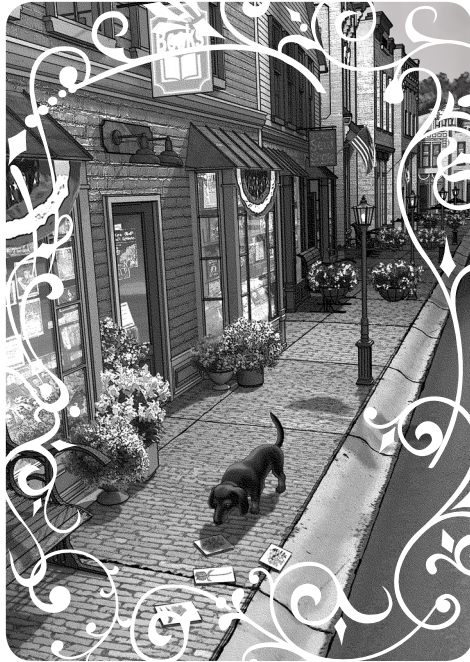


Suspicious Plots





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Jolyn Sharp

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1



The delicate scent of lavender wafted through the air, and Kaylee Bleu inhaled appreciatively. Summer had certainly arrived in Washington's San Juan Islands, and the herb's purple blooms extended in a vibrant panorama in the field behind Kaylee's home, Wildflower Cottage. As she exhaled, she turned her attention back to the discussion heating up among her friends.

"So you're saying these books are like *The Lord of the Rings*?" Kaylee asked, arching a skeptical eyebrow at DeeDee Wilcox. "I have to confess that I'm not big into dragons and fairies."

"Everybody said they weren't into adolescent wizards before Harry Potter," DeeDee replied with a shrug. "And look how that turned out."

Jessica Roberts raised her glass of iced tea. "Hear, hear."

"I can't keep the Books of the Night series in stock." DeeDee owned *Between the Lines*, a mystery bookstore in their beloved hometown, Turtle Cove, on beautiful Orcas Island. "They're like J. R. R. Tolkien meets Agatha Christie."

"Just imagine how popular they'll be once the television series comes out," Jessica added. "I hear there's one in the works."

"You've read these too, Jess?" Kaylee asked.

Jessica nodded. "And I enthusiastically second DeeDee's recommendation."

Mary Bishop chimed in. "I read an article saying that these books are all the rage on college campuses these days."

"Well then," Kaylee said with a smile, "if they're what all the cool kids are reading, how can I refuse?"

"Admit it, Kaylee—resistance is futile." DeeDee pulled a

somewhat battered hardcover book out of her tote bag and handed it to Kaylee. "You've got to at least try the first book in the series."

"If this is the first one, why is it called *The Night of the Third*?" Kaylee asked.

"You'll find out," DeeDee replied with a smile.

Kaylee flipped the book over and gazed at the photograph of the impossibly young author on the back. "So this Griffin Graves is coming to Turtle Cove?" she asked. "And teaching a workshop? That sounds like quite a commitment."

DeeDee's beaming smile proclaimed her pride in securing this coup for her bookstore. "He lives on the mainland, but he's staying on the island for the week. Few can resist Moira's place." DeeDee's friend Moira Harper owned a gorgeous second home in one of the most spectacular spots on Orcas Island, but the travel photographer was rarely there. When DeeDee needed an incentive to tempt the occasional famous author to the island, Moira often happily donated it as a guesthouse, a lure that frequently helped seal the deal.

"I'd stay there for free while I spend a week being fawned over by my biggest fans," Jessica said. "Not exactly a hard sell."

DeeDee chuckled in agreement. "The workshop filled up in record time. And I think some of the students are so eager that they're already in town. I arranged a special rate for them at the Tall Pines B&B."

"That's a good choice," Mary said. "Conrad is an excellent chef."

"Speaking of which . . ." Jessica leaned over to peer around Mary. "How are those hamburgers coming, gentlemen?"

