

CHECKING OUT LOVE

AN OVERDUE Match



Sarah Monzon

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*For my mom and all the bold, beautiful,
and bald ladies in the world.
This one is dedicated to you.*

1

Libraries aren't famous for their penal codes, but some literary offenses deserve due punishments. I haven't decided yet where I stand on late fees—for or against—as I truly can see both sides of the argument on that one. As someone who has impatiently waited in the digital queue for my turn for a book to become available, a little incentive to the lackadaisical reader to get a move on is useful. However, I also understand the desire to linger between the pages of certain books and how hard it is to move on after a literary hangover.

On the issue of mishandling of books, however, I am firmly in the camp of some sort of consequence, for to mistreat a book is most certainly a punishable crime.

I unfold the dog-eared corner and smooth out the cream-colored paper of the hardcover in my hands, making soothing, cooing noises under my breath. A book doesn't have feelings, but it does have a soul. Life exhaled into every word by the author and then breathed into each person who reads those same words. So, in a sense, books are both alive themselves and give life to others simultaneously. Which is why they should be treated with care and not irresponsibly—something the patron who folded these pages clearly disagrees with. I turn the page and unfold another corner.

“Uh-oh. I know that look. Did someone write in a book again, Evangeline?” Hayley teases as she retrieves a paper from the printer, one bearing the list of titles to be pulled from the shelves and set aside for patrons who put in holds on the library’s website.

I turn to her, frowning. “I’m not against writing in books. The margins are great for that and so are a rainbow of highlighters. If someone wants to commit marginalia by engaging with the text in their own copies, who am I to judge? What I’m against is people writing in *library* books. There’s a big difference.” I turn a few more pages and hold up the offending evidence. “But some Neanderthal dog-eared at least seventy percent of this title. Seventy percent! He should be dragged from his cave and beaten with his own club.” I mutter that last part under my breath.

Hayley gasps in mock horror. “A duel for the author’s honor must be in order. It’s pistols at dawn.”

I shake my head while swallowing back a grin. “You know I prefer swords for a duel.”

“Swords? Really?” Her button nose scrunches. “I’d imagine they’d be really heavy to hold out in front of you. Wouldn’t your muscles tremble and your palms get so sweaty they’d lose their grip on the hilt? Then you’d be run through and I’d be left alone to do the reshelving by myself. Oooh!” Her eyes alight with mischief the second a new thought enters her head. “Unless you’re dueling some regency rogue and he decides that instead of running you through, he’ll teach you the proper way to wield that deadly weapon.” She shimmies her shoulders. “The perfect excuse to get close and use his charms to seduce and disarm you.”

My cheeks twitch at her theatrics, a smile threatening to unleash. With sheer willpower, I force a deadpan look onto my face. “I changed my mind. I choose pistols. Pull the trigger. Bam. Done.”

She tries to push out her bottom lip to pout, but her laughing makes it impossible. “You’re no fun, you know that? Besides, the hero coming up with an excuse to teach the heroine a skill, eliciting the need to put his arms around her, is a well-established device of romance novels for a reason. Plus, bullet wounds bleed a lot. You don’t want that. Think of the mess you’d have to clean up.”

I’d rather not think about it, thank you very much. Somehow our conversation has gotten off topic, although that’s not exactly unusual when it comes to Hayley.

She extends the paper with the list of holds out to me. “Want to keep an eye on the dastardly dog-eared deviant under the guise of getting actual work done?”

“Nice alliteration, and yes, I do.” I take the paper.

I’d only gotten a quick look at the retreating form of the patron who’d turned in this mistreated book. He’d headed toward the nonfiction aisles, specifically the biography shelves near the back corner, opposite the children’s section.

I quickly scan the library’s barcode on the cover and return the book in the system, noting the borrower’s name. Tai Davis. I’d only moved to Little Creek (pronounced *crick*, like the ache you’d get in your neck) six months ago, and though the town is small, the name Tai Davis doesn’t ring any bells.

But if he’s willing to mutilate almost every page of a book, I really don’t trust him to roam the aisles of the library unsupervised. I take my job as protector of free thought, untold universes, awaiting adventures, and expanding personal perspectives seriously. Because books are more than just paper and ink. They’re a portal leading to anywhere you ever wanted to go—heart, mind, or soul.

Hayley and Martha, the children’s librarian, like to tease me about my strict standards when it comes to the treatment of books. Martha points out that at least my patrons don’t chew on the pages of paperbacks, the books coming back soggy,

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slobbery, and smelling of spit-up. She has a point, and I also concede that I may go beyond the bounds of what's deemed the appropriate amount of caring when it comes to library property, but I can't help it. Books are my friends, and I can't stand to see them bullied. Call it my quirk.

I straighten my leopard-print pencil skirt, then run my thumb along the waistband to make sure my vintage library due date card graphic tee is tucked in before I step around the beveled corner of the desk and head toward the back of the library.

