

ANTIQUÉ BLUES

Excerpt

by Jane K. Cleland

Chapter One

“The make-up didn’t quite cover Lydia’s black eye.”

I paused just outside the study. I knew the voice. Trish Shannon, my friend Mo’s mother, was talking about Mo’s kid sister.

I was on my way to the loft to spend some time with Mo’s just-purchased Japanese woodblock print, but hearing Trish, I peeked through the one inch gap between the door and the jamb in time to see Trish brush aside tears. Despite being in her late sixties, Trish’s face was unwrinkled, her complexion creamy. When she retired from her pro-golf career, she stopped dyeing her hair, and now twenty years later, it was mostly silvery white peppered with a few streaks of darker-than-night black.

Frank, Mo’s dad, a well-regarded blues guitarist, slapped his chair arm. “Son of a bitch.”

“We don’t know it was Cal.”

“Who else? You think Lydia has someone else in her life who hits her?”

“To be fair, we’ve never seen her with a black eye before. She says she fell down.”

“He treats her like dirt, and now he’s hitting her? I’ll kill him. That’s what I’ll do, the son of a bitch. Then our baby girl won’t have to worry about falling anymore.”

Trish smoothed her skirt, then met Frank's eyes. "I'll help."

"Josie?" Mo called from somewhere in back of me, maybe the kitchen.

I scooted to the teak and iron spiral staircase that led to the loft. "In here!"

Mo hurried around the corner. Mo's raven-black hair was newly cut into a stylish wedge.

"I know, I know," I said with more composure than I felt. "The party is outside, but I wanted to see the print again, so I thought I'd sneak up to the loft."

Mo flushed. She was a new collector, a bit awed at having taken the leap from admirer to buyer, and the fact that I, the owner of Prescott's Antiques and Auctions, respected her purchase, tickled her.

"I'm thrilled you like it enough to want to see it again. There's no need to sneak, though!"

"Thanks, Mo. Maybe I'll grab Ty. I'd like him to see it, too."

"Mo?" Trish called. "Is that you?"

Mo poked her head into the study.

"Do you have a minute?" Frank asked.

"Sure." Mo turned to me. "Go on ahead. I'll catch up with you."

Mo disappeared into the study, closing the door, and I made my way to the backyard. Garden party fun swirled around me, the kind of hum and buzz that comes from fifty people clinking glasses, laughing, and walking across the flagstone patio.

I spotted Ty over by the shed chatting with an attractive woman in her late twenties. She had wavy reddish brown hair that fell to below her shoulders, and curves galore. The white-washed shed was designed to look like a miniature house, complete with dormer and blue shutters. Ty stepped inside, reappearing seconds later carrying an old-style wooden croquet set.

At the woman's direction, Ty delivered the croquet set to a couple standing on the grass. He smiled at something the redhead said, then left her and walked to the bar. By the time I reached him, he was talking to Lydia, Mo's sister. Lydia was wearing oversized sunglasses, all the better to hide a black eye. She was taller than Mo by several inches, and thinner by several pounds. Her hair was as black as Mo's and cut in an easy-to-maintain short bob. As if Ty felt my presence, he turned in my direction, and when our eyes met, he smiled. My heart gave an extra thump. Ty and I had been a couple for ten years, and I still felt the new-love thrill every time I saw his face. I wagged a finger, asking him to join me. Ty said something to Lydia and crossed the patio.

He smiled down at me. "What's up, cutie?"

"I want you to see Mo's print." As we set off for the loft, I added, "Am I interrupting? Were you getting ready to play croquet?"

"No, although I will if you want to."

I took his hand. "I like croquet. We used to play it when I was a kid."

"Let's buy a set."

"That's a great idea. Our first game for our new life together."

He squeezed my hand. "Speaking of which... any more thoughts about the wedding?"

"I'm in favor of it."

"Good."

"But I want to disappear on a Friday, and reappear on Monday, married, and you want a proper wedding and a big reception. I just hate being the center of attention."

