

MURDER WORTH THE WEIGHT

by D.M. Barr

EXCERPT

CAMARIN TORRES PEERED down the tracks again, as if repeated checking would cause her delayed train to magically appear. It was a warm April afternoon, but the unexpected heat did little to lift her spirits. She was heading back to her apartment after yet another unsuccessful interview. If this kept up, she'd be the only one of her NYU friends graduating next month without a job lined up. How ironic not to be able to afford the food she wouldn't allow herself to eat anyway. She checked her watch a third time. The 5:03 from White Plains to Grand Central was already ten minutes late.

Camarin heard a voice a few feet behind her softly exclaim, "Dammit!" Curiosity aroused, she spied a girl in her late teens standing by the vending machine, fervently searching through her handbag.

Camarin stared, mesmerized by what could have been a mirror image of her late twin sister Monaeka. Long, dark hair partially obscured her tanned, pretty face, and despite the temperature, she'd draped her two-hundred-plus pound body in an oversized raincoat. But as Camarin well knew, yards of fabric didn't really fool anyone. The girl hunched over slightly, a stance her sister Monaeka had perfected, a sign of deference to a world demanding an apology for violating their arbitrary standards.

Camarin felt a familiar tug of compassion as the girl plunked a few coins into the machine and then searched for more. Looking on, she debated the merits of acquiescing to her own desire for a late-afternoon sweet. *What's really the harm?* Cam reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out three quarters, which she held out toward the stranger as she walked toward her.

"Want to share something?"

The girl tensed and gave her a quizzical look, but after a moment her shoulders relaxed. "That's so nice of you. Thanks."

Camarin winked and pushed the quarters into the machine. One click and clunk later, she retrieved their prize—a Kit Kat bar. One of Monaeka's favorites. As she held it out to the girl, a slim, stylish woman clad in black came out of nowhere and snatched the chocolate bar right out of her hand.

"You don't need it," she said. "You'll thank me later."

The girl's face turned bright red, but she said nothing, just watched in shock as the thief continued down the platform.

Camarin felt the blood rush to her temples. No matter how many years and miles she'd put between herself and her past, the critical voices kept seeking her out, today in the form of this interloper. Enough, she decided. She set down the briefcase containing her resume and clips and tore after the woman, grabbing her arm and pulling her around so they stood face-to-face.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Camarin yelled.

Heads turned. Conversations ceased.

"What's it to you?" the offender shot back.

Camarin pointed at the girl, whose eyes were wide in disbelief. "That girl happens to be a friend of mine, so I'm asking a second time... what are you doing?"

"Saving her from herself, that's what. Your friend is huge, and it's unhealthy. If she can't control herself, she needs others to do it for her."

"Well, Miss High-and-Mighty, since you know everything about everyone, did you ever consider that my friend...Sabrina's...size might have nothing to do with self-control? Could it be the result of...the lithium she takes to control her bipolar disorder? Are you a psychiatrist who has a better suggestion for more appropriate meds that don't put on weight?"

"Well, no... no," the woman stammered, as if the rush of passion suddenly drained from her, leaving her feeling exposed.

"You know what I think?"

The fat shamer glared back but remained silent, so Camarin summoned her courage and repeated herself, a few decibels louder. "I said, do you know what I think?"

"No. What?" The woman sneered.

"I think you should go over to Sabrina and apologize."

"Apologize for helping her get thin?" Her voice dripped with indignation.

"No, apologize for sticking your big nose where it doesn't belong," interjected a young, beer-bellied man in overalls a few feet away. A *Joe's Plumbing* patch was embroidered on his chest pocket.

"What exactly do we have to do to be accepted by you people? Why can't you just leave us alone?" screamed a plump, older woman with perfectly coiffed hair and a fitted suit.

"Give her back the Kit Kat bar," hollered a man clad in military garb, who then started chanting, "Kit Kat, Kit Kat, Kit Kat..." Others joined in, and the cacophony grew stronger.

“You may have grabbed a Kit Kat, but you ended up with Snickers,” said Cam with a smirk. “Maybe you want to just hand over the candy, so we can forget this whole ugly incident?”

