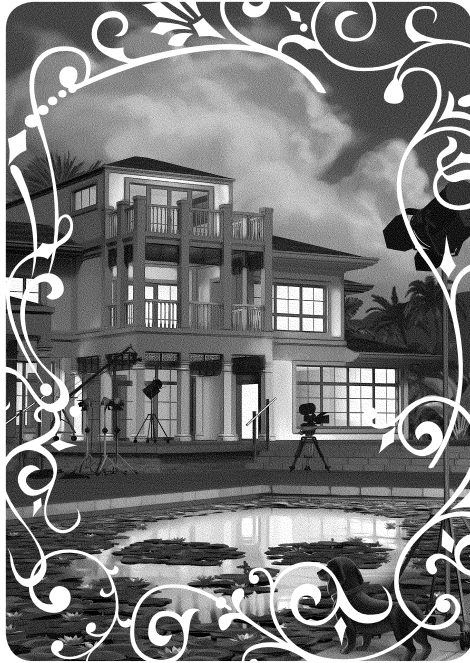


The Lily Vanishes





The Lily Vanishes



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1



Fog hung low over the island, drifting through colorful autumn trees like smoke from a nearby campfire. Kaylee Bleu slowed her car to savor the peaceful rural scene. One of the best things about moving to Orcas Island to run her grandmother's flower shop was the commute. No longer did she have to deal with reckless city drivers and congested traffic in downtown Seattle. It was only a couple of miles from cozy Wildflower Cottage, also purchased from her grandmother, to quaint downtown Turtle Cove and The Flower Patch.

This early in the morning most of the downtown businesses weren't open, although customers piled into Death by Chocolate, the bakery owned by her friend Jessica Roberts. Kaylee parked behind the Victorian mansion that housed her own store and got out, holding the door open for her dachshund to leap onto the pavement. "Let's go grab a coffee and say hi to Jessica." She snapped a leash on Bear and slung her tote over her shoulder.

Due to food service regulations, the little dog had to wait outside the coffee shop, tied to a post. Happy to accept the praise of passersby, who adored his cute face and tartan bow tie, he didn't seem to mind.

Jessica greeted Kaylee with a smile. "How are you and Bear today?" She gave the dog a wave through the plate glass window. He wagged his tail, giving her a big doggy grin.

"We're great, thanks," Kaylee said, studying the contents of the bakery case. "I told myself I'd just have coffee but I'm intrigued by those." She pointed to a plate of pretty chocolate confections.

"Those are chocolate swirl meringues." Jessica laughed as

she picked up a sheet of waxed paper. "Very low calorie." She winked.

"I'm sure." Kaylee promised herself she and Bear would take a long walk later.

It wasn't lost on Kaylee that there was an extra bounce in Jessica's step as she filled a to-go cup with coffee and bagged two meringues—one for Kaylee and one for Mary Bishop, Kaylee's part-time employee. Finally she couldn't take it any longer, and she said, "All right, Jess. I know you have something to say. Spill it."

"You caught me. It's huge, Kaylee." Jessica's brown eyes sparkled with glee. "Bernard Martin is filming a movie here on the island. And guess what? I've been hired to cater the set."

"That's great, Jess." Kaylee had heard the name Bernard Martin before. She leafed through her memory banks. "Doesn't he make moody thrillers, like Alfred Hitchcock?" Kaylee remembered visiting her grandmother on wintry Saturday afternoons as a teenager and into her adult years. They'd cuddle up and eat a big bowl of popcorn while they watched one of Martin's movies. The films were spare, elegant, and nail-bitingly suspenseful.

Jessica nodded. "That's right. But this is his first project in years. He more or less retired after his wife died. Now he's back and filming at his compound." She reached out and grabbed Kaylee's arm. "And we're going to be in the credits. You and I."

"We? What are you talking about?" Kaylee regarded her friend with amusement. Never a dull moment with the vibrant, outgoing Jessica around. Maybe she wanted her to help serve cakes at the shoot. That sounded like fun.

The baker leaned across the counter, lowering her voice. "They asked me if there was a local florist who was good. And of course I said yes." She pointed at Kaylee, who gasped. "You and Mary are fantastic. And since the movie is called *Flowers in the Sea*, they need you."

