

# A Fatal Arrangement





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Gayle Roper

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# 1



“I’m really sorry, Dr. Bleu.” Dr. Meninger, the head of the botany department, spoke without a trace of the regret he claimed.

Kaylee swallowed her disbelief and dismay. *Never let them see you bleed.* Hadn’t someone somewhere said that?

“Budget cuts, you know.” Dr. Meninger smiled pleasantly, the picture of collegial civility.

Kaylee responded automatically, though inside she felt hollow. Her life had just imploded and he was blaming it on budget cuts? *Ha!* It was politics, pure and simple. She knew that as well as she knew her name. She also knew there was nothing she could do to change the situation.

There had been one tenured position opened by the retirement of old Dr. Howson, and Kaylee had expected it to be hers. After all, she had a solid reputation as a teacher, and because of her PhD in plant taxonomy, she had become an expert witness for the Seattle Police Department in homicide cases, earning herself—and by extension the university—a certain notoriety. Students came to the University of Washington because they read about her testimony bringing criminals to justice.

What she had thought was a great mark in her favor had been turned against her by jealous colleagues. “Prima donna,” were the whispers. “She thinks she’s better than the rest of us. Asks for special concessions, you know.”

Untrue, as anyone who knew her would testify, but how could she refute such accusations without sounding like the demanding braggart of the rumors? She couldn’t, especially since she was fairly sure they’d been started by her main competition

for the professorship. So she held her tongue, going for civility and maturity in spite of her deep distress at the character assassination. She had been certain Dr. Meninger would see beyond cheap gossip and false accusations.

"It's like being hit right between the eyes," she told her grandmother when they talked on the phone that evening. "My world is spinning out of control, and I'm so dizzy I can't see where I'm going anymore."

"Honey, you did right deciding to behave with such class," Beatrice Lyons said. "I'm proud of you."

"Thanks." Kaylee hit speaker on her phone and collapsed on the sofa in her tidy, colorful apartment. "But I've never been unemployed before. I've certainly never been fired. Or 'let go,' as he put it. I don't know how to behave. It's embarrassing."

"Head high, Katherine Leigh. You have nothing to be ashamed about."

"I can hold my head up all I want, but what do I do with all the hours in the day?"

"Relax, my girl. Have fun. Enjoy life. You've been working hard for so many years, first for your doctorate and then to be ready for that tenured position. It's time to find yourself."

"But I wasn't lost until today. I knew what I wanted and where I was going. It's only now that I don't know who I am. I mean, if I can't be a professor at the university I love, what can I be?"

Bear, her adorable dachshund, heard the despair in her voice and stood on his hind legs with his front paws on her knees. He looked at her with great concern—or at least that's what Kaylee read in his eyes.

"It's okay, Bear. Really." Kaylee fondled his silky ears. "Or at least it will be someday. I think." She sighed. "I hope."

He didn't look convinced, but after a lick on her hand he lay down with his head on her foot.

"I have a solution to your problem," Bea said.

"I'm glad someone does. I'm listening."

"You can take over The Flower Patch."

Kaylee frowned. "What? The Flower Patch is your life."

Bea sighed. "I'm tired, Kaylee. It's been so hard since your grandfather died, and I just don't have the energy or the enthusiasm to keep the shop going."

"Oh, Grandma." Kaylee immediately felt guilty for dumping her problems on her grandmother and more than slightly unnerved to hear the distress in the normally stoic woman's voice. She knew—everybody knew—the past five years had been hard for Bea without her husband, Edmond Lyons, especially given the mysterious circumstances of his death. Ed had gone out alone in his small skiff, not an unusual circumstance for someone living on an island, but he'd never returned. The skiff was later discovered floating loose in the Sound. No one was aboard, nor was his body ever found.

"Don't you go feeling sorry for me. I can't stand pity. I'm a widow, not an invalid."

Kaylee smiled. The starch was back in Bea's voice, and Kaylee's world was righted, at least that part of it. Bea's grit and courage were legendary in the family and were the reason Kaylee's parents had felt free to move to Florida to be near their son and his family, which included their two grandchildren.

"You taking over The Flower Patch and living in Wildflower Cottage is the solution to both our problems," Bea continued. "I've been so sad at the idea of a stranger buying my home and my business. Crazy, I know, but both places are so personal, so special to me. They hold such memories. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you were there to embrace those memories, to love them as much as I do? And you'd make your own to add to the line. Family. Continuity."

Kaylee could hear the longing in her grandmother's voice. She squeezed her eyes closed. Did she want to operate a flower shop on Orcas Island. "It's a lovely idea, Grandma, a really lovely idea, but I don't think so."

"I've surprised you."

That was an understatement. "You have. If you feel so strongly about it, why are you moving to Arizona?"

"I'm an old woman, and it's time."

"You're not old." Kaylee quickly did the math. She was forty, her mom was sixty, so her grandmother was in her eighties. *Yikes!* She was so vibrant and full of life that Kaylee often forgot just how old she was.

