

Thorn to Secrecy





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Virginia Smith

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1



The bell over the front door of The Flower Patch jingled merrily, and the aroma of warm chocolate immediately overpowered the lingering scent of the lily bouquet Kaylee Bleu had just set in the refrigerated display case. She glanced up and smiled when she saw who had entered the Victorian mansion that housed her flower shop.

Jessica Roberts, the owner of the Death by Chocolate bakery next door, bustled in with a grin on her pixielike face and a luscious-looking treat in her hands. "Congratulations!"

Incredulous, Kaylee shut the display case door. "How in the world did you find out so quickly? I just got the call half an hour ago." Her best friend was notorious for discovering Orcas Island news at lightning speed, but this was impressive even for Jessica. Kaylee's focus shifted to the item in Jessica's hands, and the dessert's dark-brown filling and delicate crust made her mouth water. "Is that a chocolate tart?"

"Bittersweet." Jessica arched an eyebrow. "Like your victory in winning the contract to supply the decorations for the Autumn Jubilee."

Kaylee cocked her head to one side. She'd found the brand-new victory simply sweet. "Bittersweet because . . .?"

"Because, while it's a real coup on your part, that event is going to be a load of work." Jessica set the tart on the flower shop's counter. "You know you're going to work your fingers bare, don't you?"

Kaylee held up her thorn-calloused hands for inspection and shrugged. "What else is new?"

Before Jessica could answer, the clink of silverware announced the arrival of Kaylee's assistant, Mary Bishop, who emerged from the back carrying three glass dessert plates. "I thought I heard Jessica's voice and smelled chocolate."

"You have the nose of a bloodhound," Jessica told her.

As if the canine reference served as a summons, Kaylee's beloved dachshund, Bear, trotted through the doorway on his short legs, issuing a yip of greeting. He came to a stop at Jessica's feet, where he sat on his haunches and gazed adoringly at her with his large brown eyes.

"Sorry, Bear, no chocolate for dogs," Jessica said. "But I brought something for you." She reached into her pocket and pulled out one of the dog cookies she often baked next door.

Bear accepted his treat with a grateful tail wag and scampered off to his dog bed.

Jessica produced a knife and a pie server from her apron pocket. "Still warm and extra-delicious." She cut a generous slice for each of them, then slid the portions onto the plates Mary held out.

"And extra-appreciated," Kaylee said, accepting a plate from Mary. She sank her fork into the tip and cut off a small chunk, then popped it into her mouth. Her knees went weak as the decadent, silky-smooth chocolate hit her taste buds. "And amazing," she continued after finishing her first bite. "But really, how did you find out I'd been awarded the contract for the decorations?"

"You want me to reveal my sources?" Jessica flashed her a teasing grin and then relented. "Joy Skenandore is hosting her bridge group tonight, so she stopped by the bakery an hour ago to pick up a dozen cream puffs."

Joy, the energetic wife of Sheriff's Deputy Dean Skenandore, had proposed Turtle Cove host an Autumn Jubilee to celebrate the start of fall in Washington State's beautiful San Juan Islands.

Her bright idea had also promptly earned her the position of committee chairperson. While it would be an even bigger job than Kaylee's, she could think of no one better qualified to throw a lively community party than Joy.

Kaylee did a quick mental calculation. "Wait, you knew an hour ago?" She planted a hand on her hip. "That means you knew I'd been given the contract before I did. And you didn't tell me?"

Jessica wagged her fork in Kaylee's direction. "I needed that hour to bake your celebratory tart. Besides, I promised Joy I'd keep my lips zipped. And to be honest, I'm still not convinced that this thing is going to be worth the effort."

"I think the aim is to extend tourist season past Labor Day, which could be a real boon." Mary sliced a bite off her wedge of tart. "Local businesses stand to benefit, including ours."

"And I'm fully prepared to appreciate those benefits," Jessica said. "But I have to admit that I'm worried the committee doesn't have enough time or money to pull off the event Joy is envisioning. If they want to draw in off-island visitors, they should have started securing sponsors and advertising to mainlanders months ago."