On the other side of the deck, four men were clustered around a grill. Mary's husband, Herb, wore a striped chef's apron, but it was DeeDee's husband, Andy, who wielded the spatula. Andy managed a natural-foods store, and he and DeeDee had brought over grass-fed ground beef, fresh corn on the cob, and locally

made ice cream. They'd also brought their school-age daughters, Zoe and Polly, who were in the yard tossing a tennis ball for Kaylee's dachshund, Bear.

"Yeah, Dad," Zoe, the older of the girls, said. "We're starving. And so's Bear. Right, buddy?" When Bear gave a yip, Polly threw the ball again, and he dashed after it as fast as his little legs could carry him.

"They're coming along," Luke, Jessica's husband, called out, then turned back to the conversation he was having with local handyman and handsome bachelor Reese Holt.

Jessica chuckled as she picked up the sweating iced tea pitcher and refilled everyone's glasses. "That's Luke code for 'it will be a while,'" she said authoritatively.

"I'm in no hurry," Kaylee said, leaning back in her chair with a sigh. "I'm beat. The twelve-hour days are beginning to wear on my old bones."

"Careful." Mary wagged a finger at Kaylee, but there was a twinkle in her eye. "We're all your age or older." As Kaylee's part-time help at her florist shop, The Flower Patch, Mary had been working those long hours right alongside her, courtesy of tourist season on the island.

"Whatever age my bones are, they're aching too," Jessica agreed. She owned Death by Chocolate, the bakery next door to The Flower Patch, and her business was benefiting from the recent influx of tourists and summer residents as well. "Not that I'm complaining. We're on track for a record summer, and it's barely begun."

"Same here, fingers crossed," Kaylee said. "I hope the Fourth of July Festival planning committee likes the red, white, and blue window boxes we did."

"How could they not?" Mary asked. "They're spectacular, if I do say so myself."

"Have you had much luck with your new idea of renting out big potted plants?" DeeDee asked Kaylee. "The ones you brought over to the bookstore are just the thing I needed to create a private area for the workshop."

"It was hardly my idea," Kaylee said modestly. "You're the one who asked me for help creating a partition, and Mary was the one who suggested plants."

"Whoever's idea it was, they're perfect." DeeDee took a sip of iced tea. "What are they called again? Monster trees?"

"*Monstera deliciosa*," Kaylee corrected with a chuckle. "I chose them both for the name and for the fact that the broad leaves will offer plenty of privacy for your budding authors."

"Clive Randall sure seemed impressed when he saw you arranging them," DeeDee said.

"So impressed that he asked Kaylee to come to his gallery Monday for a consultation," Mary added.

"Really?" Jessica's warm brown eyes lit up. "Half the artwork in his gallery costs more than my car. He's definitely someone whose good side you want to be on."

"He wants some tall plants to add atmosphere during an upcoming event," Kaylee said. "It's a retrospective of paintings by Shirley Lucas, that regional artist who passed away recently."

"The burgers and corn will be ready in ten minutes, ladies," Reese called from the grill.

"I guess it's time we start doing our part," Kaylee said as she scooted her chair back. "I'll grab the condiments."

"I'll come with you," Mary volunteered as she got up. "My salad is in the fridge."

"I'll do drinks," Jessica offered.

"My helpers and I will set the table," DeeDee announced, then said to her daughters, "Girls, let's go wash hands."

A short while later, the group of ten—plus Bear, who sprawled

at Kaylee's feet with his head on her foot and hope in his big brown eyes—had gathered around the large patio table. As Kaylee took a bite of her hamburger, she marveled at how life's journey had brought her to this moment, sharing a Saturday evening cookout with close friends she hadn't even known just a couple of years before.

Formerly a professor of plant taxonomy at the University of Washington and occasional forensic botanist with the Seattle police, Kaylee had been laid off in a department reshuffle. With her professional life turned upside down, she moved from Seattle to Turtle Cove to take over The Flower Patch from her grandmother, Bea Lyons, who had retired and moved to Arizona. She had also taken Bea's place in the Petal Pushers garden club, where she'd become close with fellow members Mary, DeeDee, and Jessica.

