

Calling the landlord is something I look forward to about as much as having a tooth pulled or standing in line to get a new driver's license photo. But it had to be done.

I flipped through the names in the contacts on my computer, trying to remember whether I had listed him under his last name, Hagland, or just "L" for landlord. Or possibly "I" for "incompetent landlord."

From the length of time he took to answer, I could just imagine him sitting there, staring at the caller ID while he decided whether DS Investigations paid him enough rent to make it worth the effort to pick up the receiver. Leroy Hagland owns a lot of buildings in Ellicott City, but our office was in one of the crummy ones, tucked down in a hollow away from the restored stone buildings of Main Street. Here "restoration" was no more than a slap of paint and an exit sign in the stairwell to pass the fire inspection. So he never failed to let us know that we were about the least important of his tenants.

"H'lo, Mrs. Maxwell," his voice finally grumbled into my ear.

Since I've been divorced for five years, I hate being called "Mrs." and he knows it, but I think he takes a perverse joy in getting it wrong, so I tried to swallow my annoyance and focus on the reason for my urgent

call.

"I know Rodney asked you about an air perfuming system," I began.

"It's an air purifier," Rodney insisted in a high-pitched nasal whine that carried all the way from his Administrator's cubicle on the other side of the office.

"Whatever." I waved for him to be quiet, even though he couldn't see me. Then I turned back to the phone. "Rodney didn't authorize you to add the charge to our rent. He just asked how much it would cost."

"I said we wanted to explore the option," Rodney clarified needlessly.

"So you don't want me to install the system?" Hagland asked in his perpetually tired and annoyed voice.

"No," I said firmly, "we do not. A thousand dollars a month is just too much."

"You can't put a price on clean air," Rodney admonished.

"Dave can," I called over to Rodney's cubicle, reminding him that my brother was still the boss.

Our intern, Brittany, giggled as she walked over to the printer.

I turned back to the landlord on the phone, "If you have your contractor pick up the trash more than once a month, I think we'll find the air a lot easier to breathe even without the Stratosphere 3000 air purifying system."

"Whaddaya mean, once a month?" Hagland growled. "Your garbage is picked up every week."

I shook my head, though of course he couldn't see that. "Nope."

"The truck comes at night, so you don't see him."

"He may come at night, but he doesn't pick up any

trash. The dumpster hasn't been emptied since the week after Christmas." I thought I saw a fruitcake in there we could probably salvage for next year's office party.

"Well, that hasn't been a month."

"It's been a lot more than a week."

There was a scratching noise that I assume was the landlord rubbing the phone against the stubble on his chin, but he might also have been using the phone receiver to scrape mud off his shoes or something. Finally, his annoyed voice came back on. "I'll look into it."

"I don't want you to look into our dumpster. I want you to empty it."

"You know what I mean," he snarled with even more force than usual. Then he just hung up.

"You should have been nicer to him, Karen." Rodney said as he came out of his cubicle balancing a tall green teacup on a tiny saucer. "Now he'll probably raise our rent."

I sighed. "You're right."

That stopped him. The teacup wobbled in his slender hand. "Y-you agree with me?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "He raises the rate every January."

But not by much.

I'd been handling administrative stuff at my brother Dave's investigation firm for over five years before he hired Rodney, the self-proclaimed "Office Maximizer" to "help" me. I knew how to deal with our recalcitrant landlord. I really knew how to manage all the office business without Rodney's help. But since I'd decided that I wanted to do some of the investigation myself, I simply didn't have time to do all the administrative

work anymore. Of course we had a college intern working for us, too. Brittany The Bright-Eyed Wondergirl came in for at least a couple of hours every day to make the place look prettier. I couldn't see that she was much use beyond that.

Okay, that wasn't fair. She was interested in investigation and had helped me out with a few things. But she spent most of her time mistyping reports and scribbling incoherent phone messages.

Rodney spent most of his time "improving" the office to maximize efficiency. Last month, he tried to reorganize the office according to the principles of feng shui, but gave up when Dave spent the "coins of prosperity" on a hotdog. Right now, he seemed to think we needed improved air. The only useful thing I could tell that he'd done so far was to maximize our caffeine intake by keeping our new cappuccino machine in top operating condition. He particularly liked cleaning the milk wand.

He liked using it, too, so he very frequently made cappuccino for me, whether I wanted him to or not. Usually I did want it though, so this improved our working relationship tremendously.

Of course, a tremendous improvement on mud is only a better grade of mud, isn't it? Anyway, I continue to handle most of the bills, which is why I noticed the increase in rent before Rodney had a chance to order his air system. But now that I had that straightened out, I had to hurry and get through the rest of the bills before it was time to leave for my assignment.

Twice a month, I was supposed to follow Mrs. Linore Burkstead to the "Haute Coiture" salon and watch outside while she had her hair done. Her husband was convinced that she was having an affair

with her stylist, so he hired our firm to do surveillance. He only wanted to pay for about a couple of hours a month, however, so if his wife was having an affair any place other than in the stylist's chair, he wouldn't be likely to learn about it.

It doesn't make much sense, but, as Dave says, it doesn't have to. As long as they pay us.

Mrs. Burkstead's appointment was at 2:30, so I would leave the office on Thursdays at about 2:00. By the time I had finished watching the shampoo and styling and followed her home, it was time for me to leave to meet my son when he got off the school bus.

That meant I had to get things finished early on Thursdays, and this mess with the rent had really slowed me down. I started to make really good progress on the rest of the bills however. All I had left was—

"I can't read this word. Is Dave coming in at all today?" Brittany whined from her desk.

I looked up to see her spin her chair around in frustration. Well, the first time, it was frustration. Then I think she spun around a few more times just for fun. The chair squeaked in protest with each turn, and her streaky blonde hair flew out around her head in a golden arc.

"Check the schedule." I nodded toward the oversized dry erase board chart Rodney had set up so that we could tell at a glance where all our "key players" were.

