

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE DIVA FROSTS A CUPCAKE*

KRISTA DAVIS

# The Diva Wraps it Up

a domestic  
diva mystery

**“Davis finely blends  
mystery and comedy.”**

—SeattlePI.com

~ DELICIOUS RECIPES AND ENTERTAINING TIPS INCLUDED! ~

### ***The Diva Frosts a Cupcake***

“Reader alert: Tasty descriptions may spark intense cupcake cravings.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Davis . . . again combines food and felonies in this tasty whodunit, which keeps the reader fascinated until the killer is iced.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“[Davis] manages to mix together a hodgepodge of ingredients to come up with a treat for readers. *The Diva Frosts a Cupcake* will leave readers anxiously awaiting the next sample in the series.”

—*Lesa’s Book Critique*

“Sure to delight cozy mystery lovers and cat and dog enthusiasts alike . . . I love Sophie, she is such a great character.”

—*Debbie’s Book Blog*

### ***The Diva Digs up the Dirt***

“Perfectly enjoyable.”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“A satisfying, complex story . . . [An] enjoyable mystery . . . Poignant, but also funny at times.”

—*Vibrant Nation*

“*The Diva Digs up the Dirt* definitely hit the spot . . . [A] fun mystery and a great way to spend a few hours by the pool or at the beach.”

—*Booking Magazine*

### ***The Diva Haunts the House***

“The quirky characters are well developed, the story line is as crisp as a fall apple, and the twists and turns are as tight as a corkscrew.”

—*AnnArbor.com*

“Davis finely blends mystery and comedy, keeping *The Diva Haunts the House* entertaining and alluring.”

—*SeattlePI.com*

### ***The Diva Cooks a Goose***

“For fans of Donna Andrews and Diane Mott Davidson . . . [A] real winner.”

—*The Seaside*

“Sophie keeps a cool head . . . ensuring a Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night.”

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“A great whodunit.”

—Once Upon a Roman

“This is not your run-of-the-mill cozy; the characters are real to life, interesting, and keep you wondering what will happen next. Krista Davis writes one enjoyable read.”

—The Romance Readers Connecti

### ***The Diva Paints the Town***

“[Davis] handles this tricky tale with aplomb and fills it with a cast of eccentrics . . . And the three animals are endlessly amusing.”

—Richmond Times-Dispat

“Davis plates up another delectable whodunit, complete with recipes. Indeed, her novels are every bit as good as Diane Mott Davidson’s Goldy Schulz mysteries.”

—Shi

“Davis’s latest is an enjoyable mystery that includes decorating tips, a few pets, an unusual bequest, and recipes . . . Once again, Krista Davis brings us interesting, fun characters.”

—Lesia’s Book Critiqu

“Ms. Davis immerses the reader into the world of interior design.”

—TwoLips Revie

### ***The Diva Takes the Cake***

“*The Diva Takes the Cake* does just that—takes the cake.”

—The Romance Readers Connecti

“[A] fun little bonbon of a book.”

—ReviewingTheEvidence.co

“Sure to thrill cozy fans.”

—Fresh Ficti

“Davis has devised a delightful romp, with engaging characters and a nicely crafted setting in which to place them.”

—Shi

### ***The Diva Runs Out of Thyme***

“[A] tricky whodunit laced with delectable food . . . [A] fine mystery that’s stuffed with suspects—and a reminder that nobody’s Thanksgiving is perfect.”

—Richmond Times-Dispat

“A mouthwatering mix of murder, mirth, and mayhem, nicely spiced by new author Krista Davis.”  
—Mary Jane Maffini, author of *The Busy Woman’s Guide to Murder*

“This cozy mystery delivers . . . a keep-you-guessing plot filled with suspicious-acting characters, and twists and turns around every corner. Davis’s smart writing style and engaging characters are sure to garner fans.”

—AuthorsDen.co

“Filled with humor, delicious recipes, and holiday decorating tips . . . [A] must-read to prepare for the holiday season!”

—*The Romance Readers Connect*

“[A] fun romp into the world of food, murder, and mayhem.”

—*Armchair Interview*

“*The Diva Runs Out of Thyme* is as much comedy as mystery . . . [A] really good book . . . [A] series worth watching.”

