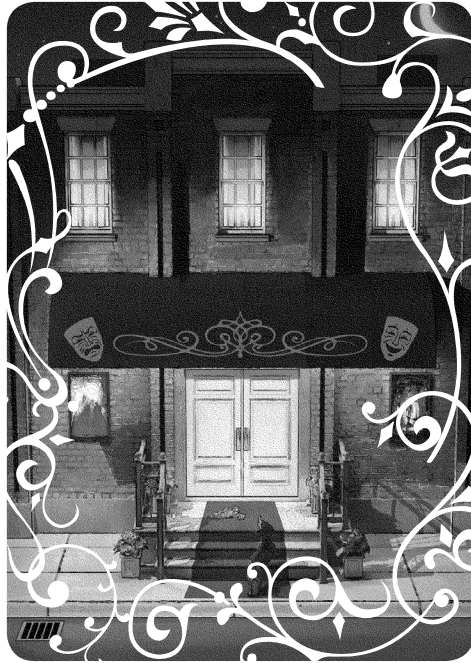


Woes By Any Other Name





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Jan Fields

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1



A chilly breeze slipped up the street and ruffled Kaylee Bleu's long, dark hair despite the knit hat she'd put on before leaving The Flower Patch. Shivering slightly, she wondered if she needed to stretch her legs as much as she'd thought when she'd left her shop.

She glanced down at her dog, Bear, to see if he was feeling the effects of the crisp autumn day in Turtle Cove, Washington. If the little dachshund was cold, he didn't show it. He held his head high and pranced, or got as close to prancing as he could with his short legs. The sight put a smile on Kaylee's lips despite the chill. "You're looking dapper," she told him.

Bear peered up at her quizzically, showing off the bow tie Kaylee had chosen for the day. She thought the pattern of fall leaves was particularly appropriate for November, and Bear was handsome as always. As if he could read her mind, the dog wagged his tail and offered her a single friendly bark though he never broke his stride, trotting along the sidewalk with purpose. Bear took his walks seriously and wasn't prone to dawdling, especially not when they were walking toward the ferry launch. The little dog loved the ferry. Kaylee didn't know if it was the wealth of interesting scents coming off Puget Sound or the chance for so many new arrivals to admire him. She rather suspected it was a bit of both.

Not that Kaylee disagreed with him. The bustle of people streaming off the ferry to visit Orcas Island never ceased to fascinate her. She also loved walking along the shoreline and watching the bald eagles soar and dip as they fished for breakfast.

She even enjoyed the slightly fishy salt spray. She thought of those moments as her reminders of how blessed she was to live in such an incredibly beautiful place.

Kaylee's wandering thoughts were brought sharply into focus as Bear suddenly lunged forward, his front legs nearly lifting off the ground in his eagerness to rush ahead. "What's your hurry?" she asked him as she examined the sidewalk ahead, expecting to see one of her friends coming their way.

About a half a block away, she spotted a couple peering into the front window of Glasstastic, one of the trendy new businesses that sometimes popped up unexpectedly on the island. This one was an art gallery and gift shop that, as its name implied, specialized in glass merchandise. Kaylee thought the works inside were lovely but considerably out of her price range for something that would sit on a shelf, inviting dust.

Kaylee noticed the couple for two reasons. For one, they were an extremely attractive pair, as if they'd stepped off a screen where they portrayed the perfect young lovers. The slender woman, with coal-black hair that hung as long and straight as Kaylee's, pointed at the window and tilted her face up toward her companion, her teeth flashing brilliantly white. The man beside her was only slightly taller, but he had broad shoulders and a head of close-cropped red curls. His teeth remained hidden behind a tight smile, and he seemed mildly annoyed by whatever the woman was saying.

The other reason Kaylee noticed the couple—and surely the reason for Bear's excitement—was that each of them held a leash in one hand, and on the end of each leash was a dachshund. Kaylee was struck by how much the two dogs resembled Bear. If he hadn't been wearing his bow tie, it might have been hard to tell him apart from them. They were the same rich russet color—and their enthusiasm ramped up to match Bear's as they

noticed a fellow dachshund approaching.

