

A Seedy Development





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Elizabeth Penney

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1



When an airport tower became visible above the trees lining the forested road, Kaylee Bleu raised her eyebrows in surprise. “I never knew there was an airport out this way,” she said to her friend and shop assistant, Mary Bishop, who sat in the passenger seat of Kaylee’s SUV. “Seeing is believing, I guess.”

“The Turtle Cove Airport is the smallest airport in the San Juan Islands, but it’s active,” Mary replied, then gestured backward over her shoulder. “Looks like Bear is excited.”

Kaylee glanced in the rearview mirror at the dachshund riding in the back seat, his nose pressed to the window, and she chuckled. “Bear loves airports. They’re another place for him to explore and meet new people.”

Mary pointed to a large sign depicting the silhouette of an airplane and the name of the airfield. “Take the next right.”

As Kaylee slowed to turn, she scanned another sign just past the first one that listed various flying businesses located at the airport. She spotted a shipping service, helicopter scenic tours, and something called an FBO.

“What’s an FBO?” she asked. “And actually, I’m not totally sure what a fly-in is either.” She and Mary were headed to a meeting for vendors participating in Orcas Island, Washington’s, Apple Fest Fly-In, a fall-themed event to be held on the airport grounds. The Flower Patch, the business Kaylee had purchased from her grandmother, was going to host a booth at the multiday event.

“An FBO is a fixed-base operation providing services to pilots,” Mary explained. “Like fuel, repairs, and tie-downs.”

"Tie-downs? You mean they secure parked planes with lines to keep them in place?"

"That's as good a description as any."

"You sure know the lingo," Kaylee said.

Amusement sparkled in Mary's eyes. "I wouldn't know it if my darling husband hadn't bought me a glider ride for my sixtieth birthday."

Kaylee laughed. "Herb sure knows the way to your heart."

"He does still surprise me sometimes, even after all these years," Mary said. "As for your other question, a fly-in is when pilots bring their planes to a certain location for a get-together."

"That's a unique idea." Kaylee navigated her Ford Escape along the winding approach road. "I read in the paper that antique, military, and experimental planes will be exhibited."

Mary nodded. "There's one now."

To their left, a red biplane of World War I-era vintage was taxiing along the runway. A moment later, the aircraft lifted off and soon became a bright dot in the clear blue sky.

Kaylee brought her gaze back to earth to focus on her destination, a cluster of metal buildings ahead. "Oh good. Jess and DeeDee are here," she observed when she saw their vehicles among the others in the parking lot. Along with Mary and Kaylee, Jessica Roberts and DeeDee Wilcox rounded out the Petal Pushers garden club.

For the Apple Fest, Jessica and DeeDee were sharing Kaylee's booth to sell items related to their own businesses. While Kaylee planned to offer wreaths and other decorations from her flower shop, Jessica would bring loads of delicious treats from her bakery, Death by Chocolate, which sat beside The Flower Patch on Turtle Cove's Main Street. DeeDee would be selling her handmade goat milk soap as well as any apple- or flying-themed books she had in stock at her mystery bookstore, Between the Lines, another Main Street business.

As Kaylee pulled into the parking area, she caught sight of an orchard with heavily laden trees beyond a tall mesh fence at the end of the lot. Considering the orchard's close proximity to the airport and the apple theme of the fest, she wondered if the orchard owner was involved with the event.

Kaylee slid her SUV into a spot at the end of the lot next to a shiny black pickup she recognized instantly as belonging to the island's most popular handyman, Reese Holt. Her pulse ratcheted up a tiny bit at the thought of seeing her handsome friend.

"This is a good turnout," Mary said. "The Turtle Cove Festivities Committee must have done a great job getting the word out."

"I'm not surprised," Kaylee said. "They always bring their A game when they're prepping for special events."

Mary unlatched her seat belt and picked up her purse. "The Apple Fest is a little outside their purview, but hopefully it'll bring lots of visitors to town."

