

# ORGANIZED FOR CHRISTMAS WISHES

By Ritter Ames

With this final cookie, in this final batch, we're *finally* done with our Christmas cookie baking for the year," Kate McKenzie said, brushing away her bangs with a forearm of the pink MOM sweatshirt. The sweatshirt had been her favorite Mother's Day gift the previous spring, decorated by her twin eight year old daughters, Samantha and Suzanne, with pastel flowers and rhinestones. The shirt's color and design didn't exactly fit the season but its warmth factor did, and that was the way Kate determined her style criteria now that the family lived in Vermont.

She pushed the last of the refrigerated spritz cookie dough through the cookie press and onto the cold baking sheet. They used parchment paper for the sugar cookies, and Kate could hear the soft crackle sound as Meg Berman added flourishes to a batch of round bodied snowmen.

The pair worked in Kate's cheery cherry and white kitchen, since she had more counter space than at the Berman's, and the women needed plenty of room for the stacks of bakery boxes to hold all the cookies. Bright sunlight powered through the windows, reflecting off the knee high snow that covered the landscape. The deep drifts hid any imperfections and gave Hazelton, Vermont its typical festive air for the holiday season.

Kate looked out the panes of her cottage door to the back porch and uttered a little *brrr*. "You'd think the sun could do a better job at melting some of the snowfall. It's been two days."

"Yes, and with any luck we won't get a new round in the next few days, since everything is nicely shoveled and plowed at the moment," Meg replied. "This is the joy of living in Currier and Ives country, Katie. An almost guaranteed white Christmas."

"I'll keep reminding myself to be grateful," Kate said, rubbing her upper arms.

Meg laughed.

The oven heat permeated the room, and the aromatic smell of baking sugared batter filled the air. Kate walked closer to get more of the residual warmth. Someday, she hoped to get acclimated to Vermont's winter temps, but only a year after their move and she still felt like her body was set to the more temperate climate of coastal Oregon.

Without thinking, she double-checked the oven again to make sure it was at 350 degrees, then snapped the rubber band on her left wrist to remind herself not to check it a third time. "At least it's perfect cookie baking weather—snow covered outside so the heat is really welcome inside."

"I'm just glad we're doing this together," Meg said. "I always have good intentions, but end up backing out once I get overrun with all the other things that crop up this time of the year. When you said we could do it as a team, I had hopes I'd actually get some cookies baked this time."

"You can definitely mark cookie baking off your to-do list," Kate said, her gaze running over the countertops and table filled with sheets and boxes of cookies for the town's holiday cookie exchange. "This kind of event is such a win-win, we absolutely had to participate."

For every dozen goodies they took to the exchange, the women would take away a dozen of someone else's best efforts. The exchange not only provided an easy way to bake ahead for

the holidays and have a wide selection of cookies and treats for holiday occasions, but also provided one of the best organizing tips Kate had ever known to reduce stress for the hectic season. Cookies could be used right away or frozen for events coming closer to the holiday. Best of all, because those participating in the cookie exchange did so offering the cookies as their gift to everyone else in the event, it meant every participating family was happily able to mark their neighbors off their gift-giving list with one delicious stroke.

Kate spent the previous evening printing self-sticking labels with all the ingredients for their cookies, so anyone with food allergies wouldn't have to guess at the risks. She also printed out "From the Kitchen of the McKenzie Family—Merry Christmas" and corresponding labels for Meg to use with the Berman family highlighted. It wouldn't take a minute to slap the correct labels on the side of each bakery box full of goodies, and was much easier than having to write everything onto the boxes by hand. Red and green bows were the finishing touches. Those would get added once they were at the drop off point, so the boxes would stack well in the van and the bows wouldn't be crushed en route to their destination.

"Getting the dough out of my refrigerator was a key thing, too. It's good we're getting this all finished today," Meg said, piping blue icing around a snowman's black hat. "Making up the batter early to chill, and to get the cookies baked and shaped... Well, I don't know that my sweet tooth would have had the willpower to stay away much longer." She finished the snowman, then stabbed the metal point of her frosting bag into the round belly of two cookies. "Oops, couple of rejects here. Guess we need to break for coffee and cookies."

"Meg Berman, you are so evil."

"You love my bad influence, Kate McKenzie. Admit it."

Kate filled two mugs with coffee. "I love your cookies, that's for sure." She yawned as she passed one of the mugs to Meg, then scooped up a cookie. "Hope this sugar and caffeine wakes me a little. Not enough sleep last night."

"Up late wrapping gifts?"

"Up late trying to figure out how to answer Santa questions without really answering. Sam and Suze want to believe, I think. They listened too closely to my answers about the magic of believing for anyone who really wanted to let go of the illusion. But so many things have them finally questioning the tradition. Keith had no ideas when he came home either, but I guess midnight really isn't a good time to do creative parent trouble shooting. I guess we've been lucky the Santa story lasted this long."

Meg nodded. "Those questions. I remember when we went through that with Mark. I think Ben will be happy to believe until he's ninety-three as long as presents always appear in his stocking."

Kate laughed. "Yeah, try having two at the same time working to figure the logistics of everything."

"I can only imagine, thank goodness." Meg took a sip. "Yum, hazelnut blend." She settled into one of the chairs, then groaned. "Oh, we've been on our feet for hours. My legs almost forgot how to bend at the knee."

"But look how much we've accomplished. In the four hours since Keith took the kids to school, you've nearly finished decorating all the sugar cookies we baked yesterday, and the last batch of today's spritz cookies are pressed and the baking is nearly done."

"I'm tired and cranky, and all I can think about is sugar cookies," Meg groused, before taking a bite of snowman and grinning. "However, I will note I'm more organized this year than

I ever have been at Christmastime, and it's all due to watching you and doing just a small percentage of the things you suggest. I'm seeing less stress as the holiday season approaches."

Kate broke off her snowman's hat and popped the whole thing into her mouth. "Yum! Was this your mom's recipe?"

"I'd love to say so, but really it's Martha Stewart's. I've found my own way of organizing, and that's to find the recipes I like on the internet and bookmark them for when I need ideas later."

"Can't argue with what works," Kate said. "I found my latest favorite pasta recipe in a mystery novel, *Murder Al Dente* by Jennifer L. Hart. Just use the system that works best for you."

The oven timer dinged, and Kate rose from her chair. "I'll get these cooling, and continue loading up the boxes with the cookies that are ready to go."

