

SECRETS
WE WHISPER TO
THE SHADOWS

SARA SIMONI

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Sara Simoni

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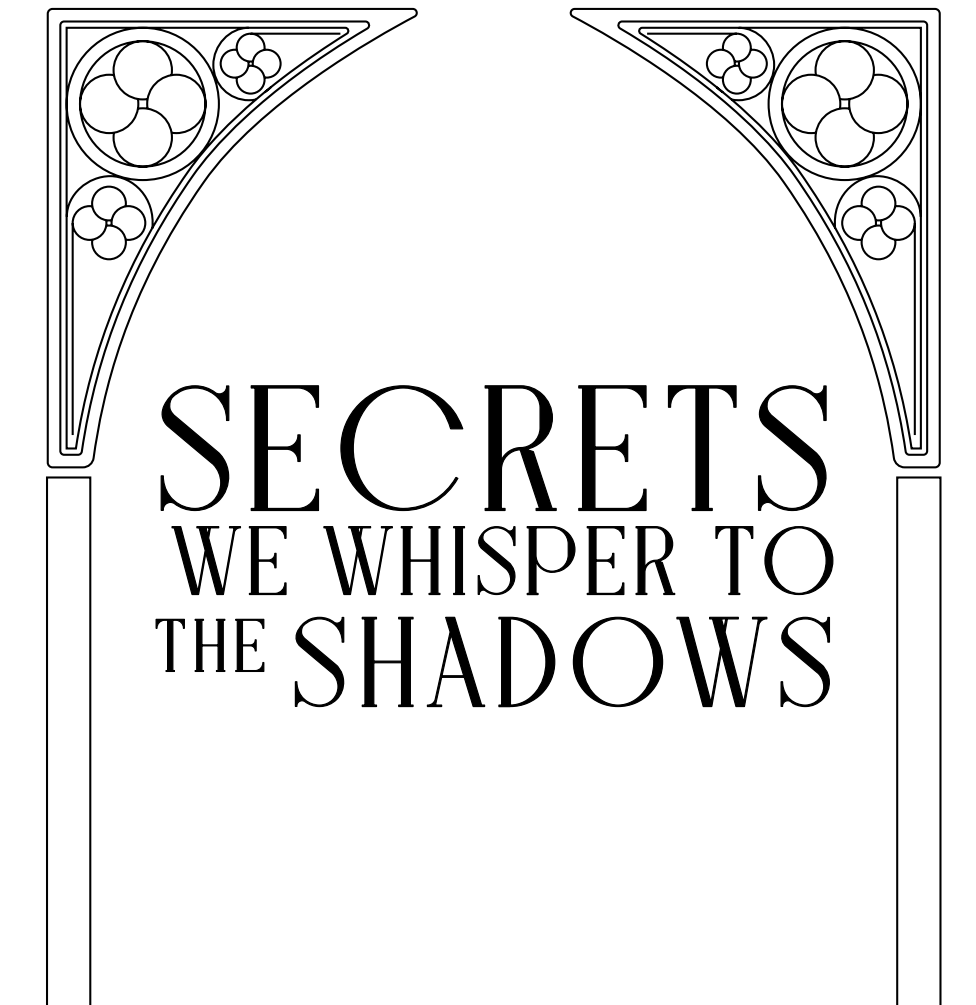
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Warning!

Please read instructions carefully before use!

Secrets We Whisper to the Shadows talks about challenging issues, including abuse, addiction, torture, the death of close relatives and parental figures, and domestic, physical, psychological, and sexual violence. It also has some explicit language.

Known side-effects: you may experience stress, increased heart rate, insomnia, and/or loss of time perception.

Take at least 30 minutes after meals. Keep out of the reach of children.

THE CIRCUS OF BAD GIRLS



Clelia

October 4, 1898

Balbo Theater, Turin

According to *The Ladies' Journal*, sewing is the most suitable of pastimes for marriageable young ladies. And – my goodness – it's true! Few things help one relax or divert the mind quite as much as using needle and thread to stitch up a linear laceration.

In the orange light of the kerosene lamp on the dressing room vanity, the needle kissed the skin, penetrated under one edge of the wound, and reemerged out the other side. Squinting, Clelia tied the final knot. She then leaned down to her leather bag at the foot of her stool – pushing up her glasses before they fell off her nose – and proudly pulled out her wonderfully shiny new scissors. She straightened and, with one satisfying snip, cut off the extra thread.

"Finished!"

Sitting opposite her in a worn-out armchair, Madame Lidia Bruno leaned back and released her still-red-rouged lip from between her teeth. "That wasn't too bad. Are you sure you did it properly?" With

slender fingers, she touched the taut skin on her forehead around the wound, which was now just a thin line closed by the stitches.

