



Why was an *L* hanging in the window?

I set down the plastic container of leftovers I had been unsuccessfully trying to shove into a lunch box and went over to the living room window to investigate. The sparse light of the November morning reflected in the remains of a glass ornament hanging from the window latch. The bottom and left side had been broken off, so that what was once a crystal cross was now just a dangerous-looking piece of glass in the shape of the letter *L*. Fractured crystal shards lay scattered on the carpet below. A small tag dangled forlornly alongside the broken ornament with words in Brian's distinctive scrawl: *To Karen, Keep the Faith*.

It had been my first gift from Brian—well, my second if I counted the strange and now dead plant he had brought me on our first date, which I didn't. And I'd only had the ornament for a week and just found a good place to hang it a few days ago. It didn't seem fair that it should already be broken. I hoped the break would not turn out to be symbolic of our new relationship, my first since the divorce.

Walking back toward the kitchen, I prepared to round up the usual suspects. "What happened to the crystal cross in the window?" I yelled up the stairs, nearly deafening the dog. Reaching down to rub her ears, I reassured her that she was not in trouble, since she's not anywhere near big enough to reach the window latch. Then I let her out into the backyard.

I repeated my question at an even louder volume and was finally rewarded with the sight of my nine-year-old son, Evan, hopping into the kitchen in shorts, socks, and a sweatshirt, with a soccer ball clenched between his knees. "What d'ya say?" he asked. At the same moment, he jumped, flicked the ball up into the air, and caught it in his arms.

I cast a nervous glance at the glasses of milk on the table in the corner. Even though it would have been nearly impossible for him to knock over the milk at this distance, I could feel a spill looming on the horizon. "Put the ball away and eat your breakfast."

He frowned at the cereal boxes and sliced bananas arranged on the table for his benefit. "Why doesn't Alicia have to eat her breakfast?"

"She does. And you're avoiding my question. I want to know how my crystal cross got broken." I pointed to the living room window.

He shrugged. "I dunno. I didn't do it." He tossed the soccer ball into a box by the door.

"Don't throw balls in the house," I admonished automatically before I stepped over toward the stairs to holler up to his sister. "Alicia! The bus will be here any minute." Then I went back to the row of lunches in progress on the kitchen counter. "What kind of sandwich do you want?"

"I want to buy today."

"You're buying tomorrow because I have to go into the office early before I start my new assignment." This was only the second case Dave had assigned me to handle on my own, and I was anxious to make sure everything went smoothly. Since Dave happens to be my younger

brother, as well as my boss, I was pretty sure he wouldn't fire me if I screwed up. But I would be back to filing agency invoices full-time while he hired someone else to do the interesting work.

I had never really wanted a career, but my ex-husband forced me into the job market by making me his ex-wife. And after five years of having just a "job," I could now actually see a career opening before me, with fulfilling work, challenge, and a sense of accomplishment. If I failed in this new case, I would be back to just a job. I couldn't let that happen.

Evan hacked at a piece of banana with his spoon. "What does your work have to do with my lunch?"

"Since I'm going in early tomorrow, I won't have time to make lunches." I took a deep breath. "Alicia!"

Something fell down the stairs. I first assumed it to be Alicia's book bag, but when she slunk into the kitchen a moment later, I realized that the thumping noise on the stairs had been caused by Alicia's new boots—dark, heavy monstrosities that had apparently been designed for a construction worker in mourning. She threw herself into a chair and pushed a lock of hair away from her face, allowing just enough room to inhale. "Don't we have any other cereal?"

Evan pointed his spoon at her accusingly. "You picked out the green one."

I peered inside the half-empty box. "And I think she ate all the marshmallows out so all that's left is the semi-nutritious cereal." I looked over at Evan. "Was it green originally, or have we just had this a long time?"

Alicia snatched the box from my hands and dumped

about three pieces of cereal into her bowl. When I saw the back of the box, I remembered why she had chosen it. It came with a free sample CD from some teen pop star with green hair. She frowned as I poured more cereal into her bowl.

“Would you rather eat the CD instead?” I suggested. “It probably has more protein.”

Evan offered to get it.

Alicia hit him with the cereal box.

“Eat!” I ordered. Then I went back to the lunches on the counter. Since Evan claimed that only first graders carried lunch boxes now, he insisted on using my plain, blue thermal lunch bag. So for my own lunch, I was trying to cram a rectangular plastic tub of leftover spaghetti into a Bob the Tomato lunch box that was about two sizes too small.

And that reminded me of why I’d given up the effort earlier.

I looked over at the kids. “Do either of you know how my crystal cross got broken?” I waved toward the living room window.

“Why do you always accuse me of everything?” Alicia moaned through greenish lips.

“I’m not accusing. I’m asking.” But I had to admit I really was accusing, I just didn’t know which of them to blame.

Yet.

“It didn’t break itself,” I pointed out. “And I didn’t do it.”

“Well, I didn’t either.” Evan huffed. Then his expression brightened. “Maybe there was an earthquake that rattled the house and the cross smashed into the window frame

and broke into a million pieces.” He demonstrated with a piece of green cereal on the table.

Alicia suddenly flipped a large swath of hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ear. “Was that the glass thing your boyfriend gave you?” Her look of school-morning resentment warmed into a look of genuine concern. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

Evan grinned in triumph. “I knew you did it.”

Alicia tried to kick him under the table, but he scooted out of her reach. “I didn’t say I did it, you twerp.” She turned to me with a look of almost clinical empathy. “I’m just sorry it happened. A gift from that special guy is something to be treasured forever.”

