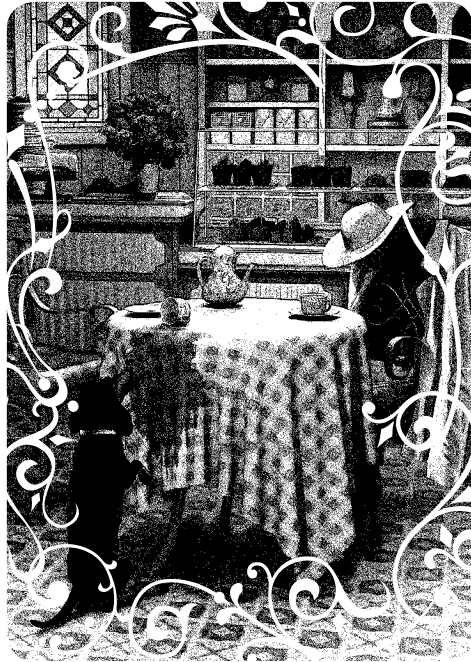


# Rooted in Malice





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Jan Fields

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*Rooted in Malice*

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# 1



Taking a break from sweeping nonexistent dirt from the hardwood floor, Kaylee Bleu paused near The Flower Patch's tall front window to peer outside at the gray, blustery February afternoon. A lone pickup truck rumbled down Main Street toward Turtle Cove's marina. The lack of traffic—foot or motor—proved more than anything that Washington's Orcas Island was suffering from the winter doldrums, a time when the tourists stayed away and the residents wished for warm spring days. Kaylee for one wasn't looking forward to the next time she had to brave the bone-chilling cold.

As Kaylee resumed her sweeping, her dachshund, Bear, gave a yip from the small, braided rug in front of the cash register counter, as if he'd somehow sensed she had been thinking about how much she didn't want to venture out of the warmth of her flower shop. Kaylee sighed, but offered the little dog a lopsided smile. "I know, buddy. We'll go for a walk as soon as my sweeping is done."

Kaylee's friend and assistant, Mary Bishop, glanced along the shelf of add-on gifts she was dusting. "That'll be the most excitement this place has seen all day," Mary said. "Now that Valentine's Day is over, some of the shops are planning to go to half days or even closing a few days each week until the weather brightens."

"We could try that, I suppose," Kaylee replied absently as she bent over her dustpan. She would prefer to be helping customers, but to be honest, she actually enjoyed sweeping. The swish of the bristles against the floor was both relaxing and purposeful,

resulting in neat piles of debris. In a way it reminded her of the peace she found in arranging flowers.

"You sound enthusiastic," Mary said drily as she walked to the next shelf and began carefully dusting each item.

Kaylee shrugged. "I'm not unenthusiastic. Mostly I'm not sure what I'd do with the extra time at home. Much like this place, Wildflower Cottage only requires so much cleaning. I'd catch up on my reading, I suppose. I certainly couldn't get out in my garden."

Mary chuckled. "You're telling me. The only thing growing in my garden this time of year is puddles. Speaking of which, Jess suggested skipping the Petals meeting on Tuesday again."

She referred to their friend Jessica Roberts, a fellow member of the Petal Pushers garden club, which also included another friend, DeeDee Wilcox. They hadn't been meeting regularly due to the weather, and Kaylee was starting to feel downright glum about it—in spite of the fact that all four women worked on the same street, so she still saw her friends nearly every day.

Mary sighed. "I try to remember that all the rain we get now will make Orcas Island burst into bloom in spring."

"That's a good attitude." Kaylee dumped the small amount of dirt she'd swept up into the garbage behind the front counter. "I suppose I could use the extra time to plan my flower beds and maybe brush up on some of the botanical science journal articles I've been collecting."

"Maybe you should try writing one," Mary suggested. "Or maybe a book. It would keep you busy."

Kaylee gaped at her. "What on earth would I write about?"

"Your work with the Orcas Island Sheriff's Department comes to mind."

Kaylee rolled her eyes. "I doubt that would be interesting to anyone."

