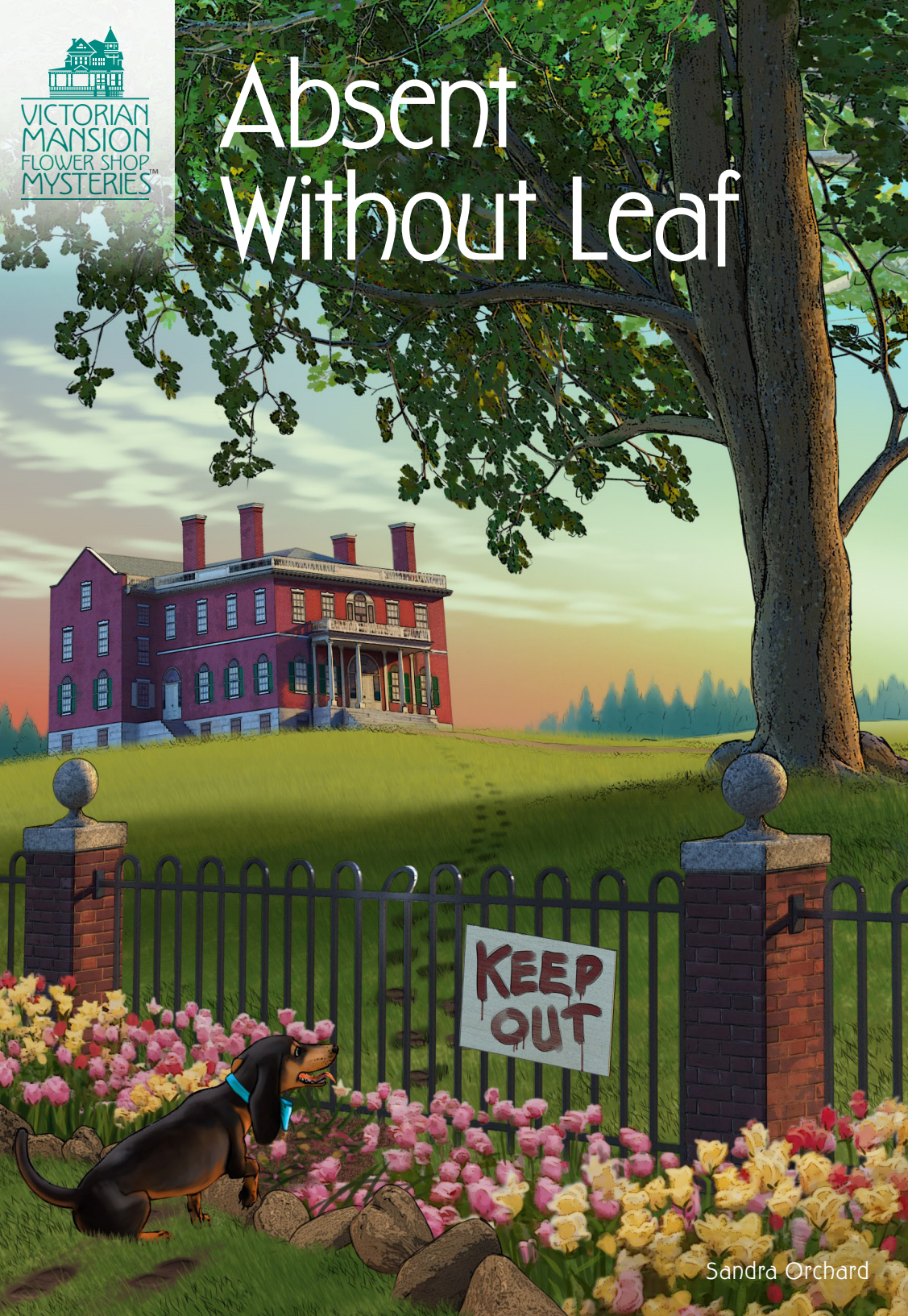


Absent Without Leaf





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Sandra Orchard

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Absent Without Leaf

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1



“This is crazy.” Kaylee Bleu frowned and swept a long, dark strand of hair out of her eyes. “How can no one know who owns one of the largest estates on Orcas Island?” she demanded of her fellow members of the Petal Pushers garden club.

