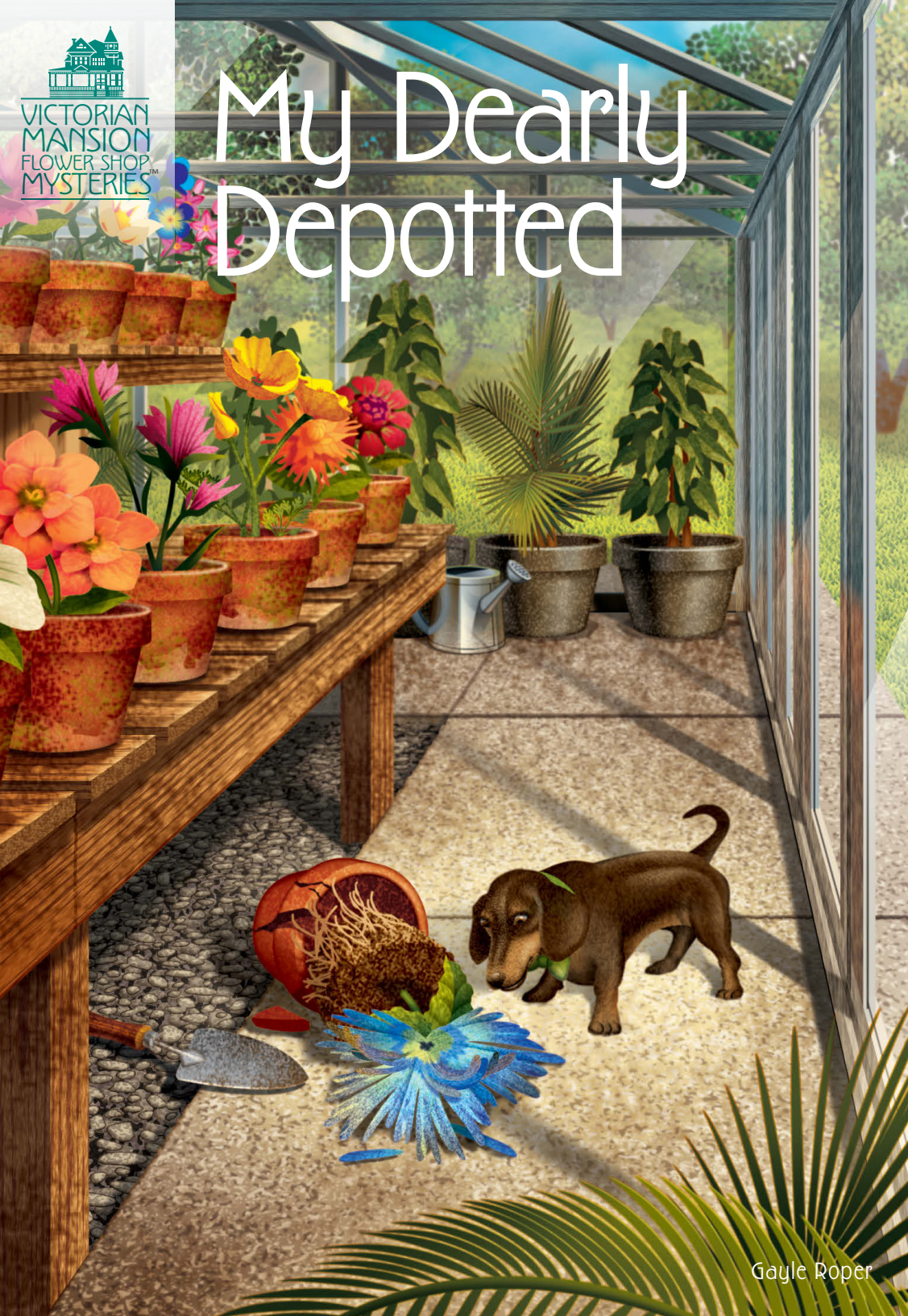
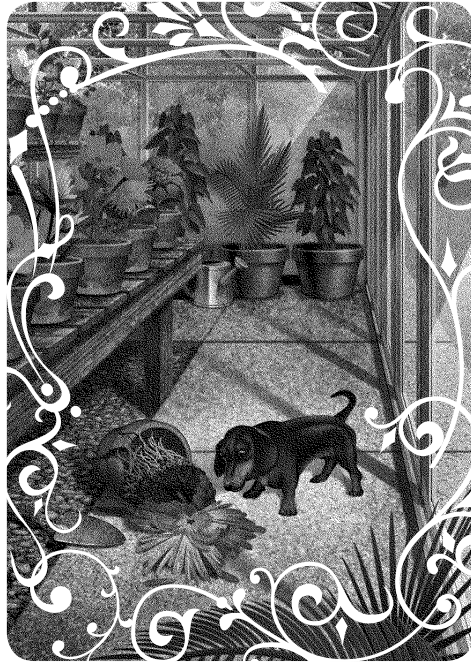


My Dearly Depotted





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Gayle Roper

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1



Kaylee Bleu reached toward the back door of The Flower Patch, expecting it to be firmly locked as usual. Instead the knob turned easily in her hand.

