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I was glad she could not see my skeptical grin. “So George Washington slept there?”

“Oh yes. And ate at least two meals, possibly three. He planned his campaign from the first bedchamber. And that is why the house is so important.”

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*George Washington  
Stepped Here*  
A Karen Maxwell Mystery

K. D. Hays

HEARTSONG  
PRESENTS  
MYSTERY



This book is dedicated to Trent and Meg with all my love. (And in case you're wondering, I flipped a coin to determine who would be listed first.)

I'd like to thank my critique partners Lisa Cochrane, Christie Kelley, Kathy Love, Janet Mullany, and Kate Poole; my editors Susan Downs, Candice Speare, and Ellen Tarver; and also Sharon Zarate for sharing her expertise about the business of private investigation. I also owe thanks to my mom, Betty Dolan, and husband, Jim Weidman, for introducing me to some of the best mysteries ever written.

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I don't have time for this," Dave muttered as he picked up a chocolate chip cookie off my desk.

Setting down the box of new "DS Investigations" stationery that I had just picked up from the printer's, I reached over to snatch the remaining cookie out of his reach. "That makes two of us. I don't have time for you taking my lunch, either. And why are you sitting at my desk?"

He shrugged as he leaned back in the swivel chair. "Technically, it's my desk. I own the firm now, so I own everything in this office." A smile of satisfaction gradually spread over his face as he gazed around the shabby second-floor apartment of the old house that served as the headquarters for the newly renamed DS Investigations. Rays of afternoon sun shining through the drafty windows illuminated sprays of dust motes in the air, and I made a mental note to have another talk with the landlord about the cleaning service.

After hiding the cookie behind a plant, I picked up the box of stationery again and put it in a drawer. "You really are enjoying having the firm all to yourself now, aren't you?"

"Yes," he sighed with contentment. "Yes, I am." The chair groaned alarmingly as Dave turned and leaned farther back.

I reached behind him to grab a tray of invoices before they tipped onto the floor. Then I tried to make my next question sound casual. "Does that mean you've

changed your mind about taking on a new partner?” I winced at the childish, hopeful sound in my voice. As much as I wanted Dave to let me try some of the real investigative work that had been handled by his former partner, I didn’t want him to see how badly I wanted it. He was, after all, my younger brother. I had guilted him into giving me a job after my divorce, but now, if I wanted him to give me a better job, I was going to have to earn it.

He nodded slowly. “I think I’m ready to fly solo for a while.”

“With a couple of stewardesses to clean up after you.” I threw out an empty paper coffee cup and unfolded a wadded-up receipt he had left in my in-box.

He grinned sheepishly. “Well, yeah. I don’t have time for that paper. . .stuff.”

“You mean the paper stuff that enables you to draw a paycheck?”

“That’s why I hired you and Brittany, sis.”

I leaned back against the file cabinet. “Well, are you going to let me get back to work, or do you intend to handle the Nabco client report yourself?”

He launched himself forward out of the chair, gesturing for me to be seated as if he were a king bestowing favors on a loyal subject. “Oh no, I’ll leave that to you.”

As I sat, he leaned toward me and lowered his voice. “But I was wondering if you might like the chance to take on an investigative assignment.”

Those were the words I’d been waiting to hear for the past five years—ever since I had started working for him. I’d filed papers and typed reports and copied

files and done 90 percent of the work that kept the office functioning, but never had I had the chance to do the 10 percent of the work that kept the office alive. Investigation. Just the thought of getting out of the dank, dim old building—even if it was only to go into other often danker and dimmer buildings of Ellicott City—set my heartbeat up a notch.

But if I let him know this was the opportunity I'd been waiting for, he'd press his advantage over me somehow. So I tried to act as if I didn't really care one way or the other.

"I might be," I allowed.

"Are you doing anything on Saturday?"

My hopes plummeted as I waved toward the desk calendar. "I'm doing *everything* on Saturday. Evan has a game at nine o'clock, and then I believe he has team pictures at eleven, which should give me approximately fifteen minutes to drive Alicia to her drama class, which is at least twenty minutes away. If I don't hit any traffic lights."

"Is that all?" He grimaced with annoyance as he shoved the last bite of cookie into his mouth and licked a smear of chocolate off his fingers. Since he has no family of his own, he doesn't quite believe how much time kids take up. He thinks I spend my weekends soaking in the tub reading romance novels.

"Well, no." I brushed the cookie crumbs off my Rolodex. "Then I need to take the dog to the vet and get to the store to get something to organize Alicia's closet—oh, and a new rug for the bathroom floor—and then I have to get back in time to meet the termite inspector—"

He waved to cut me off. “But you can do that stuff another day, right?”

I hate it when he interrupts. “No.”

Okay, that was not strictly true. Bathroom accessories would no doubt remain available for purchase in the days beyond Saturday. “When else am I going to have time to do this stuff?” I asked.

He nodded toward his office, an enclave of disorganized papers and empty sardine cans that was the only private space in the whole agency. Formerly occupied by the senior partner, Nate, the office had succumbed to Dave’s slovenly influences before we’d even finished cleaning up from Nate’s retirement party. “I have a job for you on Saturday.”

“You promised I wouldn’t have to work weekends.” I hadn’t said no, and he knew it. This was all part of the bargaining process. If he could, he’d get me to take this assignment for free to gain experience. I wasn’t that desperate—or at least I didn’t think I was.

“This is a special job—you might call it an undercover assignment.”

“I don’t care. I’m not working on a Saturday,” I insisted, although at the same time I was trying to remember where to find the termite company’s phone number so I could call to reschedule the inspection.

Dave assumed a singsong voice, as if trying to lure a child to an ice cream truck. “This is real investigative work.”

I hesitated. He was going to call my bluff at any moment. “I still don’t care.”

He sighed and shrugged himself off the door frame. “Well, I guess I’ll have to give the assignment to Brittany,

then.” He turned to go back into his office.

Uh-oh, I’d held out too long. “Doesn’t she have finals or something?” I couldn’t leave things this way. I couldn’t let Dave give an assignment, a real undercover assignment, to a mere college student who mishandled phone messages and misspelled half the words on the reports she typed. “I wouldn’t want to take valuable time away from her studies.”

Dave turned back and pursed his lips. “She’s majoring in criminal justice. Seems like the extra work would help in her studies.”

“Are you paying overtime?”

“Comp time.”

“Including transportation?”

Dave pursed his lips again, this time adding a twist to the side that gives the impression that he’s pondering some deep philosophical question, which is a false impression because he doesn’t have the depth of character to ponder any philosophical questions whatsoever. He had me and he knew it. “One way.”

“Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Great. I’ll get you the file.” He shuffled back to his office while I contemplated my calendar with a sigh.

Back when Dave offered me work in his investigation agency, I had no illusions about what the job would be like. I would not be tracking down ruthless murderers or underworld jewel thieves. I would not mingle with the rich and famous, looking for clues in the midst of glamorous undercover liaisons. And I would not form an unlikely friendship with a rival police detective who hated my methods but grudgingly admired my results. That was TV. Instead,

I would be answering phones, filing papers, and doing background checks on the computer. I could get my work finished in time to pick up the kids from school, help with homework, and get dinner ready before Cub Scouts. And in the first few years after the divorce, that was all I wanted.

But after a while, as my active anger toward my philandering ex-husband faded to a general sense of disgust, I found myself growing tired of the day-to-day sameness of my job. Maybe being a mom wasn't as much fun as it used to be. I could no longer just coast through the day, waiting anxiously to hug Alicia and Evan as they got off the school bus.

They had told me to stop hugging them at the bus stop, for one thing.

And there was no one else to wait for.

So the opportunity to maybe turn my job into a real career was one I simply could not pass up.

A few moments later Dave handed me a folder with a brown drink ring on the corner and the name MCGREGOR scrawled on the front.

When I opened the folder, a lone sheet of scratch paper fluttered to the desk. I looked up at him in disgust. "This is it? Where's the case sheet? Where are the contact forms? Where's the log?"

He scratched his nose. "I figured you could do all that before you go out on Saturday."

"Go? Go where?" I picked up the piece of paper. "Seventeen seventy-six? Is it a hotel room?"

"It's a date, actually."

"Oh, great. Instead of a *where*, I get a *when*. So this is a time-travel assignment?"

He grinned. “Yeah, sort of.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

As he headed back toward his office, he beckoned for me to follow. “Look, I do have more information; I just haven’t put it all together yet.” He added in a low voice, “Because she keeps calling and interrupting me.” As he sank into his chair, he pulled a yellow Post-it note off a box of crackers next to his computer monitor. “This is the client. Eileen McGregor.”