When Kaylee drew closer to the couple, the man's rich baritone rolled toward her clearly. "With as much as we travel, buying something so fragile isn't wise," he said. "It'll become the world's most dangerous jigsaw puzzle the first time the dogs run into whatever table you put it on."

"Don't be such a grouch," the woman replied, her voice musical and equally carrying. "We're done traveling, and I can finally have exactly the home of my dreams."

"Another sculpture is an expense we don't need, Belinda."

She poked him lightly. "You let me worry about that."

The man grunted in disagreement, and it appeared he was going to argue further, but Belinda had caught sight of Bear. She squealed and rushed toward Kaylee, but stopped several feet away. "What a handsome boy! Will he mind if we come say hi? Sullivan is very friendly."

"I think he'll have a nervous breakdown if you don't," Kaylee said with a laugh while her dog nearly danced with excitement. "Bear adores making new friends."

"Wonderful." The woman hurried closer. The two dachshunds sniffed each other, their tails whipping happily back and forth. Kaylee heard a yip from the third dachshund, who was straining at the end of his leash. The man holding the lead observed the women with a scowl.

Belinda waved her companion forward. "Rhett, bring Gilbert over. Don't be a grump."

The man sighed deeply and walked over. Soon all three dogs were happily getting acquainted while the women beamed at them. Belinda thrust out her right hand toward Kaylee. "I'm Belinda Case. This is my husband, Rhett. Do you live here on Orcas Island? It's so beautiful."

"I do live here. I'm Kaylee Bleu. It's lovely to meet you." She

shook Belinda's hand, then gestured up the street. "I own the flower shop a few blocks that way. Are you staying in Turtle Cove?"

Belinda's expression brightened still more. "We just moved here," she said, almost breathless, as if the thrill of being there was almost overwhelming. "Our little house even has a name—Robin's Nest. Don't you just love that?"

"How charming! My house is called Wildflower Cottage," Kaylee said. "I love the naming of houses. They become such a big part of our lives. Why shouldn't they have their own names?"

Belinda beamed. "I feel the same way."

"It's silly," Rhett grumbled. "I'm going to call it 'the house.'"

"Party pooper," Belinda said, wrinkling her nose at her husband. He only crossed his arms over his chest and frowned in mild disapproval. She ignored him and smiled at Kaylee. "Did you say your little guy's name is Bear? I love that, and the bow tie is brilliant. I should get some for Gilbert and Sullivan."

Kaylee laughed aloud in surprise as the names registered with her. "Gilbert and Sullivan? You must love musicals."

"I do," Belinda agreed. "And it suits them. They're both little hams, which is good since they've been in a lot of plays."

"Dog actors? That must be interesting." Kaylee wondered what being a dog's stage mom entailed. "And also a lot of work."

Gilbert and Sullivan had nearly tied themselves together as they danced around Bear, and Belinda untangled the leashes with the ease of frequent practice. "Not so much for us since we're usually on the stage with them. Rhett and I are actors too, and Rhett is also a writer and director." She patted his arm with her free hand. "He's the whole package."

The praise elicited a grudging smile from him.

"I can't imagine acting," Kaylee said. "I think I would collapse from sheer embarrassment."

"I thrive on it," Belinda said. Then she cocked her head and

examined Kaylee appraisingly. "It's too bad you don't want to try acting. You have a great look. I'd love to have you in the play we're casting here."

"A play?" Kaylee raised her eyebrows in surprise. "On the island?"

Belinda bounced lightly on her toes with excitement. "Yes, it's going to be a whirlwind to get it ready by the end of November, but it's a short piece. I think of it as a test drive of our new theater. We bought the old ropewalk on the waterfront and restored it." Her expression grew concerned. "I hope you're not one of those people who think old buildings should never be repurposed."

Kaylee shrugged. "It's far better than letting them decay until they fall down. I suppose it depends on whether it's a respectful restoration."

"We've definitely tried," Belinda said.

