

# Bindings

3

*Turning Pages*

Jenny Kalahar

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Jenny Kalahar

Book 3 in the  
Turning Pages Series



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*Bindings* is dedicated to all those who tirelessly, patiently, and lovingly protect and serve the emotional and physical needs of animals and people everywhere. Thank you to my dear husband Patrick, who makes my writing possible. Thanks to Last Stanza Poetry Association members, Poetry Society of Indiana, ICHC friends, and to everyone who helps and encourages any author along their creative way.

# Chapter One

Kris Dehlvi sat on a plush chair with his back to the windows holding Lila Pearl, watching sparkling dust float in the strong afternoon light. His right arm supported her, but it was starting to fall asleep right along with the baby. Not wanting to wake her, he stayed as still as he could, and soon his breathing matched hers.

Nearly hypnotized by the sunlit dust, he eventually closed his eyes, letting the soothing classical music from the stereo in the rare bookshop's main room calm his thoughts. Tatyana, his girlfriend, was leaving for Botswana once school ended for the summer.

"I'm going home," she said as she'd stood on his front porch the day before. She was clearly upset as she held his hand and looked at their feet.

"Okay, but you just got here."

"No," she said, pulling him with her as she sat on the cushioned bench. She kept her eyes on the pots of red and pink geraniums hanging above the railing. "My parents and I are going back to the country of our birth. We had planned to stay there for a month or two to visit family like we did when I was eleven." She'd paused, her head bowed. "Lately, though, my mother is hinting that she might want to stay there forever."

Kris replayed that scene over and over to the rhythm of L.P.'s soft breathing and the gentle music, his eyes still closed. He remembered feeling relieved, but then guilty that he'd felt relieved. He had wanted to pull away from her for weeks, ever since the picnic at the Cumber's celebrating the grand opening of their new antique shop. Nothing had happened, and they hadn't argued, but being around all the loving couples at the party made him realize that he didn't have that same kind of bond with Tatyana. They were good friends, but nothing more. It hadn't been fair to her to pretend it was something more.

Mrs. O'Malley leaned against the doorway and watched Kris and her grandniece resting. She sighed almost noiselessly, but it was loud enough to

rouse the boy, who opened his eyes and smiled.

“Could you take her, Mrs. O? My arm is getting numb,” he whispered.

Mavis O’Malley pushed her glasses higher onto her nose before crossing the room to lift the baby into her arms. L.P. yawned and sleepily asked, “Mama?” even though she could see that it was her great-aunt who was holding her.

“Your mom had to go away for a little while, Lily. Want to go back to sleep, or do you want Kris to take you to the front room to pet Buglit?”

L.P. twisted around until she found Kris, who was standing nearby in front of a showcase shaking the numbness from his arm. She grinned and opened and closed her hand toward him.

Mrs. O’Malley gave the baby back to Kris and watched as the boy carried her to the main room in search of the shop’s resident calico cat.

“L.P.—where’s Bug? Can you find Bug?” coaxed Kris.

“Bah!” called L.P., using her name for Buglit. She didn’t see the cat, but she did spot Mack O’Malley at the far end of the room where he was shelving books in the science fiction paperback section. She smiled, showing off her four new teeth.

Mr. O’Malley placed a stack of paperbacks on the end table near the bookshop’s big red sofa. “Well, Lila Pearl. Did you enjoy your nap with Kris?”

She yawned a long, slow yawn. “Ba-ah!” she called again, and Buglit dashed into the room from the hallway.

“There’s Bug,” Mrs. O’Malley said. She lifted the calico cat and hugged her to her chest. The older woman then stood close to L.P. so the tiny girl could pet her favorite cat with one outstretched finger.

“That’s nice, sweetie,” said Mack. “Soft. The kitty has *soft* fur, doesn’t she?” He then looked at the boy. “Hey, Kris—what’s going on at your house? Any news?”

Kris scratched Buglit under her chin with his free hand and answered, “Mom and Dad are thinking about taking in another kid.”

“I knew they were talking about fostering again, but I didn’t know it would be this soon. Are they going to get a boy or a girl, do you know?” asked Mrs. O’Malley.

“I’m not sure. And they aren’t going to foster at first like they did with me. I think they want to adopt from the start.”

L.P. squealed, making Kris and the O’Malleys laugh. Buglit had licked her finger.

