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Colder than a murdering mortician's morgue.

*No, wait.* Librarian Monah Trenary mentally crossed out the line and tried again. Colder than a murderous mortician's morgue. She scratched her head and bit her lip. Were morgues cold? She'd only been in the local mortuary once, but it didn't seem nearly as cold as the library today. Much more and she wouldn't be able to control the chattering of her teeth.

She flipped her long, dark hair over her shoulder and cast a glance toward the back room. What was taking that AC guy so long, anyway? He'd been working at least an hour. Surely he could shut the whole unit down until he'd fixed it so she could thaw out.

The cold had already chased several patrons away this morning. Well, except for Dena Drolen. Her habit of coming in to check if any of her mail ended up here by mistake proved to be almost as bothersome as when Monah had to take it to her. Especially when she made Monah run around the library collecting information about one thing or another. Last week it was engineering and car parts. Today, legal guides and medical journals. The woman couldn't have left soon enough as far as she was concerned. She'd have to try again to straighten out the workers at the post office.

The front door whooshed open and her assistant, Sandy Magrew, rushed in. Older than Monah by almost thirty years, Sandy felt more like a matronly friend than a co-worker. She peered around the room and skittered to a stop across the counter from Monah.

“Good. You’re alone.” She leaned close and lowered her voice. “You’ll never guess who I saw at lunch today.”

Monah crumpled the paper she’d been writing on and tossed it atop the full trashcan. “Who?”

Sandy reached across the counter and clasped her hand, only to let go and emit a little squeal at the loud *whump* against the front window.

“That dumb bird.” She pointed at the offending cardinal bouncing off the glass pane. “He’s going to scare the life clean out of me some day. Why does he do that?”

Monah opened the blinds a little wider. “That’s the first time he’s done it today. I’d begun to think he’d had enough of battering himself against the glass.”

“Well, you should do something.”

“Like what?”

*Whump*. The thumps increased in frequency. How he could continually do that without knocking himself silly?

“I don’t know. Scare it away. Get someone to catch it. *Something*.”

Monah grinned. “I kinda like it.”

“What? Why?”

“Well, it’s unique. What other library do you know that has a bird so desperate to get in?” She tapped her chin. “You know, I oughta make a sign that says something to the effect that even the birds are after the bookworms in here.”

Sandy rolled her eyes and moaned. “Only you, Monah.”

Monah watched the bird hit the window one more time before giving her attention back to Sandy. “So, who did you say you saw at lunch?”

Sandy’s smile returned, and an excited shiver shook her ample frame. “Wayne Drolen. Thankfully he didn’t see me because that allowed me to eavesdrop on what he was saying.” She peeked over her glasses and sucked air through her teeth. . .her usual attempt to appear ashamed. One corner of her mouth rose. “It didn’t hurt that I ducked a little lower in the booth. Was that wrong?”

Monah bit the inside of her cheek. She knew better than to listen to gossip, but wondering who he spoke to didn’t count as gossip, did it? Besides, the battle for the funds donated to the city kept getting more and more intense, and Wayne was her biggest opponent. The library, woefully behind the times, needed new computers, and she needed to learn something, anything, to keep the playing field level. “Who was he talking to?”

“His fishing buddy, Gary Walker.”

“Oh.” Pressing her lips together to keep from asking, Monah silently willed Sandy to continue.

The two stared at each other, waiting for the other’s prompting. Sandy broke first.

“All right, I’ll just tell ya. . .since I know you wanna know.” The whole top half of her body now lay on the counter. “Wayne told Gary he hired a publicist to help him sell the community on a sports complex. He paid extra to keep the rest of his city council bunch from learning about it. Said a little help on the side wouldn’t hurt his odds. Even said she was easy on the eyes.” She stood upright and straightened her blouse. “What a weasel.”

“A publicist, huh?” Monah’s heart thumped in time to the cardinal attacking the window.

“Yep. Sounds like he intends to get every dime of that money, dear.” Sandy patted her hand. “Hate to say it, but you’d better get on the ball if you want even a fraction.”

Voices at the front door silenced them. Several teenagers paraded in followed by a dour Miss Tait. The teacher’s attempts to shush them fell on deaf ears.

Sandy scooped an armful of books off the counter. “Here comes another one of the money-grabbers. Don’t you worry, Monah. I intend to do whatever I can to make sure the library gets its share.”

A snarl lifted the corner of Sandy’s lips, and Monah groaned in understanding. “Why doesn’t Miss Tait call and tell me when she’s going to bring her summer school students in here?”