Mary Bishop cleared her throat. “I remember when Pennybrook Grove was owned by the Merchant family. They’d call every so often with a trespasser complaint.” Mary had been a 911 dispatcher for the island’s sheriff’s department before retiring and becoming a part-time employee at Kaylee’s florist shop, The Flower Patch. “But I have no idea who bought it after Herbert Merchant passed away five or six years ago.”

The furrow in Kaylee’s brow deepened. “Spring break is next week for Turtle Cove schools, and I’ve already reserved a bus to drive us all to see the tree.” She picked up her clipboard, incredulously scanning the agenda secured to its surface. “How will it look if we have to cancel our horticultural camp’s first outing?”

Bakery owner Jessica Roberts moved to the window of the Old Cape Lighthouse keeper’s quarters and gazed across West Sound toward the twenty-acre gated property in question. “If you ask me, the town should’ve bought the place and designated it as a conservation area. They could’ve used the mansion as a museum or something. I mean, what’s the point of knowing where the island’s oldest tree stands if no one can see it?”

“The clerk at the town office said it was bought by a trust five years ago,” DeeDee Wilcox explained. The mystery bookshop owner and mother of two school-age daughters had been given the task of securing permission for the excursion. “The best she

could do was give me their lawyer's contact information. But when I tried calling him, his receptionist said he's on vacation and no one else there has the authority to tell me what I want to know."

Kaylee's little dachshund, Bear, must have sensed the discouragement in DeeDee's voice, because he sat beside her chair and pawed at her knee, as if to say she'd done her best. With a smile, DeeDee bent to give him an affectionate pat. "Thanks, buddy."

"Which law firm?" Mary asked.

"I don't remember the name, but it's in Washington, D.C." DeeDee put a knowing emphasis on the location.

Mary sighed. "Then we're probably looking at a politician."

"And somehow I doubt anyone who's that protective of his or her privacy is going to give us permission anyway." Jessica paced the floor, studying her own clipboard. Her short, black hair bounced with her movements, the glossy locks glistening under the overhead lights. "Maybe we should move up the field trip to The Flower Patch from later in the week to Monday. That would at least give us more time to come up with another activity."

"But we anchored the whole theme of the camp on the tree's story," Kaylee said, frustration edging her voice.

While the women discussed their dilemma, Jessica's twenty-something daughter, Mila, slipped into the room. She shared Jessica's dark eyes and hair, courtesy of their Japanese-American heritage, as well as her mother's spunky personality. As she tiptoed toward her mom, she dropped a set of keys, which clanged noisily against the hardwood floor. "Whoops," Mila said as she bent to retrieve the keys. "So much for being sneaky."

Mary laughed. "You can't sneak in and out of here without telling us what you're up to, young lady."

"Mila needs to borrow my SUV to pick up a bureau she bought from a resale shop in Eastsound for her new apartment," Jessica said, digging in her purse for her own keys. "I get to zip

home in her Mini Cooper tonight.”

“A new place?” DeeDee asked. “Are you moving back to Orcas Island?”

“No, it’s just a bigger place in Seattle,” Mila said as she and Jessica swapped key rings.

“And in a safer neighborhood,” Jessica added.

Mila smiled at her mother. “Closer to my new job too.”

“Congratulations,” Kaylee said. “What’s the new job?”

“I’ll be working for one of the big tech companies,” Mila explained. “My official title is Community Outreach Administrator, but it’s just a fancy way of saying I’ll get to coordinate the company’s participation in community events and advise the bosses on which local charities to donate their money to.”

“That’s great!” Kaylee, Mary, and DeeDee crowed in unison.

“And maybe eventually she can move back here and telecommute,” Jessica said, earning an indulgent eye roll from her daughter. “In the meantime, Luke and I get to enjoy having her visit for a couple of weeks.”

