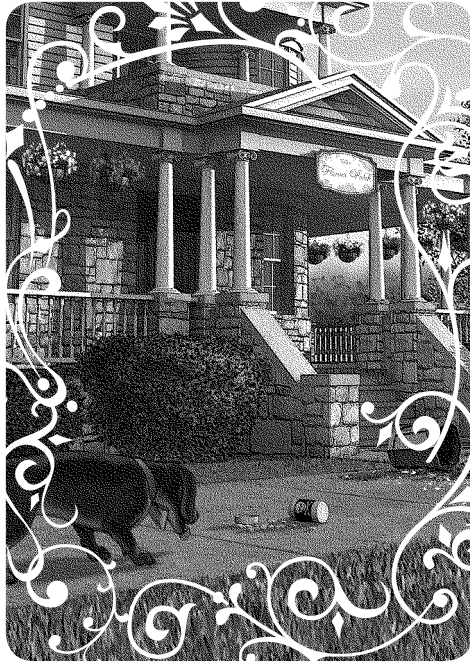


Pocket Full of Deadly





Pocket Full of Deadly



Jan Fields

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June on Orcas Island promised cool breezes off Puget Sound and warm sunshine most days, a stark contrast to the rainy reputation held by its closest major city, Seattle. With the temperature rarely creeping out of the seventies, the weather was perfect for all the things the island offered tourists, such as shopping, kayaking, biking, and whale watches. Most days, the ferry arrived in Turtle Cove's port packed with people seeking quieter days and restoration after the stress of their lives on the mainland.

At The Flower Patch, florist Kaylee Bleu did her best to help the island's summer guests find some of the peace they sought—after all, the perfect bouquet or a beautiful new wreath to take home could ease tension in even the most high-strung shopper. Kaylee suspected many tourists were drawn to her flower shop because of its location in an old Victorian mansion in downtown Turtle Cove. The gorgeous wraparound porch dotted with colorful hanging baskets beckoned passersby to pause in the shade for a moment, even take a seat in one of the white wooden rockers to watch the traffic on the sidewalk as tourists visited the other quaint shops that lined the street.

And I'm always glad when they come inside once they're done people watching, Kaylee thought as she pushed a strand of her long, dark hair behind her ear and glanced at some newcomers browsing the shop. She set down the pen she'd been using to scribble notes on the back of an envelope. It seemed new ideas for the article she was writing for a botany journal only popped into her head when she was away from her computer.

Toenails skittering on the wood floor drew her attention, and she leaned forward to watch her tiny best friend, Bear, dash around the counter. The dachshund's polka-dot bow tie bounced as he scurried over to a young man, who crouched and held out his hand in greeting. A wedding ring glinted in the shop lights as the man rubbed Bear's head, and the dog received the pats happily, wiggling with the joy of making a new friend and making Kaylee giggle. Bear loved the busy season and all the new faces that came in on the ferry every day.

The young man's wife smiled down at man and dog before refocusing her attention on the cooler that held small flower arrangements. Judging by her rapt expression, Kaylee was fairly certain one of the arrangements would be going with the couple.

Kaylee peered closer at the flower cooler. *As long as there are enough for her to choose from.* She sighed. She loved the rush of June in Turtle Cove, but it was nearly impossible to keep a decent selection of small arrangements, especially with orders for more elaborate creations coming in every day as well. Businesses wanted to look their best for potential customers, and flowers were a big part of that. Plus, there were the usual personal arrangements for anniversaries, birthdays, and more. *And here I am, messing with notes for my article instead of making more bouquets to sell.*

As if cued by that thought, Mary Bishop walked in from the workroom, a daisy arrangement in each hand. As usual, Mary's blue eyes sparkled with good humor behind her glasses. Having once been the right-hand woman of Kaylee's grandmother, Bea Lyons, Mary now worked for Kaylee, though Kaylee thought of her as more of a mentor. The older woman was a talented arranger and had helped Kaylee get into the swing of things, and Kaylee was grateful for it. Of course, Mary often commented that Kaylee had inherited her grandmother's special gift for floral design,

though with Mary's kind and generous nature, Kaylee wasn't sure how much to believe the praise. Thankfully, the customers at The Flower Patch seemed to agree with Mary's assessment.

