

*A*t exactly the moment young Septimus was stretching awake after his nap, sliding his eleven-year-old feet into slippers made for those of a fourteen-year-old and crossing to his bedroom window, Miss Prim was passing through the rusty garden gate. The boy watched her with interest. At first glance, she didn't appear nervous or afraid in the least. Nor did she have the threatening air of the previous incumbent, who always looked as if he knew exactly what kind of book anyone daring to ask for a book was going to ask for.

'Perhaps we'll like her,' Septimus said to himself, rubbing his eyes with the heels of both hands. Then, moving away from the window, he quickly buttoned his jacket and went downstairs to open the door.

Miss Prim, just then making her way calmly along the

path between banks of blue hydrangeas, had begun her day convinced it was the one she'd been waiting for all her life. Over the years she'd dreamed about an opportunity such as this. She'd pictured it, she'd imagined it, she'd pondered every detail. And yet, that morning, as she came through the garden, Prudencia Prim had to acknowledge that she felt not the slightest quickening of the heart, nor even the faintest tremor of excitement that would indicate that the great day had arrived.

They would observe her with curiosity, she knew. People tended to look at her like that, she was well aware of it. Just as she knew that she was very different from the people who examined her in this hostile fashion. Few could admit to being the victim of a fatal historical error, she told herself proudly. Few people lived, as she did, with the constant feeling of having been born at the wrong time and in the wrong place. And fewer still realized, as she did, that all that was worth admiring, all that was beautiful and sublime, seemed to be vanishing with hardly a trace. The world, lamented Prudencia Prim, had lost its taste for beauty, harmony and balance. And few could see this truth; just as few could feel within themselves the resolve to make a stand.

It was this steely determination that had prompted Miss Prim, three days before she walked down the path lined with hydrangeas, to reply to a small ad printed in the newspaper.

Wanted: a feminine spirit quite undaunted by the world to work as a librarian for a gentleman and his books. Able to live with dogs and children. Preferably without work experience. Graduates and postgraduates need not apply.

Miss Prim only partly fitted this description. She was quite undaunted by the world, that was clear. As was her undoubted ability to work as a librarian for a gentleman and his books. But she had no experience of dealing with children or dogs, much less living with them. If she was honest, though, what most concerned her was the problem posed by ‘graduates and postgraduates need not apply’.

Miss Prim considered herself a highly qualified woman. With degrees in international relations, political science and anthropology, she had a PhD in sociology and was an expert on library science and medieval Russian art. People who knew her looked curiously at this extraordinary CV, especially as its holder was a mere administrative assistant with no apparent ambitions. They didn’t understand, she said to herself peevishly; they didn’t understand the concept of *excellence*. How could they, in a world where things no longer meant what they were supposed to mean?

‘Are you *his* new librarian?’

Startled, the applicant looked down. There, in the porch of what appeared to be the main entrance to the house, she met the gaze of a little boy with blond hair and a scowl.

‘Are you or aren’t you?’ pressed the child.

‘I think it’s too soon to say,’ she replied. ‘I’m here because of the advertisement your father placed in the paper.’

‘He’s not a father,’ the boy said simply, then turned and ran back inside.

Disconcerted, Miss Prim stared at the doorway. She was absolutely sure that there had been specific mention in the advert of a gentleman with children. Naturally, it wasn’t necessary for a gentleman to have children: in her life she’d known a few without them. But when a paragraph contained both the words *gentleman* and *children*, what else was one to think?

Just then she raised her eyes and took in the house for the first time. She’d been so absorbed in her thoughts as she came through the garden that she hadn’t paid it any attention. It was an old building of faded red stone, with a great many windows and French doors leading onto the garden. A solid, shabby edifice, its cracked and creviced walls were adorned with climbing roses that seemed never to have encountered a gardener. The front porch, supported by four columns and hung with a huge wisteria, looked bleak and imposing.

‘It must be freezing in winter,’ she murmured.