She froze, keys at the ready to slip into the lock. She tried the knob again. Maybe she'd imagined the movement. She hadn't. The knob revolved easily, and the door slid open a few inches. She stared at the dark shadowy wedge between door and jamb. Had she somehow forgotten to lock the door when she'd left the night before?

She narrowed her eyes, searching her memory. She clearly recalled Bear, her little dachshund, leaving the shop, scrambling down the back steps, and running to her car to wait patiently for her to let him in. She could see the keys in her hand as she pulled the door shut—back-door key, front-door key, and the keys to her home. She could see the dangling red enamel heart on the key ring, a gift from her grandmother when they signed the papers transferring ownership of The Flower Patch and Wildflower Cottage to Kaylee.

What she couldn't see was the back-door key in the lock.

Still, she was *sure* she had locked up. Before she moved to the tiny town of Turtle Cove on Orcas Island, she'd lived in Seattle. City dwellers always locked up, and the habit traveled with them, even to lovely safe places like this island.

Kaylee looked at the crack of open doorway where Bear was pushing his nose, forcing the slice of shadow to grow wider. What if someone was in there? She felt a chill that had nothing to do with the cool air of a Northwest morning in late May.

"No, boy." She bent and picked up the dog. He might be fearless in his ignorance, but she knew better than to enter a breeched building. Bear's license and name tag jingled as he looked at her in question. She gave him a quick kiss on the head. "There may be bad guys in there, and believe me, you don't want to meet them."

She walked back to the car, climbed in, and set Bear on the passenger seat. He stared at her. This was not their routine. She smiled to reassure him and dialed 911.

After she made the call, Kaylee drove the car around to the front of the house where there was more traffic. If there *was* someone in the house, it didn't pay to take chances. While she waited, she surveyed the curb appeal of her shop. Several baskets of coral *Pelargonium*, *Lobelia siphilitica*, and *Petunia axillaris* hung on the porch. A big blue pottery urn filled with the same geraniums, blue lobelia, and white petunias sat beside the front door.

The sheriff's department car pulled up several minutes later. Kaylee waved the officer around back and followed. Deputy Nick Durham climbed from his cruiser, all swagger as usual. He grinned at her and gave Bear a pat on the head. "Trouble, Kaylee?"

"Maybe. The door's unlocked." She tipped her head to indicate the partially opened door.

"And you're sure you locked it last night?"

"I always do." Not quite the answer to his question, but it was the best she could give.

"You haven't gone in?"

She shook her head.

He nodded approval. "You and Bear wait here." He entered the shop, his hand resting on his weapon.

Kaylee sank to the back steps and tried to be patient even as visions of floral carnage filled her mind. Beheaded stems, crushed flowers, shredded leaves—the thought of such vandalism made her stomach queasy.

Today was Wednesday. If damaged, her flowers for Dr. Blakely's birthday party Friday night could not be quickly replaced—one of the difficulties of having a florist's shop on an island. Her agent in Seattle would have to track down growers who had what she needed, negotiate for the blooms, buy them, drive to pick them up, and drive to the dock to ship them by ferry, which only stopped at Orcas Island a few times a day. She'd be lucky if they arrived by late afternoon tomorrow—more likely sometime Friday. It would take a miracle to get centerpieces made in time for the party.

Kaylee rubbed her forehead. The thought of Margo Blakely's over-the-top distress if the flowers for her husband's party weren't exactly as planned made Kaylee shudder. Margo was wonderful, but she knew what she wanted, and she expected what she wanted. Kaylee supposed that was what came of having a husband who catered to her every whim for the fifty-some years of their marriage. Bear, sensing her distress and confused by the alteration in his routine, climbed into her lap. She petted him absently and he licked her chin. She smiled at him. "You'll protect me from Margo Blakely, won't you, my brave boy?"

His little body shivered, and he jumped down.

"Coward." She gave him a mock scowl. "She loves you, even if she is a bit too enthusiastic about showing it."

Bear scowled right back. He loved people's attention as much as the next dog, but he didn't like being hugged so hard he could barely breathe. He'd suffered this indignity several times at Margo's hands.

Kaylee smiled at her disgruntled dog. "I understand. She is a bit overwhelming. You can hide under my desk whenever she comes in."

Nick reappeared in the open door and looked around the empty parking area. "Who are you talking to?"

"My favorite guy."

Bear barked once for clarification.