"It's blank." She snorted indignantly.

Of course it was. I knew Dave would never fill in his schedule in advance. We were lucky if we could figure out where he'd been *after* he'd been there, let alone before. The only thing on the schedule for this week was my surveillance at the salon and Rodney's

meeting with an office furniture salesman.

“Is he on night surveillance again?” she asked with a spin.

“I can’t remember,” I mumbled in reply, hoping she’d take the hint and leave me alone. Just two more bills. Two. But I’d already lost my place and typed in the amount of the previous bill backward.

The phone rang and I reached for it out of habit, too late realizing I should have left it for Brittany or Rodney to answer. “Good afternoon,” I said as I tried to type in the correct number with my left hand.

“Hi,” a young man’s voice said with enthusiasm. “Can I talk to Nate?”

“He’s not here anymore. He retired.” I switched the phone to my left hand so I could type with my right.

“Oh, great. I know he’ll enjoy that. So, then could I talk to the new person in charge of capital purchasing?”

I stifled a groan. This chatty guy was just another telemarketer who happened to have our old senior partner’s name in his database. “I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “He’s not available.”

“Would that be...” the salesman paused ever-so-slightly as he no doubt looked through his database “Dave Sarkesian?”

“Yes.”

“Can I speak with him?”

“No.” Typing with one hand, I had almost managed to finish another bill. But I was probably putting in the amount backward again, since I couldn’t focus while I was talking on the phone. “If you have information to pitch,” I advised, “send it in the mail. We’ll look at it when we have the chance.”

“But this is a special offer, only available for a limited time.”

“It so happens that limited time is just what I have. And you’re not getting it. Good—”

“But I know Dave will want to take advantage of this offer!”

“—bye.” I tried to put the phone back on the base without looking, but I missed and stuck it in a potted plant instead.

It was 1:45. Just one bill left. I could certainly finish by the time I had to go.

“Karen?” Brittany’s voice broke into my thoughts about the Federal Express bill I was holding. “Who’s the client with the night surveillance every few months? I’ll look up the file.”

“What?” I said, confused. There was a reason I needed to check the amount on the bill. But now I’d forgotten what it was.

Or was it the gas credit card bill that I was supposed to double check? .

My glance strayed to the clock on my desk. 1:48.

Brittany spun in her chair again. I think she’d just realized she could do this without tipping the chair over and it fascinated her. “Was it Wrey Electric?” she asked.

I gritted my teeth. “Why don’t you get out the file and *see* if it was Wrey Electric?”

The chair squeaked, but the clomp of Brittany’s clogs across the uneven floorboards indicated that she had stopped spinning and gotten up to find the file.

1:49.

The phone rang again. Brittany wouldn’t be able to answer it in time; she was leaning over a file cabinet. Rodney was making espresso. With a sigh, I turned away from the bills and picked up the phone.

“Good afternoon,” I said unconvincingly.

“Hey, Karen, it’s Doreen.”

Doreen, our insurance agent, is used to the nondescript greeting we use to answer the phone as well as my often rushed and unfriendly tone of voice. She sounded as cheerful as ever. I started to wonder whether I might enjoy a job in the insurance industry.

“Hello, Doreen.” I shuffled through my notes, trying to remember what I had last asked her to do. She had to be calling me back about something. I was always asking her to look up stuff in her databases for us.

“Remember when I said you’d owe me?” she asked.

I let the papers fall to the desk. This time she was calling to ask *me* a favor. And I had about 10 minutes to help her. “I remember,” I said guardedly.

“I need you guys to check something out for me.”

“Uh-huh.” I grabbed a pad of paper.

“We’ve got a claim for snow damage to a sunroom.”

“Uh-huh.” I wrote down *Snow damage. Sunroom*. We hadn’t had much snow this winter. In fact, I think it had only snowed once so far, just a few inches, but that was enough to close schools for two days. We are pretty wimpy about snow here in central Maryland.

“Well,” she continued, “the homeowners claim that the glass ceiling caved from the pressure and everything in the room was ruined.”

This seemed pretty straightforward. I’m sure one of her regular investigators could have handled it, but if this was how she wanted the favor repaid, I wasn’t going to object. Maybe her regular investigators were too busy.

“Okay,” I said tapping the pen against the paper as I glanced at the clock. “Give me the address.”

“There’s more.” Doreen hesitated.

“Oh?” It was now 1:54.

“They claim that everything in the room was damaged.”

“You said that already.”

“Everything is some furniture, carpet, and a rare parrot that was supposedly worth over \$15,000.”

The paper ripped as I dug the point of the pen into it. “A live parrot?”

“Well, I think he’s dead now.”

“No, I mean, not a parrot statue or something.”

Doreen sighed. “Yeah, it was a real parrot.”

“So,” I scribbled a little design on the corner of the paper as I determinedly avoided looking at the clock, “you need us to find out if the bird’s really dead?”

“We know he’s dead. We need you to find out if he was in the room when it collapsed.”

“What?” I laughed a little and it came out as a sort of a snort. “Do you think he was out partying or something?”

Doreen laughed, too. “No, probably not. But the pictures our investigator took make it look like the sunroom hadn’t been finished at the time of the collapse. We don’t think there was much of anything in the room at the time, including the parrot.”

“Alright. I’ll see what we can find out. You’ll fax me your investigator’s report?”

“Yep.”

“Okay. Sorry to rush you, but I’ve gotta run.”

“Thanks, Karen. I knew we could count on you.”

I looked at the phone for a moment after I hung up. *A parrot. We’re investigating the death of a parrot.* I knew right then Dave would assign the case to me. It would bring in no money and garner no prestige whatsoever for the investigator or the firm. But it might help

restore his confidence in me, which had probably sunk pretty low after I got fired in the middle of my last case. My last real case. I didn't count overseeing a shampoo every week as real investigative work. I was starting to wonder if Dave was ever going to assign me any more real cases or whether I would be stuck doing routine bills and copyediting activity reports for the rest of my working life while everyone else in the firm did the actual work.

