



MYSTERIES OF COBBLE HILL FARM

Digging Up Secrets

**SNEAK
PEEK!**

*Free First
Chapter*

ELIZABETH PENNEY

CHAPTER ONE

As Dr. Harriet Bailey unlocked the door that connected her new residence to the veterinary office, a canine symphony rose from the kennels in the back. On this Tuesday morning in June, she felt like pinching herself. How did an animal doctor from Connecticut find herself practicing in a remote yet charming English village at age thirty-three? The short answer was that a failed romance and an unexpected inheritance had added up to a life-changing opportunity.

Harriet was the new vet at Cobble Hill Farm in White Church Bay, Yorkshire, attempting to fill the shoes of her beloved grandfather, Dr. Harold Bailey. Thankfully, her aunt Jinny, a local physician and fount of wisdom, lived next door. That helped keep homesickness for her stateside family and friends at bay.

Inside the cheerful clinic, a row of patients and their owners waited.

“Cobble Hill Vet Clinic. How may I help you?” Receptionist Polly Thatcher, her ponytail swinging, held the phone receiver in place with her shoulder while tapping on the computer keyboard. She greeted Harriet with a grin and mouthed, “Miss Birtwhistle, Room One.”

Harriet found the file in the day’s stack and skimmed it as she hurried down the short hall. The blood test results confirmed exactly what she’d thought.

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“Good morning, Miss Birtwhistle.” Harriet greeted the retired schoolteacher, who was seated in the examination room clutching a black-and-white cat to her chest. “How are you today?” She set the chart on the counter, suppressing the treat-and-go training she’d received at her former job, where high daily volume was the metric for success. In White Church Bay, she was learning that veterinary practice included the whole family, both human and animal members, and she could show genuine concern for all involved, which was her natural desire anyway.

“I’m doing pretty well,” Jane Birtwhistle said. “This dry weather means my joints don’t ache so much.”

“I’m glad to hear that. How’s Mittens? Let’s weigh him.” Harriet reached for the cat, likely named for his white paws. He really was adorable.

Jane surrendered him reluctantly then hovered near the counter as Harriet set the cat in the weighing bucket. “Usually, sick cats go off their feed,” Jane said. “But he’s a greedy old brute. He’s been stealing food from the others.” She owned a dozen or so cats at last count.

“And still losing weight.” Harriet made a note. He was down an ounce from the last visit. Another sign that her diagnosis was correct. She gently lifted Mittens out of the bucket and onto the counter, where she listened to his heart and checked his vitals, murmuring soothing words to him.

“Is he going to be all right?” Jane’s pale blue eyes filled with tears. “He’s my favorite. I’ve had him twelve years, ever since he was a wee mite.”

“I have good news for you.” Harriet stroked Mittens under the chin, eliciting a purr. “His diagnosis is treatable. It’s hyperthyroidism, a disorder of the thyroid gland.”

Jane sniffled. “Are you sure? I thought maybe it was cancer.” Her voice lowered to a whisper on the dreaded word.

“No, there’s no cancer. We checked for that too, just in case. Like with people, it’s common for older cats’ bodies to start to work differently as they age. Hyperthyroidism is common. It’s characterized by rapid weight loss even though the cat is still eating.” Harriet showed her the printout. “See? The blood test confirmed it. His levels are out of optimal range, but as I said earlier, it’s treatable.”

Hope transformed the elderly woman’s face, pinkening her cheeks. “So he’ll be all right?”

“He’ll be fine if you give him this medicine as directed.” Harriet gave her a tube of cream to rub inside the cat’s ears, along with instructions and things to watch for. “Ear cream is easier than giving him pills, and there are fewer side effects.”

Jane laughed in relief. “He doesn’t like taking pills, do you, my love?” She picked up her cat and put him inside the carrier. “Thank you, Doctor.”

“I’m happy to help. Polly will schedule a follow-up visit so we can make sure everything is going okay. But please call if there are any problems.”

