



## *Tailing a Tabby*

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Chapter 1

Once upon a time, I'd imagined my adulthood would include a bright purple bicycle, a daily dish of ice cream, hair that would do whatever I wanted it to, and lots of books.

Fast forward to my present age of thirty-three. These days, my bicycle was a silvery green, my ice cream had turned into fruits and vegetables, and my black curly hair still refused to obey any command I gave it.

I glanced into the small round mirror above the windshield and grinned at what I saw behind me. At least I'd gotten the books part right.

"Hey, Minnie, did I tell you that if I ever get a tattoo, it'll be a cherry blossom?"

Of course, my childhood vision of a bookish future hadn't taken into account that the books would be on a bookmobile, that I'd be driving said bookmobile, that I'd be accompanied by a teenaged volunteer, or that my—

"Mrr."

—that my recently acquired cat, Eddie, would have become a fixture on the bookmobile. "There is no way," I told him, "that you're getting a tattoo. Thessie can do whatever she wants, assuming her parents approve."

Eddie didn't respond, but Thessie did. "I still don't get why you haven't told your boss about the Edster. He's the sweetest, most adorable cat ever." She leaned forward and stretched her long fingers into the cat carrier resting under her feet.

Though he'd originally been a bookmobile stowaway, Eddie had been an instant hit with the patrons. It had quickly become obvious that he was going to be a permanent addition to the bookmobile, so I'd bought a proper carrier and retired the picnic basket I'd first used for cat transportation. Eddie had acclimated to the change with an ill grace that had been eliminated with an offering of his favorite cat treats.

"Yes, you are," Thessie cooed, scratching the side of his face, "you're sweet and purry and so very furry."

"Exactly," I muttered. My boss, Stephen Rangel, the director of the Chilson District Library, was a stickler for rules, cleanliness, and propriety. And not necessarily in that order. "If Stephen finds out about Eddie, he'll use cat dander as an excuse to end the program."

From the moment I'd dreamed up the idea of a bookmobile, Stephen had done his best to shoot it down. Homebound patrons can download ebooks from the library's website, he'd said. There is no reason to spend the money on something so outrageously expensive. It just wasn't

needed, he'd said.

Thanks to a donation from a wealthy – and now sadly deceased – library patron, the bookmobile's cost, outfitting, and first year of operational expenses weren't a matter of concern for the library's board of directors. Unfortunately, a source for the second year of expenses hadn't yet materialized.

In the financial fantasy world that I visited occasionally, I'd find a solid revenue stream that would support operations perpetually. When I took even wilder flights of fancy, I'd find enough money to hire a part time bookmobile assistant. Thessie was going back to her senior year of high school in a few more weeks, and it would be far easier to hire a replacement than to find another reliable volunteer.

"What are you thinking about?" Thessie asked. "Your face is going all squinchy."

I thought about telling her my monetary concerns. After all, she was considering library science as a college major. Maybe I should tell her about the harsh realities of library life. About fiscal woes and endless meetings and the occasional twenty-three boxes of National Geographic magazine left on the doorstep like twenty-three foundlings. Then again, this intelligent and attractive young woman was thinking about going into library science. Who was I to discourage her?

"Dinner," I said. "There's nothing but some sad-looking lettuce in the fridge."

Thessie gave Eddie's chin one more scratch and sat up, her long, dark hair sliding back over her shoulders. "You were not thinking about dinner. You were still thinking about your boss and the bookmobile."

And someday her intelligence was going to get her into trouble.

"What I don't get," she went on, "is why Mr. Rangle hasn't changed his mind. I mean we're doing great out here!" She flung out her arms at the rolling countryside. "We're getting more people to come to the bookmobile every week and they're checking out more and more books. Plus people are signing up for library cards, like, every day, and soon we're going to start the contest."

Her cheeks flushed pink. The contest had been her idea from top to bottom, including the ultimate prize of the bookmobile stopping at the winner's house. The idea was brilliant, and I was glad to give her full credit. "Why doesn't he see how cool this is?" she asked.

"Because he's a..." Just in time I stopped myself from saying an unkind word. "Because he's the library director. Because he's thinking about repairs and maintenance and breakdowns and the cost of replacing the vehicle."

Thessie laughed. "Replacing? It's brand new!"

Indeed it was, but it had also cost an amazing amount of money and, if a future library board ever wanted to replace the bookmobile, we had to start saving now. Where that money was going to come from, I had no idea, but it was too nice a day to worry about it.

