



VICTORIAN
MANSION
FLOWER SHOP
MYSTERIES™

Weeds of Doubt



Sandra Orchard



Weeds of Doubt



Sandra Orchard

Annie's[®]
AnniesFiction.com

**Books in the Victorian Mansion
Flower Shop Mysteries series**

A Fatal Arrangement
Bloomed to Die
The Mistletoe Murder
My Dearly Depotted
Digging Up Secrets
Planted Evidence
Loot of All Evil
Pine and Punishment
Herbal Malady
Deadhead and Buried
The Lily Vanishes
A Cultivated Crime
Suspicious Plots
Weeds of Doubt
Thorn to Secrecy
A Seedy Development

. . . and more to come!

Weeds of Doubt

Copyright © 2019 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

Weeds of Doubt / by Sandra Orchard

p. cm.

ISBN: 978-1-64025-810-5

I. Title

2018958650

AnniesFiction.com

(800) 282-6643

Victorian Mansion Flower Shop Mysteries™

Series Creators: Shari Lohner, Janice Tate

Editor: Jane Haertel

Cover Illustrator: Bob Kayganich

10 11 12 13 14 | Printed in China | 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1



DeeDee Wilcox burst into the Old Cape Lighthouse keeper's quarters, her sun-streaked blonde hair bouncing around her shoulders, her cheeks flushed. "We desperately need your help," she said to the rest of the Petal Pushers garden club, who had assembled for their biweekly meeting. The second part of "we" trailed DeeDee through the door, uncertainty written on her face.

"Of course we'll help if we can." Kaylee Bleu glanced from Jessica Roberts, who was setting out the chocolate treats she'd brought from her bakery, to Mary Bishop, who was sitting on the sofa. "Right, girls?"

Mary — who at sixty, didn't fit the "girls" moniker any more than Jessica, who was tickling fifty — grinned. "Absolutely! And we always love to welcome visitors too," she said to DeeDee's friend.

"Sorry." DeeDee motioned to the petite, dark-haired woman standing behind her. "This is Wilma Graham. She's been organizing a high school reunion."

"For your class?" Kaylee asked.

"No, I was a couple of years behind her in school, but it's more than that. She's the school librarian and she's been working on creating an Alumni Hall of Fame too. The plan had been to unveil it all for their twenty-five-year reunion, but we just learned our school's most beloved teacher and coach has been having some serious health concerns. He's put his house up for sale and plans to move out east to be closer to his family. And you know how quickly houses sell in the summer months here."

Jessica nodded. "My neighbor's sold in forty-eight hours."

"Exactly," DeeDee said. "We've decided to schedule the reunion for the last weekend of August. Labor Day is that Monday, so we'll be able to extend activities right through Sunday and still give everyone a day to travel home before the new workweek."

Kaylee counted quickly on her phone's calendar app. "That's only four weeks away."

"That's why we need help," Wilma said. Her voice was quiet and shy. "Alumni need to be contacted. Venues need to be booked. Activities planned. Accommodations secured." Tears sprang to her eyes and she shook her head. "I don't know if it's even possible, but I know everyone would want Mr. Fletcher to be at the reunion. He was the best teacher ever. He helped so many kids, and we were his last class. He retired the year we graduated."

DeeDee squeezed her hand. "If anyone can do it, the Petal Pushers can."

"Accommodations shouldn't be too big a deal," Kaylee said. "I don't have any weddings scheduled that weekend, and if there was one, I would have at least heard about it, so the Turtle Cove Inn shouldn't be clogged with wedding guests."

"Besides," Jessica added, "a lot of the alumni traveling in from off island would probably have family or friends still here they could stay with. But I know the manager of the Turtle Cove Inn. I can talk to him about reserving a block of rooms for a group rate. And I'd be happy to help with food." Jessica held up a plate of flower-shaped chocolates, her eyes twinkling.

"Ooh." DeeDee reached for a chocolate sunflower on a stick. "These are gorgeous."

"If you didn't already have a theme in mind," Mary chimed in, "we could make it flower-related. We are the Petal Pushers after all."

"That's actually a great idea." Wilma beamed. "Our high school prom had a flower theme, and Mr. Fletcher used to help

organize the poinsettia fund-raiser every year at Christmastime.”

Kaylee frowned. “Well, I’m not sure how many poinsettias I could get in for an August event, but I can try. And Mary and I can take care of decorating whatever venues you decide on.”