I followed him into the room reluctantly, hoping the sour smell coming from the bookcase could be traced to something with a lid that might eventually be closed.

He rolled his chair over to me, holding out the adhesive-backed note like an angler trying to lure in a trout. “She’s an old lady on the board of the Reisterstown Historical Society. Y’ know, the ‘hysterical society’? One of those types that wants to keep everything the way it looked in ‘the old days.’ Anyway, she says the society is missing a valuable artifact. Something having to do with George Washington.”

“Has she filed a police report?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “My guess is because the item is worthless and she thinks the police won’t do anything to help recover it. But I’m sure you’ll find out. She’s paid us a nine-hundred-dollar retainer, so I told her we’d start right away.” He fished around in his shirt pocket. “Why don’t you deposit this on your way home?” He handed me a folded check.

I sighed. “No deposit slip, no case number—you didn’t even endorse it.”

“You can sign my name as well as I do.”

“Okay.” I had pretty much given up on getting Dave to keep financial stuff in order. I just should have been grateful that the check wasn’t lost or covered with mustard. I opened the nearly empty McGregor file and placed the check inside. “So what’s with the date?”

He leaned over to squint at the paper. “I was wrong, actually. I mean, it is a date, but it’s also a place. The 1776 House.”

“The 1776 House? Never heard of it. Did Betsy Ross make flags there or something?”

Dave shrugged. “Maybe she knit the Declaration of Independence there. In any case, it’s the place where they kept this missing artifact. Guess it’s probably in Reisterstown somewhere.”

I snapped the file shut. “You didn’t even get an address?”

“I got a check. And I have the lady’s phone number. I figured you or Brittany could manage the details.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

He settled back in what I still thought of as Nate’s big leather chair. “You said you had the kids this weekend, right? Well, take them up there and pretend you’re a mother bringing her kids to learn about history. And then you can ask around—”

“Wait a minute!” I planted my hands on my hips as I glared at him. “I *am* a mother. And I *do* try to take my kids to learn about history. Maybe not as often as—”

He held up his hands as if fending off physical blows from me. “What are you so upset about?”

“This is not an undercover assignment!” I smacked the file against the palm of my hand. “You said it

would be an undercover assignment. A soccer mom going undercover as a soccer mom is not much of a challenge!”

“Yes, that’s the whole point. You’ll be convincing.”

“I’ll be bored stiff.”

He shrugged. “Then you’ll be convincingly bored.”

“Dave! This is not how I want to spend my Saturdays.”

“You’re getting paid. Besides, it’s just one Saturday.”

I sighed. “Okay. I guess you’re right.”

But he wasn’t. For that matter, neither was I.



I didn’t think that Betsy Ross ever lived in Reisterstown, but other than that, I couldn’t really say anything for certain about this 1776 House. So the next day I called Mrs. McGregor for some background, including the address of the site, since the only address I had was the one on her personal check.

“Good morning. This is Karen Maxwell of DS Investigations.”

“Wait while I fix the volume,” a woman’s voice ordered sternly.

*Wham!*

I surmised that either she dropped the phone or a large object just flattened her house. Various muffled scraping sounds followed before the imperious voice returned. “Hello?” she asked.

“Is this Mrs. McGregor?”

“Yes.”

“I am Karen Maxwell with DS Investigations. I have

a few questions to ask, but I will try not to take up too much of your—”

“Well,” she huffed, “I don’t think I have ever talked to you before.”

“No, ma’am. You spoke with my brother, Dave Sarkesian. I need to get some information from you about the case before I—”

“I thought he was handling the case. He told me he would see to it personally.”

I could almost *hear* her pout through untold miles of fiber-optic phone line.

“This is a matter of some delicacy, you understand,” she continued, “and I do not want it bandied about all over town. That is why I called Mr. Sarkesian instead of the police.”

“I understand, ma’am. Can I get the address of the—”

Her tone grew even haughtier. “Well, I really thought I’d be working with Mr. Sarkesian himself. I’m not sure I should be giving confidential information to *you*.”

So I wasn’t good enough for her. Fine. Then I would just have to pretend to be Dave, in a way. I put a simpering smile onto my face, hoping the expression would come through in my voice. “Mrs. McGregor, I am Mr. Sarkesian’s *secretary*. I am simply trying to collect information so that *he* can devote his mental energy to the science of investigation.”

“Oh. In that case, what do you need to know?”

I took down the address of the site and contact information, and she even offered bank account information to authorize monthly withdrawals from

her account should the investigation expenses exceed the initial retainer fee. This woman was serious about finding the missing—

The missing thing. Whatever it was. That was what I had to find out next.

“Now, ma’am, I need information about the missing artifact.”

“Won’t Mr. Sarkesian come to discuss the matter in person?”

*Not likely.* I think he had already dismissed this one as an open-and-shut case, meaning that she had opened her checkbook and he had shut his wallet with the check inside.

But I came up with an answer for her. “He prefers to be briefed in advance of a meeting so that he has adequate time to think.”

“Oh.”

“So what can you tell me about the missing artifact?”

“Well, no one knows how the thief got it out of the glass case, because only two of us have the key, you know, and I would never steal it, of course, and neither would Ann.” Her words came faster and faster as if she were afraid she would forget a detail. “Ann Bleckenstrauss is the chair of the Exhibits Committee, so this year she has the other key. But she did say she thought we should have an extra copy—of course she also thought we should donate everything to the Daughters of the American Patriots for safekeeping, although I thought if we just put an electronic sensor on the case. . . . But when the board discussed the motion, they—although Jimmy Reynolds might have persuaded them to put a

sensor on the case if he hadn't been out for hip surgery that week—”

“What case are you referring to?” Yes, it was rude to interrupt the client, but her zealous rant was already driving me crazy. I had a pretty good idea of why Dave had given this assignment to me.

“The permanent exhibits case,” she said pointedly, as if I were a fool not to have already known this. “Well, Ann has keys to all the exhibit cases—”

“But what was *in* the exhibits case? What was stolen?”

“The Washington notes!” The pitch of her voice rose to an almost painful level. “The Washington notes were taken right from our own locked permanent exhibits case. And that is why I believe it was someone within the society.”

“You believe a member of the society stole the. . . Could you explain what the notes are?”

“The Washington notes are exactly what the name implies. They are notes that George Washington penned on a piece of leather. When he spent the night in the house.”

I was glad she could not see my skeptical grin. “So George Washington slept there?”

“Oh yes. And ate at least two meals, possibly three. He planned his campaign from the first bedchamber. And that is why the house is so important.”

“Where did the notes come from? And why would he write on leather?”

“They were written on a piece of leather most likely cut from the bottom of a chair.”

“The father of our country vandalized furniture?”

In the pause that followed, I could just about

hear her glare at me for impugning the name of the great man. “It was wartime,” she said finally. “He did what he had to do. Now, the notes were found during renovations during the 1920s. They prove Washington’s connection to the house. Without the notes, the house is simply another old building.” The pitch of her voice had returned to normal levels, but she now sounded as if she were choking back tears. “We must have them back. And no one must know that they’re missing, or we will be certain to suffer a reduction in visitors. Everyone comes to see the Washington notes.”

I tapped my pen on my notepad. “If the notes are so important to the house, why would someone within the society take them away?”

“There are those members of the board”—she sniffed in derision—“who believe the notes to be fake. They have insisted that we should remove them from display until they can be authenticated. The rest of the board, of course, votes this proposal down every year. But I think she has grown so desperate that she would forcibly remove the notes rather than admit they’re wrong.”

“She?”

Her voice dropped to a bitter sneer. “Paula Lowell.”

I took down the name. “So you think Paula Lowell stole the piece of leather.”

“The Washington notes.”

I cringed. “Er, yeah, the notes. Or at least you’re confident they were stolen by someone in the organization?”

“Paula Lowell is a member of the board, as is her sister, Patty. And we cannot deny that she serves with great dedication. But she does not trust any historical

fact unless she herself has discovered it. So her dedication is really most trying.” She sighed. “I can only hope that someday she and her sister will find a site more to their liking.”

“Do you think if she finds a new site she’ll return the piece of—the Washington notes? If she took them?”

Her voice grew strident again. “I am not willing to wait for her to decide on a proper time to return them. I want the notes back in their case straightaway. That is why we hired your brother. At the end of next month, the society will finally have the chance to host a visit from Lucinda Fotheringill, president of the Daughters of the American Patriots. We must have the notes back in place by then, or the 1776 House will be deemed a sham, an unimportant relic.”