"Sparing no cost, for whatever good it will do," Rhett grumbled. "\$5,000 seemed pretty ridiculous for new front doors."

Belinda made a playful shooing motion at her husband. "It's worth every penny, dear." She returned her attention to Kaylee. "We used locals in the restoration as much as possible."

"That's always appreciated," Kaylee said. "I think it's great that it's going to be a theater." She also thought it was a brave idea. She was vaguely aware of hearing about work on the ropewalk and knew the old factory wasn't exactly in one of the touristy neighborhoods. "Just so you know, though, we're heading into our off-season. The crowds have thinned down substantially already, and once winter hits, Orcas Island becomes a string of small, very quiet towns. I hope you're not counting on a lot of tourists if your play premieres at the end of November."

"That doesn't worry me," Belinda replied. "As I said, this is more of a test run of the renovation. That way, we'll be totally ready in the spring when the crowds pick up again. The play

we're doing is going to be fun. It's a romantic romp, a comedy of errors. Rhett wrote it, and it's so funny."

Kaylee snuck a quick glance at the silent, brooding man and couldn't quite picture him as the author of such a piece. *There must be hidden depths to him.* "Sounds fun. I'll be there on opening night if I can."

"Tell your friends." Belinda bent down and scooped up Sullivan. The little dog wriggled in her arms for a moment before settling down. "We're holding open auditions starting Friday. We have a troupe that we've brought with us from the mainland, but I want to build connections to thespians in the community as well. You should come try out."

Kaylee took a small step back, aghast at the idea of acting in a stage play. "I don't think I'm cut out for acting."

"Even if you're not, it'll give you a chance to cheer on your neighbors." She squeezed the bicep of the man beside her. "Auditions are always a good time, aren't they, Rhett?"

"They do tend to be unusual," Rhett said.

"Perhaps I'll come then, though you definitely won't see me on the stage." Kaylee glanced down as she felt a tug on her pants. She saw that Bear had run around one of her legs, wrapping the leash with him. Kaylee bent to untangle him, then lifted him, leaving Gilbert panting up at Bear, tail still wagging.

"You know, it's amazing how much your Bear resembles Gilbert and Sullivan." Belinda reached out to rub the top of Bear's head. "We actually bought these guys *because* they were identical. It lets us use whichever dog is in the mood for acting. But the play Rhett wrote this time uses both dogs, so we don't have an understudy. Do you think Bear would enjoy that?"

Kaylee considered. "I think he'd love it, but I'm not sure if he's properly trained for it. He knows sit and stay, but he doesn't have many other tricks in his repertoire. Not many that

he didn't think up on his own, anyway."

"That's not a problem," Belinda said. "They won't be doing anything unusual. And they're on a leash the whole time. One of the key plot points has to do with the main characters accidentally swapping dogs, and then the confusion that ensues. Bear would need to come to rehearsals, but they wouldn't be overly demanding."

"I promise to consider it," Kaylee said.

"Wonderful." Belinda beamed as brightly as if Kaylee had fully committed instead of giving a vague maybe. "I'll see you there." She turned to Rhett. "We need to get going. Everyone is waiting for us at the theater."

Rhett rolled his eyes. "Because I was the one holding us up."

Belinda linked her arm through his. "Don't be such a bear." Then she giggled and nodded toward Kaylee. "We have a Bear now, so you can give up the role."

With a last warm goodbye, Belinda walked off with her husband. Kaylee watched them go. She definitely suspected Belinda Case would leave a mark on Turtle Cove.

Having spent so much time chatting with the actors, Kaylee decided against walking the rest of the way to the ferry. She didn't want to stretch her break out quite so long. Though Mary Bishop, her assistant at the flower shop, never complained about being left alone, Kaylee tried not to abuse Mary's kind heart and good humor. Besides, Kaylee was chilled clear through.

"We'd better get inside again where it's warm," she told Bear and set him on the sidewalk. She was glad when he let her tug him toward the shop without resisting. Sometimes sudden changes to their walking plan weren't always met with flexibility. The little dog didn't like missing out on meeting new people at the ferry, but apparently Gilbert and Sullivan had temporarily satisfied his craving for new friends.

