

CHAPTER 1

Wednesday

“Help me!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m desperate!”

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m at my wits’ end!”

I sat up like a shot. “Do you need an ambulance?”

“Do you have any tape?”

I rubbed my eyes and checked my alarm clock: it was 6:09 a.m. “Not on me.”

“I don’t know what to do!” Aunt Muriel yelled.

“Did you rip something?”

“No, foolish! I need to get these Christmas presents wrapped before your mother gets here! I’ve been *everywhere* and can’t find any tape!”

I yawned. “Why are you wrapping at dawn?”

“I wanted to wrap last night. I left the house yesterday afternoon for some odds and ends and tape, of course. There’s some kind of shortage. Everybody’s out. I had no idea. I didn’t get home until after ten.” Auntie yawned back.

“Can’t Ma bring some?”

Aunt Muriel sighed. “I haven’t been able to reach her. I keep getting her voice mail. And I certainly can’t arrive with the twins’ presents unwrapped!”

I considered it. My sister, Ethel, who lives in Northern Virginia, is due to give birth to twins near, or on, Christmas Day. We think. However, I seriously doubted the soon-to-be newborns could spy unwrapped Christmas presents, even in a womb with a view.

Since Ethel hasn’t been able to see or tie her shoes since Halloween, Auntie and Ma made plans to descend upon her and Ike, and take care of Christmas and the fixings. This sounded like pandemonium, but a lot of fun, anyhow.

Fate had other plans for me. Or rather, my unemployment status does. Since I’d been let go last summer from EEJIT - Executive Enterprises for Job Intuitive Technologies - I’ve been working part-time, full time. My mortgage lender thinks it’s a good idea for me to pay on a monthly basis. Since my unemployment compensation pays half my former salary, I need to make up the gap somewhere. And playing the lottery hasn’t proved to be very reliable.

I’m Mina. Casually, my nickname’s pronounced just like the bird’s. Formally, the full-length version is Wilhelmina Kitchen. I’m named after a great-grandmother I never met and plan to poke in her spiritual side with a shish kabob skewer slightly post-Rapture. This isn’t because I dislike her. I’m just not that keen about our common cooking disorder. Aside from our last name, I also inherited Great-Grandma’s catering crazies. Long ago, Bumpa, my great-grandfather, locked the oven door on Grandma Mina cooking for crowds, after she made enough food one evening to feed a large, diverse community - like the Bronx. Her wooden spoon floated down the proverbial genetic cesspool into my hot little oven mitts. To this day, I cannot fathom making potato salad with less than five pounds of potatoes.

“I think the twins will be okay with it.”

“Well, I hope so. I mean really – their first Christmas!”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll try. And don’t forget to bring your presents today!”

After assuring Auntie the twins would not need a therapist before their actual birth date, and that I'd arrive with Bounty Noel, I hung up and rolled over. I didn't have to be at my next part-time job until nine o'clock, when I became one of Santa's Sidekicks at Countryside Mall. This has been a steady gig since Black Friday. I get paid minimum wage, with a maximum serving of bruised shins. I also have to sport a lot of "Santa Sparkle" which means I'll get huge employee discounts at all the stores eventually. I've been hopeful the discounts will balance out the crummy paycheck. I'm also hoping this translates to friends and family getting something besides frozen chicken stock for Christmas.

Vinnie, my twenty-plus pound, mini mountain lion-sized tabby yawned and thwacked my head with his tail. Clearly, his breakfast plans did not include my sleeping late. Vinnie was bequeathed to me by Trixie, my BFF who's an ER RN. Trixie's upstairs neighbor made her final visit on Trixie's watch a long time ago. That's when she made Trixie pledge an oath to place her Vincent in a new home. And so Trixie arrived on my doorstep with Vincent, a stuffy name for an even larger stuffed cat. I call him Vinnie, to keep him humble.

I swatted Vinnie's tail away and stared at the clock. Crap. Not quite asleep, with someplace I dreaded to go. I cringed at the thought of another Sidekick shift and slid further under the covers.

