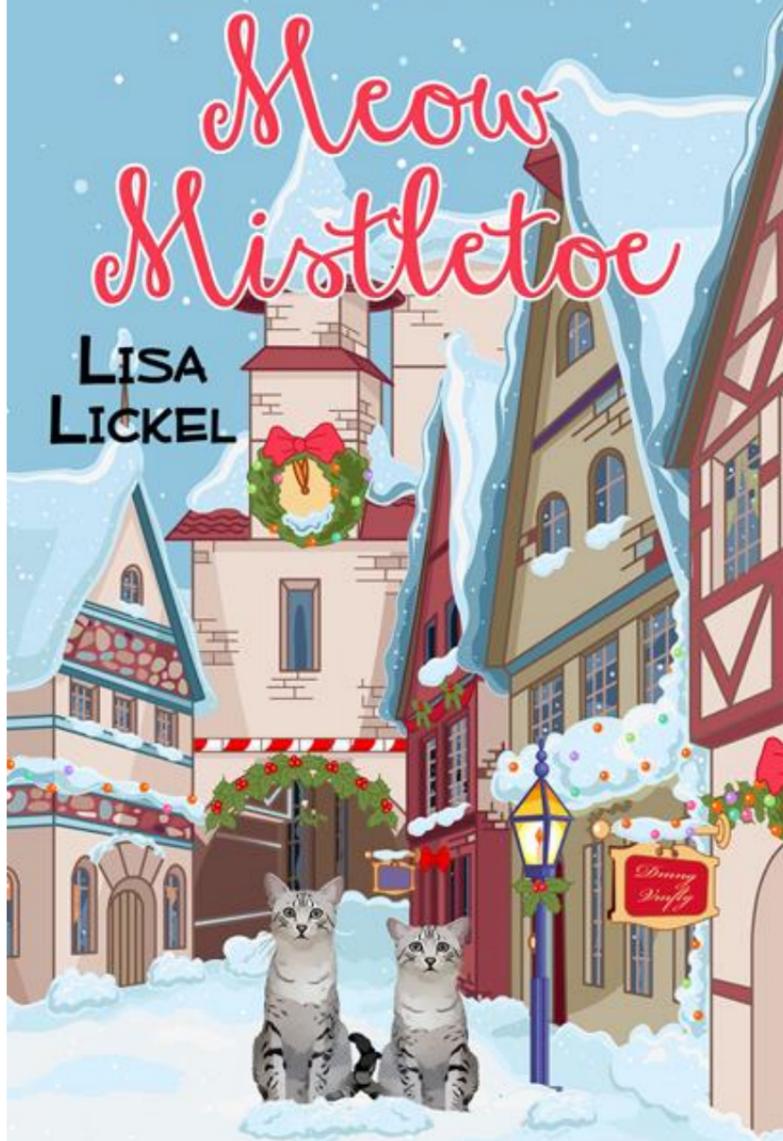


CHRISTMAS REUNITES THE LOVELORN
AND BRINGS ABOUT NEW ROMANCE
UNDER THE MISTLETOE ONE SPECIAL NIGHT.

Meow Mistletoe

LISA
LICKEL



Meow Mistletoe

Lisa Lickel

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.

Meow Mistletoe

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*What People are Saying about
Lisa Lickel's Books*

After a broken engagement, Ivy wonders if story-book romance isn't just a myth, but she can't help being intrigued by Adam, a cat-lover as well. Her plan is to get to know him better at the CAT Christmas party but... a catnapping has her searching for the missing cat rather than spending time with Adam...and that's just the beginning of the party. Meow Mistletoe is a party you don't want to miss!

~Lillian Duncan, author of *A Christmas Stolen*

Meow Mayhem (coming Jan 2019)

Lisa Lickel's protagonists are charmingly believable, and she makes this dog lover almost want a cat. Or at least an Egyptian Mau. And I wish Apple Grove was a real place...or do I?

~Anita Klumpers, author of *Hounded*

Lisa Lickel writes with a unique and witty form, producing a very enjoyable story for readers of all types, not only those of us who are crazy cat humans. Lickel creates colorful characters of every shape and size, and there's a new adventure at the turn of nearly every page.

~Nansee, reviewer.

1

“Where’s Adelaide? Who’s got my baby?”

Pfannie Morgenstern was such a drama queen. Just look at her nametag. She even drew little upside-down triangles like cat ears over the n’s. I was on a mission to meet and apologize to Donald’s friend Adam, so I ignored the perpetually frantic pet owner accosting Christmas partygoers as if they’d hidden her fat Siamese in their cups of punch.