Harriet led the pair out and then picked up the next folder. It was for a patient she hadn’t seen before—a retriever mix named Jolly with a mysterious lump, according to his owner, a Mr. Terry Leaper.

“Jolly?” she called in the reception area.

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A stout middle-aged man dressed in a blue work shirt and jeans got to his feet, tugging on a leash attached to a dog with silky golden fur. Moving forward, Mr. Leaper eyed Harriet up and down. “So, you’re the new Doc Bailey.”

“I am. And this handsome creature must be Jolly. Right this way, please, Mr. Leaper.”

As they walked to the exam room, Mr. Leaper said, “Please, call me Terry.”

With cancer on her mind after Jane Birtwhistle’s worry, Harriet was relieved to diagnose a common problem. “It’s called a lipoma,” she told Terry. “A soft growth in the tissue under the skin.”

Terry eyed the lump dubiously. “What’s to be done about it? I’m worried that it might keep growing.”

With its position on Jolly’s ribs, the growth was already impeding the movement of his front leg. “I recommend removing it. It’s a simple operation. He’ll be in and out in hours.” While the clinic didn’t have facilities for long and complicated surgeries, it was perfectly adequate for simple procedures like this one.

Terry gripped the edge of the counter, his face going white. “Sorry. I don’t like the idea of my poor dog going under the knife.”

Harriet helped Terry to a chair. “That’s understandable. *Operation* is always a scary word. And our pets are like family to us, aren’t they?”

“They are,” Terry agreed gruffly. “Lost my wife a few years ago, and Jolly has brought me a lot of comfort. He even goes to work with me. I’m a plumber, you see, so I travel all over with Jolly in my van.”

“We’ll take good care of him,” Harriet said. “I promise. Like you take good care of him. Why don’t we schedule this for next week?”

Say on Monday morning?” She returned to the dog, giving his head and neck a thorough scratching. “You’ll feel much better, won’t you, boy?” Jolly wagged his tail as if he understood her words.

Terry nodded. “Monday. Thanks, Doc. It’s nice to know what that is and how to fix it.”

By midmorning the place cleared out, the first group of patients handled. “Should I pop through and put the kettle on for elevenses?” Polly asked, rolling her chair back. They usually took a break at this time.

“Thank you,” Harriet said. “I’m ready for a cup of tea.” While she started each day with coffee dispensed from her beloved machine, she’d learned to enjoy the tea breaks built into her new routine. People in England made a point of sitting and relaxing instead of grabbing food and drink on the go.

While waiting for the kettle to boil, she finished up notes on the charts and stacked them to be filed. Polly was very particular about her filing system, and Harriet wouldn’t dream of disturbing it. When she’d arrived a month ago to take over the practice, she’d been relieved to find Polly, age twenty-four and local, already on board. Not only did she know all the patients, but she had made it her mission to help Harriet navigate the inevitable potholes and pitfalls.

“Tea is on the terrace,” Polly sang, inclining her head around the door. “It’s such a nice day, I thought we might as well enjoy the sun on our faces.”

“I’ll be right there.” Harriet made sure the answering machine was on and followed Polly out to the slate patio, accessed by French doors from the kitchen. Her grandfather had added the surprisingly

modern touch to the stone Georgian-style house, which had been built around 1820. The plumbing, electrical, and heating systems had been updated to comply with safety regulations, but many things were beginning to show their age. Otherwise, the house had kept its considerable charm.

The garden itself was an enchanted fairyland on this brilliant June morning. A low stone wall enclosed the area, with a green wooden gate on one side leading to Grandad's art gallery, and another that led to a barn with extra kennel space. Bees buzzed among the sweet-scented riot of rose, delphinium, foxglove, and lavender, and birds twittered in the crab apple and cherry trees.

Harriet's heart soared with joy as she chose a teak chair at the table. Good work, new friends, and a beautiful place to live. *Thank You*, she breathed in a silent prayer. *I am truly blessed*. What a reversal from the bitter despair of several months ago, when her world had imploded with her grandfather's death on top of her broken engagement to a colleague.

