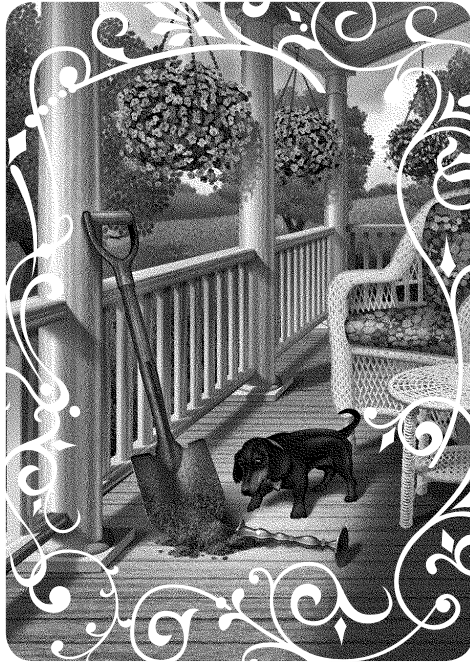


# Digging Up Secrets





# Digging Up Secrets



Sandra Orchard

*Annie's*<sup>®</sup>  
AnniesFiction.com

*Digging Up Secrets*

Copyright © 2018 Annie's.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews. For information address Annie's, 306 East Parr Road, Berne, Indiana 46711-1138.

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

---

Library of Congress-in-Publication Data

*Digging Up Secrets* / by Sandra Orchard

p. cm.

ISBN: 978-1-64025-801-3

I. Title

2017958114

---

AnniesFiction.com

(800) 282-6643

Victorian Mansion Flower Shop Mysteries™

Series Creators: Shari Lohner, Janice Tate

Series Editor: Shari Lohner

Cover Illustrator: Bill Bruning

# 1



Kaylee Bleu's part-time floral designer, Mary Bishop, burst into The Flower Patch, her white and gray hair wildly wind-blown, her complexion paler than the fistful of white lilies clutched in her hand. "Please tell me that hole in the side yard isn't what it looks like."

"What do you mean?" Kaylee's stomach lurched, then she realized what had Mary concerned. "George Bard is trying to locate the wellhead. He figures the foot valve in the bottom of the well is shot and that's why we have no water." And her plants were parched. She hurried toward one of the Victorian mansion's side windows to scope out her plumber's progress.

As she moved, she twisted her long, brown hair into a ponytail. It was a wonder it hadn't already turned as white as Mary's, despite the twenty years Mary had on her. At the window, Kaylee squinted down at the large, rectangular swath George had shoveled. She grimaced. He'd had to dig down almost four feet before finally locating the wellhead.

"Yikes, I didn't realize he'd have to dig so deep." Kaylee shook her head. "Wait, what did you think the hole was?"

"A grave!"

Kaylee shot Mary a frown.

Mary shrugged. "Hey, you can hardly blame me with the way trouble seems to find you."

A couple of the mysteries Kaylee had recently been roped into flitted through her mind, and she winced. "It's not as if I go looking for problems," she protested.

Mary squeezed Kaylee's arm. "I'm sorry. Chalk it up to too

many years as a police dispatcher before retiring to this job. Orcas Island may only have a few thousand year-round residents, but when our numbers swell during tourist season, some of the calls that come in would make your hair curl."

"Well please don't start any rumors about a body in my yard." Kaylee returned to the front of the store and flipped the sign to *Open*. "Chelsea Banks and her mother are due any minute to discuss what we can do for her wedding. And thanks to the crazy cheap package deals that new florist in Eastsound has been advertising, this might be the only wedding I do this fall." Kaylee stooped to straighten the royal blue bow tie her dachshund, Bear, sported proudly that morning. "I may have said I was looking forward to things slowing down with the end of tourist season, but just because it's September doesn't mean I want our business to dry up altogether."

Chelsea burst into the shop and Bear let out a happy bark in greeting. Grinning, Chelsea made a fuss over the little dog, while Mrs. Banks glanced around the shop. She appeared unimpressed.

