

The Bookstore Girl

By ChronoEclipse

Part 1

Zoe had been scrambling for months to try and get a job over the winter holidays so that she could save up for some trips she planned to take after she graduated college next spring. The 21-year-old was sharp, spunky and up for anything so she was really perplexed as to why it was taking her so long to find employment.

But as luck would have it one of her roommates had mentioned walking by an old bookstore downtown with a 'help wanted' sign in the window. So Zoe got up early the next day, printed off a copy of her resume, put on her trendy red pea coat and headed downtown.

The bookstore, Timeless Tomes, was a quaint little used book shop hidden down a quiet side street nestled between a tailor and a hole-in-the-wall taqueria. It looked like it had been around for ages.

In stark contrast to the musty old shop, a beautiful young black woman sat at a coffee table in the front of the shop reading a Zadie Smith novel with her feet propped up on the chair on the other side of the table.

Zoe bit her lip at the sight of the pretty girl around her age sitting with a confident radiance and reading one of her favorite books. She walked over and decided to chat her up a little.

"White Teeth?" Zoe asked the young woman.

"Hmm?" The girl asked, looking up with a smile and rubbing a finger along her teeth.

Zoe laughed shyly and blushed.

“No... I meant what you’re reading. I love that book.” Zoe said, smiling warmly at the girl.

“Ooooooh. Well, i’m only halfway through my third re-read so don’t, like, spoil anything that I might have missed in the first two read-throughs...” The black woman replied with a grin. Her long braided hair tossed along her shoulders playfully as she laughed.

“Okay i’ll try my best!” Zoe said with a wink.

There was a pause of awkward silence from the two women for a moment as they looked each other over and decided what to say next. Zoe noted the woman’s perfect facial structure with high cheekbones and the sensual curvature of her shoulders. The way she held herself as she sat reading like she gave 0 shits about what anyone thought of her.

“Julie.” The young woman said, holding out a smooth well-treated hand.

Zoe thought she just seemed so grown-up and worldly.

“Uh Zoe... with an accent on the ‘e’.” Zoe said, blowing the blonde bangs of her pixie cut out of her eyes.

“Hi ‘Zoe with an accent on the E’.” Julie said, shaking her hand.

‘AHHHH SHE WAS SO COOL!’ Zoe thought internally as she shook the girl’s hand and smiled at her.

She began to picture the two of them making out together in the restroom of the taqueria, peeling off each other’s clothes... Julie’s hand on her pert breast...

“So you’re coming to apply for a job?” Julie asked.

Zoe shook off her sexual fantasy. She realized it had also been a while since she had been on a decent date too and she was getting extra thirsty.

‘But: Job first, love-life second’. She thought to herself, refocusing.

“Uh yeah how did you know?” Zoe asked, surprised.

“Well either i’m psychic or I can tell a resume when I see one.” Julie said, gesturing to the sheet of paper in Zoe’s other hand.

“Oh right. Yeah my roommate said she thought this store was hiring so I figured, ‘why not’ Right? I’ve always loved books and I don’t know... there’s something kind of romantic about working in an old bookstore over the holidays.” Zoe explained.

Julie grinned.

“I totally get you. And you’re totally right. There is definitely something magical about this place.” She said with a chuckle.

“I just hope I'm what they’re looking for.” Zoe said, biting her lip.

“Oh stop! She’s going to love you! You’re perfect. I can tell! You go march right on in there and tell her that you want to work here and you’ll get the job!” Julie said confidently.

“Really?... Do you work here too?” Zoe asked hopefully.

Julie smirked.

“I did for a long time. But... it wasn’t really conducive to my social life.” She explained.

“Oh that’s okay for me! I practically don’t have a social life!” Zoe said with a shrug and a laugh.

“Fantastic... yeah Dee’s going to love you...” Julie said grinning.

“I hope so...” Zoe said, taking a deep breath. “Well, wish me luck!”

“You don’t need it girl! You got this... I adore your coat by the way.” Julie said, gesturing up and down Zoe’s body.

Zoe blushed again.

“Thanks!” She said giddily.

She pushed open the door and headed inside. A bell jingled from the doorway as she entered causing a big fluffy orange and white cat who had been laying down in the window to pop up and run to the counter, jumping up onto it and startling the very old woman who looked to be snoozing away behind the register.