“And help brainstorm activity ideas?” DeeDee pressed.

“Our brains are at your disposal,” Kaylee replied with a grin.

The women laughed.

“This is so great.” Wilma plopped into the closest empty chair and pulled a thick binder from her book bag. “I’ll show you what ideas I’ve already compiled.”

Three hours later, when the sun had slipped into the ocean, painting the sky and water brilliant colors, the Petal Pushers left the lighthouse keeper’s quarters, each armed with a page full of duties to complete by the next meeting.



The month to the reunion had flown by and Kaylee scrambled to put the finishing touches to her share of the preparations. She finished taping a *Welcome Turtle Cove Alumni* banner to the front window of her flower shop, The Flower Patch, and stepped back to examine the result.

Reese Holt came out of Jessica’s bakery next door with a cup of coffee and stopped at Kaylee’s side. “Looks good.”

Bear, Kaylee’s lovable dachshund, danced excitedly around his legs. Reese was one of the dog’s favorite people on earth, besides Kaylee.

Reese stooped and greeted the little dachshund. “When’s this whole shindig set to start?” he asked Kaylee.

Kaylee glanced at her watch and felt her heart rate tick up. “Any minute! And I still have three more venues to finish decorating.”

"I can give you a hand."

"No, that's okay. I'm sure you have a job to get back to." With Reese's stellar reputation as a master carpenter and all-around handyman, everyone in town always seemed to be trying to schedule his services.

"I'm ahead of schedule at the moment. And I'd be happy to help. I may not be an alumnus of Turtle Cove High, but I know Mr. Fletcher and I think it's great that Wilma wanted to pull this together before he moved away."

"Thanks. I really appreciate it. You could start by loading the arrangements by the door into the van." She turned to Mary, who worked part-time at The Flower Patch. They went inside the shop. "We're stop number three on DeeDee's Turtle Cove Crawl this afternoon, so I should be back to give you a hand before too many alumni show up."

Mary dismissed her with a wave. "I can handle it. I've got the clues right here to help them figure out their next destination."

"Do you mind if I leave Bear with you?"

"I never do."

"Thanks." She grabbed a box to take to the van, then paused. "When the photographer gets here, he can take the formal shots of each alumni under the arbor or—wait, do you think the lighting in here is bright enough? But a professional would come prepared with his or her own, right?"

"Go," Mary ordered. "I'll take care of the photographer."

"Thanks!" Kaylee dashed out behind Reese, carrying the last load of sunflowers to the van.

"Where to first?" Reese asked, climbing into the passenger's seat.

"Get Wired," Kaylee said. "We chose places that used to be popular hangouts back in the day."

Reese laughed. "That explains why Keith had the old computers and video games on display. Get Wired was probably

the closest thing Turtle Cove had to a video arcade.”

“That’s what Wilma said. And I’m sure the guys won’t notice much else there, so we figured we’d need an eye-catching clue to get their attention away from the video games.”

Kaylee parked at the curb in front of the electronics store. “The sunflowers?”

“Yup.” Kaylee jumped down from the van and grabbed one of the large pots.

Reese picked up the other and then hurried ahead to open the shop door. “I don’t get it. Where does a sunflower tell them to go next? Are you counting on the flowers turning toward the light, which also happens to be the direction of the next location?”

“That would have required some serious planning. And to be honest, I didn’t even think of it. What do you get from sunflowers?”

His brow furrowed. “Seeds and oil. Oh! So from here they’re supposed to go to the health food store?”

“That’s right.” Kaylee set her sunflower on one side of the vintage video game display Keith had set up and then shifted Reese’s pot into place on the other side.

“But I thought the destinations were supposed to be places where the alumni hung out during high school? I find it hard to believe the health food store was all that popular.”

Kaylee laughed. “It probably wouldn’t have been if it’d been here. But back in the day, that place was a music store, very popular with rock star wannabes, according to DeeDee.” Kaylee drove them to the next location she needed to decorate. “Not all the destinations were hangouts either. Some, like DeeDee’s shop, are businesses that belong to alumni from different years.”

“So how does The Flower Patch fit?” Reese asked. “Is it grandfathered in because your dad and grandparents went to Turtle Cove High?”

Kaylee grinned. “No, it was the most popular place for the

guys to buy the corsages for their prom dates.”

“So the corsages are a clue for your store? Here I thought it would be for the high school gym or wherever they held the prom.”