"Well, I think he's dumb not to see how sweet this bookmobile is." Thessie turned around and looked at the shelves. "Three thousand books, right?"

A few more than that, since I'd shoved a few more books onto the shelves than I should

have, but she was close.

“And we have what no other bookmobile has.” She tapped the cat carrier with the toes of her flip flops. “We have an Eddie.”

“How lucky can we get?” I asked dryly.

“Mrr.”

Thessie peered through the slots of the plastic carrier. “He’s looking at you. I think you hurt his little kitty feelings.”

I doubted it. The three months I’d spent with Eddie had taught me many things and the top two items were 1) A Cat’s Purr Makes Everything Okay and 2) The Cat Always Wins. Eddie was my little buddy, and I loved him dearly, but he could make Machiavelli’s advice to the Medicis look like kindergarten lessons.

Take the day of the bookmobile’s maiden voyage, for instance. Unwilling to be left behind, he’d snuck out and followed me on my walk through town, then bounded aboard when my back was turned. I hadn’t known he was there until it was too late to take him home. The patrons loved him, but with Stephen’s certain disapproval looming, I hadn’t taken Eddie out for any additional trips until Brynn, a five year-old girl in remission from leukemia, asked to pet the bookmobile cat.

I’d been strong in my resistance to her request for perhaps three seconds, which was how long it took for her lower lip started trembling. As a result, Eddie was now as much a part of the bookmobile as I was. More, perhaps. Everyone knew Eddie’s name. I was “the Bookmobile Lady.” But as long as the patrons were happy and as long as Stephen didn’t find out about Eddie, as was well with my world.

Thessie looked at me sideways. “Aren’t you afraid that someone’s going to tell Mr. Rangel about Eddie?”

Of course I was. “Not really,” I said. “Stephen says since the bookmobile was my idea, that I should take care of everything about it. If people as much even say the word ‘bookmobile’ to him, he tells them to talk to me.”

“I don’t know,” Thessie said doubtfully. “Seems like you should just tell him. I mean, he’s going to find out one of these days, right? Wouldn’t it be better if you told him yourself instead of someone else telling him?”

Life advice from a seventeen-year old. Advice that was correct, no less. I gave her a crooked smile. “Yup.”

She giggled. “Minnie, are you scared of your boss?”

As if. While the rest of the library staff was, in fact, intimidated by the curt and abrupt Stephen, I had an inherent advantage – I was short. Really short. As in five feet tall if I stood with perfect posture. I’d spent my entire life smaller than the majority of the world and, as a self-defense mechanism, I’d learned not to be intimidated by people.

“No, I’m not scared,” I told Thessie. “I’m waiting for the right time to tell him, that’s all.” The afternoon before the world ended would be perfect. Lawsuit-minded, allergy-sensitive Stephen would never allow a cat on the bookmobile and I couldn’t disappoint Brynn and all the

other Eddie fans. I'd backed myself into a conundrum of a corner and there was no way out.

"Uh-huh." Thessie settled back into her seat. "Well, let me know when you figure out the right time. I'd really like to be there."

"What, so you can get it on your smart phone and upload it to the internet?"

She gave me a hurt look that was completely fake. "Would I do something like that?"

"In a heartbeat." I studied at the road ahead. "Hang on, kiddo. We're about to hit the roughest stretch of road in Tonedagana County.

My adopted county was in the hilly, lake-laden, and summer-tourist-packed countryside of northwestern lower Michigan. (In mitten-speak, the ring finger's first knuckle.) Though I'd grown up in the Detroit area, I'd spent many youthful summers with my Aunt Frances, my dad's sister, up in Chilson, a small town that overlooked both the sparkling blue Janay Lake and the majestic Lake Michigan. The happy fact that I'd landed a wonderful job in my favorite place in the world was a piece of good fortune for which I was grateful every single day.

The condition of some of the back roads, however, wasn't anything the area chambers of commerce were likely to talk up.

I slowed, steered around the largest of the potholes, gritted my teeth and hoped that I wasn't doing any permanent damage to the bookmobile. We bounced and rattled and, after approximately an eternity, made it through the worst of the holes without unshelving a single book.

Thessie leaned forward to check on the only creature in the vehicle who wasn't wearing a seatbelt. "Hey, Eddie, are you okay?"

"MrrRRRrr!"

"Sorry about the bumpy ride, pal," I said. "We'll go home a different way."

Thessie gave me a look. "You talk to him like he really knows what you're saying."

Most hours of most days I knew it was an impossibility that my furry little friend could understand human speech. Every once in a while, though, he'd react to something I said in such a way that made me wonder.

