



## Chapter 1

“Okay, so I put my dream of writing a book on hold so I can help a hoarder avoid going to jail,” Pat blurted to her husband as soon as he walked in the door from work. Patience “Pat” Oaktree, the self-proclaimed most successful professional organizer in the State, was trying to preempt him from asking how her day as an author had gone on this first evening of the six-month sabbatical she had planned for herself.

“I don’t understand. You worked so hard to clear your client schedule so you could finally focus on your writing,” said Frederic “Fred” Watson, while

immediately postponing Pat's response by giving her a passionate kiss. Pat followed him to the screened-in sunroom where Fred poured them each a glass of the Sauvignon Blanc that Pat had chilling in the ice bucket.

"Do you want the short version or the long one?" answered Pat.

Fred took a slice of French bread from the napkin-lined wicker basket, slathered it with creamy Camembert cheese, sat back in his cushioned chair, smiled, and said, "You might as well give me all the details."

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The day had started off exactly as Pat had envisioned. After she waved goodbye to Fred as he left for work, Pat had taken her mug of English Breakfast tea and two peanut butter cookies up to her office in the converted spare bedroom. Fish One and Fish Two, her pet goldfish, were noisily making bubbles at their water's surface. Pat fed them their daily food flakes and said cheerily, "Don't forget, guys, it's your job to help me write my books." Fish One and Fish Two gobbled up their food and returned to swimming around in circles.

Pat pulled out her book idea box, the clear plastic

shoebox that contained all the colored 3x5 index cards on which she had scribbled her book notes during her ten years as a professional organizer – at around three ideas a day, she had generated several thousand of them. She sorted them into categories on the floor, eliminating duplicates as she went. She ended up with piles of tips for every room in a house – each room could be a chapter in a home-organizing book. And piles of tips for various home storage areas – garage, attic, basement – which could be compiled into another volume. She had enough other notes for a book on paper and electronic files and another one on time management. And she had a small group of odd tips with ideas as diverse as outdoor organizing and using one's sense of smell in the organizing process.

Pat ate her last bite of cookie, took a sip of now-cool tea, and considered her piles. She watched Fish One and Fish Two swim a few circles. She looked back at her piles. They all sounded boring.

*Patience, Patience.* Pat admonished herself with the silent mantra that had served her so well all these years, the first use of the word being a directive and the second being her name. She had to remember

that, after ten years, much about organizing seemed obvious and, therefore, boring to her, but it was generally fresh and enlightening material for her clients and, presumably, for her potential readers.

Pat got up off the floor, walked over to her bookshelf, perused the dozens of organizing books she had collected over the years, reconsidered her piles of cards, and decided that the topic on which she had the most original material was information management.

Pat stood at her desk and sorted the relevant index cards into subcategories. She paused at the one that read: Flyers from sporting events should be tossed once the date has passed. What did that mean? Which client had papers that fit this category? Why had Pat thought the situation merited a 3x5 card? Try as she would, Pat couldn't remember. But she did start to think about a former client who had run across an old grocery shopping list in a stack of papers. This particular client had even dated her lists, and the one in question was over two years old. Everything on the list was crossed off except for the cream cheese. The client had refused to throw it out because she could not remember why she

needed cream cheese, whether she had been able to purchase it, and, if not, how she had done without it. *Oh, no! I can't be like that*, thought Pat, and she quickly tore up the enigmatic index card and threw it in the wastebasket.

Pat went to get another cookie. She solved a number puzzle from a newspaper page that Fred had left out for her on the kitchen table. *I must remember to ask him to keep these temptations out of sight while I'm writing!* She phoned to schedule a long-overdue haircut appointment. She watched Fish One and Fish Two swim some more laps. They were not doing their job of helping her write. She decided she needed a place to work with fewer distractions.

So she packed up her laptop, notepad, pen, and 3x5 cards on information management and went to the neighborhood coffee shop, where she ordered her favorite double mocha mud beverage and settled in to make a list of all the sources of information that made its way into people's lives.

