

# Pine and Punishment



Johnnie Alexander



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*Pine and Punishment*

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# 1



Kaylee Bleu stepped back from the display window and appraised her work with a critical eye. A squat pine tree, cut from the woods behind Mary Bishop's home, occupied one side of the space. Gold lights twinkled amidst the branches, which were decorated with an assortment of miniature ornaments. Gaily wrapped packages and brilliant red poinsettias filled the space under and around the tree, while sparkling lights framed the entire scene.

"Something's not quite right," Kaylee murmured as she tilted her head.

"Talking to yourself again?" Mary set two steaming cups of cocoa on the counter beside the cash register. On this wintry Sunday afternoon, the two women were replacing the autumn displays with Christmas cheer at The Flower Patch, the florist shop Kaylee had purchased from her grandmother when she moved to Turtle Cove, Washington.

"I was talking to Bear."

Hearing his name, the dachshund barked, then sat up on his hind legs and pawed the air with his front feet. His bow tie, decorated with candy canes and peppermints, added to the festive mood.

"If only I knew what he was saying, then maybe I'd know what to do about this." Kaylee waved her hand at the display window. "The other window is beautiful. But this one . . . something seems off."

"Let me see," Mary offered. She took a moment to study Kaylee's arrangement, then disappeared into the workroom.

"Is it that bad?" Kaylee called after her.

"Not at all," Mary answered. She returned with a rectangular block which she deftly slid beneath the decorated pine tree and its draping.

"Ta-da!" she announced with a pleased smile. "The tree only needed more height."

Kaylee eyed the arrangement from different angles and gave a contented sigh. "Now it's perfect. What would I ever do without you?"

"You did most of the work. I just added a tiny tweak."

"That 'tiny tweak' made all the difference. Such a simple thing."

"Sometimes, maybe most of the time, the simplest thing is all that's needed."

"You're being very philosophical this afternoon."

"I'm just thinking about all the hoopla we allow ourselves to get involved with during the holidays," Mary said. "I'm still recovering from Thanksgiving dinner and the Black Friday shop-till-you-drop sales."

"You should be home taking it easy —"

"No place I'd rather be than right here," Mary interrupted. "This is where I always am the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Decorating The Flower Patch. It's tradition."

"I'm grateful for it."

"Besides, I wasn't really complaining. I love all the decorations and the lights and the presents." Mary's blue eyes twinkled behind her designer frames. "Especially the presents."

"But?" Kaylee prompted.

"But it might be nice, just for once, to have a simpler Christmas."

"I agree, but I don't think it will happen this year."

Mary chuckled. "It's your own fault that you got roped into the Festivity Committee's shenanigans. I warned you to stay away from Sylvia, but you didn't listen."

"It wasn't my fault," Kaylee protested. "She cornered me in the library. Smack dab between the biographies and the local history section. I really think she followed me there."

Sylvia Rosenthal and her sister owned The Chandlery Gift Shop across the street. That's what made it even stranger that the sixty-something widow had surprised Kaylee at the library. Her cheerful disposition had made it impossible to refuse her invitation—no, her insistence—that Kaylee join the committee.

"She may have," Mary said. "When Sylvia makes up her mind about something, nothing stops her. And she decided you were the perfect person to fill the vacant spot on the Festivity Committee."

"And so I did."

Not that Kaylee really minded. She wanted to participate in Turtle Cove's activities and traditions. When she'd first moved to Orcas Island, the Petal Pushers, her grandmother's gardening club, had welcomed Kaylee with open arms. Since then Kaylee had become acquainted with other local business owners, the town leaders, and her regular customers. She reveled in being part of such a close-knit community.

Mary's steady presence had also been a blessing. The retired police dispatcher, who kept her trim shape by taking tai chi classes, worked for Kaylee as a part-time floral designer.

No, not *for* Kaylee. Mary worked *with* Kaylee.

She meant what she'd said—Kaylee didn't know what she would do without Mary's good-natured practicality and talent for designing exceptional floral arrangements.

Mary and the other two Petal Pushers, Jessica Roberts, who owned the Death by Chocolate bakery next door, and DeeDee Wilcox, whose mystery bookstore was just down the street, were now Kaylee's dearest and closest friends in Turtle Cove.

"When's the next meeting?" Mary asked as she stirred her cocoa with a peppermint stick.