I heard the front door bang open, followed by shuffling and grunting. I sat up.

Vito swore softly and continued banging his way through my house and into the basement.

Vito Spaghetti's my retired next door neighbor. He's got a spare key to my place that I haven't had the chutzpah to get returned. He's a good guy mostly, except that he considers himself more of a roommate than a neighbor. And yes, Vito Spaghetti's not his name at all. It's the alias the Feds gave him after he went into a witness protection program that he's kind of strayed from.

His real name is Vladimir Pryzchntchynzski. Gesundheit. He used to be the leader of the Moils, a part of the Jewish Polish mafia out of Bumville, New Jersey. Ever since he got transplanted to Lancaster, "Pee-ay", he's developed a fondness for helping out the crowd at St. Bart's Episcopal and Swiffering. This landed him in a lot of hot water last summer with the St. Bart's crowd, not the Swiffering. That's another story (called *Kitchen Addiction!*)

Vinnie walked over top of me and headed downstairs, greeting Vito and meowing away about how glad he was that someone arose at a sensible hour, and would he mind pouring a heaping bowl of Kitty Cookies, as he was famished?

I took the hint and tumbled into the bathroom, pulling on my robe and tottering downstairs. I found the hallway crammed floor to ceiling with cartons and boxes.

Vito was in the kitchen, giving Vinnie his cookies. Coffee was brewing.

"What's with the boxes?"

"Sorry, sorry, sorry Toots," Vito answered in his usual triple-speak. "I ran outta room at my place. These are for the Christmas Bizarre."

"Don't you mean bazaar?"

"Whatever."

"These are legitimate, right?"

"Absolutely!"

Ever since last summer, when my basement became the unsuspecting cache for a not-too-legitimate enterprise, I've been on the nervy side where Vito and cartons are concerned.

I shook my head and poured myself some coffee. Some things are better left unsaid. Especially before a cup O'Joe.

The phone rang. "Whaddaya got for tape?" It was Trixie.

"Where are you?"

“On my way home from night shift.”

“Night shift? I thought you got put on days?”

Trixie grunted. “I was, until everyone came down with Crew Flu.”

“Crew Flu?”

“Yeah, the flu the whole staff gets right before Christmas – especially when they're spazzing about a tape shortage.”

“Tape shortage?”

“Good grief, don't you watch the news?”

The truth is, I do. But since I couldn't afford to buy anything to wrap yet, I really hadn't made the connection. Then I remembered Aunt Muriel.

“Is it really that much of a crisis?”

“Are you kidding? You and K. were my last hope. Guess I'll end up using Band-Aids after all. Hope Mike doesn't think it's a nursing fetish.”

Mike Green is Trixie's somewhat new-ish SO. She hooked up with him sometime after Vito gave up his protected status, just before Mike, a US Marshal, was able to fully investigate why. Apparently their relationship is still on the horizon for the holidays.

“You're wrapping boyfriend presents! I'm happy for you!”

Trixie sighed. “Yes. No. Sort of. We're unofficially official.”

“What the heck does that mean?”

“We talk every night on the telephone, and see each other just about every weekend. So we're kind of assuming the exclusive relationship thing but we're both too chicken to bring it up.”

“Wow.” Dating sure got complicated since I last ventured out, sometime around the Ice Age.

“So I'm hoping our Christmas presents do the talking.”

“What'd you get him?”

“Silk boxers and a mask!”

That should speak volumes. At least she hadn't bought him the complete costume. Trixie's always had a thing for a guy in uniform. Prior to her current beaux, this inclination took some odd twists.

“That sounds... convincing. Do you think you'll get a ring?”

“God no!”

“Oh. Well, what do you want?”

“Plastic. I've seen his tastes. A Visa gift card would be excellent.”

Ah, young love.

“Are you still working at the mall?”

“Yeah, I've gotta be there this morning.”

“Great! Can you look around for tape?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks. Maybe as a mall employee you'll get a deal?”

I shrugged. “It's worth a shot.”

