

SISTERS  
of the  
LAST STRAW

**The Case of the Haunted Chapel**

The two nuns stared open-eyed at each other.

“Did you hear that?” whispered Sister Lovely, as both nuns turned toward the altar.

“There’s no one there! It has to be ghosts!” cried Sister Lovely.

“Ohhhhh . . . galloping goosebumps!” shouted Sister Lacey as she rose in fright.





Karen Kelly Boyce

SISTERS  
of the  
LAST  
STRAW

The Case of the  
Haunted Chapel

TAN Books  
Charlotte, North Carolina

Dedicated to  
Mr. Conner Michael Ditchik, my grandson—  
Always find the good in others  
and overlook their faults.

With special thanks and great love  
for my friends who inspired this story—  
Lauren, Linda, Mary Jean, and Sue.  
One who has such friends is never alone.

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Book design by Regina Doman

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in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

Summary: When a new order of Sisters moves into an old convent,  
mysterious mishaps make them suspect their chapel is haunted.

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# Chapter 1

## In a Big Jam

Mother Mercy wrinkled her nose. *It smells like smoke*, she thought. Rising from the chair behind her large desk, she hurried to the door. Pulling open the door, she backed up as a cloud of fumes billowed into the office. She coughed on the thick smoke and her eyes filled with tears. Mother heard the footsteps of the other nuns who shared the house as they scurried toward the source of the smoke. It was pouring out of the back kitchen.

Since Mother Mercy was short and chubby, she found herself behind the rest of the nuns. Sister Lacey, petite and quick, was the first to reach the kitchen.

*Sisters of the Last Straw*

“I’ll be a son of a...a...a...” looking toward Mother, she quickly caught herself, “...sea cook!” she exclaimed.

Sister Lovely, who entered the kitchen right behind Sister Lacey, was the quick-thinking one. She grabbed the fire extinguisher that was on the inner wall of the large kitchen. Pulling the pin, the tall nun aimed the hose and sent a gush of foam toward the fire on the antique stove.

As the fire was put out, the Sisters could see the huge canning pot glowing orange with the heat of the now-extinguished flames. Sister Shiny bravely reached over the pot and turned off the stove.

Just as she withdrew her arm, the pot began to shake and vibrate. The nuns all backed away from the pot as the rumbling grew louder. The jars in the burnt-dry pot began to explode.

“Run!” Mother Mercy shouted as all the sisters ran out of the kitchen and back into the hall. POP...POP!



The popping sounds of the jars in the pot grew louder and were followed by the sounds BANG...SPLAT! The little glass jars hit the walls and broke, the jam oozing down the walls. Sister Shiny covered her eyes with her hands, unable to look at the walls of the formerly-spotless kitchen.

Mother Mercy's round eyes widened as jar after jar exploded and released first blueberry, then strawberry, and finally mint jam.

“How many jars are there?!?” exclaimed Sister Shiny as the large ‘pops’ continued to explode.

“The better question would be—*where is* Sister Krumbles?” shouted Mother, her face hardened in an angry frown.

As if by magic, Sister Krumbles appeared at the screen door which led to the backyard. Covered in dust, with her veil hanging off-center, she carried a dirt-caked shovel. The last jar of mint jam exploded onto the kitchen ceiling. Just as Sister Krumbles entered the kitchen, a large glob of green landed on top of her veil.

*Sisters of the Last Straw*

Her mouth opened in surprise as she took in the sight of the kitchen with jams flowing off the walls and ceiling. A sheepish look of guilt spread over the heavy nun's face as her blue eyes surveyed the scene which she had clearly created.

“Oh, no!” she exclaimed, “I forgot about the jams!”

The Sisters had planned making the jams for months. They wanted to sell the jams in their gift shop, which they were opening in the front room, just across from the new chapel. When visitors came, the Sisters hoped they would be attracted to the shop and purchase some of the rosaries and jams that the Sisters made. The sales would help fund some of the good works the Sisters planned.

The jam was Sister Lacey's idea. At one meeting of the small community of nuns, she had suggested that the Sisters make small fruit preserves with unique names like St. Blaise Blueberry, or Mother Mary Mint.

The Sisters had enjoyed coming up with distinctive names for each flavor. Sister Lovely had volunteered to make pretty labels for each jar on the computer. Sister Shiny had offered to find colorful ribbons to tie around the tops of the little jars. All the Sisters had agreed that it was an inspired idea.

Sister Krumbles had been so excited about it that she had decided to make the preserves herself. After all, she had grown up on a farm and had lots of experience with canning.

The superior of the convent, Mother Mercy, had come away from the meeting filled with a feeling of optimism. Now, the sight of the jams sliding down the walls of the smoke-choked kitchen filled her with feelings of anger.

The bewildered look on Sister Krumbles' face only made the Mother Superior angrier. Sister Shiny saw how red their superior's face had become and decided to escape the coming temper tantrum.

*Sisters of the Last Straw*

“I’ll just run up to the cleaning closet and get our supplies and gloves. It will take a lot of elbow grease to get this kitchen clean,” she announced. In her spotless habit, she ran up the sweeping hallway stairs which led to the second story of the mansion.

The second story had ten bedrooms and seven bathrooms. It contained numerous deep closets, one of which held the linens and the cleaning supplies. Sister Shiny ran so fast that she almost slipped on the polished wooden floor. She had seen Mother lose her temper once before!

Small white-haired Sister Lacey walked into the kitchen. She was dismayed to see Mother’s face go from red to a deep purple color as she seemed to expand, filling her habit. The Mother Superior looked as if she were about to explode like the jars of jam.

Sister Lacey wisely decided it would be better to not speak to her. But when she looked around the kitchen, she yelled in dismay.

“Holy...J...J...Jumping Jam!” shouted the older nun. “I’ve never seen such a...miserable mess!”

Jam was dripping down the walls and cabinets. Green mint jam was dripping from the ceiling. Sister Lacey thought she could distract the Superior from poor Sister Krumbles by the task of cleaning up the kitchen. “Mother Superior, how should we clean this up?”

It didn’t seem to work. Mother Mercy just stared at Sister Krumbles, who stood frozen and frightened in front of the screen door.

Sister Lacey used pot holders to remove the hot canning pot from the jelly-covered stove and set it in the sink. “Why, Marvelous Miracles! It looks like the pot is fine! Not ruined at all!” she exclaimed nervously.

The angry nun ignored the comments. In a loud voice she shouted at Sister Krumbles, “How could you forget about the jam?!? It was your *only* job today!”

*Sisters of the Last Straw*

Sister Krumbles hung her head. “I put all the jam in the jars and I put the tops on to seal. I carefully placed the jars in the boiling pot to seal the jars. I don’t know what went wrong. I went out to build the pen for the goats and... well, I just forgot!”

The pretty Sister Lovely quickly walked across the room and put her arm around the distraught and dusty nun.

“Come on upstairs with me and I’ll help you clean up,” Sister Lovely said in a kind voice.

“Oh, what’s the point of cleaning her up now, I’d like to know?” shouted Mother Mercy, even though she was calming down. “She might as well stay and help clean this kitchen. She can’t get much dirtier than she already is!”

As if to put an end to the argument, Sister Shiny appeared with aprons, gloves, and cleaning buckets. The nuns quickly began to work. Sister Lacey scrubbed the pot, and carefully picked up all the broken glass from the jam jars.

Sister Lovely, being the tallest, took a mop and cleaned off the ceiling. Sister Krumbles wiped down the cabinets, while Sister Shiny scrubbed the walls. Mother Mercy worked the anger out of her system by washing the messiest parts of the kitchen floor all by herself.

Her temper had almost gotten the better of her. Mother never knew how to control it. Her temper and disobedience had gotten her dismissed from two orders already. She had given up hope of becoming a nun. That was, until her aunt decided to move to Europe.

In a generous moment, her aunt had given this mansion to Mother Mercy. She knew her niece needed a place to go. She and her friend Sister Krumbles had just been dismissed from their second religious order for bad habits. Sister Krumbles and Mother Mercy had grown up in the same town. They had been friends since they were children. and had always dreamed of becoming nuns.

### *Sisters of the Last Straw*

Mother Mercy had been told she was too disobedient and bad-tempered to be a good nun. Sister Krumbles—well, she had been refused final vows just because of her accidents and forgetfulness. Both of the women had moved into the mansion and prayed every night in the house's chapel. Depressed, they had almost given up hope of finding an order of nuns that would accept them.

One night, during prayer, Sister Krumbles had an inspiration. *Why not start their own order?* Mother Mercy thought it was a great idea. She decided to make herself the Mother Superior of the new order. *If I am in charge of everything, I won't lose my temper!* she thought

They applied to the Bishop for permission. They had wanted to call themselves the Sisters of the Rose. Their Bishop hadn't refused them, but when he reviewed their history, he had jokingly changed the name of the order to the Sisters of the Last Straw.



He had sent them other sisters who had been dismissed from established orders for bad personal habits. The Bishop seemed to find the whole idea funny.