"Tuesday night. We're meeting at the Old Cape Lighthouse."

"But that's when the Petal Pushers meet."

"I told Sylvia, but it was the only time she could get all the committee members together." Kaylee peered into her cup, seemingly intent on its contents. "You know, we could use more help. The Petal Pushers could join us."

"Oh no." Mary practically guffawed. "We love you, Kaylee, but you will not sweet-talk us into that madness."

"Don't say no until you've heard me out."

Mary crossed her arms, but the stern expression on her face was softened by a faint smile. "I'm listening."

"I want to bring back the tree-lighting tradition." Kaylee's hopeful tone became more eager. "You know, the Petal Pushers and their families decorating a giant tree on the lawn at the Old Cape Lighthouse. Having the mayor turn on the lights. Cookies and cocoa. Candy canes. I loved that as a kid. It was always so fun."

"Do you know why they ended that tradition?"

"I asked Sylvia after the first meeting, but she just glared at me." Kaylee imitated Sylvia's Southern drawl. "'Darlin', we never, *never* speak of that debacle.'"

Mary laughed at Kaylee's impersonation. "Sylvia is right. We never do."

"You're not going to tell me?"

"Perhaps we should see how it looks from the street," Mary suggested. "In case we need to make any more tweaks."

"You're changing the subject."

"I know." Mary grabbed her coat and headed out the front door.

Given no other choice, Kaylee took a moment to plug in the strands of lights decorating both the front windows, shrugged into her heavy jacket, and joined Mary on the Victorian mansion's broad front porch.



She gazed at the windows as she stood beside the older woman. The lighted displays exuded a cheerful holiday spirit. Kaylee was pleased with their work, but she didn't want to say so until Mary had voiced her opinion.

Instead of saying anything, Mary descended the front steps and gazed back at the mansion from the middle of the quiet street. Most of the downtown shops were closed, though a few restaurants nearby were open. This was another Turtle Cove tradition Kaylee loved. The shop owners enthusiastically participated in the post-Thanksgiving shopping frenzy on Friday and Saturday. But this Sunday was a day of rest, the last one they'd have for a while as they catered to the holiday crowds.

Kaylee joined Mary in the street, lifting her face to the first snowflakes floating from the skies.

"Reese will be here tomorrow to put up the outside lights," Kaylee said. Kaylee and Reese Holt, the town's most sought-after handyman, had settled into an easygoing, comfortable friendship since Kaylee had come to live here.

"That will be like tying the bow on a vase," Mary said. "The perfect final touch."

The two women stood in silence for a few moments, both gazing at the historic Victorian with its many rooms and secrets. Kaylee supposed not even her grandmother, who had owned The Flower Patch for many years, knew all the mansion's nooks and crannies, nor all its mysteries.

The screech of brakes followed by the revving of a car engine broke the evening's peaceful tranquility. A bright red compact car on Shoreline Drive, the street that bordered the ocean, backed up, then turned onto Main Street.

Kaylee and Mary stepped onto the sidewalk as the vehicle came toward them. The driver slid to an abrupt stop and switched off the ignition.

"How strange," Mary said. "That's Gina Beckett. What in the world is she doing here?"

"I hope she's not complaining about her husband's flowers," Kaylee whispered, then forced a smile as an attractive brunette emerged from the car.

"Surely not," Mary whispered back then took a couple of steps forward. "Hi, Gina. What brings you downtown on a day like today?"

"I was on my way to Wildflower Cottage to see you." Gina's unflinching gaze bored into Kaylee, causing her to shift uncomfortably. "Then I just happened to glance down Main Street and there you were. Right in the street. It was a sign."

Kaylee inwardly groaned while her mind raced to think what Gina could have to complain about. The floral arrangements she and Mary had created for her husband's funeral were exactly what Gina had ordered—after changing her mind at least a dozen times.

Before Kaylee could speak, Mary gestured toward the mansion. "We were admiring the window displays."

Gina glanced at the windows then turned back to Kaylee without commenting on them. "I need to talk to you. It's very important."

"Perhaps I should be leaving," Mary said diplomatically.

"There's no need," Gina replied. "Maybe you can help too."

Kaylee and Mary exchanged curious glances, and Kaylee was even more certain Gina had a complaint.