—*Mysterious Review*

“An entertaining mystery novel with charming characters. The plot of the mystery is well drawn out . . . Davis is an excellent mystery author.”

—MyShelf.co

“The beginning of a good culinary cozy series with some interesting and different characters.”

—*Gumshoe Review*

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*Berkley Prime Crime titles by Krista Davis*

*Domestic Diva Mysteries*

THE DIVA RUNS OUT OF THYME  
THE DIVA TAKES THE CAKE  
THE DIVA PAINTS THE TOWN  
THE DIVA COOKS A GOOSE  
THE DIVA HAUNTS THE HOUSE  
THE DIVA DIGS UP THE DIRT  
THE DIVA FROSTS A CUPCAKE  
THE DIVA WRAPS IT UP

*Paws & Claws Mysteries*

MURDER, SHE BARKED

THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP  
Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Group (USA) LLC  
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014

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USA • Canada • UK • Ireland • Australia • New Zealand • India • South Africa • China

[penguin.com](http://penguin.com)

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THE DIVA WRAPS IT UP

A Berkley Prime Crime Book / published by arrangement with the author

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For information, address: The Berkley Publishing Group,  
a division of Penguin Group (USA) LLC,  
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

eBook ISBN: 978-0-698-14318-0

PUBLISHING HISTORY  
Berkley Prime Crime mass-market edition / June 2014

Cover illustration by Teresa Fasolino.  
Cover design by Diane Kolsky.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: The recipes contained in this book are to be followed exactly as written. The publisher is not responsible for your specific health or allergy needs that may require medical supervision. The publisher is not responsible for any adverse reactions to the recipes contained in this book.

Version\_1

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*To my readers, with love and appreciation.*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over a year ago, I put out a call for recipes from readers. I asked for their favorite family Christmas cookie recipes. So many people responded! They shared a little bit about themselves and their cookies. They offered an amazing variety of cookies, many handed down for generations. I am delighted to share their recipes at the end of this book. Very special thanks to all my cookie recipe contributors: Ellen Marie Knehans, Nancy Foust, Kathy Kaminski, Michelle Melvin, Jeanne Schutts, Margaret F. Johnson, Jessica Faust, James Ashcroft, Elaine Faber, Roberta Daniels, and Kitty Free.

I am always so grateful when experts take the time to enthusiastically share their specialized knowledge with me. Seth Guggenheim, assistant ethics counsel for the Virginia State Bar, was kind enough to set me straight about Alex German's ethical responsibilities. I hope I got it right and that Alex makes Seth proud. Thanks also to Lucy Zahrey, aka the Poison Lady, who is helpful, gracious, and fun. Any mistakes are, of course, my own.

The title for this book posed some challenges. Thanks to readers Lori Meadows-Clark and Wendy Robbins, who suggested the title *The Diva Wraps It Up* without having read the book. How very appropriate it is! And for those who may wonder, the title does not mean the end of the series. Rest assured that another Domestic Diva Mystery is in the works.

Thanks also to my many friends who patiently answer questions and offer suggestions, Leslie Budewitz, Perry Garson, Betsy Strickland, Janet Bolin, Janet Cantrell, Laurie Cass, Daryl Wood Gerber, and Marilyn Levinson. Very special thanks to my friend, Peg Cochran who gave me some clever ideas for Gwen's Christmas letter and to Teresa Fasolino for painting another beautiful cover. As always, I owe deep gratitude to those who provide so much support and friendship, my mom Marianne, Susan Smith Erba, and Amy Wheeler.

I would be lost without my wonderful editor, Sandra Harding, and my incredible agent, Jessica Faust. They're always there with the unvarnished truth, delightful humor, and, when warranted, cupcakes and champagne!

Thank you all!