The woman spat at the ground in front of Camarin and defiantly threw the chocolate bar on the tracks, eliciting loud boos from the small but agitated crowd. Then she ran down the platform, heading for the stairs that led to the parking lot.

“Good riddance,” the plumber called after her.

Camarin stood for a moment, shaking from the encounter. Then she returned to the now teary-eyed girl. “Sorry I made you bipolar,” she whispered. “I needed to make a point, and it was all I could come up with on the spur of the moment. Hi, I’m Camarin.”

“I’m Lexie,” the girl said. “No one has ever stood up for me before. Thank you.”

“Hey, I know what it’s like. I used to deal with jerks like that all the time.”

The plumber pushed a run of quarters into the vending machine and took out two Kit Kat bars, handing one to each of the women. Others on the platform clapped and cheered. The sound was slowly drowned out by the roar of the oncoming 5:03 PM train.

As the doors opened, Camarin noticed Lexie and the plumber now chatting animatedly. Not wishing to intrude, she entered the next car over. It was practically empty, not unusual considering most people were traveling in the opposite direction at this hour. A perfect opportunity to relax after an upsetting confrontation. *Perhaps savor that chocolate bar.* She could always purge later.

Given the plethora of unoccupied seats, she was surprised when a handsome man in an expensive-looking suit asked if the spot beside her was taken. She guessed he was in his early forties, since his face was too young for the silver in his hair and beard. He spoke with a confidence so lacking in her gawky college-boy contemporaries. She felt a shiver as the silk of his sleeve touched her bare arm as he settled in.

She wondered what clever icebreaker she could use to engage her attractive new neighbor in conversation. *Nice weather, huh?* would be too lame. Seconds passed. Other passengers shuffled by. Soon, the moment would be lost.

Then, to her delight, he leaned in covertly, as if sharing a private confidence. “Nice going. You’d never seen that girl before in your life, had you?”

She pulled back and studied his expression. Affable or accusatory? His smile assured her of his friendly intentions.

“What gave me away?”

“Nothing. Just a hunch. One you just confirmed.”

Camarin twisted her mouth, irked at having been so easily played.

“Do you always go around tricking strangers into confessing their secrets?” she asked.

“Probably as often as you go around defending the underdog.” The man winked. “Nothing to be ashamed of though. Quite the opposite. As I think you’ve already figured out, life is just a series of bluffs.”

Camarin considered the comment as the train rumbled along the tracks toward Scarsdale.

“And do *you* bluff much?”

“Funny you should ask. These days, it’s all I do.”

Grateful for such a provocative opening, she pressed forward. “That sounds intriguing. Care to elaborate?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” he said with a smile. “Up until a few years ago, I’d spent my entire career practicing law. Then my circumstances and interests changed, and I decided to become a redeemer of lost causes. I just purchased a failing magazine, which I intend to make profitable again. If that’s not the bluff of the century, I don’t know what is.”

Elegant and he owns a magazine? Camarin’s heart skipped a beat.

“That’s such a coincidence. I’m just coming from an interview with a magazine.”

“Some might call it a coincidence. I call it kismet,” the man said as he held out his hand. “Lyle Fletcher, fledgling publisher.”



AS THE TRAIN rolled down the tracks toward Manhattan, Camarin sensed her future suddenly lurching ahead as well. “Camarin Torres, journalism and prelaw major. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

She reached out to shake his hand, eager to see if his grip would be as firm as she imagined, but the conductor interrupted, asking to punch their tickets. There was no way to try again without looking awkward, so she swallowed her disappointment and returned her hand to her side.

Fletcher broke the pregnant pause. “So, there must be many professions out there for someone as bold and beautiful as you. Why journalism and law?”

Camarin’s face grew warm. Had anyone else handed her that line, she would have regarded it as a come-on. But he seemed sincere, so she felt comfortable opening up. “All my life I’ve seen bullying and discrimination. As a child, I felt helpless to stop it. But as an adult, I can make a difference.”

“Bullying because of your ethnicity? You’re...”

“My mother’s side of the family comes from Guam. But no, fortunately, I’ve encountered very little bias because of my roots. Maybe it’s because we live just outside Los Angeles, where I’m part of a large Chamorro community who share an intense sense of cultural pride. In fact, I think my background may have worked in my favor, that push for diversity in colleges and all.”