“I imagine Wilma hopes you won’t be the only one who makes that mistake. We didn’t want to make it too easy.” Kaylee and Reese made short work of finishing setup at the remaining venues. Her cell phone rang as she parked once more outside The Flower Patch. She glanced at the caller ID—DeeDee.

DeeDee was already standing on the sidewalk in front, her phone pressed to her ear, and when she spotted the van, she clicked off her phone and dashed toward Kaylee, her face frantic. “The photographer bailed on us. What are we going to do? Wilma’s counting on those photos for the special collage she has planned for Mr. Fletcher.”

Reese rounded the van. “Why don’t you ask Arnold Boyer?”

“The dentist? You know him? I thought he left the island long before you arrived.”

“We met in college. He’s here for the reunion. I saw him at the coffee shop an hour ago.” Reese pulled out his phone and tapped the screen. “He gave me his number. He used to be a photographer for the college yearbook.”

“Yeah, I think he took pictures for Turtle Cove High’s yearbook too,” DeeDee said.

“See?” Reese said, listening to his phone ring. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to fill in for your photographer.”

“You think he has a decent camera with him? I think Wilma was hoping for better pictures than could be taken on a phone.”

“His girlfriend had a fancy DSLR camera hanging around her neck.”

“Perfect!” DeeDee squealed.

Wilma, who’d walked up behind DeeDee, didn’t seem nearly as thrilled about the option.

"I know you wanted a photographer who wasn't part of the group," Kaylee said to her. "But if you want his girlfriend in some of the pictures, one of us could take a few with her in them."

Wilma shook her head. "Don't worry about it. She's not one of our classmates, and this weekend is mostly for them."

Reese pocketed his phone. "Sounds as if Arnold's girl, Amber Mason, is already on the job. He says they've got a whole gang at the park reenacting some of his old yearbook photos."

"Yes," Wilma said softly, "I'd e-mailed him that I hoped to do that."

A swell of hoots and hollers came from the direction of the park.

DeeDee beelined toward it. "This I've got to see!"

"Sounds like they're having fun," Kaylee said encouragingly to Wilma, who looked gloomier than ever.

"Let's see what they're up to," Reese suggested, nudging them both toward the laughter.

The park came into view and Reese burst into laughter. "This is not going to end well."

People of all shapes and sizes were on their hands and knees forming a pyramid. The petite woman on the second row didn't appear nearly strong enough to hold the solidly built man being helped up onto her back, but she was clearly giving it her best effort.

A redheaded bombshell stood behind them shaking her head. "There's no way I'm standing on the top."

Kaylee gasped. "Is that Ginger Andrews? The soap opera queen?"

"Yup. She's Turtle Cove's claim to fame," Wilma said.

A tall, dapper gentleman, whose stylish salt-and-pepper hair and square-cut chin could have easily landed him a role as her leading man, whispered something in her ear. He must have paid her quite a compliment from the way she blushed.

"Who's the guy talking to her?" Kaylee asked.

"Reggie Blake. He was our prom king. Now he's an electronics magnate."

"And let me guess," Reese interjected. "Ginger was the prom queen?"

"No, that was actually his wife, Nina, but she couldn't make it to the reunion."

Whatever Reggie said to Ginger convinced her to let him help her to the top of the pyramid. As she stepped up the second row, the whole thing began to wobble.

Kaylee covered her face. "I can't watch." But she peeked between her fingers.

As Ginger stepped to the pinnacle and spread her arms in a victory V, the whole pyramid collapsed like a house of cards. A muscled young man dashed into the fray just in time to catch Ginger before she hit the ground—not that his heroic catch stopped her shrill scream. Everyone within earshot who hadn't already been watching came running, cell phones out as they took videos and pictures. And Ginger clearly wasn't happy about being caught in such a pose. She glared all around as the giggling group behind her untangled themselves.

"I'm guessing that doesn't match the photo in the yearbook," Kaylee said to Wilma.

She giggled. "Actually, it's pretty close."

Reese waved over a slight, dark-haired man wearing round, black-rimmed glasses. "This is Arnold," he said, then introduced Kaylee.

Somehow the man looked like a dentist. He was at least half a foot shorter than Reese, clean-shaven and handsome in a different way from Reese's rugged attractiveness. But from the dreamy expression Kaylee caught on Wilma's face, she definitely preferred Arnold's type.

Arnold glanced around the crowd, trying to find his girlfriend, Amber. "She's the redhead," he said, standing on his tiptoes to scan the park grounds. "Not Ginger, but every bit as beautiful."