I was certain now why my brother assigned this “case” to me. The woman sounded nuts. And it sounded as if she worked with people who were equally, if not more, insane. Stealing an old piece of leather. Who would go to such lengths? And why would this woman pay nine hundred dollars to get it back? Dave handed all this craziness to me while he went on to work with more appealing clients.

Before I left that afternoon, I briefed Dave on the conversation.

“You’re doing great.” He layered two anchovies on a cracker and tipped the whole mess into his mouth. “Uf oo oo a oo ob, ah an et oo av or ases.”

“Can we try that again? I’m not very fluent in cracker.”

He swallowed. “If you do a good job with this, I

can let you have more cases. Take the lead on them.”

“Great.” I didn’t know whether to believe him. But regardless, I still had to take care of the administrative work, or none of us would have any cases. I dropped a file onto his desk. “You need to sign these, put them in the attached envelopes, and drop them in the mailbox before you leave.”

“Sign, envelopes, mailbox. Got it.”

“See you!” I put on my sunglasses and started for the door.

He opened the folder. “Oh yeah. Hey, thanks for taking that ‘hysterical society’ lady off my hands. I’ve got enough to do with the Petrinelli case.”

“You mean you’d rather spend your time trailing the very attractive Mrs. Petrinelli rather than listening to poor old Mrs. McGregor.”

He grinned. “You’ll have a great time with the kids tomorrow. The old lady told me all about the house and lovely garden. They even demonstrate how to cook over an open fire. I’m sure you’ll pick up some great tips for the kitchen.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, not that he could see with the sunglasses I was wearing. “You owe me, buddy.”

“Just think of this as a test, Karen.”

“And you the teacher. Now that is scary.” But I smiled as I walked out. For all his obnoxious behavior, my brother is a fairly successful investigator, probably because he has a remarkable ability to understand what motivates people. Me, for instance. Just the promise of more interesting work was enough to induce me to give up a weekend afternoon. I knew I could do a good job

with this case. In one visit, I would find the thief and get her to confess and cough up the piece of ratty leather before the weekend was out.

All I had to do was convince my kids to go along with it.



As I plowed through the loose gravel in the parking lot of the 1776 House, I looked over at Evan and realized we had a problem. “Leave the soccer ball in the van!”

“But, Mom, the coach said he wanted us to practice every spare minute.” Evan clutched the ball to his chest.

“Well, you’re not going to have any spare minutes for a while. We’ll be touring the house.”

“I can practice dribbling while I listen. See?” He demonstrated by kicking the ball around me in a tight circle.

“Put the ball back.”

He continued in a second orbit around Planet Mom.

I reached for the ball with my foot and missed by an embarrassingly large margin. “Where is your sister?” I scanned the parking lot, the gardens, and the entrance to the gift shop. Then I saw that she was still reading in the back of the van. I banged on the window. “Come on. We’re waiting for you. Evan, put the ball inside.”

He started around me again, this time with a big grin on his face. As Alicia opened the sliding door, I stepped in front of Evan, scooped up the ball, and tossed it inside.

“Ouch!”

Alicia’s grunt was more one of indignation than pain, so if I had hit her with the ball, it wasn’t too serious.

“Sorry.” I offered her a halfhearted, this-is-what-you-get-for-ignoring-your-mom smile. “Don’t forget

to shut the door when you get out.”

She eased herself out, gave me a nasty look, and re-opened her folio of drama scripts, reading as she walked slowly toward the entrance to the house.

I turned to Evan. “Come on. This visit won’t take too long, and then you can practice afterwards.” As I looked at him, I felt a frown aging my forehead yet again. “Did you have that chocolate mustache when they took the team picture?” I always send the fall soccer pictures to relatives, and I didn’t want them thinking Evan had grown premature facial hair.

He squinted as if trying to look through the inside of his face. “We had chocolate granola bars after the game.”

I sighed, pulled a tissue from my purse, and handed it to him. “I think you’ll find it tastes much better if you get it *in* your mouth next time.”

He grinned sheepishly. “Okay.”

Alicia’s shuffling footsteps drew her up to the gift shop entrance at the end of the building. She reached for the doorknob, no doubt drawn by an instinctive adolescent need to spend money.

“No, Alicia. The entrance is over here.” I pointed to the front door of the two-story house that was smaller than I’d expected. It looked pretty much like an ordinary house, except that it was built of brick that seemed as if it might crumble to powder if you looked at it wrong.

As we climbed the worn marble steps, Evan read the small sign framed on the door. “Please enter through the gift shop.” He turned around, jumped down the steps, and nearly flattened his sister, who was still immersed in

her book of plays.

“Evan, please step next to people rather than on top of them. Alicia, put the book away. I want you to pay attention during the tour.”

Alicia rolled her eyes but tucked the book into her shoulder bag without verbal complaint. My struggle with preteen rebellion is still in the early stages, thankfully.

As we stepped into a long narrow gift shop crowded with shelves of painted porcelain, lace-edged tea towels, and a host of other things I couldn't imagine anyone wanting, the cloying smell of too many different varieties of scented candles assaulted our noses. We were greeted by an older woman standing behind the counter and dressed in colonial attire. “Welcome to the 1776 House, young sir and good ladies. Have you visited us before?” As she spoke, she bobbed her head, fluttering the oversized ruffles on her white cap.

I shook my head. “No, no, this is our first visit. Evan, put down the pen.”

“But, Mom, look! It's shaped like a gun.”

The lady behind the counter smiled. “That is a musket, young man. See if you can spot one just like it in the museum.”

“You brought us to a museum?” He pointed the tiny weapon/writing implement at me accusingly. “I thought you said we were just going to look at a house for a few minutes.”

“It's a house-museum,” I admitted.

Alicia had already found a refrigerator case somewhere, because she planted a plastic bottle of orange soda on the counter. “How much?”

“It’s one dollar and twenty-five cents.” The lady at the counter laid a hand on top of the bottle. “But you cannot take this into the house.”

Alicia wrapped her hand possessively around the soda.

I put on my best bargaining smile. “After the tour, Alicia.”

Her hand lingered on the bottle just long enough to show her utter contempt for the rules. Then she returned the soda to the small glass-doored refrigerator in the back of the shop.

I glanced at the shelves of blue-and-white pottery, crocheted doilies, iron trivets, and perfumed soaps, hoping they made most of their money from the souvenirs rather than the admission fees, because I forgot to stop at the ATM. “How much is the tour?”

“The tour is free, *with* museum admission. One adult, two students—that’s nine dollars.”

I handed her a ten. “I need a receipt. Rats.”

“Excuse me?” The lady behind the counter frowned so severely that the blue ribbons on her cap drooped to match.

I grinned apologetically. “Er, no, I was talking to my daughter. Alicia, remind me to write down the mileage before we leave. I forgot to get it earlier.” I reached out to take the receipt from the frowning lady.

“Why do you need the mileage?” Alicia asked.

I waved for her to be quiet. “I’ll tell you later.”

A short woman—also dressed like Betsy Ross—sailed into the room, the ruffles on her cap waving smartly in the wind she created with her own rapid progress. “Are you good people ready to begin the tour?”

I started to answer affirmatively but then closed my mouth and simply nodded instead so she wouldn't recognize my voice. The tour guide's name tag said EILEEN MCGREGOR. I didn't want her, or anyone else in the house, to know I was there to investigate, at least not yet.

"Very well." She adjusted the volume on her hearing aid. "We will begin our tour in the hall. Please follow me up the stairs, and as we go on our way, we ask that you not touch any of the exhibits, but you may take any pictures you like. Except for the ones on the walls, of course."

My son snickered. He naturally reached out to the first painting we passed, and I slapped his hand away with the alacrity learned from my fourth-grade teacher at St. Bernadette's.

The room the guide referred to as a hall was really more of a general all-purpose room, as far as I could see. It had a sofa, a table set up with food, and a four-poster bed in one corner, like an efficiency apartment.

"This was the home of Josiah Barnswallow from 1757 until 1793," Mrs. McGregor announced in an unnecessarily loud voice. "He was a merchant and a great patriot who supported the colonial army with supplies and even his own service in the Maryland militia. He served as an aide to General George Washington and was a personal friend of the great man, as well. And there's more to that tale to come."

A cough sounded from the next room. I could hear footsteps but couldn't see anyone.