"You're supposed to be the center of attention on your wedding day."

"I don't want to have to perform."

“You’re too modest. You give touching toasts. You deliver inspirational speeches.”

“Maybe, but I’m never comfortable. I want to enjoy my own wedding.”

“Good point.”

I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to disappoint Ty, but I didn’t want to disappoint myself either.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Now we think.” Ty kissed my forehead. “We’ll figure it out.”

I twirled my engagement ring. We might be struggling a bit with wedding plans, but I was super-excited to be engaged.

When we reached the top of the loft stairs, I blinked, momentarily blinded by the dazzling sunlight streaming in through the wall of windows.

“Nice poster,” Ty said.

“It’s a Japanese woodblock print, not a poster.”

“I was joking.”

“Oh.” I took a step closer. “It shouldn’t be hanging here. The inks break down in sunlight.”

“It’s holding up fine so far. What’s the artist’s name again?”

“Utagawa Hiroshige, one of Japan’s most revered nineteenth century artists. This print is called *Meguro Drum Bridge and Sunset Hill*. It comes from the series, *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, which many experts consider to be his finest work.”

The winter scene was rendered in shades of white, blue, and brown, with a touch of coppery-orange in the shadows. Faint sparkles glittered across the sky. A dark orange rectangular signature cartouche was positioned on the right side, halfway up. A second rectangular

cartouche, also in dark orange, was positioned at the top right, abutting a square poem-card. All three contained black calligraphy. The poem-card featured a subtly gradated orange-and-blue design of what appeared to be a shimmering orange sunset reflected on undulating blue water. The vibrant and bold colors in the print itself were also gradated, especially the blues in the sky and river. I stepped back to consider the picture itself, not the technique. Snowflakes spun against a steel blue sky. Five people crossed a lapis river on a snow-covered bridge, none of their faces visible. Some were turned aside. Others were hidden by umbrellas. All were hunched over as they trudged through a storm.

“If it’s from a series named *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*,” Ty asked, “how can this one be number one-eleven?”

“I know... it’s funny. Actually, there are a hundred and eighteen in the series.”

“What’s Edo?”

“Tokyo. It was renamed in 1868.”

“Do you know everything?”

I laughed. “Would that it were so. I looked it up when Mo told me she acquired it. Hiroshige designed it in 1857. Original prints from this series are extremely scarce. Only seven complete sets are known to be extant. No one knows how many sheets were printed from each image in the first place, probably no more than a few hundred, so it’s rare to see one, and it’s super-rare to see one in this good a condition. More than a hundred and fifty years of framing and reframing, packing and moving, exposure to light, curious hands touching and stroking, coffee spills, and so on take their toll.”

“You think it’s a fake.”

“Let’s just say that I want to know more about it.”

We stood for a while longer, taking in the snow-tipped trees and pristine white hillside, and the people, solitary figures on a snowy bridge.

“I like that,” Ty said, pointing to the square poem-card. “He really captured the feeling of moving water.”

“The technique is called *bokashi*.” I squinted and the illusion of undulating water strengthened. “The detail is amazing.”

“*Bokashi*,” a man said. “The mark of a master.”

I turned quickly. Cal and Lydia were climbing the stairs to join us. Lydia still wore her sunglasses.

Ty and I had seen Lydia several times during the dozen-odd years Mo and I had been friends. At thirty, Lydia was the youngest-ever director of Hitchen University’s Technology Transfer department. She traveled the world negotiating private industry’s use of university-owned patents and intellectual property. She was articulate and poised, and not the least bit shy about sharing her opinions. To call her direct was like calling the ocean wet—it was true, but missed the point. I didn’t warm to her, but I appreciated that I always knew where I stood with her and that her opinions were always informed and thoughtful. I’d met her boyfriend, Cal Lewis, before, but Ty hadn’t. Since Cal and I shared an interest in art and antiques, and he was smart, educated, classically handsome, and utterly charming, I couldn’t account for the fact that every time I spent any time with him, I felt like I needed a shower.

