

Naked Came the Librarian

Chapter 6

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I'm not a stalker; I'm just trying to help. I'm not a stalker; I'm just trying to help.

Dan had repeated these two sentences over and over in his mind ever since he'd left the library nearly three hours earlier. He'd silently chanted them while watching Lia bound up the stairs two-at-a-time, wearing her windbreaker and messenger bag, headed to the upper-level exit where she always locked her bicycle. The words had given him a sense of purpose as he followed her out of the library parking lot. Following her--he in his car, she on her bike--had required some deft maneuvering, but his quiet mantra had helped him remain somewhat calm behind the wheel. Yet now, shielding himself from the pepper spray held just inches from his face, he didn't feel like the good guy he was trying to be. He felt like a criminal. This was decidedly *not* the impression he wanted to make.

His intentions had been purely good, but as he quickly thought over his actions of the past day, he couldn't come up with anything that sounded particularly honorable.

He'd skulked around the library all afternoon, overhearing most of Lia's conversation with her old high school classmate from his seat at a nearby computer (he was still surprised by the amount of anonymity he could achieve just by putting up the hood of his sweatshirt and scrunching forward in a cubicle).

He'd followed her up the stairs as she left, stealthily peeking around corners before moving from floor to floor like a poor man's James Bond.

He'd circled blocks, made illegal U-turns, and used other questionable driving tactics while following her to The Blue Fish.

He'd waited in his car through most of Lia's two-hour dinner, but he'd also wandered over to the restaurant's plate-glass window and peered through it a few times--just to be sure they hadn't left, he'd told himself.

He'd given her a bit of a head start before following her after she left the restaurant, but still, his car had caught up to her far too quickly on the Arsenal Bridge. With no cross-streets--that weren't gated and locked, anyway--and no easy way to make a U-turn without losing her, he'd decelerated to a slow crawl behind her. Tired of feeling--and acting--like a stalker, he'd planned to just speed away after they got off the bridge, but Lia had surprised him by gesturing to him to follow her just as he began to press down on the gas pedal. She'd turned onto a side street in a dark and deserted part of the downtown area, gotten off her bike, and marched without hesitation over to his driver-side window, curls streaming from beneath her helmet, eyes blazing angrily, pepper spray at the ready.

Realizing his situation, Dan knew that he would have a hard time convincing Lia that not only was he *not* a first-class creep, but that he was actually a good guy, a respectable guy, a guy who might like to take her out for coffee and get to know her better. For the moment, though, he just wanted to escape with his vision intact.

“Who do you think you are? Don't think I haven't noticed you following me, and not just now, but a few hours ago, too! You're driving this old rusted-up car with no muffler, and you thought I wouldn't notice? I'm not afraid of you, and I'm not afraid to use this, either!” Lia brandished the pepper spray in Dan's face menacingly.

“Aurelia! Wait!”

At the sound of her name, Lia stopped waving the spray around. “Do I know you?”

“Yes! Well, no. Sort of. Do you recognize me?” Dan removed his hood and leaned over a bit, allowing the glow of a street lamp overhead to illuminate his face.

Lia peered at him carefully. She wore that same appealing look of intense concentration that Dan had first noticed that night at the reference desk, but, he noted to himself, it seemed just a little less endearing when accompanied by the threat of pepper spray.

“You do look familiar. Do you go to Riverbend?” Lia paused, lowering the pepper spray and narrowing her eyes even further. “Wait. I *do* recognize you. You're that kid with the campaign financing paper...the plagiarism kid...John Anderson!” Her arm holding the pepper spray tensed again. “What is your problem? Why are you following me? What, the plagiarism scandal isn't bad enough, so now you've got to stalk me, too?”

“No, no, I'm not stalking you, I'm just following you. Which is kind of like stalking. But I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to talk to you. You didn't answer my e-

mail, and I didn't want to talk to you at Riverbend because I was afraid I'd be recognized, or you'd call security, or..."

Lia stepped back from the window, eyes wide with incredulity. "You actually thought that following me to dinner and then following me home would somehow be a better way to get me to talk to you? Ever think of just sending that e-mail again?"

"I would have, but I have to talk to you *now*. I know that my paper is getting you in trouble, and I want to help you with that...but I also have to warn you about something. Please, you have to listen." Dan arranged his face into what he hoped was an honest, open, supplicating expression.

Lia just looked at him, seemingly at a loss for words. The message in her eyes, however, was unmistakable: You have got to be kidding me.

"You have *got* to be kidding me!" Lia fell back exhaustedly onto her living-room sofa without taking off her jacket or her bag, speaking the words with gusto though only her aged gray cat, Dante, could hear her.

Lia sat there, bewildered, for several minutes. She shook her head slowly back and forth, the only outward indication of her mental unrest. Dante hopped up on the couch next to her--a movement that was growing less agile and more labored as time passed--and settled with his head resting on her arm.