"The more the merrier," Kaylee said, then climbed out and went to the back to clip Bear's leash to his collar. He hopped out of the car and started trotting toward a pair of double doors on the closest building, clearly assuming that Kaylee and Mary would come along.

A sign beside the propped-open doors denoted the building as the Turtle Cove FBO. The sound of voices drifted out, but the muffled noise was soon overpowered by a throaty rumble coming from the parking lot.

Kaylee stopped and turned toward the source of the roar. A huge, red diesel pickup barreled between lines of parked cars right toward her and Bear.

Kaylee prepared to scoop up her dog and leap out of the way, but the truck screeched to a halt a few feet away from her.

The driver's side window was rolled down, revealing a scowling blonde woman in a lime-green windbreaker at the wheel. The passenger side door opened, and a short, stout man wearing khakis and a polo shirt slid down.

"Don't bother to pick me up," he said, an English accent flavoring his words. "I'll catch a ride with Brett." He slammed the door.

Leaning out of her open window, the woman yelled at him, "I'm calling my lawyer tomorrow!"

The man flapped a hand and stomped along the pavement. Under one arm, he carried a leather portfolio. The truck roared off, looping back onto the road with a squeal of tires. The diesel engine's grumble receded into the distance.

"Wasn't that nice?" Mary muttered as she and Kaylee started walking again, eager to distance themselves from the feuding couple.

When the man caught up with them near the entrance, Kaylee did her best to pretend she hadn't heard a thing. "Good evening," she said when it became apparent not greeting him would be rude.

"Evening," he replied with a short nod. He stood back to let them enter the building first, then brushed past them as they walked into a large room full of people.

Rows of folding chairs were set up in the middle of the space, which had big picture windows viewing the runway. Two long tables were set up to one side, offering drinks and plates of cookies. A young man with frizzy hair and a petite, older woman with pale, permed curls lingered near a podium at the front of the room, apparently waiting for the meeting to begin. The man from the parking lot joined them.

Kaylee glanced around. Closed doors marked *Office* and *Restrooms* led off the main room, and a kitchenette was located in an alcove, but that appeared to be the extent of the place. Although

his truck was parked outside, Reese was nowhere to be seen.

"Kaylee, Mary, over here. We saved your seats." Jessica waved from a chair in the middle row. Beside her, DeeDee smiled and lifted a paper cup, indicating that they should get themselves some refreshments. Their purses rested on two adjacent chairs. Most of the other seats were full or reserved with a coat or bag.

"Want something to drink?" Mary asked. "I think I'd like a coffee."

"That sounds good." Kaylee followed Mary to the table, where they availed themselves of coffee and chocolate oatmeal cookies.

"Mmmm. I can tell who made these cookies," Mary said, nodding toward Jessica.

"Jess's touch is unmistakable," Kaylee agreed.

The duo edged their way through the chairs, Bear trotting along behind them. People paused their visiting to greet the adorable dog, who wore a bow tie with a parachute print. Bear had an ever-growing collection of bow ties to suit any occasion, and they made excellent conversation starters.

"Thanks for saving us a place," Kaylee said as she and Mary settled beside DeeDee. Bear sat on the floor, lifting his snout in hopes of dropped crumbs. Not wanting him to feel left out, Kaylee found a biscuit in her bag for him.

"You made it just in time." DeeDee nodded toward the clock on the wall, which indicated it was a few minutes past the hour.

Kaylee sipped her coffee and delighted in the rich flavor. "Did Jess bring the coffee too?"

Jessica leaned forward so she could see Kaylee across DeeDee. "Sure did. If you'd ever tasted the coffee the manager here makes, you'd thank me."

"Did you notice the organic apple orchard next door?" DeeDee asked. "It belongs to my godfather, Wilfred Bates. He's also a pilot and airplane mechanic."

"That's handy," Kaylee said. "Being right next door to the airport."

DeeDee scowled. "Yes, unfortunately other people think that too. They've been—"

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen." The frizzy-haired man at the front of the room had stepped forward to the podium. "I'm Brett Horne, airport manager, and I'd like to welcome you to our humble operation." His smug smile belied his modest words. "Tonight we're going to discuss the upcoming Apple Fest Fly-In, specifically vendor placement and rules." He gestured to the petite, older woman. "I'll let Lorraine Swift here tell you all about it."