"We'll help however we can," Kaylee said. "Let's go inside. We have a saucepan of cocoa on the stove."

"None for me," Gina said as they climbed the steps to the porch. "I'm glad I saw you. Saved me from driving all the way to your cottage."

"I'm glad too," Kaylee said. The only thing worse than handling a customer complaint was handling one in her home.

Fortunately, the majority of her customers loved their flowers and arrangements. She treated the few who didn't with as much grace and kindness as possible. Sometimes it seemed the unhappy customer only needed someone to listen. And after years of working with college students in her former life as a professor, Kaylee was skilled at listening. Still, complaints caused her neck muscles to tighten.

The women entered the shop, and Bear immediately greeted them with a bark and a fast-waving tail.

"Cute dog," Gina said perfunctorily.

"Thanks," Kaylee replied. "Why don't we go to the consultation area—I mean, the kitchen? We can talk in there."

The consultation area had the most comfortable seating, but large photographs of bridal bouquets lined the walls while cake toppers and other wedding items lined the shelves. It wasn't at all appropriate for meeting with a young woman whose husband had died only a week before.

"That's fine," Gina said. "Wherever you think best."

As soon as they were seated at the table, Gina pulled an envelope from her handbag. "I have something very important to show you. I hardly know what to think of it."

Curiosity replaced the dread in Kaylee's stomach. Maybe Gina wasn't here to complain after all. "What is it?" she asked.

"A note. A clue." Gina's wide-eyed gaze shifted between Kaylee and Mary. The uptight, terse persona disappeared as Gina transformed into someone with a bright and engaging personality.

"What kind of clue?" Kaylee asked.

"I don't know." Gina's voice trembled as if she were on the verge of tears, but her eyes gleamed with excitement. "That's why I brought it to you. I don't know what to make of it."

"To me?" Kaylee glanced again at Mary who shrugged subtly, clearly just as baffled as Kaylee.

"Who else? Everyone in town knows how great you are at solving mysteries. And this one has to be easy compared to some of the other cases you've been involved in."

"I'm not a detective," Kaylee hedged as she puzzled over Gina's odd demeanor. Self-assured one moment and choked with emotion the next, the young widow was a study in contradictions.

"This case will be fun," Gina said, brushing away Kaylee's protest. "Well, sad too. But there's no murder involved. I'd think you would be glad of that."

"Thrilled," Kaylee said flatly. Did Gina think she enjoyed solving murders? Gracious, no. They and other mysteries just seemed to come her way.

"Why don't you tell us about your note?" Mary said.

"I found it about an hour ago in Jake's boating office. You know, down at the marina. I was trying to find the checkbook, and I accidentally pulled the drawer out too far. But then the drawer wouldn't slide back in." Gina tapped the envelope. "This had fallen behind it."

"A note to Jake?" Kaylee asked.

"From Jake." Gina slid the envelope toward Kaylee. "See? It's addressed to me."

The printed lettering, written in a masculine hand, said: *To my only love.*

"Go ahead," Gina urged. "Open it."

Kaylee glanced at Mary then slid a card from the envelope. When she opened the card, a pressed sprig of lavender fell to the table, along with pressed lavender rose petals. The old-fashioned fragrance wafted upward, reminding Kaylee of long-ago summer mornings when she and her grandfather walked through the lavender fields behind the cottage.

"Isn't it romantic?" Gina said, her voice wavering. "Our

anniversary is next month. I'm sure he meant this as a surprise. Only now—" She stopped. "I still can't believe he's gone."

Mary placed a box of tissues on the table and squeezed Gina's arm. "I'm so sorry," she said. "You and Jake should have celebrated many more anniversaries together."

Kaylee hadn't met the Becketts before Jake's death, though she'd seen them around town a few times. But even she'd been shocked to learn that he had died of a heart attack. According to the obituary, he'd celebrated his twenty-sixth birthday only a couple of months ago.

"Read the note, Kaylee," Gina urged. "Please."

Kaylee cleared her throat and read the note aloud.

*Let the adventure begin*

*Where vacations begin*

*For those not at home on the isle.*

*You know what to do to find the next clue.*

*These numbers reveal the smile.*

*48.597805, -122.943944*

"What does it mean?" Kaylee asked.