Mary's kind voice broke into Kaylee's thoughts. "I love what you girls did with the table lighting," she was telling Polly and Zoe. "I'd have never thought to put citronella candles into jelly jars."

Jessica nodded in agreement. "I love how the candlelight glows through the textured glass. It's absolutely magical."

"It reminds me of the dragon lights of Ellaryn in *The Night of the Third*." Zoe was clearly quite proud that she'd recently read her first "grown-up" book. The preteen glanced around the table and asked in a mature voice, "What are you all reading this summer?"

"Funny you should ask," Herb said, a twinkle in his eye. "I'm in the middle of a book about the development of the American power grid. I bet it's right up your alley, Zoe."

Zoe made a face that suggested it wasn't and turned to Luke. "Are you reading anything right now?"

Luke scratched his chin. "Let's see, I just finished Ty Cobb's memoir, and now I'm reading a book about Jackie Robinson." At Zoe's blank expression, Luke explained, "They're great baseball players."

Zoe just nodded and moved on to the next adult. Aside from Kaylee, who was well into a mystery set in the Roaring Twenties, and Polly, who had just begun the fourth Harry Potter book, everyone else seemed to be starting, finishing, or in the middle of a Griffin Graves book. DeeDee said she was rereading the series ahead of her workshop, and Andy admitted that she'd gotten him hooked as well. Jessica, too, had been reading the Books of the Night, which she claimed her twentysomething daughter, Mila, had first brought to her attention.

Kaylee wasn't surprised by the others, but when Reese said that he was just starting the second book in the series, she shot him an incredulous look. "Really? You too?"

He threw up his hands and laughed. "What can I say? Even the island handyman likes a well-written adventure. You've got to give them a chance, Kaylee."

"But there are dragons," she protested.

"Dragons and much more." Reese paused. "But I don't want to give you any spoilers."

Kaylee sighed. "And you promise there's a mystery buried in the fantasy?"

"The mystery generates the momentum of the plot, and there's a huge emphasis on plant life, though it's largely fictional," Jessica said. "You'll love it. Trust us."

"I suppose I could crack into it tomorrow after church." Considering how busy they'd been at the flower shop, Kaylee had intentionally left her Sunday open so she could relax a bit before returning to the shop's hectic seasonal pace on Monday.

"Attagirl." DeeDee beamed at her. "If you don't like the one I gave you, we'll stop harassing you. But I'm betting you'll be banging down my door for the next one as soon as you hit the last page."

Jessica and Mary raised their iced tea glasses to that, and the group fell into quiet contemplation. In the silence, the tree frogs

started their rhythmic calling. Kaylee peeked under the table and saw that the evening's sounds had lulled Bear to sleep.

After a delicious dessert of brownies from Jessica's bakery topped with scoops of the ice cream the Wilcoxes had brought, the party broke up.

"We'd better get these two girls home to bed," DeeDee said, standing. Zoe joined her, and Andy gently lifted a sleepy Polly in his arms. "This was lovely. Let's do it again—maybe at the end of the season, when we all come up for air again."

"Thank you all for coming," Kaylee said as she rose to bid her guests farewell. "It really was a perfect evening."

"I'll see you next Saturday to fix that sticky door at the shop," Reese said.

"You're on," Kaylee replied.

Mary hugged Kaylee. "And I'll see you Monday morning, bright and early."

One by one, the guests said good night, until it was just Kaylee and Bear left on the deck. When it was silent once more, the tree frogs resumed their singing.

2



The sun had barely peeked over the horizon when Kaylee and Bear entered The Flower Patch Monday morning, and Mary arrived right behind them. While Bear, who sported a jaunty red bow tie with blue anchors on it that morning, curled up with a chew toy on his dog bed, Kaylee and Mary worked together on a few special orders as well as some patriotic bouquets for the sales floor.