“Eh what? Oh! Oh hello dearie. What can I do for you today?” The elderly woman rattled.

She fumbled around the counter with a shaky wrinkled hand trying to feel for her glasses. She managed to find them and slowly put them on, peering at Zoe who tucked some blond hair behind her ear and smiled at the elderly woman.

“Um hello ma’am. I’m here about the job opening...” Zoe explained a bit nervously.

She took a deep breath and caught the smell of the store. It had that nice old book smell to it.

“Eh what? You’ll have to speak up a little louder dear.” The old woman rattled cupping a shaky hand to her ear.

“Oh uh, I said I’m here for a job!” Zoe said loudly.

The little old lady behind the counter perked up and a bright smile crossed her thin wrinkled lips.

“You are? That’s wonderful. I’ve been needing some extra help around here. It’s tough to do it all at my age.” She explained as she slowly shuffled around the counter with the aid of a wooden cane.

“Well I have plenty of energy and I'm ready to work hard ma'am!” Zoe said brightly.

“Now then let me just get a good look at you.” The old woman chirped as she hobbled over to the college girl.

Zoe was amazed that this woman was working here seemingly all by herself. She looked to be easily in her 80s, hunched over and gripping her cane with a bit of a stoop in her back. Her frail bony body was engulfed in a large baggy cardigan sweater that hung off her shrunken body like the skin of her neck hung off her chin. Her white wispy hair was gathered up in a bun and she shuffled along in a pair of flats barely lifting her old tired feet off the ground.

“Do your uh children or grandchildren help out around the store at all ma'am?” Zoe asked as the old woman shuffled very close to her.

“Oh my no, I don't have any kids... or grandkids for that matter. And enough with all this 'ma'am' business. You can just call me Doris.” The old woman explained as she peered intently at Zoe's face with her tired sunken eyes through her bifocals.

“Right Doris. I'm Zoe.” The young woman replied, handing the elderly bookstore owner her resume.

Doris took the sheet of paper in her trembling hand with a nod of thanks and then turned around and set it on the counter without looking at it. She then turned back to the college girl and reached out feeling her biceps and her cheek with a clammy wrinkled hand.

Zoe flinched a bit at being examined like some kind of prize horse by the elderly woman but knew that old people could be a tad eccentric so she rolled with it.

“All right Zoe. I think you'll do quite nicely here. You're hired!” Doris chirped happily.

“I am? That’s it?” Zoe asked, surprised.

“Congratulations.” Doris quavered as she began shuffling back around the counter.

“Thank you ma’a- Doris! You won’t regret this!” Zoe said excitedly.

She was practically bouncing with joy as Doris slowly pulled out a stack of papers.

“Oh I imagine I won’t dear. Now just read this employee packet and sign the last page for me... you wouldn’t happen to be available to work today would you? Starting in oh about 5 minutes?” Doris asked, raising a gray eyebrow.

“Um yes! I can totally start today! I’m so ready!” Zoe said, taking off her coat and hanging it on the coat hook behind the counter.

“Oh that’s wonderful! As soon as you’re done with the new hire paperwork go ahead and clock in with the time clock in the back... and don’t forget to check the schedule back there. Your shifts are the ones marked ‘employee two’...” Doris explained.

“Sure but no worries on that end. I’m really looking to save up during the holidays so I want to work as many shifts as possible.” Zoe said, skimming through the paperwork.

“That’s what I like to hear! See I knew I had a good feeling about you!” The old woman said with a wink.

Zoe figured that the job was straight-foward enough that she didn’t need to read every single page of this thick employee manual. So she skipped ahead to the last page and quickly signed it. Leaving the page with her signature for Doris and heading into the back so that she could clock in.

The time clock in the back was far more technologically advanced than anything else in this sleepy little shop. It had an LED screen and everything. “Please place your hand against the scanner.” The machine instructed. Zoe

shrugged and did as she was told. A blue light seemingly scanned her handprint and the screen declared her to be 'clocked in'.

~9:00am~

Zoe bopped out of the back room excited to start work. Doris was nodding off again while sitting on the stool and petting the cat on her lap.

"Okay Doris! I'm all set and ready to go!" Zoe said while swinging her fist across her chest enthusiastically.