"If I knew I wouldn't be here," Gina replied. "You have to help me figure it out, Kaylee. This is the last gift I have from Jake. If you don't help me—" Her voice caught and more tears gushed down her cheeks. "If you don't help me, I don't know what to do."



After giving Gina time to compose herself, Kaylee read the note out loud again.

Mary turned to Gina. "You must have some idea what he's talking about."

"But I don't. It's the best kind of mystery." Now that the tears were over, Gina was once again strangely upbeat. She shrugged out of her coat and propped her elbows on the kitchen table. "Where do vacations begin? At first, I thought maybe the marina. You know, with all the whale-watching tours and that kind of thing. But what does any of that have to do with a smile?"

"I can't imagine." Mary shifted her gaze to Kaylee. "Can you?"

"There's something about these numbers . . ." Kaylee pointed at the last line.

"Maybe they're a combination," Gina said. "Except Jake didn't have a safe, so I hope they aren't. A combination, I mean."

"It doesn't look like a phone number," Mary said.

"It's not. I tried dialing it, just in case. But I only got that recording. You know, 'Your call cannot be completed as dialed.'"

As the other two women talked, Kaylee concentrated on the spacing between the numbers. She'd seen numbers like these before.

"I know what they are," she said.

Mary and Gina stared at her.

"I used to date someone who was into satellite locations, things like that, when GPS was just getting started."

"These numbers are for a satellite?" Gina asked doubtfully. "What do satellites have to do with Orcas Island? Or with Jake?"

"They're a location," Kaylee said. "Longitude and latitude."

"I still don't get it," Gina replied.

"I do," Mary said. "It's a geocache."

"That's right." Kaylee pointed to the numbers again. "The first geocaching occurred near Portland, Oregon. This guy I used to date, he and I spent a lot of weekends tracking down locations. We even created a few of our own."

"Whatever happened to that guy?" Mary teased.

"He moved to Alaska to study weather patterns. I wasn't that keen on going with him."

Mary opened her mouth to say something, but Gina spoke before she could.

"Why would Jake leave me a geocache? We've never done anything like that before. I wouldn't even know how."

"It's not that hard. All you need is a geocache app. I'll show you." Kaylee pulled out her phone and searched for an appropriate app. Once it downloaded, she plugged in the numbers. A map of the southern shore of Orcas Island appeared on the screen. A red star marked the specific location.

Kaylee zoomed in on the star and smiled.

"There you have it, ladies. Where vacations begin for those who don't live here."

"Where?" Gina and Mary asked as they both tried to see the small screen in Kaylee's hand.

"The ferry landing."

Mary picked up the note. "It's easy once you know the answer, isn't it?"

"I still don't get it," Gina said. "Jake wanted me to go to the ferry landing? Why?"

"To find whatever he hid there," Kaylee said.

"I'm supposed to search the entire place? Why would he expect me to do that?"

"The numbers are more specific," Kaylee explained. "You

may have to search a bit, but you should be able to find the cache without too much trouble. Just download this app on your phone and follow the directions."

"You make it sound so easy." Gina's lips pressed into a pout as she rummaged through her bag. "He could have just written an address."

Kaylee and Mary exchanged glances. Mary patted Gina's hand. "I'm sure he meant well. He probably thought you'd enjoy a little mystery."

"Besides," Kaylee added, "addresses don't always work. The coordinates could be for, I don't know, a tree or maybe a lamppost. We found a cache buried beneath the slide at a school playground."

"I suppose you're right." Gina sounded doubtful but she held up her phone. "What's the app?"

Kaylee told her and Gina soon had the app installed on her phone. She entered the coordinates and the same map appeared on the screen.

"Guess I'll be driving to the ferry landing tomorrow. I just hope wherever he hid this thing won't be hard to find. I don't want to dig under a slide."

Kaylee ignored Gina's petulance and picked up the sprig of lavender. "Could this be a clue too?"

"And the part about a smile," Mary chimed in. "Perhaps that means something."

"Like what? Lavender grows all over this island. And who doesn't smile when they're on vacation?" Gina placed the sprig, petals, and card back into the envelope, shoved it into her bag, and stood. "Thanks for the help, Kaylee. At least now I know what those numbers mean."

"You're welcome." Kaylee led the way to the front of the shop while Gina put on her coat. "If you need anything else, just let me know."



"Do you mean that?"