She grabbed me. “Did you see her, Ivy? She’s got the bluest eyes.” Pfannie sniffed. “I’ve only been her housemate for four months. She doesn’t know anyone here.”

I looked at her hand, fingers tipped in crimson like daggers, on my arm. Her wrist jingled with a charm bracelet—silver, all cats, of course. She sniffed some more and hesitantly withdrew her dangerous touch.

“It’s just, Ivy...please, you know everyone here. Help me look, won’t you? Who would want to kidnap my Adelaide?”

No one, I wanted to tell her. Adelaide wasn’t even purebred. Judging by the tan patches on her hips, some calico had hedged its way into her family line. And no, I didn’t know everyone here. But I wanted to. I watched Donald’s hunky pal, Adam Thompson, stride away.

I slid my eyes back to Pfannie’s amazing makeup

job. I didn't think she was that much older than I was—maybe thirty-five at the most, and obviously better groomed. Even her hair was supposed to be chic-messy, sticking out from a bun while mine was just plain messy, curling all over my shoulders no matter how hard I tried to make it behave. Doing its own thing—just like a cat. Pfannie was right—cats were not our pets. We were their housemates.

“How long has it been since you last saw Adelaide?” I asked, hoping this would be a quick little piece of cake. “Let's look over here.”

Seriously, how hard could it be to find a pet cat among the few dozen animal lovers at our first ever holiday Cat Association Titlist get-together? And speaking of cake...the dessert table had at least four kinds of chocolate, reflected in colored glass balls scattered around the green and plaid tablecloth. I gazed longingly as we passed on our mission to find Adelaide.

Our little group was the Illinois branch of a national cat fanciers association. Donald Conklin, my friend who'd introduced me to the group years ago, before Stanley, was the outgoing president. Pfannie's nephew, Almanzo, named after Laura's husband in Little House on the Prairie, was incoming president.

We stopped at various nooks and crannies in the humungous sprawling veterinarian complex outside of the capital, Springfield, which sponsored our organization. Donald was the mayor of a tiny little town in western Illinois called Apple Grove. We weren't far from there, about forty minutes northeast. It had taken Memnet and me a couple of hours to drive down here from our place in Maplewood, on the far western edge of Chicago, where I currently lived alone

except for my cat...but not for long. Yippee! My much-needed fresh start was in the works. That thought alone pushed me out of my dejection from being ditched. There was nothing like the gloom of rejection to throw a girl off her game.

As we wandered the room's perimeter, I called for Adelaide a couple of times, swishing aside long coats in the cloak room to peek under them. Hooper's Animal Haven had an amazingly designed public area which could be conformed in various layouts for classes, meetings, or the occasional convention. For the Cat Association party, a large gathering room with a buffet and drinks bar had been opened. Three rooms were partitioned off to the side where pets could visit, supervised, away from their owners, have some privacy to take care of business, or try different varieties of food. Did I mention Hooper's sold expensive, custom-mixed pet food? As well as everything a pet owner could, and couldn't, imagine necessary to provide extraordinary living experiences for host and...yep, housemate. I should know, as I maintained their website.

I popped into the room where my darling Memnet, a purebred silver Egyptian Mau, the only spotted breed of domestic cat, lay in kingly glory atop a carpeted kitty playhouse. Ginger, the fourteen-year-old honor student in charge of the room, waved. Memnet lazily groomed a paw while four other cats, including Donald's bronze Mau, Tut, patted toys about.

"Have you seen Mrs. Morgenstern's cat?" I asked her. "The Siamese mix?"

Ginger frowned. Pfannie took a quick inhaled hiss. I cut her off. "Her sweet chubby little Adelaide?"

"No, ma'am. Ma'ams." Ginger shook her head. "Was she assigned to this room? Did you check the other rooms?"

"We will." I smiled at her despite being "ma'am'd" like some little old lady, and pulled Pfannie away. We did. Check the rooms. No Adelaide.

"Isn't your boyfriend here?" I asked Pfannie before we got out of the party room. "Rudy? Ron? R—"

"Rolf." Pfannie pursed her lips. Sparks shot from her eyes. "He *was*. He stepped out for a minute. Half an hour ago."

Hmm. "So...maybe Adelaide is with him?"

"No way! She's so...so new. She hasn't decided whether she likes him or not."