“You’re all invited to come see the new place once I’ve moved in,” Mila said graciously, then hitched her thumb toward the door. “I’d better get going. Sorry for interrupting the meeting.”

Among a chorus of goodbyes, Mila headed for the door.

DeeDee circled their discussion back to the tree. “When I drove to the estate the week before last, the house—at least what I could see of it through the trees—looked completely deserted. The neighbor wasn’t around either, so chances are no one would be the wiser if we just drove the kids out there.”

“Having our group cited for trespassing would *not* be a good start to our spring break camp,” Mary said. “Seeing the island’s oldest tree isn’t worth ending up in jail.”

Mila stopped in the doorway. “Are you talking about the tree out at Pennybrook Grove?”

"Yes," Kaylee said. "Do you know who owns the property?"

"No, but I used to date their neighbor, Tad Mason. He'd probably know."

Jessica's eyes widened. "I didn't realize the Masons lived next door to the estate. I thought he and his mom lived in town. I guess it's been a while since I talked to Tabitha."

"They moved out there after Tad's dad died," Mila said. "But Tad doesn't live there currently. He's in grad school out east."

"Would you mind asking Tad if he knows his neighbors?" Jessica asked.

Regret colored Mila's pretty face. "I don't know his number anymore, and he's not on social media." Her expression brightened a little. "I could call his mom if you like and see what she knows."

"Wait, are we talking about Tabitha Mason?" Mary asked. When Mila nodded, Mary beamed. "Then I think we're in luck. Tad phoned in an order for a flower arrangement to be delivered on her birthday tomorrow. He gave me the address, but I didn't realize their house neighbored Pennybrook Grove."

"That's perfect." Kaylee flipped up her itinerary and jotted a reminder on the notepad behind it. "Thanks for the offer to call her, Mila, but I'm making tomorrow morning's flower deliveries. I can ask Tabitha Mason myself if she can help us contact her reclusive neighbors."

Mila opened the door. "No problem. See you later."

As Mila was exiting, she held the door as schoolteacher Sara Wright bustled in.

"Sorry I'm late," Sara said. "I'm coaching the middle school girls volleyball team and our game went long." She shrugged out of her coat and finger-combed her windblown red hair back into a perfect bob.

Mary shooed away her apology with a wave of her hand. "We're just grateful for your experienced help with the spring

break camp. Most teachers would be desperate for a week off."

Sara shook her head. "I love the kids. And since the camp is only in the afternoons, I still get to sleep in. As long as I don't have to grade papers, it's all good."

The group chuckled, then launched into a discussion about the other activities planned for their camp. After confirming the schedule of events and the role each woman would play, Kaylee reached into her tote for a manila folder.

"I've compiled lists of the supplies we still need," Kaylee said. She handed the food list to Jessica, who had volunteered her staff at Death by Chocolate to provide the camp's snacks.

"I'll take the book list," DeeDee offered. She scanned the paper Kaylee gave her. "Looks like my next stop is the public library."

"Arts and crafts or plant gathering?" Kaylee asked Sara, holding out both lists to the teacher.

Sara scanned both lists quickly. "I'll take the arts and crafts."

"Are you sure?" Mary asked.

"Absolutely. You and Kaylee can take care of the plant gathering. I doubt you have the ones on that list on hand in the flower shop."

"You're right," Kaylee agreed. "We'll have to comb the meadows for the wild plants. At least we can enlist the kids' help in finding some of them." She straightened her stack of notes. "Okay, looks as if we're done for the night." She summoned Bear and snapped on his lead. "See all of you here on Saturday for registration?"

Everyone agreed, then grabbed their coats and headed out. Kaylee and Mary hopped into Kaylee's red Ford Escape for the return trip to The Flower Patch, where Mary had left her car. Kaylee started the engine and flipped on her headlights. Thanks to the recent time change, twilight still lingered, but the streets were quiet.

As they drove past The Sunfish Café, a man clutching a

yellow rain slicker stepped out of the restaurant and into the road.

Kaylee slammed on her brakes with a shriek. The Escape stopped a couple feet away from the man, and Kaylee thanked her lucky stars that she'd recently replaced the brakes as her heart pounded.

