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FANCY GOLD MEDAL

VALERIE WOLZIEN  
Author of THE FORTIETH BIRTHDAY BODY

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藏书  
MERRY  
MURDER

VALERIE WOLZIEN

FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL • NEW YORK

For my parents

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**Evan Knowlson was sitting in one of the plaid chairs in front of the fireplace. A small lamp disguised as a candle was lit on the table by the chair; its light beamed down on a cup of creamy liquid beside a plate of tiny cookies shaped and decorated to look like wreaths. It took Susan a few moments to realize that he must be dead; no one could live with a hole the size of the one he had in his right temple.**

**“Susan? Why is it taking you so long? Are you okay?” Kelly appeared behind her.**

**Susan heard her gasp, but then there was almost a full minute of silence before the other woman spoke.**

**“I told you he would come back, didn’t I . . .?”**

**Also by Valerie Wolzien**  
***Published by Fawcett Books:***

**MURDER AT THE PTA LUNCHEON**  
**THE FORTIETH BIRTHDAY BODY**

# ONE

"WHAT I REALLY HATE IS BUYING GIFTS FOR TEACHERS. Between the teachers at her day school, and her piano teacher, and the prima donna who runs her ballet classes, I don't have time to shop for presents for the family."

"And the gymnastic instructor, and their tutors . . . I know exactly what you mean. Tell me, do you really like this dress, or is it too tailored?"

"I bought a dozen rolls of imported paper at a fabulous shop up on the Cape and now I can't remember where I put the damn things. And this year was going to be different. This year I was going to get organized."

"What I hate more than anything is helping the kids buy gifts for his ex-wife. I know she's their mother, but that doesn't mean they have to buy her the most expensive thing in the store. Last year—"

"Do you think it's a little long? Not that it couldn't be shortened easily, but I wonder if it would drape as well if it were hemmed."

"Of course, we had to get rid of all the poinsettias before

the cat poisoned herself again, and I don't know what the house is going to look like without them."

"Kathleen, will you stop listening to everyone else's conversation and tell me what you think about this dress?" Susan Henshaw, an attractive brunette in her early forties, urged the woman with whom she was sharing a large dressing room in one of the most expensive dress shops in Connecticut. "I know the paisley—"

"It looks fine, but there's a green dress out there . . . It's a size eight, but it looks big. I'll get it for you." Kathleen Gordon pushed aside the heavy canvas curtain and vanished down the plushly carpeted corridor back to the selling floor.

"Next year, I'm going to St. Bart's and forgetting about Christmas!" announced a harassed-looking woman, glancing into the cubicle Kathleen had just left. "Susan! I didn't know you were here! Good to see you. We're looking forward to your open house. My husband wants to know if Jed's going to make his famous Ivy League Punch again."

"We wouldn't know how to celebrate Christmas without it," Susan answered. As soon as the other woman took off, heading in the same direction Kathleen had taken, Susan pulled a large notebook from her handbag and, finding a clean sheet of paper and pen, she wrote: "Find crystal punch bowls."

She was still staring at those four words, sucking on the end of her pen, when Kathleen returned, a sweep of jade silk across her arm.

Susan frowned at the material. "I think that's more your color than mine. Probably more your size, too," she added, glancing up at the stunning blond.

"Try it on," Kathleen urged.

"I don't think it's going to fit," Susan said, her voice muffled as she pulled the dress she had been wearing over her head.

"So what will it hurt to try . . ." Kathleen began, and then stopped. "Damn it. I sound like my mother."

"If she's anything like mine, she'll be thrilled to hear it," Susan answered, smoothing the silk down over her hips.

"That reminds me, I wanted to stop at the drugstore and buy some gardenia-scented soap. She might like that. I can hang up the paisley, if you don't want it."

"Take it. I think you were right about this one," Susan said, swirling before the mirror. "It's lovely, isn't it?"

"Perfect," agreed Kathleen, looking down at the clothing she held.

"I was talking about the dress I'm wearing," Susan said.

Kathleen looked up and smiled. "I'm sorry. I was just wondering what I've forgotten. My mother's visit is starting to make me crazy—and she hasn't even arrived yet."

"Your mother, my mother-in-law—we're going to be nervous wrecks by the New Year. Maybe we should take the first plane out of here. We could go someplace warm and sip rum punch instead of eggnog."

"Good idea. When do we leave?"

"I'd say now, but what will I do about the fifty couples we invited to a holiday open house next week?" Susan asked, taking a last look at herself in the mirror.

