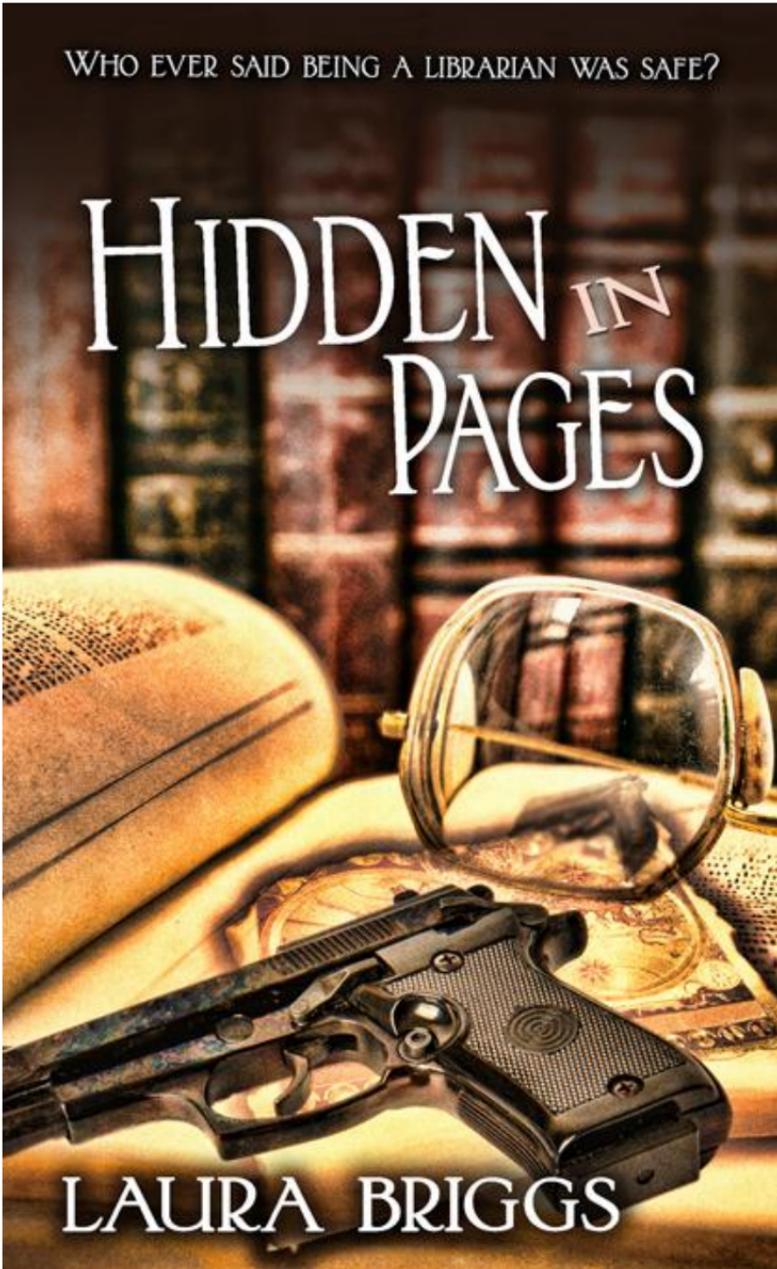


WHO EVER SAID BEING A LIBRARIAN WAS SAFE?

HIDDEN ^{IN} PAGES



LAURA BRIGGS

Hidden in Pages

Laura Briggs

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Praise for Laura Briggs

Only In Novels

Honorable Mention for Books 2010: The Best of the Year's Bookshelf Blockbusters ~ "In fewer than 60 pages, Briggs manages to tell a charming story with adorable characters and a hint of romance..." ~ Kristin Dreyer Kramer, Nights and Weekends

4 out of 5 Books ~ "*Only in Novels* is a great story filled with loveable characters and a positive message that can be read in one sitting..." ~ Poinsettia, The Long and Short of It Romance Reviews

"There's something deadly in the mist," the elderly woman whispered. "And it keeps anyone from leaving the jungle...alive that is."