"Wonderful. Wonderful. Let me show you how the register works... Your first hour here can be a bit overwhelming. There's a lot to learn. But I promise you you'll get the hang of things as the day goes on." Doris cautioned.

"No problemo. I'm a quick learner." Zoe said, hopping over to the register.

"That's good dear. That's very good..." Doris rattled.

She began to explain how the register worked. The thing was an absolute antique that had 0 computing capabilities whatsoever.

"That's why I keep this little calculator right here. Make sure you don't lose this or we'll really be in trouble!" Doris explained patting a small dusty calculator stashed in a cubby under the desk.

"Well I mean, we could always use the calc app on our phones in a pinch right? But i'll do my best not to lose it." Zoe said.

Doris furrowed her wrinkled brow.

"The what-what on the what now?" She asked, sticking a gnarled finger into her hairy ear.

"I uh... it's okay. Don't worry about it. What's next?" Zoe asked, remembering that her grandma still uses a landline.

“Next we have the credit card machine, and let me just say... hope that they’re paying with cash every time!” Doris said with a chuckle.

Zoe stared wide-eyed at the pad Doris pulled out from under the counter. ‘Machine’ wasn’t really the right word for it. It looked more like a medieval torture device for the hand.

“And they get the white copy. The yellow copy goes into the register and the pink copy goes into the file folder right here.” Doris explained.

“Why do we need both the yellow and pink copies?” Zoe asked.

Doris blinked at her for a moment.

“You know? I don’t really remember... best to keep doing it though to be on the safe side.” The old woman rattled.

“Okee-dokee...” Zoe said with a shrug.

“Come follow me. I’ll show you how to process new shipments...” The old woman said, waving her trembling hand as she grabbed her cane and hobbled toward the back room.

“Sure thing!” Zoe said, jumping up to follow her.

Doris was right, the morning training was a bit hectic and filled with a lot of information that Zoe tried her best to retain. She figured over the next few weeks she’d have a better handle on it all and maybe even earn her elderly bosses trust enough to convince her to update some of these archaic systems.

The elderly woman needed to rest her eyes for a few minutes so Zoe took it upon herself to stock some shelves. She stacked up an entire box worth of books into her hands and headed over to the shelves. The 21-year-old danced around the door tossing books onto various shelves trying to do her best to be quick about it so that she could get through all of the boxes of resold books and impress Doris. But her energetic enthusiasm paid little mind to neatness or

order as the books were restocked haphazardly and in only the roughest alphabetical order.

She got through two boxes of books this way and was feeling very proud of herself. A few customers came in during this time and Zoe was eager to help them. One woman was trying to buy one of the big encyclopedia sets on the top shelf in the reference books section. It was too high for Zoe to reach even on her tiptoes so she eagerly climbed the stacks of bookshelves in her sock and pulled all of the heavy tomes down in one bear hug.

She blew her bangs out of her eyes as she carried them all over to the counter for the woman and dumped them out of her arm next to the register.

“I admire your pluck dear... but we do have a ladder for you to use in the future...” Doris said with a wrinkly smirk, shaking her head.

“Oh cool...” Zoe said, a bit embarrassed.

Several times when customers wanted to make purchases Zoe would insist on wringing them up - for the practice. But each time they needed to pay with a credit card she stood there like a deer in headlights and Doris would need to take over, leaving Zoe to go back to restocking and reorganizing the bookshelves. Zoe was much more comfortable doing the manual labor parts of the job and figured that was better anyway since Doris looked like she'd fall over and break her hip if she tried to pick up a David Foster Wallace novel.

But sometimes she was stuck manning the register, when Doris was napping or during her many long slow trips to the bathroom. During one such period a gentleman in a suit came into the store. He looked like the kind of slick businessman that managed a hedge fund or something and talked about ‘power lunches’. His hair was slicked back and he was wearing heavy cologne. Zoe rolled her eyes as he gave her a once over and grinned as if to say ‘aren’t you hot for me? I have money...’

“Hey there sweetheart. I’m here to pick up a book I special ordered.” He said in that quick ‘time is money’ kind of way.

“Oh uh... special orders right... ummm...” Zoe said, looking around.

Doris hadn't told her anything about a 'special orders' section so she hoped there would be a very obvious place where this guy's book would be.

“What was the name of the book you ordered?” She asked him as she poked around behind the counter.

