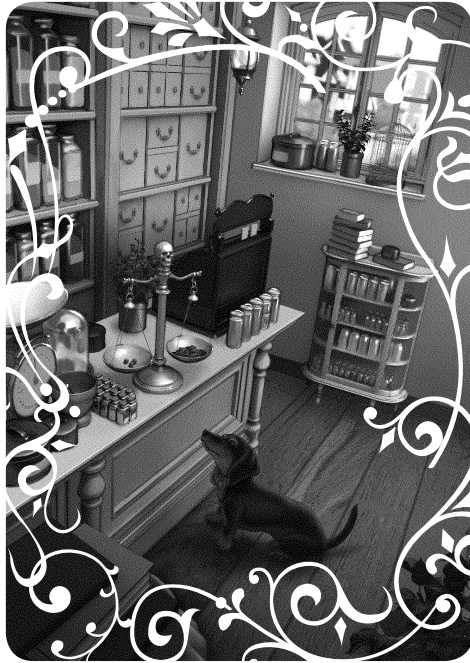


Herbal Malady





Herbal Malady



Jolyn Sharp

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1



For the customers of The Flower Patch, the signs of incipient spring included colorful crocuses dotting the ground or early daffodils joyously pushing toward the sun.

But for Kaylee Bleu, the shop's owner, the surest sign was the sharp spike in traffic through the store. The season nurtured hope and optimism, but it also meant long days and sore feet for Kaylee. This was the time when everyone had a hundred questions as they contemplated the changes and experiments they would introduce in this year's garden.

Of course, Kaylee had done her best to encourage this state of affairs. She had spent the winter ordering plants and planters, and with the help of her part-time floral designer, Mary Bishop, she'd set up the shop as a sort of spring wonderland—or vernal vortex, as she sometimes thought of it in her more cynical moments.

Kaylee and Mary had rearranged the store into themed groups. The culinary herbs and small potted succulents were next to a section of brilliant hanging baskets. Flats of annuals and baskets of bulbs and tubers—for those who liked to plan ahead—led into a display of larger potted plants and even a few potted ficus trees decorated with dainty white fairy lights.

Kaylee might awaken feeling refreshed and energized each spring morning, but the end of the workday invariably found her exhausted.

And so, one day shortly before closing time, Kaylee sighed when the bell over the shop door chimed.

Bear, Kaylee's reddish-brown dachshund, barked once. The

dog had long ago appointed himself the official greeter of The Flower Patch.

Kaylee mustered a smile as she turned to the door. She knew most of the residents in Turtle Cove, but she didn't know the woman who had entered the store. Turtle Cove was on the West Sound side of Orcas Island in Washington, and it was only late April, so the tourism season hadn't really kicked in yet.

The woman appeared to be in her early sixties. She was casually dressed in a soft green T-shirt and comfortable-looking gray cargo pants with hiking shoes flecked with mud. What troubled Kaylee was the woman's expression—a mixture of concern and unhappiness.

Taken aback, Kaylee hesitated for a fraction of a second before moving forward again. "Good afternoon. May I help you?"

The woman caught sight of her. "Kaylee Bleu?"

"Yes, I'm Kaylee," she replied. Now she was more puzzled. Few people in this small community found it necessary to ask for her by name.

"I'm Vi Gherson, and I've been told that you might be able to help me."

"What can I do for you? Are you a gardener?"

Vi shook her head. "I hear you're a scientist and you have a degree in plant taxonomy."

"That's right," Kaylee said, feeling more curious than ever.

Before Kaylee was laid off from her teaching position at the University of Washington in Seattle, she had taught plant taxonomy and served as a forensic botanist consultant for local law enforcement. Her scientific career didn't usually come up in conversation with her customers, though.

Vi nodded, clearly relieved. "I want you to analyze this for me," she said with both defiance and doubt in her voice. With a flourish, she pulled a plastic sandwich bag from her purse

and thumped it onto the counter.