They made half a dozen of the arrangements, which featured creamy white and red roses interspersed with blue *Centaurea cyanus*—known commonly as cornflowers or bachelor buttons—but once Kaylee had flipped the door sign to *Open*, the beautiful bouquets were sold out within the hour. By lunchtime, Kaylee had a list of five more customers who wanted similar arrangements, and she'd promised them they'd be done the next day. *I sure hope my next wholesale shipment is on time this afternoon*, Kaylee thought.

Checking the time after her last customer, Kaylee saw that she had only a few minutes to clean herself up before her appointment with Clive Randall. After washing her hands and checking to make sure that her straight, dark hair was behaving, she left the shop in Mary's hands and headed down to the Randall Gallery, which was located at the end of the Turtle Cove business district. The building that housed the gallery sported a corner entrance, surrounded by large windows that caught the diffused light coming off the water, and the interior's white walls offered an airy and open space to hang and view art. A narrow alley ran along the side of the building, leading to a rear parking lot.

Clive Randall was standing next to a ladder, directing an assistant in hanging a rather large painting, when Kaylee opened the door and set off a subtle chime. A small man dressed somewhat formally for Turtle Cove in summer-weight wool slacks, an Oxford shirt open at the collar, and a vest, he had sandy hair flecked with gray and cut in a youthful style. He turned and greeted her warmly when she stepped in.

"Miss Bleu, I am so honored that you have given us your time today," he said, reaching out to shake her hand.

"Kaylee, please."

"Only if you'll call me Clive. Let me give you a tour."

"I'd love one," Kaylee said.

"Hannah, I'll return shortly," Clive told his assistant, then gestured for Kaylee to follow him from the large front room down a hallway. "This building used to be a five-and-dime store, if you can believe it."

"It's certainly much different now," Kaylee said, noting the gallery's modern, minimalist style.

"There's an office and a framing workroom off this hallway, plus our rear exit, and then we have another gallery at the back." Clive pointed toward a darkened doorway at the end of the hall.

As they passed the workroom, Kaylee caught sight of large, stretched canvases draped with cloth. She assumed these were paintings awaiting their frames. When they entered the rear gallery, Kaylee squinted in the darkness at a series of portraits. When Clive flicked the lights on, however, Kaylee saw not people but plants. Peering more closely, she realized that each painting's subject was presented in a manner that recalled traditional portrait poses.

"Shirley Lucas called this her Still Life series, but" — Clive swept his arm around in a circle — "there is so much energy in these paintings. I'd hardly call them still. You can almost feel them breathe."

"They're beautiful, and yet they sort of make me want to laugh." Kaylee felt a little embarrassed at not being appropriately reverent in a room filled with art.

"I think that was the artist's intent. Shirley Lucas infused her world with whimsy." He stepped toward a painting and waved for Kaylee to come closer. "Look at the detail she gave to the leaves, the pots. She studied everything, and yet in capturing a true likeness of such familiar subjects, she managed to make them . . . strange."

"And breathtaking. That's a *Dracaena marginata*, a dragon tree. It's a common plant for an office, but here it has so much personality. It's almost winking at me."

Clive laughed. "Actually, that leads me to what I was hoping to consult with you about." They moved to the next painting. "From what I can gather from interviews and the few scholarly articles about Shirley's work, this series features common houseplants. Most of the paintings in the other room are from another phase, in which the artist was capturing plants that grow wild in the Pacific Northwest region."

As Clive spoke, Kaylee made her way around the room, examining each painting and gauging the expressions of the plants depicted. By the time she came full circle, she was utterly charmed by the series.

"What I'd like," Clive said when she rejoined him, "is to place some live plants about the gallery that would complement these painted ones."

Kaylee nodded thoughtfully and bent over to read a price tag. When she saw the figure, her eyes widened and she stood up again. "Do all of her paintings cost around that much?"