“Lord of the Rings - like the movie. First edition... Listen, is the girl who helped me last week around? She'll know where it is. Hot little brunette chick... Or the old black lady?” The guy asked impatiently.

“Uh... I don't think they work here anymore...” Zoe said confused as she continued to move around boxes trying to find his order.

“Ah Mr. Remington. Back for your book. We have it right here...” Doris said hobbling up to the counter and reaching down to the one shelf Zoe hadn't checked yet.

She pulled out the copy, wrapped in brown paper and slid it over to the businessman.

“Your sister is going to love this present.” Doris chortled with a wink of her sunken eye.

“Uh... thanks.” The man replied wondering who this old woman was.

~10:00am~

As the morning rolled on Zoe did begin to feel like she had a better handle on things. She was even able to complete a few transactions without any help from Doris.

Speaking of Doris, as the morning rolled on Zoe began to notice that the old woman was napping less and even seemed a bit less hunched on her stool. She was getting downright chatty, talking about her favorite books and telling funny stories from her time working in the store.

Zoe had finished putting some more books back, more neatly this time than she had an hour ago, and spotted the fluffy orange and white cat laying on the ledge by the window. She walked over calmly and reached out to give the kitty a little pet. The cat responded by batting her hand away with his paw and giving her a small hiss.

“He’s not a big fan of young people. Give it some time.” Doris said with a chuckle.

“What’s the cat’s name again?” Zoe asked.

“Oscar... it's short for Oscar Wilde.” Doris explained with a chuckle.

“He’s your cat?” Zoe asked.

“Well, he’s more the store’s cat. So I suppose that makes him your cat too.” Doris pointed out.

“Splendid. I’ve always wanted a kitty cat.” Zoe smirked.

Oscar licked his paw and eyed Zoe warily.

“So it’s usually pretty slow from now until the lunch rush, why don’t you grab the broom and dustpan from the back and sweep up out front.” Doris instructed.

“Sure thing... Hey, is it okay if I put on my headphones and listen to music while I'm doing it?” Zoe asked, giving the old woman a hopeful grin.

Doris smiled and nodded her wrinkled head.

“I don’t see why not! I suppose you find classical music a bit boring...” The old woman said with a chuckle.

Zoe didn’t want to hurt the old woman’s feelings but she was right. The instrumental classical records playing all morning were kind of a drag.

“No! It’s rad, very atmospheric!” She said encouragingly.

“Oh you don’t have to humor an old woman. I know the kind of stuff you kids listen to. But trust me, the music will grow on you!” Doris said giggling and shaking her head.

Zoe smirked and shrugged. She couldn’t imagine vibing on the stale Schubert concerto playing any time soon. The 29-year-old grabbed her phone and headphones from her coat as well as the broom and dustpan and headed out to the front of the shop.

Julie the girl from before was still out at the cafe table with her legs propped up on the empty chair reading her book.

“Oh hey! You’re still here!” Zoe said in delighted surprise.

“Yep, still here. It’s my day off and I’ve got nowhere else to be so I’m going to chill here and enjoy my book!” Julie said with a grin.

“Hey no complaints here!” Zoe said as she began sweeping.

“What about you ‘Zoe with an accent on the E’? How’s your first day going?” Julie asked, tossing some locks of her hair back over her shoulder.

“Oh it’s going Aces. I’ve really gotten the hang of things. It kind of feels like I’ve been working here for years!” Zoe replied honestly.

Julie laughed and Zoe slipped her headphones on to begin sweeping.

“What are you listening to?” The younger woman asked from her chair.

Zoe removed one of her ear buds and looked over, not quite hearing the question.

“Your music!” Julie reiterated.

“Oh the Iron Maidens!” Zoe replied.

“I love them! I was singing ‘D-d-denture cream’ in the shower this morning!” Julie said, giving her new friend the ‘rock on sign’ with her hand.

“Cool yeah I haven’t listened to much of their stuff past their first album.” Zoe said with a smile and a shrug.

“Oh you have to listen to the rest of their stuff once their sound, er, ‘matures’. It’s the birth of ‘Old Core’ man! ‘Sad Sacks’ is, like, quintessential!” Julie said enthusiastically.

“Cool i’ll uh, have to check it out!” Zoe said with a smile and a nod before resuming sweeping.