"If they have enough of Jed's punch, they won't even miss you."

"Now there's an idea." Susan laughed. "Let me pay for this and we can go to the drugstore. I can look at stuff for Chrissy there while you shop. I think her Christmas wish list this year was drawn up by the editors of *Vogue* magazine. It ranges from expensive makeup to expensive clothing; it's dreadful."

"She's fifteen years old, Sue. Remember how we were at that age?"

"Well, maybe . . . But I think I was influenced more by *Seventeen* magazine than *Vogue*." She stopped to fasten two



buttons on the shoulder of her sweater. "Our latest crisis is what to buy Seth St. John for Christmas."

"Then they're still dating?" Kathleen said, walking out of the dressing room in front of her friend.

"Yes, and this is the first time Chrissy has ever given or gotten a present from a boy. She's so young and so vulnerable . . ."

"Susan, are you talking about your daughter?" the woman whose cat's eating habits were interfering with her holiday decorating scheme asked from behind her.

"Barbara!" Susan exclaimed, turning and looking into the face of her daughter's boyfriend's mother.

"You will never believe what Seth just bought Chrissy. She'll be so thrilled," Barbara St. John gushed enthusiastically, brushing her abundant red hair over her shoulder and licking glossy burnished lips.

"What?" Susan asked, suspecting that she wasn't going to get an answer.

"I'm sworn to secrecy. But I can tell you that it's perfect. She'll love it. Look at the time! I'm going to be late. See you at Evan's party!" In a swirl of mink, she trotted between long racks of party dresses, leaving a rainbow of silk, brocade, and beaded chiffon shimmering in her wake.

"I . . ." Susan started to speak before realizing that she was standing at the counter alone. "Kathleen?"

"Over here," came the reply from behind a mannequin wrapped in a beaded black velvet cape.

"Find something interesting? Something you can't live without?" Susan asked, following the sound of her friend's voice to the men's department, where, as usual, Kathleen's remarkable good looks had attracted all the men in sight. What a way to get sales help during the holiday rush. "Is that for you?" she asked, as Kathleen held a beige sweater up in front of her chest.

"No. I was thinking about Jerry. Do you think he'd like it?"

"It's hand knit from a combination of hand-spun and hand-dyed silk and alpaca yarns," the salesperson quickly informed them.

Susan glanced at the dangling price tag. "Wow. Those hands must belong to some union. It's pretty expensive. Does Jerry need a new sweater? Weren't you going to knit one for him?"

"I must have been crazy to even think about it. I signed up for a class at the knitting shop in Darien, spent over a hundred dollars for yarn, and then remembered that I've never been able to do any sort of handwork."

"Not really?"

"Really. My lowest grade in junior high was home economics. My knitting and sewing were a disaster. When I was a rookie cop and hardly making enough money to live on, I still had to pay someone to hem my uniforms—or send them home to my mother. Why I thought living in the suburbs would change all that . . ." She looked at the sweater doubtfully. "I'll think about it," she halfheartedly assured the salesman, handing it back to him.

"We better get going if we're going to stop at the drugstore. I'd hate to be late for Kelly's party," Susan said, signing the credit-card form and collecting her package. "Maybe you should have tried knitting something simpler for your first project. Like a scarf."

"I once crocheted a scarf for my mother for Christmas. I got the pattern out of one of those magazine articles titled 'One Hundred Christmas Gifts to Make for Less than Ten Dollars.'"

"And?" Susan prompted.

"It was so ugly, my mother never wore it."

"Your own mother?"

"Especially my own mother."

"Kathleen . . ." Susan began a sentence not knowing how she planned on ending it.

"In a few days you'll meet her," Kathleen said. "Then you'll understand."

## TWO

THE LARGE, WHITE CAPE COD COTTAGE LOOKED LIKE AN illustration in an advertisement urging people to spend Christmas in Connecticut, to experience Christmas "as it once was." If, of course, Christmas once was suburban and wealthy.

"What a beautiful wreath. I don't think I've ever seen one so lush."

"You're probably going to see dozens more. Kelly has always taken her Christmas decorating very seriously. Although this year . . ." Susan left the thought unfinished, pushing open the evergreen-laden gate and passing into the front yard of the pristine house.

"Wow." Kathleen stopped so abruptly that Susan plowed right into her.

"Oh, no. I'll bet I've crushed my cookies." Susan gently

shook the large basket she was carrying. "I should have baked something a little less delicate." She looked over Kathleen's shoulder. "It is beautiful, isn't it? It looks like a Christmas card."