"Why does he have a bed in his hallway?" Evan asked.

I was pleased that he asked, since I wondered the same thing myself but had not yet figured out how to ask questions without using my voice.

Mrs. McGregor favored him with a displeased schoolteacher expression. “This room, young man, is not a hallway but a hall. The hall is the main living room in the house. Now, we have furnished the house to the year 1776, and by that time, Mr. Barnswallow had built a separate kitchen building out behind the house. But originally, all the cooking would have been done at that fireplace there.”

“Did he cook from his bed? Why didn’t he call this ‘the bedroom?’” Evan asked.

She peered down her nose at him. “Mr. Barnswallow had fourteen children. There are beds in every room of the house.”

While I looked around to see if I could spot the person who had coughed in the next room, Mrs. McGregor described the fabric of the bed curtains, pointed out the intricate carving on the legs of the bed and table, and discussed the vernacular style of the chairs around the table and the evidence of the influence of various furniture makers on design elements throughout the room.

Evan let out a fake snore.

I elbowed him in the ribs.

I did not see a glass case anywhere in the room, but I didn’t expect to, since the missing artifact had been taken from a bedroom, and this was called the hall.

Even though it had a bed.

We were next shown through the parlor, while our guide lavished the same loving attention on furniture design.

“Notice the beautiful faux wood finish on the doors.”

“Faux wood?” Alicia’s face wrinkled in puzzlement. “But then what are the doors really made of?”

“Wood,” Mrs. McGregor replied as she started briskly for the stairs. “But fake wood was more fashionable than real wood.”

The coughing sounded again, and another costumed woman appeared in the doorway of the room we had just vacated. Her frowning face was crowned by a big black hat that accentuated her pointed nose and chin. “Ahem.” She cast a withering look of disgust at our tour guide before turning to address her remarks to us. “The door was painted to resemble a more expensive, imported wood. It was the *variety and grade* of wood used in public rooms that demonstrated status.” As she and Mrs. McGregor glared at each other in a brief moment of mutual antipathy, I wondered if I might possibly be seeing Paula Lowell. But she turned and walked out a door that led to the yard in back before I could think up a reasonable question to keep her in the room.

Mrs. McGregor fumed as if she’d just watched a pesky mouse disappear into a hole and knew it was now futile to make any attempt to catch it.

We shuffled upstairs and visited the nursery and the green bedchamber. There was then only one room left, and I was ready to run over our guide in my haste to see it so we could get out of the house before I fell asleep on my feet or my son succeeded in touching one of the ugly portraits, which would no doubt set off an alarm monitored by the the Hysterical Society Touching Police.

“And now, the 1776 House is pleased to present the first bedchamber. During August of 1777, General George Washington slept in this room while en route to Philadelphia. He and his aides, including Mr. Barnswallow, of course, planned much of their strategy for the upcoming Battle of the Brandywine right here in this room.” With a dramatic flourish, Mrs. McGregor stepped aside to let us enter.

Alicia peered inside but did not actually commit to taking a full step.

Evan walked in, looked at each wall, and turned around to march back out. “Can we go now? We’ve had enough history for today.”

“No, we haven’t,” I whispered hoarsely. This was the room I needed to examine. I took mental inventory of the red, white, and blue striped bed curtains, the chest of drawers with a washbowl and pitcher, the painting of Washington hanging over the fireplace (out of Evan’s reach, fortunately), and the trunk propped open to display what appeared to be George Washington’s full dress uniform. Nowhere did I see a glass case of any kind, empty or full.

Mrs. McGregor moved to the door. “Thank you for visiting the 1776 House. You are invited to tour the grounds on your own and meet the . . .” Her face fell into a sneer. “The *actors* in the kitchen, blacksmith shop, and springhouse.”

I almost stopped her and told her who I was and of my need to explore the room in more detail. But I didn’t. This was my only chance to look around as an ordinary visitor. Other people who worked here might reveal something if I asked the right questions and if

they thought I was just another tourist.

I could come back to examine this room later.

Mrs. McGregor led us back downstairs to the parlor and pointed to a doorway that appeared to lead into the gift shop. “We hope you will have time to visit our store before you leave. This house receives no federal or state funding and is entirely dependent upon the support of the community to remain open.”

“I’m going to support the house, Mom.” Alicia started toward the gift shop.

“Will you buy me one, too?” Evan pleaded. “I promise I’ll pay you back from my next week’s allowance.”

I handed him a five. “You already owe her your next two weeks’ allowance. But I’ll buy you each a soda if you won’t complain while we visit the outbuildings.”

“Do we have to?” Evan whined.

“Do you have to what?” I asked. “Complain?”

“No.” He kicked the toe of his shoe against the dark floorboards. “Do we have to look at any more boring stuff?”

“Yes.” I patted the money in his hand. “Get a drink. I’ll meet you outside.”

I was not bringing the kids with me again on an assignment. Ever.

While they sought the comforts of the refrigerated beverage case, I stepped out the back door that led directly into the yard, the door used earlier by the black-hatted woman I hoped was Paula Lowell.

The yard turned out to be a small expanse of packed dirt with sporadic tufts of grass and a small square garden enclosed by a low fence made of uneven sticks. Three outbuildings, two made of brick and one

made of squared-off logs, stood at the back of the lot.

I decided I had the best chance of finding Paula Lowell in the kitchen that Mrs. McGregor had mentioned, so I started for the building with the most smoke pouring from the stone chimney. But unless dinner had gone horribly awry, I realized from the odd smell that met me at the doorway that this building was not the kitchen. A tall, muscular man stood with his back toward me, pumping the handle of a giant fireplace bellows. Each blast of air sent sparks shooting toward the ceiling. Stepping away from the giant bellows, he pulled a glowing red bar from the flames. He pounded the bar with an iron hammer, the ripple of muscles just barely visible through the thin white shirt. It was a shirt with puffy sleeves, like the blouses we wore to school with our plaid jumpers.

But even with his long dark hair tied back in a ponytail, the blacksmith looked more like a pirate than a schoolgirl. A nice pirate. His frank, open features and bright blue eyes made him look too earnest to be dangerous, despite his obvious physical strength.

He plunged the red-hot iron into a trough of cool water, sending up a hiss of steam. Then he looked up at me with a frown. "Why are ye dressed so strangely?"



“Me?” I looked down at my jeans. “I’m not.” Okay, so in his world, the pirate shirt was normal and my jeans and sweater were “strange.” I smiled and decided to play along. “Why, this is the latest fashion.”

He shook his head. “Must be the French. They can be blamed for most of the fashion atrocities.” He pulled the iron out of the water and examined it for a moment.

“What are you making?”

“It’s a lantern hook. That is, it will be in a few minutes.” He laid the iron back in the fire and pumped the bellows again.

I tried to think of some way to ask him about the missing artifact. “Is that George Washington’s horse-shoe?” I pointed to a wall display hung with various iron implements.

A look of pain flashed over his features. “I’m afraid not.”

“I heard that you had something of Washington’s here, but I didn’t see anything in the house. . . .” I hoped he would pick up the thread.

He removed the iron from the fire and placed it in a vise. “I believe you’ll find a good collection of Washington artifacts at Mount Vernon.”

“But you do have something of Washington’s here, don’t you?”

He bent the iron to a ninety-degree angle, repositioned it in the vise, and bent it in another place. The

rigid iron moved like a pipe cleaner under his guidance. When the red glow began to fade, he set the piece back in the fire and began to pump the bellows once again.

I assumed he hadn't heard my question. "Do you have something of Washington's here?"

He looked at me for a moment, his blue eyes darkening with intensity as if trying to convey something he did not wish to put into words. After casting a glance at the doorway, he answered me in a low voice. "There is little real evidence connecting this house with Washington. We had a piece of writing rumored to have been inscribed by him, but they've removed it from public display until it's been authenticated. And it probably never will be, so it's just as well that it's gone. But it's a treasured story to many of the ladies in the house—that George Washington slept here, etc., etc.—so I hate to see them disappointed."

"You don't believe Washington slept here?"

He shook his head. "Of course, it's possible that George Washington *stepped* through here sometime. This road was a major trade route, and Mr. Barnswallow held a license to run a tavern. But there is no indication in any of Washington's diaries or other records that he spent any time here. This site is valuable for what it really is, an example of a typical home and business of the middling class. Most of us feel we do the public a disservice by repeating the old George Washington story, and we've been trying to remove all that nonsense from the house."

He moved with such grace and spoke with such quiet assurance that I found myself wishing I could simply continue watching and listening to him for the

rest of the afternoon.

