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JOANNE FLUKE

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SUGAR COOKIE MURDER



A HANNAH SWENSEN
HOLIDAY MYSTERY WITH RECIPES

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Hannah bent over to examine the large lump of fur. The animal she thought she'd seen was really the expensive fur coat that Martin's new wife was wearing. The only other animal in sight was the reindeer sugar cookie that was broken near Brandi's feet, along with the pieces of a Christmas tree cookie, and a bell decorated in red and green icing. Brandi must have taken several cookies from the dessert table and come out here to eat them. The big question was, did she also take the antique cake knife?

Hoping that she'd just slipped and fallen, Hannah reached down to tap Brandi on the shoulder. "Brandi? Do you need help getting up?" she asked, shaking her a little harder and wondering if she should go for help.

Hannah certainly wouldn't risk moving Brandi, but she'd taken a first aid class in college and she knew there was a pulse point just under the jawbone on the side of a person's neck. The collar of Brandi's coat was in the way and Hannah pushed it back. This caused the coat to fall open and Hannah gave a strangled gasp as she caught sight of Brandi's chest.

"Hannah? Are you out there?" Edna called from the kitchen.

"I'm here."

"Did you find the knife?"

Hannah glanced down at her mother's valuable antique knife, buried to the hilt in Brandi's too-perfectly-proportioned-to-be-natural chest. "I found it . . ."

Books by Joanne Fluke

Chocolate Chip Cookie Murder

Strawberry Shortcake Murder

Blueberry Muffin Murder

Lemon Meringue Pie Murder

Fudge Cupcake Murder

Sugar Cookie Murder

Peach Cobbler Murder

Cherry Cheesecake Murder

Published by Kensington Publishing Corporation

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SUGAR
COOKIE
MURDER

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KENSINGTON BOOKS
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This book is for Haley, Rachael, and Madeline.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Ruel, my in-house story editor.
And thanks to our kids who say things like, "You should
make a cookie that tastes like German Chocolate Cake."
(I've almost got it, and it'll be in the next Hannah book!)

I'm grateful to our friends and neighbors:
Mel and Kurt, Lyn and Bill, Gina and the kids, Jay, Bob M.,
Amanda, John B., Dr. Bob and Sue Hagaman, and to every-
one who came running when I said I was testing potluck
recipes for this book.

Thank you to my talented editor, John Scognamiglio,
for his constant support.

Editors don't come any better than John.
And thanks to all the good folks at Kensington who keep
Hannah Swensen sleuthing and baking to her heart's content.

Thank you to Hiro Kimura, my cover artist, for his
incredible artwork.

Big hugs to Terry Sommers and her family for critiquing
my recipes and for letting me use their family recipe, Aunt
Grace's Breakfast Muffins.
Happy Birthday, Terry!

Thanks to Jamie Wallace for shepherding my Web site
MurderSheBaked.com

Thank you to Laura Levine (she writes the Jaine Austen
mysteries),
Helen Kauffman, and Charlene Timms, for the title
suggestions.
They were all great, and you may see them in print yet.

Thanks to Merle and Tracy for information about Alzheimer's, and to Doris Hannon for asking about "Hot Stuff" and "Silver Fox."

A big hug to all my e-mail and regular mail friends who share their feelings, their baking experiences, and their love for Hannah with me.



Chapter One



It was a meatball, a really big meatball, and it was rolling out of her closet. It stopped a few feet from the end of the bed, and that was when she noticed its eyes and its face. The eyes stared at her in abject disappointment, and two tears of gravy rolled down its fat bumpy cheeks. It looked so miserable Hannah wanted to reach out and give it a hug.

“You forgot me,” the meatball said, “and I’m an entrée. And from what I hear, your entrées aren’t that good.”

“Yes, they are. We’ve got . . .”

“I’m doing my best not to take this as a personal insult,” the meatball interrupted her, “but you know I’m a lot more delicious than your mother’s Hawaiian Pot Roast. What really makes me mad is that you left me out, but you put in four of your sister Andrea’s Jell-O molds. Well, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to dump a can of fruit in some Jell-O. If you want her name in the cookbook, you ought to teach her to cook.”