Wilma frowned. "We'd better encourage everyone to get started on the crawl or some of the businesses will be ready to close before everyone does the rounds."

"There she is," Arnold pointed to a redhead slinking into the bushes next to the trailhead, snapping photos of couples strolling along the trail.

"Oh no!" Kaylee ran toward her with Arnold, Reese, and Wilma on her heels. "Excuse me, Miss. You don't want to be in there. That tall plant with the white, plate-sized flowers is *Heracleum mantegazzianum*."

Amber's forehead wrinkled.

"Giant hogweed. It's poisonous." Kaylee pointed to the posted warning sign.

Amber's expression transformed to one of panic. She pulled her arms tight to her body and dashed into the clearing. "Thanks for telling me!"

Ginger stepped onto the trail and squinted in their direction. The rugged young man who'd saved her when the pyramid collapsed trailed a few feet behind her, and from the way he scanned the area every few seconds, Kaylee guessed that he was the actress's bodyguard. Ginger stomped over to Amber, her hands fisted at her side. "Who are you?"

Amber straightened, clearly not happy with Ginger's tone.

"She's my date," Arnold said protectively.

Ginger turned on him. "Well, I'm here to relax with old friends, not be hounded by the paparazzi, so make sure your girlfriend doesn't leak any pictures to the papers, or you'll both be sorry."

Reggie slipped into their midst and laid a soothing hand on

her arm. "Of course they wouldn't do that." He gazed pointedly at Amber. "Would you?"

Amber's defiant countenance didn't make any promises.

"Amber volunteered to fill in when our photographer bailed," Wilma interjected. "We're lucky to have her."

Ginger snorted.

"Ginger, why don't we get started on this town crawl? The less time you spend in a given place, the less likely someone is to catch a photo of you and leak it," Reggie coaxed.

The actress hesitated for a moment, then nodded, and the pair strolled off.

Arnold's expression turned wistful. "He still has the magic touch." A hint of envy colored his tone. "He was always the most popular guy in school."

"Maybe to airheads like Ginger," Wilma muttered. More audibly, she said, "He always seemed a little phony to me."

"You should go back to your hotel and wash with soap and water to make sure there's no hogweed sap on you," Kaylee advised Amber, "and change your clothes to be on the safe side. I'd recommend long sleeves and pants for the next several days. If your skin came into contact with the plant and is then exposed to sunlight, you'll get some nasty blistering burns. Some people have even been hospitalized from their exposure to that plant."

"I'm sorry. I know you need me taking pictures at The Flower Patch," Amber said to Wilma. "I won't be long, I promise." She lifted her camera from around her neck and handed it to Arnold. "You get started and I'll catch up to you at the flower shop."

"I should walk you back to the hotel," Arnold countered.

"No," Amber insisted. "I don't want you to miss out on a moment of your reunion because I was too busy taking pictures to read a sign. Kaylee, do you think I'll be okay?"

"I'm sure you'll be fine if you wash right away," Kaylee reassured her. "I think I'll have a word with the town about cordoning off this area to make sure no one walks into the plant again."

"Why doesn't the town get rid of them?" Wilma asked as Amber left.

"They are trying to," Kaylee explained, "but it will take several years to get rid of a mature plant like this. It's been here probably five years or so, and it's been dropping seeds into the surrounding soil all that time. If they pull it while it has seeds, they risk spreading it. And even if they pull this plant, the seeds already planted can live for up to five years, so it'll simply keep growing. The best thing to do is spray it with an herbicide during its growing season to prevent it creating more seeds and continue to do so until it uses up the stockpile of seeds already in the soil."

"Well they'd better do something before someone gets seriously hurt."

2



Around five o'clock, Kaylee began bringing in the sidewalk displays she'd set out for the Turtle Cove Crawl.

A balding man waved at her from across the street. "Excuse me. I need to talk to you." He hurried over, hampered by a slight limp and followed by a blonde with thick glasses that slipped down her nose.

Arnold and Amber emerged from Jessica's shop next door, and Amber brought up her ever-present camera and snapped a few pictures.

The blonde woman paused at the display of DeeDee's handcrafted soaps as the man addressed Kaylee. "You're the owner, right?"

"That's right."

"Then you must know a lot about plants."

"A fair amount, yes."

"Good." He pulled a yellow card from his pocket that Kaylee recognized as one of the clue cards for the town crawl. "What's a popular Chinese maple used in bonsai gardens that would have made King Neptune proud?"