"I think Joy's got it under control," Kaylee said. "And knowing her, she'll make it amazing even on a shoestring budget." She closed her eyes to savor a bite of chocolate before continuing. "But speaking of the budget, I will say that I was surprised to get the call. I thought for sure the contract would go to Lorna over at Daisies Galore."

Lorna Singer, the owner of The Flower Patch's primary competition on Orcas Island, set her standard prices at least fifteen percent lower than Kaylee's. It might be a savvy business move, but it did make Kaylee wonder how Lorna made enough profit to survive.

"Joy knows she'll get what she pays for," Mary said. "She didn't go with the cheapest bid because your creations are gorgeous."

Though Kaylee felt a flush of pride at the compliment, she voiced a quick defense on Lorna's behalf. "Her fresh-cut arrangements are lovely."

Jessica speared her last bite of tart. "They're lovely, but not the true art that you produce here."

"With Mary's help." Kaylee smiled at the part-time floral designer who had worked for Kaylee's grandmother, Bea Lyons, and stayed on after Kaylee had purchased The Flower Patch from Bea a few years earlier.

Mary stacked Jessica's empty plate on top of her own and extended a hand for Kaylee's. "I just follow directions from the boss."

Kaylee smiled as she gave up her plate. Their abilities complemented each other, making them a terrific team—a big reason for The Flower Patch's continued success after Bea retired and moved to Arizona to live with her twin sister.

Jessica glanced at the clock. "I'd better get back to the bakery." She gathered Kaylee in a quick hug. "Congratulations again. You'll do a fabulous job."

"Thanks, Jess," Kaylee said. "Do you want me to wrap up the tart for you to take?"

"No way." Jessica winked. "You'll need the sustenance to get you through all the late nights you're about to spend making decorations for the Autumn Jubilee."

The bell dinged a farewell as Jessica bustled through the door. Kaylee picked up the remaining tart. "Can I send some of this with you, Mary?"

Mary eyed the pan, which was well over two-thirds full. "Herb certainly won't say no, although I might make him come to a tai chi class with me to earn it." Mary's husband, Herb, was a former mail carrier, and she encouraged him to enjoy an active retirement.

Grinning, Kaylee followed Mary into the kitchen, where she

set about slicing and wrapping up a generous wedge while Mary washed the plates. The bell over the front door sounded again just as Kaylee was putting away the plastic wrap. She glanced at the wall clock and saw that it was just past three o'clock. "That'll be the delivery from Madison's. He's late today."

But the newcomer wasn't the expected delivery from the shop's wholesale supplier. Instead, it was a young man ordering a birthday bouquet for his wife, which Kaylee promised to have delivered the following morning.

When Mary left at four o'clock, tart wedge in hand, the delivery from Madison's still hadn't arrived. Kaylee was waiting on the roses in that order to complete the centerpieces for a ladies' luncheon the next day. She glanced at her worktable, where a dozen beribboned vases sat ready for her to fill. *Where are those flowers?* The later they arrived, the later into the night she'd have to work to get the order finished on time. The customer was coming by to pick up the arrangements as soon as the shop opened in the morning.

Finally she snatched up the workroom's telephone and dialed the wholesale business.

"Madison's Wholesale Floral Supply," announced the familiar voice of Ken Madison, the business's owner.

"Hi, Mr. Madison. This is Kaylee Bleu over in Turtle Cove."

"Always a pleasure to hear from my favorite customer." The words rang with his usual cheerful manner. "Are you calling to place another order so soon?"

"Actually, I'm wondering where my current order is. I expected it this morning."

"It hasn't arrived?" Dismay colored his tone. "Bryce left the warehouse at ten. He did have several orders to deliver, but I would have expected him to arrive before now."

"I hope nothing has happened to him," Kaylee said. "Maybe

the ferry was delayed." Madison's was located on the mainland, a ferry ride and a drive from Orcas Island.

"Oh, I doubt that's the problem. He's getting slower and slower. I don't know what he does with his time when he ought to be working. If that boy weren't my grandson I'd fire him in a New York minute."

Instead of voicing an opinion, Kaylee asked, "Do you have any way of getting in touch with him? If those supplies aren't going to arrive today, I need to do some quick substitutions for an order I need ready first thing tomorrow."