Did everyone behave like this after having a wound stitched? The last thing she needed was for the wound to reopen and ruin her perfect work. Clelia leaned toward the woman and held her wrist. "I'm absolutely certain. Just try not to touch the wound too much, all right? And if you do, wash your hands first."

Lidia snorted and moved her fingers to fiddle with the torn edge of one of the posters on her dressing room wall. "Wash my hands? As if I had time to waste on such things! Maybe you'll even tell me to use that smelly poultice again!"

The same problem every single time. "It's called carbolic acid, and it helps prevent infections." And it's meant to be used on surgical instruments, not skin.

"They might as well call it eau d'hôpital! The smell of it has soaked into my clothes, and it's bound to drive my husband crazy. Dear God, he's not going to want to go near me on stage!"

As if to emphasize the point, the white poodle under her chair barked once.

Yes, it was such a pity that his wife, the leading actress of the company, put up with that man. Clelia jumped down off the stool, made her way through the costumes scattered across the floor, and picked up her bag. "Did your husband give you that wound?" She forced herself to keep her tone neutral, her eyes low.

Lidia shrugged. "I'm such a stubborn person. I'm always making him angry." Her blue eyes then sparkled with pride, like a young girl pleased with her rebelliousness. "But I've got my own ideas about how I should deliver my lines, even if he doesn't agree."

Violent and domineering. And the worst part was how everyone seemed to accept situations like this as if they were normal. A bitter

taste filled Clelia's mouth as she snapped her bag shut. "I see."

Lidia pulled her robe tight around herself and, for the first time, dared to glance at the big framed mirror on the wall beside her. She shuddered. "Will the scar go away?"

"My stitches are very precise." She was proud of that, but it was all she could promise her. It was so unfair: the feeling of powerlessness made her tremble. She wished she could do more, because wounds like that had the power to sink invisibly under the skin and down to the soul, where infections were much harder to treat. There were no sutures fine enough for that.

"I suppose so." Lidia lowered her eyes and forced a smile. "I need to thank you, Miss. If the seamstress hadn't told me about you, I don't know what I would have done. I'd never let a doctor lay hands on me."

A flicker of both pride and annoyance flared in Clelia's chest, and her cheeks tingled. "I'm a doctor, too." Or at least she would be in a few years, once she graduated and got her license. But now wasn't the time for formalities.

Lidia bent down to pick up her poodle and gave the kind of condescending nod she might have done if Clelia had claimed to be King Umberto's secret daughter. "My husband will make payment," she mumbled, burying her face in the dog's curly fur.

The message was as clear as a telegram: it was time to go. The irritating tingling in her cheeks eased off and disappeared. Lidia was an actress, and the face she used to earn her living had just been scarred. She needed some time alone to get used to the sight of the stitches. She'd been much more matter-of-fact about things than she'd expected, anyway. How accustomed to violence and pain must she be to keep so calm? It would almost have been better to see her cry, scream, or break down. Instead, that calmness, only faintly tinged with sad-

ness, spoke of familiarity – of an acceptance of suffering that should never be tolerable to anyone.

“Get in touch if you need anything.” Clelia gripped the worn handle of her bag tightly, resisting the urge to scream on Lidia’s behalf. With her back stiff, she stepped out into the backstage hallway and closed the dressing room door behind her.

Something collided into her shoulder and made her stagger. A stagehand carrying a big rolled-up carpet under each arm and chewing a cigar brushed past her without a glance. “Coming through.”

What terrible manners! Couldn’t he be a little more careful? Her medical instruments were delicate. Clelia adjusted her leg-of-mutton sleeves and waited for the rude man to disappear behind a panel that led onto the stage.

“I apologize for him.” Leaning against the opposite wall of the hallway stood a handsome man in his thirties wearing a gaudy burgundy waistcoat. He arched a dark eyebrow. “It’s so hard to find good help these days.”

He must have been Lidia’s husband – the leading actor and the one who inflicted the wound that Clelia had just stitched up. His hair was neatly combed in soft waves of warm dark brown. As he twirled his mustache, his well-manicured hands looked like an angel’s – better suited to caressing than punching. His full lips seemed made for whispering words of love. But of course, if monsters always looked frightening, no one would ever let them come near them.

“Good evening.” Clelia tried not to sound too curt, but that was difficult after what she’d been told in the dressing room. To avoid having to look him in the face, she rummaged through her skirt pocket to find the big gold signet ring she’d taken off before stitching up the wound. It was a pity that it was so loose on her, but she liked keeping it with her when she worked as a kind of good luck charm.

He nodded at the dressing room door. “Will her face go back to the way it was?”