"At least promise me you'll consider the possibility," her grandmother urged.

Kaylee saw the flower shop in her mind's eye . . . the coolers full of colorful blooms, the scarred workbench in the design studio where Bea made her beautiful arrangements, like the decorative wreaths she created from dried flowers and grapevines. Kaylee could still smell the wonderful aroma of the fresh flowers, a fragrance that evoked memories of golden days helping her grandmother in the shop. She saw herself as a child sweeping up the stripped leaves, snipped buds, and clipped stems that always littered the workroom floor and, as she grew older, creating arrangements with her grandmother's help.

"I've been teaching you how to be a florist all your life," Bea said, her voice persuasive.

"True. I acquired my love of all things flora from you and my love of reading from Grandpa."

"Think about it, honey. That's all I ask. Whatever you decide, I'm moving to Arizona to live with Lucille. These joints of mine need dry heat, and this heart needs time with my twin."

One of several sticking points jumped out at Kaylee. "You said

you're selling both The Flower Patch and Wildflower Cottage?"

"I have to. They'll provide my retirement funds. I wish I could give them to you, but I can't afford to do that."

"Of course you can't. I just don't think I can afford to buy them."

"Don't let it worry you. I'm sure we can work out a good deal, one you can afford and I can live with."

After they hung up, Kaylee thought for a long time. She had vivid memories of visits to her grandparents on Orcas Island. Somehow, the place had always felt like home, even though she had never lived there. She would still be working with plants, and she would feel closer to family residing in her beloved grandparents' home and continuing the business her grandmother had built.

*Maybe it's time for something new.*



## 2



One Monday in late June, Kaylee made her way to the main deck of the Washington State Ferry, where she leaned on the rail and turned her face to the wind. Who'd have thought losing her job would turn into such a great and unexpected adventure?

Granted, it wasn't an Indiana Jones escapade. Not many academics—or ex-academics in her case—raced around the world besting bad guys. Certainly no one would make a movie about her, but she was very happy with her normal-size adventure, one that was blissfully lacking in the politics and pressure of academia.

She grinned at the bald eagle that sailed overhead, wings spread wide. Feeling slightly foolish but unable to resist, she extended her arms in imitation. She laughed as the wind caught her jacket and pulled it away from her body so that she had wings too.

"Orcas Island," boomed the ferry's public address system.

At hearing the announcement, Kaylee's stomach gave a little flip—part excitement, part apprehension. The time had come to take that first big step in her adventure.

She followed the other passengers planning to disembark on Orcas down the steps to the car deck and walked between the vehicles until she reached her red Ford Escape. She slid behind the wheel and looked at her passenger.

"You ready, Bear?"

The little dachshund, who had been sound asleep on his favorite blanket until she opened the door, looked at her with a disgruntled expression.

"It's not my fault you had to stay in the car." She reached

out and scratched him behind an ear. "I told you it's the rule and one I can't change."

Bear leaned into her scratch but still radiated you-left-me displeasure. His bow tie had been knocked crooked by his napping position and the chest protector of his doggie seat belt.

The ferry slid into its slip, and all around her cars leaped to life. Slowly they pulled forward and off, Kaylee in the center of the stream. Orcas was the largest of the many San Juan Islands and the one Kaylee was most familiar with. Her grandparents had lived on the island as long as she could remember.

"You're going to love it here, Bear." She laughed out loud, something she hadn't done for weeks. She drove into Turtle Cove on the shore of West Sound, the smaller of the two arms of water that ate into the island. "*We're* going to love it here."

Bear appeared somewhat skeptical, but she knew he'd change his mind as soon as he realized how wonderful their new life was going to be. For one thing, he wouldn't have to be alone all day since she planned to take him to work with her. He was such a people dog—he'd love being the shop mascot.

The town looked much the same as it had the last time she'd seen it some twenty years ago. A couple of the shops had been repainted, and there were new signs at High Tide Outfitters, the village's sports outfitter, and Between the Lines, the bookstore located across the street and down from The Flower Patch. Up and down the street, flower boxes burst with blooms, yards were alive with color, and full hanging baskets of red and white petunias hung from the artsy light posts that lined the street. The moist, temperate climate made for wonderful growing conditions.

She pulled to the curb and sat staring at the impressive Victorian mansion that housed The Flower Patch. She leaned forward, studying the sign that hung above the porch, gold leaf spelling out the shop's name against a deep green background.

*My shop. "Unbelievable."*

Bear looked at her, confused. He gave a bark. He was ready to go. That was the way it worked. You stopped the car. You got out. You went somewhere.

"Okay, my friend. You deserve to get out of the car. You've been a very good boy."

Bear sat as Kaylee walked around the front of the car. When she reached for the door's handle, he stood, tail wagging, waiting impatiently for his seat belt to be taken off and the lead to be attached. Once that was done, he jumped out and ran in little circles, happy to be free again.

