

CHECKING OUT LOVE

HEARTS *in* Circulation



Sarah Monzon

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*For Elijah. Sorry, kid. I saddle you with my sensory
processing issues and all you get is this dedication.
And my love. Always my love.*

1

You cannot be serious,” I say, my voice oozing with dubiety as I take in the heap of metal littering the corner of the library’s parking lot. The monstrosity looks like it’s in need of a tow truck to take it to its eternal resting place in the junkyard and not at all like a vehicle primed and ready for its reincarnate life as the new bookmobile.

“I’m afraid he’s deadly serious, Hayley.” Evangeline breathes out the words while also staring at what has become my newest worst nightmare, dethroning my recurring irrational fear of getting stuck inside the “It’s a Small World” ride at Disney World.

“Maybe we shouldn’t use the word *deadly*.” Martha winces from my right.

I’m sandwiched between our small town’s other two librarians, the three of us in a disbelieving stupor, still trying to make sense of the . . . the . . . *thing* . . . parked cattywampus in front of us. When Marge from the town council had dropped by last week to say there would be a surprise waiting for us this morning, not in a million years would our imaginations have come up with something like this.

And our imaginations are Olympic-level, let me tell you.

We're librarians, after all. We practically marinate in the creative realms, and yet we've still been blindsided.

"Yeah, new rule. *Deadly* and all of its synonyms are no longer a part of our vocabulary when referring to . . ." I wave my hand in front of me, gesturing to the heap of metal. The paint is chipping and peeling, the seams are flaking iron oxide at an alarming rate, and I can't imagine the parts under the hood are somehow in any better condition.

It still needs a name, though.

I swipe my hand in its general direction again. "Cletus."

Martha whips her head toward me, her wide, caramel-colored eyes disbelieving. "Cletus? Really?"

Evangeline laughs softly. "Haven't you noticed Hayley's little quirk of naming inanimate objects?"

Martha shakes her head, her curly hair growing bigger by the second with the humidity in the air. "Okay, fine. But Cletus?" She huffs.

I shrug, not seeing why she's so put out with my choice. "It looks like a Cletus to me. You don't think so?"

She turns so her whole body is facing me. We are no longer the three of us united against . . . Cletus.

Okay, maybe not the best name, but I'm nothing if not stubborn, so I'm sticking with it. Especially in the face of Martha's incredulity.

"The name Cletus is of Greek origin. It means *illustrious*." Now it's her turn to wave her hand at the unwanted, not-asked-for automotive hand-me-down. "Does that thing look illustrious to you?"

I purse my lips and pretend to inspect the newly acquired bookmobile, hiding another wince by tapping my mouth with my finger. "It does have a certain *je ne sais quoi* about it."

"If *je ne sais quoi* means *tetanus shot*." Evangeline mumbles more to herself but loud enough that we all can hear.

"The definition is actually 'a quality that cannot be described,'"

Martha supplies helpfully, which is no help at all. “And *that*, ladies”—she punctuates by pointing a finger at Cletus—“can be described with a litany of negative adjectives.”

“We’re in the foothills of southeastern Tennessee, not the cliffs of Santorini, so of course I meant the hillbilly version of Cletus and not the Greek rendition.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth.” Evangeline’s voice holds a note of forced optimism.

Optimism I’m just not seeing at the moment.

Martha’s eyes brighten. “Did you know that the first bookmobiles precede anything with an engine, and library deliveries to the remote regions of the Appalachian Mountains were made with horses as the means of transportation? It was called the Pack Horse Library Project.”

I cock my hip. “I’m pretty sure this is the perfect time to look a gift horse in the mouth. Because if this was the 1930s, then the proverbial horse we’ve just been given is an old, lame swayback nag that would probably have keeled over on the first strenuous incline to a hollow where we—so sorry, *I*—would’ve been left stranded to fend off wildlife and the elements or perish.”

“Someone is being a bit dramatic.” Martha attempts to quell her grin but fails.

I sigh as I let my chin fall to my chest. We’ve sorely gotten off topic. “Explain to me how we inherited Cletus.”

“Without getting too mired in small-town politics, Mayor Breckenbridge made acquiring a bookmobile for the library one of his reelection campaign promises. Even though we’re a part of the county library system, because of our geographical location and the fact he’d planned to donate the mobile library, it was a promise he could fulfill because he knew the county would use our branch as the bookmobile’s home port. What he failed to inform the good citizens of Little Creek, however, was that when he said *bookmobile* what he really meant was

the beat-up, rust-bucket, ancestral remains of a Volkswagen Transporter that was sitting in his front lawn.” Evangeline tsks.

“And how did the responsibility of mobile librarian fall on my shoulders again?”

“I can’t drive a manual transmission,” Martha answers simply.

