Mako’s First Christmas

A Helen & Hounds Cozy Mystery Short Story

Catherine Waltan

For readers who joined Catherine’s list.
Thank you for being here.

1. The Fruitcake Situation

There were three things in Maplewood that nobody argued about.

The first was that the Methodist church had the best Christmas lights on Main Street. The Lutherans had tried for eleven years running to beat them and had never once come close.

The second was that Helen Lighthall's lemon bars were the finest in the county, and possibly the state. Even the Lutherans admitted that.

And the third was that nobody, under any circumstances, said a single unkind word about Hattie Brenneman's fruitcake.

"It's not that it's *bad*," Mae Delaney explained, on the Tuesday before Christmas, as she and Helen carried a folding table between them across the snowy parking lot of the Maplewood Methodist church. "Nobody's saying it's bad. I would never say it's bad."

"You're saying it's bad," said Helen.

"I am saying," said Mae, with great dignity, "that it is a *fruitcake*. And that it weighs eleven pounds. And that Hattie's been baking the same one from the same recipe every Christmas since

1961, and the church auctions it off every year at the Christmas Bazaar for the food pantry, and every year somebody pays five hundred dollars for it, and nobody I have ever met has admitted to eating any." She shifted her end of the table. "Watch the curb."

Helen watched the curb.

Behind them, three Labradors watched the curb too. Halo, the yellow one, cleared it in a single joyful bound and immediately began eating snow. Shadow, the black one, stepped over it with great precision, the way an elderly gentleman steps over a puddle in his good shoes. And Mako, the chocolate puppy, did not see it at all, because both of his enormous ears had blown forward over his eyes in the wind, and he walked straight into it, bounced off, sat down in the snow with a look of total astonishment, and then got up and trotted on as though nothing had happened.

"That dog," said Mae, "is going to be the death of you."

"He's going to be the death of something," Helen agreed. "I just haven't worked out what yet."

Mako had been living with Helen for five weeks.

In that time, he had eaten one seat belt, two leather boots, a library book, a dish towel, the trainer's clicker at puppy kindergarten and most of a Thanksgiving turkey drumstick. He had also, though he was too young to know it, helped solve a murder. He'd done it mostly by having the largest ears of any dog Helen had ever seen, and a stubborn little cowlick of fur at the tip of his tail that would not lie flat no matter what anybody did to it.

He was about four and a half months old now and growing like a weed. His legs had gotten longer, and his paws had gotten bigger, and his chest had gotten broader. His ears had not gotten any smaller. If anything, Helen suspected, they were still growing too, quietly, when nobody was looking.

He had never had a Christmas before. He'd been born in a straw-filled stall under an old man's porch in August, and he'd spent the autumn at a dog rescue an hour outside of town. Then, in November, he had come home with Helen and discovered everything at once: carpet, and stairs, and the refrigerator, and snow, and the neighbor's cat, and Christmas.

He was very much in favor of Christmas.

He was in favor of the tree in Helen’s living room, which he had tried twice to carry outside. He was in favor of the paper and the ribbons and the boxes. He was particularly in favor of the cookies, of which there were a great many in Helen’s kitchen this week, and he had spent most of the last five days sitting in front of the oven door, staring through the glass with his whole heart in his eyes.

And he was in favor, it turned out, of church.

The Maplewood Methodist Christmas Bazaar was held every year in the fellowship hall, a big, low, wood-paneled room in the church basement that smelled of coffee and floor wax and a hundred years of potluck suppers. By four o’clock on Tuesday afternoon it was nearly ready.

Tables ran along all four walls, loaded with knitted scarves and jars of jam and wreaths made of pinecones and quilts and hand-carved wooden reindeer. There was a hot cider station by the door, and a bake table (Helen’s, naturally) at the far end, and a tree in the corner covered in paper angels that the Sunday school had cut out and colored. The Sunday school had not entirely understood the assignment; several of the angels were purple, and one was clearly a dinosaur.

And in the place of honor, on a small round table all its own, under a little brass spotlight that Pastor Dan had borrowed from the community theater, stood Hattie Brenneman’s fruitcake.

It sat in a round red tin about the size of a hatbox, with a picture of a snowy village painted on the lid, and a brass key on the side like a music box. Hattie had kept her fruitcake in that same tin for sixty-five years, and if you

turned the key, it played a few tinkling bars of *Silent Night*. It played them a little out of tune these days, and a little slowly, like a very old man humming to himself. But it played them.

Beside the tin was a hand-lettered card in an elegant, shaky script:

HATTIE BRENNEMAN'S CHRISTMAS FRUITCAKE Est. 1961 Silent Auction — Proceeds to the Maplewood Food Pantry Opening Bid: $200

"Two hundred dollars," said Mae, reading it. "For a fruitcake."

"For the food pantry," said Helen.

"For a *fruitcake*," said Mae.

