

SECRETS of MARY'S
BOOKSHOP

A New Chapter



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A NEW CHAPTER

By Kristin Eckhardt

Chapter One

MARY FISHER opened her eyes and squinted against the light filtering in through the open window. The early morning sun reflected off the white wainscoting, and her bedroom was bright and cheerful, but something wasn't right.

She pushed herself up, rustling the crisp white sheets and throwing aside the chenille bedspread. She took her glasses from the wicker nightstand and slipped them on. Then she swung her legs over the side of the bed, slid her feet into her fuzzy slippers, and slowly straightened up.

"Gus?" she called. She glanced toward the dresser, craning her neck to see into the closet. The cat wasn't in the room. She padded out to the hall, her footsteps muffled by the soft slippers. "Where are you?"

Gus always slept at her feet. She couldn't remember a night he hadn't. At least not since John died. John had never allowed pets into the bedroom, but now that—

Mary took a deep breath. Tears welled in her eyes, and she rested her hand on the wall to steady herself. It would get easier. That's what everyone told her. Just give it time. Mary wasn't so sure, though. After a lifetime with him, she didn't think she could ever get used to waking up alone. She'd moved in with her older sister, Betty, when she'd relocated to Ivy Bay three weeks ago and was thankful to have her near. After another deep breath, she called out again.

"Gus!" She continued down the stairs and peeked into the living room. Betty had painted the walls a light grey, the color of the ocean when it washes ashore.

Gus wasn't there. She moved down the hall, walking toward the kitchen. He wasn't waiting by his food dish or pawing at the screen door. Where could he—

Then she spotted him, crouched down on the floor under the telephone, just as the phone began to ring. Mary marveled—Gus always seemed to be in the right place just as things were about to happen. The cat had a kind of sixth sense or something. Mary didn't actually believe in that stuff, but she couldn't deny Gus was always in the middle of the action. He quirked his ears up, pushed himself up, and gave a long, lazy stretch, arching his back.

Mary shook her head and grabbed the phone on the second ring.

“Mary?”

She recognized the voice immediately. Benjamin McArthur, Ivy Bay's chief of police, was a big man, but he had a kind voice, and he cared deeply for the people of his town. Mary had known him when they were both kids splashing in the waves, and she'd been pleased to reconnect with him after moving back last month.

“Chief McArthur, what's wrong?” She felt Gus rub against her legs, his soft gray fur soothing her heightened nerves.

“Could you come down to the shop?”

Mary could hear vague noises in the background—people talking and what sounded like a siren. “My shop?” An icy shiver ran down her spine. “Why?”

“I think you should come down here, Mary,” he said gently.

She felt sweat bead on the back of her neck. There just couldn't be anything wrong with the shop, could there? She hadn't even opened for business yet.

“What happened, Chief?” She hoped he couldn't hear the pleading in her voice.

“You'll see when you get here, Mary. No use explaining things twice.”

Mary stood still for a moment, trying to make sense of the conversation. Something was wrong with her bookshop. The store she'd put everything into.

“Okay. I'll be there as soon as I can,” she said. She set the phone back in its cradle, scooped up Gus, who nuzzled against her shoulder and purred, and headed back to the bedroom.

As she made her way back down the hallway, she noticed that her sister's door was still closed. The phone hadn't awakened her or she'd be out here

to question the early morning call. Betty often had trouble sleeping, so Mary didn't want to disturb her—not until she knew for certain that there was something to be disturbed about.

Her hands trembled as she dressed in her favorite khakis and a white turtleneck. She then put on a red cardigan. Only taking time to run a comb through her short, curly gray hair, she picked up her quilted tote bag and put Gus inside. His head popped up and he draped his front paws over the side, purring.

She carefully slung the bag over her shoulder, then walked back into the living room. She scribbled a quick note to Betty and left it on the hall table, then rushed out the door and onto the wide porch.