1:58. Time to grab my coat.

"I'm off to watch Mrs. Burkstead," I called to Brittany. "See you tomorrow."

"See ya." She waved the folder she was leafing through, presumably still looking for clues to Dave's whereabouts.

As I reached over to grab my purse out of the desk drawer, the phone rang again.

Rodney was still in the kitchen.

Brittany was still standing by the file cabinet.

With a sigh, I grabbed the receiver. "Good afternoon," I said tersely.

"I'm trying to reach DS Investigations," a woman said in a brusque but not unfriendly cultured voice. "Do I have the right number?"

"You do," was all I said in response. We keep our phone greeting as vague as possible to avoid tipping off relatives and friends of clients who find our number by mistake. "How can I help you?" I tried not to make my voice sound as tense as I felt. I'd been hoping this was another telemarketer so I could hang up and run. But if the caller was a potential client, I wanted to talk to her to increase the likelihood that I might get the case, should there be one. If I turned the phone over to Brittany, we probably wouldn't even get a legible phone

number for this woman.

“I need to hire an investigator,” she said gravely.

I waited in vain for her to continue. “Yes?” I prompted.

“But it needs to be... oh, how can I put this?”

Gentility seeped through her voice, and I could almost picture her sitting under an enormous fan on the porch of an antebellum mansion, even though her accent put her closer to upstate New York than anywhere in the South. “It needs to be discreet,” she said at last. “I can’t have someone in a trench coat walking around with a magnifying glass at practice.”

I smothered a laugh. “Discretion is priority in this business, ma’am.” I pictured Dave skulking around in a trench coat with a big magnifying glass and almost lost it. I didn’t think the potential client would be real impressed to have me giggle in her ear.

“Well, I wanted to see what your investigators look like, but you don’t have any pictures on your website.”

“No, ma’am.” I’m not sure why I kept using the deferential “ma’am,” since the woman didn’t sound much older than myself. I think I just did it to try to keep myself from laughing at her ignorance. Maybe she thought we should have a big billboard on Route 40 so that everyone would know what our investigators looked like, including people being investigated.

“I wanted to come by the office,” she continued with a faint whine in her voice “but you have only a post office box listed. You are local, aren’t you?”

“Our office is in Ellicott City. Ma’am.” Okay, now I was overdoing the “ma’am” bit, and I needed to cut it out and get a grip on myself.

“Well, you should have more information out there,” she insisted. “I need to see what your

investigators look like before I hire one.”

“I think,” I said slowly, “that if you tell me what this all about, then I can tell you whether we think we can help you. We don't put our investigators pictures online because investigations tend to be more effective when people don't realize they're being investigated.”

“Well, yes, I guess that makes sense. What is your starting retainer?”

“Uh, nine hundred.” The caller's suddenly businesslike question surprised me for a minute, but I knew that our retainer was lower than a lot of investigation firms, so it should be a good selling point for us.

“Very good. And how long has the firm been licensed?”

“Eighteen years.” Nate had been in business that long. Dave had been licensed for a little less than 10 years. And I'd only had my license for two years and had hardly ever really used it. But she asked about the firm, not each of the investigators.

“Good,” she said, as if checking items off a list. “And you promise that you can be discreet?”

“Of course.” We'd never mingled with nobility or the rich and famous, but we had done work for the old moneyed families in Maryland and knew some of them could be passionate about maintaining their privacy.

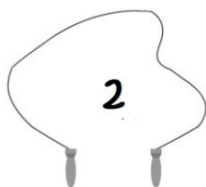
“Good,” she murmured, and again I had the sense that she was going through a checklist. I wondered if she might be the personal assistant to a rich woman who needed us to find missing heirloom jewels or locate the beneficiary of a testator's unexpected bequest.

“I need to hire an investigator,” she said, rather redundantly.

“Yes,” I said, trying to be patient as my gaze strayed to the clock. I was going to have to flat-out run down to Main Street to make it to the salon on time. But it would be worth it if I was able to rope in a new client. With this woman’s educated voice and concerns about discretion, I thought we might be looking at something substantial. Even if it was just a woman wishing to keep tabs on her husband, she might be a client with enough money to pay for a extensive investigation. So I didn’t want to make her feel rushed.

“Why do you want to hire an investigator?” I asked gently.

“I need an investigator. Your best investigator,” she said firmly. “To find out who broke my daughter’s jump rope.”



“Your daughter’s... jump rope?” I could hardly bring myself to say the words. A broken jump rope. I’d thought the dead parrot was as low as I could get for one day. This woman had to be crackers. And I’d had such high hopes from the tone of her voice.

“Yes,” the woman continued smoothly, “my daughter jumps on a competitive team, and someone sabotaged her rope during the regional competition.”

They had jump rope teams? Jump rope competitions? Wasn’t jump rope something little girls in pigtails did during recess? “Uh, I’m not sure I understand,” I mumbled, with a glance at the clock. Should I take notes? Or try to get her off the phone? Over the years we’d learned the hard way that even if a client was willing to pay, sometimes a matter just wasn’t worth investigating.

“My daughter is a member of the Jumptastics Jump Rope Team,” the woman explained with obvious pride. “You’ve probably seen one of their shows—they perform all over Howard County.”

“Um, no, I guess I haven’t seen them.” *Because they’re probably on the little kids’ playground at recess*, my mind screamed. Jump rope is something to *do*, not something to watch.

“Well, in any case,” she continued “Hayley has a chance to make it to the world competition in South

Africa. That is, she had a chance. Until someone did this to her.”

South Africa? Who would take their little girl to South Africa to jump rope? If nothing else, maybe I could talk some sense into this woman. “Um, look Mrs. ...”