Vito lumbered back down the basement stairs with more cartons.

I glanced up at the clock. I was becoming a quarter-till late. “Gotta go! Later!” I hung up and dashed upstairs, whirling myself in and out of the shower and into my garb.

Luckily, Vinnie was occupied with tripping Vito's travels up and down the basement steps. This was helpful, since I found out the hard way that Vinnie has a definite thing against my Sidekick shoe covers. Which is odd, even for him. I mean, they're just a kind of slip-on cover that

“converts” your shoe into a pointy elf boot, complete with a jingle bell toe. Unfortunately, my right jingle bell is dented and the fabric's a bit frayed since Vinnie's last encounter.

I returned downstairs, bedecked. Vito sat in the kitchen sipping coffee, petting Vinnie on the counter, while they read the paper together. “Hey, you look cute, kid. You made sure you got all your Sparkle this time, right?”

I nodded. The first time I arrived for my shift I was missing my hat which I immediately discovered was a big no-no. They made me drive all the way back home to get it, or I'd miss my shift. With gas prices the way they are, I've been very careful ever since.

However, I'd also learned I had to hide specific costume bits from Vinnie. Oddly enough, his antipathy toward the booties is dysfunctionally proportionate to his fondness for the hat. After a daylong frantic search, I finally found it wadded up and stashed as one of his coveted possessions. No hat, no job, see? Now I hide it in the bread drawer. It also keeps Ma and Auntie's paint swatch samples from getting lonesome. And what the hell, it's festive, no?

The rest of my costume consists of a wide, fake plastic leather belt, and a red felt vest that sports Sparkle buttons and pins from each of the participating stores in the mall, in case the little tikes don't know where to shop after they tell Santa about their lists.

Vinnie recognized his bootie prey and came racing down the hall. I grabbed my coat and shut the door to the garage with a bang.

I jumped into the Doo-doo – my poop brown mini-van – and turned the key in the ignition. Bupkis. I banged my head against the steering wheel, reprimanding myself about forgetting her bent toward religious stations.

I turned on the radio, and Christmas carols filled the air. Luckily, this being Lancaster, every local radio station began playing Christmas carols post-Halloween. I'd listened to nine-thousand plays of “Dominique the Donkey” and can now sing it in Pig Latin, backwards.

However, Christmas carols are a lot easier religious-esque listening than Reverend Hollers-a-lot. I turned up the radio's volume and re-started the van. She purred and we backed quickly down my steep driveway. Which is why I almost ran over my neighbor Bruce, and his Goliath-sized Great Dane, David.

“Sorry!” I called out the window. Bruce was brushing the snow off his jeans and his dog from where they'd rolled sideways to avoid getting flattened.

“Geez, Mina! Careful, huh?”

“I know, I know. I'm late.”

“Oh great! You're working?”

I shook my head. “My other part time job.”

“You're cooking at Squirrel Run Acres? Fabulous.”

“Nope. Santa's Sidekick.”

“Oh! At the mall? Hey, can you pick me up some tape?”

“I'll try...” I shook my head. This was the third request for tape in one morning. I made a mental note to pick up gift bags for my presents while I was locating tape for everyone else. I'm not that good a wrapper, and figured bags are better for frozen chicken stock, anyway. I chugged the Doo-doo down the block and toward Countryside Mall.

I pulled into the lot and parked way, way back as instructed. After all, I was at the mall as an employee, not a shopper. I had ignored this rule for my first couple of shifts (how would they know it was my van?) and got a written warning, along with a demerit from my upcoming coupon cache. Since they already had a fix on the Doo-doo, I didn't want to risk losing anymore coupons.

Tiny flakes of snow began to flutter down from a dreary, grey sky, as I walked across the parking lot. It wasn't exactly Christmas-type snow, but at least it wasn't rain. The bland day matched my plain-vanilla mood.

Inside Christmas carols blasted more or less merrily. The mall was already open for business with expanded store hours, welcoming stouthearted early birds. I made my way toward the Santa kiosk. As usual, I walked smack dab into the middle of a fight.