Nick grinned. "I should have known." He turned to Kaylee. "It's clear. You can come in."

She scrambled to her feet, her heart thudding once again. "Nobody's there? You're sure?"

"No bad guys hiding behind the roses, if that's what you mean."

"And how are the roses?" She held her breath for the answer.

"They look fine to me." He gestured to the shop. "How many millions of them do you have in there?"

"Margo Blakely likes roses."

"Ah." Nick understood immediately. Everyone knew Margo. "Come in and check things for me."

She entered cautiously, afraid of what she might find in spite of Nick's relaxed attitude. She walked through the public area of the shop and went directly to the door to the second floor. Grasping the knob, she relaxed when it didn't turn in her hand. The project was safe.

Nick entered after her. "Is anything missing? Disturbed? Damaged?"

She turned her attention to the shop itself and spun slowly in a circle, carefully eyeing the shelves of floral arrangements, soaps and creams, and creative gifts. "Everything looks just like I left it last night, even the cash register."

Nick nodded. "Good. I checked the basement. The windows are secure, and seemed fine to me. Go down and look around sometime today, will you?"

When Kaylee nodded, he pointed to the ceiling and the upper floors of the house. "What about up there? You've got the door locked."

"I don't want any curious customers poking around." She gave a half-hearted smile. "My workroom, office, and storage are up there."

"Let's check up there just to be certain."

Kaylee nodded and unlocked the door with the key she retrieved from the lintel. She led the way up, her hands cold at the thought of someone trespassing, especially up here. Bear appeared and scooted past her and Nick, determined to be first, his long body rippling as he coiled to take each tread.

While Nick wandered from room to room looking for bad guys, Bear on his heels, Kaylee checked her office, where nothing looked disturbed. Bear settled in his dog bed beside his water bowl and looked longingly toward the container of dog treats on the filing cabinet. She gave him a treat, then went to the turret room. When she saw her plants in front of the window, looking strong and healthy, she took a deep breath. All the years of work, all the time and patience hadn't been lost to vandalism.

She glanced at the filing cabinet against the far wall and breathed another sigh of relief. All the drawers were firmly closed. She pulled them open one at a time. All her papers were in their folders. All the seed packets were in order. On the shelves beside the cabinet her watering pot, mister, and bags of soil and fertilizers looked untouched.

Nick walked in the room and stood beside her. He studied the plants. "You've got a little nursery going here."

"A project I've been working on for some time." She kept her voice light as she studied the plants, some budding, some developing buds, some merely healthy and green. She fingered a leaf, so relieved the plants were all right she felt weak in the knees.

Nick nodded and turned to go downstairs. "There's no one here or on the third floor."

"You went up there?" She'd been so engrossed in evaluating the plants she hadn't even heard him.

"I found the key over the lintel just where you had the other one downstairs. Quite the collection of stuff you've got up there."

You ever need extra cash, you could have a great yard sale."

"If I ever decide to do that, I'll call you to lug everything down for me."

He grinned at her, and they trotted down the stairs. Kaylee walked with Nick to the back door.

"You must have just forgotten to lock up last night." It was clear he liked that tidy answer to the riddle.

Kaylee bristled but said nothing. She was certain she'd followed her usual pattern for closing. Well, almost certain. Why would she have acted differently? With a wink and a wave, Nick left and she went to work.



The next morning Kaylee approached her shop's back door with a strange flip-flopping in her stomach. She knew it was locked. She *knew* it. She had rattled it, unlocked and relocked it, even pushed against it before she left last night. No doubt whatsoever.

Kaylee gripped the knob and turned. She heard a slight click as the latch disengaged. Unlocked! Again! How could that be? With a concerned frown she pushed the door wider and leaned in.

"Mary? Are you here?"

But Mary Bishop, her friend and employee, wasn't present. No surprise. She wasn't due for another hour. It was merely wishful thinking that Mary had come to work early, a tidy solution equal to the one Nick had settled on yesterday.

But now that she had disproved her own solution, she no longer believed his either.

As Kaylee pushed the door wide and sun splashed into the back hall, everything looked fine. She should have left a hair taped from door to jamb like they did in movies and on TV.

If the hair was disturbed, you'd had company. Or maybe a bucket of water balanced to fall on the person invading. Of course if the door was closed, what would she balance the bucket on?

Yesterday she had called the police. Yesterday nothing had been disturbed. Was today a mere repeat or an escalation into vandalism?

Bear darted past her into the store before she could catch him. He showed not a trace of alarm. No sudden stops, no growls, just the clattering of his nails against the floor as he made his way to the door upstairs, no doubt wanting another treat.

