

Baked to a Crisp

A Silly Karl's Bakery Murder Mystery



by Kelly Szabo

*To my small but demanding employers,
J, A & S,
Thank you for your patience.*

Prologue

Rupert Merkatroid sat in his leather wingback chair, sipping a martini. His view of New York City was unobstructed, and the evening lights twinkled like a diamond bracelet.

A large, white fluffy cat sprang up onto his lap and curled into a ball, purring loudly. Rupert petted the soft fur. He glanced around the penthouse. His face stared back at him from the framed covers of Art World Magazine that hung on the far wall. His collection of autographed celebrity photo collection gave him nothing but a sense of phoniness that left him feeling empty.

Rupert Merkatroid had all the material things that a world famous artist could want. The only thing he wanted now in his life was a family, but this was something money wouldn't easily buy. And at eighty-four, he was running out of time.

"I may have to leave all of this to you Delilah," he said, motioning to his surroundings, "if I can't find any relatives."

He sighed and grabbed an olive off the toothpick with his teeth and chewed it slowly.

The phone on the glass table next to him rang. He picked it up. "Yes."

It was his lawyer.

He sat up suddenly, startling the cat and causing her to jump down.

"You don't say. In Everett? Are you sure?"

With the phone to his ear, he set the martini down on the table. He popped the last olive from the toothpick into his mouth, but before he could speak again, it had lodged itself in his throat.

From the very second it was stuck, he knew he was in trouble. He stood up, gripping his throat. The phone dropped from his hand with a loud crack onto the marble floor, causing the battery to pop out and fly across the floor into a corner. He gasped for air, but none came.

He remembered his neighbor downstairs, and made his way to the front door. *Please don't let me go like this*, he thought. *I've got family!*

Rupert Merkatroid made it as far as the elevators, but the closest one was fifteen floors below. He pounded in vain on the button, but it was no use. Eyes watering, he collapsed onto the floor. He was losing consciousness and the elevator was still nowhere to be seen.

The last thing Rupert Merkatroid saw was his cat Delilah. She sat in the doorway looking at him. It was a cruel look, he thought, as she did nothing but lick her paw and then retreat back inside, leaving him alone to die.

Chapter 1

The small Picasso hung on the bakery wall between two mixers. It was high enough that no one could easily reach it, but not high enough to avoid splatters of maple icing and chocolate cake batter. The glass of the frame was covered with tiny droplets of bakery ingredients, but they didn't take away from its splendor. Judy Bacon didn't mind. She was just thrilled she had a real Picasso.

Judy had owned Karl's Bakery & Coffee Shoppe for almost twenty-eight years. She loved the place so much that even after coming into a large sum of money, she just couldn't bear to sell. Instead, she bought some art.

It was around nine in the morning on a Saturday. Judy and her right-hand gal Stella were icing smiley face cookies and admiring the fine piece of art.

Stella itched her nose with the back of her hand. "I still can't believe you are insisting on hanging that in the bakery of all places. It's worth way too much to be hanging here Judy. If anything, hire a big guy with a gun to sit on a bucket of lemon filling and guard the darn thing."

Judy had a wistful look about her. "Oh Stella, you worry too much. Try relaxing for thirty seconds and enjoy it."

Stella rolled her eyes.

Teresa, Judy's cake decorator, was in the decorating corner, but could hear every word of their conversation. "How much did you pay for that again?" she shouted.

"One hundred and fifty thousand."

"For a painting that's twelve inches by twelve inches?" Teresa shook her head. "That seems like a lot, Judy."

"It's a Picasso, Teresa, not some painting from a garage sale," said Stella.

"Well, there's nothing wrong with garage sale paintings," said Judy. "I bought the other painting from a garage sale, and I love it."

"Yes, and it only cost you five dollars," said Stella.

The other painting was larger than the Picasso, and sat on the scaling bench propped up with a two-pound weight; Judy couldn't decide where to hang it. It was a still life of a platter of various rustic loaves of bread on a table next to an open window, and when Judy spotted it at the garage sale, she knew she just had to have it.

"Well, that's the beauty of being a millionaire; I have the freedom to buy as many garage sale paintings as I choose."

Stella walked over to the painting, holding her hand up to avoid dripping icing onto the floor. "Who painted this?"

"I have no idea," said Judy. "It says something like Gary Wells or something on it."

"Grace Wells, not Gary Wells." Stella squinted at the signature.

"Well, whatever. I just like the painting."

Judy had just dipped her hand back into the icing when the lights went out.

"Oh no!" hollered Teresa. "You've GOT to be kidding me!"

"What's wrong," said Stella. "Can't you write on a cake in the dark?"

"Ha ha, Stella," retorted Teresa. "I'd like to see you write on a cake in the dark."

Judy and Stella stifled a laugh.

"Hold on," said Judy, making her way like a blind woman to the sink. "Let me wash this icing off my hand and then I'll get a flashlight."

Earl, Judy's husband, had been upstairs in the office. He made his way down the ramp, a flashlight shining a clear path around cardboard boxes and buckets of filling.

"Fear not ladies!" he said in a jolly manner. "I'm here to rescue you."