---

# MARS'S LIST



Mars Winston and Natasha  
Bernie Frei  
Nina Reid Norwood  
Gwen and Baxter Babineaux  
    Bethany, Bradley, and Katrina Babineaux  
Patty Babineaux (Baxter's ex-wife)  
Elvin Babineaux (Baxter's brother)  
Sugar (Elvin's girlfriend)  
Liza and Luis Simon  
Twiggy and Jonah Lawrence  
Claudine Lawrence (Jonah's mom)  
Horace and Edith Scroggins  
Phyllis Tate (Horace's secretary)  
Jill Kinghorn (owner of Fleur de Lis)  
Mabel Akins (Horace and Edith's housekeeper)

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*Dearest Friends and Family,*

*We moved into our dream home in Old Town Alexandria, this year. Built in 1847, it just drips with historic splendor, majestic moldings, and the kind of craftsmanship you simply can't buy anymore. We had to rip out the kitchen, of course (can you even imagine the mess?), but now it's so beautiful that it's being featured in Charming Homes Magazine!*

*We Babineauxs know how boring these Christmas letters can be, so this year we're including one fib about each of the five of us. We'll let you guess what's true and what's not!*

*Bethany adores her new room. We built a special study nook for her, which turns out to have been a brilliant idea. She's so far ahead of all the other tenth graders in her prestigious nationally ranked private school that we've been advised to homeschool her so she can move at a faster pace. She'll miss being a cheerleader, of course, but she's so involved with her nonprofit company that makes shoes for underprivileged children in third-world countries that she barely had time to be on the homecoming court or edit the newspaper anyway.*

*Little sister, Katrina, is already being called an art prodigy and sold a painting for a thousand dollars! We're told she has incredible abilities. Can you believe that she's starting school next year? She works part-time, too, testing toys at a local store.*

*Bradley has been the most valuable player on the football team this year. He's the school's track star, as well. They're begging him to play basketball, but he's taking so many college-level courses that we can't see how he can make the time for it, especially now that he reads to children at the library. This year he painted low-income housing units, collected winter coats for those in need, and spearheaded the planting of cherry trees along the river.*

*Baxter barely has time to use the movie room we outfitted with a popcorn machine and candy dispensers. He is living proof that what goes around comes around. All those years of hard work are really paying off now, if you know what I mean! Baxter has broken all the sales records at Scroggins Realty, and has been made vice president! But he found time to take me to Paris for nonstop partying. We even had dinner with Kenny G and Liza with a Z, who couldn't keep her hands off Baxter! Ooh-la-la!*

*Baxter's brother, Elvin, is on a cross-country trip with his new girlfriend, Sugar (a professional ballet dancer!), to promote healthy eating and fight childhood hunger. If he comes through your town, I hope you'll turn out and support these important causes.*

*In between herding the kids, I wrote a cookbook, lost twenty-five pounds, had an affair with a yummy neighbor, was president of the PTA, and won the Mother of the Year award. (They must have known about Katrina's impetigo. The poor child looked like a leper with all those blistery sores. No one else would touch her.) But the highlight of my year had to be the invitation to decorate the White House. Yes! That one! The First Lady selected humility, harmony, and hope as the theme and for a few glorious days, I had the honor of preparing our nation's finest residence for the holidays. I was even invited to eat lunch at the White House! What a fabulous experience. I am truly humbled by the opportunity to serve my nation in this way.*

*The enclosed photo was taken at the mountain cabin Baxter bought me for our anniversary. Now that we're in our fabulous and huge historical house with so many extra bedrooms, we hope you'll stop by for a visit.*

*May you all have as wonderful and magical a Christmas as the Babineaux family!*

*Baxter, Gwen, Bethany, Bradley, and Katrina Babineaux*



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*The Diva  
Wraps It Up*



KRISTA DAVIS



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

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## CHAPTER ONE

Dear Natasha,

My son-in-law is quite a cook. I would love to give him a set of professional-quality knives for Christmas. Can you recommend some good brands?

Hungry Mom in Turkey, Arkansas

Dear Hungry Mom,

Never give knives as presents. The gift of a knife is believed to sever the friendship. In this case, it might even sever the relationship between your daughter and her husband! Unless, of course, that's what you had in mind, in which case any old knives would do.

Natasha

Horace Scroggins poured hot chocolate into a mug. "It's my own special blend." He glanced out the door of his office as if he thought employees might be eavesdropping to hear his secret ingredients. "add vanilla! Learned it from my true love."

He was too cute. I accepted the mug and made a fuss like I thought vanilla in hot chocolate was very special indeed.

