

# Dormant Lies





# Dormant Lies



Elizabeth Penney

*Annie's*<sup>®</sup>  
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*  
*Woes By Any Other Name*  
*Noel Way Out*  
*Rooted in Malice*  
*Absent Without Leaf*  
*Dormant Lies*  
*Best Laid Plants*  
*Pocket Full of Deadly*  
*To Hive and to Hold*

*Dormant Lies*

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

*Dormant Lies* / by Elizabeth Penney

p. cm.

ISBN: 978-1-64025-817-4

I. Title

2019940391

---

AnniesFiction.com

(800) 282-6643

Victorian Mansion Flower Shop Mysteries™

Series Creators: Shari Lohner, Janice Tate

Editor: Elizabeth Morrissey

Cover Illustrator: Bob Kayganich

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

# 1



“Kaylee, that is absolutely exquisite.”

The compliment startled Kaylee Bleu, who had been so engrossed in creating the colorful bouquet in front of her that she hadn’t noticed Mary Bishop return to The Flower Patch from a run to Death by Chocolate, the bakery next door. Kaylee smiled at her assistant floral designer. “You think so?”

“Oh yes.” Mary set a bakery bag on the worktable and shrugged out of her spring jacket. “Is it for the inn?”

“How’d you guess?”

“I’d say that lily of the valley in your hand was the real giveaway.”

Kaylee tucked the scented sprig of *Convallaria majalis* into the arrangement of orchids, lilacs, and sweet peas. “It’s been fun coming up with new arrangements for the Lily of the Valley Inn every week. When she hired me a few months ago, Natalie’s only request was that I include her inn’s namesake.”

“And for good reason. Lily of the valley is such a delicate, old-fashioned flower. It’s perfect for the Victorian feel of the inn. Is her standing order still for three bouquets?”

Kaylee nodded as she inserted the stem of another *Convallaria majalis* into place and admired its white, bell-like blooms. “A large one for the lobby and two smaller ones for the dining room and the sitting area. Orcas Island’s tourist season will soon be upon us, so hopefully business will pick up for her and she’ll add arrangements for the guest rooms too.”

“Fingers crossed.” Mary brushed her gray bob into place and grabbed the bakery bag. “Ready for a break? Jess asked us

to test her latest experiment—turtle muffins, right out of the oven. She figured it was appropriate for Turtle Cove’s bakery to serve turtle muffins.” Their good friend, Jessica Roberts, a fellow member of the Petal Pushers gardening club, owned the best bakery in Turtle Cove, Washington, where they all lived. “That pot of coffee I started before I left should be ready by now, so we can have a nice little snack.”

At the mention of the word *snack*, the dachshund who’d been sleeping on a cushion nearby raised his head.

Kaylee smiled at her dog. “Sorry, only a biscuit for you, Bear.”

As if understanding, Bear lowered his silky, reddish-brown head back to his cushion.

“I’ll be back in a jiffy with our coffee,” Mary said, adding with a smile, “and a couple of dog cookies.”

Kaylee continued to work on the bouquet until Mary returned with a tray laden with coffee cups and plated muffins. Bear sat up when Mary reentered the room, and she tossed him a small treat, which he caught in his mouth and chewed contentedly.

“Good catch,” Mary said. “Here you are, Kaylee.” She set a mug and a plate on the worktable.

Kaylee stepped away from her work and took a bite of muffin. She hummed appreciatively and washed it down with a sip of coffee. “Hits the spot. Thanks, Mary.”

“Anytime.” Mary drank from her own mug. “Isn’t Reese’s family arriving today?”

Tiny butterflies fluttered in Kaylee’s belly at the mention of Reese Holt. She and Turtle Cove’s favorite handyman had been officially dating only a short while, although they’d met when she first moved to the island. The butterflies’ activity intensified when she thought about the fact that she was going to meet his sister and his widowed mother that very morning. “Yes. His mother, Camila, and his sister, Riley, her husband, Toby, and

their little son, Kevin."

"It must be exciting to finally meet them." Mary broke off a bite of muffin.

Kaylee's butterflies ramped up another notch. "Exciting, yes, but . . ." She lowered her voice. "I'm actually a little nervous. Isn't that ridiculous? I'm over forty. Surely I'm mature enough to handle the situation."

Mary saluted her with the mug, smiling. "Well, if things go the way I predict, it *is* a big deal."