"I'll call his cell phone and get right back with you," Mr. Madison promised.

Kaylee disconnected the call, then walked to the large cooler and inspected her inventory. The church luncheon organizer had requested yellow roses, but Kaylee didn't have enough on hand. She did have plenty of chrysanthemums and some beautiful bee balm she'd harvested herself just yesterday. Maybe sunflowers? She'd spotted a field of healthy-looking late blooms not far from Wildflower Cottage, where she lived. The sun wouldn't set for another couple of hours, so if she needed to she could run out there, but . . .

The phone rang, startling her from her brainstorming session. Mr. Madison's voice sounded in her ear the moment she connected the call.

"The boy is on the other side of the island. He's on his way."

Relief flooded Kaylee. "Thank you, Mr. Madison. What a load off my mind."

"I'll be having a talk with him," the older man assured her. "He needs to know this is no way to run a business."

As Kaylee thanked him again and ended the call, Bear trotted into the room and planted himself at her feet, then cast an expectant gaze up at her.

"I know," she told the dachshund. "It's almost time to go home and have dinner. But I'm afraid we'll have to stay here for a while. We've got a deadline to meet, and it's going to take ages to disleaf all those roses."

Bear gave a nearly inaudible whimper and did not move.

Kaylee dropped down on her haunches to rub his silky ears. "I don't like having my schedule interrupted any more than you do. Tell you what—we'll take everything home and work on this after dinner. How does that sound?"

Bear wagged his tail and leaned into her hand. He was likely responding to her affectionate petting more than her words, but she decided to take his antics as proof that he approved of the plan.

Kaylee set about gathering the tools she would need at home and shutting up the shop. When everything, including Bear, had been loaded into her red Ford Escape, she pulled the vehicle around to the front of the mansion and opened the rear door to wait for the tardy delivery. Within a few moments, a van bearing the logo of Madison's Wholesale Floral Supply pulled to a stop behind her. A gangly young man in his early twenties with unkempt hair that swept the tops of his shoulders hopped out of the driver's seat.

"Sorry I'm late," Bryce Madison mumbled without making eye contact. He made his way to the back of the van at a frustratingly slow pace. "Gramps said you were in a hurry. Didn't know that."

Kaylee let the comment pass, though she might have replied that it was not unreasonable to expect deliveries to be made during business hours. Instead, she kept her expression pleasant as he loaded several reinforced boxes into the back of her vehicle.

When all of the boxes were transferred, Kaylee closed the rear door. "Thanks, Bryce. Enjoy your evening."

"Yep." He sauntered back to his van and pulled away from

the curb without another glance at Kaylee. *Not a talker, to be sure.*

Relieved to finally have her delivery in her possession, Kaylee slid into the driver's seat of her SUV and headed for home. She had a lot of work to do.



After a quick supper, Kaylee moved all of the boxed roses from her car into the kitchen, piling the still-cool refrigerated cartons on the table, which she had covered in plastic for the task. She pulled on her work gloves, then applied her box cutter to the closest box. As soon as she opened the flaps, the heady scent of roses filled the air. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, appreciating the classic aroma that she never grew tired of.

After a moment, she removed a paper-wrapped bundle of flowers and laid them on the plastic table cover. The color of the blossoms was perfect, a deep lemony yellow. She lifted one and inspected it closely. *No sign of aphids, thank goodness.* Not that she'd expected to find any pests stowing away on a shipment from Madison's.

She plucked the excess leaves from the stem, leaving just enough to give her arrangements the aesthetically pleasing appearance she desired, without taking up so much room in the vase that she had trouble fitting all the flowers she wanted inside. She laid the finished rose back in the carton, ready for transport to the shop in the morning. Then she picked up the next one and repeated the procedure.

The sun had long set and a garbage bag full of discarded leaves lay at Kaylee's feet when she opened the final carton, yawning as she did so. Bear, who had been dozing nearby, stood and stretched, then trotted toward her, issuing a plaintive woof.

"We didn't get our evening walk, did we?" Kaylee gestured

toward the flower boxes. "Sorry, buddy. Work has to come first."

The dog heaved a sigh and flopped dramatically to the floor.

