

# Snipped *in the* Bud

DONNA ALICE PATTON



A Tale from the Garden of Mysteries - 1

A Tale from the Garden of Mysteries – Book 1

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*Snipped in the Bud*  
*A Tale from the Garden of Mysteries*  
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*Jenny and the Hooky Playing Fiasco*

## In Memory

. . . of three special ladies who are gone much too soon.

*Linda Sherlock*—thanks always for your inspiration and encouragement. We never met in person, but you were a bright light in my world. I cherish your memory and all the times you were never too busy to read a first draft.

*Florence Scott*—You were the first to recognize that *Snipped in the Bud* could become a book. Thank you for championing this book from the beginning.

*Gwen Rice Clark*—Sweet mentor and friend. How can words ever begin to thank you for your encouragement, your smiles, prayers and your steadfast knowledge that I would publish a book? Even though we knew one another almost thirty years, it seems such a short time. The world is a little dimmer this year without you in it, but I know we will meet again one day. Miss you!

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## Chapter One

### SNATCHED!

**A**nother Summer Snow is missing!" Ten-year-old Becky McGuffey burst into the kitchen and slumped in a chair. "What am I going to do?"

Across the table, her teenaged sister, Yvonne, didn't even look up from her book.

Becky studied the book's cover: *The Mystery of the Haunted Orchard*. The picture showed a sinister house with spindly apple trees, the branches reaching out like bony arms. Even with her troubles, she shivered. Becky loved a good mystery. In books—not in real life.

*Having a mystery happen to me is no fun at all.* "What am I going to do?"

This time, Yvonne looked up and rolled her eyes. "It's just a rose. Plenty more will bloom before the fair."

"Just a rose!"

That showed how much her sister knew. Becky sat up and pushed a yellow sun visor decorated with purple flowers back from her sweaty forehead.

“Summer Snow is my *best* white rose. It’s won first prize two years in a row at the junior garden show. It *has* to win the grand prize this year. The winner gets a gold plaque and a one-hundred-dollar gift card from Sam’s Garden Center.”

Not that she wanted to tell Yvonne, but Becky had secret plans for that contest prize.

*I’ve been saving my birthday and Christmas money for two whole years now. If I win, the prize money will make exactly enough.*

Yvonne popped a bubble of purple gum.

The grape scent tickled Becky’s nose. Even though she liked the color purple, she didn’t like grape anything.

“Why the worry?” Yvonne asked. “You couldn’t enter that rose anyway. The fair is still weeks away.”

“I know that.”

Becky had the dates—September 4th to 9th—marked in red on her puppy-dog calendar. “I don’t care if someone takes a rose now and then, if they ask.”

Sitting up straight, she tried to explain the problem to Yvonne. “Someone is taking my roses. Every day for the past two weeks I’ve found another rose gone. I have to stop the person taking them. What if they pick the rose that I’m going to enter in the fair?”

As a Junior Rose Grower, Becky had learned the hard way not to count on any single rose when entering a competition.

As the time drew near for the contest, she kept her eyes on her eight rose bushes. Only the most perfect blooms were picked for competition.

"You aren't going to put umbrellas over your bushes this year, are you?" Yvonne asked with suspicion in her dark eyes. "It looks weird. All my friends laughed and called us the Family Who Didn't Want Wet Flowers."

"Roses can be beaten down by the rain," Becky said, dodging the question.

Last summer, Yvonne had squawked plenty about the polka-dotted umbrellas sheltering Summer Snow and Candy Apple Red. This year, Becky could add a Princess Pink Nose umbrella and one with a clown. Yvonne would not be happy about those and right now Becky needed her sister's advice.

"What am I going to do? I have to find out who's taking my roses before it's too late."

"Who knows?" Yvonne said as she shrugged and went back to her book.

Another grape bubble popped, to Becky's irritation.

Suddenly, Becky had an idea.

*I love mysteries too. Why can't I be like the girl detectives in books and solve this? Someone is taking my roses and I have to find out who. I'll solve the mystery myself. But how?*

"When someone in one of your books wants to solve a mystery, what do they do?" she asked her sister.



This was a topic Yvonne loved. A sparkle came into her eyes. She actually put down the book and looked interested. “The first thing to do is to look for clues or anyone suspicious.”

“Clues! That’s right.” Becky had read enough Nancy Drew mysteries to know that. “Where would I look?”

“That’s easy. You go to the scene of the crime.”

“Huh?”

“Your roses were taken from the garden, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then that’s the place you start. See if any suspicious characters are hanging around. Then search to see if they left any clues.”

“I’ll start in my rose garden, at the scene of the crime.” Becky jumped off the chair and squared her shoulders.

The first thing she needed before she could look for clues was a magnifying glass, just like Nancy Drew. Becky wasn’t too sure what a detective did with the magnifying glass, but it always helped the girls in books.

She tiptoed into the study where Mom worked and pantomimed borrowing from the supply box.

Mom nodded, her dark curls bobbing.

Rummaging around in a box of pencils, scissors, and paper clips, Becky pulled out the magnifying glass. With a quick wave, she mouthed “thank you”—although Mom didn’t notice.

Becky closed the study door without a squeak.

Then she made a fast stop in her bedroom for a pink notebook with roses on the cover and a pencil.

*I'll find a clue and stop that rose thief. Today.*



## Chapter Two

### CLUES IN THE ROSE GARDEN

**M**agnifying glass in hand, Becky headed outside. She went out the front door, careful to close it softly. Standing on the porch, she peered through the blue morning glory vines climbing up the railing.

A good detective looked over the scene of the crime and searched for someone or something suspicious.

The only trouble was . . . everything seemed normal.

A lawnmower started up in the neighbor's yard, the mailman waved as he drove by, and a little boy on a tricycle pedaled past making racecar noises.

Becky sighed.

Her family lived in a nice neighborhood called Robin Hood Meadow. When they first moved into the brick ranch house, shutters trimmed in blue, Becky asked the realtor, "Where are Maid Marian and Friar Tuck? Does Robin Hood play here every day?"

*Well, she dismissed herself, I was only six then. Four whole years ago.*

Her family was glad to leave the cramped apartment on B Street for the roomy house with a yard. The best thing as far as Becky was concerned was being able to have a real garden of her own.

Finally, a dream come true.

For those first years in the new house her garden stayed small. Dad said there were too many other things to do first, like planting grass seed and putting in a new driveway.

Most of her plants still lived at Grandma's farm, which was okay with her.

Ever since Becky had been old enough, Grandma Bauer let her help plant seeds in the spacious farm garden. Grandma even set aside a little plot just for her.

"My grandma helped me begin my first garden when I was six," Grandma said as they set out Becky's first flat of marigold plants. "Grannie Joseph told me marigolds were named after Jesus' Mother. Then we studied all the other plants that were named after Mary."

Becky grinned and sank her hands deep into the soft loamy dirt. Did anything feel as good as rich, chocolate-colored soil?

"I'll be a gardener just like you someday."

"You'll be a better gardener than I am," Grandma had predicted. "One day you'll be winning prizes."

Since Grandma had been a member of the Green Thumb Ladies Garden Club for almost fifty years, she

loved having Becky follow in her footsteps. They shared their love of gardening over plenty of weekends at the Rose of Sharon Farm.

At home, the apartment's windowsills were wide and deep. Mom had given Becky permission to grow flowers and even some herbs in pots. If only she had been able to grow her favorite flower inside, she might not have minded container gardening.

As long as Becky could remember, roses had been special because of her favorite saint, Saint Theresa. Becky loved Grandma's stories about the girl saint and her garden nickname, The Little Flower. A person would have to be beautiful inside and out for someone to give them such a pretty name.

The more Becky learned about St. Theresa, the more she knew this was true. She especially loved stories about the saint's "shower of roses." Her favorite prayer began, *St. Theresa, send me a rose from the heavenly garden . . .*

Becky's roses might not be as pretty as a rose from Heaven, but she loved everything about them—their sweet scent, silky petals, and even the pokey thorns, once she learned to avoid them.

For her sixth birthday, Grandma gave Becky a Peace Rose that had to stay on the farm. A bloom from that rose became Becky's first entry in the Fulcomb County Fair. It won an Honorable Mention and a Junior Gardener plaque.

That first taste of victory hooked Becky for life. Like Grandma, she had topsoil in her blood and Miracle Grow in her heart.

The following summer, Becky entered more flowers in the fair. The year after that, when she was eight, the fair board changed the rules. Grandchildren could no longer enter unless they grew gardens at their own home.

“It’s because of that Alma Snyder,” Grandma said when she had read the rules. “She only did it because her granddaughter Meredith lives with her. It knocks out every other competitor.”

Grandma protested about how unfair it was, but it didn’t matter. Mrs. Snyder had her way.

So, Becky had missed one summer of entering the fair because of the stacked rules. But this year, as with the two previous years, it didn’t matter. Becky had her own garden at last and nothing could ruin that.

Skipping down the porch steps, she walked to her roses. Mom called it an apron-sized yard with a pocket garden. They had a nice green lawn and in one corner, Dad had built a white fence in a V to set apart Becky’s rainbow of roses.

Besides the white Summer Snow and Candy Apple Red, there was another Peace bush and five other colors of heavenly scented flowers. It had always been a peaceful corner before. Now, the bare stub of Summer Snow’s stalk mocked Becky.

*Ha, ha, someone took me!*

Sitting down on the warm grass, Becky sketched a picture of her garden in the notebook. She turned a page and wrote **SUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS**.

Then she looked around.

Next door, the Claxtons were in their front yard trying to teach their four-year-old son, Rodney, to golf. Mr. and Mrs. Claxton always wore sporty golf outfits, with visor caps on their dark hair. They dressed Rodney in tiny golf pants, white sneakers, and a miniature golf cap that had **FUTURE GOLF PRO** stitched on the front.

Becky smiled and waved. “Hi Mr. and Mrs. Claxton. Hi Rodney.”

“Hi, Becky,” Mr. Claxton shouted back. “He picked his own club today!”

Rodney swung a red plastic putter and hit the new maple tree in the yard. “Me don’t like golf,” he said just like always. Becky wrote down:

**CLAXTON FAMILY**—not suspicious.

Next, she studied the neighbor to her left, Mrs. Montgomery. Becky couldn’t see her, but Mrs. M, as all the kids called her, would be in the backyard.

Mrs. M. was what Mom called a kindred spirit. She loved to garden too. Only, Mrs. M grew just one plant—gourds. She could make a million magical things out of them, from bird feeders to gnome houses.

Maybe she had seen someone suspicious.

Becky went to the back gate and knocked.

A cheery voice called out, "Come in."

"Hi, Mrs. M. Have you been back here all morning?"

Becky asked as she walked into the backyard.

"No, I watered the front lawn earlier."

"You did?" Excited, Becky's fingers tightened around the pencil. "Did you happen to see anyone around my roses?"

"I sure did."

"Really? Who?" Could the mystery be solved already?

Mrs. M. squinted from under a broad-brimmed straw hat. "I saw your mother. She stopped to smell them."

"Oh." Becky's hopes dropped to the toes of her pink gym shoes. Mom always began the day that way. She said it lifted her spirits. "Did you see anyone else?"

Brushing paint over a gourd shaped like a pear, Mrs. M thought. "Hmm, well, I did see Mr. Claxton. He jumped the fence to pick—"

"My Summer Snow!"

Mrs. M. chuckled, "Oh my, no. Rodney finally hit a golf ball and it flew into your garden. Why all the questions, dearie?"

Becky told the story about her missing roses. "I'm going to find the clues and solve who did it."

"Oh my." Mrs. M's broad, sunburned face beamed, all her wrinkles curving into smiles. "I always loved a good whodunit myself."



“A whowhatzit?”

“A who-done-it. It’s not proper grammar.” Mrs. M had been a second-grade teacher, so she’d know. “But a cute nickname for a mystery. Tell me, have you discovered any clues yet?”

Becky had to admit she hadn’t. “Yvonne told me to look around for anyone who seems suspicious. But nobody does.”

“That could be a problem. Let’s see, have you searched the area for footprints or anything strange like candy wrappers or such?”

“Not yet. Should I? Is that the most important step?”

“Oh, yes, dearie,” Mrs. M. gave an emphatic nod of her head. “In all the mystery books I’ve read, the detective always goes over the scene with a fine-toothed comb. Or a magnifying glass like the one you have sticking out of your pocket. If I were you, I’d begin where the crime took place.”

“I will. Thank you, Mrs. M.” Becky hollered over her shoulder and skipped out of the gate.

*Clues. I need clues.*

Yvonne and Mrs. M. both said to search the scene of the crime.



## Chapter Three

### CLUES IN THE MULCH

**H**urrying back to the garden, Becky stopped and stared. *What if I ran over a clue? What if my sneakers erased something already? Why wasn't I more careful?*

Walking in a big circle around the roses, she took her time, looking for anything different.

After she walked around three times, she sat down on the grass with a sigh. Except for the missing Summer Snow, everything looked the same, like a painting of a rose garden on a summer day.

A Sweet Surrender bud seemed almost ready to burst into bloom. What if the mysterious rose snatcher decided to pick that one tomorrow?

Standing, Becky dusted off the back of her purple sundress. Holding the magnifying glass in front of her eye, she walked on tiptoe toward the edge of the garden.

Grass. Dirt. Mulch. Rose petals.

*Hmm, could be a clue.*

The petals were from a Rockin' Robin rose that had

bloomed the day before.

Maybe the snatcher tried to pick it first and it fell apart in his hand. Or was it a *her*?

Becky found several footprints in the dirt.

*Mine.* She could tell by the star shape on the bottom of her sneakers.

Next, she spied the print made by a big, man-sized shoe that must belong to Mr. Claxton.

Probably chasing after Rodney's ball.

Then she spotted what seemed to be a flip-flop print.

Yvonne?

The problem was there wasn't a lot of dirt around the roses. Her dad had helped spread cypress mulch to hold in the moisture. It took some imprints but not as many as dirt.

Deciding to search from a different angle, Becky walked out on the sidewalk. She went back to the driveway and pretended to be going past her house.