Taking a deep breath, Kaylee entered. The building was silent. She walked carefully around the store, once again checking the gift section, the consulting area, and the floral displays. The beautiful wreaths of grapevine, dried flowers, and seedpods still hung elegantly on the walls, and the coolers were full of colorful, fragrant, unharmed blooms. She headed upstairs and circled the workroom with its scarred worktable, then went to her office, where the desk sat under its never-ending blizzard of papers, all stacked just as she'd left them.

Grabbing her cell, she called the police for the second day in a row. "I just want to report that my back door was open again this morning, and I know I locked it last evening."

"Do you need an officer to respond?"

Did she want Nick to come and smile his charming smile even as he thought she was at fault? "No. Everything looks fine. I just wanted it on the record. I'm about to call a locksmith."

"Reese will be your best bet there."

Reese Holt was the island's premier jack-of-all-trades. "I was wondering if he did that too. I'll call him next."

When she hung up with the dispatcher, she dialed Reese, who agreed to drop by as soon as he could.

"Your buddy Reese is coming, Bear." Kaylee rubbed the dog's ears. Bear's eyes lit up and he ran in a circle. To distract him, she tossed him a treat, which he caught in midair.

When Reese, tall, sandy-haired, and handsome, walked through the front door a half hour later, Bear raced to him and sat at his feet waiting for the generous attention he knew was coming. When Reese crouched and gave him a good long scratch, the little dog's eyes closed in rapture.

With a final pat, Reese straightened. "Your call was well-timed. You caught me as I was about to leave for a job up in Eastsound. Your back door's lock is giving you trouble?"

"You could say that. Someone's making a hobby of unlocking it. I come in the morning and it's open, even though I *know* I locked it the night before." She waved a hand around the store. "Nothing's disturbed or damaged or even moved."

"Some kid having fun?" Reese examined the door. "Are any of the other shops having the same trouble?"

Kaylee considered. "I never thought of that. I'll check with Jessica and DeeDee." Her friend Jessica Roberts owned Death by Chocolate, the bakery and coffee shop next door. DeeDee Wilcox owned the business across the street, a bookstore aptly named Between the Lines. Both women were members, along with Kaylee, of the Petal Pushers garden club.

Reese examined the door. "This lock isn't damaged beyond the scratches of regular use."

Images of TV detectives crouching over a lock using those mysterious slender metal picks they'd pulled from a black zippered case filled her mind. "I bet someone picked it."

Reese looked skeptical. "I don't know of anyone in Turtle Cove with those kinds of skills."

"And you would know this how?"

He glanced at her. "Small community. It's hard to keep secrets."

She knew that to be true. “How does someone learn to pick a lock?”

Reese shrugged as he worked to disassemble the old mechanism. “Probably lessons online. Everything else seems to be there.”

Kaylee frowned. “Maybe I should get a dead bolt.”

“I was about to suggest that.” He opened the package with the new hardware. “I don’t have a dead bolt in stock. I checked before I came. I’ll look in the hardware store in Eastsound. If they don’t have one, I’ll order one. It should be here in a couple of days.”

“Monday’s Memorial Day.”

“And I have no plans, so I can install it whenever it arrives.” The dead bolt, like everything else, depended on the ferry.

By ten o’clock the locks were changed, Reese bade her and Bear farewell, and Kaylee settled at her desk while Mary Bishop—her friend, employee, and leader of the Petal Pushers—worked the shop. After an hour of bills and invoices, Kaylee’s phone dinged. A text. Good. She was ready to be disturbed.

Hey, Kaylee, we’re almost there! We’ve all got tomorrow off, so we’re coming on the midday ferry instead of the late afternoon one as originally planned. We want to enjoy every minute of the long weekend.

Kaylee grinned. Maddie—Dr. Madeleine Hayes, a professor of botany and her very good friend—was coming to the island with some other friends from the university. She typed back.

I can’t wait! I’m surprised you found people who weren’t either taking a course somewhere or teaching one.

A moment later, her phone dinged again.

Some were at classes last week but have the holiday free. Some start teaching Wednesday. One thing for sure. We're going to camp in Moran State Park. I made reservations.

She typed back quickly.

I hear Moran is wonderful. It'll be such fun!

Her ringtone played, and Kaylee pushed talk, hating to interrupt her text conversation with Maddie, but business was business. "You've reached The Flower Patch. Kaylee speaking. How may I help you?"

"I'm so glad you're coming with us! Everyone's excited to see you. They miss you." The voice was brimming with enthusiasm, and Kaylee recognized it at once.

"Maddie!"

"I got tired of typing. You texted me back immediately, so I knew you weren't busy with a nervous bride demanding your attention."

"No bride at the moment. I kept the weekend wedding-free for you guys."

"You're giving up your warm, cozy bed to come camping with us and wake up every morning with a creaky back like the rest of us aging scholars. Everyone's impressed."