"Our hero," said Stella blandly. "Go help out Teresa. She's stuck in mid-sentence, something I never thought I'd ever live to witness."

"I heard that too, Stella!" Teresa shouted.

Judy and Stella giggled again and washed the icing from their hands.

Earl aided Teresa by shining the flashlight onto her cake. He called to Judy, "You'll be happy to know that I just spoke with Abel. He's up the street at Gweedo's Pizzeria. Said he'd be here in about fifteen minutes."

The oven was on the fritz again. Three of its shelves weren't level, making it impossible for Judy to bake off pans of cake that weren't lopsided.

"Good," Judy called back. "I've got orders up the kazoo for next week. I need that oven working properly."

From the front of the bakery there came a wave of laughter, followed by clapping.

"What on earth is going on out there?" asked Judy, handing Stella a towel.

Stella took the towel and wiped her hands. "Let's go find out. Maybe they're raving about your new paintings? It's not like you get to see a real Picasso hanging in a bakery."

Although Stella couldn't see Judy's face very well, it was lit up with a smile. "Great idea."

Earl placed the flashlight down on its end, allowing the light to reflect off the ceiling. "I think I'll join you."

Teresa looked up from her cake. "What? You're leaving me here alone?"

Earl smiled and patted her on the shoulder. "You'll be just fine."

"Great," she said. "Just great."

Chapter 2

Andie and Myra stood together at the sandwich bar in the deli, a bunch of amber table candles in front of them. Andie held a large lighter that resembled a torch.

“OK,” Andie explained. “In order to get this thing to light, you have to hold down this top button with your thumb, and then you have to pull the trigger thingy with your pointer finger.”

“I know how to work a lighter, thank you very much,” said Myra. “I may be new, but I’m not stupid.”

Myra was the newest employee at Karl’s, having been there for three weeks. She was twenty-one and headstrong, but was nice to customers and knew how to work.

Andie exhaled. “Yes, I know you’re not stupid, Myra.” She handed Myra the lighter. “Here. Just light the darn things.”

“How’s it going up here?” asked Judy.

“Just fine,” said Andie, exasperation in her voice. “No one’s complained yet. Coffee’s still hot, and we’re lighting some candles for the tables.”

“Great. That will be a nice touch.”

“Also, Liz put in a call to PUD about the power. Said they’ll be out within the hour.”

Liz Johnson and her husband Larry were regulars at Karl’s. Liz worked for the PUD and was ready to retire after almost thirty years working in accounts. Larry had retired four years before and wanted her to do the same so they could travel at least once before he keeled over dead from old age.

“That’s great,” said Earl. “Abel won’t be able to fix the oven until the power is back on anyway.”

Gathered around a booth in the front of the bakery sat a group of Karl’s regular customers. A smaller table had been pulled up to the booth to accommodate them all, and among them sat a young man Judy didn’t recognize, wearing a business suit. Although there was limited light from the front windows, everyone seemed cheerful.

Judy, Earl and Stella made their way over.

“Ah, Judy and company! You’re just in time to hear the good news.”

It was Walter Watson who spoke, lifting his coffee cup in a celebratory toast. He was somewhere in his mid-eighties and the most cheerful of the bunch.

“Really?” asked Judy. “Well then, let’s hear it.” She, Earl and Stella each dragged a chair over and sat down.

“Judy, you’re not going to believe it,” said Larry Johnson, sitting across from Walter. Liz was sitting by his side, shaking her head and smiling.

Larry held up a copy of the day’s Everett Herald to the window light and pointed to a small headline on the front page that read *World Renowned Artist Dies*.

“You remember hearing about that Rupert Merkatroid fella? The one born in pokey old Everett?”

Judy remembered. “Yeah. He was a famous artist, born and raised here.” She squinted at the article. “He died?”

“Sure did,” said Hank Green, who sat next Walter. “He was eighty-four like me, but that isn’t what killed him.” He opened his mouth and let out a wheezy laugh.

Bud Steiner was attempting to read the paper without light but gave up momentarily to comment. “Nope. The guy choked on an olive. How’s that for a howdy do?”

Bud was seventy-nine years old. In all the years he had frequented the bakery, no one had ever seen him smile.

Judy shook her head and looked at Earl and Stella. “That’s terrible.”

“Tell them the rest, Larry,” said Walter.

Larry pointed to the gentleman in the suit. “Mr. McDougall here was our bearer of good news.”

Liz cut in. “It happened yesterday, you see. Larry and I were having a cup of coffee at the breakfast table, when Mr. McDougall here came to our front door.” Liz struggled to find the words to go on. “Well, it turns out that Mr. McDougall is the attorney for the estate of Rupert Merkatroid. And, well, it seems that we’ve inherited some of it.”

Everyone clapped and cheered at the end of the anecdote, except for Bud, who merely grunted and kept reading his paper in the dark.

Judy was stunned.

“That’s fantastic, Liz!” Judy cried.

Earl blinked at Larry. “How the heck did you two manage to pull that off?”

Larry laughed. "Well that's the crazy thing of it all! Turns out Liz was one of his surviving relatives. Talk about luck."

