

# Noel Way Out





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Katy Lee

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*Noel Way Out*

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# 1



With old-fashioned Christmas carols offering a nostalgic soundtrack and the scent of spiced cider on the fireplace-warmed air, the atmosphere inside Orcas Island’s Old Cape Lighthouse keeper’s quarters was anything but cold. In fact, it was easy to forget that winter was fast approaching the quaint town of Turtle Cove, Washington—or it would be if local florist Kaylee Bleu and the Petal Pushers garden club weren’t decorating the lighthouse for the holidays. The four friends bustled around with evergreen garlands, strands of twinkling lights, and red velvet bows.

However, the wreaths and garlands weren’t the only things in the room sporting festive bows.

“Where did you get Bear’s bow tie?” bookshop owner DeeDee Wilcox asked Kaylee. She paused to give Kaylee’s beloved dachshund, Bear, a scratch behind the ears. “The red-and-green houndstooth is too adorable.”

“He has Jessica to thank for that,” Kaylee said, flashing a grateful smile toward her best friend, baker Jessica Roberts. “It might be my new favorite. Thank you again, Jess.”

“My pleasure, though it doesn’t take much to make him look handsome,” Jessica replied over her shoulder, then returned to examining the cozy common room with an expert eye. She held up a length of fir garland in front of the closest window. “What do you ladies think? One for each window?”

Kaylee paused in the process of unpacking a plastic tub of decorations and glanced toward her friend, then nodded approvingly. “Definitely. It will frame the ocean view like a picture on a postcard. The Christmas Bazaar shoppers will love it.”

“Do we have enough battery-operated candles for each window, Kaylee?” DeeDee gestured toward the bin Kaylee was unpacking.

“I got extras on clearance last year, so we should be all set,” Kaylee answered. “Jessica, do you have enough garland for the windows and the spiral staircase railing?”

Jessica nodded. “We have plenty for the outside eaves as well.”

“Great. Let me grab a stepladder and we can do the windows together.” As she strode toward the storage closet, Kaylee pulled her long, dark-brown hair back into a ponytail to keep it out of the way for the work ahead. She retrieved the ladder and returned to the main room, then stopped short when she saw the latest addition to the decor. “Mary, that garland is amazing!”

Mary Bishop—Kaylee’s part-time help at her florist shop, The Flower Patch—beamed as she held up the elaborate decoration she had just unboxed. “What, this old thing?” she joked.

Kaylee stepped closer. “How many different kinds of greenery did you use in there? I see holly, ivy, juniper, and . . . is that mountain laurel?”

“Good eye,” Mary said. “I wove in a little mistletoe too. Herb took me to a fascinating library program about the homes of the first presidents last week, and I was inspired to do more research. This is the sort of decoration George Washington might have had at Mount Vernon or Thomas Jefferson at Monticello.”

“It’s gorgeous,” DeeDee said. “Where should we put it? It deserves a special place.”

Mary gestured toward the fireplace. “I thought we could drape it across the mantel for the Christmas Bazaar.”

“Wonderful idea,” Kaylee agreed. “You know, I think all the shoppers will want to buy it.”

“What if we make it a raffle prize?” DeeDee chimed in. “We’re

already using this year's bazaar proceeds to fund a new roof for this cottage. Why not add a raffle too? I'm sure Mary's garland would be a huge draw."

"A brilliant idea from the leader of the Christmas Bazaar planning committee," Kaylee said as she set up her stepladder near the window Jessica was preparing to decorate. She grabbed a staple gun and climbed the ladder. "Any winner will be thrilled to get such a lovely prize."

"I doubt Bernie McNeil will be eager to share the winner's circle," Jessica said with a smirk as she handed Kaylee one end of the garland. "You know she'll be after the blue ribbon again in the Christmas Bazaar Amateur Bake-Off."

Mary smiled sweetly. "Bernie may be a little competitive, but you've got to admit, her treats are quite tasty—even if they don't hold a candle to what you make at Death by Chocolate."