And it did. The rambling house, with its dormers peeking out of the slate roof, its numerous windows, each made up of tiny panes of glass through which dozens of candles were gleaming, was surrounded by a forest of small evergreens, all trained or trimmed into the traditional Christmas-tree shape. Wreaths, bearing fluttering gold bows, hung atop windows and on either side of the gleaming red front door. A layer of snow shimmered on the trees and edges of the roof, and blanketed the now-dead lawn; it also made walking up the artistically curving, cobblestone path particularly hazardous.

"I feel a little like a drunken sailor," Kathleen commented as she slipped on a large, smooth rock.

"Be careful. I once twisted my ankle on this walk and it was only raining that day."

"You'd think Kelly would get rid of this health hazard now that Evan isn't around anymore," came a voice from behind the two women.

"You make it sound as though he's dead," Susan answered, turning to find out who was there.

"For her, he is. Not that she'll ever admit it," came the reply.

"Jennifer, I haven't seen you since your trip. How was St. Thomas?" Susan asked, recognizing a neighbor who was awkwardly holding a large cardboard box out in front of her.

"Fabulous. I got a tan and did all my Christmas shopping in the same week." The woman slid on the walk. "Damn it! I know this is going to distress Kelly, but I'm not going to break a leg just so that she can have the perfect entrance to the perfect home." She stepped off the cobblestones and

on to the snow-covered lawn. Kathleen and Susan followed suit.

"Do you think it will really upset Kelly?" Kathleen quietly asked. Susan knew Kelly much better than she did.

But the front door opened, and she got her answer without anyone speaking.

"Merry Christmas! I was watching from the window and I saw you leave the cobblestones first, Jen! But it's Christmas and I forgive you all! Come in. Come in."

"Merry Christmas, Kelly." Jennifer entered and kissed Kelly Knowlson. An attractive woman in her mid-forties, Kelly was clinging to the look prescribed in the late fifties—fluffy hair pulled back by a headband and wearing a kilt and matching cashmere twin set. "I'm sorry I messed up your picture-perfect entrance, but I thought you'd appreciate me not killing myself on the way to your party. Bloodying up the walk and all that."

"You look wonderful—so tan," Kelly said. Susan noticed that she didn't assure Jennifer that walking on the grass was allowed. "Are these your cookies?" she asked, taking the large box from her friend's hands.

"Yes. Are you going to spread them out in the dining room?"

"Don't I always? Why don't I go ahead, while you put your coats and everything back in the cloakroom? Susan, you and Kathleen just leave your cookies there on the table and I'll come back for them. I don't want to spill Jennifer's precious cargo."

"Cloakroom?" Kathleen repeated, a little incredulously.

"Follow Jennifer," Susan suggested, putting down her basket next to Kathleen's large box and then hurrying down the hallway and through an open Dutch door.

"Why . . . it is a cloakroom," Kathleen was saying, looking around the square windowless room. The walls were white and had three walnut bands running around them. Sit-

uated at foot intervals along the wood were walnut pegs—long enough to hold the heaviest fur and smooth enough not to snag the most delicate scarf. “I’ve never seen anything like this in a private home.”

“You’ve never been to Kelly’s before?” Jennifer asked, fluffing out her hair before the mirror provided.

“No. She left Hancock about the time I arrived. And, in the last few months since her return, I’ve only seen her around the club. We were assigned to the same paddleball team this fall.”

“Then prepare yourself. Kelly’s house is a monument to compulsive behavior,” Jennifer said on her way out of the room.

“Compulsive behavior?” Kathleen repeated.

“Kelly is something of a perfectionist.” Susan suggested an alternate term. “You must have seen a little of it, if you played on her team.”

“Well, she certainly worked hard to win, but we all did. And I don’t see what that has to do with her house.”

“You will,” Susan assured her. “Follow me.”

“Where are we supposed to meet?” Kathleen asked, thinking about the size of the house.

“The living room.”

“How do you know?”

“Because we always meet in the living room,” Susan answered.

Kathleen decided not to ask any more questions.

Their progress to the front of the house was impeded by the arrival of the rest of the guests. Moving into the hallway, Susan and Kathleen were surrounded by a dozen women, busily removing their coats and greeting each other. They were swept up in the atmosphere of geniality that begins any party, and it wasn’t until most of the women were seated on the deep, comfortable couches and chairs, that Kathleen had a chance to look around.

