

Deadhead and Buried





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Jan Fields

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Kaylee Bleu hated leaving her adorable dachshund behind when she went out to eat. Somehow, Bear’s big brown eyes always made her feel guilty. Therefore, O’Brien’s restaurant was one of Kaylee’s favorite spots on Orcas Island, and she was grateful that her friend Mary Bishop had suggested it for dinner. Not only was the food delicious, but the large patio was dog friendly. Bear was a bit of a social butterfly but also well-behaved, so he’d become a favorite at O’Brien’s.

As the quiet bustle of diners and servers murmured around them, Kaylee shifted in her seat, careful not to move her ankle, where Bear’s warm body pressed against her. It being summer, she didn’t exactly need the extra doggy furnace, but she liked knowing where he was.

She peeked across the table over the top of her menu. Mary’s head was bowed as she pored over her own menu. Mary had been preoccupied and quiet ever since she’d come back from her trip to the mainland to attend a funeral. Kaylee had done her best to give Mary space—and made doubly sure to keep up her side of the load at her shop, The Flower Patch, where Mary was a part-time florist—but she couldn’t help worrying. What if the passing of her friend had made Mary think about retiring? After all, she’d retired once before, leaving her job as dispatcher for the sheriff’s department. Mary always said she loved working at The Flower Patch, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t decide to give it up for more free time. Kaylee fidgeted nervously. What would she do without Mary’s help? When Kaylee’s grandmother, Bea Lyons, had owned the shop, she’d relied heavily on Mary, and

when Kaylee took over the business, she did the same.

Kaylee's worry certainly hadn't decreased when Mary nervously asked Kaylee to join her for dinner so they could talk. *Please don't tell me you're going to quit*, Kaylee begged silently. She would be completely lost without Mary's help.

Kaylee felt the pressure on her ankle shift, and she smiled down at Bear, who was particularly handsome this evening in his bright blue bow tie. Kaylee knew that the little dog had noticed Mary's change in mood as well. He was acting unusually reserved around Mary, and it probably wasn't because she smelled like her new kitten, Lily. In fact, Kaylee hadn't seen Bear beg Mary for a treat in days. Since the dachshund's one true weakness was dog cookies, his hesitance to beg spoke volumes about Mary's odd behavior. As nervous as Kaylee felt about whatever bombshell Mary planned to drop on her, a part of her would be glad when it was over.

To Kaylee's surprise, the warm pressure on her ankle lifted, and Bear scooted to the limits of his leash and gave one sharp bark. Kaylee recognized it as his greeting. He'd clearly spotted someone he knew, and, judging by the wild wagging of his tail, it was someone he liked a lot. Kaylee followed his gaze and immediately spotted Deputy Nick Durham leading a lovely young woman by the hand.

Kaylee smiled. The charming sheriff's deputy always made a fuss over Bear whenever he saw him. It was no wonder he was one of Bear's favorite people.

True to form, Nick turned at the sound of Bear's bark and waved at Mary and Kaylee. "I see you ladies have a handsome date for dinner," he called, gesturing at Bear.

"I wouldn't want Herb thinking Bear is moving in on his lady," Kaylee said, "so I'd best claim Bear as my date."

Mary laughed. "Don't worry. Herb doesn't mind sharing

my affections with Bear.”

The little dog sat up on his haunches and pawed the air, one of his standby tricks for getting attention.

Nick’s date clapped her hands together. “He is adorable. I’d love to get a little dog. I’m sure he’s wonderful company.” She beamed at Nick. “Don’t you think that would be great? I love animals. Honestly, I’d live in a zoo if I was able.”

“Oh no,” Nick said in mock alarm. “I’d better get you to our table before he charms you away from me.” He wagged a finger at Bear as if warning him off.

Bear sat up and pawed the air again, not intimidated in the least.

Kaylee laughed. If there was one person on Orcas Island—or in the entire state of Washington, for that matter—who couldn’t point fingers at anyone else for charming others, it was Nick Durham. He was a good guy, but an absolutely incorrigible flirt.

Nick grinned back at Kaylee, almost as if he read her thoughts in her expression. “Have a nice evening, ladies,” he said, then led his date away. The young woman cast one last glance over her shoulder at Bear, appearing almost wistful.