It took the group of nuns a whole hour, but they worked hard and the kitchen sparkled. It was cleaner, if possible, than before the jam explosion.

The Sisters were happy that Mother Mercy now seemed calm and pleased. But as she looked at her fellow nuns who stood proudly admiring their work, she started to laugh. The other sisters were confused. Why was Mother laughing at them? But when they looked at one another, the nuns *all* started laughing.

Sister Lacey and Sister Lovely held mops and scrub brushes and only had little smears of jam on their aprons and shoes. Sister Shiny, with her yellow rubber gloves and crisp white apron, didn't have a single spot on her.

*Sisters of the Last Straw*

Standing right next to her was poor Sister Krumbles. She had forgotten to put on her apron, and was covered from head to toe with dirt and jam. Her black-and-white habit was now brown, green, blue, and red and her veil was hanging off to one side.

All the nuns started to laugh, but Mother Mercy laughed so hard that she started to cry.

Sister Krumbles was so relieved to see her best friend laugh that she went towards Sister Mercy to hug her. But as she started to walk, her foot slipped on the wet floor and she landed with a crash right on her bum.

“Oh...Mother of a Merciful Mess!” exclaimed Sister Lacey. With that, all the nuns were reduced to laughter and tears.

When she caught her breath, Mother Mercy helped Sister Krumbles to her feet. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have lost my temper. I need to ask your forgiveness, Sister. During evening prayers, I will ask Jesus to forgive me for losing my temper.”

Sister Krumbles smiled, “I will ask Jesus to help me pay more attention to my work.”

Sister Lacey happily volunteered to start dinner, while Sister Lovely accompanied Sister Krumbles upstairs to clean up. Sister Shiny collected all the mops and buckets to put them away.

Mother Mercy started down the hall in a much better mood, with a smile on her face. But halfway down the hall, Mother Mercy stopped. The smile froze on her face. As she stood as still as a statue, she asked aloud to the now-empty hall, “Building a pen for...goats? *What goats?*”

SISTERS  
of the  
LAST STRAW

**The Case of the Vanishing  
Novice**

“Don’t fret,” said Mother Mercy. “Maybe Sister Krumbles and Sister Lovely have already found her.”

But soon they saw the two Sisters walking toward the car. Kathy was not with them!

“Oh...Missing Mystery!” whispered Sister Lacey.

“We looked down every alley and side street!” said Sister Krumbles, now out of breath. “Kathy has vanished!”





Karen Kelly Boyce

SISTERS

of the

LAST  
STRAW

#2 The Case of the  
Vanishing Novice

TAN Books  
Charlotte, North Carolina

Dedicated to  
Kaitlyn Faith Ditchik,  
my granddaughter:  
Always let those you love know where you are.

With special thanks to Kathy Scudieri,  
whose laughter in a coffee shop one night  
encouraged me to write this series.

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Book design by Regina Doman

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in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

Summary: New mishaps occur in the Sister's convent when their  
neighbor dislikes their new puppy and their new sister-in-training  
goes missing!

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# Chapter 1

## Stepping In It

Sister Shiny's eyes popped open. It was still dark in her bedroom, but her large grin seemed to light the room. She slipped her feet into her white slippers, tied her fluffy robe around her waist and tiptoed quietly out the door.

Last week, when Sister Shiny came downstairs, Mary, the housekeeper, had already finished cleaning the convent! There was nothing left for Sister Shiny to clean. All week she had been upset about it. So today Sister Shiny had set her alarm clock to wake her up an hour before Mary arrived.

And it worked! Sister Shiny was happy as she snuck downstairs. She grabbed a cloth and spray bottle from the closet and began to clean.

Sister Shiny started in the parlor by spraying the large mirror. She almost squealed with delight. Today she would clean all the mirrors, windows, and shiny surfaces. *Not only can I clean, she smiled, I also get to look at myself while I do it!*

Looking at herself in the mirror, she wondered why God had made her so pretty. She knew it was wrong to think so much about how she looked. It was vanity—and her vanity had gotten her dismissed from all the religious orders she had tried to enter before.

Sister Shiny's superiors had told her the problem was not only that she liked to look at herself. The problem was that it distracted her from her other duties. Whenever Sister Shiny was given a job, she would see herself in a mirror and forget what she was doing. She would spend time admiring herself instead of doing her work.

She had tried to stop, but never succeeded. That was why she had been asked to leave the other communities of sisters she had tried to join.

But this community, Our Lady of the Angels, was different. All the Sisters in this convent struggled with bad habits. This order was a chance for them to try to conquer their faults together.

Sister Shiny was glad that she had been allowed to join, even if their Bishop jokingly had nicknamed them the Sisters of the Last Straw. Still, she could not really see what was wrong with admiring herself. *If God didn't want me to enjoy looking at myself, why did He make me so beautiful?* Sister Shiny wondered.

“Look at those large green eyes, and my flawless skin,” she whispered to herself as she worked. Cleaning this big mirror gave her a nice long time to admire herself.

Sister Shiny cleaned and cleaned. By the time she heard Mary opening the convent door, she was almost done. She looked at her happy face in the shiny side of the toaster one more time. That's when she felt it. A cold, wet liquid was soaking her slipper. *What is it?* she thought, looking down.

“No....I’m dirty!” she screamed. Mary came running as the howling woke the other Sisters in the house.



Mother Mercy jumped from her bed. Scrambling for her glasses on the nightstand, she tried to get them on. Looking at the clock, she could feel her face getting warm.

“What kind of racket is going on downstairs this early in the morning?” she shouted. Something was wrong, and she had better find out what it was. **Lord, help me be patient!** she thought.



“Oh! Waking Wailings!” muttered Sister Lacey when she heard the screams. The short sister quickly put on her robe. When she got excited, she had a habit of using bad words. So she tried to use other words instead when something upset her. Now she thought, *Is someone breaking into our convent? Is the house on fire?*

“Oh, Screaming Shenanigans!” she yelled as she stumbled to the hallway.



When Sister Lovely heard the noise, she knew her sisters needed her. Sighing, the tall sister put on her slippers and hurried out to the hallway to see if she could help.



Sister Krumbles fell to the floor in a mass of tangled covers. *What is going on?* She could not get out of the blankets. She rolled around on the floor, getting more and more frustrated. Finally getting free, she rushed to her bedroom door with a blanket caught in her sock. She bolted down the hallway. “I’m coming!” she shouted.



Hearing the shouts and screams, Kathy jumped up in the dark and put on her robe and slippers. But she was confused by her new room.

Kathy had come to the convent just a month ago to decide if she wanted to join the community. She was a postulant in the order.

Instead of opening the door to the hallway, Kathy opened her closet door and ran inside, slamming the door behind her. It took her a few seconds to realize what she had done. Fully awake, she finally found the right door and scrambled out of the room.

There, she found all the other Sisters stumbling down the dark hallway. Frightened, Kathy cried, “Who is it? Is it a robber?”

Another heart-rending scream rose from downstairs, “No....no!” Sister Lovely covered her mouth and Sister Krumble’s eyes opened wide.

“Let’s try to stay calm!” Mother Mercy commanded. She had noticed that Sister Shiny was missing. “Follow me, Sisters!”

Crowding behind her, the group started down the stairs. Then Sister Krumble’s foot got caught in the blanket. She lost her balance.

She tried to grab the banister to stop her fall. But instead she fell into Sister Lovely, who stumbled into Sister Lacey, who bumped into Mother Mercy.

“Ouch!” “Oof!” “Ow!” “Whoo...oa!” shouted all the Sisters as they stumbled down the steps. Just then, another shriek pierced the air.

“It’s coming from the kitchen!” shouted Mother Mercy. She ran down the hall with the rest of the Sisters right behind her. Reaching the kitchen, they stopped in surprise.

There was not a fire. There was not a burglar. There was just Sister Shiny standing in the kitchen, her fists in balls, her eyes closed. Next to her, the housekeeper Mary was trying to wipe up something on the floor.

“What is it, Shiny?” Sister Krumbles panted. Trembling, Sister Shiny stopped screaming and pointed to her foot. She had one spotless white slipper and one wet, yellow one. “I stepped in this horrible yellow puddle. What on earth could it be?” she cried, tears running down her face.



Kathy hung her head and blushed. “Oh dear... It looks like my puppy Gracie has wet the floor,” she said.

“Oh...Puddles of Pee!” yelled Sister Lacey. “All that screaming for just a little mess?”

A yellow puppy appeared at the kitchen door. She barked with delight at seeing all the Sisters.

When Kathy had come to the convent, she didn’t want to leave her dog behind. Mother Mercy had allowed her to bring her pet, which seemed like a bad idea now.

“That dog!” Sister Shiny sputtered. She pointed to the pup. “That dog has to go!”

Kathy picked up Gracie. “It’s my fault. I let her out of her crate when I woke up to take her for a walk, but then I fell back to sleep.”

This was too much for Mother Mercy. She was cross from having been woken up. She was sore from falling down steps. And she was angry to see the mess on the floor. “Well, for once I think Sister Shiny is right—that dog is too much trouble!”