Frowning, Kaylee peered down at the bag but did not touch it. It contained whole semidry leaves and twigs mixed with bits of coarsely chopped plant matter. Based only on appearance, she could tell that it was a mixture of plants. She studied her visitor. "What is it?"

Vi stared back at her. "That's what I want you to tell me," she replied with a touch of impatience.

"Yes, but where did it come from? Why do you want to know about it? I'm afraid I need a little more context." By nature and training, Kaylee seldom jumped to an immediate conclusion. But she did wonder if Vi had found a bag of loose tea among her child or grandchild's things and assumed the bag contained drugs.

"Okay, yes, fair enough." Vi seemed to gather her thoughts for a moment. "You've heard of Dr. T.?"

Surprised, Kaylee bit back a response. The first words that came to mind were *quack*, *fake*, and *charlatan*. Then his radio jingle wormed its way into her mind, sung by a chorus of children:

Wake up

Rise up

A new day

A new you.

Then a silky male voice intoned, "Dr. T.'s Tisanes: Ancient Wisdom for New Age Health."

"From the radio?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

Vi narrowed her eyes with a grim smile. Her manner suggested that she knew perfectly well what words Kaylee had declined to

use, but she merely said, "Yes, from the radio and the hundreds of flyers posted on every bulletin board on the island."

A new glimmer of suspicion about this woman and her motivation was forming. Warily, Kaylee asked, "What about him?"

Vi gestured at the bag. "That's Dr. T.'s stuff. It's his Brain Booster, his most popular product."

Kaylee had heard of the so-called miracle supplement. It was heavily advertised all over the Puget Sound area.

"I want you to analyze it," Vi continued, "and tell me if it has legitimate medicinal properties. I need to know if there's any way it can do the things Dr. T. claims."

"If it's a question of medicines—" Kaylee began.

"The FDA doesn't classify it as a medicine," Vi interrupted. "It's considered a supplement."

"So that means it's almost completely unregulated," Kaylee added.

"Yes, but it doesn't stop Dr. T. from making medical claims about it. His public advertising is very circumspect, but I know for a fact that behind closed doors he promises all kinds of health benefits."

"Even still—"

"I don't have any proof," Vi admitted. "And the FDA doesn't want to get involved. Don't you see?" Her voice took on a plaintive note. "I've tried. I've written letters. But the FDA says it's a supplement and they aren't willing to get into it. That's why I've come to you."

Kaylee saw a fierce determination in Vi's expression and stance. She thought for a moment and then said, "There are commercial labs that do this kind of work. Or universities. Some researcher might be interested in analyzing it. Why me?"

For the first time, Vi seemed to hesitate. "A friend I hike with says—well, Rory thinks I should take it to a lab in San Francisco.

He has some contacts there at the Academy of Sciences at the Golden Gate Park. And I might do that as well. But you're local, and my handyman says you can be trusted."

"Who's your handyman?" Kaylee asked, though she suspected who it was.

"Reese Holt."

Kaylee nodded. Reese was Turtle Cove's most popular handyman. He'd also been one of the first people to befriend Kaylee when she'd moved to the island. Knowing that he had recommended her to Vi made Kaylee reconsider.

"And I'm not sure how public I want to be about this yet." All at once, Vi's energy and determination seemed to drain from her.

Kaylee made up her mind. She stepped past Vi to turn the lock on the door and flip the sign to *Closed*. Turning, she asked, "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, please."

Once the tea was made, Kaylee and her guest sat down in the sitting area.

Bear took up a spot on the floor next to Vi as if he sensed she needed comfort.

"What exactly is your interest in all this?" Kaylee asked when Vi seemed to have calmed a bit. "Have you been taking this supplement?" The sample Vi had brought was still in its plastic sandwich bag.

Vi snorted. "Oh no. I wouldn't waste my money on that."

"Where did you get it?" Kaylee asked.

"My brother-in-law, Raymond, bought it," Vi said in a subdued tone. "I think Dr. T. is ripping him off." Then she fell silent.