Mrs. O’Malley said, “Well, that is kind of them to want to help out another child, Kris. This will be a big change for you and your brothers. Are you excited?”

Kris paused, taking in a slow breath. “I’m not what you’d call *excited*, but I think adopting again is a good thing. I guess I don’t know if I want so many things to change all at once.” He looked down at the baby shyly as he said, “Tatyana told me yesterday that she’s moving back to Botswana.”

The O’Malleys each looked for the other’s reaction to this announcement.

“She is, huh? Her parents, too? I thought her dad was enjoying his professorship,” said Mack as he walked toward the science fiction paperbacks again, scooping up the stack on the end table on his way.

Kris shrugged. “They plan to go back for only this summer, but Taty thinks they might stay permanently. Her mom’s family has been putting pressure on them, I guess. They don’t want Taty to be a young woman away from her home country. That’s a part of it, anyway.”

“Hmm. Well, I’m sorry to hear this, Kris,” said Mrs. O’Malley, frowning. “I know how close you two are. You’re sure going to miss her, aren’t you?”

Kris shrugged again and looked only at Buglit. “I guess.”

His answer seemed strange to Mrs. O’Malley, but she let the topic drop. Buglit jumped to the floor from her arms, so she took L.P. from Kris, who then went to the science fiction section.

The Mary twins—so-called by the O’Malleys because the friends look alike, both have gray hair, and usually dress alike—came in to browse for romance novels. “Hello, everyone. Nice to see you again, Kris. My, how tall and handsome you’re getting to be,” complimented the older Mary.

“Hello, Marys,” said Kris.

“His voice! I can’t get used to that grown-up voice coming out of him, can you, Mary?”

“No, I can’t either, Mary.”

“He’s like a young Cary Grant, don’t you think so?”

“Oh, no, dear. Definitely more of a Paul Newman type with his sandy hair and those piercing blue eyes.”

“I once saw Paul Newman and his wife in person. I’ll never forget that day in New York. Have I ever told you about meeting Paul Newman, Mary?”

“Yes, yes. But now that I look at Kris closer, he’s starting to resemble my cousin Melvin. When Melvin was much younger and still had hair, of course. Melvin was a looker. He eventually married Ethel Ramsbacher, which was unfortunate. Did I ever tell you about Ethel Ramsbacher?”

The ladies chatted some more about unfortunate Cousin Melvin before switching to a discussion of the high price of saffron as they headed to the far end of the main room to look at the recently shelved romance paperbacks.

Sighing and stretching, Kris told Mr. O’Malley, “Well, I should get home. I need to study for a final exam. I can’t wait until I can get back to working here every day. It seems like a whole decade has gone by since last summer.”

Mack nodded, feeling the same way. “Are you doing anything this Saturday? Oh, and do you know if Matt is doing anything Saturday?”

Kris shook his head. “I don’t have anything going on. I’d have to call Matt to ask him if he’s got any big plans. Katrina is taking piano lessons now, and I think Saturday is one of the two days of the week that she has ’em, so I don’t think she’s available.”

“No, I only need your help and Matt’s. There are two auctions in two different towns taking place simultaneously on Saturday, and I’d like to go to both of them. Since I’m only one tall, plaid-shirted fellow, I can’t manage to cover both by myself. Mrs. O should stay here to run the shop, and that puts me in a bind.”

“Oh, yeah—I can do one of them for you, Mack. I’ve gone to a few auctions, and I know how they work.”



“Thanks, kiddo. The ads for both state that they’ll be selling a lot of old books. Neither has a preview before the morning of the sale, so I don’t know if one will be more worthwhile than the other, if both will be great, or if both will be a wash. You’ll definitely need Matt along. Trying to keep track of what you’ve bid on and how much you’ve spent is hard. I hate to go without Mavis as my helper, but we can’t afford to be closed on a busy Saturday. Do you think Matt would want to go with us? I can drop you boys at one auction, get a bidder number for you, then go to the other sale.”

“I’m sure he’ll want to do it,” Kris said from his seat atop a short, white stepladder.

“Listen—and no arguing about this: I’m going to pay you kids. I know you’re planning to work here again in exchange for so-called ‘book-dealing lessons’ this summer, Kris, but this is a different situation.”

“Okay. Want me to try to get Matt on the phone now?”