"And I'll finish up with these, and get the rest in the refrigerator again to set." Meg said. "When are we supposed to have everything at the Design Center?"

"Tomorrow by noon, but I thought we could get them over there today on our way to pick up the kids from school."

"Ben and Mark were so excited about this being the last full week at school before the break. They're planning their schedules of sleeping in to the point where they would hardly get dressed this morning."

"Sleep in every day except Christmas morning, of course," Kate said.

"Oh, naturally," Meg agreed. "Mark may be almost-middle-school-mature-and-jaded now about Santa and flying reindeer, but I'll find both boys downstairs at dawn to see what kind of haul they've netted."

Both women had two children. Kate's twin daughters Samantha and Suzanne attended second grade at Hazelton East Elementary, and Meg's youngest, Ben, was learning to adjust to first grade there, too. The Berman's older son, Mark, was sweating through fourth grade, while finding ways to distance himself from the younger kids.

Kate set the cookie sheet in a space near the cooling racks. "How are Mark's grades this year since he's gotten glasses?" She used the thin cookie lifter to gently transfer from the rack the ones that had already spent enough time cooling and placed them carefully into a box, freeing up space for the new batch.

"Thank goodness we found out about his eyes when we did." Meg added sugary buttons down a snowman's round torso. "This year is a killer for him. Gil has even suggested we talk him out of continuing in taekwondo if he's going to keep participating in team sports."

"Tough workload, huh?"

"Much more than I remember."

"Sounds like the holiday break is coming at a good time then."

Meg picked up the tray of fully-dressed cookies and pulled open the refrigerator door. "Looks like your fridge could use a break, too."

"Filled?"

"Pretty much." She headed for the back door, calling, "I'll just run next door and put these in mine. I'll be back in a flash to check for cooled ones, and to help you load the van."

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By one-thirty, Kate's van was packed to the rafters with all the boxes, and on its way to the design center so they could turn over their bounty to Valerie James.

“Don’t you just love the decorations, Katie?” Meg asked, craning her neck as they moved down the slushy street. Besides the lamp posts wreathed in greenery, nearly every storefront boasted Christmas themes, competing in the annual downtown Hazelton window display contest. Both teams and individuals competed, and the window with the best holiday treatment meant someone or some group would win a shopping spree provided by the local merchants, as well as the treasured bragging rights until next year’s big event.

“I’m so glad my family can be here to see it start to finish this year. The twins have loved seeing the daily changes,” Kate said. “We always flew in right before Christmas after Keith and I married. And last year I was still so stressed trying to reorient from the move that I barely noticed what went on down the main street.”

“It’s really a fun event that has just grown bigger every year. Winter fest followed by more winter fests, until we finally reach New Year’s,” Meg explained, giving a bit of Hazelton history as they drove. “We’ve always let our holiday festivities begin with Halloween, so the high school kids can produce their ghoulish best designs. Then by November, it’s time for the younger kids to decorate with turkeys and horns of plenty.”

“And the adults take over for Christmas,” Kate said.

“Yep, and the competition can get fierce.”

Kate did not doubt that in the slightest. In just a couple of short blocks she saw store treatments ranging from “Up on a House Top” and “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” to “Jolly Old St. Nicholas,” each with a holiday-rich design and animated props to grab everyone’s attention.

“Once the autumn leaf tours end, everyone really looks to places like ours for that Victorian Christmas feel for the holidays,” Meg continued. “And our merchants need these window contests for added area draw.”

Coming from their neighborhood, the drive only took them partway down the main street that started a half-mile from Old Lobber’s Outcropping at the north end, and ended a half-dozen or so blocks down before the turnoff to Hazelton Pond. The shops in between the natural landmarks were as varied as the townspeople, and Kate felt the window displays chosen this year would be hard to top in the future.

Some contenders were predictable, like Hazelton Hardware with *Santa’s Workshop* and Dazelight Donuts sporting *Mrs. Claus’s Kitchen*, but even those clichés reflected the love and care that went into each design. Some not so ordinary windows were Saree’s Book Nook that boasted *The Reindeer Bedtime* with life-sized Vixen posed carefully in a rocker, half-glasses perched on her nose, and reading the Clement C. Moore classic *Twas the Night Before Christmas* to half-pint reindeer fawns tucked under three heavily quilted beds and listening in rapt delight. Equally creative was the IT consulting firm. That team used the large window in the front of the office the company had converted from an old filling station to show elves hard at work updating Santa’s FB pages and changing an electronic Naughty and Nice board. Real frost decorated the corners and edges of each glass, and the sidewalks were clean of snow and ice so customers could shop with ease or stop and get a better look at all the entries.

Kate smiled at the greenery and Christmas ornaments that decorated each of the old-fashioned lamp posts. “So, since snow comes well ahead of Thanksgiving—”

“Right,” Meg said with a laugh. “Our creative adults start planning out Christmas displays long before the competition time begins. On the whole, it’s good fun, but there’s some natural competition and things can always be swayed by votes for favorites, too.”

“I can imagine,” Kate mused.

As they pulled into the parking lot of the Hazelton lumber yard, the women got an eyeful of the completed window Valerie set up on the side dedicated to the Design Center. Well-dressed child mannequins offered wrapped gifts to bashful children dressed in clothes a little too large or small for their bodies. Fake snow filled the scene, and one of the boy mannequins was shown draping his coat over the shoulders of one of the littlest girls, his arms moving to show his efforts to get the fit a bit better on her narrow shoulders. Each of the giving children clutched a small piece of paper, and on the wall beside them was a huge representation of the wish lists they carried, with words like ‘baby doll,’ ‘warm hat,’ ‘dump truck,’ and ‘heavy coat’ in letters large enough that everyone could easily read. A decorated angel tree in one corner lighted the space like the glow of a thousand candles, and an outside speaker system continually played a children’s choral version of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” The display was visually beautiful and technically superb...but just a little off somehow.

Working at the Design Center was a new business extension for Valerie James. She’d always been known as the go-getter interior designer in the area, but a small town had its limits on how much business was available in this avenue, and the woman had become a master at crafting her own niches in existing businesses. She’d branched into helping local Realtors with staging homes for better sales, and convinced the local lumber yard to upscale with her vision for a sampling and sale venue which now sat front and center in a space that once housed only plumbing fixtures. She’d also taken over responsibility for all the windows and displays—not just the festive front glass—and the whole place had a fresh look that came from more than simply a new coat of paint.