Kaylee sipped her tea as she waited patiently for Vi to continue.

"Raymond was in a bad way for a long time after my sister, Margaret, died," Vi finally said. "It even started to affect his physical health. He lost weight, and he got weak. I was really

worried about him.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Kaylee said.

“A few months ago, Raymond found out about Dr. T., and he started buying and taking a lot of Greene’s supplements.”

“Greene?” Kaylee asked.

“Dr. T.’s real name is Tyrone Greene,” Vi explained.

“What happened when Raymond took the supplements?”

“They didn’t seem to do much good at first, but Greene began working on Raymond. He told him about his grand plan to overthrow Western medicine with natural remedies based on Native American herbs.”

“Did Raymond believe him?”

“Unfortunately, he seems to have fallen for Greene’s line.” Vi sighed. “He’s spending all kinds of money on these quack cures.”

“And how is Raymond’s health now?” Kaylee asked.

“Well, that’s the thing. His health *has* improved. Which is great. But at the same time, I’m worried about Raymond. He’s gullible and naturally trusting of people, and he’ll tell you anything. He lacks that sort of filter. And lately, I’ve noticed his tendency to spill personal details is getting worse.” Vi clenched her fists. “I can’t stand by and watch him get taken advantage of when he’s vulnerable. I’ll happily pay you to look into this for me.”

“I understand your concern, but I still don’t see how an analysis of Dr. T.’s product would do any good,” Kaylee said gently.

“I simply want Raymond to see Greene for what he is,” Vi said. “If you could prove that Dr. T.’s supplement is useless—or even harmful—Raymond would have to face the fact that Greene is a fraud.”

2



“Are you going to analyze the sample?” DeeDee Wilcox asked. She shoved her spade into the ground and used it to lever up the root ball of a *Buddleja davidii*, or butterfly bush.

Kaylee yanked the root ball out of the ground and dragged it to a tarp where they had deposited other plant roots.

Though this was a busy season for The Flower Patch, Mary had assured Kaylee that she could hold down the fort at the shop by herself for a while. So Kaylee had joined DeeDee from the Petal Pushers garden club to come out on this search-and-destroy mission.

The larger Orcas Island garden club had taken the lead in organizing all the local garden clubs on the island, and the Petal Pushers had agreed to monitor a small portion of the Turtleback Mountain Preserve. The other members of the Petals planned to volunteer their time later in the week.

Kaylee took a minute to knock some dirt from her work gloves. Already she was starting to feel a strain in her shoulders. The plants they were ripping up, though still young, were a vibrant, healthy green, and they covered the hillside. Unfortunately, they were also an invasive species that had made significant inroads on the island and threatened to choke out a host of native plants.

“You said she’s willing to pay you,” DeeDee went on.

Kaylee glanced around as she stretched. “My grandparents used to take my brother and me hiking out here,” she mused instead of answering DeeDee. “I seem to recall that it was a pretty popular spot back then.” She followed her friend to the next bush.

“Some people still come here,” DeeDee said, once again

thrusting her spade into the earth. "But they put in the new trails on the south slope a few years ago, and those are much more popular. More view with less work. These trails have been left for the hard-core hikers."

Kaylee silently tossed the root ball onto the tarp.

"There's another one." DeeDee pointed to an innocuous-looking bush, then crossed her arms. "And you're avoiding the subject."

"First of all, testing that sample is not my job," Kaylee replied. She felt that Vi had put her in an uncomfortable position, and she couldn't help but feel a little resentful about it. "Vi should go to a commercial lab. Apparently, she even has a friend who's advising her to do just that."

"Why is she insisting on you?"

"To tell you the truth, I think there's a touch of paranoia there. Reese told her I could be trusted—which was very nice of him—and Vi only wants to deal with someone recommended by someone she knows. And, well . . ."

Her friend glanced at her sharply. "What?"

