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Lorna Barrett



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

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O N E



Crowded behind a table with her two employees and her guest author, Tricia Miles, owner of the Haven't Got a Clue mystery bookstore, held the left end of the sheet cake and flashed her most winning smile. "Cheese," she called along with the others.

"Oh, darn," Frannie Mae Armstrong said from behind her digital camera. As the only member of the Tuesday Night Book Club who owned such a camera, Frannie had been designated the group's official photographer for all signing events.

Behind her, Tricia's older-by-five-years sister, Angelica, flapped her hands in the air, encouraging them all to smile brightly. Her grin was positively demonic.

Tricia fought the urge to deck her.

A sigh from her near right and the muttered "Get on with it" also grated on Tricia's nerves.

Historical mystery author Zoë Carter turned her head and sighed as well, her patience waning—not with Frannie

but with her assistant, who shifted from foot to foot. “Kimberly, please!”

Kimberly Peters, a skinny, bored, twenty-something in a wrinkled gray suit, ran a hand through her shaggy straw-colored hair, and sighed.

Frannie laughed nervously, pressed the button, and the flash went off. Tricia’s facial muscles relaxed as Frannie studied the miniature screen on the back of the camera.

“Oh, Mr. Everett, you must’ve blinked. Let’s go for another one.” She moved the viewfinder back against her eye.

In his late seventies, William Everett was Tricia’s oldest yet newest employee. He gave her an anxious glance.

“Do you mind?” Tricia asked the best-selling author.

“Of course not,” Zoë said patiently. “I’m here for all my fans.”

“Say cheese!” Frannie encouraged in her strongest Texas twang.

Dutifully, Tricia, Zoë, Mr. Everett, and Tricia’s other employee, Ginny Wilson—at twenty-four the baby of the group—complied. The flash went off and Frannie inspected the results. “Perfect!”

A round of applause from Angelica and the members of the Tuesday Night Book Club greeted her announcement. Zoë’s talk had gone well, if not spectacularly. Though she’d spoken in little more than a monotone, the twenty or so shoppers who’d crowded into the narrow bookstore for what was the last stop on Zoë’s first and only national book tour had listened politely. Most of them had also picked up more than one copy of the book—for friends, family, and, in some cases, to put away and never be read. Signed first editions could be valuable, even for *New York Times* best sellers like Zoë Carter.

Stoneham’s master baker, Nikki Brimfield, and her assistant, Steve Fenton, took charge of the eats table, assembling napkins, plates, and plastic cutlery.

Zoë sat down behind the stack of books on the larger of

the two tables, away from the frosting and punch, and picked up her gold Cross pen, ready to sign. Kimberly leaned back against a bookshelf and folded her arms over her chest, looking aggrieved.

Frannie was the first in line, clutching three copies of Zoë's last book, *Forever Cherished*. She thrust her free hand forward, shaking Zoë's arm so forcefully the petite woman was nearly pulled from her chair. "I sure am glad to meet you at last, Miz Carter. I'm the receptionist over at the Chamber of Commerce. My boss, Bob Kelly, has spoken to you a number of times."

"Uh, yes. I believe I remember him," Zoë said, with a hint of scorn in her voice.

Frannie missed it. "I just started reading mysteries a few months back, after meeting Tricia," she said, flashing a grateful smile in Tricia's direction. "Of course, my very favorite author is Nora Roberts. What a storyteller, and you're guaranteed at least three books a year from her—not counting the ones she writes as J. D. Robb."

Kimberly rolled her eyes. "That hack? A reader can get dizzy from all that head hopping. And her prose—? Don't get me started."

Frannie's jaw dropped, and Tricia stood by, both aghast at this assault on one of the romance genre's icons.

"Kimberly, why don't you go outside for a cigarette break?" a tight-lipped Zoë suggested.

"It's cold. And, anyway, you know I'm trying to cut down."

"But—but—" Frannie sputtered around the wad of gum in her mouth. "But I like Miz Nora's books. And millions of other people do, too."

"There's no accounting for taste," Kimberly said. She indicated the bright green palm fronds on Frannie's long Hawaiian shirt over a turtleneck and slacks. "And what's with the getup?"

Frannie looked down at herself. She longed to retire to

the Aloha State one day, and her attire was the closest she could get to it while living in the great state of New Hampshire. “Getup?” she echoed, puzzled.

But Kimberly had already forgotten about her and rummaged through the handbag hanging off her shoulder, turning up a crushed pack of smokes. She moved away.

Frannie’s jaw tightened, her mouth a thin line. She glanced down at the books still cradled in her left arm.

