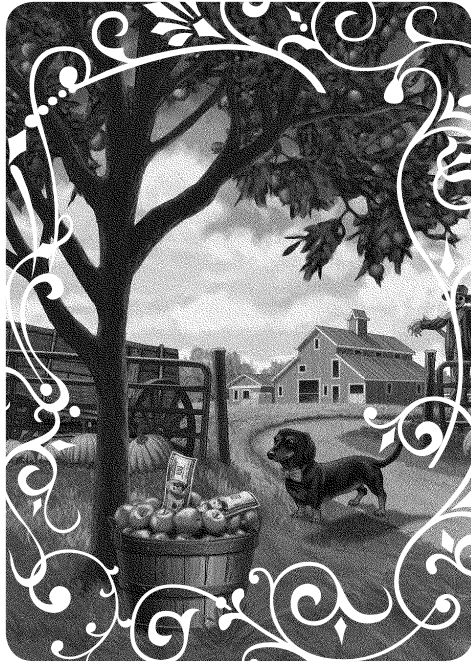


Loot of All Evil





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Elizabeth Penney

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Loot of All Evil

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Series Creators: Shari Lohner, Janice Tate

Editor: Elizabeth Morrissey

Cover Illustrator: Bob Kayganich

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1



One sunny November morning on Washington's Orcas Island, Kaylee Bleu opened the front door of her florist shop, The Flower Patch, and stepped into a thicket of . . . pumpkins?

Arrangements made with white, orange, frosted, and gilded miniature pumpkins caught her eye from every surface. Pumpkin-trimmed garlands were tacked to the Victorian mansion's ornate window and door trim, and vibrant matching wreaths hung on the wall. A giant basket full of speckled pumpkins trimmed in bittersweet vines rested near the front counter, and pint-size cuties marched along the countertop. Although she was a botanist by training, Kaylee hadn't realized that the *Cucurbita pepo* family had so many varied and tiny forms. Even her dachshund, Bear, seemed impressed as he glanced around with wide eyes.

"What do you think?" Mary Bishop grinned, blue eyes twinkling behind her glasses. The part-time floral designer had stayed on when Kaylee bought her grandmother's shop, and Kaylee was forever grateful. Mary's brilliant, innovative designs never failed to delight.

She must have been up all night doing this.

Kaylee set down her tote, her gaze still taking in the colorful displays. "I love them. They're gorgeous. But I thought pumpkin season was over. Well, except for pie at Thanksgiving dinner."

Mary nodded. "That's how it used to be, when everyone grew jack-o'-lanterns or pie pumpkins. But these ornamental types have really caught on. I thought we could do a big push with them for late fall this year, if you like the idea." She touched a pale-green eucalyptus wreath adorned with

vibrant mini pumpkins. “We can sell wreaths like this all the way through Christmas.”

“I think it’s a great idea, Mary.” Kaylee’s brain began to whirl with design ideas of her own. *Pumpkins: not just for Halloween anymore.* She smiled.

Bear sniffed at a snowman created from stacked white pumpkins and gave a little bark, making the women laugh. “We’ll put that snowman in the back until after Thanksgiving,” Mary said. “I know some stores put out Christmas stuff in mid-November or earlier, but I’m not quite ready for that.”

“Me neither.” Kaylee sighed, thinking of the holiday fast approaching. With her parents in Florida and her grandmother in Arizona, it was shaping up to be another quiet one in her small adopted hometown of Turtle Cove. “I can’t believe Thanksgiving is only two weeks away. Where does the time go?”

Mary ran a hand through her white and gray bob. “Wait until you’re my age. The months and years really seem to zip by.”

“That’s what Grandma always says.” Kaylee started walking toward the back, where there was a small kitchen. “Want some coffee? I need another cup this morning.”

“Yes please,” Mary called. “I’m going to get this place straightened up before we open.”