I hoped that was a quote from one of the teen magazines she kept on her nightstand and not evidence of a secret boyfriend, since she is only twelve.

“Hey,” Evan called from the window, where he stood examining the broken glass. “Why did Brian give you an *L*?”

Alicia snorted in derision. “It was a cross, you—”

“And it was supposed to be a reminder to treat each other with more respect,” I interrupted. “So no more name-calling, please. Alicia, your mouth only has time for food this morning.”

“Yeah, I guess it would be a cross. The only time we ever see him anymore is in *church*.” Evan muttered the words softly, so I wasn’t sure he really meant me to hear.

I walked over, put an arm around his shoulder, and gave him what I hoped was a reassuring squeeze. Together, we watched the leaves tumble out of a sugar maple tree, covering the dog as she lay in wait for a squirrel. “You don’t mind that we go to church sometimes now, do you?”

I asked in a quiet voice while Alicia crunched down the remainder of her cereal.

“No,” he said unconvincingly.

“Last week you said you had a lot of fun in kid’s class.”

“I did.”

“So what’s wrong?”

“I dunno.” He stared down at the broken glass on the carpet. “Dad and Linda never make us go to church.”

I swallowed the nasty comment I was tempted to make about his father worshipping at Our Lady of the Fairway or the Temple of the Holy Tailgate. To be perfectly honest, I didn’t really want to go to church most Sundays either. And if I didn’t feel like going to church, then God probably didn’t feel like listening to me, which meant the whole thing was a tremendous waste of time. But I wasn’t about to let my son know that. “You know,” I said finally, “your dad and I don’t agree on a lot of things. You do things his way at his house and my way at my house.”

He looked up at me. “Which house is *my* house? When do I get to do things my way?”

I planted a kiss on the top of his head. “You get to watch TV now, if you’d like. Since you’re ready for school.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He gave me a quick hug in acknowledgment of the days back when I used to refuse to let him watch TV before school. Did I give in on that rule to buy his affection? Probably. But it was worth it. And cartoons didn’t seem to warp his mind any more in the morning than after school.

The painful squeal of brakes outside warned me that Alicia’s school bus was turning the corner. I stepped over to open the front door and quickly assessed the number

of kids waiting at the bus stop. "Hurry, Alicia. You've only got three kids' worth of time today."

"Well, where are the rest of them?" she demanded in annoyance as she slung her purple book bag over her shoulder.

"Oh, so you're the only one who gets to run late?"

"Yes. They *have* to be on time so I have time to be late." Her voice was sullen, but just before she stepped out the door, she turned and flashed a lopsided grin to acknowledge the unreasonableness of her statement. "See ya."

"Have a good day." I smiled, hoping that middle school had improved to the point where it was actually possible to have a good day.

From the TV, someone with a deep voice was threatening to take over the world by putting remote control devices in everyone's shoes.

Just before I made a final attempt to fit the spaghetti container into Evan's old lunch box, I went over to the living room window to examine the broken glass ornament one more time. It probably had smashed against the window frame, just as he had suggested. But we don't get many earthquakes in central Maryland, so the cause of the smashing motion was likely an act of man, rather than an act of God. I didn't want to accuse Evan, though. I wanted him to confess the truth to me on his own.

Just then he laughed at something having to do with the villain and women's shoes. He was a good kid, just growing up too fast for me.

Back in the kitchen, I stared at the container of spaghetti and the impossibly small lunch box. The container was warped on one side because I'd left it in the microwave

too long. Orange stains stretched unappetizingly around the perimeter.

I didn't even want spaghetti for lunch today.

I would buy lunch from one of the shops on Main Street after I went over to the Blue Moon Art and Antiques Gallery for my "job interview." Dave had already arranged for me to "work" in the store three days a week, but today I would go in, meet the owners, and while they pretended to interview me as a potential applicant, I would interview them about unexplained damage to the store's inventory.

I wondered if the Blue Moon was one of those shops that sold collectible Star Wars lunch boxes and, if so, whether they were big enough to hold any of my plastic containers.



After I saw Evan safely onto the school bus, I threw Bob the Tomato (loaded with a container of yogurt) into the minivan and headed off to the office. As I drove through the old, fashionable, quaint section of town, I cast a few extra glances at the Blue Moon to see if anything looked out of the ordinary. I can't afford either art or antiques, so I'd never really paid any attention to the gallery before, and I wouldn't really know what was ordinary. But I looked nevertheless.

I turned a corner to drive down the old, unfashionable, not-restored-enough-to-be-quaint Hill Street, only to find another car parked in my usual parking place. For five years, I had always parked in front of the two-story clapboard shop where DS Investigations runs its covert

operations from an unmarked office on the second floor.

Okay, most of our firm's business consists of running computer background checks for employers and doing surveillance for clients who think their spouses are cheating on them, so it's not the glamorous stuff of fiction. But I pretend sometimes that I'm walking into Sam Spade's office, about to be confronted with the Maltese Falcon. After all, I do have a private investigator's license. But the reality is that I spend most of my time working on accounts receivable and proofreading letters typed by our incompetent college student receptionist, Brittany. I was excited to finally get casework to handle. All I had to do now was get the office set up so things could run smoothly without me three days a week.