As was their habit, the clinic cat, Charlie, a scruffy female calico, and Maxwell, a long-haired dachshund with wheeled rear legs due to an injury, joined them. Maxwell, as always, lurked near the table, hoping for crumbs, and Charlie jumped onto the wall to bask in the sunshine. Harriet chuckled again at the thought of her grandfather naming every single one of his office cats Charlie, regardless of their gender. He said it kept things simpler that way. One less thing to keep straight.

Polly handed her a mug of tea then pushed a plate of scones toward her.

“What flavor do we have today?” Harriet asked. A neighbor brought them home-baked goods every morning, something she’d always done for Old Doc Bailey, as he was known.

“Her famous apricot. She added almonds to this batch and topped them with toasted oats as well.” Polly took a bite of one and hummed in approval. “Very good,” she muttered with her mouth full.

Harriet bit into a scone and enjoyed how the pastry melted in her mouth. Plenty of butter and fresh eggs made all the difference. Doreen Danby and her husband, Tom, owned a nearby farm, where they raised sheep, chickens, and five long-legged children. When things calmed down, Harriet really should pay Doreen a visit and thank her for her kindness—and the delectable baked goods.

Polly’s cell phone rang. She looked at the screen and frowned.

“Who is it this time?” Harriet asked. To say Polly had an active dating life was putting it mildly. Harriet could barely keep up with her young assistant’s active social life and roster of friends, who had a constant calendar of picnics, movies, concerts, and dancing keeping Polly busy.

“It’s Van. It’s not like him to call when he’s on duty. Maybe I’d better take this.” She answered the phone and listened intently. Then she handed it to Harriet. “It’s for you. It’s an emergency.”



Harriet pressed the clutch and changed gears, her sweaty palm sliding on the shift. It was bad enough that she had to drive on the wrong

side of the road. Operating a tricky manual transmission at the same time was too much. The clinic's Land Rover was a beast of a vehicle, and as soon as she could afford it, she would replace it with a sleek new automatic. Maybe then she could get used to driving on the left side of the—*whoops*. She'd started to drift over the center again.

She rattled to a stop in the dooryard of Primrose Cottage, parking next to the police car and ambulance already there. Beside the kitchen door, two men watched as EMTs guided a gurney through the narrow opening. She ran to join Detective Constable Van Worthington and Pastor Fitzwilliam "Will" Knight, the minister of the village church.

"How is she?" Harriet asked, fearing the answer. Elderly Meredith Bennett was unconscious, an oxygen mask over her nose and a terrible gray tinge to her thin cheeks.

"We're praying she'll be all right," Pastor Will said in the same deep voice that brought his flock comfort during sermons. "I found her lying on her kitchen floor when I came to visit." His soft brown eyes were somber with concern.

"What happened? Did she fall?" Harriet pictured Meredith taking a tumble and breaking a hip. But she had a head injury, judging by the bandage.

"Someone knocked her on the head," Van said. "I'll be interviewing the neighbors to find out if they saw anyone here before the reverend came to call." Despite his assertive words, the young policeman appeared worried. Deadly assaults didn't occur very often in White Church Bay. Or so she'd been told.

A chill went down Harriet's spine. Who would hurt sweet Meredith? Although her tiny cottage was well furnished, she wasn't wealthy.

"We're also trying to locate her granddaughter, Stacey," the detective constable went on. "She'll need to know about this."