“Callaghan. I’m Gina Callaghan.”

“Mrs. Callaghan, how old is your daughter?”

“Seventeen. Eighteen next month.”

My jaw hit the edge of the phone receiver. Girls that age are getting ready to go to college. They do not wear pigtails and jump rope at recess. I wanted to make sure I heard her correctly. “So your daughter is in high school?”

“Yes, at Centennial. She’s a senior. I’m not sure if she’ll be able to continue competitive jumping in college, so this is her last chance.”

The desperation and concern in her voice sounded genuine. And the mother in me made me relent. So maybe this made no sense. If Gina Callaghan was willing to pay to have the firm investigate a broken jump rope, I guess we could do it. Or at least consider doing it. We could meet her in person.

“Okay,” I turned to my desk calendar “can you come in tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, I think I can clear room in my schedule. What time?”

“10:30.” That would give me time to run through paperwork and talk to Dave about Doreen's parrot.

“And where is your office?”

“As you’re coming up Main Street from the river, you go about four blocks, past the Mexican restaurant, and look for Merryman Street on your left.”

“Yes”

“Then come down the hill. We’re in a two story brown building on the left side. Number 12. Come around to the side of the house and ring the buzzer. We’re on the second floor.”

“Are you in a house?”

“Well, it used to be a house, and it still looks like a house—from the outside.” From the inside, it looked kind of like a hunting lodge decorated by Martha Stewart, with the Dave’s beloved antler coat rack by the door and “improvements” from Rodney like a tabletop fountain that he plugged in to cover the noise from the photocopier. But I figured Gina Callaghan could see this all for herself in the morning and decide whether she wanted DS Investigations to look into her allegation of sabotage. And we could decide whether we thought she was nuts.

My son Evan is nearly 10-years-old now, so I shouldn’t have worried about him being at home by himself for a short time after school. But I did anyway. His sister Alicia, who is 12 and almost old enough to legally babysit, would not be home until later because she was staying after school for drama club. But Evan is a good kid, not the daredevil type, except when it snows and he tries to use a cookie sheet as a snowboard.

Fortunately for me, there was no snow today, though it was cold enough for it. The undersized trees lining the road into my townhouse development stuck their bare brown branches into a dull grey sky. The ground was a mass of dried mud, decorated with tufts of dormant grass and bits of leftover leaves. An ugly winter day. But a safe one, and today I was grateful for that. No snow to tempt Evan to see if the dog could

pull his sled along tire tracks in the street. I didn't think he could get into too much trouble before I finished my surveillance of Mrs. Burkstead and came home.

I was wrong.

I arrived home to find a fire engine in front of the house and Evan standing on the sidewalk with my neighbor Amy and her daughter, a cute little blond cherub of about five. Evan looked huge next to her, with his scruffy coffee-brown hair sticking up in odd places and his shirt sleeves hanging too long because he has a habit of stretching them out and pulling his hands up inside them. It actually made sense for him to do that now, since he was standing outside without a coat in January. No one seemed worried, and this kept me surprisingly calm.

Well, the dog was worried and barking as if the firefighters standing around the yard were aliens who had come to transport all her dog food to another planet, but I was used to that.

One firefighter was talking into a radio while two others looked over at me with bemused grins.

Now I was definitely not worried. I was wondering if I should be angry. Obviously the firefighters had been called out on a less-than-dangerous mission. I hoped it wasn't a prank call.

"What's going on?" I asked as I stepped over a small cluster of free newspapers that I was too lazy to pick up and walked over to Evan and Amy.

Evan slouched as if he thought he could curl up and make himself invisible. "Nothing."

I waved toward the fire truck. "Nothing?"

"Well, I..." He dug the toe of his shoe into the mud and looked at Amy.

She looked right back and nodded, as if urging him

to tell the story.

"I wanted to make a waffle," Evan said to the mud.

I wondered where this was going. "We don't have a waffle iron."

"No," he finally looked up at me, his dark eyes pleading for leniency, "just one of those waffles you put in the toaster oven."

"Okay." I nodded for him to keep going.

"And, well, I forgot about it, I guess."

"Huh?"

"I turned on the toaster oven and went to, um..."

He looked down again.

"Play video games?" I guessed. He was supposed to do his homework first.

He nodded.

"So it caught on fire?" I guessed again.

He nodded. "It looked like a volcano. And all the smoke alarms went off.

"And so you came outside and asked a neighbor to call 911?" I guessed for a third time.

"Er, I didn't really have..."

"I came over and got him," Amy explained, pushing her glasses back up to the bridge of her nose. "I heard the alarms and since your van wasn't out front, I figured you weren't home from work yet. So I made him come over to my house."

"Yeah," Evan added, "except I wanted to stay outside since you always tell us to meet on the sidewalk if we have a fire."

Suddenly I felt weak. There really *had* been an emergency, and if my quick-thinking neighbor hadn't been home watching, Evan might have been in serious danger. I grabbed Amy's arm. "Thank you," I said in a shaky voice.

“It was nothing,” she said. We just happened to be outside watching because Nicole likes to be out when all the kids get off the school bus.”

“But Evan could have been—”

“No,” she reassured me quickly. “The firefighters said there was nothing burning when they checked out the house. It all stayed inside the toaster oven. No harm done.”

“But what if you hadn’t come over? What if he’d tried to put it out with water and—”

“I wouldn’t do that, Mom,” Evan insisted. “I know not to use water around electric things. We learn that in Scouts. Every year.”

“You see?” Amy smiled. “It would have been okay.”

I shook my head. It might not have been okay. It was just sheer luck that Evan wasn’t hurt or killed. I should never have left him alone. “You are not allowed to use the toaster oven,” I admonished Evan, waving a finger in his face just like a mom in a cartoon. “Ever!”

“But Mom...”

“Not ever, do you understand?”

With a look of hurt and disgust, he turned and ran off, disappearing around the hedges at the side of the house.