"Well, that could be a problem." Oops, had I said that out loud? Fortunately, Pfannie didn't act as though she'd heard.

Two exits on either side of the party room led back into the clinic area, while two exits led outside, one of them to the parking lot.

Pfannie continued to head for the exterior-side hall out of the party room and into the main complex. This passageway was decorated with lattice covered in white net and little lights, like a wedding reception joint. Which this room was on occasion. Pet weddings were huge. Anyway, in honor of Christmas, a glorious ball of mistletoe hung from the top of the lattice. Pfannie eyeballed the mistletoe as we got close. Her tears put out the sparks in her eyes from her belief in Rolf's abandonment.

"I've forgotten Rolf's pet cat's name," I said, trying to figure out what was going on. "Maybe Adelaide is with...him? Her?"

"It's Junior. Black with pea green eyes," Pfannie said.

A memory caught me. "Isn't Junior the bicolor with the white bib and tie? A tuxedo? I love him." And I did. Junior had won Personality of the Year two years ago. He and Mem were buddies.

"He's so unimaginative," Pfannie muttered. "He has no idea how hard it is to do everything alone. None." Her teary lashes fluttered at the mistletoe. "Please, Ivy. What if Adelaide is hurt? Trapped somewhere, and needs me? She has no one else."

I scanned the room. No one was paying any attention to us. Donald was chatting it up with some folks whose names I couldn't recall. Where was Adam? Pfannie wasn't a bad sort, just one of those people who needed attention. Constantly. "Sure," I told her. "We can keep looking. She's bound to turn up. It's a big place, but she has to be somewhere, right?" And it wasn't as if I had anything else to do. Since my ex-fiancé's decampment after such a long, fizzled relationship, I couldn't get over the desolation of being a rejected half, as if there was something wrong with me.

Quiet, contemporary jazzy holiday music followed us through the twinkly lights. We walked on, checking the ladies' rooms along the wall of the main building entrance and reception, and under the water fountain.

"Adelaide might be thirsty and tried to beg a drink of water, but no one would help her," Pfannie said.

I did not roll my eyes, though I almost had to physically stick my fingers on the lids to stop them. Pfannie took the lead when we reached the door of Hooper's Animal Haven Supply Salon. The Salon was open for business during the party, naturally.

"Maybe she sneaked inside," Pfannie said, with all the feral intent of Christmas shop-aholism, despite her quest for her missing pet. I followed, even though I was pretty sure the two clerks would notice a stray Siamese.

It was half an hour before I could return Pfannie's attention to our mission. I tugged her away from the cat sweaters with holes for ears. She weepingly thrust the blue-and-white rhinestone-decorated kitty hoodie back into the clerk's arms. "I'll be back later. With Adelaide. To try it on," she called.

"I'm sure she'll turn up," the chubby clerk yodeled back, waving a matching adult-size scarf with jingling bells.

Like we were leaving on the *Titanic*. This time I rolled my eyes and dragged Pfannie out the other door of the shop which opened into the side hall leading back to the party room. The area was surprisingly dark. I halted and Pfannie crashed into me.

"Wh-what?" she whispered. "Why'd you stop? Did you hear something?"

"It's dark," I said in my normal voice. "I don't know why the lights are off. I think the switches are over here, on the wall near the corner." I hoped they weren't covered and locked. I heard party sounds echoing so I didn't expect we were off limits. We'd all had to check in at the reception desk when we arrived.

"I thought you heard a meow. Or a purr."

I wouldn't willingly interrupt a purr. But footsteps echoed along the hall. Firm steps, purposeful. I held my breath.

The silhouette of a back-lit very fit man's arm pushing open the door to the men's room sent Pfannie into action. She scurried forward. "Oh, hey! Sir! Kind

sir! Please help us. Adelaide is missing. I wonder if you wouldn't mind checking..."

I wasn't sure which would be worse, standing there in the dark, or supporting Pfannie's dubious request. I shook my head. The person looked past Pfannie toward me. Once tagged, I had to follow, of course, and approached slowly and most reluctantly. He probably thought I was a hundred years old.

Shoot me now, I begged anyone when I neared them. I didn't need the reflected men's room light on the man's name tag to identify Donald's friend.

Pfannie squinted at the tag while taking surreptitious peeks into the men's room, as if she'd never been inside. She probably hadn't. "A-adam? Is it you?"