Kaylee issued a derisive snort. Mary, Jessica, and DeeDee Wilcox, another member of the Petal Pushers, had been staunch believers from the beginning that Kaylee and Reese were a perfect couple, destined for happily ever after. *They've been right so far.* She pushed that thought right back out of her head. She and Reese were having a lot of fun dating, and that was more than enough for now. *But what if Reese's mother doesn't like me? Would that ruin the whole thing?*

A knock on the back door interrupted Kaylee's thoughts. However, her butterflies spun into a frenzy when she saw who was walking in—Reese himself.

"Good morning, ladies." Reese ducked his head in greeting, blue eyes twinkling. As usual, he wore a faded flannel shirt with jeans and a pair of boots. Casual work attire had never been so attractive. Bear came running to greet his friend and Reese crouched to give him his due.

"Good morning to you," Kaylee said, trying to focus on snipping a thorny rose stem as if she didn't have a care in the world. "On your way to the airport?" His family was flying from Los Angeles to Seattle, and at Sea-Tac Airport they were catching a short commuter flight over to Orcas Island.

Still busy ruffling Bear's fur around his neck, Reese glanced up at her. "I am. I thought you might want to join me."



Kaylee bit her lip, glancing at the arrangements. "I'd love to." *And I'd love to get the hurdle of introductions over with.* "But I have to make a delivery to the Lily of the Valley Inn."

"Perfect," Reese said, rising to his feet. "That's where they're staying. Riley is renting a car at the airport, so I thought we'd lead the way over." A grin quirked his lips. "She's notorious for getting lost. Even when Toby is behind the wheel."

"Are you being a helpful brother or a smug one?" Mary teased, then asked, "Would you like some coffee?"

"I'd love some. Thanks, Mary."

"You're welcome to share my muffin too," Kaylee added.

"Lucky me." Reese patted his trim midsection. "I had breakfast, but I've always got room for muffins."

"So you don't mind riding in the delivery van?" Kaylee asked him while Mary went to pour some coffee. "I need to make sure the flowers get there in one piece."

"Of course not." Reese moved closer and kissed Kaylee, making her heart flutter. "I want those beautiful flowers—and their even more beautiful florist—to arrive safely."

Mary returned and Reese stepped away to accept the mug she offered, giving Kaylee space to finish the order.

"How nice that your folks are staying at the Lily of the Valley," Mary said. "Since Natalie just opened, I'm sure she appreciates the business."

"My mom and Riley love historic buildings, so I recommended they stay there," Reese said. "I've been doing some of the renovations, so I'm familiar with the place. Natalie gave them a discount, even though I told her she didn't have to."

"That was generous of her." Kaylee always appreciated the way the Orcas Island business community supported each other. They'd certainly helped her with their patronage and referrals after her grandmother, Bea Lyons, had retired and sold Kaylee



her flower shop and her home, Wildflower Cottage. And she'd needed both the fiscal and moral support at the time, having recently lost her job as a professor of plant taxonomy at the University of Washington.

"Sure was." Reese popped in a bite of muffin and glanced at the clock.

"What time is their flight getting in?" Kaylee asked.

"Soon," Reese answered, then gestured toward Kaylee's work area. "But take your time."

"As luck would have it, I'm done. You can carry this out for me." Kaylee placed the big arrangement into his strong hands and picked up the smaller ones herself.

"I'll get the doors," Mary said, hurrying ahead with Bear on her heels. The delivery van was parked in the rear lot, so she opened the shop's back door and then the van's door.

"Thanks, Mary." Before shutting the van door, Kaylee checked one more time to be sure the flowers were secure. "I should be back before lunch—right, Reese?"

"I'm guessing so." Reese went to the passenger door, where Bear was already sitting with a hopeful expression on his face. "Is Bear coming with us? I'm sure my family won't mind."

"Sure, why not?" Kaylee glanced inside the van. "I have a spare leash, so we're all set."

With a wave to Mary, Kaylee navigated the van out of the lot and onto Main Street. Weather on the island could vary drastically from day to day in April, but Kaylee saw that today was shaping up to be beautiful. The temperature on the bank clock read in the low fifties already, and bright sunshine was warming the multicolored tulips in the public garden.