My hands were shaking, and my voice had come out all harsh and angry. But inside, I knew that shaking was due to fear, not anger. Well, yes it was anger. Anger at myself, not at him. He couldn’t know that, of course. And by the time I’d realized it myself, he was gone with no chance for me to apologize.

I sighed and raked my hands through my hair, which is about as close as I get to combing it most days since it’s so short. Then I remembered that Amy and

her daughter were still standing there. I turned to her and attempted to smile and joke about it. "Well, that went well, don't you think? I've probably got him dying to turn on the toaster oven every chance he gets now."

She put a hand on my arm reassuringly. "Don't worry about it."

"It was my fault for leaving him alone."

"He has to learn to be alone sometime."

"But he's obviously not ready yet."

"Oh, I don't know. He handled himself very—"

"He almost burned down the house!" I interrupted hysterically. "And himself with it."

At the height of my motherly melodrama, I heard a man clear his throat behind me. A voice crackled on a radio nearby, and I remembered the firefighters. I turned to see if they were still enjoying the episode.

All of them except the man who had come up behind me were back on the truck. The one who was left, the guy in charge, I guess, had a serious expression, so if he thought the incident was funny, he was at least making an attempt to hide his amusement.

"We've searched the premises, and everything's secure, Ma'am," he said. "The best thing to do would have been to close the door on the toaster oven and wait for it to burn out. But since he was alone, calling us was the right choice."

"Er, thanks." I couldn't look him in the face. Even the firefighters knew I made a mistake leaving a nine-year-old alone.

"This is Unit Four," the firefighter drawled into his radio. "We are headed back to the station."

"Thank you," I said as he started to turn away.

He nodded in acknowledgment as he responded to something else on the radio. One of the guys on the

truck waved. As the truck pulled away, the dog started up another frenzy of barking in the backyard. Thank heavens she was outside so nothing would have happened to—

But Evan had been inside. Did I care more about my dog than my own son? What kind of a mother—

Now I was overreacting again. Nothing happened. I needed to get a grip on myself.

I turned back to Amy, who was kneeling down next to her daughter, pointing to the back of the fire engine.

“Didn’t get to see the ladder.” The girl pouted from inside the fur-rimmed hood of her puffy winter coat, “And they didn’t spray any water...”

Amy’s round face lit with an indulgent smile as she pushed her glasses back up on her nose again and turned to me almost apologetically.

I forced myself to smile in return. “I need a Diet Coke. Want one?”

“No, thanks.” She sighed. “I’ve gotta get dinner started. But can I get you to join me on a walk later?”

I hesitated. Just spending time with Amy did not automatically guarantee that I was going to reveal another example of how messed up my life had become. Yes, our walks did tend to evolve into discussions of my children’s problems or ex-husband’s inadequacies, but it didn’t have to be that way. I could force her to reveal some defect in her husband. Or her adorable daughter. Or maybe she had a problem goldfish or something.

“Please?” she begged. “You know I’ll make up some excuse to sit down in front of the TV if you don’t go with me.”

I mentally checked my schedule and didn’t remember anything in particular that I had to do, so I

caved. "Sure, I'll go. Eight o'clock okay?"

"Yep, it's perfect."

Nicole tugged at her mom's blouse. "I go to bed at eight."

"That's why it's perfect," Amy answered, taking her hand.

"But I wanna go," the little girl insisted, jumping up and down.

Amy started to steer her daughter toward their house across the street. "See you later," she called to me.

"I wanna go!" Nicole repeated, still jumping even though her mother was pulling her forward.

"No, it will be past your bedtime," Amy answered.

"But I WANNA!" the girl screamed at a volume that seemed physically impossible from a body that size. I wondered if she was wearing a hidden microphone. She dug her heels firmly into the ground to prevent her mom from pulling her any further.

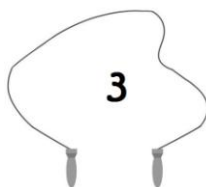
Amy was probably going to have to pick her up to get her home.

"Bye." I waved as I turned away quickly so that Amy to deal with this rebellion without an audience. Maybe her life wasn't as perfect as it seemed. Maybe I'd forgotten what it was like to live with a five-year-old.

Maybe my life wasn't as messed up as I thought.

Then a rush of panic flooded over me as I saw a white pickup truck turn the corner.

Maybe I'd forgotten that I'd invited my boyfriend Brian and his parents over for an early dinner.



A welcoming hostess would have waited out on the lawn and walked up to greet her guests with a smile as they parked in front of the house.

I was not a welcoming hostess.

I raced inside as fast as I could and slammed the door behind me.

Was it Thursday already? I couldn't believe I had forgotten. They must have the wrong day. It had to be the wrong day.

After I looked frantically through the jumbled entries on the kitchen calendar, not even able to remember what week we were in, I finally made myself stop.

It didn't matter if they had the wrong day. They were here, and I had to do something about it.

Fast.

This would be my first time meeting his parents, and of course their first time seeing my house, so I had to make sure it wasn't a complete disaster.

From the tiny narrow foyer, I stepped into the almost-as-tiny kitchen. My gaze scanned the table and counters—an empty toaster waffle box, a sleeve of crackers, a can of spray cheese and a cup with cloudy liquid in the bottom. Not too bad, actually. Just the remnants of Evan's after school snack.

But I looked through the counter behind the sink

that opened into the next room, I cringed. My guests would be spending most of their time in the nebulous open space that serves as a living room, dining room and dog highway to the backyard. And it looked like a war zone. There was no time to deal with the brown streaks on the carpet by the sliding glass doors or the stacks of baby pictures waiting to be sorted into albums. But I had to clear off the dining room table or all six of us would be eating in a miniature kitchen that still smelled faintly like burnt waffles.