Mack nodded. “Yes, please. Mavis and I are headed to Jack and Darla’s for a supper party. We’re going to shoo everyone out right at closing time to give us a chance to get back to our apartment to clean up and put on our going-out clothes. Danny, the Cumbers, Jack’s folks, and a couple of others will be there, too.”

“Oh, I thought you two have L.P. because the Jacksons went somewhere for the afternoon,” Kris said.

“No,” said Mrs. O’Malley from the computer chair where she was sitting with the baby on her lap. “Darla wanted some uninterrupted time at home to cook and clean.”

Kris walked to the counter and reached for the telephone. “Matt? Hey, are you—wow! What is that awful noise in the background? ... It *is*? Oh, man! Well, she’s just beginning. Maybe after a few more lessons, it won’t sound like a horror movie soundtrack. Anyway, are you doing anything special on Saturday? I have a job for you if you want it. A *paying* job for Mr. O. We’d go to an auction, bid on books, and then wait there for him to come back from another auction to pick us up. ... You will? Great! Okay, I’ll talk to you later about what time and all that stuff. Bye!”



“I take it Matt isn’t too excited by Katrina’s piano practicing,” said Mack as he straightened the small, colorful area rug in front of the sofa.

“No. I don’t know how Browser can stand it. I wonder why he wasn’t howling. Maybe he’s in the yard with his paws over his ears.”

Mrs. O’Malley said, “I took lessons for a while when I was a girl. I couldn’t make both hands do different things at the same time. I’m sure Katrina is already doing better than I ever did.”

Mack, who was wiping dust from his glasses with his shirttail, asked, “So, is Matt on board for the auction?”

“He said he’ll go.”

“Great!” He looked at the clock. “Mavis, you should probably carry your little miss next door to Jack. I’ll close up shop while you’re gone.”

Mrs. O’Malley frowned. She snuggled the baby higher into her arms, not wanting to let go. “In a minute, maybe. I don’t see why there’s some big rush. She still wants to cuddle.”

“Or *you* do,” Mack said.



“Darla! I love it!” Mrs. Cumber said after slipping off her coat in Jack and Darla Jackson’s living room that evening. She crossed the orange shag carpeting to stand in front of a dazzlingly lit-up blue and red 1970s jukebox.

“Here it is,” Jack said proudly. He lifted a soda can and made a toasting gesture to the machine. “Fully restored. My folks gave it to us as a surprise a few days ago.”

“Wow! That is something else!” said Mack as he held the door open for his wife.

Mrs. O’Malley stopped in surprise when she saw the strobing machine in the corner. “Oh, Jack! I have the strongest urge to do the Hustle right now. Wasn’t there one almost exactly like it at the Dairy Deluxe about a million years ago?”

John Jackson called from the kitchen, “That’s *the* very jukebox, Mavis.” He stepped into the living room to join Danny, Lisa and Sonny Smith, the Cumbers, the O’Malleys, and his son Jack. “It was put into storage for twenty-five years after the Dairy closed, but then it went up for auction this past winter when the Douglass estate was sold. You should have seen all the middle-aged people bidding silly high prices for anything at all having to do with their old hangout. Even ice cream dishes brought big bucks. I was lucky to be able to get this tugboat for the price I did. Probably because it didn’t work, and it was dirty.” He finally looked away from the jukebox to his company. “Hello, everyone! Nice to see you all. Darla and Ruthie are still getting supper ready, so go ahead and have a seat wherever you’d like.”

Mrs. O’Malley went to stand in front of the jukebox, looking over the song selections and the details of the machine. “I can’t *believe* it. I never thought I’d see this one—or one like it—again. I wonder if it recognizes me in my old age.”

“Should I have it play?” asked Jack, smiling. “And you’re hardly ‘old,’ Mavis.” He looked around at the gathered group for suggestions. “What should I put on? Disco? Country? Blues? I have it all loaded up.”

“Have any Lawrence Welk?” Sonny asked.

“Liberace?” tried Lisa.

“Um, no. Sorry. And you two should clearly enter the modern age—at least a little bit.”

“Well, put on some blues,” said Mack.

Jack snapped his fingers. “Blues it is.”

Danny took a seat on the center of a vintage orange and black tuxedo-style sofa, his long legs in black jeans stretching out in front of him.