Kaylee lifted the bundle of roses out of the carton, revealing a plastic jar in the bottom of the box. Picking it up, she read the label. *Stay Fresh Flower Preservative*.

"Why is this in here?" She held the jar aloft for Bear's inspection. "Mr. Madison knows I prefer my homemade preservative. I'll bet his grandson added this to the order by mistake."

She snapped her mouth shut on the accusation. She didn't know the young man well enough to dislike him, after all. Then again, he certainly hadn't shown much dedication to his grandfather's business, and taking over a business from another generation was something Kaylee knew plenty about. She'd considered stepping in to buy The Flower Patch from Bea a golden opportunity after her position as a plant taxonomy professor at the University of Washington in Seattle had been cut. Sure, she'd had some insecurity and growing pains along the way, but she sincerely appreciated the significance of assuming responsibility for her grandmother's life's work—unlike Bryce, who clearly couldn't care less.

But Bryce was not her concern. Refocusing her thoughts on the unwanted preservative, Kaylee decided she'd call Mr. Madison in the morning to make sure she wasn't invoiced for it, then return it when the next delivery arrived. She tossed the jar into the tote containing her tools and set to work on the last bundle of roses.

It was past Kaylee's usual bedtime when she finished her task. Glad to be done, she tied off the garbage bag and set it in the corner of the kitchen along with two empty flower cartons. Disleafed roses took up less space, so she'd been able to consolidate. She'd take the boxes and garbage bag to the curb the next morning, which was trash pickup day.

The overnight temperature would be in the midforties, which would be cooler than the house, so she carried the cartons of prepared roses out to her SUV, combining the trip with Bear's long-overdue evening walk. Safe in their foam-lined corrugated cartons, the flowers would be fine until morning.

Tired from a long but productive day, Kaylee rushed through her nighttime routine and climbed gratefully between the sheets. Bear's warm little body nestled at her side, and within minutes, they were both asleep . . .

Until a noise jolted her awake. Instantly alert, Bear leaped off the bed and ran to the bedroom window. He barked three times, dancing in place.

"Shhh." Kaylee sat up in bed. "Bear, be quiet a minute."

The dog fell silent, and Kaylee strained to listen for another sound like the one that had awakened her—a thud, like something hitting glass.

Heart pounding in her ears, she slipped out of bed and crept to the bedroom window. With trembling fingers, she lifted the edge of the shade and peered outside. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust.

The moon cast white light on the lavender fields that surrounded the cottage. The fir trees that grew in abundance appeared as black towers in the night. A breeze blowing from the ocean stirred the dark fronds into an eerie dance. Other than that, nothing moved.

Kaylee dropped the shade back into place. *I'm just being silly. The wind must have rattled the window.*

"It's okay," she told Bear. "There's nothing out there."

But before she could take a step, a new noise reached her, this time from the direction of the front of the house. She froze. It sounded like the entry door rattling.

Someone was trying to break in.

2



Courageous despite his small stature, Bear charged from the bedroom, his sharp barks filling the cottage. Kaylee cast a frantic glance around the room, searching for anything that could be used as a weapon against her intruder.

Nothing.

Of course she had no defensive weapons in here. She rarely needed to defend herself against anything in peaceful Turtle Cove. Until now.

Bear's barking grew more insistent in the kitchen. At a loss for another option, Kaylee dashed forward and snatched the nearest thing she could lay her hands on. A thick hardback book from her nightstand wasn't much of a weapon, but if she threw it hard enough, maybe it would stun an intruder long enough for her to get away.

The rattling noise had ceased, but Kaylee's skin was still crawling. Without switching on any lights, she tiptoed from the room, the book raised high in both hands and ready to launch. Fast heartbeats pounded in her ears, and her breath caught in her chest. She kept to the shadows as she crept across the kitchen to the small entry hall where Bear had taken up a brave stance and continued his furious barking.

Wait. What am I doing? She was acting like every foolish victim in the scary movies her mom used to watch on late-night television. Anything could be on the other side of that door. The weapon of choice here wasn't a hefty book, but a cell phone. She dashed back to the bedroom, snatched her phone off the nightstand, and dialed 911.

