

the best holiday event was unplanned

# SUSAN M. BAGANZ

SUGAR COOKIES &  
STREET LAMPS



AN  
ORCHARD HILL  
CHURCH *Christmas* STORY

Sugar Cookies  
and Street  
Lamps

Susan M. Baganz

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**Sugar Cookies and Street Lamps**  
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# 1

Noelle crossed her fingers. The holidays always brought out the worst in people.

And sometimes, if one was fortunate, the best. She hoped for the latter.

She was dressed for the initial meeting with the company representative. Working thirty hours a week at the library gave her time to dream and to eagerly pursue her passion of being an event planner. She'd done parties before but nothing this big—and it wasn't even Thanksgiving yet.

She fluffed her perpetually flat hair, walked through the pristine glass doors of the building and found her way to the elevator. Punching the button for the fourth floor she leaned against the mirrored paneled walls. Deep breath. *You can do this*. She needed to remain positive, be up-beat, not let on how much she disliked Christmas. So why did her biggest break occur at this time of year? Why couldn't it have been a wedding? While there was no romance in sight for her, she loved weddings. If this event had been a wedding, it would have been a breeze.

She sighed. She needed to get over herself. Next up might be a major award event or a larger corporate celebration in the greater Milwaukee area. This Christmas party was just another event—a stepping stone to that dream. The season didn't matter. She was capable and ready to make this opportunity open

bigger doors for her. Taking a deep breath she swallowed to quiet her quivering nerves.

She exited at her floor and glanced down the hallway. There it was. Mankai Investments. She took a few measured steps to the door and with another deep breath, opened it and stepped in.

It was almost like walking into a classy hotel, with the beauty that surrounded her. Ahead of her, a tall desk in the rich wood-toned setting bespoke of wealth and elegance. The woman behind it styled her hair in a classic updo and wore a business suit.

Noelle stepped to the dark wood barrier, and the receptionist raised her eyebrows and stood. "May I help you?" the silky-toned voice inquired.

"Miss Starr from Starr Main Events is here for Mr. Cameron."

"I'll inform him. Please take a seat. Can I get you anything to drink? Coffee, water, a soda?" The woman pointed to a refreshments area surrounded by beautiful rich-toned leather chairs, side tables, and magazines.

"No, but thank you." Noelle gave a nod to the woman and went to the seating area. She set down her briefcase and began to take off her coat.

"Let me help you with that," a voice from behind said. Hands took the coat and slid it down, freeing her arms.

"Thank you." Noelle turned toward the voice as the man hung her coat on the rack.

"You are welcome, Miss Starr. Rudolph Cameron at your service. If you'll follow me, we can talk in my office." He turned to the receptionist as he passed by. "Thank you, Mrs. Meyerson."

The woman gave a nod. "You're welcome, Mr.

Cameron.”

Noelle tried to walk as gracefully as possible past windowed offices that were as opulent as the foyer. Used to wearing more sensible heels, her two-inch-high ones made her as graceful as a galloping giraffe as she scampered to keep up with the much-taller gentleman. Mr. Cameron opened a six-paneled oak door and into a spacious office.

“Why don’t we sit over here?” He motioned to an area that equaled the size of the living room in her cozy shared apartment. “Can I get you some coffee, herbal or black tea, or anything else? Chai latte? I’m not a coffee drinker myself. I picked up an extra chai on my way in if you want it.”

“Chai? That would be lovely.”

He brought over two cups labeled from a coffee shop that was in the lobby of the building. “I add extra cinnamon to mine. It’s not even Christmas yet, but I do love the trappings of the season, in spite of the impending cold that’s predicted.”

Sipping her sugary latte, she closed her eyes. “This is like a warm hug.” She took a deep breath, intentionally relaxing her shoulders before setting the cup on the dark wood table. “Thank you. That was thoughtful of you. What if I didn’t like chai?”

Mr. Cameron shrugged. “I’d drink it later—just reheat it in the microwave in the break room.” He sat to her right. “Shall we get down to business?”

Noelle dragged her laptop out of her bag and opened it up, knocking over the cup of chai. Mr. Cameron grabbed a handful of tissues from a box on the table and righted the cup as she snatched her computer off the desk.