"I think using forensic botany to solve crimes—including

murders—would be interesting to plenty of people. Academics and otherwise.”

“If you say so.” Kaylee leaned on her broom. “As for reducing shop hours, I don’t want to be closed tomorrow since we do still get some foot traffic on Saturdays. Let’s try closing on Monday next week.”

Mary’s eyebrows shot up, her face the picture of surprise. “I thought talking you into that would be harder. You’re actually taking an extra day off?”

Kaylee smiled sheepishly. “Mostly I was giving you another day off. I figured I’d come in and do some bookkeeping and paperwork, though I’ll keep the shop closed.”

Before Mary could scold Kaylee for being a workaholic—again—the door to the shop opened and Reese Holt walked in. Rain dripped from the brim of the handsome handyman’s beloved L.A. Dodgers baseball cap. A partially buttoned heavy coat covered his trademark flannel shirt. Kaylee couldn’t help but notice how the coat accentuated Reese’s broad shoulders.

“Shopping for flowers?” Kaylee asked. Reese occasionally bought small arrangements for some of his elderly customers to brighten their day—one of the many things Kaylee found endearing about him.

Before Reese could answer, Bear drew his attention by dancing around his feet. Reese laughed and bent to pet the little dog. “I’m glad to see you too, Bear.”

Mary dropped her dustcloth on the counter. “I think Bear’s lonely. He loves all the attention he gets from customers during the busy months.”

“Spring is coming,” Reese promised Bear before straightening to give Kaylee a smile that made her heart flutter. “No flower buying today, I’m afraid. I’m just spreading the word that I’ll be gone for the next few days, possibly through Wednesday.”

Mary came around the counter, her face concerned. "Nothing wrong I hope. No family problems?"

He shook his head. "Everyone's great, though my nephew had a small tree climbing accident and sprained his wrist. Apparently he's trying to claim it as an excuse to eat ice cream for dinner."

Mary laughed. "Sounds like something my Herb would have tried when he was a boy."

Reese grinned. "It's something I might have tried too. I suspect my sister isn't going to fall for it any more than my mom would have, though."

"So what is taking you off the island?" Kaylee asked, a little disappointed at the thought of not seeing Reese for the next few days. *Because we're friends*, she told herself pointedly. *With the island so quiet, I appreciate every moment I spend with my friends.*

Reese's answer pulled her out of her thoughts. "I'm giving a lecture on winter boating safety to a private sailing club in Seattle."

"Sounds fancy," Kaylee said.

"Sounds awful," Reese replied glumly. "I'm happy to help people be safer on the water, but I suspect this talk is mostly their idea of filler entertainment at a club meeting."

"Then why go?" Mary asked.

"One of the club members owns property outside Turtle Cove. I do some work for him during the off-season and handle all the handyman needs for the place. He's a good customer and a good guy, so I didn't want to say no to him. But I would rather not go, especially since the ferry crossing is going to be unpleasant in this rough weather."

"It is awfully windy," Kaylee said, sneaking another glance out the window.

"I'm planning to pack a lunch, but I doubt I'll eat it with how much extra motion there will be." He grinned at Kaylee.



"Speaking of eating, I also wanted to say that I heard last week about a new steak house opening in Eastsound in the spring. They're planning to have outdoor service like O'Brien's. Maybe you'll want to take Bear and try it out when they open."

"O'Brien's has always treated Bear so well," Kaylee said. "It could be risky trying to take him to a new place where they might not welcome him."

Reese's grin wilted. "Good point."

Kaylee was surprised at how disappointed Reese seemed by her reply. She wondered if he knew the owners of the restaurant. *Maybe I should have been more supportive of a new business?*

Before she could ask about his reaction, he said, "I ought to run if I'm going to catch the ferry. I'll see you both when I get back." Bear yipped at his feet and Reese chuckled. "Right, buddy. I'll see all three of you when I get back."

Once Reese had left, Mary arched an eyebrow at Kaylee. "You're going to break his heart."

"What are you talking about?" Kaylee asked.

"He was clearly hinting about a date at that new restaurant," Mary said. "And you shot him right down."