“Hey, Lydia,” I said, smiling. I allowed my smile to fade some. “Cal.”

“Josie!” he said.

He kissed my cheek and I fought an urge to rub the cooties away.

“I don’t know if you’ve ever met my fiancé, Ty Alvarez. He used to be police chief back when you were in high school.”

Cal extended his hand for a shake. “And now?”

“Homeland Security. How about you?”

“Assistant professor at Hitchens, art history. I’m also the assistant director of the Langdon Art Museum on campus.”

I turned to Ty. “We’ve been there. Do you remember? They specialize in Asian art.”

“Last winter. You liked one of the fish bowls.”

Cal smiled at me, and I had to stop myself from backing up a step, a visceral reaction.

“If you liked it,” Cal said, “it must be special.”

“Everything in the museum is special.”

“Is that your specialization?” Ty asked. “Asian art?”

“My dissertation was on the nature of Kami in Japanese artifacts. I study the sacred energy communicated from artist to art.” He laughed. “You can blame it on the navy. I was stationed in Japan, at Yokosuka and I got interested in the concept that objects like vases and pots have souls.”

Lydia pushed up her glasses. “I love that idea... pots have souls.”

Cal turned to me. “Isn’t that why you were attracted to the fish bowl? Because it spoke to you on a subliminal, emotional level?”

“Not really. I’m awed by objects of great beauty and inspired by the artists and makers who create them, but there’s nothing mystical about it. The craftsmanship of that fish bowl... well, it’s breath-taking.” I turned to the print. “Same with this woodblock print. The way

Hiroshige was able to create the sense of quiet and isolation—the stillness of a snowstorm. It’s an astonishing accomplishment. Where did you find it?”

“A Boston gallery. I heard through the grapevine that it was included in an estate sale they acquired. I got there before they even catalogued the collection. They only deal in contemporary art, so I was able to get a great price. I tried to get my museum to buy it.”

“They didn’t want it? I’m surprised.”

“The only Hiroshige they’d consider is an original *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. Are you ready for their logic? It’s the only work famous enough to add clout to their fundraising, which is, evidently, their sole concern. Absurd!”

“Well, at least you know the print found a good home with Mo.”

“That’s bull. All fine art should be in museums, not in the hands of greedy and selfish collectors.”

My jaw tightened. “Mo doesn’t have a greedy or selfish bone in her body.”

“All collectors, by definition, are greedy and selfish.” He held up a hand like a traffic cop. “I’m not overlooking the fact that I’m the one who sold it, which makes me an accessory to the crime. I get it... but Mo’s rapaciousness and my complicity are irrelevant. The fact that Mo is a decent woman and I’m a pragmatist aren’t germane to the broader point.”

“Josie?” Mo called from downstairs.

I leaned over the railing. “Hey, Mo.”

“I can’t come up now, but I need to talk to you at some point. My insurance company needs an appraisal.”

“What about the gallery it came from?”

“Rheingold... they’re not certified whatever. You are.”

“I’d love to. Thank you, Mo.”

Mo’s gaze shifted to a spot over my left shoulder and her expression darkened. I glanced back. Her eyes were searing into Cal’s face with such ferocity, I could almost smell the singed flesh.

Cal smiled at me, but his eyes remained cold. “I can make it easy for you, Joz. Type up my statement of authenticity on your letterhead, attach the receipt, and boom—you’re done.”

“Thanks, but the insurance company needs to know the print’s value, not just whether the seller says it’s genuine and the sales price.”

“I negotiated a fair price. That sets the value.”

“Come on, Cal,” Lydia said. “You know better than that.” She turned to me. “I deal with this issue all the time. Just now, for instance, I have to figure out how to price a promising, but unproven, compound. Do I consider what it might be worth to a pharmaceutical company hot for a new diabetes medication? Do I look to past sales for comparable compounds? Do I try to gauge the likelihood of success and discount the price accordingly? I have to deal with imperfect information, insufficient evidence, conflicting expert opinions, and plenty of uncertainty. In other words, how much is a compound with no known value worth?”