Sister Lovely noticed the tears that ran down Kathy's face. She rushed to give her a hug, "Now, now—don't cry! Please let her keep her dog, Mother Mercy." Gracie wriggled in Kathy's arms and licked Sister Lovely's face.

Mother Mercy's face grew red with anger. "I am the head of the convent!" she shouted. "I make the decisions, and I say the dog goes!"

Kathy hugged the puppy tighter, and began to weep. Sister Lacey blurted out, "Oh....Mother of Meanness!" Then she remembered that this was not the right way for a sister to talk to her mother superior, and she said, "I'm sorry."

Mother Mercy remembered that her bad habit was losing her temper. She silently prayed and tried to stay calm, but she still felt very, very angry.

"But don't you think Kathy should have another chance?" Sister Lovely asked. "She only forgot once. And dogs can be useful."

Sister Krumbles said, "Why, we can train Gracie to be a guard dog."

Mother Mercy tried not to yell. “Why in the world would we need a guard dog? To protect us from Sister Shiny’s screaming?”

“No, no,” laughed Sister Krumbles. “We can train her to guard the goats. She can live outside with them. That way she will not mess up the house.”

“Why, that’s a wonderful idea!” Sister Lovely said.

“I suppose that might work,” Mother Mercy said gruffly. She was beginning to be sorry for having yelled. Now she would have to ask God’s forgiveness.

Kathy gave Mother Mercy a hug. Mother Mercy tried not to be mad when Gracie licked her nose. “Well, we are up early! Let’s go into the chapel and begin Morning Prayer,” Mother Mercy said. She wanted to apologize to Jesus for yelling. So she quickly went to the chapel before *anything* else could happen to make her lose her temper.

Sister Shiny still stood on one foot weeping.

“I will help you, Sister.” With a smile, Sister Lovely helped Sister Shiny hop to the kitchen sink. Sister Shiny wiped her eyes and said, “Thank you.”

Sister Lacey helped Mary finish cleaning up. Kathy just hugged her puppy and said softly, “Thank you for giving Gracie another chance, Sisters.”

“That’s what community is for,” Sister Krumbles said. She felt so happy about her fellow sisters. She held out her arms and stepped back to look at them all fondly. “Isn’t it wonderful how we can solve any problem by working together?”

Just then, she felt something squish under her bare foot and between her toes. Looking down, she saw something soft and brown. And she yelled just as loud as Sister Shiny had.

Sister Lacey’s eyes opened wide as she scrambled to get the mop again. “Oh...Piles of Puppy Poop!”

SISTERS  
of the  
LAST STRAW

**The Case of the Stolen Rosaries**

But all they saw was Sister Lacey in her bathrobe. She was staring at the empty counter. “Son of a Tiptoeing Thief!” yelled Sister Lacey. “How did they do it?”

“What happened?” asked Mother Mercy, as her face went white.

“The robber got in again! I don’t know how he did it! I was sleeping here all night and I didn’t hear a thing!”





Karen Kelly Boyce

SISTERS

of the

LAST  
STRAW

#3 The Case of the  
Stolen Rosaries

TAN Books  
Charlotte, North Carolina

Dedicated to Heather Tsapp,  
My first fan

In memory of my talented friend:  
Till we meet again  
Karen F. Riley  
1962–2013

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in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

Summary: A renegade rooster terrorizes the Sisters' back yard and a  
mysterious thief snatches the Sisters' rosaries in this third adventure  
about a convent of misfit nuns.

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# Chapter 1

## That Darn Rooster

Sister Krumbles stood looking out the screen door of the kitchen. There was a long staff in her hand. Her hand was shaking. She had to go outside, but she didn't want to. She was afraid.

She was not afraid of robbers. She was not afraid of big dogs. She was not afraid of ghosts. She was afraid of a rooster.

The Sisters in her convent had received the gift of seven chickens and one rooster from a friend, Farmer Murphy. They loved having fresh eggs each morning. It saved the Sisters money to have their own chickens. Sister Krumbles loved the fat hens. But she did not love the rooster. His name was Ronnie. And he was mean.

Sister Krumbles slowly opened the screen door and scanned the yard. She quietly tiptoed outside. Looking around, she didn't see the rooster.

She reached the bin that held the goat food. She opened the metal bin as quietly as she could. She poured the pellets into the feeder as the goats ran from the goat house to get their breakfast.

With the long staff in her hand, Sister Krumbles headed toward the chicken coop. She grabbed a handful of grain and tossed it around for the chickens. "Here Ch...ch...ch...chick!" she whispered. The hens all came running to peck at the grain.

She was almost done with her chores! Sister Krumbles tiptoed toward the kitchen door. Then she heard a loud, "CAW! CAW!" She jumped.

But it was just a large crow. It flew to the old pine tree in the center of the yard.

With a sigh, Sister Krumbles headed for the porch. Just then, Ronnie the Rooster darted out from behind the tree and rushed at her!

“AHHH....!” screamed Sister Krumbles. The nasty rooster flew toward her, beating his wings. He blocked her way. Taking the staff, she pounded the ground. THUMP THUMP! Startled, the rooster jumped back.

Sister Krumbles took a step back and Ronnie the Rooster took a step toward her. The Sister took another step back and Ronnie moved closer. THUMP...THUMP! went the staff against the ground. Sister Krumbles stepped backward onto the porch. She turned and ran into the kitchen, slamming the door behind her. Ronnie flew right into the door. He cackled in rage.

Sister Krumbles laughed. “Ha! Ha! You didn’t get me!” She jumped and waved her arms in a silly dance. “You didn’t get me today—yay! You didn’t get me today—yay!”

When she stopped, she saw all the other sisters in the kitchen were watching her. Sister Shiny was filling the salt shaker. Mother Mercy and the others were eating breakfast.

Sister Krumble's face turned red. "I was just glad that Ronnie didn't peck me today," she said.

"So we see," said Mother Mercy, the head of the order. "Can't you even feed the animals without causing a ruckus?"

Sister Krumbles hung her head in shame. "I don't know what to do about that rooster! I'm afraid of him!"

Mother Mercy stamped her foot. She had a hard time keeping her temper. "Why did you take all these animals from Farmer Murphy if you are afraid of them?"

"Silly Superior!" said Sister Lacey. "We all should take turns helping with the chickens! After all, we all eat the eggs!"

As soon as she said it, the short sister realized this was not a good thing to say. Sister Lacey always found it hard to watch what she said. She had learned to say funny things instead of bad words. But sometimes she still spoke up when she should be quiet.

She tried again. “Well, we are all afraid of something. Son of a Splashing Swimming Pool! I’ve been afraid of swimming ever since one of my brothers dunked me in the pool. What are you afraid of, Mother Mercy?”

Mother Mercy thought. As she did, the corners of her frown turned up. She began to smile. “I am afraid of losing my temper!” Everyone laughed.

“I’m also afraid of what would happen if I was not in charge,” Mother Mercy said. “I guess that is why I made myself head of the order.”

Mother Mercy and Sister Krumbles had started the order of the Sisters of the Last Straw. This order was for sisters who had not been able to stay in other convents because of bad habits. Each of the Sisters in the order had a bad habit that she was trying to overcome. They had to help each other.

“Holy Hilarity!” giggled Sister Lacey. “I guess we are all afraid of something. Jesus would want us to entrust our little fears to Him. He will help us be brave!”

“Yes, but we should still help one another!” said Mother Mercy. “You are right. We will all take turns helping Sister Krumbles feed the animals.”

Sister Shiny’s eyes opened wide. *I don’t want to help Sister Krumbles with her messy projects!* she thought. *Why, the back yard is full of dirt and bugs! Those animals smell! They never take baths! I don’t want to get my shoes dirty! I don’t want to get my hands dirty!*

The thought of dirt made Sister Shiny dizzy. The room spun around her. She backed away, and tripped over a stool. She tried to grab the counter. Instead she grabbed the big can of salt.

The lid went flying into the air. Salt sprayed everywhere. It covered Sister Shiny! The empty canister landed on Sister Shiny’s head. It looked as if she were wearing a tin hat over her veil.

“Poor Sister Shiny!” Sister Krumbles said. “You need a hug!” She reached out her arms. She had dirt on the edge of her habit. She had chicken feathers stuck on her veil. She had a smear of mud on her cheek.



“No!” gasped Sister Shiny. But Sister Krumbles hugged her anyway. Now Sister Shiny was covered with mud, salt, and feathers. She began to shake.

Mother Mercy started to chuckle. “I guess Sister Krumbles is Sister Shiny’s biggest fear!”

But then they heard another scream. It was not Sister Shiny. It came from the front of the house. Sister Wanda was screaming. “We’ve been robbed again!” she yelled.

Sister Wanda was a tall, thin girl. She was a novice in the order. Her chore was to clean the Sisters’ gift shop. The Sisters ran the shop to raise money for their good works.