"Oh don't be silly," Kaylee said, though she'd also caught that air of disappointment from him. She and Reese were friends. Sure, they were close friends, and she did find him extremely handsome and kind, and Bear adored him . . . Kaylee gave herself a mental shake. Mary was not going to get her caught up in her matchmaking. "Maybe he thought I'd enjoy hearing about more potentially pet-friendly places."

"Sure," Mary said with a sly grin.

Desperate to head off the rest of this discussion, Kaylee grabbed her coat from the hook and slipped it on. "I'm going next door to get some hot chocolate. I think we need a pick-me-up to get through the afternoon."

"That might be a good idea," Mary said. "A nap is calling me, but cocoa sounds better."

Bear hadn't missed Kaylee shrugging into her jacket, and he raced to the shop door and danced around with his tail wagging furiously. Kaylee bent to pat him on the head. "Sorry, Bear. No dogs at the bakery. You stay here with Mary, and I promise we'll have a nice walk soon."

Bear clearly realized the message in her tone because his enthusiasm subsided immediately. Even his jaunty red bow tie seemed to droop.

"You are not making me feel guilty," Kaylee lied. "We had that nice walk before I started cleaning. You're not fooling me."

Bear licked her hand once, then returned to moping. Mary walked over and swept him up in her arms. "I'll comfort him in his despair while you're gone."

Kaylee chuckled. "Thanks. Don't stuff him with treats."

As soon as Kaylee pulled the door open, the wind blasted her, whipping up her long, dark hair and making her eyes sting. She pulled the knit hat from the pocket of her jacket and tugged it on with the hope of avoiding a tangled mess from the wind playing hairdresser.

The trek to Death by Chocolate was short since the bakery was right next door, but Kaylee was still glad to get out of the cold. The wind had picked up since the walk she'd taken with Bear earlier and she hoped it would blow itself out soon. When she pulled on the door to the bakery, a gust tried to jerk it out of her hands, and it took real effort to pull the door closed again.

"Kaylee Bleu! I didn't think you had the grit to get out in this kind of wind."

Kaylee pushed the hair out of her eyes and faced Roz Corzo. The tall, burly woman owned a boat down at the marina and

used it to guide whale watches and fishing tours for tourists. One look at Roz would convince anyone that she wasn't the sort to be intimidated by wind or much of anything else. Her hair was mostly gray and cut short, and her skin was aged beyond her years from all the time spent outdoors. She wore a heavy fisherman's sweater with baggy jeans tucked into worn boots.

"Nice to see you, Roz," Kaylee said.

Roz barked out a laugh and elbowed the woman beside her. "She's lying, of course."

"Don't be that way," the other woman said. Like Roz, this woman was tall, but she lacked Roz's muscles and broad shoulders. Instead, her frame was willowy and her dark hair hung down her back in a tidy French braid. She wore a floral silk scarf around her neck and a stylish wool coat. "I'm Jeanette Colson." The woman offered Kaylee her hand. "I used to live on the island years ago."

"Oh, maybe you knew my grandparents," Kaylee suggested. "Ed and Bea Lyons?"

Jeanette's expression lit up in recollection. "I certainly did. They were always incredibly nice to me, and I'll be the first to admit, I wasn't always the easiest person to be nice to."

"That's all right," Roz growled. "They were even nice to me. It was spooky."

That made Kaylee laugh. Roz could be abrasive, but it was hard to outright dislike anyone so aware of her own shortcomings. "We all have our moments."

Roz narrowed her eyes at Kaylee. "Really? I ain't seen yours yet, Miss Perfect."

"Stop," Jeanette said airily, waving her hand at Roz before focusing on Kaylee. "I think she acts that way to see if she can provoke everyone into being as grumpy as she is. Now, if you're

living on the island, you must be helping Bea and Mary with the flower shop?"

"Bea retired and moved to Arizona," Kaylee said. "But I run the shop with Mary. She's there now."

The cheerful expression darkened a bit, but Jeanette kept a smile on her face. "I'll have to run by and say hello if I have a chance before I leave."