The Flower Patch only had two customers when Kaylee

walked in, and they were quietly browsing in different parts of the shop. It was clear evidence of the change of seasons. The flower shop bustled throughout the spring and summer, grew quiet between Halloween and Thanksgiving, then ramped up again for Christmas.

"Sorry to be gone so long," Kaylee said to Mary as she unclipped the leash from Bear's collar. He shook himself, though Kaylee couldn't imagine what he was shaking off.

Mary stood behind the counter with her hands wrapped around a mug, and Bear pranced over to where she stood. "Don't worry about it," Mary said. "It's been quiet. I hope you two didn't freeze out there. I think winter is trying to elbow autumn out of the way early this year."

"It is a little chilly," Kaylee admitted. "But we had a great walk. We met some new residents."

Mary raised both eyebrows. "New residents of Turtle Cove?"

"Apparently," Kaylee said. "Belinda and Rhett Case. They bought a cottage called Robin's Nest."

"Oh, I know that one," Mary said. "It's on Greenman Street. It's adorable, though it doesn't have much space for gardening."

Kaylee almost smiled at the reproof in Mary's voice. Like Kaylee and their two close friends, DeeDee Wilcox and Jessica Roberts, Mary was a member of the Petal Pushers, a local gardening club. They didn't quite *live* for their gardens, but they did love them dearly.

"I think Belinda and Rhett may be a little too busy for gardening anyway," Kaylee said. "Belinda told me they bought the old ropewalk and are converting it into a theater."

"I saw that someone was working on that building." Mary set her mug down on the counter. "I'm glad. It's quite historic, from a time when people had to make rope in long buildings so they could twist the fibers that stretched the length of the building."

"You're sure up on your town history, aren't you?"

Mary smiled. "I saw a fascinating presentation by the historical society about it once. Apparently the ropewalk couldn't make a rope any longer than the building itself. That's why the factories were so long. The ropewalk here was once over a thousand feet long, but part of the building was taken down years ago when the factory first closed."

"That is interesting." Kaylee leaned on her elbows on the counter. "It'll be fun to have a theater group in Turtle Cove, though they're picking an odd time to begin. Belinda said they'd be opening auditions to the community soon. Their first show is a romantic comedy."

"Won't that be fun?" Mary asked, her eyes sparkling at the idea.

"I hope so, since they asked me to consider letting Bear be in the play."

Again Mary's eyebrows went up. "The play needs a dachshund?"

"More than one, actually." Kaylee told Mary about Gilbert and Sullivan, describing the two friendly little dachshunds and how much Bear had enjoyed them. "It was the most amazing thing. Gilbert and Sullivan look enough like Bear that it's hard to believe they aren't all from the same litter. And they're both so sweet. Belinda said they usually only have one dog role, and the two dogs share it. When one gets tired or stubborn, the other takes over. But this time, the play has two roles for dachshunds, so they need an understudy."

Realization bloomed on Mary's face. "Bear would be perfect. Are you going to do it?"

Kaylee sighed. "I'm not sure. I think Bear would love it. He has relished every chance he's ever gotten to take part in community events." She giggled. "Remember when DeeDee's girls dressed

him up as a hot dog for the pet parade? There aren't that many dogs who would have hammed it up quite so enthusiastically."

"Bear's not a ham," Mary said loyally. "He's civic-minded." As if to assuage possible hurt feelings in the little dog, she followed up her remark by bending down to scratch him behind the ears.

"Bear may love the limelight, but I'm not sure I share his sentiments. I don't know how much time we're talking about for him to play understudy. Belinda insisted it wouldn't be arduous, but she also said he'd have to be at rehearsals."

"You shouldn't bother. It'll be a waste of your time."

Kaylee spun sharply to see that one of the women browsing in the shop had approached the counter. The woman was short and stout with a head of wild blonde curls and brown eyes that squinted in Kaylee's direction.

Kaylee blinked a few times. "I beg your pardon?"