Cal laughed. “More than a Japanese woodblock print.”

“I rely on data,” Lydia said, her eyes fixed on my face, ignoring Cal’s comment. “How about you?”

“The same. I always say I’m in the research and analysis business.”

“Josie?” We all looked down at Mo. “I’ve got to get back to the party. I’ll bring the print to your place Monday after school, if that’s all right.”

I told her that would be fine and thanked her again. After one more scorching look at Cal, she headed out.

I turned to Cal. “By any chance do you know how many impressions of the print were made?”

“No. Sorry.”

“How did you authenticate it?”

“I was able to verify provenance. You’ll read the details in the statement I gave Mo. Here’s the one-minute version: A few years after trade opened with Japan, Abner Barnes went on a fact-finding mission for a Boston merchant, seeking importing or exporting opportunities. That was in 1861. He bought this print for his private collection. It has remained in the Barnes family until now. And, of course, the *bokashi* in the title cartouche proves it’s a first edition.”

“Why did the Barnes family sell it?”

“Probably the current Barnes is an assistant professor tired of earning a quarter of what his lawyer girlfriend does, so when his dad died, he decided to liquidate the estate.” He snickered. “How about you, Ty? I know Josie’s at the top of her game. What do you think about having less power and earning less money than Josie?”

Ty glanced down at me and smiled, then turned back to Cal. “Josie and I work in different fields. Each has to be judged on its own merit. As Homeland Security’s director of training for the tri-state area, I have plenty of power, and I earn a good living. From what I hear, it’s tough to get an assistant professorship, and even tougher to land an assistant director slot in a museum, so it sounds like you’re doing well, too.”

Cal's mouth twisted into a sardonic grin. "Good deflection, Ty. Sounds like you've had some practice saying it." He winked at me, and I moved closer to Ty. "Speaking of practice, do you play tennis, Ty? Lydia here can't even give me a game."

"No. I never caught the bug."

"How about rock climbing? That's my new favorite hobby. I can get up that wall faster than anyone."

"Which wall?" Ty asked. "I used to climb quarries for fun. I'd love to give it a try."

"Middleton Gym, on Islington. We should meet there someday. I like a good race."

"Not me. I like to take it slow, plan each move, and execute according to the plan."

"You're not a risk-taker."

"Not hardly."

"Which makes for a good security analyst," Lydia said. She play-punched Cal's arm. "And good husband material."

"If you don't mind spending life bored." Cal placed his arm around Lydia's shoulders and squeezed, a little too hard for my taste. "What do you think, baby? You look like you're ready for some champagne."

"Definitely." She raised her hand, a mini-wave goodbye. "Nice chatting."

We stood at the railing and watched them return to the party. As soon as they were out of earshot, Ty began laughing.

"I can't help it," I said. "I hate him."

"I know. I think it's funny."

"Poor Lydia."

"She seems to like him."

Lowering my voice even further, I repeated what I'd overhead, that Trish and Frank thought Cal hit her, that he had escalated from generalized nastiness to physical abuse. "I don't understand staying with a man who hits you."

"Maybe she thinks she deserved it."

"Ick."

"Ick?"

"A technical term for dismay." I leaned my head against Ty's shoulder. "I love you."

Ty raised my chin with his index finger, leaned down, and kissed me.

Chapter Two

Gretchen, Prescott's office manager, had hung wind chimes on the inside of our front door years earlier, and they jangled merrily as Mo stepped inside. She held a large red leather portfolio.

After she said hello to everyone, she unzipped the portfolio and lifted out the woodblock print. I placed it on an easel we keep in a corner next to the bank of file cabinets.

Sasha, my chief antiques appraiser, walked toward it slowly, her concentration absolute. "I never thought I'd see a Hiroshige close up."

Fred, my other antiques appraiser, joined her. "Look at the color saturation."

Mo stood nearby beaming like a new mother listening to people coo over her baby.