Jack pressed a selection, and the record played without being paid to do so. “Didn’t It Rain” by Sister Rosetta Tharpe splashed out of the speakers. “I can’t have the volume too loud,” he explained. “It would hurt the baby’s ears.”

“Weeee!” squealed L.P. as she crawled from the kitchen to look at the lights and hear the lively music. Jack lifted her to his chest, pushed his

glasses higher on his nose, and danced energetically with her as she laughed and laughed, her eyes shining.

Mrs. O'Malley removed her jacket, slung it on the arm of a chair, and patted Danny's knee to greet her brother before taking Mack's offered hand. The O'Malleys swiveled and jumped, clapped and sang along with the words they knew, their own singing volume about the same as the recording.

The Cumbers took a seat on either side of Danny and clapped happily, and Darla and Ruthie Jackson stood in the kitchen entranceway, smiling. Lisa pulled her husband from a purple-striped armchair and moved all around him as he stood nearly still, uncertain as to how to dance to anything other than a polka or a waltz.

A swanky song called "Bumble Bee" by Lavern Baker started. The two couples danced with the same enthusiasm the whole time that second song played. Mrs. O'Malley accidentally ran into Lila Pearl's playpen, but she quickly recovered and found the beat again.

When that record ended, the world was suddenly silent. L.P. wanted down from her father's arms. She crawled to the jukebox to try to pat it into playing another tune, but just then Darla announced that supper was ready to dish up.

"Sissy, you and Mr. Bookstore dance *deliciously*. You should go out dancing now and again. I never hear about you two dancing anywhere," said Mrs. Cumber as they stood in front of the pizza casserole on the kitchen table.

"We're too tired by the end of the day to do anything terribly exciting," said Mack as he buttered a thick slice of warm bread.

Mrs. O'Malley nodded. "I like to bowl, but I go with the ladies. I haven't even been bowling in quite a while, now that I think about it. I don't know, Mack. Maybe we should go out more together. What do you think?"

"We're partying right now, aren't we? And we had the picnic at the farm a few weeks ago. Why, we're practically party *animals*."

"No. We're not," countered his wife flatly, shaking her head.

Darla and her mother-in-law, Ruthie, had made two casseroles, a ham, barbeque burger bacon beans, potato salad, a grape and melon salad, mixed cold greens, and candied yams.

“What are we celebrating, exactly,” Mack asked Jack as he spooned up a serving of the savory beans.

“Mom and Dad’s anniversary. It’s their fortieth.”

“What?” asked Mrs. O’Malley, who had overheard.

“It is?” asked Elwood Cumber, his plate already full. He stopped on his way to the dining room to look at the Jacksons in surprise.

Mr. and Mrs. Jackson both nodded.

“Forty years ago today. I know—we don’t seem old enough. We were mere children when we married,” said John Jackson.

“Well, happy anniversary, you two,” said Mrs. O’Malley, all smiles. She put her plate down before giving Ruthie a hug. She then squeezed John’s arm. Her face was still a little flushed from dancing, making her smile extra radiant.

“Congrats!” said Lisa, setting her full plate next to her husband’s. “I knew about the jukebox. I assumed this was a party to christen it.”

“Ba-baa!” said Lila Pearl, adding her congratulations to the round of handshaking and hugging going on above her head.

“So, let me get this straight,” said Elwood. “It’s *your* anniversary, but you buy a great, expensive present for your kids? How’s come *that* is, John?”

“Um ... Ruth wouldn’t let me have it at *our* house.”

“I *thought* so,” said Elwood, continuing into the dining room again. He let loose and loudly laughed once he’d set his plate safely onto the table.

“How goes the antique biz, Quaintance?” asked John, scooting his chair closer to the table. “Any interesting customers come in lately? I know you haven’t had your Barntiques open for very long, but you must have *some* stories to tell us by now.”

“Oh, you betcha!” she answered. “Last week I had a lady in there named GillyAnn—she must be eighty-five or ninety—and she wanted to know if we had any old legerdemain supplies. You know—things for a magic act. She

used to tour with her husband when they were young, and now that her husband has passed on, she wants to go back on stage. She sold their trunk of tricks decades ago and always regretted giving them up.”

“A magic act?” asked Darla as she put L.P. into her highchair. “Fabulous! So, did you have anything?”