"I refuse to be called an aging scholar. I'm not that old!"

"Oh, wait until you hear the latest on Bobbi Brownstone."

Bobbi Brownstone. As much as she loved her new life in Turtle Cove, Kaylee had to admit she still had a grievance against Dr. Roberta Brownstone for her hints and outright lies that had cost Kaylee her reputation at the university and the tenured position available in the botany department. As an expert plant taxonomist with longer service to the university than Bobbi, the job should have been hers.

"She's not coming with you, is she?"

"You know me better than that," Maddie said. "I'd never impose Bobbi on you!"

Kaylee could picture Maddie's look of outrage on her behalf and felt warm with affection.

"And just you wait until you hear the latest on her, Kaylee. Just desserts. That's all I can say. Just desserts."

Kaylee couldn't help smiling. Not that she wanted terrible things to happen to Bobbi, but little inconveniences and problems were just what the woman deserved. Not pneumonia, but maybe a bad cold. Not a broken ankle, but maybe a severe sprain.

"So tell me."

"Later. This deserves a face-to-face."

"Really? You're making me wait?"

Maddie laughed. "Gotta go. Patricia and I are going to the outdoor store to get sleeping bags and stuff. You can share our tent—I borrowed it from my nephew—but you'll need your own sleeping bag."

"Suddenly my bed looks very inviting."

"Nope. You're committed. Get ready to bond with nature, feel a oneness with the universe, experience the circle of life. I can already smell the fresh air."

Kaylee laughed. "The thought of all that fresh air apparently makes you embrace the common culture and roll out the clichés."

But fresh air was something the island had in abundance. So were camping venues, especially in Moran.

"Just don't expect me to eat s'mores." Maddie made a gagging noise. "I can't stand them. And they're so bad for you."

Kaylee liked s'mores a lot, but Maddie was right about their lack of nutritional value. Sugar, sugar, and more sugar, but so tasty!

"Can we at least roast marshmallows without incurring your wrath?" Kaylee had a large bag resting on her kitchen table.

Maddie gave a long, dramatic sigh. "If we must. Gotta go. See you tomorrow."

Kaylee shivered with anticipation as she clicked off. Fun was ahead.



"Hey, Mary?" Kaylee wandered downstairs into the shop where Mary was restocking some of the artisan goat-milk soaps and creams DeeDee made. "Do you and Herb go camping?"

Mary shook her head, her beautiful white-and-gray hair swinging about her ears. "Herb refuses. He says he camped enough in the military, and he's not doing it by choice as long as he can draw breath."

"I need a sleeping bag for a few nights, and I don't want to buy one since I'll probably never use it again. Any ideas where I can borrow one?"

Mary adjusted a silk daisy of a cheery bouquet. "Try DeeDee. She and her family think it's great fun to go somewhere and live in a tent. Not even one of those motor homes on wheels where you have a kitchen and a bathroom. An actual tent, with a camp stove and a picnic table and the bathroom down the road." She shuddered.

Kaylee had to agree that that last thought wasn't particularly appealing, but if Maddie and straight-laced Patricia could manage, so could she.

Mary eyed Kaylee. "Why this sudden need for a sleeping bag?"

"Some friends from the university are coming for the weekend and camping at Moran State Park. They've asked me to join them."

"Can't you just go out there for meals and the campfire, then go home to sleep in your own soft bed and use your own bathroom?"

"I could, but I've been invited. I can't say no without sounding—" She searched for the right word. In light of her leaving the university under less-than-ideal circumstances, these people could have written her off and cut her out of their lives. Instead they asked her to come along. "Without sounding ungrateful," she finally finished. "They didn't have to include me."

Mary, who knew Kaylee's story, nodded.

Kaylee pulled her phone from her pocket and punched in DeeDee's number.

"Between the Lines," DeeDee answered. "Have I got the book for you!"

"I bet you do, but I don't need a book. It's Kaylee. I need to borrow a sleeping bag."

Kaylee could practically hear DeeDee's jaw drop. "You're kidding."

"Not kidding." Kaylee reached to the lintel of the door to the house's upper floors and grabbed the key resting there. She studied it a minute before she inserted it in the lock. Better get creative about where to put it. She thought it amazing that whoever opened her back door hadn't found it and gone upstairs. Unless they had, and had just relocked the door and replaced the key. For want of a better idea, she slid the key into her pants pocket after she opened the door.

She started up the stairs. "I'm going camping at Moran with some university friends."

"Oh what fun!"

Kaylee gave a puff of laughter. "We'll see."

She reached the top of the stairs and turned toward the turret room with its big windows and natural light. She smiled in anticipation. Her plants flourished there. For ten years she'd nursed them, babied them, and had brought this project with her from her former home in Seattle, then to Wildflower Cottage,

and now here, where the light, temperature, and humidity had turned out to be perfect.