"Welcome to The Flower Patch," Kaylee said cheerfully, trying to ignore the woman's sour expression. "I have the albums you asked to view set out over here." Kaylee motioned to a table at the back of the showroom stacked with albums showcasing designs from previous weddings. They featured her own arrangements as well as those of her grandmother, Bea Lyons, who had owned the shop before her but was now retired and lived in Arizona.

Mrs. Banks gave a nod and summoned her daughter to join her at the table. Chelsea oohed over picture after picture, pointing out aspects of various settings she'd like to include in her wedding, commenting on preferred colors, and asking the names of flowers that caught her eye.

A holler from the direction of the backyard sliced through the windows.

"What was that?" Mrs. Banks demanded haughtily.

Visions of George tumbling into the hole and injuring himself streaked through Kaylee's mind. "I'm not sure. Would you excuse us a moment?" She raced out the back door with Mary on her heels. The scent of ocean breezes and damp earth did nothing to slow Kaylee's racing heart as she spotted George scrambling out of the hole, clawing at the dirt like a wild man, his welding helmet bobbing on the top of his head.

"Are you okay?" Kaylee asked.

"Did you burn yourself?" Mary added, scanning his arms. He flung off his helmet. "There's a body down there!"

"Of course there is." Kaylee glared at Mary. "Did you put him up to this?"

Mary was white again. Whiter than before.

Kaylee's heart sank. *Not a prank.* She vigorously shook her head. *No, no, no. This cannot be happening.* Kaylee braced herself and peeked into the hole.

But there was no body, muddy, bloody, partially decomposed, or otherwise.

"There's no body," she said, not bothering to temper her exasperation.

Mary stood a couple of feet behind her, clearly not eager to see for herself. But she cautiously peeked around Kaylee anyway. Mary gasped. "Is that a—" She gulped.

"Skull," George blurted, as Mrs. Banks and Chelsea rushed out of the shop. "There's a bashed skull buried facedown behind the flower shop." Only he wasn't talking to Mary. He was yelling into the phone he held with a shaky hand against his ear.

Mrs. Banks's eyes bulged. She shielded her mouth and nose with one hand and tugged Chelsea back toward the shop door.

Kaylee stared at the skull and noticed two cracks on the back of it. Who was this poor soul? And how had he or she ended up buried in the flower shop's yard?

Bear slipped out past them.

"Bear, no!" Kaylee shrieked.

He paused, his paws barely still on the edge of the pit, and gave her a questioning gaze.

"This is unacceptable," Mrs. Banks declared. "Come on Chelsea. We'll find another florist."

"No, wait." Kaylee wavered between reaching down to haul Bear away from the hole and chasing after her client—a client who could be highly influential in all the wrong ways if Kaylee didn't fix this. "This grave must be hundreds of years old, probably from the Native Americans who first inhabited the island."

Mrs. Banks sniffed in that snooty way TV shows liked to depict wealthy aristocrats, but at least she'd stopped.

Mary grabbed hold of Bear's collar, then whispered in Kaylee's ear, "The skull can't be that old or George would've discovered it when he first installed the well for your grandmother."

"You're not helping," Kaylee hissed out of the side of her mouth. To Mrs. Banks, she said, "They found skeletal remains of bison in the peat bogs and estimated that they were thousands of years old. Apparently, the peat acts like a natural embalming."

"You don't have peat here," George muttered.

Kaylee shot him a silencing glare.

"She's right, Mom," Chelsea said. "Besides, I like Kaylee's designs better than the ones we saw at that other florist. And this shop's been here for years, so you know it's not some new fly-by-night place."

"There are several quality shops on the mainland we could check out."

"The wedding is less than two months away, and it would be more hassle and expense for them to set up a wedding here than it's worth."

Mrs. Banks nudged her daughter toward the garden gate,

apparently intending to bypass going back through the store altogether. "Nothing is too much trouble for you, sweetheart."

Chelsea dug in her heels. "I think The Flower Patch will do a perfect job." She flashed Kaylee a smile that earned her an instant ten-percent discount . . . if her mother could be swayed.