The same question Lidia had asked. But coming from the person who’d hurt her, it sounded very wrong. Clelia slid the ring onto her index finger and nodded. “I did my best. But if scarring presents a problem, it would be better if she stopped getting hurt.”

“That’s exactly what I say. She really needs to stop making me so angry. This is one of the closing shows for the General Exposition. Prince Sallier himself is in attendance! And what does she do? She changes her lines. She says they sounded better that way!” He threw up his arms in exasperation. “She only needs to stick to the script – it’s not that hard!”

One of Clelia’s eyebrows twitched upwards. Did he seriously expect her to agree with him? What a nerve. It would serve him right if Prince Sallier and the audience found out exactly what kind of man and husband he was. Maybe they’d boo him instead of showering him with applause. Or maybe they wouldn’t even care. After all, that’s how the world worked. There were victims and there were perpetrators, and those fortunate enough to belong to the second group never stopped to wonder if something might be wrong.

Clelia shrugged and held out her hand. “I’m afraid I don’t really understand much about any of that, sorry. Anyway, it’s getting late, and my stepmother is waiting for me at home. Can I have my payment, please?”

The man patted his jacket and trousers, as if searching for something in one of his pockets. “I’m terribly sorry but I don’t have any money with me. You see ... it all happened so fast, after the show ...”

So, he wasn’t just violent but cheap. What a gentleman. He could’ve written a manual about it and given up acting. “I can come

back another day.” But she wasn’t even sure she wanted his money. It would have felt dirty to her.

His dark eyes glimmered. “I wouldn’t dream of inconveniencing you. I’ll walk you home, and we’ll call in at my place on the way, so I can give you what I owe.” His tone was gentle. Too gentle. Like a trap made of soft words closing in around her.

“That’s not necessary.” Where was that rude stagehand when you needed him? The hallway was empty except for her and the actor. The rest of the troupe must have gone home by now.

He pushed off the wall, walked over to her, and placed a heavy hand on her shoulder. “Good girls shouldn’t be out alone. Especially after dark.”

His touch made her shiver. She wanted to brush his hand off her, but that would have been rude. It would also be rude to refuse such a polite invitation. She felt a pang of danger in her gut. This must be how rabbits feel when they smell the scent of hunting dogs on the wind. “You should take care of your wife, Mr. ...”

The man narrowed his eyes, as if it were inconceivable that someone didn’t know his name. But after a moment, his expression softened to the same affable look as before. “I am Lorenzo Bruno, the lead actor, but please call me Lorenzo. I couldn’t possibly let you go home alone and without your payment.” As if to emphasize his point, he tightened his grip and guided her toward the exit at the end of the corridor.

A feeling that things were spiraling out of control, like laundry blowing off a clothesline, took her breath away. Clelia clutched the sweaty handle of her bag. She wished she could plant her feet on the floor and return to the moment when she’d stepped out of Madame Lidia’s dressing room. But that was impossible. What explanation could she give her stepmother if she came home empty-handed?

Without letting her go, Lorenzo threw open the door and led her down the steps to the street behind the Balbo Theater. The few streetlights were the only islands of light in the liquid shadows of the night. The windows of the elegant buildings that surrounded them were dark and lifeless.

That corner of Turin was deserted – no street sweepers, no night carriages, no drunks, nothing. If anything happened, no one would know about it until morning.

Clelia turned toward Via Doria, but Lorenzo’s fingers tightened their grip, pulling her in the opposite direction, toward Via dell’Arcivescovado.

She felt a heavy weight in her gut. “My house is that way.”

“Do you want your money or not?” Now there was a barely hidden note of annoyance in his voice. There it was: his true nature breaking through – the bullying nature that his courtesy could no longer disguise.

Fine. All she had to do was humor him for a while, and then tonight’s job would finally be over. Clelia pursed her lips and pushed her objections back down her throat, her heartbeat growing loud enough to drown out the sound of her heels on the cobblestones as she walked beside the actor. Was that shadow down the street, in front of the shuttered cobbler’s shop, moving, or was it just her imagination?

He made her turn to the right and stopped in front of an old door set in a weathered façade. Letting her go for a moment, he reached into his pocket for a set of equally old keys, which clattered in the lock.

The thought of taking advantage of that moment to turn and run crossed her mind, more tempting than it should have been. How selfish. It would be like betraying the trust of her stepmother, who needed her to do her part.

But the fear wasn't easy to shake off. Wanting it to go away wasn't enough. Clelia took a step back. "I'll wait for you out here."

The door creaked open onto a darkened hallway. He gestured for her to go inside. "I couldn't possibly leave you out here in the street alone, not with all the criminals in this city."