Mary carried the arrangements over to the cooler and the young woman examined them excitedly, then called her husband to admire her favorites. He stood, leaving Bear to pout after him. As Kaylee watched, the woman chose one of the daisy bouquets, leaving Mary to pop the other into the cooler.

Smiling at the young couple as they approached with Bear at their heels, Kaylee nudged aside the envelope bearing her notes. "Did you find everything you were looking for?" she asked with a smile.

"I didn't know we were looking for anything," the young man said, leaning casually against the counter. "But apparently we found it anyway."

The girl nudged him with her shoulder. "This will be lovely in our room at the Northern Lights Inn," she said. "I adore flowers, especially daisies. They're such an innocent and hopeful flower."

"I agree," Kaylee said as she rang up the sale.

Mary walked over to stand beside her as the young couple walked out. She tapped the envelope where Kaylee had scrawled her notes. "You should go upstairs and work on that article. I can hold down the fort."

"I know." Kaylee fiddled with the pen, tapping it on the envelope. "And I appreciate it, but every time I sit down at the computer, all my creativity seeps out of me. My writing comes out so dry."

"Isn't this for a scientific journal?" Mary asked. "That doesn't sound like a place you'd need lively writing."

"Everyone appreciates lively writing," Kaylee said. "Even scientists. Plus, when I'm upstairs, I miss being down here. I guess I want to have my cake and eat it too."

"Now you're making me hungry." Mary leaned over to peek at the notes. "What's the name of the journal again?"

"*The National Botanical Science Journal*." Kaylee winced, uncomfortable at the thought of how grand the publication sounded. "I know it's a mouthful. I'm writing about the use of botanical analysis in murder investigations."

"Well there's an area you have plenty of experience in," Mary said. She was referencing Kaylee's work as a forensic botanist, both currently for the Orcas Island Sheriff's Department and previously for the Seattle Police Department in her former life as a plant taxonomy professor at the University of Washington. Mary may have also been tipping her hat toward Kaylee's amateur detective work as well.

"True," Kaylee replied, "but I have to be careful not to rely too much on anecdotal content. My case notes add interest, I think, but I have to keep the science at the forefront. This is a serious scientific journal."

"Sounds like a tough balancing act." Mary chuckled. "I'm more of a *House & Garden* reader myself."

Their discussion was interrupted when Bear raced for the door and began barking wildly. Bear often barked a single quick yip to welcome new customers, but this kind of frenzied barking wasn't like him, not unless something serious was going on outside. "What's the matter, Bear?" Kaylee asked as she and Mary walked around the counter to the door.

Mary groaned as she peeked through the front window. "It's Fred and Vince again."

"Call Reese." Kaylee pushed open the door. "I'll see what I can do until he gets here."

Kaylee knew Bear had squeezed out the door with her, but she didn't stop to push him back into the shop. Instead, at the edge of the steps, she pointed at the little dog. "Stay," she commanded firmly.

He froze but whined, not happy that Kaylee intended to face an angry man without his protection.

"I mean it," she told him.

Bear shifted from paw to paw, but he obeyed.

Kaylee hurried down the steps. The way Vince Mack was waving his hands around made Kaylee suspect his next action might be to punch the man who stood before him clutching two handfuls of plants. Kaylee saw glimpses of *Impatiens hawkeri* and *Antirrhinum majus* flowers in the clumps. Kaylee groaned, hoping the rest of the impatiens, snapdragons, and other annuals in the nearby planter were left undisturbed.

In his long, rumpled blue jacket and trousers liberally dusted with soil, Fred Dorman resembled an elderly gardener from one of the British movies Kaylee liked so well. Fred, who had to be well over eighty, was blinking at Vince in confusion and muttering, "They can't thrive this way." He held out a handful of torn plants. "It's wrong. She wouldn't want this."