I parked across the street and decided that the light rain that was falling did not require the use of the Barney umbrella I'd brought with me. As I hurried across the street with my jacket held over my head, I noticed that the shutter next to our right-side front window was dangling precariously from one hinge. If someone had purposefully hung a shutter that way on Main Street, it would look shabby-chic. On our end of Hill Street, it just looked shabby.

So as soon as I unlocked the office, turned on the computers, printers, copier, and coffeemaker, I placed a call to our landlord, who owned about forty little buildings like ours and always managed to give me the impression that every single one of the others was more important.

"I'm aware of it, Karen," he informed me in a tired voice after I told him about the broken shutter.

"And you're going to fix it?" I opted to use my stern

mother voice rather than my hopeful tenant voice.

"Yes, I'll fix it when I paint the building."

"And when is that?"

"After I fix the shutter."

"Which will be?"

"Sometime. I don't know, I'm busy." I heard him yawn. "Call me if it hits someone."

"If it hits someone, their *lawyer* will call you."

"Look, it's on the list. It'll get fixed when it gets fixed."

There was a sound indicating either that he scratched at stubble on his face with the phone receiver or that the phone line was being gnawed to pieces by giant shrews. "S'been like that for a year, now," he reasoned. "A few more months won't make much difference."

I was stunned. I forgot all about the shrews and hardly realized that he'd hung up on me. The shutter had been hanging half off its hinges for a year and I hadn't noticed? Even though I parked right under it five days a week? That didn't say much for my investigative powers of observation.

I decided not to mention the matter to Dave.

With fresh coffee in hand, I was ready to face the answering machine. Although there were no calls concerning the Blue Moon, there were two regarding background checks, an offer for satellite TV service, and an opportunity to trade my time-share for membership in a fitness club. Then I got to the last message on the machine and at the sound of the deep rich voice, I stopped. It was Brian's voice.

The pen dropped from my hand and rolled off the desk to lodge somewhere under the battered credenza.

"Hi, Karen, it's me. I tried to catch you at home before you left, and I've left a message on your cell phone, too. I'm really sorry, but I forgot we added a rehearsal tonight. So obviously we can't do dinner tonight, but I hope you can still help with rehearsal. I'll call you later to reschedule dinner. Keep the faith!"

I could picture the smile he always put into those closing words. But *I* sure didn't feel like smiling. That was the third date he'd canceled on me. Evan was right—the only time I saw him anymore was in church. I went to his church at least once a week to help him with a Christmas play he was directing for the youth group. He always seemed to have time for those "dates."

I hit the delete button on the answering machine with more force than was strictly necessary. Then I hit it again, harder, just to make sure.

"What is it?" A high voice squeaked from somewhere behind me. "A spider? A mouse?"

I turned to see Brittany cowering in the doorway.

"Boyfriend."

She nodded in understanding before stepping inside. We don't see eye to eye on very many things, but some subjects are truly universal among women.

She shook drops of rain out of her ponytail, unwrapped a scarf from around her neck, and hung it on the ugly antler coatrack by the door, where it dripped water onto the scuffed wood floor. The oversize sleeves of her sweater hung limp with the rain she had absorbed walking down the hill from her apartment without a raincoat or umbrella. Coats and umbrellas are not cool. Scarves are cool, but not of much use unless worn over your head. Which is not

cool. Being soaking wet in November is apparently okay. If not cool in a fashion sense, it is at least so temperature-wise. I expect about half of the young women in Alicia and Brittany's generation to be dead of pneumonia before they hit twenty-five.

As I said, we don't see eye to eye on many things.

The need to be on time for work is another example. This was the first time she'd made it in before ten all year. "I'm glad you're here on t—" I stopped myself before I could say what I really thought because I needed to get on her good side, "early today." I smiled at her even though she was dripping water on a report that was ready to be mailed. While she put away her shoulder bag and arranged her hair, I moved the report and replaced it with a plant that needed watering. "Since I'm going to be out of the office a great deal for the next few weeks, I'm hoping you can take over a few tasks temporarily."

"Tasks?" She was cowering as if she expected me to ask her to train tigers or something.

"Just some of the routine logs and forms."

I thought this would reassure her, but instead, she looked even more apprehensive. "F-forms?" she stuttered. "I thought you might need help with some surveillance work."

She wanted to do the "fun" stuff.

I suppressed a sigh. "What I need is someone to make sure Dave fills out his forms on a regular basis, and to add up the hours properly for billing." I held up one of the ubiquitous forms that littered Dave's office, half-sheets he was supposed to tear out of a carbon book and fill out for each period of surveillance. "You know, his tears? I would

like you to total the hours for each case and compile a list of activities and draft a preliminary report.”

“Draft?” Her eyes were wide with terror, as if she were an animal in the road that was about to be flattened by a car.

“Write. And don’t worry, I’ll check everything you do against the tears, so you don’t need to be nervous.” I would have to check everything from the numbers to the spelling of her own name, but at least that would be faster than compiling everything myself.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for this. . . .” she said uneasily.

She wasn’t. “You’ll do fine,” I lied, offering what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “And you can call me if you get stuck.”

“I can?” Her expression brightened and her eyes returned to their normal size. “That won’t mess up the case for you?”

“As long as you don’t call every five minutes, it should be fine.”

“And you start at the Blue Moon tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll be there three days a week?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Until I make the case.” I said that with a confidence I didn’t feel. My biggest fear was that the client would either ask to have me removed or that they would simply run out of money before I learned anything of value.

I got all jittery just thinking about it. “Let me show you the form I use to compile the information from the tears,” I announced suddenly to change the subject.