"How exciting." Adelle Bradbury managed a polite smile as she stamped the due date for *Dangerous Mist*.

After all, Mrs. Crabel was one of Lindstone Library's frequent patrons, checking out multiple novels each week.

"Don't you love adventure stories?" The older woman tapped the cover to the latest D.E. Hensen novel—a rugged hero crawling from plane wreckage in the wild.

"Oh, not me," Adelle laughed, tucking a strand of blonde hair back in her bun. An unusual style for a woman in her twenties, but Adelle considered it professional. "Jungle fever isn't really my idea of fun," she added.

She blushed, remembering her own tame hobby: scouring book fairs for rare copies of her favorite novels. The only event besides church volunteer work on her otherwise blank social calendar.

This love for old books had earned her the nickname of "Marian the Librarian" among her co-workers. That and the fact she saw nothing creepy in the historic library's gothic architecture, the only staffer who didn't feel an aura of shuddering romance in its halls.

"See you next week," she said, returning Mrs. Crabel's goodbye wave. Slipping on reading glasses,

she began the evening task of cataloguing new arrivals. Except instead of hot-off-the-press editions, these came from a private collection, the possessions of one recently deceased Professor Anderson Hymer.

"Pristine volumes," claimed the woman who donated them, the professor's secretary, now in charge of dispersing his estate. "He was the only living direct descendant of Blaine Hymer," she emphasized. "You know—the architect and garden designer behind the Temple Gardens?"

"Of course," Adelle nodded.

Designed in the late 1800s, the local attraction was renowned the world over for its unique floral landscape patterned after the blueprints to King Solomon's Temple. Even the hedges and flowers had been coordinated to emphasize the treasure theme, with blossoms in colors of ruby, ivory, and gold.

Curious, Adelle popped the seal on the cardboard box and rummaged through its contents. Faded hardbacks and leather copies, a few nice soft covers. One large clothbound volume with gold lettering caught her eye, Blaine Hymer himself listed as the author.

The Quest for the Temple Gardens was the title emblazoned across the cover in elaborate swirling font. It sounded like an adventure novel, though she suspected it was merely a nonfiction account of Mr. Hymer's horticultural masterpiece.

"First edition," Adelle noted, turning the brittle pages to the copyright information.

The room was quiet, occupied only by herself and Dr. Ravenwood, a kindly, white haired gentleman conducting architectural research in the magazine stacks. He'd visited the library every day this week,

often disappearing among the shelves until closing time.

“So many rich sources of study,” he would explain with a hearty chuckle that made her smile. His clipped goatee and neatly pressed suits suggested he might have been a rather dashing figure in his youth.

She could hear him paging through articles even now, his grey flannel jacket visible through an empty slot in one of the shelves.

Five more minutes and she would begin the process of clearing the floors, shutting off lights, and closing blinds. Which was why the trill of the entrance bell inspired an automatic frown. Adelle pictured a pile of overdue books or a college student in need of help for a last-minute paper.

But as she glanced at this newest customer, the usual reprimand froze on her lips.

Dressed in a rumpled evening suit, his tie was loose and trailing with tattered ends. A purple bruise stained his jaw line and his dark hair was tousled in a wild manner, as if fingers had been raked through it both ways.

He all but collapsed against the desk, his gaze roaming wildly around the room before concentrating on her with strange intensity.

“I’m looking for a book,” he began, his tone slightly breathless. “A volume from the 1800s with—” he stopped, gaze lighting up as he spotted the volume in her hands. He reached for it eagerly, his fingers closing around the cover before she could snatch it away.

“Excuse me,” she said, knowing her voice sounded flustered, “but this one isn’t available for customers to check out.” She pulled gently on the

book, attempting to dislodge it from his grasp without damaging the fragile binding. His grip tightened in response, his fingers brushing hers in a moment that sent shivers up her spine.