"Too bad you can't enter the competition since you're a professional, Jess," DeeDee said. "You'd win every time."

Jessica smiled at the compliment, then shrugged. "It certainly doesn't have to be me, but I would love to see someone else take the win at this year's bazaar. Bernie's gloating doesn't exactly make her a loveable champion."

Once the greenery was secured, Kaylee descended her stepladder. "Does this look even?"

All four women stood back and scrutinized the soft-needled garland, which swooped gracefully across the top of the window and was decorated with a red velvet bow in the center.

"Perfect," Jessica said.

DeeDee picked up a length of garland from the pile on a table and headed for the staircase railing. "Mary, do you want to help me with this?"

"Sure, just let me finish this." Mary draped her elaborate garland across the mantel, then joined DeeDee at the staircase

while Jessica and Kaylee continued decorating the windows.

"Do any of you know what Bernie is entering in the bake-off this time?" Kaylee asked as she repositioned her ladder and climbed it.

"No idea." Jessica grabbed another garland and offered it to Kaylee. "But that's no surprise. She hasn't set foot in Death by Chocolate in six years."

"Remind us what happened there," Mary said as she and DeeDee started twisting their garland around the staircase railing.

"She wanted me to make her winning recipe from that year a regular offering at the bakery, but I politely declined," Jessica explained. "I only use my own recipes."

"That's your prerogative as a business owner," Kaylee said as she adjusted her end of the garland, then stapled it in place. "And you certainly don't need help from anyone else to come up with delicious desserts."

"She didn't take too kindly to my refusal. It seems she expected me to pay her for the recipe. And give her a cut of the profits. And name it after her. 'Bernie's Banana Bonanza Brownies,' if I recall correctly." Jessica sighed. "Things got a little heated, and she stormed out of the shop, hollering about how I'd cheated her, among other things."

"How terrible," Kaylee said. "I wish I'd been here to defend you, but part of me isn't sorry to have missed such a scene." Six years ago, Kaylee had still been living in Seattle, working as a plant taxonomy professor at the University of Washington. Although she'd thought she was happy in academia, fate worked its magic. She wound up moving to Orcas Island to take over The Flower Patch from her grandmother, Bea Lyons, who retired to Arizona. Now, Kaylee couldn't imagine a happier life than the one she lived in Turtle Cove.

"If you ask me, you did the right thing, Jess," DeeDee said. "Banana brownies sound a little odd."



"To be fair, they were delicious, if unconventional," Jessica said as she and Kaylee moved to decorate their final window. "But unconventional is kind of her thing. I think it's how she wins every year. Judges are always surprised that her flavor combinations are so tasty."

"One of my customers at Between the Lines said Bernie might try her hand at organic fruit jellies," DeeDee said. Her mystery bookshop was just down Turtle Cove's Main Street from The Flower Patch and Death by Chocolate. "But another customer mentioned zucchini bread, so who knows what Bernie is entering."

"Organic jelly?" Jessica frowned in thought. "I wonder if she's getting her fruit from Holly Shultz."

"Who's Holly Shultz?" Kaylee asked. As a botanist, Kaylee's interest was piqued by the mention of anyone who might be a fellow plant lover.

"She moved to Orcas Island about six months ago," DeeDee said as she descended a few steps to secure the railing garland in another spot. "She's renting a cottage in Gingerbread Acres. It has a greenhouse out back where she grows organic fruits and vegetables that she's selling at Perfectly Natural."

"Andy must be thrilled to have locally grown produce this time of year," Jessica said. DeeDee's husband, Andy, managed the organic grocery store.

DeeDee nodded as she twisted wire around the garland. "He's ecstatic. And you're probably right, Jessica: I bet Bernie will buy Holly out if she thinks it's the best produce on the island."

"I wouldn't be too sure," Jessica replied as she and Kaylee started testing battery-operated candles to make sure they worked. "When I met Holly, I got the sense that she's fairly skeptical of new people—especially those with a forceful personality like Bernie McNeil's. I doubt she'd let Bernie anywhere near her greenhouse."