By the time Kaylee returned with two coffee mugs, Jessica Roberts, owner of Death by Chocolate, the bakery next door, was at the counter talking to Mary. “These pumpkins are adorable.” Jessica picked up two of the smallest, one perfectly round and the other with white ribs and orange stripes. “What are they, babies?” Petite with short, dark hair, the baker’s pretty features revealed her Asian heritage.

“No, they’re bred to be small,” Mary said. “And in different colors too. Every year there are new varieties coming out.”

“Consider me a fan.” Jessica gently set the pumpkins back

on the counter, then clasped her hands together. "I've come to ask you both for a favor." With a slight wince, she waited for an answer.

"What is it, Jess?" Kaylee asked as she settled on a stool behind the counter. Jessica was known for her enthusiastic overcommitment at times, so Kaylee had a pretty good idea where this was going.

Jessica's bright eyes danced between their faces. "As you know, I'm on the planning committee for the Turtle Cove community Thanksgiving dinner this year. It's going to be held at the Northern Lights Inn, which is a fantastic location. We're getting donations of locally grown vegetables and even turkeys raised here on the island—"

Kaylee grinned. "And you need some volunteers. Well, count me in. I won't be with family, so helping with the community dinner sounds perfect." Even she could hear the dejection in her voice.

"Bea's not coming?" Jessica asked. "I'm sorry to hear that. And I take it you're not going to see her or your parents either?"

"No, not this year." Kaylee pretended great interest in her coffee, which wasn't nearly as good as the fresh-ground java Jessica brewed next door. "But I'm sure a lot of other people are in the same boat, right? That's why you're having the community dinner."

"Exactly. But a lot of people do attend with their family or friends. They enjoy having someone else make most of the meal." Jessica laughed. "And do the dishes. The inn has an industrial dishwasher."

"I can do without dishes and so can Herb," Mary said. "Count us in to volunteer and to eat. We bring something that day to share, right?"

"Yes we do," Jessica said. "The item depends on your last name. Both of you are 'B,' so you should bring dessert. I'm 'R,' so I'm doing a side dish."

Kaylee picked up a mini pumpkin. "If these don't sell, I see a lot of pies in my future." The others laughed.

"Actually, that brings me to another thing," Jessica said. "To raise money for the dinner, the Main Street businesses are going to hold a bake sale. We're calling it Anything But Pie. The rule is, you have to use pumpkin but you can't—"

"Make pie," Kaylee and Mary said in unison.

"Cute idea," Kaylee added. "It will be interesting to see how creative we can all get."

"That's what I thought." Jessica glanced at the wall clock and yelped. "I'd better get back. One of my employees is going off shift. See you later." With a jingle of bells, she dashed out the door.

The shop seemed quiet without their energetic friend. Kaylee reached under the counter and switched on the sound system. Soft music filled the air. "What's on the agenda today?"

Mary peered over her glasses at a note, then handed it to Kaylee. "Since we are going ahead with the specialty pumpkins, here's an order for what I think we'll need. Would you mind driving out to Madrona Grove Farm and Orchard to pick it up while I work on arrangements? That's where I got all these yesterday. It's a really nice drive."

At the word *drive*, Bear leaped up and began to cavort around Kaylee's stool, his nails skittering on the polished wood floor. They both smiled at his excitement.

"Looks like Bear wants to go." Kaylee finished her coffee. "And I love exploring the island, so the answer is yes."

"Great," Mary said. "I'll call ahead, and hopefully they'll have it ready for you when you get there."

Kaylee hopped into her red Ford Escape with Bear and set off toward the farm. Orcas Island was shaped like saddlebags, with the bay of East Sound dividing two land masses. Turtle Cove was in the western land mass and her destination in the eastern

one, which meant she had to drive up one side of the fjord-like bay and down the other.

Her route cut through the inland countryside, a mix of forests and fields with occasional houses set among gardens or in the woods. The autumn peak had passed, but some orange and yellow leaves still clung and the hayfields were golden umber. November was usually the wettest month, but the good weather had held this year. Today the air was almost totally still, giving the landscape a placid peace as it basked in the sunshine.