“Valerie may annoy me on a daily basis with her ego and self-promotion, but I have to hand it to her,” Meg said as she opened the passenger door of the van. “She definitely knows how to spruce things up, yet keep the character of the place.”

“Rustic, but upscale retail,” Kate agreed, taking a moment to gaze over the entire display with the theme *My Christmas Wishlist* before moving to the back door of the vehicle. “Think she’ll win?”

“Not a chance. It blows everyone else’s away, of course, but it’s too grandiose for our town leaders.”

“Too professional?”

“Too Madison Avenue,” Meg replied, stepping back with a first stack of cookie boxes so Kate could reach in and grab another for herself. “She added a touch of homespun and whimsy, but it still looks like it was *designed*. That’s kind of the kiss of death for these types of things around Hazelton.”

Kate felt a little badly for Valerie. They’d had a moment in early summer when the organizer truly started to get why the decorator seemed so intent on competing whether Kate wanted to or no. That didn’t make her like Valerie any more, necessarily, but it did help her dislike the woman a little less. And feel empathy when Valerie pulled out all the stops to impress, but instead of applause received a “better luck next time” ribbon.

The pair hip-bumped the doors closed, then made their way to the side of the building with automatic doors. Meg knew everyone, so their progress toward the design area was slow, and Valerie met them halfway.

“Please tell me you have more cookies,” she said, motioning for the cookie laden friends to follow her down a broad aisle lined with specialty paint colors and carpet samples. Valerie wore black leggings and a sweater that looked like Dior’s idea of a poinsettia collage.

Kate was glad she had her blue wool coat buttoned tight, so Valerie couldn't see that her MOM sweatshirt and jeans were anything but upscale attire. But realized the designer was likely too focused on current worries to notice, since she continued to grouse, "I opened up so much space in here, moved endless samples just to hold everything for the big cookie takeaway day, but nobody has brought any by besides you two. Can you believe it?"

"The deadline isn't until tomorrow," Kate reminded, as she looked around her stack of boxes to see the direction Valerie indicated for the drop off. "People are really busy this time of year. I'm sure all our neighbors will be coming in to leave cookies soon. Everyone I've talked to thinks this is simply the best idea."

Valerie made kind of a *hrumph* sound, then grabbed the top box from Meg's stack as they neared a back counter. "I hope you're right. People are so inconsiderate." She sat the box on the countertop and gave an airy wave between the women and the space, as she added, "Just put those there, and bring any more in that you have. Make sure they are stacked nicely. I don't need any falling cookie disasters at this point. And be sure you have ingredients lists on the outside of all the boxes. Oh, and your names, of course." Then Valerie hurried over to a potential customer.

"Wow, yes, *people* can be so inconsiderate." Meg rolled her eyes and Kate laughed.

On their last trip in, Valerie returned from her unsuccessful attempt at landing the customer, her aggravation factor even higher than before. "Honestly, why do people think they can just ask question after question, and pick the brain of a professional without any intention of buying anything? Just whine, whine, whine about the disaster her house is right now."

"A no sale, huh?" Meg acted empathetic, but Kate caught the upward twitch her friend's lips made as she spoke.

"Just someone else who thinks because Martha Stewart gives away free information on her website that I should do the same. Mrs. Garner had a huge leak in her home and now has wallpaper and wood issues. She wants the least expensive way to repair the damage," Valerie huffed, and kicked at some tinsel that had migrated from the front of the store. "Honestly, I need to write a book or two so I can tell people the only way they'll get my expertise is to pay for it."

But then she would want Saree to hold a bunch of author signings for her at the Book Nook, Kate thought. *Poor Saree...*

Meg apparently was thinking beyond Hazelton at Valerie's words, and leaned close to whisper, "Maybe she'll get a book tour and be gone for months at a time. Or a television show based in New York."

Kate bit her lip to keep from laughing as she placed her last stack of boxes atop the others. They'd made sure to rotate the boxes, so the label side faced out in the cookie columns and stayed easy to read. As she turned to leave, Kate noticed a man she'd never met talking with dumpling-shaped Mrs. Garner, the almost-customer who had started Valerie's newest complaint jag.

"I've never seen him before." Kate nodded toward the stranger, noticing he held a broom in one hand. "Is he new to town?"

Valerie twisted to see, then gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "Oh, that's Ted Jefferson. He has the patience of Job, and is as poor as a church mouse. He'll listen to the crazy woman as long as she'll talk. Showed up about a week ago, and Caleb offered him a janitor position. It's true, we needed someone here after the last college student took off for campuses unknown, but really, I swear Ted rotates the same three sets of clothes all week—khaki shirt, like today, then black flannel and followed by red flannel. And I'm honestly not sure he doesn't only have two pair of pants."

Kate self-consciously clutched the neck of her coat together with one hand, as she waved and smiled when Ted looked their way. He nodded a greeting, and continued listening to the voluble woman talking and gesturing beside him. The man was razor thin and probably in his late forties. A thick lock of graying brown hair flopped over his forehead. Something about him looked familiar to Kate at first glance, but then she decided she must be mistaken. He was tall and looked fit, and the expression he wore could only be described as contented. It was nice to see someone who projected that feeling of satisfaction in the day's hectic world.

"Well, he seems nice and very patient to listen like that," Kate said.

"Don't be fooled," Valerie replied, quirking an eyebrow. "He needs every break he can get, and being nice is his favorite tool. I've got this guy figured out."

"Well, he looks presentable. He'll probably add to his wardrobe when he starts receiving a paycheck." Meg added. "And you can't fault his work ethic."

"No." Valerie put a hand on her hip. "But it's just weird. I offered to front him some money until he got paid, to help him get more clothes, but he said, 'thanks, but I have exactly what I need.' Can you believe that?"

Kate worked to hide a smile. "Some people have less desire for material things. Ted seems to be one of those types."

"But, clothes? I mean, really!"

Valerie stepped away, and Kate and Meg headed for the exit.

"You know," Kate mused, pulling keys from a pocket. "I have to wonder if Valerie doesn't have some great-great-Uncle Ebenezer in the branches of her family tree."

"Nah," Meg leaned close and whispered. "Scrooge would take Ted's side about clothes, or think three shirts is one too many. I'm back to thinking that our gal Val fits the Cruella model again."