DeeDee whispered to Kaylee, "That's Wilfred's lady friend. She's been trying to pin him down for years." She nodded toward a burly young man in the front row wearing a ball cap. "And that's her son, Floyd."

Lorraine smiled wanly at the group as she hustled to the podium. She pulled the microphone down to where she could easily speak into it. "Hello. It's good to see you all. The first annual Apple Fest Fly-In is sure to be a big success with your help."

The sound of an airplane engine grew louder, the motor whining as the craft approached. The audience turned toward the big windows, curious to see what was coming in. Lorraine said another couple of words, something about sign-ups, but gave up once she saw she'd lost her listeners.

A small red-and-white plane taxied along the paved strip, coming to a smooth stop right in front of the building. A door over one wing opened, and two men climbed out. One was older, rangy, and lean, wearing a ball cap. The other was Reese Holt.

"Wilfred gives lessons too," DeeDee said. "He's a flight instructor."

Kaylee sat back against the hard chair, amazed. She'd seen Reese

only yesterday, and he hadn't said a thing about learning to fly.

"Now that you two are here," Lorraine said as instructor and student entered the room, "we can continue."

"Quite an entrance, guys," the shorter, older man at the front of the room cracked. "Should have thought of it myself."

Better than being dropped off by an angry woman, Kaylee thought.

"Yeah, your Beech 18 would have upstaged us for sure, David," Wilfred said, finding a seat in the front row. Reese sat in another vacant seat a few places down.

David nodded in acknowledgment, then returned his attention to Lorraine, who gave the microphone another adjustment. "Let's move on," she said.

Lorraine droned on about vendor paperwork, then answered questions from the audience while passing out a series of forms. After she wrapped up her portion, David took the helm. Kaylee shoved the pile of paper handouts into her bag, thinking that later would be soon enough to go over it all.

"Hi, I'm David Smythe." He spelled his last name for them. "I'm the leading pilot based at this airport."

DeeDee gave a soft snort. "I thought that was Wilfred."

"I won't keep you long," David went on, "but I wanted to let you know about the planes that we've got coming." He clicked a remote and a slideshow began playing on a screen behind the podium. The impressive roster featured retired military bombers, helicopters, and ultralight airplanes. "We have pilots coming from ten states so far," David said, then clicked one more time, revealing what looked like a property map divided into lots.

"Did he have to go there?" DeeDee hissed under her breath.

Kaylee glanced over to see her friend scowling, an expression not frequently seen on the cheerful bookshop owner.

Lorraine stepped forward. "Is this really the best time?" She sent a glance toward the front row, where Wilfred sat.

"It's all right, Lorraine," Brett said. "I told him he could make the announcement."

She subsided and stood near the wall, but her arms were crossed, and she glared at David.

"This is a map of a proposed fly-in community," David announced. "The planning board has given us preliminary approval to create half a dozen house lots on land I own adjacent to the airport."

"What's a fly-in community?" someone called.

"Glad you asked. A fly-in community is built adjacent to a small airport. It includes houses and hangars so pilots can literally walk out their front doors and hop into their airplanes." David smiled. "This project will bring a lot of tax revenue to the island and increase business at this airport. All good things for property owners."

There were more questions, while DeeDee fumed the entire time. Kaylee didn't understand her reaction. The fly-in community sounded neat, reminding her of homes with private docks, but using airspace instead of water.

Once the meeting broke up, however, Kaylee learned the answer. As they stood, DeeDee waved to her godfather. "Wilfred. Over here."

Wilfred picked his way through the chairs, followed by Reese, who greeted Kaylee with a smile. "My new student's not doing too badly," Wilfred told them proudly.

Reese laughed. "It's not the flying, it's the landing that worries me. I have to admit I was glad when we touched down."