"I live by myself," I told Thessie. "Since there's no one else around, I guess I've gotten into the habit of talking to him like he's a person."

She looked at the cat carrier, looked at me, then looked back at the carrier. "Does he ever talk back?"

"Mrr," Eddie said.

I laughed at the startled expression on Thessie's face and flicked the left turn signal. The bookmobile's first stop of the afternoon was the parking lot of a long-shuttered restaurant. At first, the owner hadn't been thrilled with the idea, but when I'd casually mentioned the increase in traffic the property would inevitably get, he'd agreed and a bright new FOR SALE sign had appeared in the restaurant's front window the next day.

We bumped into the parking lot and I headed for the shade of a large maple tree. When we came to a complete stop, I said, "The Eddie has landed."

Thessie unbuckled her seatbelt and popped open the cat carrier. "That sounds familiar. Is

it a movie quote?"

I thought about having a teaching moment regarding the Apollo moon landing, but we didn't have time. "Not exactly. Can you please pop the vents?" Thessie, at five foot eight, could easily reach up to the ceiling to open the vents. Being undertall has its advantages, but ceiling-reach ability isn't one of them.

"Is there anything wrong with the air conditioning?" Thessie asked.

"Nothing." But I'd heard enough stories about generator problems from fellow bookmobile librarians to want to avoid running ours as much as possible. "We'll be fine here in the shade."

There was a knock on the back door. "Hey! Are you in there?" a loud male voice called. "Hey!"

As I hurried down the aisle to open the door, making sure my shirt was completely tucked into my cropped pants, a wave of unease washed over me. The man's fist pounded on the door and I was suddenly very aware that Thessie and I were two females alone out in the middle of nowhere.

I shook my head at myself. We'd be fine. For the last few weeks I'd been taking an intense series of self-defense classes, Thessie had a smart phone practically embedded into her skin, and we had Eddie who, if he was awake, could potentially function as a deterrent to crime via howling and hissing and the use of his cat claws. Plus, I'd always had the vague feeling that bookmobile librarians generated a protective shield. Heck, maybe the books themselves created the shield.

My fanciful thoughts must have been making me smile, because when I opened the door, the gray-haired gentleman standing outside barked out, "What's so funny?"

His face was sour with a grimacing frown, as if he was trying to put a bad face on a bad face. My smile stayed determinedly on. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it? Welcome to the bookmobile." I lowered the outside steps. "Come on in, we're glad to have you."

"I'm here for my wife," he growled as he thumped up the stairs. "She ordered some books but she's got a doctor's appointment so she asked me to pick up her holds. What did she order this time, more bodice rippers?"

The sneer in his voice made me want to defend the romance genre, but I swallowed down my reaction and stayed the helpful professional I'd trained to be. Four years of undergraduate work followed by almost three years of graduate work had given me a wide range of knowledge. The subsequent years during which I'd been a librarian had supplied me with the know-how to apply that knowledge. And then there were the lessons my mother had tried to instill in me, starting with "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it at all."

I continued to smile, asked for his wife's name, and handed him the small pile of books she'd requested.

"Is there anything else?" I asked.

He didn't look up and didn't look around. "No," he said shortly. "There's nothing here for me."

I almost recommended *Beyond Anger: A Guide for Men*, but I held back and he stomped out as loudly as he'd stomped in.

"Hey," Thessie said. "That guy didn't check out those books!"

"Discretion is the better part of valor."

"What?"

"I can do it another way." I started up the computer at the rear desk. When the system came online, I matched the name from the slip of paper I'd removed from the pile of books and pulled up the woman's library card number. In practically no time, I'd done changed her hold books to being checked out.

Thessie watched me from the front, where she was setting up the other computer. Eddie watched me from his favorite bookmobile perch – the top of the passenger's seat headrest. Thessie looked unhappy. Eddie looked almost asleep.

"I can't believe you didn't make him check out those books," Thessie said. "That's against the library rules, it's got to be."

One of the things I'd learned in the six weeks the bookmobile had been on the road was that a bookmobile is not quite like a library. It's a different creature altogether and, subsequently, the types of behaviors for both patrons and staff are different.

I wasn't sure how to explain this to Thessie. She was young enough to still be seeing the world in black and white.

"Did you hear him?" she continued. "'There's nothing here for me,' he said, in front of all these books!" She pointed at the shelves. "And even worse" —She whipped around to face Eddie— "he ignored you completely. You're sitting right there, looking all regal and cat-like, and he doesn't say a thing. What kind of person can ignore a cat?"