"I did not!"

"You did TOO!"

"NOT!"

"TOO!"

Santa sat on top of his St. Nick throne with his head in his hands. The kid standing next to him, who was supposed to be in his lap, was wailing to beat the band.

"I want my picture with Santy!"

I looked around for the kid's mother. She was yakking on her smartphone nearby. I rolled my eyes back toward the kiosk and attempted to referee Sheree and Barry.

"Wazzup?" I took off my jacket and tucked it under the employee table, behind the computer picture taking setup.

Barry harrumphed and shoved his hands on his hips. "She's deleted all the photos off the hard drive!"

"I did not!" Sheree whined.

I held up a hand. The boy next to Santa cried some more. "Look, go give the kid a cookie while we fix this." I shoved a Santa's Snack at Sheree.

"Are you kidding? We can't give him this – they cost seven-fifty!"

"Just give it to him! I'll pay for it!" Santa hollered back.

Sheree shrugged, took the cookie and left.

"So what happened?"

Barry sighed and threw his hands up in the air melodramatically. "I don't know. I think she did a re-boot in the middle of starting up. I can't find any of the photos from last night! All those families are allowed to email us for the next *year* for more prints! I'm afraid to take the kid's picture in case it permanently erases the previous ones!"

"Wow. That's a problem."

"Thanks."

"Did you call Nelson?"

Barry shook his head. "No. I guess I have to. I hate calling Nelson."

I nodded in agreement. Nelson is a real SHIT. Don't get me wrong. I'm not cussing or making judgments. It's just that Nelson is Santa's Helpful Information Technology - SHIT. It even says so on his badge. The fact that he acts like his acronym makes the computer phobic among us a bit tense when we need his help. Which is ramping up to a daily basis, since our motley crew is a tad techno challenged. My team usually reserves calling Nelson toward the end of our shift, so the next crew can deal with him.

"Who called last time?"

"I did."

"Okay, I'll call Nelson. Why don't you give the kid's mom some coupons and send her shopping?"

"What will we do about the line?"

I looked around. A line had already formed. A dozen parents and their charming offspring wriggled in agitation, waiting to get their magical moment with Santa over and done with.

“Give me some coupons. I'll handle this.”

I took the coupons and shoved them in my vest pockets. Then I called Nelson on one of the mall's walkie-talkies.

“What is it?” he barked.

“We can't take any pictures and there's already a line.”

He grunted. “She rebooted the system again, right?”

“Dunno,” I lied. “When can you be here?”

“Right behind you.”

I whirled around to see Nelson slinging his walkie-talkie onto the seat next to him as he whirred past me on a golf cart. Which he really didn't need. He could have used the exercise. Nelson is quite talented, computer-wise. Unfortunately, all those years sitting in front of a computer hasn't really helped his physique. He rolled off the cart and huffed toward me, and immediately began tapping away on the keyboard to save the day.

“How long do you think it will take?” I gazed nervously at the growing line.

“How do I know?” he snapped.

I held my breath, counted to ten, and began again. “How long do you think I should advise these families that they're going to wait?”

“Forever.”

I bit my lip, turned around and headed toward the frustrated mob. While the crowd was comprised of exhausted parents scouring the Earth for bargains, even they had to be less hostile than Nelson.

“Hi! Look folks, Santa's run into a teensy-weensy technical glitch, so we'll be a little while longer before we start taking pictures.”

A collective groan and various uncomplimentary comments hurtled forth.

“In the meantime,” I yelled above the din, “here are some advance store discount coupons, so you can take a jump on your holiday shopping, and not have to wait in line!”

“I stood on line for two hours last night and you closed up on us! I had to take a vacation day just to get my kid onto Santa's lap this morning!”

“Hey, me too!”

“Yeah, I thought I recognized you.”

I sighed. I was wondering how I could get assigned to another shift sans Sheree. “I'm very, very sorry. We're doing the best we can.” It was lame, but truthful.