“How did you meet Holly?” Mary asked.

“Andy introduced us last week when I was buying fruit for tarts and she was dropping off a delivery.” Jessica placed a candle on the window ledge. “We got to chatting, and she told me what she’s growing. Tomatoes, bell peppers, cucumbers, zucchini, raspberries, blueberries, mulberries—you name it, she’s growing it.”

“Mulberries?” Kaylee’s modest interest suddenly skyrocketed. “She has mulberry trees in her greenhouse? How wonderful! Are they *Morus alba* or *Morus nigra*?”

“Could you translate that, Dr. Bleu?” Jessica raised an eyebrow. “I forgot my Latin dictionary today.”

Kaylee laughed. Despite being several years out of academia, she still referred to plants by their Latin names in her mind—and, if she didn’t catch herself, often in conversation. “I mean are they the dark or white variety?”

“I have no idea,” Jessica admitted.

“*Morus nigra*?” DeeDee had gone back to the top of the staircase to begin affixing red bows to the garland on the railing, and now her voice echoed down from above. “Like the black death?”

Kaylee chuckled. “I think you’ve been spending too much time with your mystery books. I said *morus*, not *mortis*. *Mortis* means ‘death.’ *Morus* means ‘mulberries.’”

“Tomato, to-mah-to,” DeeDee joked.

“Speaking of tomatoes, I wonder if I could convince Holly to enter something in the bake-off that uses produce from her greenhouse.” Jessica placed a candle on the last empty windowsill, then whirled around with a bright smile on her face. “She could use her mulberries. She doesn’t sell those through Perfectly Natural, so whatever she enters would certainly be unique.”

“More unique than what Bernie enters, you mean.” Mary cocked an eyebrow at Jessica. “I hope you’re not trying to interfere

with the bake-off."

"I'm not trying to interfere," Jessica said. "Well, not really. I just would like to see someone else have a chance at winning for a change."

"Like someone who didn't yell at you in front of your customers?" Kaylee pulled a strand of white Christmas lights from another bin and released the wire tie holding the bundle together.

"If Holly keeps so much to herself, how are you going to convince her to enter a very public bake-off?" Mary asked as she began winding lit garland around one of the room's wooden support beams.

"I bet I can charm her into it." Jessica grabbed her own strand of lights from the bin and started untangling it. "When we chatted, I mentioned coming out to see her greenhouse, so maybe I could follow through on that."

Mary tilted her head. "Did she invite you?"

"Not exactly," Jessica admitted. "But she didn't say no either."

"If you do go visit, can I go with you?" Kaylee asked hopefully. "I'd love to meet Holly and see her greenhouse. I'll bring her a plant from the flower shop."

"That'll be a nice welcome gift," Mary said. "I'm sure she will appreciate it as a fellow plant lover. Maybe she'd like to take part in the community garden next spring. Be sure to invite her."

DeeDee finished securing a bouquet of pine cones to the newel post at the top of the staircase and started down the steps. "I wouldn't plan on her saying yes to any of your requests. Andy says she really keeps to herself."

"It doesn't hurt to ask," Jessica said. "Kaylee, we can drive out to Gingerbread Acres later this week if you want."

"Sounds good," Kaylee agreed, then wrinkled her brow. "Why is it called Gingerbread Acres? It sounds cute."

"It used to be." Mary sighed and walked to the refreshment

table. "I remember when the neighborhood was built. They advertised it as a planned community for Christmas lovers. Every girl in my class wanted to live in those adorable cottages." As Mary talked, she poured hot apple cider into four mugs, and the other women joined her for a break. "All the homes were covered with cedar shakes, and the trim was white with splashes of red and green here and there. They really looked like gingerbread houses. They even gave the streets Christmas-themed names, like Reindeer Road and Jingle Bell Court."

"And Candy Cane Lane, of course," DeeDee added. She grabbed a cup of cider and a chocolate cookie from Death by Chocolate, and the other women followed suit.