Bear seemed disappointed that he hadn’t gotten any petting out of the encounter. He trotted back to his position at Kaylee’s side and flopped down on the end of her foot with a sigh. Kaylee glanced across the table at Mary, only to see her waving at someone else.

Jessica and Luke Roberts stood at the edge of the patio, waving back at Mary. Kaylee raised a hand in greeting as Jessica towed Luke over to their table. As always, they made a handsome couple. Though nearly ten years older than Kaylee, Jessica—with her coal-black hair and her brown eyes usually alight with excitement—seemed the same age or younger. She owned Death by Chocolate, the bakery next to The Flower Patch, and her sparkling

personality helped make the dessert shop a Turtle Cove favorite. Luke, a tax accountant, had a quieter nature, radiating a kind of strong stability that always struck Kaylee as a nice contrast to Jessica's energy and enthusiasm.

As soon as they reached the table, Jessica took Mary's hand. "I haven't seen you since you got back to the island. I was beginning to think you'd lost your love for my coffee." Jessica's tone was teasing, but then her smile faded. "I'm so sorry to hear about your friend."

Mary's return smile was strained. "Thank you. It was a difficult time, but I'm glad to be home again."

Glad to be home, Kaylee thought, but clearly still upset.

"And we're glad to have you back." Jessica widened her eyes in mock alarm. "Especially with the summer teen program about to begin."

"Why don't you and Luke join us?" Mary suggested. "I'd love to hear what you're going to do with the kids. It was wonderful of you to take on so much of the work for the program."

Kaylee nearly frowned as Jessica thanked Mary for the invitation and Luke pulled out a chair. Was Mary going to include Jessica and Luke in whatever talk she'd invited Kaylee out to have? Or was this Mary chickening out? *That's it, Kaylee thought despairingly. She's planning to quit. Why else would she put off telling me? What am I going to do?*

"Did you know Nick Durham has a new girlfriend?" Mary asked, nodding in the direction of Nick's table.

"I did," Jessica said. "She looks just like Kaylee."

Startled, Kaylee turned toward Nick's table. His date was slender with long, straight dark brown hair, so she supposed that was a similarity. However, while Kaylee's skin tone was more olive, Nick's date had a golden-brown tan that probably faded in the winter. "I don't really see it," she said.

"Of course you don't. We never see ourselves quite the way other people see us," Jessica said lightly, but immediately returned to the topic of Nick's date. "Her name is Felicia Lewis. She's been in *Death by Chocolate* several times. And not always with Nick."

"That's not shocking," Kaylee said. "His job takes up a lot of his time."

"Perhaps," Jessica said, her eyes sparkling. "But she used to come in with Isaac Pine, and they were definitely close."

"I don't know that name," Kaylee said.

"He's one of the summer people," Mary explained. "He's been in The Flower Patch a few times over the years, usually to pick up flowers when his parents were visiting the island. His mother loves entertaining. I don't think his parents summer on Orcas Island anymore, though. Isaac is a quiet sort, but always very polite."

"And rich," Luke put in, making everyone stare at him in surprise. Luke normally ignored the conversation if it tended toward gossip. His face reddened. "I happen to know his family's land here is of interest to developers. It's quite an extensive piece of property."

"Ugh." Mary pulled a face. "Developers are the bane of the islands. They can turn a beautiful village into some kind of tourist theme park."

"I think that's the goal, generally," Jessica said.

"I wouldn't worry about that piece of land." Luke waved a hand dismissively. "I'm fairly sure the Pines have no interest in letting it go." His gaze fell on Nick's table for the first time, and he frowned. "And as much as I like Nick, I strongly disapprove of anyone moving in on someone else's girlfriend. Isaac Pine seems like a good sort."

"We don't know that Nick did anything like that," Kaylee said loyally. Though Nick's flirting could be mildly annoying, she liked him. He was a good deputy, and he'd certainly helped

her more than once. "That doesn't sound like him."

"I don't know about that," Jessica said. "He is a flirt. Though I do like Felicia. She seems very sweet."

"She liked Bear." In Kaylee's book, anyone who appreciated her beloved dog certainly got the benefit of the doubt.

"Well, if Nick has stolen someone's girl, he may end up with a punch in the nose," Luke said. "I like Nick, but where women are concerned, I'm not sure he's entirely blameless."