Mrs. Banks shook her head. "What will people say when they find out your flowers were done by the florist with skeletons in her backyard?"

"Just remind them of all the skeletons in their closets," Mary quipped.

Chelsea giggled, but Mrs. Banks looked seriously affronted.

Kaylee swatted Mary's arm. "She's kidding. Besides, who's going to hear about it?"

The blare of a siren erupted somewhere in the distance.

*Please, please, please, let it be for something else.* This discovery didn't warrant the urgency of a siren. But just in case whoever took George's call didn't see it that way, Kaylee joined Mrs. Banks in prodding Chelsea toward the front gate. "I have a good idea of what you want now. How about I prepare a proposal with various options and we meet at Turtleback Country Club tomorrow afternoon to go over possible layouts? Then we can tweak it on-site to customize it to what you want."

"That sounds lovely," Chelsea said. Apparently catching on to the importance of getting her mother as far away as possible before a deputy showed up, she hurried out of the garden gate ahead of her. Chelsea held open her Bentley's passenger door for her mom, who climbed in just as a cruiser rounded the corner. "I'll text you a time," she said to Kaylee.

Kaylee backed toward the shop, waving. "Great."

Chelsea jumped in her car and sped off, and the cruiser parked in the spot she'd vacated.

Kaylee dipped her head to glance inside the police car and



waved at Deputy Dean Skenandore. As he hauled himself out of the driver's seat, she asked brightly, "How are those two adorable granddaughters of yours?" The twins had visited the island often over the summer and clearly had their grandfather wrapped around their pudgy little toddler fingers.

The deputy's usual gruff demeanor faded with his grin. "Good as gold. They're coming for another visit this weekend."

"Bear, no!" Mary's shout rose from the yard, and Kaylee raced for the gate.

Dean hurried after her. "George said he found the skull while digging up your wellhead?"

"That's right." Kaylee yanked open the gate to the side yard, grateful that the low-lying fence shielded it at least partially from the view of curious passersby. "And it has twin cracks down the back of it."

Mary held Kaylee's muddy, wriggling dachshund tight to her chest. "Bear dug up more . . . stuff. I'm going to take him inside for a bath, okay?"

"Thanks, Mary," Kaylee said. "Maybe you should stay in there and watch the shop."

Mary glanced at the hole and shuddered. "Sure thing."

"Did he unearth the rest of the body?" Deputy Skenandore asked.

"Just some clothes," George said, looking a little peaked.

Kaylee peered into the opening to see a mud-encrusted windbreaker, a metal button probably from a pair of jeans, and the rubber soles of an apparently decomposed pair of shoes.

"We're clearly not looking at an ancient burial ground," the deputy muttered.

"No," Kaylee said, "but you'd be surprised how long synthetics and metals take to decompose. I was a forensic botanist before I moved here and I saw it in several cases I worked. This body could've been here for decades."

"Not more than thirty-five years," George piped up. "That's when I installed the well for your grandmother. These days we don't bury the wellhead."

Dean nodded, then tapped something into his smartphone before circling the hole and scrutinizing the evidence from various angles. A few minutes later, his phone beeped and he glanced at the screen. "According to our forensics consultant, in these soil conditions, a body that has not been embalmed would decay within eight to twelve years." He typed in another message.

"So whoever this person was, he would've disappeared ten or more years ago." Kaylee sighed. "That leaves a twenty-five-year window."

"Yeah." The deputy tucked his phone back in his pocket. "I just asked a clerk to pull up all the unsolved missing person cases from the past thirty-five years."

"Are there that many?"

"Just the usual. Wealthy businessmen on the verge of bankruptcy or divorce. Teen runaways. An abused wife who hopefully found her way to a safer place." Dean dropped to his belly. Reaching into the hole, he pushed aside the edge of the windbreaker with the tip of his pen. A pinecone lay beneath the jacket.

"Whoa. Is that what it looks like?" Kaylee asked.

"A pinecone. Any idea how long they take to decay?" the deputy asked.