Everyone went out into the hallway. Sister Wanda was running towards them. When she saw the Sisters coming, she stopped. “Screaming Sister Shenanigans! What happened?” asked Sister Lacey.

“The rosaries are gone again!” Sister Wanda said. “I’ll show you!” She turned to run back to the shop, but instead she opened the door next to the shop door and dashed inside. There was a thump.

“What are you doing in the clothes closet?”  
Mother Mercy shouted.

Sister Wanda stumbled out of the closet. She was very red. No matter where she was, she always seemed to get lost.

“Please stop running and tell us what happened,”  
Mother Mercy said. “What happened to the rosaries?”

The Sisters’ best-selling items were the special rosaries they made of sparkling beads. Last month, the Sisters had discovered several rosaries were missing after a big party. The Sisters thought that someone had come in during the party and taken them. Now they were always very careful to lock the door to the little shop whenever they left.

Sister Wanda said, “Well, yesterday evening, I decided to make some rosaries. I made five pretty rosaries. This morning I put the rosaries here on the counter before we went to pray. After breakfast, I came back to clean the shop. But when I opened the door, all the rosaries I made were gone!”

“Did you forget to lock the door?” Mother Mercy asked.

“I know I locked the gift shop door behind me. I had to unlock it to get back in just now,” said Sister Wanda.

Mother Mercy pointed to the window. “Did you leave the window open?”

“I guess I did,” said Sister Wanda. “I wanted to air out the shop. But that window is so high off the ground. I did not think that anyone could climb through it.”

“Rosary Robbing Rascals!” exclaimed Sister Lacey, “How did the robbers get in?”

Mother Mercy looked around the gift shop in dismay. “I don’t know, but I intend to find out! It’s time to call the police!”

SISTERS  
of the  
LAST STRAW

The Case of the  
Flower Phantom

“Is there a note? Let us know who your secret admirer is!”

Gabby opened the small envelope that was attached to the flower. She frowned.

“Well, who sent it?” Sister Krumbles asked.

“It just says ‘I KNOW!’ and there’s no name. What could it mean?”





Karen Kelly Boyce

SISTERS

of the

LAST  
STRAW

#4 The Case of the  
Flower Phantom

TAN Books  
Charlotte, North Carolina

Dedicated to a talented young writer  
and a wonderful fan  
Theresa Claire Mladinich

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Summary: A chatty house guest staying with the Sisters for Thanksgiving receives mysterious flowers with scary messages. Who is sending them and why? The Sisters of the Last Straw are a group of misfit nuns who struggle with their problems while seeking to love Jesus more.

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# Chapter 1

## Muddy Messes

Soft breezes ruffled fallen leaves on the late autumn day. Sister Lacey loved the feel of the earth on her hands. The tiny nun was enjoying the plants and trees God had made. She had just finished digging up the rosemary bush and the geraniums. Those plants would die in the winter cold, so she put them in large pots to bring inside. *I'll put them in my room with the other pretty flowers*, she thought.

Next she dug up the calla lilies. She was thrilled to find that each lily bulb had grown a second bulb! Next year, the Sisters could have twice as many calla lilies for the vase by Mary's statue in the chapel.

Sister Lacey loved the chapel and the little community of sisters where she lived. *I am so grateful Mother Mercy and Sister Krumbles started this community so that we can all work on overcoming our bad habits together*, she thought. Sister Lacey’s problem was using salty language when she was surprised or angry. But thanks to the Sisters of the Last Straw, she was learning to think before she spoke.

Then Sister Lacey heard a CREEAAAK—and a big THUMP!

And “O...ooh! Oh no!” someone yelled.

Sister Lacey remembered just in time not to say any bad words. “Screaming shenanigans! What’s going on!” she shouted instead, and rushed around the corner of the garage.

When she saw what had happened, she had to stop herself from saying anything.

Beside the convent, the large and beautiful rose of Sharon bush had been pulled up by the roots and was lying on the ground! There was a large muddy hole where it had stood.

And struggling beneath the bush was young Sister Wanda! The work overalls she wore over her habit were coated with mud. Her face was streaked with sludge.

“Messy mishaps!” Sister Lacey shouted. “What are you doing? Are you alright?”

“Oh!” said Sister Wanda. “I was just trying to help you dig up all the plants in the yard for winter!”

“Warm-hearted Wanda! How were you trying to help me?”

“At breakfast you said that it was time to dig up the bushes for the winter. I saw you working so hard. So I thought I would help you. I just finished digging up the entire front yard!”

Sister Lacey looked around. There were two deep holes where the young apple trees used to be. There was a long muddy trench where flowering bushes used to line the yard. The corners of the yard were big grubby patches. Beside the patches were large mounds of muck. The entire yard looked like a herd of elephants had marched through it.

Sister Lacey laughed. Once she started, she kept on laughing until she felt better. Sister Wanda loved helping. But her bad habits were not paying attention and day-dreaming when she should be listening. She often forgot things, lost things, or got lost herself.

Sister Lacey was learning to be patient with her, so she said, “Gracious gardener gaffes! I didn’t need to dig up ALL the bulbs and plants. Most of them do fine with the winter cold. There are only a few that have to be dug up and kept warm in the winter!”

Sister Wanda’s smile froze. “O...oooh!” was all she could say.

Sister Lacey pulled Sister Wanda to her feet. “Don’t worry. Now we can replant the bushes and flowers right where they will look their best.”

Sister Wanda was so thankful that Sister Lacey wasn’t angry. She was happy to replant the front yard with the older sister’s help. They set right to work.

First, they replanted the two small apple trees. Next, they replanted the forsythia bushes along the fence of the goat pen.

“I think we should move the rose of Sharon bush to the center of the yard,” Sister Lacey said. “It will be just the right spot for our Mary statue.”

“Why is that?” asked Sister Wanda, huffing and puffing as she carried the bush.

“Flowers can have secret meanings,” said Sister Lacey, “and ‘Rose of Sharon’ is a nickname for Our Lady. So it will be perfect to have it behind the statue! And we can plant tulip bulbs around it, since their meaning is ‘prayers.’”

“Wow! I never knew that!” Sister Wanda said as they worked together.

Their neighbor Mr. Lemon came out of his large house. Mr. Lemon wanted everything nice and neat. Because of this, he did not like the Sisters and their many messy projects. Sister Lacey waved at him, but he did not look at her. Instead he swept autumn leaves off of his stone porch, grumbling.

“Grumbly grouch,” said Sister Lacey. Then she was sorry she had spoken without thinking.

“I wonder why he is always so grumpy,” Sister Wanda said. “I wish we could be friends with him.”

“Friends with Mr. Lemon? He would have to change first,” said Sister Lacey. “And no one likes to change.”

“How beautiful the yard looks now!” exclaimed Sister Lovely. She had come out of the convent and stood at the front door.

“Thank you!” Sister Lacey said. “I couldn’t have done it without Sister Wanda!” She winked at the young sister, who smiled.

Sister Lovely looked a little worried as she glanced up and down the street.

“Is something wrong?” asked Sister Lacey.

“Oh! Not really,” Sister Lovely said. “You haven’t seen a woman in a big hat, have you?”

“No,” Sister Lacey said. “Why?”

“My cousin Gabby is coming to spend Thanksgiving with us. She’ll be here soon.”

“What fun!” Sister Lacey said. “We will watch for her.”

Sister Lovely did not look as happy as Sister Lacey expected. She just sighed and went back inside.

Just as the two Sisters were cleaning their work tools, a taxi pulled up. A tall, thin woman with a large black hat stepped out of the cab. She looked over at Mr. Lemon and grinned. She gave him a cheery wave. He raised his hand halfway and squinted. Frowning, he turned away. The tall woman turned to the two Sisters and smiled.

“May I help you?” called Sister Lacey.

“I’m sure you can. I’m Miss Gabby Fibber, Sister Lovely’s cousin. I’m here for a visit.”

“Oh Gallivanting guest!” smiled Sister Lacey. “We’ve been expecting you!”

“I’ll go tell Sister Lovely!” Sister Wanda exclaimed. She hurried inside, forgetting she was still holding the muddy rake. Gabby paid the driver and took two large suitcases out of the taxi.



“Let me clean up my tools and then I will take your bags!” the older sister said. “I’m Sister Lacey.”

“Sister Lacey! Why, I’ve been told so much about you!” Gabby said as Sister Lacey put her tools back into the wheelbarrow. Babbling on and on, Gabby laughed, “I heard that you have trouble with using bad words. I couldn’t stop laughing at the silly expressions you use instead! All of you Sisters are funny. Sister Shiny! Watching her admire herself in all the mirrors must be a hoot!”

Sister Lacey couldn’t believe what she was hearing. *Has someone been talking about us to Gabby?*

Gabby just continued on. “Oh, and that clumsy Sister Krumbles! Her accidents really trigger Mother Mercy’s bad temper. Ha! No wonder Sister Wanda keeps getting lost! I’d get lost too!”

Sister Lacey tried to defend the Sisters. “We all have bad habits, but we are trying to improve. I think we’ve made lots of progress!”

