

Book Signing Blues

“Mom, you outdid yourself,” Linda said, gesturing to her plateful of eggs, bacon and French toast.

“How could I not? You need your strength to make a good impression this afternoon. This is a big day in my baby’s life.” Eleanor punctuated her words by waving a fork in the air.

“I’m thirty years old. I’m not a baby anymore.”

“You’ll always be my baby.”

“Don’t argue with your mother, you’ll never win,” Max said, tossing his newspaper aside. “Do you have everything prepared for your book signing?”

“I think so. I made a list so I wouldn’t forget anything. It’s a little nerve-wracking, this being my first one and all.”

“Your first of many,” Eleanor said.

“Hopefully,” Linda said, her eyes dreamy.

“Don’t you think you should have a signing in Ann Arbor? It’s only fifteen minutes away and I think you’d get a better turnout,” Max said. “It’s just like the real estate business. The first thing I learned as a realtor was location, location, location.”

“Of course, Dad. Maybe that’s where I’ll go next. When Carol Martin agreed to let me appear at the Friendly Pharmacy, I couldn’t pass it up. Small towns support their own. I’m expecting quite a turnout. Every author needs the backing of their hometown to create a following.”

“Carol has been a good friend for years,” Eleanor said. “I knew she wouldn’t say no.”

“Well, she is doing me a favor,” Linda said, “but I’m doing one for her too. I’m sure her sales will double today with all the exposure. It’s a win-win situation. The Chelsea Chronicle will probably be there to cover the story.”

“We are so proud of you, dear. My baby, the author!” Eleanor’s eyes grew misty.

“It is thrilling,” Linda admitted. “I’ve dreamed about this day for the last two years.”

“Your mother showed me the bookmarks you’ll be handing out. They look great. That’s a nice picture of you by the way.”

Linda nodded. “I’ve done a lot of research on book signings. They say it’s a good idea to hand out a freebie. I thought putting my picture and website address on a bookmark was a clever way of advertising.”

“They sure are fancy,” Max said. “I hope you didn’t spend too much.”

“Sometimes you have to spend money to make money,” Linda said, taking a sip of orange juice. “Publishing houses expect the author to do a lot of their own promoting these days. Money is tight right now.”

“I’m sure you know what you’re doing,” Max said, refilling his coffee. “So you’re there from 12:00 – 5:00, right? That’s a long time for a signing isn’t it?”

“You’re right, but I wanted the additional time to get maximum exposure. More bang for my buck, so to speak. It will be exhausting, what with all the handshaking and schmoozing, but I’m more than ready for it.”

“That a girl. You always were a trooper,” Max said.

“I was wondering, Mom, if you could drive me there and drop me off. There isn’t much parking in front of the store and it’s likely to fill up early. It doesn’t make sense for me to hog a spot.”

“That’s fine. Your father and I will be there the last hour or so. We’ll help you take down your display and we’ll go out for a victory dinner.”

“It’s nice to know you two are rallying behind me.”

“I have to go to the office for a few hours to get some paperwork together for a closing on Monday. We should be there no later than 3:30.” Max said.

“Perfect. I don’t want you two getting tired out. I know Mom doesn’t like big crowds in small spaces.”

Eleanor dropped Linda off an hour early. Linda wanted everything set up properly before people started streaming in. She wore a red suit with gold buttons. The salesclerk who sold it to her described it as a “power suit”.

Linda made two trips unloading the car. “I’m leaving a box of books in the backseat. I read that it is smart to have some on hand after the signing for what they call sidewalk sales.”

“Good idea.” Eleanor said. “Good luck, honey. Remember how proud we are of you.”

Linda gave her a quick hug. “Don’t make me cry. I spent an hour on my make-up.”

In the store, Linda noticed the poster she had dropped off two weeks ago taped to the wall above the condom rack. It made her swell with pride. She saw a teenage girl behind the register. "Hello, I am Linda Lancelot."

The girl stared at her.

"I'm here for the book signing." Her eyes darted to her poster. "Is Carol here yet?"

"Oh," the girl said. "She won't be coming in today. Some kind of family emergency or something. She left me a note about you. I haven't had a chance to read it all yet. You're early aren't you?"

Linda was disappointed Carol wasn't there. She wanted to discuss a marketing strategy. "Hmmm, that's too bad." She looked around. "Where does she have me set up?"

"Um," the girl said.

"Didn't she set up a table?"

The girl studied Carol's note. "She didn't mention one, but I saw a table in the back room if you want to get it out."