"This place is perfect for a Christmas party," she said aloud.

"It certainly has the right color scheme," agreed another woman.

The living room was large and long. It had been divided into three seating areas: one before an elegant enameled brick fireplace in the center of the room, one around the grand piano that filled the farthest end, and one near the entrance. There were five couches and more chairs than Kathleen could count; they were all upholstered in various plaids and prints, chosen for their color scheme of muted dark greens and ruby red. Pictures on the walls were mainly watercolors of rural snow scenes, elaborate gold frames proclaiming their expense despite the homey subject. Each artwork was draped with evergreen boughs and holly berries. Dozens of shiny brass candle holders sat on tables and on the mantel; matching sconces hung at appropriate intervals on the walls. The candles were all bayberry and all lit, as was the fireplace. Any empty corners or tabletops displayed brilliant red poinsettias or copper bowls of paperwhites, just coming into bloom.

"I think the narcissus are an innovation," Kathleen heard someone say.

"Never. Nothing changes except the type of cookies we choose to bring. We must have just missed them other years," another contradicted.

"Nothing except the guest list; this is the first of Kelly's cookie-exchange parties in the past few years that Rebecca's missed."

"Shh! She might hear you!"

Susan smiled at this conversation, but didn't get involved. She was going to forget town gossip and intrigue and have a nice time. As nothing else was said on the subject, she decided that everyone else must feel the same.

Kathleen thought that they were all waiting for something,

but didn't know what until Kelly made her entrance. She carried a large silver tray, which she placed on the coffee table before the fire, then sat down in a wing chair that seemed to have been saved for her. She pushed back the tortoiseshell headband she wore and smiled at everybody.

"I always think of my party as the beginning of the holiday season here in Hancock," she announced.

"We all missed it when you were away last year," someone nearby stated, and a cloud passed over Kelly's face.

"We won't think about that," she insisted. "We're here to have fun. How about some eggnog?"

"It's a little early in the day for me—" Kathleen began.

"It's never too early for eggnog. Heavens, it's practically breakfast," Kelly said, clearly disagreeing. "Milk, sugar, eggs . . . All that's missing is some bacon or toast."

"Well . . ."

"It's not alcoholic," Susan whispered in Kathleen's ear. "Kelly doesn't drink."

"Oh."

"Why don't we all go into the kitchen and get some lunch?" Kelly suggested. "After all, we should have something nourishing before we get to the goodies, shouldn't we?"

So, almost immediately after sitting down, they were all getting up and walking to the kitchen. Kathleen, amazed, followed the crowd.

The kitchen matched the rest of the house. The color scheme was, of course, blue and white. Baskets and a king's ransom of copper pans hung from exposed rafters. Candles glowed, flowers blossomed, and, in the middle of the room, sat a gigantic antique trestle table, originally designed to seat a dozen hungry farmers, loaded with loaves of homemade bread and two varieties of muffins, three pots of steaming soup, and fruit salads with creamy dressing. With cries that signaled the abandoning of their diets for the holiday season, the ladies dug in.



"I didn't know Kelly had any children," Kathleen whispered to Susan as they made their way, plates brimming with food, back to the living room.

"She doesn't. Are you thinking about that gigantic table?"

"That, and the size of the house. There must be at least four bedrooms upstairs," Kathleen guessed, glancing toward the wide stairway, treads stenciled with different animal silhouettes, that led up to the second floor.

"Only three. Although two of them have sitting rooms attached. And there are three full baths. Kelly and Evan had this house built to very specific requirements. They did an incredible amount of entertaining. Not just this type of thing, but having people out from the city for weekends. I assume his business required it."

"And she loved it."

"That she does," Susan replied, finding a seat with a small table nearby. She balanced her food in one hand while moving a pot of flowers and a Lalique ashtray to make a place to set it down. "Or did," she said, correcting her last statement. "This is the first party she's given since the divorce. But it's the same as it always was."

"And that's just the way it should be. Why should she give up anything that she loved just because Evan decided to run off and marry another woman?" asked a woman whose striking clothing set off her elegant, prematurely gray chignon.

"Well, maybe." Susan didn't agree, but didn't think this was the time to talk about it. "Elizabeth, do you know Kathleen Gordon?"

"Of course. We met at one or two Christmas parties last year, and at the Labor Day extravaganza at the club. Although I was suffering from such bad jet lag the first week of September that I don't even remember the picnic. But Derek said it was important that we go," answered Elizabeth