Quaintance nodded after swallowing a sip of water. “A top hat. She bought it. And some old white handkerchiefs, and a very slender walking stick that she said she’ll have sawn in half and painted to make a wand. She left happy. I’ve been checking the newspaper every day to see if she’s advertised her show yet.”

“Ha! It sounds like you’re having fun, Quainty,” Mrs. O’Malley said to her sister. “If you see her again, tell her we’ve got a few vintage magic books in stock.”

“Oh, yes! I should have thought to send her over to you and Mr. Bookstore. Well, I wasn’t thinking along those lines when I was scrambling around trying to find magical tidbits of my own.”

When everyone had settled at last around the table with full plates, Mrs. Cumber began to sing “Happy Anniversary.” It was a solo at first, but then the others joined in as the elder Jacksons held hands under the table and looked happily embarrassed. L.P. clapped her hands a few times, not caring in the least that she wasn’t exactly on the beat.

Glasses of water and iced tea were held high as Jack gave a toast. “To Mom and Dad, the best ... well, simply the best. May you have another forty happy years together.”

Ruth raised her glass and replied, “Thank you, Jack. And, since the jukebox is over here and not in *my* living room, I’m sure they’ll be very happy years, indeed.”

“Oh, you love that jukebox, too. Admit it, Ruth,” said John.

“I love that it’s in Darla and Jack’s house.”

“Well, if I ever go missing in the middle of the afternoon, at least you’ll know where to find me.”

A dog barked in the back yard.

“Jack, why don’t you invite Patrick to join the party? It seems strange not to have him in here with us,” said Ruth as she cut into her slice of ham.

“He’s afraid of the beast in the corner.”

“That dog? He’s survived storms and floods and L.P.’s teething tantrums. How can he possibly be afraid of a jukebox?” asked Mack.

Jack sipped his water and said, “Pat bumped into it yesterday while romping around with the baby. It started playing Little Richard’s ‘Tutti Frutti,’ and it scared the heck out of him. I’m not sure if the hackles on his back have settled down even now. He hasn’t wanted to come into the house since.”

## Chapter Two

“When I first open a book, I don’t want to be shouted at. I don’t want to hear the screaming of a damsel in distress, the trumpeting of a charging elephant, or the banging of a nightclub drum. I want there to be whispering at the beginning. Very, very interesting whispering, but whispering all the same,” read Mrs. O’Malley from a book she was holding in one hand. She supported her grandniece on her lap with her other arm. The afternoon sun was too weak to make its way through the clouds, so the late spring day felt cooler than it should have for that time of the year. But it was warm inside the bookshop, and the overhead lights and table lamps gave enough yellow glow of their own to make anyone browsing the bookshelves feel golden.

A rush of wind tangled and detangled the green leaves of a small maple tree outside the display window as Mrs. O’Malley held Lila Pearl. She adjusted the baby into a more upright position on her leg, and Buglit extended a paw from under the counter where she had been snoozing on a stack of folded paper bags. A rollicking piece by Bach had started on the stereo a moment before. The cat had never liked Bach, so she woke up in a cranky mood. When she spotted the baby, however, her spirits improved.

“Mrrew,” Bug called. She sniffed the light, powdery scents that came from freshly changed L.P. and decided to join the baby. Bug purred and climbed onto the one still-vacant and irresistible leg.

Mrs. O’Malley closed her book, lifted the cat, and turned her around so they all faced the cash register and computer. There the three friends companionable sat together as Buglit tried hard to ignore Bach’s harpsichord pounding away from the speakers overhead, and Mrs. O’Malley tried hard not to doze off from pure contentment.

All three roused as Darla Jackson pushed in through the glass front door, bringing a rush of cool air in with her. Dressed in sweatpants and a dust-covered hooded sweatshirt, bits of dirty hay clung to the folds of her hood where it met her neck and brown ponytail.



“Shh!” Darla said, holding up one hand to motion for Mrs. O’Malley to stay just as she was. She took her cell phone from a pocket, stepped around the counter, and took a photo of the trio as they snuggled together. She then admired the resulting shot.

Mrs. O’Malley grinned as Darla showed her the screen. Buglit jumped to the floor as L.P. was handed to Darla.

“Bug—don’t jump in the bassinet again,” Mrs. O’Malley warned, sending the cat in the opposite direction.

“I thought Bug hates Bach. How’d you get her to tolerate being in the same room with the stereo while her least favorite composer was on?” Darla asked as she pulled L.P.’s striped shirt lower over her tummy.