"Nice day," Reese said, settling back in the passenger seat. "Riley lucked out. It's not supposed to rain all week." Although the San Juan Islands didn't get the same amount of rain as Seattle,

it could get pretty damp at times.

"I'll say," Kaylee said. "Do they have a lot of activities planned?"

"Riley's got a long list," Reese answered. "And I hope you're planning to join us."

"Really?" Kaylee blurted, then gave an embarrassed smile. "I mean, I thought you'd want to spend a lot of time with your family since you don't see them often."

"You're right, I don't see them often. Between jobs and family obligations, they've never had time to visit before now. And I do want to spend a lot of time with them—but with you too. I want part of their first trip to Orcas Island to be getting to know you. And vice versa." He took her hand and squeezed it gently.

Encouraged, she confessed, "I hope they like me." *Did I really just say that? It sounds like I'm in high school again.* But that was one of the benefits of dating Reese. Kaylee felt comfortable being herself, even if it meant sharing her vulnerabilities.

"Of course they will." Reese's smile was warm and reassuring. "I like you. A lot, actually." Bear yipped as if in agreement. "And Bear's your biggest fan. He's definitely got good taste."

Kaylee snorted but a smile crept across her face at his teasing. She liked the way Reese made his feelings for her clear without too much sentiment. She wasn't a gushy, hearts-and-flowers kind of girl. As if affirming Reese's words, Bear stuck his nose forward and licked her hand. She laughed and felt the tension in her shoulders ease a tiny bit.

At the small but active Turtle Cove Airport, Kaylee parked in the public lot. As they got out and walked toward the terminal, the buzz of a plane grew louder.

Reese tilted back his head and studied the sky. "Right on time."

Instead of going inside, they waited at the edge of the tarmac as the small jet landed and taxied to a halt. A few minutes later,

the door opened and passengers began to disembark. First out were a couple of businessmen, identified by their briefcases and glances at their watches.

"Guess they're not on island time yet," Reese said, watching the men scurry past them into the building. "Things are more relaxed here than those guys seem to be used to."

Kaylee nodded absently, her pulse ratcheting up as she waited to meet Reese's family. Bear, leashed at her feet, seemed to sense her anxiety and shifted around, trying to find a comfortable position.

A young woman holding the hand of an adorable, dark-haired little boy appeared in the doorway of the plane. She glanced up at them and a huge grin broke across her face. She waved, and Kaylee heard her tell the boy, "There's Uncle Reese, Kevin."

Reese began to trot across the tarmac, and after a moment, Kaylee followed. By the time she reached them, Reese was hugging the woman. Behind them, a stocky man helped an older woman with styled blonde hair down the steps. At the rear of the plane, a uniformed airport worker opened the luggage compartment and began unloading bags onto a cart.

After her brother released her, Riley brushed back a lock of her brown hair and said, "You must be Kaylee." Kaylee expected a handshake at most, but Riley threw her arms around her and gave her a big squeeze. "It's wonderful to meet you."

"Same here," Kaylee said, returning the embrace. "Welcome to Orcas Island."

"This is Kevin. He's four." Putting both hands on his shoulders, Riley presented her son to Kaylee. "Say hi, Kevin."

Kevin greeted Kaylee, even holding out his hand in imitation of an adult. Everyone laughed, which broke the ice.

Kaylee shook his hand solemnly. "Nice to make your acquaintance, Kevin. And this is Bear." Bear whined, tail going double time. "He loves kids. Would you like to meet him?"

A big grin spread over Kevin's face, and he nodded eagerly.

While boy and dog got acquainted, Riley gestured toward a broad-chested man with receding dark hair and attractive features. "This big lug is my husband."

"Toby Vidal," he said. "Nice to meet you, Kaylee."

"Likewise." Kaylee shook his hand, then Toby moved on to Reese, and their handshake quickly became a robust hug.

As the men greeted each other, Riley pulled her mother forward. "Mom, this is Kaylee Bleu, Reese's girlfriend. Kaylee, this is our mom, Camila Holt." She threw a humorous glance toward her brother. "Sorry. You know I always take over."

Reese shrugged with a laugh. "Good to know nothing's changed."

As Kaylee grasped the older woman's fine-boned hand, their eyes met and held. Kaylee hoped her face conveyed friendly interest, but in Camila's expression, she read only a cool reserve.