What was the meatball talking about? No ordinary mortal could teach Andrea to cook! Her sister was firmly entrenched among the ranks of the culinary-impaired. Hannah sat bolt upright in bed, prepared to give the Swedish treat a piece of her mind. But there was no longer a round, brown entrée with the delectable scent of mushrooms and beef positioned in front of her closet or at the foot of her bed. With the exception of

Moishe, who was curled up at her feet sleeping peacefully, she was alone.

Hannah blinked several times, and then the truth of the situation dawned. She'd been dreaming. The talking meatball had retreated into whatever corner of her mind had created it, but the message it had delivered remained. Hannah had goofed big time. She'd forgotten to include Edna Ferguson's recipe for Not So Swedish Meatballs in the packet to be tested at tonight's potluck dinner.

"Uh-oh," Hannah groaned, feeling around under the bed for her slippers. When she'd wiggled her feet inside the fake fur lining, she patted the mattress to wake the orange and white tomcat who'd been her roommate for the past year and a half. "Come on, Moishe. Time to wake up and smell the kitty crunchies."

Moishe opened one yellow eye and regarded her balefully. Then the phrase "kitty crunchies" must have registered in his feline brain, because he jumped off the bed with an athletic grace that Hannah could only envy, and padded down the hallway at her side as she headed for the kitchen.

Once Moishe had been fed and watered and she'd poured herself a cup of strong coffee, Hannah sat down at the kitchen table that was on the cusp of becoming an antique and considered the problem of Edna Ferguson's meatballs. Since the whole thing was her fault for forgetting to include them, she'd have to find time to test them herself. One thing for sure . . . Edna wouldn't be the soul of understanding if she couldn't find her favorite recipe in the cookbook.

Hannah glanced down at her coffee mug. Empty. And she didn't even remember drinking it. If she showered and dressed right now, before she was fully awake, the lure of a second mug of coffee would make her hurry.

Before the second hand on her apple-shaped wall clock had made twelve complete revolutions, Hannah was back in the kitchen. Instead of her robe, she was wearing jeans and a

dark green pullover sweater. Her feet were encased in fur-lined, moosehide boots to stave off the chill of the first cold week in December, and her towel-dried hair was already springing up into a riot of red curls.

"Coffee," Hannah breathed, pouring a mug, inhaling the fragrance and taking the first steaming sip, "is almost as good as . . ." but before she could decide exactly what it was almost as good as, the phone rang.

"Mother!" Hannah muttered in the same tone she used when she stubbed her toe, but she reached for the phone. To let the answering machine get it would only delay the inevitable. Delores Swensen was relentless. If she wanted to talk to her eldest daughter, she'd keep on calling until she was successful.

"Good morning, Mother," Hannah forced a cheery note into her voice and sank down in a chair. Conversations with Delores had been known to last as long as an hour.

"Good morning, dear. You sound like you got up on the right side of the bed," Delores replied, matching Hannah's cheery tone and raising her a cliché. "I know this Christmas potluck has been a lot of work for you and I called to see if there was anything I could do to help."

Warning bells went off in Hannah's head. When Delores tried to be this helpful, she had an ulterior motive. "That's nice of you, Mother, but I think I've got everything covered."

"I thought so. You're so organized, dear. Did I tell you that Luanne found an antique silver cake knife with a provenance that dates back to the Regency period?"

"No, you didn't," Hannah said, getting up to pour more coffee and stretching out the phone cord to within an inch of its life. Luanne Hanks was Delores and Carrie's assistant at Granny's Attic, the antique store they'd opened right next to Hannah's bakery, and she was a genius at finding valuable antiques at estate auctions.

"I thought you might want to use it tonight. It has a lovely old-fashioned Christmas tree on the handle."

“Didn’t you say it was Regency?”

“That’s right, dear.”

“But I didn’t think they had Christmas trees in Regency England.”

“They didn’t. But don’t forget that the Regent’s family was German. And since this particular knife was used at court, it’s decorated with a German Christmas tree.”

“I’d love to use it,” Hannah said. “It’ll fit in perfectly.”

“That’s what I thought. When I showed it to Winthrop last night, he thought it would be appropriate to cut a cake from the period.”