Kaylee smiled, impressed by the clever clue Wilma had devised. "Do you know what King Neptune is usually depicted holding?" Kaylee asked.

The man glanced back at his wife. "Cheryl, do you?"

The woman set down a bar of soap and ambled closer. "Yes, a trident. Is there such a thing as a trident maple?"

"There is. The *Acer buergerianum*."

The man studied a map of the town. "I don't see any businesses

called trident. Is it this Gumshoe Place? Trident is a brand of chewing gum, right?"

Arnold shared a smile with Kaylee over their heads as the man's wife glanced at the map. "You need to put on your reading glasses. That says Gunther's Sea Kayak rentals."

Arnold sidled up to Cheryl and whispered, "The Latin name Miss Bleu gave you was another hint."

"It was?" Cheryl's eyes widened and her gaze shifted back to Kaylee. "What did you say it was again?"

"Acer buergerianum."

"Buergerianium? It's got to be the burger joint," the man said. "Although the pronunciation is a little different. Isn't that where you said you always hung out on Friday nights with your classmates?"

The woman peered at Kaylee for confirmation.

Kaylee feigned an "I'm not supposed to say" shrug that reassured them they were on the right track.

The woman grinned. "Thanks!"

Amber snapped a picture of the pair.

Cheryl frowned at her. "Do I know you?"

Arnold introduced her as his date, and Cheryl introduced her husband, Phil Newton.

"We were charged with capturing a portrait of every alumni in attendance," Arnold explained. "We had a display set up inside the flower shop."

"And I remember seeing you collecting a clue at the counter inside this afternoon," Amber interjected. "But I think we missed getting a formal photo. I think we could do with more candid shots anyway, though."

"Fine by me, as long as you get my good side." Cheryl laughed and fell into reminiscing about school days with Arnold while Kaylee returned to closing up the shop.

"I'll take care of putting those away," Mary said when Kaylee carried the last display in from the sidewalk. "You need to hurry home and freshen up for your date."

"It isn't a date. Reese just asked me if I'd come along to the reunion dinner so he wouldn't be the only non-alumni there. Arnold talked him into going."

Mary shook her head and said to Bear, "What are we going to do with her?"

Kaylee rolled her eyes and scooped her dachshund into her arms. "The last thing I want to do is sabotage our friendship by reading more into a dinner invitation than there is."

"Whatever you say. Oh, and a last-minute order came in to be delivered to the soap opera star at her hotel first thing tomorrow morning. I put it together and stored it in the first cooler. Will you be able to deliver it?"

"Sure. No problem. I'll see you tomorrow."



By the time Kaylee arrived at the Pacific Street Diner an hour later, the place was packed. The usual top-forty playlist had been replaced with tunes from those of the alumni's high school days, but Ginger and Reggie were the only ones dancing on the small dance floor. Across the room, Reese waved from his table.

After pulling her chair out for her, he made introductions. "You already know Amber and Arnold and Wilma." He motioned to the man next to Wilma. "This is Ewan Sutherland."

Ewan stood and reached across the table to shake Kaylee's hand. He might have been another soap opera star—tall, dark, and handsome—but Reese said he was a veterinarian, living off the island. "You're the flower shop owner with the little

dachshund, aren't you?" he asked.

"That's right."

The last couple at the table introduced themselves. They turned out to be Phil and Cheryl Newton, the pair she'd helped with the trident maple clue.

Arnold was watching Reggie and Ginger on the dance floor. "I wish I could dance like that. I swear there's nothing the man can't do."

Phil glanced over his shoulder and snorted. "Trust me. You're a much better man than he is."

"That's what I always tried to tell him," Wilma said.

"How do you know him?" Kaylee asked Phil. "I got the impression earlier that you didn't grow up in Turtle Cove."

Phil downed the last of his soda before responding. "You're right. I didn't. I met Cheryl and Reggie at college. Then after college we went into business together."

"It didn't work out, I take it?" Amber asked.

Phil twirled his glass, watching the ice swirl. "Actually we did great. But after a while our visions for the company headed in different directions, so we split."

"And you went to work for someone else?" Amber asked.

"No, no. Cheryl and I started our own company and he still has the old one."

"What kind of business?" Reese asked.

"The tech industry."

His wife must have seen Wilma's and Ewan's eyes glaze over, because she patted her husband's hand. "Enough about us. What do you do for a living, Amber?"