The man gave her a little wave of thanks as he crossed in front of her car, then he stopped on the other side and glanced up and down the street. At the blast of the ferry whistle, he seemed to come to a decision and strode toward the water.

"I heard we're supposed to get as much as an inch of rain tonight," Mary said, apparently having paid more attention to the man's unworn rain slicker than the fact that he'd walked out in front of them.

"It can rain all it wants now," Kaylee said as she eased the car forward again. "As long as it's dry for our camp."



The next morning, Kaylee decided to drive past Tabitha Mason's house to check out Pennybrook Grove before delivering Tabitha's flowers. "Maybe we'll get lucky and find them home," Kaylee said to Bear, who was watching the scenery sweep past the side window.

Kaylee hadn't been to the property herself since she was a young girl, about the age their campers would be. Growing up, visiting her grandparents on the island had always been a summer highlight for her and her brother, Kyle. And since their grandmother, Bea Lyons, had run The Flower Patch for so many years before selling it to Kaylee so she could retire, she'd seemed to know everyone, including Herbert Merchant, who had owned the estate at that time.

Although she had fleeting memories of the family, what had stuck most in Kaylee's recollection was her absolute awe of the old tree, and her surprise that the tallest tree on the property, a towering Douglas fir, wasn't the oldest. She hoped they still had the giant *Pseudotsuga menziesii* too, as its size would make for another good lesson. For that matter, so would teaching the children some of the trees' Latin names. After years of teaching plant taxonomy at the University of Washington, it was second nature to Kaylee to think of plants by their scientific names.

Spotting the driveway, she flicked on her signal, only to be blocked by a locked gate at the entrance. She stopped without turning in and peered down the long winding driveway, but she couldn't see the mansion. The majestic Douglas fir she remembered so well still stood head and shoulders above the rest of the trees. Anticipation flowed through her as she thought of how rewarding the field trip could be, if only they could gain access to the property.

They'd have to keep a close eye on the students, of course, since the property sat on a bluff overlooking the rocky shore—the one side that wasn't fenced—but Sara was used to reining in children.

Kaylee turned the delivery van around, then returned the way she'd come and parked in Tabitha Mason's driveway. Grabbing the colorful spring bouquet she'd made, Kaylee wagged a finger at her prancing dog. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but you're staying here. I'll only be a minute."

But one minute turned into three, then five. After her third knock went unanswered, Kaylee wandered around the side of the house to peek in the garage. It was empty.

She tried the garage's side door, hoping she could leave the flowers for Tabitha on a bench inside, but it was locked. Kaylee eyed the large rolling door, but decided against trying to open it. Somehow going that far felt too much like an invasion of privacy.

As she contemplated her next step, a calico cat with wet fur and a pink collar twined around her legs, mewing loudly. Kaylee bent down and gave her some attention. "Hello there. Do you live here?"

Barking erupted from Kaylee's delivery van. Kaylee instinctively said "shush," not that Bear likely heard it over all the noise he was making. He stood on the passenger seat, craning for a better view of Kaylee's new friend. "Don't worry, Bear. I'm not bringing her home."

The cat mewed mournfully.

"He actually likes cats," Kaylee cooed, giving the feline another affectionate rub, "but I'm sure your mistress will be home soon." Straightening, she glanced around. "Let's see if there's a back porch where I can leave these flowers in the meantime."

The day's mild weather wouldn't hurt the spring arrangement, but she wasn't so sure she could say the same for the cat. Kaylee let herself in through the back gate and walked toward the house, but there was nothing more than a small slab of cement by the back door.

"So much for the porch idea," she said to the cat. Kaylee pulled a card that said *Sorry we missed you* from her pocket and jotted in the date and time she'd attempted delivery.

Judging by the fact that the rear entrance was more easily accessible from the driveway than the front door, she tucked the card in the jamb of the back door instead of walking to the front porch to leave it there. "Now don't you climb up and take it," she joked to the cat.