Hannah frowned at the mention of her mother’s “significant other.” She had no basis in fact, but she had the inkling that “Winnie,” as her niece Tracey called him, wasn’t precisely on the level. She’d asked Norman Rhodes, Carrie’s son and the man she occasionally dated, to check Winthrop out on the Internet. Norman had done it, but he hadn’t found anything shady about the British lord who was visiting Lake Eden “for a lark.”

Hannah pulled herself back to the problem at hand. “I think using the cake knife is a great idea, but as far as I know, no one is bringing a cake made from a Regency recipe.”

“Yes, they are, dear. You’re forgetting about Lady Hermoine’s Chocolate Sunshine Cake.”

“Lady Hermoine?” Hannah’s voice reached a high note that would have shocked the Jordan High choir director who’d assigned her to the second alto section. “Who’s Lady Hermoine? You *know* that’s my original recipe!”

“Of course I do, but there’s a slight problem, dear. You see, the knife is very valuable. I didn’t want to let just anyone use it, so I fibbed a bit.”

“What’s a *bit*?”

“I said that Lady Hermoine’s Chocolate Sunshine Cake originated a lot earlier. If it’ll make him happy, is there any

harm in letting Winthrop think the recipe's been in our family for hundreds of years?"

Hannah sighed. She didn't like lying even when it was for a good cause, and Winthrop's happiness wasn't high on her list of good causes. "Your fib won't work, Mother. My cake uses frozen orange juice concentrate and that certainly wasn't around back then!"

"That's all right. Winthrop won't notice. And on the off chance he does, I'll say the original recipe called for orange marmalade." Delores gave a sigh and when she spoke again, her voice held a quaver. "That's all right, isn't it?"

Hannah thought about it for a second or two and then she caved. That little quaver in her mother's voice always got to her. "All right, Mother. I won't lie if Winthrop asks me straight out, but as long as he doesn't, I'll play along."

"Thank you, dear! And now I'd better rush. Carrie's picking me up in ten minutes and I still have to do my makeup."

Hannah said her goodbyes and hung up, but the moment she placed the phone back in the cradle it rang again. "Mother," she muttered, grabbing for the phone. Delores often called back immediately if she'd forgotten to say something she felt was important.

"What is it, Mother?" Hannah asked, not bothering with a greeting. She had to leave her condo soon or she'd be late for work.

"I'm not your mother," a male voice replied, chuckling slightly. "It's Mike."

Hannah sat down in her chair with a thunk. Hearing Mike Kingston's voice always made her knees turn weak and her heart beat faster, but she took a deep breath and tried to ignore it.

"I called to find out who's testing my pâté tonight."

Hannah took another deep breath and fought her urge to cave in without a whimper. Tall, rugged, and more handsome

than any man had a right to be, Mike wasn't easy to deny. "I can't tell you. You know the rules. The recipe tester has to remain anonymous. Otherwise there could be hard feelings."

"But I really need to know. I might have forgotten to put something in the recipe."

"What?" Hannah asked. She remembered Mike's recipe and there were only two ingredients.

"I need to make sure I wrote down horseradish sauce and not just horseradish. If the tester uses straight horseradish, it'll be too spicy for some people."

"No problem, Mike," Hannah's response was immediate. "You specified horseradish sauce."

"But how do you know, unless . . . *you're* testing it!"

Hannah groaned softly under her breath. Mike was the head detective at the Winnetka County Sheriff's Department, and he'd picked up on her blunder right away. "Uh . . . I can't confirm or deny that."

"Of course you can't, but thanks for putting my mind at ease about that horseradish sauce. How about tonight? Do you want me to pick you up?"

"I think it'd be better if we met at the community center. I'm going to leave work around three, head home to get dressed and pick up the food I'm bringing, and get there early to make sure Edna has all the help she needs in the kitchen."

"Okay. I'll see you there."

Was that a sigh of relief she'd just heard in Mike's voice? "You sound happy that you don't have to pick me up."

"It's not that. I'd pick you up if you needed me. It's just that Shawna Lee asked me if I'd take her to the party."