Flowers in the Sea. That was an evocative name. “You’re the best, Jess. If they call, I’ll definitely do it. It sounds like a wonderful opportunity.” She’d never worked on a film set before, and now that it was a possibility, she realized she really wanted to.

The bells on the door jingled and several new customers entered. Kaylee picked up her coffee and bag of pastries. “I’ll get out of your way. See you later, Jess.”

“Keep me posted,” Jessica called. “If Bernard Martin hires you, I want to be the first to know.”

Heads swiveled, and Kaylee felt curious eyes on her back as the shop door shut behind her. She stifled a laugh. Thanks to Jessica, rumors of her involvement with the project would be all over the island by the time she finished her coffee.

Juggling her belongings, Bear at her heels, Kaylee unlocked the front door of The Flower Patch. There was still a good hour until the shop officially opened, and Mary had an early morning dentist appointment, so she could sip her coffee and check the inventory in the coolers.

The landline was ringing when she stepped inside, but before Kaylee could get there, voice mail came on. “This is Amy Early, Bernard Martin’s assistant. We’d like to talk to you—”

Kaylee lunged for the phone. “Hello? This is Kaylee Bleu. How may I help you?” She ran a hand through her hair, smoothing it in the reflection in the display case as if the woman could see her. Amy began to talk and Kaylee tried to listen and absorb each word. But underneath, excitement swirled in her belly, almost drowning out everything except the basics: She was being offered a huge contract to provide flowers for a real live movie.



“Bernard Martin?” Mary kept a hand on her cheek as she cocked her head in inquiry. Her words sounded somewhat garbled thanks to the numbing agent the dentist had used. “He’s back on the island? I never thought I’d hear that.”

“Why not?” Kaylee was busy inserting roses into an anniversary arrangement. Next would come baby’s breath and greenery.

Mary propped herself on a stool and sipped a cup of lukewarm tea, wincing. “His wife Lily drowned in a pool on their property two or three years ago. She was only twenty-five. He was probably twice her age, but by all accounts he was heartbroken. He left immediately and hasn’t been back.”

“Until now.” Kaylee stripped lower leaves from a branch. “The movie is called *Flowers in the Sea*.” She pointed to a stack of papers on the counter. “Take a gander. Amy e-mailed over the order and a contract.”

“*Flowers in the Sea*?” Behind her designer frames, Mary’s blue eyes widened. “But that’s the picture he was planning to make with Lily. I understand the script was written for her.” She picked up the order and read through it.

“Hmm. I guess he decided to go ahead and make it. Maybe as a tribute to her memory.” Kaylee finished the bouquet, set it aside, and started another. “I’m trying to get through these before I leave.”

“Leave?”

“It’s one of their conditions. They need me to stay on-site quite a lot during initial shooting, to help maintain the flowers or change them if something doesn’t look right. I hope that will be okay.”

Mary set the papers back on the counter, smiling. “There’s no way you can say no to this. It’s an incredible opportunity. Besides, it’s kind of slow right now, between holidays.”

“I should be able to get away if you need me,” Kaylee

reassured her. She inhaled, hating to share this next piece of news. She never wanted Mary to feel like she was dumping responsibility for the business on her. "They want me to go out there this afternoon. And get this. They're sending a car for me. Me, Kaylee Bleu, florist."

"And former professor and forensic botanist." Mary reminded her. "That's pretty important stuff right there." Kaylee had worked as a professor of plant taxonomy at the University of Washington, during which time she had also occasionally consulted as a forensic botanist for the Seattle police—work she had unintentionally continued when she'd moved to Turtle Cove.

"I won't need those skills," Kaylee said decisively. "I'm going to a movie shoot, not a crime scene."



A well-kept vintage Lincoln Town Car arrived exactly at three o'clock as promised. "I'll be in touch," Kaylee told Mary, gathering her suitcase, tote bag, and Bear, who had received special permission to join Kaylee.

"Have fun," Mary said. "And promise you'll call me later. I want to hear all about the place. I understand it's incredible."