As she was working, she overheard the conversation from a neighboring table. It seemed she could not avoid distractions.

"Can you believe he's got so much stuff that the

city is actually threatening to put him in jail?” said the man with short, wavy, jet-black hair – not a strand out of place – sounding a bit too enthused. Pat thought she knew him from someplace.

“It’s so sad to see Kurt in these circumstances,” said the other man, whose back was toward Pat, shaking his grey-haired head slowly and seriously.

“Well, we’ll rally the troops on Thursday evening, and by Sunday night we’ll have the place all spruced up. It’ll be a great story. I mean, it’ll be great for Kurt.”

Now Pat recognized the black-haired man as a writer for the local newspaper. Sometimes Fred, who acted as Pat’s private clipping service, gave her his articles to read.

He continued, “The tricky part will be getting Kurt away for the weekend. That’s where you come in, Pastor Michael.”

Pat did not like the sound of this. But what could she do? Should she pull the pastor aside and try to explain her concern in confidence? No, she didn’t know anything about him. So she would take her chances with the reporter.

She stood up and walked over to the men’s table.

“Excuse me,” she said to the black-haired man. “Aren’t you Skip Featherton, the newspaper columnist?”

Skip beamed. “Yes, I am. And you are?”

“Patience Oaktree. I’m a professional organizer.” Pat steamrolled on before Skip could get a word in. “Did I hear you’re doing a piece about a hoarder? Did you know that there are more than a few documented cases of hoarders committing suicide after well-intentioned friends and family members have cleared out their homes for them?”

“Is that true?” The pastor directed his comment at Skip.

“Pastor Michael Wingwin.” Skip nodded at the pastor as he introduced him to Pat and tried to deflect her question. She shook the minister’s hand.

Pat was pleased that the pastor persisted. “Is what she said true, Skip?” he asked again.

Skip paused. Then he admitted, “I’m not sure.”

“Then you’ll want to pull next weekend’s article until we’ve looked into this,” the minister said with just enough weight in his voice to leave no alternative, yet still be polite.

“Pull my column?! The space is already set aside,” Skip protested.

“We both know that the paper changes articles around all the time.”

Skip shot a dagger look at Pat as he answered the minister, “I suppose you’re right.”

Pastor Michael turned his attention back to Pat. “It’s positively wonderful that you have come along at just the right moment. And it would be exceedingly kind of you if you would come to our meeting on Thursday night and help enlighten our volunteers about the right way to handle this unfortunate situation. I suppose it would be too much to hope that someone with your expertise would have time in her schedule to actually coordinate the whole project ...?” The pitch of the pastor’s voice rose as his words trailed off, leaving an unanswered question hanging in the air.

*This pastor is pretty slick.* Pat figured he was only guessing at her credentials. But she was, after all, the most successful professional organizer in the State, so she figured she was the best person for the job. And the situation sounded serious, so she took the bait. And next thing Pat knew, she heard herself confessing, as it were, that her time for the next six months was fairly flexible since she was taking a

sabbatical to write a long-overdue book.

“But I can’t agree to participate unless the man with the problem wants help.” Pat could not compromise her basic principles.

“Then you’ll want to accompany me on my weekly visit to him tomorrow morning and ask him for yourself. Meet me at the church at eleven o’clock?” *So much for my haircut.* And the pastor reached into his pocket, took out his wallet, and handed Pat a printed card with his contact information on it. *I didn’t know ministers carried business cards.*

The pastor had a very mild manner, but Pat realized he was a force nonetheless.

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“I spent the rest of the day compiling some basic information on how to help hoarders and emailing it to the minister.” Pat finished her story and looked at Fred.

“I have no problem with it.” Fred always supported Pat. “You’re the one who always says you’re not running a charity.”

“Well, I guess maybe this time I am,” Pat sighed.