Air hissed through Sandy’s teeth. “Oh, I’m sorry, dear. She did call. Guess I forgot to tell you.” She hustled around the counter. “I’m going to the office. Too much work to do to deal with the likes of—”

The last word was lost in the slamming of the office door. Chicken. Monah grimaced, wishing she could follow Sandy and avoid the commotion this group always caused.

“Hey, Miss Trenary,” the teens chimed as they filed past.

“Remember,” Miss Tait called out, waving three of her bony fingers in the air, “I want three references for the author you choose. You’re free to leave once your report is in my possession.” She turned to Monah and scowled. “Yet another misuse of city funds, eh, Miss Trenary? You’ve no cause to have it so cold in here. It may be warmer outside than a usual Massachusetts summer, but this is ridiculous. I’ll be sure to let the city council know about your disregard for proper money management.”

“There’s something wrong with the air conditioner. The repairman is working on it.”

Monah hated the defensive tone in her voice. It made her sound like one of Miss Tait's students.

“Yes, well, don't think I won't hold you responsible if I catch my death in here.”

*Oh, please.* “Here. Take my sweater.” She pulled it free from the back of her chair and handed it across the counter. “It'll help until the repairman is finished.”

The old teacher snatched it from her grasp and stalked away, her heavy heels clomping despite the carpeted floor. *Is it me or all humans in general?* The woman didn't seem to like anyone. . . except the principal.

“Miss Trenary, where can I find books about—?”

She didn't hear the rest of Ashley Knight's question. She knew this would happen. With only one reference computer, the students would bombard her with questions about where to find what they wanted. Not to mention the library's computer relic was much too slow for doing research on the internet. Why couldn't Miss Tait see that?

Monah handed Ashley a sheet of paper and pencil so she could take notes. Oh, well. Maybe one day Miss Tait would understand the need. In the meantime, Monah wouldn't let the grouchy teacher spoil the day. Besides, she enjoyed every aspect of the library and hoped to teach that love to the kids.

*Whump.*

Ashley gasped. “Did you see that?”

Three more thumps came in quick succession.

“Oh, my goodness. How cool is that?” She turned. “Hey, guys. Come see this goofy bird. It's throwing itself against the window.”

The commotion brought the rest of the students, followed by Miss Tait, her bony shoulders poking mountains in the sleeves of Monah's sweater.

“Get to work, all of you.” She clapped her hands for emphasis, two, thin silver bracelets jangling on her frail wrists. Once they’d left, she turned to Monah. “Now what have you got going on?”

Monah motioned to the window. “See for yourself.” Thankfully, the cardinal didn’t let her down. Her smile faded in the face of Miss Tait’s frown.

“I certainly hope it doesn’t cause more of a disturbance, or you’ll have to do something about it. This is a library, you know.” She turned on her heel and stomped away before Monah could reply.

Monah shrugged off the barbs and sought out Ashley. The poor teen looked lost as she wandered amidst the nonfiction section running her finger along the book spines.

“What is it you’re looking for, Ashley?”

Relief washed across the girl’s face. “I’m supposed to pick a famous author from the old days and write a report. I need three books about whoever I pick.”

Monah fought a smile at her ‘old days’ comment. What did Ashley consider old? Then again, maybe she didn’t want to know. “And who did you decide on?”

The girl lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know. You got any suggestions?”

Monah peeked down a long aisle to see if Miss Tait could see them. The old woman’s head was bowed, her fingers rifling through the pages of a book. Monah pulled her gaze back to Ashley. “Well, Samuel Clemens would be an easy one. Or you could write about Nathaniel Hawthorne or Ralph Waldo Emerson. Then there’s Longfellow or Edgar Allen Poe. If you want a female to write about, there’s Harriet Beecher Stowe and Laura Ingalls Wild. . .er.” She drifted into silence at Ashley’s open-mouthed stare.

“How do you know all that stuff?”

She feigned insulted astonishment and put her hands on her hips. “Hey, I know stuff.”

Ashley held her hands out. “No. I only meant—”

With a laugh, Monah slipped her arm around the girl and led her toward the biographies.

“I knew what you meant. Just choose someone, and I’ll show you the books you can use.”

“See, that’s what I mean. How do you know where to find that stuff? There’s tons of books in here.”

She stopped to look Ashley in the eyes. “I’ve worked here for a while. Everything’s been laid out the same way for years. For instance, all the biographies are in the 900 section along this wall.” She motioned to the number. “And there’s more about American authors in the 800’s. Plus, I love books. I love the way they feel. I even love their scent.” She pulled one off the shelf. “Here, smell.”

Ashley took a big whiff. Monah saw the sneeze coming and felt in her pockets for a tissue, but she was too late. Ashley didn’t just sneeze, not the expected little dainty ‘a-choo’. She exploded with a manly blast. So much for a quiet library.