Mary nodded. "Every year, the neighborhood would decorate their lawns with wooden displays that told the story of the first Christmas. Then they'd do carol singing in the evenings the week before Christmas. Folks from all over the island would drive over there to participate."

"Do they still do it?" Kaylee asked.

"Not since Miranda Foster died years ago," Mary said. "She was the one who organized everything. Without her, everybody else stopped caring. Many of the homes were repainted, and lots of them became rentals. Overall, it's not kept up very well at all."

"Things really took a turn for Warren Foster after Miranda passed away," Jessica added, frowning into her cider. "That's about when his nephew, Zach, ended up in jail."

"How horrible," Kaylee said. "What happened?"

"He got arrested for grand larceny, if I remember right," Jessica answered.

"Didn't you and Zach go to high school together, DeeDee?" Mary asked.

"We did." DeeDee sipped her drink, seemingly trying to recall memories from more than two decades earlier. "He wasn't

a bad kid in school, but his parents were killed in a car accident our junior year. After that, he took up with a rough crowd until graduation, then he moved to the mainland. I heard about his arrest at a reunion."

"Warren took both his wife's death and his nephew going to prison poorly," Mary said. "He became quite the hermit from then on. Now that he's out of jail, Zach comes over from the mainland to see him every now and then, but he doesn't stay—just long enough to drop off some groceries and talk Warren into handing out more money he doesn't have." Mary released a huff of breath, then shook her head. "Anyway, from the sounds of it, Holly lives next door to Warren. That's the only property in Gingerbread Acres I can think of with a greenhouse."

"I can't wait to see it." Kaylee turned to Jessica. "As long as you don't think we'll be unwelcome."

Jessica flapped a hand dismissively. "If you bring her a plant and I bring chocolate, how could we possibly be unwelcome? Even if she says no to the bake-off, I would still like to welcome her to Turtle Cove."

"Me too," Kaylee replied. "I know what it feels like to move to an island alone and start over. And I had all of you to help me get situated."

"Not to mention the fact that being Bea's granddaughter gave you a bit of a running start at fitting in." Mary smiled fondly at Kaylee. "Your grandma would be proud of you. I'll be sure to tell her you've become the Turtle Cove welcoming committee when she and Lucille return from Greece." Mary's face took on a dreamy expression. "A three-week cruise around those stunning island coasts—can you imagine?"

"I don't know," DeeDee said. "The San Juan archipelago has some pretty majestic coastlines too."

"I'll give you that." Mary snapped her fingers. "Kaylee, how

about giving Holly one of the ocean spray plants? They're native to the island."

"Oh, the *Holodiscus discolor*. That's a perfect gift for a newbie." Kaylee pictured the shrub's delicate white blooms, which were fragile but long-lasting. "Whether or not she makes Orcas Island her permanent home, she will always know she was welcome here."

"Yes, and she'll know that you aren't just interested in her mulberry trees," DeeDee said with a wink.

Kaylee shrugged and pinched off a bite of her cookie. "I have to admit, I am intrigued by the idea of growing mulberry trees in a greenhouse."

"To be honest, I wouldn't expect to get too close," Jessica said. "She seemed happy to tell me about her other produce, but when I asked about the mulberries, she clammed up tight. It was sort of strange, actually."

"Are you digging for a mystery?" Kaylee teased. Jessica was known for her willingness to entertain some rather outlandish conspiracy theories.

"Certainly not," Jessica said with a sniff. "But if I were, could we schedule the excavation for Thursday? I'm hosting a retirement tea at the bakery for the church secretary tomorrow afternoon."

"Thursday is perfect," Kaylee said. "And the retirement party sounds like fun."

Jessica grimaced. "It will be if I can stay out of Bernie's sights."

"I thought Bernie declared she'd never set foot in Death by Chocolate again after the banana brownie incident," DeeDee said.

"I think she'll lift the ban for a major church-related event," Jessica replied. "She's been in the women's league at Mustard Seed Community Church longer than she's lived in Gingerbread Acres."

