

# The Cellar at Mermaid Street

Written by Tanya Reddin

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## Synopsis

In a damp cellar beneath an inn on Mermaid Street, widow Anne Farrow and her smuggler brother Tom are interrupted by Eli Wick, a young customs officer raised in Rye. Eli asks them to close their infamous smuggling tunnel for one night to prevent a dangerous shipment. As arguments about survival, loyalty, and morality spiral into darkly comic sparring, Anne agrees, though not for the reasons Eli believes. When knocking begins from inside the sealed tunnel and a cheerful folk song drifts down from the pub above, Anne & Tom confront an unsettling truth, that it's all about survival.

*(dark comedy, festival version)*

## Characters (3):

- **ANNE FARROW** — early 40s. Widow. Innkeeper. Dry, controlled, in charge. Sister of Tom.
- **TOM FARROW** — late 30s. Smuggler. Nervous mouth, stubborn hearted. Brother of Anne.
- **ELI WICK** — early 20s. Customs officer. Earnest, fraying, a little dodgy.

All characters speak in a low born Sussex accent.

## Setting

A cellar beneath an inn on Mermaid Street, Rye. Barrels. Rope. Hidden tunnel door. Night.

*(ANNE scrubs a dark stain. TOM watches, drinking.)*

## TOM

If you scrub long enough, that stone will start remembering things you'd rather forget.

## ANNE

Then it'll feel right at home here, won't it?.

## TOM

Are you sure it's pig's blood?

**ANNE**

Yes.

**TOM**

Because blood suggests motive, and I don't like motive before midnight.

**ANNE**

You don't like anything before midnight.

**TOM**

That's when hope usually dies and things happen.

*(Loud authoritative knock on cellar door.)*

**TOM (cont.)**

That's the law, I'm sure of it.

**ANNE**

Na, I know who it is.

*(ANNE opens the door. ELI stands there.)*

**ELI**

*(ELI takes off his cap)*

Evening, Mrs Farrow.

**ANNE**

You look like you still believe in doors.

**ELI**

I believe in procedure.

**TOM**

That'll pass.

*(ELI steps inside.)*

**ELI**

There's a shipment coming.

This one's big.

**ANNE**

They're always big when someone's waiting.

**ELI**

It's coming through your tunnel.

I need you to close it.

**ANNE**

What, tonight?

**ELI**

Yes tonight.

**ANNE**

Will it only be tonight?

**ELI**

Yes. I grew up here. I know whose children wear shoes because of smuggling. I also know whose fathers died because of it.

**ANNE**

You're very young to talk like that..

**ELI**

This town pretends it's honest, because it's old.

**TOM**

Old things deserve respect.

**ELI**

Old things also rot.

**ANNE**

*(Anne looks Eli up & down)*

So do new ones, if you leave them in the damp.

*(ELI pushes on.)*

**ELI**

My father believed rules meant something. He believed if you keep standing still, eventually the world would stop running.

**TOM**

Interesting way to see it.

**ELI**

He drowned believing he was right.

**ANNE**

Being right can be a very heavy burden.

**ELI**

Look, I don't want any bodies.

Lock the tunnel.

**ANNE**

And what about the men wanting to use it?

**ELI**

They'll have to find another way.

I'm trying to make one good decision, for a change.

**ANNE**

In a bad system.

**ELI**

Yes.

*(ANNE moves to the tunnel.)*

**TOM**

Anne...

**ANNE**

Tonight, it stays shut.

*(She bars it.)*

**ELI**

Thank you Mrs Farrow.

**ANNE**

Don't thank me. I just want to know it's for the best.

**ELI**

Tomorrow I'll have to stop pretending.

**TOM**

Tomorrow we can all pretend harder.

*(ELI exits.)*

*(Silence stretches.)*

**TOM**

You didn't even hesitate.

**ANNE**

I did. Just not where you could see it.

**TOM**

That lad thinks he's done a good thing tonight.

**ANNE**

That's what worries me.

**TOM**

Because good things don't last?

**ANNE**

Because they're expensive.

*(She returns to the stain. Scrubs twice. Stops.)*

**TOM**

You could've said no.

**ANNE**

I did. Years ago and it didn't stick.

**TOM**

No, I mean you could've said no to him.