"You did a good job, Reese." Lorraine appeared at Wilfred's elbow, her son hovering behind her. "Smooth as silk." Much shorter than her beau, she stood on tiptoes to give him a peck on the cheek.

DeeDee introduced her friends to Wilfred, Lorraine, and

Floyd, then took Wilfred's arm. "Wilfred's always been like a second father to me."

The ruggedly handsome older man patted his goddaughter's arm. "And you've been like a daughter to me." He chuckled. "And Polly and Zoe are like my grandchildren."

"You spoil my daughters too much," DeeDee said lightly. "I'm pretty sure they're the only students at the elementary school who've copiloted a scenic plane tour of Orcas Island."

Lorraine, who'd been listening to this exchange with pursed lips, elbowed her way to the center of the group. "Floyd and I operate Deep Green Cleaning." She pressed business cards on Kaylee, Mary, and Jessica. "We do high-end houses and special projects, here on Orcas and via boat to other islands. Please feel free to pass the cards along to anyone who might need us."

Kaylee tucked the card into her bag. "I own The Flower Patch in town. Quite a few of our customers are putting on events. They might need cleaners, so I'll mention you if it comes up."

"I appreciate that." Seeming pleased, Lorraine turned to her son. "You hear that, Floyd? We might have some new customers."

The young man nodded, seeming content to let his more outgoing mother take the social lead.

"I couldn't believe it when David brought up the development tonight," DeeDee said. "You must have been so upset, Wilfred."

Wilfred shook his head. "Not really. Nothing's going to stop them building on his land."

"My husband went to the planning board meetings, and he told me the proposed houses will add a lot to the tax base," Jessica said. Her husband, Luke, was a tax accountant.

"As long as they stop there." Lorraine rolled her eyes.

Mary, sensitive to social cues, changed the subject. "Did I hear that you're helping with the entertainment lineup, Lorraine?"

"I sure am," Lorraine said. "We need more bands for the

entertainment during the closing party on the last night.”

“Well, have I got a group for you,” Mary said brightly. “My husband, Herb, has been talking to DeeDee and Jess’s husbands. They’re willing to get together and play a set of classic rock songs.”

“Andy agreed?” DeeDee’s mouth dropped open. “He hasn’t played for . . . well, since Zoe was born.” Her smile was reminiscent. “He brought his guitar to the hospital room and played for us.”

“Herb is playing guitar too,” Mary said. “Luke can play bass. Now they only need a drummer.”

“I can handle that,” Reese said. “I’m a pretty fair drummer, if I do say so myself.”

Kaylee regarded Reese with admiration. She’d learned two new things about him tonight: that he was adventurous enough to learn to fly, and he was musical too. She hung back to talk to him as the others filed out of the room. “How was your lesson?” she asked.

“Awesome.” Reese pulled out his wallet and handed Kaylee a plastic card. “This is my student pilot certificate. I even have my own logbook.”

“You’re all official and everything. Congratulations.” She beamed as she handed the card back to him.

“Maybe you can come up with us sometime,” Reese said as he slid the card back into his wallet and pocketed it. “You’ll be safe, since Wilfred will be there.”

Kaylee marveled at the idea of viewing the San Juan Islands from above. “I’d love that.”

As they began walking toward the open door to the parking lot, Kaylee heard voices from outside. When a coarse laugh rang out, she slowed instinctively.

“We can do it the hard way or the easy way.” Kaylee recognized David Smythe’s English accent. “Either way, I’m going to get your land, mate. Count on it.”

2



Reese sent Kaylee a concerned frown, but she shrugged it off and started moving again. Outside, Wilfred and David stood near the entrance. The Petal Pushers chatted with Lorraine and Floyd some distance away. By their body language, Kaylee guessed they hadn't heard David's statement. *Or was it a threat?*

"As I've told you before," Wilfred said as Kaylee and Reese emerged, "I'm not interested in selling. My family has been on that land for over a century."

"I'm afraid it's too late." David clapped Wilfred on the shoulder. "The time for negotiation is coming to an end."