"She lives there too?" Kaylee asked.

"Yep," Mary said. "She and Miranda Foster were best friends. And I think she still goes to visit Warren from time to time."

“It’s safe to say Miranda brought out the best in them both.” Jessica nudged Kaylee with her shoulder. “Assuming I survive a run-in with Bernie, what time do you want to go to see Holly on Thursday?”

Kaylee brought up the calendar on her phone and checked her schedule. “I have a wedding consultation in the morning, but I’m pretty open otherwise. Want to plan for going right after lunch?”

Jessica nodded. “Works for me. If I go on a full stomach, I won’t be tempted to steal any mulberries off Holly’s trees.”

Kaylee laughed, thinking about the mess the juicy berries were notorious for making. “Well, Jess, if it’s *Morus nigra* she’s growing, I’m afraid you’d be caught red-handed.”

## 2



Thursday afternoon, Kaylee stepped out of The Flower Patch's front door with a large ocean spray plant in one hand and Bear's leash in the other.

"Enjoy your visit," Mary called from inside the shop before closing the door behind Kaylee.

Kaylee descended the porch steps, then glanced back at the beautiful Victorian mansion that housed her business. Evergreen garland was wrapped around the porch pillars and swagged along the railing, and a wreath decorated with flocked pine cones, gold jingle bells, and plaid ribbon graced the door to welcome customers. Her moment of appreciation was interrupted when Bear released his greeting bark and tugged on his leash.

Jerry Hood, a longtime captain of the ferry line that connected Orcas Island to the mainland, was just exiting Death by Chocolate with a large to-go cup in his hand. The day was bright and sunny, but in the chilly December air, Kaylee could see a wisp of steam drifting from the hole in the lid.

"Hello there, Bear," Jerry said, bending down to give the dachshund a scratch behind the ears with his free hand. Bear leaned into the tall man's hand, clearly enjoying the attention. Jerry stood and shifted his kind gaze to Kaylee. "Staying out of trouble, young lady?"

Kaylee was glad to see that Jerry's typical jovial spirit was in place. He'd recently lost his brother, Gordon, and Kaylee wouldn't have blamed Jerry for adopting a gruff countenance. She smiled and answered, "I'm doing my best. It's a little hard on a day as beautiful as this, though."



Jerry glanced at the sky and nodded. "Yup, not a cloud in sight. You can see Mount Rainier clear as day out on the water. But it won't last. A storm is supposed to come through. Could be a doozy."

"I'm sure you've seen your fair share of storms, haven't you?"

"Indeed I have." Jerry scratched at his wind-reddened cheek. "But this one sounds like it'll be the worst I've seen in thirty years."

"You've been a ferry captain for thirty years? Wow."

"Yes ma'am, ever since I was discharged from the Navy. Granted, I don't get out on the boat as often as I did before they made me the port manager. But when I do get out there, I still get a thrill from welcoming everyone to Orcas Island."

"I understand that. Jessica and I are heading out to welcome a new resident ourselves. Have you met Holly Shultz?"

Jerry nodded. "I remember the day she moved here. She seemed a bit skittish. I thought she was going to have a coronary when I asked her if everything in her vehicle was battened down tight. It can get rocky in the hold, you know."

"I've heard she likes to keep to herself, but we still want to go out to her home to greet her officially."

Jerry bent and gave Bear another pat. "Just be home before that storm blows in." He stood and gestured toward the ferry dock. "I'd better run before the boat leaves without me." Chuckling at his joke, Jerry gave Kaylee a wave then continued down the sidewalk.

The door of Death by Chocolate opened again and Jessica emerged. The wind ruffled her dark hair in its stylish pixie cut, but she didn't seem to notice the chill thanks to her burgundy wool coat and chunky gray scarf.

"Holly will love that plant," Jessica said as she met Kaylee on the sidewalk. She lifted a paper bag bearing her shop's logo. "I'm bringing chocolate truffles."