"I think we're in for a major crisis." Jessica sighed. "Oliver has been very droopy lately. I think we're going to see some kind of storm coming." She gazed pointedly at Nick's table. "And that might be the eye of the storm right there."

Kaylee smiled at the dramatic prediction. Oliver was Jessica's lavender geranium, and her friend was convinced that Oliver was psychic. She often saw omens in every drooping leaf or wilted petal. Coupled with her love of conspiracy theories, it was no wonder she saw dire warnings regarding Nick's dating life.

The server arrived to take their orders, and Kaylee was glad their conversation was interrupted. She felt guilty gossiping about Nick. She was pleased that a new topic came up after they'd placed their dinner requests.

As the server left their table, Jessica turned pointedly to Mary. "Are you going to be able to help out with the Learners on Location program?" Jessica asked, referring to the teen project she'd mentioned earlier.

"Of course," Mary said. "Kaylee signed the shop up for a tutorial on the basics of flower arranging. We'll tag team so she can share botanical information on all the flowers."

"Just what every teen boy wants to know," Luke muttered.

Jessica poked him. "Every teen doesn't have to try every project. And some of the boys might like flower arranging."

Luke shrugged. "It's too bad Reese is at a conference on the

mainland. I'm sure he would do a project that's geared a little more toward the boys."

"Again, some boys might *like* flower arranging," Kaylee said. "There are lots of male designers. But if you must know, Reese is going to be back in time to do a program on making things from found and recycled objects, which might be of interest to both the boys and the girls. And Nick is doing a demonstration on animal tracks. So you needn't worry about the poor, bored boys."

"I'll have to remind DeeDee about Reese's program," Jessica said. "She might want to sneak the girls in. Polly and Zoe both love pounding nails." Along with Kaylee, Jessica, and Mary, DeeDee Wilcox was the fourth member of the Petal Pushers, the garden club that had taken on the Learners on Location project.

Luke raised his hands in mock defeat. "I stand corrected. You've clearly got more than enough interesting things for all the kids."

When their food arrived, conversation continued about the program and other summer projects the club might take on. Summer was a busy time on Orcas Island, with lots of people coming and going. Some, like Isaac Pine, lived across Puget Sound in Seattle and had seasonal homes on the island, but others simply visited for the charm and beauty. Though Turtle Cove was one of the smaller villages on Orcas, it offered breathtaking scenery, quaint and sometimes quirky shops, and plenty of things to do and see. Small businesses around town took visitors on whale-watching cruises and rented everything from kayaks and sailboats to bicycles.

About the time they were discussing whether anyone had room for dessert, Nick and Felicia arrived at the table, stopping on their way out. Nick bent to offer Bear a pat on the head, then introduced Felicia.

"We've met at Death by Chocolate," Jessica said, offering the young woman her lovely smile. "Nice to see you, Felicia."

"I love your bakery." Felicia patted her flat stomach. "Although it will get me into trouble if I'm not careful."

"I know the feeling," Kaylee said.

"Kaylee and Mary are at The Flower Patch," Nick said to Felicia. "And they're all in that gardening group I told you about, the Petal Pushers." He turned to Kaylee. "Felicia is crazy about flowers, and I thought she might be able to visit your group. Could she sit in on a meeting?"

Felicia's cheeks were reddening from all the attention. "I do love flowers," the blushing woman said, almost shyly. "There seem to be so many in bloom here."

"You should see Kaylee's house," Nick said. "Her backyard is all wildflowers and lavender. The smell is amazing."

Felicia reddened still more, probably worried that Nick was trying a bit too hard to push her into the group. "It sounds lovely."

"You should come by the shop," Mary suggested warmly. "We're going to be demonstrating flower arranging as part of a summer program for teens from the mainland. We would love to have another hand to help with the kids if you're interested."

Felicia brightened at the invitation. "That sounds like fun, though I don't know how much help I'll be. I can pass out ribbons or something, but I'd be right there with the teens hanging on your every word. I'd love to learn more about flower arranging."

"Then we'll plan on your coming," Mary said, and she gave the young woman the details for the demonstration.

Just as Mary finished briefing Felicia, a strange man walked up to their table, his gaze so fixed on Felicia that Kaylee doubted he even noticed any of the rest of them. The man was tall and slender, with close-cropped blond hair and freckles. His eyes were very blue and his mouth was set in a thin line.