An older lady with her Shirley Temple cloned granddaughter trotted up to me, as I moved down the line doling out coupons. “Excuse me, but you wouldn't happen to have any coupons for Carols Cards 'n Wraps?”

I rummaged around and shuffled my discount deck. “Umm... yes, actually I do.” I held out the coupon. She snatched it from my fingers and hustled away as her grandkid stomped her patent-leather feet. “No, no, no! Grammy's coming back here with you later, after we find some tape!” she shouted, hustling the tapping child away.

“Tape?” someone in the line called out. Immediately, several families followed behind, noses toward the ground in search of the scarce commodity.

I put the Cookie Break sign up, to keep the line from expanding farther while Nelson fixed his sights on keeping us from computer doomsday.

A kid at the back scowled at me. “I wanna see Santa NOW!”

“Very soon. Santa's special computer helper is working on it now.” Even I couldn't bring myself to call Nelson a SHIT out loud.

The kid snorted. “That loser couldn't install a Wii.”

I thought about it. “Luckily, it's just a camera setup on a desktop.”

“Loser.”

I stared at the kid, and then looked at his father. The dad was engrossed with texting someone. Hadn't heard a word. I reciprocated by sticking my tongue out at the brat, and stalked away.

While I usually try to fit in with the Lancaster folk and they're being so nice and all, there are some things that just irk the Jersey out of me.

Nelson was right. After what felt like forever, we were back in business. After Sheree's technical gaff, we figured it was best if Barry did the picture taking, while she worked the line. I got the happy chore of settling the tots on and off Santa's lap. Another serving of bruised knees, please.

Eventually the rotten kid's turn came. He hopped up onto Santa's lap and immediately pulled his beard.

“Ow!”

“Hey, it's real!”

“Of course it's real, you little punk! I'm Santa, dammit!”

After the kid recited an expansive list of high-end computer games and gadgets, he hopped off, stuck his tongue out at me, and kicked me in the shin for emphasis.

“Another name for the lump of coal list!” I shouted after him nastily, rubbing my leg. It was all I could do since his father had detached from the Borg and stood patting his offspring's head.

After most of Central Pennsylvania's children kicked, puked and peed on me, my shift was done. And so was I. The next shift arrived; we traded places and I limped toward Chi-Chi's department store.

Shopping while wearing Sparkle was a no brainer, even if I did smell like slightly used diapers. The store clerks were instructed to add a thirty percent discount toward Sparkle purchases, even on top of sales and coupons. I clutched the precious fifty percent employee coupon I'd received with my last paycheck, and wandered in, holding my breath and hoping my purchases would amount to free – or maybe even cash back?

After a quick sprint of selective looting and pillaging from Kids Wear to Housewares, I stood in line with my arms aching and full. Package handles and hangers sliced into my fingers like cheese. I was happy.

I made it to the register and dumped my stash on the counter. “Do you have any coupons?” the clerk asked.

“Yes!” I produced my crumpled half-off coupon from behind the mountain of merchandise. She took it, then looked at me sympathetically. “Oh, I didn't see your Santa Sparkle from behind your pile,” she said. “You're wearing a Chi-Chi button somewhere, right?”

I panicked and fumbled around my vest front at the fifty or so store buttons pinned to it. It stuck me in the finger and I began to bleed. “Here!” I shoved the button at her with my un-pricked hand, while sucking my thumb.

“Thank you, and here – you wouldn't want to bleed on your purchases,” she said nicely, handing me a paper towel.

Well, I guess she has to be nice. She's probably a Lancaster native. It still makes me uneasy, especially around the holidays. I mean, who's nice to you at Christmas? Especially when you're bleeding.

She rang everything up. The total came to a little over four hundred dollars. I felt my credit card wilt inside my wallet.

“Now, let's add your mall employee coupon, along with your Sparkle discount!” she added brightly.

My heart began to beat again and I exhaled.

“That will be \$138.80.”

“That's great!”

“But wait, there was a fifty percent coupon in the paper.”