“I apologize for my niece’s deplorable behavior,” Zoë said. “Kimberly’s been with me since her mother died, about ten years. I’m sad to say she never left her rebellious teen years behind her.” She reached for the first of Frannie’s books. “Here, let me sign that for you. Could you spell the name, please?”

Frannie sniffed. “Frannie—with an I-E, not Y.”

Zoë bent down, picked up her pen, opened the book to the title page, and wrote: *To Frannie, I hope you enjoy Jess and Addie’s last adventure. Fondly, Zoë Carter.* The words were written in tight cursive script. No flourishes, no embellishments. Just like Zoë herself.

“Thank you,” Frannie said, a wan smile crossing her lips. She handed over the other two books. “Could you make the second one out to my sister? It’s her birthday next month.”

“I’d be delighted.”

Tricia looked up to see Ginny at the register, ringing up a sale. She tossed back her long red hair and gave Tricia a wide grin and a thumbs-up. The event promised to be the best author signing Haven’t Got a Clue had hosted since it opened exactly twelve months before.

As the next person in line offered Zoë a book, Tricia caught a whiff of perfume as a hand on her elbow pulled her away. Angelica.

“What are you doing just standing around?” she hissed. “This is your opportunity to sell the rest of your stock. Make the most of it.”

Tricia's jaw clenched. Her sister had been in the book-selling business only five months; her own store was next door. Under Angelica's ownership, the *Cookery* had never held a book signing. In fact, in the six months since she'd moved to Stoneham, this was the first book signing Angelica had bothered to attend at *Haven't Got a Clue*.

"Why don't you just back off and take notes, and we'll compare strategies later," Tricia suggested.

Angelica shook her head, not a moussed hair on her blond head moving. "These events are supposed to boost sales."

"And they do. Go help Ginny at the sales counter and you'll see for yourself."

Angelica frowned. "I was really hoping to speak to Zoë for a few minutes."

"What about?"

"Oh, you know, the craft of writing. The publishing world. Stuff like that."

Angelica had never been interested in those subjects before. Tricia looked back toward her guest, who was signing a book for Tuesday Night Book Club newcomer Julia Overline. "I'm sure Zoë would be glad to talk to you for a few moments, but can't it wait until the end of the signing? I'd rather she give the most attention to paying customers. That is, after all, what she's here for."

"Oh, all right," Angelica grouched. She and Ginny were not the best of friends. In fact, Tricia had had to break up more than a couple of spats between them. Still, Angelica turned and headed toward the cash desk. Ginny looked up, saw her approach, and glowered.

Tricia turned her attention back to her guest author and the line of fans awaiting her attention. Elderly Grace Harris, her short white hair perfectly coiffed and always as poised as her first name, stepped up to the table with two copies of the book nestled in the crook of her left arm, offering her right hand to Zoë.

“It’s nice to meet you once again, Ms. Carter—this time in happier circumstances.” She didn’t elaborate, and Zoë continued to smile sweetly. “I’ve read every one of your books at least three times. You deserve every award you’ve received,” Grace said, her voice carefully modulated.

“Thank you so much. Believe me, I feel so honored to have those two Edgar statuettes and my three Agatha Award teapots. Historical mysteries usually aren’t as popular as, say, a Tess Gerritsen thriller or the forensic novels of Kathy Reichs and Patricia Cornwell, but I don’t mind being in such good company.”

“I was disappointed to hear you’ve decided to retire the series. Isn’t there anything your fans can do to change your mind?”

“I’m afraid not. It’s time to move on, literally and figuratively speaking. I’m selling off the old Stoneham homestead. My winter residence in North Carolina will be my permanent home base.”

“I’m surprised a woman your age still lives in this climate,” Kimberly cut in, returning pink-cheeked from her smoke break outside.

“I have ties here,” Grace said, taken aback. “And I like the changing of the seasons.”

“Highly overrated. And a fall on the ice could be fatal for someone your age. That’s why I can’t wait to get Aunt Zoë out of this backwater. And what is it with all the goose poop around here?” She lifted her right foot to examine the bottom of her shoe, where some of the offensive goop still clung, then wiped her feet on the carpet, staining it.

Tricia stepped forward. “I’m terribly sorry. Lately the geese have gotten out of hand. We make an effort to clear the sidewalk several times a day, but—”

“Obviously, you’re not doing a very good job of it.”

Tricia clamped her teeth together, trying to hold onto her patience. Kimberly could have wiped her feet on the

natural bristle doormat just inside the entrance, instead of grinding the droppings into the rug.

Zoë turned in her chair, lowered her voice. “If you’re going to continue to be this disagreeable, Kimberly, why don’t you just go home?”

“It’s my job to take care of you, Auntie dear. To see to your every need,” Kimberly simpered.

The cords in Zoë’s neck distended alarmingly, and Tricia was afraid she was about to lose her temper when a voice rang out from behind her.