He caught Felicia by the arm. "I need to talk to you," he told her. "Right now."

Nick grabbed the man's wrist, just above where he held Felicia's arm. "Back off, Pine."

Kaylee realized the man must be Felicia's former boyfriend, Isaac Pine. Judging by his serious expression as he stared back at Nick, he wasn't done with the relationship. Bear growled deep in his chest, upset by his friend's angry voice. Kaylee scooted her chair back slightly and scooped Bear up to quiet him.

"This has nothing to do with you, Deputy Durham," Isaac said. Though he had let go of Felicia's arm, he gazed at her intensely over Nick's shoulder. "You need to talk to me. Now."

"That's it," Nick said, twisting Isaac's arm behind him. "You're out of here!"

Bear barked once as Nick wrestled the man away from the table.

"Nick!" Felicia gasped, but the deputy didn't look at her as he marched his detainee toward the edge of the patio, leaving Felicia staring after the men with wide, frightened eyes.

2



For a moment, it seemed as if the whole restaurant was frozen by the conflict they'd just seen. Then Mary stood up and spoke gently to Felicia. "Would you like to sit with us while you wait for Nick?"

Felicia faced the table, then managed a weak smile. "No, thank you. I should probably go after them." Her voice sounded less than convinced, but she turned to follow them just as Nick stepped back on the patio.

"Here he comes," Jessica said with forced cheer.

Mary sank back into her seat. Kaylee wasn't sure if it was safe to put Bear back down. Nick's face was still red with emotion.

As soon as he reached them, he took Felicia's hand. "It's okay. Isaac's gone."

Felicia snatched her hand back. "You didn't have to be so aggressive with him. What's wrong with you?"

Nick gaped at her. "What's wrong with *me*?"

Her face dark, Felicia stepped around him and stalked off. Nick quickly followed, leaving an awkward silence in his wake.

Mary finally broke the ensuing silence. "Wow. That was dramatic."

"You know," Luke said, "I think you ought to rethink the belief that Nick wouldn't move in on another guy's girlfriend, because it certainly looked to me like there's bad blood between him and Isaac."

"That doesn't mean Nick took his girlfriend," Kaylee argued. "Though I do think Isaac still has feelings for her." She gave Bear a squeeze and set him back down by her chair.

To Kaylee's relief, their server immediately approached to ask if anyone wanted dessert. Since they were all full, Mary just asked for the check. Kaylee noticed her voice sounded as relieved as Kaylee felt. This had certainly been an unusual dinner.

"I can bring some flowers from my garden for your Learners on Location demonstration," Jessica offered while they waited for their server to return. "I know flowers can be expensive, and I have some lovely ones blooming. The zinnias and dahlias are especially impressive this year."

Kaylee smiled, grateful for the donation and the change in topic. "That's so nice of you. I'm going to cut some *Daucus carota* from my garden as well. The lacy texture is a wonderful addition to so many arrangements."

"I know that one," Luke said. "Wild carrot."

"I like the name Queen Anne's lace better," Jessica said. "Makes it sound regal. We have some of that growing wild, but I like the more colorful flowers for my beds."

Kaylee found herself relaxing with the talk of plants. As a trained botanist, there was really no topic that felt more natural to her. She loved everything about plants: their complexity, the amazing way they adapted to their environments, and their benefits to mankind—an area she felt had barely been tapped. She was glad to be out of the cutthroat world of academia that had consumed her entire life before her move to Orcas Island, but she still loved reading about the research others were doing.

"What day did you say Reese was coming back?" Jessica asked, breaking into Kaylee's musings. "I need to talk to him about an irrigation system for my garden."

"I can put that in," Luke protested.

Jessica chuckled. "Right. I think I heard that last year when I first started talking about it." She squeezed his hand to soften the criticism. "You do plenty around the house. I don't think you

have the time for such a big project.”

“In answer to your question, Jess, Reese is coming back on the Thursday morning ferry,” Kaylee added.

“It’s certainly helpful that you know Reese’s schedule so well,” Mary said, her voice slightly teasing.

“It’s just because I helped with the scheduling of the Learners on Location presentations before he left,” Kaylee replied, a little defensively. “I had to make sure we scheduled his presentation on upcycled furniture for when he would actually be on the island.”