Mako, who had been investigating the bottom of the Sunday school tree, came trotting over to see what they were looking at. He sniffed the air beneath the round table. Then he lifted his head, and his ears came up, and he gazed at the red tin on top of it with an expression of reverence such as Helen had previously only seen him direct at roast turkey.

"No," said Helen.

Mako looked at her.

"Absolutely not," said Helen. "That fruitcake is worth more than you are."

"That fruitcake," said a cracked old voice behind them, "is worth more than all three of

them put together, and don’t let anyone tell you different.”

2. Hattie

Hattie Brenneman was eighty-six years old and stood, Helen guessed, about four foot ten in her church shoes. She had snow-white hair set in tight curls, a red wool coat with a sprig of holly pinned to the lapel, a carved wooden cane with a silver handle, and a pair of thick glasses that magnified her pale blue eyes to the size of quarters. She was leaning on the arm of a tall, worried-looking young man in a Maplewood Hardware sweatshirt.

"Hattie," said Helen warmly. "Merry Christmas."

"Helen Lighthall." Hattie peered up at her through the thick glasses. "I'd know that voice anywhere. Twenty-eight years I bought my rye bread from you, and not one bad loaf in the lot." She turned her enormous blue eyes downward. "And who's this?"

Mako had come to sit at Hattie's feet. He gazed up at her, ears forward, tail sweeping the linoleum, with exactly the same reverent expression he'd been directing at the fruitcake.

"This is Mako," said Helen. "He's new."

“He’s *brown*,” said Hattie, squinting. “And he’s got ears like a jackrabbit.” She reached down, slowly, and patted the top of Mako’s head with a small, papery hand. Mako held perfectly still for it and closed his eyes. “Well. You’re a handsome thing, aren’t you? Handsome and trouble. I can always tell trouble. I married it, back in 1958.” She straightened up. “Ben, help me to that chair. My hip’s acting up.”

The young man in the hardware sweatshirt helped her into a folding chair by the round table. He looked at Helen apologetically over his grandmother’s head.

“Ben Brenneman,” he said, shaking her hand. “Hattie’s grandson. I drive her now, since her eyes got bad.”

“My eyes are fine,” said Hattie.

“Gran, you put the cat food in the refrigerator on Sunday.”

“The cat didn’t complain.” Hattie sniffed. She reached out and laid her hand on the red tin, flat, the way you’d lay your hand on the head of an old dog. For a moment her face changed: something tired and uncertain came into it, under all the starch. Then she patted the tin twice and took her hand away. “Sixty-five years,” she said. “Sixty-five Christmases. My

Walter used to say it was the only thing in the whole county that never changed."

"It's very famous," said Helen.

"It's very *heavy*," said Hattie, and laughed, a dry little cackle. "Heaviest thing in this hall. Eleven pounds. Walter used to say you could build a barn with it." She looked at the tin again, and the tired look came back, just for a second. "Well. Maybe this year somebody'll actually eat a slice."

Ben glanced at her quickly. Hattie didn't say anything else.

The bazaar opened at six.

By half past, the fellowship hall was full of people in snowy boots and Christmas sweaters, carrying paper cups of hot cider and armloads of knitted mittens and wooden reindeer. The Lutheran choir had come over as a gesture of interdenominational goodwill (and, Mae said darkly, to scout the lights), and was singing carols on the little stage by the door. The Sunday school children were running between the tables in a pack, high on sugar cookies. And there was a steady line at Helen's bake table, which was down to its last two dozen lemon bars by seven.

There was a steady stream at the fruitcake table, too.

Helen watched it from behind her cash box. People came up to the round red tin under its little brass spotlight in ones and twos, and read the card, and wrote their bids on the clipboard beside it, and went away again, shaking their heads and laughing. By seven o'clock, the clipboard said *$340*. Mike Arrington wrote down three hundred and fifty, and then winked at Helen across the room.

"You hate fruitcake," Helen told him, when he came over for a lemon bar.

“I’m the sheriff,” said Mike. “I’ve got to be seen supporting the food pantry.” He considered the lemon bar. “And I don’t hate it. I’ve just never met anybody who’s eaten it.”

There was a woman at the clipboard, Helen noticed: a tall, angular woman of about sixty, in an expensive red cape with a fur collar, who had been standing in front of the fruitcake for a long time, looking at it. She didn’t write a bid. She simply looked at the tin with her lips pressed together. Then she turned around sharply and walked away toward the coat room.

“Who’s that?” Helen asked.

“Rhonda Fiske,” said Mae, appearing at her elbow with a plate of gingerbread. “Owns the Fiske Family Bakery over in Fairhaven. Makes a German Christmas stollen, very fancy, sells for forty dollars a loaf. Every year she puts one in the bazaar, and every year it comes second to Hattie’s fruitcake. Every single year.” Mae bit the head off a gingerbread man. “She’s been trying to get the church to drop the fruitcake auction for a decade. Says it’s *unhygienic*. Says it’s *a fire risk*. Last year she wrote to the bishop.”

“About a fruitcake?”