Horace had always reminded me of Santa Claus. A petite man with rosy round cheeks and a belly that jiggled, 364 days of the year he wore a bow tie and suspenders, and at Christmastime they were inevitably red. On the day of the Scottish Christmas Walk, he donned a kilt and proudly paraded through the streets of Old Town.

I had never heard Horace utter a bad word about anyone. In his early sixties, he had a head of fluff hair as white as snow. He always smiled, amazing in itself since he was married to Edith Scroggins, the most odious and unfriendly woman imaginable.

As an event planner, I didn't typically handle small company gatherings, but for the past few years Horace had talked me into arranging his real estate company's Christmas party. It kicked off the Christmas season in Old Town. Horace had bought a magnificent historical town house for his real

estate business many long years ago. His staff delighted in decorating it with a towering balsam fir in the two-story foyer. Scottish tartan ribbons curled through wreaths in the most tasteful and elegant manner, and groups of ruby red poinsettias graced antique tables and mantels. The muted colonial green walls provided a perfect backdrop for the tartan ribbons and bold reds.

It was Horace's habit to invite people to whom his company had sold homes in Old Town Alexandria, which included half my neighbors.

He sat down in his desk chair. The weathered leather gave, soft and cushy under his weight. He drank from his mug like he was thirsty and smiled at me. "Always settles my stomach. There's nothing like hot chocolate to cure whatever ails you." He held a pink box out to me. "Peanut brittle?"

"No, thanks. Do you have a queasy tummy?" I asked. "The party is going very well. You needn't worry."

"You did a lovely job, Sophie. I'm just getting older, I guess. Can't eat everything I used to."

Luis Simon, a distinguished psychiatrist who had bought a home on my street through Scroggins Realty in August, popped his head in the doorway. With prominent cheekbones and sultry bedroom eyes, Luis was worthy of posing for the cover of a romance novel. He carried a cup of English Bishop a flaming holiday punch loaded with rum and oranges studded with cloves. "Horace! Where's the Scottish dirk you were telling me about?"

"Dirk?" I asked.

Horace jumped up. He steadied himself briefly, his fingertips on his desk. "A traditional Scottish dagger, my dear." He turned to the bookcase behind him, took a tiny key from a book, and unlocked a desk drawer. He removed the knife gingerly and proudly presented it in his open palms as though it were a prized possession.

"An antique. The sheath bears sterling silver thistles."

Probably hand carved, the sheath appeared to be ebony. I didn't have to be an antiques expert to see that it bore the hallmarks of age.

He grasped the handle. A silver crown on the top held a large amber stone. Horace withdrew the handle to reveal a gleaming knife. "I like to imagine that it was really used, and not just worn for ceremonies."

Luis whistled his admiration and took the knife from Horace. "It's sharp! And heavier than I expected. You could do some damage with this thing." He danced backward and extended his arm as though it were a sword.

"They made things to last in the old days, didn't they?" Horace beamed. "Let's find Babineaux. He wanted to see it, too." He locked the drawer again and tucked the key back into the book.

They scuttled out of Horace's office with the enthusiasm of little boys who had found a shiny object. I moseyed toward the buffet to check on the food. Guests couldn't seem to get enough of the oysters on the half shell and rolls of salmon on pumpernickel with pink peppercorns and crème fraîche. The baked Brie with toasted pecans and fig glaze was always a hit. I couldn't resist a taste of the melting cheese with a hint of salt and a smidge of sweet fig. Heavenly! And I had to try the seared foie gras with caramelized pears. The caterer had outdone himself.

I spotted my ex-husband, Mars Winston, gabbing with my best friend, Nina Reid Norwood. Everyone appeared to be having fun. I checked my watch, grabbed my pashmina, and slipped out the front door in search of the carolers I'd hired, shivering at the chill. Mother Nature had cooperated beautifully, sending us sparkling snowflakes. Not enough to have to shovel, but the right amount for perfect ambiance. In the spirit of the season I'd worn a red velvet dress, but it lacked sleeves. No matter. The pashmina would cover my bare arms. Besides, I didn't plan to be outdoors long.

The carolers hurried along the street toward me. Dressed in traditional Victorian garb, with white faux fur trim on their clothes, they fit in perfectly on Old Town's colonial streets.