For whatever reason, Kaylee suspected Jeanette wasn't being honest. Did she have some problem with Mary? Kaylee pushed down the idea. "Are you staying long?"

"Only through the weekend," Jeanette answered. "I have to head to work early next week, but I wanted to spend some time with Roz. Sometimes it's good to be with someone who's in on all your secrets, especially the ones about your ex. Isn't that right, Roz?"

Roz scowled at her. "Richard wasn't my ex, Jeanette. He died."

Jeanette winced. "Of course. Sorry. I was talking about Bart." She dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, leaning toward Kaylee. "That's probably why I have an ex. I'm too self-absorbed." She gestured toward the counter where Jessica Roberts, the bakery owner, held up a white box. "I believe our goodies are ready."

"No hurry," Jessica said. "I didn't want to interrupt your conversation."

Roz huffed. "If you don't interrupt Jeanette, you'll never get to talk."

"It's true," Jeanette said as she collected the box and handed money to Jessica. "We ought to share these with your neighbor. It might soften the old grouch up."

"I'm not wasting any treats on Pop Ronson," Roz retorted. "That man is a menace."

"He'd be fine if you didn't go out of your way to antagonize him," Jeanette said. "He's nice enough to me, if a little cranky."

Thankfully, once we get the boat out, you two will be too far apart to fight."

"You're still on about taking the boat out tonight?" Roz huffed. "That doesn't make a lick of sense with this wind. And I've barely had any sleep since you arrived. Can't we have dinner at the inn and hit the sack early? We could take the boat out first thing tomorrow."

Kaylee glanced toward the windows where she could see the wind whipping branches on the shrubs in the planter boxes across the street. It was obviously a terrible night to be on the water. Kaylee had a strong stomach, but she suspected that would put it to the test. Taking a boat out on the ocean in these conditions might even be dangerous.

"Don't be such an old lady," Jeanette said. "I love being at sea in the winter here. It's more of a contest, a battle with the elements."

"One that not every boat wins," Jessica warned. "This kind of weather is treacherous, especially at night."

Roz glared at Jessica. "I know the waters here far better than you do. And I know my boat." She whipped her head toward Jeanette. "Let's go. If we're going out in this weather, I've got things to check."

Roz stomped out the door, letting in a blast of cold air in the process. Jeanette eyed Kaylee and Jessica then shrugged before following her friend. "Don't worry. I'll bring a life raft along."

"Oh dear." Jessica put both hands to her pixie-like face after the door closed. "I think I said exactly the wrong thing. Now Roz is sure to go out, if only to be contrary."

Kaylee had to admit that might be a possibility. "She does have a lot of experience though. And it's still hours before dark. Maybe with some time to think about it, both of them will change their minds."

"I hope so," Jessica said, then cocked her head at Kaylee.

"Did you come in for something?"

Kaylee laughed. "Right. Sorry. Can I have two hot chocolates, please? Mary and I could use a boost from our rather slow morning."

"I understand that," Jessica said as she set about preparing the hot chocolate. She warmed cream, shaved chocolate, and pure cocoa—no packaged powder for Death by Chocolate customers. "Roz and her friend actually qualified as a rush of customers today."

"Honestly, it's a bit surprising to me that Roz has an old friend who is as outgoing as Jeanette," Kaylee said. "Jeanette must be truly committed to the friendship to come and visit in February, though I suppose it's every bit as gray and rainy in Seattle. I haven't forgotten the winter doldrums from my years at the university."

"We don't get quite as much rain as Seattle," Jessica agreed. "Though I think we get more wind. A boat ride certainly would be lively. Even the fishing boats don't go out in this kind of wind. Jeanette must *love* boats to even suggest it."

Kaylee wrinkled her nose. "I enjoy boats, but I'm not a fan of seasickness." Then a thought hit her. "Who's that Pop guy they were talking about?"

"Pop Ronson? He runs whale watches and fishing trips from the marina, the same as Roz. His boat, *The Misty Maid*, is in the slip right next to Roz's. The two are constantly yelling at one another from the decks of their boats. Nick has been called out more than once for noise complaints."