“About a fruitcake.” Mae finished the gingerbread man and handed one to Helen.

“And did you see that boy over there?”

Helen looked. By the hot cider station, a gangly teenage boy in a too-big parka was hovering near the fruitcake table, looking at the tin, and then looking around the room, and then looking at the tin again. He had a skateboard under one arm, which he was clearly not supposed to have brought into church.

“That’s Kyle Abernathy,” said Helen. “My neighbor’s grandson. He’s visiting for the holidays.”

“He’s been circling that fruitcake for an hour,” said Mae. “Like a buzzard.”

“He’s fifteen,” said Helen. “He circles everything. He circled my refrigerator for three days.”

At a quarter to eight, Pastor Dan climbed up onto the little stage by the door, tapped the microphone, and announced, to general applause, that it was time for the Christmas singalong.

The lights in the fellowship hall went down. Somebody switched on the strings of colored lights along the walls, and the tree in the corner glowed with its paper angels and its purple dinosaur. The Lutheran choir and the Methodist choir joined together on the little stage, which was not built for forty people and groaned alarmingly. Somebody's grandmother sat down at the old upright piano. And everyone in the hall turned toward the stage, cups of cider in hand, children on their shoulders, and began to sing *O Come, All Ye Faithful*.

Helen sang too. She loved this part. She'd loved it every Christmas since she was a girl: the hall in the half-dark, the colored lights, the snow falling past the high basement windows, a hundred voices singing slightly out of tune.

Beside her, Mike sang too, in a deep, careful baritone she hadn't known he had. Halo sat at her feet and leaned against her legs. Shadow lay under the bake table with his chin on his paws, keeping watch over the cash box.

Mako, she assumed, was with Shadow.

They sang *O Come, All Ye Faithful*, and *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, and *Joy to the World*. They sang *Silent Night* with the lights turned down even lower and everybody holding a little paper candle with a battery-powered bulb in it. It was beautiful. Several people cried, which they did every year. And then Pastor Dan said, “Merry Christmas, everybody!” and the lights came up again.

And a woman screamed.

It was Hattie Brenneman’s grandson’s wife, Jenny, a sensible young woman who did not ordinarily scream. She was standing beside the little round table under the brass spotlight with her hands over her mouth.

The table was empty.

The card was still there, *HATTIE BRENNEMAN’S CHRISTMAS FRUITCAKE, Est. 1961*. The clipboard was still there, with Mike’s bid of three hundred and fifty dollars at the bottom. The brass spotlight was still shining on the white tablecloth.

The fruitcake was gone. Tin and all.

3. Under the Table

For a moment, nobody said anything at all.

Then everybody said everything at once. Pastor Dan said “Oh, my goodness.” The Lutheran choir director said something under his breath that a choir director should not say in a church basement. Somebody’s child burst into tears. Mae Delaney said, quite loudly, “Well, I’ll be.” And Hattie Brenneman, who had been sitting in her folding chair at the edge of the stage during the singalong with her cane across her knees, stood up very slowly and stared at the empty table through her thick glasses.

She didn’t say anything. She only stared. Helen, watching her across the room, thought she looked less upset than she ought to. She looked, if anything, frightened.

“All right,” said Mike Arrington.

He didn’t raise his voice. He didn’t need to. He simply said *all right* in the voice he used at accident scenes, and the whole fellowship hall went quiet and turned to look at him.

“Nobody leave just yet,” Mike said pleasantly. “I’m sure there’s a simple explanation.

Somebody probably moved it to keep it safe during the singing. Let's all just have a look around." He smiled. "It's an eleven-pound fruitcake, folks. It can't have gone far."

People began, sheepishly, to look under their own tables.

And Rhonda Fiske, in her red cape with the fur collar, pointed one long finger straight across the room and said, in a high, carrying voice, "*There*."

Everyone turned to look.

She was pointing at the round table. At the white tablecloth that hung down nearly to the floor. And at the place where the tablecloth had been pushed aside at the bottom, just a little. Sticking out from under the hem, wagging slowly back and forth across the linoleum, was a short brown tail with a small, stubborn whorl of fur at the very tip.

Helen closed her eyes.

"*Mako*," she said.

He came out when she called him. He always came, eventually; that was one of his good qualities. He backed out from under the tablecloth, rear end first, tail going, and turned around and sat down in the middle of the floor in front of a hundred people and looked up at Helen with his ears flopped over his eyes and an expression of perfect, shining innocence.

His whiskers were covered in crumbs.

Dark brown, sticky-looking crumbs. They were on his muzzle and his chin and the fur of his chest. There was a candied cherry stuck to one ear.

There was a gasp from the hall. Then there was a murmur. Then there was a sound Helen had heard many times in her twenty-eight years running a bakery in a small town, and had always dreaded: the sound of a hundred people beginning to make up their minds.

“Well, there’s your thief, Sheriff,” said Rhonda Fiske. She folded her arms under the red cape. “Caught him red-handed. Or red-pawed. I *told* the bishop that fruitcake was an attractive nuisance.”