Kaylee startled at the bluntness of the question. "Of course I mean it."

"Then come with me."

"What?"

"Come with me tomorrow. To the ferry." The pleading in Gina's eyes matched the tone of her voice. "You said you've done this kind of thing before. You'll know what to look for, where something could be hidden."

"I can't," Kaylee blurted, more because she was stunned at Gina's invitation than any other reason. Her mind scurried to soften the refusal. After all, Gina had just lost her husband. Her grief was almost palpable. But something more than grief seemed to have hold of Gina. Kaylee couldn't quite put her finger on it, but Gina was behaving—well, oddly. Her mood seemed to bounce between morose pouting and nervous energy. Driving to the ferry and back with her would be exhausting.

"There's so much to do here at the shop," she finally said. "This is one of our busiest times."

"I understand." Gina gazed around as if seeing the shop for the first time. "You have quite a successful business here, don't you?"

"We do all right."

"Jake had such dreams for his business. He built and repaired boats. It wasn't easy getting started, but he had some money saved. Enough to buy the business from the previous owner's widow, and he worked hard. I didn't much care for the long hours, but he promised we'd be rich someday. And then he died."

Pelted with guilt arrows, Kaylee didn't know what to say. She stood like a mannequin while Mary placed a motherly arm around Gina's shoulders.

"Jake was a go-getter, that's for sure," she said. "I'm sure he would have been a success."

"Thanks, Mary." Gina's eyes filled again. "I don't want to take up any more of your time, so I'll be going."

"Good luck tomorrow," Kaylee said. "I hope you find the cache."

"I hope so too. It'll be awfully sad if I don't."

Before Kaylee or Mary could say anything else, Gina was out the door and scurrying to her car.

"I feel so bad for her," Kaylee said. "And guilty."

"For not going with her?"

"You know me so well. But how can I? I've got appointments, orders, design work. Plus Christmas shopping and baking, and Reese is coming tomorrow. It's too much." Kaylee ended her mini tirade with a sigh. She did have a lot of items on her to-do list. But so did everyone else. Why was she making herself into a holiday martyr? "I'm sorry, Mary."

"No apologies needed. Though you do sound tired. I think we've done enough for one day, don't you?"

Before Kaylee answered, a knock sounded against the windowpane. Jessica Roberts's smiling face was practically pressed against the glass. Kaylee waved her in, and Jessica stamped her boots on the welcome mat.

"It's snowing," she announced.

"We know," Kaylee said. "What brings you by?"

"I got a new mystery from DeeDee's bookstore but left it at the bakery. I want to read it tonight."

"That's the advantage of an e-reader," Mary said. "You can access your library anytime from anywhere."

"Well, we have to support DeeDee," Jessica returned. "And call me old-fashioned, but I like a *real* book. Especially when it's signed by the author."

"You got Lorelei Lewis's latest?" Mary said then laughed. "Try saying that three times fast."

"No thanks. And yes, I did. DeeDee read an advance copy and said it's amazing. One of Lorelei's best."

"That's great," Kaylee said. "Sounds like things have worked out well for her." The first mystery Kaylee encountered after moving to Turtle Cove had indirectly involved the flamboyant author. And Kaylee's first wedding job had been for Lorelei's spoiled daughter and a guy nobody seemed to like except for his head-over-heels-in-love bride. It was hard to believe so much time had passed since then. From what Kaylee had heard through the Turtle Cove grapevine, Lorelei's daughter and son-in-law were blissfully happy.

"Your window displays are beautiful," Jessica said. "Mine are next, right?"

"You bet," Kaylee said. "As soon as you decide what theme you want. Will it be 'Chocolate Around the World' or 'Nutcracker's Enchanting Sweets'?"

"They both sound so fun and festive. You choose."

"Not going to happen," Kaylee said. "Your shop, your windows, your decision."

Jessica playfully groaned. "I'll let you know by noon tomorrow. Promise. I just saw Gina Beckett leaving. What was she doing here?"

"Curiosity . . ." Mary said in a lilting voice, leaving the rest of the phrase unspoken.

"That's why a cat has nine lives," Jessica retorted good-naturedly. "Curiosity kills it but can't keep it dead."

Kaylee laughed at her best friend's logic. "It's not a secret, really," she said. "Apparently Jake left Gina a note and she needed help deciphering it."