"The play. You shouldn't bother going out for auditions," the woman replied. "It's a disaster waiting to happen. And it probably will never open."

"And what makes you say that?" Mary asked.

The woman looked at her slyly. "I'd rather keep my reasons to myself. But mark my words, that play is doomed."

Before Kaylee could come up with a response to the startling comments, the woman marched out of the shop. As the door swung closed behind her, Kaylee wondered exactly what secrets she had been hinting at. With a shiver, Kaylee scooped up Bear and gave him a worried hug.

The woman's warning had felt a little too real.

2



Throughout the week, Kaylee vacillated about the play. One moment, she was sure she would take Bear and let him audition. The next, she decided she wouldn't audition, but she'd go in order to show her support for the new venture. Still later, she thought maybe she'd stay home and have a cozy evening with Bear. It was as if the options were balls bouncing around in her head, and she didn't reach out to catch one until the light began to fade on Friday evening.

Pulling her red Ford Escape into the theater's newly paved parking lot, Kaylee still wasn't sure if she'd made the right choice in coming. "We could go home," she said to Bear, but his excited yip told her that he was eager for an adventure. "Fine. We'll go in."

Once the decision was made, Kaylee hopped out of the car quickly, as if to keep herself from changing her mind. She knew she was being silly. Letting Bear be in the play wouldn't be a big deal. He'd have fun and charm everyone he met—she didn't doubt that. When she took a moment to think about it, she knew that the real reason she shied away from the idea was her own feelings about public performances.

As a former plant taxonomy professor at the University of Washington, she had plenty of experience with public speaking. She had stood in front of a classroom full of reluctant students many times. But somehow, the thought of talking about her passion for plants was a very different thing from performing on a stage. Though he was perfectly capable of jumping down from the back seat by himself, she picked up Bear and cuddled him. "I think I'm getting stage fright for you."

Bear gave her a reassuring doggie kiss on the chin.

"You're right," she agreed. "We're a team, and we'll be fine."

Kaylee stood holding Bear for a moment as she looked toward the old building. The battered bricks were weathered but seemed in good shape. As Mary had said, the old factory was basically a long box and now bore an oversize black awning and a large wooden sign identifying it as the *Ropeworks Playhouse*. Though the overall theme was rustic, the lighting in the parking lot and the front of the theater was modern enough that it was easy to see the lot filling up. *I guess I'm the only one with stage fright.*

With so many cars pulling in, Kaylee decided to carry Bear into the theater for safety. Once inside, she snapped on his leash and put him down. Bear immediately began sniffing the old wooden floors, as well as everything else he could reach. In the lobby, a sign on an easel directed all those auditioning to sign in at the folding table against one wall and then wait in the theater until their names were called. Kaylee wasn't sure if Bear needed to sign in, but just in case, she headed for the crowd around the table.

Near the table, Kaylee recognized a blonde head at the edge of the group. "DeeDee!"

DeeDee Wilcox waved back. Almost immediately, DeeDee's younger daughter, Polly, leaned out from behind her mother and squealed. "Bear!" The girl rushed over to squat and pat Bear on the head.

"Polly," her mother called after her. "You need to stay with me."

Polly popped to her feet and tugged on Kaylee's free hand. "Come on," she said. "You can stand with us."

"I don't want to cut in line," Kaylee said as the little girl towed her toward DeeDee.

"It's not exactly a line," DeeDee said as she put a protective arm around Polly's shoulders. "I think we're more of an amorphous clump."

"Amorphous?" Kaylee asked.

DeeDee grinned. "It's Zoe's word of the day."

Zoe, who was quickly approaching her teen years, stood next to her mother, watching her sister with irritation until she heard her name. Her attention snapped to Kaylee and she said, "Amorphous is an adjective that describes something without a clearly defined form or shape. Are you going to be in the play?"

"I am," Polly sang out before Kaylee could speak.

"Maybe," DeeDee told her daughter, her voice full of motherly caution. "There's no guarantee that either of you will get a part, so you need to be prepared for that. Let's audition first. Just go out there and do your best."