"You can never go wrong with chocolate," Kaylee said agreeably.

"My life motto." Jessica's eyes sparkled. "Ready to roll? I told Gretchen I'd be back by two."

"That's what I told Mary as well, but of course she told me to take my time."

"She's a gem."

"She really is. She offered to keep Bear too, but he always loves exploring new places. It's okay to bring him, right? I don't know how Holly feels about dogs."

"I can't imagine anyone fearing that adorable little guy. Huh, buddy?" Jessica cooed the last words at Bear. He responded by wagging his tail so hard his whole back end waved. "He'll keep the mood light and fun."

"It sounds like we shouldn't waste any time. I saw Jerry a minute ago, and he seems to think a storm is coming in."

"Always trust a sailor to give you the weather report." Jessica glanced back at her bakery as she pulled her coat tighter around herself. She paused and squinted through the window toward the front counter. "Kaylee, do you think Oliver is looking droopy?" Oliver, Jessica's beloved lavender geranium, resided near the cash register, and Jessica frequently based predictions about the future on the plant's overall health. To the baker, droopy leaves were a bad omen. "I saw Bernie poking at his soil during the retirement tea yesterday. I tried to distract her by talking about the bake-off. I hope she didn't put a hex on him or something."

Kaylee peered through the window and studied Oliver, then offered her friend a reassuring smile. "He's as healthy as ever, Jess. You worry too much."

"Phew." Jessica made a show of wiping her brow. "Let's move on to our next concern: convincing Holly to enter the bake-off."

With Bear leading the way, the friends walked down the small

alley between their businesses to the parking area behind them. Kaylee secured the ocean spray plant in the trunk while Jessica opened the passenger side door and got in. Bear strained at his leash toward Jessica, so Kaylee released him, and he hopped into Jessica's lap before she closed the door.

"I guess he knows that your lap is the comfiest seat in the car," Kaylee said as she climbed into the driver's seat. "Now, can you tell me where I'm going?"

"Sure." Jessica latched her seat belt with a click, then placed a hand around Bear's body. "Head toward your house. Gingerbread Acres is actually only a couple of miles past Wildflower Cottage. I'm surprised you've never heard of it before."

"I guess I'm still discovering the hidden depths of Orcas Island," Kaylee said. "And Wildflower Cottage is pretty secluded, so it's easy to forget that I have neighbors sometimes."

With Jessica giving her directions, Kaylee easily made her way to the tiny subdivision. An old wooden sign buried in tall, dried grass marked the turnoff from the main road. Several of the plastic letters were missing, leaving faded gaps in the words *Gingerbread Acres*.

"Holly mentioned that the greenhouse is on the end of a cul-de-sac, so she must live on Jingle Bell Court," Jessica explained. "Turn left here, then take the next right."

Kaylee followed Jessica's instructions, driving slowly to avoid the potholes that pockmarked the streets. A garbage truck rumbled along ahead of them, pausing at each house, and Kaylee passed it carefully on the narrow lane. The second turn led them to Jingle Bell Court, a bell-shaped cul-de-sac lined by seven houses. At the far end, Kaylee saw the top of a greenhouse, its glass roof glinting in the sunshine.

The small cottage that stood in front of the glass building appeared to be a little worse for wear, with weathered cedar

shakes, trim that was sparsely coated in peeling green paint, and a series of cracks in the walkway leading to the front door, but it was otherwise well-maintained. The grass and shrubs were neat, and a few ornamental kale plants in pots near the door looked healthy.

"This must be the place," Kaylee said.

Jessica frowned at the cottage next to it, which was practically being swallowed up by overgrown shrubbery and tall grass. "And Warren Foster's is in that jungle somewhere."

Kaylee parked in front of Holly's cottage, then she and Jessica climbed out. With Jessica holding his leash, Bear immediately set to work sniffing the new surroundings.

Kaylee retrieved the ocean spray plant from the trunk, then ran her gaze over Warren's house. "It's a shame what Mary said about him becoming a hermit after his wife passed away."