“Shall we cut the cake?”

Tricia turned, grateful for the interruption. Nikki held a cake knife in one hand, a stack of paper napkins in the other. Though younger than Tricia by ten years, at thirty-one Nikki looked older—probably because she worked so hard. As manager of the Stoneham Patisserie, her baking prowess was renowned. She’d insisted on bringing the cake, her contribution as a member of the book club. And who in their right mind would turn down one of her fabulous creations?

But Zoë hadn’t finished with Kimberly. “Go. Now.”

Kimberly’s cheeks flushed. “I’ll go. But how will you get home, Auntie dear? You can’t walk the dangerous streets of Stoneham—all four blocks of it—back to the house.” She bent lower, but her words were still audible to a handful of onlookers. “Not with your blackmailer lurking out there.”

The color drained from Zoë’s face. “I’m sure I can prevail on someone to take me home.”

“Y-yes, of course,” Tricia stammered. “I’d be delighted.”

“I’d be glad to take Ms. Carter home,” Mr. Everett volunteered eagerly. She’ll be quite safe with me.”

Zoë looked as if she was about to protest, but Kimberly spoke again. “I may not be there when you get back. And you forgot to take your medication earlier, so you’d better take it by at least eight o’clock. I wouldn’t want you to keel

over and get hurt.” She turned on her heel, marched to the door, and yanked it open. Tricia was glad she didn’t slam it—otherwise she’d probably need to replace the glass. Twenty or so pairs of eyes stared at the exit.

Embarrassed for Zoë, Grace turned away, and the next person in line held out a book for the author to sign.

Tricia turned to Nikki and found her looking at the door where Kimberly had exited, her expression thoughtful. “She’s a nasty piece of work.”

“And how.” Tricia let out an exasperated breath. “Thanks for breaking the tension.”

“No problem. But I didn’t mean to rush the evening along, either,” Nikki said, making the first cut. “It’s just that I really need to get home and get to bed. Three thirty comes awfully early. I already told Steve to head on home.”

“Three thirty? Is that when you guys have to get up?” Tricia asked.

“It’s the only way to have fresh bread and pastries available for our customers at eight a.m.”

“Then it’s well worth it—at least for your customers. Any news on the bank loan?”

“Not yet. I’ve got my fingers crossed it’ll be either tomorrow or Thursday. Then the Stoneham Patisserie will be mine, all mine.” The power of her grin could have lit a hundred lightbulbs.

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed, too. What does Steve think?” Steve Fenton was well known around town as “the weirdo who doesn’t drive.” He had a reputation as a loner who was often seen riding his bike or jogging around the village—and sometimes hitched a ride to nearby Milford and surrounds. Maybe ten years older than Nikki, he was also her only employee and as knowledgeable about baking as Ginny was about bookselling—and just as valued.

“He says he’ll rough up the bank manager if I don’t get it.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Steve is. He’s all bluff and bluster, but I’m glad he’s on my side.”

Steve could be called scary. Tall, brawny, head shaved bald, sporting a do-rag and gold earring, and his muscular arms covered with tattoos, he fit the description of a biker, but without the motorcycle.

Tricia glanced down at the sheet cake. Zoë’s book cover had been reproduced in exact detail, but now was marred by the cake’s dissection. “Too bad cutting the cake ruins the picture. Just how did you transfer the cover onto the frosting?”

Nikki shrugged. “I snatched the picture off her Web site. It’s much the same process as an inkjet printer—only with edible inks. Not my favorite way to decorate a cake, but for occasions like this it works well.”

“And what’s the surprise?” Tricia asked knowingly.

Nikki’s eyes sparkled, subtracting a few years from her face. “Mocha chocolate cake with rum-infused white ganache filling.”

“Sounds heavenly,” Tricia said. Her stomach growled. She hadn’t had dinner, and although cake wasn’t her favorite food, she was willing to eat just about anything to stave off hunger pangs.

Already the book club members and the others who’d shown up for the signing were lining up in front of the eats table, their eyes wide in anticipation. “Let me get out of your way,” Tricia told Nikki, just as the little bell over the entrance jingled. Russ Smith, editor of the *Stoneham Weekly News*, entered the store. A Nikon digital camera dangled around his neck, and he grasped it in anticipation of taking a shot. He looked across the crowded shop, found Tricia, and made his way through the throng.

“Am I too late?”

“Nikki’s just cutting the cake.”

“I mean to interview the big-time author.” He didn’t roll

his eyes, but his tone suggested he'd thought about it. He glanced in Zoë's direction. "Not much of a looker, is she?"