The blue of the flower that blossomed two days ago was a true blue, not a blue-tinged purple. Blue.

Finally, after all this time and all this work. She was so close to her goal she could taste it.

She entered the room and froze. "No!"



Kaylee shook. Her breath came in gasps and her heart pounded. Ten years of work destroyed!

The filing cabinet drawers were open. The floor was littered with shredded papers, scattered seed packets with their contents spilling out, and soil strewn over everything as if someone had taken the bag from the shelf and shaken it with great enthusiasm. With greater enthusiasm that person had ground the soil under foot, further damaging the seeds and the papers that documented her trail of research.

But the most obvious vandalism was by the windows, set in the curved outer wall.

She stared in disbelief at her plants, her drooping and dying plants. She squeezed her eyes shut, waited a couple of beats, then opened them, hoping against hope that she'd imagined the catastrophe.

She hadn't.

Yesterday her plants had been lush and lovely. The flowers had been large and vibrant, the buds fat and ready to pop, and the leaves a rich green that gardeners everywhere would swoon over. Yesterday the filing cabinet with the now gaping drawers had been full of order and history. Yesterday she'd allowed herself to believe her years of work were heading toward the big payoff she'd envisioned from the beginning of the project.

And now? She felt a sob rise in her throat as she thought about the scope and malice of the vandalism. Who? Why?

She reached a shaking hand to run a finger over a shriveling leaf. She lifted the drooping head of what had once been a beautiful blue bloom.

She shifted her weight and there was a grinding noise under her feet. She looked down. Her seeds. She turned in a slow circle and tried to take in the damage.

She'd worked with generations of these plants, harvesting the seeds of the strongest, raising a new crop and harvesting the best seeds from it, repeating the process over and over. It was her personal project, a hobby of sorts, begun while she was still teaching but totally separate from any work-related research. This experiment had been done on her time, at her home in Seattle, not at the university.

Through the years she'd taken meticulous notes, cataloged the thousands of seeds she'd harvested, referenced, and cross-referenced every step of her work. She'd decided to pick it up again recently here in Turtle Cove, and the turret room had been the perfect place to not only propagate the plants, but also to store seeds as well as printed copies of the research notes stored on her computer.

She didn't talk about this work much because most people weren't interested in propagating new cultivars. Planting flowers and enjoying them, yes. Making bouquets with them, yes. But developing new strains was too scientific and fussy for most.

She hadn't even talked about it with her university colleagues. At work it was all botany all the time—scientific and orderly. Much as she had loved that, this private project was horticulture, science combined with aesthetics. Sure, she used her scientific knowledge as she worked with the plants, but the work wasn't just about cold hard facts and taxonomy. It was also about beauty.

Absently she turned over a leaf, checking automatically for aphids, mealybugs, or spider mites. The underside of the leaf was clean, as she had expected.

A person had caused this wreckage, not some pest or insect.

The action had been deliberate and nasty. What she didn't understand was how someone had known the plants were here.

She tried to order her thoughts enough to analyze the situation. All she came up with was that whoever had done this must have come in through the back door.

She became aware of someone calling her name. Make that two someones. DeeDee was shouting over the phone Kaylee still held in her hand, and Mary was calling as she thundered up the steps from the store. Bear's sharp barks of concern mingled with the women's voices as he climbed with Mary.

Mary burst into the room, Bear at her side. "Kaylee! Are you all ri—" She skidded to a halt when she saw the destruction. "Oh no!"

Bear ran to Kaylee and reared up on his back legs, his front paws on her knee. She picked him up and buried her face in his sleek fur. He twisted and licked her cheek. She felt like crying.

Vaguely she heard the front door burst open and DeeDee's voice echo through the store as she shouted for Kaylee.

"Up here!" Mary called. "Turret room." She moved toward Kaylee and stood beside her, staring at the chaos. "Oh, Kaylee. I'm so sorry."

DeeDee thundered up the stairs and stopped short in the doorway. "What happened?" She spotted Kaylee. "Kaylee? Are you all right?"

Was she all right? No she wasn't. Not by a long shot.

Mary and DeeDee stood on either side of her. DeeDee patted her back. "You scared me to death, Kaylee. I thought you were dying. Or Bear was."

Kaylee shuddered, remembering a few instances where she had feared for Bear's life.

"I thought at the very least you'd broken a bone, maybe gotten attacked," DeeDee added.

Kaylee took a deep breath. "Nope. Dead and dying plants and scattered seeds. Emotional pain, not physical." She seemed incapable of forming complete sentences.

DeeDee looked around the room. "Should we clean it up? Would that help?"

Kaylee put out a hand. "Nice thought, but please don't touch anything. I need to go through it all piece by piece. These plants and these seeds are the result of years of work."