*I'm skipping along, hum, hum, hum, and I see a nice rose garden. Hmm, is anyone home? No, everyone is asleep. Well, I'll just reach over and pick—*

"Ouch!" A thorn.

A drop of blood appeared on her finger.

Becky wrapped the hem of her dress around it. Now, she'd have to go inside for a bandage. Turning to go, she noticed for the first time that the dirt at the edge of the garden had tracks in it.

Not footprints. Those were wheel prints. Could it be a clue?

Becky forgot about her bleeding finger and knelt on the sidewalk. Could it be a bike? No, too big.

Bike tires were narrower. This tread looked wider to her. The stripes or chevrons went up like the wings of a bird in flight. One stripe had a funny, jagged space missing, like a mouth without a tooth.

Taking out her notebook, she drew a careful picture of the tire pattern. It could be a clue.

Becky thought about what to do next.

First, she'd make sure it hadn't come from their house. She hurried into the garage and held up the drawing to her bike tires.

No, too wide.

Next, she held the drawing up to Yvonne's bike, then to Mom's and Dad's. None of the bike tires matched.

What else had wheels?

She compared it to the boxy spreader Dad used to sow grass seed in the fall, and then she compared the lawn mower. The wheels almost fit but had a different pattern. Dad's lawn mower Vs slanted down. The Vs in the roses slanted up.

*What else has wheels?*

Looking closer, Becky realized she'd missed the most obvious garden tool.

The wheelbarrow.

It sat in the corner filled with compost she planned to spread around her tomato plants in the backyard. Mrs. M. had given her some special, stinky stuff guaranteed to grow anything better.

Squatting beside the bright red wheelbarrow, Becky studied the shape of the wheel as her heart thumped like raindrops on a melon. It almost matched.

*Could it have been me?*

She tried to remember if she'd wheeled the big wheelbarrow past the garden.

*No. Mrs. M. gave me the compost and I walked down the driveway. I didn't go anywhere near the roses.*

Becky turned the wheel just in case. The tire didn't have a jagged piece missing.

So, someone else had gone past her garden with a wheelbarrow, but who?

Was this a clue or not?

Becky sat back on her heels, feeling very discouraged. Maybe it didn't mean anything. Lots of people in the neighborhood had lawn mowers or wheelbarrows. She couldn't run around looking at every single tire.

Even if they matched, how did that prove someone had taken Summer Snow?

"Becky!" Mom called from the porch, "Time for lunch."

"Coming."

Over lunch, Becky told Mom and Yvonne about the

morning's search for suspicious people or clues. Biting into a tuna sandwich, Becky chewed and stared at the roosters decorating the walls.

Mom loved rooster anything. The kitchen had a rooster wallpaper border, rooster mugs, rooster placemats, and a rooster teapot. She had even hung a painting of Saint Francis holding a rooster.

"Sounds as if you've been busy," Mom said as she poured more iced tea from a rooster pitcher. "Now, if you were a character in one of *my* stories, your next step would be to see if there's a pattern to the crime."

Mom was a writer. Her heroine, Maggie O'Malley, solved crimes in the tiny town of Springdale Falls.

"A pattern?"

"Yes. Are you the only one missing roses? Or has anyone else in the neighborhood had a rose theft? Some criminals target one person. That would make it a personal crime against you. If other people are missing roses, the thief doesn't care who he steals from. Maybe he steals a dozen roses a day to keep from paying \$29.95 at Easton's Floral Shoppe."

Becky grinned. "Hey, I never thought of that."

"It's often helpful to Maggie in my books. If someone on Friar Tuck Lane has roses missing, that would show the rose snatcher worked his way down there too."

"And if nobody on Maid Marian had roses taken, the thief didn't go there," Yvonne put in. "If you can find out

which direction the person came from, you might find a suspect.”

“Gee.” Becky frowned. “There’s more to solving a mystery than I thought.”

“A good detective has to think of all the possibilities,” Mom said, “and take good notes.”

Becky held up her pink notebook. “I am.”

After Becky finished her iced tea and potato chips, she got up to clear the table. Yvonne did breakfast, Becky did lunch, and they both helped after dinner.

“Mom, could I walk through the neighborhood and ask if anyone else has had roses taken?” Becky asked.

“Sure,” Mom agreed with a bright smile, “after you do your afternoon chores.”

Becky’s smile turned upside down, “Drat, I forgot.”

Hurrying to the refrigerator, she looked at the list under BECKY’S JOBS. Each day she and Yvonne had chores to do. Her sister always got up early and did all her jobs so she could spend the rest of the day reading.

Becky liked to ease in to the day first, puttering in her garden before the sun got too hot. Mom didn’t care but she had to do the chores before dinner and afternoon fun.

Today’s list seemed long. “Two loads of wash. Sweep back porch and garage. Wipe down kitchen cabinets.”

Becky groaned but raced for the laundry room. If she hurried, she’d have time to do a quick search of Friar Tuck and Maid Marian Way.

She just *had* to win the flower show at the fair this year, or she wouldn't have enough money for her secret present for Grandma.

*So, ha-ha, Mr. Rose Thief. I'll find out who you are today. You can't hide from me.*

*I hope.*





## Chapter Four

### NOBODY KNOWS ABOUT ROSES

**I**'m finished, Yvonne," Becky called from the back porch after the chores were done. A quick glance at the clock told her she had an hour before dinner. "Tell Mom I went to look for clues."

"It's called *sleuthing* in books," Yvonne said.

She lay stretched out on a chaise lounge in the backyard. She'd finished the book about the haunted mansion and now was reading a book called *In the Candle's Flame*.

As she walked by, Becky glanced at the book in her sister's lap. Its cover showed an eerie face peeking around a glowing candle.

Becky shivered. Some mysteries could be spooky. She bit a corner of her lip.

Did she really want to find out who was taking her roses? *Yes. The fair's too important this year. I have to win. Summer Snow can beat any other rose . . . I think.*

A prickle of worry shoved the hope out of her mind.  
*Are my roses really good enough?*

This year, for the first time in her gardening career, Becky had serious competition for the prize at the garden show. It came from a girl named Amanda Quint.

Amanda had moved to Ohio the year before and joined Becky's homeschool social group. Since many of kids in the subdivision were taught at home, the moms organized activities they could do together.

Once every few months, Mom had a journal-writing party. The first time Amanda came, Becky had been proud to show off her roses.

"You win prizes for flowers?" Amanda asked in a sneering way none of the other girls liked. "And money?"

"Yes." Becky answered.

For some reason, she hadn't liked the greedy looks Amanda gave the plaques and ribbons hanging on the bedroom wall. Becky couldn't wait for Amanda to leave so she could wipe the smeary fingerprints off the green marble trophy she'd won for Junior Gardener of the Year.

"Maybe I'll get my father to let me have a garden too."

*I was so dumb to tell her about all the prizes I won. But how could I know she'd decide to grow roses too?*

Amanda's idea of a garden was to get her rich dad to hire a gardener from Beckwith's Landscaping.

When the judges disqualified Amanda's flowers at the junior show last summer, Becky expected her to quit.

To her surprise, Amanda took losing as a challenge. "I'll show those old judges," she'd fumed at the next homeschool activity day. "I'm going to learn everything I can and grow my own roses. You'll see. They won't disqualify me again because I didn't do my own work."

As she now walked along Robin Hood Way, Becky worried. Much to her own disappointment but true to her word, Amanda had taken junior gardening classes.

Just like Becky, she gave lots of time and attention to producing great plants. Plus, her dad had the money to buy the best of everything.

She had to admit Amanda's roses looked wonderful. But were they good enough to win?

What if Amanda had taken Becky's roses to keep her from winning first place?

*Does she want to win that much? No, not even Amanda could be that sneaky. Could she?*

Becky walked to the end of Robin Hood Way. She studied the roses in the grouchy man's yard. She didn't know his name. Whenever she complimented him on his flowers, he grunted.

She couldn't tell if any of his flowers had been picked or not. A sturdy chain-link fence surrounded the yard. If anyone took his flowers, they'd have to be tall enough to reach over the fence.

Taking out her notebook, Becky wrote down what she'd learned so far:

GROUCHY MAN—can't tell. Fence too high.

"Hi Becky, whatcha doin'?" a fast-talking voice asked at her elbow.

Peter Wimple always reminded Becky of a puppy yapping, "like me, like me." He could never stand still either and bounced around in his tennis shoes like the sidewalk was a trampoline.

Peter acted as if he and Becky were best friends, a feeling she didn't share.

Becky sighed. *Now I remember why I never walk down Robin Hood Way.*

Forcing herself to smile, she turned and closed her notebook. "Hi, Peter."

"Whatcha doin'?" he asked again, pointing at the notebook. "Taking notes on who's going to win the Junior Garden Show this year? Bet you got my name in there, right? You wanna see my roses? They are awesome! I am so winning that grand prize this year. You know about that, right?"

"Yes, I—" Becky tried to interrupt but Peter kept talking.

"They're awarding a one-hundred-dollar-gift card. Know why?"

"Yes, I—"

Peter didn't even pay attention to her. "It's because this year is the hundredth anniversary of the Fulcomb County Fair. All the prizes are bigger this year. Last year,

I only got fifty cents for an honorable mention ribbon. What did you get for winning first prize?"

It took Becky a few seconds to realize Peter had actually stopped talking and expected an answer.

"Oh! I won five dollars for Summer Snow."

She didn't remind Peter that every junior gardener who entered the fair got one honorable mention just for trying. Even if the contestant's flower—like Peter's—was the worst in the show.

"I'm hoping I win this year too."

"Maybe you won't." Peter grinned. The sun glinted off the braces on his teeth. "Come see my roses. I've got a white one just like yours."

Although she'd rather not, Becky didn't want to hurt his feelings. She'd heard some of the other public school kids teasing him when he got off the bus.

They called him "Motor Mouth Wimple."

"Okay," she said.

Becky followed him into the backyard and the most dismal garden she'd ever seen. Peter's dusty zinnias drooped, almost panting for water. He had two scrawny rose bushes plunked in the middle of a big tractor tire filled with dirt.

Around the edges of the roses, Peter had tried, but not very successfully, to grow tomatoes. One plant flopped over in limp defeat. The other had two raisin-sized green tomatoes. It was hard to find something nice to say.

Becky cleared her throat and searched for polite words. “I . . . um . . . wow, that’s a cool idea to use a tractor tire for your garden.”

Peter smiled like she’d given him a rare orchid. Then his face turned serious.

“Becky, could you tell me something? Do you think my roses have a chance to win? I really want that gift card for someone special.”

No! She wanted to shout but didn’t. “Well, I—”

“My roses sure don’t look like Mrs. Kopek’s down the street,” he said. “Or Amanda’s. Or yours.”

“They’re kind of small, aren’t they?” Becky said. “They might need some more rose food.”

She walked closer to the sad roses, examining them for spider mites or disease. The leaves on the white rose looked like Peter had dusted them with bath powder.

Not good.

“Here’s a problem.” Becky showed him the leaves. “This is powdery mildew. It can cause the leaves to turn yellow and mess up your flowers.”

“What should I do?” Peter asked, rocking from one foot to the other and twisting his hands. “Will they die? So many of my plants die. I can’t stand it when my flowers die. I feel like Charlie Brown and his Christmas tree, you know?”

*Not really.*

“Keep the ground under your roses clean,” Becky said.

“You’ve got too much mulch around them, and they can’t breathe. Push the mulch away so the air can get to the roots. There’s a homemade remedy my grandma taught me too. You take—” She paused. “Here, I’ll write it down.”

Becky wrote on a notebook page:

1 teaspoon baking soda

½ teaspoon oil

1 quart warm water

Mix well and spray.

She tore the page out and handed it to Peter. “This will work. Let me know if you need any more help.”

“Thanks, Becky.” His eyes shone as he took the paper. “You’re the best gardener I know. Someday, I hope I’m as good as you. Maybe we can both win first prize this year.”

*That’ll be the day.*

“You’re welcome, Peter.” She left him standing, no, *bouncing* beside his poor, dying roses and let herself out of the yard.

As she walked along, Becky realized she hadn’t asked Peter if anyone had taken his roses.

*Probably not, she decided. So, all I’ve found out today is that I don’t have any new clues.*

Disappointed, she turned and headed for home.

*Tomorrow, I’ll go in the other direction,* she decided.

She had to find a clue somewhere and stop the thief.

If he picked Summer Snow the week of the fair, she would have no chance to win and . . .

*If I don't win, there goes my secret wish.*

Her heart clenched at the thought of losing. *I can't!*

This was Becky's chance to do something nice for Grandma, to celebrate her fifty years of gardening. To repay her for all the kind things she had done for Becky.

*I have to win, and no pesky rose thief is going to stop me!*





## Chapter Five

### A SUSPECT

**E**arly the next morning, Becky eased the screen door open and walked onto the porch. Closing the door softly, she raced down the steps and inspected her roses.

The sun hadn't been up long, but the thief had struck again. The pink Sweet Surrender had disappeared. It had been in bud the day before and Becky looked forward to its blooming.

*Grandma gave me that bush for my birthday. I wanted to email her a picture of the first flower. Guess that won't happen now.*

"I'll find out who you are," she vowed, shaking her fist in the air. "You'll be sorry."

Notebook clenched in her hand Becky turned in the opposite direction from her clue search the day before.

Walking down Maid Marian Lane, she found Mrs. Kopek watering her roses. "Good morning, Mrs. Kopek."

The woman turned with a worried frown. A garden hose quivered in her hand.

“Oh, Rebecca,” she greeted using Becky’s real name. “It’s not a good morning at all, not at all.”

When the gray-haired lady got excited, she repeated words.

“Why not?”

“Someone picked two of my Amber Suns again today. After they made off with three the day before. I planned to show them off to the Garden Club at our meeting this very afternoon.”

Becky knew Amber Suns were a yellowish-white rose.

“Someone took your roses? They picked mine too.”

Could this be a clue?

She told Mrs. Kopek how she’d been losing roses and her hunt for the suspect. “How long have you been losing yours?”