“Right.” Jessica’s tone was similar to Mary’s. “You had to know for purely organizational reasons.”

“Now, Jess,” Luke scolded. “Don’t tease. You’re making Kaylee blush.”

Kaylee put up a palm to cool her warm cheek as the server returned. She was grateful as the conversation changed to dividing up the check. She would cheerfully have paid it all just to keep them off the topic of Reese. He was a good friend, and Kaylee enjoyed his company very much, but the Petal Pushers seemed insistent on turning it into something romantic.

The group broke up after the check was paid, and Kaylee walked out to the parking lot with Mary by her side and Bear in her arms. Mary reached over and gave the little dog’s ears a scratch, sending his tail wagging. “He was certainly a good boy this evening.”

Kaylee agreed. “I’ll have to give him an extra treat when we get home.”

When they arrived at their cars, Mary touched Kaylee’s arm. “Can I ask a favor of you?”

“Of course,” Kaylee said, wondering if Mary was finally going to spill what was bothering her. Her stomach tensed. *Don’t quit, please.* “Anything.”

Mary laced her fingers together and stared down at her

hands. “The funeral that Herb and I went to was terrible, and it wasn’t just because I miss my old friend.” She sighed deeply. “As I sat there during the service, I realized none of the choices really seemed right for Anne. She was such a lively person, and she would have hated the choice of music. I know she would. And the floral arrangements had several flowers she hated because they triggered her allergies.”

“That’s too bad,” Kaylee said sympathetically, wondering how this could possibly relate to a favor.

“After the funeral, when I talked to Anne’s family” — again Mary sighed — “half the family seemed furious with the other half. There was this ugly fight, and the most awful things were said. It was horrible. Anne would have been heartbroken to hear it.” She raised her eyes to Kaylee’s. “I don’t want that.”

“I’m sure that won’t happen,” Kaylee said gently. “And that’s a long time in the future. You’re still young and in good health. You don’t need to worry about a funeral.”

“I’m sure Anne thought that too,” Mary said. “That’s the problem: It always seems a long way off until the time comes. I want to make sure nothing like that happens when I’m gone. So I’ve decided to plan my funeral.”

Kaylee’s eyes widened. “Really? How does Herb feel about that?”

“Well, at first he wasn’t in favor of the plan at all. Now he’s come around. Mostly. He’s okay with helping me pick music and things like that.” She stopped and took a deep breath, giving Kaylee the sense that she was about to reveal the favor. “But he has completely refused to come with me to pick out a casket.”

“Oh.” Kaylee could see why Herb would feel that way. She was a bit creeped out by the idea. *Who would want to look at caskets knowing they would be inside one someday?*

“I want to square away *all* the details,” Mary said. “Still, I hate the idea of doing it by myself.”

Kaylee had a sinking feeling about where this was going, and it was confirmed by Mary's next words.

"Would you go with me? I have an appointment with Giles on Tuesday afternoon." Giles Akin was the local coroner, and he also ran Akin Funeral Chapel with his wife, Thelma, and their son, Jay.

Kaylee squirmed a little inside, but she knew that Mary would do her the same favor, and she'd always been there for Kaylee's grandmother as well. Kaylee forced a smile, hoping it came across at least halfway natural. "Of course, Mary. You know I'd do anything for you."

A bright smile blossomed on Mary's face, and she threw her arms around Kaylee. Bear was squeezed into the hug and licked both of their faces, his tail whipping back and forth.

"Thank you," Mary said. "I know it's a lot to ask, but I'll feel so much better once this plan is in place. Honestly, this has been bothering me so much."

"I could tell something was troubling you," Kaylee said. "I'm just glad it's something I can help with." And she meant it. Mary's expression suggested that a huge weight had come off her shoulders. Sure, it was probably going to be an uncomfortable few hours, but it would be well worth it to give her friend some peace of mind.



On Monday morning, Kaylee stood gazing out the windows of her home, Wildflower Cottage, absolutely dazzled by the beauty of the view. The plantings close to the cottage were lovely, but the fields of lavender never failed to delight her. "We live in the best place in the world," she said to Bear, who woofed as if in agreement.