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Next morning, Kate started with vacuuming, pulling out the sofa and Keith's heavy chair so she could drag out all the cat toys that disappeared throughout the week.

"You know, I really do like you, cat." She shook a catnip mouse at the orange and gold feline reclining on the window seat, his smushed face intently focused on the item in Kate's hand. "But one part of me wants to lock all of these toys up and let you bore yourself to tears."

She gave it another slight shake for emphasis, but noticed he never actually looked at her. *It's hopeless. You're as bad as the kids. I'm just here to get the things you can't reach.*

She tossed the toy and it landed on one of Samantha's presents under the tree. In a flying flash the cat scooped the toy mouse in its mouth and started scaling up the middle of the tree.

"Oh, no." He'd reached the midpoint of the trunk before her hands caught hold of his furry middle and pulled him out. They'd had enough trouble getting him to leave the presents alone, and once that problem was finally solved they were left with his wanting to still climb the branches. "Bad Kate. Cat toys must always be thrown toward the kitchen," she grumbled to herself. The doorbell took her out of her self-admonishment.

"Are you busy?" Meg asked as soon as Kate opened the front door.

"Vacuuming and unearthing cat toys."

"Good. Come ride with me to the Hazelton Market."

"I'll just be a few more minutes."

"It's the market, Katie, and it's new stock day for craft and culinary items. Come on. The house and vacuum will be waiting when you get back, but you don't know what we might miss if we don't leave now."

The Hazelton Market was more co-op and rustic cubicle than it was anything resembling a grocery store. It was one of Kate's favorite places, and everyone knew it—especially Meg. Farm fresh eggs and dairy were available most days, as farmers dropped off products to sell and came back later to retrieve their profits. One of Kate's favorite conversations after the family moved to Hazelton was overhearing a sunny faced woman remark to Mr. Sims, the store owner, that she was saving up her egg money to give herself a new Kindle. The woman said their house was filled with books but she wasn't ready to stop reading. Kate loved the old-meets-new angle of the egg woman's mission.

When the McKenzie household needed a full shopping list of groceries, the supermarket at Bennington was the better choice. But for interesting buys that may only be around for a day or so, and the chance to visit with neighbors and grab up whatever staples were needed, the Hazelton Market fit the bill.

Kate needed no arm twisting. In minutes they were on the road, with Meg behind the wheel of her Camry, and the women musing over what goodies might be awaiting their discovery.

"I shouldn't even think about baked goods after all our cookie work. But if there are some good Christmas desserts I need to try, please give me a nudge when we get there," she told Meg.

"Personally, I'm on the lookout for one of Mrs. Wilton's fruitcakes. Mother grabbed up the last available one yesterday." Meg sighed as she turned onto Main Street. "I know it's too soon to hope for another round out of her kitchen, but..." She flashed one of her more mischievous grins, then added, "I'm going try to bribe Mr. Sims into holding one back for me. It's never worked before, but I'm not one to give up easily."

"I've never been a fan of fruitcake."

"That's because you've never eaten one of Mrs. Wilton's creations. Trust me on this." Meg turned at the next corner and pulled into the parking lot the market shared with the bank drive-in branch.

Inside the building, Kate immediately smelled cinnamon and pine. Warm apple cider enticed from one corner, and both women grabbed a cup. Evergreen boughs decorated the thick wooden pillars that delineated the aisles and held up the upper floor, where Mr. Sims and his family lived.

While Meg set off immediately to try to implement her coercion tactics in the hope of netting a treasured fruitcake, Kate headed for the dairy and baking aisles. Her pantry was low on eggs, flour, and milk after the activity of the last couple of days, and this seemed a perfect time to replenish supplies. All while she checked out the transient displays, of course.

There wasn't a lot of people around, so Kate took her time wandering. She scooped up a festive container of chocolate covered pretzels—all homemade and totally organic—and told herself the calories wouldn't count because of the labeling. A selection of artisan cheeses caught her attention, and she spent several minutes making her choices and waiting for her purchases to be cut and wrapped.

On her way to the dairy section, her cart already filling up nicely, a friendly sounding laugh erupted to her right. In her peripheral vision she noticed someone in a black shirt talking to one of the produce guys and realized the man with the high humor was Ted. He was talking to Jess Sims, the owner of the market, so Kate stopped and introduced herself.

"Hi, Ted, right?" Kate said, having waited for a break in their conversation to interrupt. She held out a hand. "I'm Kate McKenzie, and I wanted to take the opportunity to welcome you



to Hazelton. As another newcomer myself, I have to tell you this is a great community you've found."

"You were at the Design Center yesterday," he said, shaking her hand.

Kate was impressed at the man's observation skills. "Yes, Valerie told me your name, but you were busy talking with Mrs. Garner so I didn't have a chance to introduce myself then."

"Nice selection of seasonal goodies there," Jess said, looking into Kate's cart. "Be sure and check out the wonderful cross-stitched ornaments Miss Penniann brought in for sale. They're in the front of the store and just the thing for people with cats. Absolutely lovely and completely unbreakable on the tree."

"Excellent idea, I'll check them out."

Ted gave her an easy smile. "You have a cat?"

Kate nodded. "He wandered into our lives a few months ago, and we're still getting used to each other's quirks. The Christmas tree has a huge allure to him, and I can't seem to get him to stop climbing up the center and knocking down ornaments as a pastime."

Jess laughed. "You'll get him organized into better habits soon, Kate." Then he turned to Ted and explained, "Kate has an organizational business here, Stack in Your Favor, and her husband is Keith McKenzie, one of the on-air personalities at WHAZ sports radio. Once Keith retired from pro hockey he brought his family here to Hazelton."

*Well, a career ending injury and a fortuitous offer from the radio station actually put everything into play.* But while Kate thought those things, she didn't have a chance to even try to say any of them before Ted lost his easy smile and asked, "The former goalie, Keith McKenzie? He's your husband?"

"Yes. You'll probably see him around if you go to any local sporting events," Kate said. "The radio station tries to cover a good selection, and Keith always volunteers to get out of the studio."

She and Jess laughed, but while Ted regained his smile he stayed silent. A few minutes later he made his goodbyes and left the store.

"I hope I didn't run him off, interrupting the two of you like that," Kate said, frowning.

Jess waved off her worry. "Ted's kind of a different fish. He's nice enough, but I've seen him take off like that before. Don't worry about it."