But I had a job to do. Who were the “us” who wanted to “remove” the Washington “nonsense” from the house? This man could give me a list of suspects if I could keep him talking. “Our tour guide seemed pretty proud that George Washington slept here,” I observed casually. “So who *doesn't* believe that he did?”

He sighed, and then his mouth clamped into a thin line. Apparently asking directly for the information I wanted had been a bad idea.

“I’m just curious,” I added quickly, to make it seem like no big deal.

“It’s a matter that is frequently discussed at board meetings. First Thursday of every month. We’re always looking for new volunteers.”

And he wasn’t going to discuss it now. He had turned away from me to examine a selection of metal rods in the back corner. Was he really busy, or was he trying to discourage my line of questioning?

“Oh, here you are.” Evan sauntered in clutching a half-filled bottle of root beer. “The other building has a weird scary lady in it.” He waved toward the blacksmith. “What’s he doing?”

“Welcome to the smithy! You must be my new apprentice.” The blacksmith had turned back around again, now with a big welcoming smile, as if the arrival of Evan was what he had waited for all day. His eyes twinkled at the sight of Evan’s discomfiture. “Don’t just stand there, now,” he admonished. “Step forward so I can show you your duties.”

Evan looked at me uncertainly.

I plucked the soda bottle out of his hands. “Go on;

you heard the man. It's time for you to get to work."

And that gave me time to watch, just as I'd wanted.



After several very peaceful minutes in which the only sounds were Evan's voice as he asked questions, the gentle, low voice of the blacksmith as he answered, the creak of the bellows, and the clang of iron against the anvil, the tranquility was shattered by the arrival of a troop of Tiger Scouts.

"Ugh. First graders." Evan dropped the pliers he was holding and began to step away.

"Say thank you," I whispered.

He grabbed the soda from my hand. "Thank you," he called over his shoulder.

"You are most welcome. Come visit us again. We're here every Saturday." The blacksmith flashed that warm smile again, and I somehow felt as if it were my insides, rather than the bars of iron, that were melting in the heat.

And that meant, of course, that he would be married. No use even giving the man another thought.

We found Alicia sitting out in the yard, chewing a piece of grass and reading her plays.

I felt my nose wrinkle in disgust. "Aren't you afraid some animal stepped on that? Or worse?"

She shrugged.

I looked around the yard. Butterflies darted around sprays of goldenrod in the enclosed garden. "Do you want to visit the springhouse or the kitchen next?"

Evan took a swig of his root beer. “Which one is most likely to have a PS II?”

I laughed. “Since they didn’t even have PlayStation I that long ago, that’s a silly question.”

“So was yours.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “We’ve had enough of this, and we want to go home. Dad never makes us go to boring places like this on the weekends.”

“Ten more minutes. You can last that long.”

He rolled his eyes, expressing serious doubt that he would indeed survive the additional ten minutes without his video games.

“You had fun in there.” I nodded toward the blacksmith shop.

“Yeah, but the scary lady is in *there*.” He pointed toward a brick building that must be the kitchen, unless they kept a fire burning in the springhouse.

“What’s so scary about her? I want to see.” I pulled him toward the kitchen building. “Come with us, Alicia.”

She hoisted herself up as if preparing for her own execution and trying to be a good sport about it.

“Now, I really think you will find this interesting,” I continued as we climbed the brick step up into the kitchen, “because—”

“Restrain your loose tongue, if you please!” a woman barked at me as we entered the smoky room. “I’ve much to do to prepare the master’s dinner and no time for idle distraction.”

I flashed Evan a look but dared not say anything. This must be the “scary lady.” Although she wore a flat white cap instead of a pointy hat, much of the rest

of her appearance left a very witchlike impression. She wore multiple skirts, an apron, and a jacket of completely mismatched designs, with striped witch socks and ugly black shoes. Her thin face and long nose added to the witch impression. She minced something with quick strokes of a long, heavy knife, set down the implement, and swept the bits from the chopping board into a ceramic bowl. Then she turned to the fire and muttered to herself as she stirred the kettle hanging over the blaze.

I mustered the courage to speak. “What kind of brew—I mean stew—are you making?”

“Stew? What’s a stew, pray tell? This is a ragout of beef and turnips.”

Evan nudged me. “I think you were right,” he whispered. “It is a brew.”

The witch woman pointed at two iron kettles with coals stacked on the lids. “I’ve roasted venison and a pigeon pie. And now I must finish the blackberry fool. The master likes to dine late, at four of the clock, so thankfully I have more time than most cooks.”

She told us more about her work in the kitchen and her life, or her character’s life. I was ready to leave after about two minutes, because this woman plainly was not going to break character to answer my questions about George Washington.

But Alicia was fascinated. “She seems so. . .so real,” she murmured.

So we stayed.

After listening to a lengthy discourse on the medicinal use of rosemary, I heard the sound of footsteps outside and turned toward the door, expecting to be

run over by Tiger Scouts again.

But it was the blacksmith.

He bowed. "At your service. Good ladies, have you seen Mr. Holbrock about? I've finished with the lantern hook he commissioned from me."

I thought this break in the cook's kitchen monologue would be a good time to make our exit. Evan took the hint immediately; Alicia needed a little more coaxing. I smiled and nodded a farewell to the blacksmith and the cook, but I didn't say anything as I turned away because I didn't want to interrupt their conversation.

Although their voices dropped low, I could still hear them as I walked out. So I lingered to listen outside the door.

"Just be sure," the cook whispered in a low voice, "that he pays you in cash. Don't take anything in trade."

The blacksmith sighed. "I won't. But I don't think we have anything to worry about. I believe he learned his lesson. We can trust him."

"Ha!" the woman scoffed. "You're a more trusting soul than I am. Just don't take anything in trade. You don't want to end up holding stolen merchandise."

"I won't. Well, I've got to head out now. I'll see you next week."

"Please take some of this beef with you. And some pie."

"I don't need—"

Her voice softened. "Yes, you do need it, Brian. I know you don't have time to cook for yourself, with all those meetings."

"Well, all right. If you insist."

“I do.”

Evan pulled at my sleeve. “Mom, I thought we were leaving.”

I started away from the door with a guilty jerk. Ah, but there was no use feeling guilty for eavesdropping. That’s what the job was all about.

We walked around the side of the house and headed toward the car, all of us silent, except for Evan banging his empty root beer bottle rhythmically against his leg. I reviewed what I had learned.

His name was Brian and he lived alone.

No, that was not why I had driven all the way out here, wasted an entire afternoon, and eavesdropped on private conversations. I did it because I was working.

I learned that someone, a Mr. Holbrock, had a reputation for pawning off stolen merchandise. I learned that Paula Lowell was not the only person pleased to see the Washington notes disappear. And I learned that the disappearance might be a secret even to the volunteers.

Okay, so I hadn’t ferreted out the thief on my first day. I wasn’t even certain I had identified Paula Lowell. But I did put in enough hours to use up part of the retainer. I would just have to come back on another Saturday.

As a volunteer.

Then I could ask all kinds of nosy questions and chalk it up to curiosity.

As long as I didn’t have to wear witch clothes and a goofy cap.



Why does it smell like burned toast in here?” Evan’s nose wrinkled into an ugly expression that made him look far too much like a teenager. But he’s only nine. So as he sat down to breakfast, I reached out to ruffle his already-mussed brown hair.

“I’m trying out a new air freshener.” I pretended to hold up a bottle. “‘Toaster oven crumbs.’ Do you like it?”

He favored me with a sour look, and one eyebrow rose briefly before his whole face exploded into a yawn. It was plainly too early on a Monday morning to trifle with his sense of humor. “Where’s the cereal?”

“I’m making scrambled eggs this morning.” I poured the beaten eggs into a heated pan and nodded toward the bowl of apple slices, orange wedges, and diced pineapple. “Have some fruit while you’re waiting.”

“Ooh, pineapple!”

“Use a spoon.” Even though I was facing the stove, I knew Evan was picking pieces of pineapple out with his fingers.

“Alicia,” I called toward the stairs. “Breakfast is almost ready.”

I listened for an answering moan or some other sign of life. When I heard a drawer slam upstairs, I felt fairly certain that she was up. The dog might have learned to open drawers to look for leftover crackers or candy in the kids’ pockets, but she would have no

incentive to *close* a drawer.

Apparently Evan never found much incentive to close drawers, either. Every time I entered his room, I fully expected the dresser to collapse forward on top of me from the combined weight of all the open drawers. He maintained this delicate balance of nature by storing most of his clothing on the floor.