While the cat milled around, casting occasional glances at the delivery van where Bear kept up his vigilant watch, Kaylee took in Tabitha's backyard. The grass had already turned green, and birdsong filled the air. An impressive variety of perennials were already growing vigorously in the wide flower beds bordering the

property fence. On the other side of the fence, shrubs and trees ensured the Pennybrook Grove owner's privacy, but also made Tabitha's secluded space feel like a peaceful sanctuary. Kaylee could even hear the soothing splash of waves in the distance.

A flash of bright green beyond the trees on the other side of the fence snagged Kaylee's attention. Most of the summer people hired groundskeepers to take care of their properties during the rest of the year. If that was who she'd seen, maybe he could give her the owner's contact information. Kaylee peered up and down the fence line, looking for a break in the trees through which she might spot the person again. But the flower beds bordering Tabitha's side of the fence made it awkward. The last thing Kaylee wanted to do was inadvertently step on Tabitha's soon-to-bloom tulips. Toward the back of the yard, she finally found a break in the foliage. And from the looks of the adjoining swath of crushed plants, so had Tabitha's cat.

"Did you do this?" Kaylee asked the calico, who had trailed her.

Unsurprisingly, the cat ignored her.

Kaylee gingerly stepped around the trampled flowers and up to the fence. Standing on her tiptoes, she peered every which way until she caught sight of a woman in a bright-green jacket, wearing gardening gloves and carrying a hand spade.

"Excuse me!" Kaylee called out.

Instead of responding, the woman wandered off to a circular flower bed deeper in the yard, apparently deaf to Kaylee's call.

Kaylee tried calling once more over the fence, but she'd already lost sight of the woman. Glancing toward Pennybrook Grove's gate, which was several yards away, Kaylee weighed her options: hop the fence and catch up to the woman before she disappeared entirely, or go around and rattle the driveway's gate until someone let her in.

The woman stepped back into view.

Kaylee waved her arm. "Excuse me!" She set Tabitha's floral arrangement on the ground next to the fence and then clambered over.

The woman still hadn't noticed Kaylee—or if she had, she was doing an impressive job of ignoring her.

"Excuse me." Kaylee waved again and hurried toward the woman. "I was hoping to talk to you."

The woman pivoted abruptly, her eyes wide. She tugged on a wire near her chin and pulled out a pair of earbuds. The tinny sound of music humming from them reassured Kaylee that the woman had honestly not heard her before that moment.

"I'm Kaylee Bleu." She offered a hand. "I'm the owner of The Flower Patch."

"How did you get on this property?" the woman demanded, ignoring Kaylee's gesture. "We don't need any flowers. Thank you."

Kaylee's offered handshake turned into an apologetic wave. "Oh no, I'm not here to try to sell you anything. I was hoping you could help me contact the estate's owner. You see, our garden club is—"

The woman's gaze shifted to something beyond Kaylee's right shoulder. Kaylee's skin prickled and the rest of her explanation stuck in her throat.

Footfalls thudded on the ground, faster and louder by the second.

Kaylee spun around.

A man, gun drawn, raced toward her.

Her hands shot into the air. "No, wait! I'm just a florist!"

2



The linebacker-size man tackled her, and Kaylee hit the dirt.

"What are you doing? Get off me!" she yelled. "I wasn't hurting anyone. I just had a question."

"Pull her up," a gruff male voice ordered from somewhere nearby.

The voice sounded vaguely familiar and the instant her attacker hauled her off the ground, Kaylee realized why. "Phil? Phil Haynes? It's me, Kaylee Bleu. Your sister's college roommate."

The frown marring Phil's handsome features transformed swiftly into a smile. "Kaylee? Hey, good to see you." To the man who still held Kaylee's arm, he said, "You can release her. She's not our prowler." His attention returned to Kaylee. "Or have you taken up a life of crime I don't know about? The last I heard, you were a professor and forensic botany consultant for the Seattle police department."

Kaylee's heart gave a silly little kick that the man had actually discussed her with his sister, Brynn, who was ten years younger. Back in their college days, Kaylee had had a major crush on the tall, dark-haired, brown-eyed guy who would periodically give them a welcome respite from residence food by taking them out for dinner.