"Are you ready to see our shop?" As she said the words *our shop*, Kaylee felt her shoulders straighten and her breath catch. She was a business owner.

They walked up the steps to the big Victorian's wraparound porch where planters bursting with color hung above the porch railings. Just before she opened the door, Kaylee leaned down and adjusted the green plaid bow tie Bear wore, which matched her blazer. Not that she regularly dressed in outfits to match her dog—she wasn't quite that eccentric—but she did want to make a good first impression, and the green in the plaid made her eyes seem greener and Bear more handsome.

She pushed open the door and smiled at the tinkle of bells overhead. She'd loved that sound as a child. Grandpa Ed had once told her that the bells were a warning to the fairies who lived in the flowers, telling them to hide because someone had come into the shop.

A display against the west wall immediately caught Kaylee's eye. A huge photo of a bride holding one of Bea's beautiful bouquets hung suspended. Over the bride's shoulder was a huge urn full of flowers in shades of pink, cream, and blue. A bridesmaid stood in the distance, carrying a gorgeous nosegay in

the same shades. At her side stood an adorable flower girl with a smaller nosegay and a wreath of colorful flowers in her hair.

The urn, full of the silk flowers featured in the photo, sat beside the photo, while on the other side a shiny white stepladder held small bouquets with trailing ribbons, a glittering tiara, and bejeweled dress sandals. All the items rested on a sweep of pink netting.

If that visual didn't make a prospective bride drool, nothing would.

"Kaylee!" A smiling woman with a chin-length gray-and-white bob and dark notice-me glasses walked around the counter with her arms extended. "I wasn't sure you'd be in today. I thought you might go straight to the house."

Kaylee smiled as the friendly stranger grasped both of her hands. "You must be Mary."

"Mary Bishop. I'm so glad to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you." Her gaze dropped to Bear. "And look at you! Aren't you the cutest thing?"

Bear's ears perked up, and he trotted closer for a good petting.

Mary scratched under his chin. "I love your tie."

"So does he." Kaylee grinned at the tail-wagging Bear. "He's a terrible ham but a total charmer."

"Is this Bea's granddaughter?" called a lovely, petite woman with short, dark hair, a big smile, and a touch of Asian ancestry. She approached with hand outstretched. "I'm Jessica Roberts." Kaylee guessed Jessica was about the same age she was. The woman balanced stems of *Gerbera jamesonii* and *Asparagus setaceus* in one hand. "I own Death by Chocolate, the bakery and coffee shop next door." She indicated the gerbera daisies and asparagus ferns in her hand. "For my tables. Having you next door is so handy. I'm also a Petal."

"A Petal?"

Jessica laughed. "I guess Bea didn't tell you. It's short for Petal Pushers, our West Sound garden club. There's a bigger, island-wide garden club on Orcas, but we also have our little local one. Bea is a founding member."

"We hope you'll join us." Mary brushed her hair off her forehead. "We'd love your expertise."

"We meet Tuesdays in the keeper's quarters at the Old Cape Lighthouse," Jessica said. "I usually bring something chocolate, and Mary brings the hot drinks."

Kaylee wondered just how much gardening the group got done or even discussed. "In that case, I'm in. Thanks for including me, Jessica."

"Make that Jess. Jessica sounds so formal."

Kaylee smiled. "Okay. Jess it is."

"A new Petal. Wonderful." Mary gestured to an enticing stack of skin care products on the counter. "DeeDee Wilcox, the woman who crafts those wonderful lavender goat-milk soaps and creams, is in the club too. She owns the mystery bookstore across the street and down the way."

Kaylee looked out the front window at the store with its window boxes filled with rose geraniums, blue lobelia, and chartreuse sweet potato vines. "I look forward to meeting her. How many people are in the group?"

"Four regulars," Jessica said, then grinned. "Counting you and uncounting Bea. And we're more than a club. The other ladies are like my sisters, but we don't squabble as much." She glanced at her watch. "I've got to get back. According to Oliver, we may be in for some rocky times around here." She turned and headed for the door.

"Oliver?" Kaylee asked.

Mary sighed. "Oliver is a lavender geranium that 'tells the future.'"

Kaylee blinked, unsure how to respond.

Jessica halted and narrowed her eyes at Mary. "You mock, but Oliver predicted last year's storm and my first gray hair."

"How did he do that?" Kaylee asked, curiosity getting the best of her.

Mary rolled her eyes. "Jess is convinced that whenever Oliver's leaves are droopy or he loses too many petals at once, it's a bad omen." She leaned in and whispered loudly enough for Jessica to hear. "Our Jess can always be counted on for a good conspiracy theory. I think it stems from her empty-nest syndrome."

"I heard that," Jessica called over her shoulder. "I don't have time to argue now, but I shall remember the slight and we'll take it up later—over something chocolate." She reached for the door handle.

But before she could grab it, the door opened, exploding inward as a woman with blond hair and wild eyes rushed in, nearly knocking Jessica over. "He's coming! I can't believe it! He's coming!"