"They can take decades, thanks to the resins in them." Kaylee examined the cone more closely, mentally reviewing the evergreens known to populate the islands, and realized this wasn't one of them. "Technically, this isn't a pinecone. It's a *Picea breweriana*—Brewer's spruce. It could be a significant clue."

The deputy snorted. "Lots of people pick up pinecones and stuff them in their pockets. You should see the collections my granddaughters have, and they're toddlers."

"But the *Picea breweriana* is rare," Kaylee said. "Trust me. I spent years studying plant taxonomy. This species is only found in the Klamath Mountains of southwestern Oregon and northern California."

Dean jotted that tidbit on his notepad. "So we're looking at someone who traveled out of state."

"Or a visitor from one of those states," Kaylee said. "Assuming the cone came from the victim's pocket."

Two more deputies arrived, along with an evidence collection technician and the coroner. One of the deputies began cordoning off the shop's yard with crime scene tape.

Kaylee cringed. "Is that really necessary?" She gave Dean her best pleading face. She'd already almost lost Mrs. Banks's business this morning. If the woman saw crime scene tape on her next visit, that would seal the order's doom—and likely the doom of every order from any other country club member with a daughter getting married in the next twelve months, if Mrs. Banks had any say in the matter. And Kaylee had a bad feeling Mrs. Banks would ensure everyone knew her thoughts on The Flower Patch. Kaylee stifled a groan.

Dean took pity on her and instructed the deputy to string the tape on the inside of the fence, where it wouldn't be so visible from the street. "And turn off your cruiser's lights," he barked. "We don't want to attract the whole neighborhood."

But it was too late. People were already heading their way up the street.

Dean asked George a slew of questions and meticulously recorded the answers on his notepad. "Okay, George, you're free to go. It'll likely be a few days before we release the scene."

"What?" Kaylee's voice hit a new octave. "You mean he can't fix my well before he goes? I don't have any water. And I have hundreds of thirsty plants inside."

"Isn't Mrs. Roberts a friend of yours?" the deputy asked.

"Yes, but—" Kaylee furrowed her brow, not following what that had to do with anything.

"Why don't you just run next door to her shop to fill your watering jugs?"

*The man clearly has no idea how many trips that would take, nor does he seem to care that I can only do it after hours or when Mary can watch the shop.* Realizing it wasn't a battle she'd win, however, Kaylee shrugged. "I guess we will make do. May I get back to work inside now?"

"Sure. Go ahead. I know where to find you if I have any questions."

Kaylee was about to slip in the side door when she spotted her friend Jessica Roberts hurrying over from her bakery, Death by Chocolate, which was right next door. Kaylee let herself out the gate to meet her.

Jessica rushed up and clasped Kaylee's forearms in a stranglehold. "Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"One of my customers said there's a dead body in your backyard."

Kaylee shushed her and glanced over at the crowd gathered on the sidewalk, straining to see what was happening on the other side of the fence. Desperate to get away from prying eyes and ears, Kaylee ushered Jessica into the shop to fill her in on the morning's developments.

"I just knew something bad was going to happen today," Jessica said as they ducked inside. "Oliver has been drooping all morning."

Oliver was Jessica's prized lavender geranium, and Jessica also believed him to be the predictor of all things unpleasant about to befall herself or her nearest and dearest. He had a spot of honor on the counter in Death by Chocolate.

Before Kaylee had a chance to give Jessica the lowdown, their friend DeeDee Wilcox, owner of the mystery bookstore down the street, rushed in too. At the sight of Kaylee, DeeDee splayed her hand against her chest. "Thank goodness you're okay! As soon as I saw all the cruisers pull up in front of your shop, I booted out my customers and closed my place so I could make sure nothing had happened to you."

"I'm fine," Kaylee said. "Although I'm not sure I'll be able to say the same for my business." She peeked out the window at the growing crowd. "This isn't the kind of word-of-mouth publicity a florist hopes for." She explained what had transpired that morning.