They gathered in front of the door, and at the signal, I opened it and stepped aside on the sidewalk to watch them.

They began with "Deck the Halls." The doors to the upstairs balcony opened, and Horace led a small group out to watch. I didn't care for the blanched color of his normally rosy face. He still smiled, though, and listened to the voices blend.

But then he grasped the railing with both hands and appeared to sway. None of the people behind him seemed to realize that he wasn't well.

Only when he leaned forward did they finally cluster around him in concern. With an enormous snap, the railing split, and Horace plunged headlong onto the sidewalk, landing directly in front of the carolers.

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## CHAPTER TWO

Dear Sophie,

My sister was stationed in Germany and brought me a nutcracker as a gift. I'm not quite sure what to do with it. It looks sort of awkward and lonely standing there by itself.

Clara in Nut Plains, Connecticut

Dear Clara,

The height of most nutcrackers makes them wonderful anchors for vignettes. Use him to give your mantel arrangement height. Or cluster him with some candles for a charming centerpiece on your dining table. I love them set next to poinsettias, too.

Sophie

For a few eternally long seconds, everyone watched in shocked silence. A horrific red stain seeped onto the brick sidewalk.

Screams sounded all around me.

“Nooooo! Horace!” his secretary, Phyllis Tate, shrieked from the balcony.

I rushed to Horace, not knowing what to do. If he had broken his spine, then moving him would be the worst possible thing.

“Horace?” I whispered into his ear. “Can you hear me?”

He lay facedown. A couple of people wanted to turn him over, but I didn't let them.

Phyllis arrived at the scene and moaned his name over and over again, tears etching trails through her makeup.

Placing my face close to the sidewalk, I tried to see his eyes. He didn't appear to be bleeding from his nose or mouth. Where was the blood coming from?

Sirens sounded in the distance, and I thanked my lucky stars that Old Town wasn't very big. They would arrive momentarily. “I think we should leave him this way,” I said to no one in particular.

There wasn't much I could do except cover his hand with mine and murmur encouragement.

“You’ll be fine, Horace. The ambulance is on the way.”

Horace’s hand twitched. He whispered something in a voice too faint to hear.

“They’re coming, Horace. Hang in there!”

He pressed my hand feebly and tried to speak. I lowered my head as close to his as possible.

He murmured, “In the desk drawer. Edith must never know. Tell her I always loved her.”

“Fool!”

I looked up to see Horace’s wife, Edith, looming over us. Tall and slender, a permanent scowl creased her face. She regarded her husband with frigid eyes.

Officer Wong arrived at the same time as the ambulance. She shooed everyone back to make way for the emergency medical technicians to work.

They immobilized him with some difficulty. When they finally turned him over, I saw the problem. Horace’s prized dirk jutted from his chest. He had fallen on his own sword, so to speak.

Screams and gasps echoed again as onlookers saw the knife handle. In minutes, Horace was loaded into the ambulance and it rolled away, picking up speed.

Edith returned to the building. I hurried inside, dodged her, and made a beeline for Horace’s office. I took the time to close the door, quickly wiped my hands on tissues, and located the key in a book of poems, on the page with Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.”

Moving in haste, I fumbled with the key, finally opened the drawer, and found only one item inside—an aging envelope.

I wrapped the pashmina around it and slid the drawer closed just as the door swung open.

Edith stared at me, cold as ice. “What are you doing in here?”

I sniffled, pulled another tissue from the box on Horace’s desk, and turned my back to her. “I needed a moment alone.” Wiping my eyes, I turned to face her. “He said to tell you he always loved you.”

“Get out.” She couldn’t have said it in a more demeaning and hostile manner if she had tried.

I hurried past her into the hallway, clutching the pashmina carefully so I wouldn’t accidentally drop Horace’s precious letter.

Wong pulled me aside. “Sophie,” she said calmly, “you do know that you have blood on your dress?”

I glanced down and shuddered. *Gross*. “From kneeling on the sidewalk, I guess. How is Horace? Did the EMTs tell you anything? Can a person survive that kind of wound?”

“Wish I knew. What happened exactly?”