She'd woken early, feeling full of energy. The weather was pleasant and sunny, so Kaylee decided to bike to The Flower Patch. She wanted to feel the tingle of muscles well used, and the exercise would invigorate her. She didn't spend enough time enjoying the beauty of the island face-to-face, rather than through the protective shell of her car.

"How about an adventure today?" she asked Bear, who wore a jaunty polka-dot bow tie that Kaylee had picked out to match her mood. Unsurprisingly, he yipped and raced around her excitedly.

Kaylee wheeled the bicycle out of the shed and hooked Bear's harness into the doggy seat. The little dog sat patiently as she made sure he was secure, though his tail wagged hard, thumping rhythmically against the seat. "I know," Kaylee said. "I'm excited too." She swung a leg over the bike and set off.

Since it was early morning, the road into town was empty, giving Kaylee plenty of opportunity to admire the quiet countryside. Closer to town, the road would hug the coastline on one side, but at the beginning of Kaylee's ride, the passing scenery was a mix of sparse woodland lined with mostly firs, cedars, and madrone trees, all evergreen. That meant the view was this beautiful all year round. Now and then, she'd pass one of the small summer cottages rented to guests who wanted a quiet spot in the trees.

As she pedaled, Kaylee realized that her stressful past life as a plant taxonomy professor at the University of Washington felt very far away. Surrounded as she was by nature these days, the life of an academic felt almost like a dream she'd had, and not always a pleasant one. She'd had good friends at the university, people who insisted she'd miss the intellectual challenge of academia. True, she did miss some things, but she was certain she'd gained much more than she'd lost.

While she was caught up in her thoughts, a car had joined her on the road, though far behind her. The sound of the roaring engine finally cut through her musings. She glanced in the mirror clipped to her handlebars, but the road was so hilly that she couldn't see the car clearly. "If I can't see him," she murmured, "he might not see me."

Bear must have heard her voice and picked up on her nervousness, because he whined anxiously.

Now that she was paying attention, Kaylee could tell the car coming up behind her was going very fast. She moved as far to the side of the road as she could to give the car plenty of room to pass. She was closer than she liked to the ditch, but with the car coming up so quickly, she thought the driver might be surprised to find her on the road at all, and she wanted to be sure he had plenty of time to react. She'd heard from people in town that guests to the island didn't always share the road as well as one would like.

The speeding car crested the last hill between it and Kaylee. In moments, the car roared by her, but it was too close to the shoulder. Kaylee turned sharply to avoid being clipped by one of the sedan's side mirrors. The movement ran her right off the road and into the ditch, pitching Kaylee off the bike. The car never stopped or even slowed down, and it was out of sight before Kaylee could get back on her feet.

Bear barked excitedly as Kaylee righted the bike and checked him over. "Are you all right?" she asked, brushing dirt and specks of brush from his coat. Bear's response was to lick her cheek. She laughed. "I'll take that as a yes. That was far too close for comfort, wasn't it, boy?"

Kaylee unbuckled Bear from the seat and took him for a short walk in the stand of trees near the road. She needed the time to recover from the near accident before getting back on the bike.

Bear enthusiastically took the opportunity to sniff around trees and in holes. “At least one of us is having a great time,” Kaylee said.

When her knees no longer felt wobbly and her hands stopped shaking, Kaylee buckled Bear back into the seat and headed off again for town. She would no longer be at work early, but she knew Mary would understand once she heard the details. Kaylee wished she’d gotten a glimpse of the car’s driver or even a bit of the license plate. “Not that I’d go to the police,” she muttered. She spoke to the police often enough and doubted they would do much about the driver. After all, he hadn’t hit her.

“I should stop saying ‘he,’” Kaylee said aloud to Bear. “I suppose it could have been a woman as easily as a man. It was probably just someone who wasn’t paying attention. It’s not like that car was aiming for me.” On the other hand, it had been very close—too close. She had trouble believing a driver wouldn’t have seen her. And now that she thought about it, had the vehicle actually swerved toward her?

Don’t be silly, Kaylee.

With a sigh, she realized that the encounter had ruined her enjoyment of the beautiful morning. If she let it, she suspected it would make her jumpy about riding the bike on the island. “And that would just be ridiculous. There’s nothing to be afraid of out here.”

But Kaylee had a nervous flutter in her stomach that lasted all the way to town.