

ON SKEIN OF DEATH by Allie Pleiter

Excerpt

Chapter One

So it's more than 'yarn'?" the young woman staring at my shop sign asked. "The letters . . . stand for something?" She didn't stare at the single word. Instead, I could tell she was wondering about the period after each letter.

My big wooden shop sign is one of the things I love most about Y.A.R.N. Like the shop, the sign is full of color and texture. It shows a ball of green yarn winding its way through the four letters to land-as all yarn should-on a pair of knitting needles. I had it hand-carved by a local artist, and when it first arrived, I spent a whole day just touching it. I ran my fingers lovingly over the carved lines and curves before I let them put it up. Now it sits nestled beside a big display window to stand out against the colonial charm of my brick storefront.

I stopped watering the potted plants on either side of my door and offered the woman my warmest smile. "Oh, you bet they do." Since that sign went up on opening day three months ago, there isn't a single moment I love more than telling someone what Y.A.R.N. means.

"What?" she asked.

I have answered this question a hundred times. I'd happily answer it a thousand times more. "Come on inside and I'll show you," I said as I pulled the shop door open. I'll admit I have had to learn to tamp down my raging enthusiasm at moments like this. In the shop's first weeks, I tended to go a little overboard and scare off unsuspecting customers. Now it almost always ends the same wonderful way.

"What's your name?" I asked as we walked inside.

"Caroline," she offered. She was dressed in trendy weekend yoga wear, a wildly designed combination of turquoise and peach. This was a woman who liked color. And if there's one thing Y.A.R.N. is overflowing with, it's color.

I gave her a moment to take it all in. "Welcome to Y.A.R.N., Caroline. I'm Libby Beckett." I gestured around the shop. Every wall is covered with stacked square cubbies holding all kinds of yarn.

Soft pastels, riotous self-stripping mixes, understated heathers, thick, thin, fuzzy, shiny-there's a whole universe of things just begging to be touched and explored.

Y.A.R.N. is a comfort space. More than just comfortable, the shop exudes comfort, with deep cushioned chairs, bright warm lighting, tables to gather at, and thick rugs underfoot. It smells like good coffee, frequently of baked goods, and of the particular but unidentifiable scent of creativity. Not a speck of chrome to be found here, just deep shelves and bins in every nook and cranny.

This isn't a place where you just duck in and grab what you need; it's a soothing haven where you linger and discover. Where you sit for an hour and no one cares-in fact we love when you do.

Y.A.R.N. is the thing I was born to do. Sure, I was good as a pharmaceutical sales rep, but that was just a job. I think of Y.A.R.N. as the most excellent work of my soul. My prescription, if you will, for happiness-mine and everyone's.

Caroline was intrigued; I could tell already. I led her to the only black furnishing in the whole color-strewn shop: the giant blackboard that covers one wall. With one hand I gave her my friendliest handshake, while with the other I pointed up to the colorful list scribbled all over the chalkboard. "And here's the answer to your question."

I watched Caroline take in the kaleidoscope of words. Some are scribbled in a reckless manner; others are artfully drawn. I have always thought of my blackboard as graffiti of the very best kind. Only one version is painted to permanently stand at the top of the board-my original vision of what Y.A.R.N. stood for: You're Absolutely Ready Now. Maybe someday it will stop sending a zing through my veins when I read it, but that hasn't happened yet.

At the bottom of the board sat a little bucket of colored chalks painted with the invitation: Add your own. And my customers have over the months-some funny, some poignant:

You'll Always Remember Nice

Yellow Adds Romantic Notions

Yell at Ridiculous Negativity

Yielding Amounts to Relatively Nothing

Your Anger Rewards No one

There have been dozens. I want there to be thousands before I'm done . . . if I'm ever done.

Caroline took a moment to read several. "Cool." I could see her catch the notion that perhaps yarn could be more than just what Grandma kept around the house to crochet granny squares. No disrespect to granny squares-I'm thrilled they're coming "back."