“He’s a puppy,” said Helen. “He’s four months old. He can’t lift an eleven-pound tin off a table.”

“He’s eaten a turkey drumstick,” Mae pointed out unhelpfully.

“*Mae.*”

“I’m only saying.”

“He’s got crumbs all over his face, Helen,” said somebody in the crowd, not unkindly. “And a cherry on his ear.”

Helen looked at Mako. Mako looked at Helen. Then he sneezed, and the candied cherry fell off his ear and rolled across the floor and stopped at the toe of Rhonda Fiske’s boot.

Rhonda Fiske looked down at it as if it were evidence in a murder trial.

Helen knelt down on the linoleum in front of the puppy. She took his chin in her hand, gently, and turned his face toward the light, and looked at the crumbs on his whiskers. She looked at them very carefully, the way she’d once looked at a tray of croissants to tell whether the butter had been cold enough. She sniffed. Then she picked one crumb off his chin and rubbed it between her finger and thumb, and smelled it again, and put it, to everyone’s astonishment, on the tip of her tongue.

The hall was very quiet.

“Molasses,” said Helen. “Ginger. Cinnamon. A good deal of clove.” She stood up. “That’s gingerbread. That’s not fruitcake. This dog has

been eating gingerbread." She turned around. "Mae, how many gingerbread men did you have on that plate when you came over to my table?"

Mae looked down at her empty paper plate. Her face went slowly pink.

"I might," she said, "have set it down. On the floor. Next to the round table. During *Hark the Herald*." She paused. "There were six."

"And the cherry?" said Rhonda Fiske, sharply.

"There's a bowl of candied cherries on the jam table," said Helen. "Mrs. Oberholtzer's cherry preserves. For sampling." She pointed. The bowl on the jam table, two tables down from the round one, sat at exactly the height of an enterprising puppy's nose. It was considerably less full than it had been at six o'clock. "He's been sampling."

Somebody in the crowd laughed. Then somebody else did. Then the whole fellowship hall was laughing, and Mako, delighted by the sound, rolled over on his back on the linoleum and waved all four legs in the air, and the laughter got louder.

Rhonda Fiske did not laugh. She looked at Helen for a long moment with her lips pressed together. Then she turned on her heel, her red cape swirling, and walked away toward the coat room.

“Well,” said Mike Arrington, beside Helen, very quietly. “That clears the deputy. But it doesn’t find the fruitcake.”

“No,” said Helen. “It doesn’t.”

She looked across the room at Hattie Brenneman, still standing by her folding chair at the edge of the stage. The old woman was holding very tightly to the silver handle of her cane, and she was not looking at the empty table, or at the puppy on the floor, or at anyone in the room.

She was looking at the ceiling.

4. Suspects and Sugar Cookies

They searched the church for an hour.

Mike organized it, the way he organized everything: calmly, in sections, with volunteers. The Methodist men took the sanctuary upstairs. The Lutheran choir took the Sunday school classrooms. The women's auxiliary took the kitchen and the pantry and the supply closets. The teenagers, under the supervision of Kyle Abernathy's grandmother, took the parking lot and every car in it.

Helen took the coat room, because that was where Rhonda Fiske had gone, and because she had a feeling.

Rhonda Fiske was sitting on the bench in the coat room, among the parkas and the snowy boots and the dripping umbrellas, with her red cape around her shoulders and her face in her hands. When she heard Helen in the doorway, she looked up quickly. Her eyes were red.

"Oh," she said. "It's you." She straightened up and sniffed. "I suppose you think I took it."

"I don't think anything yet," said Helen. She sat down on the bench beside her. "But you did

write to the bishop."

"I did write to the bishop." Rhonda Fiske laughed, a short, unhappy laugh. "I write to the bishop every year. I write to the church council. I wrote to the newspaper once. Do you know why?"

"Because your stollen comes second," said Helen.

"Because my stollen comes *second*." Rhonda pressed a lace handkerchief to her eyes. "Every year. Every year, Mrs. Lighthall, for eleven years, I put my very best stollen in that auction. I use my great-grandmother's recipe from Dresden. Marzipan made by hand, and rum-soaked raisins, and real butter, a pound and a half. I start it in October. And every single year, it sells for a hundred and twenty dollars, and Hattie Brenneman's fruitcake sells for five hundred. And nobody eats the fruitcake." She looked at Helen with her red eyes. "Do you know what that does to a baker? You must know. You must."

Helen did know. She'd been a baker for twenty-eight years. She knew exactly what it felt like to put your whole heart into something and watch people walk past it.

"I didn't take the fruitcake," said Rhonda Fiske. "I wanted to. God forgive me, every year

I want to. But I didn't." She put the handkerchief away. "I was in here during the singalong. Crying in the coats, like a fool, because my stollen got eighty dollars this year. Eighty." She sniffed. "Somebody saw me. Ask the Lutheran choir director. He came in for his scarf in the middle of *Joy to the World* and gave me the most terrible look."