With a gaze that seemed more pleading than threatening, he said, "I don't want to check it out. I want to buy it. For whatever price you'll take."

Was this a joke? Adelle fumbled for an answer amidst her confusion.

"I need this book," he continued, "and as soon as possible."

He might be drunk, yet there was no trace of liquor on his breath. If this were a novel, he would be a spy on a mission to save civilization as she knew it. As it was, she hoped he wasn't toting a weapon somewhere on his disheveled person.

"I'm afraid it's not possible," she managed in her firmest tone. "And unless you intend to check something out from our collection, I'll have to ask you to leave."

Digging frantically in his pocket, he yanked out a wallet and emptied its contents. "Here's two hundred dollars; I can write you a check for the rest, however much it is. Please, just let me have it."

She shook her head, her eyes widening as they met his deep brown orbs. The intensity in his gaze made her tremble. "I—I can't," she stammered. "It's the property of the library. And at the moment, it's not for sale to anyone for *any* price."

His shoulders slumped, defeat creeping into his features as he collected the scattered bills.

It was enough to make her pity him. She softened her tone. "If you come back in the future, perhaps it will be available. But it's almost ten o'clock, which

means the library has to close.”

This was a good excuse, and she prayed he would take the hint. Part of her was frightened by his behavior, the other part intrigued by his interest.

“Right,” he murmured; his gaze still on the book as she slid it inside her shoulder bag. Something about his fixation with the volume made her hesitate to leave it in the pile of donated books, where it might disappear into this patron’s pocket the moment she was distracted by something else. Better to safeguard it — and maybe peruse it a little — before making her recommendation to the library director about its future.

“Later, then.” With this reluctant statement, the stranger slipped out the door, his figure vanishing in the darkness.

She flinched at the sound of a chair scraping the floor, then breathed a sigh of relief as Dr. Ravenwood appeared from the darkness. Placing a stack of journals on the counter, he offered her an inquisitive smile. “You seem pale, my dear. I hope that gentleman didn’t upset you too much?”

“Not at all,” Adelle assured him, scanning the card he handed her.

“Quite a fuss he made. I could hear every word from where I sat. Do you mind if I look at the book?” he asked, his tone casual. “I have some experience in the antiquarian world, so I could tell you if it has any value.”

She pulled it from her bag and watched him examine the binding and pages, his features growing excited. “Ah, yes, this is a very fine item, especially to a local historian like myself. Two hundred dollars is hardly an adequate price. Perhaps more like eight

hundred.”

“That much?” The library had never been so lucky; most antique donations were too damaged to interest a collector.

“It’s quite valuable,” Dr. Ravenwood assured her. “In the right hands, it might be worth even more. I would be willing to pay you my estimated figure to become its owner.”

Her mouth dropped open, her first impulse to laugh.

The little volume was strangely popular for an unknown work.

“That’s very generous,” she said, “but I’m afraid the final decision lies with the library director.”

Secretly, she felt the director would jump at the chance to sell it, given how badly the building needed funds. Adelle was naturally cautious, her instinct telling her to seek a second opinion.

“Yes, of course.” He seemed reluctant to return it, his fingers still stroking its cover as she reached to take it. “You’re quite right to wait. Although, if I were you,” he advised softly, “I shouldn’t leave this volume unguarded.” With this final warning, he collected his coat and pushed open the door, leaving her alone in the silence of closing hour.

She took his advice to heart and kept the book among the contents of her shoulder bag as she left the building that night. The evening’s events must have affected her somehow, heightening her normally subdued imagination. What else could explain the way she shrank from shadowy nooks and corners? Or jumped each time a breaker was switched off, plunging the building into further darkness? *Please let it be my imagination, Lord.*

For once, Adelle agreed: Lindstone Library *was* the perfect setting for a gothic novel.