Gabby didn’t listen. On and on she talked!

Sister Lacey was stunned. *Gabby is Sister Lovely's cousin. Sister Lovely must have told her all these things. Why would she do that?*

*SISTERS*  
of the  
*LAST STRAW*

**The Case of the Christmas Tree Capers**



Karen Kelly Boyce

SISTERS  
of the  
LAST  
STRAW

The Case of the  
Christmas Tree Capers

TAN Books  
Charlotte, North Carolina

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Dedicated to a beautiful girl and a  
great fan, Grace Gaudino





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# Chapter 1

## The Trees Arrive

Mother Mercy fingered her rosary as she knelt in the chapel. Dear Lord, please help me to learn patience. Give me the grace...

“CHOMP...CHOMP...SMACK!”

Mother’s body straightened as she tried to resume her silent prayers....*the grace to remain calm. The strength to control my...*

“SMACK...SLURP...GULP!”

Mother Mercy’s eyes flew open. Her face heated and her lips tightened. Turning abruptly, she saw Sister Lovely kneeling in the pew behind her. Sister Lovely’s eyes were closed and her hands were folded in prayer. She looked so saintly, as if she were about to rise to heaven itself. Then,

*Sisters of the Last Straw*

suddenly her mouth moved.

“SMACK...SMACK...CHAM!”

*She's chewing gum!* Mother Mercy realized as all the other Sisters turned to look at Lovely. However, deep in prayer, with her eyes closed, Sister Lovely continued chomping away at the gum in her mouth.

Mother Mercy's fists tightened around her rosary. Sister Shiny's mouth hung open. Sister Lacey snickered as the gum chewing sounds rose and fell in volume. None of the Sisters could concentrate on their prayers. That is, except for Lovely, who seemed lost in the mysteries of her rosary.

Mother stomped out of the chapel. The other Sisters followed. Sister Wanda had prepared breakfast, and morning prayers were over before they began.

Mercy tried to calm herself. After all, this was why she founded this young community of religious. Each of the Sisters had bad habits they

were trying to overcome. Sister Wanda lost everything, including herself. Sister Shiny couldn't stop cleaning and admiring herself in the mirror. Lacey fought a habit of bad language, while Mother Mercy struggled to control her anger. Sister Krumbles was prone to accidents. *Poor Sister Lovely is giving up smoking, and the gum chewing seems to help*, thought Mother.

A few minutes later, Sister Lovely entered the room and seemed unaware that anything was wrong. Joining the others for breakfast, Lovely took the gum out of her mouth and stuck the wad under the table top. No one noticed, and she fully intended to remove the gum after breakfast. However, by the time she had eaten all her eggs and the Sisters cleaned up the remnants of breakfast, Sister Lovely forgot about the gum.

SCREECH! the winding wheels sounded as a truck braked on the road outside the convent.

“The trees are here!” shouted Sister Krumbles. She jumped up and down, looking out the

picture window. Turning, she ran toward the kitchen door. The truck's backup alarms sounded as Krumbles hit the newly polished floor and started skidding.

“Ah...!” Sister Krumbles yelled.

The other Sisters watched in wonder. Krumbles twisted and twirled like a skateboarder. It was magical! That is, until she hit the kitchen counter.

“Whoa...aaa!” Krumbles yelled as she spun around in a tight circle. Spinning faster and faster, she became a blur and her form tightened. Like a top, Krumbles spun as if she would never stop. Finally, much to the relief of the others, she grabbed the doorknob of the back door. She didn't fall. She didn't crash. She slowed to a graceful stand at the kitchen door.

With a big grin, she turned to look at all the other Sisters, who stood frozen with fear. “Well, why are you waiting? Let's get out and see the trees!”

“Guess we should get outside.” Sister Lovely

laughed, and out they went.

“Son of a Jam-packed Jalopy!” shouted Sister Lacey. “I can’t believe how many we ordered!”

The heavy-set driver huffed and puffed as he handed his partner each tree. The tall, thin partner dragged each tree to a large pile that he was creating at the top of the driveway. In less than fifteen minutes, they closed the back of the truck, jumped in the cab, and pulled away.

All the Sisters stood in a circle around the mountainous heap of trees.

“Pile of Pines!” shouted Sister Lacey. “What now?”

Mother Mercy looked stumped.

Sister Lacey had seen an ad for shipments of pine trees in a gardening magazine. It had seemed like a wonderful way to raise money for Christmas gifts for all the poor children in town. However, with a large pile of trees from Canada sitting on the driveway, the Sisters were baffled.

“I’ll make a sign so everyone passing can see

that we have trees for sale,” shouted Sister Shiny as she escaped into the house.

Looking around, Sister Lovely smiled. “Well, we’d better get these trees standing so people can see them from the street!”

The trees were bulky and awkward. Sister Krumbles and Mother Mercy struggled to lift the top tree. The branches scratched Krumble’s cheek as she pulled. The tree swayed back and forth as Mother tried to hold it still.

“How do we make it stay up?” Mother Mercy asked.

Krumbles pulled one large pine back and leaned it against the side of the house. It didn’t look very special.

Sisters Wanda and Lovely lifted another large tree and dragged it back to lean it against the garage. It looked so ordinary.

Sister Lovely, always trying to be cheerful, said, “Well, two down and just forty-eight more to go!”



After a lot of hard work, half of the trees lined both the side of the house and the garage. Unfortunately, the pile on the driveway didn't look any smaller. The standing pines didn't look like Christmas trees.

Sister Lovely rubbed her back. Mother Mercy wiped her brow. Their faces had been scratched by the branches. Pine needles covered their habits. Sister Krumbles hadn't even noticed the large pine branch that was stuck in her veil as she tried to catch her breath.

Sister Shiny, spotlessly clean, came out of the back door carrying a large poster board that said in big black letters "CHRISTMAS TREES FOR SALE - \$30.00 EACH!"

"What a wonderful sign! I'll sit out front," Sister Lovely offered as she took a lawn chair and positioned herself by the sidewalk.

"We'll wait here!" said Sister Wanda. "The customers will need help tying the trees to their cars."

Mother Mercy smiled. “This was a wonderful idea. Each tree cost us just ten dollars. If we sell all fifty trees for thirty dollars, we’ll make enough money to buy all the needy children great Christmas gifts.”

The Sisters sat in chairs by the remaining pile of trees and waited. People walked and drove by but didn’t seem to notice them. A few people passing stopped and read the sign that Sister Lovely held. Still, they kept going. No one bought a single tree.

The Sisters sat for two hours. When they got cold, Sister Wanda brought out a few blankets, but even with the blankets, the cold wind turned their fingers blue and their noses red. No one stopped to buy a Christmas tree.

“Sad Sack Sale! What could be wrong?” asked Sister Lacey. “I was sure that the trees would sell!”

Mother Mercy stamped her foot. “I KNEW IT! I knew we would get swindled. It was a hare-brained scheme! We spent our Christmas money

on these trees and no one is buying them.”

Lacey hung her head in shame. “Sorrowful Senseless Scheme! It’s my fault; it was my idea to order the trees.”

Sister Krumbles put her arm around Lacey. “It’s not your fault. We forgot to ask God to bless us and the trees.”

Mother Mercy smiled for the first time that morning. Looking around, she lifted her arms and took the hands of two other Sisters. The Sisters joined hands and formed a circle around the pile of Christmas trees.

“Let us pray,” said Mother Mercy. “Lord bless these trees. Let the evergreens remind people of the eternal life that awaits us all. May the lights on these trees remind them of the Light of Christ, who came to us as a baby more than two thousand years ago. AND PLEASE! Let people come and buy the trees so we may have enough money to buy gifts for all your children. Let us pray! Hail Mary, full of grace...”

After praying, a sense of peace filled the Sisters.

“We should never forget to pray,” Sister Lovely smiled. “God always answers prayer. I am sure He’ll send us the inspiration needed to sell our trees.”

“I know why people aren’t stopping to buy the trees,” Sister Wanda said. “Whenever my father took me to pick out our Christmas tree, the trees were all lit up. Music was playing and the lot was all decorated. These trees don’t look like Christmas trees.”

All the Sisters were silent. They looked around at the plain yard and the pile of trees. The plastic lawn chairs and the windy driveway looked dreary and dull. The plain black-and-white sign seemed ordinary and bland.

“Son of a Christmas Calamity! None of us know anything about running a Christmas tree lot!” Sister Lacey shouted as she spun around.

“Humph! That’s why I’m the leader around

here!” answered Mother Mercy. “We’re going to investigate. Sisters Wanda and Krumbles, take the car and go around town and check out the Christmas tree lots. We need to know how they attract customers! The rest of us will go into the house and have some hot chocolate while we wait for you to report back.” Off everyone went according to Mother Mercy’s orders.