"What are you doing here?" Phil prodded, jolting Kaylee out of her walk down memory lane.

"Oh," Kaylee said, willing herself not to stutter. "Well, my position at the university got eliminated a couple of years ago, and my grandmother invited me to come to Orcas Island to take

over her flower shop. I'd always loved my visits here growing up, so how could I refuse?"

"I was asking what you're doing *here*," he said, gesturing at the ground. "But yeah—Brynn didn't tell me you live on Orcas Island, or I would've looked you up."

"I'm sure she has her hands full with those twins," Kaylee said, ignoring a twinge of longing. It had been a long time since she'd visited her old friend. Pushing the thought aside, her brow furrowed. "What are *you* doing here?"

Phil flicked his hand at the other man—his colleague, maybe? "You can return to your post. I've got this."

The burly man slanted a sideways glance at Kaylee, appearing less than confident. Then, without a word, he headed through the trees, toward the house if Kaylee remembered correctly. The woman followed, also silent.

"Do you still work for the National Security Agency?" Kaylee asked. "Let me guess—I breached the perimeter on some secret meeting involving the president."

Phil laughed out loud. "It's not quite that bad. You just startled the admiral's wife while she was tending her garden."

Kaylee gaped after the woman in the bright-green jacket. "You mean she lives here? I thought she was the groundskeeper. The Petal Pushers have been trying to contact the residents here for weeks. But no one seemed to know who owned the place."

Phil quirked an eyebrow. "The Petal Pushers?"

"The garden club I belong to. We're hosting a spring break camp for elementary school kids next week, and we wanted to bring them here on a field trip to see the island's oldest tree." Kaylee winced at the memory of the less-than-stellar impression she'd made on the owner. "You said admiral?"

"Yes, Rear Admiral Robert Newton."

"I take it he's pretty important?"

Phil's smile didn't reach his eyes. "He's about to become the admiral of the naval fleet in Hawaii."

Kaylee's heart sank. The likelihood of being able to bring her campers here seemed to be taking a nosedive. "So you're here to ensure any would-be prowlers don't make off with documents critical to our national security?"

"How many campers will you have?" Phil asked, apparently deciding her question didn't warrant an answer. Or maybe it was one of those "I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you" scenarios.

Kaylee studied his all-business expression and opted not to tease him—especially not if he was about to offer to help her. "Registration is tomorrow, but we anticipate about thirty kids between seven and ten years old. And we'll have at least one adult supervising every ten campers."

Although Phil's sober expression didn't offer the encouragement she'd have liked to see, he surprised her by saying, "Come with me. I'll introduce you to Rear Admiral Newton and you can ask him yourself."

Phil cupped her elbow in his hand and led her through the impressive arboretum—an exquisite collection of everything from *Arbutus menziesii* to *Pyrus communis*. Eventually, the Pacific madrone and wild pear trees gave way to a clearing overlooking the bluffs above West Sound. A massive two-story stone house surrounded by cascading rock gardens dominated the open space.

A long-legged, thirtysomething man, whose sandy blond highlights looked as if they came from a bottle rather than the sun, sauntered across the yard toward them. "Are you going to introduce me to your friend?" he asked Phil, his gaze never releasing its lock on Kaylee.

"This is Kaylee Bleu, an old friend of mine," Phil told the young man. "Kaylee, meet Ryan Newton, the admiral's son. He's

been crashing here for the past couple of weeks." He cleared his throat. "While he's between jobs."

Kaylee nodded. "I see."

Ryan shook her hand. "Do you have dinner plans?"

Kaylee was caught off guard by the abrupt invitation and couldn't think of a response. She must've looked like a deer caught in the headlights, because Phil spoke up on her behalf.

"Now's not a good time, Ryan," he said.

Ryan glanced back at the house, where a distinguished man stood on the porch with rigid posture. Ryan saluted Phil. "Got it," he said, then turned on his heel and headed in the opposite direction.

"I wouldn't recommend spending your time on that one," Phil murmured to Kaylee.