I knew how she felt, but professionalism dictated that I keep my opinions about patrons to myself. It would be best if I didn't have any opinions at all, but since I was still living and breathing, I didn't see that happening.

The sound of multiple pairs of footsteps came across the parking lot. Even before the feet reached the stairs, a woman's voice called up, "Is Eddie here?"

"He sure is," Thessie said.

The middle-aged woman, followed by another middle-aged woman, a grandmotherly type, and two pre-adolescent girls, bounded aboard the bookmobile. "Hello, Bookmobile Lady," the first woman said, grinning. "And good morning, Bookmobile Girl. We're going to need a bunch of books, but first we need our Eddie fix."

All five brushed past us on their way to Eddie's perch. He graciously allowed their pets, and even lifted his chin while the youngest girl scratched him.

Thessie elbowed me. "Look at that. A month ago, that first lady brought her sister to see Eddie, remember? Then they brought their daughters, and now they brought their mother. Eddie is increasing circulation. Tell that to Stephen."

I reached out, picked an Eddie hair off a bookshelf and handed it to her.

"Well, sure," she said, putting it in her pocket, "there's a little bit of a downside."

I stooped, picked another Eddie hair off the floor and handed that to her, too.

“Um, Bookmobile Lady?” The grandmotherly woman was poised at my elbow. “Can you help me find a good book?”

“Anything in particular?” Historical novels, I guessed. Maybe a romance.

“Something scary,” she said with relish. “*Silence of the Lambs*, *The Shining*, you know the kind. What do you have that’ll scare the pants off me?”

I smiled. I loved being a librarian. Absolutely loved it.

After I showed her the bookmobile’s small horror section, I helped her elder daughter find the biographies and the granddaughters find the Amish fiction. While I showed the other daughter where the romances lived, I overheard Thessie greet a new arrival. I listened to a male request for anything on the Civil War with half an ear, Thessie’s directional response, and his subsequent request a few minutes later, which was to borrow two books even though he didn’t have a library card.

“What do you mean I have to get a library card?” he asked Thessie. “The guy I saw in the parking lot said he didn’t have to use one to check out his wife’s stuff. Why do I need a card?”

The granddaughters came up to me, their arms piled high with books to be checked out. I didn’t hear Thessie’s response, but whatever she said resulted in the guy heaving a loud sigh and walking out with heavy, dragging feet.

At the end of the forty-five minutes, when they’d all left, I shut the door and Thessie flopped herself onto the carpeted step that served as both seating and as stepstool to access the higher books.

“Wow, what was with these first two guys?” she asked. “It must be crabby day for men, or something. And that younger one, the guy about your age who wanted to check out books without a library card, did you see? He was wearing socks with sandals.” She gave a fake shudder. “That’s like the worst.”

I’d been busy with the Friends of Eddie and hadn’t seen anything but the back of the man’s head. “Oh, I don’t know. He could have been barefoot and tracked in cow manure.”

Thessie snorted a laugh. “Gross. You’re right, that would have been worse.”

“Close the vents, will you?” I asked. “We need to get moving if I’m going to get you back on time.”

Fifteen minutes later, I dropped Thessie off at her car. She was spending a large chunk of the summer with her grandparents at their home on Five Mile Lake, which was cleverly named for its length. Due to the narrow and twisting nature of her grandparents’ driveway, she’d made arrangements to leave her car in the township hall’s parking lot, a lovely lot with two lovely entrances, the best possible kind of parking lot for bookmobile maneuvering.

When we’d come to a halt, I said, “Don’t worry about those two men today. One bad bookmobile day does not a summer make. It’ll be better on Tuesday.”

She scrunched up her face into something only a mother could love. “I sure hope so. If Tuesday isn’t better, I might have to quit.”

Quit? I knew she was joking, but I didn't see much humor in it. "I'll make some arrangements. How about a barbershop quartet at lunchtime?"

She laughed, air-kissed Eddie, told me to say hello to my hot new boyfriend for her, and went out into the afternoon sunshine, her long hair bouncing off her back.

"Which way do you want to go home?" I asked Eddie. "We can take the county highway, which is the most direct route, or we can take the lake road, which is longer but a lot prettier."

Whatever Eddie had intended to say got caught in the middle of his yawn, so his response came out something like "Rrroorr."

"That's right," I said, nodding. "They repaved the lake road earlier this summer, didn't they?" The extra miles were worth it to avoid the potholes of the county highway. "Thanks for reminding me."