“Emergency dispatch.” The female voice on the other end of the line was clipped and efficient. “What is your emergency?”

Kaylee knew several people at the sheriff’s office, but she didn’t recognize this voice. “This is Kaylee Bleu. I think someone is trying to break into my house.”

Bear’s barking gained in intensity, and she ran back toward the entry to find him jumping on his hind legs, his front paws scrambling at the door. “They were trying to open my front door,” she said as loud as she dared.

“I’m sending a car right over,” the dispatcher said.

“My address is—”

“The system already gave me your address, Ms. Bleu. There’s an on-duty deputy not far from you, and he’ll be there in a moment. I’ll stay on the line with you until he arrives.”

“Thank you.” Kaylee pressed the phone tighter to her ear, then hugged the book to her chest with her other hand. The phone call may have been the smarter defense, but she wasn’t about to put down that book just yet.

She backed into a dark corner of the kitchen. From this vantage point, she could see the front door. If the person who came up to—or through—that door wasn’t a deputy, Kaylee planned to throw the book as hard as possible, which ought to buy her enough time to dash into the bedroom and lock herself in the bathroom, and maybe from there she could climb out the window . . .

Bear stopped barking. *What does that mean?* The sudden silence pressed against Kaylee, the quiet emphasizing how strongly her heartbeat was pulsating through her.

After a moment, Bear trotted to her, apparently content to stand down from sounding his feisty alarm. She set her book on the counter, leaned down, and scooped up the fearless dog with her now free hand.

“I think we might have scared off whoever it was,” she told

the dispatcher. *Maybe Bear more than me, but I'll take it.* "Good boy," she whispered to her small protector.

"Stay put, ma'am. The deputy has almost arrived at your house. He'll make sure there's no one outside."

The sound of a siren reached Kaylee, increasing in volume until lights flashed through the kitchen windows.

"He's here," Kaylee told the dispatcher as she returned a squirming Bear to the floor. The moment his short legs touched the tile, the dog sprinted for the adjacent entryway and resumed his barking.

The dispatcher confirmed the deputy's arrival and ended the call as a knock sounded on the front door. Kaylee pulled the curtain aside just to be sure and found Deputy Alan Brooks standing on the covered porch. Her muscles trembling with relief, she picked up Bear and opened the door. "Hi, Alan."

"Hello, Kaylee." The young officer ducked his shaved head in greeting, studying her with bright blue eyes. "Heard you're having a bit of excitement out here tonight."

The presence of the broad-shouldered deputy had an immediate calming effect on Kaylee. She managed a weak smile. "Something woke us up—a noise outside my bedroom window. And then it sounded like somebody was rattling the front door, trying to get in. I didn't see anything, but Bear sure thought someone was out there. I think all the barking might have dissuaded whoever it was."

Alan smiled and extended his hand for Bear to sniff before patting his head. "Good job, Bear. Kaylee, lock this door and sit tight while I take a look around."

Kaylee did as he instructed. She took Bear into the living room, switching on all the lights as she went, and settled into one of the comfortable chairs. While she waited, she willed her nerves to relax. Her ears strained to detect any unusual sounds

outside or in, but she heard nothing.

Bear arranged himself in her lap and rested his head in the crook of her elbow. The dachshund's breath slowed and deepened as he relaxed into a nap. *Lucky dog*. Fortunately, she found that his untroubled snoring soothed her as well.

A few minutes later, another knock on the front door made Kaylee jump. Bear leaped off the chair and ran in that direction. This time his bark did not hold the frantic tone it had earlier, but Kaylee still hurried after him. She opened the door to find Deputy Brooks on the porch holding a long black flashlight.

"I don't see anything out of the ordinary." He flashed the beam all around the doorjamb. "No sign of attempted forced entry here or on any of the windows. Everything appears to be in order."

Kaylee received the good news with a nod. "Maybe it really was just the wind."

The deputy nodded at Bear. "Your friend there seemed to think differently. Besides, it would take a pretty strong wind to rattle this door." He rapped a knuckle on the solid wood. "Could have been a raccoon or other animal, but I'm not ruling out the possibility of an intruder. I'll stay in this area for the rest of my shift, just to be on the safe side. I'm off at six, but I'll leave a note for one of the other deputies to drop by tomorrow to check things out in the daylight."

