

THE BOOKMARKS

By Liane Fazio

She unpacked her bag and placed each item carefully on the kitchen table. She bought more than expected, but there were so many great finds at the estate sale that she just couldn't pass any of them up. She'd find the room for them in her tiny apartment. She always did. Many items just needed a little TLC and a good home. That's how she always looked at her weekend shopping. Her mom once called her the Indiana Jones of bargain hunting. "It's like you're always looking for that special artifact and you won't stop until you find it," her mom had said.

"Everything has a story, Mom," she replied. "Nothing should be discarded just because it's old."

She took a microfiber cloth from under the kitchen sink and began to gently dust off her new treasures. The last item was an old book. It was in good condition, the binding still intact, but the pages were yellowed with age. She ran the cloth over the cover, and the smell of years of dust made her sneeze. The book dropped face down onto the kitchen table with a loud thud.

Sniffing, she picked up the book and took it onto the small balcony that was just off the kitchen. She pulled her shirt over her nose, held it at arm's length, and quickly thumbed through the pages forward and back several times to release the dust. Once she was satisfied the book was refreshed, she ran the microfiber cloth over the cover, inside and out, brought it back inside, and placed it on her bookshelf among her personal library.

Later that night, she settled onto the couch with her new book. It was still early, and she wanted to read a chapter or two before bed. Opening the book, she began to read.

Before she knew it, she finished the first chapter. Turning to the next page, there was a small, beige piece of paper, the size of a sticky note, stuck in between the pages. The bookmark was thick and crisp, and on it was a single number written in thick black ink: 1. She tried to pull the bookmark out, but it was stuck in good. She closed the book and examined the outer pages. There weren't any changes in the way the paper lay to indicate that there was extra paper stuck into the binding. She held the book upside down by the binding and shook it back and forth very fast. No paper fell out. She shrugged. Maybe the previous owner only read this far, she thought. "I'll let you know how the story ends," she said aloud with a smile.

After chapter 2, she found another bookmark, same as the other, but this time with a number 2. She smiled to herself. The story was pretty good so far. Maybe the previous owner was just marking how far they read daily or weekly. She continued on.

As she expected, there was a third bookmark after chapter 3 and marked with a thick black 3. She was getting tired and thought this was a good place to stop, but she wanted to see if there were other bookmarks after each chapter, which she supposed there were. It was cute at first, but it broke the fantasy of reading and was getting too distracting. If they weren't so stuck in the binding, then she could pluck them out before she continued to read. She went into the bathroom and got her cuticle scissors.

She placed her own bookmark at the end of chapter 3 and flipped to the end of chapter 4. And there it was. She took her cuticle scissors and carefully cut out the bookmark with the number 4 on it. Repeating this process through chapter 10, she laid all the bookmarks on the end table in a pile. Then she went back and cut out 1, 2, and 3. "This is my book now," she said, a little annoyed. "I'd like to enjoy it my way."

She flipped to the end of chapter 11 and stopped. The cuticle scissors froze at the edge of the bookmark. Instead of that bookmark having the number 11 written on it, it had one word written in large block letters: READY. She shrugged and cut it out.

At the end of chapter 12 was the word OR. She didn't think twice about it and cut it out. READY OR. She shook her head. Who would disrespect a book like this? Did someone think it was funny? Well, obviously someone did, but come on. She was trying not to get creeped out but couldn't stop looking at those two bookmarks. READY OR. This was her book now, and she was getting mad.

"Ha ha, so funny. Not! No wonder someone left this book at an estate sale. No one wanted it because it's defaced, and you're ruining the story for the reader. You damaged this book on purpose! Well, the joke's on you. I'm taking out all of your stupid bookmarks. So, suck on that!" she said aloud, irritated.

Flipping through the next chapters, she found all the bookmarks and cut them out without reading them. She knew she was being unreasonable and should have taken her time because she left gashes and holes on some of the pages. Those could be mended with tape if need be. She was breathing hard and shaking by the time she stopped after chapter 16. With hands trembling from anger, she put the cuticle scissors down on the end table. She laid the bookmarks out in order on the coffee table. They read:

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

READY

OR

NOT

HERE

I

COME

She stared at the bookmarks disbelievingly as the lamp on the end table turned off and jumped. The apartment was in complete darkness. “Who’s there?” she asked in a trembling voice. The apartment was quiet. She patted the end table for her phone, found it, and turned on the flashlight. The beam was shaky as it quickly panned the living room. She took a deep breath and placed her hands on her knees. The flashlight shone on the bookmarks.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, READY OR NOT HERE I COME

Her eyes fell upon the book. It was thick, and she only got to chapter 16. What if there were more bookmarks? With a shaking hand, she opened the book. She thumbed to the end of chapter 17 and found that bookmark: OPEN. The end of chapter 18: THE. At the end of chapter

19: DOOR. She slammed the book shut and slid it off the coffee table and onto the floor.

Recoiling against the couch, she pulled the blanket around her.

“This isn’t funny!” she yelled. “I’m just trying to read a book. And it’s not even horror!

Just a little romance before bed,” she whispered in a little voice.

Knock knock knock at her door.