

Naked Came the Librarian

Chapter 8

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I take the steps to my office two at a time. I'm mad, and I'm not supposed to be mad, not even-tempered Lia, not the Lia who took teasing as a kid for her brains and her name and ribbing as an adult for becoming a mild-mannered librarian. Well, that Lia is out the door, I fume, that Lia who sweetly helps students who are posing as students, answers her far-flung friends' information needs, listens to shallow guys from her past suddenly gush at her, and refrains from telling Danny Boy that he is a sneaky, low-down, immoral idiot.

Tears sting the corners of my eyes but I brush them away. No time for feeling sorry for myself. It's time to take action.

There he is, as promised, Dan Crofton--student imposter. At least he has the sense to wait outside the open door.

I brush past him into the office and turn around to face him.

"Dan, I'm calling the Dean right now. We are making an appointment to see him. We will go together and you will confess your involvement with the so-called plagiarism case on campus which isn't a plagiarism case at all but a business scam. You knowingly took part in the unscrupulous practices of EduTech and have bruised my reputation, as well the library's and college's."

The words burst out of me. There is no holding back now. Chris Miller laid out what I needed to do, what I had already resolved to do. I need to clear my part in this debacle, and more importantly, this foolish Danny Boy, this immature, weak young man, who has the audacity to want to be friends with me, has to come clean with the college and to himself.

Still shaking, so mad I can't stand still, I pace the small room, then stop and stare at Dan. I managed to suppress my tears but he can't. They roll down his cheeks and plop onto his sweatshirt. He lets them roll.

I hand him a Kleenex.

"Call the Dean, Lia," Dan says, "I'm tired of this charade, too, the pretense I've been living under and your total loss of faith in me."

"My faith in you?" I screech. "Dan, I never *had* faith in you; I don't even know you. And don't give me that 'poor me' attitude. You need to get a grip. You need to straighten out your own life before you dare to presume to intrude on others'. You have caused Riverbend College a lot of grief and if you follow my advice, your number one priority is to repair that damage."

I jerk open the college directory and dial the Dean's phone number. His secretary answers.

"Lois, this is Lia Wintergarden. I have Dan Crofton in my office, who is the student imposter who initiated the plagiarism incident on campus. He and I want to see the Dean as soon as possible."

Ethan, Dan, and I walk slowly up the steps to the academic building where the Dean's office is. We aren't speaking. I refuse to talk to Dan until this meeting is over and I am almost as mad at Ethan who knew all about EduTech's underhanded methods, was too afraid to talk about it for fear of repercussions from EduTech, and, on top of the plagiarism issue, had the unprofessional lack of control to yell at a student. Talk about embarrassment. And yet, as we walk into the office, with the Dean, the President, and the College attorney standing in a kind of receiving line, I feel blessedly naked. After all, this is an opportunity to be seen for what and who I am—clear, determined, truthful.

But just as I shake the attorney's hand, who, at least, is smiling, I realize that I too have been hiding behind more than one façade--the perfect daughter, librarian, friend, and girlfriend. This last item makes me pause so that I almost forget to shake the president's hand. Here I am, in the heart of the midwest waiting for my far-flung boyfriend while he plays at international vagabond. Maybe I'm not so sure about Lia Wintergarden's character, after all. The Dean begins to set the stage for Dan's confession, Ethan's statement about his relationship with EduTech, and my, what?--my slowness in getting it, my acceptance of things as they are.

I stand at the computer station helping a patron from the community--not a student, faculty, or staff member--who has come into the college library at 8:00 at night hoping to get help sending his resumé to Manpower. He has been to two public libraries in town; one was closed and in the other, the staff members said they couldn't help him. So here he is in the college library, desperate to get his life back on track. I'm not busy with student requests. I'm glad, actually, to do something meaningful. I am tired, though, very tired after the meeting with the Dean and President, who basically listened, didn't scold, and then told us that Riverbend had joined other colleges in bringing a lawsuit against EduTech.

Chris is probably watching me to see how I handle this situation with the patron from the community, whose needs should be addressed but not at the expense of our own students. Maybe she should be spying on Ethan, I think, who, I grant, did apologize to the dean and president for shouting at a student and then to me for not immediately offering his knowledge of EduTech's practices. The memory of Mrs. Willow, however, was all I needed to know exactly how to treat an unemployed, middle aged man with limited computer skills trying to find a job. I felt Mrs. Willow's clear blue eyes course through me like a living stream long before I heard Chris Miller's exhortations on how to treat the public.

I turn around quickly. But Chris's familiar profile is nowhere to be seen. Not everyone is after you, Lia, I say to myself.

The patron's email doesn't go through. He remains calm. I remain calm.

"You have a fax number," I reassure him. "Let's go to plan B; send your resume as a fax."