“F-form?” The deer was back in the headlights again.

I sighed and hoped that next year Dave wouldn’t simply hire the first criminal justice major who came looking for a part-time job.



Later in the morning, when Brittany was settled comfortably into the task of copying and filing reports, I set out for my “job interview” at the Blue Moon. Since it’s so hard to find parking on Main Street, I grabbed the Barney umbrella and took a ten-minute walk down into the fashionable part of town where the cut-stone buildings have been power-washed clean of two hundred years of soot, and boutique stores of all shapes and sizes offer everything from custom dog bowls to stained glass flower arrangements.

The Blue Moon, as it turned out, was not one of the shops that had 1970s-era collectibles mingled with antique “junk.” This was a more elegant establishment, housed in a turn-of-the-century department storefront, with a recessed entrance and marble-tiled foyer. Long glass cases angled back to the entrance were filled with dark, heavy furniture and hung with a variety of artwork. Some of the art looked old, but some looked modern and out-of-place. A portrait of a woman in an ugly green hat hung next to a canvas that looked as though someone had accidentally dripped pizza sauce on it and then halfheartedly tried to wipe it up.

It reminded me of the carpet in my dining room.

A glance at the price tag, however, revealed that it was worth substantially more.

Or was it? I considered bringing in a piece of my carpet to see if the store could sell it on consignment.

“May I help you?” a girl’s voice asked. She sounded like Brittany on a really good day. But the girl who came out to greet me was nothing like Brittany.

Where Brittany’s model-gorgeous features seemed to be arranged in a permanent pout, this girl wore the smile of a perpetual beauty pageant finalist. Confident, serene, and bubbling with happiness. This sort of unnatural good cheer usually makes me a little nauseated.

But somehow, in her, it was contagious.

I found myself smiling back. “I’m here to see Mr. Photopoulos. For a job interview. I’m Karen Maxwell.”

She reached out to shake my hand. Her grip was firm and sure, just like everything else about her. “I’m Vicki Bourbonnais, nice to meet you.” Then she waved me in as if she were inviting me into her home. “Come right in. I’ll tell them you’re here.” I wondered if she was related to the owners.

But her pale, lightly freckled features and petite figure bore no resemblance to the dark coloring and large frame of George Photopoulos, owner of the Blue Moon. He was in the back of the store, bent over, examining the underside of a large, ornate cabinet.

I hung back. No one wants to meet someone with their rear end first.

“Mr. P?” Vicki announced with perfect perky flight attendant intonation. “Karen Maxwell is here to see you.”

“Ah, she is? Good.” His voice boomed as he waved toward a door in the corner. “Send her back to the office.”

Vicki led the way with gestures that made me feel I should be stowing my tray table for takeoff. From the showroom floor, we entered a dark, narrow space with a

ceiling that stretched to unfathomable, unlit heights. The only light came from a series of small, wrought-iron wall sconces with battered paper shades. Most of the room was taken up by a scruffy tweed sofa and massive old desks stacked with paper.

"Mrs. P?" Vicki called as she walked in. "Karen Maxwell is here to meet with you and Mr. P."

At first, I had no idea who she was talking to. All I could see were piles of paper and books. Then, from behind one of the piles, a woman appeared suddenly, her face and hair as dark as that of her husband, but her facial features were small and pointed, where his were large and blunt. "We're glad you're here, Mrs. Maxwell," she said, her voice harsh and raspy, but friendly nevertheless.

I tried not to cringe. I hate being called *Mrs.* Maxwell, since I've been divorced for five years. I am simply *Ms.* Maxwell unless I decide to go back to using my always-mispronounced maiden name. Of course, the more important issue was her obvious relief at seeing me. It was vitally important for the employees to think I was just another one of them. "Yes, I understand you've been shorthanded lately," I said quickly, hoping Vicki believed the explanation. "And that you need someone to help so you and Mr. Photopoulos can work on some other projects."

She opened her mouth to say something else but closed it again when Mr. Photopoulos lumbered into the room, instantly filling it with his presence.

"Er, thanks, Vicki," his voice rumbled. "You can go back out front now."

With a smile and a gesture that almost looked like a curtsy, Vicki disappeared.

Mr. Photopoulos closed the door behind her with great deliberation, testing it to see if it had latched. Then he put his ear to the door as if to listen for her retreating footsteps. He motioned for me to sit down on a spindly wooden chair while he sank into a cracked leather armchair. "Okay, Mrs. Maxwell." His voice dropped to a raspy whisper. "What do you need to know before you start?"

"Well, start by telling me," I whispered back, "if we really need to whisper." I glanced at the exposed stone walls on two sides of the room. The other two walls were old plaster and seemed solid enough to prevent the transmission of much sound.

"No, we don't," Mrs. Photopoulos said flatly.

Mr. Photopoulos looked a little sheepish.

I pulled a pad of paper and pen out of my bag. "So, tell me why you called us."

Mr. Photopoulos frowned. "I told your brother—that was your brother I talked to, wasn't it?"

"Yes." I nodded. "You talked to him when you first called a few weeks back. But I want to hear the whole story directly from you." Clients often remembered information they hadn't mentioned the first time around. And I didn't always trust Dave's notes. He has a dangerous tendency to spill food on the important details.

"Well," Mr. Photopoulos's voice began to drop in volume again, "we think that it might be possible that there's a chance that—"

"One of our employees is damaging the merchandise," Mrs. Photopoulos cut in. "Deliberately. On purpose."