"Nice to meet you, Kaylee," Reese's mother said, her voice soft. "I've heard a lot about you." The glance she bestowed on her son was anything but reserved. Fierce maternal pride flared as she dropped Kaylee's hand and reached toward him. "Where's my hug, big fella?"

As mother embraced son, Reese glanced over at Kaylee. She gave him a bright smile, but her nerves were back full force. Would Camila accept her as Reese's girlfriend? Kaylee didn't know much about what had happened when Reese's former fiancée had broken off their engagement, but certainly Camila had been upset by the situation. No doubt the older woman was concerned about Kaylee breaking her son's heart too—but that would never happen. Kaylee adored Reese, and she would do anything to keep him from getting hurt.

The next little while was a babble of confusion as a rental

SUV was picked up, bags were loaded, and the party made preparations to depart the airport.

"Follow us," Reese told Toby. "We're doing a flower delivery at the inn where you're staying."

Riley clapped her hands together. "Oh that's right, Kaylee's a florist. I can't wait to see your work."

"She's very good," Reese said. "The best on the island. In all the San Juan Islands as a matter of fact."

Kaylee felt her cheeks heat at his compliments, but she managed to keep smiling. "He's my biggest fan, as you can see."

"As it should be." Toby's nod was decisive. "Let's load up, gang. We need to get going." He herded his wife, son, and mother-in-law to the SUV, a roomy vehicle with a third row.

"They're nice," Kaylee said as she settled into the van driver's seat. She felt distinct relief at getting through the introductions and started the car. "Your sister and mother are lovely. And Kevin is just adorable."

"Isn't he?" Reese craned his neck, checking to see that the SUV was behind them. "He and I are going to have a blast this week."

"I'm sure you will." Kaylee also kept an eye on the rearview mirror, driving slowly until she was sure their guests were well underway. She signaled extra early to let them know which way they were turning out of the airport.

Orcas Island was shaped like a set of saddlebags, and the Lily of the Valley Inn was in the segment opposite the one where Turtle Cove was located, so Kaylee went east instead of west. The route followed the inner shore for a while, then they took a road leading into the island's interior, toward Moran State Park. They passed farms, forests, and fields, as well as the occasional enclave of homes.

Finally Kaylee spotted the inn sign hanging by the road, a carved and painted depiction of the namesake flowers with gilded

lettering curving around the blooms. She slowed and steered onto the gravel drive that was bordered by woods on both sides.

The wooded area soon opened up to reveal a few acres of green grass with a rambling brick Victorian house at the center. Ornate windows lined the first and second floors, and octagonal turrets jutted out from both sides. Wide, welcoming stairs dotted with overflowing flowerpots led the way to the covered porch that surrounded the inn. To one side of the building, an arbor arch and hedge marked the entrance to an enclosed garden behind the main house, and a barn and a couple of smaller outbuildings sat to the other side.

Kaylee rolled into the parking area and stopped under a spreading maple. She saw a huge patch of lily of the valley growing among the tree's roots, tiny white bells nodding in the breeze. They could be finicky about where they were planted, but they'd grow happily in that particular spot.

Toby pulled up beside her and everyone got out. He opened the trunk so he and Reese could get the luggage.

"This place is beautiful," Riley announced as she shut her door. "Great pick, bro."

Kaylee opened the back doors of the van. Camila, who was standing nearby, gasped in admiration, and Kaylee felt a swell of pride.

"Wow, those arrangements are stunning," Riley said, bouncing over for a closer peek. "I love the hot-pink dahlias."

"Would you like help carrying them in?" Camila asked.

Before Kaylee could answer, a woman's scream rang out from the house. "Help! Oh, somebody help!"



Kaylee whirled to face the house, trying to figure out where the scream had originated. An upstairs window in one of the turrets was open, and when the woman called again, she realized it had come from that room. She took off running toward the inn.

"That sounded like Natalie," Reese said, keeping pace with her. "Stay put, everyone," he called over his shoulder. "We'll be right back."

When Kaylee glanced behind her, she saw a handful of puzzled faces watching her and Reese. *They're probably wondering what they've gotten into here.* Even Bear barked from the passenger seat of the van, unhappy to be left behind when Kaylee and Reese were clearly headed off on an adventure.

Kaylee and Reese raced down a brick path and up onto the wide porch. They didn't bother to ring or knock, but instead opened the door and swiftly entered a square foyer with a high ceiling. A double landing staircase lay straight ahead.