Unfortunately, since we don't eat there very often, the dining room table had become a depository for everything from school notices to folded laundry, not to mention the miscellaneous junk that I couldn't ever put away because it didn't really have an "away." The edges of the table were littered with a tube of superglue, a little bag of extra buttons from a new blouse, half a package of shoelaces, a book of poems given to me by Evan's teacher, and a half-eaten candy cane with fuzzy antlers and googly eyes. It all had to go.

I grabbed the afghan off the living room sofa, laid it on a chair, and pushed everything off the table onto the afghan. Then I wadded it all up together and stuffed it in the corner, behind a fake potted plant. Now that the junk was off the table, though, I could see how dusty it was. No time to get a dust cloth. The only loose fabric in sight was the afghan, and that was already gainfully employed.

My shirtsleeve? I was wearing a white blouse, so that would be pretty obvious.

Ding! The doorbell. Time's up!

I swiped the biggest swath of dust off with the tail of my blouse, tucked it into my pants, and headed back down the narrow foyer to the front door.

Evan's backpack was sitting right next to the door where he'd dropped it when he came in. The straps lay in front of the threshold, as if he'd laid a deliberate snare to trip up whoever came in the door next. I picked up the backpack, but the only place I had time to move it was into the already overcrowded coat closet. As I shoved the bag inside, the handle of the vacuum cleaner swung out to jab me in the leg. Pushing the vacuum handle back in with one hand, I quickly shut the door with the other hand, trapping my attacker inside as the hinges squealed in protest.

Then I turned to the front door, hoping I hadn't just wiped a big wad of dust across my face. I couldn't believe they were here already. I know we'd agreed on an early time so that they could get to a show later downtown, but it couldn't be more than 4:30.

What kind of person shows up for dinner at 4:30?

"Hello," I said as I pulled the door open, hoping I'd remembered to smile. I probably hadn't done it in time.

A big man filled the doorway—Brian's dad, presumably,—so I could see right away where Brian got his size. He was actually a little taller than Brian and though his hair was thinning and gray, he stood straight, with no stooping or other sign of age.

He wasn't frowning, exactly, but he wasn't smiling, either, and that made him look a little forbidding.

The petite woman at his side was easier to face.

"Hello, Karen." Much smaller than either her husband or her son, Brian's mom shared her son's wide, open features, warm smile, and bright blue eyes that sparkled with a sense of mischief, as if any moment could turn into an occasion for laughter. Her smile made me feel a little less jumpy, but I found it a little disconcerting to have someone I had never met speak as if she knew me.

I felt I was at a disadvantage somehow.

I was, actually. She knew my name, and I just knew her as “Brian’s mom,” Mrs. Kieffer.

As I stepped back to allow them to come in, I hoped desperately that the bathrooms weren’t too dirty or the dog hadn’t left anything embarrassing by the patio door. Brian was the last one to come in, and as he did, he leaned in close, grazed my cheek with a kiss, and whispered “Sorry we’re early. Dad gets real nervous about traffic getting into the city.”

The sound of his rich voice, the tickle of warm breath against my ear and the strength of having him at my side made all the unease fade to insignificance. If I needed to live through moments like these to have this man in my life, it was worth it.

I would have given him a hug, but the last time I did, one of my earrings got tangled in his long hair and I didn’t want to risk it. His dark wavy hair was tied back as usual, but loose tendrils escaped to curl around his face.

Besides, his parents might not approve of a hug in front of them.

What is it about being around parents that turns us into insecure children again?

Brian stepped over to his mom in the living room and took her coat. This raised a warning flag in my mind, but I wasn’t sure why. I was hoping fervently that there weren’t great huge balls of dog hair hanging on the legs of the coffee table.

“You have a lovely home, Karen,” Mrs. Kieffer said. “Such an understated decor.”

What did that mean? Did that mean she thought I had no decor? Well, she was right. My townhouse was still painted the original neutral tones given to it by the

builder, with cheap nondescript vinyl flooring in the entry hall and kitchen and carpet that could be called the color of dry dirt throughout the rest. I tried to keep it fairly clean, but had never been ambitious enough to put up fancy window treatments or anything.

“Thank you,” I said, deciding it had at least nominally been meant as a compliment.

The squeal of door hinges warned me that Brian was opening the coat closet to put his mom’s coat inside.

“Wait,” I lunged toward the closet, “why don’t we—”

My voice was drowned out by the avalanche of bookbags, boots, umbrellas, badminton racquets and other closet debris that tumbled out onto Brian’s feet.

I think I flushed down to the roots of my hair.

“Sorry.”

“S’okay.” He grinned as he quickly tossed everything back inside. The vacuum cleaner handle shot out toward him, but he caught it and stuffed it back without missing a beat.

In the living room, Mrs. Kieffer cleared her throat. “Brian said you have two children?” She looked around as if expecting to see them climb out from under the sofa.

“Uh, yes.” I hurried into the living room to join her. “Evan and Alicia. “There they are.” I pointed to their portraits on the wall by the stairs. Evan in his soccer uniform, proudly clutching a ball, and Alicia in a pink tutu with a crown on her head. Okay, those pictures were a little old. Alicia had long since quit ballet and liked to wear black nail polish and big clomping heavy boots. And while Evan still loved soccer, he had lost the round cherubic face and wide spaced baby-teeth

grin of his preschool years.

“They’ll be joining us for dinner, I hope?” Mrs. Kieffer asked.

“Alicia will be late. She has play practice and doesn’t get dropped off until about 5:30.”

With a nervous glance, Mr. Kieffer stepped toward his wife, and said in a low voice, “We’re not going to wait that long before we—”

She cut him off with a casual wave of her hand. “No, don’t worry. Of course not.”

He was going to say “before we eat.”

