answer!"

I felt sad. Would she be glad to see me if she learned my true identity? Would she curtsy then, or would she strike me?

Rain beat against the windows and lightning flashed, the rumbling of thunder close behind.

Herbert didn't bow.

Those same eyes.

The same pale serious face.

*"Jacqui, don't go."*

*The moon hung high overhead. The frigid air smelled of dirt and sweat. Thirty children trained at knife-fighting by lamp-light a few yards up the narrow alley. "Please don't go. This feels bad. Men don't want little kids for nothing good."*

Mrs. Bryce said, "My boy's gone missing."

Startled at her words, I jolted out of the memory. "What?"

"My son. He's missing. It's why I called you." Several portraits sat upon a tiny dresser in the corner across the room to the right. Mrs. Bryce went to it and handed me a tintype photo: a boy. Light skin, dark hair, dark eyes, round face. She claimed he was twelve; he looked closer to ten.

*Sitting with Ma at her trestle table in the cathedral, eating warm bread with butter. The sounds of moaning and panting down the hall behind the tan linen curtains. Telling Ma our story and laughing at escaping the police. The smells of sex and baking in the air. His big dark eyes happy, his pale face flushed with the liquor he tasted and the candle-lit warmth. His little legs kicked under the stool ...*

I shook my head, trying to clear the memories of that terrible night. "This is a recent picture?"

Mrs. Bryce nodded. "Yes, mum, taken before Yuletide. Maybe three weeks ago? Right after we moved here."

"And you're sure he didn't run off?"

Mrs. Bryce's brown eyes filled with tears. "No, mum, I swear. David was a good boy, in the midst of his chore-work. 'Off to sweep the stair,' he said, 'I'll be right back.' He never came in."

Thunder pealed. Harsh light illuminated the barren room.

I called myself an investigator, but I investigated minor matters: a missing dog, renters who moved without paying. So this case violated rules I laid for myself. I avoided police affairs ...

"I can't pay you ..." Mrs. Bryce said.

... and I didn't do a case without payment in advance. Not even this one.

"... but I'll do whatever you like, anything, if you'll help me."

I never liked Eleanora. She never liked me. When she realized who I was ....

"Please, mum, I know how it looks. The police said he run off, but I know he was taken and they all ignore me."

This woman lived most of her life a dozen blocks from this very point, well on the other side of that spiked wrought-iron fence encircling the Pot. Why would she expect the police to help an out-of-town widow with no Family connections and no bribe money? Had she really forgotten?

My borrowed corset pinched at the hips; it chafed with every move. I wanted to change into my own clothes, get away from this room full of bad memories and guilt.

I regarded the portrait, feeling melancholy: David looked just like him. "Show me where you last saw the boy."

The Bryce's back stair appeared much like any two blocks from the Pot: rickety wooden steps with rusty metal banisters leading down to a rat-infested alley.

Clouds loomed dark across the sky. The only real light came from an oil lamp far down the alley to our right. We took refuge from the downpour under the eaves, out of the wind.

A dark figure moved in the shadows twenty yards to our left. Something about him frightened me. I hoped the rain would hide our words and send him away.

"When your boy disappeared, did you find anything amiss?"

"Nothing at all. Everything was as it should be, except I found his little broom on the ground," her voice broke, "and him gone."

I surveyed the alley. It appeared normal ... except ...

I crossed towards a red spot on the far wall, near waist level. “Was this here before he went missing?”

“No, mum, at least, I don’t think so.”

I leaned over to examine the spot, Tenni’s corset stabbing at my midsection. A solid red silhouette of a dog, ink-stamped onto the wall.

The tower clock chimed three. The man began walking towards us.

“I must go.” I might be Jacqueline Spadros, but that would hardly stop a scoundrel from committing robbery or worse before he learned of it. We hurried back inside, and I breathed a sigh of relief when the door locked behind me.

Then I remembered I carried weapons, and felt silly.

Mrs. Bryce said, “You’re going to find him . . . right?”

I shook my head and kept walking through the room. The situation frightened me. “This is a police matter, and I can’t be involved. No quadrant-lady can, but especially not me.”

“But—”

I turned to her. “Do you realize who my father-in-law is? What he would do to all three of us (I gestured at Herbert) if he learned I came here?”

She turned even paler than she was, and nodded.

“Don’t ever contact me at my home again. It’s much too dangerous. If you wish to hire me in the future, send a note to Madame Biltcliffe. Address it to my maid Amelia Dewey.”