"Right." Polly's head bobbed in agreement. Then she whispered to Kaylee, "I'm going to be in the play."

Kaylee laughed. "You probably will." She couldn't imagine DeeDee's daughters failing at anything they put their minds to.

Zoe gave her sister another glare, then spoke to Kaylee in a precocious tone. "Are you auditioning?"

"Not me," Kaylee said. "Bear is auditioning to be an understudy for the dachshunds who are in the play."

Polly's eyes widened. "There are dogs in the play? This is going to be so much fun!" She clapped her hands and jumped in place.

"Next!" The voice announced, and the crowd mashed a little closer to the table. Polly whirled at the sound and squeezed between a stout couple to get a better spot.

"Polly!" DeeDee called, then sighed and addressed her eldest. "Can you get your sister, please?"

Zoe echoed her mother's sigh before vanishing into the crowd.

"I hope I don't regret the decision to let them audition," DeeDee said to Kaylee.

"I'm sure they'll have fun. The couple running the show seems to know what they're doing. I met them the other day

when I was walking Bear.” Kaylee remembered the encounter with the unpleasant stranger at her shop. “Though it’s possible it won’t really matter. Maybe.”

“What do you mean?” DeeDee’s attention laser focused on Kaylee. As the owner of a mystery bookshop, DeeDee loved a good plot twist, but she found real life mysteries a bit alarming if they might involve her daughters.

“Nothing probably,” Kaylee said, already regretting her comment. “We had someone in the shop the other day who overheard Mary and me talking about the play. The woman said she thought the production was doomed. I suppose she may have been talking about the money involved. When I met them, one of the owners seemed to think they weren’t spending their renovation funds wisely.” Kaylee waved a hand to reference the beautiful workmanship shown in the lobby. The style was rustic but modern in feel, and Kaylee knew it had to be a huge change from what had once been a long, mostly open building. “This must have been a pricey project.”

“No doubt,” DeeDee said. “My husband told me he’d been inside this building before and though it appeared structurally sound, it had significant signs of disrepair from being unused for so long. They must have had to fix a lot of those issues before they even got to the aesthetic stuff.” Her gaze darted toward the dense crowd where Polly and Zoe had disappeared. “So you don’t think the woman was hinting at anything ominous?”

“I’m sure she wasn’t,” Kaylee said, hoping her tone didn’t sound as doubtful as she felt.

Zoe popped out of the crowd, hauling Polly by the hand. “She’d already gotten to the table and signed up, so I went ahead and signed up too.”

“Well, I should scold you,” DeeDee said with a frown. “But I’ll be glad to get out of this crowd.” She offered an apologetic

smile to Kaylee. "Do you mind if we abandon you and go get seats? We can save you one."

"That would be great, thanks," Kaylee said.

DeeDee and the girls eased out of the crowd, and Kaylee braced herself for the wait. For a moment, she wished Polly had signed Bear up too. *No, I shouldn't benefit from Polly's naughtiness.*

To Kaylee's relief, Bear waited patiently beside her as if he stood in line all the time. Behind the table, a young woman responded with boundless patience as each person signed in and asked questions. When Kaylee approached, she noticed the young woman's eyes were slightly red, as if she might have been crying earlier, though she seemed to perk up when she saw Bear. "Auntie Belinda was right," she said. "He could be Gilbert and Sullivan's long-lost brother. Is it okay if I pet him?"

"Sure," Kaylee said. "Bear loves attention."

The girl's sweet smile spread into a grin. "Bear? I love that name." She rubbed his ears. "Aren't you handsome? Auntie Belinda already signed him up, so I'll make a note that he arrived and you two can go into the theater. I think they're about ready to start."

"Thanks."

