

## THE BOOKMARKS

**By Liane Fazio**

She unpacked her bag and placed each item carefully on to the kitchen table. She had bought more than expected, but the estate sale's treasures were too good to pass up. Despite her tiny apartment, she always found room for them. Many items just needed a little TLC and a good home. That's how she viewed her weekend shopping sprees. Her mom once called her the 'Indiana Jones of bargain hunting' saying, "It's like you're always searching for that special artifact, and you won't stop until you find it."

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

She took a microfiber cloth from under the sink and began to gently dust off her new finds. The last item was an old book. It was a collector's item and was still in good condition. Not worth too much, she knew, but a great find, nonetheless. The binding was intact, although the pages were yellowed with age. It was had been loved, that was for sure. As she wiped the cover, the smell of years of dust made her sneeze, and the book dropped onto the table with a loud thud.

Sniffing, she picked up the book and stepped onto the small balcony off the kitchen. She pulled her shirt over her nose, held the book at arm's length, and quickly thumbed through the pages to free the dust. She squinted as the cloud of dust drifted away. Satisfied, she wiped it

down inside and out, then placed it on her bookshelf among her personal collection.

Later that night, she settled onto the couch with a cup of mint tea, a cozy blanket and the book. It was still early, and she wanted to read a chapter or two before bed. She opened the book, began to read and she was quickly drawn in.

Turning the page after chapter 1, she found a small, beige piece of paper, the size of a sticky note, wedged between the pages. The thick, crisp bookmark had a single number written in bold black ink: 1. It was firmly stuck in the binding, and she couldn't pull it out.

"Maybe the previous owner only read this far," she mused aloud with a smile. "It's pretty good so far, isn't it? I'll let you know how the story ends." She read on.

After chapter 2 she found a similar bookmark with the number 2 written on it. These bookmarks were cute at first, but now they were becoming more of a distraction, and she decided to remove them.

"This is my book now," she declared, a hint of annoyance in her voice. "I want to enjoy it my way."

A part of herself hated to do it, but she retrieved cuticle scissors from the bathroom and used them to carefully extract the bookmarks as to not to damage the pages. She flipped forward through the chapters and cut out the annoying bookmarks without paying them much attention. About halfway through the book, she laid the bookmarks out in order on the coffee table and noticed they began to form a message:

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

READY

OR

NOT

HERE

I

COME

She sat back on the couch and reread the message the bookmarks spelled out. This had to be some sort of joke. Someone who had no knowledge of the rarity of this book had wedged these small pieces of paper into this book and added it to the estate sale she went to this morning. And a collector's item at that! She was getting more angrier as she thought about the bookmarks and decided she would bring the book and its bookmarks back to the estate sale tomorrow and talk to the seller. Suddenly, the lamp on the end table flickered off, plunging the room into darkness.

"Who's there?" she called out, her voice trembling.

The silence was deafening. She fumbled for her phone on the end table and used it as a flashlight to scan the room. Her gaze returned to the book. It was thick and while removing the bookmarks she had only reached chapter 16. What if there were more bookmarks?

“Nope,” she hurriedly got up from the couch and went into the kitchen. Using her flashlight, she rummaged through drawers until she found an envelope. She looked out her balcony door at the street below. The night was still and quiet. Slowly walking back into the living room, she went to the front door and peered through the peephole. The hallway was empty. Exhaling a breath she didn’t realize she held, she walked back to the couch.

Kneeling on the floor, she pushed the bookmarks into the envelope. But eyeing the book, she couldn’t help wondering if there were more bookmarks. She sat back on the couch and held her phone between her knees, so the flashlight fell upon the book.

Hands shaking, she reluctantly turned to the end of chapter 17. There she found that bookmark. It read: OPEN. She carefully cut it out. Turning to the end of chapter 18, that bookmark read: THE. The small scissors sliced it out. Slowing flipping to the end of chapter 19, she held her hand over the bookmark not wanting to read it. Taking a deep breath, she exhaled and pulled her hand away: DOOR.

Slamming the book shut, she pushed it off the table and onto the floor. The envelope flew off of the table and the bookmarks scattered to the floor. Her phone fell onto the carpet with the flashlight down, once again leaving her surrounded in darkness. Huddled on the couch, she wrapped herself in the blanket up to her eyes.

"This isn't funny!" she yelled. "Why did you have to ruin this? That book is a collector's item! I'm just trying to enjoy it. And it's not even horror, just a little romance before bed," she whined.

Then came a knock at her door.