Walking distance from the library to Adelle's bungalow was only two blocks, but somehow it seemed longer that evening. Twice, she heard the scuff of shoes against the pavement, only to find a deserted sidewalk. Her skin prickled from the sensation of being watched and, not for the first time, she wished to feel a protective masculine arm twined with hers.

After a warm bath to calm her nerves, she slipped into a flannel gown and robe, her damp hair trailing past her shoulders. She fished the antique book from her shoulder bag, turning it over to study the cloth cover. Despite its shabby appearance, Dr. Ravenwood had suggested it was more than met the eye.

She thought of the stranger's pleading gaze as he tried to purchase the volume. The memory of his fingers pressing against hers inspired a blush, then a frown for letting her emotions get the best of her. After all, there was nothing romantic in that scenario. Most likely it was a prank or a silly bet that prompted his strange request.

Adelle's bedtime routine ended with a short Bible study, her cat Webster curled next to her as she read through the Psalms. Resting her finger against a line in the twenty-third chapter, she paused as something echoed from the other part of the house. A creaking sound, like the pressure of human feet against floorboards.

"What was that?" she whispered.

Webster stared back at her, his eyes mirroring the

surprise she imagined was visible in her own.

Is someone in the house? The thought made her go cold, the knowledge she was trapped in a room without a phone, since her cell was in her shoulder bag on the coffee table. Her mind raced, trying to recall if she'd left any doors or windows unlocked. The lock on the sliding glass entrance to the patio was temperamental, she knew, and often refused to catch.

A faint thump reverberated, sending the nervous tabby beneath the bed.

Heart hammering, Adelle quietly slipped into the hallway. A movement of shadow from the living room made her breath catch. Glancing round, she grabbed the first object she saw: a tall, wooden figurine carved in the shape of a giraffe.

Keep me safe, Lord, she prayed, aware this was the most dangerous thing she had ever done. This evening seemed destined for danger. A thought that failed to comfort her as she crept down the carpeted hall.

She froze at the sight of a man's silhouette by the coffee table, head bent in concentration as he studied something cradled in his hands. As he leaned further into the moonlight, she recognized the stranger from the library, Mr. Hymer's book his choice of reading material.

Adelle flicked on a floor lamp. "Don't move," she said, brandishing her giraffe in what she hoped was a threatening manner.

The man glanced up, his eyebrows slightly raised at the sight of her weapon. He had traded his raggedy suit for a pair of jeans and a beat up leather jacket, an ensemble that made Adelle think of heroes from B-grade adventure movies. A faded knapsack was slung across his shoulder, its flap pulled open as if ready to

swallow the book at a moment's notice.

"So you heard me?" he said, after a moment of silent surprise. "Too bad. I thought I was more stealthy than that." His tone implied he was disappointed rather than alarmed at being caught.

Was he deranged? She searched his face for the same wildness from earlier, but found only amusement and a trace of cockiness in his bold stare. "Give me the book," she said, extending a hand that trembled despite her firm tone.

"Sorry, but I can't," he replied in a breezy tone, slapping the cover shut. "Like I said before, it's an urgent matter. One that involves protecting historical property. Surely you, Miss Bradbury, can appreciate a need to preserve the past?"

Her eyes narrowed. "How do you know my name?"

"Name plate," he answered. "Adelle Bradbury, Librarian. The bronze engraving looked very professional."

"Oh," she answered, a trifle disappointed by the obviousness of this deduction. There was something boyishly attractive in his manner that lacked the sinister edge of a home intruder. Maybe that was why Adelle's breathing calmed, her heart racing more from curiosity than fear.

"An old book...is an emergency?" Her fingers still gripped the giraffe in case her thief proved to be a desperate sort. Judging from the bruises on his face, he didn't keep the best company.