Entering the auditorium through worn wooden doors with thick iron handles, Kaylee found the rustic theme continued into the theater, where rough-hewn beams and dark walls set a cozy, woody tone. Granted, however rustic the decor was, she could tell the lights and rigging above the stage were clearly brand-new and state-of-the-art. *Whoever's paying the bills for this project has put in a lot of money.*

Kaylee slipped into the open chair beside DeeDee and her daughters. She settled Bear into her lap just as Belinda Case appeared on the stage, front and center. The young woman was elegant and beautiful in a blue floral dress, with her hair skillfully twisted into an updo. She carried a long-stemmed lily in one

hand. Though she couldn't clearly see it, Kaylee recognized it immediately as a *Lilium auratum* and wondered where Belinda had gotten it. Kaylee didn't have any at her shop. The large lilies were grown primarily in Japan, and it was costly to have flowers flown in from so far away unless they were for a special order.

Her preoccupation with the lily nearly made Kaylee miss the first words of Belinda's opening speech, in which she welcomed everyone to the Ropeworks Playhouse and expressed her excitement to be part of their wonderful community.

Kaylee was struck again by how lovely the young woman was, especially since she radiated joy and friendliness.

The actress continued with her opening. "With our commitment to community involvement, we knew we wanted to use some local actors in our first production. But first, let me introduce you to the family we brought with us—the Victory Players!" Belinda began to clap as a small group of people walked onstage.

Kaylee spotted the young girl who had signed everyone in, then she recognized someone who surprised her even more. The stout, curly-haired woman who had made the dire prediction about the failure of the first show was a member of the troupe. Kaylee scooted slightly forward in her seat as Belinda introduced each person, eager to hear the name of the mystery woman.

"And this is Delia Putnam," Belinda said finally, sweeping her arm toward the older woman. "Delia has appeared in a number of comedies in playhouses throughout the Pacific Northwest. Her most recent role was Miss Hannigan in *Annie*, for which she received stellar reviews. We're grateful to have her and her talents in our troupe."

Kaylee watched the woman bow slightly to the audience, beaming at everyone like someone's kindly grandmother. It was hard to believe she had been all gloom and doom only a few days before at The Flower Patch. The fact that she was a member of the

troupe made Kaylee nervous. *Why would someone so connected with the show be going around telling people that it's doomed?*

When she had finished introductions, Belinda focused her attention on the crowd again. "Who knows which of you will be joining our troupe for this first performance, and perhaps for many to come in the future?"

She went on to describe the roles they would be filling, mainly small parts playing townspeople. Kaylee was glad to hear there were several roles for children since it would mean DeeDee's girls were likely to get cast. *Of course, if the show isn't going to work out, maybe that's setting them up for disappointment.*

Bear must have sensed Kaylee's disquiet because he shifted in her lap to nuzzle her hand. "It's okay," she whispered. "I'm being silly."

"Silly about what?" DeeDee asked quietly.

Kaylee gestured toward the stage. "The older woman, Delia, is the one who I told you about, the lady at the shop who didn't think the show was worth auditioning for."

"That's odd."

"I had the same reaction."

DeeDee frowned. "There's no way I'm going to get the girls out of here without auditioning. So I guess I'll have to hope for the best."

The auditions were handled efficiently and kindly, with everyone given the time they needed to make the best possible impression. As she watched, Kaylee thought there was certainly no reason to doubt the quality of the show—or the courage of her neighbors. She couldn't imagine trying to recite a monologue as half the town watched, and she could see more than one person openly sweating with nerves as they climbed the stairs to the stage. Kaylee was impressed with how compassionately Belinda handled each one. Within moments, Belinda could calm even the most fearful performer.

Kaylee most enjoyed all the children's auditions, especially DeeDee's girls, who clearly threw themselves into each thing they were asked to do. In Kaylee's biased opinion, Zoe and Polly were brilliant.

After the children, Belinda called Kaylee and Bear up to the stage. DeeDee squeezed Kaylee's arm as she stood up. "You two will be great," she whispered.

Kaylee hoped so. Though she had slowly relaxed while watching and getting caught up in the audition performances, all that had been undone the second Bear's name was called. Kaylee felt nearly sick with nerves. Bear took it all in stride, gazing eagerly around as Kaylee carried him up to the stage.