I sighed. “Sorry, I don't get the paper. I don't have that coupon.”

“No worries, we have one here.” She held up a pristinely cut-out coupon, complete with bar code. “Lots of people forget them. The store wants you to come back, see? Now, it probably won't take because of your other discounts. But let's try.”

She scanned the coupon and we heard a beep. She smiled at me. “Your total is \$69.40.”

Yippee!

She handed me several miles of receipts along with my bags.

“Oh! Wait! Do you have any boxes?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not here, but if you go upstairs to customer service they do. And, if you're willing to wait in line, just show them your receipt and they'll wrap everything for free.”

Free? Wow. You can't beat that. I wondered if they'd wrap frozen soup. Maybe if I gave them some? With the money I'd saved, I could splurge and make beef bourguignon for all of Chi-Chi's staff – it's to die for.

I took my stuff and made my way toward the escalator. From there, I schlepped toward the back of the store, and joined the end of a line I sensed was waiting for their free gift wrapping, too. I took my place behind a determined Grandma and her BFF.

“You bet! Why should we buy wrap when they'll wrap for free?”

“You don't have to tell me twice. Besides, how's anyone supposed to wrap with no tape? I can't find tape anywhere.”

I winced, remembering my mission for Aunt Muriel. And Trixie. And Bruce. And probably K. Yeeshkabiddle.

We shuffled our way toward the counter. I was just about four persons in, when a clerk came to the front and shut down the works.

“Hey, what gives?” the grandma in front of me shouted.

“We've been waiting in line for an hour!” her buddy added.

A short, pudgy sales manager sporting a mayonnaise-spotted tie spun around. He cringed and bore it. “Ladies and gentlemen, our apologies. But our gift wrapping services are closed for the day.”

“You're supposed to stay open as long as Chi-Chi's stays open!”

He nodded sadly. “Yes, I know. But we've run out of tape.”

A resounding groan ensued.

“Now, if you don't mind coming back with your merchandise tomorrow, and of course your receipts; we're expecting a shipment from our Connecticut store in the morning.”

“Got any boxes?” a man in back of me shouted.

“Boxes, we can do!” He leapt behind the counter to dole some out.

About an hour later, I was waddling back through the mall, grasping my bags and clasping folded gift boxes under my armpits. They were free, right? I figured the best thing to do was load up the van, then return to my tape mission. Which was a shame, since I was literally walking past

Carol's Cards 'n Wraps. But I figured carrying all my purchases into the tiny store would cause a lot of breakage I couldn't afford.

As soon as I reached the entrance of the store, I realized the detour might be well-timed. A line extended all the way to the mall entrance.

“What's the line for?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Tape,” a man replied glumly.

I looked at him. He shrugged. “My wife said I had to get tape. Everyone's out. I just happened to see an office supply truck pull into the mall, so I'm hoping. I guess a lot of other people had the same idea.”

“Wow. I better get in line right after I put my gifts in my van.”

“Lady, if I were you, I wouldn't wait. I've been to every grocery store, drug store, box store and gift store in the county. If I can't get tape here, I'm telling my wife to fold everything up in grocery bags and tell the kids Santa's gone green.”

I hurried out to the Doo-doo, threw my stash inside and hurried back. The line now extended out into the parking lot, stretching toward Hellum and back.

After I'd grown visibly older, I'd made my way up to where I could at least glimpse the counter. I saw the sales clerk ring up another sale, and handed a bag with several containers of tape to a relieved patron.

He turned to leave when the man behind him grabbed the bag.

“You can't do that! That's stealing!”

“Here! Here's your money!”

“Gentlemen, please, if you can't resolve this peaceably I'll be forced to call Security. Next,” the clerk went on about his business.

The two men came wrestling out of the store, grabbing at each other and clutching the bag of tape. This escalated into shoving, some punches and the arrival of Security. The rest of us stood in line watching calmly. ‘Tis the season, right?

“What was that all about?” I wondered aloud.

A disheartened customer walking past me answered. “They ran out of tape. That guy bought the last few rolls.”