Following Prescott's protocol, I videotaped the print, front and back, describing it carefully, including its measurements, then uploaded the file to our cloud storage. Gretchen printed a receipt and logged the print into our computer database.

"Do you have time for coffee?" I asked Mo.

She glanced at the clock mounted near the ceiling, a Chessman original. It was 4:35.

"A quick one. My mom's book club meets at the house tomorrow and I told her I'd make my irresistible chocolate swirl cupcakes before dinner tonight."

"What makes them irresistible?" Cara, our grandmotherly receptionist, asked.

"Sanding sugar. It adds a sweet crunch."

A gleam of interest lit up Cara's eyes. "I've used pearl sugar, but never sanding."

"Pearl is good, too. Sanding is coarser."

"I'm going to try it." Cara looked at me and smiled. "I'll bring up coffee."

I thanked her and pushed open the heavy door to the warehouse.

Mo paused ten steps in, taking in the rows of shelves. A walk-in safe in the corner held our most valuable objects, but our inventory of vintage goods and collectibles was organized by type and stored on open shelving.

“This is incredible, Josie. As long as we’ve been friends... I had no idea.”

“Thanks. We sell a lot, so we need to stock a lot.”

Hank, Prescott’s Maine coon cat, dashed over and mewed imperatively. He wanted to know where I’d been. “This handsome fellow is Hank.” I scooped him up for a cuddle. “Have you been a good boy, Hank?” Angela, the newest addition to our feline family, scampered in our direction. “And this beauty is Angela.” She followed us up the stairs. “She’s my little angel.”

Upstairs, I took one of the yellow brocade Queen Anne wing chairs, and Hank curled up on my lap. I stroked his tummy, activating his purring machine. Mo sat across from me on the matching love seat. She extracted an envelope from her bag and handed it over. I unfolded the documents, the receipt and Cal’s statement of authenticity, which required that I stop petting Hank. Annoyed, he jumped down.

Cal paid \$25,500 to the Rheingold Gallery in Boston for the print, a bargain, but not a steal. Stapled to the receipt was a copy of Mo’s check to Cal for \$28,050, giving him a ten percent finder’s fee, a fair reward for locating the print and negotiating its price.

“Have you purchased anything else through Cal?”

“No. I had no plans to buy anything, but I just fell in love with this print. Besides, between the way Cal found it, you know, just out of the blue, and my godmother leaving me some money, it felt like it was meant to be.”

“I know just what you mean. Serendipity. I’m sorry to hear about your godmother, though.”

“Thanks. Edith Winslow. She was a dear, one of my mom’s golf instructors, and the person who convinced her to go pro. She died about six months ago and left me twenty-five thousand dollars. Wasn’t that incredibly generous of her?”

“I bet every time you look at the print, you think of her.”

Mo smiled. “Exactly.”

I heard the click-clack of Gretchen’s heels crossing the concrete and mounting the stairs. Gretchen was the only one among us who wore stilettos every day. She came into the office and lowered the silver tray onto the mahogany butler’s table.

“Cara’s on the phone, so I deputized myself.”

I thanked her and poured from the silver pot into Minton cups.

Mo added a thimbleful of cream to her coffee and stirred. She waited until the sound of Gretchen’s heels faded away, then said, “Lydia thinks paying for an appraisal is a waste of money.”

“Your insurance company won’t issue the rider without it.”

“She said that I don’t need insurance, that the print isn’t valuable enough to worry about. That since I live at home—that’s a nice way for her to get in a dig about my divorce—and the house is secured six ways to Sunday, I shouldn’t bother. What do you think? If you were me, would you get the appraisal?”

“Yes. Forget the insurance implications... it’s the only way to know what an object is truly worth.”

“Lydia’s smart and sensible, but she doesn’t always consider the whole picture. That example she gave yesterday, about what a new compound might be worth to a pharmaceutical

company... when you rely so heavily on data and expert opinions, you risk forgetting about the people who are sick.”

I felt uncomfortable. If I didn’t tread carefully, I’d find myself enmeshed in someone else’s family feud.