Helen believed her. She wasn't sure why, exactly. But she'd spent twenty-eight years across a bakery counter from people, and she knew the difference between a woman who'd done something wrong and a woman who'd simply wanted to.

"For what it's worth," she said, standing up, "I tasted your stollen at the bake table. I bought a slice. With my own money." She smiled. "It's the best I've ever had."

Rhonda Fiske stared at her. Then, quite suddenly, she burst into tears all over again, and Helen patted her on the shoulder and left her among the coats.

Kyle Abernathy was in the parking lot, sitting on his skateboard by the church dumpster with his hood up, looking guilty.

“I didn’t take it,” he said, before Helen had even opened her mouth. “I swear. I know everybody thinks I took it. Grandma thinks I took it. I didn’t.”

“I don’t think you took it, Kyle,” said Helen. “Why were you circling it all night?”

Kyle went red to the tips of his ears. He looked at the ground. He looked at his skateboard. Then he mumbled something into his parka.

“I’m sorry?” said Helen.

“I said I wanted to *bid* on it,” Kyle said, louder, miserably. “For my grandma. For Christmas. She’s always wanted that fruitcake. Every year she says, *One of these years I’m going to win Hattie Brenneman’s fruitcake.* And she never does, because she’s on Social Security and somebody always bids more.” He kicked at the snow. “I’ve been saving my lawn-mowing money since June. I’ve got two hundred and eighty dollars. But every time I went over to the clipboard, the bid was already higher. And then the sheriff bid three-fifty, and I couldn’t—” He stopped. “I couldn’t even do that.”

Helen looked at him for a long moment, at this gangly, red-eared fifteen-year-old boy sitting on a skateboard in a church parking lot, who had mowed lawns all summer to buy his grandmother a fruitcake that nobody ate.

“Kyle,” she said, “that is the nicest thing I’ve heard all year.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Kyle said. “It’s gone now anyway.”

“Maybe,” said Helen. “Maybe not.”

By nine o’clock, the fellowship hall was half empty and the fruitcake had not been found.

The Methodist men had searched every pew in the sanctuary. The Lutheran choir had searched every Sunday school cubby. The women’s auxiliary had searched every cupboard in the kitchen, and found, among other things, a lost casserole dish from 1994, a box of Christmas pageant costumes, and a family of mice living in a bag of flour. The teenagers had searched every car in the parking lot and found nothing except, in the trunk of Pastor Dan’s station wagon, a very large stash of chocolate he had told his wife he’d given up for Advent.

But no fruitcake.

Mike came back down the basement stairs, brushing snow off his shoulders. He looked tired.

“It’s not in the building,” he said. “Not that we can find. We’ve had a hundred people looking for an hour. Unless somebody walked out the front door with an eleven-pound red tin under their coat in the middle of *Silent Night*, it ought to be here.” He shook his head. “And nobody did. I had a deputy on the door all night. Nobody left before the singing finished.”

“Then it’s still here,” said Helen.

“Then it’s still here,” Mike agreed. “Somewhere.”

Helen looked across the hall.

Hattie Brenneman was still sitting in her folding chair at the edge of the stage, with her cane across her knees, very small and very still in her red coat. Her grandson Ben sat beside her, holding her hand. Hattie hadn’t moved in an hour. She hadn’t searched. She hadn’t asked anyone whether they’d found it. She hadn’t said a single word.

Every few minutes, Helen noticed, her enormous blue eyes went to the ceiling.

5. Silent Night

It was the furnace that gave it away. The furnace, and Mako’s ears.

The Maplewood Methodist Church had a furnace that was older than Hattie Brenneman. It lived in a cellar beneath the fellowship hall, and it came on at irregular intervals with a tremendous clank and a shudder that you could feel through the floor, like a freight train going by. Everybody in the congregation was used to it. Nobody even noticed it anymore.

At nine-fifteen, while Helen was packing up her bake table and Mike was helping Pastor Dan stack chairs, the furnace came on.

CLANK. The floor shuddered. The cups on the cider table rattled. The paper angels on the Sunday school tree swayed.

And Mako, who had been asleep under the bake table on top of Shadow, woke up.

He lifted his head. His ears came up. They swiveled, both together, slowly, away from the stage and away from the cider table, toward the back wall of the fellowship hall, beside the kitchen door. He stood up. He walked out from

under the table, very slowly, with his nose lifted and his ears pointed at that back wall like a pair of radar dishes. And he stood in the middle of the floor and stared at it, perfectly still.

Helen put down her cash box.

“What is it, sweetheart?” she said softly.

Mako didn’t look at her. He stared at the wall. There was nothing there, as far as Helen could see. Just wood paneling, and a fire extinguisher, and a coat hook, and a little square wooden door set into the paneling at about waist height, painted the same color as the wall, with a small brass handle. She’d seen it a hundred times at a hundred church suppers and never once wondered what it was.