"Please don't shush him. I think it's great when people are brave enough to strike out on their own and become entrepreneurs. And you've done it twice?" Amber directed that last comment back to Phil.

"Yes." He folded his wife's hands in his. "But I recently retired from the business so we could enjoy our health while we have it. There's more to life than making money."

"Wow," Arnold said. "You've done well for yourself to retire so young. I figure I'll have to work until I'm sixty at least. Longer if I get married and start a family."

Wilma rubbed her thumbnail along a groove in the wooden table. "Would you like to start a family?"

He glanced at Amber, whose attention had shifted to photographing the growing group on the dance floor. "Sure, if I find the right woman."

The color that rushed to Wilma's cheeks told Kaylee plainly that Wilma wished she were that woman.

"How about you two?" Ewan asked Phil and Cheryl. "You have kids?"

"No, we never did," Cheryl said. "We tried for a few years, but it never happened. I enjoy working though."

"You didn't retire when your husband did?" Amber interjected. Obviously she hadn't been paying attention to the conversation.

Cheryl's eyes narrowed as if she resented the question. "No. Like I said, I enjoy my work."

"Are you involved in research and development?"

"I mostly crunch numbers."

"Cheryl was always a whiz at math in school," Wilma chimed in.

"And I guess having Phil at home helps lighten the load of household chores?" Ewan said, with a twinkle in his eye.

Cheryl smiled. "Yes."

"I'm thinking of taking a gourmet cooking course," Phil added. "To give her extra-special treats to come home to."

"What a sweet idea," Wilma cooed.

"You never did tell us what you do, Amber," Cheryl said.

“Nothing terribly exciting. Just office work.”

Ewan laughed. “On the days when I have cats trying to shred my arms or a dog trying to make a meal of a finger, I sometimes wish my job could be so unexciting.” He winked at her, earning a giggle.

The alumni of the table soon became immersed in regaling each other with stories from high school, while Amber wandered off to take photos of the groups at the other tables.

Kaylee turned to Reese. “How serious do you think Amber and Arnold are?” she whispered.

“I’m under the impression they’ve only known each other a couple of weeks,” Reese said.

Kaylee stifled a grimace. If Arnold was inviting her to his class reunion after a mere two-week acquaintance, it must be pretty serious, at least on his part. Poor Wilma didn’t have a chance.

Amber scurried back to the table and tapped Wilma’s shoulder. “I have a fabulous idea. So many people are snapping photos with their cell phones. You should invite them to send all their photos to you and you could post them on a private social media group so everyone can enjoy them and download copies of ones they’d like to keep. I could set it up for you, if you like. We could even make a slide show of them for the final night or to play during the dinner dance. That way, everyone can enjoy all the photos, not only the ones I take.”

“That *is* a fabulous idea!” Wilma stood right up and made the announcement, sharing the e-mail address she’d created for the reunion.

Kaylee ordered a burger and fries and, while she ate, enjoyed listening to everyone’s stories. Amber seemed to spend more time away from the table than at it, even sharing a dance with Arnold’s idol, Reggie, which gave Kaylee a smidgen of optimism that there might be hope for a match between Wilma and Arnold yet.

"This doesn't look good," Reese said out of the blue.

Kaylee followed his gaze to see an attractive blonde woman in tight jeans, three-inch heels, and a shimmery, clingy top stalking toward Reggie and Ginger on the dance floor. "Who's that?"

Cheryl twisted around in her chair. "Uh-oh. That's Nina, Reggie's wife. Someone said she was recovering from plastic surgery at a European spa and that's why he was here without her."

"People can be so cruel," Kaylee said. "You'd think by this age they'd be too mature for all that high school cattiness."

"No, it's true," Wilma said. "At least, the part about Reggie coming alone. Nina isn't registered for the reunion."

As Nina made her way to Ginger and Reggie, the pale fury on her face transformed into a placid mask. She tapped Ginger on the shoulder and apparently asked to cut in, because Ginger stepped back and Nina moved into her husband's arms, although he didn't seem particularly pleased to see her.

Reggie escorted Nina to his table before the song finished. Thankfully, Ginger and her apparent bodyguard had already relocated to a pair of stools at the bar, sparing them from an uncomfortable situation.

Nina summoned the waitress a little too loudly and ordered herself a glass of wine against her husband's wishes, so she changed it to a martini, clearly to spite him.