“You know what I like best about teaching first grade?” Mo continued. “It means something. I teach kids to read. I teach them to empathize. I make good citizens. All Lydia makes is money.”

“She *does* help bring new medications to market. Anyway, it’s not a competition.” I smiled. “Anyone who teaches with as much passion as you do is a hero in my book. So is anyone who volunteers as much as you do.”

“Thank you, Josie. I don’t know why I let Lydia get under my skin. I’m a grown woman. It’s about time I start acting like it.”

“You’re doing great, Mo!”

Mo sipped her coffee. “I had brunch with Steve yesterday.”

I leaned back. “Really? That’s a surprise.”

I liked Mo a lot. She hadn’t confided in me about why she and Steve had split, but from the scuttlebutt that had made its way around New Hampshire Children First!, I gathered that Steve had a roving eye, and Mo got tired of being lied to.

“I know,” Mo said. “I called him about a month ago. I don’t know where I found the courage. We’ve got out a few times since then. Do you think I’m weak?”

“No! Why would you ask that?”

She placed her cup on the tray. “I’m thinking of getting back with him.”

“You must love him very much.”

“Everyone will laugh at me.”

“I’m not laughing. I think it’s romantic. Besides, who cares what other people think? It’s your life.”

“Not everyone is as non-judgmental as you are.”

“I don’t know about that—but thank you. Good luck, Mo. I’ll be rooting for you both.”

“Thanks.” She reached for her coffee cup. “Do you know Nora Burke?”

“No. Who is she?”

“A book club friend I saw yesterday.” She set her cup down without drinking. “After I left Steve, three people told me they’d seen him with another woman, at a candlelit dinner, all lovey-dovey in the park, that sort of thing. They thought they were doing the right thing.”

“What did you think?”

“That they enjoyed it a bit too much.”

“That’s awful. Why do you ask? Is Steve seeing Nora?”

“What? No. Sorry... I was thinking of something else. I don’t know who he was seeing—or even if the accusations were true. He denied it then, and he still does. We broke up because of money.” She waved it aside. “Never mind. I need to go.” She took one last sip and stood. “This is some of the best coffee ever. What’s your secret?”

“Arabica beans, freshly ground. Cara tells me it’s the single most important factor.”

I walked Mo out.

The trees that ringed the parking lot were dressed in their autumn best. Some leaves glowed like topaz. Others glistened like opals. I took in a deep breath of warm, clean air. September in New Hampshire is perfect, with temperatures in the seventies most days. Everywhere you look, you’re surrounded by a mural painted in iridescent pinks, incandescent

reds, radiant oranges, and glittering golds, as showy as a peacock. October is perfect, too, a little cooler, with the autumn foliage fading, but still teeming with color. Then winter sets in.

Mo leaned against her car, an old Saab. She stared off into the woods for a moment, past the white steeple of the Congregational Church next door, toward the ocean.

“Are you going to this year’s volunteer appreciation luncheon?” I asked.

Mo turned toward me, shielding her eyes from the sun with the side of her hand. “Sure. How about you?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

That’s where Mo and I first met. About a year after I moved to New Hampshire, a dozen years ago, I’d joined the fundraising committee of New Hampshire Children First! Mo had been wrangling horses in the charity’s therapeutic horse-riding program for a few years, starting when she was eighteen. That first year, we sat next to one another at the charity’s annual volunteer appreciation luncheon. I’d been stunned to receive the Fundraiser of the Year award. Mo had received the charity’s highest honor, Volunteer of the Year.

Mo opened the driver’s side door. “Those kids... those horses... they’ve gotten me through more than one dark day.”

“You’ve gotten those kids through some dark days, too.”

She gave me a quick hug. I stood and watched until she turned left out of the lot, toward the interstate.