“I’m so sorry. I’m not usually this clumsy,” she

blurted. *Oh, dear.* Why was she so nervous around this man? Had she ruined her chance already?

"No worries." He pushed aside the sopping wad of tissues and then retrieved paper towels from a closet.

She sighed and held out her hand for some of the paper towels. "I lied. I tend to be particularly clumsy when I'm nervous." She wiped away more of the damp area on the table while balancing her laptop in one arm. At least he was being nice about this. Perhaps she still had a shot at this contract.

Mr. Cameron grinned. "Nothing to be nervous about, Miss Starr. It was only a little spill after all. And I don't bite." Taking her wet towel, he tossed them into the brushed nickel garbage can to the side of the table and settled back into his seat.

She placed her laptop back on the table and logged in, opening up her document.

"Why don't we use first names? Maybe that would be more comfortable. We'll be working with each other often during the next two months as we prepare for this gala. You can call me Rudy."

"That'd be nice. I'm Noelle." Her heart skipped a beat at the warmth in his voice. He wasn't an enemy and was doing everything to make this as easy as possible.

"A Christmas baby I suspect?" Rudy asked.

"Christmas Eve."

"Wow. That's either really cool or uber-disappointing."

*Uber?* "More the latter. My parents like to joke I was the first star born as well since I'm the oldest child. And the jokes about my name at the holiday season are tedious." Noelle hoped he'd change the subject. She



didn't need the reminder of the most irritating moments of her life. It was bad enough having to live through the jokes when they happened; reliving them was the ultimate torture. What had her parents been thinking, anyway?

"Did you get double gifts?"

She shrugged. "Not really. I received one small birthday gift on Christmas Eve and we didn't open our Christmas presents until Christmas morning. My birthday became lost in the shadow of Santa Claus."

Rudy frowned. "I'm sorry to hear that. Christmas can be a crazy time, but Christmas Eve has a magic of its own. When I can, I try to make the candlelight service at church. There's something holy and wonderful about the way God worked to bring salvation through Jesus coming in the flesh as an infant."

*Great.* Just what she needed. Someone who loved Christmas. "Yeah, well, now that my siblings all have families of their own, we don't usually celebrate until before or after the holiday. Christmas Eve is just another day on the calendar. Now. What is the date and a location for your event?"

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She'd changed the subject abruptly, and he didn't miss the stiffening of her spine when he mentioned church and God. The thought that she didn't appreciate and perhaps even resented Christmas, saddened Rudy.

He outlined the venue and confirmed the date and time.

"Any special theme your company would like?"

"Do you recall the song 'Silver Bells'?"

“Sure.”

“We wanted kind of a city sidewalk type of theme around the room with light posts and a mock store fronts. There are chandeliers in the room, but I checked and some of the lighting can be dimmed. Instead of cake, the owner of the company wants cookies from all around the world.”

“Wow. That sounds lovely. It will be an added expense to create those storefront props. This becomes almost like staging a play.”

“I realize that, but I have some ideas that might help. When I saw how beautifully you did my cousin Emily’s wedding, I recommended you to my boss for this event. It’s OK if it costs a little extra to perfect a theme that will impress him.” He excluded the fact that when he’d spied her there, bustling about, he thought she was cute. She was even more adorable up close and in person, clumsiness and all. Although, her lack of faith was a complication he hadn’t anticipated.

Noelle gave a soft smile. “Emily and Todd’s wedding was lovely, and it was a delight to organize the ceremony and reception. I hope I can do you justice with this. What is the schedule for the evening?”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine, and I am at your disposal outside of business hours. I can pound nails and paint and help however you desire.”

“Really? That would be great. Since I’ll have to outsource the set design and construction, if you can help with that it would save on costs.”

“I’d love to do that. I’m excited about this event. We’ve never done anything like this before for our investors. It’s a formal, black-tie affair, and with some brief presentations. My boss wants an orchestra for the dinner, and a live band for some dancing later.”

“An orchestra and a band?”

Rudy nodded. “Spare no expense. The orchestra can be a small group like a string quartet—and my boss prefers that a band would do Christmas standards in a more classic tradition. Bing Crosby type thing or a little do-wop for fun.”

“With it being so close to Christmas, do you believe you’ll get a good turnout?”