"Natalie?" Kaylee called. "Where are you?"

A muffled answer came from the second floor. "I'm in the pink room's bath."

"Be right there!" Reese sprinted ahead, taking the stairs two at a time.

Kaylee followed a little more slowly, and she paused in the upstairs hall to get her breath back. Down the hall to the right, she heard the rumble of Reese's voice and, to Kaylee's relief, Natalie's lighter tone. *If she's talking, then maybe she's okay.*

Kaylee took a few steps in that direction, but before she



reached the bathroom, Reese emerged, a vintage toolbox in hand, and entered the adjacent room. When she got to the doorway, she saw why.

Water gushed from the plumbing affixed to an elegant claw-foot tub.

"Those pipes sprang a leak all of a sudden," Natalie explained. Her curly blonde hair was plastered to her head, and her sweatshirt and faded jeans were soaked. She waved a wrench. "I tried to fix it, but I think I just made it worse."

Kaylee grabbed a towel from the rack and threw it onto the tile floor to soak up water. "Reese is shutting off the water supply, I take it." A thumping noise in the wall answered her.

Natalie nodded as she grabbed a couple more bath towels for the cleanup. "The pipes are in there, at the back of the blue room's closet."

Reese worked fast, and the spray of water soon slowed to a trickle and then ceased completely.

"Whew," Natalie said. "Thank goodness Reese showed up when he did." Then a look of shock crossed her face. "That means . . ."

"Yes, his family is here," Kaylee said. "And I have the flower order too, by the way."

The innkeeper picked up a hand towel and began drying her face and hair. "I guess I'll have to leave this for now." Her hazel eyes were wide and panicky.

"I'll stay and clean up," Kaylee offered. She crouched down and began wiping the tiles.

Reese appeared in the doorway. "I'll take a peek at this later and figure out what happened. I don't have my truck right now, and I might need some other tools that you don't have on hand."

Natalie sighed defeatedly. "Just add it to my list of home improvement disasters. Or inn improvement disasters, I guess."

"Been there," Kaylee reassured her. "Go on and take care of your guests. We'll handle this."

Natalie hovered a moment, then issued a sincere thanks and vanished. Reese took a towel and began sopping up puddles.

"I'm glad you got here when you did," Kaylee said.

"Me too." Reese set aside a soaked towel and grabbed a dry one. "I had to cut the wall open to find the valve. Someone papered over the access panel."

Kaylee groaned sympathetically. The front door slammed and the sound of voices drifted up the stairwell, and Kaylee heard a familiar bark, which meant Reese's relatives had brought Bear with them. He would have been fine in the van since the windows were open, but she appreciated the gesture.

Reese and Kaylee had just finished cleaning up by the time footsteps ascended the staircase. They peeked out of the bathroom to see Natalie ushering her guests down the hall in the opposite direction.

"I've put you in the green suite," the innkeeper said. "There are two bedrooms and a pullout sofa in the sitting room for Kevin." She unlocked the door and let them enter.

"Want to go see?" Reese asked. "She did a nice job in there."

Kaylee trailed behind Reese to the suite, taking in her surroundings as she did. The old house featured thick, carved woodwork, quaint brass light fixtures, and Victorian-style wallpaper and furniture.

The charming and cozy feel continued in the suite, which contained four-poster beds and comfortable overstuffed seating grouped around a small fireplace. Kevin was running around with Bear while the adults set suitcases in the bedrooms and checked out the bathroom.

"I'll let you get settled," Natalie was saying as Reese and Kaylee entered the room. "If you need anything, I'll be down

the hall or downstairs." Noticing Kaylee, Natalie put a hand to her cheek. "The flowers! I almost forgot."

"So did I," Kaylee said with a laugh, then told Reese's family, "I'll see you all in a bit."

"Wait a minute." Riley raised an eyebrow at Natalie. "What happened up here? We thought someone was getting murdered." Her mother frowned at this comment, but Riley ignored it.

"Just a problem with the plumbing in one of the rooms Natalie is still renovating," Kaylee said, emphasizing that the room was under construction because she didn't want Riley or Camila to suspect that their suite's plumbing might also be faulty.

"That reminds me," Reese said. "Natalie, let me show you what I found."

While Reese and Natalie left the room, Kaylee turned back to Camila and the Vidals. "I'd better get out of here and let you all relax."