I spin on my heel and clamp desperate fingers to Evangeline’s shoulders, pinning her in place. “You can. My cousin taught you. I’ve seen you driving Tai’s Challenger around town.”

Maybe I’m overreacting, but I can’t shake this queasy feeling in my stomach every time I picture myself behind the wheel. Like there should be ominous music playing in the background. Or if my life were being written by some cosmic author, this is when they’d be cackling with ill-conceived glee at laying down breadcrumbs of foreshadowing for some major event in the near future, filing them under the words *conflict* and *raising the stakes*.

Evangeline eases out of my grip, a fake-innocent smile playing at her lips. “Ah yes, but you see, it’s your turn.” She says that last bit in a sing-song voice.

My jaw slackens. I’ve never not liked my words being thrown back in my face more.

She rubs her chin dramatically. “I seem to recall a time when I asked you to help me out with a certain matter of a critter stuck in the book return receptacle. Do you remember what you told me?”

“That it was your turn,” I grind out, then throw my hands up in frustration. “But this is different!”

Her tattooed eyebrows rise ever so slowly. “I could’ve needed a rabies shot. You might need a tetanus shot. I think we’re even.”

I seal my lips against the mild curse pushing to be released. Not a bad word; more like a hex. Not voodoo doll stuff, though.

We live in the South, but New Orleans south is another brand altogether.

I just sometimes wish for a tepid inconvenience to be brought down upon another person's head. Like, *May you never have matching Tupperware containers and lids*. I don't want real harm to befall anyone I'm mildly annoyed with, but the idea that they could be somewhat inconvenienced cools my negative feelings toward them in the moment.

I do not, however, wish these curses on my friends. Ever. And Evangeline is one of my best friends.

Mayor Breckenbridge, though . . . Oh yeah, he definitely deserves a curse.

My lips turn up at the sides. *Mayor Breckenbridge, may you only ever find one square of toilet paper left on the roll for the rest of your life*.

"Why does she look like she's hatching an evil plan?" Martha stage-whispers out of the side of her mouth.

Evangeline lifts a hand to shield her eyes from the sun, squinting. "Is it revenge evil or overthrow-the-government evil?"

"Um." Martha frowns. "Both?"

Evangeline lowers her hand and flicks me lightly on the forehead. "I love ya, Hayley, but I don't have money to bail you out of jail, so just don't, okay?"

"I wasn't scheming anything nefarious, thank you very much. It's nice to see what y'all truly think of me."

"I truly think you're a force to be reckoned with." Evangeline loops her arm through mine.

"Peach-pie-sweet but with a hefty splash of spicy bourbon added to the recipe." Martha links her arm with mine on the other side.

Once more, the three of us face down Cletus and the threat he poses.

I take in a deep, bracing lungful of air and let it out slowly.

“I guess Cletus and I should get better acquainted. Maybe we can come to some kind of agreement for our working relationship.” I force cheerfulness into my voice. “He won’t break down on the side of the road and leave me stranded, and I won’t forget to put on the parking brake and secretly hope he rolls off the side of a mountain.”

“That’s the spirit?” Martha’s voice pitches high at the end. “Okay, ladies, I’m off to get ready for preschool story time.” She unhooks her arm and gracefully glides toward the library’s entrance like some kind of literary book fairy. It’s no wonder all the kids who come in love her.

Evangeline moves to stand in front of me. Her eyes have lost their teasing glint, and she’s looking at me seriously. The early morning sun is hanging in the sky just behind her head, casting her in a slightly shadowed silhouette. “Tell me the truth. Are you really scared to drive that thing? Because if you are, you don’t have to do it. I mean, you were right. I know how to drive a stick shift now too, and neither one of us needs to get a CDL. It’s not exactly on my bucket list to wrestle a heap of metal masquerading as a bookmobile around narrow country roads or anything, but you shouldn’t be afraid of coming to work just because of Mayor Breckenbridge’s, uh, generosity.”

I snort at her liberal use of the word. Mayor Breckenbridge wasn’t thinking of anyone but himself if he’d planned all along to bestow this rust bucket on us. But it’s not fair to ask Evangeline to shoulder the responsibility either, especially since she’s technically head librarian and already has a full plate. Saying it was my turn was a diplomatic way of her assigning me the task. Besides, I may be more than a little nervous at the idea of driving Cletus farther than ten feet, but Evangeline has faced enough fears and been brave beyond measure this year. She’s earned herself a nice, long reprieve.