"Yes?" He let the door close to reach out and take Pfannie's outstretched hand. We now had only weak light reflected from the Christmas decorations. "Adam Thompson."

"Oh, yes," Pfannie said. "Widower. Chicago. Smoke Mau." She nodded, her human resources department memory in full showoff mode. "Feisty lady. Had some run-ins with Ivy's fella, if I recall."

I was not exactly a fan of the dark, but in this case my gratitude was unbounded. How marvelous that Pfannie would recall something I'd tried to put out of my head for the past eight months, and the reason I wanted to apologize to him. In person this time. It might take that long to cool the heat percolating around my face.

Adam peered around Pfannie.

She half-turned and indicated me. "You remember Ivy Preston, don't you?"

"Of course."

Mortified, I couldn't bring myself to speak. I couldn't be sure, but...had he winked? He faced Pfannie. "You were saying?"

I twisted and fanned my face, though I realized that was counter-productive. Frantic motion would only create more energy and make me warmer.

"But we shouldn't keep you," Pfannie was telling Adam.

"I'll be happy to check the room for you," Adam said. "Though I don't know how a Siamese cat would go unnoticed." His teeth gleamed in the semi-dark. "I'll just come and find you in a few minutes, shall I?"

Pfannie tittered. I had no other word to describe the sound escaping her lips. Adam glanced briefly in my direction before making it all the way into the men's room. I clutched my companion's elbow and urged her back toward the party. "C'mon. Maybe Adelaide's turned up by now. Let's check with the others."

"Oh, my. Isn't he a hunk? Nasty scars, though." Pfannie followed along, thoughts of Rolf apparently not preventing her from hyperventilating over another man.

I admitted a sting of woe. Pfannie had a past husband and current boyfriend. The unfairness of life, my mother would tell me if I complained to her. I, too, had wondered about Adam Thompson's scarred neck and arm but being hitched to Stanley blinded me to appreciating any of Adam's qualities.

"I've never seen such a beautiful creature as his Isis," Pfannie blathered. "Well deserving of the Best in Class trophy." She stopped and set her hand on mine. "We think the world of you and Memnet, Ivy. Almanzo was telling me the other day he hoped you'd

agree to a seat on the board.”

Her eyes got that misty look and made me mentally start backing up.

“If only you and he...well, I mean, now that you and what’s his name—”

“Ivy! There you are!” Donald called and beckoned.

Good grief! I was so saved. Pfannie was a very young aunt to have a nephew my age. He had learned about my age from official files of the group that were supposed to be private and made sure to let me know he thought we would be suitable partners. Almanzo was still single...go figure...and had managed to date every other single woman in our branch. Except me. I’d been engaged. Last week I turned down two phone invitations from him to attend this evening’s party together. I contemplated changing my phone number. And my birthday.

Donald understood me, and my frame of mind. He also knew how I felt about Christmas—unadulterated hatred grown stronger with my canceled wedding set for last weekend—and he offered me a sympathetic smile. He had retrieved his cat Tut who was oddly content in Donald’s arms despite the commotion in the room. “I wanted to share something with you...” His twinkly expression faded only a smidgeon when he noticed who was with me. “Mrs. Morgenstern. Hello.”

She sniffed. “Mr. President. Has my Adelaide been found?”

How in the world did that woman turn the tears on and off like that? What gift.

“I didn’t know she was missing.” Donald swung his worried gaze toward mine. “Is that where you’ve been? Looking for her?”

“Yes.” Pfannie began twisting a lace-edged

handkerchief between her hands, setting the cat charms at her wrist jingling in a clash with the music. "We ran into Adam—Isis's companion—who agreed to check in the men's room for us."

I choked on the laughter bubbling up at her statement, stuffed it back, but snorted, which only made me giggle harder. Pfannie narrowed her eyes at me. I grabbed my throat and made like I needed water.

Tut gave an angry hiss and jumped down, sat, and sent his ears back. Donald must have clutched him in a sensitive spot. Donald stopped biting his lips and cupped his mouth like a megaphone. "Everyone! Excuse me, friends!"

Background noise dissolved like bubbles from flat champagne.

"Has anyone seen Adelaide, Mrs. Morgenstern's cat? Let's all take a look around ourselves. Think of the last time you might have seen her. And let's offer up a prayer of safety, shall we?"

"Oh, I should have thought of that right away," Pfannie whispered at me. She raised her hand to toss in her two cents. "She's a precious Siamese, quite young. I'm worried she hasn't had a chance to get to get comfortable with anyone yet and may have gone into hiding. Don't worry, people. No cause to call the authorities. I'm quite certain this isn't a case of bullying."