With a final goodbye, she called Bear, then walked down the hall to the blue room, where Natalie and Reese were discussing the plumbing. As she moved closer, her toe nudged an old metal lunch box depicting a musical group she vaguely remembered from decades earlier.

Natalie glanced up at the sound of Kaylee's foot hitting the lunch box. "Here, I'll take that." She strode over and picked it up. "I'm guessing this belonged to my mother in her teen years. This was her room back then."

"Have you been finding lots of family treasures during the renovations?" Kaylee asked. Natalie's grandmother, Elsie Bingham, had owned the house previously, when it was still a private family home.

"Oh, tons," Natalie said, her eyes lighting up. "My grandmother was a tidy lady, but her children collected a lot of stuff, my mom included."

"I'm in the same boat at Wildflower Cottage. Even after a few years, I'm still stumbling across old photographs or nostalgic items that belonged to my grandparents or my mom."

"I keep hoping I'll find a real treasure that will pay off the mortgage." Natalie rubbed her temples, then asked Reese, "So, do you think we need to replace those pipes?"

"It'd be the smart thing to do since the wall is already open," he said. "You don't want a leak in the joints later on that'll force you to tear into the wall again."

Natalie ran a hand through her damp hair with a sigh. "All right." Then she faced Kaylee. "Would you like a cup of coffee before heading out? Or lunch? I'm doing sandwiches for Reese's family."

Kaylee nodded. "Lunch with everyone sounds great, if it's not too much trouble."

"Count me in." Reese rose to his feet. "I'll go get the flowers, Kaylee." He put up a hand at her protest. "No, I insist. You take a break."

Reese took off at a near trot, disappearing down the staircase. Natalie leaned close as she and Kaylee descended the steps at a more leisurely pace, Bear hopping along behind them. "What a nice guy. Does he have a brother?"

Kaylee laughed. "Afraid not. Just the one sister."

"Too bad." Natalie snapped her fingers in mock dismay. "Anyway, I am far too busy getting this place off the ground to date. What do they say when you make a home improvement budget? Double it? I'm about there."

Kaylee and Bear trailed behind Natalie through the square foyer to the rear of the building. To left and right were the living room and dining room, glimpsed through open doors. Both were gracious, with high ceilings and vintage yet comfortable flair. This wasn't Kaylee's first visit to the inn, but each time she noticed something new.

In the kitchen, Natalie set the lunch box on the stainless-steel counter, then glanced down at her water-spotted sweatshirt. "I really need to change. But first, coffee."

"How about I brew the coffee while you change?" Kaylee offered.

"Saving the day again, Kaylee Bleu," Natalie said, gratitude clear on her face. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

While Natalie trotted up the back stairs to her quarters, Bear found a sunny corner, where he curled up and closed his eyes, ready for a nap. Kaylee found the coffee and filters and made a fresh pot. As she waited for it to brew, she appreciated the large, attractive kitchen. The vintage charm extended to this room, which featured slate tile floors, tall, white cupboards, a farmhouse sink to die for, and a six-burner gas range.

"That feels better," Natalie said as she reentered the kitchen. She wore a pink Oxford shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a fresh pair of jeans. She reached for a cupboard door and grabbed two mugs, then nodded at the lunch box on the counter. "Want to open it up and have a peek at what's inside?"

"Sure," Kaylee said, excited to see what old treasures she might uncover. She flicked the latch and eased up the metal lid, which was slightly bent. If there was anything remotely personal in there, she'd give the whole thing to Natalie without examining it.

The lid opened with a rusty squeak to reveal tiny boxes of beads, cards wound with elastic, needles, thread, and a small bottle of perfume. A sweet scent floated out of the box—the remains of the perfume, Kaylee guessed, which had been reduced to a brown film.

"What is it?" Natalie asked. She set two cups of coffee on the counter and peered over Kaylee's shoulder.

"It's someone's beading kit," Kaylee said. "My mother used to love making bracelets and necklaces with supplies like this."

"Cool. It must have belonged to my mom or one of my aunts." Natalie giggled. "I'll have to tease them about liking that rock band." Indeed, the musicians were kind of corny with their long hair and bell-bottoms. "If you want it, feel free to take it. I'm trying to get rid of stuff."