*SISTERS*  
of the  
*LAST STRAW*

**The Case of the Easter Egg Escapades**



Karen Kelly Boyce

SISTERS  
of the  
LAST  
STRAW

The Case of the  
Christmas Tree Capers

TAN Books  
Charlotte, North Carolina



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Peter Gallagher



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# Chapter 1

## Money Leaks

Mother Mercy stood at the window in her office. Clasping her hands behind her back, she tried to steady the shaking. A bright flash from the neighbor's window caught her attention, and she watched Mr. Lemon snap the blinds shut. He's probably busy counting all his money. Money was the last thing she wanted to think about.

Mother looked the other way and saw Sister Krumbles holding wood for Farmer Murphy. The happy Sister hadn't a care in the world. The kind farmer was helping Krumbles build a pen for her new little bunny, Cotton. *If only I could find something to take my mind off my troubles,* Mother Mercy thought as she glanced at the papers on

her desk. Walking over, she knew that she had to face facts. She couldn't avoid the troubles ahead.

On her desk lay two letters, one from the township and one from the contractor. The letters weren't threatening or dangerous looking—just plain white papers. However, each time Mother picked up either letter, she could feel her tummy roll and feel queasy. The contractor's bid to repair the leaking roof was over a thousand dollars. The most expensive part was the cost of removing the mold that the leaking rain had caused over the years.

The other letter was from the township. It stated that the mold must be removed, or the township would condemn the house. Unfortunately, the cost to repair the roof and remove the mold was three thousand dollars, and all the money the Sisters had in the bank was five hundred dollars. To make matters worse, the Sisters had to start the mold removal process within thirty days. If they didn't, they wouldn't have a

Karen Kelly Boyce

home. That would be the end of the Sisters of the Last Straw.

Mother Mercy looked up from the desk to the ornate trim around the high ceilings and then to the sturdy wooden door. Her elderly aunt had given her the large home and land that went with it before she moved to Europe. For a year, the Sisters of the Last Straw had made the mansion their home as they worked to help the poor of Spring Creek Township. The bishop was proud of them. Father McNulty was grateful to them. The Sisters had worked hard building a relationship with the community. Mother Mercy propped her elbows on the desk and rested her head in her hands. I can't tell the Sisters that we might lose everything. I must figure this out for myself.



Mr. Lemon didn't just close the blinds, he slammed the window shut and locked it too. *I see that snoopy Sister looking over here.* He grimaced.



*Sisters of the Last Straw*

*She's probably wondering what's in the package that was just delivered.* Now, with the door and windows locked and all the curtains and blinds shut, Mr. Lemon felt safe in the dark. He re-opened the package. It seemed to glow as he held it up.

Mr. Lemon smiled. Unaccustomed to the movement, the muscles in his mouth ached. Few could say that they had ever seen the grumpy Mr. Lemon smile. But smile he did. He smiled at the birthday gift his Uncle Harry had mailed to him. It was an ancient Roman coin, one he had wanted since he was a small boy. And it was worth thousands of dollars.

Mr. Lemon could sit all day and just admire the coin. He had such a love for the shiny silver. It was so valuable, rare, and special. He knew he had to hide it from prying eyes and thieves who might try to steal his wonderful possession. *I'll order a safe to be installed, he decided, a strong safe to guard my precious coin!* Until then, he was determined to keep the coin right with him. He slipped

it deep down in his pocket.



Sister Krumbles clapped her hands. The main frame of the new rabbit hutch was elevated on legs. It had a room in the back to protect Cotton from the weather and an open front platform that allowed the white bunny to enjoy the sun. Knowing all about rabbits, Farmer Murphy put a hinged door on the back of the pen so Krumbles would be able to see into Cotton's room and take her in and out.

Krumbles bounced up and down as the farmer latched the back door.

“Now what?” she asked.

He picked up the staple gun. “Now I have to staple the wire around the open area. That will keep Cotton in and anything else out.”

Krumbles unwound the wire as Farmer Murphy stapled it to the frame and added a piece to the top.

“There! Let’s see how Cotton likes her new home.” Farmer Murphy said.

Krumbles lifted Cotton out of the laundry basket she had been living in. Hugging the little rabbit close to her heart, she kissed the soft head and gently stroked her.

“Look, Cotton. Look at your new home!” Krumbles whispered, “I just know you’ll be happy here.”

Farmer Murphy smiled as he opened the back hatch and Krumbles placed the little rabbit inside. Cotton looked around and hopped right to the open area where food and water were waiting.

“Oh look! She knows her way around already!”

“Yes, and she looks happy.” Farmer Murphy’s face lit up. “I see the chickens I gave you are also happy in their pen.”

“They give us delicious eggs—white ones and brown ones. I like them both.” Krumbles smiled.

“You know, I have chickens called Easter

*Karen Kelly Boyce*

chickens. They lay eggs of all different colors! Every morning, their nests look like Easter baskets filled with colorful dyed eggs. Still, I think they taste the same as the brown and white eggs. Would you like some Easter chickens? It will be my gift. Easter is not far away.”

Krumbles couldn't believe her ears. “YES! I'D LOVE SOME EASTER CHICKENS!” She clapped her hands and jumped up and down.

“I'll swing by with them tomorrow.” Farmer Murphy walked away. “Now I have to hurry home to milk the cows.”

Sister Krumbles waved goodbye and off she went to feed the other animals. She gave grain to the goats and scattered seed for the chickens. Then she sat on the back porch and watched the farm animals enjoy their dinner. The chickens tossed the seed in the air as they flocked around the pen. They seem to have so much fun together. The goats ran from feeding bin to feeding bin, frolicking in the early spring evening. The goats

love to play together too.

Turning her attention to the newest farm member, Krumbles watched the little bunny in her new home. She finished her meal and hopped around the pen as if she were looking for something. *Or someone*, Krumbles frowned. *I think she is looking for a friend.* It made Sister Krumbles' heart sink to think that Cotton might be lonely. "I'm never lonely," she whispered out loud. "I have my Sister friends to keep me company."

She sat and thought about how blessed she was to be part of this community. The Sisters of the Last Straw was a new order. All the Sisters tried other orders but had been dismissed for having troubling behavior. Even with their faults, Sister Krumbles loved each and every one of them. *I love Mother Mercy even though she gets so angry at times! And I love Sister Shiny, who always cleans up my messes.* Krumbles smiled just thinking about it. *And I love Sister Lacey even though she sometimes uses the wrong words. I think she is so funny. And who*

Karen Kelly Boyce

*wouldn't love kind Sister Lovely, who struggles so hard to quit smoking.*

It must be hard to be alone and have no friends to talk to, and even worse when there's no one to share fun with. Sister Krumbles remembered all the times she and Sister Wanda had shared being lost together.

Looking at Cotton the rabbit made her sad. Suddenly, she smiled! Tomorrow, after Farmer Murphy delivers the new chickens, I'll buy Cotton a little friend. What harm could one more rabbit do? The new pen has room for two! Why! There's even room for more than two! With that happy plan, Krumbles flung open the back door and ran into the house. It was her turn to make dinner.

*SISTERS*  
of the  
*LAST STRAW*

**The Case of the Campground Creature**





Karen Kelly Boyce

SISTERS  
of the  
LAST  
STRAW

The Case of the  
Campground Creature

TAN Books  
Gastonia, North Carolina

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To Tai Ulrich, one of my first fans

In memory of Susan Lamia,  
who is polishing mirrors in heaven



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# Chapter 1

## Camper Creatures

Sister Shiny stood on the side porch. She was covered head to toe. She looked like an astronaut on a foreign planet. Goggles covered her eyes, and a medical mask covered her mouth. Vinyl gloves reached past her elbows. The skirt of her habit was partly hiked up into her belt, displaying rubber boots that reached past her knees. In one hand she held a spray bottle of disinfectant, and in the other a bottle of bleach cleaner. She looked like a cowboy ready for a showdown.

Weighed down with all that cleaning equipment, Shiny stomped off, swaying from side to side—one stiff, heavy leg at a time—to the camper in the driveway.

The thought of going camping sent chills down her spine. *The Great Outdoors! Isn't that what they call it? What's so great about it? GREAT BIG BUGS! GREAT BIG ANIMALS! GREAT BIG DIRT!*

Last night, Sister Shiny tried to talk the other Sisters out of using the camper, but they didn't listen. She tried to convince them that a nice hotel with daily maids and room service was the way to go. But it didn't help. All the other Sisters were excited about the planned camping trip.

Then, failing to change their minds, she tried to finagle her way into staying home. "Someone should stay home and watch the house."

Sister Mona agreed. "Oh, thieves could break in and take all our stuff!"

"That's just silly! What's to watch? We can just lock the house up!" Sister Wanda said, as she thumbed through the owner's manual for the camper.

Shiny paused for a moment and then tried



again. “Someone has to stay home and feed the animals.”

Sister Mona, the visiting nun, moaned, “The animals will starve! Or die of loneliness. That would be horrible!”

“Oh, don’t worry. I already asked Farmer Murphy, and he’s happy to swing by each day to feed and check on the animals!” said Sister Krumbles.

*This isn’t going well!* thought Shiny, but she tried again. “What if the poor come by for food? I should be here to help them.”

Mona paled. “Poor People will wither away. We’ll be arrested for murder!”