"The plants were fine, you old kook!" Vince shouted. The fit, active owner of High Tide Outfitters, a shop down the block that sold and rented kayaks and other outdoor gear, was usually easygoing, though driven. Kaylee barely recognized the red-faced man raving at Fred. "Leave them alone."

Lately Kaylee had broken up several loud arguments between the two men in front of the shop, so she called out their names, hoping to draw their attention from each other. It didn't seem to work.

Fred shook one of the handfuls of plants close to Vince's face. "Do these seem all right?"

Vince jumped away, though not in time to avoid being spattered with loose, slightly muddy dirt.

Kaylee reached the men and gently put her hands on Fred's fists as she eased between them. "Please. Let's all calm down."

"Calm down?" Vince raked a hand through his brown hair, which was going gray. "Have you seen what he's done to this planter? And the one in front of my store is even worse."

Kaylee had to admit, the tall stone planter was badly torn up with a good third of the flowers ripped out by the roots. "He doesn't mean any harm," she insisted, twisting around to face Vince.

"I don't care what he *means*," Vince said, though he seemed to notice they were drawing the attention of passersby and had dropped his tone slightly. "I care about what he *does*. He's upsetting my wife with all the destruction. *We* happen to care about our town and how it looks."

Kaylee blinked at the implied criticism. Of course she cared about how the town looked, but she didn't see how yelling at a confused elderly man was going to fix anything.

"There he goes again." Vince pointed at Fred, who had returned to uprooting plants.

"Fred," Kaylee said, hurrying to the older man's side and resting her hands on his again. "You can stop now. The rest of the plants are fine."

Fred squinted at her, but he didn't pull out any more flowers. "Do I know you?"

"You do. I'm Kaylee Bleu."

"That's a pretty name."

"Thank you."

A lanky, middle-aged man wearing a faded baseball hat walked up behind Fred and laid a hand on the older man's shoulder. Fred jumped and spun, glaring in suspicion.

"Sorry," the other man said. "I didn't mean to scare you, Fred. Why don't you let me take you home?"

"Who are you?" Fred demanded.

"It's me, Zeb Hansen. I'm your neighbor. Do you remember?" Zeb wagged his finger at Fred. "You must have left home really

early this morning, because I didn't see you. You're supposed to let me help. I think you should come with me now. You need to do some weeding at home."

Fred shook his head, making a shaggy hank of white hair fall into his eyes. "I have to stay here. I have to fix this. She won't be happy about this." He blinked and his eyes filled with tears. "I don't want to disappoint her."

"Do you hear that?" Vince asked gruffly. "He has no intention of stopping. That man belongs in a home or something."

"That's what I want to do," Zeb said, his tone annoyed. "I'm trying to take him home."

"That's not the home I mean. He'll only return later and wreak more destruction. He's a menace." Vince's voice had risen to a shout once more, and Zeb matched his hostility as he shouted back.

Noticing Fred cower away from the arguing men, Kaylee slipped her hand through his arm. "Will you come with me?" she asked.

He blinked at her, his eyes still wet. "Can you help me find her? She's not at home and I'm worried. She needs me."

Kaylee wondered if Fred might have a pet. "Who are you looking for?"

"Elizabeth, of course. Don't you know?" Fred's expression darkened and grew suspicious. "Who are you?"

Kaylee repressed a sigh. She needed to get Fred off the street, and she was more than a little worried that Zeb and Vince might soon come to blows. She could also hear Bear barking from The Flower Patch's porch and spared a single moment to be grateful he was obeying her command to stay.

Kaylee almost teared up in gratitude when she caught sight of Reese Holt trotting across the street. She was certain he could deal with the raging men around her.

Reese walked straight to Fred and leaned close to him. "Are you all right?"

"Reese!" Fred's countenance lightened. "You need to help me. There's too much yelling. I don't like all the yelling. Elizabeth doesn't like it either."

"I'm not wild about it myself," Kaylee added, and Reese gave her a sympathetic glance.

"What's with the yelling, guys?" Reese asked Zeb and Vince.

"He's being horrible," Zeb said simply, pointing at Vince. "Thinks he can bully an old man and get away with it."