Much to Kaylee's surprise, Belinda gave her a quick hug. "Thanks for coming. I know this can be scary, but you'll be fine, and Bear will be great."

"I believe the last part at least," Kaylee said, trying for a light tone, but recognizing that she sounded as scared as she felt.

Belinda explained that the tryout was mostly about walking on a leash. "I want to see if Bear can stay on task with entrances and exits. He'll be excited to see Gilbert and Sullivan, but we don't want him to stop moving. If he won't walk by them without stopping to say hi, we won't be able to use him."

Kaylee gave a nod. "Got it."

"For your audition, you and Bear will need to walk to the middle of the stage, pause and count to five, then cross the rest of the way and exit," Belinda said. "Each time it's your cue to cross, Quinn will tap you."

"Quinn?" Kaylee asked.

Belinda pointed toward the young woman who had manned the table. Quinn waved. "My niece and the youngest member of the troupe. She'll be acting as stage manager for the auditions."

Kaylee felt her cheeks warm. She was sure Belinda had said

Quinn's name during the introductions, but Kaylee had been distracted by the mystery surrounding Delia. "Okay," she said. "I think we can do that."

"Great." Belinda smiled brightly. "Go with Quinn, and she'll show you where to stand and help Bear into his costume."

"Costume?" Kaylee echoed.

"It's a little saddlebag-style backpack. Not heavy, but it is part of the whole mistaken-identity gag in the play, so I need to know if he'll wear it." She tapped the polka-dot bow tie Bear was wearing. "I don't think it's a problem since he's clearly used to dressing up, but it's still good to be sure."

"Should I take off the bow tie?"

Belinda paused, clearly thinking it over. "No, not for the audition. He won't be able to wear it in the actual play, but it will be fine for tonight."

"Sounds good," Kaylee said, forcing cheer into her voice. She followed Quinn offstage and was pleased to see Bear didn't mind the backpack as Kaylee strapped it on. Within moments, they were in place and waiting for their cue.

Rhett walked up to stand beside Kaylee with one of the other dachshunds on a leash. The dog offered Bear one sniff, then shifted focus to the stage. Bear's attention went everywhere as he looked at the other dog, at Rhett, at Quinn, and at Kaylee, all with his tail wagging wildly. Kaylee bent to give him a pat, then stood up and took a deep breath as they began.

For the audition, Belinda stayed on the stage watching the action. Delia led the other little dachshund. Kaylee wished she'd asked Rhett which dog he was leading. With them all wearing matching saddlebags, it was impossible to discern one dog from another. The only way to tell them apart was that Bear wagged his tail wildly every time he passed Gilbert or Sullivan. But he kept walking.

In fact, it was Kaylee who nearly messed up, not Bear. During one of her exits, she almost ran into a stagehand dressed in black and standing in the shadows. If Bear hadn't spotted him and pulled Kaylee to the side, she certainly would have collided with the man. Kaylee whispered a quiet apology, but the stagehand didn't say anything. Kaylee felt her face warm as he stared at her. *We probably aren't supposed to talk backstage.*

When the scene finished, Belinda called Kaylee and Bear out after Delia and Rhett had led the other dogs from the stage. Belinda squeezed Kaylee's free hand while the audience clapped wildly. It was clear Bear enjoyed the applause very much.

"He did great. He followed your lead perfectly," Belinda said, causing Kaylee to feel a swell of pride on Bear's behalf. "Now let's have some applause for our other two stars," Belinda called, raising her voice to be heard in the audience. "Gilbert? Sullivan?"

Rhett trotted out from the wings leading one of the dogs. They stopped at center stage and bowed. Kaylee giggled as the tiny dachshund bent his head in a bow to match Rhett's. Then Kaylee realized Rhett was the only one who came out with a dog.

"Delia?" Belinda called. "Bring out Sullivan."

They waited another moment, but when the older woman didn't walk out onto the stage, Belinda, Rhett, and Kaylee rushed to the opposite wing from where Rhett had been standing. They found Delia Putnam lying still as death in the shadows near the backstage rigging.

And Sullivan was nowhere to be seen.