She glanced at her watch; it was almost mid-afternoon. All the windows were wide open, their curtains fluttering capriciously in the fresh September breeze, as white and light as sails. ‘It looks just like a ship,’ she thought, ‘an old ship run aground.’ And coming around the porch, she went up to the

nearest French door, hoping to find a host who had, at least, reached adulthood.

Looking in, Miss Prim saw a large, untidy room, full of books and children. There were many more books than children, but somehow the way they were distributed made it look as if there were almost as many children as books. The applicant counted thirty arms, thirty legs and fifteen heads. Their owners were dotted about on the rug, lying on old sofas, curled up in dilapidated leather armchairs. She also noticed two gigantic dogs lying on either side of a wingchair that faced the fireplace, its back to the window. The boy who had spoken to her in the porch was there on the rug, bowed conscientiously over a notebook. The others raised their heads from time to time to answer a speaker whose voice seemed to spring straight from the wingchair.

‘Let’s begin,’ said the man in the wingchair.

‘Can we ask for clues?’ said one of the children.

Instead of replying, the man’s voice recited:

*Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas;
magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo:
iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna;
iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.*

‘Well?’ he said when he’d finished.

The children remained silent.

‘Could it be Horace?’ asked one of them timidly.

‘It could be,’ replied the man, ‘but it isn’t. Come on, try again. Anyone dare translate it?’

The applicant, observing the scene from behind the heavy curtains that hung on either side of a pair of lace panels, thought the question far too difficult. The children were too young to recognize a work from a single quotation, especially when the quotation was in Latin. Despite having read Virgil with pleasure, Miss Prim did not approve of the game; she didn’t approve at all.

‘I’ll give you some help,’ the voice continued from within the wingchair. ‘These lines were dedicated to a Roman politician from the early years of the Empire. A politician who became friends with some of the great poets we’ve studied, such as Horace. One of those friends dedicated the lines to him for having mediated in the Treaty of Brundisium which, as you know, or should know, put an end to the conflict between Antony and Octavian.’

The man fell silent and stared at the children (or so Miss Prim imagined, from her hiding place) with a look of mute interrogation that received no response. Only one of the dogs, as if wanting to show its interest in the historical event, got up slowly and lazily, lumbered nearer to the fireplace and lay down once again on the rug.

‘We studied all this, absolutely all of it, last spring,’ complained the man.

The children, still looking down, chewed their pens

thoughtfully, swung their feet nonchalantly, rested their cheeks on their hands.

‘Pack of ignorant brutes,’ insisted the voice irritably. ‘What on earth’s the matter with you today?’

Miss Prim felt a wave of heat rise to her face. She had no experience whatsoever with children, this was true, but she was a mistress of the art of delicacy. Miss Prim firmly believed that delicacy was the force that drove the universe. Where it was lacking, she knew, the world became gloomy and dark. Indignant at the scene and growing a little stiff, she tried to shift quietly in her hiding place, but a sudden growl from one of the dogs made her stop.

‘All right,’ the man’s voice softened. ‘Let’s try again with something a bit easier.’

‘By the same author?’ asked a little girl.

‘By exactly the same author. Ready? I’m only going to recite half a line.’

... *facilis descensus Averno* ...

A sudden forest of raised hands and noisy cries of triumph showed that this time the pupils knew the answer.

‘Virgil!’ they shouted in a shrill chorus. ‘It’s the *Aeneid*!’

‘That’s right, that’s right,’ laughed the man, pleased. ‘And what I recited before was from the *Eclogues*, *Eclogue IV*. Therefore, the Roman statesman who was a friend of Virgil and Horace is ...’

Before any of the children could answer, Miss Prim's clear, melodious voice came from behind the curtains, filling the room.

'Asinius Pollio, of course.'

Fifteen childish heads turned in unison towards the window. Surprised by her boldness, the applicant instinctively retreated. Only a sense of her own dignity and the importance of the reason for her presence stopped her from running away.

'I apologize deeply for making such an entrance,' she said, advancing slowly to the centre of the room. 'I know I should have announced myself, but the boy who answered the front door left me alone in the porch. So I thought I'd look in here, and that's when I heard you talking about Virgil and Pollio. I really am terribly sorry, sir.'

'Are you here about the post of librarian?'