"I'm not bullying anyone," Vince insisted, though he had dropped his volume again. He waved a hand toward the large planter. "I didn't want one of those big eyesores in front of my shop in the first place, but I didn't get a vote when they decided the whole street needed them. Now that I'm stuck with it, I certainly don't want it full of bare dirt and shredded plants because this old coot likes to tear things up."

"I'll take him home," Zeb said.

Fred frowned at Zeb. "I don't know you." He put a hand on Reese's arm and muttered, "I don't want to go with him. He yells and I don't know him."

"Of course you know me," Zeb said, his own annoyance making his tone sharp. "I'm your neighbor."

"Taking him home doesn't fix anything," Vince said. "Clearly he has no trouble walking into downtown to destroy the planters. Taking him home is a delaying tactic, and we've had enough of those. I want him stopped. Right now!"

"Let's stay calm," Reese said, which nearly made Kaylee roll her eyes. It was way too late for Zeb and Vince to stay calm. "I've been trying to get in touch with Fred's son, Cameron, but it's proving to be a problem. In the meantime, we're doing the best we can."

"Which is not good enough." Vince pointed at Fred. "He's a problem. One that better be solved soon or I'll solve it myself."

"Vince Mack, what has gotten into you?" Every gaze settled on Mary, who stood on the flower shop steps with Bear in her arms. "Does Lydia know that you're acting this way?"

Vince's mouth snapped shut, and he shuffled uncomfortably for a moment before squaring his shoulders and announcing, "I have to get to my shop. Lydia is waiting for me." He stomped off, leaving an awkward silence in his wake.

"Fred, let's go," Zeb said finally, reaching out for the old man. Fred pulled away again.

"It's okay, Zeb." Reese held up a hand. "Kaylee and I will get Fred calmed down, and then I'll drive him home."

Zeb didn't appear happy, but he eventually nodded. "No problem. I have errands to run anyway." The stiff set of his shoulders as he walked off suggested there *was* a problem, and Kaylee wondered if Zeb was feeling the weight of trying to help out a confused neighbor who didn't even recognize him.

Kaylee patted Fred's arm. "You must be hot out here in that coat. Why don't you come inside for a glass of iced tea?"

Fred's expression brightened. "I like iced tea. My Elizabeth does too."

Kaylee gave Reese a questioning glance, raising her eyebrows. Though she had encountered Fred tearing up the planters twice before, this was the first time she'd heard him mention a woman's name. Was she one of the volunteers trying to keep Fred out of trouble?

Reese whispered, "His late wife."

That solves one mystery. Kaylee slipped a hand through Fred's arm. "Let's go get iced tea then. And I might have some cookies to go with it."

Fred nodded, shoving the handfuls of torn plants into the

pockets of the long coat he wore. The coat was almost brittle with dirt, showing only traces of the blue canvas underneath, and Kaylee wondered how Fred could stand wearing a coat on such a warm day.

She and Reese led Fred into The Flower Patch. After they came in, Mary hung a sign on the door letting customers know they'd return soon, then turned the lock. Kaylee exchanged glances with Mary, grateful for her friend's foresight. It would be easier for Fred to calm down without so many people around.

Soon Fred was seated in the small kitchen area, happily sipping iced tea with Bear in his lap and a plate of gingersnaps in front of him. Across the table, Mary listened to him chatter about the new hydrangea Elizabeth wanted in their yard while Kaylee leaned against the kitchen cabinets and sipped from her own glass. Reese hadn't joined them yet. Kaylee was fairly sure he was in the front room making phone calls on Fred's behalf.

"Elizabeth loves her garden and always wants it to be perfect," Fred said.

"I can understand that," Mary told him.

Fred stopped talking suddenly and began patting the many pockets in his coat.

"Do you need something?" Mary asked.

Fred didn't answer but continued rooting through his pockets until he pulled out a broken piece of dog biscuit. "I knew I had one," he said brightly and handed the biscuit to Bear. Before Kaylee could react, the little dog inhaled the treat.

Kaylee studied Bear worriedly, her fingers to her lips. *Who knows what might have been in that coat pocket along with the treat?* She watched Bear closely, but the dog remained content in Fred's lap. Kaylee made a mental note to keep an eye on her pup's health.