"Likes to play the field?"

"That's putting it kindly."

Rear Admiral Newton strode over to them. Up close, he was an imposing figure at six feet and then some. From his salt-and-pepper hair and finely-lined face, Kaylee pegged him at being in his mid to late fifties. "What's going on, Haynes?" the man demanded. "Diane said this woman came over the fence."

"I'm sorry, sir," Kaylee said. "I called out to your wife to try to get her attention, but she didn't hear me. I'm afraid I climbed over without thinking."

"This is Kaylee Bleu, sir," Phil said. "She's heading up a horticulture camp for schoolchildren next week and would like permission to bring them here to see the island's oldest tree."

"Out of the question," the admiral said firmly without a second's hesitation.

"Sir, I understand your concern," Phil said, "but I wouldn't consider a group of children to pose a threat."

"Of course not, but—"

"Mark and I will be here to keep our eyes on them," Phil continued.

The admiral sputtered a few more protests, but Phil deflected them like a champion jousting and finally earned consent.

"Keep the children out of Diane's flower beds," the admiral barked, then strode back to the house.

"Wow," Kaylee said when the admiral was out of earshot. "Your talent might be wasted on security detail, Phil. You should be a negotiator."

He grinned, and this time light sparkled in his eyes. "It was the least I could do after the unceremonious welcome we gave you. I'll walk you out." He guided her toward the driveway.

Kaylee stopped short as a small parking area came into view, recognizing a black Ford pickup with a massive toolbox in the bed. "Reese is working for the admiral?"

Phil raised an eyebrow. "Reese?"

Kaylee motioned to the truck. "Reese Holt, Turtle Cove's favorite handyman." *And handsomest*, a little voice added in her mind.

"Right, yes. He's repairing a broken window."

Kaylee squinted at the windows she could see from this side of the house, but the broken one must've been on another side.

Phil tugged on her elbow. "Coming?"

She pictured Pennybrook Grove's long, winding driveway and then the subsequent walk down the road to Tabitha Mason's. "Actually, I'm parked next door. I was delivering a flower arrangement. It'd be quicker to cut across the yard and go back over the fence the way I came—oh no!" Remembering Bear in the van, Kaylee sucked in a breath. "My dog will be wondering where I am."

"Did you talk to the person who lives next door?" Phil asked, his brusque tone stunning Kaylee into silence. Without waiting for a response, Phil steered her into the copse of trees behind the

house. "There was a prowler on the grounds yesterday evening. We'd hoped to ask the neighbor if she saw anything, but she wasn't home when we stopped by."

"A prowler? Is that how the window got broken?" Kaylee peered through the trees and caught a glimpse of Reese working on a narrow window beside the back door.

"Yes." Phil's hold shifted from her elbow to the small of her back with a gentle push, urging her to pick up the pace.

The possible significance of the trampled flowers she'd seen suddenly dawned on Kaylee and she gasped.

"What is it?" Phil asked.

Kaylee explained about the flowers. "But Tabitha Mason isn't home right now either." Kaylee's eyes widened as a worse thought struck her. "In fact, her cat came up to me bedraggled and wet from being left out in the rain. What if Tabitha saw something she shouldn't have yesterday and the prowler hurt her?"

A strangled squeak drew Kaylee's attention to her left where Diane Newton was kneeling over a nearby flower bed, apparently listening in on their conversation. The woman ducked her head and attacked the dirt with a vengeance. *The poor woman. Last night's trespasser must have her wound up tighter than a ten-day clock.*

Leading Kaylee back through the trees, Phil said, "There was no vehicle in the driveway or garage when I checked the place."

"There still isn't. Maybe she's at work or away. But you'd think she'd have left some shelter for the cat."

When they reached the break in the trees that marked where Kaylee had vaulted the fence, they both climbed over, and Kaylee pointed out the trampled plants to Phil. Upon close inspection, they had clearly been trodden on by a person, not the cat.

"This could be how your prowler got in and out," Kaylee said. "Look, these footprints are mine." She held her foot over one to show how her shoe matched the size and shape. "But

these other prints head both toward the fence and away from it." They were bigger than Kaylee's, but an average size for a man.

