

# *Bookstore Breakdown*

***By Cheryl Krajna***

Caroline folded up the last few chairs and stacked them in the corner of the activity room. "What a day," she thought to herself. "Think about what we could have done if we had known about this sooner!"

Caroline has been the general manager of Buffalo Books & Brew, a locally owned bookstore and tearoom/coffee shop in the heart of Buffalo's revitalized Elmwood Strip, since it opened a year ago. She has worked nights and weekends to make BBB an integral part of the neighborhood and the Western New York community at large by organizing weekly poetry readings, monthly "meet the author" nights with local writers and a children's writing club co-sponsored by the WNY Writing Project. She loves her work, but not necessarily those with whom she spends so many hours.

"I don't know how we got through that in one piece!" Marty said as he gathered the remaining cookies and punch and takes

them into the kitchen. Marty has worked at BBB for 10 months and is the go-to person if neither Alexis nor Caroline is in the store.

"Our Guardian Angels must have been working overtime tonight to help us," Caroline replied with a sigh.

Both had just worked more than 12 hours – the last three of which were spent shepherding about 25 elementary school pupils through a "make your own journal" activity. The event had come as a surprise to both Caroline and Marty, who learned about it that morning when they arrived for work.

It had been organized by Alexis, BBB's owner and founder. Alexis is a "big ideas" person with little interest in details. Unbeknownst to Caroline, Marty and the other employees, Alexis had invited two classes from nearby Tapestry Charter School and had booked Beverly from the Western New York Book Arts Collaborative to lead the program. Alexis had sent out the invitations a month prior, but had completely forgotten to tell her staff. She had no idea how many children had signed up to attend and had forgotten to remind Beverly, so Caroline and Marty weren't even sure if she would show up.

Fortunately for Caroline and Marty, Beverly was kind and gracious, and brought along her own fancy papers, pens and journaling supplies for the children to use. She formed an instant rapport with the children, despite or perhaps because of the fact that the 26 of them were crowded around a table built for no more

than 15 to fit comfortably. Several of the parents had elected to stay, as well, filling up the room to beyond capacity.

Caroline and Marty had to dash to the local discount store to purchase additional snacks to augment the store's depleted supply. (The weekly poetry reading had taken place the prior evening, and since it was April - National Poetry Month - it had been well attended.)

Snacks for in-store events usually were provided by Cassandra, manager of the tea room upstairs. She was Alexis' college roommate, a New Age devotee and a phenomenal baker. Unfortunately she had left early to attend a Yanni concert at HSBC Arena, so no one was upstairs to whip up treats for the children and their parents.

"That went well, didn't it?" Alexis said, smiling broadly as she closed out the cash register for the night. "We did a brisk business with the parents who stayed around to wait for their children. I think next year we should invite all the Buffalo Public Schools. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Um, let's just clean up and go home," Caroline answered. "We've got that shipment coming in tomorrow morning before we open, and it's been a long day."

They all said their goodnights and went home exhausted but pleased that the event had gone well.

Caroline was back at the store at 8 a.m. to receive the shipment from one of the local publishers. Alexis' nephew Ernie was supposed to be there to help, but he was nowhere to be

found. She and the delivery person unloaded and stacked all the boxes in the store room, which took more than hour. Ernie sauntered in at 9:59 a.m. – a minute before opening time.

"Sorry Car," he said to Caroline, using a diminutive form of her name which she hated. "I ran into some pals at the Monkey Bar last night and we were out pretty late."

Caroline said nothing, only seethed. She thought about the week before when Ernie was supposed to stay after closing to help her set up the poetry book display in the front window. Then, his excuse had been a last-minute invitation to attend a concert with friends. Or the Saturday last month when Ernie was scheduled to open the store because Alexis and Caroline were at a bookstore owner's conference in Chicago and Marty was home with the flu. Ernie had overslept then, too, leaving about 15 youngsters and their parents standing outside in freezing rain, waiting to get in for the children's book club meeting.

"Ernie, you're just the person I was looking for," Alexis called to him. "The Buffalo News called about doing a story for our first anniversary. You're so good with people. I want you here with me to talk to the reporter."

"Love to, babe," Ernie replied, flashing Alexis a wide smile as he brushed past Marty and Caroline.

Caroline shot Marty a look conveying her anger. Marty shrugged his shoulders and kept straightening the books and dusting the shelves, which he did every morning. Marty loved working at BBB and didn't want to cause any trouble.

A few weeks later, Alexis came in one morning brimming with the energy of a new idea and clutching an enormous bouquet of daffodils from her garden, which she set in a vase on the front counter. Business had picked up considerably since the Buffalo News article was published, even though the reporter had spelled some of the employees' names wrong and had said the store opened at 9 a.m. instead of 10 a.m. on Sundays, which meant Caroline and Marty had to be at work an hour earlier. Caroline asked Alexis to call the newspaper for a correction, but so far she had not.

"Marty, I'd like you to work with Glen to organize a summer reading camp for the kids in the neighborhood," she said. Marty immediately paled. "I know some teachers who would love to come in and help. Call Laurie at Just Buffalo Literary Center, too. Maybe we can work together on this."

"I can certainly help too," said Adam, Alexis' husband, co-owner of BBB and a history professor at the University at Buffalo. "I'm on sabbatical, so I'll have some extra time this summer."

Marty thanked Adam for the offer, but still looked shaken.