"Oh wow," DeeDee said, following her gaze out the window. "But hey, you never know. The notoriety could bring in more clients."

"And here comes a couple up the walk now," Mary said cheerily from the front of the store where she was working on the window display.

"Oh no." Kaylee vainly attempted to prop up the droopiest plants. "I still haven't watered."

Jessica squeezed her arm. "We can help with that. DeeDee and I will go fill some water jugs for you right now. Don't worry. I'm sure the deputies will clear out before you know it."

"Thanks. You guys are the best."

"Don't mention it," DeeDee said as she and Jessica headed out the door.

"Uh-oh." Mary stared out the front window. "That couple must've changed their mind. I don't see them now." Mary craned her neck and peered in the direction of the crowd gawking at the goings-on in the side yard. "That's a lot of people. We should put out a sale sign."

Kaylee shook her head. "I don't want to capitalize on this.

That's someone's missing loved one back there. A family somewhere has been wondering what happened to that person for years, and now they're going to find out the worst news possible."

Mary sobered. "You're right. If you think about it, at least one good thing should come of your water problem."

"How do you figure?"

"It'll finally bring closure for the victim's family."

Kaylee sighed. "If the sheriff's department can ID him or her."

"Oh wow." Mary was back to peering out the window. "Even Mr. Phelps is out there. I didn't think he ever got out anymore."

"The owner of the computer store?" Kaylee snuck a peek out the side window.

"His son runs the store these days."

"I don't think I've seen him out in daylight before."

Mary nodded. "Just goes to show you how powerful morbid curiosity is."

The bell above the shop's front door tinkled and a handsome couple, who appeared to be in their early fifties, strolled in.

Bear let out a friendly woof and meandered over to give them a sniff. The woman stooped down and held her hand out for him to sniff, then stroked the soft fur on his head, which was still a little damp from the bath Mary had given him.

"What a cutie you are," she cooed.

"Good morning," Kaylee said. "How may I help you?"

The gentleman flashed her a warm smile. "Is Bea around?"

"No, I'm sorry. She's moved to Arizona. I'm her granddaughter Kaylee."

The man reached for Kaylee's hand and enveloped it between his. "Pleased to meet you."

Kaylee glanced down, surprised by how warm his hands were.

"I was just reminiscing with Raylene," he went on, releasing Kaylee's hand and surveying the shop. "I was telling her how

my first job was here. I made deliveries on my bicycle, watered plants, that sort of thing.”

“Oh, Grandma will be sorry she missed you, Mr. . . . ?”

The man gave Kaylee a bemused look, clearly thinking she should know who he was.

She took in his mildly-salted dark hair and the fine lines that framed his eyes and creased his forehead. His broad, muscular torso said he took his fitness seriously. His left ring finger was void of a ring as was the woman’s. But nothing about his appearance rang a bell.

Mary joined them and extended her hand to the man. “Congressman, so nice of you to drop in.” To Kaylee she added, “Congressman Munk grew up on the island. Now he just visits the old family home in the summers, I believe.”

The man nodded. “Call me Ted.”

“You’ll have to forgive Kaylee,” Mary said. “She doesn’t pay much attention to politics.”

His smile broadened. “Well, we’ll have to remedy that. Won’t we, Raylene?” He glanced at the slender redhead accompanying him. “After all, the election is in two months.”

Raylene pulled a button from her handbag and handed it to Kaylee.

“Oh.” The button said *Ted Munk for Governor* in red and blue. “Um, thank you.”

“You are registered to vote, aren’t you?” Ted asked.

“Yes, of course.”

Ted’s rather contagious smile spread across his face once more. “Well, if you have any concerns or questions at all, don’t hesitate to call.” He passed her his business card, but held it a tad longer than necessary after she accepted it. His eyes twinkled. “I’m here to serve,” he said. “The citizens of Turtle Cove hold an extra-special place in my heart.”

"We appreciate that," Mary said. "I was thinking that if our citizens spotted the future governor leaving The Flower Patch with a lovely floral bouquet, it would go a long way to mitigating the effect the scene outside is having on Kaylee's business."