Surprised that their friend Deputy Nick Durham had responded to such a call, Kaylee asked, "Roz can yell that loud?"

"Apparently they bought bullhorns at one point," Jessica said as she stirred the cups of hot chocolate vigorously. "Nick confiscated at least one of those, as I remember."

Kaylee pictured two grizzled boat captains blasting derisive

comments at each other. The image made her giggle. "Any idea what caused the feud between the two of them?"

"He and Roz have been at it for years. Pop can't understand how Roz gets more business than he does considering she's a . . . challenging personality. He's always coming up with theories about how she's cheating him." Jessica chuckled. "You should hear some of the conspiracy theories he's come up with. One of them involved Roz using some kind of illegal technology, stolen from the government, that makes the whales show up more for her boat than for his."

Since Kaylee knew full well that Jessica was fond of conspiracy theories of all sorts, she was surprised that her friend would laugh at someone else's outlandish theories. "What do you think it is?"

Jessica lifted one shoulder in a small shrug, then topped each cup of hot chocolate with a generous dollop of whipped cream. "Honestly, I can't imagine. It's a mystery." She snapped the lids on the cups.

"One I believe I'll ignore," Kaylee said as she handed over money. "I have more cleaning to do at the shop. Thanks for the chat, and for the chocolate of course."

Jessica pushed the two cups of hot chocolate into a small cardboard carrier to make it easier for Kaylee to hold both cups with one hand. As Kaylee picked them up, her eye was drawn to the lavender geranium that Jessica kept on the end of the counter. Jessica treated the plant like a pet, down to naming it Oliver. According to Jessica, Oliver was unusually sensitive to danger and hostility around him, and the plant drooped to warn Jessica of impending doom.

As always, Oliver was healthy and bright. Though Jessica fussed over the plant, she clearly didn't give in to an urge to overwater him or any of the other habits people sometimes fell into when they loved a potted plant a bit too much. Still, as

Kaylee examined the healthy little plant, a frilly green leaf fell off onto the counter.

"Did you see that?" Jessica squeaked in horror.

Kaylee picked up the leaf. It showed no signs of wilt and lacked the dark edges she'd expect from a leaf about to fall. She pointed toward the door. "It was probably weakened by all the wind coming in."

"And decided to fall right now?" Disbelief was clear in Jessica's tone. "Nope, Oliver can tell something is wrong. I'm sure of it." She peered directly into Kaylee's eyes. "And remember, he dropped a leaf as you were looking at him. I think the warning is for you."

Kaylee forced a smile. "Don't worry, Oliver. I'm fine."

"Don't take this too lightly, Kaylee. I mean it. Be careful for the next day or so, okay?"

"I'll be careful," Kaylee promised. She headed out into the wind, but it wasn't only the weather that sent a cold chill through her. As much as she didn't want to give any credence to a warning made by a plant, Kaylee couldn't shake off the creepy sensation tickling her spine.





“I was beginning to worry that you’d gotten blown away,” Mary said with a laugh when Kaylee entered The Flower Patch, the wind giving her an extra shove through the doorway.

“Sorry about that.” Kaylee pulled one of the cups from the holder and handed it to Mary before bending to pat Bear as he danced around her feet. “I ran into Roz Corzo and a friend of hers, a woman named Jeanette Colson. She mentioned your name.”

Mary frowned slightly. “I remember Jeanette. She’s been gone a long time. What brings her to Turtle Cove?”

“Visiting Roz, apparently.” Kaylee shrugged out of her jacket and hung it up. “I take it by the frown that Jeanette wasn’t one of your favorite people.”

Mary took a long sip of her hot chocolate, which Kaylee suspected was a stalling gesture. “I didn’t know her all that well, but she was a bit too fond of drama, I thought,” Mary said finally. “Divorce is ugly enough without letting it become a circus. And I always thought she seemed especially focused on getting sympathy from your grandparents.” She shook her head. “I’ll be honest—I didn’t miss her when she left.”