“And you’ll still have time to write a book before the kids are back.” Fred and Pat both suspected that

their two children might move home in a couple of years. Charley, their born-organized daughter, had just graduated from college with a degree in chemistry. Not being able to decide between graduate school or starting a career, she had signed on for a two-year tour overseas with a volunteer organization, which would no doubt be followed by some down time. And Ben, their borderline chronically disorganized son, was a junior with no plans beyond graduation. “Maybe you’ll even be able to write a book about this hoarding project,” Fred speculated. He always tried to put an optimistic spin on things and point out Pat’s opportunities.

“Maybe.” Pat smiled weakly. If it would make a good book, she was sure Skip Featherton would be on top of it and get the scoop.



## Chapter 2

The next morning, Pat read the bulletin board outside the church office as she waited for Pastor Michael. The postings indicated an active congregation – preschool, Bible study, youth group, social committee. Pat had heard a lot about older churches’ dwindling memberships, but this one, in its decades-old traditional building, appeared to be thriving.

When the pastor was ready to go, he said, “You’ll want to drive, and I’ll ride with you. That way Kurt can’t send you away if he wants me to stay.”

Pat smiled as she realized she had been given

another glimpse into the minister's subtle ways of getting people to accommodate his wishes.

"Kurt Peters is a very proud man." Pastor Michael continued to explain his take on the situation as he and Pat walked up Kurt's driveway from the street. Indeed, the lawn was recently mowed, but Pat noticed that the bushes could use some trimming and the curtains inside the house were all drawn closed, even though it was a sunny day full of beautiful autumn color.

The minister went on to say, "I try to visit Kurt every week while the weather's warm enough."

Pat wondered what difference the temperature made, but the minister promptly answered her unspoken question. "I haven't been in the house since shortly after his wife Erika died five years ago."

And sure enough, when they knocked on Kurt's door, he opened it narrowly, came out onto the front porch, and did not invite them inside. He was maybe twenty pounds over his ideal weight, and his greying blond hair was about an inch too long, but he was smartly dressed in a white knit golf shirt – so white that Pat wondered if it was brand new – a pale blue lightweight cardigan, a pair of khakis, and

brown loafers. By way of a greeting, he glanced at Pat and said to the pastor, “Who’s she?”

Pastor Michael introduced Pat. And Kurt responded by asking, “Why’s she here?”

“Some of us at the church are concerned about the summons you got to appear in court, and we were thinking maybe we could help you clear some of the stuff from your place,” Pastor Michael began.

“Over my dead body!”

“That’s sort of what Pat said when she heard us talking about it yesterday.”

“Talking behind my back is not nice,” Kurt told the pastor. Then he turned to Pat, “So you heard them talking and just decided to butt into my life, too?” He pulled an inhaler out of his pants pocket and took a puff.

“Has your asthma been bothering you again?” the minister asked softly.

“Stress always makes it worse, Michael. And you’re not helping.”

“I told the pastor I’ve had some success helping people who have a lot of stuff,” Pat interjected, “but only if the person wants my help.” She carefully avoided using words like ‘excessive,’ ‘clutter,’ and ‘hoarders.’

“Mmmm.” Kurt finally indicated that the three of them should sit down to talk on the Adirondack-style, plastic porch chairs.

The pastor told Kurt of the church’s plan to assemble a team for an intervention-style clean-out of his house. Kurt took another puff on his inhaler.

And the pastor explained how Pat was going to give a presentation to the would-be volunteers educating them on why their plan was not a good idea. Kurt nodded.

“But you’re still in a pickle, Kurt. That’s why I think you should consider accepting Pat’s help. She’s an expert in these matters, Kurt, and she’s on your side.”

Several seconds passed. Kurt did not say yes, but he didn’t say no, either.

“We’ll need to take a tour of your house if you want me to help you.” Pat figured there was no sense in avoiding the issue.

Kurt squinted, but not because of the sun, which had gone behind a small cloud. “Not today.” He looked at Pat. “You come back tomorrow. Alone.”

Pat stood up, and the minister followed her cue. If he was offended by Kurt’s restriction, he gave no

indication of it. Pat extended her hand to Kurt. “Will ten o’clock be okay?”

Kurt reluctantly shook Pat’s hand. “It’ll do,” he agreed, in his own negative way.