The man spoke gently, and seemed quite unconcerned by the fact that a stranger had just burst into his sitting room. A gentleman, thought Miss Prim admiringly. A true gentleman. Maybe she'd judged him too hastily; and she'd undoubtedly been rash.

'Yes, sir. I rang this morning. I came about your advertisement.'

The man in the wingchair stared at her for a few seconds, long enough to realize that the woman standing before him was too young for the job.

'Have you brought your CV, Miss . . .?'

‘Prim. Miss Prudencia Prim,’ she replied, adding apologetically: ‘It’s an unusual name, I know.’

‘I’d say it has character. But if you wouldn’t mind, before we go any further I’d like to see your CV. Have you brought it with you?’

‘The advert stated that the applicant shouldn’t have any qualifications, so I didn’t think it would be needed.’

‘Then I take it you don’t have any higher qualifications. I mean, other than a basic knowledge of librarianship, is that right?’

Miss Prim remained silent. For some reason she couldn’t fathom, the conversation wasn’t taking the course she’d expected.

‘Actually, I do have some qualifications,’ she said eventually. ‘A few . . . quite a few.’

‘Quite a few?’ The tone of the man in the wingchair hardened slightly. ‘Miss Prim, I thought the advert was clear.’

‘Yes, it was,’ she said quickly, ‘of course it was. But please, let me explain. I’m not a conventional person from an academic point of view. I’ve never made use of my qualifications in my career. I don’t use them, I never mention them and,’ she paused for breath, ‘you can rest assured that they will not interfere with my work in any way.’

As she finished, the librarian noticed that the children and dogs had been staring at her in silence for some time. Then she recalled what the boy in the porch had said about the

man she was now speaking to. Could it really be that of this tribe of children not one of them was his?

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘what qualifications are we talking about? And how many?’

The applicant swallowed, wondering how best to deal with this tricky question.

‘If you’d be so kind as to give me a sheet of paper, sir, I could draw you a quick diagram.’

‘A quick diagram?’ exclaimed the man in astonishment. ‘Are you insane? Why would a person whose qualifications need a diagram apply for a post that specifically rules out qualifications?’

Miss Prim hesitated for a moment before answering. She wanted to tell the truth, of course, she had to tell the truth, she desperately wanted to; but she knew that if she did, she wouldn’t get the job. She couldn’t say that she’d had a hunch as she read the advert. She couldn’t explain that her heart had beaten faster, her eyes had clouded over, that in the ad’s few lines she’d glimpsed a new dawn. Lying, however, was out of the question. Even if she’d wanted to – and she definitely did not – there was the regrettable matter of the reddening of her nose. Miss Prim’s nose was endowed with great moral sensitivity. It didn’t redden when she was complimented, or when she was shouted at; she had never flinched at a rude remark, or even an insult. But at the prospect of a lie, then there was nothing to be done. An involuntary inaccuracy, a single exaggeration, an innocent

deception and her nose lit up like a magnificent beacon.

‘Well?’ asked the man in the wingchair.

‘I was seeking a refuge,’ she said suddenly.

‘A refuge? You mean, somewhere to live?’ The man stared at his shoes anxiously. ‘Miss Prim, I apologize in advance for what I’m about to say. The question I’m going to ask is rather delicate, and it’s difficult for me to ask it, but it’s my duty to do so. Are you in trouble? The victim of a misunderstanding? An unfortunate incident? Some legal irregularity, perhaps?’

The librarian, who came from a family strictly trained in the nobility of civic virtue, reacted strongly and heatedly to this accusation.

‘Of course not, sir, definitely not! I’m an honourable person. I pay my taxes, I pay my parking fines, I make small donations to charity. I’ve never committed a criminal act or offence. There’s not a single blot on my CV, or my family’s. If you’d like to check . . .’

‘There’s no need, Miss Prim,’ he replied, disconcerted. ‘Please forgive me; I obviously misinterpreted your words.’

The applicant, perfectly composed a few minutes earlier, now looked very upset. The children meanwhile continued to watch her wordlessly.