"Some more, some less." Clive shrugged. "It's been a slow process, but at last her popularity is growing. Not everything displayed here is for sale. I've managed to convince a few of my

clients who own her works to let me display them for the show. They agreed because a retrospective will raise her profile, and thus the value of her work.” Clive sighed. “It’s such a pity she was all but unknown while she was alive. I should know. I represented her from the beginning, as she started painting rather late in life.”

“What about her family? Do any of these pieces belong to them?”

Clive gazed at the paintings on the wall. “Sadly, no. They’ve lost almost all control of her work by now. Although her grandchildren came to me recently for help reclaiming a few pieces, if possible.”

“Is that difficult?”

“It can be. Come this way. I want you to see some other pieces,” he said, waving Kaylee out of the back gallery.

She followed Clive down the hall to the front gallery, where she realized that the room was only partially ready for the event. Here, the paintings were even larger, and the plants depicted were shown in their natural landscape. As Kaylee examined the artworks more closely, however, her sense of unfamiliarity increased. They were all still familiar plants—albeit with a higher concentration of more exotic varieties—but the artist had succeeded in making the familiar feel strange, just as Clive had said. In the way that the other paintings imbued the plants with human characteristics, in these examples they appeared almost animal-like. She glanced at Clive, who seemed to anticipate her question.

“From what I understand, it may be hard to find suitable companion plants for this series,” he said. “But I’d be very interested to see what you come up with.”

Plants and paintings in dialogue. What a lovely idea. Kaylee smiled. “I would love to help. Do you mind if I take some quick photos to help me remember what’s here?” She pulled out her phone.

Clive hesitated. “They must be strictly for your personal use,” he said. “I don’t have the rights to reproduce these works,

and photographs would be a form of reproduction.”

“Of course,” Kaylee agreed. She quickly took photos of the paintings in both galleries, then returned to her client. “And now, let’s talk about what else you might like for the gallery.”

“I’m all ears,” Clive said.

She gestured toward the front door. “*Howea forsteriana* are elegant door framers, and they can mark a transition from the world outside to the world that Shirley Lucas created with her art. And then perhaps a *Dracaena marginata* about four feet high to draw attention to the hall. That might help unify the two series.”

“Lovely. What’s a—what did you call it?”

“Oh, the *forsteriana*? Those are the Kentia palms. I have two right now that are just over five feet tall. I can have them ready for delivery by tomorrow morning.” She outlined some additional options, and Clive seemed pleased with her proposal.

“Perfect,” he said when they’d covered the entire gallery. “It’s all coming together so nicely. Promise me that you’ll come to the opening reception. You can meet the artist’s grandchildren.”

“I’d love to. Thank you for the invitation.”

Clive beamed at her. “It’s really going to be special.”

Kaylee returned his smile as she said goodbye, but in her mind she was running the numbers. *How much extra business would I have to do to buy one of Shirley Lucas’s paintings?*



That afternoon, after Kaylee had sent Mary home to relax, Bert Greenleaf dropped by The Flower Patch with his Jack Russell terrier, Rocky. Bert owned A New Leaf, an interior design shop in Turtle Cove that he ran with his wife, Ingrid.

“Judy Pratt showed my wife the bouquet she bought this

morning, and Ingrid sent me over here right away to order three of them for the shop," he told Kaylee. "I know you're busy, and I wouldn't bother you if she didn't have her heart set on them."

"No bother at all. It's always a pleasure to see you, Bert," Kaylee replied.

"A glassblower on the mainland has created blue-and-white starburst vases exclusively for us to sell. Those arrangements will be just the thing to show them off. Rocky, no!" He interrupted himself to chastise his energetic dog, who'd gotten a hold of one of Kaylee's foam cylinders and was running around the shop followed by Bear.

Kaylee managed to entice the two playful dogs to the sitting room with Bear's squeaky rabbit toy, then shut the door on them. Bert and his wife were regular customers, and Rocky was one of Bear's best friends. The dogs would be fine in there together.

Kaylee returned to the front counter, where Bert was waiting. "We'll have your arrangements ready for pickup tomorrow morning, if that works for you." Kaylee rubbed her temples. "I just need to find a moment to make them."