An exasperated look crossed his face with her question. "This is no ordinary book. If I had time—which I don't—I could show you some things about it that would amaze you." He glanced at the clock on the

mantel, the frantic look returning to his face. "As it is, I've been here too long." Dropping the book into his knapsack, he backed towards the patio door.

"I'll call the police if you take that book!" Adelle scolded, the words slipping from her lips. Why was she so intent on arguing with a possibly dangerous thief when the safest thing was to let him escape and then phone the authorities?

"Maybe so," he said, "but this book was promised to me by the owner, and I intend to make that promise a reality." A look of weariness crept into his eyes with these words, his movement towards the door slowing for a moment. If he was lying, it was a practiced art for him.

She stepped forward. "I could charge you with breaking and entering. But I won't if you're willing to leave the book here. If it's truly yours, then I'll do my best to see that the library director learns the truth."

He shook his head. "It's too late. As intimidating as that wooden giraffe is, I'll have to be leaving now." He gripped the door handle, his expression serious. "I don't mean you any harm, but if I let you keep this book then you'll be in great danger."

It was the kind of line she would have laughed at if she found it in a novel. As it was, her cheeks flushed with anger. He was duping her. Obviously, he was a common criminal bent on making a profit at the expense of the library.

"So you're threatening me over a book that's worth a few hundred dollars? I suppose you think a boring librarian is a perfect victim," she added, the burst of indignation giving her unexpected pluck. "If you think you'll get away with this, then—"

"Shhh!" he raised a warning finger to his mouth,

his head cocked slightly to one side. "Did you hear that?" His eyes half-closed in concentration as if straining to hear.

"What?" Adelle whispered, thinking this must be a trick somehow.

An instinct that vanished with the sound of wood splintering as the front door crashed inwards.

Adelle screamed at the sight of two muscular, hooded figures breaking apart the wooden planks, firearms evident in their grip. Her knees crumpled, her fingers losing their grip on the wooden giraffe.

"C'mon!" the book thief shouted, grabbing her hand. He yanked her out the sliding door and across the lawn. She stumbled as he pulled her swiftly towards the open back gate and the street beyond.

Panting, she glanced over her shoulder to see the men with guns now exiting the patio door in pursuit.

Father help me, Adelle prayed, her thoughts whirling as fast as the scenery before her. *What have I gotten myself into?*

She tripped as the sound of gunfire erupted.

"Stay low," the stranger hissed, one hand pushing her down. A bullet ricocheted off the street lamp ahead of them, shattering its glass globe and extinguishing the patch of pale light.

In the glow of moonlight, Adelle saw the outline of a car parked by the curb, its long shape reminiscent of a classic 1930's model.

"Get inside," her rescuer yelled, pushing her towards the passenger door.

Shaking, she obeyed.

Doors closed, he started the engine, the car lurching away from the curb before the gunmen reached them.

"Who *were* those people?" Adelle gasped between breaths as she huddled in the passenger seat. "And who are you?" she asked, her gaze turning with sudden realization to her driver. A man who, for all she knew, was just as sinister as the hooded figures she'd escaped from moments before.

"Sure you really want to know?" He flashed a roguish grin as he veered the car onto a quiet side street, the speedometer hovering near eighty. "Because I'm not someone a, quote, 'boring librarian' wants as an acquaintance."

She felt her cheeks burn as he tossed her words back in her face. "I have a right to the truth, considering what just happened." Although she had looked on him as a rescuer when the armed strangers interrupted his thievery.

"Call me Brandon, then. Though I doubt we'll have time for much chit chat before they catch up to us."

As he spoke, headlights flashed in the rearview mirror; a small sports car was closing in behind them.

Adelle slumped low in her seat, her heart racing at the memory of bullets ripping through the atmosphere. "They had a car," she said, her tone dazed.

"Of course," Brandon snapped. "Did you think they came on foot?"

She gripped the dashboard as the car accelerated to a speed that only race tracks allowed. Her eyes squeezed shut as he swerved between the lanes in an attempt to dodge a series of bullets from their pursuers.