"Well, I wanted to speak to you anyway, because Meg Berman waxed poetic about Mrs. Wilton's fruitcakes."

"Yes." Jess laughed. "She cornered me on the subject right before Ted and I started talking. I assume you want on the waiting list, too."

"If there is one, but not for me," Kate said. "I'd like to give a cake to Meg for Christmas."

"I'll see what I can do." The shopkeeper gave her a grin, then added, "After the first of the year, I'd really like to see if I could hire you to come in and give me some tips on organizing stock and displays in the store. If you have any openings in your schedule, of course. I have more people interested in consigning goods every day, but I need to figure ways to store it all better or I'm going to have to look at expansion. I don't want to go that route if I can avoid it."

Kate swept her gaze around the store. Jess was right, the place was perfect the way it was. Making it bigger could take away the charm already built into the space. "I'll start working on some ideas, and we can definitely talk after New Year's. That will give me a few weeks to get my brain thinking in the right direction."

“Sounds like a great plan. And I’ll keep my eye out for an extra fruitcake to send your way.”

“Terrific.”

Jess patted her shoulder and left, and Kate restarted her cart toward the dairy section. She connected again with Meg when her friend was checking out the spiced apple butter that another local culinary entrepreneur offered for sale. The two women finally wandered by the cross-stitch ornaments on their way to the check out.

“Oh, look, we can get them with the kids’ names,” Meg said, scooping up one each for Mark and Ben.

Kate quickly found a Samantha in green and a Suzanne in red, and added the oval, lace-trimmed ornaments to her basket. The design even incorporated the year below the name.

“Pretty, timely, and cat-proof all in one neat package.”

As they left the store she noticed Ted still in the parking lot. He stood talking to the kids’ elementary school principal.

After she related the earlier experience with Meg, Kate said, “I was afraid I had run him off, but I guess I worried for nothing.”

“You’re not the only worrier in our town at the moment,” Meg said as they loaded the car. She turned and nodded toward the principal. “Mrs. Dixon is expecting a short fall unless she cuts the after-school program. She’s looking for help from anyone who can figure a way we can keep things going at the status quo.”

“That program is great for the kids and for working parents.”

“Yes, but as heating fuel prices rise and federal education budgets are cut, it’s all affecting little Hazelton at every turn,” Meg replied.

Ted was nodding at whatever the principal said and patted her shoulder a couple of times before breaking away. He strode down the sidewalk toward the design center. Mrs. Dixon entered the market.

“Well, some good news anyway,” Meg said, her hand clasping the top of the open driver’s side door as she spoke to Kate over the silver top of the Camry. “After I made my case to Jess, I ran into Caleb while he was picking up lunch to take back to the lumber yard. He said an anonymous benefactor is paying for all of Mrs. Garner’s repairs—paint, paper, wall board, the works. Even fixing the bad spot in her floor that wasn’t part of the leak, but has needed to be repaired for several years.”

“Wonderful.” Kate had always been in awe of people who could change lives in that way, and was so glad one of those “angels” came just when Mrs. Garner needed help. “This will be a Christmas she will remember.”

Meg shot her a wicked grin. “One Valerie will always remember, too. Caleb put her in charge of overseeing the project.”

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That evening, after the twins were in bed and Kate had the house to herself, she went back over what she still needed to do for the holidays. Keith’s parents were staying overnight on Christmas Eve so they could see the girls’ discover their Santa gifts the next morning. In years past, of course, they had stayed with his parents when just visiting for the season. Now that they lived nearby, though, Jane McKenzie suggested this alternative and Kate quickly agreed.

Also on Christmas Eve, all the neighbors in their little cul de sac who spent the holidays at home were joining in for a kind of traveling block party. Everyone was welcomed into each other’s houses all day, and Kate hoped this would become an annual event. Since Hazelton could

always count on a white Christmas, this gave folks a way to move and visit a bit, and to celebrate without feeling trapped in their own houses over the holiday.

She still had a long list of make-ahead food to prepare and gifts to wrap. Early presents already rested under the tree and tempted the cat on a daily basis. But she still had more gifts tucked away in hiding, and would have to turn her office into a wrapping station again soon. Being able to work on the countertops there, instead of sitting and wrapping on the floor, made the job easier on her back and made the task go much faster. She reminded herself to ask if Meg wanted to combine their wrapping chores, as dividing the work would make everything go even more quickly.

*And make the job more fun.* It was nice having a best friend close by.

She was reading in bed about midnight, the cat sprawled over Keith's half of the comforter, when her husband made it home from work. He'd been getting up early that week to shuttle the kids to school, so his day had been a long one and the shadowed eyes under his tousled brown hair showed the fatigue.

"Hey, cat, I want to sleep with my wife," he groused affectionately, as he waved the cat toward the floor. When the animal simply looked at him, Keith picked up the fur ball and carried him out to the hall, closing the door as he re-entered the room alone. "Only way to make sure I won't wake up with a tail in my face."

"The cat means well."

"At least I know you're well-protected when I'm not here," Keith said, smiling before he pulled his sweater over his head, then emptied his pockets into the wooden box on his nightstand.

Kate tossed her magazine aside and pulled the covers back on his side of the bed. "Anything exciting happen at the station today?"

"Got word the youth baseball league received an anonymous gift to fund most of next year's season. Ran into the commissioner today and he said the league's been really worried about what they were going to do." Keith laughed as he stripped down to boxers. "He was on a date with Valerie last week just after he'd heard, and she made him take her home because he couldn't stop thinking and talking about the budget shortfall."

"That is a great mood-killer, even if Miss All-About-Me isn't your date for the evening."

"The kids are ecstatic and the league officials are quietly jumping for joy, too," he said, sliding into bed.

"That's a lot like Mrs. Garner's news. Valerie was really irritated hearing about her problems, too."

"What's up with Mrs. G?" Keith asked, slipping an arm around Kate as she retold what Meg learned earlier in the day about the leak repairs and house refurbishment.

"Living in Hazelton almost feels like Santa is visiting regularly."

"Yeah, small towns are closer," Keith said. "But I'm sure things like this happen all over during the holidays. It's just the big city news swallows up so much of this smaller impact stuff. Remember the stories that crop up about Starbucks customer's paying for the people behind them, and the paying it forward thing ends up going for dozens of cars or more. Or the anonymous people who go into places that have layaway and pay off everyone's bill."