"Why?" I left my question as vague as possible to see what they'd give me.

"We don't care why," she snapped back. "We just want it stopped. It's costing us a fortune."

Mr. Photopoulos looked thoughtful. "Might be a way to make money outta it."

"How can we make money selling damaged goods?" his wife demanded shrilly.

"Not us." He waved his massive arm toward the showroom. "The person doing the damaging. Might be making money off it somehow."

After looking at them each in turn for a moment to see if they would reveal anything else, I continued my questioning. "So why do you think merchandise is being damaged deliberately? Tell me what has happened."

Mr. Photopoulos resettled himself in his chair, which creaked faintly in protest. "Well, it started awhile back."

"October 2," his wife interjected.

"Some furniture arrived from an estate sale in Glyndon. There was a wonderful Shaker-style dining set. But two of the chairs had broken legs." He shook his head. "They weren't like that when I purchased the set."

"Couldn't they have been damaged by whoever packed up and moved the furniture?"

"Yes. But it's our guy who brought it down for us."

"Eric, one of our porters," Mrs. Photopoulos added.

"So do you think Eric is damaging merchandise?"

"Maybe. The next thing we noticed was a tall clock. A piece of molding was chipped off and the case was dented."

"An accident?"

"Possibly."

Mrs. Photopoulos leaned forward. "But then we

had artwork getting damaged. The pictures are all hung on the wall by George personally, on account of them being worth so much more than the furniture. Some of them, anyway. The oil paintings can fetch a pretty penny, especially at auction. So Carl and Eric never touch them. Carl's our other porter."

"Almost never." Mr. Photopoulos flashed a guilty, apologetic look at his wife. "Sometimes I get them to move the big ones."

I flipped to the next page in my notebook. "Tell me about the artwork that was damaged."

"Two paintings by John Tollefsen."

I nodded. "I've heard of him."

Mrs. Photopoulos frowned, her sharp features contorting into an expression of great disdain, as if I'd actually brought in the piece of stained carpeting and tried to pass it off as Picasso. "Of course you've heard of him," she huffed. "He's the penultimate painter in this whole area. Buyers come down from New York all the time."

Since she'd just described him as the second-worst painter on the eastern seaboard, I couldn't see why they were making such a fuss. But I was working for them and they were effectively paying my salary, so I decided it was better not to flaunt my superiority with the English language.

"The paintings were scratched and torn." Mr. Photopoulos demonstrated with his hands. "Each had a great deep, long gash right through the canvas. When I noticed the first one, I thought maybe the corner of another frame got scraped against it."

His wife shook her head. "But when there were two of

them, both so valuable. . . it was too much of a coincidence. And both Tollefsens.”

“Well, it was just one at first,” Mr. Photopoulos pointed out. “And then nothing happened for a couple weeks, so I called your brother to cancel, remember.”

I nodded. “I remember.” Dave offered me the case one week, then took it away the next. I was heartbroken.

“When I saw the gash in the second painting, I called the police. But they seemed to think it was an accident. We knew better, so we called your firm back right away.”

I scribbled down the information. “Did you report this to your insurance company?”

Mrs. Photopoulos shook her head. “No, we couldn’t. They would raise our rates to ridiculous levels. Maybe even cancel us.”

“Was any other artwork damaged?” I asked.

“No,” Mrs. Photopoulos announced.

“There was another scratch,” Mr. Photopoulos said hesitantly.

She turned to him with a frown again etched into her face. “There was? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Mr. Photopoulos shrugged. “This one might have been an accident. One of the pieces by Geraldine Miller.”

“Oh, that.” She waved it away with a short laugh, her face relaxing. “I thought that was part of the composition.”

For a moment I couldn’t remember whether Geraldine started with a *G* or a *J*. I ended up with a letter that was kind of a cross between the two. Then I looked up. “So you have *three* deliberately damaged pieces of art?”

“Well, at least two.” Mr. Photopoulos counted on his

massive fingers. "And four damaged antiques."

"You didn't tell me about the other antique."

"A Tiffany-style lamp. One of the glass panels was broken."

I scribbled that down, grateful that I at least remembered that Tiffany started with a *T*. "Wow," I marveled. "That sounds valuable."

He shook his head. "Tiffany-style. It's not worth nearly as much as a real Tiffany."

"It's worth a lot less now with a broken shade," Mrs. Photopoulos added. "We need to stop this carnage. D'ya want a lemon drop?"

The shift in conversation from broken glass to candy was so sudden that all I could do was blink at the pearly ceramic bowl of wrapped yellow candies she held in front of my face. "No, thank you." No candy before lunch. I'm such a mom sometimes.

"So, yes." Mrs. Photopoulos nodded, her face puckering as she sucked on a lemon drop. "We have three damaged pieces of art and four damaged antiques."

"And why do you think that one of your employees is involved?" I asked, looking at each of them in turn.

"We have a good security system," Mr. Photopoulos began.

His wife elaborated. "Cameras on both doors. The tapes show nobody coming in or out after hours except our employees."

I nodded. Normally in a case like this, we would just set up a hidden camera for the client and check it periodically to see if it revealed any suspicious activity, but here the space was so large and the incidents of damage

had been so far apart, it would be impossible to place a hidden camera where it could show everything. We'd need about twenty cameras. And that would cost more than the client was willing to pay.

"I'm going to need to see all your employee files," I said, looking around to see if they had a copier in the office.

"You mean the payroll files?" Mr. Photopoulos asked slowly.