I let my gaze roam over the beautifully artistic tattoo ink-

ing her bald scalp, taking in the lacework lines, colorful bouquet of flowers, and the striking image of a rising phoenix. A few months ago, she'd been hiding the fact she has alopecia, afraid her friends and the townspeople would see and treat her differently simply because she'd lost all of her hair to the autoimmune disease. She'd nearly given up on the idea that anyone would ever love her or find her beautiful just the way she is. Now she more often than not forgoes wearing any of her wigs, proudly displaying the new tattoo that Tai created for her. There's no way I'm going to ask her to do this instead of doing it myself. Like she said, driving Cletus isn't on her bucket list. But it is on mine.

I mean, the words *Drive Cletus* obviously aren't written down physically on a piece of paper anywhere, but I can remedy that real quick since I add to my bucket list (if that's what we're going to call it) every day anyway. Literally.

Every day starts with a blank page in the little notebook I carry around with me, looking for something to jot down and check off, all under the same heading. *Make It Count*.

I can never pay back my debt, but I'm really hoping I can pay it forward.

2

I'm sitting in the driver's seat, my hands gripping Cletus's wheel, and nothing bad has happened. Granted the keys aren't even in the ignition and we're still in the library's parking lot, but still. I'm counting it as a win.

"Maybe I've misjudged you, old boy," I say as I stroke the leather stitching. "Maybe you're more of a classic that's just in need of a makeover. Not a true representation of what lies inside."

Like that awful cover of *Persuasion* that looks like the man-eating plant from *Little Shop of Horrors* is planning on having Anne Elliot as its next meal.

I turn my head and look at the bookmobile's interior. On the whole, not quite as scary as the outside. There are neat little shelves for us to display and transport books, and it has nice flooring that looks fairly new. Thankfully Mayor Breckenbridge did that much in his bequeathment. Although I'm not sure who's going to want to come inside with the outside looking the way it does.

Even though I know my initial reaction was one of obtuse disbelief and immediate denial and fear, the idea of a bookmobile is growing on me. I can be the librarian edition of Christy Huddleston, bringing books and knowledge and literacy to our

own backwoods, rural communities like Cutter Gap. And who knows? Maybe there's an opinionated and painfully honest yet compassionate and sympathetic—not to mention ruggedly handsome—Scottish doctor waiting for me on my future book route. Hook me up, Catherine Marshall.

I'm catching the vision, seeing the inside of Cletus filled with tomes and paperbacks and board books. Little kids with big imaginations waiting to be swept away to places like Hogwarts and Narnia. Their parents on the hunt for new recipes, escape reads of their own, and the newest releases in nonfiction as well. People who don't currently have access to all the library has to offer now given the opportunity to reap the benefits of free Wi-Fi and media.

I turn back around in the seat and pat the dashboard affectionately. "I take back what I said and sincerely hope you won't hold my snap judgment against me. We're going to end up being a good team, you and I."

It's more reflex than conscious thought that has me reaching into my purse and pulling out a small notebook not much bigger than the palm of my hand. I flip to the next blank page and jot down the day's date. Next, in neat handwriting, I write *Drive Cletus*, then stop myself before adding a check mark since I haven't actually driven him yet or done anything that impacts someone else's life. Which means I need to be on the lookout for my Good Samaritan moment to add to my list for today.

My thumb slips, and the previous pages in the notebook fan open, marking at least one inscription on each page. I randomly select an entry and trace the words with my fingertip.

Give away my umbrella in a downpour

I grin as I remember that one. It had been raining cats and dogs when I'd come out of a store and noticed a mother with a toddler in her arms, huddled under the awning. I could tell

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she was weighing if she should wait the weather out or make a mad dash to her car even though it would mean both her and her child getting soaked. I'd opened my umbrella and handed it over, then raced out into the storm myself.

I flip to another page.

Take a CPR class

I haven't had to use these acquired skills yet, but knowing that I can jump in and potentially save someone's life seems like one of the bigger things I've done.

Leave coupons next to the item in the grocery store

Let someone cut in front of me in line

Give an extra tip along with an encouraging note

Play pinochle with the nursing home residents

Help Tai and Evangeline realize they're perfect for each other

My list varies in scale and weight of importance. Some days I can only manage to do something small and relatively insignificant. Other days I can almost convince myself I'm making a difference in the world.

I'm sure a psychologist would have a field day with my notebook if one ever saw it and knew when I'd started recording my acts of kindness and why. I get what it looks like when given the full picture, but I swear I'm not trying to repay a debt. How can I? It's my life. My literal life. Brain-synapses-firing, heart-pumping, breath-in-my-lungs life.

Or, I guess more specifically, blood-cleansing, bile-producing, metabolizing-proteins-and-carbohydrates life. Which, if you don't know, are the three main functions of the liver, although the underrated organ is responsible for so much more. Which someone realizes the moment it refuses to function properly.

Ask me how I know.

It was three weeks before my twelfth birthday when my liver decided to go on strike for good. Acute liver failure, the doctors had called it. Before that, I'd thought the worst thing my body was going to do was put me through the rigorous torture of puberty.