“We’d better enjoy it while we can,” Kaylee said to Bear. “Winter will be upon us soon enough.”

They soon reached Eastsound, the largest town on the island. The medical center, library, and historical museum were here, along with a variety of other businesses. Kaylee detoured down Main Street, enjoying a glimpse of the charming and eclectic boutiques, shops, and eateries. As a shop owner now, she took a special interest in seeing how other business owners did window displays or otherwise made their stores inviting.

Kaylee thought back to her former employment as a professor of plant taxonomy at the University of Washington in Seattle, a position she’d suddenly lost due to department reorganization. Her grandmother, Bea Lyons, offered her a chance to transition from the ivory tower to retail, a move that required connecting with the community and her customers. Now she could apply the theoretical to real life.

After leaving the village behind, Kaylee took the road leading down the shore. The winding road offered water views on one side and verdant hills on the other. Now that summer was over, there were few sailboats in the water, but she spotted several fishermen in small boats and a fishing charter headed out to deeper water. This was salmon season after all.

At the end of the peninsula, she slowed, looking for Madrona

Grove Road. *There it is.* She signaled and turned, then immediately slowed. The road was no more than a lane, barely wide enough for two cars to pass. Dense shrubbery or brick walls hid large houses with waterfront property.

Past the last mansion, the road became dirt. Shrubby woods pressed close for a while, and then she saw a painted sign for the farm at the foot of a gravel driveway. A short way in, the woods vanished, giving way to fields on both sides. A white two-story frame farmhouse sat next to a charming brown barn surrounded by flower gardens and potted shrubs and trees. A few black-and-white hens pecked in the grass, free-range.

Bear sat up and stared at the birds, his ears at attention. "No, Bear. We're not chasing the chickens." She pulled the SUV into a space between a Volkswagen Beetle and a tan sedan. She fished for a leash and attached it to the excited little dog before exiting the car. Terrorized chickens would not get the relationship with the farm off on the right foot.

A middle-aged woman in faded jeans and a barn jacket was arranging a display of perennials in pots. She flicked her long, dark braid behind her shoulder and smiled at Kaylee, blue eyes crinkling. "Good morning. Can I help you?"

"Hi, I'm Kaylee Bleu from The Flower Patch over in Turtle Cove. I'm here to pick up an order of pumpkins."

The woman nodded and pointed to the open barn doors. "You'll want to talk to my husband, Paul. He's inside. I'm Violet Moore. Welcome to the farm."

"Nice to meet you," Kaylee said. She tugged at her dog's leash, trying to prevent him from lurching toward the farm owner. "Come on, Bear."

"What a cutie." Violet hunkered down and gave Bear a pat on the head. With a wag of his tail, he nuzzled her hand. "He's a lover."

"He sure is." Her appreciation of Bear warmed Kaylee's

heart. "We'll let you get back to work." Kaylee entered the barn, practically dragging Bear away from his new friend.

The interior was rustic, with that distinctive aroma of old wood and hay common to old barns. Tables and bins held an array of pumpkins, apples, and a selection of late vegetables. A man was loading a bin with huge bundles of leafy greens. Everything about him was nut-brown—his curly hair, tanned skin, and clothing. He glanced at Kaylee with narrow hazel eyes and nodded a greeting.

"What are those?" Kaylee asked, although it was not what she had planned to say.

"Collard greens." His hands continued to move as he stacked the bundles. "Fantastic with black-eyed peas and cornbread."

"Did someone say collards?" A woman darted out around a set of shelves holding dried herbs, sunflower seeds in packets, and jam. "Boyd, we have to get some. As my aunt in Georgia says, I love me some collards."

Surprised recognition jolted Kaylee. "Kathy? I didn't expect to see you here." Kathy Fitz was the head librarian at Orcas Island Library in Eastsound.

