

BookMarck

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Chapter One - The Library

Cameron Taylor untied the front flap of the red rope folder, raised it from its resting place on her lap, and emptied its contents across the length of the library table. Her gaze shifted from her son, Abisai, who was sitting across from her, to her former husband, Gus, who was sitting next to her.

Abbie waited as the various college brochures and pamphlets spread and settled across the table, then flipped them about with a single index finger as if higher education was a communicable disease.

Gus finally interrupted their shared silence.

“This is a little dramatic, isn’t it, Cameron?” Gus asked.

Abbie loved his father’s voice. Gus had been raised in Martinique. He had spoken French and French Creole in their home to encourage their trilingualism. Abbie wondered if he’d lost any of his facility with French since his father’s departure from their home after the divorce.

“No, Gus. I am **not** being overly dramatic,” Cameron responded testily.

“College deadlines are slipping away.”

Cameron turned her attention back to Abbie.

“I have not seen a single application from you, Abisai Taylor. Not a single college essay.”

Abbie could not bring himself to meet his mother’s eyes. Abbie had often heard his mother described as *focused* and *relentless*, usually in the context of qualities he did not have.

“Have you considered UMass? I hear that they have an impressive literary department,” asked Gus, attempting to conciliate.

Gus briefly shuffled through the disarray of papers in hopes of finding the UMass brochure.

“Well then,” said Gus, responding to his own question. “How about Stanford? Maybe continue your fencing career?”

Abbie, provoked by the absurdity of his father’s question, finally spoke.

“Dad. You know that’s silly. I don’t have the skill set to be a Division I fencer and that is where the scholarship money is.”

“I didn’t think that this conversation was about money,” responded Gus as he turned toward his ex-wife.

“Is it?”

“Not if you help pay for his tuition,” responded Cameron, unable to hide her skepticism.

“What about financial aid?” asked Gus, attempting to sidestep their continuing dispute.

Cameron sighed with resignation.

“We’ll never qualify for financial aid.”

Abisai’s younger sister Charlotte had been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis after her eighth birthday. Since that day, Cameron and Gus had mobilized into *Team Charlotte*. They researched MS. They translated what they’d learned into family strategies. They economized the family’s spending to save for treatments yet to be discovered. And if an accumulation of money was a measure of success, then Cameron Taylor was indeed a success, having amassed a small fortune over a number of careers.

In Abbie’s opinion, it was the financial imbalance between his monetized mother and his modest father that led to their divorce.

Abbie tuned out his parents as their conversation followed a familiar spiral into an argument. He knew that the real reason for their having invited him to this ‘family meeting’ was so that he could serve as their buffer. He knew that their decision to meet at the North Orange Public Library was an embarrassingly transparent attempt to encourage one another to negotiate using their ‘inside voices.’

Abbie shifted his chair ninety degrees and pretended to stretch out his legs, furtively scanning the room to see if his parents were attracting attention.

Mom has to be annoyed with how empty this place is, thought Abbie. Cameron Taylor had developed a national reputation as a fighter for freedom of expression and as an obstruction to the closure of public libraries. Abbie found it ironic that the North Orange School Board was that evening to entertain two motions: one motion to exclude from his high school curriculum several books deemed to be

‘controversial,’ followed by a motion to permanently close the North Orange Public Library.

School Board Member Ron Luck had self-identified on the town website as a prophet, foreseeing a time when all local libraries would be rendered obsolete by e-resources and pandemics.

On this particular afternoon, Luck’s opinion was hard to refute. Here they sat as living evidence to the obsolescence of public libraries, accompanied by a lone librarian who was shamelessly leaning upon the reference desk with both elbows, giving the Taylors’ argument his full attention.

Abbie side-eyed the librarian. He looked familiar. Had they met? The librarian’s facial features were fascinatingly asymmetrical. His thinning black hair had been combed over his scalp to camouflage his thinning pate. The man’s skin was pale and cratered; his mouth expressionless.

The librarian’s attention finally drifted to Abbie. Realizing that he’d been caught eavesdropping, the librarian hastily pushed off his elbows and walked away.

Abbie turned his attention back to his parents’ conversation, and to the annoyance in the voice of his normally unflappable father.

“What are you accusing me of? Being financially unsuccessful is not a crime!” Gus punctuated his remarks by jabbing his index finger into the surface of the table.

“Enough,” sighed Abbie.

Abbie pushed his chair back from the table, enjoying the ease with which his chair slid across the floor.

“Mom, you don’t have to advocate for me.

“Dad, you don’t have to defend yourself.

“I’m sorry that I’ve put you two in this position.”

Cameron exhaled and instinctively reached across the table to her son.