“There are other food shelters, so no one will starve. How kind you are, Shiny, but we all deserve a rest after all the work we did this year,” said Sister Lovely.

“B-b-but . . .”

“YOU ARE GOING!” said Mother Mercy. “Case closed!”

“Well, if I must go, I’m going to sleep in a spotless camper.” Sister Shiny wasn’t happy, but she realized she could not get out of it. Shiny then made her own plans.

As Sister Shiny swung open the door to the camper, a sour smell hit her sensitive nose. “Ugh!”

The kind Farmer Murphy had given them the camper as a gift, but it had been sitting unused in a barn. Squirrels, chipmunks, or even bugs would have made the camper their home. Shiny’s skin crawled.

And *crawl* was the right word! When Shiny opened a drawer, she saw ants crawling everywhere.

Sweat dripped down her forehead. Her heart pounded. *This is the most disgusting and grimy place I’ve ever seen.*

Shiny pulled up her yellow vinyl gloves. She hiked the skirt of her habit a little higher so it wouldn’t touch the icky floor.

Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling that mil-

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lions of germs were watching—just waiting to pounce on any spot of skin they could find. She wanted to run away but instead squared her shoulders and whispered, “You may be many and I just one, but God is on my side!” Shiny wanted all the nasty bacteria to be afraid.

She continued to spray and scrub the inside of the camper. Stepping way back, she knocked down all the cobwebs that had accumulated in the hidden crevices and corners of the long-neglected camper. With eagle-like eyes, she watched for any spiders that might attack, upset by the destruction of their hanging homes. Seeing none, she let out a long sigh of relief. *Maybe I can get this camper clean without meeting any creepy creatures!*

Unfortunately, Shiny was wrong. When she opened a drawer in the little kitchenette, she froze. A mouse, afraid to move, stared up at her though little beady eyes. Shiny looked down at it, frozen in fear. Neither she nor the mouse moved.

For what seemed like an eternity, they both stared at each other.

Shiny began to tremble. The little mouse began to tremble. Overcome with fear, neither one could look away.



Sister Krumbles glanced out the front window. *Look at Sister Shiny carrying all those cleaning products out to the camper!* Krumbles's face reddened with shame.

“I haven't helped at all!” she whispered to herself. Krumbles decided that once she finished feeding the goats, chickens, and rabbits, she would help get the camper ready for their planned trip. With renewed enthusiasm, she rushed past Mother Mercy, who stood in the kitchen doorway.

“Scuse!” she said as she brushed past Mother. She rushed out to the backyard, her favorite place in the world. Sister Krumbles loved animals. *The animals love me. They never care if I'm clumsy!* The

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chickens didn't mind if she stumbled. The goats weren't embarrassed when she fell. The rabbits jumped around and got as confused as she did! *Animals never judge. They always love you just the way you are!*

Krumbles scattered cornmeal for the chickens. Ronnie the rooster was the first to start picking at the kernels. She tossed hay to the goats, and Crayons, her favorite goat, led the herd out to the hay. Cotton the rabbit and all his friends waited at the feeder for their grain. Sister Krumbles stroked the rabbit's head. "I'll always love and care for all of you. You've all been fine friends."

As much as she loved caring for them, Krumbles cut her visit short with her beloved animal friends. Today, she wanted to help the other Sisters with the camper. Tomorrow, they would be leaving for a trip to the country. This was going to be the Sisters first vacation together.

*I'm so lucky to be part of this community.* The Sisters of the Last Straw were a new order. All the

*Sisters of the Last Straw*

Sisters had come together after being asked to leave other orders because of their bad habits. Sister Krumbles was clumsy and caused accidents and havoc wherever she went. Having grown up on the rough side of town, Sister Lacey struggled with bad language. Now she used colorful substitutes as replacements for unbecoming language. Sister Wanda was often distracted and known to get lost. Sister Shiny, pleased with her appearance, couldn't stop staring at herself in every mirror. She also loved cleaning and fighting germs.

Mother Superior, Sister Krumbles's best friend, had a quick temper. Krumbles, with her clumsiness and accidents, was often the one to set her off.

And last but not least, there was Sister Lovely. Krumbles had to smile. *Poor Sister Lovely was working hard to give up smoking.*

A new Sister had joined the order. Her name was Sister Mona, and she had her struggles too. She was the most fearful and worrisome person

Krumbles had ever met.

Just then, Krumbles looked up and saw Sister Mona strolling down the path.

“Hello! A beautiful day, isn’t it?”

Sister Mona sighed. “The weatherman says it might rain today.”

Krumbles peered at the blue cloudless sky. “Well, we could use the rain. And if it is going to rain, I’m glad I got out early to take care of the animals.”

Sister Mona looked around and her shoulders slumped. “These poor animals. I feel sorry for them.”

“Why?”

“All fenced in and locked up! They should be living in the wild. They’ve got to be so sad.” Mona looked around, turned heel, and headed for the house.

Krumbles stood silent. She had been so happy just a moment ago. Now she plopped down on the bench and stared. *I thought my animals were*

*Sisters of the Last Straw*

*happy. I take such good care of them.* Sister Krumbles glanced around and frowned. Sighing, she decided that she would think about it later. She had work to do.

Krumbles hurried from the backyard and her beloved animals to help with the camper. *I'm not going to think about what Sister Mona said! I'm going to help get the camper ready!* When she reached the door of the camper, she found that it was locked.

BAM! BAM! BAM! She knocked loudly on the camper door.

The loud knocking startled Sister Shiny.

The banging startled the mouse.

“AHH!” yelled Sister Shiny. The mouse leaped from the drawer and landed on her sleeve!

The next sound was a loud THUMP! Shiny fainted and landed on the dusty floor.



SISTERS  
of the  
LAST STRAW

Case of the Missing Maps



Karen Kelly Boyce

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To my fans Amelia Lukacs and Ariana Lukacs.  
May you always be blessed with the Joy of the Lord!



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# Chapter 1

## The Wild Wasp

Sister Wanda ran in through the back door and shouted, “There’s a wasp nest in the garage, and wasps are swarming all around! I need help!”

Sister Krumbles jumped up from the sofa and headed for the basement door. “There’s some bug spray in the basement. I’ll get it!” Glancing over her shoulder, Krumbles didn’t watch her step. Her shoes were untied, and she stepped on one of the laces. She caught her foot and fell.

“AHH!” Krumbles tumbled head over heels down the basement stairs.

BAM! She hit the wall of the finished basement with enough force to break a large hole in the wallboard. Stunned, she caught her breath

and shouted, “I’m okay!” as the other Sisters rushed down the stairs to check if Krumbles was all right.

However, Sister Krumbles was already up and peering into the huge hole that she’d created in the wall. “LOOK! There’s a trunk back here behind the wall. I wonder what’s in it.”

Sisters Lacey and Krumbles lifted the heavy, dusty trunk and pulled it from behind the wall.

Sister Wanda tugged on the lid. “It’s locked!” she shouted, as she continued to tug on the lid of the old, worn trunk.

“Bugged and Befuddled!” Sister Lacey said as she ran to get a crowbar. “Maybe we can pry it open.”

Mother Mercy’s eyes opened wide. “I don’t want to destroy it. It probably belongs to my Aunt Elizabeth. Before we do anything else, I’d better give her a call.” Mother Mercy ran upstairs to the phone.

Krumbles continued to pull on the trunk lid as if she thought it would magically pop open.

In less than a minute, Mother Mercy returned and shook her head. “Sister Krumbles, let it be. I left my aunt a message about the trunk. We’ll just wait for her to call back before we touch it.”

Krumbles sighed, looking disappointed. “Curiosity is killing me. I don’t think I can bear to wait.”

Mother Mercy smiled. “You’ll soon be too busy to think about it. Mother crouched down and tied Sister Krumbles’s shoes. “Father McNulty is having Eucharistic Adoration at the church, and I promised we would help him. If we don’t leave now, we’ll be late.”

Sister Lovely turned her gaze toward heaven and smiled. “Eucharistic Adoration! I love spending quiet time with Our Lord. Sometimes, He speaks to my heart. All the time, He reminds me not to worry because everything is in His hands. Such Peace!”

“Well, Lollygagging Ladies, let’s get going!” Lacey led the way up the stairs.

The Sisters were in such a rush that they

forgot about the wasps in the garage—that is, until Lacey lifted the garage door open.

“AH! Dastardly Demons!” Most of the wasps flew back to their nest on the ceiling, but one of them headed right for Sister Lacey. As it flew by her head, she made the mistake of swatting at it. That made the wasp angry. It buzzed louder and got closer. Lacey reached up and waved at the wasp as she ran, making the wasp even angrier.

“BUZZ!” it hissed.

Sister Lacey covered her face with her veil and ran toward the shed, hoping to find safety inside. Her veil confused the wasp long enough for her to make a getaway. She ran down the driveway, waving her hands above her head to shoo away the wasp. However, the wasp followed her as she ran toward the shed. BUZZ! BUZZ!