The librarian rocked back on her heels. "Kaylee, what are you doing here?" A handsome Native American man loomed up behind her, shaking his long, black hair into place. Kaylee wondered if he shared her Quinault ancestry, which she'd inherited from her father.

"I'm buying pumpkins for the shop. I could ask you the same thing." Kaylee smiled but she allowed her gaze to go beyond Kathy and rest on her companion. Bear investigated both newcomers with a thorough shoe sniffing.

"Doing a little shopping too. Kaylee Bleu, meet Boyd Parsons." Kathy tugged on the man's arm, bringing him forward. She looked up at him, her expression dreamy. "He's my ex-husband."

Kaylee quickly suppressed her shock. According to the story she'd heard, Kathy had gotten divorced twenty years ago from a man who cheated on her and had been happily single ever since.

"Nice to meet you, Boyd," she said, dimly aware that Paul had finished stacking the collards and left the barn. Hopefully he'd be back soon so she could ask about her order.

Boyd smiled at Kaylee but before he could speak, Kathy continued. "Boyd is a best-selling true crime writer. Maybe you've heard of him." She smiled proudly. "He's here working on an Orcas Island cold case for his next book."

"Of course I've heard of you." Kaylee realized she had seen Boyd's books, but she'd never connected him to Kathy. "Tell me more about your new project." Her pulse jumped in excitement. Due to her forensic botany work and the mysteries she'd solved in the past, she was eager to learn more.

Paul hadn't returned to the barn, but other customers were milling around the shop, including a mother and her toddler, as well as two men wearing windbreakers and khakis with binoculars around their necks. Orcas Island was popular with bird-watchers all year round.

Boyd chuckled, a deep rich sound. "Well, we know who the perpetrators were. It's the spoils of their crime I'm trying to find." He had the smooth, cultured voice of a classical music radio show host. "In the 1930s, a Seattle bank was robbed and one of the perpetrators, Lester Clayton, escaped to this island. He holed up with a widow who lived at Buttercup Cottage."

"That's right next door to this farm," Kathy added. "Boyd bought the place for a writing retreat."

"Killed two birds," Boyd said, not noticing the bird-watchers within earshot. "There's long been speculation about what happened to the proceeds of the robbery, as well as about Edna Taylor, the widow. Some wonder if she was in cahoots with Lester."

"People have searched for the loot over the years with no luck," Kathy put in. "But Boyd thinks he can figure it out."

Boyd's smile was modest. "I hope so. The other robbers claimed Lester was the bagman, so there's a good chance it's still here on the island."

"I assume Lester didn't say where he hid it." Kaylee pictured the man biding his time in jail until he could retrieve his ill-gotten fortune.

The writer sighed and shook his head. "Unfortunately, Lester was killed in a shoot-out at the cottage. And Edna claimed she had no knowledge of the money, never even saw it. She passed away from influenza soon after the event."

"It all sounds very intriguing," Kaylee said. "I can't wait to hear what you find out." Aware of time passing, she craned her neck looking for Paul. He was standing with Violet out by the perennials, speaking in low, intense tones. Then Paul pivoted and stalked back toward the barn. That was her cue. "It was great seeing you two, but I'd better grab my pumpkins and get going."

"We'll see you later, Kaylee. Have a good day." Kathy linked arms with Boyd and led him toward the collards. "I can't wait to cook you my special Southern good-luck meal."

"I can use plenty of that," Boyd said, giving that attractive chuckle again.

With a headshake of bemusement at the couple, who seemed on the best of terms despite their history, Kaylee hurried to intercept Paul. "I'm here to pick up an order of pumpkins for The Flower Patch."

He took the paper Kaylee handed to him and scanned it. "I have it ready for you. Bring your car around back and we'll load up."

Kaylee drove to the loading area and Paul helped her stow several crates of pumpkins in the rear. "If you need more, let me

know," the farmer said. "We've got plenty." His lips curved in a brief smile. "Though they are going fast."