Between the *J* and *K* shelves, I spot him. The same black leather jacket pulled taut between impressively wide shoulders and ending in large silver buckles at a trim waist. His head is bent, and although I can't see what's in his hands, it doesn't take Sherlock Holmes on the case to figure out it must be an open book. Location is a dead giveaway.

I walk softly in my red canvas high-tops to the aisle of shelves just on the other side of him. I can watch him through the small space between the top of Walter Isaacson's published works and the bottom of the metal shelf holding our copy of Antonia Fraser's writings on Mary, Queen of Scots, and Oliver Cromwell.

The man isn't that tall. Maybe a smidge over an inch of my own five-foot-three frame. With my restricted view between the shelves, I can only really see from the top of his shoulders to the middle of the back of his head. His hair is thick, black as an inkwell, and swirls softly over the large collar of his biker-style jacket like an artistic script font. He turns, putting himself in profile, and I suck in a sharp breath.

I blame my reaction on surprise and the ingrained teachings of my granny, Carol Sykes. I've never seen anyone with a neck tattoo in person before. According to her, the only people who would permanently mark themselves in such a visible location on their bodies are "dangerous" and I should "stay away for my

safety” because they probably “got their tattoos either in jail or as a gang sign.” Which, to be fair, maybe was the case fifty years ago? I don’t know. I wasn’t alive fifty years ago, and things do tend to change over the course of a couple generations.

Even though I read profusely and open my mind to many different viewpoints, the voice of my childhood—of my granny—is still loudest overall. Which is probably the reason I subconsciously take a step back. It’s definitely not because I correlate a human canvas with anything deviant or think that he “put graffiti on God’s temple,” or that he will “regret his decisions when he’s old and wrinkled.”

But even from this distance, the beautiful artwork draws my eye—so much so that granny’s voice in my mind fades as my focus pools to one location. It’s a simple red rose with unfolding petals so soft looking that I want to run my finger over the bloom to feel the velvety texture. It’s delicate. Intricate. Beautiful. Made even more so because of the contrast of the hard lines framing the picture. The strong angle of the man’s stern jaw ends in a powerful set chin. Even his neck is corded muscle and thrumming veins, a juxtaposition against the soft blossom.

Guilt sits heavy in my stomach, though I can’t pinpoint its exact cause. There are too many options to choose from, starting with the fact that I haven’t turned on my heel and distanced myself from a man I’ve been conditioned since childhood to see as dangerous. Or maybe it’s because I’m openly staring at a man, ogling the lines of his neck—both natural and inked—instead of acting like a proper lady and averting my eyes. Or maybe it’s as simple as being at work and not actually getting any work done at the moment.

Whatever the reason, the guilt isn’t enough to propel me into any sort of action. I stand there and I stare, tracing the different weighted lines with my gaze.

In reading fiction, I’ve learned that there are, in essence,

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three types of people. There are main characters, who are your heroes and heroines. The stars of the story. They may see conflict within their journey, but ultimately they receive their happily-ever-after in the end. Then there are the secondary characters. The supporting cast, if you will. Their job is to be a sort of shining light for the main characters, adding just enough spice to the story to bring out the flavor but never steal the show. And finally, the third category is the villain. The antagonist to the protagonist. Whether slightly sinister or downright diabolical, this is the fictional persona readers love to hate.

Personally, I'm a secondary character. For reasons that shall not be named at this time, I will likely never fit into the heroine role. Not in my own story. Not in any story. Contrarily, the level of my ability to be nefarious is set at exactly zero, therefore I don't fit into the mold of a villain either. Which is fine by me. Everyone loves a good sidekick.

But where does Mr. Tai Davis fit? I can tell that under no circumstance would he ever be mistaken for a secondary character. Maybe it's the way his presence commands the space even though he's currently the only patron in the J-K aisle, no underling for him to direct. That, along with the width of his stance and set of shoulders, is just the first entry of proof that he would steal the attention on every page he stepped onto.

Which only leaves villain or hero as options. The fact that he's in a library does give him a tally mark under the Hero heading, in my opinion. All good heroes should be well-read. However, his handling of books—or mishandling, rather—is definitely a slash against him. (No, I'm not harping on the dog-ear thing too much. If people want to treat library books as their own personal collection, then they can keep the book they ruined and buy the library a new copy.) Then there's his neck tattoo. Of a rose. Does that make him bad? Or good?

It makes him neither because tattoos have no moral standing on a person's character.

The cover of a book closing with a puff of air on the other side of the shelves snaps me out of . . . whatever *that* was. Mr. Davis pivots to face the opposite direction and strides toward the exit. I wait a couple of seconds so he can get ahead of me before tailing him again since I don't know if he will bank left toward the fiction section or right toward the audiobooks and DVDs. I'm not exactly sure what he would do to mar those media platforms, but as long as I'm around, the answer will be nothing. Unless, of course, he checks them out. There's not much I can do once inventory leaves the library.