I choked again on snorts of glee at her posturing and felt the warmth of someone behind me. "Like Memnet and Isis," someone said dryly.

"Hey!" I hissed at Isis's "companion," my need to apologize for the cat fight at last spring's convention lost. "Mem was provoked."

Adam held up his hands. His slow grin curled my

toes. "Maybe."

Two issues struck me at the same time. In the few months since Stanley had left me not-quite-at-the-altar-but-too-close-for-comfort, I had managed to thaw toward men. Not only thaw, but be attracted to a man. I was not dead.

But I'd also agreed to move a hundred miles away from what might have been the start of a beautiful relationship.

"Ah, good." Donald rubbed his hands together as he joined us. "I've been working toward getting the three of us together all night. Adam and I have been talking."

2

A shriek interrupted Donald's intriguing statement about talking to Adam. I heaved out a frustrated sigh and joined the general head swivel of the crowd toward the screamer in the rear corner. Pfannie. Of course. She'd managed to migrate to the coat rack near the exit to the parking lot during Donald, Adam, and my almost-summit.

"Someone left the side door cracked open! Who knows if my Adelaide got out?" She wrung her hands for good measure. But, ever-charitable, she added to the chaos. "Is anyone else's friend missing?"

Good pet owners know to look down, so it was a very odd sight indeed of a gaggle of sixty-odd partygoers checking their feet and hopping around tails and the occasional harness collar of a particularly snooty cat. I backed with Donald and Adam toward the sideline and watched the dance. I probably should film it for the internet. Maybe put it on our association website. Animal lovers gone wild. It could go viral and start a whole new craze.

Did I mention I was in charge of the website and social media promotion? That's because part of my company, McTeague's Technical Services, dealt with small businesses web and information systems. I was also happy to be private people's personal help desk and set up home computer systems. I enjoyed hosting a

special unique side service as a clearing house for online mail and message inboxes. Quite handy for vacations, business trips, and various other discretionary issues. The service also made me one of the loneliest people in Maplewood, as no one was sure what I knew about whom, and so they feared talking to me or meeting me in public. Not that I'd ever tell.

Needless to say, starting over at Donald's invitation to help revitalize Apple Grove was a win-win prospect. I glanced at Adam out of the corner of my eye.

"So, Adam," I said slowly to get his attention.

He smiled down on me.

"I wanted to follow up on our last email exchange with a personal apology. Memnet is ageing, as you know. He has some foibles, but he's really very much a gentleman. He didn't mean to swat Isis like that and get her all riled up. Right before her spotlight showing."

He rocked on his heels and scanned the calming crowd before answering. "Isis is high-spirited," he admitted. "She deserved it." His molten silvery grey eyes, the color of Isis's pelt, met mine. "I think we've done enough apologizing, don't you?"

"Sure, yes." How could a man's lips be so beautiful? Stanley's lips were uneven, without that angelic bow...I shook myself and forcibly removed my gaze.

Unfortunately, toward that of Almanzo Benteen, who shared not only my birth year but my height. We stared, eye-to-eye. Or glared, to be more accurate. His shoulders were damp with snow and a whiff of cold air swirled around him. He must have been outside. Checking the bushes around the parking lot for a lost

cat, maybe? Or letting one out? Almanzo raised a bristly black brow and practically growled at Adam and Donald. "I don't believe anything like this has happened in the past at our gatherings," he said. "A valuable pet gone missing?"

"Not at a holiday gathering I can recall," Donald agreed smoothly. "There was the case of the forgotten Persian three years ago," he said, "at your first convention, I believe. And the calico sisters who escaped—"

"At least the weather is more tolerable in the spring," Almanzo cut in. "It's barely above freezing. Adelaide could die."

"Her pelt is thick for a reason," I reminded him. "We'll find her. I doubt she went far, if she did make it outside. Who would leave a door open?"

"I've notified the authorities," Almanzo said.

Donald's face stiffened. "I am certain Doctor Hooper will be helpful. This is, after all, his venue which he volunteered at no cost for this gathering. He must know every hiding spot."