"I'll do that," Kaylee promised. She tugged on Bear's leash. "Come on, boy. Ready for our adventure?" They exited the shop and walked down the steps to the sidewalk.

A man in a chauffeur's uniform was already holding the back door open. He was short and rather squat, with dark hair and a pitted complexion. He nodded in greeting as Kaylee and Bear approached. "Good afternoon, ma'am," he said in a deep, resonant voice that was so smooth it reminded her of honey. "I'm Mervin Tuttle, your driver. May I take your bag?"

"Thank you. Nice to meet you, Mervin." As Kaylee handed her bag to Mervin to load, she noticed two passengers already inside the car: Jessica and Reese Holt, island handyman and a friend of Kaylee's. Jessica wore a pink cashmere sweater with wool pants while the carpenter had forgone his usual T-shirt and jeans in favor of corduroy pants and a cozy-looking fisherman's knit sweater.

"Reese!" Kaylee exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

He gave her his heartwarming grin, teeth flashing white against tanned skin. "I've been hired as part of the crew. What a hoot, huh?"

"I'll say." Kaylee slid into the car, enjoying the comfort of the soft leather seat. Bear hopped onto her lap, and Mervin shut the door.

Jessica, sitting on the other side of Reese, leaned forward. "I'm so excited. Mila made me promise to take lots of pictures." Jessica's adult daughter lived off the island.

"And Mary wants me to give her regular updates." Kaylee studied the front of The Flower Patch, admiring the Victorian's gingerbread-adorned charm. A tingle of excitement ran through her body. Oh, how she loved her business and her life here on Orcas Island.

Mervin slid behind the wheel, started the engine, and smoothly merged into traffic. Within a few minutes, they were leaving downtown and heading north.

"Do you know where we're going?" Kaylee asked Reese. They sat shoulder to shoulder, and a whiff of Reese's signature scent—wood dust, cotton, and aftershave—drifted her way. Apparently Bear liked it as much as she did, because he stood up on her lap and nuzzled Reese with his cold nose. "Bear, stop it."

Reese laughed and rubbed the dog's ears. "I don't mind. Bernard's place is south of Deer Harbor."

Orcas Island was roughly shaped like saddlebags, and Kaylee remembered the western side was forked. The western fork was Deer Harbor.

"It's a really cool place," Jessica said. "I checked it out online. It's on its own little island, attached by a causeway." She scrolled through her phone and handed it to Kaylee. "Check this out."

Reese bent his head close to Kaylee's to share the screen, causing Bear to lick his nose.

"Bear!" Kaylee scolded.

"I'll take him." Jessica reached for the dog. "You can't blame him, though." Her eyes were alight with mischief.

Kaylee ignored her friend's remark, but heat burned in her face anyway. Jessica was convinced romance would—and should—blossom between Kaylee and the handyman. Kaylee didn't want to go there right now. She was just happy to have Reese's friendship.

They flipped through the photos, murmuring in amazement at each one. The place was spectacular, a tree-crowned isle with a beach, multiple contemporary buildings, and extensive gardens with charming features. Kaylee noticed they were on a high-end real estate site.

"Is Bernard selling?" Kaylee asked. Realizing that might be an indiscreet question, she glanced at their driver. He didn't seem to be listening and in fact had turned on the radio, which played at a low volume through the front speakers.

"I think at one point he was," Jessica said. "After his wife died. That's an old listing. See where it says 'Not Available' there at the top? I'm glad they left the pictures up, though."

They were well out in the countryside now, and by unspoken assent the trio fell silent, focused on watching the scenery go by. The fog had burned off hours ago, and glimpses of the sound, blue and glittering under the afternoon sun, were visible through

the trees. The community of Deer Harbor was charming, with shingled buildings lining the main street. The marina was quite sizable, and even with the chill of early autumn in the air, there were still several boats dotting the water.

Finally they reached the end of the peninsula and, while the road curved up to follow the other shore, the chauffeur turned onto a private road. This led to the causeway Jessica had mentioned. They drove across to an island, where Mervin stopped at a gate. A few taps on the keypad and he was through.