The fact that he would patrol the area did a lot to relieve Kaylee's anxiety. The weight compressing her lungs lightened a bit. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

The deputy flashed a friendly grin and touched his shiny head with two fingers in a playful salute. "We aim to please. Now you two go on back to bed and get some rest. Good night."

Kaylee thanked him again and then closed and locked the door. *Rest?* Her brain felt like somebody had zapped it with jumper cables and a dose of adrenaline. There wouldn't be

much rest in store for her between now and morning.

Still, I ought to try. Tomorrow would be a busy day, what with the order for the ladies' luncheon and several other promised deliveries. On top of that, it was Mary's much-deserved day off, so Kaylee would have to handle things herself.

"Come on, Bear. Let's go back to bed. Maybe your easy snoozing will rub off on me."

As she passed through the kitchen, she reached for the light switch, but paused. What could it hurt to leave the lights on just this once?



"I fail to see anything funny about it." Kaylee glared at a smiling Jessica. "It was scary."

They sat at one of the cozy tables in Death by Chocolate waiting for the coffee to finish brewing. Sleep had indeed evaded Kaylee for the remainder of the night, so at dawn she'd simply given up. She'd flung back the covers with a growl of frustration, dressed, and headed to town. Bakers, after all, kept baker hours, which meant Jessica started her days at Death by Chocolate long before sunup. Today, Kaylee would need an extra-large dose of Jessica's strong coffee—and a little something delicious to calm her nerves.

The sumptuous pastry in front of her promised to do the job. *Pains au chocolat* were one of her favorites, and her early arrival earned her one fresh out of the oven.

"You were going to attack a burglar with a book, and you don't think that's funny?" Jessica tried to cover her laughter with her hand over her mouth. "DeeDee is going to get a huge kick out of this." DeeDee Wilcox, owner of Between the Lines

mystery bookshop, was a mutual friend and a fellow member of the Petal Pushers, the garden club to which Kaylee, Jessica, and Mary belonged.

"It was a big and heavy book," Kaylee said, a bit defensively.

"What was it? *War and Peace*?"

"No, it was a floral reference guide." She issued a wounded sniff. "In hardback."

Jessica gave her a serious expression that was clearly forced.

"Oh, in hardback. Why, that makes all the difference."

Kaylee felt a grin break over her own face. "I guess it is kind of funny now."

"That's my girl." Jessica reached across the table to pat her hand. "No sense in worrying yourself into a tizzy. You're safe."

The coffee machine finished its job with a gurgle and a blast of steam. As Jessica rose to fetch their coffee, the bakery's front door opened and a familiar figure entered. Reese Holt, the handsome handyman who could fix anything, squatted to greet Bear as the dog left his post beneath Kaylee's chair and strained on his lead to deliver an enthusiastic welcome to one of his favorite humans. Bear wasn't usually allowed in the bakery, but Jessica had let him sneak in since it was before opening time.

"Hey, pup." Reese delivered the required head rub, and then stood. "And good morning, ladies. I know I'm a little early, but any chance for half a dozen fresh pastries?" Reese flashed his engaging smile at them.

"I might be able to accommodate that if you give me a few minutes to finish garnishing the ones that just came out of the oven. My morning schedule has suffered a minor interruption." She dipped her forehead in Kaylee's direction.

"Sorry about that," Kaylee said with a sheepish grin.

"That's what friends are for." Jessica emerged from behind the bakery counter with two mugs of coffee. She set one in front of

Kaylee and the other in front of the empty chair she had vacated. "Sit," she instructed Reese. "I'll have those pastries out in no time. For now, Kaylee can tell you about her late-night adventure."

Reese's eyebrows arched as he slid into the chair and picked up his coffee mug. "Adventure?"

"It wasn't much of an adventure, really." Kaylee described the whole incident, leaving out her choice of literary weaponry. She ended her tale by admitting, "In the light of day I'm feeling a little foolish for calling 911."