"Mary!" Kaylee gasped.

"No." Ted held up his hand. "She's absolutely right. I'll take two mixed floral arrangements in those plastic vases I can poke into the ground. They're for my parents' graves."

Kaylee nodded solemnly and set to work.

Ted meandered over to the counter and watched. "Have any of the deputies spoken to you? Do they know who the victim is?"

"Not that I've heard yet." Kaylee shoved the image of the dirt-encrusted skull from her mind as she poked a mix of *Zantedeschia aethiopica*, *Gerbera jamesonii*, *Dahlia pinnata*, *Iris germanica*, and *Trientalis borealis*—or as in layman's terms, ivory calla lilies, red gerbera daisies, yellow dahlias, blue irises, and starflowers—into a memorial vase. She finished it off with greenery, then presented it for Ted's inspection. "How's this?"

"Perfect. If I win the governor's race, I might just have to put you on retainer for all our events."

Kaylee blushed. Considering the governor's mansion was in Olympia, over 150 miles away, she didn't have any illusions he was serious. Still, it was nice of him to say.

She quickly made up the second vase, and his assistant paid for them.

"Don't worry," Ted said as he reached the door. "I'll speak to the sheriff. See about getting you your yard back as expeditiously as possible."

"I'd appreciate that. Thank you."

He graced her with another of his warm smiles, nodded to Mary, then trailed his assistant outside.



As soon as the door closed behind him, Mary rolled her eyes. "He hasn't changed a bit."

"How do you mean?"

"He's obsessed with winning whatever he puts his mind to. He's been that way ever since he beat my kid sister in their fifth-grade spelling bee."

Kaylee picked up the button Ted's assistant had given her and chucked it in the closest drawer. "I suppose a politician has to court votes wherever he goes."

Mary laughed. "I'm pretty sure he's interested in courting more than your vote."

## 2



“P

roprietor Kaylee Bleu is digging up more than flowers at The Flower Patch in Turtle Cove,” the radio announcer said in a tone straight out of *The Twilight Zone*.

Kaylee snapped off her car’s radio as she parked in front of her shop. “I wasn’t even the one digging,” she grumbled to Bear as she grabbed her ringing cell phone.

“Hey, Miss Bleu.” Chelsea’s bubbly voice rang over the line. “I think we should postpone our meeting.”

Kaylee’s heart plummeted. She needed this job. She doubted her grandmother’s cash flow had ever been this tight at the end of a busy tourist season. “Is your mom still uncomfortable about the investigation?”

Chelsea snorted as if that was the understatement of the year. “Yeah, she’s in a total snit over the radio report.”

Kaylee muffled a groan.

“I suggested we spend the day shopping on the mainland for bridesmaids’ gifts. Hopefully by tomorrow the talk will have died down.”

*Fat chance of that on an island this size.* Not when the birth of twin foals at the Pomeroy’s horse farm was the lead story the same day an earthquake hit Vancouver Island, less than fifty miles west of them. With Kaylee’s luck, Orcas Island’s weekly newspaper would put out a special edition just to cover the story while it was still hot. “Could we make it Monday instead?” Kaylee asked. “I’m helping out with our church’s youth group tomorrow afternoon.”

“Even better.”

“Great. I’ll see you then.”

Kaylee pushed open her SUV’s driver’s side door and watched as a car crawled along the street in her direction, then parked in front of Death by Chocolate. The delicious smell of baked pastries and chocolate emanating from Jessica’s shop almost tempted Kaylee to take a few extra minutes to indulge in coffee and a muffin—and maybe a little self-pity—before lugging in the jugs of water she’d brought from home. But the sight of a couple pausing at the bakery’s door and looking her way, or more precisely toward the crime scene tape still gracing the side yard, changed her mind.

Bear, still sitting in the car, gave a sharp bark.

“Yeah, my sentiments exactly.” Kaylee adjusted his red-striped bow tie and let him out. “I think I’d rather get straight to work than field questions about the body in the backyard from Jessica’s customers.” She popped her trunk and hefted out two of the three-gallon jugs she’d filled. Bear dashed to the front door. He stood up against it and it swung open.