They expected to eat at 5:00 probably. Right when I had suggested. But I had been thinking they would arrive at five and eat about 5:30 or 5:45. Their show didn’t start until 8:00.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was 4:40. I could barely get a carryout pizza on the table before five. And Mrs. Kieffer didn’t exactly look like the type to eat out of a cardboard box. She had a casual elegance, as if she wore clothing that had been personally designed for her and had spent her life posing for “candid” magazine photos. Like one of the Kennedys or something.

I wasn’t going to serve macaroni and cheese or fish sticks to this woman.

Inviting them over on a weeknight had not been one of my better ideas. I’m sure when they met Brian’s first wife, she had planned everything to the last detail. But even if she hadn’t, I’d heard that Chloe was one of those talented people who could make anything out of nothing.

I was not.

“Would you like something to drink?” I asked, rather forlornly. I had planned to make two kinds of

iced tea and this lemon punch that one of Brian's friends had made at the historic site where he volunteers on Saturdays. But of course, since I'd forgotten the dinner, I hadn't gone shopping, and I had no lemons or fancy teabags. I didn't have time to make the drinks even if I had the ingredients. I was sunk.

"Thank you. Anything without caffeine would be great," Mrs. Kieffer said.

"Would you care for something?" I asked Mr. Kieffer.

He shook his head.

"Hey, Dad," Brian said, "Karen has a border collie that looks just like our old dog, Shiloh."

"Oh, yeah?" His eyes brightened, and for the first time, he actually looked interested in being at my house.

"Yeah. She's out in the back." Brian waved toward the glass door that led out to the deck.

His dad stepped up to him and almost grinned. "Bet you want to keep her out there, too."

"Ah no, she's great. Go take a look."

As his parents walked toward the back of the living room, he turned to follow me into the kitchen. "I'll help you with the drinks," he offered.

"What did he mean about keeping my dog in the yard?"

"Nothing. Just an old joke." He opened a cabinet. "I'll get out glasses."

"Thanks." I peered into the refrigerator. "I don't suppose your mom likes Ice Blue Gatorade?"

He laughed. "No, probably not. But she loves water with a splash of lemon and orange juice, if you have that."

"That I probably do have." There was about an inch of orange juice left in the carton and a bottle of

lemon juice on the door.

"I'll fix it. And you can give my dad a glass of milk," Brian suggested.

"But I didn't think he wanted anything."

"Mom will make him drink it before dinner. She says it helps prevent heartburn."

I picked up two of the glasses he'd taken out and held them up to the light to make sure they really looked clean. "So she knows my cooking will give him heartburn, huh?"

"Everything gives him heartburn."

"It's probably from all the milk." I handed him a glass for his mom and poured milk into the other one.

"Maybe." Brian grinned. "But I've never had the nerve to suggest it, and I'm sure dad hasn't either."

We had been speaking in low voices, but now I let mine drop to a whisper. "So does she rule the house?"

"Definitely," Brian whispered back. "Dad would not willingly drive all the way to Baltimore to see a musical about hairstylists. But Mom wanted to see it, so..."

I laughed as I put the milk back into the refrigerator. "And she's got you going along, too."

"Yeah. But at least I like musicals."

Just as I was starting to relax again, I saw the time on my watch. "Oh, rats."

"What?"

"Nothing." I peered at the refrigerator shelves desperately, as if I expected to find a fully cooked dinner hiding behind the tub of sour cream.

"Karen," there was a note of warning in Brian's voice. We had some problems with me not communicating very well, and I guess he figured I was headed down that road again.

Which was true.

“Okay.” I shut the refrigerator and turned to face him. “I forgot that you were bringing your parents over tonight. I don’t have anything ready for dinner. I haven’t even been to the grocery store.”

He grinned. “Yeah, I figured as much.”

That made me a little mad. I was visibly upset and he found it amusing? “So,” I demanded, “I look as flustered as I feel?”

“No, it’s not that. But, it always smells like food in this house, whenever I come over for dinner.”

If he was trying to reassure me, it wasn’t working. “You mean my house smells like a restaurant?”

“No, like someone’s been home cooking all day, like in a spaghetti commercial. But when we walked in just now it smelled like...”

“Wet dog?”

“Well, yeah, a little. But more like, I don’t know, dried flowers or perfume or something.”

“Potpourri,” I murmured. “The fall fundraiser for the drama club.”

“Okay, that’s the smell.”

I sighed. “I can’t serve that for dinner, though.”

“No...” He opened the cabinet with the pots and pans, and then quickly closed it as if he knew right away it didn’t have what he needed.

“What are you looking for?”

He opened the cabinet with the canned food. “Do you have any carrots?”

“Yeah, but I keep them in the refrigerator.”

“And some rice?”

“I think so.”

“Then we’re all set.” He pulled out two cans and set them on the counter triumphantly. “My dad likes

Spam.”

I looked suspiciously at the dusty can he was pointing to. “This must have been left from the previous owner of the house. I never buy Spam.”

He picked up the can. “It says it’s still good for a while yet.”

“Let me see that.” I reached for the unfamiliar rectangular can. “It says ‘16.’ That’s probably 1916.”

He laughed. “Just fix the rice and grate some carrots for me and I’ll do the rest.”

“I’m not serving suspicious Spam to your parents.”

“It’s my dad’s favorite dish.”

“Spam and grated carrots? What, does he have bad teeth?”

“Mom calls it ‘Hawaiian Haystack.’ It’s rice with diced Spam and cream of chicken soup and whatever else she happens to have around. I figured you probably had carrots. Pineapple is good, too, but I didn’t see any.”

“Nope, we’re out.”

“Grated cheese is good, too.”

“I probably have some.”

“And those crunchy Chinese noodles.”

“You’re out of luck, there. But I do have Fritos”

He nodded. “Hey, I’ve used them before.”

“You make this a lot?”

“Every time they come over.”

I guess I didn’t look convinced because he came over and draped his arms over me in a big reassuring hug. “Relax, Karen,” he said softly. “Everything will be okay.”