As David walked back into the building, Floyd called out, "David. Hold up." The other man barely looked back as Floyd hurried after him.

"Is everything all right?" Kaylee asked Wilfred, who was staring after the English pilot, seemingly lost in thought.

The older man shook his head. "Fine. Everything is fine." He blinked pale blue eyes that warmed when he drew his gaze from the doorway to Kaylee and Reese. "Are you two coming over to the farm? DeeDee wants me to show you around the orchard."

Kaylee glanced at Mary and her other friends. "I'd love to, but I need to check with Mary. She's riding with me."

Mary agreed enthusiastically to the detour so Kaylee drove over to the farm, which was reached via a lane a short distance down the road that went back toward Turtle Cove. Kaylee had been so intent on finding the airport she hadn't noticed the painted sign, which read:

Bates Fruit Farm

From our family to yours since 1890.

"I've seen their fruit in the supermarket," Mary said. "They grow peaches, cherries, and plums as well as apples."

"Now that you mention it, I have too," Kaylee said. "I recognize the logo."

They navigated along a narrow road between rows of fruit trees with distinctive twisted shapes. To the left were trees filled with yellow, pink, and red apples. The trees on the other side were bare of fruit now, their season having passed.

"I overheard a weird conversation between David and Wilfred," Kaylee said hesitantly. Did she really want to taint such a lovely experience with this conversation? But what else could she do? It was all she could think about. "I got the impression that David wants to buy Wilfred's land."

Mary stared out at the orchard. "I can see the logic of that, since it's adjacent to his. But what a shame if this all became houses. That's happened so often here on the island."

With the value of island land and the desirability of second homes, Kaylee could understand the situation—but that didn't mean she had to like it. She may be a transplant to the island rather than a lifelong resident like Mary, but she had lived there long enough to bristle at the idea of greed or commercialism overrunning the rural character that was part of Orcas Island's charm.

A farmhouse nestled among shade trees came into view at the end of the road. A couple of barns and low metal buildings dotted the surrounding landscape. Near one barn, chickens pecked at the grass. Goats and a horse grazed alongside the chickens, and they raised their heads in curiosity as Kaylee drove by.

Kaylee parked alongside several other cars resting next to the

longest outbuilding, which had a sign that said *Bates Fruit Packing House* mounted on the wall. She left Bear in the car, windows open, because he wasn't allowed inside a food handling area. But on the brisk fall day, he was content with another biscuit to gnaw on and Kaylee's promise that they wouldn't be long.

Kaylee and Mary entered the building and found Jessica, DeeDee, Reese, Lorraine, and Wilfred standing behind a barrier that prevented contamination.

"Welcome to Bates's, ladies," Wilfred said kindly. "Now that you're here, I'll start the tour."

As he led the small group around from station to station, he explained several processes carried out in the building, including washing, inspection, grading, and packing fruit.

"Does all of the fruit make it into the grocery store?" Jessica asked.

"Only the top-grade fruit does," Wilfred answered. "Anything else is sold for processing into applesauce or jelly and the like."

Kaylee nodded toward a sign on the wall that said *USDA Certified Organic*. "And you're organic?"

"Yes ma'am, 100 percent," Wilfred said proudly.

Mary adjusted her glasses, studying the sign. "That's not easy to get."

"It isn't. It starts with the soil and affects every step of the process." Wilfred began listing criteria on his fingers. "No commercial fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides allowed. And we have to get our water tested on a regular basis too."

His audience murmured in amazement and appreciation. Kaylee knew from other apple growers that it was hard producing a flawless apple without chemicals. The fruit was subject to a number of blights and insect attacks. But judging by the ones rotating on the nearby conveyor, Wilfred had the technique down.

"Get this," Lorraine said. "You can't even pack commercial

apples in the same room with organic." Her eyes were aglow with fervor. "But who would mix anyway? It's like my cleaning business. We're green, green, green. That's why we named it what we did."

"Makes sense," Jessica said. "I'll have to ask you for recommendations regarding products. I've been meaning to go more eco-friendly myself."

