The Quiet Checkpoint

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

Dana Whitlock liked libraries before she understood what they were for.

As a girl, she’d loved the smell first—paper and paste and dust warmed by air-conditioning that never quite kept up with Texas. She’d loved the hush second, the way even adults lowered their voices as if the building had ears and deserved respect. Later, when she started writing, she’d loved the promise that lived in a library: that a person could come in empty and walk out carrying something that changed their mind.

Now, at fifty-four, Dana loved the library for another reason.

It still felt like one of the last places that didn’t ask her to perform.

She parked in the staff lot behind the Cedar Ridge Branch and cut through a narrow gate that squeaked on its hinge. The morning was already bright, sun sliding over the top of the strip mall across the street, turning the windshields into white glare. A grackle watched her from the power line like it was counting her steps.

Dana adjusted the canvas tote on her shoulder—returned books, a bag of donated bookmarks, two packs of label stickers—and breathed in the building’s cooler air as soon as she stepped inside.

Quiet wrapped around her. Not silence. Quiet. The difference mattered.

Reading sample — continued

Marta at the front desk looked up from her monitor and smiled the way she always did when she saw Dana, like Dana wasn’t just a volunteer but part of the furniture that made the place work.

“Morning, Ms. Whitlock.”

“Morning,” Dana said, and meant it. “You’re early.”

Marta lifted one shoulder. “Someone’s kid tested the fire alarm at seven. I’m trying to pretend that didn’t happen.”

Dana laughed softly and passed the desk. The library lights were half on—enough to wake the shelves, not enough to feel harsh. On the bulletin board, flyers advertised a job fair, a citizenship workshop, a Storytime called BRAVE READERS, and a watercolor class. Somebody had replaced last month’s “Banned Books Week” display with a winter reading challenge. The old poster—READ FREELY—was gone.

Dana didn’t comment. She’d learned when to spend her oxygen.

In the workroom, she hung her tote on the back of a chair and pulled on her volunteer badge lanyard. It was a plastic rectangle with her name and photo and the words LIBRARY FRIEND printed in cheerful font. It had never opened a door before; it didn’t need to. Staff recognized her. Kids recognized her. Even the regulars—retirees who read westerns and romance, students who camped in corners, parents who used the children’s section like a babysitter with carpet—recognized her.