“Well, I can’t rightly say. My daughter, Grace, had her baby and I was gone for a few days. I wouldn’t know if some of them were missing last week.”

That wasn’t much help. But still, it was a clue.

A little boy rode by on a tricycle and waved at Mrs. Kopek.

“Hello, Carter. How are you today?” She turned to Becky and smiled. “A nice little boy.”

Becky gave her a distracted smile and watched the boy as he rode down the street.

*So, I’m not the only one who lost roses. The thief took Mrs. Kopek’s too.*

“Thank you, Mrs. Kopek. I’m going to see if I can find anyone else whose roses were taken.”

“Why?”

Becky had thought this out carefully, thanks to Mom and Yvonne. “If only *my* roses were taken, it would be personal. Maybe someone who doesn’t want me to compete in the fair.”

Like that awful Amanda trying to keep Becky from winning.

“I even had some suspicions about this one girl,” she went on.

Wasn’t that a cool word to use? *Suspicions*.

“But since someone took your roses too, it must mean the thief doesn’t care whose roses he takes,” Becky finished. “So, it’s probably not her.”

*Guess you’re off my list of suspects, Amanda.*

“Not necessarily.” Mrs. Kopek shook her. “It could still be someone who doesn’t want you to compete. I saw this movie once where a girl had to win a horse show.”

She adjusted the sprayer on her hose. “Someone stole her horse and four other horses. That way no one knew who the real target was. Maybe the thief is taking other roses to confuse you. If you can think of someone suspicious, I wouldn’t be so quick to cross them off your list, off your list.”

Wide-eyed, Becky stared around her normal, quiet neighborhood. Prickly bumps grew on her arms.

Birds sang, children laughed and splashed through a sprinkler, and somewhere a lawn mower roared into action. Even though she didn't want to believe it, Mrs. Kopek's words made sense.

Maybe her roses were taken to throw me off the trail of the real target. *Me!*

There was only one person Becky knew who might not want her to compete.

Amanda!

"Thanks for giving me a clue, Mrs. Kopek. Bye."

"What clue?" Puzzled, Mrs. Kopek turned back to spraying her roses. "What clue?"

Becky's feet thumped loudly on the concrete as she ran. If someone wanted to sabotage her roses and keep her from competing, she knew exactly who would be so mean—Amanda.

Filled with righteous anger, Becky stomped along, adding up her clues. Didn't it all make sense?

Amanda wanted to win. She lived six houses away from Mrs. Kopek. She had a wheelbarrow. She . . . well, Becky couldn't think of anymore reasons with her mind swirling like a sprinkler, but it had to be Amanda.

She marched into Amanda's rose garden so mad that she saw everything through a red, fuzzy haze. Kneeling beside a Rockin' Robin rose, Amanda hummed while patting mulch around the thorny stems.

A green wheelbarrow sat beside her, filled with

fragrant, black-satin bark.

Amanda wore a white jumper and a cute pink T-shirt with giant roses all over it. A white headband held back her pale-blond ponytails.

Glancing up, she smiled, until she realized who her visitor was. Then her face went bright red. Her mouth screwed up in an ugly scowl.

Standing up, she ran toward Becky and pointed.

Becky did the same.

“You!” they shouted together. “You took my roses!”



## Chapter Six

### OVERHEARD!

**I** did not!" Becky shouted.  
"Yes, you did!" Amanda hollered back. "You don't want anyone to beat you at the fair, so you've been picking my roses." Amanda's dirt-flecked fingers pointed right at Becky's face. "If you don't stop, I'm going to call the police. So there!"

Becky didn't think rose picking was a crime. Just in case, she would ask Mom when she got home. As a mystery writer, Mom often talked to the police for research.

If rose thefts were a crime, then Amanda Quint was guilty. "Maybe I'll call the police on *you*. I didn't pick your roses. Someone has been picking *mine*. I think it's you. I've got clues to prove it."

Opening the pink notebook, Becky held the drawing of the tire track right in front of Amanda's squinty blue eyes.

"What's that?" Amanda asked.

“A drawing of a clue left in my garden.” Becky pointed dramatically at Amanda’s green wheelbarrow. “It belongs to that.”

Amanda scowled, “You’re a nut.”

“I am not. I can prove you’re guilty. See this funny wedge cut out of the tire? I’m going to compare it to your wheel.”

“Go ahead, Miss Detective,” Amanda teased in her sneering voice. “It won’t prove a thing except that you’re no detective.”

Becky sat down beside the wheel and turned it carefully. The tire’s Vs had caught a few bits of gravel but other than that, nothing. No funny jagged cut.

Examining it, Becky could tell Amanda’s wheelbarrow tread was smaller than the drawing too.

Her face flaming, Becky sat back on the heels of her purple sneakers. “I guess I was wrong.”

“Told you so,” Amanda sneered. “Like I have to take any of your roses to make you lose? Why would I? Mine are going to beat yours anyway. Daddy bought my bushes all the way from a famous garden in France. I’m doing all the work, but any time I have a question, I can email Monsieur Dumont. He happens to be a master gardener. I’ll win this year fair and square.”

It was true. Becky’s heart sank to her waist.

Amanda might win. Hardier roses always did better at the flower show.

Amanda's dad had the money to buy the best. Even though some of Becky's roses were good stock, two of her other bushes, including Summer Snow, came from the supermarket.

*Might as well kiss that prize money good-bye right now.* Tears welled in Becky's eyes, but she blinked them away.

Realizing Amanda's blue eyes were glaring at her, Becky mumbled, "Sorry."

"You should be," Amanda grumbled. "You better stay away from my roses too."

Head hanging, Becky brushed the dirt off her knees and trudged back home. The sun beat down on top of her head.

Although her sun visor kept her face shaded, it flamed with guilt. Trudging along, staring at her shoes and the cracks in the sidewalk, she thought about Amanda's missing roses.

*I didn't take them either, Amanda.*

Becky had proved one thing. Whoever was taking the roses wasn't doing it for personal reasons. She, Amanda, and Mrs. Kopek all had flowers missing.

*Maybe I've proved something else too, she thought. Whoever the thief is, he's moving in a pattern.*

Now, if only she could figure out who and why.

*Solving a mystery is sure harder work than I thought. Maybe I should just give up.*



Back home, Becky headed inside for a cold glass of lemonade. She poured it from the rooster pitcher in the fridge and took it out into the backyard. Yvonne had stretched out in the hammock between the shade of two maple trees. The mystery book lay open on her lap.

Becky sat down in a chair that matched the hammock and put her lemonade on the glass tabletop. "Guess I'm no good at solving mysteries. My only clue is a loss. I don't have a suspect and I don't know what to do next."

"Tell me about it." Yvonne put down the book and sat up. "A real-life mystery is more exciting than reading about one."

"Not if it's happening to you." Becky sighed.

"In most of the books I've read," Yvonne said, "the detectives make a list of clues. Tell me what you know."

"Nothing."

"Sure, you do. Get your notebook and let me see."

Becky didn't want to, but she went back inside to the kitchen and got the notebook and a purple gel pen.

When she got back outside, Yvonne was ready. "Okay, let's start with the first thing you know. What's missing?"

"Yesterday, a Summer Snow rose. Today, a Sweet Surrender."

"And?" Yvonne encouraged.

"What?"

Yvonne's eyes twinkled. "This will never do, Detective Becky. You told me you've had roses missing for the last

two weeks. That should be your first clue. Why two weeks ago? Why not three weeks ago? Four?”

Becky’s eyes lit up. “That’s right. None of them were missing before then.”

Opening the notebook to a clean page, she scribbled:  
ROSES MISSING FOR TWO WEEKS.

“You’re sure about the date?” Yvonne asked.

“Yes, because the first rose vanished the day after Grandma Bauer’s birthday. Remember, we had the cookout for her? Grandma wanted to see how all my roses were doing. I showed her the Grandiflora Red that had almost opened. She asked me to email her a picture when it bloomed. When I went out the next day, it was snipped off.”

“So, that’s several clues. You know the date the first rose vanished. You know only roses were taken. Now, think about what else you know as a fact.”

Becky chewed on the pen and thought. “Well, I don’t think anyone on Robin Hood Way has lost roses. On Maid Marian Drive, though, Mrs. Kopek lost a couple. I haven’t talked to the grouchy man yet.”

“Draw a map of the houses and let’s see if there’s a pattern.”

Quickly, Becky drew the streets, including the grouchy man’s, Mrs. Kopek’s, and Amanda’s houses.

Yvonne bent her head over the page. “There you go.”

Eyes wide, Becky nodded. Even though she’d only

drawn the people that knew they'd lost roses, it made a perfect square. There was only one problem.

"What does it mean?"

"It might mean that whoever took the roses lives in that area," Yvonne suggested.

"Like Amanda." Becky tried not to sound glum. "She says she's missing roses too. I think she wants me to lose. That's what I think."

Discouraged about the whole competition, Becky told her sister about the fancy roses and the master gardener.

Yvonne listened, nodding once or twice in sympathy. "I don't know much about gardening, not like you, but I do know what Grandma always says."

She grinned. Making her voice sound gruff and stern like Grandma's, Yvonne said, "You can stick a fifty-dollar daisy in the ground but that doesn't mean it will grow any better than a weed. Growing takes sun, water, and love, not a fancy price tag."

In her own voice, Yvonne reminded Becky, "You give your roses all of those. I'll bet you have as much of a chance to win the garden show as Amanda does."

"I guess I forgot."

"Let's walk down to the Dairy Dugout and get an ice cream cone," Yvonne suggested with a smile. "My treat."

"Can we stop by the library too?"

"Sure."

*I won't let this rose thief spoil the rest of my summer.*

Becky would check out a few mystery books to see if she could get some tips on being a better detective.

At the corner, the girls passed a boy in blue overalls sitting on his tricycle. “Hi,” he said. “You have to buy a ticket to cross the street.”

“Hi, Carter,” Yvonne answered. “Are you selling the tickets?”

He nodded. “For five hundred dollars.”

“Oh, gee, that’s a lot. I only have two hundred,” Yvonne said, pretending to look worried.

“That’s how much it costs today,” the boy replied. “Two hundred dollars.”

Becky and Yvonne pulled imaginary money out of their pockets and gave it to Carter.

At the library, Becky first browsed through the new books while Yvonne read the cooking magazines. Mom wouldn’t allow her to buy them, but she said if Yvonne wanted to read them for free, it was up to her.

On the way to the detective books, Becky came upon a new book on growing annuals—flowers that only bloomed once. She’d scattered some zinnia seeds earlier that week and wanted to see if there were any tips.

Sitting at the table, she overheard a conversation between two teenaged boys in one of the study cubbies behind her.

“Hey, man, those things cost too much. Why should I buy ’em when there are lots you can take for free?”

“That’s stealing.” The second boy sounded quieter, like he wanted the other boy to listen. “If you take something that doesn’t belong to you, it’s not right.”

*He’s sure right*, Becky agreed.

Lost in her book, she caught only a tag end of the boy’s voice until a word jumped out.

Roses.

“Like, man, I only took five or six of the pink ones,” he grumbled. “Sasha wanted one of them corsage things and I didn’t have any money.”

“That’s stealing. You better offer to pay for them.”

The first boy argued back. “There’s lots more flowers. She won’t miss a few roses.”

Heart pounding, Becky clenched the book in her hands. Her breath came fast and shallow.

*Did I just hear the rose thief admit his crime? What should I do?*

They argued a bit more and then the calmer boy said, “If you don’t, I’ll tell Sasha. See if she likes you when she finds out you stole her birthday present.”

“Oh, man.”

Trembling, Becky laid down the book on zinnias and got up pretending to stretch her legs.

*I have to see what they look like.*

She walked around the tables until she could see the boys.

They looked like brothers.

They had the same short dark hair and deep blue eyes. One boy had a scowl on his face and slumped in a space shuttle T-shirt.

The second boy, Becky guessed, was the one with a conscience. He wore a clean white shirt advertising a golf club.

They stared up at her.

“Um . . . uh,” she said. “Do you know where they keep the books on flowers?”

The scowler deepened his look but the other boy gave her a nice smile and pointed toward the non-fiction section. “They’re over there.”

“Thanks.”

Becky scooted over to the gardening books and grabbed one on shrub roses. She pretended to read and got interested in the first paragraph. Looking up, she noticed the cubby.

It was empty.

Oh, no! Where had they gone?

Shoving the book back onto the shelf, she ran around to the front and saw them going out the glass doors of the library.

Becky wanted to tell Yvonne but didn’t dare take the time. *I can’t let them get away!*



## Chapter Seven

### A ROSE IS A ROSE

Becky hurried out of the library following the boys. Keeping them in sight, she dodged around people on the sidewalk, eyes focused on the black space shuttle T-shirt. There was one scary moment when the slumpy boy turned around.

Thinking fast, Becky squatted down to admire a baby chuckling in a stroller. “Hi, cutie,” she cooed to the baby, to his mother’s delight.

From the corner of her eye, she watched the boys change direction and cross a busy street.

Hurrying after them, Becky wondered why they hadn’t gone toward Robin Hood Meadow. They were walking instead to the business part of town. The boys vanished around Taco Pete’s.

Breathing hard, Becky ran after them, determined to keep them in sight. As her sneakered feet pounded around a corner, she came to a sudden stop.

*Huh?*

She blinked once. Twice. When she opened her eyes, the strange sight hadn't disappeared.

Dozens of green plastic tubs filled with roses spread out in a fragrant carpet before her. A whole rainbow of colors brightened the sidewalk.

Wow! It looked like a whole garden of roses.

*This must be a new shop. I've never seen it before.*

Pretending to browse, Becky walked slowly past the roses and glanced at the sign over a green-and-white striped awning. EMMA'S ROSE ROUNDUP.

The sign showed a picture of a cowgirl lassoing a bunch of roses. Smaller words said, FOR YOUR HONEY, FOR YOUR SWEETIE, FOR YOUR GAL, LASSO A DOZEN TODAY.

Through the store's glass front window, Becky saw the boys from the library talking to a big, grandmotherly woman wearing a green apron. The woman's face turned bright red.