The furnace shuddered again. *CLANK.*

And then, very faintly, so faintly that Helen thought at first she’d imagined it, she heard it too.

A few thin, tinkling notes. Slow and a little out of tune, like a very old man humming to himself in another room.

Si-lent night… ho-ly night…

Then it stopped.

Mako barked. Once. Sharp and high and astonished, as if he’d just discovered something wonderful. Then he trotted straight across the fellowship hall to the little square door in the

paneling and sat down in front of it and looked back at Helen over his shoulder, with his ears up and his tail sweeping the floor.

The whole room had gone quiet.

“That,” said Pastor Dan slowly, “is the old dumbwaiter. From when the kitchen used to be upstairs. Nobody’s used it in forty years.” He frowned. “It goes up to the old choir room. Behind the organ.”

Helen walked across the room. She put her hand on the little brass handle and pulled, and the square wooden door slid up into the wall with a groan of old wood.

Behind it was a narrow dark shaft, smelling of dust and old rope. In the shaft, on a little wooden shelf hanging from two ropes, sat a round red tin about the size of a hatbox, with a picture of a snowy village painted on the lid and a brass key on the side.

When the furnace clanked, the old ropes swayed, and the shelf swayed with them, and the tin bumped gently against the side of the shaft. And each time it bumped, the brass key turned a quarter of an inch, and the music box inside the tin played a few more tinkling notes of *Silent Night*.

Behind Helen, there was a gasp, and then a cheer, and then a burst of applause, and Kyle Abernathy shouted "*Yes!*" and did a little dance.

But Helen wasn't looking at the crowd. She was looking past them, across the room, at the edge of the stage. Hattie Brenneman had stood up out of her folding chair. She was holding on to her cane with both hands, and her face, under the white curls, had gone the color of paper.

"The old choir room," said Helen quietly. "Behind the organ. Where you can reach the top of the dumbwaiter from upstairs." She looked at Hattie. "Where the women's auxiliary keeps the robes for the Christmas pageant. Where you went, Mrs. Brenneman, to fix your hair, just before the singalong started. I saw you go up the stairs with Ben's help. You came back down just after the lights went off."

Hattie didn't say anything.

"You didn't take it out of the hall during the singing," said Helen gently. "You took it out before. When everybody was getting their cider. You carried it up the back stairs and put it in the dumbwaiter and sent it down halfway, between the floors, where nobody would ever look. And then you came back down and sat in your chair and waited for somebody to notice it

was gone.” She paused. “But I don’t understand why. It’s your fruitcake. It’s always been your fruitcake. Why on earth would you hide it?”

For a long moment, Hattie Brenneman stood very still at the edge of the little stage, holding her cane.

Then her face crumpled, all at once, like a paper bag.

“Because it’s *ruined*,” she said.

6. The Recipe

They sat in the church kitchen, the two of them, with the door closed and two cups of tea between them on the old steel counter, and the red tin in the middle. Ben had brought his grandmother in and settled her on a stool and then, at a look from Helen, gone out again. Outside the kitchen door, Helen could hear the murmur of the last of the bazaar crowd, and Mike's voice, calm and unhurried, telling everyone that the fruitcake had been found safe and sound and the auction would go ahead as planned, and that everybody should go on home now and get out of the snow.

Hattie took the lid off the tin. Inside, wrapped in cheesecloth and waxed paper, sat the fruitcake: dark and heavy and dense, studded with cherries and citron and walnuts, smelling of brandy and molasses and cloves.

There was a slice cut out of one side. A thin one.

"I always taste it," said Hattie. "Every year. The day of the bazaar. Just a sliver, off the side, where nobody will notice. Walter taught me that. *Always taste it before you sell it, Hat. A*

baker who doesn't taste her own bread is a baker who's going to get a surprise." She looked down at the tin. "I tasted it this afternoon. Before Ben drove me over."

"And?" said Helen.

Hattie's chin trembled.

"Salt," she said. "A whole cup of salt. Where the sugar should have been." She pressed a lace handkerchief to her mouth. "I couldn't see the canisters. They're the same color, the sugar and the salt, the same size, side by side on the shelf. Ben's been telling me for a year I need to label them. And I said, *Benjamin Brenneman, I've been baking in that kitchen since before your father was born, I don't need a label to tell me which is the sugar.*" She laughed, a cracked, unhappy little laugh. "Well. I needed a label."

"Oh, Hattie," said Helen softly.

"Sixty-five years," said Hattie. "Sixty-five Christmases. And everybody makes jokes about it, I know they do. *Hattie's fruitcake, nobody eats it, you could build a barn with it.* I know. I'm old, Helen, I'm not deaf. But they *buy* it. Every year, they buy it, five hundred dollars, for the food pantry, because it's tradition, because it's mine, because Walter's name is on it, sort of." She twisted the handkerchief in her small papery hands. "And this year somebody was

going to pay five hundred dollars for a cake full of salt. And someday somebody would finally cut a slice and taste it. And they'd say, *Well, Hattie Brenneman's finally lost it. Poor old thing. Can't even tell salt from sugar anymore.* And they'd be right." Her voice broke. "So I hid it. I thought, if it was gone, if somebody had stolen it, then nobody would ever have to know. It would just be a mystery. A Christmas mystery. People would talk about it for years." She looked up at Helen through her thick glasses, her enormous pale blue eyes swimming. "I didn't think about the food pantry. I didn't think about anything at all. I'm a foolish old woman."