“So, discriminated against as a woman?”

“No again,” she said, reluctant to share too much of her past with a stranger, no matter how charming. “Let’s just say I’ve seen how cruel people can be to those who don’t quite fit in, no matter how hard they try. I’m going to make sure that doesn’t happen to anyone else ever again.”

“You’re going to personally end intolerance?” Fletcher seemed both dubious and amused.

“Well, at least make a sizeable dent in it,” she said with a smile. It wasn’t the first time that people had appeared incredulous at her idealism. “You’re speaking to the world’s first female Chamorro anti-discrimination crusader. After graduation anyway. And eventually law school, when I can afford it.”

“Lofty ambitions. You’ll need them in a world that doesn’t always cooperate with people’s dreams. Again, I’m impressed.”

“Thank you,” she said, her face growing even hotter. A charismatic publisher thought she was impressive. A once-disappointing day was rapidly metamorphosing into something magical, like a child’s giant, colorful carnival balloon.

“Have you interviewed at my magazine, *Trend*?”

Pop! Camarin did her best not to cringe with contempt. *Trend* represented everything in the world she’d come to hate: the brainwashing of women to fit into narrow, permissible roles dictated by fashion designers and greedy advertisers. And this man, appealing or not, was one of their leaders. Camarin paused, trying to formulate a polite and diplomatic response.

“You have heard of it, right?”

“Yes, of course. But no, I didn’t interview there. No offense, but as you said, it’s failing. As a matter of fact, I turned down an unsolicited offer from one of your competitors, *Drift*. I’m just interested in more...serious publications.”

“No offense taken,” he said with a grin. “I realize that up to now *Trend* has just covered style and gossip—total fluff. That’s what I’m planning to change. In your words, go in a more serious direction.”

She wondered if the comment was authentic or if he was just another jerk and this was an excuse that allowed him to live with himself. They remained quiet for a bit, and then curiosity got the better of her.

“I didn’t realize *Trend* is based in Westchester.”

Fletcher’s face clouded over. “No, it’s in Manhattan. I was out here today because...my late wife owned a condo in White Plains that we’d been renting out. I was just meeting with the real estate agent I might hire to sell it for me.”

Cam looked down at her pumps, annoyed at herself for bringing up such a sensitive subject. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Of my wife or the condo?”

She glanced back, astonished. He started to laugh, and she felt the earlier harshness of her judgment soften by a smidgen. He really was quite charming—for a body shamer.

“Are you ever serious?” she asked.

“Oh, when I am, you’ll definitely know it. Like now. How many years of college do you have left?”

His tone switched from whimsical to all business, and something about the way he commanded control sent a shiver up her spine. *Hot as hell. Dammit.* “About a month. Then I’m done.”

The conductor announced that they would soon be arriving at Grand Central Station, their final destination, and the windows grew dark as they entered the tunnel.

He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a business card. It read *Trend Magazine*, with a fashionable NoHo address, close to her own apartment.

She held up her hand. “That’s kind of you, but I really don’t think—”

“Hey, I can see you’re not enamored with our current format. Nevertheless, I’d still like you to come in, show us your work. Allow us to describe the magazine’s revamped editorial direction. I think it may surprise you. I can use someone with your guts and ambition to develop our investigative-reporting beat. That is, if you have any interest.”

She took the card, slipping it into her jacket pocket. “If you’re really serious about moving away from your current focus, I’ll try to keep an open mind.” After all, a job was a job, and up to now, no one else but *Drift* had made an offer.

“Call tomorrow and speak to Rachel. She’ll set everything up. You’re going to be a superstar. Of that, I’m already certain.” He reached out to shake her hand. It felt as forceful as Camarin had imagined earlier. She didn’t try to read anything into the almost imperceptible squeeze he added at the end. Until proven otherwise, he was still the enemy.

As he rose and headed for the exit, she waited a few beats longer before also joining the crowd jostling toward the platform. By the stairs a newsstand featured the latest issue of *Trend*. Hating herself, she slapped down her \$3.50 for a copy. Magazines like this were part of what had driven her sister over the edge, but she needed to see if there was anything redeemable within its pages. The jury was still out until Lyle Fletcher had proven himself a reformer, and not an enabler.