She waved pudgy hands at something the boy in the space shuttle T- shirt said. While he hung his head, the woman hollered.

Becky couldn't tell what she said, but the glass in the window seemed to rattle. Unsure about what to do next, she walked past the store.

Could the boy have been stealing roses to sell? If he had stolen all the roses in those tubs, he must be robbing from everyone in Robin Hood Meadow that grew roses.

But that didn't make sense, or did it?



Becky turned around and walked back toward the sweet-scented roses. Trying not to look suspicious, she counted the blossoms in one tub. Twenty-four.

*That sure is an awful lot of roses.*

Chewing a corner of her lip, Becky stood and thought hard. *How can I tell if any of these are my roses?*

They all looked the same.

Lost in thought, she didn't notice the nicer boy had come out until he asked, "Hi. Did you find your book on flowers?"

"Um, yes, thank you."

"Can I help you?" He'd changed into a dark-green work apron with a logo in brown lasso letters that read, *Emma's Rose Roundup*. "Do you want to buy some roses?"

"Huh? No, I grow my own."

He winked. "Smart girl, especially with the prices so high."

"Um . . ." Becky shook her head over sounding so dumb. Taking a deep breath, she pointed toward the boy inside. "That boy doesn't look very happy. I heard him getting yelled at."

"He deserved it. This is my aunt's shop. We work for her during the summer. He did something he shouldn't have and now he's going to lose a week's pay. We have to tell my aunt when we take roses so she can take it out of our earnings. My brother forgot the rules."

*There goes my great clue.* She had caught a rose thief, but not the right one.

"I'm sorry." Becky did feel sorry for the scruffy boy.

Just then, the scruffy boy hurried out of the store, blinking like he might cry, grabbed a broom, and ducked back inside.

"It's not your fault," the neatly dressed boy said. "He knows better than to take stock without asking. Hey, hi, Yvonne. What are you doing here?"

Becky turned to see her older sister, red-faced and as flustered as the boy's aunt.

"Rebecca Elizabeth, what do you think you're doing?" Yvonne said while leaning over to take off a sandal. A pebble dropped out of the sandal, and she slipped it back on. "You didn't tell me you were leaving. Hi, Chet."

She stopped and talked in a sweeter voice. "Looking at the roses?" Yvonne asked Becky, but Becky couldn't begin to explain with Chet staring at her.

Yvonne laughed with a funny, half-angry snort.

"That's my sister, crazy about flowers. I turned around at the library and she'd vanished."

"Maybe she should work for us," Chet said.

For some reason, Yvonne thought that was the funniest idea in the world. She got all giggly. With her voice high and squeaky, she blushed at everything Chet said. The two of them carried on a dumb conversation filled with lots of silly looks.

It took Becky a minute to realize that Yvonne liked him.

*Good thing she likes Chet instead of the boy who takes roses.* They might have a problem with a rose thief in the family.

“Chet!” his aunt called from inside the store. “Start taking the thorns off those roses.”

“Guess I’d better hustle,” he said in a disappointed voice. With a glance over his shoulder, he handed Yvonne a pale pink rose. “I’ll tell Auntie to take it off my pay. A rose for a rose.”

Yvonne’s cheeks turned pink.

*I’m gonna be sick.* Becky groaned.

“Bye, Chet,” Yvonne said as they waved good-bye and walked toward the Dairy Dugout.

With a dreamy look on her face, she lifted the rose to her nose and sniffed.

“Who is he?”

“Chet Andrews. I worked with him at the fair last year.” Yvonne twirled the rose in her hands, not seeming to notice the thorns.

Becky rolled her eyes, but Yvonne didn’t notice. Looking at her sister with a critical eye, Becky had to admit she was pretty enough. Dark eyes with long, curly lashes. Shoulder length dark hair that she kept brushed to silky perfection. A cute smile and a fun personality.

Maybe Chet did like her.

Becky thought about that as they walked along. He liked roses anyway. Guess he'd make a good boyfriend for Yvonne.

After they'd each ordered a Dairy Dugout special, the sisters sat at a wrought iron table under a red umbrella. The special was a vanilla cone with chocolate sprinkles and a cherry on top.

Becky licked the drips of creamy vanilla before she spoke. "I thought for sure I'd discovered a clue when I overheard those boys. They sounded so guilty."

"What happened? One minute I was reading a great article and the next I noticed you leaving. I had to run to catch up to you. What were you doing with Chet?"

Becky explained about eavesdropping on Chet and his brother. Licking the last of the ice cream off her fingers, she said, "I was sure I'd caught the thief."

"That was just a red herring," Yvonne said.

They dropped their napkins in the wastebasket shaped like a giant cone and started for home.

"I think it's Amanda." Becky scowled, kicking rocks with her purple sneakers. "She doesn't want me to win."

"Why?"

"Don't know." Becky shrugged. "None of the other junior gardeners like her. She brags about how much her plants cost. Or how her dad knows this master gardener that gives her some secret growing tips."

"Hmm, braggy people can be hard to take."

"I know. We try to be her friend, but she's always so—so obnoxious. I bet she's picking my roses so that I'll give up and not enter the fair."

Yvonne didn't answer until they turned into their driveway.

Then she said in a slow, thoughtful way, "Maybe Amanda would like to be friends but doesn't know how. Sometimes people that always show off do it because they're afraid others won't like them."

"Ha! Amanda is too mean to be afraid of anybody."

"You never know. People show their fear in funny ways sometimes. You did say she lost roses too."

Becky scowled. "That's what she said."

"Maybe it's true. Why not give her the benefit of the doubt? Go see her and ask if she wants to help you solve the mystery. Maybe she's as worried about it as you are."

"No way! I'm not talking to her again."

All through supper and cleaning up, Becky thought about what Yvonne had said. Could it be true that Amanda might want to be friends?

*No, I'll solve the mystery alone.*

She was sure it was Amanda, anyway. *Except, what if it's someone else?*

What if Amanda really did lose roses?

Becky went to bed and opened a new book but she couldn't read. Troubled thoughts about Amanda took her mind a hundred miles from chapter one.

“Night, Becky.” Mom peeked around the door. “Don’t read too late.”

“Mom?”

“Yup?”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

Mom came in and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Pulling her feet out of the way, Becky leaned against the headboard and put her arms around the knees of her pansy PJs. “When your detective solves a mystery, what does she do when she runs out of clues?”

“Well . . .” Mom gave her a sheepish look. “Sometimes I cheat a little. A writer has to in a book because there always have to be some clues. Why?”

“I think I’ve run out of clues in my rose mystery. I can’t think of anything else to try.”

“Then let’s brainstorm.” Mom winked. “That’s writer talk for let’s see what we can do with what we have. Show me your clues and I’ll see if I get an idea.”

Becky got up and pulled her notebook out of the pocket of the purple sundress.

Mom asked questions and read the notes. Becky told her about the clues, the boys at Emma’s Rose Roundup, and her thoughts on suspects.

“So, you didn’t find anyone suspicious. Your only clue is the tread pattern, which you believe is a wheelbarrow. You found out roses are missing from Maid Marian Drive

but not down Robin Hood Way? That would indicate the perpetrator.” Mom winked again. “That’s the person who committed the crime.”

“Oh.”

“It means the person either came or went from that direction.”

“That’s right.” Becky sat up, eyes wide. Excitement bubbled inside like a fountain on spray. “So, maybe it’s someone that lives in that direction.”

“Could be. Or it could be someone who wants you to think that.”

“Huh?”

“In mysteries, it’s called a red herring. That’s a false clue that takes your attention off the real mystery.”

Becky sighed. “Like the boys from the library?”

“Yes. Or like someone coming from Robin Hood Way and only taking roses on Maid Marian.”

No wonder it was so hard to write mysteries. They were like compost piles—too many layers.

Disappointed, Becky grumbled, “So I’m back to where I was the other day. All I know is that someone is taking my roses.”

Mom shook her head. “Actually, you know more than that. You have several clues. You just need to figure out how to put them all together. Scoot under the covers and get some sleep. Let your brain work on it.”

Becky slid between the cool sheets, watching as Mom

turned out the light and pulled the door almost shut.

Leaning up on one elbow, she asked, “Mom? Yvonne thinks I should work with Amanda to solve the mystery.”

“What do you think?” Mom asked.

“I don’t know. Amanda isn’t very friendly.”

“Maybe she’s waiting for you to make the first move. Night.” Mom turned with her hand on the doorknob.

“Night, Mom.”

*Should I or shouldn’t I?*

Becky went to sleep with that troubling question on her mind. In her dreams, Chet offered Yvonne a giant ice cream cone and they all ended up trapped in a dump truck of mulch.

Frightened awake, Becky sat up. Her heart hammered like a woodpecker in her chest. The scent of rain and fresh-washed mulch came through the open window. It was probably the reason she’d dreamed about the dump truck.

Lying back down, Becky tried to still her mind.

*I wish someone could tell me what to do because I don’t have a clue.*

Just in case the scary dream came back, she reached over and switched on the night-light shaped like an angel.

Not that she needed it or anything. Just in case . . .





## Chapter Eight

### ANOTHER WEED IN THE GARDEN

**S**hould I? Shouldn't I?

Sitting on her bed, Becky sorted a rainbow of hair scrunchies into two piles. One for *should*, and one for *shouldn't*. Dropping the last purple loop on the *should* pile, she sighed.

*Guess I'm going to ask Amanda for help.*

Yippee.

Becky tiptoed into Mom's office and wrote a note on the scratch pad she kept by the computer:

*Going to Amanda's. Maybe we can solve the mystery together.*

Mom usually stared at notes and nodded or frowned. This time a smile twinkled in her brown eyes, and she said, "I think you'll be happy you did, Becky."

"Hope so. The fair's in a few weeks. I have to catch the thief before then or I might not have any roses to enter. I'm still not sure Amanda's not the thief though. She wants to win as much as me."

“Sometimes, if you go in a direction you don’t plan, good things happen.”

“Is that one of Maggie O’Malley’s sayings?” Becky asked.

Known for her witty sayings, Maggie often solved mysteries by jumbling quotations.

Mom winked. “Nope. I read it in the *Thought for Today*.”



Becky walked slowly toward Amanda’s house. No matter what Mom and Yvonne said, she couldn’t see Amanda wanting to help. She never wanted to cooperate, even when they had Homeschool Days.

An uncomfortable thought popped into Becky’s mind. *Maybe the reason Amanda is so hard to get along with is because nobody ever wants to be her partner.*

It would sure make Becky unhappy if she always got picked last for games or teams. *Why is doing the right thing so hard for regular people?*

After ringing the doorbell and waiting, Becky jumped off the front step. *I’ll look around back. Amanda might be in the garden.*

*That’s where I should be too.* Weeding and watering her roses instead of trying to talk to Amanda.

*I know she won’t help.*

No one appeared to be in the backyard either.

After a fast glance toward the house, Becky checked the wheelbarrow tire again. Just like before, there was no jagged piece missing.

Too bad. Amanda made such a good suspect. Turning to leave, Becky noticed a bent rose dangling from a stem. She reached over to see if it could be straightened.

Such a shame, a beautiful shade of red too. It looked like someone had started to snap it off.

The rose thief?

“Ah-ha!” A shriek startled her. “I caught you.”

Amanda ran from the tool shed with a fierce expression on her face. In one hand, she waved a hoe like a weapon.

“You’re the one who’s been picking my roses. Caught you in the act. Thought you could fool me playing detective.”

Startled, Becky flushed crimson and stuttered, “I-I didn’t. I came to talk to you. When I saw this rose dangling, I tried to straighten it up. Honest.”

“Liar! You tried to pick it. Don’t try to deny it. You don’t want me to enter the fair because you want to win. admit it.”

“Yes, I want to win, but—”

“Cheater!”

There had to be a way to explain. This was all wrong. “I want to win but not by taking your roses. I came here so we could work together.”

Amanda’s mean face squinted, making her look ugly.

“A likely story. You came here to pick another rose. Why? Wasn’t the one you got this morning enough?”

“You lost another rose this morning?” Becky asked, surprised to realize she’d been so worried about talking to Amanda that she hadn’t even looked at her own rose garden this morning.

“Like you don’t know.” Amanda sneered. “Well, Miss Know-it-all, you’re in trouble now. I’m going to talk to Mrs. Franklin and tell her what a cheater you are. What do you think about that?”

“Amanda,” Becky begged, almost near tears. “Please don’t do that.”

Going to the garden club president was a serious matter. Hadn’t Grandma told her plenty of times what happened when a gardener got written up for breaking a rule?

It was the worst thing that could happen. It meant automatic disqualification from competitions for a year—a whole year.

“Please, don’t do that,” Becky begged again. “I didn’t take your roses. Honest. You’ve got to believe me.”

“Why?” Amanda asked. “You didn’t believe me. You came here with your drawings to check my wheelbarrow. Why should I believe you?”

Becky’s heart clenched. “I don’t know.”

Now that the situation had changed, Becky didn’t feel good at all to be accused.

Now she knew how Amanda felt.

“Get out of my garden and stay out.”

A warm flush spread up Becky’s neck and across her face. She turned to leave in disgrace then stopped. Not wanting to go with all those bad feelings churning inside, she looked at Amanda’s scowling face.

“About your rose. I didn’t try to break it off, but I know a way to fix it so it will keep blooming. You make a splint with a toothpick and scotch tape. That way you don’t lose the flower. Well . . . um . . . bye.”

Amanda glared after her, hands gripped around the hoe’s handle.

Hot tears pricked Becky’s eyes as she made her way home. Ashamed of herself, she spent the rest of the afternoon working on her roses. Weeding, mulching, deadheading—picking off the old roses so new roses could form—and watering. Even the discovery of another wheel tread didn’t cheer her up.

*Who cares about clues?*

Becky realized that she was no closer to solving the mystery than she had been on the first day. And now she had to worry about Amanda going to the president of the garden club. Maybe Becky wouldn’t be entering any competitions this year. Then how would she earn the rest of the money she needed for her grandmother’s present?