Before Lorraine could respond, Floyd walked into the building, glanced around, then hurried to join the others.

"Where have you been?" Lorraine asked him, but Kaylee didn't catch his mumbled response.

"Right this way to the orchard, folks," Wilfred said, waving his arm in a wide sweep toward a pair of double doors.

"I'm going to go get Bear," Kaylee told her friends. "He'd love a walk."

"We'll wait for you," DeeDee said.

Kaylee hurried toward the exit, eager not to hold everyone up. As she passed by Lorraine and her son, she heard the older woman ask, "What did David say about the lessons?"

Floyd grunted in disgust. "He said no, even though you already paid for them. He said I was the least natural pilot he'd ever had the misfortune of teaching—"

Feeling like she was eavesdropping, Kaylee tuned out their conversation and continued on to her vehicle. But she gathered that the less-than-tactful David had profoundly insulted poor Floyd.

Out in the fragrant orchard, the group—minus Floyd, who had disappeared—strolled between rows of trees. As Kaylee had predicted, Bear loved sniffing at the trees and grass, even the sweet, fallen apples lying here and there.

"We grow Honeycrisp, Gala, Braeburn, and Cripps Pink." Wilfred plucked apples and handed them out. "Just wipe them

to make sure there's no dust. No chemicals on that skin. Never have been, ever since my granddad planted these trees."

Kaylee bit into hers with pleasure, enjoying the tart yet sweet taste as it hit her tongue. *Nothing like a ripe, crisp Malus pumila off the tree.* Referring to plants by their Latin names was a hard habit to break despite having traded the classroom for the florist studio a few years earlier. Before moving to Orcas Island to take over her grandmother's business, Kaylee had been a plant taxonomy professor at the University of Washington—and occasional forensic botany consultant for the police, which she still dabbled in as needed with the island sheriff's department.

"We'll be selling a lot of our apples at the fest," Wilfred said. "It's a banner year."

"You can say that again." Reese gestured toward the closest tree. "These branches have so many apples on them, they're practically groaning."

Dusk was falling, the first few pinpricks of stars appearing in the indigo sky. Wilfred wrapped up the tour, and the group started back toward the parking lot. Wilfred and Lorraine led the way, and DeeDee and Kaylee followed behind them with the rest of the visitors bringing up the rear.

"What on earth did David Smythe want after the meeting?" Lorraine asked Wilfred as they walked, acid lacing her tone. "And by the way, he was terribly rude to my poor Floyd. Hopefully you can give him lessons. He's dying to learn to fly."

DeeDee and Kaylee silently exchanged concerned looks as Lorraine unloaded on Wilfred.

"He told me he's going to get my land." Wilfred spread his arms out wide. "I told him it's not for sale."

While this was technically true, Kaylee reflected, it didn't convey the menacing confidence the developer had exuded during the discussion. Was Wilfred in denial about the threat to

his orchard and home? But how could David Smythe force him to sell? Maybe he was only a blowhard and Wilfred knew it.

"How can you be so calm?" Lorraine demanded, her voice as tart as any Granny Smith apple.

Wilfred settled his hat more firmly on his head. "Well, after we had that knock-down-drag-out last week in the middle of the FBO, I decided I wasn't going to let him get under my skin anymore."

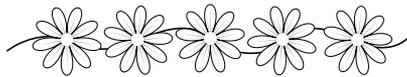
Lorraine huffed out air. "I don't trust that man an inch. You can ask Brett about him. I can't believe Brett is in business with him, after what David did to Brett's father. Poor Lon." She snorted. "I guess money talks. Although I've heard David isn't exactly solvent."

"I wouldn't know about that," Wilfred said. "But about Floyd, sure I'll give him a lesson or two. He can see how he likes it before he commits long-term."

DeeDee grasped Kaylee's arm and held her back. Once the others were out of earshot, she said, "We need to find Wilfred's son, Kip. I have a feeling my godfather is in over his head." Lorraine glanced over her shoulder at them, so DeeDee added, "Let's talk tomorrow, at your shop."