“I’ll save you.” Sister Lovely took a broom and started swatting the wasp. Instead of helping, she only made the wasp angrier and louder. It zipped over to Lovely and buzzed around her.

“AH!” Lovely yelled as she tried to get away. She ran, but the angry wasp kept up with her. Lovely screamed further, “Save me!” as the wasp continued to follow her.

Coming to Lovely’s rescue, Sister Wanda grabbed the garden hose and started spraying. The powerful force of water stunned the wasp and sent it back to its nest.

Meanwhile, Mother Mercy came running from the basement with bug spray in hand, shouting, “STAND BACK!”

Mother started spraying the wasp nest. She sprayed so hard that soon the entire nest was covered with white, drippy foam. The wasps no longer buzzed. The bugs stopped swarming.

After checking that Sisters Lacey and Lovely were all right, Mother Mercy relaxed. No one had been stung. Both Sisters, however, were soaking wet from the hose and dripping all over the driveway.

“Better go in the house and dry off. Put on dry habits. Now we’re going to be late!” Mother

Mercy looked at her watch.

“Don’t diddle-daddle!” Lacey shouted as she and Sister Lovely rushed into the house. All the other Sisters piled into the car. Sister Wanda pulled onto the street and parked in front of the house to wait for the wet Sisters to emerge. It didn’t take long. Lacey and Lovely, in nice dry habits, rushed out the front door. As soon as they jumped in the car, Wanda stomped on the gas. She burned rubber and the tires screeched as they headed to church!

“SLOW DOWN!” Mother Mercy yelled as the car careened down the street. Wanda applied the brakes, and the nuns slid forward in their seats.

“We must always obey the law!” Mother Mercy added.

Even at their slower speed, the Sisters made it to the parish church on the edge of town with time to spare.

Father McNulty stood in the vestibule, wait-

ing for them. “So glad you came to help. My schedule has been busy lately.”

Mother Mercy smiled. “Just call us whenever you need help. Jesus teaches us to help one another.”

Sister Lovely spread out the altar cloths. “These are so white and crisp!”

The tall, thin priest grinned. “Thanks to the Rosary Altar Society. Those ladies are dedicated to keeping the church just so.”

Sister Wanda found the candlesticks and placed them on either side of the altar. Sister Shiny took a polishing cloth and buffed the golden candlesticks until they glowed. Krumbles ran to the candle drawer in the sacristy. She grabbed two handfuls of candles. As she ran back to the altar, a candle started slipping from her left hand. She tossed the loose candle up in the air and caught it with her right hand, which was already full of candles. Instantly, another candle started to slip. Up in the air it went! She caught it with her other hand. Candles started to fly from one hand to the other.

“Son of a Jealous Juggler! Can you teach me how to juggle?” Lacey looked in amazement as the candles flew in the air.

“I don’t know how to juggle!” Krumbles answered as candles flew from hand to hand.

“Well, you could have fooled me.” Shiny watched as Krumbles juggled her way to the altar. When Krumbles reached the altar, she stopped grabbing the candles and they all dropped to the floor. Only two of them broke. She placed the two unbroken candles in the glowing holders.

Sister Wanda brought out the monstrance. “Oh, what a beautiful monstrance!” It had a golden base encrusted with jewels. Bright silver and gold branches reached from the base and surrounded the center opening where the luna would be placed.

“It’s magnificent!” Lovely sighed.

“Shining Sensation! Nothing could be too worthy or beautiful enough to hold the Body of Christ!” Sister Lacey bowed her head in reverence.



Father McNulty appeared with all of his vestments on. Having heard the Sisters' comments, he responded, "It is a glorious monstrance! But it doesn't mean as much to me as the monstrance I used to have."

Lovely's eyes opened wide. "I can't imagine a more beautiful one."

Father smiled sadly. "My previous one was not as ornate; it just meant so much more to me. You see, my parents gave it to me on the day of my priestly ordination. They weren't rich, and they sacrificed to buy it. They even had it engraved. Now that they are both gone, I would love to have it!"

Mother Mercy frowned. "What happened to it?"

Father sighed as he lit the candles that stood beside the monstrance. "It was stolen many years ago!"

"Rascally Robbers! Did they ever catch the thieves?" Lacey shook her head.

"No, and I've given up hope that it will ever be found."

The Sisters rushed to take their places in the pews as Father knelt to begin his prayers.

Each Sister knelt and bowed her head as Father went to the tabernacle and then placed the luna, which contained the Body of Christ, within the monstrance.

Father then began singing part of an ancient Eucharistic hymn called *O Salutaris Hostia*, meaning “O Saving Victim,” as the Sisters sang along. When they finished singing, Father and the Sisters prayed silently for their special intentions.

Wanda, who always got lost herself, prayed that Father McNulty would find the monstrance his parents had given him. And as she prayed, she felt God whispering in her heart, “It will be found!”

Soon the church doors opened, and parishioners joined them in adoration. The hour flew by; the Sisters were surprised when Father said the closing prayers. They helped to put the church

back in order and then headed for home.

As they were driving, Mother Mercy's cell phone rang. "It's Aunt Elizabeth," she announced before taking the call. While her aunt spoke, Mother Mercy smiled and nodded. The others couldn't wait to hear if her aunt knew where the key to the trunk was.

Still smiling, she got off the phone and looked at all the expectant faces of her fellow Sisters. "It's mixed news. The bad news is that the trunk doesn't belong to Aunt Elizabeth. She says it must have belonged to the family who lived in the house before she bought it."

"Who were they?" Sister Lovely sighed. "Will we have to get their permission to open it?"

Mother Mercy grinned. "Well, that's the good news. Aunt Elizabeth purchased the house almost fifty years ago. She has no idea where that family is. She says she checked with her lawyer, and the trunk is part of the house now. Since she gave us the house, the trunk is ours."

“Does she have a key?” Krumbles jumped up and down in her seat with excitement.

“Not sure.” Mother Mercy shook her head. “She said she found a ring of keys when she moved in. She never knew what the keys were for. She tried them on all the doors of the house, but they didn’t fit any locks. Still, she saved them. Aunt Elizabeth put them on the top of the bookshelf in the library. She said to try those keys before we break the lid of the trunk.”

“Does your aunt have any idea what is hidden in the trunk?” Lovely asked.

“No, the basement was finished when she bought the house. The workmen must have dry-walled right over the trunk.

“Maybe they just didn’t want to lift that heavy trunk!” Sister Lovely said, trying to be kind.

“Perhaps the trunk is full of treasure, and they hid it there, intending to come back for the loot!” Krumbles rubbed her hands together in delight.

“Or maybe they just forgot where they put it,”

Wanda said.

Sister Shiny paled and her eyes opened wide. “Deliberate Disorder!”

Lovely giggled. “Now you sound like Sister Lacey!”

“Did your Aunt Elizabeth remember where she put the deed? I know she was anxious for us to receive the mansion officially,” said Sister Lovely.

Mother Mercy smiled. “She knows she left the deed somewhere in the house, but she can’t remember where. We’ll have to look for it so she can sign the house over to us.”

“Holy Piles of Paper!” Sister Lacey shouted. “I was dreaming of gold in the trunk, but I guess that deed would be good as gold to us!”

All the Sisters were excited about opening the mystery trunk, but none were as excited as Sister Krumbles. As soon as they pulled into the driveway, she flung open the car door and bolted for the house.

“Scampering Skedoodle! I’ve never seen

Krumbles move so fast!” Lacey laughed as Krumbles ran through the front door.

Sister Lovely tried to catch up. But no one could catch up to Krumbles, who ran to the library. She pulled a rickety chair from Mother’s desk and pushed it over to the bookcase. After climbing onto the chair, she tried to reach the top of the bookcase. She even stood on her tip-toes, but her hand was at least a foot below the top of the case. Disappointed, Krumbles was about to give up when she suddenly grinned. *I’ve got an idea!*

Taking one foot off the chair, Krumbles started to climb the bookcase as if it were a ladder.

“STOP!” Krumbles froze at Lovely’s command.

Once Sister Lovely was certain that Krumbles had heard her, she grabbed a ladder from the closet. Using the ladder, Krumbles safely climbed up and found the keys. When she was safely back on the floor, all the Sisters headed to the basement.

Sister Lacey tried one key and then the next,

but none of them fit. “Locked up Latches! There’s only one key left to try!”

“It fits!” Sister Wanda shouted, as the key turned and the trunk lid unbolted.

All the curious Sisters gathered around as Lacey lifted the lid. The trunk was filled with books and clothes. The books were dusty, and the clothes were dresses and shoes of a bygone era.

“This trunk must have been sitting here for a hundred years.” Sister Krumbles lifted an old dress and held it up to herself. She started to dance around the basement.

All the other Sisters were disappointed and headed for the stairs.

“Wait! Something is wrong with this trunk!” Wanda yanked the rest of the books and clothes from the trunk and rapped on the bottom.

“What is it?” Mother Mercy demanded.

Wanda looked up. “I’m sure this trunk has a false bottom.”