"Sure," Linda said. "That's no problem. One of the reasons I'm here early is to troubleshoot. I didn't catch your name by the way."

"Daisy."

"Well Daisy, it's nice to meet you. I'm sure we'll work well together today." Linda gave her a big grin. She knew it was important to establish a good relationship with the employees.

In the back room, Linda found an old card table and two rusty chairs. This can't be the right table, she thought. She returned to the cash register and explained the problem. "There must be another one somewhere, maybe a little bigger?"

Daisy looked uneasy. "I'm sorry. I'm new here. Maybe there's one in the basement? I can't leave the register, though."

"I'll go down and have a look-see," Linda said, smiling to herself. This was one of the minor inconveniences she had read about in her writer's magazines.

She navigated the steep steps in her new heels and walked into a cobweb. It clung to her bangs and wrapped around her nose. She sneezed, pulled it off and dropped it far from her body so it wouldn't get on her suit. The musty basement was filled with old Coca-Cola signs, boxes, and antiquated shelving. There wasn't a table. The old card table would have to do, she decided. Tiny setbacks wouldn't dash her spirits.

On her way back up the stairs, her panty hose snagged on a nail that stuck out from the wall. Not to worry, she told herself. She wiggled them off in the stairwell and balled them up in her fist. Her legs were still tan from the summer. A ruined pair of nylons was a small price to pay on the day she was launching her new career.

In the backroom, she dusted the card table off with an old rag. Her heels threw her off balance as she struggled to carry it out of the room. She leaned the table against some shelves in the personal hygiene aisle and went back to see Daisy. "Where should I set up?"

"Carol's note says to be sure not to block the main aisle ways. How 'bout toward the back of the store?"

“That’ll be fine,” Linda said. She found a space in the back corner that still had a view of the entrance. She put an easel at the front door and displayed a cardboard sign with a picture of her and her book cover.

She draped the table with a dark blue cloth. Two tissue boxes hidden under the cloth served as platforms for her books. She set out three brand-new Sharpies. It was 11:40. She needed to hurry. No reason to miss out on a book sale because she was unprepared. That would be an amateur’s mistake. She decided to lay fifty bookmarks out to start, fanning them across the table.

“Daisy, is it okay to move the Bic lighter display? I want to put this by the register.” She waved a “Have You Met Our Visiting Author?” sign.

Daisy shrugged.

Taking that as a yes, Linda picked up the plastic lighter tower and set it on a shelf behind her. “Daisy, do you know where Carol has my books for sale? I don’t see them.”

Daisy scanned the store. “Maybe by the magazines and cards?”

“Of course,” Linda said, laughing. “That only makes sense.” She found five of her books on the bottom shelf, hidden under a stack of comics. Clearing a space on the magazine rack, she arranged her five books in the center.

Linda knew Carol had purchased dozens of her books; she just had to find them. She recognized three brown boxes stacked up to form a pedestal for a Nabisco cracker display. After shoving the crackers in between the diet aids, she schlepped the boxes to her table.

By noon, Linda was sitting in the rusty chair with her Sharpie poised in the air. She felt giddy from the excitement. There was a tally sheet to record sales, a clipboard to

compile a mailing list, and her books elevated on the tissue box platform. Her heart thumped with anticipation.

As customers milled through the store, Linda made it a point to make eye contact and smile. Sometimes she would wave. Her corner didn't have a lot of traffic, but people could see her as they walked past her aisle. At 12:45, she started getting restless. No one had visited her table. It's still early, she thought. Maybe the power suit was intimidating. She jotted "no power suit" on an index card for future reference.

She practiced signing her name on the index cards. It had to be a perfect signature. She reminded herself to confirm the correct spelling of each recipient's name. A signed book was a keepsake.

At 1:05, her face brightened when she saw Mrs. Thorpe heading towards her.
"Hello, Mrs. Thorpe! It is so good to see you."

"Linda? Is that you?" The old woman squinted.
"Of course it is," Linda said, wondering if Mrs. Thorpe was getting senile. "It was very kind of you to come."

"Well what is all this? Are you selling something?" Mrs. Thorpe leaned over and peered at her book.

"Yes, I'm having a book signing today. My first novel has just been published."
"You're an author now? I thought you were an auto worker."
"Well no. I used to work at a factory that made parts for the automotive industry. When the automakers ran into trouble, it crippled our business. We were down-sized. I haven't worked there in years."