"Yeah, payroll, I-9 forms, reviews—everything you have."

His face scrunched into a frown. "We don't—do we have any employee files?" He turned to his wife.

"We have a company that does payroll for us," she explained. "All the tax forms were giving me a headache."

"Well, but they won't have the applications and reviews."

"I don't think we—do we keep those?" Mr. Photopoulos asked his wife. "The applications?"

Mrs. Photopoulos waved the bowl of yellow candies. "I sent all that stuff to the payroll company. Let them deal with it."

"But they probably wouldn't keep. . ." I decided not to bother even finishing the sentence. The payroll company would keep only the financial records and toss out the rest. I would have to start from scratch.

I made a few more notes in my book and then stood.

"Can you show me the damaged merchandise? Pretend you're showing me around the store as a new employee?"

Mr. Photopoulos heaved himself to his feet. "Makes sense. C'mon." He waved me toward the door.

For a man as large as he was, he moved with surprising

speed, so I had to scramble to keep up as he headed back into the gallery. He stopped first at a big grandfather clock with hideous flowers painted on the face. The damage looked just as he'd described it, and I could easily imagine the police dismissing it as accidental. The same was true with the fake Tiffany lamp that he pointed out nearby.

Just as he was starting toward the wall to show me the damaged paintings, the phone at the counter nearest to the front door began to ring. Vicki glided over and snagged it before the second ring. "Good morning, Blue Moon Gallery, you-won't-find-a-selection-like-ours-but-once-in-a-blue-moon. How may I help you?" I think she managed it all in one breath.

Mr. Photopoulos waited to see if the call was for him.

"Well, is it something you can bring in?" she asked the caller.

"Ah." He waved it off. "Just someone wanting an appraisal, probably. C'mon."

"You do appraisals?"

He nodded. "Sarah Kuo is our primary appraiser. She's in every Wednesday afternoon. One of the Tollefsen paintings is up there." He pointed to an oil painting of what looked like a glass of dirty water on a dirty table reflected in a dirty mirror. There was a slash in the canvas running the length of one side.

The painting was hung about eight feet from the floor, behind an ornately carved chest of drawers. The damage could have been caused by accidentally banging something into the picture, but it would have to be a big something, like a ladder. I considered it for a moment. "It almost looks like someone was trying to cut the picture

out of the frame and got interrupted.”

“Huh, yeah it does.”

The second painting he showed me was in an even more unlikely place for accidental damage. Depicting a dead flower clenched in a dirty glove, this painting was hanging about four feet higher up than the first and was surrounded by other framed works that were untouched.

I stared at the gash running down the right side of the canvas. “You’d need a trapeze to get up there.”

“We have an extra-long ladder in the back, but I don’t get it out too often. Most of the merchandise can be reached with the gallery ladder. See?”

As if to illustrate his point, Vicki stepped out from behind the counter with a folding ladder held in a tight embrace. She carried it over to the far wall, opened it up, and swiftly climbed up a few steps to straighten a crooked painting of a ship that appeared about ready to capsize. It looked slightly less precarious after the adjustment.

“And where is the third picture?”

“The third? Oh, we’ve taken that one down. But it was there, just above that chest of drawers.” He pointed to an empty space on the wall not far from the damaged Tollefsen paintings.

“Are these things all antiques or are some reproductions?” I suddenly asked in a loud voice. “And what do the different colored price tags mean?” Vicki was headed our direction with a painting of something large and purple, so I wanted to sound like an employee in training.

“Uh, some are reproductions.” Mr. Photopoulos’s deep bass once again faded to a whisper.

“And the tags?”

"They tell us whether the item belongs to the gallery or is on consignment," Vicki answered as she drew closer. "And how much room there is to negotiate in price." She rested the purple picture against a table with enormous clawed feet that looked as if it might run away at any moment, leaving the painting to crash to the floor.

"The tags were Vicki's idea." Mr. Photopoulos beamed.

"I guess I'm not experienced enough to negotiate prices yet." I sighed. But if this assignment lasted long enough, maybe I would get to play a little. I was so used to haggling for a lower price on something; it would be fun to try to keep the price high for a change.

The ringing phone interrupted my reverie, reminding me that I did not want the chance to haggle with customers, because if I was here long enough to become an expert in antiques, then I would have failed as an investigator.

"Karen," Mrs. Photopoulos stuck her head out from the office, "there's a call for you."

"Sorry." I flashed an apologetic grin at Mr. Photopoulos as I jogged toward the office. I was certain that Mrs. Photopoulos had something to say to me and had used the ringing phone as an excuse.

But it turned out that the call really was for me. It was Brittany.

"Karen, we have a problem." She sounded rushed and frantic. "The copier stopped working. All that stuff you gave me to do? I can't do it. And Dave's not here yet. So I don't know what to do."

"Well, one thing you *shouldn't* do is call me on the store phone," I said tersely. "Use my cell."

Her voice rose to a wail. "I couldn't find the number."

To her credit, she did actually sound concerned. I suppose she could have just sat filing her nails all morning waiting for me to come back.

“Okay, calm down.” I gave her my cell number. Then I lowered my voice. “And I’m sure the copier is just jammed—it happens all the time. If you flip the front panel open, there’s a diagram telling you how to fix it.”

“Front panel?” she repeated uncertainly.

“Yes. The panel in the front.” I couldn’t think of any other way to describe it.

“And that will tell me how to fix it?”