The dirty clothing as well as the clean.

“That shirt has mustard on it.” I pointed to a stain on his sleeve as I set the saltshaker on the table.

His face wrinkled in thought for a moment. “I have art first thing. I can pretend it’s yellow paint.”

“Or you could pretend you put on a clean shirt the first time. Go on up and change.”

He slithered out of his chair and onto the floor, bearing a striking resemblance to the eggs I had poured into the pan a minute before. “I can’t go to school, Mom. All my bones have evaporated.”

“Very convincing.” I nodded. “And you’d better get up before Alicia sees what a good actor you’ve become. She’ll make you try out for community theater.”

Evan jumped up with such speed he might have made it to the second floor without the use of the stairs.

“Watch where you’re going, twerp!” Alicia’s dulcet big-sisterly tones projected down from above.

“Sorry!” Evan actually sounded almost apologetic. His mood had apparently improved.

Alicia’s, however, still needed work. She stalked into the kitchen with a disdainful frown, as if she were queen and I the court ambassador of a conquered nation that failed to pay sufficient tribute. “I don’t have any clean socks.”

“In the basket.” I nodded toward a basket of socks and underwear on the floor. “They needed a little more time in the dryer this morning.”

She sniffed, flipping a shock of ash blond hair out of her eyes. “You cooked breakfast?”

“Yes.” I smiled as I scooped egg onto a plate and handed it to her.

For a moment she just looked at it as if not quite sure what to do.

“Sit down. I’ll have your toast in a minute. I burned the first batch.”

She shuffled over to the table wearing big furry slippers with perky ears and grinning faces that seemed a great deal more alert than she was. Orange juice sloshed over onto the table as she dropped her plate into place. “Do you have the day off work? You never have time to cook us breakfast on school days.”

“I got up early today.” I examined her feet for a moment. The slippers were miniature dogs that looked very much like our first pet, Molly. “Those are my slippers, aren’t they?”

“You never wear them.”

“It never seemed right somehow. I felt like I was banging poor Molly’s head into the risers whenever I went up the stairs.”

Alicia slurped her orange juice. “Did you see that dog on Saturday? It reminded me so much of Molly.”

“A dog?” Evan asked as he landed back at the table. “Where?” He was wearing a dark-colored shirt, so if it wasn’t actually clean, at least any stains would be less noticeable.

Alicia reached to take the piece of toast I handed

her. “At that house we went to. With the actors.”

“Oh, the old house with the scary lady. Maybe she turned herself into a dog.” Evan bared his teeth as if he planned to eat the toast I offered him right from my hand.

I shook my head.

He closed his mouth reluctantly and took the slice of toast in his hand.

“Did you see the dog, Mom?” Alicia persisted.

“No.” I smiled. “But I’ll look for it next time.”

Evan’s hand froze halfway to his mouth. “Next time?”

I hadn’t planned to say anything about the 1776 House for a while, but since Alicia had already introduced the topic, I decided to forge ahead. “I think I might go back and volunteer at the site once in a while. I found it a very interesting place.”

Evan dropped his toast. “Are you kidding?”

“It was kinda neat,” Alicia mused as she attempted to spear a chunk of apple with her fork. “Not the tour part, but the cooking part.” The apple skittered off her plate, launched across the place mat, and clung to the side of her juice glass.

I didn’t bother to ask what Evan thought. Maybe I could find a soccer camp to send him to on Saturdays for the next few weeks. And this Saturday, both kids would be with their dad.

I paused for a moment, bracing myself for the usual burst of impotent rage that usually followed my thoughts about my ex and how he’d ruined our lives.

Maybe it was just the really good coffee I had made that morning, but the thought of Jeff bothered

me hardly at all this time. I kissed Evan on the top of his head in a vain attempt to flatten an unruly tuft of hair.

“What was that for?” he asked as he wiped his mouth on a wadded-up napkin.

“Just because.” I glanced at the clock. “Alicia, you’d better hurry up. Your bus will be here soon.”

She shoveled the last bite of egg into her mouth, her eyes on the clock.

“Don’t forget to brush your teeth,” I called as she dashed away from the table.

It seemed that nothing could defeat my good mood. Even the wail of the garbage truck as it crushed trash down the street and lumbered forward to collect the garbage that probably hadn’t been put out yet failed to lower my spirits. “Evan, did you remember to take out the trash?”

His face froze in a guilty expression. “No.” He started to get up.

“Never mind. I’ll get it.” I rushed to the sliding glass door that led out back, then ran across the uneven deck planking, down the short flight of steps, and through the mud to where the trash can was propped against the side of the house. Fumbling with the gate latch, I got the can through and down to the curb just as the garbage truck squealed to a stop in front of me.

“Hello,” my neighbor called cheerfully from across the street, yelling to compensate for the grinding and groaning of the truck as it crushed the debris of our past week.

I gave a brief wave and then began to hunt around on the ground for the lids the trash workers always

managed to fling amazing distances from the cans.

As my eyes scanned the ground, my neighbor's feet suddenly appeared in my field of vision. "I was wondering if you'd like to come over after work. I'm having a few of the girls in for tea." She spoke in a softer voice now that the noise of the garbage truck had moved on down the street. With a lopsided smile, she disentangled a strand of long brown hair from the hinge of her glasses. Then she bent down to retrieve one of my trash can lids.

"I'm sorry, I don't have time today," I answered automatically. As she handed me the dented lid, I mumbled something about my schedule and the kids. "The girls" were probably all neighbors like her who stayed home with their young children while their husbands worked to pay the bills. I was done with that part of my life and had no wish to be reminded of it. My good mood had finally evaporated.

"Oh, maybe some other day, then?" my neighbor asked hopefully.

"Sure." I turned away, embarrassed that I could not even remember her name. Her black cat was named Zeus; he liked to sleep under the azalea bushes near our front porch. It drove our dog crazy.

"You still need to take Tara for a walk," I reminded Evan as I stepped back into the kitchen and tripped over the dog's leash. The acrid smell of burnt toast hung in the air. A pan crusted with dried egg sat on the stove, and the sink was littered with apple peel and egg residue. I had to clean all of this up before I left for work. I suddenly wondered what made me do it. Instead of handing Alicia a granola bar and letting Evan get his

own cereal, I had prepared a Sunday morning feast. But it was Monday, and I didn't have time for this.

As I looked at the basket of laundry I folded when I got up early that morning, I remembered. When I woke up and thought of the new assignment at work, the day seemed to hold a lot of promise. Nothing had happened to change that. The new assignment still held promise. Brian's face flashed in my mind. Lots of promise.

Nothing had changed, except that I had declined a neighbor's invitation. And I didn't even know her, so why should that bother me? I didn't even want to know her. She would be just one more person I'd have to explain things to about Jeff and why we'd moved here. The ones who are married are the worst, because they think they understand, but they don't. Not by a long shot.

By now, I had slipped into an all-out bad mood.



I must have hit every single stoplight on the way to work. When I walked in, I expected Dave to grill me about the Saturday visit right away. But he was nowhere in sight. Well, that would give me time to speak with Mrs. McGregor before I reported to him.

Brittany was typing industriously at her desk. I felt guilty after all the mean things I'd thought about her—here she was, hard at work, while I hadn't even taken off my jacket. Then when I walked closer, I could see that she was instant messaging a friend. At least I hoped it was a friend and not a client, because the

message ended with a whole line of smiley faces.

“Where’s Dave?” I asked as I hung my coat on a rack of moose antlers by the door. Brittany shrugged, her eyes still glued to the computer screen. “You can call him on the cell.”

“Yes. I could have done that from home. The point of having an office is so we have a place to work together so we can occasionally discuss things face-to-face.”

She shrugged again. “You can get one of the phones with pictures.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I stalked off toward the kitchen to put my lunch in the fridge. On the way back, I realized that I would be doing the same thing to Mrs. McGregor that Dave had forced on me—giving her my presence only by telephone when she really wanted personal contact. Dave would have to pay this woman a visit sometime before this was all over.

I pictured my brother outfitted in the type of puffy shirt and knee-length breeches that Brian had been wearing. While they gave the blacksmith a roguish air, I suspected they would not look so flattering on Dave, who is not tall and has a bit of a paunch. I made a mental note to take plenty of pictures, because they could prove quite useful in future salary negotiations.