“I guess the temptation of a triple cuddle was too much for her to resist. She sure loves your baby.” Mrs. O’Malley stood, stretched, and yawned. “It’s been quiet in here today. It felt good to have a slow business day, though. We were working so long to get Elwood and Quainty’s antique shop open—while also working full days here—that Mack and I were worn out. It’s been weeks, but I can’t seem to rest enough now. I was sitting here thinking about the party at your place last night, and about the Cumber’s party in April. Wasn’t that grand opening picnic something else?”

Darla nodded as she lowered the baby into her portable bassinet beside the computer chair. She then opened the mini refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of orange juice. Mrs. O’Malley handed her a clean cup. “It was ... it really was. I can’t get used to seeing Kris holding hands with a girl. He’s growing up fast!”

Mrs. O’Malley sighed. “But Kris told us that Tatyana is leaving for Botswana when school lets out. He said that she and her family may stay there longer than this summer.”

“Poor kid. I remember *my* first heartbreak.” Darla drank, then added, “I hope he’s not too upset.”

“Actually, I got the impression that he wasn’t. Oh, well. Teenagers are full of ups and downs. It’s hard to tell *what* he’s feeling. Maybe he’s still holding out hope that she’ll be back when the new school year starts again this fall.”

Darla finished her drink. Some hay from her sweatshirt dropped to the floor.

“Don’t bother picking it up, Darla. I need to clean and sweep this afternoon, but I keep putting it off. Now that you’re taking L.P., I no longer have an excuse. There’s hardly been anyone in the shop all day. I think the gloomy weather has everyone staying inside.”

Buglit rubbed Darla’s legs in greeting. “Hiya, kitty. Been taking care of L.P. and Auntie Mavis for me?”

The calico squinted up at Darla, enjoying being appreciated for all her hard work. Buglit then left them to visit the litter box in the cats-only room at the far end of the hallway.

“So. How’d you do at the auction?” asked Mrs. O’Malley.

“Good,” Darla answered, pouring herself more juice. “I won’t really know until I get them next door where Jack and I can go carefully through them. The records I did manage to examine there seemed to be in nice, clean condition. I didn’t see any rarities, but they should sell all right in our shop. I like selling online, but it’s much more fun to talk to people in person about the music and performers they love and to recommend others that they might never have heard of before. Jack has taught me so much.”

Mrs. O’Malley nodded. “You don’t miss your life as a parking meter reader, then?”

“I thought I might, but I don’t. Running the record shop with Jack is fun. He teaches me the business and all about music and musicians, and I’m teaching myself how to sell our rare records online. I love having the baby with us day and night, and I don’t have to worry if I have to leave for a while to take L.P. to her appointments. You’re always here for me to visit or to watch the baby, too. The boss is Jack, and he never cares if I need time off. Also, he calls *me* ‘the boss,’ to keep emphasizing that we’re in this together now.”

“I feel the same way with our store. Owning a business is a big commitment and a lot of work, but with Mack, it’s a lot of laughs, too.”

“Where is Mack? In the storage room?” Darla asked, glancing around the empty main room and down the hallway.

“No. He’s at your other aunt and uncle’s place. They bought the contents of a farm shed in Patience a couple of days ago. Elwood finally has everything loaded into their antique shop except the salamanders and cobwebs. El said they’d gotten about twenty boxes of old books with the vintage automotive parts and tools, and Mack volunteered to sort through the group for ones that they should keep to sell. The rest can be donated away, or we can take them here and put them outside on our windowsill as freebies. If there are any rare or valuable books, we’ll list them on the internet for Quainty.”

“Sounds good. I was thinking of doing the same thing if they buy a group that includes records. Jack can sort through them and, if they like, we can list the more exciting ones online for them.” She looked at the time on her phone. “Well, I suppose my little girly and I should get over to the shop. Jack’s dad dropped off Mrs. Jackson—and yes, I’m still calling her that—at home before bringing the truckload of records here. It was nice of them to take me with them today. He parked in the back alley and is helping Jack unload everything into the office. I think I’ll see if I can get a ride with Mr. J back to our house so I can clean up and flop onto my cushy chair for a nap before dinner. Jack can bring L.P. home later. Auctions wear me out.”