Brandon ran a stop sign, swinging the vehicle into a darkened business district where the shops were locked behind metal gates. "Open my bag," he said, shoving the faded knapsack into her lap. "You'll find a pistol near the bottom."

She obeyed automatically, her hands digging past a strange assortment of tools including crowbars, a compass, and a hatchet, until her fingers closed around the cool steel of a handgun. "Got it," she said.

"Perfect. Now hand me the gun and take over the wheel."

Is he kidding? "Wait!" she screeched. "I—I don't think I can—"

But he was already leaning out the driver side window, firing off a round in the direction of the sports car.

Adelle jerked the steering wheel, narrowly missing a row of newspaper racks outside an antiques shop. She mouthed a prayer as they shot past an ornamental fountain, a row of street lamps illuminating a four way stop in the distance.

She flinched at the squeal of brakes, the sight of the sports car careening towards a street lamp as she glanced behind them.

"Blew out a tire," Brandon confided, a grim smile on his face as he took the wheel. "That should slow them down for a few minutes," he added, as they sped through the four way stop without hesitation, only to narrowly avoid a sideswipe with a large van, its shape looming suddenly from an alleyway.

"Watch out!" Adelle shrieked, bracing herself against the car door. "You're going to kill someone!"

He glanced briefly at the van in the rear view mirror, his eyes narrowing. "That's no innocent

bystander. They're reinforcements—courtesy of our friends in the sports car."

"You mean they're after the book, too?" Adelle glanced at the knapsack, where *The Quest for the Temple Gardens* peeked above the jumbled items. "If this is what they want," she said, pulling it free, "then why not just give it to them? Our lives are worth more than a little money." Her fingers edged towards the window, as if entertaining the notion of tossing it out as a peace offering.

"We're not talking about money." He snatched the book with a glare. "This book that you're so eager to toss away is actually a map. A key to one of the world's greatest historical mysteries."

The van was closing in; she could the glimpse the occupants now, their faces hidden by ski masks. Fear skittered through her as the slim nose of a rifle appeared behind the windshield.

"Tell me what the mystery is," she demanded. "At least I'll know what I'm risking my skin for."

"The lost treasure of King Solomon," he replied, without missing a beat.

Her mouth dropped open, her senses reeling from the wild claim. Not to mention the bullet that whizzed past, nicking the glass in the car's side mirror. "You're lying." She gulped after a moment. "It's not possible. It's all lost. Those stories about it being hidden are myth—"

"Hang on!" Brandon yelled, as he spun the car in a wild U-turn. They cut in front of the van, veering towards the business district's turnoff.

The flash of headlights greeted them; the sports car from earlier was dead ahead and moving towards them at an alarming rate.

Adelle screamed, covering her eyes just as they swerved out of its path, leaving the vehicle behind them to take the blow, the sickening crunch of metal audible on the night wind as the van collided with the sports car.

Adelle had a fleeting image of crumpled, twisted steel, and of smoke wafting in the pale light of a street lamp, an image engulfed by darkness as they sped away into the night.

The all-night diner known as The Smokestack was a hangout for local bohemian artists and college students, a convenient stop for truck drivers en route to faraway destinations. So it was strange for Adelle to be there at two in the morning in her flannel nightgown, a stranger's coat wrapped around her for modesty's sake.

Although, technically, Brandon was no longer a stranger, having saved her life twice in the same night. He sat across from her in the back booth, studying the binding on the book that had set the evening's events in motion.

Sirens sounded in the distance; Adelle shuddered, thinking she knew where they must be going. Hugging her knees, she let her eyes flutter closed briefly. When she opened them again, it was to find her companion flicking open a pocket knife.

She watched him flip to the book's center spread of black and white floral illustrations, then gasped as he ran the blade along the bottom seam, slicing the thick, glossy paper apart.

A moment later, he unfolded the insert to be twice