Helen reached across the counter and covered Hattie's small, cold hand with her own.

"You're not foolish," she said. "You're a baker. You didn't want to put your name on something that wasn't right. That's the most baker-ish thing I've ever heard."

Hattie sniffed.

"And there's an easy way to fix it," said Helen.

Hattie looked at her.

"The auction closes tomorrow night at seven," said Helen. "That gives us twenty-two hours. I have a kitchen with two ovens and every ingredient you can name, and a sheriff

who owes me a favor, and three dogs, one of whom is very good at finding things." She smiled. "You have a recipe. And you have sixty-five years of knowing exactly how it's supposed to taste."

"My eyes—" Hattie began.

"I'll be your eyes," said Helen. "You'll be my hands. Well, the other way around, really. You tell me what to do, and I'll read the labels." She squeezed the old woman's hand. "And we'll put Walter's fruitcake back on that table tomorrow night, exactly the way it's supposed to be."

For a long moment, Hattie Brenneman looked at her across the steel counter.

Then she took off her thick glasses, and wiped them on her lace handkerchief, and put them back on, and lifted her chin.

"Well," she said. "You'd better buy more brandy. That recipe takes a lot of brandy." She paused. "And Helen?"

"Yes?"

"That brown dog of yours." Hattie's mouth twitched. "Bring him too. I want to give him a cherry."

They baked all night.

They baked in Helen's kitchen on Elm Street, with snow piling up against the windows and the radio playing Christmas carols low on the counter and three Labradors arranged across the kitchen floor like rugs. Hattie sat on a stool at the kitchen table in her red coat, with a cup of tea at her elbow and her cane hooked over the back of the chair, and recited the recipe from memory. She didn't need to read it. She'd never needed to read it. She'd been baking it since 1961.

"Two cups of flour. Sifted, mind, not scooped."

Helen sifted.

"Now the brown sugar. Dark, not light. *Packed*. Show me." Hattie peered at the cup through her thick glasses. "Pack it harder. Walter always said you could stand a spoon up in my brown sugar."

Helen packed it harder.

"Now," said Hattie, with great ceremony, "the sugar." She paused. "*The sugar*, Helen. Read me the label."

Helen held up the canister and read the label out loud: "*Sugar.* Granulated. Domino."

“Thank you,” said Hattie, with enormous dignity.

They worked through the night. They chopped cherries and citron and candied pineapple. They toasted walnuts. They soaked the raisins in brandy, and then, at Hattie’s insistence, soaked them in some more brandy. They creamed butter and sugar in Helen’s big yellow mixing bowl, the one she’d bought the day she opened the bakery. They folded in the fruit and the nuts and the spices, by hand, slowly, the way Hattie said Walter’s mother had done it in 1938. They lined Hattie’s old red tin with brown paper, and filled it, and slid it into the oven at two in the morning, at the very low temperature Hattie insisted on. It was so low, Helen thought privately, that it would take until Easter.

It took until six.

Mako stayed awake the entire time. He sat in front of the oven door, the way he had sat every day that week, staring through the glass at the red tin inside with his whole heart in his eyes and his tail sweeping slowly back and forth across the linoleum. Every hour or so, without looking, Hattie reached down from her stool and gave him a cherry.

“You’ll ruin him,” Helen said.

“Somebody ought to,” said Hattie.

Halo slept by the stove, snoring. Shadow lay in the kitchen doorway with his chin on his paws, keeping watch, the way he always did. And sometime around four in the morning, when the kitchen was warm and dim and smelled of brandy and molasses and cloves, Hattie Brenneman put her head down on her folded arms on Helen’s kitchen table and fell asleep, and Helen put a blanket over her shoulders and let her sleep.

At six o’clock, with the sky just beginning to go gray over the snowy rooftops of Elm Street, Helen took the fruitcake out of the oven.

She set it on a rack on the counter to cool. It was dark and glossy and heavy and smelled like every Christmas Helen had ever had. And then, because a baker who doesn’t taste her own bread is a baker who’s going to get a surprise, she cut a thin sliver off the side, where nobody would notice, and woke Hattie up, and gave it to her.

Hattie chewed it slowly, with her eyes closed.

Then she opened them, enormous and blue behind her thick glasses, and they were full of tears.

“That’s it,” she said. “That’s Walter’s. That’s exactly it.”

Under the table, Mako thumped his tail.