Kaylee thought about that a bit as she sipped her own hot chocolate. Even distracted by her thoughts, she was aware of the creamy, rich liquid restoring the warmth that the biting wind had sucked away. When she felt thawed, she said, “Jessica didn’t remember Jeanette.”

“I’m not surprised,” Mary said. “The only reason I knew her was because of Bea and Ed. Jeanette was never community-minded, but she latched on to your grandparents fiercely. She

used to come into the shop to pour out some new tale of her husband's transgressions. Bea is kind, understanding, and often sympathetic, but at some point she'd always try to get Jeanette to see Bart's side, and that's when the woman would stomp out in a huff. She was never terribly interested in other people's viewpoints."

"She and Roz make an unlikely pair," Kaylee said. "Roz doesn't seem the type to let other people take advantage of her much."

"You might be surprised," Mary said. "Roz isn't exactly social, but everyone needs a friend. Even if it's a toxic one."

Kaylee raised her eyebrows. "Jeanette was *that* bad?"

Mary sighed and waved off the question. "Don't mind me. It's been years and the woman annoyed me to no end, so I may be remembering her unfairly. Though in my defense, I will add that Ed eventually put a stop to her coming out to the house. He said Jeanette always upset Bea. Jeanette left the island right after that."

Before Mary could comment again, the shop door opened and a young couple came in, laughing as they struggled to close the door.

"We made it," the young man said. "Now how do we buy flowers and get them home without being blown away?"

Kaylee smiled brightly, happy to have customers at last. "I'm sure we can figure something out. Are you looking for anything specific?"



The wind seemed to blow itself out by Monday morning, and Kaylee was almost sorry she'd decided not to open the shop. The weather wasn't exactly welcoming, but it did seem brighter. Kaylee could almost believe spring really was coming in a matter

of weeks. In honor of that idea, she chose a bow tie for Bear that featured tiny daisies sprinkled all over the green fabric.

Kaylee locked the shop door behind her and headed up to her second-floor office with Bear scampering up the steps beside her. When they reached the office, Bear immediately ran over to stare pointedly at the filing cabinet where Kaylee kept a bag of treats for him.

"No treats yet," she said with mild reproof. "You just had breakfast. You're going to become a little brown watermelon if I give you as many treats as you want."

Bear offered a yip of disagreement, but he gave up and trotted to his dog bed to chew on a squeaky dog toy. Kaylee settled behind the weathered desk and was soon completely wrapped up in numbers and paperwork, with only the quiet squeaks as background music.

When pounding erupted on the door downstairs, both Kaylee and Bear jumped. Bear launched into a flurry of barking and raced for the stairs, clearly intent on defending the shop.

"Hush, Bear," Kaylee called as she followed him. "I get it. Someone is at the door."

Bear subsided into low growls, and Kaylee figured that was the best she was going to get until the person at the door stopped pounding. When she reached the bottom of the stairs and could see through the front door, Kaylee felt a fresh burst of surprise. Roz stood out on the porch, glaring into the shop with her signature scowl. She wore a knit cap over her gray curls and held her arms stiffly by her side, her hands in tight fists.

Watching the furious woman, Kaylee had a fleeting thought that it might be better to leave the door between them. Then she pushed that down. She *knew* Roz. She wasn't scared of her.

"We'd best find out what's going on," she murmured to Bear, then flipped the lock and pulled the door open.

Roz stomped in, virtually pushing Kaylee aside. "You have to help me!"

"Help you with what?" Kaylee glanced up and down the porch before closing the door, in case Roz's friend Jeanette was waiting outside. No one should have to wait in the cold. There was no sign of Jeanette, so she closed and locked the door, then turned to face Roz.

"Jeanette is missing," Roz announced, her hands on her hips. "And the cops think I killed her."

"Hold on. Let's go to the kitchen and sit down with some coffee to talk about this. Okay?"

Years before, her grandmother had impressed upon Kaylee the magic of a warm drink. "It's hard to fight over a cup of tea or a good mug of coffee," Bea had said. "A warm beverage is like getting a hug in a cup. Never underestimate its value when someone is upset."