‘I don’t know how you could have thought such a thing,’ she lamented.

‘Please, forgive me,’ urged the man again. ‘How can I make up for my rudeness?’

‘We *could* hire her.’ The voice of the tousled boy in the

porch came suddenly from somewhere on the rug. 'You're *always* saying that one should do the right thing. You're *always* saying that.'

For a moment the man in the wingchair seemed put out. Then he smiled at the boy, gave a little nod and approached the applicant with a look of contrition.

'Miss Prim, a woman who puts up with rudeness such as I've just inflicted without turning and leaving has my total confidence, whatever job she's to be entrusted with. Would you be so kind as to accept the position?'

The applicant was just opening her mouth to say no when she had a fleeting vision. She pictured the long, dark days at her office, heard the tedious chit-chat about sport, recalled mocking smiles and malicious glances, remembered half-whispered rude remarks. Then she came to and made a decision. After all, he *was* a gentleman. And who wouldn't want to work for a gentleman?

'When do I start, sir?'

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and went out through the French windows to fetch her suitcases.

Once inside the room that would be hers for the coming months, Prudencia sat down on the bed and stared out of the large window that stood open onto the terrace. There wasn't much furniture, but what there was was exactly as it should be: an ottoman covered in faded blue damask, a huge Venetian mirror, a Georgian cast-iron fireplace, a wardrobe painted aquamarine and two ancient Wilton rugs. 'Rather too luxurious for a librarian,' she thought. Although luxurious wasn't exactly the right word. It all looked extremely well used. It had all been lived with, mended, worn out. It exuded experience. 'This would have been considered the height of comfort – a century ago,' sighed Miss Prim, as she started to unpack.

A creaking sound made her look up, and her gaze landed on a painting leaning on the mantelpiece. It was a small

board depicting three figures, painted by a child. The technique wasn't bad; superb for a child, she reflected as she admired with pleasure the young artist's brushwork.

'It's Rublev's *Holy Trinity*,' said a now familiar young voice behind her.

'Yes, I know, thank you, young man. By the way, shouldn't you knock before coming in?' she said, and saw that the boy wasn't alone.

'But the door was open, wasn't it?' he said to the three other children crowding behind him, who all nodded. 'This is my sister, Teseris. She's ten. This is Dekka, he's nine, and Eksi is the youngest, she's *only* seven and a half. My name's Septimus. But they're not our *real* names,' he said with a confidential look.

Miss Prim stared at the four siblings and was surprised at how different they were. Though little Dekka had the same untidy blond hair as his older brother, the mischievous yet absolutely innocent expression on his face was quite unlike the thoughtful look of the boy who had met her in the porch. Nor was it easy to tell that the two girls were sisters. One possessed a serene, gentle beauty; the other radiated vivacity and charm.

Teseris suddenly whispered something in her older brother's ear before asking softly: 'Miss Prim, do you think it's possible to step through a mirror?'

She looked at the child, dumbfounded, before realizing what she meant.

‘I remember my father reading me that story before I went to sleep,’ she said, smiling.

The little girl gave her brother a sideways glance.

‘I told you she wouldn’t *understand*,’ said the boy smugly.

Not knowing what to say, Miss Prim opened another suitcase and took out a jade-green silk kimono that she hung carelessly in the wardrobe. So this was dealing with children, she thought, a little ruffled. This was what the advert had been referring to, quite simply. Not pranks, or sweets, or fairy tales, but – who would have thought it? – mysteries and riddles.

‘Do you like Rublev’s icon?’ asked the boy, peering at some books poking out of one of the suitcases.

‘Very much,’ she said gravely, putting her items of clothing away one by one. ‘It’s a marvellous picture.’

Little Teseris looked up when she heard this.

‘Icons aren’t pictures, Miss Prim. They’re *windows*.’

She broke off from hanging up her dresses and looked at the girl uneasily. The man who ran this house had definitely gone too far with these children. At ten years of age you shouldn’t have such ridiculous ideas about icons and windows. It wasn’t a bad thing, of course not, it just wasn’t natural. Fairies and princesses, dragons and knights, poems by Robert Louis Stevenson, apple tart; in her opinion, this was what a child that age should take an interest in.