Mary must have seen the worried expression on Kaylee's face.

"Fred gives biscuits to all the dogs," she said conversationally. "I've never heard of any of them suffering for it."

"Aw, pishposh," Fred said gruffly. "A little treat never hurt anyone. Did it, lad?" He patted Bear on the head and the little dog yipped in enthusiastic agreement.

Kaylee didn't know what to say to that, but she was spared having to come up with anything when Reese came into the kitchen and tugged on her arm, drawing her away from the table.

Having Reese there instantly made Kaylee feel calmer. She and Orcas Island's favorite handyman had been dating for a while and friends much longer, so she was used to him bringing a levelheaded reliability to situations such as this. Still, she felt a rush of appreciation for his presence of mind and composed demeanor.

Reese held up his phone, his blue eyes serious. "I finally got through to Cameron Dorman's assistant. Apparently, Cam's on assignment in Malaysia for the Smithsonian."

"Is he a scientist of some sort?" Kaylee asked. "Or a historian?"

Reese shook his head. "Photojournalist. At any rate, he's apparently hard to reach, but his assistant promised to let Cam know that I need to talk to him about his father. Unfortunately, she has no idea when Cam will be able to check in."

Kaylee frowned. "Seems a little ill-advised to leave his dad here without help, even if it is for work."

"I think Cam is stuck between a rock and a hard place." Reese raked a hand through his sandy brown hair. "He's a good guy, and Fred's decline has been fairly slow until recently. I'm sure if Cam knew the extent of Fred's illness, he'd be here."

"You're familiar with the family?"

"I knew Elizabeth a little," Reese said. "She was always gracious and warm, but she's been gone nearly ten years now. I maintain the house for Fred and Cam and go over regularly to

check on things. Fred used to do a lot of his own repairs, but he finally either forgot how or simply didn't notice the problems as they came up. So I run regular maintenance checks."

"Do you think Fred is safe living alone?" Kaylee asked.

"His neighbors help watch out for him, but I think he needs more than that now," Reese said, glancing over his shoulder at the elderly man. "All this is heartbreaking. Fred Dorman was always a sharp guy."

Kaylee followed Reese's gaze and watched as Mary gently prevented Fred from putting some of the plants from his pocket into his glass of tea. Whatever he once was, poor Fred Dorman wasn't sharp anymore. Unfortunately, his behavior could easily shift from worrisome to dangerous sooner rather than later.



When Reese left with Fred, Mary waved in the customers who had been relaxing in the white rocking chairs on the porch. Despite the steady stream of tourists who came in the rest of the afternoon, Kaylee sent Mary home early. "With the Petal Pushers meeting tonight, I'm sure you can use the extra time to feed Herb," Kaylee told her friend.

Mary snorted. "Herb is well able to feed himself, but I don't mind spending a little time with him and Lily." Lily was Mary and Herb's calico cat, and a more spoiled creature Kaylee couldn't imagine. Then she glanced down at Bear, who was napping with his head on her foot, and she had to admit she probably could.

After Mary went home, Kaylee swept and straightened up the flower shop as closing time drew near. Only a single shopper remained when Kaylee had finished tidying. The woman stood at one of the shelves, clearly torn between two of the silk flower arrangements.

"Need help deciding?" Kaylee asked.

The woman sighed before answering. "I hope I'm not holding you up. I'm terrible at making decisions like this. I'm hosting a baby shower for my sister, and I think one of these would be a nice centerpiece since she could keep it afterward."

"Do you know if the baby is a girl or a boy?" Kaylee asked.

The woman shook her head. "Which is why I admire this one." She touched the delicate morning glories spilling out of a small ceramic basket. "It has both pink and blue flowers. Or I could go with white and yellow." She waved at the other arrangement full of silk daisies.

"You seem to be fonder of the morning glories," Kaylee suggested as the woman adjusted the basket slightly to admire the arrangement from another angle.

"I am. They remind me of mornings in North Carolina, where we're from. If you're awake early enough, the countryside is full of color from these."