Her ears throbbed. The urgent need to find some excuse and stall for time almost choked her. But her mind had gone blank, and she didn't know what to say. "Are you ... are you sure?" She'd go along with it only if he explicitly invited her. If that happened, she wouldn't be able to refuse.

"Of course, women like you are always welcome in my home. Come in."

That was it. Backing out was no longer possible.

It seemed to her that the darkness at the edges of her vision was flickering. Just go along with what the man wanted. That was the only way to end this and get back home, safe and sound among her books in her laboratory. Clelia lowered her head and stepped inside. The smell of damp and mold stung her nostrils. The shape of a staircase with wrought iron rails took shape in the darkness.

The pressure of Lorenzo's hand at the bottom of her back, just above her corset boning, almost made her stumble. "Go on, up you go."

She took a deep breath. Just a few more minutes, and it would all be over. She was doing it for her stepmother. Clelia clenched her fists and began to climb the stairs, the sound of his footsteps close behind, his presence looming. She turned at the tiny landing and saw the second floor above the next flight of stairs.

"Here we are." He went up past her and opened the small wooden door to his apartment. "Come in, make yourself comfortable." He went inside ahead of her and lit a kerosene lamp, its glass clouded

with dust. A soft light spread across the sideboard and chairs that, besides a table with a chipped top, were the only furniture.

Who would have thought that the lead actors of the Balbo Theater troupe lived in such a plain, neglected place? The room stank of dust, old pipe tobacco, and onions, as if no one ever bothered to air it or take care of it.

Frozen in the doorway, Clelia fidgeted with her hands, but Lorenzo suddenly turned to her, his brow furrowed. His friendly smiles were now gone. "Enough stalling! What's your problem? Girls like you usually beg to spend time with me."

Her insides were writhing like snakes. His mask was now completely off, revealing the revolting man he truly was. Of course, she should have known. What Lidia had said should have prepared her for this. But facing it was something else entirely. She tried to pull away, but Lorenzo grabbed her wrist and dragged her into the apartment, making her drop her bag on the hard tile floor. Her instruments! Clelia slipped, but another shove threw her backwards into the table.

Her hair escaped the knot at the back of her neck, falling in a brown curtain over her face. She heard the hairpin that had held it in place clink as it hit the floor. Her breathing quickened, echoing in her ears.

The scoundrel loomed over her. His breath, stinking of cheap wine, was so close it fogged up her glasses. "I wonder when a serious young student like you will get another chance like this."

"Let me go." Her mouth was so dry, just talking was a nightmare. "I'm saying this for your own good."

A pulsing vibration moved through the deepest shadows – the ones lingering in the far corners of the room and under the furniture – as if some strange gravitational force were acting on them.

He gripped her shoulder with a huge hand, crushing her collarbone. "You know, I noticed you right away when you arrived. You're not pretty, but I'm used to actresses, and you get tired of beauty after a while. There's some fire in you, though. A fire in the eyes that you hide behind your glasses. And I want it."

The darkness contracted and expanded, contracted and expanded, as it was crossed by waves.

Spiders cold with fear somersaulted in her gut. As the disgusting man leaned closer, fumbling to unbutton his trousers, Clelia froze, her muscles refusing to respond.

The throbbing in the air grew louder, swelling into a roar. The shadows exploded into a rushing current of liquid blackness, swirling around them so dark that it hurt her eyes. The darkness then thickened in the center of the room, materializing as a solid shape.

Clelia held her breath. Right behind Lorenzo, who was still struggling with his trousers, oblivious to it all, a figure moved forward.

The dull glow of the kerosene lamp illuminated blonde hair cascading loosely over a red dress. And a face that would have been perfect, if not for the embroidered patch over one eye and the unnatural crimson hue of the other. Slender fingers, their nails a little too long, rose and stretched forward. They closed around the scoundrel's throat, dragged him backwards, and pulled him away from her.

His loose trousers fell around his ankles, leaving his hairy legs only covered by his underpants. The sight was almost comical, more like a circus act than a stage drama. But a circus for very grown-up, very bad little girls.

There were victims and tormentors, prey and predators, all locked in an eternal, ruthless hunt. But Lorenzo Bruno had utterly misjudged which one she was.

The man's mouth opened in a strangled groan. He tried to scream,

to struggle, but the hands around his throat tightened. His eyeballs bulged from their sockets. "H ... elp!"

The woman's lips curved into a smile, revealing a pair of sharp fangs.

Lorenzo arched his back, and, just then, she sank her teeth into his jugular vein. His screams died away in a gurgling fountain of blood.

Of course, it's easy to make a dramatic entrance when someone has already done all the hard work for you. Clelia folded her arms on her chest. "Well, you certainly took your time, Mother."