"Part of me can't help but wonder whether she has already tried a commercial lab and they turned her down, especially if she told them everything she told me."

DeeDee rested her spade against a tree and stretched her back. "Why would they do that?"

Kaylee grabbed the tarp and started to drag it up the trail, then stopped. "I'm only speculating, but they might decline the work if they were afraid of litigation."

DeeDee cocked an eyebrow.

"After all, part of what makes these charlatans successful is bluster. If Vi is out trying to scientifically prove that Dr. T. is a fraud, he's likely to respond to a threat to his livelihood. Threatening lawsuits is the obvious course."

DeeDee shrugged, then began loosening the ground around

the next butterfly bush. "If his supplements really are worthless, he'd lose his case."

"Not necessarily," Kaylee answered. "Nothing is ever that cut-and-dried. Dr. T. probably has some plants in his mix that some research paper suggests *might* have health benefits of one kind or another. That's all he'd need to support his public claims."

"Wouldn't your analysis prove something?"

"It's unlikely I'd come up with definitive results. Rather, it would all be a matter of probabilities and likelihoods. Which means that it would end up being a judgment call for the jury, and who knows which way it would go?"

"Well, that's a depressing thought," DeeDee remarked.

"But there's an even bigger issue," Kaylee continued. "Whether you win or lose, lawsuits are always expensive. And lawyers tend to drag things out for a very long time, with the meter always running. Think of *Bleak House*."

DeeDee chuckled at the literary reference. She owned *Between the Lines*, a mystery bookshop that was located down the street from *The Flower Patch*.

"It might come down to a question of simply who wants to win more, and Dr. T. is going to be highly motivated indeed. A commercial lab might decide that the risk of litigation outweighed the value of the job."

"And as a private individual," DeeDee said, "you'd have even fewer resources for defending yourself in a lawsuit than a company would."

Kaylee nodded. "They might have insurance against that kind of thing, though their best course is still not to get involved in the first place."

The pair was quiet for a moment as they worked.

Kaylee recalled the things Vi had told her about Tyrone Greene. "If Dr. T. is charismatic and has a following, which seems

to be the case, then he'll also be doing his best to whip up public sympathy the whole time the lawsuit's going on."

"Good point. He'll be playing the part of the persecuted innovator whose amazing breakthroughs are being squashed." DeeDee tied up a bag. "Okay, I take it back. You'd be crazy to do this favor for Vi."

Kaylee didn't respond.

DeeDee gave her another sharp look. "What did you tell her?" She sighed. "I said I'd think about it."

"Kaylee," DeeDee said in a warning tone.

"I know. As you can see, I've been trying to think it through. Not to mention that I'm not sure I'd have all the resources I'd need to do it. I might have to call in some favors from my old colleagues at the university."

"Yet another reason why you should tell this woman to go to a commercial lab. You can even make a recommendation, if it would make you feel better." DeeDee paused, then asked, "Where is the sample now?"

Kaylee grimaced. "It's still in the shop."



When DeeDee stopped to drink some water from her canteen, Kaylee wandered a little farther up the trail, trying to remember her visits here many years before with her grandparents.

The trees were still bare this early in the spring, but the woods nevertheless felt denser and more overgrown than she remembered them. Even though DeeDee had told her the newer trails attracted the hikers now, it seemed clear that this trail was still getting some use.

Around a corner in the path, Kaylee found a thicket of butterfly bushes off to the left. She called over her shoulder to DeeDee, "Wait until you see this infestation."

Turning back, she was suddenly confronted by the sight of a man, crouching at the side of the trail only a few feet away.

Kaylee let out a sharp cry and took a step backward, almost losing her balance.

Behind her, DeeDee yelled, "What's wrong?"

As Kaylee recovered from her surprise, she realized it was not a man but a boy, or rather, a teenager. She didn't recognize him.

The teenager was obviously startled by Kaylee's appearance. He leaped to his feet and gaped at her, his eyes wild. When DeeDee came hurrying over to them, he whirled around and raced up the path.