*I tried to be nice to Amanda but she’s still mean.*

*What am I going to do now?*



## Chapter Nine

### PETALS FROM A FRIEND

**Y**oo-hoo, Becky,” Mrs. M. called from the yard next door. “Could you please help me for a few minutes?”

“Sure.”

*Anything to get away from my guilty thoughts.*

Mrs. M. held the gate open and motioned Becky into the backyard.

“I want to try out this new gourd design and I can’t tie the rope. Let me show you.” Blushing modestly, the white-haired woman asked, “Do you like it?”

“Cool,” was Becky’s first word after spotting the design. “I love it.”

Gourds had been strung along a length of white clothesline. Each had been painted like a house or shop, so the collection looked like a hanging village. There was a gourd church, a gourd school, a gourd bank, bakery, library, and lots of little gourd cottages. Best of all, they’d been hollowed out to make birdhouses. A wooden perch under each hole welcomed a bird to move inside.

Becky held one end of the line up while Mrs. M. tied it to her fence. Then Becky helped her tie the other end to the patio-awning's post.

The gourds swayed in a breeze like a miniature town.

"This is my entry for the fair this year." Mrs. M. said with a satisfied smile on her wrinkle-crinkled face.

"You'll win the sweepstakes ribbon," Becky predicted. "You always do."

With a shrug and a frown, the older woman said, "I suppose it's because I'm the only one who does gourd designs. Most people don't bother with them these days, although the sweepstakes ribbons are nice. Come in for some lemonade."

She turned and motioned toward the door.

"That sounds yummy," Becky said. "It's hot out here."

Inside the cool kitchen, Becky took her usual chair by the window and looked around the pretty room. Mrs. M's kitchen had been decorated by students from the nearby college in sunny yellows and gleaming whites.

Ivy stencils ran across the ceiling with pink morning glories peeking out in unexpected places. The room felt soothing and safe, unlike Becky's scattered thoughts.

When the lemonade had been poured, Becky took a quick sip and put her glass down. Cupping the icy glass, it startled her when Mrs. M. asked, "How is your mystery solving coming along? Have you figured out who done it?"

“No. I figured out who messed it up, though.”

“Oh?”

“Me.”

Tears of remorse stung her eyes. Before she could stop them, one dripped past her nose. Ashamed, she tried to wipe it away with a sunny yellow napkin.

“Sometimes it helps to talk,” Mrs. M. said in her comforting voice.

Bet she was a wonderful second-grade teacher. “Well, I thought for sure that the person taking my roses was Amanda Quint.”

“Isn’t she the girl with blond ponytails who got disqualified last year?”

“Yes.”

Mrs. M. took a sip of her lemonade and questioned, “Is that why you thought she might be guilty?”

“No, I just—”

Face flaming with a guilty flush, Becky explained the whole story about the tread mark and thinking it belonged to Amanda.

Even though it was embarrassing, she poured out the blowout with Amanda today and ended with her worries about having Amanda tattle to Mrs. Franklin.

“So, she accused you just like you did her?” Mrs. M. gave her a pat on the shoulder. “It didn’t feel too good, I imagine.”

Becky shook her head.



She kept her eyes on a drip of moisture sliding down her striped glass. First, it went through the red ring, then the blue, and then the yellow stripe.

“You know, something like that happened to me when I was about your age,” Mrs. M. said. “There was a girl, Sadie Wilkins.

“Oh, my, I remember her to this day. She was such a brat and a tattletale. Although, what bothered me about her the most was the way she said my name. My first name is Arabella. For some reason, she thought that was the funniest thing in the world. She’d screech the first part like there were a hundred r’s, then say fella instead of bella. It just about drove me mad.”

In spite of her downcast spirits, Becky felt a giggle bubble up and spill out.

“It is funny now, but it wasn’t back then.”

“What happened?”

“It’s a long story but the upshot was we both liked this little boy. Funny, I can’t remember his name, but he had the most amazing talent. He could turn his ears inside out. Laugh if you want.”

Becky did.

“Valentine’s Day came along. I had my heart set on surprising Jimmy.” She snapped her fingers. “Yes, that was his name. I just remembered. Oh, the hours I spent in the dime store looking at the penny valentines until finally I found the perfect one.

"It had a monkey on the front and said, 'Your love makes a monkey out of me.' I thought that was just so funny, although it doesn't make sense, does it?" Mrs. M. laughed.

Becky had a hard time smothering her giggles.

"I made the mistake of telling Sadie," Mrs. M. said. "For some reason I had to wait to buy the valentine, and when I went back, it was gone. I was sure Sadie had bought it for Jimmy, especially when he got it on Valentine's Day. I'm ashamed to say this now, but I got mad on the playground and pulled Sadie's braids."

"What happened?"

"She got mad back and marched off to tell the teacher. I had to stand in the corner during the afternoon recess, which did nothing to cool off my temper. I spent the whole time planning how I'd get back at her.

"After school I marched up to Sadie and accused her of giving Jimmy the valentine. She insisted she hadn't. Then she hollered at me for buying a valentine for our teacher. Sadie said she told me weeks before that was the very card she planned to buy. I swore I hadn't done it on purpose. It was the only card that had HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY, TEACHER, on front."

"So, what happened?"

"Turned out, another girl had given Jimmy the monkey card. Well, I was so ashamed I cried. Then I ran straight into my teacher and told her the whole story."

“What did she say?” Becky sat up in her chair, anxious to hear the outcome.

Mrs. M. got a remembering smile on her wrinkled face. “Sister Francis was her name, the prettiest nun in the whole school we girls thought. We all longed to grow up and be as beautiful and holy as she was. Except Sadie, of course.” Mrs. M. gave a funny snort.

Becky couldn’t help it. She giggled again.

“Sister Francis listened to the whole story. She didn’t scold. She just began to tell me another story about St. Theresa and her little way of love.”

Uncomfortable, Becky guessed where this might lead.

“Sister told me about one time when Theresa and the other nuns were washing their handkerchiefs. One nun kept splashing dirty water in Theresa’s face and my, it made her angry. She figured out she’d get revenge by splashing this other nun the next time they washed hankies.”

“St. Theresa?”

“Yes, but she didn’t. Instead, Theresa decided that since Jesus had to endure so much pain and suffering for us, it was a little thing she could endure to suffer for Him. She would show her love by letting the other nun splash her all she wanted. Sister Francis didn’t tell me I had to apologize to Sadie. She wasn’t like that. But I knew I should. I’d accused her wrongly. So, I did.”

“Did you become friends?”

Mrs. M. laughed so hard that tears rolled down her cheeks. She had to wipe them away with a napkin. "No, we never did. She never apologized to me about our teacher's valentine, either. But none of it mattered because I knew I'd done the right thing."

"I guess this story is a teaching one?" Becky asked.

"Could be, if you decide what you want to do with it. You did accuse Amanda without proper evidence except for your suspicions."

"She accused me too," Becky reminded her, still angry over that encounter.

"True." Mrs. M. stood and picked up the lemonade pitcher and glasses. "But like Sister Francis always said, there has to be someone who makes the first move. Someone willing to make the sacrifice to apologize first. It seems to me you and Amanda could be a help to one another."

Becky snorted.

"You both have roses missing, and you both want to enter the fair. Besides, now you've got to worry about her reporting you to the garden club president. There's an old saying about catching more flies with honey than with vinegar. Seems to me if you are nice to Amanda, she might be nice in return."

Becky stood up and pushed in the chair. "Guess I'd better go home. Thank you for the lemonade."

"You're welcome."

She didn't say she planned to apologize to Amanda, and Mrs. M. didn't ask. She was a cool grown-up that way. Not like some people, who told you exactly what to do. She gave you choices and pointed out what was good or bad about each one.

Becky didn't know if she liked that or not, but it sure made a person think harder.

On the way into her house, she pulled the sprinkler back to hit her tomato plants.

"Becky," Yvonne called from the back porch, "time to set the table."

"Coming."

Becky stood a minute watching the water drip off her plants and wondered what to do.

Why was it so hard to decide?

*What if I apologize to Amanda and she threatens to report me to the garden club anyway?*

Was taking a risk worth it? Do she want to chance making Amanda madder?

In her heart, Becky knew what a good person would do. She'd march right up to Amanda and apologize for accusing her.

*Can I?*



## Chapter Ten

### A ROSE WITHOUT A THORN

**t**he next morning, Becky dressed in a pale purple top and a pleated pair of white skorts—half shorts, half skirt. She wanted to look good when she talked to Amanda.

During the night as she tossed and turned on the cool sheets, Becky realized it hadn't been right to accuse Amanda when she didn't have any proof.

Like Mrs. M. said, someone had to make the first move. *Guess it's me.*

It could have been the Claxtons who'd knocked the roses off with Rodney's golf club. Or maybe one of Yvonne's friends helped themselves to a blossom or two. It wouldn't be the first time.

*But who stole all the other roses?* a pesky voice asked in her mind.

Becky ate breakfast without tasting a bite of granola or the banana. She finished the last sip of orange juice, stood up, and stretched.

"I'll be back later."

"Where are you going?" Yvonne asked as she loaded the dishwasher.

"I owe Amanda an apology." Becky sighed and took her bowl to the sink. "Just because I think she took the roses so she'd win the competition doesn't mean she did."

"Hope it goes well."

"Thanks."

Becky went next door to see if Mrs. M. might give her some words of encouragement, but she found the gate locked.

Maybe today was the day she helped people at the senior center make gourd crafts.

For a minute, Becky stopped in her own yard to admire her roses and say a quick prayer.

Scuffing along, Becky scraped her purple flip-flops along the sidewalk. Halfway to Amanda's house, she almost turned around.

Squaring her shoulders, Becky forced herself to keep going. No one answered the front door, so she walked to the backyard. Coming into the garden, she hollered as loud as she could, "Amanda!"

No way did she want a repeat of her last visit to this yard.

Amanda came from the garden shed with a small, green spade in her hand. "Oh, it's you."

After one scared look, her blue eyes studied the

spade's handle. Worry lines crossed her forehead as she stared hard at a tiny crack in the wooden handle. "What do you want?"

"I came to say I'm sorry. It was wrong to accuse you of taking my roses. Guess I wanted to find out who was doing it so bad that I blamed you."

Becky cleared her throat and tried not to look right at Amanda's frowning face. Studying an ant crawling along the purple strap of her flip-flop, she shared her special dream.

"Winning the competition means a lot to me. This year is my grandma's anniversary—fifty years of gardening. I want to do something special for her. I've been saving my money to buy a fountain for the past two years. If I win, I'll have enough. But I want to win honestly. I'd never take your roses to knock you out of the competition."

Amanda scuffed the tip of her tennis shoe along the flagstone patio. A crimson flush flamed across her cheeks as she twisted the spade in her hands.

"I guess maybe I shouldn't have accused you, either. It just makes me so mad that someone is taking my roses. What if they steal the ones I need to enter in the fair?"

As if confessing a secret of her own, Amanda's voice got low.

"I want to win too, but not for the money. I thought if I won, then people might like me better. Maybe I could



buy something that the whole homeschool group could use like a tent so we could camp out in the backyard. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"That would be cool. But . . ." Becky was unsure if she should say anything else. What if Amanda got angry all over again and ordered her out of the yard?

Taking a deep breath, she plunged ahead. "You don't have to buy things to make people like you. All you have to do is be friendly."

*And stop bragging so much*, Becky thought but didn't say.

Amanda hung her head and blinked away tears. "It's easy for you. Everybody likes you."

"Not everybody," Becky said. Even though she felt sorry for Amanda, she didn't know what else to say to make things right. "I guess I'd better go now. Maybe more clues will show up, and we'll find out who's taking both our roses. Bye."

"Wait! I mean, do you have to go?"

It was the first time Amanda had acted like she wanted to be friends.

Becky grinned. "I can stay awhile."

A few minutes of awkward silence went by before Amanda said, "I tried your idea, the one with the toothpick and the tape. It worked."

Becky smiled until her jaws ached. "Sam at the garden center told me how to do that. He said it helps to sell the

plants if they don't get the giant blooms knocked off."

Amanda looked up and a timid smile crossed her face.

Was she scared? Becky couldn't be sure. Could Yvonne be right? Maybe Amanda was afraid all the time and it was hard for her to make friends.

"You want a Popsicle?" Amanda asked. "It's sure hot enough for one."

"Okay."

Becky had never been inside Amanda's house. The kitchen had to be as large as Becky's whole house. Gleaming white appliances were spaced around a white, marble-tile floor.

She couldn't help comparing it with her own yellow, rooster-filled kitchen. So much white made everything look cold, like an ice castle.

*Brrr. It's even cold enough to make ice cubes.*

With the air conditioning on, Becky's flip-flops were little protection against the icy tiles. Shivering in her thin purple top and skort, Becky looked around at the copper pots on top of a giant stove.

A yummy smell of tomato sauce made her tummy rumble.

Standing beside the sink, a thin-faced woman in a blue uniform turned to glare at them. In one hand, she held a vegetable peeler and in the other a carrot stick. The woman's lips were set in a straight line.

Becky trembled under the look, but it didn't bother

Amanda. "We're just getting Popsicles, Mrs. Bean."

"Don't make a mess," the woman's voice came out harsh and rusty, like she didn't talk enough to oil her words.

She glared the whole time Amanda opened the giant refrigerator and shoved frozen vegetables and pizzas out of the way.

There were five different kinds of Popsicles, almost like a grocery store. The expensive choices, like pudding pops and striped firecrackers that Becky's mom wouldn't buy.

"Take whatever kind you'd like," Amanda said.

Nervous with Mrs. Bean watching her every move, Becky pointed to the box in front with red, white, and blue firecracker pops.

"I'll have one too." Amanda got the treats and led the way back outside to the patio.

"Is that your mom? Or your stepmom?" Becky asked once they'd settled on white wrought-iron chairs with cushions so deep that Becky sank a mile into the pink and white flowered fabric.

"No." Amanda laughed right before she popped the Popsicle into her mouth. Her answer came out all slurpy as she ate and talked. "That's our cook. She's kind of mean. She always acts like she owns the kitchen. Mom says not to ant—something her or she'll leave, and good help is hard to find."