“Yes.” It had little diagrams, so she wouldn’t even have to know how to read. “I have to get off the phone now. I’ll see you in about an hour.”

“Okay.” Her voice sounded very small, like Alicia’s the first time I left her at home by herself.

I hung up with a glance at Mrs. Photopoulos. Though she appeared to be engrossed in something on the computer, I was pretty certain she had heard every word. This did not make DS Investigations look very professional.

When I walked back into the gallery, Mr. Photopoulos was nowhere in sight. Vicki was carrying a painting of a dead tree with something underneath it.

“I thought Mr. P. was the one who was supposed to move all the paintings.” I couldn’t help but observe.

“He hangs them all initially. But then I rotate them around.” She nodded toward the glass cases in front of the store. “We don’t want the same paintings in the sunlight all the time. And people are more likely to notice a work if it’s in a fresh place, with just the right light and surroundings.”

I nodded. "That makes sense. So part of your job is to—"

She shook her head and her smile faded. Her voice dropped to a whisper as she leaned forward, hugging the painting to her chest. "Mrs. P. still doesn't like me to move them, even though Mr. P. thinks it's okay. So I do it when she's not looking."

"What if she catches you?"

"She won't. And I know it's the right thing to do. So does Mr. P. He lets his wife think that he's the one doing the moving."

"He won't expect *me* to move paintings around, will he? I wouldn't have the first idea how to find the right light."

"Oh, I can teach you that. But no, they won't expect you to move paintings. You'll be answering the phone and helping customers, mostly. Scheduling appraisals. When do you start?" She held the picture up in front of another painting and eyed it critically.

"Tomorrow. Is the light good for that one there?" I nodded toward the dead tree picture.

"It's okay, but I think I can do better." She moved farther along the wall and eventually hung the painting over a marble-topped Victorian vanity that looked suspiciously new. I didn't even think the Victorians had running water, let alone fancy bathroom sinks with built-in towel racks.

"So that's the right light for it?"

"It'll do for now."

"Why do so many artists like to paint dead things?" I wondered aloud. If the price tag on this painting was any

indication, there was a lot of money to be made from it.

“You can best capture the soul of something when it’s dead or dying. You get the essence, the true sense of it.” She spoke with the passion of an undertaker.

I decided I really did not have the same passion for art that Vicki apparently did. But this was going to be an interesting assignment.



When I got back to the office, I paused. The crooked shutter didn't look as though it was in imminent danger of falling, but I gave it a wide berth, nevertheless. I still found it hard to believe I hadn't noticed it sooner.

Inside, I had to feel my way up the uneven stairs because the stairway light had burned out. Since the building had been built before electricity was common, it was a mystery to me why they hadn't put in more windows. Maybe the original inhabitants were moles.

Dave is tall enough to reach the light fixture if he stands on a chair, so I was relieved to see him in the office when I arrived. He'd been working night surveillance for several weeks and didn't usually make it in until mid-afternoon, when it was time for me to leave to meet Evan after school.

"Hey, Dave!" I waved.

He saluted me with a cup of coffee but offered no greeting.

"When you have a chance, can you change the light in the stairway?"

He grunted.

After I hung my jacket on the antlers, I turned to inspect the damage to the copier. Every door was open, exposing the insides of the machine and giving the strange impression that it was opening wide for a dental exam. Paper lay festooned about the floor in all directions, some of it torn and smeared with black toner, some of it folded

accordion style as if Brittany had given up trying to fix the machine and decided to make paper fans to sell at one of the shops down the street.

“Where’s Brittany?”

Dave shrugged.

I assumed she’d gone out to get lunch.

“I’m in here.” The direction of her mournful voice indicated that if she had gotten lunch, she was now eating it in the bathroom. “I’m trying to get the toner off my hands.”

I cracked open the door to the small restroom in the back corner of the office. Plumbing, as well as electricity, had been a late addition to the building, so the sink was situated partially over the toilet and the whole room was hardly large enough to hold anything bigger than a broom. Brittany rubbed her blackened hands under a thin stream of water, scowling up at me as if I were her mother. “It won’t come off!”

An awful thought suddenly struck me. “You didn’t try to open the toner cartridge, did you?”

“Toner?”

“The black stuff.”

She nodded despondently.

I left Brittany scrubbing and went in search of a black mess. And under the pile of paper fans, I found it. Fine black particles of toner saturated the rug. “Don’t step in this,” I warned Dave as I went in search of paper towels.

He yawned and downed the rest of his coffee while I gently scooped up the mound of black powder into a wad of paper towels.

“Can you make more coffee?” he asked.

"I'm trying to clean up this mess before our office turns into a coal mine." After I carefully deposited the wad of towels into the trash, I began to stuff the torn copy paper into the recycling bin.

"I need to have someone make copies of a file I borrowed last night."

"Then maybe you should call a repairman," I snapped as I yanked a piece of accorded paper from the inside of the copier and took out a new toner cartridge.

"But you've almost got it working again. So can you copy the file?"

"No." As I stood up, I started to wipe my hands on my pants before remembering that the black stuff would most likely not wash out. I went back for more paper towels. "I have six invoices and a report that need to get out today. Get Brittany to do it."

"I'm not going near that thing again!" she called from the bathroom.

"So get a temp," I suggested to Dave as I started back to my desk.

I set up the invoices, but I couldn't get the hourly figures from Dave's tears to match the database. And then I couldn't even see the hourly figures on his tears because Dave loomed over my desk, blocking all light and air. I refused to look up and give him the satisfaction of having gained my attention. He had it, of course. But I wasn't about to let him know that.