"Did they always have such a rocky relationship?" Amber asked Cheryl.

"Nina grew up spoiled and beautiful. Of course, Reggie could afford to dote on her. But he's also a horrible flirt. He really does adore her, but she started to lose her self-confidence and took to drinking too much, which he never liked."

"When we were business partners," Phil interjected, "we maintained a strict two-drink limit for any public event. Business owners can't afford to jeopardize the integrity of their

company by having a few too many and having their judgment impaired, you know?"

Ewan, the vet sitting beside Wilma, who'd been quietly watching the comings and goings most of the evening, said, "Seems like Reggie has his hands full trying to ensure Nina follows suit."

"Enough of this gloomy talk," Amber said brightly. "As a whole your classmates seem to be quite accomplished." She motioned around the table. "You have a dentist, a vet, accomplished businesspeople, even a famous actress."

Arnold smiled at her approvingly. "Amber is quite talented herself. Show them one of your sleight-of-hand tricks," he urged.

Amber brushed off the request. "I'm sure your friends don't want to see something silly like that."

"I'd love to see a trick," Phil said.

Amber blushed, but put her camera away in its case. "Pay close attention," she said, then dazzled them with so many innocent-looking gestures and misdirection she had them convinced she could rub a coin into her elbow and make a saltshaker disappear.

"How did you do that?" Cheryl asked.

Amber grinned. "I shifted your attention from what I was really doing. Like when I appeared to accidentally drop the coin before I finished the first trick."

"You did that on purpose?"

Her grin widened. "No move is ever by accident." She squeezed Arnold's hand. "You know that, right?"

"I'm learning."

"Good." She looped her camera gear and purse over her shoulder. "I'll be back. I need to go refresh my lipstick."

A few minutes later, Arnold was telling them a funny story about a bodybuilder who'd fainted at the mere sight of the dental drill when DeeDee stopped by the table. "You wouldn't believe the things I just heard Nina saying to Amber in the restroom,"

she whispered to Kaylee. "I think she mistook her for Ginger."

Kaylee remembered Amber dancing with Reggie earlier in the evening and wondered how long Nina might have been hovering in the shadows before making her entrance.

"She insisted she knew Amber's type," DeeDee went on in a low voice. "For a minute there, I thought I was going to have to call in Arnold and Reggie to break it up."

"That's probably not the kind of memory Wilma's trying to create with this reunion," Kaylee noted quietly.

DeeDee shook her head. "I can't believe there's as much drama as ever in this class. You'd think they would've mellowed out by now."

"Is the teacher Wilma wanted to honor here?" Kaylee asked, louder.

"Not tonight. But he's going to give us a guided nature hike tomorrow, then stay for the picnic. He's also joining us for the dinner cruise on Sunday, and of course we'll be honoring him in the Hall of Fame Sunday night." DeeDee glanced at her husband, Andy, who was pointing to his watch. "I better get going. Our babysitter couldn't stay late tonight."

"See you tomorrow," said Kaylee.

Cheryl, Phil, and Ewan rose too, and said their good nights.

"Hey, I thought Amber was going to be right back," Arnold said suddenly with an anxious expression.

At the bar, Ginger's bodyguard suddenly seemed very interested in something or someone outside the nearby window. The bodyguard whispered something in Ginger's ear then let himself out the side door.

"I need to make a call," Wilma announced and excused herself from the table.

Reese and Arnold talked about their college days, but as another ten minutes passed with no sign of Amber, Arnold grew increasingly worried.

"I'll go check on her," Kaylee volunteered. "She probably got chatting with someone and lost track of time."

But the women's restroom was empty.

Kaylee scanned the bar area as she headed back to their table, but couldn't spot the redhead anywhere. And Kaylee had clearly missed some action during her brief search of the restroom, because Reggie was now escorting his wife out the front door with a firm hand on her elbow. He offered Kaylee a magnanimous smile as he passed, but it seemed considerably more forced than the charming smiles he'd been passing around before.

Kaylee pushed open the side exit to see if she could spot Amber and was surprised to find it raining. Ginger's bodyguard stood under the protection of the eaves, smoking a cigarette. A couple dashed toward their Honda parked in the back lot. Kaylee slipped back inside and took a longer route through the restaurant so she could scan the other tables on her way back to theirs. Amber had been so talkative with everyone, it wouldn't have surprised Kaylee to find her chatting at another table, oblivious to Arnold's distress.

But there was no sign of her anywhere. She was gone.