"We've been slammed over at the shop too. A nonstop flow of foot traffic. Including . . ." Bert paused, checked to make sure no one else was listening, then leaned toward Kaylee. "We had a notorious character drop in, and I suspect he's making the rounds. Again."

"Who? What happened?"

"A wheeler-dealer by the name of Baron. Have you encountered him?"

Kaylee shook her head, intrigued.

Bert pursed his lips, and Kaylee suddenly had a very good idea of exactly how he felt about the man. "Emmet Baron. He's one of those guys that always has some scheme going. I mean, he seems to have a legitimate business as a publisher.

That's over on the mainland, and I guess he's done a lot of regional-interest books. I don't know much about that." He glanced about again. "He has a house here on the island, up on Mount Constitution. But any time I've seen him in Turtle Cove, it seems he's peddling another scheme."

Kaylee furrowed her brow. "You mean things that are illegal?"

Bert hesitated. "No, I wouldn't say that. There just always seems to be something off about them — and him. The last time he came to my shop, he had this set of plastic toy monsters that he claimed were collectible. He said I should sell them for fifty bucks each. They were obviously junk, and I'm not sure why he even brought them to me. I don't deal in that sort of thing. It still took me two hours to get rid of him, and he had the nerve to get a little nasty with me at the end. I was worried I'd have to call the police."

"He sounds more than just persistent," Kaylee said.

"I'll say. There's something about him that just makes your skin crawl." Bert's voice had risen in his indignation, but he lowered it once again. "And I'm not saying I know anything for certain, but he has a reputation for renegeing on commitments and not paying his bills. Granted, I've only heard those things through the grapevine. Wouldn't surprise me, though."

"Goodness," Kaylee said, not sure how to respond to Bert's speculation about a man she didn't know.

"To tell you the truth, after the last time, I was surprised he had the nerve to even come to my shop, not that it seemed to bother him any. He breezed right on in as if nothing had happened. But I hadn't forgotten. I ran him out as soon as he opened his briefcase."

Kaylee had always found Bert very friendly, so she was startled by the satisfaction in his voice. "You mean he's back with something new?"

Bert shrugged dismissively. "Note cards, apparently. He's always got something on offer, but it always comes with a price." He straightened. "Anyway, I just wanted to give you a heads-up. The man's a pest. Give us a call if he comes at you and won't take no for an answer."

"Thanks," Kaylee said, appreciating the support within the small-business community in Turtle Cove. Suddenly, Kaylee felt that the shop was a little too quiet. "What do you think those dogs are up to?"

With Bert close behind, Kaylee went to the sitting room and opened the door to let them out. They found Bear and Rocky playing tug-of-war with one of the couch pillows. Thankfully, it appeared the only damage done was a little slobber on the fabric.

"Rocky!" Bert snapped his fingers. "Come!" The little Jack Russell immediately released the pillow and followed his master out the front door.

Kaylee glanced down at Bear. "Well I hope you had fun."

In response, Bear trotted to his bed behind the counter, where he flopped down for a nap in spite of the bustle around him.

During a brief lull in the late afternoon, Kaylee thought she'd have a chance to sit down in the kitchen for a snack. But she'd no sooner peeled the lid off a plastic container of blueberry yogurt than she heard the door chime, followed by shoes scraping against the shop's wooden floor. Bear was first to dash out and greet the customer, but the short, square-faced man didn't seem to notice the little brown dachshund at his feet as he marched straight to the counter and rapped his knuckles on it.

Concerned that he could be a disgruntled customer, perhaps a father of a bride who wasn't happy with the cost or quality of the wedding arrangements, Kaylee hurried over.

The man's posture softened when she approached. "Kaylee Bleu, I presume? Just the woman I wanted to see."

“How can I help you?” Kaylee asked, trying to hide her relief that he wasn’t an irate client.

“The name’s Emmet Baron,” he said, now smiling broadly. “And have I got something to show you.”