"I'm sorry to hear that, dear."

“It was a blessing in disguise,” Linda said, keeping her face cheery. “It gave me time to write my book.”

“My brother was a writer. He refused to get a real job and ended up poverty-stricken. We all tried to help him, but after a while, we had to give up or go broke ourselves. He ended up hanging himself.”

Linda swallowed hard. “That is tragic, but I am optimistic. I think my novel has a high income potential.”

“I hope so. Good luck to you, dear.”

“Are you interested in buying one? I can personalize it for you.”

“No, no. I’m just here to get Harold some suppositories and an enema kit. His bowels have been wreaking havoc.”

“I see,” Linda said, determined to stay upbeat. “Tell Mr. Thorpe I hope everything works out and maybe you’ll consider buying my book some other time. It’d make a great gift.”

She watched Mrs. Thorpe wander off.

That was good practice for me, she thought. The next customer won’t get away so easily.

“Hello! How are you today?” she asked a middle-aged woman, flashing her most winning smile.

The woman smiled back. Linda’s hope soared.

“Tell me about your book,” the woman said.

“I’d love to,” Linda said with renewed enthusiasm. “It is a murder mystery set in Traverse City. The MISTRESS OF MURDER begins with a wealthy business man who...”

“Sorry,” the woman said, tossing the book aside. “I’m into romances.”

“Me too! There is a romantic slant to the book. Ya see, the police chief and the medical examiner...”

“Sorry,” the woman said, giving her a sympathetic frown.

“Well please, take a bookmark. You can visit my website. Maybe my next book will be a romance.”

“Thank you,” the lady said and drifted away.

“Hi there, sir! Would you like to buy my book?”

The man with a hapless comb-over looked at it for a moment. “Nah, I like history.”

“Do you? We have something in common. Traverse City is a very historical town. There are several landmarks depicted in my book. In fact...”

The man was gone.

“Good afternoon. That is a lovely brooch you are wearing.”

The elderly lady caressed her pin. “Why thank you! My husband gave it to me years ago. He’s in a nursing home now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’d like to offer you the opportunity to look over my book. I’m signing copies today.”

“Millard and I love to read. Books take us places our legs can’t anymore.”

“You do? Great! I think you might enjoy going to Traverse City, that’s the setting for my novel, *Mistress of Murder*.”

The lady rummaged through her purse for her bifocals.

“It is a mystery. Do you like mysteries?” Linda decided not to waste her time if the answer was no.

“Who doesn’t?” The lady opened the book and thumbed through the pages.

Linda’s pulse quickened.

“Awww! It’s small print. We only read large print.”

“Is that so? Well, this is only the first printing. I can talk to my publisher about having the second printing done in a larger font size.” She wrote “large print” on an index card. “In the meantime, do you have a good magnifying glass?”

“Yes, but I have carpal tunnel. The darn thing makes my wrist ache if I hold it too long.”

“Well at least sign my mailing list and take a bookmark. I’ll post it on my website if we come out with a large print edition.”

“I’m too old for computers! I’ll take a couple bookmarks though. I give them out to the trick-or-treaters every year.”

“Super,” Linda said, beaming. “Take a dozen. I am a true advocate of promoting childhood literacy. Go ahead and sign the mailing list anyway. I can send you a personal card about my upcoming projects.”

“Bookmarks are cheaper than passing out candy,” the lady said as she printed her name and address. When she was gone, Linda realized there were only two Sharpies left on the table.

At 2:12, Linda yawned and fidgeted in her seat. Her new shoes pinched her toes.

“Is that you, Linda? I haven’t seen you since you and Allie were in high school!”

“Hi Mrs. Meyer,” Linda said, sitting up straight. Allie was one of the popular girls Linda despised. “How is Allie?”

“She’s doing great. She married a surgeon, ya know. She just had her third child, a little girl. She’s precious. And you know Allie, the baby is only three months old and she is back in her size 3 jeans.”

“That’s fantastic. Really great.” Linda felt a pang in her stomach.

“Are you married? Any children?”

“Nope, no children,” Linda said, forcing a grin. “If I did, I would never have had the energy to write *Mistress of Murder*.”

“Really? You never married?” Mrs. Meyer made a clucking sound with her tongue.

“Well, I was. I’m divorced. It’s been a year.”

“You poor thing,” Mrs. Meyer shook her head.

“Oh no, I’m fine. Great, actually. My novel has been published and this new career has been a whirlwind.”

“Where are you living now?”