‘So was it you who painted this *window*?’ she asked, trying to appear casual.

The girl nodded.

‘She painted it from memory,’ added her brother. ‘She saw it in the Tretyakov Gallery two years ago. She sat in front of it and refused to look at anything else. When we got home she started painting it all over the place. There are windows like this in every room.’

‘That’s impossible,’ said Miss Prim briskly. ‘No one could paint something like this from memory. Especially not a little girl of eight, as your sister would have been at the time. It’s just not possible.’

‘But you weren’t there!’ exclaimed little Dekka with surprising vehemence. ‘How do you know?’

Without a word, she went over to the picture, opened her handbag and took out a ruler and pair of compasses. There they were, there was no doubt about it: the octagon formed by the figures, the inner and outer circles, the shape of the chalice at the centre.

‘How did you do it, Teseris? You can’t possibly have painted it on your own, even with a reproduction to copy from. Someone must have helped you. Tell me the truth: was it your father, or your uncle, or whoever it is who looks after you?’

‘No one helped me,’ said the little girl quietly but firmly. Then, addressing her younger sister: ‘Did they, Eksi?’

‘No one helped her. She *always* does things on her own,’ Eksi solemnly confirmed, while at the same moment trying to balance on one leg.

Stunned by this sisterly show of defiance, Miss Prim did

not insist. If these had been adults, her interrogation skills would have exposed the deception easily. But a child wasn't an adult; there was a big difference between a child and an adult. A child might scream, cry noisily, react in some ridiculous fashion. And what would happen then? An employee who provokes to anger the most vulnerable members of the family on her first day at work can't count on great prospects in the job. Especially – she shuddered – when she'd had the misfortune to enter the house in such an irregular fashion.

'And what were children as young as you doing in the Tretyakov Gallery? Moscow is a long way away.'

'We went there to study art,' replied Septimus.

'Do you mean with your school?'

The children looked at one another in delight.

'Oh, no!' said the boy. 'We've *never* gone to school.'

This, said as if it were perfectly natural, fell like a stone into the librarian's already agitated mind. Children who didn't go to school? It couldn't be true. A group of children who seemed half wild and didn't go to school – where had she ended up? Miss Prim recalled her first impression of the man who had hired her. A strange individual, no doubt about it. An outlandish character, a hermit; who knows, perhaps even a madman.

'Miss Prim.' Just then, the deep, cultured voice of the Man in the Wingchair himself floated up to her from the staircase. 'When you've finished unpacking, I'd like to see you in the library, please.'

She secretly prided herself on the tenacity with which she strove to do the correct thing at all times. And in the present situation, she reflected, the correct course of action was to make her excuses and leave immediately. Heartened by this conclusion, she quickly shut her suitcases, tidied her hair in the mirror, shot a final glance at the Rublev icon and prepared to do her duty.

‘Of course,’ she called out. ‘I’ll be straight down.’

The Man in the Wingchair was standing in the middle of the room, hands clasped behind his back. While the librarian had been unpacking, he’d been rehearsing how best to explain her duties to her. It wasn’t an easy task, because what he required wasn’t a librarian in the usual sense. Following the previous incumbent’s departure, his library needed to be completely re-catalogued and reorganized. The volumes of fiction, essays and history were thick with dust, and those on theology had colonized all the rooms in the house to a greater or lesser extent. The day before, he’d found the homilies of St John Chrysostom in the pantry, between jars of jam and packets of lentils. How had they got there? It was difficult to know. It could have been the children – they treated books as if they were notebooks or boxes of pencils; but it could just as easily have been him. It wouldn’t be the first time, and it probably wouldn’t be the last. And he had to admit that these were the consequences of his own rules.

He vividly recalled his father's prohibition on the removal of books from the library. This had meant that he and his siblings had had to choose between fresh air and reading. Thus, he had spent the afternoons of his childhood with Jules Verne, Alexandre Dumas, Robert Louis Stevenson, Homer, Walter Scott. Outside, in the sunshine, the other children yelled and ran around, but he was always indoors, reading, immersed in worlds of which the others had barely an inkling. Years later, returning home after a long absence, he had abolished this rule. He loved to watch the children reading in the sun, stretched out on the lawn, perched in the comfortable old branches of a tree, munching on apples, devouring buttered toast, leaving sticky fingerprints on his beloved books.