* * *

Rheingold Gallery was located on Newbury Street in the tony Back Bay section of Boston. I only knew of it from one mention in an industry publication called *Antiques Insights*. Each issue of the magazine included a column called “Small Victories.” The snippet, which I recalled seeing in

one of last spring's issues, had compared traditional Japanese art with the hot, new Superflat movement. Rheingold had recently acquired some important contemporary works and the "Small Victories" author had been impressed with Rheingold's catalogue copy, referencing it as an example of how to shrewdly adapt antiques insights to modern-era art. I parked in the garage under Boston Common and walked the few blocks to the address.

Through the plate-glass window, I saw an attractive woman in her forties leaning against a teak desk chatting with a tall man some years younger. She wore a teal-and-beige Chanel tweed suit. Her sandy blonde hair was pinned up in a French twist. He wore jeans and an off-white linen shirt, untucked. His hair was long.

The paintings perched on easels in the window were abstracts, some geometric and symmetrical, others comprised of seemingly random slashes of color. I recognized a dramatic Jun Inoue painting, a combination of graffiti and *shodo*, traditional Japanese calligraphy.

I entered the gallery. The woman smiled, then turned her attention back to the man.

A younger woman with waist-long dirty-blonde hair and big brown eyes approached me and asked if she could show me anything in particular.

I didn't reply for a few seconds, taking in the gallery's minimalist style, noting the bold colors and the simplicity. "Thanks. I'm interested in learning about a Japanese woodblock print you sold last week."

"Oh, sorry. We only deal in midcentury modern and contemporary art."

"This was part of an estate you bought."

She looked confounded. "That's not possible. I'd know if we bought an entire estate."

"The Barnes estate."

"I'm afraid there's some mistake."

I pulled the receipt from my bag and held it so she could see it.

“This isn’t... this doesn’t make sense.”

“Is the owner around? Or a manager?”

She glanced at the older woman. “Sylvia owns the gallery. Sylvia Rheingold And you are... ?”

“Josie Prescott. I’m an antiques appraiser from New Hampshire.”

Sylvia patted the man on his upper arm, said something to him, and leaned in for an air kiss. He grinned and left.

“This is Josie Prescott,” the young woman said. “She has a receipt... you need to look at it.”

I held it up.

“Thank you, Heidi, that’s all.” Sylvia waited until Heidi disappeared behind a partition.

“Where did you get this?”

“From a friend who hired me to appraise it.”

Her brow creased and she met my eyes straight on. “This isn’t our receipt. It’s our logo, but not our format.”

“Do you know Cal Lewis?”

“No.”

“Cal told me he heard through what he called the grapevine that you bought the Barnes estate, which included a Hiroshige woodblock print.”

“I rarely buy estates. I don’t have the capacity to catalogue and sell objects that are out of my niche, which as you can see, is rather narrow.”

“Since you didn’t sell this print and you don’t know Cal Lewis, it seems to me I might have stumbled into a bramble patch.”

“Who is Cal Lewis?”

“He’s an assistant professor at Hitchens and the assistant director of their on-campus museum. He’s a fairly well-known expert in Asian artifacts, mostly Japanese vases and pots.” I was tempted to add that I had no clue why he would do such a thing—or why he thought he could get away with it—but didn’t.

“If he was going to try some kind of con job, why wouldn’t he choose a gallery that deals in Japanese art?”

“I don’t know.”

“Should I expect other appraisers to contact me to ask about sales I didn’t make?”

“I don’t know that either. I’ll ask him and let you know what he says.”

From her skeptical look and the derisive twist of her mouth, I could tell she was wondering if I was involved, and I bristled.

“I’m just the messenger,” I said, “as upset as you are, maybe more so.”

Sylvia scorn faded. She nodded slowly. “Can I get a copy of this document?”

“I’ll ask the owner for permission, and if she says it’s all right, I’ll email it to you.”

I extracted a business card from my tote bag and handed it over.

Sylvia stared at it for a moment, then raised her eyes to mine. “Whatever is going on here... it’s not good.”

I slipped the receipt into my bag. “I’m sorry to drop this Pandora’s box on your doorstep. I’ll be in touch soon.”

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