"Maybe," Kate said, snuggling into Keith's shoulder. "But something about what I'm seeing right now seems special. Like a mystery Santa really is taking an interest in Hazelton. That's what I hope, anyway."

He kissed her forehead. "Just so that's the only mystery you're around this year. All I really want for Christmas is for us to not see Lieutenant Johnson in his official state police

capacity. Well, I'd also like a new set of golf clubs, but if I have to choose I'd put 'no dead bodies' at the top of my wish list."

"No crime solving, I promise. Don't worry. Meg and I have too much to do. I think I maxed out the to-do list on my phone today."

"What happened to my wife and her notepads of lists?"

"She's experimenting with new ways to do old things. I don't want to get boring." She sighed. "But I will *probably* switch back to paper. Old boring me."

"Never—you could never be boring." Keith pulled her closer and kissed her long enough that she forgot all about to-do lists in any form. As they broke from the kiss, Keith said, "Speaking of phones." He reached over to grab his cell from the nightstand. "One of the guys at the station told me about a Santa tracker app that's free for downloading. May be enough to give us another year before we have to actually address the St. Nick dilemma in earnest."

Keith punched up the app and held it out to let Kate read the message saying Santa's Christmas Eve route would be available soon to all the good little boys and girls around the world.

"Sounds perfect." She kissed his cheek. "I love that I can count on you to back me up on any parenting problem. I'm a lucky woman."

"Always, babe. We're in this together." He turned off the lamp, then gave her another reason to appreciate him.

\* \* \*

The next day was the big cookie giveaway, and they arrived to help Valerie with distribution duties. Instead of the empty area they'd seen a couple of days earlier, they now found stacks and stacks of boxes and containers of cookies. The designer was dressed in show stopping red. A green bow around her neck finished off the Christmas theme, but her mood was miles away from festive.

"I wish more people had volunteered for this stage," Valerie said, rubbing one temple with the first knuckle on her right hand. "The job isn't hard, but is detail oriented, and it would be so much easier if the three of us didn't have to do *everything*."

As Valerie turned and focused on how to divide the lists, Meg sidled closer to Kate and whispered, "Think we should tell Miss Congeniality that if she acted nicer people might be more willing to help her?"

"Hush," Kate murmured in reply, grinning. "You're going to start us giggling, and you know what will happen then."

"We'll be sent to time out?"

"Shh. Stop it."

Valerie turned around. "Is there a problem?"

*Ohmigod, she sounds exactly like a school marm.* Kate knew she couldn't answer without cracking up so shook her head.

Meg still had enough control to cover for them. "No, not a problem, per se. We were just thinking maybe if we had a fourth person we could have two two-person teams. What do you think?"

A few minutes later Valerie pulled Ted in to help, and the daunting task started to look much more manageable. One person on each team collected cookies, while the other person marked off who received what and cross-indexed for food allergy restrictions.

Since Kate and Ted were the cookie pullers, she had another opportunity to spend time around him. They made brief conversation as they moved to fulfill their jobs, and again she had

the feeling she'd met him before. Or someone who looked very much like him. She just couldn't be sure.

She wondered if he had family in the area, so maybe a brother or cousin closely resembled him. Her neighborhood Christmas Eve block party gave her an idea. She was about to ask him if he wanted to attend, to see if he already had other plans, when he was paged over the loud speaker.

"Ted Jefferson, please come to the rear loading dock," the amplified voice called.

"Nice working with you, Kate." Ted smiled, then turned to Valerie. "Gotta go. The boss is calling."

"Yes, yes...Go on." Valerie waved a hand, frowning. "Thank you for doing what you could."

"We're nearly done," Meg said, looking up from her stack of pages. "Katie, do you think you could pull for both of us?"

Kate nodded and waved at Ted, hoping she'd get another chance to talk to him. Then she answered Meg, "Absolutely. I know what to do now, so I can work faster." She smiled as she took another box and put it with the current order she'd been working.

They finished with a few minutes to spare, but would need to hurry to get their cookies home and unloaded before it was time to pick up the kids from school. Because of the time crunch, Kate didn't have another chance to invite Ted to the block party. They loaded their cookie supply in the van, and Meg also arrived with a garland of greenery she'd purchased as they left the building.

"Where are you putting the garland?"

"I want to hang it high over the mantle," Meg said. "If I put it on the mantle Romeo will jump up there and knock it down." Romeo was the Berman family's sweet tuxedo cat who seemed to be trying to redecorate everything in their house this year. "I gave up on the idea in the past once the cats came to live with us, but now that we went with a fake tree for the convenience factor, I really miss having the evergreen smell in the house. Gil came up with this compromise since no matter how hard Romeo tries he shouldn't be able to reach high enough with our cathedral ceiling in the living room. I'm hoping your hubby will spot my hubby on the ladder again, like when Gil put up our outside lights."

"Sure. I'll send Keith over before he leaves for work tonight."

Meg placed the greenery in the back floorboard of the van and the Christmassy aroma filled the vehicle. "You have no idea how much peace of mind it gave me that Keith was watching out when Gil played decorating monkey this year. My dear husband always thinks gravity isn't anything to worry about when hanging strings of lights."

"I think most men are like that." Kate chuckled. "To be honest, I've always been a nervous wreck whenever Keith starts channeling Clark Griswold. I'm glad the guys could spot each other this year. Maybe a safety precedent has been set, and we won't have to worry until they're too old to climb."

"I certainly hope so. I've warned Gil that I'm terrible at caring for handicapped husbands." Meg slammed her door. "Did I tell you about Valerie's next door neighbor?"

Kate turned the key. "No, what happened?"

"He was at the top of his ladder using a heavy duty staple gun to attach lights. But no one was spotting him from below. A dog ran by and knocked the ladder, the bottom anchor shoes gave, and he fell onto the concrete walk. Two broken ribs, a cracked ulna, and a fractured shoulder blade later, his decorating season has ended. But at least he's alive."

“Scary.”

“No kidding. And it happened in an instant,” Meg said. “But the good news is that someone hired a commercial crew to come over and finish putting up his lights. And they’ll be back to take them all down again after New Year’s.”

“Who’s footing the bill?”

“No one knows,” Meg said. “Mother can’t even get the information out of Caleb, and you know how good she is at squeezing information. He just told her someone wanted to do a nice thing for someone else, but wants no recognition. A Christmas secret.”