"Excuse me." A woman's voice behind me stops my feet from moving after Mr. Davis.

I turn around and smile pleasantly at the woman with her arm slung across a young boy's shoulders. "How can I help you?"

The mother looks down at her son. "Go ahead and ask," she encourages him with a small push between his shoulder blades.

"Um." The boy raises his bright blue eyes from underneath a shock of wheat-colored hair, then lowers them back down to the patterned carpet again. "I'm looking for a book."

I sneak a quick peek over my shoulder, but my mark is gone. Next time I'll just tag his return as damaged and charge him for a new copy. I glance back down at the boy in front of me and feel the muscles in my face relax. There's no question here. *This* boy is hero material, on par with Henry Huggins or Max Crumbly.

I squat down to eye level. "Then you've come to the right place. What book are you looking for?"

He shrugs. "A good one?"

I sneak one more peek toward the exit as I lead the mother and son toward the children's section. This time I get a glimpse

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of black leather as the automatic doors close, a single book tucked between the muscular curve of a hip and arm.

Pistols at dawn, I think facetiously at his retreating form before turning to introduce my new little friend to the wonderful world of Perodia, where Tag and his squirrel companion, Skyla, meet the last firehawk. Boy, is he in for an adventure.

2

The reasons I'm not heroine material, based on genre:

- Sci-fi—I'm afraid of heights. I have trouble even crossing bridges and would pass out if forced to, say, go to the top of the Space Needle (ask me how I know). There's no way that I could explore intergalactic regions and interact with extraterrestrial intelligence from a spaceship in actual space.
- Western—I'm allergic to horses. I found this out the hard way one year in sleepaway camp. I was so excited to flex my inner Annie Oakley only to find out that if I got within ten feet of a horse, my eyes would swell shut and I'd break out in a rash that would give me the nickname Blind Ketchup Girl for a week. A little on the nose, as far as demeaning names go, but nine-year-old bullies aren't particularly bright. The point is, you really can't have a compelling western without horses.
- Mystery/Thriller/Suspense—A search-and-rescue team had to get me out of a corn maze once. Also, I've never been able to win even a single game of Clue. Being able to puzzle out scenarios seems like a pretty basic prerequisite for the genre.

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- Fantasy—Sadly, I have no magical powers with which to save humanity.
- Historical—Automatically disqualified by being born in the current century. Also, I'm kind of partial to breathing deeply and thus would refuse to wear a corset. There's also my love of indoor plumbing.

And that leaves romance. This genre took me a little longer than the others to realize I also didn't qualify for a leading role. My ex-fiancé, Brett, was the first to let me in on the secret, although I missed the clues to begin with because, as I've established, I'd never make it as a mystery-solving sleuth. But looking back, I can see the hints along the way even before he sat me down for the big reveal.

The ebbing interest in his eyes when he looked at me. The loss of touch that coincided with the loss of my hair. The tie of attraction that had at one time bound him to me unraveling, until one day it just wasn't there anymore. At least for him.

At first, I convinced myself Brett's actions and words had nothing to do with my heroine status and everything to do with demoting him from leading man to villain. I mean, it was classic villainous behavior for him to have such a shallow depth of feeling that he was no longer attracted to me and stopped loving me when I developed alopecia, an autoimmune disease in which my T cells sound the bugle cry to attack my hair follicles like the swarm of bees that kept Winnie the Pooh from the honey in the tree (that's probably a strange analogy, but I subbed for Martha at story time yesterday and the toddlers and preschoolers made buzzing sounds when we came to that page, so it's still fresh in my mind).

That reflects on Brett and his character, not me. If it were true love, then when my hair fell out—first in patches, then at an increased rate that I ended up shaving the remaining

valiant strands that had resisted the attack—he would’ve still run his fingers over the soft buzz of fuzz around my crown, kissed the widening spots that were as smooth as a baby’s bottom, and tried to convince me that I was still beautiful, hair or no hair.

But Brett’s rejection wasn’t a quiet confession in an empty room. It was more like a kid at the top of a mountain shouting into the wind so his words bounce off the range in an endless echo. The same words reverberating over and over and over again.

There’s a study someone conducted somewhere about how a person can disbelieve something told to them once as a lie, but when that same thing is repeated x amount of times, they accept it as truth. I can probably look up the study in the reference section, but I really don’t want to.

The point is, Brett might have been the first voice to tell me I’m not heroine material, but it wasn’t until I kept hearing the echo from sources all around me that I began to believe he might be right.

Echoes like the ones from romance books themselves, in fact.