Mary paused on the first step. For the first time since she'd moved back to Ivy Bay, she didn't feel safe. She turned back, headed to the front door, and slipped her key into the lock, turning it until the dead bolt slid into place. Her car was parked in the driveway, but she walked past it. The bookshop was close. Driving would take as long as walking.

She hurried out past the white picket fence, turned down the cracked concrete sidewalk, and headed toward the village common. Between cottages edged with glorious climbing roses, she caught glimpses of the breathtaking blue of the bay.

She crossed a small stone footbridge, passing over a cranberry bog, which had been drained since its autumn flooding. Green vines grew thick along the bottom of the bog, and soon blossoms would burst forth, each guarding a berry. She often thought that the Lord had certainly saved a generous serving of beauty for Cape Cod. This morning, however, she didn't pay much attention to the view.

At the edge of the bog, Mary turned left onto Main Street. Her shop was about halfway down, and she craned her neck to see what was happening.

She flinched when she saw the small crowd gathered around a police car. Its flashing lights reflected in the windows of the neighboring shops. The bookstore looked like other cottages in the village, except for the wooden sign that hung over the door with the words MARY'S MYSTERY BOOKSHOP. The wooden storefront held a large, paned window, and there was a smaller

window over the glass door. An elm tree stood in the grassy area between the street and the wide sidewalk, partially blocking her view of the shop.

A few neighbors called out to her, some wearing robes and slippers. Owen Cooper, the president of Ivy Bay Bank & Trust, stood in a green jogging suit, obviously out for an early morning run before the bank opened. Lori Stone, a local realtor and the woman who had helped her buy the bookshop, was there too, with her miniature schnauzer, Bitsy, on a short leash.

What had happened to the shop? She didn't see any smoke, but maybe a fire had already been put out. As she got closer, she noticed a line of yellow police tape roping off the sidewalk in front of her store. Shards of glass littered the ground, reflecting the early morning sun. The glass in the door was gone.

Chief McArthur met her at the entrance of the shop. His build almost filled the doorway. He was only a handful of years from retirement, and she was glad to have his experience now. He gave her a sympathetic smile as he ushered her inside the small bookshop.

“Mary, take a deep breath. It's going to look worse than it actually is.” He stepped back to reveal the shop.

Broken glass dotted the wide pine floorboards in front of her, along the circular display table on which she planned to feature book specials and best sellers. The floor-to-ceiling bookcases that lined the walls hadn't been touched, but the shop had half a dozen freestanding bookcases, one of which was tilted, leaving a pile of dented hardcovers and creased paperbacks scattered on the floor. The braided rug near the children's section had been flipped aside, and half of it was now on the other side of the room, hung over the upended rocking chair.

Gus mewed sharply. With a mumbled apology, Mary set her bag on the floor, well away from the broken glass, and he darted out and started sniffing.

“What happened, Chief McArthur?” She ran her hand along the painted molding on the wall. At least the structure itself didn't appear to be damaged. Mary whispered a prayer of thanks that the intruder had come when no one was here. Yes, there was a mess, but things could be repaired or replaced. No one had been hurt. Gus moseyed around the corner, stopped, then pawed at the wall.

“Who would do this to my store?” she said, almost to herself. The police chief gave a weary sigh. “Well, we had a couple of incidents of vandalism last night; some graffiti and that sort of thing. It was probably kids making trouble, since school let out for the summer.” He surveyed the shop. “But can you tell me if anything was taken, Mary? That will help us figure out where to start.”

Mary crouched down and picked up a book from the pile next to her. It was a cozy mystery by one of her favorite authors. She dusted it off and laid it down gently on a shelf. She drew back and shook her head.

“It will take me a while to make sense of all this. I’ll have to look at my inventory records, to be sure.” She bent down to pick up another book. The binding was cracked, as if it’d been stepped on. She gently set it back on the ground. Then she stepped around the pile of books and moved toward her gram’s rocking chair, setting it carefully back into place. She ran her hands over the high crown-shaped back and scrolled arms, checking for damage, much like she used to do to her children after they’d taken a bad tumble.