**ANNE**

To him I said "tonight." That's not yes. That's a postponement.

**TOM**

You're very precise with words for someone who runs an inn.

**ANNE**

Words are much cheaper than barrels.

**TOM**

You know what he'll do tomorrow.

**ANNE**

He'll wake up proud and it will fade by breakfast.

**TOM**

He'll come back with men.

**ANNE**

Maybe, eventually.

*(TOM paces.)*

**TOM**

You're not scared at all?

**ANNE**

Of the law? Naaaa.

*(Anne laughs)*

*(TOM stops.)*

**TOM**

That tunnel feeds half this street.

**ANNE**

And starved the rest.

**TOM**

It fed us.

**ANNE**

It fed you, you mean.

**TOM**

That's not fair.

*(Anne pours herself another drink. Doesn't offer one.)*

**TOM**

Your husband...

**ANNE**

Careful.

**TOM**

He ran it too.

**ANNE**

He believed in balance. That's what killed him.

**TOM**

He slipped.

**ANNE**

No, he hesitated.

**TOM**

So this is you choosing?

**ANNE**

This is me remembering.

**TOM**

Remembering what?

**ANNE**

Who knocks, who doesn't, and who waits to be invited.

*(A faint creak from the tunnel. Not a knock yet. TOM clocks it.)*

**TOM**

Did you hear that?

That sounded like...

**ANNE**

What happens when the tide turns.

**TOM**

We're a bit early for the tide.

**ANNE**

The sea's been impatient lately.

*(TOM moves closer to the tunnel door.)*

**TOM**

If someone's in there...

**ANNE**

...then they're either lost or late.

*(Laughter from the inn above)*

**TOM**

They're having a good time up there tonight.

**ANNE**

They always do.

**TOM**

You ever think about leaving?

**ANNE**

Every morning.

**TOM**

And?

**ANNE**

Every night I remember why I don't.

*(Another faint sound from the tunnel. Still not a knock.)*

**TOM**

Anne, say it plain.

**ANNE**

If anyone comes through that door tonight, it won't be for trade.

**TOM**

It'll be for blood?

**ANNE**

Or something just as sinister.

**TOM**

We don't sell either.

**ANNE**

Exactly.

*(Silence. Then... a knock, from inside the tunnel.)*

**TOM**

*(Tom sits up startled)*

...someone's in there Anne

*(Another knock)*

**TOM**

No one's meant to knock.

**ANNE**

Shows good manners are contagious, dont it?

*(TOM moves toward the tunnel.)*

**ANNE (cont.)**

Don't Tom.

*(He stops.)*

**TOM**

Tell me we aren't ignoring people in the tunnel.

**ANNE**

I didn't ignore anyone.

**TOM**

You barred a door in a collapsing tunnel at high tide.

**ANNE**

Semantics.

*(Knock. Knock. Knock.)*

**TOM**

They'll drown.

**ANNE**

Eventually.

**TOM**

You're disturbingly calm.

**ANNE**

I've run an inn for twenty years. You learn to know who means business.

**TOM**

What do you mean?.

**ANNE**

Those men are competition.

*(Another knock. Then muffled shouting. Incoherent.)*

**TOM**

They're not our lads?.

**ANNE**

No.

**TOM**

Are they not smugglers at all?

**ANNE**

No.

**TOM**

Who are they?

*(ANNE pours two drinks, unhurried.)*

**ANNE**

Men who don't pay. Men who don't share. Men who'd happily sell you and charge you for the rope.

*(She hands TOM a glass.)*

**TOM**

You used the law as a distraction didn't you?

**ANNE**

Maybe just a little.

*(The knocking turns frantic)*

**TOM**

Jesus Anne.

**ANNE**

*(looks at audience, and nods head towards Tom)*

He never did like cellars.

*(swigs a drink)*

**TOM**

If they die there...

**ANNE**

...then the sea did it.

*(The knocking slows. Then it stops.)*

**TOM**

Anne.

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**ANNE**

Yes?

**TOM**

Are we the bad people?

*(She considers, genuinely.)*

**ANNE**

Oh, absolutely.

*(She clinks her glass against his.)*

We're locals and we look after our own.

*(They drink.)*

**BLACKOUT**

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