Hannah closed her eyes and counted to ten. Shawna Lee Quinn had been Mike's secretary in Minneapolis and he'd convinced her to follow him to Lake Eden. She'd landed a job at the Winnetka Sheriff's Department and Mike had found her an apartment in the complex where he lived. He insisted

that they were just friends, and Hannah had done her best not to be jealous, but it was difficult to stave off the green-eyed monster when the Southern beauty who'd been crowned Miss Atlanta called Mike every time her car wouldn't start.

"Hannah? Is something wrong?"

Hannah took a deep breath and forced herself to be calm.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought we had a date."

"We do. I'm just giving Shawna Lee a lift there, that's all. She's meeting someone and she's got her own way home."

"Oh. Well . . . okay," Hannah said, hoping that the person Shawna Lee was meeting would show up and she wouldn't turn out to be a third wheel on their date.

"You're really a nice person, Hannah."

"What brought *that* on?" Hannah asked and immediately wished she hadn't. She'd broken one of her mother's cardinal rules: *If a man compliments you, don't argue with him. Just smile and say thank you.*

"Shawna Lee told me you accepted her brownie recipe for the cookbook."

"That's right. The person who tested it thought her brownies were really good."

"But you had the power to veto it and you didn't."

Hannah hoped Mike would never find out how close she'd come to relegating Shawna Lee's recipe to the circular file. As the "author" of the Lake Eden potluck cookbook and the head of the cookbook committee, Hannah had the power to accept or reject as she saw fit. The only thing that had stopped her in Shawna Lee's case was the fear that someone might find out and accuse her of being petty. "Of course I didn't use my veto. Why would I veto a perfectly good recipe?"

Mike chuckled, and Hannah felt her toes tingle. It was an intimate chuckle, one that should be heard up close and personal, not transmitted over telephone wires. "Have you tasted those brownies yet?"

"Not yet." Hannah's eyebrows began to knit, but she

stopped in mid-frown. The magazine she'd paged through in the supermarket line had warned that frowns caused wrinkles in women over thirty, and she'd passed the three decade mark a couple of months ago.

"They're the best brownies I've ever tasted, and I've tasted a lot. I told Shawna Lee she should call them *hot brownies*."

"Hot brownies?"

"Yeah. *Hot* as in '*terrific*' not *hot* from the stove. You know what I mean?"

"I get it."

"Anyway, they're definitely hot, and if I work it just right, I might be able to talk her into letting you add them to your menu, especially if you call them Shawna Lee's Brownies. What do you think about that?"

"Impressive," Hannah said, envisioning the anvil she'd like to impress into the top of Mike's head. Bake Shawna Lee's brownies for *her* shop? Not a chance!

Five minutes later, Hannah was still sitting at her kitchen table, staring down into her half-filled and rapidly cooling coffee mug. *Hot brownies. The best Mike had ever tasted.* The slow burn she'd started to do when Mike had first uttered those words had grown into a sizable conflagration. If Mike liked hot brownies so much, she'd give him hot brownies. They wouldn't be "hot" as in "terrific." And they wouldn't be "hot" from the stove. Her brownies would be "hot" as in "five-alarm-chili-hot" and she could hardly wait to hear Mike yowl when he bit into one!



Chapter Two



“Hi, Hannah,” Lisa Herman called out as she came in the back door at The Cookie Jar. “It’s really snowing out there. I had to brush off the whole top of the . . . what’s *that?*”

Hannah glanced up at her young partner and started to laugh. Lisa looked absolutely horrified at the sight of the box of brownie mix Hannah had just upended into her bowl. “It’s brownie mix.”

“I can see that. But why are you using it?”

“Mike called me this morning and he told me all about Shawna Lee Quinn’s brownies. He said they were *hot* as in *terrific*. I thought about it after I hung up and I decided I should make him some of my *hot* brownies.”

“Okay. But I still don’t understand why you’re using . . .”

Lisa stopped speaking as Hannah picked up an open can of diced jalapeño peppers and dumped them into the bowl. She blinked a couple of times as if she couldn’t believe her eyes, and then she laughed. “I get it. *Hot* brownies.”

“Very hot. And I didn’t want to waste time and effort baking something that Mike’s going to trash ten seconds after he tastes it.”