"So how was the Blue Moon?" He yawned audibly as he held his empty coffee cup right at my eye level. When this got no response, he yawned with even greater exaggeration, his foul breath nearly gagging me.

Okay, he won. I pushed my chair back and stood. "Regular or hazelnut?"

"Do we have any more of that candy kind? Toffee something?"

"I'll look," I lied. The toffee caramel coffee had a disgusting aftertaste and if he wanted it, he'd have to make it himself.

"So what'd you learn at the antique place?" Dave followed me into the closet we had converted into a kitchen.

I opened the cabinet, scanned for any sign of mice, and then reached for the nearest bag of coffee. "They think one of the employees is deliberately damaging merchandise."

"What?" Dave snickered as he took a box of mini donuts off the top of the refrigerator. "Do they think one of their employees is out for revenge because he didn't get a promotion or something? They watch too much TV."

As I spooned coffee into the basket, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the smell of toffee.

Served me right, I guess, for lying when I said I'd look for it. I mean, I guess I sort of did end up looking for it. I just hadn't intended to. God had made me honest, somehow. Or given Dave revenge, I wasn't sure which. I just realized recently how often I had fallen into the habit of telling little lies of convenience. That realization was Brian's influence, I suppose. But his influence didn't extend very far yet, because I seemed to be telling just as many of these little lies as I always had.

"You know," Dave murmured thoughtfully through a mouthful of crumbs, "I'll bet the owners of that shop

asked their employees to damage stuff so they could claim the insurance money.”

“They said they didn’t even file a claim.”

“They could be lying.”

“But why would they damage their own merchandise?”

He shrugged. “Maybe it was stuff they couldn’t sell. Decided they’d get their money another way.”

“I don’t know. . .” I watched the first drips of coffee splash into the pot. Did it make sense? Would the owners damage their own merchandise? But why would *anyone* damage the items? Stealing made sense. Vandalism did not. “I don’t think they’re damaging stuff they couldn’t sell,” I concluded tentatively. “The first damage they noted was to some chairs they’d just acquired. Why would they buy them if they didn’t think they could sell them? And then why would they hire us to find out why they’re broken?”

“Remember,” Dave said as he yanked out the glass carafe and stuck his cup under the stream of coffee, “we have to be logical, but the suspects don’t. I mean they usually are, but not always.”

“I’ll see what their criminal background looks like and get Doreen to see if they’ve filed any insurance claims.” I started back toward my desk.

“Oh, can you copy that file for me first?”

I turned around with a sweet, sisterly smile. “I’ll be happy to show you how to do it yourself. And don’t tell me copying is a secretary’s job because I’m not your secretary anymore. Remember? Last year you made me your office administrator.”

“Lots of administrators make copies. You do it all the time. What’s a few more?”

I realized that as he spoke, he was shifting from foot to foot like a child in need of a restroom.

"Are you afraid to use the copier?" I asked.

He laughed. "Afraid? Of course not. It's just. . .beneath my dignity as the principal in this office."

"Well, you and your dignity have a good time up there on the mountain. I have work to do."

"Please? I'll change the lightbulb in the hallway."

"You're supposed to do that anyway."

"I'll buy coffee next month."

"You'll buy a kind I don't like."

"Please, Karen. You do such a good job."

I sighed. "Okay. You take those invoices out of the printer, put them in envelopes, seal them, and run them through the postage meter. And I'll copy your file for you." I bet that I could finish the file in less time than it would take to do the other chores.

"Agreed." He dropped a grease-spattered file on my desk.

As I laid credit card receipts on the copier plate, out of the corner of my eye I watched Dave remove the invoices from the printer and deposit them on Brittany's chair.

I wagged a finger at him. "No fair!"

"What?" He feigned innocence. "We've got to pay her to do something. If she won't make copies, we'll have her do the mail."

"Right now we're paying her to wash her hands." I started my last page of copies.

"Soap costs too much." He marched over to the bathroom. "You're done, Lady Macbeth. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten those little hands."

"You want me to use perfume to wash my hands?"

"Please," Dave begged, "tell me you're not an English major."

"Criminal justice. With a minor in psychology."

I hit Dave over the head with the file folder.

"I hope you're happy. I now have exactly nine minutes to run the background check on the Photopouloses before I leave for the overnight drop."

"Why don't you have Brittany run the check?"

I fumbled for a good answer. The truth was that I didn't trust Brittany to do the job properly. But I hated to say it right to her face. "It's my case. I'll do it."

And the search turned up nothing. No charges, let alone convictions. Not so much as a parking ticket. I called our insurance agent and convinced her that it was in the best interests of the insurance industry to run a check through her databases to see if any claims had been filed by the owners of the Blue Moon. And then I had to run—literally.

"See you on Thursday." I pulled on my coat and buttoned it against the increasing wind.

Dave frowned. "But tomorrow's Wednesday."

"And I'll be at the Blue Moon, watching all the employees like a hawk. Doreen said they hadn't filed any insurance claims, so the owners are off the hook for now."

"No claims, huh?" Dave looked thoughtfully out the window. A tree bare of its leaves stood in stark contrast against the dull gray sky. "The butler did it," he said finally.

"I think, in this case, the butler is a piece of furniture."

“A jealous piece of furniture.”

“See you Thursday.”

“Yeah, whatever.” His gaze shifted to the copier.

And I left before he could ask me to do anything else.