Kaylee thought of DeeDee's daughters who, at eight and eleven, were the perfect age to play with beads. "I know two little girls who would love to make jewelry."

"It's all theirs," Natalie said, then opened the commercial refrigerator. "Maybe I'll set up a smorgasbord and let people make their own sandwiches." She began pulling out packets of sliced meat and cheese.

"Where do you want this?" Reese asked from the kitchen doorway, most of his face hidden behind the tall arrangement he held.

Natalie gasped, a hand to her mouth. "Wow, Kaylee. You've outdone yourself." She came closer, her finger reaching out to touch a spray of white bells. "It's gorgeous."

"I'm glad you're pleased," Kaylee said, sliding off the stool. "Come on, Reese. I'll show you where to put that."

She led him to a round table in the middle of the foyer.

"Where do you want the other two?" Reese asked after setting down the larger bouquet.

Kaylee showed him where they were to go, then said, "Come to the kitchen for coffee afterward."

"Will do. Be right back." Whistling, Reese went out through the front door.

It was nice having him around to help, Kaylee reflected as she walked back to the kitchen, wishing he could go with her on deliveries more often.

"Lunch is coming right up." Natalie was opening plastic bags and stacking different bread choices on a plate, including

white and wheat slices and croissants.

"Is there anything I can do?" Kaylee asked.

Natalie thought for a second. "How about putting out plates and silverware on the counter? People can make their lunch there, and then we'll eat on the back porch, since it's such a nice day. The plates are in the cupboard above the dishwasher."

"No problem." Kaylee pulled out her phone. "But first let me check in with Mary." She sent her assistant a text asking if it was okay to stay for lunch, and Mary responded almost immediately: *Enjoy spending time with Reese's family for as long as you want!*

After sending a final text promising to be back by midafternoon, Kaylee returned her phone to her pocket and set to work getting out dishes, napkins, and silverware while Natalie completed the buffet. In addition to sandwiches and salads, there was a selection of bottled water, juice, and iced tea.

"Can I eat lunch here every day?" Kaylee joked.

"I'd be delighted," Natalie said. "I love taking care of people. It's the only thing I've wanted to do since I was a little girl. Granted, owning an inn is a lot more fun than managing the cleaning staff at that big hotel in Seattle where I used to work." She glanced around at the array. "We're all done. Go relax. That's an order."

"Speaking of all done," Reese said, entering the kitchen, "the flowers are in place. And Natalie, I called my go-to plumber, George Bard, and told him about the bathroom situation. He's going to get back to you with a quote. I told him to go easy on you."

"Thank you so much, Reese." Natalie beamed. "Lunch is ready if you want to go tell your family."

Reese gave her two thumbs up before leaving again.

While waiting for the guests to come down, Kaylee sipped her coffee and picked through the lunch box. She couldn't wait to see Zoe and Polly giggle over the retro goodies inside.

Then her fingers brushed something tucked at the very



bottom. She nudged aside the bead supplies and pulled out a packet of letters, tied with a faded purple ribbon. They brought a floral aroma with them. The label on the old perfume bottle in the box confirmed that the scent was lily of the valley.

The envelopes were addressed to Ellen Bingham in a heavy, masculine penmanship. Kaylee glanced up. "Natalie, I think you might want to take a look at these."

Natalie buzzed over, wiping her hands on a dish towel. Her mouth dropped open. "Ellen is my mother. I wonder . . ." She squinted at the return address. "Nope. They're not from my father. He wasn't overseas then." She picked up the packet and studied the faded postmark. "But they were written around the time she got married."

Kaylee pointed out the postmark, which dated to the early 1970s. "That's before my time."

"Mine too, though not by much." Natalie slid the top envelope out and turned it over. The edge had been sliced open, indicating that someone had read it. "I feel a little funny about this, but here goes." With a wince, she removed the letter and scanned to the signature. "Grady. Hmm." Her nose wrinkled as if she recognized the name, but she didn't say more. Instead, she set the letters down and picked up the bottle of perfume. She studied the label, then sniffed. "Huh. My mother always wears this perfume." She smiled at Kaylee. "Obviously these flowers are a family favorite."

A figure moving along a path in the backyard caught Kaylee's eye. Tall, older, and female—and towing a rolling suitcase. "You have company," she told the innkeeper.

Natalie craned her neck to peer out the glass. Her brows went up and her mouth dropped open. "What's she doing here?"