For a bit she rocked out to her music and swept up all the leaves and dirt from the entryway trading flirtatious looks with Julie periodically as she did so.

When she was done she took off her headphones and emptied the dustpan into the trash. On her way back into the shop she paused to look over at Julie with a wry smile.

“Would you say that you’re hanging around here all morning because you have no place better to go or because you’re interested in something or someone here...?” Zoe asked boldly.

“Mmm who’s to say?” Julie answered coquettishly with a cheshire grin.

Zoe smirked and walked back into the shop. Strangely, Julie didn’t seem so grown up and worldly as she had seemed to Zoe when they had met this morning. She sort of seemed like a silly flirtatious college kid... but then again, wasn’t that what Zoe was as well?

~11:00am~

Zoe headed back inside and found Doris peering at a list of books on the screen of a customer's phone. After squinting and blinking a few times the gray haired

older woman took the glasses off and rested them on the counter realizing that she could see the screen better without them.

“Ah, here's my assistant now. Zoe would please help this young lady find these books from her list?” Doris asked, waving a veiny hand.

“Oh sure thing!” Zoe replied brightly and hopped over energetically to the middle-aged customer.

She took the woman's phone and scrolled through the list making mental notes of where each of the items would be found in the shop. She then gave the woman a smile and nod and led her back to the shelves.

“Boy you sure know your way around. I feel like I would get lost all the time with these big stacks of old books!” The woman joked.

Zoe gave her a wry grin and tapped her blonde head.

“I have a system.” She explains as she twirled around the corner impressively and grabbed two of the books from the woman's list from shelves across from one another.

“Ah! That's your secret!” The woman said with a pretty laugh and took the books from Zoe. “So how many years have you worked here?” She asked.

Zoe paused at the question as she pulled a third book from another shelf.

“Huh. You know it really feels like years but today is my first day!” She said, shaking off the feeling that she had been working here for over a decade.

The woman looked a mix of surprised and impressed.

“Well I wish my employees were as competent as you are on their first day!” The customer said, putting her hand on her hip and chuckling. “What did you do before this?” The nosy woman inquired.

“Oh... I was in school.” Zoe replied and furrowed her brow causing the lines that had been sneaking along it to accentuate.

Zoe had never gotten that question before, sure she was mature and held herself with an heir of someone with experience but taking a look at her one could tell that she was not old enough to have a lengthy work history... Or at least one could a few hours ago.

“Well, if you’re new to the area you should come check out the book group I host at my house every third Saturday of the month! It’s a lot of fun. This month we’re reading ‘Still Alice by Lisa Genova’.” The woman said enthusiastically.

She slipped Zoe a bookmark with the information printed on it as Zoe passed her the last book from her list. The woman's finger gently glided across the thinning skin on the back of Zoe’s hand.

Zoe looked down at the book group invite and then up at the woman. It was a nice offer and this woman was very attractive and not that much older than her... The 37-year-old blonde blinked and looked again at the woman in front of her. She was DEFINITELY around Zoe’s mother’s age.

“Oh wow...” Zoe said outloud thinking about how crazy it was that she thought this woman who was clearly in her 40s was around Zoe’s age.

“I know right? Scary subject! My memory is terrible so... knock on wood! Anyway... I should grab your e-mail... I invited the other gal that works here last month and we had a whole scheduling kerfuffle and I haven’t seen her around the store to tell her.” The woman said, pulling out a pen and a small notebook.

“Uh Doris?” Zoe asked.

“Oh no this woman was younger, around our age, brown hair... Is she the owner’s daughter maybe?” The customer asked.

“I don’t think so?” Zoe replied.

'Did she say OUR age or YOUR age?' She wondered. In either case Doris was old enough to be her grandmother, at least... right?

She scribbled down her email address.

"Okay great... Zoe! Such a pretty name. I'll send you an e-mail reminder for the next meet-up... I'm Gina by the way... I completely forgot I hadn't told you that yet. See? Terrible memory! Hope it's not early onset alzheimers!... Anyway, it was nice to meet you. Thank you so much for the help and I hope to see you soon!" Gina said with a bright smile quickly backing up toward the counter.

Once she had paid for her books and hurried out of the shop leaving the door chimes to jingle, Doris smirked at Zoe.

"My my you left her all afluster. She was blushing and smile the whole way through her credit card transaction." Doris explained.