"I'll bet," Kaylee said. "According to my designer, they're really hot this year."

Paul scratched his curly head. "Violet told me ornamentals would extend the season past Halloween and she was right. Never thought I'd see the day pumpkins would be described as fashionable. Wonders never cease."

"That's for sure." With a laugh, Kaylee thanked him and hopped back into her car. As she drove slowly along the rutted lane leading back to the drive, she saw the two bird-watchers again. The short, stout one waved at her to stop. Thinking they needed directions or perhaps bird information, she braked and rolled down her window.

They trotted up to the car. The stout one leaned in her window. "Hey, miss. You're from around here, right?" At her nod, he asked, "Do you really think there's buried treasure on this island? Or is that guy just trying to sell books?"

"I honestly have no idea," Kaylee said. "I'm fairly new to Orcas." With a wave, she pressed the gas again. She couldn't blame the men for asking. The idea of finding a bank robber's hidden spoils was enticing.

2



“Tonight I brought something a little extra.” Mary set a thermos of hot cider on the table in the meeting room. “Besides this.” The Petal Pushers garden club met on Tuesdays in the public room of the Old Cape Lighthouse’s keeper’s cottage, a historic building with a water view. Mary foraged in a second large tote bag and pulled out four orange pumpkins about the size of cantaloupes.

“Halloween’s been over for a while,” DeeDee Wilcox said dubiously. DeeDee owned *Between the Lines*, a mystery bookstore near The Flower Patch. In addition to selling books, she made wonderful handmade goat milk soap and skin care products, which she sold at Kaylee’s shop.

“I realize that,” Mary said. “We’re making table ornaments for Thanksgiving.” Next out of her bag was a selection of hand tools and a drill.

“If Mary gets her way, we’ll be selling pumpkins until Christmas.” Kaylee grabbed a dark chocolate brownie from the plate Jessica had contributed from her bakery. Sitting at her feet, Bear begged with a whine. “No chocolate for you, Bear.” She tossed him a dog treat instead, then took a bite of her brownie. “Yum, cream cheese. These are awesome, Jess.”

“Thank you kindly. New recipe.” Jessica took it upon herself to pour the cider since Mary was busy. “That looks dangerous,” she said, waving at the drill. “Are you sure you trust us with that thing?”

“I’ll do the drilling,” Mary said. “I only have one drill anyway. But you can create the designs.” The last thing out of her bag was

an example for them to reference—a pumpkin decorated with small drilled starbursts and lit by a battery-powered votive. Unlike a jack-o'-lantern, which usually had the top cut open, the bottom of this pumpkin had been removed to accommodate the light.

“Oh, a little lantern!” DeeDee said, clasping her hands together. “I love it. The girls will too, especially Zoe.” Zoe was her eleven-year-old daughter, sister to the eight-year-old Polly. “I might make heart shapes on mine. They’ll flip over that.”

“We should do some for the community Thanksgiving dinner,” Kaylee suggested. “They’d be great centerpieces.”

“Good idea,” Jessica said. “Let’s add it to the plan. We can get other volunteers to help.” She dispensed refills of cider, the brownies went around again, and the women began creating their designs, working on paper first.

“I had an interesting encounter at Madrona Grove Farm today,” Kaylee said. “I ran into Kathy Fitz and her ex-husband.”

DeeDee whistled. “Boyd Parsons? Is he still a hunk? He looks like it in his author photos, but those glamour shots are often deceptive.”

Jessica narrowed her eyes. “You mean is he still a no-good cheating rat? He broke Kathy’s heart, as I recall. It was pretty ugly. She was depressed for a long time.”

Kaylee put up a hand. “I have no idea about the rat part. He *is* gorgeous and well-spoken. The two of them seemed happy together.”