"Oh my God! How am I supposed to do that?" Marty practically shouted at Caroline when the two were alone in the back of the store. "It's May! Some of the schools are finished in a few weeks! How am I supposed to put things together and get out publicity to the schools in time? Where will we put all the kids? What will we do with them all day?"

"We'll figure out something," Caroline said, patting Marty on the arm in support.

"I'd love to help with that," said Ellen, a college student who had started working at BBB that week to replace Jim, who ran off to California with his girlfriend to try to break into show business as a screenwriter. "I'm an education major at Buff State and I love kids. This would be a great thing to put on my résumé."

"Thanks," Marty said, looking considerably less stressed than he had a few minutes earlier. "I'll take you up on that."

Caroline laughed softly to herself as Marty and Ellen chatted about the reading camp. She left them to go back to the store room for a box of the new books. She opened the door and immediately closed it again, not believing what she had seen: Cassandra and Ernie *in flagrante delicto*. Alexis was by no means a tyrant about rules and policies, but she had made one point abundantly clear: She told people when she hired them that she would not allow fraternization between employees.

"Hey there – you're too young to have a senior moment," Adam said jovially when he spotted Caroline standing outside the store room door, unmoving. "Are you OK?"

"Yes, um, yes, um, I'm OK," Caroline stammered a bit too loudly - hoping Ernie and Cassandra would hear her and stop what they were doing. "I thought I had to sneeze, but it must have been a false alarm."

"OK," Adam said, giving her a quizzical look. "I just wanted to compliment you on the window display. It looks great."

Caroline, Marty and Ellen had arranged an intricate display of books and college memorabilia in honor of upcoming college graduations, to urge people to buy books as graduation gifts. Alexis had not commented, so Caroline was grateful to receive the compliment from Adam. She made a mental note to pass it along to Marty and Ellen.

When Adam left, Caroline quickly walked away from the store room. Ernie and Cassandra emerged a few minutes later, each checking to see if the coast was clear before leaving the store room. Ernie went back to the cash register and Cassandra returned to the tearoom, which was swamped with customers. Belle, Cassandra's assistant manager, had rushed downstairs looking for Cassandra while Caroline, Marty and Ellen were talking about the summer reading camp,

Everyone stayed busy with customers for the next couple of hours. At around 3 p.m., Glen rushed in.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," he told Caroline. "I know I was supposed to be here at 2, but my elderly neighbor fell down the stairs so I waited with her until the ambulance came."

"Is she OK?" asked Alexis, who had overheard the conversation. "Does she have family? Go be with her if she needs you. We can manage here." Caroline nodded her agreement.

"That's OK," Glen replied. "I called her son, and he went with her to the hospital. I'll stay late tonight to make up the time I missed, then go by the hospital and see how she is."

"Thanks Glen," Caroline said. "We missed you, for sure, but you did the right thing."

Glen was conscientious, a hard worker and a reliable employee, but he had the worst case of halitosis Caroline had ever encountered. She and Marty jokingly referred to him as "Dragon Breath" when he wasn't around. Marty had told her that he heard customers making fun of Glen, too. Alexis apparently had not noticed. She spent most of her time chatting with customers about the latest best sellers, thinking up grandiose events and window displays or on the phone with publishers.

The next few days passed without incident until Ellen approached Caroline as the two closed up the shop for the day. Ellen appeared nervous, so Caroline asked her what was wrong.

"I really don't want to make trouble, but I have to tell you about something I saw," Ellen said, her eyes never leaving the floor.

"You can tell me, whatever it is," Caroline assured her.

"Well, I was upstairs in the tearoom yesterday, buying a scone to eat during my lunch break," she said. "Cassandra's scones are awesome!"

"That's for sure," Caroline said, smiling. "I've gained five pounds since I started working here just from those scones. Now, don't be afraid. Tell me what you saw."

"Well, Cassandra was at the cash register, chatting with that guy who comes in all the time – the older guy with brown hair who always wears a Buffalo Sabres baseball cap?"

"I know who you mean," Caroline said.

"I overheard him tell Cassandra to 'put it on his tab like always,' and I didn't think that sounded right. Cassandra laughed and closed the register. From what I could tell, the man didn't pay for his food and tea," Ellen said. "I wouldn't have thought anything about it, except that later I heard Alexis on the phone with Adam, laughing that Cassandra had messed up the account books again and the totals weren't matching. I don't think Alexis has a clue what's going on."

"Thank you, Ellen. You did the right thing in telling me," Caroline told her. "I won't tell anyone that it was you who brought this to my attention. Now go enjoy your evening."

Ellen left and Caroline sat down heavily on one of the overstuffed chairs scattered around the bookstore. Just this morning, Alexis had given Marty a \$100 gift card and a homemade cake for his birthday. Caroline had received a \$150 gift card, a homemade pie and a beautiful card from Alexis on her birthday the month before. Caroline loved this place, but she was frustrated at so many things. **What should she do?**

## *Questions for discussion*

- Would you like to work for Alexis at Buffalo Books & Brew? Why or why not?
- What should Caroline do about what Ellen told her?
- Is Caroline an effective general manager?
- Discuss Alexis' leadership style.
- Did Caroline handle the "store room situation" correctly? If not, what should she have done?
- Should Caroline have handled Ernie's late arrivals differently? Why or why not?
- What ideas do you have for Caroline to help her cope with Alexis' forgetfulness and lack of planning?
- What, if anything, could/should be done about Glen's lack of personal hygiene?
- Do you have any ideas for Marty about the summer reading camp?
- What is Adam's role in all of this?