Kaylee was glad to see Bea was correct, as always, when Roz huffed and relaxed the tiniest bit, shoving her still fisted hands into the deep pockets of her heavy coat. "Yeah, coffee would be good."

Once they were seated at the small table and chairs in the kitchen with steaming mugs, Kaylee brought the conversation back to Roz's opening remark. "Why would the police possibly believe you killed anyone?"

Roz set her mug down on the table with enough force that the coffee sloshed nearly over the side. "Well, you remember how Jeanette wanted to take the boat out on Friday night?"

Kaylee nodded.

"I tried to talk her out of it," Roz said. "I'm no coward, but I was tired, and the water was unusually rough. I try to take care of my boat. It's the only livelihood I've got." Roz paused and stared into her coffee mug.

"It certainly didn't seem a fit night for boating," Kaylee prompted.

"Jeanette wouldn't let up. She's always been that way. She even offered to bring along a life raft," Roz grumbled. "You should have seen her schlepping this huge duffel and claiming I was a wimp when I tried to back out after we left *Death by Chocolate*."

"But you finally agreed," Kaylee said.

"Yeah, I finally agreed, and we took the boat out after we picked up some dinner to go at O'Brien's. I sure wasn't going to try to cook on the boat in that weather."

Roz stalled again, making Kaylee wonder why. Usually when Roz had a full head of steam, coaxing wasn't necessary. Kaylee sat quietly, sipping her own coffee and waiting for Roz to continue, which she eventually did.

"After we ate, I broke out the pastries from the bakery. Jeanette insisted on making us some tea to go with them." Roz wrinkled her nose in disgust. "I don't usually drink tea. Water that you wash dried weeds in doesn't strike me as a beverage."

Kaylee didn't bother arguing with that, though she enjoyed a good cup of tea. "Why do you have tea on board if you don't care for it? For clients?"

Roz reared back, as if the very idea of stocking something for clients was offensive. "Hardly," she scoffed. "If clients want something, they best pack a picnic. No, Jeanette brought the tea with her. She said she made it herself with rubbish right from her own garden."

Kaylee raised an eyebrow, rather doubting Jeanette had called her plants *rubbish*.

Roz saw the expression and misinterpreted it. "You should have heard her. She talked it up like it was the elixir of the gods or something, claiming health benefits like a television huckster. I drank it to shut her up. And I can tell you, it was noxious. Weed water, it was, and bitter to boot."

Kaylee was beginning to wonder if Roz was ever going to get to the point or if she was simply going to continue harping on about her hatred of tea. But then Roz slapped a hand down on the table, making Kaylee jump and eliciting an annoyed growl from Bear on the floor by Kaylee's feet.

"Right after I finished the vile stuff, I started getting sleepy. I could hardly hold my head up. I was tired, but this wasn't natural, I tell you. I guess I passed out."

Kaylee sat up straighter. The story was getting interesting after all. "Do you think Jeanette put something in the tea?"

"I'd hate to think that, but I haven't come up with anything else," Roz said. "I didn't wake up until Saturday morning. My boat was adrift, and Jeanette was missing. So was that stupid duffel with the life raft in it."

"So you believe she used the raft to get off your boat? Would an inflatable raft be safe in that weather?"

"Of course not," Roz snapped. "My own boat was barely safe in that weather." She dropped her gaze to her coffee again, and the vitality drained from her voice as she continued her story. "I called the Coast Guard. All day Saturday and Sunday I searched the area where we'd been when I was last awake. I also called her phone, in case she'd gotten off the boat in some normal way, but nothing. I have no idea what happened to Jeanette."

"What if she was unaware the tea was tainted somehow?" Kaylee suggested. "Maybe she got tired too, and staggered to the deck and fell over."

"I thought that at first, but why would she have taken the duffel?" Roz's expression was stricken. "I shouldn't have gone out. We should have stayed on shore. I knew it was a bad idea." She rubbed her hand over her face.

Kaylee frowned. "You said the police believe you killed Jeanette. What would make you think that?"