Lisa picked up the empty can and took a sniff. Then she immediately grabbed for a paper towel to dab at the tears

that were beginning to run down her cheeks. “One sniff and my eyes are watering. Those must be some really potent peppers.”

“Florence said they were,” Hannah named the woman who owned the Lake Eden Red Owl grocery. “She told me she put one can in a pot of chili and it was so hot, nobody could eat it.”

Lisa hung up her coat, switched from her boots to her shoes, and headed for the sink to wash her hands. “Are you going to call Mike and have him come here to taste them?”

“No way! He’s armed, you know. I’ll just run them out to the sheriff’s station and leave them for him.”

“Anonymously?”

“That would be my choice, but he’s a good detective. He’d figure out who sent them. I’ll just drop them off at the front desk and come straight back here.”

“Sounds like a wise decision,” Lisa said, rolling her apron up at the waist and tying it in place by wrapping the strings around her twice. She was petite, and the chef’s aprons were designed for someone Hannah’s size. “What do you want me to do first?”

“You can check the cake in the cooler. I need to see if the raspberry Jell-O is set.”

“Raspberry Jell-O?”

Hannah glanced up at Lisa. It was clear from the expression on her face that she was thoroughly mystified. “It’s Andrea’s recipe for Jell-O Cake, and it needs two different colors of Jell-O. She got it in late, but I promised I’d bake it and test it at the party tonight.”

“So you’re going to put it in the cookbook?”

Hannah sighed deeply. “I’ll have to include it if it turns out all right. It’s a family obligation, you know?”

“I know all about family obligations. I barely managed to keep Dad from submitting his father’s catfish bait recipe.”

“He should have done it. I would have put it in.”

Lisa's mouth dropped open in shock. "You're kidding!"

"No, I'm not. Tell him I want it. As far as I'm concerned, every book needs a sprinkling of humor."

"Even a cookbook?"

"Especially a cookbook. All the recipes are so precise. I miss those days when it was a pinch of salt, a smidgen of pepper, and a snippet of parsley. Of course that was before Fanny Farmer standardized level cooking measurements."

Lisa turned to Hannah with surprise. "I didn't know Fanny Farmer did that! And she was from Minnesota! So was Betty Crocker."

"Actually, Betty Crocker wasn't from anywhere. It's the name General Mills came up with to market their first cookbook. But General Mills is based in Minnesota so I guess you could say they both came from here."

"Good. I love it when important people besides Sinclair Lewis come from Minnesota."

Hannah blinked. What Lisa said was a jump in logic. "You've got something against Sinclair Lewis?"

"Not really. I realize he's important, but his books are depressing. I'm already living depressing. My mother's dead, my dad's got Alzheimer's, and the wedding's off."

"Whoa!" Hannah pushed Lisa down on a stool at the workstation and made an end run to the kitchen coffeepot. This was a crisis. "What's this about the wedding? Did you have a fight with Herb?"

"Of course not. I love Herb and he loves me. That's not the problem."

"What is?" Hannah filled two mugs, put one down in front of Lisa, and sat down on the opposite stool.

"It's a matter of timing. Herb and I talked about it last night and we both agreed to call off the wedding."

"For good? I mean, you don't have to tell me if it's too personal, but . . ."

"It's not personal," Lisa interrupted her. "And no, it's not

off for good. We just decided to wait to get married until everything's settled with Dad."

"He's okay, isn't he?" Hannah felt a quick jolt of fear. Lisa adored her father and she'd given up her college scholarship to stay home and take care of him.

"Dad's fine. It's just that Marge found a new doctor for him, a really good neurologist, and he was accepted in a new drug-testing program. It's some kind of cocktail thing, three drugs that work together to boost a brain-signaling chemical that improves memory. Dad's all excited about it, but the only thing is, the study starts this coming Monday and it lasts for two months. Herb and I didn't think it was fair for us to get married in the middle of the program, especially since we'll be switching houses and all."

"That makes sense," Hannah said, breathing a sigh of relief. As far as she was concerned, Lisa and Herb made a perfect couple. And Herb's mother, Marge Beeseman, was really stepping into the breach to help with Lisa's dad. She was giving them her house as a wedding present and she was moving into Jack Herman's home to become his caretaker. And even though Marge was a widow and Jack was a widower and they used to date in high school, no one in town was saying boo about the living arrangements. "So when do you think you'll get married?"