"Come by before you open," Kaylee offered. "We'll be there."

DeeDee nodded agreement. "See you then. I'll bring the coffee."



The next morning, the bookstore owner showed up at the front door of the grand old Victorian mansion that housed The Flower Patch. As promised, she had cups of coffee as well as a paper sack from Death by Chocolate in her hands.

"How do caramel apple muffins sound?" DeeDee asked,

setting her offerings down on the counter.

“Perfect.” Kaylee handed a coffee to Mary, then took one for herself and pulled off the lid to add cream.

“Hi, guys,” Jessica sang out as she popped through the door behind DeeDee. Since the bakery was next door, she hadn’t bothered with a coat. Instead, she wore an apron with *Death by Chocolate* emblazoned across the bib. “I thought I’d pop over and join you. Gretchen can handle the counter.”

“I’m glad you did.” Kaylee opened the sack of muffins while Mary grabbed small paper plates and napkins from the back. “Are you making these to sell at the Apple Fest?”

Jessica nodded. “There aren’t a lot of good recipes combining chocolate and apples, so I’m stepping outside my comfort zone and—gasp!—trying out recipes that don’t include chocolate. Please don’t hold back with your opinions. I can’t serve bad muffins at the festival and leave our guests with a poor impression of us.”

“Nothing bad has ever come from your kitchen, chocolate or not,” Mary said, handing out plates.

“Said completely objectively, of course,” Kaylee teased, knowing that Mary was both right about Jessica’s baking skills and too kind to ever say a disparaging word against their friend.

There was a short silence while they all sampled the muffins, then Mary said, “I think you’ve got a winner. The taste reminds me of caramel apples, but better, since there’s no sticky mess.”

“Polly would argue that the sticky mess is the best part,” DeeDee said.

The baker gave her a thumbs-up. “Thanks. I think the apples have a particularly good consistency. I’m planning to buy from Wilfred for all my Apple Fest recipes. He said I could pick up a few cases next time I go out.”

“I enjoyed visiting the orchard last night,” Kaylee said. “What a lovely place. Bear liked it too.”

Bear, who was sniffing around for stray crumbs, wagged his tail at the mention of his name, then returned to his task.

DeeDee's mouth turned down. "I'm worried about Wilfred. He's under a lot of pressure."

"To sell, you mean?" Mary finished off the last piece of her muffin.

"Exactly. David Smythe is being pretty pushy about it." DeeDee set down her cup and began to pace. "The problem is, he's getting older, obviously, and there isn't anyone to take over for him. Well, except his son."

"What's the story with that?" Kaylee asked. "You said we have to find him?"

DeeDee pivoted on her boot heel and walked back the other way. "He and his father had a falling out a few years ago, and Wilfred hasn't heard from him since." She grimaced. "I don't think Kip approves of Lorraine, or her son."

"That's a bit childish, isn't it?" Mary crossed her arms. "Wilfred's wife has been gone for a decade. Surely he deserves some companionship."

"That does sound odd." Jessica drained her cup. "Kip worked for Luke in the accounting practice about five years ago. As I recall, he was a low-key person, not the type to get emotional."

DeeDee ran a hand through her hair. "That's just it—he's not. Maybe he knows something about those two we don't." She pursed her lips. "They're pretty new to the island. They've only been here about three years."

Kaylee laughed. "Is that really a strike against them?" She'd faced a little resistance from longtime residents when she'd first moved to Orcas Island. Thankfully that had all gone by the wayside and she was now an accepted member of the community.

"I only meant that we don't know their background," DeeDee said with an apologetic smile. "Kip was living in Seattle then, so

maybe he did.”

“He was logging hours toward a CPA license when he worked for Luke,” Jessica put in. “I wonder if he ever took the test.”

“How old is he?” Kaylee asked, her mind already on how they could locate the missing young man.

DeeDee returned to the counter. “In his late twenties, I think.” She glanced upward, calculating. “That’s right. Wilfred is sixty-three and he was thirty-five when Kip was born.”