"Morning glory is actually the common name for over a thousand different species in the *Convolvulaceae* family," Kaylee said. Sometimes learning more about a plant helped an indecisive customer choose. "In Japanese art, they symbolize summer."

"This is going to be a summer baby, due in August." The woman picked up the arrangement. "That seems appropriate. I'll take this one."

After ringing up the woman's purchase and bidding her good evening, Kaylee locked the door and finished the closing chores. Bear rallied enough to follow her around, though he showed extra enthusiasm when they went into the kitchen. "How about we share a quick supper here?" Kaylee suggested. "It would be silly to drive home to Wildflower Cottage only to turn around and come back for the meeting."

Bear yipped an agreeable response and Kaylee opened the kitchen cupboards to check out the selection of soups. Though they didn't stock a lot of food in the small kitchen, Mary and Kaylee often ate lunch at work so they always kept canned soup and sandwich ingredients. She decided on lentil soup and had just begun rummaging for the can opener when Bear barked and raced out of the kitchen, heading toward the front of the store.

Kaylee followed him and spotted Reese through the glass. When she opened the door, Reese held up a large paper sack. "I hoped you'd still be here. I thought we might share supper before you go to the garden club meeting." He grinned down at Bear who danced around his feet. "I even got a side of bacon for Bear."

"Always my hero. And Bear's." Kaylee led the way to the kitchen. "Did you get Fred home all right?"

"Yeah, and I checked over the house to make sure he had food. He actually seems to be maintaining the house pretty well. If he didn't have this gardening obsession, he'd probably be okay."

Kaylee pulled the iced tea pitcher from the refrigerator. "Was he always fond of gardening?"

"I don't think so, though he and Elizabeth had a beautiful yard. I think it was mostly a social activity for Fred, something to do with his wife. After Elizabeth died, he let her flower beds go to seed. It was no longer a showplace like it was before, but he kept the lawn mowed so the yard was neat enough . . . until this past year, at least. That's when he started wanting to pull up plants. At first, he just cleared out his own beds, but the need to do the same all over town is definitely a new and troubling escalation."

"It's causing its share of trouble." Kaylee retrieved glasses from the cabinet and poured their drinks.

"At least the drama is over for today," Reese said. "Fred was worn out, so I think he'll stay put for the night. When I left, he was settling down with the dinner I got him along the way. But there's no doubt that we're going to need to figure out a better answer than hauling him home each time."

They sat down to eat and changed the conversation to cheerier subjects. As they finished the meal, Reese asked about any new Petal Pushers projects.

Kaylee shook her head. "Other than tending the grounds of the lighthouse, we're between projects, though that might change tonight." She glanced over at the clock on the wall and yelped. "I need to clean up and get going. I don't want to be late to the meeting. Do you want to come? I know you're not exactly a gardener, but you're always welcome."

A twinkle lit Reese's eyes. "I'm tempted to say yes simply because Jessica normally brings treats, but I should get home. I have a long to-do list for tomorrow and I need to prep." He stood and began gathering the napkins and foam boxes from their shared supper.

By the time Kaylee had cleaned up, bid Reese good night, and locked the shop behind her, she and Bear would have to step lively to get to the lighthouse on time for the meeting. Thankfully she had a fresh burst of energy from the excellent supper, so they strode up the sidewalk briskly.

In colder months, Kaylee would have driven the modest distance to the Old Cape Lighthouse, but tonight it felt good to stroll along the quieter streets in the cooling air after a day made unexpectedly stressful by conflict and worry. A few couples strode arm in arm, but the bustling stream of people who'd been out earlier must have found other things to do. As she walked, Kaylee noticed that several of the shops they passed had new displays in the front windows, and she wished she had time to linger over them. "We'll have to take a nice walk tomorrow, complete with extensive window-shopping," she told Bear, who panted blithely in agreement.

Soon their destination was within sight. The white clapboard siding nearly glowed in the waning light. It wasn't particularly tall for a lighthouse, but it was a lovely one all the same with the contrast of the reddish-brown roof tiles and the crisp white against the startling indigo and rose of the sky slipping into evening.