The lake road, whose official name was Tonedagana County Road 350, curled through glacier-carved hills, first offering up stupendous views of the hilly countryside, then descending to the shores of Five Mile Lake. Water, water everywhere, and not a drop of it fronted real estate that was affordable for mere mortals.

But knowing that I'd never be able to own a lakeside home didn't take away the pleasure I got from seeing the deep blue waters of the many lakes that graced Tonedagana County. Besides Five Mile Lake, the great Lake Michigan, and the large Janay Lake, we had Lake Mitchell, Dooley Lake, Spear Lake, Rock Lake, Peck Lake, and half a dozen other lakes of various shapes and sizes that provided our county with stunning scenic beauty and a healthy tax base.

"Too bad the library doesn't get a bigger share," I told Eddie, but if his closed eyes were any indication, he wasn't paying any attention to my ramblings.

And he was right. On this gorgeous July day, I shouldn't be thinking about millages and taxable values and operational expenses or anything at all. I should be enjoying the day and the view.

"There are lots of reasons," I said to my uncaring cat, "that this part of the state is the playground for the downstate folks." Of which I'd been one, not too long ago, but I didn't like to be reminded of that fact. "Lots of Chicago people come up here and I bet half the Detroit area has either a family cottage or a hunting cabin in the area." I paused. Did some quick mental math. "And two thirds of Dearborn."

To be fair, the majority of the properties hadn't been purchased by the nouveau riche. Many cottages had been handed down from generation to generation with hardly an improvement made. Sure, some had been winterized and suburbanized, but many looked just as they had eighty years earlier, one bathroom, three small bedrooms, and a kitchen with no cabinets, only shelves.

Through the flickering sunlight that filtered down through the maple and white birch trees, I could see glimpses of water sparkling with bright diamonds. "Too bad you're a cat," I told Eddie, "if you weren't stuck in that cat carrier, you could be up here with me, enjoying the view."



I heard a sound that might have been, and probably was, a snore.

I glanced over. Eddie was sleeping with one side of his face smushed against the front of the carrier. Tufts of black and white hair stuck out between the squares of wire, as did the tip of one ear.

“You are such a dork,” I said, but I said it quietly and with affection. Eddie was a doofus, but he was my doofus, and I loved him. “You’re lucky I didn’t name you Alonzo.” I had first encountered Eddie in a cemetery, next to the gravesite of one Alonzo Tillotson, born 1847, died 1926.

I’d assumed the tabby cat had a home and tried to shoo him away, but he’d followed me all the way down the hill and into Chilson where he’d done that figure eight thing, purring and turning and twisting around my ankles. If he’d been trying to charm me, it had worked just fine.

Dr. Joe, the vet, had checked him out and told me he was around two years old. I’d tempted fate by running an notice in the newspaper for a lost cat, but even though I’d virtuously run a normal-size advertisement instead of the tiny one I’d considered, no one had called. Eddie and I had been together ever since.

“Not inseparable, though,” I said. “That would be weird. I mean I like you a lot, but there’s no need for you to come into the bathroom with me.”

Eddie opened his eyes to narrow slits, then closed them again.

“Or the shower.” I tried to think of other zones that should be Eddie-free. The kitchen counter, certainly. Though I’d never seen him up there, there was paw-print evidence that he’d made the jump. And my closet. Maybe I needed to get a different latch for the door. What he found attractive about curling up on my shoes, I had no idea, but it wasn’t unusual for me to come home and find him sleeping on the floor of my tiny closet. For two weeks he’d preferred my blue flip-flops, but he’d switched to my running shoes. “Hope the flip-flops don’t get lonely,” I told him.

“Mrr.”

“Tell me about it,” I said. “Depressed flip-flops are the worst. No flip, no flop, nothing but Eddie hair on them. It’s a—”

“MRRR!”

I took my gaze off the road for a scant second. “You okay, pal?” He’d sounded a little frantic and I hoped his stomach had settled completely from his lunch of dry cat food and water.

“MRR!” He sprang to his feet. “MRRRR!”

“Okay, bud, okay.” I checked the road for a place to pull over. Nothing but curving asphalt, narrow shoulders, even narrower driveways, and trees. “Hang on a minute, there’s bound to be a spot past this curve, then we’ll pull over and see what’s up, okay?”

The road was curving sharply and the fact that I’d already started bringing the bookmobile to a stop was the only thing that kept me from hitting the woman who was running into the middle of the road, waving her arms over her head and shouting.