“We expect so. For every person who attends, my boss is donating a sum of money to two special causes: Veteran’s Support Mission and Modern Day Slavery Abolition.”

“That’s unusual. Not local food pantries or warming shelters?”

“Our organization already supports those places. We wanted to do something beyond the walls of our city. Veterans and the issues surrounding human trafficking are important to us. I myself specialize in helping clients who desire more ethical investments. Free trade, no alcohol or tobacco or the use of slave labor in any way. And if they want to be more into reducing a carbon footprint type of green investing, I help them with that, too.”

“Do those investments make a good return?”

“Some can, over time. Like anything else in the market, returns can fluctuate. Do you invest?”

“I set aside a little money in a Roth 401K that I add to yearly, but it’s not much.”

“If you desire, we can talk a little about ways you can maximize your savings.”

“I can’t afford to be a client here.”

Rudy shook his head. “We don’t charge an hourly fee. And trust me. Whether you possess two thousand dollars or a million, we’ll treat you with the same

respect and dignity.”

He made the company sound great, but Noelle wondered whether he was just giving her a sales pitch. She shook herself. Why did she always jump to the most negative conclusion about people? She needed to focus on the event. “We never did discuss the plan for the evening and also the kind of menu do you want—besides the cookies.” She pulled up the catering menu for the venue.

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Thirty minutes later, Noelle stood to leave. Rudy grinned as he walked her to the front door. “Let me help you with your coat.” He pulled it off the rack as she set her computer bag on the chair.

“Thank you.” She glanced up at him and turned around after he helped her slip into the coat. “Thank you for your time, the chai, and this opportunity. I’ll be getting started on this tonight and will email you the contract.”

“Great. Call or email me anytime. I’ll draw some sketches of the backdrops for the event. I forgot; we never discussed the cookies and where we’ll get all of those.”

“And I’m really sorry for spilling tea all over your table.”

“Don’t worry about it, Noelle. It gave us something to talk about, didn’t it?”

He smiled at her, and for a moment she forgot what she was about to say. The way he said her name made her want to hear it again...and she never wanted to hear her Christmassy name. “I’ll call around to the various bakeries to figure out what we can arrange, and I’ll get back to you. That might dictate storefront

designs depending on the nationality.”

“Great. And if you need someone to go do some taste testing with, I’m your man.”

Her eyebrows rose. She gave a soft smile and nodded. “Noted. Good afternoon, Mr. Cameron.”

“You too, Miss Starr. I look forward to hearing from you.”

As she left, she wondered at the disappointment she felt as he’d called her “Miss Starr”. “Noelle” sounded so much better falling from his lips. She shrugged it off as stress-related. She’d made it through the first meeting and had a doable plan for the event. Hope soared inside that Christmas this year would be exceptional.

## 2

Noelle was restocking shelves at the library, all the while trying to figure out how design storefronts and where to get the faux-gas lampposts she would need for this gala.

“Good afternoon, Noelle.”

The book she was about to slide onto the shelf slipped from her grasp. A strong hand managed to catch it before it hit the floor.

“Oh!” She peered into those sparkling eyes and the captivating dimples of Rudy Cameron, the Mankai representative. She found his pink nose and cheeks oddly adorable—and then she realized his name was Rudolph. *How cute.* Maybe he did understand a little about the ribbing Noelle Starr, born on Christmas Eve, had to endure.

He handed her the book. “Books are almost sacred, aren’t they? The hundreds of hours, words, and ideas that floated around in someone’s head, all put to paper...”

She clasped the book to her chest. “Yes. I agree.” She slid the book into its spot and faced the man. “Is there anything I can do to help you, Mr. Cameron?”

“Rudy.”

“Rudy,” she parroted.

“I was wondering when you had a break. There are some ideas for the event I wanted to run past you.”

She glanced at the clock. “I can take one in five

minutes. If you'll wait for me by the conference room upstairs, I can join you there, and we can meet."

"I won't be taking you away from a lunch or anything?"

"Not if you don't mind me eating it in front of you while we talk."

"Not at all."

"I'll see you there in a few minutes. The door should be unlocked, so you can go right in. No one has reserved it for the day."