I pick up a stack of books from a basket at the end of the A-E aisle of fiction. Books that people have taken off the shelves to look at but ultimately decided not to check out. Instead of reshelving the titles themselves, we encourage patrons to place the books in the baskets so we librarians can reshelve them properly. You’d be surprised how many people will just put a book willy-nilly on a shelf instead of paying attention to alphabetical and numerical order. Melvil Dewey would roll over in his grave.

I shuffle the trio of books, looking at their covers. Romances, all of them. And all proving my point. The first is a bodice-ripper from the early 2000s, with a Fabio-esque cover model. His luscious locks flow in the breeze, and the woman in his

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arms, décolletage on full display, has a head of hair that Pantene would be privileged to put in one of their commercials. The next is a book with a contemporary setting. The military man with a black past has a high and tight crew cut, but the woman he's staring at broodily has a mane of curls running the full length of her back. The third is much the same.

I don't have to read the stories within to know that (A) every hero dreams of running his fingers through the woman's hair, and (B) every hero equates anything false—I'm talking even a little bit of lipstick or rouge, in the case of the bodice-ripper—as some sort of moral deficiency in the heroine, stripping her of heroine status.

Yep. I no longer have any hair for a man to be tempted by (A). The disease that started as alopecia areata, or spot balding, has progressed past even alopecia totalis, where I didn't have any hair on my head but still had hair on other places on my body. Now, it's alopecia universalis, which, as I'm sure you've guessed, is a complete and universal loss of hair. Everywhere. I no longer have to shave my legs (yay!), but I also have lost characteristics that are essentially associated with being human. The face radically changes when it no longer sports eyebrows or eyelashes.

Which, of course, leads to (B) and the fact that not only do I apply makeup, as do probably ninety-five percent of modern women, but a lot of what I wear is fake. Fake eyelashes. Fake temporary eyebrow tattoos. Fake hair in the form of a wig.

I quickly reshelve the trio of books and make my way back to the front desk. I don't often think of my character status anymore. Not since I moved to Little Creek and began my fresh start, anyway. But for some reason, my stalking of Tai Davis earlier brought it all back. Maybe because I wasn't able to clearly classify him, although, again, I'm not sure why I even tried. I don't often make a habit of judging people without talking to them first. Even then, I try to give them the benefit

of the doubt if the first impression isn't the best. Life isn't a Jane Austen retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*.

"I've been meaning to ask you." Hayley looks up from the computer where the library's catalog is glowing on the screen. "Can you call me at exactly 7:10 tonight?"

"That's a really specific time. What would happen if I called at 7:09 or 7:11?" My fingers graze the zipper of my skirt, which has scooted to its current and erroneous position in front of my hip bone. Taking the waist, I rotate the material an inch to the left to put it back in place.

"I might either be the victim or the perpetrator of a murder." Hayley spins the desk chair to face me.

The bookmarks by the checkout area are askew, so I reach over and fix the stack. "If you think you might be murdered, then don't do whatever it is you're planning on doing. Same advice if you think you might be the one on the other side of the trigger."

"Or—" she draws the word out—"you can call me at exactly 7:10 like a good friend and citizen. Really, Evangeline, you might be considered an accessory if you don't make the call. Sheriff Jacobs is just looking for a good bust on which to build his new reelection campaign."

"And arresting a couple of small-town librarians will give that to him?"

"I don't know." She winks. "I heard a rumor that librarians have a wild side."

At this my composure cracks and I let out the small laugh I'd been holding back. "Let me guess, another first date tonight?"

She nods, her thick bangs bouncing a little with the motion. "I need a way-out call. 7:10 is the perfect time. We're supposed to meet at the Tasty Tortellini at 6:30. That gives a ten-minute buffer if he's running late, plus thirty minutes to order and deduce if he's some weirdo who collects his own toenail clippings in a jar or Chris Hemsworth's equally hot

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but less famous long-lost brother. The food comes, I take a couple delicious bites of their portobello ravioli in Parmesan cream sauce, then you call. If the date is going horribly, then I pretend you're having an emergency and I have to leave right away—taking my meal to go, of course. *But* if the date is going well, then I'll tell you I'll see you at work tomorrow and then give you the juicy details in the morning."

"He's going to know exactly what you're doing," I warn.

Hayley shrugs. "So what? If I leave, I won't care if he does. If I stay, then he knows I'm interested. Win-win, if you ask me." She leans forward and captures my hands, begging over them. "Please? I promise I'll return the favor next time you go out on a first date."

I snort. "You know I don't date."

"Then I promise to feed your cat the next time you go home to see your grandparents."

Kitty Purry is rather independent, and I can leave her with some extra food and water over a weekend, but she did give me the stink eye last time I came back from a visit home, hiding under the bed for two days at the perfect distance where I could almost reach her but not quite as punishment. "Fine."

Hayley springs from the chair. "You're the best!"

See? Sidekick material.