If only.

Instead of worrying about being called Rudolph because of a large pimple on the tip of my nose, or the uncomfortable development of inconvenient breasts that did nothing but get in the way when I was playing sports, or dealing with my first menstrual cycle that of course came at school when I didn't have any hygiene products in my backpack, I had to come to terms with the fact that I might not even live to be a teenager. Without a new liver, my life expectancy had been whittled down to a couple of weeks, tops.

The day I was wheeled into the operating room to receive a transplant . . .

There aren't words. Not even the most poetic of authors could describe the kaleidoscope of feelings that were contained in my pubescent body. I no longer had an immediate death sentence hanging over my head. You simply cannot repay someone for saving your life. It's impossible. Especially when that person had to die to do it.

But you know what you *can* do? You can make every day that you weren't supposed to live count. You can try every day to impact another person's life for the better, even if your attempts are only a fraction of the influence yours was given. And that's what I've been doing for the last seventeen borrowed years of my twenty-nine-year-old life.

A knock on the window scares the living daylight out of me, and I grip my throat, trying to stuff the scream leaping out of my esophagus back down.

Tai stands on the other side, a mischievous grin on his face.

I reach for the door handle, then push the door open with enough force to catch my cousin in the shoulder. The hinges give off a loud squeak in protest, allowing him time to dodge the full brunt of my attack.

“Need to apply some WD-40 on that,” I say, neglecting to acknowledge he got me with a jump scare because I don’t want him relishing in the pleasure of it.

Tai hooks his thumbs through his belt loops and rocks back on his heels, his gaze raking over Cletus. “By the looks of it, even submersing it in a lake of WD-40 wouldn’t do much in way of improvements.”

“I don’t believe anyone asked your opinion.” I sniff. Sure, I might’ve said something similar an hour ago, but that was before I’d gotten to know Cletus. Things are different now.

Tai tilts his head, studying me.

I jut my chin out at him.

He in turn lets out an exasperated breath. “Angel says you’ve named it.”

Angel is Tai’s nickname for Evangeline. “Tai, Cletus, Cletus, Tai.” I move my hand between them as I make introductions.

Tai chokes on a laugh but doesn’t make any other comment. Being more like a second brother to me than a cousin, he’s very familiar with this particular quirk of mine. Growing up, I had a Hula-Hoop named Leilani and a Chia Pet I called Alex. My first car I named Ruth, which I thought was clever because of the what the biblical Ruth told her mother-in-law Naomi: “Where you go, I will go.” You get the point.

“Does it run?” Tai pushes against the front wheel with his toe.

“I’ll have you know that Cletus holds the world record in the five-hundred-meter dash.”

“Hayley.” He gives me a deadpan look.

I make my face a mirror of his. “Tai.”

He rakes a hand through his hair. He’s nervous for me. I get it. I was nervous for me too.

Okay, fine. I'm still fairly nervous for me.

"Someone had to have driven it over here, right? I'm sure Cletus is hiding all his magic under the hood. An ugly duckling just awaiting his transformation."

Tai snorts.

"You know, I just so happen to be related to someone who does bodywork." I hop out of the driver's seat and shut the door behind me.

His eyes round, and he holds his hands up, palms out. "Get that idea out of your head right now. They are not the same thing."

"Poe-tae-toe, Poe-tah-toe."

"Potato, watermelon more like. Bodywork as in tattoos and bodywork as in car repair are not even in the same universe, and you know it."

I simply look at him. Fold my arms over my chest and look at him.

Tai and I are closer than Elliot—who is my actual brother—and I are. Part of the reason is probably an age thing. Tai and I are only six months apart, while Elliot didn't join the family until I was off to kindergarten. And part of the reason is probably the whole cheat-death thing. Tai had severe asthma growing up, and Aunt Missy worried that he would stop breathing at any second, which meant she tried to keep him in a little bubble as much as possible. When I got sick, Tai was one of the only people in my life who really got it. Who really understood the things I was thinking and feeling. We didn't necessarily have telepathy, but there were a lot of times when we'd know from a single look that the other needed a rescue.

I give that look to Tai now.

He sighs and hangs his head in defeat. "Fine. I'll see what I can do."

"You're the best." I grin and bounce on my toes, planting a kiss on his cheek.

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“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard that before. Usually right after you’ve talked me into doing something I don’t want to do.”

I laugh. “As if you’d have it any other way.” I pat his shoulder and walk past him toward the library. The books won’t reshelve themselves.

“Hey, Hales?”

I pause mid-step and turn. “Yeah?”

“Be careful when you’re driving this thing around, won’t you?”

I give him a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry. Cletus is going to take good care of me.”