Kaylee froze, six feet from the door, and glanced up and down the street. “Mary isn’t here yet.” Wariness tingled down her spine. “I was pretty distracted last night,” she muttered to herself. “I guess I could’ve forgotten to lock the door.” She stared at Bear sitting in the open doorway, his tongue lolling out. *And forgotten to latch it properly so even a twenty-pound dachshund could push it open?*

She set down the jugs and cautiously peeked inside. “Hello?” she called out in as cheerful a voice as she could muster. “Anyone here?”

No one answered. The showroom appeared in perfect order.

Leaving the front door ajar, she walked to the back of the three-story Victorian mansion and glanced in the other rooms. At the foot of the stairs, she cocked her ear toward the second floor.

Not a sound.

“Hello? Anyone upstairs?”

Bear bounded up the steps, and Kaylee followed him to the second-story landing, then from room to room. The floor was deserted, so they headed up to the third story. Bear’s little feet scurried across the old pine floors, but there was no other sound.

Finally, Bear let out a happy bark, circled Kaylee’s legs twice, and then headed down to the main floor.

“I guess we’re good.” She went back outside and retrieved the water jugs from the walkway.

The instant she returned, Bear started barking somewhere at the back of the building.

Kaylee grabbed one of the white birch branches she had for sale near the front of the store and held it like a baseball bat. “Who’s there?”

Bear’s barking came in sporadic bursts, as if he were snapping at something.

Maybe a bird or a squirrel or something had made its way in. No matter how much she tried, some creature always seemed to find another way to sneak into the old place.

Kaylee edged down the hallway, just as Bear backed out of the bathroom, barking at whoever, or whatever, he’d cornered inside. Kaylee peeked around the door’s edge. At the sight of a snake dropping through the cracked window, she let out a glass-rattling scream and leaped back.

She blinked rapidly, then realized . . . “That’s not a snake!” Kaylee stomped into the room, closed the toilet lid and stepped up on it. She grabbed hold of the dangling water hose, then stood on her tiptoes and peered out the high window. The hose was coupled to the outside tap on Jessica’s shop, but whoever fished it through the window had disappeared.

“Hello?” Kaylee called again.

"Hello," said a deep voice from behind her.

Startled, she toppled sideways.

Reese Holt lunged forward and caught her. He helped her land almost gracefully. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Jess said you needed water."

"I thought the hose was a snake." Kaylee gulped a deep breath, and with it, his outdoorsy pine scent.

Reese wore his usual worn jeans, work boots, and plaid shirt. He flashed her his disarming smile.

She shouldn't be surprised he'd have a solution to her water problem. The carpenter had been a trusted friend and big help to her grandmother, and he had transferred those qualities to his friendship with Kaylee. She tipped back her head to meet his eyes. They always reminded her of the color of the sky just before sunset.

Kaylee mentally shook herself. She had more pressing matters than the color of Reese's eyes to deal with at the moment.

Releasing her arm, he took the hose from her, dragged more in, and then laid the end in the bathtub where a leak wouldn't do any damage. "There. That should help you handle the essentials until your well is recommissioned."

"That's fabulous. Thanks so much for doing this."

"No problem." Reese's long stride ate up the short distance to the front of the store. "Anything else you need a hand with while I'm here?"

Clearly disappointed that the excitement was over, Bear flopped onto his bed by the cash register.

"Not unless you have any idea who was buried in my yard and how he got there," she said. "Being a crime scene isn't exactly good for business."

"Jessica said the disappearance probably happened when she was a teenager, or maybe in her early twenties?"

Kaylee did some quick math. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

"So I would've been in elementary school." Reese scratched his whiskers, his gaze drifting to the front window. "The only big thing I remember happening then was a teenage girl getting killed in a hit-and-run boating accident."

"They never found the body?"

"They did. But . . ." His eyes lit with a new thought. "I think the teenage boy they suspected of the crime disappeared not long afterward."