“Sorry, Ashley. Guess I should have checked for dust. Though,” she looked around, “I think you took care of that little problem for me.”

The girl giggled, her palm rubbing at her nose.

“Miss Trenary!”

Miss Tait scowled at them from the end of the aisle. Monah turned back to Ashley and made a face. “You got me into trouble,” she whispered with a grin, then raised her voice. “You should find what you’re looking for in this area, Ashley. Let me know if you need help.”

Miss Tait’s stare burned into her back all the way to the counter. More visitors had arrived and cluttered the aisles, among them, one of her regulars, Robin Beck. The others

probably just wanted to get in from the heat. Not Robin. Her daughter, Lauren, hoped to be a teacher and loved spending time in the library. Monah gave her a quick wave.

Miss Tait's sharp gaze still followed her as Monah scanned returned books and prepared them to be replaced on the shelves. At least the bird stopped slamming into the window. Miss Tait couldn't fuss about that any longer.

Sunlight sparkled off the leaded glass of the front door as Detective Mike Brockman walked in. Back when Monah's friend, Casey Alexander, thought her aunt committed suicide, Mike had been the only officer in the Pine Mills Police Department willing to help them track down the real killer. His smile was the balm on her otherwise unpleasant day. It also sent Monah's pulse into hyper drive. She shoved her glasses higher on her nose until her lashes bumped against the lenses. A raise of her eyebrows dropped them back into place. *Think before you speak so you don't make a fool of yourself again.* She met him at the front desk.

"Hey, Monah."

"Hi, Mike."

He smiled, his brown eyes twinkling. "You've got it plenty cool in here."

"Yeah. The air is stuck in the 'on' position. I've got Jimmy checking it, but maybe I should check on him. He's been at it for quite a while now, and I haven't seen a thing of him. He probably decided to take a nap. I heard someone caught him doing that on the job." *Time to shut up, Monah.* She clamped her mouth closed.

Mike leaned his forearms on the counter, his face only inches from hers, his woodsy aftershave tickling her nose. "Yeah, well I don't know that you should believe everything you hear. People in this town like to talk."

Drawn by his quiet voice and mesmerizing brown eyes, she rested her hip against the

counter, bringing her that much closer to him. “You’re right. My mistake.” She had to get a handle on her reaction to this guy. He sent her into such a state every time he came near.

He grinned. “You—”

The glass on the front door sparkled again. Now what? Ken Greer, the town’s fire chief, thumped the counter as he approached.

“Hello, Monah. Inspection day. I’ll be doing the usual checks.” He slapped Mike on the back. “Hey, Mike. Everything okay?”

They shook hands. “Sure is. Just here to give Monah a message.”

“Riiight.”

Monah caught Ken’s wink and shrunk in dismay, yet a tiny thrill went through her at the thought that maybe the two of them had been talking. She couldn’t meet Ken’s gaze when he turned to her.

“All right, I’m going to work,” Ken said. “Shouldn’t take more than an hour or so. Any problems I should know about?”

Monah shuddered and rubbed her arms. “You mean other than an air conditioner that won’t turn off? No.”

“It is a bit chilly in here. Jimmy working on it?” When she nodded, he knocked on the counter two more times. “Well, if he’s not finished by the time I am, I’ll go see if I can give him a hand.”

The words were no sooner out of his mouth when the air conditioner fell silent. She couldn’t help but grin. “Not a moment too soon. I was ready to prop open the front doors.”

Ken gave a wave over his shoulder as he headed toward the back. She turned to Mike.

“You said you had a message?”

“Yes, but you’re not going to like it much, I’m afraid.”

Monah dropped her gaze, her fingers tightening around the spine of a book. *He’s going to back out of our double date with Luke and Casey.*

“I won’t make the movie tonight. The boss wants me to stake out a warehouse and see if I can catch whoever’s burning the abandoned buildings around town.”

She wanted to stick out her lower lip as far as it would go in a big pout. She wanted to rant and rave. “You can’t order an officer to do that?”

He smiled and touched her chin with his thumb. “I wish. He specifically said me. I’m sorry, Monah. I was looking forward to a little time with you.”

“Well, maybe we—”

“Hey, Monah.” Jimmy skirted the counter and sat on her stool.

*Drat.* Now he decides to show up. She managed a tight smile. “Get it fixed?”

“I think so.” He spun around on the stool like a little kid. “You had some weird corrosion on your wires. Don’t know what caused it, but I think you’re good to go now.”

Round and round the carrot-topped head went. The spinning had to stop. He was making her dizzy, and she wondered why it didn’t seem to affect him. She put out her hand and grabbed his shoulder. “Do you have a bill for me?”