Becky licked her Popsicle trying to figure out the ant—word. “Antagonize?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. I forgot that you always win the homeschool spelling bees.”

Becky shrugged, not wanting to admit she enjoyed word games and puzzles, any subject except math. Licking up the drips from the Popsicle, squirmy ribbons of guilt twirled in her stomach. She’d never really gotten to know Amanda.

Ever since Amanda’s family had moved to Robin Hood Meadow, the other girl had been so . . . well, so . . . antagonistic. Then once Amanda started entering flower shows, she became the competition.

*Maybe I should have gotten to know her better a long time ago.* Becky didn’t know much about her at all except that her family was rich and Amanda grew roses. *Guess if I’d practiced being nicer, things would have been better.*

“What’s your favorite subject?”

“Science.” Amanda’s blue eyes lit up. She sat forward, eager to talk. “I read this cool book on Marie Curie once and I always wished I could do something important for the world like she did. I love books on inventors and stuff. It would be so neat to invent new plants like Luther Burbank.”

Happy to find they had something in common, Becky licked the blue drips sliding down her fingers. “I like reading about him too. Guess he’s probably one of the

most famous gardeners in the world. What else do you like to read?"

It turned out that Amanda had read most of the same books Becky had. To her surprise, Amanda also admitted to loving Mom's detective, Maggie O'Malley.

They finished the Popsicles and talked, discovering more things they liked—swimming, growing vegetables, the colors of purple and green, drawing flowers and riding bikes, hamburgers with mustard instead of ketchup, strawberry ice cream, and the way the air smelled after a storm.

Looking at each other, they smiled.

"Yum, my roses smell so good too. I love how they make me feel happy inside, all sparkly and dancy." Amanda nodded toward her garden.

The sweet fragrance hung heavy on the air. Yellow and black butterflies hovered over the purple butterfly bush near the fence. Wrapping her arms around the bony knees of her pink Capris, she asked, "Who do you think is taking our roses if it's not us?"

Becky frowned. "I don't know."

The good mood she'd had while getting to know Amanda wilted like a dying tomato plant.

"We better find out soon. It's not long until the fair."



## Chapter Eleven

### THE DECISION

Who do you think is taking our roses?" Becky asked.

Blushing, Amanda dropped her Popsicle stick on the glass-topped table. "Well, at first I thought it was you. Then I tried to think of any of the other kids who might be competition. There are those 4-H kids in the Green Rake Club, but they don't live near here. Besides us, there are only two junior gardeners who live around here."

"That's right." A wave of excitement zinged through Becky's veins. "Janice Trenton lives over on Friar Tuck. Plus, she got disqualified once for entering a rose she'd bought the week before."

A very big no-no in gardening contests, Becky knew. The contestants had to have grown a flower or vegetable for three months to qualify.

Could Janice be taking roses to keep someone from beating her?

Amanda shook her head.

“It’s not Janice. I talked to her last week. She broke her ankle at gymnastics. The only walking she does is with crutches. Her sister is watering Janice’s roses, so she can’t enter because she’s not taking care of them.”

Another one of the strict rules of the junior gardening world. Contestants had to care for their gardens ninety percent of the time. Amanda had found that out the hard way last year, but Becky was too polite to mention it.

“What about Peter Wimple?” Amanda asked. “He lives on Robin Hood Way, doesn’t he?”

Becky rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen Peter’s roses. We don’t have to worry about him being competition.”

“That bad?”

“He’s probably killed his roses by now,” Becky said. “Peter has to be the worst gardener in the world.”

Amanda’s eyes got wide. “Maybe he’s taking our roses because he can’t grow his own. He plans to knock us out of the competition so he can win. If his roses are the only ones left—”

“I don’t think so.” Becky shook her head. “Peter might want to win, but he’s honest. I’ve known him ever since we moved here. We can cross Peter off our list.”

Amanda sighed. “Well, if Janice and Peter are out, I can’t think of anyone else. Can you?”

Becky pulled the pink detective notebook out of her back pocket. Spreading it open on the table, she pushed it at Amanda. “Here.”

“What’s this?”

“A notebook where I wrote down clues.”

Becky squirmed in the wrought iron chair as she glanced at the first page. Across the top she’d written:

**SUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS**

Then, Amanda Quint.

Amanda glanced up. Her eyes narrowed for a minute as if she might be mad. Taking a deep breath, she blew air through her lips and flipped through the rest of the pages. “So, this is the only real clue you have? The tire marks?”

“Yes.”

“That’s why you thought it was my wheelbarrow.”

“I guess it could have been anybody’s,” Becky said.

“Could have been a bike too.”

“It’s too wide.”

Amanda pointed at the tread. “Not for one of those big three-wheeler bikes. There are lots of senior citizens that live in the neighborhood. I know at least four who ride those.”

“But why would an older person steal roses? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Sure it does.” Amanda hopped up and started to pace around the patio. “Lots of them are on fixed incomes. My mom told me. They don’t have money for extras.”

Acting as if she was too embarrassed to mention it, Amanda lowered her eyes.



“Mom makes me take bouquets to that nursing home past Friar Tuck Lane every week. She says it’s good citizenship and will look good on a college resume. Things like that are important to her. I like how my flowers cheer people up.”

Becky smiled, liking Amanda a little more.

Maybe they *could* be friends.

“But that’s not important,” Amanda said.

Opening her mouth to disagree, Becky didn’t get to say a word.

Amanda kept talking. Her eyes sparkled and her blonde ponytails bounced. “What if someone who likes flowers takes them because they can’t buy them? Your garden is right near the sidewalk. Anybody could ride up on a bike, reach right over, and snip a rose.

“It wouldn’t be hard for anyone to get to my garden. It’s in the backyard, but the driveway comes right along beside it. That has to be the answer. A senior citizen who wants roses to brighten their days. They’re poor so they can’t buy any flowers.”

Caught up in Amanda’s happiness over solving the case, Becky sat up and took another look at the clue in her notebook. Could this be the answer?

“So, all we have to do is check out all the bikes and find one with a nick out of a tire. Mystery solved.”

With a grunt, Amanda stopped and dropped back into her chair. “Listen to us,” she said. “How many people

will let us look at their bike tires? Especially when we accuse them of taking roses. It's impossible. Just like it was before. We're never going to find out who's doing it."

Becky's own excitement fizzled like a dead sparkler on the Fourth of July. "Yeah."

"This is a bummer. The first year my roses have a chance to win, and I can't protect them," Amanda grumbled. "I asked Dad if we could get a better fence around my garden. Like electric or some of that barbed wire stuff. He said no. Too dangerous."

Becky gulped. She agreed with Mr. Quint.

"Wish we could catch that old thief. If he takes the rose I plan to enter in the county fair, I might as well quit right now." Amanda slumped.

"Don't do that. There might be a way."

"How?"

"Why don't we try to catch the thief in the act?" Becky suggested.

Amanda rolled her eyes. "That won't work. We never know when the snatcher strikes."

"Yes, we do." Flipping through the notebook, Becky came to the page where she had written:

#### **TIMELINE**

The timeline idea was Yvonne's suggestion.

"My roses are always gone before I get up. So, it has to be someone who gets up earlier than I do. You could even be right about the senior citizen. Grandma Bauer

gets up at four every morning.”

Amanda did not look convinced. “How do you know the person doesn’t steal the roses at night?”

Shaking her head, Becky gave the question some thought. Slowly, she tried to figure it out as she spoke.

“I don’t think so. The night before my Summer Snow rose vanished, I went outside at ten o’clock. Mrs. M’s cat got stuck in a tree. She asked my sister and me to help get Twinkles down. Then Mom let me stay up late and watch a movie. I turned our yard light on after that and I could see the garden real clear. Summer Snow was still there.”

“Maybe the person takes them later. Like in the dead of night.”

An eerie finger raced up Becky’s spine. Prickly chills blossomed on her arms.

Amanda’s words sounded spooky, and Becky almost decided to quit right then. What if it wasn’t a *person* taking the roses?

What if it was something else?

Shaking herself to chase away the scary thoughts, Becky said, “We won’t know until we try. If someone does come in the morning, maybe we can catch them.”

“How?”

“Like real detectives. We’ll have a stakeout and wait for them to come. Can you be at my house tomorrow morning around six A.M.?”

Amanda didn't look happy about the idea. She finally said in a reluctant voice, "I guess."

Then as if she might be looking for an excuse, she asked, "What will we do when we catch them? It might be dangerous."

That thought had crossed Becky's mind too, but she shoved it away. Maybe Mr. Claxton could chase the thief with Rodney's putter?

She said, "It's a chance we have to take. See you in the morning."



## Chapter Twelve

### THE STAKEOUT

**t**he alarm shattered Becky's dreams of a million red roses chasing her. She muffled the noisy clock with her pillow.

Sitting up, she yawned and stared out the window. In the peaceful glow of sunrise, the roses sparkled with drops of dew. Quietly, Becky dressed and let herself out of the house.

"It's about time," Amanda grumbled from the porch swing. "I've been waiting for hours."

She yawned so wide Becky could see the fillings in her teeth. "Did you see anyone yet?"

"No. Just a yellow cat sniffing along the petals. Should we wait here on the porch?"

"No. Let's hide under the snowball bushes. Nobody can see us, but we'll have a good view of the garden."

Becky led the way to the giant bushes filled with fragrant white flowers. When her family had first moved into the new house, she used to hide under the bushes

and spy on the neighbors.

*Bet Amanda would think that's silly.*

They crawled under the bushes and sat down on the dewy grass.

"Ick," Amanda complained. "I'm getting all wet and this is a new tennis skirt."

Becky didn't want to go back inside the house for something to sit on, but she wanted Amanda to stay. "Keep watching. I'll get some cushions."

Tiptoeing around the house, Becky grabbed cream-colored cushions from the backyard chairs. Dragging the lumpy squares, she hurried to the hideout and shoved them under the bush.

"Hey," Amanda hollered as snowball petals showered down on her blond ponytails.

"Quiet!"

Amanda grumbled but didn't say another word.

They sat under the bushes for a long time.

The sun rose higher. Dad came out of the house, opened the garage door, and left for his job.

Yawning, Yvonne came out to get the paper.

Mrs. M. met her at the end of the driveway, and they had a short conversation. *Boring.*

"No one is coming," Amanda said, scratching a sore on her knee. "I'm going home."

Becky didn't want to watch alone. Even with the bright sun, she didn't want to corner the thief alone.

“Please stay a little longer.”

Amanda agreed to stay. They watched the Claxtons come outside and begin Rodney’s golf practice.

“Do they do that every day?” Amanda asked. “That kid couldn’t hit a basketball with that club.”

“I know,” Becky agreed. “They think he’ll be a famous golfer or something.”

Amanda shook her head. “Guess you gotta dream big.”

They waited awhile longer. The Claxtons went inside. The neighborhood went still.

“I’m going home,” Amanda said. “Nobody’s coming. This was a dumb idea.”

“Wait! I hear a squeak. Someone’s coming.”

Peeking between the snowball bushes, Becky saw a little boy on a tricycle. He wore blue overalls with a blue-and white striped shirt. Dark blue sneakers with flashing red lights pumped hard on the pedals.

“Just a kid,” Amanda said.

“Oh, that’s just Carter, a kid from the neighborhood.” Becky sat back on her heels, disappointed.

Just Carter, a little boy. Not the thief.

“This time I’m leaving.”

“Okay,” Becky mumbled, blinking back tears.

*How am I going to stop the thief and protect my roses for the fair?*

Amanda started to crawl out from under the bushes.

Discouraged, Becky scrunched down and crawled out after her.

“Wait!” Amanda said, shoving Becky roughly back.

“Why?”

“Look!”

Becky peeked over Amanda’s shoulder. All she could see was the little boy sitting on his red tricycle. “So?”

“Watch.”

Becky watched Carter back the bike into the soft dirt at the side of her roses. He looked intently at the profusion of blooms for a moment then glanced to the left and to the right. Out of his overalls came a pair of kindergarten scissors.

Snip! Off with a Summer Snow.

He dropped the flower and scissors neatly into the basket on his handlebars and pedaled away.

“He took my rose,” Becky whispered. “Could he be the thief? Carter?”

“Let’s follow him.”

They scooted out from under the bushes and hurried after him. When he reached the corner, he looked around. The girls darted behind a tree.

Hiding, they waited while Carter turned the corner of Maid Marian and Robin Hood Way. Running after him, Becky grabbed Amanda and jerked her behind a mailbox on the corner.

“Look, he’s stopping at Mr. King’s house.”



During her search for clues, Becky hadn't stopped at Mr. King's house. He only had one rose bush in the middle of a cutting garden.

The girls peeked around the mailbox and watched Carter. He got off the bike and skipped over to the one rose.

Snip! Off went a Yellow Rambler.

Just like before, he put the rose in the basket, hopped on the tricycle's seat, and pedaled away.

"He's headed for my house," Amanda said. "Let's cut around the backyards and come up past the tool shed in my yard. We can catch him in the act."

They hurried around Mr. King's yard, skirting a kiddie pool and a plastic slide. Cutting through the yard behind Kings', they startled a teenaged girl weeding a patch of marigolds.

Amanda led the way through her gate and they hid behind the tool shed to get their breaths.

*Squeak. Squeak.*

Becky heard the tricycle announcing Carter's arrival.

He stopped beside Amanda's expensive Purple Heart rose, pulled out the pink scissors and—

"Stop, thief!" Amanda yelled.



## Chapter Thirteen

### CAUGHT!

Amanda jumped out and grabbed the tricycle's handlebars.

Becky grabbed her arm. "Don't scare him."

At Amanda's shout, Carter's blue eyes opened as wide as a zinnia. He dropped the scissors into a basket filled with roses. Before Amanda could stop him, he kicked her shin hard.

"Ouch!"

"Let me go!" Carter hollered in a shaky voice, clearly trying to be brave.

Eyes blazing, Amanda held tightly to the handlebars with one hand and rubbed her shin with the other.

"You've been stealing my roses. I should call the police."

"Amanda," Becky tried to shush her. "You're scaring him."

Carter's eyes filled with tears and dribbled down his cheeks. "I didn't steal noffin."