Reese shook his head, his expression serious. "You did exactly the right thing. Your cottage is a bit isolated. That can make it a perfect target for a robbery." Kaylee must have looked startled because he hurried to add, "I'm not saying it was a robber, I'm just saying that's what we pay the police for—to keep an eye out for things like that. You should never hesitate to call if you think there's a need." He held her gaze. "And you can always call me too."

The sincerity Reese poured into his tone warmed Kaylee. "Thank you. I appreciate that." She pulled off a piece of her chocolate croissant, ready to change the topic. "You're out and about early this morning."

"Yeah, I'm starting a bathroom renovation over on the other side of the island in Sea Acre. George Bard is doing the plumbing, so I thought I'd bring breakfast to kick off the job right."

As if on cue, Jessica bustled through the doorway from the back carrying a white box. "Here you go, Reese. I put a few extra in there since you had to wait."

A smile lit his features. "I got to spend a few minutes talking to some of my favorite people *and* I get extra pastries? Today's gonna be a good day, I can tell." He paid for his order and awarded Kaylee a wink as he left the bakery.

Jessica closed the cash register drawer. "It ought to be illegal

to be that handsome, talented, and friendly at the same time. One day, some lucky woman is going to hit the jackpot with that one.”

Knowing the comment was aimed at her, Kaylee didn’t respond and instead focused on enjoying her pastry. Jessica often dropped less-than-subtle hints about Reese’s eligibility, and Kaylee did her best to either ignore them or dismiss them outright. She and Reese were friends, and that was all. Kaylee valued that friendship, and she wasn’t about to risk it by complicating it with romance, even if she’d felt that way about him. Which she didn’t. No matter what the butterflies in her stomach seemed to think.

“Reese did say something a little unnerving,” she told Jessica. “He called Wildflower Cottage ‘isolated.’”

Jessica grinned and raised an eyebrow. “You’ve lived there all this time and you hadn’t noticed that before?”

Kaylee rolled her eyes at the teasing. “Of course I have. That’s part of why I love the place. But Reese is right—that does make it an easy target if someone is looking for somewhere to rob. Do you think I ought to have an alarm system installed? Or maybe buy a weapon?”

The playful expression on Jessica’s face faded, replaced by a serious one. “Do you feel unsafe there?”

Kaylee considered the question. “Not really. I mean, Turtle Cove isn’t exactly riddled with crime—for the most part. I guess last night just rattled my nerves a bit.”

“Completely understandable,” Jessica said. “If an alarm system would make you feel better, then I bet Reese could help you. But as far as a weapon . . .”

Kaylee waited for her to continue. “Yes?”

The teasing grin returned. “Buy a copy of *War and Peace*.”

A short while later, Kaylee left the bakery feeling reinforced by Jessica’s spunk and support. The baker’s spirit and her delicious *pains au chocolat* had soothed Kaylee’s nerves exactly as she’d hoped.

She unlocked the flower shop's front door and let Bear in, then propped the door open so she could easily carry the cartons of roses inside. Instead of parking in her usual space behind The Flower Patch, she had pulled her SUV up to the curb in front since it was so early and she wouldn't be taking a spot from a potential customer. She went to her car and lifted the rear door, then frowned when she noticed that the bag containing her tools was missing. Groggy and forgetful after a sleepless night, she'd left it hanging on the pantry door back at the cottage. *At least I loaded the roses last night or else I'd really be sunk.*

She took one carton, careful not to jostle it lest she bruise the delicate flowers inside, and carried it into the shop. Inside, she glanced at the clock as she walked toward the workroom to deposit the box. Just before six thirty. Her early arrival should give her plenty of time to get those centerpieces ready before the shop opened at ten. And then she'd—

Just inside the workroom, her shoe splashed in a puddle. Kaylee halted, nearly dropping the carton of roses in her arms. The scene before her took a moment to register in her shocked brain.

The walk-in cooler door gaped open. The big silver buckets in which she kept her fresh-cut inventory had been upended on the floor. Decapitated flowers and dying petals lay strewn everywhere. Greenery had been carelessly tossed over every work space. Piles of ribbon, unwound from their rolls, lay tangled in murky puddles of water.

Her fears from the night before returned with hurricane force. The Flower Patch had been ransacked.