

Too Many Books

There she was, sprawled on the polished parquet floor of the local library. Nothing suggested that Ms Blenkinsop was pushing up daisies, except that she was not moving and felt cold to the touch. Alice had discovered the body as she was walking over to the front desk carrying a cracked cup of coffee in her hands. The first thing she noticed was a foot sticking out from behind the corner. She had wondered who had forgotten their shoe the previous day. But when there was also a leg and a body attached to it, she decided this was no oversight. The body in front of her was real. Her first instinct was to call the police, but then she changed her mind. The boys in blue would ask her a lot of questions, questions she had no answers to. Maybe she needed to get those answers first.

She put her cup on the counter and looked around. She frowned; the second anomaly that morning was a computer buzzing frantically. It was an old thing and the cooling fan sounded as if a family of bees had found shelter in its inner works. Had Ms Blenkinsop perhaps come in earlier and started work? Impossible, she would never engage in the inferior work of a desk clerk. The head librarian never left her dusty little office, at the back of the reading room.

Alice decided to take a thorough look at her chief's body first. She could see nothing out of the ordinary, no injuries, no bullet holes, no signs of strangulation. It was as if the middle-aged woman had decided to try out the floor, and once she had tested out the hardness of the wooden boards, decided to call it a day. Alice concluded that the woman's body would teach her nothing new.

She turned her attention to the computer. However strange it was that it was already working so early in the morning, even stranger was that it showed a list of books. Alice's gaze went over the list and she immediately saw that it was the inventory, neatly arranged in columns. On a whim, she decided to scroll through the list and see if there was anything strange with it, but then she thought it would be better not to. Her fingerprints would undoubtedly be left on the mouse and how could she explain that?

She studied the screen some more. Next to the columns of books, genres, years and authors were other details. And suddenly she saw a most peculiar thing! The books totalled 250,001. That wasn't right, there should only be 250,000. A long time ago the library board had decided that there should never be more than 250,000 books on the shelves and Mrs. Blenkinsop was very strict about that. For the number of books was calculated based on the shelving space and the average weight of the books. Fewer books were allowed but certainly not more. Alice wondered if this was the only time there had been more than 250,000 books on file. She hurried to her desk and turned on her computer. She opened the inventory list and compared it over days, weeks and months. Then she sat back in her chair, looking as surprised as ever. For her search revealed that Mrs. Blenkinsop had - on a regular base - entered more than the allotted 250,000 books, which was odd given her penchant for correctness. As she wondered where they had gone, she noticed that those orphan books had the status 'loaned'.

A sound somewhere to her left caught her attention and when she looked up, she saw Mr Starling, the supervisor of the regional libraries, standing there. Alice took a deep breath; a

visit from him was never good news. Had he discovered the discrepancies in the system and had he arranged to meet Ms Blenkinsop this morning? And if he had, had he killed her too? From the corner of her eye, she could see the green square with the white speech bubble and a red circle with the number 2 in it. She weighed her options for a moment and while pretending to be working, she sent a message to her colleague, who would not be in until later that day. 'Call police NOW, murder in lib.'

Starling hadn't moved from his position near the shelves with the thrillers. He wasn't looking at the volumes with familiar names such as Steven King, James Patterson and Ann Cleeves. He was staring at her. Alice started to feel uneasy, she decided to break the spell. 'Can I help you with anything, Mr Starling?' she asked as innocently as she could. The man looked at her, his beady little eyes glistening in the diffuse light that fell through the stained windows of the library.

'What are you doing, Miss Clarcke?' His voice sounded normal and yet the veiled threat was there. Alice felt a cold shiver run down her spine.

'I'm answering emails, just like I do every morning.' She fearlessly cast a look at the ominous figure. She looked firm and unwavering, but internally her stomach cringed. If he had killed her boss, he probably would not hesitate to kill her too ...

The man approached her desk and she saw that he was putting on a pair of leather gloves. 'So poor Mrs. Blenkinsop was strangled!' she thought while she tried to keep the conversation going.

'Can I offer you a cup of coffee? Mrs Blenkinsop normally comes later so you will have to wait a while.' Alice started to get up from her chair.

'Sit' He didn't even say it in a threatening tone, but Alice knew she had to obey. As she continued working, she felt a chill enter her body. She was alone with a killer! And the killer was coming closer and closer.

Fast as lightning, the regional inspector put his hands around her neck. She felt the leather pushing against her skin and his grip tightening around her neck. Before she could pull away, everything went black before her eyes. Had Mr Starling made his second victim? Alice drifted somewhere in limbo, and funny creatures floated by. She didn't feel scared, just weird. She felt her throat hurt when she swallowed and realised it was because a strange man had strangled her. But then she felt someone tugging at her body.

'Strange,' she thought. She knew she was dead, but where was the light that everyone always talked about? She peered through the darkness of her unconsciousness but she couldn't see the soothing light of the afterlife.

Something wet was flung in her face. Was it raining in the afterlife? And who's were the voices she heard? Was it the angels who came to get her?

The darkness seemed to fade away and the light returned. Through a curtain of fog and mist she could see someone standing over her. She blinked a few times and when the fog lifted, she saw her colleague trying to push a wet towel to her face.

'Cla... Clair?' she muttered.

'Hey you! How are you feeling?'

Alice looked around the room. Behind Claire, she saw two policemen on either side of a frantic Mr Sterling. His eyes were glowing, his pale face damp and moist. He was not looking at her, it was as if he was somewhere in another time, another universe. And even though it

looked as if his mind was somewhere else, his words rang out between the old and new volumes in the village library.

‘Only 250,000! Never more, never more. Only 250,000...’ He repeated it over and over again as the policemen led him out of the room.