“Oh, don’t tell me that.” Jessica put a hand to her forehead in a dramatic gesture. “Oliver lost a whole flower today and now I know why.” Oliver was her lavender geranium, credited for revealing omens of bad events to come. “I can’t believe Kathy would even consider reconciling with that man. He’s going to break her heart again.”

Mary was busy cutting the bottoms off the pumpkins, then

scooping out seeds and insides onto a newspaper. "That's not fair, Jess. He might have changed, seen the error of his ways. It can happen."

"I hope so," Jessica muttered. "Or else he'd better watch out." She stabbed her pencil onto her paper extra hard as though to emphasize her wrath.

"I'll warn him you're armed with that pencil," DeeDee said dryly. "Speaking of exes, Violet Moore, who owns Madrona Grove Farm, used to date Boyd. That was a few years after he and Kathy split up."

Kaylee thought of the tense conversation she'd witnessed between husband and wife. Had they been arguing about Boyd? "I met her today. She and her husband both seem nice."

"They are," Mary said. "I like to shop there. Support your local farmers, you know."

"If you lined up Boyd's exes, they'd make a bridge to the mainland," Jessica said.

DeeDee sent her a look. "I will say, as far as *writing* goes," she said, "Boyd is excellent. His breakout book resulted in an innocent man being released from jail."

"I think I read that one," Mary said. "It was about a casino robbery in Nevada, right?"

The bookstore owner nodded. "One of the employees was killed during a hostage situation and a guy named Eldon Landis was arrested. Boyd did some sleuthing and found out Eldon had been framed. They arrested the real killer and set Eldon free. Not that Eldon was a choirboy by any means, but he wasn't in on that robbery."

"It *was* a good book," Jessica said grudgingly. "I'll give him that. Luke loved it." Luke was Jessica's husband, a tax accountant. "He especially liked reading about how casinos manage their money."

"Boyd was on all the talk shows back then." DeeDee picked up her cup of cider, her expression thoughtful. "I wonder if I can book him for an author talk."

"Probably," Kaylee said. She was drawing flowers for her pumpkin design. "He just bought a house on the island. Buttercup Cottage." She watched the effect of this bombshell on her friends.

Jessica slapped the table. "Boyd bought a house here? Nothing good will come of that. Poor Kathy."

Mary raised her eyebrows. "Buttercup Cottage? Why, that's where a bank robber hid out during the Depression."

DeeDee's mind was on her shop. "He's moving to the island? Then I'll definitely be able to book him." She tilted her head. "If I do it soon, I can really boost Christmas sales."

Kaylee smiled. "Hold that thought, DeeDee. Jess, we'll talk to Kathy and be there for her, no matter what. And Mary, as a matter of fact, Boyd's next book is based entirely on Lester Clayton and the bank robbery."

"A Boyd Parsons book set on Orcas Island?" DeeDee asked with a rapturous expression. "Now I know I've died and gone to heaven." She grabbed a brownie and took a big bite.

"But wait. There's more." Kaylee put up a hand with a smile. "Boyd thinks he can find the proceeds of the robbery. No one ever has, apparently."

"No, but they've dug holes all over the island looking for it." Mary handed out rolls of thin, black tape. "Put a strip around the middle of your pumpkin so your dots will be level."

The other women followed her example, then began to draw their designs on the hollowed-out pumpkins with markers.

"How's this?" Jessica handed Mary her pumpkin, banded with rows of dots in a sophisticated pattern. "Buried treasure, huh? Maybe we can get in on that." She sighed. "Wouldn't it be

great to find it? I could pay off our house and help Mila with her student loans." Mila was Jessica and Luke's adult daughter.

"In that case, we'd have to see what the law says. The bank may still have a claim." Mary picked up the drill and switched it on. Startled, Bear darted to the far side of the room. After realizing it wasn't going to hurt him, he trotted back to Kaylee's side.

Mary deftly drilled holes in Jessica's pumpkin, then did the same to the others. Next, the battery lights were inserted and switched on, highlighting the creative patterns they'd made.