And for that moment, at least, I could believe it. If I hadn’t been keenly aware of his parents being in the next room needing to be fed, I think I could have just

stayed in Brian's arms and forgotten about all the annoying things that had happened that day, or any other day for that matter.

But the dog barked outside. Mr. Kieffer made a comment, and that was the end of that moment. "We'd better get you all fed and off to the theatre," I murmured as I pulled away. It was gratifying to see that he looked as reluctant to let me go as I felt leaving his arms.

While I grated carrots and cheese, Brian fixed everything else and even managed to find Evan and talk him into setting the table. I still hadn't figured out why we had Spam in the cabinet—maybe I bought it for a canned food drive at school and then forgot to send it in. Anyway, it worked. Spam and all that other stuff. Brian's parents thought I'd planned it deliberately and even my kids liked it.

Mrs. Kieffer was an easy conversationalist, encouraging Brian to talk about his latest plans for his church youth group and when Alicia arrived, getting her to tell us about her roles in the drama club.

"Aren't you in any of his plays?" Mrs. Kieffer asked, looking from Alicia to her son.

"They're just for high school kids," Alicia answered a little wistfully. She shook a lock of chestnut brown hair out of her eyes with a dramatic toss of her head.

Mrs. Kieffer raised one eyebrow as she looked at Brian, (which is a very cool intimidating mother trick that I would love to learn someday). "Well, if that isn't the silliest rule I've ever heard."

"Mom," Brian explained, "we have to keep some things separate, just for the older kids."

His mother's gaze never wavered.

"But, you know," he continued, "Alicia has been

coming to the middle school youth group the last few weeks and some of them have talked about wanting to perform so maybe we can work something out.”

That was as good as done and both females knew it. They exchanged a knowing glance, and Alicia looked appropriately grateful. This would be her reward for going to church each week.

Though I guess I've always believed in God, I had not been a real “church person” for most of my life. But Brian was, so for my New Year’s resolution this year, I had vowed to make an effort to go every Sunday. The kids came with me, or at least they had so far on the weekends they hadn’t been with their dad. It was a big church. Less formal than the ones I had been to as a kid, so that was good, but it was full of people who all seemed to know each other. Of course I didn’t know any of them. I could handle it for an hour each week, but I couldn’t quite see how Brian could want to spend so much time there with youth group, and the basketball league and Sunday School and all the other stuff he did. But then, I really had only known him a few months, and I’m sure he didn’t know what made me do half the stuff I did, either.

We still had a lot to learn about each other.

I knew quite a bit about his hobbies, but almost nothing about his job as an engineer at some firm in Columbia.

He knew substantially more about my job, since we met while I was investigating a theft at the colonial house where he volunteered and he was one of the suspects.

“Brian told me you’re interested in living history, too?” Mrs. Kieffer asked me when there was a lull in the conversation.

“Well,” I pushed a little piece of diced Spam around on my plate as I tried to think of a diplomatic way to answer her question. “I, uh, have been learning a little bit about it.” I had pretended to have an interest in history so I could go undercover as a volunteer at the site where Brian worked as a blacksmith on Saturdays. That was my first case, and since it ended, I hadn’t been back, which said a lot about my true interest in history.

“Karen was at the 1776 House for work, actually,” Brian explained. “She’s a private investigator.”

His voice rang with pride as he spoke. I was a little embarrassed at the way he almost bragged about my job and implied that it was much more impressive than it really was, but I was also flattered. And I realized that he must have told his mom about me back before he knew why I was at the 1776 House, back when he thought I was just another volunteer. So maybe he’d been interested in me just as long as I’d been interested in him. It was a reassuring thought.

But embarrassment was the unhappy emotion that won out, because suddenly Mr. Kieffer took an interest in the conversation. He leaned forward across the table, fixing me in his gaze. “An investigator, eh? Do you work with local police a lot, or do you find that they get in the way?”

“Most of them work pretty efficiently, so I can’t say they get in the way.” We seldom ever work on anything while the police are involved. People call us for things the police won’t investigate.

“Uh, huh.” He nodded. “And when there’s been a murder, how long do they rope off the crime scene?”

I hated to disappoint him, but I had to shake my head. “I don’t really know. Our firm doesn’t get called on murder cases.” That’s something the police *will*

investigate.

“Do you have a forensic specialist at your firm?”

“Well, no, because—”

His face fell as the realization struck that my job was not anything like the shows on TV. “Oh, I guess not if you don’t investigate murders.”

“We leave that for the police.”

“But I’m sure you must work on some very interesting cases,” Mrs. Kieffer interjected smoothly. “Remember all those wonderful stories Chloe used to tell about the children she taught? I’m sure Karen has a lot of great stories like those.”

I appreciated the attempt to bolster my importance, but I really didn’t want to talk about my job or be compared with Brian’s deceased wife. My status as an actual investigator was pretty precarious, since I’d been fired from my second case and hadn’t really had an opportunity to prove to my brother that I was capable of taking the lead in an investigation. I felt like talking about it would be sure to invite disaster of some sort. And I didn’t exactly have a stash of amusing prepared stories ready to entertain people as Chloe apparently had.

“Most investigation work is done on a computer now,” I explained. “So much more information is available online than there used to be.”

“But you do go out in the field, obviously, or you wouldn’t have been out at the 1776 House,” Mrs. Kieffer observed.

“I do. On occasion.”

“Oh, I’ll bet you really have had some really interesting cases,” she said with great enthusiasm. “But you probably can’t talk about them, can you?”

“No, I can’t,” I said quickly, grateful that she’d

given me an easy out. “Client confidentiality.”

And this was true of course, although I could give out some general information in a way that wouldn’t violate confidentiality standards.

But I was incredibly grateful to Brian when he looked at his watch and suggested that it might be time for them to finish up and head out to the theatre. There was no way I was going to admit that I was about to spend the next few weeks investigating the death of a parrot and a broken jump rope.