'I hope you've settled in comfortably,' he said politely, to break the ice.

'Very comfortably, thank you,' she replied. 'But I'm afraid I won't be staying.'

'Not staying?'

'There are too many questions in the air,' said Miss Prim, raising her chin slightly.

'I don't understand,' he said amiably. 'But if I can satisfy your curiosity, I'm at your disposal. I thought we'd come to an agreement.'

At the word 'curiosity', her expression hardened.

'It's not curiosity. I just don't know what kind of family this is. I've seen several children not in school. Generally,

several children would be a major challenge for anyone, but several children in a wild state is, I believe, sheer folly.'

'So you've been struck by the lack of schooling,' he muttered, frowning slightly. 'Very well, Miss Prim, you're right: if you're going to work here you're entitled to know what kind of household this is, though I must remind you that the children will not be in your charge. Their care is not part of your duties.'

'I know, sir, but the children – how can I put it? – *exist*.'

'Indeed they exist and, as the days pass, you'll grow increasingly aware of their existence.'

'Do you mean they're ill mannered?'

'I mean that the children are my life.'

His reply caught her off guard. Despite her first impressions, there seemed to be a glimmer of delicacy in the man, much more so than she could have imagined – a strange, austere, intense delicacy.

'Are . . . are the children yours? I mean, some of them?'

'Are you asking if I'm their father? No, I'm not. Four of them are my sister's children, but I've been their guardian since she died about five years ago. The rest are from the village, and they come here for lessons two or three times a week.'

Miss Prim looked down tactfully: now she understood everything. Now she could see why the children were being educated at home instead of at school. This was clearly a case of what modern psychology called prolonged grief disorder.

A sad situation, undoubtedly, but absolutely no excuse for such behaviour. Homeschooling wasn't good for children and, though it might be difficult or even embarrassing to talk about it, she knew it was her duty to do so.

'I'm terribly sorry for your loss,' she said as if addressing a wounded animal, 'but you shouldn't shut yourself away with your grief. You have to think of your nephews and nieces, of them and their future. You can't let your own sorrow lock them up inside this house and deprive them of a decent education.'

He stared at her for a moment uncomprehendingly. Then he looked down and shook his head, smiling briefly.

Prudencia, who wasn't given to romanticizing, surprised herself by reflecting how an unexpected smile could light up a dark room.

'A decent education? You think I'm a sad man who's holding on to his nephews and nieces, not letting them go to school so as not to feel lonely, is that so?'

'Is it?' she replied with a note of caution.

'No, it isn't.'

The man went to the drinks cabinet by the window, in which a dozen fine crystal flutes and six heavy whisky tumblers stood alongside an array of wines and liqueurs.

'Would you like a drink, Miss Prim? I usually have one around this time. How about a glass of port?'

'Thank you, sir, but I don't drink.'

'Do you mind if I have one?'

‘Absolutely not, you’re in your own home.’

He turned and looked at her inquiringly, trying to gauge if there was sarcasm behind her words. Then he took a sip of his drink and set the glass directly on the tabletop, prompting an involuntary, barely perceptible expression of reproof to pass across her usually serene face.

‘The truth is, I have rather particular views on formal education. But if you do decide to stay and work here, all you need to know is that I’m schooling my nephews and nieces myself because I’m determined they should have the best education possible. I don’t have the romantic reasons you attribute to me, Miss Prim. I’m not wounded, I’m not depressed, I wouldn’t even say I feel lonely. My only aim is that the children should one day become all that modern schooling is incapable of producing.’

‘Producing?’