Kaylee admired the glowing flower cutouts adorning her orange pumpkin, thinking they were much nicer than a scary jack-o'-lantern. Who knew a pumpkin could be so pretty? "Let's do some of these for the shop."

Mary laughed. "I was hoping you'd say that. I think they'll be big sellers. And we can spray them with a bleach solution as a preservative."

"I'm going to take mine home and put it in the entryway as a night-light," Jessica said. She turned her pumpkin around, examining every side. "This was fun. But before we adjourn, I did want to discuss the bake sale next week. As I may have mentioned, we can make whatever we want as long as it contains pumpkin and isn't pie."

"I'll make my pumpkin scones and whoopie pies," Mary said. "Those are always a hit."

"I'll have to think about what I'll make," DeeDee said. "Maybe I'll do cookies. How does pumpkin chocolate chip sound? The girls can help me. They love making cookies." She smiled. "And eating the dough."

"Don't let them eat too much. I'd like you to bring six dozen cookies." Jessica wrote a note on her pad. "I'm making pumpkin truffles and pumpkin chocolate cupcakes from original recipes. Mine have to include chocolate, of course, because

people expect that from me.” She looked at Kaylee in inquiry. “Any thoughts?”

“Um, no. Not yet,” Kaylee hedged. She wasn’t as experienced a baker as the others. “Let me do some research and I’ll get back to you soon, I promise.”

“By the end of the week, okay?” Jessica put her notepad away. “I want to make a flyer and place ads in the paper so people will get excited about the bake sale.”

Oh boy. Her name publicly associated with a baked item? Kaylee resolved to find something stunning but not too hard. That might be a challenge.

The meeting broke up soon after, and Kaylee and Bear headed home to Wildflower Cottage, located a couple of miles from downtown. As a child, she’d enjoyed staying with her grandparents in the cozy, white farmhouse surrounded by fields of lavender. Living there was one of the best things about her new life, and every time she arrived home, a deep peace swept over her. Even now in late fall, she could smell the aroma of *Lavandula* drifting from the dormant fields.

Inside, she gave Bear a fresh bowl of water and an evening snack, then went to the master bedroom to get ready for bed. She was washing her face when her cell phone buzzed on the nightstand.

The screen flashed the caller’s name: *Grandma*. Kaylee’s heart skipped a beat. Why was Bea calling so late? Scenarios of illness or broken bones flashed through her mind. “Hello?” She could hear the fear in her voice and she cleared her throat. “Grandma?” There, that was better.

“Hello, Kaylee.” Bea’s voice was full of warmth and life. “Did I scare you, calling so late? I’m sorry. I guessed you probably just got home from the Petal Pushers meeting.” Bea had been a member before she moved away.

Kaylee plopped down on the bed, relief coursing through her. "You did surprise me a little. I just got home about five minutes ago."

"How was the meeting?" Bea sighed. "I miss them."

Come visit. "Tonight, Jess was roping us all into this Anything But Pie bake sale to benefit the community Thanksgiving dinner. Oh, and we drilled holes in pumpkins. Rather, Mary did." Kaylee kicked off her shoes and wiggled her toes. Bear, finished with his snack, trotted into the room and jumped up on the bed to snuggle.

"Holes in pumpkins? That's quite the thing now. I saw that in a home and garden magazine. Really nice for decorations."

Kaylee ran her hand along Bear's silky fur. "I agree. Mary sent me to Madrona Grove Farm today to buy tons of those tiny ornamental pumpkins. We're making arrangements and decorations for Thanksgiving and maybe even Christmas." Kaylee went on with details, knowing that her florist grandmother liked to talk shop.

"Send me pictures," Bea said. "Your plans sound lovely."

Kaylee opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it, then went ahead. "I wish you were going to be here with me for Thanksgiving. Is there any way . . .?"

Bea sighed. "I'm afraid not, honey. It costs so much to fly around the holidays. And it's so crowded and crazy. How about I come for Easter?"