“Nope. Our secretary will send it.” He scooted off the stool and headed for the door, his pants hanging low. “Let me know if you still have problems,” he said as he strolled out the door.

Mike chuckled. “He’s never in a big hurry, is he?”

“I know, and it drives his dad crazy. He’s even threatened to dissolve the partnership, but Jimmy’s good at what he does, so it’s an idle threat.”

“Yeah. Anyway, about tonight—”

“Monah, I can’t seem to find the latest Brandy Purcell mystery. Is it out yet?” Looking much like the tiny bird she was named after, Robin Beck, her head tilted slightly, peered around a bookshelf at Monah.

She gave an inward groan. Didn’t Robin know better than to interrupt a conversation between a potential married couple? Well, okay, so maybe she was jumping the gun on the marriage thing, but a girl could dream, couldn’t she?

Mike tapped the counter. “I gotta run. Call you later.”

“Oh, okay.” She waved, but her heart dropped to her painted toenails. After a moment, she turned to Robin. “It comes out next month, Robin. I’ll let you know when I get it in.”

“All right. Thanks, Monah.” She held up a brightly colored novel, the title spelled in jagged letters across the cover. “I just love these books. I learn just as much from them as I do those crime scene shows.”

Instead of answering, Monah smiled, nodded, and watched through the window as Mike drove away. “Yeah, me too.” By the time she turned back, Robin had wandered off, only to be replaced by Miss Tait. Wonderful.

“Here’s your sweater back.” She shoved it toward Monah. “I’m plenty warm now.”

She did look a little hot with her flushed cheeks and hair sticking to her sweaty brow. Monah placed a light touch to her elbow. “Do you feel okay? Would you like some water?”

Miss Tait pressed a shaky palm to her face. “That does sound good. Is it cold?”

She looked for the case of bottled water under the counter. “No, it’s just room temperature. I’m sorry.” Where’d the water go? “Hang on a minute. I have to ask Sandy where she moved it. In fact, why don’t you go on back to your table? I’ll bring it to you.”

“Thank you.”

Monah's brows rose as Miss Tait walked away. Wow. That had to be the nicest the old teacher had ever been to her. She shook her head and went to the office.

"Sandy, where's the case of water bottles? Miss Tait needs one. I had them under the counter."

"I know. I thought they looked tacky there, so I moved them." She pulled one out from under the desk.

"When did you do that?"

"Just a little while ago. I wanted one, too."

"Okay, thanks." She took the bottle and left the office. Before she could talk to Miss Tait, one of the teens popped into her path. She set the bottle on Miss Tait's table next to a small pile of reports and crossed her arms. Young Mister Paul Dyer was a demanding soul, fueled by the fact that his father chaired the school board. It also didn't hurt that they were rich. She was surprised Paul hadn't come to her long before now. He was always looking for ways to get others to do his work for him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her teen-aged assistant, Jamie Canon, return from an errand. It was about time. The girl waved and mouthed her apologies. Monah's attention went back to the student. "What can I do for you, Paul?"

He spared a glance at Miss Tait. "I need one more reference for my author, and I can't find one. I've got to get a good grade on this report or I won't get an 'A.'"

Monah grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the shelves. "Keep your voice down. You may have wanted Miss Tait to hear you, but no one else needs to be in on your grumbling."

"Sorry."

Right. He didn't look a bit sorry, what with the smirk and glance over his shoulder at the

old teacher. Monah took a deep breath. “Who’s the author?”

“William Faulkner.”

Oh, what she wouldn’t give for computers. He’d be able to find more information about Faulkner on the web than in the library. Now that she thought about it, she wouldn’t mind some additional funds for more books, too. She pointed. “Try that one.”

“I used that one already.”

She moved down.

“How about—”

“That one, too.”

Grrrr. Okay, she knew one he wouldn’t know about. “Here.” She pulled out a large tome. “This one is filled with American authors.”

“Oh. Great.” He took it and turned without so much as a thank you.

She peeked at her watch. More than an hour before she could close up. Right now, that felt like forever.

A masculine voice called her name again. She gritted her teeth and turned. Mr. Dyer looked down on her.

“My son finished yet? I’d like to get home.”

*Wouldn’t we all.* Monah forced a smile. “I’m not sure. You can ask Miss Tait since she gave him the assignment.” She motioned to the teacher going over some papers at the table. One corner of Mr. Dyer’s mouth tightened, a sure sign he didn’t relish the confrontation, but he headed toward her anyway. With an expression that looked like he was ready to strangle the poor lady, he jerked out a chair and sat.