That was really reckless. Anyone could have been in that car--someone with a gun, someone who wanted to hurt me. What was I thinking? But...was I supposed to let them follow me home and see where I live? Wouldn't that have been worse?

Now that she was safe at home, Lia's adrenaline rush began to subside; her heart rate slowed and her mind slowly cleared.

I wouldn't have had to go home. I could have turned around and gone back to the library. I could have biked over to Tammy's house; she lives just a few blocks away and she's always saying that I can stop by anytime. I could have gone back to the restaurant, or over to the grocery store, or...

Lia had always thought of herself as being good in a crisis. Granted, librarianship wasn't really a "life or death" kind of profession--not in the ways that medicine, law, or even

Will's travel writing/journalism could sometimes be--but she had always been good at handling the tense situations that did occasionally arise in the library.

Ever since the beginning of this whole plagiarism scandal, though--*it seems like forever, but it's been less than two weeks!*--Lia had felt generally uneasy, even while doing routine tasks like fielding questions at the reference desk. After all, any student could be an imposter! When she'd noticed Andy watching her from the reference stacks, she'd felt vulnerable and alone, even though at the time, the second floor had been packed with students studying and finishing up group projects.

So when she first thought she was being followed, she wasn't sure whether to trust her instincts or just chalk it up to her recent paranoia. By the time she'd realized that her fear was justified, she'd worked herself up into a state of real panic. Driven by one thought--*I have to get home, but I don't want this person to know where I live!*--she'd done the only thing she could think of. She'd rashly attacked her attacker, armed only with pepper spray.

That pepper spray probably wouldn't even have worked...what is it, about ten years old by now? I've had that since I was an undergrad!

Lia scratched Dante absentmindedly, shifting her thoughts away from the day's events; thinking about the next day, however, didn't make her feel any better.

But now I have to see John...I mean, Dan...tomorrow.

After she'd put her pepper spray away, Dan had wanted to talk to her right then, in the street. And then, even though she'd only just learned his real name, he'd had the nerve to suggest that he come over to her house! A classic introvert, Lia thought of her house as her private sanctuary. She rarely invited friends or co-workers over, and even then she preferred to invite only one or two at a time. The idea of Dan, someone she'd just met and did *not* trust, sitting on her couch, putting his feet up on the coffee table, making himself at home...

Lia shook her head as if to banish the thought. She would have stayed there in the darkened street sooner than extend that invitation. Fortunately, her senses--which had abruptly taken their leave when she'd decided to approach the car that had been following her--had begun to return, and she'd had the good sense to suggest that Dan meet her in the library tomorrow morning. She'd started to explain where her office was (it was tucked away on another floor, away from the other reference librarians), but Dan had interrupted her to say that he already knew.

Creepy! How long has he been sneaking around the library?

They'd arranged to meet at 10:00 the next morning. She was glad that they'd be meeting in a well-lit public place, where help was just a quick phone call--or a loud scream--away. She'd be sure to keep her office door open.

I should stop thinking about the worst-case scenario...he did say that he wants to help.

Lia shook her head again, not quite believing her own train of thought. She'd always been an optimist. She couldn't help but try to find the good side of any situation, and she always looked for the best in people.

Maybe that's why I went up to that strange car...I didn't really believe anything bad would happen. Well, I got lucky this time...and there won't be a next time. I think I've learned my lesson.

Sighing, Lia dragged herself up and off of the couch, moving into the kitchen to fill the kettle with water for her tea. She couldn't remember when she'd begun her nightly tea ritual, but it had become an integral part of her process of winding down each night. She had amassed quite a variety of types and flavors, and at some point, she'd begun using her choice of tea as a kind of barometer for the day she'd just had.

If she'd had a good day--sunny weather perfect for her ride to work, a good instruction session where the students seemed interested and asked relevant questions, positive feedback from a professor--she might choose raspberry herbal, her favorite. If she'd gotten caught in the rain, encountered a particularly moody student at the reference desk, or had an otherwise challenging day, she'd be more likely to brew something she didn't particularly like, such as the tea she'd gotten from the health store that claimed to soothe sore throats but tasted like Listerine; it might not make her feel better, but would seem darkly appropriate for her mood.

Lia stood in front of the open tea cabinet and surveyed her options. Thinking over her day, she felt like she'd just gotten off an emotional roller coaster. She'd enjoyed her dinner with Andy, and was looking forward to their lunch tomorrow...but she'd been utterly terrified during her dramatic trip home, regretted her reckless actions, and wasn't really looking forward to seeing Dan again.

Standing there, Lia realized that her decision was, in fact, easy. Despite its high points, she knew wanted to put this day behind her as soon as possible. Reaching to the back of the second shelf, she pulled out the "Sleepytime" herbal tea.