Mrs. Bryce stared at me, mouth open. “I — I never sent anything to your home, mum! I swear!”

I put my hand in my pocket, touched the letter hidden there. “I’m curious. Why did you contact Madame Biltcliffe?” My dressmaker Marie Biltcliffe owned a shop in downtown Spadros quadrant; she sent me cases from time to time.

“When I went to the police station, mum,” she said, “a couple sat nearby. They must have heard me talk to the constable. The lady told me I might find help there.”

A couple so certain of Madame Biltcliffe’s association with an investigator that they told others of it? “Did they give any names?”

“I didn’t ask,” Mrs. Bryce said. “I was so upset . . .”

“I understand. What did the couple look like?”

Mrs. Bryce smiled like a young girl. “Nice looking, especially the man!” She fanned herself with her left hand. “They were about your age, and the lady had red hair.”

This didn’t help much. “If you meet them again, please let me know.” I felt like a traitor. “I’m sorry, I really am. But I can’t help you. Leave this to the police.”

Walking through the front room of this shop, I knew the right thing to do, even then. But I felt too afraid.

I handed the taxi-driver his penny. “Madame Biltcliffe’s dress shop on 42nd street, please.”

His mother Eleanora, in Bridges, her youngest gone missing.

David looked just like him.

*“Jacqui, you shouldn’t go.”*

Heedless of the pedestrians and carriages beside me in the street, I wept.

I entered Madame Biltcliffe’s dress shop through her back door. A warm glow and the smell of fresh linen greeted me. Madame’s shop maid Tenni handed me a hat box. “For tonight.”

I smiled. Quite clever, Madame.

Tenni was just seventeen, yet appeared much like me from behind — curled reddish-brown hair,

light brown skin. We wore close to the same size, and I often used Tenni as a decoy when on a case: I would wear her clothes, and she mine.

We went to a fitting room. Tenni helped me change into my original dress, a peacock blue walking gown. My husband Tony said he liked it because it matched my eyes.

I sighed with relief on removing Tenni's new maid's corset, which left a red mark on my hip. "Did anyone inquire for me?"

"No, mum. And I stayed out of sight, as you asked."

"Good girl." I gave her a penny.

Tenni curtsied. "Thank you, mum."

"Ask Madame to return."

Madame Marie Biltcliffe entered: a tall, handsome, middle-aged woman with perfect black hair.

"Have either of you spoken to anyone about my business? Someone who decided not to contact me?"

They both shook their heads.

"I have never had anyone refuse your help who I referred," Madame said. "And I never speak your name before the meeting."

"Mrs. Bryce said a young woman with red hair told her to contact you."

Madame Biltcliffe frowned. "I know of no such woman."

"I feel confused, Madame. When Mrs. Bryce wrote you, why did you not contact me?"

She seemed surprised. "I never contact you until I speak with the woman myself. I didn't know her, and she merely sent a note. If she would have waited —"

I shook my head. "She says she didn't write to me."

"How strange." Madame Biltcliffe appeared as perplexed as I felt. "I suppose I am glad she is no longer."

I laughed at that thought. "No, that she is not."

I remembered my sore midsection. "Would you make a maid's corset for me to keep here for future use?"

"I would be happy to." Madame Biltcliffe smiled and went to the curtain, holding it open for me. I emerged from the dressing room, and she curtsied as I passed by.

I breezed out of the shop and onto the street. My black and silver carriage stood ready, drawn by black horses with silver tackle. As I took my day footman Skip Honor's hand to enter the coach, I glanced to my left.

A man wearing brown stood several doors down, turning away at my glance. I didn't see his face, but he seemed familiar. I felt certain he had been watching me.

I turned to Honor. "That man. How long has he stood there?"

But when Honor and I looked again, the man was gone.

While in the coach on the way home, I pulled the letter from my pocket.

Dear Mrs. Spadros —

I hate to impose upon you during the holiday, but it would be of much help if you could find time to call on me today. My maid Tenni will, of course, be ready to assist you. It is a matter of some urgency.

Your servant, Marie Biltcliffe

The letter, on Madame's stationery, scented with her perfume, and in her handwriting. Madame claimed she never sent it. Mrs. Bryce claimed she never sent it either. Then who did? And why?

A puzzle. I moved the pieces around in my mind and could make nothing of it.