"To be honest, Warren Foster was always a bit of a grump," Jessica said. "His wife was sweet as sugar, so it was a real case of opposites attracting. Once she was gone, he shut out the world pretty fast." She gestured toward the shuttered windows, the wooden panels hanging crooked on their hinges. "Literally."

Bear led them toward Holly's front door, snuffing the sidewalk, the grass, and everything else he could reach as he went. When they got to the front door, Kaylee pushed a brass doorbell but didn't hear a corresponding chime inside, so she rapped a few times on the weathered red paint. After a few minutes, she shook her head. "She must not be home."

"Let's go around back," Jessica suggested. "Maybe she's outside."

They walked around the side of the house to the backyard. "Wow," Kaylee said when she saw the greenhouse, which was attached to the house by a short passageway. "No wonder she can promise Andy produce all year. That greenhouse is huge."

The sound of tinkling glass carried from the greenhouse.

Bear took off running toward the sound, his leash slipping from Jessica's grasp.

"Bear!" Kaylee yelled and ran after him. As she neared the greenhouse's side entrance, she realized the door was missing its glass.

A young redheaded woman knelt on the ground just inside the doorway. More glass tinkled as she swept broken fragments into a dustpan with a small hand broom.

Bear released a yip and trotted toward the woman, causing her to shriek and drop the broom. She fell backward, her face stricken with fear, but she quickly righted herself and jumped to her feet. She raised her hands as if to ward off Bear's approach.

"Bear, come," Kaylee called to her dog. Fortunately, he'd stopped halfway between Kaylee and Holly so he wasn't in danger of hurting his paws on broken glass. He returned to Kaylee, his leash dragging behind him. "I'm so sorry," Kaylee said to the woman, whose frightened expression hadn't lessened much. "We didn't mean to scare you. Is everything okay?"

The woman glanced from Kaylee to Jessica and back, her eyes as jumpy as her demeanor.

"Hi there," Jessica said brightly. "Remember me? Jessica Roberts?"

"You're the baker." Holly's voice was quiet and wary, but Kaylee detected a musical quality to it underneath the caution.

Kaylee smiled warmly. "And I'm Kaylee Bleu. I own The Flower Patch, the flower shop next door to Jessica's bakery. You're Holly, right?"

Holly nodded but didn't offer any other information. She brushed back a few strands of hair that had fallen out of her ponytail, which made her look slightly less harried than before. She glanced down at the mess of glass at her feet, then back up at Kaylee and Jessica.

"I'm sorry," Kaylee said again. "We didn't mean to catch you in the middle of cleaning up. What happened? Did the door slam too hard?"

Holly wrung her hands as her gaze darted around the greenhouse. She didn't answer for the longest time, but then finally she said quietly, "Someone broke in last night."

Jessica inhaled sharply. "Do you want me to call the sheriff for you?"

"No!" Holly yelped, then shook her head and lowered her voice. "Um, no police. It's fine. I can order another pane of glass. For now, I'll cover it with plastic or a piece of wood."

"But your beautiful fruits and vegetables could die," Jessica argued.

"They'll be fine," Holly said. "I'll be fine." She squatted to finish sweeping glass into her dustpan.

Although Kaylee was certainly concerned about Holly's break-in, she could also tell that the young woman didn't want to discuss it. Hoping to salvage the visit, Kaylee changed the subject. "We brought you some truffles and an ocean spray from my shop to welcome you to Turtle Cove. I thought you might like the plant for your collection. Jessica told me you're growing all sorts of things in here."

Kaylee stepped closer to the greenhouse and peered inside. *I could spend the whole day in here*, she thought as she marveled at the tidy rows of raised garden beds in cedar frames and matching benches holding terra-cotta pots. Vegetables hung like jewelry from beautiful parent plants: emerald-green bell peppers, garnet-hued beefsteak tomatoes, and golden squash.

And there, in the back corner, were the mulberry trees, dark-red berries dripping like rubies from the branches.