He was too kind of a man to show his irritation. I thought calling the police was overkill meant to make Donald look bad, but it was going to backfire big time if we lost the Hoopers as sponsors. I decided to leave the men to it and rejoined Pfannie. Several people had retrieved their coats in preparation to leave. I understood, but wondered what the police would say. I doubted this was a crime scene, but the way the nice party was breaking up after only an hour sure seemed a crime. I'd hardly caught up with the few people I knew well. I stopped to say good bye to Matt Jones and Barbara Inglewood who were clutching their tabbies. Babs had introduced me to Egyptian Mau cats when

she worked at the rural animal shelter just outside of Maplewood.

"We should get together before you move," Babs said. "Since I can't make the March convention this year."

"Thank you, I'd love that," I replied during our hug. "Merry Christmas. You enjoy that cruise."

There were a few people I was going to miss from Maplewood, like Babs. Stanley hadn't wanted to socialize much, though when he was on the road I managed to see my friends and go to church. He didn't keep me from going out—nothing like that. We just got lazy, I guess. It became easier not to work at friendships.

I needed to work at exercising my friendship muscle. Starting with supporting Pfannie. Others avoided her, as if she were a pet black hole. Memnet was too comfortable with Ginger to want to move. She'd been taking turns in the pet-sitting room at conventions since she was eleven, and I trusted her.

"Pfannie." I put my arm around her shoulders. "Almanzo said he called the police."

She sniffed. "I asked him to find Rolf. To let him know somebody kidnapped my baby."

I doubted that, but patted her back anyway. I hoped Adelaide hadn't gotten out and lost. She had to be hiding inside somewhere. "Has Rolf come back yet? He'll want to know about Adelaide."

Her eyes hardened. "That's why Almanzo called his buddies at the department. They should know about Rolf's lapse."

That bit of information got away from me. I was more focused on cats. "So, Rolf is a police officer?"

"State trooper." A hint of pride crept in under her

irritation.

"So that's where you met?" I knew Pfannie worked at the State Police Headquarters here in Springfield. She'd made sure everyone who attended the last conference on rescue animals heard that. Her former husband, a veterinarian, sent out regular updates on adoptable animals. Too many creatures had to go into crowded shelters. Far too few were taken home by a loving family.

"Yes, we met when he went through training. He should be here with me in my moment of crisis."

Having been part of a couple with an often-absent partner, I understood her unhappiness. "Did he say what he was going out for?" Maybe he could shed some light on the situation if we could locate him.

"Something about a call," Pfannie muttered.

"Official business?"

David Hooper, one of the owners of Hooper's Animal Haven, approached Pfannie before she could make any more comments. Middle-aged and paunchy, Dr. Hooper set one of his freckled hands gently on Pfannie's. "Mrs. Morgenstern, we'll find Adelaide. The girls are beside themselves with worry."

His three daughters were the pet-sitters that night. "Abby doesn't have your name on the sign-in sheet," he went on. "Where did you check in?"

Hmm. I narrowed my eyes in thought. I usually arrived plenty early at these functions, especially when I had to drive longer than an hour and might get lost. I didn't remember Pfannie's arrival, but I wasn't an official greeter and was probably settling Mem, or playing with other cats.

"Adelaide is new to me," Pfannie said. "I planned to carry her until she got used to things. I didn't want a

replay of that disturbing incident between Memnet and Isis." She sent a sly glance my direction.

Ouch. Considering I was her only friend at the moment, and I was beginning to wonder why, I decided to take a mental step back and review the situation. Rolf and Junior's arrival, I remembered quite well. Junior and Mem were pals and I'd been glad to see them nose each other. Then Isis pranced in, and I'd moved to get Mem settled with Ginger while losing track of Isis's owner. Hortense Phillips, the CAT secretary, had called me over to her laptop to look at updates for the website. I'd greeted some other acquaintances, had some punch, and sucked up enough courage to walk over and talk to Adam Thompson since he was with Donald.

Then Pfannie's dramatics.

Dr. Hooper went to meet the new uniformed arrivals who were local Springfield officers, not State Patrol. I wondered if Pfannie realized that when she wanted to take a dig at Rolf by calling in his comrades. By her frown, probably not.

One police officer was very young; the other was a hardened, narrow-faced Hispanic woman who took the lead. She raked Pfannie with a look that said she didn't much appreciate this waste of time, but the quicker they got to it, the quicker they could get back to the criminals. "Ma'am, I understand your cat is missing?"

The tone of her voice—G. Gonzalez, by the metal plate on the front of her coat—made the situation not-funny. More people went to the coat racks.

"She's been kidnapped," Pfannie whispered. Her face went pale. I pushed a nearby chair under her just in time.