

*Fat Cat Spreads Out* is the second book in the cozy Fat Cat series. Cozy mystery lovers expect specific things from the genre. First and foremost is comfort. These are feel-good books, in spite of the dead bodies. The bodies are not dwelt upon, or even described in detail, leaving the purpose of the murder to be furnishing a puzzle for the reader to try to work out before the sleuth does. The pace has to move along, but the reader doesn't need to be slammed with nail-biting tension at the very start.

The first thing I want to do is to introduce my sleuth and her occupation.

Charity Oliver, usually called Chase, smiled as she handed the bag of dessert bars to the customer and took her money.

"I just love these Hula Bars," the customer said. "My grandkids do, too. I can't keep them in the house."

Now you know her name and her nickname, and that she's selling dessert bars. Just for the heck of it, I use Hula Bars here, as that was the recipe in the back of the first book. Next, I want to work some more on this setting, including the time of year.

The satisfied woman left the shop with her pineapple-coconut treat, setting off the tinkling chimes above the door. A bit of brisk October air whooshed in before the door closed.

With that last passage, I hope to also put the reader into the scene a bit more with the sound of the bell and the feel of the brisk air. Word choice is vitally important in a cozy. The bell "tinkles" because that's a soft, pleasant sound. The air "whooshes in" rather than doing something more harsh and uncomfortable. And it's "brisk," not cold, which seems better to me.

At last, the shop was empty. The Bar None had done great business today, nearly non-stop. But there was so much else to do right now!

Chase let her cheek muscles relax from all the hours of smiling. They almost hurt. Still, business was good and she couldn't complain. She surveyed her domain—hers and Anna's.

The salesroom design had been handled by Chase alone, and she was so proud of it. The walls were striped the colors of raspberry and vanilla, set off by the cotton candy pink shelving that held boxed dessert bars. The glass display case near the rear of the salesroom housed fresh merchandise, dessert bars made by Chase and Anna in the kitchen behind the front area.

There's a tiny hint of tension—Chase has too much to do and is working extra hard.

The setting of the dessert bar shop is described in detail. Since the "hook" of this mystery is the dessert bar shop, I must use the name of it very near the beginning, and must describe the décor.

In doing so, I use “food” words, stripes that are raspberry and vanilla, shelves that are cotton candy pink. My aim is to get the reader in the mood for dessert bars. (It works on the writer, too. I did not lose weight penning this novel.) However, since this is the second book, I can’t dwell on description too long or I’ll bore people who have read the first one. Anna, who is another main character, is mentioned here and will be introduced very soon.

The very next passage, though, describes Inger, who is new in this book, gives her job, and slips in her age and Chase’s age. Another detail is given, the working smocks, that gives me another chance for a cute description using the evocative words “rickrack” and “mulberry.”

It hasn’t been mentioned yet that this takes place in the Dinkytown area of Minneapolis, but I try to use Scandinavian names for some of the characters to give it that flavor.

“Ms. Oliver,” said Inger, the sales clerk, “I can stay out here if you want to get off your feet.” Her smoky gray eyes smiled with the rest of her small, pretty face. The standard mulberry smocks they all wore in the salesroom, with pink rickrack and the embroidered Bar None logo, suited Inger’s blonde coloring. Her curls bounced when she nodded at the customers, who seemed to genuinely like her.

Chase wondered if Inger’s offer to let Chase rest was a veiled reference to the fact that her employee was a good ten years younger than Chase’s thirty-two, but decided it wasn’t. Inger was a genuinely kind and guileless young woman. Inger had taken a break about two hours ago, so it was Chase’s turn.

Next comes Anna, Chase’s business partner—and more. I use the word “grandmotherly” here, but later I do explain that Anna is Chase’s surrogate grandmother and the person who helped raise her.

“Thanks, Inger. Holler if you get swamped.” Chase pushed through the swinging double doors to the kitchen where Anna was working and took a seat on one of the stools at the center island. The aroma of cinnamon and pumpkin spice wafted through the room.

Chase picked up the cup of tea, now cold, that she’d left there hours ago.

“She’s a gem, Charity,” Anna said. “You did well to hire Inger.” Today, her periwinkle blue eyes sparkled, picking up the sapphire tones of her sweater, even though all you could see of it were the sleeves beneath her Bar None apron. The rest of her outfit was her usual plain T-shirt and jeans. Her grandmotherly build and gray, bobbed hair gave no indication of the fact that, in her seventies, she could work circles around Chase.

Now you now quite a bit about Anna and Chase, and something about Inger. In this passage I work in some autumn baking smells and bring you into the kitchen, where much of the action will take place.

The first actual conflict, one between Anna and Chase, takes place on the next page. Another main character, Quincy the cat, is introduced in the first chapter, as well as some real problems that will lie under the murder as subplots. But the beginning must get the reader into the setting, acquaint her with the characters, and entice her to stay.



Kaye George, national-bestselling and multiple-award-winning author, writes several mystery series: Imogene Duckworthy, Cressa Carraway (Barking Rain Press), People of the Wind (Untreed Reads), and, as Janet Cantrell, Fat Cat (Berkley Prime Crime cozies). The third, *Fat Cat Takes the Cake*, will appear April 2016. The second Cressa Carraway novel, *Requiem in Red*, will appear in early 2016. The second People of the Wind, *Death on the Trek*, comes out in June 2016. Her short stories appear in anthologies, magazines, and her own collection, *A Patchwork of Stories*. She reviews for *Suspense Magazine*. She lives in Knoxville, TN. <http://kayegeorge.com/>