Liz chimed in. "And I had no idea I was related to Rupert Merkatroid. It just sounds so absurd."

The attorney cleared his throat. "I can assure you, Mrs. Johnson, it is indeed true. Unfortunately, Mr. Merkatroid died before he could meet any of you. He was at a point in his life where he wanted to be closer to real family."

Walter nodded. "I understand completely, Mr. McDougall. I'm eighty-five and I've got family to share my life with. But at my age, if I didn't have them, I don't think I could survive."

Bud looked up from his paper again. "Is that why you waste all your time on that genealogy nonsense?"

"It's not nonsense," said Walter. "I happen to have an interest in where I came from. Unlike you, whose number one interest is the obituary section of the paper."

"That's because I'm scanning it in hopes of seeing your ugly mug posted there."

"All right, all right," chuckled Hank, trying to ease the tension. "Let's not get too carried away here fellas. We're all living on borrowed time, so let's make the best of it, OK?"

The insult rolled off Walter's back. "Well maybe Judy and Earl can give you two some financial advice. Right Earl?"

"Well, I suppose," Earl hesitated.

Larry chuckled. "Well, we just might do that."

"In fact, Mr. McDougall," said Hank, "Judy and Earl have a real Picasso hanging in the back of this place."

Douglas McDougall stared at Judy. "Really? A Picasso?"

Judy nodded. "I wanted to add something to my collection of Webbers here." She motioned to the wall above them. On it hung a collage of watercolor paintings.

Stella laughed out loud. "The worst part of it is that Judy's going to hang some cheap five-dollar painting next to it."

Larry shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing wrong with that. In the world of art, anything goes."

"That's right," said Liz. "My mother used to tell me that same thing when I was a girl. She just loved art."

"So does this mean you'll be retiring from the PUD?" asked Judy.

Liz smiled. "Well, why not? I'm twenty years younger than Larry here." She smiled at Larry and squeezed his arm. "He's wants to go traveling, but I've always kept my job because we needed the income. Now that's all changed."

"I'm sure you won't miss it, Love," said Larry. "You're always griping about your job anyway."

Liz agreed. "That's true, but it's not the job itself I complain about, it's the incompetent people." She looked at Judy. "Just last week we had some new hire hook up the wrong house. I felt so bad for the family that was waiting for their power to come on, I called them personally and apologized. Thank goodness they were gracious about the whole thing."

The front door opened, and a young man walked in. He wore a leather jacket with studs, and his hair was unkempt. He passed the bakery counter and went up to Myra who was bagging bread.

Liz grabbed Larry's arm. "Oh my goodness, that's him. That's the new employee I was just telling you about. His name is Kevin."

Kevin was whispering to Myra and she was giggling.

"Great," said Earl. "I may have to throw him out of here if he keeps her from doing her work."

"Oh Earl," said Judy. "He comes in every morning she's here, and he doesn't stay but a minute or two."

"He seems respectable," said Stella. "At least he isn't wearing droopy drawers."

"What the heck are droopy drawers?" asked Bud.

"They're pants that hang down below the kneecaps," said Hank. "It's the in look these days."

At that moment, the front door opened and in walked Abel Farbler. When he saw Judy and Earl he smiled. "Hi there!"

Earl returned the smile. "Hey Abel. How's it going today? Are you keeping out of trouble?"

Abel's cheeks flushed. "I think so."

Abel was forty-seven and a bit on the slow side when it came to other people, but there was nothing slow about his mechanical abilities. He could take apart a car engine and put it back together perfectly. He knew how to fix refrigerators, freezers, proofers, ovens and toasters, not to mention his expertise in electrical wiring. His simple mannerisms and good mood were a bonus to his skills.

"I didn't see you at the family history center yesterday Abel," said Walter.

Abel giggled. "Yeah, I was surfing the net at the library."

"Abel is doing a bit of genealogy himself," said Walter. "I've been giving him some pointers."

“Good grief,” grumbled Bud, looking at Abel. “Not you too.” He shook his head.

“I’m trying to find my biological parents,” said Abel. “I was adopted, you know.”

Judy had no idea. “Wow, Abel. That’s exciting. Any solid leads?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Well good luck,” said Earl. “Let us know what you find out.”

“Sure will, Earl,” he smiled. “So what’s this about your oven, Earl. Something not right with it?”

“Yeah, some of the shelves are crooked. I don’t think there’s anything you can do right now though, Abel. The shelves won’t rotate with the power out. Liz says it should be back on within an hour or so.”

“OK Earl. I’ll head up to the Soup Pot and take a look at their grill, and then stop by again this afternoon.”

“OK. Andie and Myra can let you in.”

Abel’s smile disappeared. He scanned the bakery and deli counters. “Myra who?”

“Myra the new girl,” said Earl. “Myra Jones.”

Abel swallowed. “Oh. I see. I think I’d better go now Earl. I’ll come back at two-thirty.”

He turned around and left out the front door. There was silence until he was gone.

“That was odd,” said Liz. “I wonder what got under his skin just now?”

“Who knows,” said Larry. “He’s a strange character, that one.”

“Well,” said Hank. “Who isn’t these days?”