“Pssst.”

Casey stood at the end of the aisle, a smile pasted on her face. She was early, but Monah didn't mind. Her friend was a welcome distraction from this long day. The two wandered back to the front desk. Several patrons had left. Others seemed intent on staying till closing. Even Robin sat at a table with a magazine in her hand, though her gaze rested on Miss Tait rather than the page in front of her.

“You look a little frayed around the edges. Rough day?”

Leave it to Casey to lay it out as she saw it. She only hoped she didn't look too frayed when Mike stopped by earlier. Casey, on the other hand, always looked great. Her blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders and flipped out at just the right angle. Added to that, the blue of her cotton sundress accentuated her eyes. Monah sighed. “You could say that. I'm ready for a relaxing meal and a movie. Where's Luke?”

“He said to call him when we picked a place to eat.”

“Okay.” Her lips dipped into a frown. “You know our night out will be without Mike.”

“I know. He called Luke.” Casey gave her a grimacing smile. “How'd you take the news?”

“About like you would if Luke backed out on you.”

“That bad, huh?”

The two shared a grin right up until Ken set up his ladder with a clatter that had all the patrons turning heads. He scrambled up the rungs and reached for the sprinklers. Monah rushed to his side.

“Why can't you call me and set up an appointment to do this? The noise is causing too much of a disturbance.”

“You know the answer to that, Monah. A surprise inspection isn't a surprise when I make

an appointment.” He grinned at his own joke. “I’m almost finished. Hey, do you mind holding the bottom of the ladder for me? You wouldn’t want me to fall and cause a disturbance.”

Monah looked at Casey and rolled her eyes. Her friend smiled and motioned that she was going into the office. Monah nodded and turned her attention back to Ken.

“Are you going to have to check every single sprinkler in here?” She glanced at her watch and then grabbed hold of the ladder.

“I’ll have you out of here by closing time. Promise.”

For the next thirty minutes, she helped Ken move around the building.

“Everything looks good, Monah. I’m going to check the fire extinguisher in the back then I’ll be out of your way till the next time.”

“Great.” Monah slid onto her stool, propped her elbows on the counter, and dropped her face into her palms. What a day. Right now, a movie didn’t sound like much fun. At this rate, she’d fall asleep during the previews. She stifled a yawn and looked around. The place was empty. When did that happen?

Casey, Jamie, and Sandy came out of the office.

Sandy set a paperback on the counter next to her purse. “We’re headed home, dear. Anything you want us to do before we leave?”

“No thanks. It appears we’re done. Sorry I wasn’t at the counter much.”

“Not a problem. I only checked out two books all afternoon.” She wagged her fingers. “Bye, girls. Have a nice evening.”

Ken scurried from the back and grabbed his ladder. “Hey, Miss Magrew, Jamie. Would you two mind holding that door for me?”

Once they were gone, Monah closed her eyes and clasped Casey’s hand. “Listen.”

She loved it.

“What?”

“Don’t you hear that?”

After a moment, Casey shook her head. “No. What?”

“It’s quiet.”

Casey swatted her on the arm. “Libraries are supposed to be quiet.”

“You’d think, huh? Today was anything but. From that cardinal throwing himself against the window, to Ashley’s booming sneezes, to Ken and his ladder.”

“That bird still doing that? Wish I could see it.”

Monah walked around the counter and flipped off all the light switches. “Come in the afternoons. He seems to do it the most then.” Only the shimmer of the exit sign above the door remained. “You ready?”

“You know it. Where you want to eat?”

“I thought maybe—”

A soft glow lit the back of the library. She headed that way. “Hang on. Ken must have left a light on.”

The corridor to the bathroom stretched out black and uninviting. Behind her, bookshelves loomed high overhead, like eerie sentinels. The library sure could be creepy after closing. Her steps slowed, and the hair on her neck stood on end. “Anybody back here?”

“Monah?” Casey called from the front.

“Coming.” Monah halted outside the restroom. Light spilled under the door and shone on her toes. She hesitated to push it open. “H-hello? Is anyone in there?”

No answer.

“Good grief. This is silly.” She shoved on the door and stepped inside.

Two hose-clad legs protruded from under the stall. Monah stumbled and caught herself on the bathroom sink.

“Oh!” She slapped her hand to her chest to calm the frightened beating of her heart. Finally, she inched forward, just enough to poke at the stall door with her finger. It swung open wide. “Ma’am? Are you. . .?”

Monah’s stomach lurched. A scream clawed at her throat. Sprawled on the floor, her head tilted oddly against the porcelain commode, lay Miss Tait.

“Casey!” The name came out in a squeal. “Call an ambulance.”