“I moved back here to Chelsea after the divorce. I kind of needed to regroup.”

“I understand. Did you buy a house then?”

“No, well, no. I’m still deciding on a location. As an author, I’m considering moving to New York. That’s where everything is happening. I’m staying with my parents temporarily until the dust settles.”

“I’ll call Allie this afternoon and let her know I saw you. Good luck with your book.”

Linda didn’t have time to be miffed, because Mrs. English from her mother’s choir group was approaching her. Linda was certain she would buy a book. “Mrs. English! What a surprise!”

“Your mother said you would be here today. Isn’t this exciting!”

“It certainly is. I feel very lucky.”

“I haven’t seen you in church since you’ve moved back,” Mrs. English said pointedly.

“That’s true. Writing and negotiating a book deal is hectic. I’ve been awful busy.”

“Too busy for God?”

“Uh, no, of course not.” Linda took a deep breath. “You’re right Mrs. English. I will go to church next Sunday. I have a lot to be thankful for now that I’m a published author. Would you like to look at my book? You might find it appealing.”

“The Mistress of Murder? Sorry, I’m not a fan of gratuitous violence.”

“Neither am I. I hate it. My book is not violent.”

“Murder isn’t violent?”

“Why yes, it is, but in my book the murderer gets caught. Justice prevails. It shows the reader the consequences of turning away from God’s teachings. It’s really a testament to God’s word.”

A man in a tight white tank top loomed over Linda. His bulging biceps sported colorful tattoos depicting swords, knives and naked women. He picked up a book and read the back. “Does this book have any gore in it?”

“It has some gritty passages,” Linda said, shifting in her seat.

His beady, piggish eyes bored through her. “Any rape scenes?”

Linda paled. She cleared her throat to give her time to think. “There are several, each more brutal and graphic than the last. It’s a real blood-bath at the end.”

The man grinned, revealing yellow pointed teeth. “How would you kill someone if you could? I’d do it real slow, watch my victim suffer.”

Linda shuddered. “I see. In my book, there is one torture scene you may find especially titillating. Would you like me to autograph a copy for you?”

“Are the victims found naked? What did they look like?”

Linda bowed her head and massaged her temples.

Something fluttered in her chest when Jake Cowhill sauntered up to her table. He was her high school sweetheart.

“Hi Linda. Good to see you.”

“Jake! You look fantastic.” She stood to give him a hug. If she had to throw herself at people to sell her book, she would.

“Wow,” he said, squeezing her love handles. “You put some meat on your bones, didn’t ya?”

Linda’s face grew hot. “A little. Working on the book didn’t give me a lot of time to exercise. Now that it’s finished, I’ll be running around on the tour circuit. I’m sure the excess weight will melt off in no time.”

“Wow, a book tour. That is impressive.”

Linda lowered her lashes.

“So where will you be going? All across the country?”

“Yeah,” Linda blurted, “all around the country. Dallas, L.A., Denver, just for starters.”

“I can’t believe you’re bothering to have a signing here then,” he said, picking up a bookmark.

“I thought it was important to start local. Kind of get my feet wet before the media storm. I’m standing on the precipice of fame and I want people to see I am true to my roots.”

“So you’ve probably got a hotshot agent and some big publishing house in New York backing you, huh?

“Um, I don’t have an agent per se. I cut out the middleman. I had my pick of big publishers from New York but opted for a smaller one out of Indiana. They have a more personal approach. They are very hands-on with their authors. This being my debut novel, I thought they were the best option for me.”

“Hey, I heard what Brian did to you. I couldn’t believe it. He must be nuts.”

“I’ve put my divorce behind me. I think I’ve learned from it, truly grown as a person because of it. As a matter of fact, I used the experience as inspiration for my book.” She tapped a fingernail on a book cover.

“He dumped you for a stripper, didn’t he?”

“Oh, he didn’t dump me, no. We just parted ways. I think his girlfriend is some sort of entertainer though. You are right about that. I don’t stay in touch with him, so I can’t be sure.” Her hands felt sweaty.

Jake slapped the bookmark on his open palm. “Good luck to you, Linda. You deserve the best. Call me sometime when you’re bored in an airport. I’d love to talk more.”

“Sure thing, Jake. Why don’t you sign the mailing list and include your phone number?”

By 3:00, Linda’s neck was starting to ache and her cheeks hurt from smiling. She was relieved to see Maggie, her best friend, come in. She needed a pep talk. She hadn’t signed a book yet. Maggie would buoy her spirits.