Jessica's eyes widened. "Like a code? Why did he do that?"

"She said it was probably an anniversary surprise."

"Did you figure it out?"

"Naturally," Mary said proudly. "Kaylee is Turtle Cove's Miss Marple, only younger and prettier. It took her maybe a minute."

"Thanks a lot, Mary," Kaylee said with a laugh.

"The note included numbers," Mary continued, "and Kaylee figured out they were a geocache location. To the ferry landing."

"He hid something for her there?" Jessica asked.

"Apparently."

"What fun!" Jessica exclaimed, then frowned. "Except, of course, that Jake is dead. Such a young man. It's really sad, isn't it?"

Kaylee and Mary murmured agreement.

"At least she'll be okay. Jake made sure Gina was protected."

"What do you mean?" Kaylee asked.

"The insurance policy," Jessica said offhandedly. "It's no surprise, really. Term insurance is cheap for young people, so they can get a substantial policy without spending a fortune."

"How substantial?" Kaylee held up her hand and shook her head. "Forget I asked. It's none of my business."

"Nor mine," Mary said. "But now I'm the curious cat."

"I don't really know," Jessica said. "Gina and her insurance agent were in the shop the other day talking, and she was signing papers. However much it was, I got the impression Gina was pleasantly surprised."

"The things people talk about in public," Mary tsked. "Private business should be discussed in private."

"What fun would that be?" Jessica asked in mock horror. "I think it must be an unwritten small-town rule. People say they don't want anyone else knowing their business, but there's nowhere they'd rather meet their accountants and lawyers and insurance agents than in a comfy bakery with good coffee and delicious pastries. Which is good business for me."

"And good for us too," Mary admitted. "I suppose it is the best way to be in the know on what's going on around here."

"I'm glad for her," Kaylee said. "Gina, I mean. That she'll be okay."

"But?" Mary asked.

"No 'but,'" Kaylee said. Though that wasn't quite true. The guilt of not agreeing to go with Gina was eating at her. Why did saying a simple *no* have to be so hard? Everything she had told Mary was true—her to-do list was long, her calendar swamped.

To distract her thoughts, she scooped Bear onto the counter and straightened his holiday bow tie. He licked her fingers, and she grinned and scratched behind his ears.

Mary glanced at the clock. "I need to go, but I'll be here bright and early in the morning."

"Thanks for all your help," Kaylee said. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"I know." Mary gave her a tender smile. "Your grandmother used to say the same."

"I'll get going too." Jessica headed toward the door, then stopped and turned back to Kaylee. "The music from *The Nutcracker* is going around and around in my head. There. I made the decision."

"So you definitely want the 'Nutcracker's Enchanting Sweets' theme?" Kaylee asked.

"Definitely," Jessica said, though doubt weakened her tone.

"You're sure?"

Jessica groaned and covered her face. "I don't know!"

Kaylee shook her head with a grin. "Oh, Jess. How about if we do the Nutcracker theme for Christmas and the Around the World theme for Valentine's Day? Then you can have both."

"Do they celebrate Valentine's Day around the world?" Jessica asked.

"If they don't, they should."

"I like it." Jessica gripped the door handle. "It's decided. Thanks, Kaylee."

She opened the door and, after a final wave, closed it behind her.

"Finally," Mary said. "I didn't think she was ever going to choose."

"At least we guessed right," Kaylee said as she reached under the counter for Bear's winter coat. "Don't you ever tell her I already ordered the nutcracker soldiers."

"My lips are sealed." Mary put on her coat and wrapped a long scarf around her neck. "You ready to go?"

"As soon as I do a quick walk-through. I want to make sure everything is ready for tomorrow. But you go ahead."

"I don't mind waiting."

"No need, but thanks."

After Mary left, Kaylee washed their mugs, then checked the calendar and the order sheet for the next day. After she fastened Bear's coat around his chest, she locked the front door and turned out the lights in the windows. As darkness descended on the shop and she headed out the back door, an unsettled feeling descended on Kaylee.

She couldn't get the image of Gina's pleading gaze out of her mind. But really, how could she possibly take time to go to the ferry? Gina could do this on her own. She *should* do it on her own. Or she could ask one of her friends to go with her.

This wasn't Kaylee's problem.

So why did she feel like it was?