Phil squatted and snapped pictures of the markings with his cell phone.

"Did the prowler get away with confidential files or something?" Kaylee asked.

Phil pushed to his feet. "I'm not at liberty to discuss the incident."

"Of course. I understand." Kaylee retrieved the flower arrangement she'd left sitting beside the fence. "I guess I'll take these back to the shop and wait to hear from Mrs. Mason."

"Who ordered the flowers for Mrs. Mason?" Phil sounded less like an old friend and more like an investigator.

"Her son," Kaylee answered. "For her birthday."

"Do you have his phone number?"

"It should be on the delivery sheet in the van. Why?"

Phil scraped his hand across his bristly chin with a reluctant sigh. "Her son clearly expected her to be home this morning."

Kaylee grimaced. "Good point. Follow me. I can give him a call right now."

As Kaylee crossed the backyard toward the gate, she scanned the grounds and trees for the cat that had refused to leave her alone when she'd first arrived. She spotted it cowering under a shrub, eyeing Phil warily, and an icy chill shivered down Kaylee's spine at the thought of what the cat might've seen the last man in her backyard do.

Bear lay contentedly dozing on the passenger seat of the delivery van. When she opened the door, he slowly stretched himself awake—until he spotted Phil, at which point he hopped to the ground and issued a few sharp barks.

"Hush, Bear, it's okay," Kaylee reassured her pint-size protector. "Phil is an old friend." She grabbed the end of his

leash and passed it to Phil. "Could you please walk him around a bit while I make the call?"

Bear's nose was already on the ground, probably onto the cat's scent. He tugged Phil toward the backyard.

"Don't let him near the cat," she called after them as she dialed. "He'll want to get close to her, and I think she's been through enough."

Tad Mason answered his phone on the third ring. "She should be home," he said in response to Kaylee's query. "She cleans houses, but she said her Friday client gave her the day off so she could enjoy a long weekend."

"Is it possible that she went away somewhere for an impromptu birthday celebration with a friend?" Kaylee asked.

"I'd say yes, but she never leaves Peony out overnight. And she always has a friend check on the cat if she's gone."

"Her car isn't here," Kaylee said.

"This doesn't make sense." Tad was starting to sound alarmed. "She wouldn't have left the cat out if she didn't plan to come home. Can you hold on? I'll try her cell phone." He disconnected their call, but called Kaylee back within a minute or so. "It went straight to voice mail."

Kaylee sighed. "I didn't want to worry you, but the estate next door had a prowler incident last night. So the fact that you expected her to be here is a little disconcerting."

"Her car might be at the mechanic's. She said it needed some work. Would you mind checking inside the house for me?"

"It's locked."

"That's weird. She doesn't usually bother locking it."

Kaylee walked up the driveway and through the back gate. "Perhaps she keeps a spare key hidden outside?" She spotted a flowerpot next to the back door. "Oh, I think I found it."

The pot had a dry spot beside it as if it had been moved,

while the rest of the cement stoop it stood on was still wet from last night's rain. She tipped the pot to glance under it, but there was nothing underneath. "Did you find the spare key?" she called to Phil, who was being led by Bear around the backyard.

"Me? No." He gave Bear's leash a gentle tug and headed Kaylee's way. "Did her son say there was one?"

"Yes." Kaylee held up her finger to silence Phil and lifted the phone she'd been muting against her jacket. "Sorry, Tad. It wasn't under the flowerpot."

"She doesn't keep it there," Tad explained. "Do you see a frog statue in the flower bed next to the back door?"

"Yes." Kaylee pointed it out to Phil, who went over to investigate.

Phil stooped down and stretched his fingers inside the frog's mouth. "Ouch!" he yelped, yanking his hand back. Then he grinned. "Just kidding." He held up the key victoriously. "We're in."

"Found it," Kaylee said to Tad. "I'll go in and check around, then call you back." Disconnecting the call, she prayed she wasn't about to discover anything Tad wouldn't want to know.