"Yeah, weird right? I guess older women just like me! Be right back. I have to use the little girls room." Zoe said with a shrug as she headed to the employee bathroom.

She was washing her hands at the sink when she looked up and gasped slightly at the nearly 40 year old woman staring back in the mirror.

~12:00pm~

The blonde leaned over the sink in a panic tugging at the puffy bags under her eyes and the crinkling skin. She was barely into her 20s! Her skin shouldn't look this dry and old, she thought. But even as she examined her mature aging face crows feet deepened in the corners of her eyes and her jaw line softened into the beginnings of jowls.

She stepped back and gave an affronted facial expression to her reflection. Nasal folds appeared as subtle crevices on the sides of her face threatening to deepen as the years went on and little smile lines framed the thinner lips of her mouth.

Zoe furrowed her brow, cringing at creases that formed along her forehead as she did so. She looked like some lady at a PTA meeting – or worse – like her mom!

Out of morbid curiosity she lifted her shirt and groaned in dissatisfaction at the pale, flabby stomach underneath. She was still a relatively thin woman but clearly her ‘indoor’ lifestyle didn’t leave a lot of room for keeping in shape and she had the middle-aged spread to show for it.

Her breasts were modest enough that they didn’t sag too terribly but they were still noticeably lower to a woman who was expecting the perky B-cups of a 21-year-old hanging from her chest. Zoe cupped them in her veiny hands and lifted them up to where they ought to be and then released them and watched them flop down making her think that she ought to invest in a support bra.

Reaching around behind her and getting a handful of cellulite from her soft butt cheeks confirmed that her wider ass was suffering the same fate. In fact as she looked back at herself in profile she noticed that her thighs and ass were really stretching out her pants and turning her normally slender figure decidedly pear-shaped.

There was a rapping at the bathroom door.

“Knock, knock, knock! Everything okay in there?” The sound of Doris’ throaty voice carried through the door.

“Uh just a minute!” Zoe called back before clearing her throat at the sound of how husky it was.

She lifted her top again and pinched a bit of her flab.

“Gotta start hitting the gym. 45 and still single, this is the time to get serious about settling down...” She thought to herself, pausing for a moment thinking there was something odd about that thought.

She shook that notion off and took a deep breath, smiling at her middle-aged face in the mirror.

“Still, I look pretty damn good for my age!” She said affirmingly to herself and then turned to exit the bathroom.

When she came out to the main part of the store she saw that things had really picked up while she had stepped out.

There was a line of customers at the register being helped by Doris, who was looking pretty spry for an old woman. There even looked to be some brown working its way through her gray hair as the 61-year-old rang up and bagged books like a pro.

“Could you help those folks over there? They need to find specific titles on the shelves but I haven’t had a chance to go back with them because things have been so busy up here.” Doris said in a friendly but hurried voice.

“Oh I'm sorry Doris! I didn’t realize it was so crazy out here. I would have been quicker!” Zoe apologized.

“Don’t worry about it hun! All of us need a minute or two to ourselves throughout the day. I remember on MY first day I shut myself back there and had a good cry for the better part of an hour!” Doris said without taking a pause from ringing up customers.

“Oh well I wasn’t crying I was – huh it’s still my first day...” Zoe said remembering.

“Uh huh. We’re going to close for lunch at 1 so if you could help these folks we’ll be able to get through this rush before then.” Doris prompted.

“Right! I’m on it!” Zoe said as she hustled around the counter to greet the customers.

Her ‘hustle’ was a bit slower and more plodding than it had been that morning and her wider ass jiggled with each step. She found that she had an almost

encyclopedic knowledge of where everything was located in the store but getting around from shelf to shelf was a lot more winding than it had been even an hour ago.

She panted as she wheeled the ladder on the back wall over to the Fiction 'P's.

"Pade, Paetro, Page, Paige, Paine, Painter. Palahniuk... Palmer. Here you go!" She said, grabbing a red and yellow softcover and handing it down to the young man below her.

"Thanks ma'am." The guy said, though just this morning he was probably a few years older than Zoe.

"No problem kiddo! Doris can ring you up at the register!" Zoe said with a smile, seemingly unphased by the 'ma'am' comment.

She slowly and carefully climbed down the ladder and leaned against the books for a moment, catching her breath as some gray spread through the sides of her hair.