The morning wore on. Dave still did not appear, and I found myself filing and working on billing rather than calling Mrs. McGregor. If I was so excited to have this case, so excited that I could hardly sleep, then why was I avoiding the actual work?

I picked up the phone to dial Eileen McGregor. Is *dial* the right term when all the phones in the office have buttons? “Wait,” she ordered as she answered, “while I adjust the—”

The phone either hit the counter hard or detonated a large quantity of explosives.

Then her voice returned. “Hello?”

“Mrs. McGregor?” I decided just to just talk really fast so she couldn’t interrupt. “DS Investigations has completed the initial survey of the 1776 House, and I am calling to offer an investigative proposal for your approval.”

“You’re not the man I talked to.”

“I am his *secretary*.” At this point, I was incredibly grateful that Dave was still AWOL. Brittany, however, seemed quite amused to hear me grovel.

“When is the investigator coming out to the house?” I could picture her frown growing deeper.

“An investigator has already surveyed the site and completed a report which enabled us to create an investigative proposal.” Okay, this was not strictly true, but I would write the report soon.

“I didn’t see an investigator.”

“That’s the general idea. Our investigators work undercover to elicit more information.”

“Oh.” I could hear the wheels turning—anyone who has watched TV usually understands this part and thinks it’s pretty cool.

“For an in-depth investigation, we would like to propose that we place one of our agents in the house as a volunteer.”

“An excellent idea. We always need more volunteers. In fact, we have a Brownie troop coming next Saturday. Can your investigator help us give house tours?”

“Our investigator will undertake the duties you ask, so long as you pay the required hourly rate.”

“But tour guides don’t get paid.”

“You’ll be paying her to investigate, not to give tours.”

She paused as if taken aback. “Her? You’re sending a woman to investigate this time?”

“We sent a woman last time.”

She gave a long sigh. “Oh, very well. But Mr. Sar. . . Sar. . . the nice young man I talked to last week will come out, too. Won’t he?”

“Of course.” Well, hopefully he would. I tried to think of something to reassure her. “But to ensure the secrecy of the investigation, we will not be able to inform you in advance of his visit. He will come when he thinks the time is right.”

“Oh yes. I see.”

“So you can expect our investigator on Saturday, coming to volunteer as one of your regular costumed. . . people.”

“Docents.”

“Er, docents.”

“Very good. We have clothing we can supply, so you won’t need to worry about that.”

“Oh, wonderful.” I tried not to sound as dismayed as I felt. This was going to involve witch clothes. I could just tell.



Dave finally sauntered in at 3:15 in the afternoon, just when I was leaving. He threw his sports coat at the antlers and missed. “There goes my basketball scholarship.” He grinned. “Could you get that for me? And yes, I know you’re not my maid. But you’re closer.”

I reached down, grabbed the coat, brushed the cracker crumbs off the lapel, and hung it neatly on the tip of an antler. “Don’t get used to it. I’m just being nice because I have to leave early today.”

“You’re leaving now?” Dave’s grin vanished. “But Evan doesn’t get off the bus until four.”

“I have to be home by 3:30 to let the termite inspector in.”

“But I need to go over three case files. And I can’t get the scheduling software to work,” Dave whined. “Can’t you postpone the inspection?”

I shook my head. “Already have. Twice. We’ll lose the warranty if I don’t let them in this time.”

“Don’t you have a neighbor who can let them in?”

“No.” I couldn’t imagine letting one of them have a key to my house.

“We could send Brittany.” He looked around hopefully.

“She leaves for class at noon on Mondays.”

He sighed. “You’re letting me down, sis.”

I set down my bag, walked over to my desk, and pulled a manual from the credenza. “This explains how to use the scheduling software.” I tossed it to him.

He caught it cleanly but then looked at it as if he’d forgotten how to read. After a moment, he pried open the cover dubiously. “Karen, please? I’ll never figure this out.”

He was right. He never would figure it out. “Okay.” I plopped back into the computer chair, switched on the computer and monitor, and took off my jacket. “Hold this. And listen, because I’m only going to explain this once.”

But I knew better.



As I got ready to head to the 1776 House, I frowned in the mirror at my short, dark, decidedly modern-looking hair, wishing that, like a doll I had as a kid, I could push a button and pull out locks of long, luxurious, old-fashioned-looking hair. But I couldn't, so I wasn't going to entice Brian with my raven tresses.

And I wasn't even supposed to be thinking about Brian anyway. I was supposed to be thinking up strategies to find the thief.

I arrived at the house about half an hour before it opened to the public. Since everything was locked up, I prepared to knock loudly, just in case Mrs. McGregor didn't have her hearing aid turned up. But just as I raised my hand, the door suddenly swung open inward so that I nearly pummeled the face of the gift shop attendant instead.

"Karen Maxwell?" she asked in an uncertain voice. I think it was the same woman who had greeted us the week before.

"Yes." I shoved my hand into my pocket.

"Eileen told me to expect you this morning. Please come in." She stepped back, her skirts swishing as if they were alive. After she closed the door behind me, she turned and offered her hand. "I'm Ann Bleckenstrauss. I understand you will be volunteering at the house."

"Yes." I looked at her closely, waiting to see if she would say anything more. I had urged Mrs. McGregor not to tell anyone that I was investigating the theft,

but I had no way of knowing whether she had taken my advice.

Ann's face split into a kindly, big-toothed smile. "We are always so pleased to have new volunteers. History has a way of being overlooked these days. We have a lovely volunteer tea to thank all our helpers the first Saturday in May, so be sure to put that on your calendar."

"I will." If this woman knew why I was there to work, she was doing a great job of hiding it. "Do you have a special training class that I need to take?" If I had to come back in the evening, Dave would have to pay me double.

"No." Ann sighed. "We are in the process of designing a training manual, but it's not finished yet. So we'll help you learn all you need to know. Now, come along with me and we'll get you a costume." She beckoned toward a set of stairs behind the counter filled with tiny china teacup earrings and elegantly painted fans. The stairs were dark and stacked with boxes, and the landing at the top was even darker and had even more boxes stacked to the ceiling. I held my breath as I squeezed past the boxes to follow Ann into a small room.

She hit the switch on the wall, and a fluorescent light on the ceiling flickered to life, casting a strange bluish glow on boxes, stacked chairs, and miscellaneous household items. A number of hats lay atop the boxes, and the arms of several candelabra stuck out at odd angles, giving the room the appearance of being full of bizarre statues. Or people.

Ann pushed aside a naked mannequin so that

she could open a closet door in the back of the room. “Much too big,” she murmured as she pushed hangers around on the rod. “This one might. . .” She pulled out a yellow dress with a cascade of white ruffles. Would Brian find me attractive dressed like a frilly lampshade? I watched with relief as she shook her head and replaced the dress in the closet. Then she pulled out a beautiful blue dress made of some shiny heavy material like silk. She held it up to me. “I think this should work well. Why don’t you try it on?”

I didn’t have to be urged twice. This dress was so much more attractive than the witch clothes I’d seen on the lady in the kitchen.

I needed Ann’s help with the zipper in the back, but it fit beautifully and the rich blue made my skin glow. Though I’d probably have to walk on my toes to keep the hem from dragging, it would be worth it. I looked like a princess. Except for my short hair. I reached up to touch it, suddenly feeling very inadequate.

Ann smiled. “We’ll get you a cap to cover your modern hairdo.” She rummaged through a box on the closet shelf and produced a small round hat. It reminded me of a shower cap, but at least the ruffles were smaller than those the other women were wearing. And it did cover up the lack of hair.

“Very nice.” Ann nodded appraisingly.

I agreed. Only as she started to lead me out of the crowded storeroom did I remember that I was not there to play dress-up but to investigate a theft. Mrs. McGregor told me Ann had keys to the permanent exhibits case, so she had ample opportunity to take the notes. But Mrs. McGregor seemed to think she had no reason

to. Could Ann possibly be one of those who wanted the notes removed and had been too shy to voice her opinion in Mrs. McGregor's presence? "Wait up for a minute." I stopped and looked down at the hem of the dress. "This really is too long and I'm afraid I'll step on it. There's not time to shorten it, but I think I could pin it up if you help me."

"Oh, of course. We have a big box of safety pins." Skirts swishing, she squeezed back past me in the tight space and reached for an old cigar box on a shelf.

"I heard," I said in what I hoped was a sufficiently casual tone of voice, "that this house used to have something that belonged to George Washington. But I didn't see it. Is it still here?"

Ann's smile faltered. "Er, it's not on display right now."