DeeDee picked up her foot and looked at the sole of her shoe where seeds had embedded themselves. She studied the drooping plants. "What have you been doing?"

"I've been cultivating a new strain of flower."

"Like inventing it?"

"Pretty much."

"That's amazing. You can grow them again, right?"

Kaylee shrugged. "Maybe. But these plants were from the most promising seeds developed over the years."

"None of the others are any good?"

"Not as good." Kaylee rubbed her forehead as she surveyed the colossal mess. The thought of bringing order to the chaos made her chest ache.

Bear struggled to get down and Kaylee set him on the floor. He nudged at a pile of soil and looked up at her as if he knew how she felt.

Mary wrapped her arms around Kaylee, who relaxed in the warm embrace. Sometimes only a hug would do.

"I'm so sorry." Mary eyed the plants. "Can you save any of them?"

Kaylee shook her head. "I don't think so."

"They were fine yesterday, weren't they?"

"They were." Kaylee studied the drooping plants, looking for a reason for their demise.

"You have to talk to the police," Mary said. "Let them figure it out."

Kaylee felt a chill slip through her as DeeDee made the call. The turret room was a crime scene. Even if she had the strength to clean up, she couldn't yet.

"They should be here any moment. The dispatcher said there's already an officer in the area." DeeDee picked up a seed packet and seeds immediately leaked out of the hole poked in the packet's side. She flipped the packet on its undamaged side so the seeds stayed inside. She set it on a shelf, propped so there was no more leakage.

"Thanks." Kaylee gave a wan smile.

Mary picked up the mister from where it lay beside an empty container of plant food and put it on top of the filing cabinet. The plant food was strewn about the room, covering everything with a fine dust. "This is going to take a long time to clean up. I'll help you when the police are done."

DeeDee squeezed Kaylee's arm. "I'll help too if you need me."

"What a disaster." Nick Durham stood in the doorway surveying the mayhem. "I understand you are quite upset. I assume this chaos is the reason why."

"That would be correct. This chaos is all that remains of ten years of work."

Nick studied the room, his hand running down his goatee. He pulled a pair of latex gloves from his pocket and put them on, snapping the cuffs. "I'd be upset too. So this is a scientific experiment messed up?"

Kaylee nodded.

Nick asked the million-dollar question. "Why?" He pulled out his phone and began taking pictures of the disordered room.

"I don't know."

"Any ideas who?"

Kaylee shook her head.

Nick leaned over the plants and clicked more photos. "Have you ladies disturbed anything?"

Mary half-raised her hand. "I picked up the mister and put it there." She pointed to the filing cabinet.

"I picked up a packet of seeds," DeeDee admitted.

"That's it?"

All three women nodded.

"Don't touch anything else until I give the word." Nick looked at Kaylee. "Are you in a competition or something, like at a county fair? Biggest flower wins and all that?"

"No, just personal research. When I started, I wasn't sure I could pull it off, so I didn't tell anyone. Well, hardly anyone. I've kept it that way."

"So some kid lets himself into The Flower Patch. He or she ignores all the pretty things and flowers on the first floor and sneaks upstairs to raid your filing cabinet and kill your plants?"

"It sounds stupid when you say it like that, but that's the best guess I have. Only it wasn't some random kid. It was someone who knows how to kill plants quickly and efficiently."

"That could be anyone with a bottle of weed killer."

"I don't think it was weed killer. There's no chemical smell."

"I don't smell chemicals either," DeeDee said. "In fact, there's no particular smell at all."

"So whoever did this used a nonchemical method." Nick wrote in his spiral notebook. "What were these plants worth?"

Kaylee stroked a leaf. "If these plants had continued to show such great results, they were worth thousands. Maybe hundreds of thousands."

"Those guys?" A skeptical Nick eyed the drooping greenery.

"Those guys. They're a new cultivar, and people will pay big money for a new flower. Nurseries that sell millions of plants a

year will want this new blue bloom. I plan to sell it after I create a name for it and make sure the name complies with the rules and recommendations of the International Code of Nomenclature for Cultivated Plants—”

“Say that again?” Nick tried to write it down.

“You can just call it the Cultivated Plant Code. After that, I’ll register it.”

“Sort of like copyrighting?” he asked.

“Sort of, but with a plant I have to patent it.”

“Like it’s an invention?”

“In a way it *is* an invention. U.S. patent law permits the patenting of plants if you have invented a new cultivar and asexually reproduced it. If you meet all the requirements—and I’ve been careful to—then the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office can issue the patent.”

“And you license your plant to nurseries and get a cut of every sale.” Nick looked at her with what seemed to be a new respect.