‘That’s the apposite word, in my opinion,’ he replied, a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

She said nothing. Was this house really the right place for a woman like her? She couldn’t say that the man was unpleasant. He wasn’t rude, or insulting, nor was there any sign of the lingering gaze she’d had to endure for years from her previous employer; but there was no delicacy in the way he spoke to the children, or sensitivity in the frank, if courteous, tone with which he addressed her. Miss Prim had to admit that in her heart a little resentment persisted over the clumsy insinuation about her motives only half an hour

earlier. But there was something else; a troubling, hidden energy in his face, something indefinable that evoked hunting trophies, ancient battles and heroic deeds.

‘So, your mind is made up to leave?’ he asked, drawing her abruptly from her thoughts.

‘No, it isn’t. I wanted an explanation and I got one. I can’t say I share your gloomy view of the education system, but I understand your fear that the brutality of the modern world might crush the children’s spirits. If I could, however, speak candidly . . .’

‘Please, go ahead.’

‘Your approach seems a little extreme, but I believe you’re guided by your convictions and that’s more than enough for me.’

‘So you think I’m going too far?’

‘Yes, I do.’

The man went to the shelves and ran his hand over several books before stopping at a thick, ancient leather-bound volume and carefully withdrawing it.

‘Do you know what this is?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

‘*De Trinitate.*’

‘St Augustine?’

‘I see you live up to your CV. Or do you perhaps have some, shall we say, spiritual concerns?’

Feeling awkward, she began playing with the amethyst ring on her right hand.

‘That’s a private matter, so if you wouldn’t mind I’d rather not answer. I consider I have the right not to.’

‘A private matter,’ he repeated quietly, staring at the book. ‘Of course, you’re right. Again, I apologize.’

Miss Prim bit her lip before adding: ‘I hope there’ll be no problem concerning my personal beliefs, because if there is it seems to me that for both our sakes you should tell me now.’

‘Absolutely none. You haven’t been hired to give lessons in theology.’

‘I’m relieved to hear it.’

‘I’m sure you are,’ he said with a smile.

There was a lengthy silence in the room, broken only by the distant laughter of children in the garden.

‘I have to say I was very surprised that the children are named after numbers,’ she said at last, in an attempt to navigate into less controversial waters.

‘Actually they’re nicknames,’ he laughed, ‘and they have a lot to do with my inability to remember birthdays. Septimus was born in September, his brother Deka in October, Tesis in April and Eksi, the youngest, in June. I’m a lover of classical languages, and this system has helped get me out of a fix more than once.’

As he spoke he gestured at the disorder in the room. A seemingly infinite quantity of books was piled on tables and shelves two, three and even sometimes four rows deep among towering stacks of papers, old maps, fossils, mineral specimens and seashells.

‘I’m afraid the state of my library tells you all you need to know about my organizational abilities.’

‘Don’t worry, I’m not intimidated by mess.’

‘I’m pleased to hear it. But I bet it bothers you.’

Miss Prim didn’t know what to say and, once again, chose to change the subject.

‘Young Teseris says she paints icons from memory.’

‘But you don’t believe her.’

‘Are you implying that I should?’

The man said nothing, simply going to the bookshelves and replacing the heavy leather-bound volume. Then he went over to the fireplace, picked up a notebook from the mantelpiece and handed it to her.

‘This is a list of all the books in the library. It’s arranged by author and was drawn up by the previous librarian. If you’re not feeling too tired, I’d like you to take a look at it this evening, so that you’re ready tomorrow for me to explain what I want you to do with this dusty old chaos. How does that sound?’

Miss Prim would have liked to carry on chatting, but she realized that for her new employer the conversation had reached its conclusion.

‘That sounds perfect.’

‘Wonderful. Supper is at nine and breakfast at eight.’

‘If you wouldn’t mind, I’d rather have my main meals in my room. I can cook myself something simple and take it upstairs.’

‘I’ll have your meals taken up to you from the kitchen, Miss Prim. As far as feeding people is concerned, we run a tight ship in this house. I hope you sleep well on your first night here,’ he said, holding out his hand.

She was tempted to object. She disliked the idea of a man who was a virtual stranger assuming the right to decide how, what and when she should eat. She disliked that domineering way of having the last word.

‘Goodnight, sir,’ she said meekly before going upstairs.