“Oh, me, too. I hardly go to them anymore, and we went to one practically every week when we were first married.” Mrs. O’Malley wrapped a white knitted blanket around L.P. and lifted her into a goodbye hug. She kissed the baby’s cheek and got a dimpled smile and a giggle in return. “I can keep her longer if you’d like. She gives me an excuse to avoid cleaning.”

“Nah. Jack misses her. And me, which is very sweet.”

Mrs. O’Malley nodded, giving her a wink. She touched L.P.’s nose. “Thank you for an entertaining visit today, Lila. Buglit and I both hope you’ll come back soon.”

“Bah!” replied the baby.

As she took L.P., Darla asked, “Are you getting a new cat from the shelter soon? It seems strange to see Buglit wandering alone among the bookcases.”

“One is coming in a few days. I told Doris to wait since I knew I was going to be tied up with our little punkin’ all day today. And then there are the two auctions tomorrow that Mack, Matt, and Kris are going to. The place will be very crowded if we have to haul in a bunch of boxes. Buglit seems a bit lonesome for her next companion, so we’ll all be glad to have a new feline roaming the aisles and sitting on the sofa.” Mrs. O’Malley touched the tip of the baby’s nose and smiled, enjoying L.P.’s brown curls and pink, round cheeks. “Oh! I forgot to tell Bug that ‘her’ baby is leaving. She’d never forgive me. Bug,” she called. “Buglit! L.P. is going next door now.”

In a flash, the calico cat sped into the main room. She bounded onto the computer chair and stepped onto the countertop. She sniffed the baby’s sock-covered toes one last time as she purred a goodbye of her own.

Mrs. O’Malley put on a CD of rockabilly music and turned the volume louder when she was alone. She wiped dust from the small tables, lamps, and knick-knacks in the main room, all the while half-dancing.

When she’d finished dusting, she re-shelved books that had been left on a cushion of the big red sofa that faced the counter and tidied the rest of the room. After a short break, she swept each room that had a wooden floor.

At nearly closing time that late afternoon, Mack entered the shop backward, carrying a cumbersome load of two cardboard boxes that he placed on the countertop.

“Hello, Mack,” said Mrs. O’Malley cheerfully from her computer chair. “Are those the books we’re going to sell for Quaintance?”

“Are you still sitting there? That’s where I left you this morning. Lazy thing!”

She playfully threw her dusting cloth at him.

Mack picked it up. “Yep. There are some dustjacketed mid-century cookbooks in one of the boxes, and about five math books in German that I think might be valuable in the other. I put several interesting oddities in that box, too.”

She yawned. "I can barely keep my eyes open. Well, if there are more books to bring in, bring them in now. I piled a group of flattened boxes here behind the counter for the auctions. Speaking of auctions, Darla went to one today. No big, exciting finds for her, sadly. I hope you have more luck tomorrow. We could use some new, interesting stock." She turned on the monitor and checked her email. "Looks like our internet sales are humming along. I should concentrate more on online selling."

Mack opened a box and pulled out a 1950s cookbook by a Cajun chef. The book's spectacular orange and yellow dustjacket showed abstract vegetables and fruits holding spice bottles and dancing toward a cooking pot. "How does this one grab you?"

"Nice! Are there more like that?" Mrs. O'Malley asked, standing for a closer look.

"This box is full of culinary delicacies, plus there are one or two more boxes full of them still in the van. I think most of the rest of the group contains math and science books. I'll try for a closer parking spot to make it easier to unload. While I do that, would you call Kris? I'll pick up the kids at about seven-thirty tomorrow morning. Have Kris call Matt with that info, please."

She nodded once, distracted by a small, orange booklet titled "Crickets in the Rain and Other Poems" by Lottie Gunn Russell. "Why does this seem familiar, Mack?"

"Oh, yeah. Quainty sent that to you. That's the booklet she was telling you about, the one with the 'ooze and slime' poem in it. She said that her neighbor friend Richard gave it to her years ago, and now she's passing it on to you."

Mrs. O'Malley opened it and read two of the poems.

"What's wrong?" Mack asked a few minutes later when he'd brought in another box from the van and lifted it to the quickly crowding countertop.

"Everyone seems to have an art thing except for me. Katrina's taking piano lessons. Darla and Kris write poetry. You repair books like a master. Quainty paints. Danny has his excellent woodcraft and carving, and Jack