“Yes, you did.”

Becky grabbed Amanda’s arm, squeezed, and frowned at her. “Let me talk,” she said under her breath.

Smiling at the crying boy, Becky stooped down to his size and looked in the basket. Roses. *Lots* of roses.

“Those sure are pretty flowers. Are they for you?”

Carter eyed Becky with suspicion. One dirty hand swiped across his drippy nose. “For my mama.”

“Oh, your mama.” Becky kept her voice friendly. “I bet she likes flowers. My mom likes flowers.”

He nodded and almost smiled back.

“My mama is sick,” Carter said. “I take flowers to make her feel better. We ain’t got no flowers growing in our yard this year. Mama got sick and all her hair falled away. Grandma came to take care of me, but she can’t grow no flowers.”

Becky’s heart dropped to somewhere in her stomach.

Poor little kid. Didn’t most people who lost their hair have some kind of cancer? Feeling sorry for him, Becky could understand why he’d want his mom to feel better.

“Where do you live?” Amanda asked, shoving her nose in his face. “I’m taking you home and telling your mother what you’ve been doing. You’re *stealing* and you better not take any more of my flowers. I need them for the fair.”

Becky saw only the confused little boy. She pulled Amanda’s arm away from Carter.

“Didn’t you hear him?” she whispered. “His mom lost her hair. That means she must have some kind of cancer. It happens from the medicine.”

“Cancer? I didn’t know.” Amanda’s face went from red to redder. “That’s awful. But we can’t let him keep taking our flowers. We need those for the fair.”

“I know.”

“So, what can we do?”

“I’ve got an idea.” Becky whispered in Amanda’s ear.

At first, Amanda looked skeptical, then she gave a cautious nod. “It might work.”

They turned back to the little boy.

“My name is Becky, and this is Amanda. Your name is Carter, right?”

He nodded. “Are you mad? Are you gonna get me in trouble with my grandma?”

Becky smiled. “We aren’t mad, and we promise not to get you in trouble with your grandma. But you have to promise one thing.”

“What?”

“Next time you want a flower, you have to ask us before you pick one. We enter our roses in the fair. It’s really important because we win money and prizes.”

“I won a free ticket to the zoo once,” he said. A tiny smile crossed his lips. “My mama took me, and we ate cotton candy.”

Amanda rolled her eyes.

"That's nice," Becky said, giving Amanda a nudge to knock it off. "Bet you can understand how important it is for us to keep our roses. We can't win prizes if you pick the one we need. That wouldn't be good, would it?"

He shrugged.

"If you ask, you can have almost any flower you want," Amanda interrupted. "But you have to ask. No more snipping . . . or else."

"Okay." He shoved up the strap of his overalls.

A puzzled expression came into his eyes as he looked at Amanda's garden. "How did you know the flowers was gone? You got lots of other flowers. My grandma says people who got lots should share."

Becky understood how it might look to a little boy who didn't know any better.

All those roses. How could anybody miss one bloom?

"You'd better go on home and get those flowers in water," Amanda said gruffly. "Or they'll wilt."

"Goofy little kid," she grumbled to Becky as they watched him peddle his way down the street. He turned down Friar Tuck into the cul-de-sac. "Guess that solves the mystery. He'd better keep his bargain or I'm going straight to his grandma. Even if his mom is sick, he should ask for flowers. I'd be glad to give him roses or anything else."

"Amanda, I've got an idea." Becky said.

"What?"

Becky whispered her idea into Amanda's ear.

Thankfully, this time the other girl agreed right away.

"I'll ask Mom to find out if it's okay and meet you here early tomorrow morning," Becky said. "I can't wait to tell my family how we solved the case."

"Hey, maybe I'll go home and tell Mrs. Bean," Amanda agreed. "My dad's on a business trip to Paris, but I'll email him tonight."

"See you later."

"Bye."

The girls hurried in opposite directions, happy to spread the good news.

One mystery solved.

Now, there was only one mystery left. Who would win at the fair? *Me or Amanda?*

Becky couldn't take time to worry about that right now. She had to ask Mom and Grandma how someone could imitate a "shower of roses" with real flowers.



## Chapter Fourteen

### SHOWER OF ROSES

**A**fter her exciting announcement, the rest of the day dragged by. When Mrs. M. came home from her morning at the senior center, Becky went to tell her what had happened.

Mrs. M. wanted all the details, so Becky ended up staying to lunch. When she mentioned the surprise plan for Carter's mom, Mrs. M. jumped right in and wanted to be a part of it too.

"I'll take my new gourd designs. Plus, my sister gave me some nice big Rose of Sharon that I didn't want to use. You can take those. They have cheerful purple and white flowers."

"Thank you," Becky answered. "My family wants to help too. We just have to wait for Mom to get permission from Carter's grandma. Waiting is so hard."

"Keep busy. That will help pass the time."

Becky tried. She weeded and watered her roses. She helped Yvonne with chores and proofread a job for Mom.

Later, Amanda came by with the good news that her family wanted to help on the project too. “Dad said he’d buy some rosebushes. That way Carter can pick some of his own.”

“That’s great! I sure hope Carter’s grandma says yes.”

Finally, right before bed, Mom came in to give Becky the thumbs up.

“I spoke to Mrs. Clark, and she thinks it’s an excellent idea. Her daughter is getting well but she’s been too ill to plant a garden this year. Mrs. Clark thinks this will cheer her up. Her exact words were that you and Amanda are thoughtful, caring girls.”

Mom winked. “I agree. Also, she apologized for Carter taking your roses. She had no idea what he’d done. The little scamp told her that some nice ladies let him pick all he wanted. She said he started picking roses about two weeks ago when his mom came home from the hospital.”

Becky smiled and tapped her notebook. “I had all the clues, but it sure was hard to figure them out.”

“Mrs. Clark told me that Carter isn’t allowed to cross the street, so that’s why he only took roses in a square pattern of streets. He needed the sidewalks to ride his tricycle.”

Becky rolled her eyes.

It sure was easy when you knew the why.

“Anyway, you’re all set for Operation Instant Garden. Becky, I want to say how proud I am of you.”



“For solving the mystery?”

“For that, and for learning to get along with Amanda.”

“She’s not so bad once you get to know her.”

Mom leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Good night.”

“Night.”



Becky was up early the next day. She loaded her wheelbarrow with plants she’d divided from her garden. Yvonne came along to help carry the shovel and rake. Later in the morning, Mom would bring Mrs. M. and her gourds.

The girls met up with Amanda, who was eating a blueberry muffin.

“There’s more in the basket.” She pointed to a wicker basket tucked in her green wheelbarrow. “Mrs. Bean made them. I dug up some mums, and I had an extra rose that’s ready to bloom. Hadn’t gotten it planted yet,” Amanda mumbled when Becky saw the expensive price tag from Sam’s Garden Center.

“Dad is sending Sam over later with more roses and some annuals like petunias and stuff,” she finished.

“We’re going to have plenty of plants.” Becky smiled.

They hurried to Carter’s house, where his smiling grandmother let them in the back gate.

“Olivia will be at her doctor’s appointment for most

of the day,” she said. “She’s going to be so happy when she gets home. I’ve made some lemonade and iced tea. Help yourself. I can’t thank you enough. You’re angels, all of you.”

Quiet as elves, they went to work on a patch of garden that hadn’t seen a gardener’s hands since Carter’s mom got sick. They weeded, hoed, planted, and raked.

Mrs. M. arrived with Mom and the Claxtons. To his parents’ surprise, Rodney had a green thumb! He helped plant petunias and a creative border of baby’s breath.

“I wonder if we can sell the golf clubs,” Mr. Claxton said as he weeded an overgrown bed of mint. “We’ve got a budding gardener on our hands.”

Becky grinned at the pun and wiped a smudge of dirt from her cheek.

“Hey, Becky, can I help?” Peter Wimple popped up behind her, holding a flat of pink petunias. “Sam asked me to help him carry in these plants. He said a bunch of people are planting a garden for a sick lady.

“You know what a great gardener I am! I’m gonna win that grand prize in the white roses this year. You won’t be mad, will you?”

“No, Peter, I won’t be mad if you win.” It took a real effort not to mumble, *like you have any hope of winning*.

“Sure, you can help,” Becky told Peter. “Mrs. M. needs someone to dig a hole for the Rose of Sharon plants.”

Peter could dig a hole without hurting anything.

*I hope.*

Later, Becky was surprised to have Mrs. Franklin, the garden club president, come by to inspect the garden.

“A little bird told me something special was going on here,” Mrs. Franklin said, “I came to see for myself. The same little bird told me that you’d have an interesting story, Becky. Would you like to share? Why did you decide to plant a garden for Mrs. Clark?”

Becky wiped the sweat out of her eyes and pushed back her yellow sun visor. “It’s kind of a long story, but it all started when I found out someone had taken my Summer Snow.”

It took quite a while to tell the whole story, but Mrs. Franklin listened to every word. Before she left, she gave Becky a small plaster statue of St. Francis.

“My contribution to this lovely space,” she said. “I noticed your mother is taking lots of pictures. Good. We might use them for a garden club program one day.”

Becky wondered why anyone would be interested in pictures of them, but didn’t think about it for long.

“Becky? Where do you want Sam to put the lilac?” Amanda called.

“Coming!”

Many hours later, everyone tiptoed out the garden gate with silly grins on their faces. Becky couldn’t wait until Carter and his mama saw the surprise garden they’d planted.

It looked beautiful.

A job well done, as Grandma Bauer liked to say. Now, Carter could pick his own roses and he wouldn't bother Becky or Amanda anymore.

*Which reminds me, Becky thought. I need to hurry home and dust my roses for aphids. Would it be wrong to pray that I win?*



## Chapter Fifteen

### AND THE WINNER IS . . .

Fair day!

Becky had been up for hours checking her roses. To her relief, a storm in the night had turned into a pleasant drizzle. When the sun came up, she ran outside to see if the umbrellas over her roses had kept the blooms safe.

Raindrops glistened off the clown umbrella shielding Summer Snow and the pink poppy one over Yellow Sunset.

Yay! Both bushes were filled with a number of blooms good enough to enter in the fair.

Shaky with anticipation, Becky hurried back inside the house to dress. Days before, she'd chosen a green jumper with a pattern of farm scenes around the hem. She wore it with a bright yellow turtleneck sweater and a yellow band around her dark hair.

"Are you excited?" Mom asked.

"Terrified," Becky answered.

A million butterflies in her stomach kept her from enjoying the special omelets and sausages Mom cooked for breakfast.

"I want to win so *much*. But now that Amanda and me are friends, I hope she wins too. Is that dumb?"

"No." Mom shook her head. "It's nice. I'm glad you girls are getting along so well. You've worked hard all summer on your gardens and you both deserve to win."

"Only one person wins the grand prize," Becky said as she put down her fork and gave up eating. "I'd better go cut my roses."

*Only one person wins the grand prize.*

Becky walked to her garden with thoughts tumbling like zinnias blowing in the wind. Tossing her gardening shears from one hand to another, she worried.

*Only me or Amanda will win the big prize. I want so much for it to be me.*

But she wanted Amanda to win too. She'd never won anything before.

Even though Amanda didn't need the prize money, winning a ribbon would be a thrill. Becky thought of all the ribbons, plaques, and trophies in her own flower-decorated room.

She had plenty of ribbons and awards, but Amanda didn't. *I wish there was a way we could both win.*

Would it be wrong to ask God to let her and Amanda both be winners?

“Becky,” Yvonne called from the front porch. “Dad says to cut your roses and get ready to leave. We’re loading your vegetables in the van now.”

“Coming.”

Snapping out of her thoughts, Becky took her gardening shears and snipped the winning roses.

May the best rose win.



The cheerful noise of the fairground rushed out to meet Becky as Dad helped her out of the van near the garden show building.

Screams and laughter came from riders on the Ferris wheel and the little kids’ roller coaster. Somewhere, a pig squealed, followed by the bellow of a very unhappy cow.

Over it all an announcer shouted, “Bill Bishop, you are wanted at the dairy barn. Bill Bishop.”

Fair scents like cotton candy, the pig barn, and frying hamburgers mingled together. Near the garden exhibits, the sweet aromas of roses and the spicy tang of marigolds perfumed the air.

“All set?” Dad asked after he carried in the big tub of roses Becky had brought along. “I’ll take Yvonne to the quilt booth to work and come back later to see the judging.”

“Okay,” Becky answered.

Wiping her sweaty hands down the sides of the green

jumper, she looked around the big, echoing room filled with white, wooden tables.

Older ladies chatted and laughed as they filled empty bottles with water and placed different flowers in each one. Their roses looked good. Some looked even better than Summer Snow.

*What if I don't win at all?*

The thought was so scary that Becky almost grabbed up her tub of roses and ran.

*This is too hard. What makes me think that I have a chance?*

Becky took a deep breath. There was no need to be scared. She had done this before. Like Grandma Bauer always said, everyone had a chance to win.

Age didn't matter in a garden show.

With that cheery thought in mind, Becky stood up straight and marched over to the entry table. "Rebecca McGuffey," she told the white-haired lady in a pink dress. "I'm entering roses."

"McGuffey. Here you go. Put your tags on the bottles with your name tucked out of sight."

The lady went on to explain all of the rules, but Becky hardly listened. She'd been to enough competitions that she knew the routine.

Fill a bottle with water, select your flower, and put it inside. Tie the tags around the bottle's neck and put it on the table with the other entries.



Easy as growing marigolds.

"I am so scared," a voice whispered at Becky's elbow. "My toes are curled inside my shoes."

She turned to see Amanda clutching a yellow bucket with six roses in different colors.

Amanda's pale face looked around in confusion. "I don't know what to do. Maybe I don't want to enter after all."

Forgetting she'd had the same fears a few minutes earlier, Becky took Amanda's arm. "Don't be scared. I'll help you."



The rest of the morning sped by while Becky showed Amanda all the secrets of placing her entries on the tables. By the time they had their roses and Becky's other entries sitting in the right sections, it was almost time for the judging.