“That was the plan.” Kaylee stared at her dying plants and the seeds scattered across the floor. “Years of cross-pollination and survival of the fittest created what were excellent cultivars. You saw them yesterday. Remember how whole and healthy they were? How blue the flowers were?”

Nick looked slightly guilty. “I have to confess that I don’t remember them from yesterday. I was looking for an intruder. And I’m not a plant guy, especially not flowers. You spend all that money, and then they die.”

Kaylee eyed him. “You do realize you’re standing in a florist’s shop talking to the florist.”

“And in the middle of a vandalized horticultural experiment talking to the horticulturalist.” Mary’s tone was slightly indignant.

“I didn’t mean to disparage your work. I have all the respect in the world for you and what you do. It’s truly impressive that

you're inventing a new species in here." He picked up a packet of seeds with a hole, neat and round, poked in its side. "Probably made with a pen or pencil. And I'm sorry you may not make your fortune. I know there are lots of flower lovers out there."

A new thought hit her. "You tried to make me mad on purpose, didn't you?" she accused.

He grinned.

"Clever," she said, no longer angry. "I can feel the shock receding a bit."

"Sometimes gentle mockery makes a person angry, and he or she snaps out of shock if it's not caused by a physical injury," Nick explained. "It's a useful trick sometimes when you need a witness to be thinking clearly."

Kaylee glanced at the plants one last time. Her gaze slid around the room, and she flinched at the destruction. "Let's go downstairs. I don't want to stare at this mess anymore today."

Nick pulled out a plastic evidence bag. "I'll be down in a bit. I need to look around some, and I want to get a sample of the soil for analysis. If you're right about the value of those plants, someone could be in serious trouble."



When Kaylee, Mary, and DeeDee reached the store downstairs, a customer was heading toward the register with an armload of items to purchase. Mary went to help her.

DeeDee squeezed Kaylee's hand. "I'm so sorry, Kaylee. I wish I could make it all better."

"Thanks." Kaylee gave DeeDee a hug. One of the best things about moving to the island had been the new friends she'd found.

The store door opened and Jessica flew in. "There's a police car out front. What's wrong?"

"You're a bit late to the show," DeeDee said.

"I was in the kitchen making a chocolate torte. I just now came into the front of the shop and noticed Oliver had dropped a leaf. I knew immediately something was wrong."

Oliver was a lavender geranium who predicted disasters by shedding leaves. At least that's what Jessica claimed. How such a smart lady could believe such nonsense flummoxed Kaylee.

Jessica took Kaylee by the shoulders. "Were you robbed?"

"Someone killed Kaylee's experimental plants and trashed her research," DeeDee said.

Jessica shook her head, clearly concerned. "Oh, Kaylee. Was it very important stuff?"

"It was to me." Kaylee stuck her hands in her pockets so no one would realize they were still shaking.

"The plants and seeds and stuff were worth a lot of money." DeeDee's eyes were filled with sorrow for the destruction of her friend's dream. "Like potentially thousands. She was going to license them."

Jessica looked impressed. "So why would anyone kill plants worth so much money? If they knew what the plants were worth, wouldn't they just steal them?"

"Good question." Kaylee sank into one of the chairs in the consultation area of the store.

"Do you still have the seeds?" Jessica asked. "Can you re-create your work?"

Kaylee looked up as if she could see through the ceiling. "Maybe. Probably. Eventually. It'll take time to grow new generations—if I can find worthy seeds. Most of them are scattered all over the floor, thoroughly compromised." She'd been so careful to keep the seeds of each generation separate, carefully labeling

and recording every step. "The packets that aren't emptied are damaged. I have to examine each seed to see if it's healthy."

DeeDee gave Kaylee a quick hug. "Let me say it again: I'm so sorry. I don't understand it all, but I know you're hurt, so I am too."

Kaylee managed a little smile for her friend. "Think of it as several priceless first editions having their spines broken and their pages torn out."

DeeDee looked horrified. "I get it now. Speaking of books, I need to get back to *Between the Lines*. You'll still come tonight, won't you? I'll bring the sleeping bag."

Kaylee nodded. Their routine meeting of the Petal Pushers at the Old Cape Lighthouse was being held this week on Thursday instead of Tuesday because Jessica hadn't been able to make it.

Footsteps thumped down the stairs, and Nick appeared in the doorway.

"Sleeping bag?" Jessica asked.

"She's going camping," DeeDee said, with as much pride as if one of her daughters had just broken a new record at school.

"With some friends from the university," Kaylee explained.

"Sorry to interrupt, but Kaylee, are you sure no one's been upstairs but you?" Nick asked.

"Until Mary and DeeDee raced to my rescue, no."

"So everything up there is yours?"

"Yes." Not that there was anything but the plants, the third-floor junk, and destruction.

"Huh. Then I'm not sure why you need to borrow a sleeping bag." And he was gone.