Tricia, too, had been surprised by the author's appearance. A plain Jane dressed in what could've been a nun's habit—black skirt and shoes, and a white blouse. No headgear, of course, and the chain around her neck was unadorned as well—no gold cross hung from it.

"Now, Russ," Tricia chided, reaching up to straighten the collar on the plaid flannel shirt beneath his denim jacket. His brown hair curled around the base of his neck. No matter how often he got a haircut, it always seemed like he needed another in short order.

"No, really, Tricia. I don't need to be here."

They'd been over this before. She had to agree that in a town full of booksellers, another author signing was hardly breaking news, although Zoë was perhaps the biggest name to come through town in quite a while. Still, despite his budding relationship with Tricia, it was only the enticement of a slice of Nikki's cake that had sealed the deal and lured Russ away from his evening with ESPN. "You told me that the last few times you've written about Zoë, you've received a lovely thank you note, and even a couple of review copies over the years."

He nodded, resigned. "You're right."

The cake line snaked around the table, and a number of people clutched their signed copies as they oohed and aahed over Nikki's to-die-for confection. What was left of the book's icing cover now looked like a mosaic, and Nikki heaped another slice onto a waiting plate.

"I saw Frannie leaving. She wasn't exactly happy," Russ said.

"No, and I'm afraid she's not my only unhappy customer. Zoë's been great, but that assistant of hers should have her mouth washed out with soap."

"Assistant?" Russ asked, looking at those assembled.

"Zoë's niece. She sent her home a few minutes ago.

That young woman was really obnoxious.” Tricia caught sight of Grace speaking to Mr. Everett, pointing at where Kimberly had stood, and frowning. “Despite the fact this is probably the best author-signing I’ve hosted, I’m afraid Kimberly may have spoiled the evening for more than a couple of people, and that could be a bad reflection on the shop.”

“Time will tell. What is this, your fourth, fifth signing?”

“Thirteenth.”

“Well, that explains it,” Russ said and laughed. “Thirteen is an unlucky number. And you are—”

“Don’t even mention that ‘village jinx’ business to me again.” A few unfortunate events some six months before had saddled Tricia with that irritating label.

Russ shrugged, his gaze wandering over to the rapidly diminishing cake.

“Tricia?” The timbre of Ginny’s voice conveyed her growing annoyance.

“Get your cake—and be nice to Zoë,” Tricia told Russ.

“If you say so.”

Tricia hurried over to the register to save her employee from her sister. “Ginny, why don’t you help Nikki with the cake,” she suggested. “She’s got to get up awfully early tomorrow morning and really needs to leave.”

“Gladly,” Ginny grated, scooted around the counter, and stalked away.

“Ange,” Tricia admonished.

“I was just trying to help Ginny with that last customer. Honestly, she has no marketing savvy at all.”

“Ginny is the best assistant in the entire village, and you know it. Why don’t you go pester your own help?”

Angelica threw back her head and sighed theatrically. “Samantha quit this afternoon.” Which would account for Angelica’s sour mood. “She wasn’t of much use, but I don’t know what I’m going to do tomorrow at the store.”

Stay busy and out of my hair, Tricia hoped.

Bursts of light drew Tricia's attention back to Zoë, who posed, pen in hand, for Russ. Again and again the camera flashed. Printing one of the shots in the *Stoneham Weekly News* wasn't going to bring in a horde of customers after the fact, but it wouldn't be bad for business, either.

Another customer stepped up to the counter. Tricia took Ginny's vacated spot at the register while Angelica bagged two copies of *Forever Cherished* and a couple of paperback thrillers from the bargain shelf.

"That'll be fifty-seven thirty," Tricia said and finally looked up. "Deborah!" She'd been so preoccupied she hadn't even noticed her customer was also her best friend in Stoneham, Deborah Black. "Thanks for coming."

"Believe me, it's my pleasure. Little Davey's teething. I had him with me all day at the shop—it's his dad's turn to deal with him." Deborah ran the Happy Domestic, a boutique specializing in new and gently used products, how-to books, gifts, and home decor. Her son had been born some seven months before. Between running her shop and taking care of the baby, the poor woman had been worn to a frazzle. For the past few months, Tricia had been consulting her on redecorating—softening the industrial-looking exposed-brick walls—in her loft apartment. At least that was the excuse Deborah had given her husband for her Wednesday "girls' night out" dinner with Tricia.

"We still on for lunch tomorrow?" Deborah asked. Unfortunately, she couldn't make dinner this week and they'd already made alternate plans.

"I wouldn't miss it."

"Lunch?" Angelica piped up hopefully. "Mind a straggler joining you?"

Yes, Tricia was tempted to blurt, but instead said, "You can't go anywhere. You lost your sales force this afternoon."

"Darn."

"See you at the diner at noon—or as close to as possi-