"Hey, look." Amanda pointed. "Is that Peter's entry? That pitiful thing?" Unfolding the entry tag, she checked the name and whispered, "It is his. Can you believe it? It's just a bud."

Becky gave Peter's white rosebud a critical glance. It wasn't even a rose at all. In the middle of all the open, heavenly scented roses, Peter's tight, barely opened bud showed just the tiniest hint of white petals.

"Poor Peter," Becky whispered back. "He's going to be

so disappointed when he doesn't win."

Amanda shrugged. "What do we do now?"

"We have to leave for a few hours while the judges score the entries," Becky explained. "Then we come back, and they announce the winners."

"I don't even care if I win now," Amanda said, shoving her limp ponytails out of her face. "I'm just glad it's over."

"Me too." Becky always had this same feeling after the entries were ready for the judging. "There's nothing left to do but wait."

"That's the hard part."

"Let's get a corndog and see the fair," Becky said. "It might make the time go faster."

With a final look at Summer Snow and Amanda's Gloriosa White sitting side by side under the tag WHITE ROSES, they raced out into the fair.

Amanda treated Becky to corn dogs and soda. Becky bought a dessert of cotton candy and fried waffles. They went to the horse show, watched a man demonstrate a waterless mop, and visited with Yvonne at the quilt booth.

A swift, stomach-lurching ride on the Octopus ride convinced both girls to wait awhile before trying that again. Faster than they thought possible, the announcer's voice echoed over the fairgrounds.

"Junior Garden Show winners announced in ten minutes. Hurry to the garden show building."

“I’m scared,” Amanda said again.

Becky’s stomach churned like a war between the corndog and a fried waffle.

“Me too. Let’s hurry.”

*I have to win. But I want Amanda to win too.*

*Please let my prayers be answered.*



## Chapter Sixteen

### A SPECIAL SURPRISE

**V**oices buzzed and excitement filled the air of the gray wooden building. Flowers and vegetables arranged on tables sat in orderly rows like a class at attention.

Becky had read somewhere that plants could hear and feel. *Wonder if the flowers are waiting to see who wins too?* Were they sorry if they didn't even get an Honorable Mention?

Near the front of the room, Mrs. Franklin stood at a podium talking to an older man with a bald head, two women in fancy flowered hats and silk dresses, and a younger man wearing jeans and a dark-green shirt with a red tie.

"Those are the judges," Becky whispered to Amanda as they made their way to the front of the crowd. "Let's find a seat."

Becky wasn't sure her trembling legs could stand up much longer.

"Girls, over here!" Mom pointed at two wooden chairs she'd saved with her purse and a box of salt-water taffy.

Becky and Amanda squeezed into the crowded row, stepping over feet and stored belongings, and sat down.

"The judges are about to start," Mom whispered. "I'll bet you're excited."

"I think I might throw up," Amanda said in Becky's ear. "This is scary. What if I don't win anything? My mom will think I'm a failure. Dad might think he wasted his money buying all those expensive plants for my garden."

Before Becky could answer, Mrs. Franklin stepped up to the wooden podium and tapped a microphone.

"Attention, please."

She waited for the murmurs and chair scraping to quiet down before she went on. With a pleasant smile, she looked out over the audience.

"Welcome junior gardeners, family, friends, and guests to the Fulcomb County Junior Garden Show. We're pleased with all the entries this year. You junior gardeners have really outdone yourself."

She paused then said, "Let's have a big hand for all of the young people here, who know life is never complete without a garden."

Everyone clapped except for Amanda. She clutched her stomach and groaned.

Mrs. Franklin's speech went on and on as Becky's legs stuck to the folding chair.

The air inside the building grew hotter and hotter. It seemed like forever until she began to announce the winners.

Marigolds. Asters. Flower arrangements.

Outside flower arrangements. Vegetable baskets.

It seemed like another hour until Mrs. Franklin got to the rose entries. "Now we come to the highlight of any garden show, the roses."

Becky reached out and grabbed Amanda's cold hand. Squeezing tight, she held her breath.

Amanda squeezed back.

*Please, please call our names.*

"As you all know, we judge roses by color. Roses in each color will win first, second, and third prizes. And this year we'll also be awarding a special grand prize to the overall best rose."

Becky had protected Summer Snow all summer long for just this moment.

*I have to win!* Grandma had always wanted a fountain, but she wouldn't buy one for herself.

Sam's had the most beautiful cascading fountain that they had ever seen. Every time they went to buy plants, Grandma stopped and sighed. "Wouldn't it look lovely in my perennial bed?"

The gift card from Summer Snow would make exactly the right amount.

*I have to win.*

Becky glanced at Amanda, who was staring straight ahead with hope in her eyes.

*Amanda has to win too.*

Yellow roses. Red roses.

The prizes in those categories mostly went to the younger kids.

Becky clapped until her hands hurt when Peter's red rose won an Honorable Mention.

At least he'd won something, poor Peter.

Orange roses. Purple roses.

"Amanda Quint, third place," Mrs. Franklin called.

"That's you!" Becky had to nudge the shocked girl to stand up. When Amanda froze in place, she gave her a shove to get her moving. "Go get your ribbon."

Slowly, dazed at the applause, Amanda went to the front and received a white ribbon. She came back to her seat, tears filling her eyes.

"It's my first ribbon. I can't believe I won."

Becky knew that feeling well. It's what Dad jokingly called the thrill of Victoria.

"Now, we come to the prizes for the white roses. This year's judges found it particularly hard to select a winner. Each entry was beautiful, well-formed, and fragrant.

"However, there were three roses that we found to be exceptional. To one of those roses, we will award first place, and I'll announce that winner in a moment. For second place, we have a tie."

Becky's heart sank into her stomach. "Second place in the white rose category for this year's Junior Garden Show goes to Amanda Quint and Becky McGuffey."

Amanda squealed. This time, she had to grab Becky and pull her out of the chair. As she passed by Mom, Becky tried not to notice her smile of sympathy.

Tears of disappointment watered Becky's eyes but she blinked hard to get rid of them. *I will not cry. I will not. Somehow, I'll get Grandma's fountain.*

Mrs. Franklin shook their hands and gave them each a red ribbon and a five-dollar gift certificate.

*Guess I should be thankful for having five dollars less to worry about.* But where would she ever get the rest?

"Thank you," Becky said, although her heart wasn't in it. On stiff legs, she clumped back to her chair and sat down.

The silk ribbon in her fingers mocked her.

*Only second place.*

"First prize," Mrs. Franklin announced, "goes to a truly singular white rose. This rose is so beautiful in its simplicity that the judges have also selected it as our best-of-show, grand-prize winner. I've asked one of our judges to show it to you."

A woman in a flowered hat came forward carrying a bottle with a white rose bud that had begun to open in soft, rippling folds. It wasn't fully opened like Summer Snow or Gloriosa White, but the audience gasped.



A beautiful flower!

"It can't be," Amanda whispered. "Becky, does that rose belong to who I think it belongs to?"

Becky couldn't answer. That rose sure looked prettier than it did a few hours ago.

"I'm proud to present this award to a young man who has come a long way as a competitor. The winner of first place in the white rose category, along with a first-prize ribbon, a gold plaque, and the one-hundred-dollar grand prize is Peter Wimple."

From somewhere in the back row, Peter whooped and sprinted toward the front of the hall. He grabbed the blue ribbon, the plaque, and the gift card from Mrs. Franklin's hands. He accidentally, stepped on her foot and bowed to the audience, which caused the lectern to tip and had to be rescued.

"Thank you, thank you!" he hollered.

Holding the ribbon above his head like an Olympic torch, Peter bounced down the aisle, stopping at the end of Becky's row.

"Thanks for helping me, Becky," he whispered. "I tried that secret formula you gave me. It worked. Told you my roses were awesome."

"You helped him *win*?" Amanda squeaked in surprise. "I thought you said we didn't have to worry about him winning. You said his roses were awful."

"I didn't help him," Becky whispered, slumping.

She slid farther down in her chair. Her face flaming in embarrassment, she ignored Peter's invitation to ride the Ferris wheel.

When Mom nudged her to be polite, Becky managed not to look at Peter. "The Ferris wheel makes me dizzy," she muttered.

Oblivious to Becky's rudeness, Peter bounced away.

Amanda had a look of disbelief on her face. "I can't believe he won with a rosebud."

Becky said nothing. All she wanted to do was to leave the stuffy building as soon as she could. She'd had such great hopes for winning and they'd all been dashed.

*I'll never be able to earn enough to buy Grandma's present.*

Why hadn't her prayers been answered? She wasn't selfish. She'd prayed for Amanda and herself both to win.

"Mom," she said past Amanda, "can we leave now?"

Mom shook her head. "Wait a few minutes."

Just then, Yvonne and Dad slid into chairs in the row behind them.

"Are we late?" Yvonne asked.

Too ashamed to admit her defeat in the rose contest, Becky pretended not to hear. Amanda, ecstatic about her ribbons, filled Becky's family in on all the details.

Becky slouched in her seat grinding her teeth. If this could just be over soon. It's not like she'd planned to use the gift card for herself.

*I wanted to get a nice gift for Grandma. Was that so wrong?*

“Attention, please.” Mrs. Franklin rapped the lectern with authority. “We have one other special prize to present. Once in a great while, the Garden Club of Fulcomb County recognizes the outstanding service of one of our young gardeners. We give this award only on very special occasions and for special work.”

She smiled. “Gardeners who receive this award must meet the highest of standards. They must have tried to improve their communities by gardening or providing gardens to those who wouldn’t otherwise have a place to enjoy the beauties of nature. This year we have two gardeners who have merited this honor.”

The audience stirred, looking around as if they could guess who the winners might be.

Becky didn’t care. She kept slouching and glaring at the floor.

“Dim the lights, please, and let me show you some pictures of these girls.”

Becky didn’t bother to look up. *Who cares? I thought for sure Summer Snow would win. What did I do wrong?*

The lights went out. Only a faint edge of sunlight seeped through the double doors at the end of the building. On a screen behind the stage, slides flashed as the audience murmured.

Next to Becky, Amanda gasped.

“Becky.” She jerked Becky’s arm. “Look. It’s—”

Jolted out of her pity party by the serious way Amanda spoke, Becky looked.

A slide snapped on the screen showing Becky hanging a pot of Pink Wave petunias on a hook.

*What a dumb picture. My tongue is sticking halfway out of my mouth. Who took that?*

*Click.*

Another slide snapped into place. This one showed Rodney and Peter clumsily trying to plant a zinnia.

*Click.*

A picture of Becky and Amanda planting a rose.

One after another, pictures came on of Operation Instant Garden.

Becky squirmed on the wooden chair, and her mind spun. Why was Mrs. Franklin showing all these pictures?

She didn’t have to wonder long.

“Lights, please.”

When the lights came on, Mrs. Franklin repeated the story Becky had told her in Carter’s backyard the day of Operation Instant Garden—the missing roses, Becky and Amanda working together to solve the mystery, and their idea to plant a garden for Carter’s mom.

As she neared the end of her story, Mrs. Franklin motioned toward a chair in the front row. A thin woman wearing a cheerful rose-print turban and a wispy summer dress got up and came forward.

“I’d like to introduce Olivia Clark, the happy and grateful recipient of two girls’ generous gardening spirits. Olivia has graciously agreed to present our award to Becky McGuffey and Amanda Quint. Girls, would you join me on the podium please?”

In a daze, Becky got to her feet and looked at her beaming family. She hadn’t noticed before, but a whole gang of people had come to cheer for them—Grandma Bauer, Carter decked out in clean overalls, his blond hair slicked back, Mrs. Kopek, Sam from the garden center, Yvonne’s friend, Chet, and Mrs. M.

They must have all known, Becky realized as she and Amanda walked toward the front. Clapping hands and shouts followed behind them.

When the girls reached the stage, Carter’s mom stepped to the microphone and read from the award plaque in a voice that broke with emotion.

“Excellence in Junior Gardening. Award for Exhibiting a True Gardener’s Spirit, One That Gives, Like Nature Itself, Beauty for Others to Enjoy.”

“Thank you, girls,” she whispered as she handed them each a plaque. She hugged them tight. “You have done a wonderful thing for me. I’m looking forward to spending many summers in my lovely new garden.”

They had to stand and pose for pictures, holding out the plaque. Mrs. Franklin came off the podium to shake their hands.

"You also receive this special gift." She handed them each an envelope. "Congratulations, girls."

The girls made their way back to the wooden seats, stopping along the way to hear congratulations or shake hands.

Becky dropped limp as a droopy daisy into her seat. Flushed with all the attention, she leaned into Mom's hug, felt Dad's hearty thump of pride on her shoulder, and heard Yvonne's excited greeting.

Amanda had been stopped a few rows up by her proud parents. Becky glanced up to see Mr. Quint smiling like he'd won a million dollars. Mrs. Quint and Mrs. Bean both grinned. Amanda's mom snapped a dozen pictures.

Peter hovered close by with a knowing smile.

*So, even Peter knew.*

"What's that?" Yvonne pointed at the envelope in Becky's sweaty hand.

"I don't know. I didn't open it yet."

"Go ahead and see what it is."

Becky ripped the envelope open and pulled out a gift certificate. She read the words but didn't believe them. Then she read them again. Could it be true?

"Yvonne, could you read this to me? It can't be true, can it?"

Her sister took the paper and read it. A dazzling smile brightened her face as she nodded.

“Looks real to me.”

Hands trembling, Becky took the certificate back and read it again. “Good for \$100 dollar purchase at Sam’s Garden Center.”

*Guess I won after all.*

“What are you going to buy?” Yvonne asked.

Becky smiled. “I know exactly.”

She couldn’t wait to surprise Grandma with the beautiful fountain for her garden.

*My prayers were answered, after all. Amanda and I both won, and everything came out all right.*

“Becky,” Amanda called, “are you ready to try that Octopus ride again?”

“Absolutely,” Becky called back.

“Hey Becky,” Peter chimed in. “Can I come too?”

“Sure,” Becky said.

The three friends linked arms and ran off to enjoy the fair.

Learn more about the Tales from the Garden of  
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*Donna Alice Patton*