"Mulberries," Kaylee said in awe. "I haven't seen mulberries in so long. May I?"

"No!" Holly sprang to her feet, and the glass tinkled in the dustpan. "Nothing is for sale in here. The food I sell is at the store. Please. I really need you to leave."

Kaylee glanced at Jessica, who shrugged. "I apologize for dropping in on you without warning," Kaylee said to Holly. "We didn't mean to catch you off guard. We just wanted to welcome you to Orcas Island."

Holly's gaze fell on the plant in Kaylee's hand, and her expression softened. "An ocean spray, you said? It's lovely. Thank you." She hesitated, then said, "I don't mean to come off as rude. I'm thankful you came by, really. And on any other day . . ." She glanced down to the shattered glass still littering the floor.

"Would you like us to help you clean up?" Jessica offered.

Holly shook her head. "That's not necessary. I can do it."

Kaylee was reluctant to leave this poor woman, the newcomer whose home had been broken into. Holly was clearly a nervous wreck, and Kaylee didn't feel right abandoning her with her burdens. "Jessica and I are friends with some of the sheriff's deputies," she said gently. "Even if you don't want to report your break-in, maybe we could ask them to patrol out here more often. Would that make you feel safer?"

Holly paled. "I don't want any attention put on me."

"They won't bother you," Jessica said quickly. "They'll just check the area every now and then."

Holly bit her lower lip. It took so long for her to reply that Kaylee was sure she would refuse this help as well. But finally she said, "I suppose that couldn't hurt. But can you leave my name out of it when you ask?"

"You bet," Jessica agreed. "Are you sure you don't want help cleaning up? Or the name of a handyman to replace this window? Our friend Reese is the best on the island."

"Thank you, but no," Holly said firmly, though with a hint

of a smile. "I appreciate you stopping by."

Kaylee knew a dismissal when she heard it. "It was lovely meeting you. I hope we see you again soon."

Holly nodded but said nothing more, so Kaylee and Jessica placed their gifts on a nearby bench and made their way back to the car.

"Ugh, I forgot to ask her about the bake-off," Jessica said as they reached the SUV. "Then again, she doesn't exactly seem like the competitive type. I don't think she'd enjoy the spotlight."

Before Kaylee could respond, a voice hollered out. At first, Kaylee thought Holly was calling to them, but she quickly realized it was a man.

"You owe me \$300!" The voice came from the other side of the overgrown shrubbery that delineated Warren Foster's property from Holly's. "And I want it now!"

Kaylee moved toward the driver's side door, wanting to mind her own business, but Bear strained at the end of the leash, his little black nose pointed directly at the shrubs. As she reeled in the leash to collect her curious dachshund, the heated conversation continued.

"I'll get you your money soon enough," a gravelly old voice said. "I got some coming in."

"You better!" A screen door rattled, and someone stomped down some wooden stairs that creaked under the weight. A man in his early forties, his face stormy, burst from the bushes and marched to the curb. He leveled a sharp kick at the plastic garbage can resting there, then climbed into a beat-up Toyota Corolla. He yanked the door shut and cranked the engine. After a few moments, the motor spluttered to life. The car pulled away and rambled out of the cul-de-sac, leaving a trail of exhaust fumes in its wake.

Kaylee glanced at the front of the cottage and saw an old



man with a craggy face, a thick, white beard, and long, straggly hair behind the screen door. Warren Foster, she assumed.

In his red housecoat, Warren resembled a skinny Santa Claus, but clearly lacked the cheery disposition. He raised a fist at the car speeding away and shouted, "Selfish kid!" Then he erupted into a coughing fit that became muffled when he slammed the interior door.

Unsettled by the scene, Kaylee hustled Bear into the car. Once she and Jessica had buckled their seat belts, they stared at each other, both of their faces drawn with worry.

At last, Jessica broke the silence. "I think one thing is for sure," she said. "I don't care how sweet this neighborhood used to be. Things have gone sour in Gingerbread Acres."