“I could see the pride that Wilfred has in the orchard,” Mary said. “It would be a shame if he let it go.”

DeeDee tapped one finger on the counter. “Exactly. If Wilfred wants to sell, then more power to him. But I have the feeling he’s being pressured.”

“I can vouch for that.” Kaylee relayed the conversation she and Reese had overheard. “It sounded like David thought he had some kind of leverage.”

“That does sound ominous,” Mary said. “Let’s look for Kip, then. We can at least apprise him of the situation. Maybe he’ll know what to do.”

“I can ask Luke if he stayed in touch,” Jessica said. She pulled out her phone and sent a text.

“Thanks, Jess.” DeeDee closed her eyes for a moment, then glanced back up at her friends. “I can’t stand by and do nothing. Wilfred has been so good to me.”

A minute later, Jessica’s phone beeped. She shook her head. “Luke says he has no idea where Kip is but will check a database he has access to.” A few moments later, the phone beeped again. “No go. Kip doesn’t have a CPA license in Washington.”

Mary groaned. “That would have been too easy.”

“I did take a peek at social media,” DeeDee said. “But there are a bunch of men with the name Kip Bates, believe it or not.”

Kaylee had searched for people more than once. “I’ll check

the directories at the library." She jotted down the information that Jessica and DeeDee knew about the young man. That would help narrow the search.

"Maybe Luke has a picture of Kip from when he worked in the office. I'll have him try to get you a photo," Jessica suggested.

The shop phone rang and Mary answered it. "Good morning, The Flower Patch. How may I help you?" As she listened to the answer, her gaze sharpened. Then she scribbled down an order. "We'll deliver the arrangement later this morning. Thanks, Brett."

"Brett?" Kaylee asked. "As in Brett Horne, the airport manager?"

"That's the one." Mary placed the order on the counter with satisfaction. "I think we've got a new customer."

Kaylee was pleased. With the foot traffic from the Apple Fest, their business would get lots of exposure. She studied the order, a tall vase with a selection of fall flowers. "Mary, let's do another one exactly like this for our booth. Seeing it more than once will reinforce us in people's minds."

"Great idea," Mary agreed.

"Good luck, you two. I'd better get to the shop." DeeDee moved toward the door, then paused. "Oh, by the way, band practice is at our house tonight. You're welcome to come over for a cookout, and we'll eat once our rock stars are rocked out."

After a chorus of assent and a short strategy session on who would bring what to dinner, DeeDee and Jessica left Mary and Kaylee to their work.

A couple of hours later, Kaylee loaded the shop's delivery van and, with an eager Bear in tow, left Mary to watch the shop and assemble the apple-themed wreaths they'd be selling at their Apple Fest booth.

Kaylee stopped at the hospital, a couple of inns, and a bank before heading out to the airfield. While driving along the access

road, she slowed down when passing by the orchard. An *Open* flag hung by the entrance and a sandwich sign announced *Pick Your Own Apples*—a perfect leisure activity for a beautiful fall day.

A number of cars and trucks were parked at the airport, with groups of people gathered on the tarmac and around the hangars. A few more planes had arrived for the fly-in, including an Army-green bomber off by itself, battered but still a magnificent example of American ingenuity.

The FBO's back door was propped open so Kaylee pulled up in a temporary parking spot alongside the building. "Let me take this in, Bear, and then we'll go for a walk to check out the airplanes and the vendors."

Kaylee opened the van's rear door and grabbed the arrangement, which, due to its size, required both arms to carry. She headed into the main room and set the flowers on the reception desk as they'd been instructed. The bill was attached with tape so she pulled it off and placed it beside the vase.

No one appeared to be in the building, but a couple of doors to the adjacent rooms were open. She checked the first and found an empty office. The second door was only slightly ajar, but the light was on, so she knocked.

The lightweight door swung open when she knocked. David Smythe was sitting at the desk, a thermos of coffee on the blotter along with a mug.

But he was slouched back in his chair, eyes open and glassy. Some kind of froth rimmed his lips.

Even without checking his vital signs, Kaylee could tell he was dead.