After assuring herself that the rocker hadn’t been damaged, she walked around the shop, switching on lights, peeking behind doors. The rolling ladder used to reach the top shelves was just where she’d left it the day before. She walked to the back reading area where posters for story-time were still propped on an overstuffed chair by the fieldstone hearth.

Then she noticed that the pine floorboards, usually hidden by the rug, had been swept clear of dust. Had the intruder tried to find something there? She tested each wide board with her foot. None of them had been loosened, and the original pegs hadn’t been removed.

Mary took a deep breath as she went to the glass-fronted case near the counter. In it, she had stocked valuable first-edition books, as well as displays showcasing Cape Cod and local authors. She smoothed one hand over the top of the satinwood case, surprised that it didn’t seem to have been opened.

She turned to the chief and shrugged. “Nothing seems to be missing.”

“How about from the till?”

“There’s no money in it yet.” She pulled her key ring out of her handbag. The key chain hanging from it banged against the drawer as she twisted a key

in the lock. A quick glance into the neat drawer was all she needed. “As far as I can tell, everything’s just where it should be.”

“Well, that’s good.” Chief McArthur tipped his hat. “I’m sorry you have to deal with this mess, Mary, but I’ll do what I can to find the vandals who caused it.”

“Thank you,” she said with a grateful smile. She headed toward a narrow closet to grab a broom and dustpan. “I’d better start cleaning up.”

Gus started meowing as he continued his way around the shop.

The police chief moved to straighten the tilted bookcase. More books cascaded to the floor. He continued to maneuver the case but didn’t have much luck straightening it. “I’m not sure if I’m making this better or worse,” he said ruefully.

Mary chuckled and moved to help him. Together, they straightened the case. They had begun picking up the fallen books, when Gus let out an indignant yowl.

“Gus!” Mary shook her head. “Not right now, okay?”

He rubbed his face against the edge of a short satinwood bookcase near the bay window and looked up at Mary expectantly.

“What is it?” she asked him as she walked toward the bookcase. Something crunched under her shoes. She stopped and lifted her shoe, surprised to see tiny shards of glass embedded in the sole. The broken window was on the other side of the shop, so where had this glass come from?

“Come here, buddy,” she said, bending down to scoop Gus into her arms. “Are you okay?” She carefully checked each of his paws as Chief McArthur approached her. Somehow, Gus had avoided the tiny slivers of glass on the floor. Mary held him tightly in her arms, and he seemed content with her protection. She looked up at the bay window and saw that it was untouched.

“What broke?” he looked around, then moved the short but heavy bookcase out from the wall a few feet, revealing larger shards of glass behind it.

Mary bent down to examine the broken glass, wondering, too, how it had gotten there.

“Careful,” he said as he picked up some of the larger shards.

She looked up at the light coral wall in front of her and slowly rose to her

feet. “Wait,” she said, frowning her brow. “There was a picture there.” She pointed to the bare nail head protruding from the wall. “I hung it here just three days ago.”

“Oh? What kind of picture?”

“It was an old photograph of the shop in an eight-by-ten-inch antique frame,” Mary told him. “I found it stashed in a box in the cellar.” She stared down at the broken glass and put a hand on her hip. “The intruder must have taken it off the wall and dropped it. That would explain the glass, anyway.”

“Was it valuable?”

“Just to me and my family,” she said, perplexed. “It was a photograph of the front of this building, taken about fifty years ago when my uncle owned it. Nothing particularly special, really.”

“That’s strange,” he mused, rubbing the back of his neck. “Nothing was taken from those other two establishments that were vandalized. Why take something from you?”

She ran her eyes over the empty wall again, her heart beating faster. “Why would someone break in just to steal a dusty old photograph?”