He nodded, turned and walked away. The dress pants, coat, shoes, created a stunning silhouette as he became a shadow hallowed by the sunlight peeking in through the southernmost windows. *Sigh*. Too bad he was a Christian. She pushed her glasses back up her nose and stuffed a few more books hastily on the shelf. She set the rolling cart back, made a quick dash to the bathroom and refreshed her lipstick.

She peeked into the back room. "Stella, I'm taking my break. I'm meeting with a client in the upstairs conference room if you need me."

The older woman nodded. "Enjoy your lunch."

Noelle grabbed her lunch bag and notepad and headed up the stairs. Her laptop was at home; she hadn't anticipated this meeting today. She took a deep breath before opening the door. Cameron stood at the table with sheets of unrolled paper depicting scenes that appeared to have come right out of a Charles Dickens novel.

"You don't want the street urchins in there too, do you?" she asked.

He gave a chuckle. His smile faded. "Actually, that could be an interesting thought, to have the wait-staff dressed..."

Noelle shook her head. "No. Not at this establishment. You wanted elegant, not bleak. You'll want the wait-staff in proper attire. The men in waistcoats, jackets, and bow ties. The woman in skirts—all black with white shirts. Simple elegance as they serve."

"Of course, you're correct. But isn't that the beauty of brainstorming something new? Coming up with the ridiculous to get the perfect concept?"

"That's one way to look at it." She blinked at the images. She wasn't used to working with a partner. She hired out for what she needed, but the ideas were always hers. Yet, these watercolor images fired the imagination. "Who sketched and painted these?"

"I did. I'm good with numbers, so going into securities and investments was a prudent move, but drawing and bringing ideas like this to life with watercolor, makes my heart sing."

Rudy was both logical and artistic. The combination intrigued her, and was not something she'd expected to find in the executive when she walked into the ultra-chic, professional setting at Mankai. "They're beautiful. I will do my best to make this happen. It will take a lot of work on such a tight schedule. I wonder if any theater companies own stage props that might be available."

"My sister works in the performing arts. Perhaps she can get us electric gas-style lighting. I can check for you."

"Or, if you want to give me her contact information, I can call her and make the arrangements."

"I can do that. As for the storefront stuff, I love working with my hands and there is a heated



workshop in my garage. I don't mind constructing these things, but I might need help with some of it."

"I understand nothing about construction, but I can paint." She examined the drawings. "Looking at these I suspect you can, too."

"I am capable, but it's a job for more than just one person."

She sighed. This event was going to require much more from her than just making some connections. What had she gotten herself into? Could she really do this? Maybe she wasn't ready for major awards and larger corporate celebrations in the greater Milwaukee area.

Noelle shook herself mentally. She was capable. This was doable. She had help. She needed to stop doubting herself. Her future career was at stake. She kicked her insecurity to the curb.

*Focus.*

"Can you get the materials? We will keep the receipts as part of the expenses for the event so you can be reimbursed. Are you sure you won't need compensation for your time in working on this?"

"Nah. I have some vacation time coming, and I'm excited about this project and it's a gift to get to help."

"Helping is a gift?" Noelle took a bit of her sandwich.

"I'm a Christian. Everyone who becomes a believer in Jesus gets a gift. At least one. The gifts are usually used for the benefit of the church, but I view my work here in helping arrange this event as a ministry. If I can use my gift to assist you in making this event spectacular, I will gladly do it."

"I still don't understand."

"You mentioned gifts you got at Christmas. But

most physical gifts we get are material. Temporary.”

“True.” She sipped from her bottle of water.

“How many of the gifts you got over the years do you really remember?”

Noelle shrugged. “Perhaps a few items. A special doll one year, perhaps?” She took another bite.

“My parents did gifts, but what I remember more are experiences and memories of things we did together. I hold those closer than the building-block set I got when I was five or the painting set I was given when I was ten, even though I colored all over the living room wall.”

“OK, so your point is?” She started wrapping up the paper from her sandwich.

“God’s gifts are memorable and far more impactful. He gives us grace, and mercy. Forgiveness from our sins especially.”

“Are you saying that I’m a, a...sinner?” The man went from charming to insulting.

“We all are. I can’t save myself from my own pride, or selfishness. Neither can you. That’s why Jesus came to earth to be born. So that he could save you and me from a lifetime of separation from God.”