"Sorry!" Kaylee shouted after him. "It's okay. We're not going to hurt you . . ." Her voice trailed off as he disappeared.

"What's he doing out here?" DeeDee said.

Something in her tone made Kaylee ask, "Do you know him?"

"Yes. That was Jared Lindner."

"Who's that?"

"You know Sally Benton?"

Kaylee shook her head.

"She's filling in for Gretchen at Death by Chocolate. Jared's her nephew," DeeDee explained as they returned to their spot. "He's the son of her sister, Maisie."

"Well, he certainly gave me a turn," Kaylee admitted as she retrieved her tools. "I wonder why he ran off like that."

"He has a reputation for being a bit odd," DeeDee said. "Though as far as I can tell, that simply means he's quiet and a bit of a loner."

"There's nothing wrong with that," Kaylee said, though she couldn't help but wonder if that was true.



By the end of the day, the Petal Pushers and the other island garden clubs had filled dozens of garbage bags with butterfly bush shrubs and incinerated them. But they were still painfully aware that they had barely made a dent in the shrub's rapid progress.

When Kaylee hadn't been worrying about Vi's request, she had pondered the mystery of how the butterfly bush, once an ornamental plant on the mainland, had taken root in the wild on Orcas Island. She thought it would make an interesting article. Maybe someday she'd exercise her old academic muscles from when she was a university professor in Seattle and write it.

DeeDee urged Kaylee to wash her hands of the entire Dr. T. mess as they trudged to their cars. "If nothing else, remember that you're a local business and he's a local business."

"A local business?" Kaylee repeated.

"Of sorts," she added. "At any rate, it seems that Dr. T. isn't doing anything illegal. People get to decide how they want to spend their money, even if you think they're wrong or crazy. So why should you get into a feud with another local businessperson? It's not in your best interest, it's not your responsibility, and it's not even any of your concern."

DeeDee's words still rang in Kaylee's ears when she got home.

Bear met her at the back door of Wildflower Cottage when she entered. The little dachshund immediately trotted to his bowl and looked up expectantly, if not a bit reprovingly. After all, Kaylee had left him alone for most of the day.

Kaylee's back and knees were sore from the long hours of work, and bending over to pet him reminded her that she'd promised herself a long, hot soak in the tub.

"You have a one-track mind sometimes, don't you?" she asked her ever-hopeful dog as she scooped his kibble into the bowl.

She scanned the kitchen and noticed the red light flashing on the phone indicating she had a voice mail. She sighed, considered ignoring it, and decided she'd better not.

She was surprised to hear the voice of Sheriff Eddie Maddox asking her to call him at the station.

She'd had the chance to get to know Sheriff Maddox a bit as she'd become unexpectedly involved in several criminal investigations in Turtle Cove. The adrenaline rush of receiving a phone call from the sheriff dispelled her lethargy, and she immediately dialed Maddox's number.

"Thank you for returning my call." The sheriff's voice sounded oddly formal.

When he didn't continue immediately, Kaylee prompted, "What can I do for you?"

"I'm calling about an investigation." Maddox hesitated, then asked, "Do you know a Vivienne Gherson?"

The first name threw her for a second, and she repeated, "Vivienne?"

"Also known as Vi?"

"I wouldn't say I know her. I met her for the first time yesterday when she came into the shop."

"She was a customer?"

Now it was Kaylee's turn to hesitate. Vi had not said that her request was confidential, but surely its nature suggested that she would prefer discretion. On the other hand, it wasn't just anyone asking her—it was law enforcement. "Not exactly," she replied at last. "She wanted me to analyze some plant matter she had."

The silence on the other end of the line seemed to suggest that Sheriff Maddox was digesting the information.

“Can I ask what this is about?” Kaylee said.

“I need to come over and talk with you,” the sheriff said.

“Of course. But I would like to know what’s going on.”

“Mrs. Gherson was found dead today. She was murdered.”