As Kaylee had expected, she and Bear were the last to arrive, but at least no one had settled into chairs yet. Her friends greeted her warmly and fussed over Bear, which was his favorite part of the evening.

"I was starting to wonder if you had run into a problem," Mary said.

"We had exactly the opposite of a problem," Kaylee replied. "Reese stopped by with supper."

The Petal Pushers all said, "*Oh*," together in a knowing tone. They stretched the word out long, seeming to rejoice in making Kaylee blush.

Kaylee knew she should be used to this, but she couldn't stop her cheeks from warming. As the only unmarried member of the Petal Pushers, her love life had gotten entirely too much attention from the group.

Jessica Roberts, who owned the bakery next to the flower shop, took mercy on her by holding up a huge tray of fudge cookies to divert attention. "Anyone want a snack?"

Jessica was a wonderful combination of energy and enthusiasm, which probably played as big a part in the success of *Death by Chocolate* as her amazing baking. Her popular café specialized in chocolaty baked goods and candies, and it also served some of the best coffee Kaylee had ever tasted. In addition to her passion for all things chocolate, Jessica also loved mysteries and wacky conspiracy theories. This certainly made for interesting conversations, but Jessica's outside-the-box thinking had spurred more than one revelation relating to real local mysteries in the time Kaylee had known her.

"They smell fantastic," Kaylee said, then scowled and patted her stomach. "But maybe later. I'm still stuffed from supper." She did pour a cup of coffee, however, knowing that Jessica always brought decaf so they wouldn't end up with sleepless nights afterward.

"Well, I have room," DeeDee Wilcox said as she stepped forward and snagged a cookie. Although DeeDee actually owned a mystery bookshop, *Between the Lines*, she wasn't quite as passionate about real-life mysteries as Jessica. DeeDee preferred to focus on her family—husband Andy and school-age daughters

Polly and Zoe—and her business. “Andy fixed supper for the girls and I wolfed something down, but I honestly couldn’t tell you what it was. I was in my workroom right up until I had to leave for the meeting.”

Along with running the bookshop, DeeDee made handcrafted lavender goat milk soap, a popular addition to the selection of merchandise Kaylee offered at The Flower Patch. With small gift items like her soap much in demand, DeeDee kept very busy during the summer months.

The group settled into chairs and Jessica sat next to Kaylee, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. “I heard the commotion outside the shop today, but I couldn’t get outside. Was it Fred and Vince again?”

“Unfortunately.” Kaylee felt a tug on her pant leg and glanced down to see Bear standing with one front paw on her shin, clearly hoping to be picked up. She lifted him into her lap with her free hand, carefully balancing her coffee in the other.

“Those planters are ridiculous.” DeeDee huffed in frustration. “They’re absurdly big, and they don’t go with anything else on the street. I know Vince hates the one near High Tide Outfitters. I wish they’d asked the Main Street business owners before sticking us with a dozen eyesores.”

“They don’t go with the rest of the outdoor decorations, but I don’t think they’re ugly,” Jessica said, clearly trying to look on the bright side. “They’re pretty enough when the plants are all in bloom. But they do seem to be causing problems.”

“It’s not the planters causing problems,” DeeDee argued. “It’s Fred.”

Kaylee gawked at DeeDee in surprise. Her friend was usually more charitable. “It’s not Fred’s fault. He’s confused, not destructive.”

DeeDee raised her chin, a sure sign she was feeling stubborn.

Kaylee had seen DeeDee's youngest daughter, Polly, make the exact same gesture. "His confusion is making him destructive, and it's affecting everyone, not just Vince. I happen to know Fred has uprooted half the plants in Nan Brewer's garden as well. She doesn't have a single dianthus left and hardly any lilies."

"I don't think I know her." Kaylee took a sip of coffee.

Mary gestured with the cookie in her hand. "She's Fred's neighbor. She used to help with Fred. I know she's skilled at talking him down when he's in the middle of one of his odd weeding spells. Fred listens to her and likes her."

"She used to?" Kaylee idly rubbed Bear's ears. "Why did she stop?"