"It's always so much more than yarn," I told her. I pointed to the perfect coordination of her top, leggings, and expensive cross-training shoes. Peach and turquoise are lush, creative colors, and Caroline had paired them beautifully. Even her hair band and shoelaces matched. "You've got a great eye for color. You'd love knitting."

"Really?" Her face caught that spark that shows whenever you open someone up to the possibility that they have some art inside them. It would be hard to come up with a moment that I live for more. Except for maybe that first bite of my friend Margo's coconut cream pie-that comes close.

"Absolutely." I guided her toward a basket of exquisitely soft and richly colored yarn over by the window: a collection of plush alpaca yarns in a range of ice-cream peach, sky blue, mint green, pale yellow, and sherbet orange that drew her touch like a sweet fuzzy kitten. "What do you do? Are you from nearby?" I asked as she fingered the beautiful skeins. Collinstown is such a picture-perfect Maryland town that we get lots of tourism, especially on gorgeous fall days like today.

"Just across the bay. I'm an entertainment reporter, which isn't nearly as glamorous as it sounds. I'm here to meet a friend for lunch over at the inn." She tilted her head in the direction of the Riverside Inn just across the street. "It was such a pretty day, I came early to just wander around."

In my head I had already selected four possible first- project scarf patterns for my new friend Caroline. "When's lunch?"

"Noon."

I checked my watch. "I can have you knitting before your first bite of salad. Want to try?"

Her eyes said yes long before she opened her mouth.

Like I said, I live for these moments. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught my shop assistant, Linda Franklin, smiling from behind the counter. Linda gets as much of a kick out of watching me do this as I get out of doing it. "I'm just here to ring up the sales you make," she says, but I've seen her in action. Linda is just as much of a yarn "evangelist" as I am. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Caroline turned out to be a natural-I seem to have a gift for spotting them-and she held up her fourth pretty-darned-near-perfect row twenty minutes later. "Look at that!" She grinned. "I didn't know I had it in me."

We'd already talked about how she could knit on the Metro into her DC job rather than scrolling through her social media (she gets enough of that at work). She confessed to frequent bouts of insomnia, so we talked about how soothing knitting can be in lonely hours. We'd chatted about how her niece would love a scarf in her school colors. When Hank, my English bulldog, who is Y.A.R.N.'s

official mascot, walked up and fixed her with his big brown eyes, Caroline talked about how her French bulldog, Milo, might like a new sweater.

I grabbed a flyer for my big event coming up. "You need to come to this. Perle Lonager creates the most amazing patterns from Scandinavian motifs-mostly Norwegian, but some other cultures as well."

"That sounds interesting." Caroline liked the idea of culturally inspired designs, I could tell. She struck me as a smart and thoughtful person-just the type of knitter who would love Perle's work.

"She's doing a fashion show and new-product launch on Saturday," I explained, "but we'll also have an exclusive dog sweater kit debuting at a smaller private workshop she's doing here in the store. That's on Friday before her lecture and dinner. You could make a whole weekend out of it. And"-I pulled out the sample version of the project that was almost finished for Hank to model-"you could have plenty of time to dive into something like this."

Caroline's eyes widened at how the sweater's clever use of zigzags, diamonds, and dots gave it a unique Nordic style. A little doggy ski sweater, if you will. "I could make that?"

"The great thing about Perle's designs is that there aren't a lot of special stitches you need to learn. Sure, some Norwegian Lusekofte sweaters are tricky, but Perle's patterns are great for beginners. It's all in the color combinations." I gave Caroline my most encouraging smile. "You could absolutely make that. I chose gray and white for Hank, but you could have a ball with all sorts of color pairings for your little Milo."

"Blue and yellow, maybe." Caroline ran her fingers over the bold rhythm of Perle's Nordic motif. A new knitter was born.

Sure, it was important to my business that I fill the room. Perle is one of the rising stars in our industry, and I had been working for months to line her up for this event. As the owner of a new shop, I needed some big successes to get my name out there, and this was my shot.