7. Deputy Mako

The auction closed on Wednesday night at seven o'clock sharp, in the fellowship hall of the Maplewood Methodist Church, under the little brass spotlight that Pastor Dan had borrowed from the community theater.

The final bid was six hundred and twenty dollars. It was the highest bid in the history of the Christmas Bazaar.

There was a bidding war, which had never happened before either. It started at seven minutes to seven, when Rhonda Fiske of the Fiske Family Bakery marched up to the clipboard in her red cape, wrote down *$400*, and marched away again without looking at anybody. At five to seven, Mike Arrington wrote *$450*. At four to seven, Rhonda Fiske came back and wrote *$500*. At three to seven, Mike wrote *$550*. At two to seven, Rhonda Fiske wrote *$600* and stood beside the clipboard with her arms folded, glaring at the sheriff.

At one minute to seven, the sheriff wrote *$620*.

And then, as Pastor Dan rang the little brass bell to close the auction, everyone in the

fellowship hall watched Mike Arrington walk across the room to where Kyle Abernathy was standing by the cider table with his grandmother, and hand Kyle a white envelope.

“Your share,” said Mike.

Kyle looked at it. “My share of what?”

“Of the fruitcake,” said Mike. “Mrs. Lighthall tells me you’ve been saving two hundred and eighty dollars since June to buy it for your grandmother. I put in the other three hundred and forty. So we’re partners.” He nodded at the envelope. “That’s the receipt. Fruitcake’s yours. Go get it.”

Kyle Abernathy stared at the sheriff. His ears turned slowly crimson. Then he turned to his grandmother, who had both hands pressed to her mouth, and said, “Merry Christmas, Grandma,” in a voice that cracked badly in the middle. Then he went over to the round table and picked up Hattie Brenneman’s red tin with both arms, very carefully, as if it were made of glass, and carried it back to his grandmother, and put it in her lap.

She cried. Kyle cried. Hattie Brenneman, watching from her folding chair at the edge of the stage, cried. Several members of the Lutheran choir cried.

Rhonda Fiske did not cry. But Helen saw her, at the very back of the hall, take out her lace handkerchief and blow her nose, quite loudly, and then walk over to Hattie Brenneman's folding chair and bend down and say something into the old woman's ear. Helen never found out what it was. But whatever it was, Hattie laughed, her dry little cackle, and patted Rhonda's hand. And at the end of the evening, the two of them left the fellowship hall together, arm in arm, the tall woman in the red cape and the tiny one in the red coat, talking about marzipan.

“You,” said Helen to Mike, on the church steps afterward, in the snow, “are a soft touch, Sheriff Arrington.”

“Don’t tell anybody,” said Mike. “I have a reputation.”

“Six hundred and twenty dollars for a fruitcake.”

“For the food pantry,” said Mike. He looked down at her in the light from the church doors, and his steady gray eyes were warm. “And for a kid who mowed lawns all summer for his grandmother. And for an old lady who didn’t want anybody to know she couldn’t see the sugar anymore.” He shrugged. “It seemed like a good use of six hundred and twenty dollars.”

Helen didn’t say anything. She tucked her arm through his, and they stood together on the church steps in the snow, watching the last of the bazaar crowd go home. They watched the colored lights on the Methodist church, the best on Main Street, glow red and green and gold against the dark sky, while the bells in the steeple rang eight o’clock.

At their feet, three Labradors sat in a row in the snow: one yellow, one black and one chocolate.

Mike came over on Christmas morning, as he'd promised, with a present for the new deputy.

It was a small, flat box wrapped in brown paper and tied with red string. He crouched down on Helen's kitchen floor and held it out, and Mako sniffed it, and then, with great seriousness, took the string in his teeth and pulled. The paper came away. Inside the box, on a bed of tissue paper, lay a small brass tag shaped like a sheriff's star, with a little ring at the top for a collar.

Engraved on the front, in neat letters, it said:

DEPUTY MAKO

MAPLEWOOD, CT

And on the back, in smaller letters:

If found, please return to Helen. He always finds his way home.

Helen looked at it for a long time. Then she looked at Mike, crouched on her kitchen floor in his good blue sweater with a puppy trying to climb into his lap, and she found that she didn't trust her voice to say anything at all. So she didn't. She just knelt down beside him and clipped the little brass star onto Mako's red collar.

It jingled when he moved. Mako, discovering this, moved a great deal. He ran three laps

around the kitchen table, jingling, his ears streaming out behind him like brown flags, with Halo bounding after him, while Shadow watched from the doorway with the expression of a dog who had seen a great many Christmases and expected to see a great many more.

Mako’s first Christmas. Helen thought, watching him, that it was probably the best one she’d ever had too.

Then he crashed into the Christmas tree.

THE END

Want more Helen & the hounds?

Mako's very first case, the one that brought him home to Helen, is in **The Angel of Larkspur Farm**, Book 1 of the Helen & Hounds Cozy Mysteries.

Find it on Amazon, or start at **catherinewaltan.com**.

Thank you for reading!

— Catherine