"She can't right now," Mary explained. "Poor Nan is healing from knee replacement surgery. She can't rush outside and defend plants at the moment, not in her own yard or anyone else's."

"Nan has some gorgeous heirloom roses," DeeDee said. "Some of the varieties are quite rare. I hope Fred doesn't manage to kill any of them."

Kaylee paused in the middle of raising her coffee for another sip. "I can't imagine he's pulling up rosebushes. Not with his bare hands. I would have seen the scratches."

"I suppose the roses are lucky then." DeeDee plucked another cookie off the tray. "They can defend themselves."

Kaylee peered at her friend. This really wasn't like DeeDee at all. She knew her friend loved plants—they all did—but she seemed uncharacteristically annoyed about a poor, confused old man.

"Nan isn't angry with Fred," Mary continued. "She's mostly sad. She told me she feels empathy for poor Fred since Nan lost her own husband suddenly and still grieves."

"Zeb Hansen seemed keen to help Fred get home," Kaylee recalled. "So he and Nan try to watch out for Fred?"

"I think they took turns," Mary said. "Though it sounded like Zeb really only filled in when Nan was busy. Nan is a retired nurse, so she's skilled at dealing with difficult patients. Honestly, there is no doubt that it's Nan's incapacitation that's caused Fred to wander so far and do so much damage."

"I think it's strange," Jessica wrinkled her brow in thought. "I haven't heard about him tearing up any of the other planters in town, and Turtle Cove has a lot of them. He focuses on the new ones on Main Street."

"They do stand out," Mary said.

"Like sore thumbs," DeeDee added. She nibbled the edge of her cookie and took a sip of coffee before asking, "Who donated those planters anyway? Nobody I've talked to seems to know."

Mary shrugged. "I heard it was an anonymous donor. And surprisingly enough for this town, the person has managed to remain anonymous."

"I'd like to find out so I'd know who to scowl at when I run into them at the grocery," DeeDee grouched. "The planter near Kaylee's shop looks as though it's been gone over by rabbits." Then her face brightened, more like the DeeDee they all knew so well. "Hey, maybe that should be our next project. We could replant the planters."

"We could make sure we watch over them too," Jessica said. "We can all see most of the planters from our shops. Between the four of us, we ought to be able to head Fred off."

"That sounds like a plan," Mary said. "I can contribute quite a few plants. I've got some dianthus that have jumped the boundaries of my flower beds."

"I could bring some hostas," Jessica offered. "I should have thinned them last year and now they're becoming garden bullies from spreading so much."

Soon everyone had named flowers they could bring from their beds, which would make the project free beyond the labor of replanting. Kaylee loved the idea that she'd be reminded of her friends every time she saw one of the planters.

"I could ask Reese for suggestions of who could help keep watch along with us," Kaylee said once they had a plan in place. "The more eyes, the better. I know Vince will be watching too, but maybe it would help to enlist some people who are less . . . volatile."

"Reese would be a good one to ask," Mary said. "He knows everyone."

"And you'd be a good one to ask Reese," Jessica said, nudging Kaylee. "Since he'd do anything for you." She sang out the last word, making the group laugh.

"He's very fond of Fred," Kaylee insisted, which made the other women laugh more. Kaylee decided to ignore the teasing, which would be easier if she wasn't blushing furiously. She knew better than to give them any more fuel, but she was willing to admit to herself that dating Reese was better than she could have dreamed. *They've been right all along . . . not that I need to tell them that.*

To Kaylee's surprise, it was DeeDee who rescued her from the teasing when she offered to tell Vince about the plan to restock and watch over the planters. "It might make him feel better. Honestly, I think he's been pushed to the edge about this planter thing. His shop is right across from mine. He's come in a few times to grumble about the planters." She smiled ruefully. "I think I've caught some of his grumpiness about it."

Kaylee pictured Vince's furious face and felt a shiver of unease. The shop owner had been more than grumpy. For a moment, she wondered if they had prevented actual violence by defusing the situation, but then she shook her head at the absurdity of the notion. Who would hurt an old man over a few flowers?