"Jeanette's ex-husband, Bart, insists I must have killed her and dumped her body overboard. He called the sheriff's department and demanded they arrest me. They didn't, of course, but they did poke around my boat as if they thought I might be a smuggler." Roz spat out the word *smuggler*.

"Did they find anything?" Kaylee asked.

Roz's gaze snapped to Kaylee's. "I didn't do anything."

"Did they find anything?" Kaylee repeated, gently but firmly.

"Blood." Roz slumped, cradling her head in her hands. "It's no big deal. I sometimes take fishermen out. Of course there's going to be blood. Deep-sea fishing makes a mess." She raised her head again. "I work hard to keep my boat clean, but blood is hard to get out. I'm sure they found nothing but fish blood, but in the meanwhile, I'm not allowed to take my boat out. How am I supposed to make a living?"

"Did you have any charters lined up?" Kaylee asked.

"Well, no," Roz answered grudgingly. "People don't exactly flock to the island this time of year. But the sheriff's department doesn't even care. I *might* have had clients."

Kaylee ignored Roz's wounded tone. "Why would Jeanette's ex-husband accuse you of murder?"

"Because he's a skunk." Roz spun her empty mug in slow circles in her hands. "Jeanette hated the guy's guts by the time they divorced, and the feeling was mutual." She narrowed her eyes. "If anyone was going to murder Jeanette, it would have been Bart. Mark my words."

"Did you say that to the sheriff?" Kaylee asked.

Roz harrumphed. "As if they cared about *my* opinion."

"If someone killed Jeanette, and it wasn't an accident, the killer would probably have been on the island. Was Bart here?"

Roz shrugged heavily. "He could have been. He has a boat. He might even have Jeanette right now. Maybe he came out to

my boat and kidnapped her. Maybe he found some way to slip something into Jeanette's tea stash and then followed us out in the boat. As soon as I passed out, he grabbed her." She tapped her forefinger on the table for emphasis. "Jeanette told me that he never did get over her. She said he'd called, begging her to come back to him. After all these years, you'd think that man would have some pride."

Kaylee could see how the sheriff's department could be less than impressed with Roz's theories, since Roz couldn't seem to keep them straight herself. *Is Jeanette's ex-husband obsessed with her or does he hate her?* Still, as far as Kaylee was concerned, there was a bigger question. "So, how does this concern me?"

Roz pointed at her. "I know how nosy you are. And how you've figured out all kinds of stuff that the sheriff's department couldn't sort out. Now, I need you to put your nosy ways to good use. Find Jeanette and prove I didn't have anything to do with her disappearance. This morning, three different people asked me if I was still drunk." Her face darkened further.

"Why would anyone think you were drunk?"

"That's the gossip network theory about all this. Folks are saying I was so drunk that I had some kind of blackout, but I don't even drink. I'm telling you, all I had was tea. One disgusting cup of tea!" Roz's voice rose enough to elicit a warning growl from Bear.

Kaylee gave him a calming rub on the head, then reached out and patted Roz's arm. She wasn't exactly enthusiastic about being called nosy, but she had to agree that Roz was in a bind. "I can't guarantee I'll find anything useful, but I can ask a few questions."

Roz nodded her head slowly. "And if you hear anyone repeating that drunk rumor, you tell them Roz Corzo doesn't drink, you hear?"

"I will," Kaylee said. "But I can't promise that anything I do or say will make much difference."



"That's okay." Roz stood slowly and handed Kaylee her empty mug. "I never trust people who promise too much. You're a good sort. Kind of a princess, but all right. Your grandparents were too."

Kaylee rose to her feet and set the mugs in the sink, trying to sort out if Roz had been complimenting her or insulting her. As she escorted Roz to the front door, Kaylee could see the boat captain slumping as if telling her story had drained her of much of the energy she'd brought into the shop. "You should try to get some rest," Kaylee said as she unlocked the door.

Roz nodded without saying anything and headed out into the chilly morning.

Kaylee closed and locked the door behind Roz, then her gaze fell on Bear's eager face. "So, what did happen to Jeanette Colson?" Bear yipped, and Kaylee nodded. "You're right. We should find out. And I have a good idea of where to start."