“He was carrying the dagger around to show everyone. When the carolers came, a group of people crowded onto the balcony to listen. Horace looked ill, then the railing broke and he fell.”

“How come no one else fell?”

“Come to think of it, that was a little bit odd. Maybe they held on to the side railings?”

“Did you see anyone plunge the knife into him?”

“No. It wasn’t like that. He was in the front of the crowd on the balcony. He must have fallen on the dagger.”

She pulled out a notebook and scribbled in it, her plump face contorting at the thought. Wong had kept her former husband’s last name, which often surprised people when they met the short African-American policewoman. She wore her hair in curls, longer toward the front and trimmed in the back, with one sassy curl tickling her forehead. It suited her. She was a no-nonsense police officer who often saw through flimsy explanations.

Edith Scroggins approached us. “I thought I told you to get out.” She eyed Wong. “You, too.” Not

even a hint of emotion showed on her stony face. She held herself painfully erect. She spat the word, "Now!" and watched us, waiting.

---

"Ma'am, I need to examine the balcony," said Wong.

"Not without my permission. Get out of my building."

"Ma'am, I can get a warrant to look at it." Wong sounded stern yet factual.

"Out!" Edith screamed like a wild woman.

Wong's mouth dropped open. Our eyes met. Without another word, we turned and walked through the empty hallway to the foyer. Edith had cleared the building. As far as I could tell, we were the last to leave.

When we reached the front door, I glanced over my shoulder. Edith held a glass of punch in her hand and watched us imperiously.

We'd barely made it outside when we heard the door lock behind us.

"Whoa!" Wong shook her head. "What a witch. She better hope her husband doesn't die. She'll be the prime suspect if there's any indication that someone tampered with that railing."

A few people still lingered on the sidewalk. "Can you believe how fast she got rid of us?" I asked. "It's been less than five minutes. Wonder what happened to the caterer?"

Wong huffed. "She's not through with me yet. If she wants a warrant for me to look at that balcony then I'll get one."

"That was the oddest thing I've ever seen. Wouldn't you have gone to the hospital with your husband?" I shivered in the cold but didn't dare unfold my pashmina.

Baxter Babineaux, who had bought a home on my block, joined us. "That was quite the act, wasn't it? I have to agree with you, Sophie. Who doesn't go to the hospital with an injured husband? Horace might die from that stab wound! I'm not related to him, but you bet I'll be keeping tabs on his condition."

Tall and portly, Baxter exuded authority in a grandiose way. He was certainly friendly enough, but he had a pretentious manner about him, which always made me feel like I might not live up to his high standards.

He frowned. "With all those HIPAA regulations, I wonder if they'll tell us anything. Old Mrs. Scrooge certainly isn't going to keep us posted on his condition."

Baxter gazed at the wreath that had hung on the balcony but now lay on the sidewalk. "Horace loved Christmas like a little kid. I never met another human being who was as generous or good as that man."

"I hope he recovers." I couldn't take the cold on my bare arms anymore. I unfolded the pashmina and wrap it around my shoulders, taking care not to drop the letter. "My coat is in there."

Baxter nodded and took a deep breath. "Mine, too. And my wife's. She hurried home because she was freezing."

The caterer, surprisingly slim for such an outstanding chef, strode up to us. "Why aren't you answering your phone?"

I smacked my forehead. "It's inside."

He snarled, "Along with all my gear."

I turned to Wong. "Isn't there anything you can do?"

She marched up to the front door and knocked firmly. "Mrs. Scroggins! This is the police. Answer the door, ma'am."

The front door opened just wide enough to see Mrs. Scroggins's bitter face. We couldn't hear the conversation, but after a minute, Wong motioned to us.

The chef, Baxter, and I hurried to the front door.

Wong spoke with authority. “You have five minutes. Babineaux and Sophie, collect all the coats. Caterer, get your stuff and hightail it out.”

Baxter and I rushed to retrieve the coats.

Baxter had parked his metallic midnight-plum Cadillac SUV in back of the building. I carefully wrapped the pashmina around Horace’s letter and stashed it under my purse on the front seat.

Unfortunately, my dress was still wet with Horace’s blood. I carried coats in my outstretched arms so I wouldn’t get it on any of them. We piled coats into the back as fast as we could, dodging the caterer and his staff as they ran in and out.