An attractive man with blond hair and a boyish smile was looking at her book. Maggie came up behind him and winked at Linda. “Are you really Linda Lancelot? I can’t believe I’m finally meeting you,” Maggie gushed, shaking Linda’s hand and practically swooning. “I have been dying to read your book, but when I heard I could get an autographed copy, I forced myself wait.” She turned to the man. “Can you believe we are standing this close to Linda Lancelot? It’s amazing.”

The man put the book down and gaped at Maggie’s ample cleavage. “Are you an avid reader?” he asked tearing his eyes from her chest to her eyes.

“Absolutely, especially murder mysteries. It started with Agatha Christie and blossomed from there. From what I hear, Mistress of Murder is going straight to the top of the best seller list.”

“I love Agatha Christie too, always have. Would you like to have a cup of coffee at the café next door and talk some more?”

“Well gee, I uh,” she glanced at Linda, her eyes begging for permission. When she saw Linda’s terse nod Maggie said, “I’d love to! Ms. Lancelot, I will be back to buy your book. It was a real honor to meet you.”

“Take a bookmark,” Linda muttered, watching them stroll away. Linda blew out a long sigh. Salty tears stung her eyes and her nose started to run. Worried she’d smudge her mascara; she lifted the tablecloth and opened a box of tissue. She walked into the back room to wipe her eyes and blow her nose.

Her parents were at the table when she returned. Max was handing out his business card to a young couple and discussing property taxes.

“Where have you been?” Eleanor hissed. “We’ve been trying to create a buzz here and you were no where to be found!”

“I needed to use the bathroom. Hey, what’s all this?” Her table had been rearranged. The bookmarks were in a stacked pile instead of a fan to make room for a plate of banana bread and some lemon bars. Her books were teetering off the side of the wobbly table.

“I brought something for your customers to nibble on. I’ve been baking for hours.”

“That’s nice, Mom. Very thoughtful.”

“So how have things been going?”

“I’ve been talking to a lot of people. Networking. Getting my name out there.”

Eleanor beamed. “I knew you would be a hit! How many books have you sold?”

“I don’t have the precise number handy, but I’m feeling good about it.”

Several people sampled Eleanor’s snacks.

“This is the best banana bread I’ve ever had,” said a woman wearing a hot pink jacket. “It is so moist!”

“Please, take a bookmark,” Linda said, “and feel free to ask me anything about my novel.”

“Did you bake the bread too?”

“No, my mother did. She is very supportive of my writing.”

“I have to have the recipe.”

“I can write it down for you,” Eleanor offered. “Linda, do you have something I can write on?”

“Sure,” Linda said, her voice flat. She handed Eleanor an index card and a Sharpie.

“I’m convinced interest rates are going to stay low,” she heard her father saying to a woman holding a baby. “It is a buyer’s market. Take my card and give me a call. I have a few hot properties I can steer you toward.”

“You could sell this recipe,” a balding man in green sweatpants told Eleanor. “These lemon bars melt in your mouth. I’ve eaten three, I couldn’t help myself.”

Eleanor flushed with pleasure. “Have you met my daughter? She is the visiting author!”

Linda reached out her hand. “I’m promoting my debut novel, *Mistress of Murder*.”

“My fingers are sticky. Do you have a napkin?”

“No, I don’t have a napkin,” Linda snapped. She saw her mother’s raised eyebrow. “Would a tissue help?” she asked, recovering. Shoving her books aside, she whipped back the tablecloth to retrieve the tissue box. She didn’t bother to pick up the books that slid to the floor.

“Linda Lancelot,” a man with a walrus mustache murmured, staring at her book. “Isn’t that the name of a porn star?”

“That was Lovelace,” Linda said through gritted teeth. “My pen name is Linda Lancelot. Take a bookmark.” She thrust five into his meaty hand.

On the way to the restaurant, Linda sat in the back seat relieved her parents couldn’t see her sulking. Eleanor’s chatter grated on her nerves. “Well today was certainly a success! All the people raving about my cooking has me considering writing a cookbook. Then we’d have two writers in the family! You made a lot of contacts today, didn’t you, Max?”

“Yeah, I think I’ll have two new listings by the end of the week and I’m sure I can unload the Portage Lake Road property on that younger couple.”

“We have a lot to celebrate tonight, don’t you agree, Linda?”

“It was unlike anything I ever imagined,” Linda said, choking back a bitter sob.