Kaylee gasped in horror at the possibility the remains belonged to the suspected teen. At the same time, a morbid hope swelled her chest. If the crushed skull did belong to the missing boy, the sheriff's department would be that much closer to being done with her yard.

"You could check the newspaper archives at the library," Reese said.

The bells above the front door announced Mary's arrival.

"Or Mary might remember his name." Reese repeated the story to her.

"Sure. I remember that. I can't believe I didn't think of it yesterday. The boy's name was Danny Lane. His mom had run off with another man when the boy was really young. And his dad was no prize. It really was no wonder he started running wild."

Through the front window, Kaylee saw Sheriff Eddie Maddox's car pull to the curb, and she rushed outside. "Sheriff, I'm so glad you're here. We think we've figured out the victim."

"Danny Lane," he said.

Kaylee's lungs deflated. "Yes." She should've known he'd have deduced as much when he reviewed the department's list of missing persons.

"The coroner confirmed the ID twenty minutes ago by matching the skull's teeth to the boy's dental records."

"Do you think someone murdered him to avenge the girl he killed in the boating accident?" Kaylee asked.

Sheriff Maddox's cheek muscle twitched. "The coroner hasn't found any evidence of foul play."

Kaylee shot him a baffled look. "What about the fractures in the back of his skull?"

"It's consistent with a tumble into an open pit and knocking his head on the wellhead."

"Except that George said he was facedown."

"Because he likely managed to roll over in an attempt to crawl out, but inadvertently brought a landslide of dirt over himself, which prevented George from spotting him before he filled the hole the next day."

Kaylee frowned. To get the twin fracture lines she'd seen, Danny's head would've had to have struck the edge of the wellhead at least twice.

Sheriff Maddox tilted his head. "You'll have your yard back soon. I thought you'd be happy."

Kaylee couldn't explain it, but the sheriff's theory didn't sit right with her. "What was Danny doing in the shop's yard?"

"I'll tell you what he was doing," growled a voice like gravel.

Startled, Kaylee whirled around to find Glen Phelps, the elderly electronics storeowner she'd hardly seen since she moved to Turtle Cove.

"He was a troublemaker." Glen punctuated the statement with a rap of his cane on the sidewalk, then let out a raspy cough. "He'd graffiti our store walls, soap the windows, pilfer product. He was probably prowling around the yard trying to find a way in and mess up her flowers somehow. He'd had run-ins with her before."

"He had a history of misdemeanors," Sheriff Maddox said. "The old-timers I questioned also believed the boy's disappearance

confirmed everyone's suspicions that he was responsible for the boating accident that killed Joelle Spiece the week before your well was dug."

"But clearly Danny didn't flee to escape conviction like they must've assumed," Kaylee said. "So what does that tell you?"

"If you ask me, he got what he deserved." Mr. Phelps leaned heavily on his cane. "You sneak around where you shouldn't, you pay."

The sheriff crossed his arms. "How about you both go about your business and leave the investigation to the professionals? I'll be in touch." He climbed back into his car and drove away.

With a harrumph, Glen turned on his heel and walked in the direction of his store. Kaylee approached The Flower Patch's front door just as Reese came out carrying a bouquet.

"Giving us business *and* ensuring our plants are watered?" Kaylee smiled. "You're a gem."

His responding smile was a shade sheepish. "Congressman Munk called in the bouquet order. I told Mary I could deliver it since I'm headed to his estate to start building him a new deck."

"Ah well, thank you for that."

"What did Maddox have to say?"

"Our victim was, in fact, Danny Lane. They think his death was an accident. He had a reputation for vandalizing the local businesses."

Reese studied her for a long moment. "But you have your doubts?"

"Yeah."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "It's not your problem. Our sheriff's department is more than capable of handling it."

Kaylee shrugged.

"If I can help you with anything else, don't hesitate to call, okay?"



“Like I said—you’re a gem.” A moment after he headed for his truck, Kaylee remembered the unlatched shop door. “Hey, how’d you get in my shop this morning?”

“The front door was unlocked.”