Edith Scroggins observed us with a steely glare. Wong helped us carry the last load. We had barely stepped out the door when we heard Edith turn the lock.

Baxter offered to give me a ride home. I hesitated, looking down at the blood on my dress.

He retrieved a throw from the back of the car and covered the leather passenger seat with it. “Try not to get blood on anything?”

I did my best.

As Baxter drove, he asked, “Would you mind taking care of the coats? My wife gets a little hyper about clutter.”

Truth be told, I would rather be in charge of the coats. Most of them belonged to neighbors and people I knew anyway. Plus, that way, I knew the coats would wind up with their owners. Not that I didn’t trust Baxter, I just knew I would get it done.

My classic Ocicat, Mochie, greeted us at the door. He had the distinctive *M* on his forehead but instead of spots, the necklaces and bracelets of his American shorthair ancestors decorated his chest and legs. He rubbed against my calves. I dropped the pashmina on the console in the foyer before helping Baxter carry coats into my dining room.

“Whoa! This place is huge. Ever think about selling?”

“Never.” I wouldn’t give up my beloved house with its creaks and quirks for anything, even if the one and a half ancient bathrooms *were* in desperate need of renovation.

I thanked him for his help, and insisted on washing the throw. “I’ll bring it over when I come to the cookie swap,” I promised.

As soon as he left, I rushed upstairs to take off my dress. “I’m not ignoring you,” I told Mochie. “But I want to get cleaned up first.”

After a hot shower, I soaked the dress in cold water and searched my closet for something warm and comfortable while Mochie sniffed the corners. I pulled on fuzzy dark green pants and a cream-colored sweater and swung Mochie into my arms for a snuggle.

“Brrrr,” I said into his fur. “It’s cold out there. Be glad you were in a nice warm house. What do you think, bake Christmas cookies by the fire or decorate?”

His head raised, his eyes bright.

“Aha. You’d like to do more investigating. Decorating it is.”

He raced up to the third floor ahead of me. As if he knew what we were going to do, he waited by the door to the little attic room that I used for storage.

I had barely opened it when he sprang inside and disappeared. I pulled out boxes of Christmas items, leaving them in a mess on the floor. Opening each box was a treat. They held old friends that brought the joy of cherished memories. I carted a box of nutcrackers, garlands, and snowmen downstairs to the kitchen.

Definitely time for a mug of hot tea to take off that chill. If only I could call someone to find out

how Horace was doing. I shook my head. How could he have stayed with a woman like Edith for all those years? What had made her such a bitter shrew? Yet even when Horace was so horribly injured, his thoughts were of her.

Nina Reid Norwood, my across-the-street neighbor and best friend, rapped on the kitchen door. A gust of cold air blew in when I opened it.

“I thought you must be back by now. That was quite a scene Edith made, throwing everyone out like we were teenagers who’d raided someone’s house while they were away.” Raised in North Carolina, Nina would never lose her Southern accent.

“I have everyone’s coats. Spread the word, okay? And don’t forget to take yours home. They’re in the dining room.” I lifted a snow woman in a red felt hat and a green muffler out of the box and set her on the table. “What’s Edith Scroggins’s problem? Do you know why she’s so cross all the time?”

Nina peered in the box of Christmas items. “Glass-half-empty person is my best guess. The woman is never happy about anything.” She lifted out two nutcrackers. “These are so cute. But I’m still glad I don’t have to decorate.”

“I thought you were staying home for Christmas. Did you change your mind?”

“I wish. We’re having a full house this year. I hired Jill from Fleur de Lis to do it for me.”

“I need to stop by there for pine roping and wreaths. Do you know anyone we can call to find out how Horace is doing?”

“Maybe his secretary, Phyllis? I think they’re good friends.” She looked around my kitchen. “Did you bring home any goodies from the party?”

“Not a thing. I have water boiling for tea. Why don’t you snoop through the freezer while I bring down a couple more boxes?”

“I have to do *everything*,” she teased.

I was carrying a third box downstairs when Nina met me at the foot of the stairs, holding Horace’s letter in her hand.

“Is there something you’d like to tell me?” she asked.