The rest of us threw our collective arms up in the air and disbanded.

I wandered along the mall, mulling about tape alternatives. I ruled out glue. I headed toward Dollar Daze, considering staples and safety-pins. That was when I ran into James and his Stressed Shoppers station.

James is my godmother's massage therapist. Formerly a Wall Street type, he traded in his ticker tape for New Age tapes at the suggestion of his former lingerie model girlfriend. That was when she was his girlfriend and just before she moved in with her girlfriend. It proved to be a little startling, especially to James. But it worked out in the end and everyone, especially James' clientele, are a lot less stressed.

“How's business?” I asked.

“Excellent! There is never a shortage of aching backs, feet or shoulders around the holidays!”

James also hires me occasionally, to cater for some of his clients. It's been exorcising my catering disorder, and gives me cash on the side. It's a pretty good setup actually, even if it isn't steady. He offers his clientele menu options via me for anniversaries, parties and the like.

And I mostly like. That is, I mostly like James. But I keep getting tingly feet around Chef Jacques – Jack – at Squirrel Run Acres. It's complicated. Especially since these are working

relationships. I'm betting that once I have an actual date with an actual guy, I'll get over it. Them. Whatever.

I nodded and left. The line to Stressed Shopper's was almost as long as the one I'd been standing on for tape. Clearly, James' bottom line would have a happy holiday.

I stepped into Dollar Daze and headed over to the aisle with the gift wrapping stuff. Boxes, bows, paper, and tissue paper abounded. Everything except tape. I looked down and saw a clerk on her knees, unpacking a carton of puppy wee-wee pads.

"Excuse me, but do you have any tape?"

She sat up and shook her head emphatically. "Boy, if I had a nickel for every time someone's asked me that today..."

"Gotcha. Ideas?"

"We got a whole bunch of duct tape, and some masking tape," she said, pointing toward the rear of the store. It wouldn't be elegant. But it was better than glue.

About twenty bucks later, I walked back with a couple dozen rolls of duct tape. I was lucky though, because Dollar Daze branched out past the usual silver variety and carried red and green colored ones. That was Christmassy, right?

I weaved back across town toward home. Bing Crosby sang out "There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays" just as we scaled Mt. Driveway, which was now covered by a fine film of ice. We slid back a bit as I pressed the garage opener. I backed up, got some momentum, then skittered inside.

After bringing in all the bags and boxes, and pulling Vinnie's head out from all the bags and boxes, I plugged in our fake Christmas tree. I'd bought the pre-lit tree last year when I was gainfully employed. This year, only half the lights worked. But they were all on one side of the tree. So I faced the dark half into the corner. Unfortunately, Vinnie loves to play spin the tree. In effect, it's the world's largest cat toy.

I called Auntie, hoping she hadn't had another nervous breakdown about the tape.

"Hi. I got your tape. Sort of."

"Oh, thank you anyway! Luckily, I remembered Vito's on the bazaar committee, and he was able to bring over several rolls! Phew!"

"Oh. That's great." I wondered what K., Trixie and Bruce would make of colored duct tape, but I figured they'd get creative.

"Is Ma there yet?"

"She had a last minute meeting. She rescheduled for tomorrow."

This was typical. While I exhibit various forms of techno-phobia, Ma is the VP for SUZ – a top notch IT company back in Jersey. Ma's test-driven or owns more gadgets than Brookstone. It figured she'd be wrapping up loose ends just before she took time off to be with Ethel and her soon-to-be grandkids.

I poured a mug o' Merlot and sat down on the sofa and turned on the news. A plump gal with short, platinum-blonde spiked hair, tipped jet black, grinned wildly at the camera. She looked like a deranged hedgehog. "Now, of course, as everyone's finding out, Central Pennsylvania's experiencing a tape shortage," she began. "Here's some helpful tips to help you with some gift wrapping alternatives." I raised my eyebrows and glanced warily at the rolls of duct tape. Should I hide them? More practically, should I sell them?