“This is not your fault,” she said.

Gus waited a beat, then teased him.

“It’s all your fault.”

Normally, Abbie would have rewarded his father with a smile or laugh, but not today.

As Abbie rose to leave, Gus called after him.

“Here. Don’t forget this.”

Gus slid a copy of *The Three Musketeers* across the table to him.

Abbie had pulled this copy of *The Three Musketeers* from the library stacks when he had first arrived at the library with his mother. Doctor Haley, the instructor of his honors literature class, had assigned the class the first ten chapters for reading. Abbie had already read *The Three Musketeers* several times over previous years, including a Gus-driven read-through entirely in French. Yet, he looked forward to again acquainting himself with characters he considered to be friends.

Abbie had been drawn to this particular edition by the cover illustration of an elaborate sword. As a member of the North Orange High School Fencing Team, Abbie appreciated the acknowledgement of swordsmanship by the publisher. Even

so, the artist's depiction had become almost entirely obscured by the accumulated grime on the book's aged cellophane jacket.

As Abbie reached for the book, Gus gently placed his large palm over Abbie's outstretched hand. Abbie's annoyance ebbed away as the warm, well-worn creases of his father's skin enveloped his own.

Abbie was reminded of his father's encouragement to read from printed pages and not from screens. To his surprise, he had begun to appreciate his father's admiration of books as sensual objects. But Abbie was also a realist and knew that his classmates perceived him as an eccentric for his appreciation of the printed word.

Maybe Mr. Luck was right. Maybe it was time to move on.

"We're proud of you, son," said Gus as he squeezed his son's hand.

"This... this... *positioning*... that your mother and I do. It's because we see a great literary future for you and your sister."

Abbie stood patiently as his father struggled to complete his thought.

"You know, son," continued Gus. "Every time you open a book, you give literacy one more chance to survive."

Whatever that means, thought Abbie.

Gus released his son's hand.

"Is that it?" Abbie asked flippantly.

Inexplicably, he felt himself starting to cry.

"Abbie. Are you still available to drive me to the school board meeting

tonight?’ asked his mother. “My car is still being repaired.”

“Yes, Mom. I didn’t forget. Do you need a ride home now?”

“No thank you, Abbie,” she responded sheepishly, as if conceding that Abbie was at that moment the most mature of the Taylors.

“Your father can drive me home.”

Abbie approached the reference desk. The librarian had turned away, pretending to be oblivious to his family’s contretemps. Abbie thumped *The Three Musketeers* onto the desk, hoping that the sound would draw the librarian’s attention.

The librarian turned toward the sound of the book.

Abbie blinked rapidly as if to clear his vision. This was not the same librarian who had glanced in Abbie’s direction just moments before. Instead of the jaundiced, asymmetric face of his predecessor, this librarian glowed with wind-swept exuberance. His carefully trimmed, snow-white beard lined his strong jawline and provided a dramatic contrast to the dark canvas of his sun-tanned skin.

As opposed to the reticence of the previous librarian, this man appeared to relish the chance to socialize. His eyes twinkled as if prepared to take on all comers.

The librarian paused as he picked up the weathered copy of *The Three Musketeers*.

“Is anything wrong?” asked Abbie, suddenly concerned that he’d been discovered as a scofflaw of late fees.

“You know?” began the librarian as he tapped the cover of *The Three*

Musketeers. Literature is sacred in Paris. *La Belle Époque* and all. I've had some fine times in Paris. Yes. Fine times."

The librarian opened several drawers until he found an antiquated book stamp and inkpad. He carefully spun the dials on the book stamp to a due date seven days forward, then pressed the stamp onto the pad to load it with ink.

The librarian opened the book to its back cover. He seemed perplexed by the bar code that appeared on the last page. Abbie grinned as the librarian searched for an appropriate landing spot for his book stamp.

"Why don't you use the scanner?" asked Abbie, gesturing to the scan gun sitting on the desktop to his right.

As if in an act of defiance, the librarian stamped the due date over the bar code and shut the back cover of the novel.

"Enjoy it!" cried the exuberant librarian as he slid *The Three Musketeers* across the reference desk to Abbie.

Abbie opened his knapsack. At the bottom sat a paperback copy of *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley which he'd borrowed from the library two years prior. It had sat embedded in the bottom of his knapsack for so long that he now considered it to be untouchable.

As Abbie turned to go, the librarian held the book stamp aloft, searching for a suitable resting place for it. He circled and surveyed the surrounding desk surfaces several times before finally abandoning his search, casually tossing the book stamp over his right shoulder with a harrumph, ignoring its clatter as it bounced on the laminate floor, spitting ink drops as it caromed about.

