

A Deadly Chapter

Christmas is no humbug affair in Lighthouse Bay, Massachusetts. The merry festivities are well underway in the quaint seaside village, and the halls of the posh Castleton Manor literary retreat are decked out in full Victorian décor. This year, the manor is hosting the Charles Dickens Society's annual gala, compete with parlor games and dramatic readings of *A Christmas Carol*, and culminating in a costume ball. Faith Newberry, Castleton's private librarian and archivist, loves being part of the holiday hustle and bustle while catering to the eccentric guests' bookish whims.

When a thief nicks some valuable antique jewelry from one of the suites, Faith is more than happy to leave the investigating to the Lighthouse Bay police. But then the obnoxious president of the society, Charles Huffam, is found dead as a doornail beneath the village's fifty-foot Christmas tree, and Faith's personal Scrooge, her boss Marlene Russell, is suspected of the crime. Faith has no choice but to make the unkind man's death her business.

Marlene's not the only person who has a bit of undigested beef with Huffam. The murder weapon was a length of chain which had been brandished by the seemingly mild-mannered gentleman playing Marley's ghost during the reading. And what about the overbearing woman whose romantic advances Huffam spurned, and her daughter, for whom Huffam had more than a passing fancy? Even Brooke Milner, Faith's friend and fellow Candle House Book Club member, might have wanted to see a stake of holly driven through Huffam's dark heart.

Faith will need all the help she can get from her friends, and especially from her fearless feline, Watson, to unmask the assailant -- or is that wassailant? -- before Castleton Manor's surplus population is decreased by yet one more.

Pine and Punishment

Florist Kaylee Bleu is celebrating Christmas in Turtle Cove, her home on Orcas Island in the Pacific Northwest. She and her trusted employee and friend, Mary Bishop, are adorning The Flower Patch with poinsettias and pine boughs in anticipation of a merry holiday season. It isn't long, though, before Kaylee's roped into joining the town's Festivities Committee. Packing one more task into her tremendous to-do list isn't exactly the direction she wants to go, but Kaylee can hardly refuse. Besides, as a member of the committee, she can try to revive Turtle Cove's tree-lighting ceremony, which was discontinued years ago for mysterious reasons.

When a young woman arrives at Kaylee's door, begging for help, Kaylee isn't sure she has the stamina to take on yet another challenge. But the weeping widow's words of woe tug at Kaylee's resolve. It seems Jake Beckett died of a heart attack, leaving behind a cryptic message before he met his maker. Kaylee quickly recognizes the jumbled numbers on the crumpled scrap of paper: they're GPS coordinates. Will they blaze a tantalizing trail leading to treasure? Or will Jake's final message turn out to be something better left buried?

Kaylee's pulled down another path when a former resident, now a tourism consultant, arrives on the island. She wants to use The Flower Patch as the starting point for her promotional campaign. The extra publicity will be welcome, but Kaylee can't help but wonder if the marketing maven has a hidden reason for returning to Turtle Cove. She seems overly interested in the dead man's cache of clues. Signs point to her having a connection to Jake before his death, and to the tragic death of another young man years before.

When it's revealed that Jake was actually murdered, Kaylee finds herself hot on the trail of a killer. More than one person with hidden motives might have been seeking Jake's demise. But can Kaylee complete her trek to the truth in time to prevent another victim from being bushwhacked?

Humbug Hijinks

Christmas bells are ringing in Somerset Harbor, Maine, where Maggie Watson and her friends are putting on a local production of A Christmas Carol, but the mood inside the town's recently restored playhouse is anything but merry and bright. The youngsters in the cast are running amok, tensions are fired up between the pompous leading man and the blustery director, and a handful of morale-crushing events have everyone in the play saying, "Bah humbug."

Thanks to her role as a backstage helper, Maggie observes all of this high drama from her place behind the curtain. When flubbed lines, lost good luck charms and pre-performance butterflies give way to more sinister incidents, however, it becomes clear to her that someone will stop at nothing to derail the production before the curtain goes up on opening night.

Further threatening Maggie's festive mood are matters of the heart, and she must come to terms with her past, her present and her future, all while trying to uncover the villain waiting in the wings to destroy everything she and the rest of the town have been working toward for the entire holiday season.

Despite the injured actors, ghostly sightings and troubling discoveries throughout the old theater, the director insists that the show must go on. Can Maggie and her good friends in the historical society discover the key player behind these increasingly frightful incidents before somebody breaks a leg for real - or much worse? If she doesn't stop the mysterious troublemaker in time, it could be curtains for one of Somerset Harbor's most notable.