Lisa looked down at her engagement ring and gave a little smile. "We're shooting for the middle of February. That's when Dad's test program is over. But instead of a big wedding, we're just going to run down to the courthouse."

"Not fair," Hannah said, getting up to stash her crock full of meatballs in the cooler and making a mental note to take it down to the community center at noon and let it cook until time for the party.

"What's not fair?"

"Your dad told me he was looking forward to walking

you down the aisle. And Tracey's all excited about being your flower girl. Not only that, your bridesmaids already ordered their dresses."

"I know." Lisa looked worried. "Herb and I talked about that and we decided we'd pay everybody back. It's the right thing to do."

"No, it's not."

"It's not?"

Hannah shook her head. "Nobody would take your money, and that's not the point anyway. Everybody's looking forward to seeing you marry Herb. Why don't you just postpone the wedding until the middle of February?"

"I always wanted to get married on Valentine's Day," Lisa sounded wistful, "but it's impossible, Hannah. I want to be with Dad while he's going through the clinical trials, and I won't have time to make all the arrangements."

"No problem. Just ask Andrea to do everything for you. She loves to plan weddings."

"But she'll be busy with the new baby."

"No, she won't. She told me she hired 'Grandma' McCann to come in during the week, just like she did when Tracey was born, and Al gave her three months maternity leave. Andrea's going to have nothing but time on her hands, and she'll be so bored, you'll be doing her a favor."

"Do you think so?" Lisa's smile was pure golden.

"I think so."

"It would be just wonderful if all we had to do was show up for the ceremony. That's my idea of a perfect wedding. But . . . are you sure Andrea would be willing to take on a big job like that?"

"Wild horses couldn't stop her," Hannah said. "I'll call her just as soon as we're through here."

"Is Andrea coming to the party tonight?"

"I hope so. She's got an appointment with Doc Knight

this morning and she's going to try to talk him into letting her go."

"I've got my fingers crossed for her. She's probably going stir-crazy at home with her feet up on pillows. I want to work right up until they rush me off to the delivery room."

Hannah turned to give Lisa a sharp look. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Of course not! Herb and I aren't even married yet."

"Marriage isn't always a prerequisite for parenthood."

"Maybe not for some people, but it is for me," Lisa said. "I'll get that cake and see if the Jell-O's set."

Hannah kicked herself mentally as Lisa ducked into the walk-in cooler to retrieve the cake. It was clear that she'd stepped over the line into an area Lisa didn't want to discuss, and this was her partner's way of changing the subject.

"The Jell-O's set," Lisa announced, carrying the cake to the workstation. "Do you want me to finish making it for you?"

"That would be great. The recipe's on the counter."

Lisa set down the cake and glanced through the recipe. "This sounds really good."

"It is. Andrea always makes it for Tracey's birthday. It's the one time of year she uses her oven."

"It must be strange having a sister who doesn't cook."

"Not really," Hannah said with a shrug. She'd gotten quite accustomed to being the baker in the family. Delores didn't "do" desserts, and Andrea avoided the oven with a passion. The only other member of the family who showed signs of inheriting Grandma Ingrid's love of baking was Hannah's youngest sister, Michelle. She was constantly calling Hannah for recipes to try out on her college roommates.

Lisa stuck some water on to boil and opened the lemon Jell-O packet. "When I'm done with this, I'll do the baking for the day. You can concentrate on the recipes you have left to test for tonight."

Hannah gave her a grateful smile. Lisa was only nineteen, but she was more responsible than others who were twice her age. Hannah had never regretted the day, only a little over a year ago, when she'd offered her diminutive assistant a partnership in The Cookie Jar.

Once the baking was done and Hannah had returned from her run to the sheriff's station with the brownies for Mike, Lisa and Hannah settled down in the back booth of the coffee shop with fresh mugs of coffee.

"So what did Mike say when you gave him the brownies?" Lisa asked.

"He wasn't there. I just wrote a quick note, put them on his desk, and came straight back here."