But more than that, I wanted to introduce Caroline-and lots of people like her-to the world of fiber arts and artists. It's the whole point of Y.A.R.N. As I watched Caroline's eyes light up, I wondered again why I had let this dream sit ignored for so many years.

Actually, I know exactly why. His name is Sterling, and I'm not married to him anymore for that and a hundred other reasons.

As I walked Caroline out the door a bit later-after Linda rang up a scarf kit, needles, yarn, and two sets of tickets to Perle's events-I wasn't at all surprised that the young woman gave me a hug. I

had no doubt that someday soon my blackboard would include whatever Caroline came up with for what Y.A.R.N. stands for.

I know there are some customer service experts who would tell me I just gave Caroline an authentic experience in my store, but I would tell you I shared what I know to be true: the yarn connects us. It's not old-fashioned; it's timeless (there's a difference, even if Sterling could never see it). I meant every bit of the hug I gave her back.

Hank woofed at my feet as he caught sight of Margo coming out the front door of the Perfect Slice pie shop she owns across the street. To Hank, Margo means food. To me, Margo has been a steadfast friend-and nonstop source of calories. She is one of those infuriating people who can stay effortlessly slim despite all the goodies she creates for a living. Were she anyone else, her figure and her perfect, shiny straight hair that falls obediently into a neat dark bob would make me want to hate her. After all, her obedient black locks make my blond waves look riotous, and her waistline . . . well, let's not go there. But I love Margo to pieces, and was thrilled for her when she opened the Perfect Slice five years ago. It's perfection that Y.A.R.N. opened just across the street, so we see each other every day.

Margo wiped her hands on her trademark green apron and smiled. I watched my best friend notice both the Y.A.R.N. bag and the bounce in Caroline's step as my new customer greeted her lunch date outside the inn. "You did it again, didn't you?"

I might have allowed myself a smug grin. "I did."

"I have customers, but you somehow manage to have a steady stream of converts." Margo crossed her arms over her chest. "I bet you even sold her tickets to the event, didn't you?"

"Two, actually. And she'll buy the dog sweater kit when it's ready, too. I guarantee it."

Her expression told me what she was going to say next. "You absolutely should run for president of the Chamber of Commerce."

As no big fan of George Barker, a real estate broker who was the current president, Margo had been on this particular mission since I moved back to Collinstown five months ago and opened the shop two months later.

"I've been a shop owner three months. I'm not qualified." That was an easier argument than "I don't want to." As much as I adore Margo, she can be a bit relentless.

She made a noise that, if we were in Georgia, would have translated to pshaw. "You are smart. You have common sense and tact. Even before you opened Y.A.R.N., your qualifications ran circles around George's."

This wasn't exactly true. George was very qualified. Overqualified. But George was one of those people who seemed to be constantly figuring out how to sell you something. Or deny you any advantage over their success. That gets old fast. So the way I saw it, my only virtue over George was that people didn't cross to the other side of the street when they saw me coming.

Then there was the fact that the Chamber president regularly interacted with the mayor of Collinstown. And since the current mayor was Gavin Maddock, that presented a bit of a problem. Gavin and I were still trying to figure out how to act around each other. Moving back newly single to the town where you grew up and opening a shop are complicated enough without having to negotiate your high school boyfriend as the town's mayor. Margo knew this, which was why she didn't bring it up.

Hank, whose extraordinary canine talent is knowing exactly when to change the subject, chose this moment to whine and bump his head into Margo's shin. This was his version of "Why is that cookie still in your hand when it should be in my mouth?"

It worked. "Oh, Hank, buddy, of course this is for you." Margo reached down and opened her hand to let Hank gobble up the shortbread circle. She is known for her pies, but her shortbread is almost as famous. Especially with Hank. Most days I am convinced she sends delicious smells wafting across the street on purpose. Every once in a while I catch Hank sitting in the window and I swear he is staring across the street, dreaming of Margo's shortbread.