At 10:30 p.m., I pull into the garage, so tired I can hardly see straight. At least, Dan won't show up tonight. He's already on his way home to his parents in Vermont where he'll get a job and prepare to apply to library school. Of all things. He probably wants to prove himself and come back to court me, I think, smiling faintly at the impossibility of that ever coming to pass. He said he wants to volunteer in his town's efforts to identify and record old public roads. Good--do something of value for a community and find some maple-syrup queen to marry.

Andy is on the road, too, making overdue deliveries of furniture in Wisconsin and Colorado. He intends to come back as well, he says, and I am no more eager to see him.

Once inside, I scoop up the meowing Dante and rush to pick up the ringing phone although I'm mystified about who might be calling at this hour.

"Lia, honey, it's Lynn."

"Lynn, oh, Lynn, it's so good to hear your voice. It's been a bad week and I'm just getting in from work."

"Sweetie, sorry about that. I didn't know you had bad weeks in college library-land. What happened?"

"It's a long story for another day, but what's up?"

"I need books, Lia, for my women, books in simple English to help them with language acquisition, and I thought you might have resources to find such books."

Another task, another need.

"Lynn, gosh, I'm tired tonight and can't think. Can I consider it tomorrow, see what I might do and call you back?"

When I hang up, I see that there's a message on the machine. I'm tempted to postpone listening to it. I don't want to do anything else except boil water for tea and cuddle Dante whose demands are few.

I listen.

"Lia, it's Will. I'm coming home and my first stop is Illinois. I want to see you. I'll call when I get closer."

In the morning, the shower's warm running water soothes me. The plagiarism mess is over, Dan and Andy have departed in opposite directions, and Will is coming. I'm not sure what I think about that. But I'm happy, happier than I've been in a long time.

Lynn wants books. I admit that I don't really want to organize a project of gathering books for Lynn. Who would be interested in taking on such a project? Clarence, I say to myself, with sudden clairvoyance. Clarence who loves books and is soon retiring and marrying Tammy; he'd love to hunt for books for Lynn's clients. Maybe Michelle Jones will help, given her connections to her kids' elementary school. And Andy--yes, Andy has a truck. He can deliver the books to Lynn and who knows, maybe he'll set up shop there under Lynn's surveillance, teaching Mexican women how to be carpenters. I'll tell Lynn she owes me; keep this man out of my hair; employ him.

Reluctantly, I turn off the shower. At least the sun is shining, a beautiful day to ride my bike to work.

As I step out of the shower, the doorbell rings. Who is that at 7:30 on a Tuesday morning? I pull a towel around myself intending to sneak a look from behind the curtain at the front window.

Will.

I don't think. I open the door. Will looks just like he always did, although, if I'm not mistaken, his T-shirt is clean. He smiles sheepishly.

"You're dripping, Lia."

At that moment, Dante heads for the door, an escape in mind. I lean down to grab him, the towel falls to the floor, and there I am holding Dante in my arms, who does not like the fact that I'm wet, and I don't know what to do.

Will picks up the towel and hands it to me; I shove Dante into his arms.

"That's quite a greeting for a guy who's been living the bum's life for two years, Lia. You could have waited to do the naked librarian routine for a couple of hours at least."

I tell Chris that I'm taking two summer months to go to Paris with Will—my dream come true to go to France, or was it my father's dream to go to France? I don't care where we are going, actually. This is the second time Will has asked me to travel with him and this time I know I don't want to be left behind. "Alternative Paris" is Will's assignment and he says that it is his last. He's giving up travel guide writing--too hard on the environment, too expensive, and too lonely, he said over stir-fry in my kitchen the evening of that first day he showed up at my house. His chopsticks poised midway from bowl to mouth, grains of rice falling into his lap, Will also asked me to live with him, or rather he asked if he could move in with me.

Maybe, I said. We'd talk about it after the summer. I wanted to see what he would do. I wanted to see how true his intentions were. I wanted a little time. But I did know that unlike Dan and Andy, I didn't want Will to leave.

True to the Will I had first met four years ago, he wasn't lacking in plans for supporting himself; he was talking about initiating a community garden and bakery; in his spare time, he would help the city organize a system for bicycle rental and parking.

After I had wrapped the towel around me the morning Will appeared, the phone rang again. It was my Dad.

"Lia, glad you're still at home this morning. Have you seen the new National Geographic? They have an article on conflict in the Sahel. Can you check a few facts for me?"

"Dad," I said, "hop on your bicycle, ride to the library, and enlist the help of the reference librarians. You'll be buddies with them in no time."

While Will is exploring alternative Paris, I will make time to visit the Eiffel Tower, for my Dad, yes, and for myself. Building the Eiffel Tower with an Erector Set with your dad is one thing; planting your feet on it, looking out over Paris, is quite another.

Will says that I'll feel very much at home in France—all naked librarians do.