"Is it being cleaned? Or did you trade it to another museum?" I tried to make it sound like a joke. "You know, like, 'I'll trade you a Washington for two Jeffersons and a Madison?'"

"Oh." She gave an unconvincing little laugh. "That might have been a good idea." Though she tried to make light of it, I could tell that something was really bothering her. Was she uneasy because the society didn't want people to know the notes were missing? Or was she nervous because she'd taken the notes, perhaps to trade them? Mrs. McGregor had mentioned that Ann wanted the notes placed with the Daughters of the American Patriots for safekeeping. Perhaps she hoped to get something in return, either for herself or for the 1776 House.

"I'd better get back to the gift shop," she murmured,

not looking at me. Without another word, she led the way down the cluttered stairs and back into the gift shop.

The woman with the black hat, the one who had interrupted Mrs. McGregor during my tour, was kneeling in front of a locked glass cabinet, trying various keys in the lock. A look of horror flitted across her features when she saw me.

Had she been caught in the act of another theft?

As she jumped to her feet, the keys jingling malevolently in her hand, she pointed at my outfit. "Ann, you cannot let her wear that gown."

"The other gowns are too big," Ann said with defiance.

"The other gowns don't have *zippers!*" the woman shot right back. "The modern zipper was not invented until 1917! That dress is only suitable for Halloween and high school plays."

Ann frowned, waving away her objection. "No one will notice."

"Yes, they will. They may not say anything to you, but they will notice."

"Then we'll have her stand with her back to the fireplace in the hall during tours. Surely you can't object to that?"

The woman snorted. "I suppose not."

But this would not work at all. If I was trapped in one room all day, I would learn very little. I had expected to be put through some sort of training class, but it appeared that they were so desperate for volunteers that they were just going to dress me up and set me out somewhere.

“I can stand with my back to the fireplace in the kitchen,” I offered. The volunteers there might speak more freely than in the house.

“Ha!” the woman sneered. “I’d like to see you try! Patty’d never let you in her kitchen in that polyester monstrosity.”

I was starting to feel sorry for the dress.

“The kitchen is not hers,” Ann said coldly. Then she turned to me with a kindlier expression. “But Paula is correct in one point, at least. If you wish to work in the kitchen, we’ll need to find you a costume more suited to a servant.”

Which meant something that didn’t fit right and didn’t make my eyes sparkle and my skin glow. I could be a peasant woman in a sack dress. I followed Ann back up the stairs with heavy footsteps.

And then I realized what Ann had just said. Not about the clothes—the important part. She referred to the woman we’d just talked to as Paula. I had identified my prime suspect.

And she already seemed to have taken a dislike to me.



When I descended again, clothed in a brown gathered skirt and shapeless green top that made me look as though I’d wrapped a sleeping bag around my middle, Paula Lowell beckoned for me to join her in the corner of the gift shop where she was rummaging through another cabinet.

“I hope you weren’t offended by my comments on

the gown,” she said, eyeing me frankly as she stood up. Her voice no longer had a hard edge to it, and even her sharp features seemed less hawkish.

I shook my head. I couldn’t allow myself to be offended by anything at this point. While I resented the fact that I would look like a colonial whale the next time I saw Brian, I had to get over it if I was going to make any progress.

“That gown was one of the disasters left over from the bicentennial. The house had just opened then, and anything with a long skirt was considered colonial. And from a distance, I suppose the polyester does look like silk, even if it’s not period correct. But if you work anywhere near the fire in that getup, it could be a disaster.”

“You mean it could catch fire? I hadn’t thought about that.”

She nodded. “It would melt onto your skin.”

That didn’t sound at all appealing.

“And,” Paula continued gently, “it just isn’t correct for the time period—obviously synthetic fabrics did not exist. We want to give visitors a good look into the past, and to do that we need to be as accurate as we can.”

“I see.” I wasn’t quite sure what to say. I wanted her to keep talking, but I didn’t want to ask questions—I wanted her to say whatever was on her mind to see if she would give away any clues.

“Do you have any questions?”

So much for that tactic.

“Is there anything else not correct that I should avoid?”

“An excellent question!” She looked from side to side to be sure we were alone before continuing, and when she spoke, her voice was lower. “You’ll see a great many inaccuracies here, but we’re trying to eliminate them.”

Aha! I leaned in closer. “Like what?” I concentrated on the Washington notes, hoping the idea would flow into her mind by osmosis.

“Your cap, for instance.”

“My cap?” I felt the gathered circle of fabric on top of my head. This had nothing to do with the missing notes.

“Yes. There is no evidence whatsoever that women ever wore circular caps like that. It’s just a simple rendition that later costumers devised. The real caps of the period were shaped in pieces like—”

I needed to get her off the subject of clothing or I would never learn anything of value. I pointed to a display of pencil sharpeners near the cash register. “Is that George Washington crossing the Delaware?”

Her gaze followed my outstretched arm, and a pained expression crossed her features similar to Brian’s last week when I’d mentioned Washington. “The gift shop is perhaps the worst of all.” She waved toward the jewelry case. “No one walked around with china teacups dangling from their earlobes. And most of the china patterns here are really nineteenth century, in any case.”

I pointed to a row of children’s books. “That coloring book about Washington looks pretty accurate.” It was a lame attempt, admittedly, but I was getting desperate. This woman was obsessed with trivialities. No wonder

Mrs. McGregor resented her intrusion so much.

Paula squinted toward the bookshelves. “Yes, those Dover books are surprisingly good. I know several adults who collect them. Not every detail is reliable, of course, but—”

She had veered off the subject once more. I decided to be blunt. “I heard that you had something of Washington’s here in the house, but I didn’t see it on my visit last week.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, and though she did not exactly smile, I could almost imagine the laughter of an evil villain inside her head. “We had an artifact *said* to be connected with Washington. It was a ridiculous story, based entirely on conjecture. Fortunately, the artifact has been removed from display.”

“What was it? The artifact, I mean.”

“A scrap of leather with a few words scribbled on it.” She sniffed derisively. “No evidence to connect it with Washington at all.”

I tried to remember all that Mrs. McGregor had mentioned in her tour last week. “Well, did George Washington stay here and plan the Battle of the Brandyglass, like the tour guides say?”

“It’s the Brandywine. And he most certainly did not plan the battle from the first bedroom,” she huffed. “Why, he was in Delaware at the time! How that ridiculous story ever got started, I’ll never understand. And it’s an absolute travesty to keep repeating it to gullible visitors.”

At last I had struck a nerve. Well, I had actually touched off several sore points, but this one finally led in the right direction. “So did Washington ever stay here?”

“No. There’s no mention of Barnswallow or the sign of the Bird in Hand—that was the sign Barnswallow used for his business—in any of Washington’s copious notes.”

“Well, we are on a main trade route,” I pointed out, repeating what Brian had said to me last Saturday. “Isn’t it possible that—”

“Patty and I spent an entire year combing through every shred of evidence we could find,” Paula said firmly. “There was no connection between this site and General Washington.” With a dismissive turn of the head, she stalked over to the book section and stuck the George Washington coloring book behind a book of American Girl paper dolls.

And that, apparently, was all that was to be said on the subject. It was just as Mrs. McGregor had told me over the phone—Paula Lowell wouldn’t believe anything unless she’d found it herself.

Maybe I could goad Paula into admitting she’d had something to do with the disappearance. “So. . .” I tried to wrest her attention from the coloring books. “I guess it’s a good thing that the Washington notes aren’t on display anymore.”

“Yes.”

I waited, hoping she would say more, but she didn’t. “I’ll bet some people were sad to take out the display, though,” I prompted. “The lady who gave us the tour seemed very fond of Washington.”

“She’ll get over it.”

Again I hoped she would say more, but instead she moved the box of pencil sharpeners to the back of a bottom shelf where only an extremely short visitor

would be able to see them. She seemed to be avoiding the subject, as if it made her nervous.

I stepped closer to her so that when she stood up, she was looking right in my face. “So, um, did *you* make the decision to remove—”

“I need to see about a laundry demonstration out in the yard,” Paula said abruptly. She started toward the door.

“Can I help? It’s such a nice day to be working outside, and I don’t know enough about the house to give a tour. You wouldn’t want me repeating that story about the Battle of the Brandyglass—”

“Brandywine,” she corrected automatically.

“Brandywine. See?” I offered a hopeful smile. “I think I’d do much better outside.”

“Hurry up, then.”

I followed her out the door, wondering what she was trying to hide. The woman who had something to say about every subject had suddenly closed her mouth, and I wanted to know why.