“Don’t read that!” I set the box down and reached for the letter.

“Too late.”

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## CHAPTER THREE

Dear Sophie,

I dearly love baking Christmas cookies with my mom and sisters. It's an annual tradition. But Mom insists on using her old, blackened-from-use cookie sheets, which always make the cookies too dark on the bottom. We've bought her new baking sheets but she won't use them. Help!

Tired of Burned Cookies in Mistletoe, Kentucky

Dear Tired of Burned Cookies,

Bring Mom parchment paper. No more greasing the baking sheet and the cookies slide off perfectly every time.

Sophie

"That's not mine. It's none of our business," I insisted.

Nina stepped away, still holding Horace's letter in her hand. "Really? Then what are *you* doing with it?"

"Did you really read it?" Even though Nina was my dearest friend in the world, I felt an obligation to protect Horace. After all, he'd said Edith should never know about it.

She eyed me. "Okay, it probably isn't yours. You couldn't have kept this a secret from me."

"Nina, you have to promise me you won't tell anyone what it says, or, for that matter, that I even have it."

"You haven't read it, have you?" She held it in the air, as if taunting me.

"No. And I don't plan to."

"Allow me."

*My sweetest Moondoggie,*

*Despite my pleas, we are moving away. They won't tell me where for fear you will follow. My life is over. I don't know how I will manage without you. No one can ever replace you. I shall*

*hold you in my heart and think of you each day. When you gaze at the moon every night, know that I am also looking at it, and for that brief moment, our hearts will meld across the miles.*

*Yours forever,  
Your Brown-Eyed Girl*

I shrank against the newel post. No wonder Nina was making such a fuss about it. What was Horace doing with it? “Is there a date on it?”

“Nope.” She checked the envelope. “No address, either. It must have been hand-delivered or left somewhere for Moondoggie.” She giggled. “I should have known it wasn’t yours. You have green eyes. Brown-Eyed Girl drew a broken heart on it.”

“Broken?” I held my hand out for it, and Nina handed it to me. Brown-Eyed Girl had drawn two sides of a heart, separated by a jagged edge. “This is so cute. How old do you think she was? Fifteen or so?”

Nina crossed her arms over her chest. “I assume you know the identity of one of them.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Where did you get it?”

“Very nice. You’re some friend. Trying to trick me into telling you what I know.”

“Why won’t you tell me?”

“Look, someone gave this to me for safekeeping. *I* never would have read it. I’m serious. It’s really none of our business.”

She wrinkled her nose and flicked the end of her tongue out at me. “But it’s so charmingly schoolgirlish and romantic.”

“I’ll make a deal with you. *If* and when I can share what very little I know, then I’ll tell you. Okay? You’ll just have to trust me.”

Thankfully, the kettle screamed and the phone rang with the distinctive jingle I had assigned to my parents. I moved the kettle off the burner and answered the phone, folding the letter neatly and storing it in a cookbook for safekeeping.

“Sophie, sweetie,” said Mom, thereby alerting me that she wanted a favor. She never called anyone *sweetie* unless she was buttering them up. “Do you remember Aunt Louise?”

Of course I did. She knew that, but she had to work up to the favor that was coming. She’d elevate it a notch by mentioning Louise, her best friend in the world from her college days. I poured water over Twinings Christmas Tea into a teapot with a red spout and handle. The middle was supposed to look like an ornament with the words *Merry Christmas* written in jaunty letters. Cinnamon and clove instantly perfumed the kitchen. Nina had her head in the freezer, in search of something to nosh on.

“Her daughter, Patty, is on her way to Old Town,” continued Mom.

She paused, and I knew what was coming. Since it was located just outside of Washington, DC, a stay in Old Town Alexandria could run into serious money.

“I told her you would be thrilled to have Patty bunk with you while she straightens out her problems there.”

It was a done deal. I didn’t even have an opportunity to make a bogus excuse and wriggle out of it. “Problems? What kind of problems?”

My kitchen door flew open. My ex-husband, Mars, short for Marshall, burst in with our hound mix, Daisy. His significant other, Natasha, charged in after him, shouting, “Just say no, Sophie!”

Mars glared at her. “No fair, Nat. Let Sophie decide.”

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