"I wonder what time we should start hiding."

Hannah laughed. "Not before noon. I checked with Barbara and she thought he'd be out in the field all morning. If he does come back early and he charges in here, he'll be so bowled over by your decorations, he'll forget all about being mad."

"You like them?"

"They're even better than last year. I never would have thought to paint Christmas designs on the mirror with Glass Wax and powdered tempera."

"It's just an idea I got from a magazine. When you wash it off, it cleans the mirror at the same time."

"Well, it makes the whole place look fantastic." Hannah glanced up at the silver and gold streamers Lisa had hung from the ceiling and admired how nicely they fluttered as the ceiling fans whirred softly overhead. She'd even hung mistletoe from the pull chains, a little extra that Hannah hadn't noticed when she'd first seen the decorations. "It's a good thing Moishe isn't here."

"Why?"

“Because mistletoe berries are poisonous for cats. So are poinsettia leaves.”

“I didn’t know that!”

“Most people don’t. Christmas is very hard on cats, especially if their people don’t know how dangerous it is. Sue told me Dr. Bob had three feline patients last Christmas who almost died from eating tinsel. It gets tangled up in their insides and causes all sorts of problems.”

Lisa just shook her head. “Maybe it’s a good thing Herb wants us to get a puppy.”

“Not necessarily. Poinsettias and mistletoe are poisonous for dogs too, and tinsel’s not good, either. And then there are the glass balls that people use to decorate trees.”

“A dog might bat at them and break them?”

“Yes, and swallow some of the pieces. And then there’s chocolate. A lot of people leave a box of chocolates out on a coffee table for guests. That’s perfect dog height, and too much chocolate can kill a dog.”

“That’s a real pity,” Lisa sounded very sympathetic. “At least if we eat too much chocolate, all we get is hyperactive. And that reminds me . . . we’d better stoke up on the chocolate tonight, because we have to be on our toes.”

“Why is that?”

“Martin Dubinski got married in Vegas, and he’s bringing his new wife to the Christmas party.”

“Uh-oh,” Hannah groaned. “Shirley submitted her Poppy Seed Cake recipe for the cookbook and it’s being tested tonight.”

“That’s what I mean. The ex-wife and the new wife. It’s straight out of a soap, especially since Shirley wants Martin back.”

“She does?” Hannah was surprised.

“I think so. At least that’s what I heard.”

“I wish I’d known that before! Now I feel really guilty about going out with Martin.”

“You went out with Martin?” Lisa looked positively mystified. “Why did you do *that*?”

“Mother. But it was only once. Tell me what you know about Martin’s new wife.”

“Well . . .” Lisa paused to take a fortifying sip of coffee. “She’s a Las Vegas dancer named Brandi Wyen. Get it?”

“Brandywine. I get it. How did Martin meet her?”

“I don’t know for sure, but what I heard was he married her just five hours after he flew to Las Vegas for a conference.”

“That doesn’t bode well. What else?”

“Before Martin and Brandi flew back here, he took her to a furrier and bought her a twenty-thousand-dollar coat so she wouldn’t be cold.”

Hannah groaned again, envisioning the old cloth coat Shirley had worn for the past three years because she hadn’t been able to afford a new one. “Do you think there’ll be fireworks at the party tonight?”

“It’s a pretty safe bet, especially since there’s another woman in the picture.”

“Another woman?” Hannah was mystified that even one woman would be attracted to Martin, much less three! He was a nice enough man, but her date with him had been boredom personified. Why he’d thought she’d be interested in discussing the newest tax laws was beyond her!

“I stopped in to see Janice Cox at Kiddie Korner after I dropped Dad off at the Senior Center,” Lisa explained. “She went to school with Martin’s secretary, Laura Jorgensen. Janice said Laura didn’t exactly confide in her, but she was pretty sure that Laura was in love with Martin.”

“Oh, boy!” Hannah breathed, almost wishing that she had gone on for her doctorate and was now teaching in a rarified academic atmosphere that was hundreds of miles from what would probably happen when Laura and Shirley met Martin and Brandi. “I guess it’s a good thing that Laura has an accounting class at the junior college tonight.”

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