“You don’t think it’s Valerie, do you?”

“Valerie James? Are you kidding me?” Meg laughed. “She would have to be the grouchiest secret Santa ever.”

“I know it sounds crazy,” Kate said, pulling onto Main Street. “But she does a lot for the community and it was her neighbor. Also, his and Mrs. Garner’s help came via connections to the lumber yard that’s connected to the design center. *And* she was out with the youth league commissioner when he was so worried he talked about the money shortfall until she couldn’t hear any more.”

Meg gave her head an emphatic shake. “Your evidence is sound except for one very important point indicating anyone *but* Valerie.”

“What’s that?”

“No one knows who the benefactor is. Our Ms. James doesn’t do *anything* without gaining some credit from the act.”

“You’re right.” Kate used the wipers to sweep away fog on the windshield, then turned on the defogger. “So who else could it be? Maybe Caleb?”

“Yeah, I could see Caleb as a secret Santa. Business has been good lately. He’s the type who would want to give back. Besides, it may be more than one person,” Meg mused. “We’re talking like this is all an individual act, but we have a whole town of caring people.”

“That’s true.”

As they passed the last of the festive shop windows, Kate asked, “Speaking of Christmas secrets and potentially big reveals, when will we know who wins the window decorating contest?”

“This weekend. The mayor makes the big announcement in a public gathering at the civic center on Saturday. That way the winner has a week to feel like royalty before Christmas.”

“I hope Saree’s window wins. Her team’s bedtime for reindeer scene is darling.”

“Yeah,” Meg said. “I’ve never seen that theme before. And though the hardware store did a great job with the workshop idea, it’s just a new take on an old concept. I’m with you about the Book Nook.”

“You don’t think Valerie has any chance?”

“Why is Valerie so much on your mind today?” Meg asked. “And, no, I don’t think she has a chance. Hers comes off too slick. It’s gorgeous with the wish list, and heartwarming with the rich children seeing the poor kids and wanting to make their lives better, but probably a little preachy, too. No, no chance at all.”

Kate thought for a moment before she answered. Her thinking Valerie might be the town’s mystery Santa was a fleeting thought, but knowing the disappointment if the designer didn’t win was something else.

“I just wish people didn’t have to experience disappointments at Christmas time,” she finally said. “Whether it’s Valerie or anyone else.”

Speaking about disappointments reminded her of the Santa tracking app, and she relayed Keith's information to Meg.

"That's great," Meg said. "Ben will have a blast watching the route, and Mark can roll his eyes all night. Everyone will be happy."

\* \* \*

Kate and the girls went to the library after school to return one stack of books and find another. As the twins wandered the early reader shelves looking for favorite authors, Kate checked out the new arrivals and put her name on the wait list for a mystery novel she'd heard good things about. From the length of the names ahead of hers it seemed others had heard the same news about the book.

She passed the community room and noticed Ted Jefferson hanging shelves on the back wall. No one else was around, so she ducked inside to see if she could invite him to the Christmas block party.

"Hi, Ted, I'm sorry to bother you, but I wanted to say hi." As she moved closer, he set down his hammer, and Kate continued, "You had to leave so quickly earlier, I didn't have a chance to ask you..."

Suddenly, she felt woozy, and realized she'd had nothing to eat since a piece of toast and coffee around six that morning. Ted's face flashed alarm, and she tried to assure him she was fine, "I skipped lunch. It's nothing."

"Let me find you a chair," he said. And with those six little words Kate solved her Santa mystery.

He brought in a blue padded chair. She offered her thanks and sat quietly for a moment gathering her thoughts.

"I think there's a kitchen over here," Ted said, motioning to the other end of the community room. "Let me see if I can find you a cookie or something."

"Thank you. That would be wonderful."

A few minutes later he returned with a small packet of crackers and a glass of water. "Not much, but it may keep you on your feet."

"This is great. Thank you," she said, opening the package.

Ted moved back a step, then said, "You were asking me something. How can I help you?"

Kate laughed, and waved a cracker-filled hand. "Oh, you've already helped enough. Yes, I wanted to ask if you had plans Christmas Eve. Our neighborhood has a kind of moving party, house to house. An indoor block party, if you will. If you don't already have plans, we'd love to have you join our family for the day."

"That's very nice," Ted replied, taking a moment to rub the back of one thumb across his forehead. "Can I get back to you on that? I'm not really sure where I'll be then."

"Is that because you're afraid my husband will recognize you and tell everyone who you really are, Mr. Edward Jefferson Robertson? Or do you still like people to call you E.J.?"

He deflated a little. "How long have you known?"

"I think subconsciously I knew all along. I kept wondering why you reminded me of someone, but I couldn't put my finger on the answer. However, it was when you said you would find me a chair the key piece snapped into the puzzle," Kate said. "You may not remember, but you said that exact line to me before, when we attended the same holiday event years ago. I was about four months pregnant with the twins and very uncomfortable being on my feet at the party."

And when Keith's coach whisked him away for a meet and greet, you were the kind man who noticed I was about to pass out and found me a place to sit."

"Your hair was longer then, and you were so pale," Ted said, nodding. "You told me you had problems with your blood pressure dropping when you stood too long."

Kate took a sip of water before saying, "And you stayed with me and listened, just like you've done with everyone in Hazelton this week. Stood and listened to everyone's problems and found a way to fix them. Just like you stopped hanging shelves for the library so you could find me a chair—the same way you did once at that very crowded NHL holiday party."

"All it—it's nothing."

"It mattered back the first time we met, and it matters now," Kate felt her smile grow broader at the memory. "You took the time to help me, and you've taken the time to help others in our town. And you make sure everyone is taken care of, just like you stayed with me at the party until Keith finally found me seated and you standing by, no matter how many times I told you that I would be fine. My husband still marvels at the fact a man as rich as you, and who owns interests in as many sports franchises as you do, would have gone to such trouble instead of farming me out to an assistant."

Kate realized he was wearing a red flannel shirt today. If Valerie was correct, she'd now witnessed the man's entire Hazelton wardrobe. Just thinking about the shocked expression the designer would wear if she knew how many houses Ted owned across the country was enough to make Kate need to cover a giggle with a cough.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I care about people. That's all. I haven't done anything big."

"No, just small things that meant the world to the people involved. Thank you," she said. The dizziness subsided, and Kate stood so she wouldn't have to crane her neck upward to talk. "But I have to ask, why the janitor job?"