That was almost six months away. "All right. I'll take what I can get." Kaylee knew she sounded grumpy but didn't try too hard to perk up her attitude. What good was having a grandmother if you couldn't be yourself, even if a bit childish and graceless at times? At her tone, Bear picked up his head, his ears pricked. "It's okay, Bear," she whispered. "I'm just disappointed."

"Oh, by the way." Bea changed the subject. "I heard that Boyd Parsons is writing a book about Edna Taylor and the bank robber."

"What?" Kaylee rocked back against her pillows, swinging her legs up onto the bed. "How did you hear that? I only found out about it today."

Bea's tone was smug. "I still have connections on the island, my dear. And news that juicy can't be contained." She chuckled. "And Kathy Fitz needs to have her head examined, bless her heart. Boyd's charming and interesting, but he's not reliable in the least. As they say, once a . . . well, you know." She didn't need to finish.

"You really are tied into the gossip network," Kaylee said in admiration. "Maybe I should call you for news."

"Maybe so. Anyway, I have something to tell you about Edna. Back in the 1930s, The Flower Patch building was home to several small businesses. She ran her seamstress business out of there."

"I didn't know that," Kaylee said. She pictured a sewing shop, with bolts of cloth and dressmaker dummies. Maybe it had been in The Flower Patch's main room.

"She stitched curtains and upholstery as well as clothing," Bea said. "When I bought the building, I found several boxes and trunks in the attic that belonged to her."

That piece of information startled Kaylee out of her relaxed state. She sat bolt upright, ignoring Bear, who grumbled at being disturbed. "Do you think there is anything in there related to the bank robbery?" Bear sighed and curled up again.

"I don't know. I remember seeing a lot of papers and some cloth and notions. Nothing too interesting, but I never disposed of it all either. I always had in the back of my mind that I'd go through it more carefully in case there was something of historic value."

"Why did the robber pick Edna's place to hide in, do you know?" That part had bothered Kaylee since she heard the story. How terrible it would be to have a fugitive criminal barge into your home.

Bea snorted softly. "That was never really determined. Some said he landed his boat nearby and hers was the first house he found. Others thought she knew him from the past and he sought her out specifically."

"What do you think?"

"I'm not sure," Bea said. "From what I know of Edna, she was a respectable, churchgoing woman. It doesn't seem likely she would willingly be involved with or aid a bank robber." She paused. "Maybe you'll find the answer in her things."

They disconnected a few minutes later, with Kaylee promising to keep Bea updated regarding the mystery around Edna Taylor. She finished getting ready for bed, grateful to crawl between the soft flannel sheets, but somehow sleep eluded her. She imagined the robber pulling his boat up in Madrona Grove in the dead of night. Then he would steal through the woods and fields, seeking shelter. Why Orcas Island? There were 172 islands in the San Juan chain—only a handful were occupied, true, but there were many places a man could hide. Almost 100 years before, even fewer people had lived on these islands. They were isolated, undeveloped, and pristine.

Lester had seen the cottage lights. Then what greeted him? A joyous welcome or frightened screaming? Kaylee had trouble deciding.

She needed to see their faces. Sitting up and switching on the lamp to Bear's disgruntlement, Kaylee picked up her phone. She opened a browser and searched for Lester Clayton. To her surprise, he was movie-star handsome, with a square jaw and straight brows over intense light-colored eyes. He had been only twenty-six when he died.

Edna Taylor was younger than Kaylee had expected, with abundant dark hair, defined cheekbones, and dark lipstick on her full lips—or at least it appeared so in the black-and-white

photo. She was twenty-four when she passed away from the flu. According to the information online, she'd been a teenage bride and then widowed when her husband was killed in an accident.

Kaylee set her phone back on the nightstand. Now she had images to go with the names, but her research had been inconclusive. Had the young seamstress been a victim or an accomplice?

She could hardly wait to find out.