“How did we get onto this conversation? I’m just an event planner.” She finished her water.

“I’m sorry if I crossed a line, but you realize the biggest event of your life will be when you meet God face to face. Without Jesus’ sacrifice...” He frowned. “If you don’t accept His eternal gift, it’s like throwing away the best Christmas or birthday gift ever.”

She shook her head. “My break is over.”

Rudy rolled up the paper. “I’ll purchase the materials and be in touch. Think about what I’ve said.”

Noelle opened the door and exited with Rudy

following behind. As fast as she could, she scuttled away to the rack of books that still needed to be stacked. The books were replaced at a faster rate than ever. She seethed inside. Sinner? *She* was a sinner? Just how rude could this man be? And she'd need to work with him for the next few weeks and much closer than she expected.

She definitely was not ready for this. But if she didn't manage to pull it off, it would be goodbye to major awards events and larger corporate celebrations in the greater Milwaukee area. Regardless, when Christmas was over, it was good riddance Mr. Rudy Cameron.

~\*~

Rudy strode out the door of the library. He wanted to kick himself. What was it about him that he couldn't shut up about his faith? He'd offended her. Only his fear about her eternal future was weighing him down. She was adorable. He longed to date her, but his faithfulness to Jesus kept him from doing anything like that as long as she didn't share his belief. While to some that might have sounded legalistic, he just cared too much about her not to share what he believed. He only hoped she wouldn't shut him out.

He headed to the home improvement store with his father's pickup truck and trailer to get the plywood required to work on the sets. He wanted to earn Noelle's trust so she could finally understand the truth about *Who* Christmas was really about.

### 3

In thick pencil, Rudy drew the outlines for the shops. He'd already emailed copies to Noelle, and she'd approved the designs, so he began making the cuts. All the while, he prayed for Noelle. *Lord, draw her to You. Open the door to her heart to hear Your voice.*

*Buzzz.* The saw gave a comforting sound as he made his cuts. Loose wood fell to the floor. He sanded the edges and piece by piece, he set the props around the garage. Every piece was so tall they needed to rest on their sides. He set aside the spare pieces and pondered how else he might be able to use them for this event.

~\*~

A text came through on Noelle's phone.

*I've started on the project and want your opinion. Are you available later to stop over? Rudy*

Wow, this man did not let the grass grow under his feet, did he? She'd researched the various types of Christmas cookies that might work for the gala, but she'd only just started contacting ethnic bakeries. Italian fig pockets, banana biscotti and Earl Grey bocca di dama—or lady's kisses, and spice cookies. Mexican chocolate icebox cookies with dulce de leche filling as well as Mexican Wedding cakes. Spicy German

lebkuchen honey cakes, spritzs and pfeffernuesse. French almond macaroons. Greek honey-dipped melomakarona, baklava tassies, and almond shortbread. Argentine Alfajores. Irish cream delights. Spanish polvorones sevillanos. Viennese Almond bars. Anzac cookies from Australia and New Zealand. Austrian walnut-chocolate bars, and raspberry linzers. Swedish gingerbread. Jewish apricot raisin rugelach. Polish chrusciki bow tie cookies. Chinese Almond Cookies. Swiss zimtsterne. Finnish butter cookies. Danish crispies. Vanocni Cukrovi cookies from the former Czechoslovakia. English cranberry orange shortbread. South African soetkoekies and krakeling. Of course, good old American sugar cookies were a must as well.

She probably gained ten pounds just reading about all the varieties that were out there. So many she'd never heard of much less tasted. And so many more nationalities that weren't represented and probably wouldn't be. Given that Milwaukee was primarily made up of people of German, English, Irish, Polish, and Norwegian heritage. For all that, the city was at least forty percent African American and at least seventeen percent was of Hispanic, Latin or Spanish origin. Could they possibly include them all?

There were so many more. How would she ever narrow it down? It seemed they could make an entire event just about cookies. She wondered if they could have fudge as well and have packages of the different kinds of cookies for sale for those interested. A boon to the bakers as well as part of the fundraiser? She would ask Rudy about that. And what about leftover cookies? Could those be donated to shelters or nursing homes? She pondered all these things as she checked in the