"It's much easier to know what's going on in a town if you're pushing a broom or washing cars, than it is to wear a suit and tie and push a pen around all day," Ted explained, flashing a kind of sheepish grin. "People actually talk to people like 'Ted,' whereas they feel they have to pitch or promote to 'E.J. Robertson.'"

"Makes sense." Kate tossed her plastic cup and wrapper into a nearby trash can. "But why? Is this your way of taking a winter break or something? Do you know people in Hazelton?"

Ted chuckled and ducked his head for a moment. "Actually, I do these kinds of things several times a year. Helps me get away from the stress of dealing with all the politics of the sports world. Caleb is in on my secret, and works as kind of my front man here in Hazelton. He's been helping me with the little fixing jobs I've found the past few days. But I've enjoyed myself so much I was thinking about moving here until..."

As his words trailed off, Kate finished it with, "Until you realized who my husband was and knew you couldn't remain incognito if Keith got a look at you."

"Exactly."

"If I promise to clue him in, so he won't slip and call you by your real name, will you consider coming to our traveling block party?" Kate asked. "It will give you a better way to interact with Hazelton residents, and I promise good food and terrific conversation. Everyone visits each other's houses throughout the day, so the party keeps a fresh thread going all the time, and you won't be trapped with anyone long enough for your secret to get tweezed out of you."

Ted grinned broadly. "That sounds wonderful. I accept."

From the doorway, two excited voices chorused, "There you are!"



“Girls, come over here and meet someone who may be moving permanently to our town,” Kate said, and wrapped an arm around each blond twin as the pair glued themselves to her sides. “Ted, I’d like you to meet my daughters, Samantha and Suzanne.”

“But people call us Sam and Suze,” Sam said.

“I’m Suze,” said the twin on Kate’s right.

“Nice to meet you both. I’m—”

Kate saw anxiety cross his face, and realized he was struggling over what name to use.

“You can call him Mr. Ted, girls.”

\* \* \*

The neighborhood traveling Christmas party was a rousing success, and Ted joined the fun in the early evening when the outdoor lights were glowing nicely against the backdrop of snow and rooftop evergreens. Kate’s pre-event checklist was crossed off completely, and she was fairly far down in her day’s activities list, too. Meg caught her in the process of checking it once again.

“Everything is going, perfectly,” Meg scolded in a stage whisper. “Your living room is full, the snacks you’ve put out on your ‘filling station’ counter are getting rave reviews, and even Ted is here joining in with the festivities. And you absolutely have to give me the recipe for the crostini. I’m making my evening meal out of those alone.”

Kate smiled and jotted the recipe on a blank page of her notepad. “It’s your basic crostini, just slice a baguette and place the slices on a baking sheet. Coat both sides of the bread with cooking spray so they’ll brown up nicely while they toast, and bake at 400 degrees for ten minutes. You can dress them up anyway you like. I’ve added combos with blue cheese, tomatoes, mozzarella, mango, pineapple, and topped with parsley, rosemary, basil, garlic, green onion. Just whatever suits your fancy. They’re great with chutney spread on top, too.” She tore off the page and handed it to Meg.

“I love easy and fabulous. Thanks!”

They were standing in the hall at the end of the foyer, which provided a perfect view of the crowd playing charades as a warm-up. The group shrieked out the answer to Keith’s pantomime. Amid the applause and congrats, Ted drew a slip to take his turn in the spotlight, and Keith joined the women to watch.

“He seems to be enjoying himself,” Meg said, nodding toward Ted, as he stretched on his toes and flapped his arms like a big bird.

Keith nodded. “We talked out on the front porch a little bit, and he’s really liking the atmosphere in Hazelton. While I know his secret can’t stay hidden indefinitely, I hope he has a break for a while.”

“Valerie may have been ready to buy him clothes when she thought he was poor, but I’ll bet she tries to be his interior designer once she finds out who he really is,” Meg replied.

“I still feel sorry for Valerie over the window contest,” Kate said. “I’m glad they announced the IT team as the winners. Their window really was one of my favorites if Saree’s didn’t win. But I saw Valerie’s face when the mayor announced the final vote, and her face kind of crumpled for a moment.”

“She always recovers quickly, but I understand what you mean,” Meg replied. “Nothing like having your hopes dashed at Christmas, especially when it’s something that kind of defines you in your career.”

Keith wrapped an arm around his wife’s shoulders, and leaned closer so there was no chance he could be overheard as he said, “Don’t tell anyone, but Ted saw Valerie’s crestfallen

look, too. He has breakfast once a month with a table full of New York editors, and he called in a favor. *USA Today* is doing a special feature on small town America right after the holidays. Hazelton will lead the pack. They're interviewing Valerie about running the annual cookie exchange, and will feature photos of the window contest, hers included. She should have already received a phone call by now setting up an interview."

"Santa Ted strikes again," Kate said, looking up to smile in his direction as someone called out the answer and another round of applause swelled in the room. "I just love when everyone's Christmas wishes come true."

"Amen to that," Meg said, giving her a quick hug before heading back to the kitchen. "And my Christmas wish is more crostini."

Kate snuggled next to Keith and watched as Suzanne listened while her grandmother whispered in her ear, explaining the slip she'd drawn. The pint-sized drama queen's face lit up as she suddenly figured out what to do. Being in the spotlight was a natural place for Suze. At the same time, Sam pulled Keith's phone from her pocket and checked Santa's current position in his worldwide journey, motioning for Ben to come over and take a look, too. Kate smiled at the juxtaposition of the twins wanting to do things with the adults, but not yet ready to leave childhood behind. She hoped life always stayed that way for both girls.

"Well, I got my Christmas wish, too," Keith said, interrupting his wife's thoughts. "I haven't seen a trace of Lieutenant Johnson." He pulled back a little so he could use a finger to raise up her chin, and asked, "So, how about you, Katie? Any of your Christmas wishes crossed off the list yet?"

"Absolutely." She raised on tiptoes to kiss his chin, then turned back toward the living room and a view of the girls and her in-laws. "I think my every wish has come true."

***You can read more about these characters in the *Organized Mysteries* series. The first book in the series is *Organized for Murder*, followed by *Organized for Homicide*, and both are available at all online booksellers in print and ebook editions. A third book in the series, *Organized for S'More Death* will be available soon.***

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