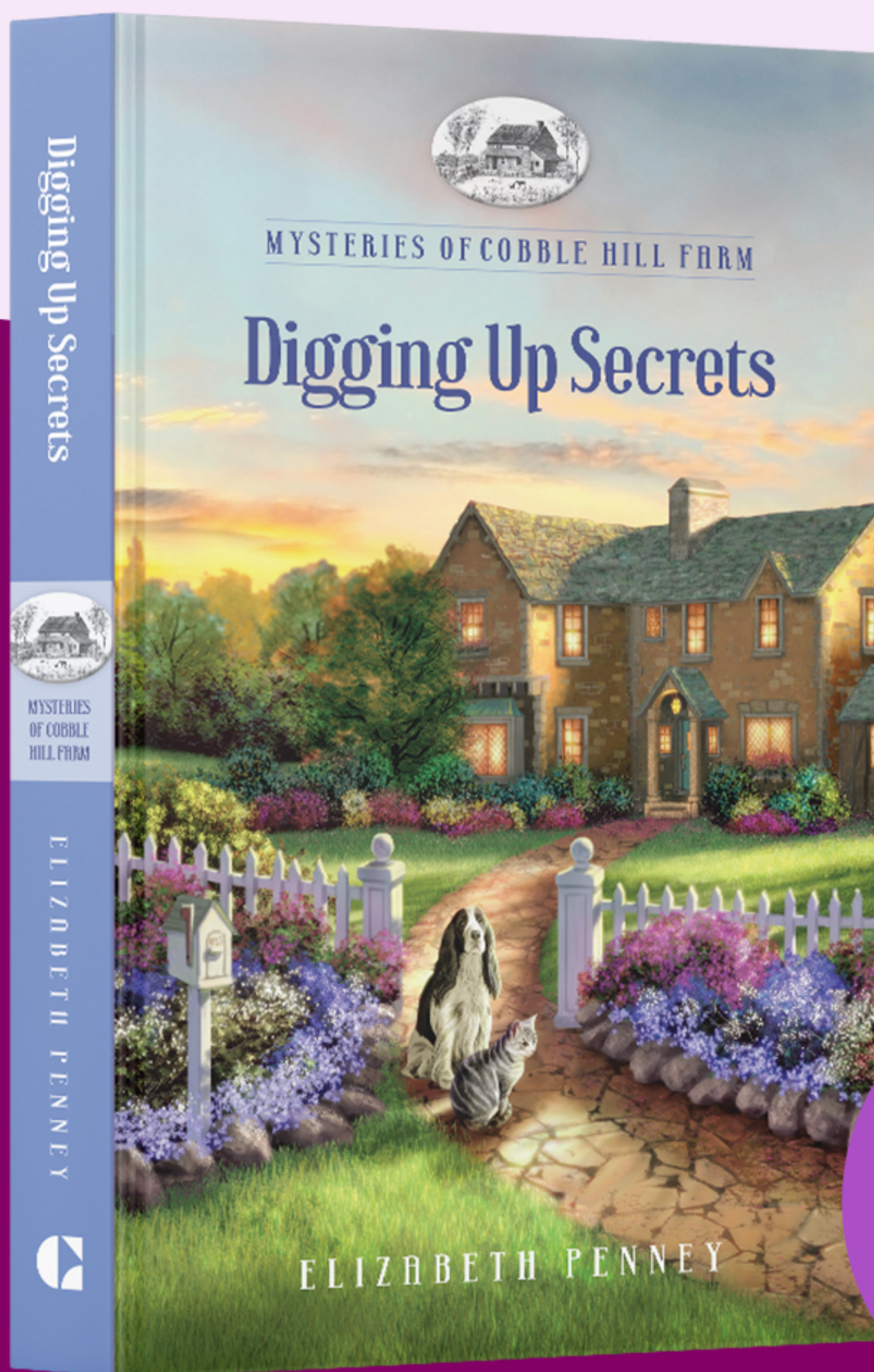
Pastor Will nodded. "Good thinking, Van. She may need to stay with Meredith for a bit, until she's fully mended."

A howl reached them from inside the house. Meredith's dog, Huntley, was the reason Harriet had been called to the scene. He'd need to be boarded while his mistress was in the hospital unless the granddaughter was willing to take him.

"That's my cue," she said. After retrieving a leash from the Land Rover, she went into the house. Huntley, an aged springer spaniel with brown and white spots, was still howling. She approached him cautiously, speaking gentle words. "It's all right, boy. I'm here to help. Your mistress will be fine, I promise."

I hope.

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