"Fancy," Reese said, his eyebrows wiggling. "A gated estate."

"The price of fame," Jessica said with a casual shrug. "I'm sure Bernard gets lots of unwelcome visitors, including paparazzi."

Kaylee was thrilled at being admitted to the exclusive enclave. She laughed at herself. She was reacting like a starstruck teenager.

The woods soon closed in beside the winding, gravel lane. Within a few minutes, they arrived at what Kaylee recognized as the main house, a sprawling wood-and-glass structure. Mervin pulled around in front of the entrance, although on one side of the circular parking area was a four-car garage. Around the house, sculpted garden areas featured native plants. Right now *Aster subspicatus* were in bloom, shaded by *Cornus nuttallii*, a species of flowering dogwood.

"Here we are," Mervin said, glancing into the rearview mirror. "Welcome to Mukilteo."

"That means 'good camping ground' or 'narrow passage,' depending on who you ask," Kaylee said, recognizing the Native American word and wondering which came first: the estate, or the city on Puget Sound.

"Nice place," Reese said with a low whistle. He eyed the angled structure with its triangular peaks and picture windows. "Post-and-beam construction. Probably all the beams are hand-hewn."

"Hand-pegged too," Mervin said. "Sit tight. I'll let you out."

The driver got out and came around to open the car doors. The trio slid out and waited while he opened the trunk and retrieved Kaylee's bag and two bakery boxes Jessica had brought. Kaylee clipped Bear's leash to his collar and he bounded out, pulling Kaylee behind him.

One of the double front doors opened and a plump woman with a heart-shaped face and close-cropped locks hurried onto the porch. She smoothed a flowing skirt with both hands. "There you are. We're so excited you've agreed to join us."

Despite her warm words, her dark eyes held a touch of sadness, as though some tragedy had touched her deeply. A moment later, she smiled and barreled down the steps, heeled boots clattering. She held out a hand. "I'm Amy Early, Bernard's assistant. And you are?"

"I'm Kaylee Bleu, from The Flower Patch." After shaking Amy's dainty hand, she stepped aside so the others could introduce themselves.

"Let's go in." Amy ushered them up onto the porch. "Bernard is waiting."

"Can't have that," Mervin muttered behind them.

Amy threw him a sharp glance. "Miss Bleu's suitcase is going over to Hideaway." To Kaylee she said, "That's one of the cabins. You'll love it."

"It does sound intriguing," Kaylee said. The idea of staying in her own cabin was appealing too. She liked her privacy.

Amy pointed to a side table. "You can leave those boxes there for now, Mrs. Roberts. Mervin will deliver them to the kitchen."

Mervin, already heading out the front door with the suitcase, gave Amy a salute. "Yes, ma'am."

Bernard's assistant ignored the barb and led the group into a two-story great room with a beamed ceiling, but not before stooping to give Bear a rub on his little brown head. "Your pet

is adorable," she said. "I love doxies."

At the far end of the room a gray-haired man of medium height stood in front of a massive fieldstone fireplace, his gaze fixed on a portrait above the mantel. He was dressed in a blue blazer and gray flannel pants, a pair of polished loafers on his feet.

Jessica clutched Kaylee's arm. "That's a painting of his late wife, Lily," she whispered.

As they crossed the polished expanse of floor, Bear trotting along at Kaylee's feet, Kaylee studied the fine painting. A woman with curled blonde hair and pale, delicate features gazed over her shoulder at the viewer. She wore a sea-green gown that faded into a frothy swirl at her feet. *What a beauty.* It was sad that she'd died so tragically.

"Wasn't she lovely?" Bernard said, still staring up at the painting. "We'll try to do you justice, Lily dear. That's the least we can do."

Reese cleared his throat. "Hello, Mr. Martin. I'm Reese Holt. And I'm thrilled to be part of your project."

Bernard gave a start, almost as if coming out of a trance, and turned to face them. "Oh yes. Mr. Holt." A knowing smile played on his thin lips.

What was that smile about? As far as she knew, Reese had never met the producer. Bernard's eyes moved beyond Reese to Kaylee and Jessica. "And who are your lovely companions?"

"They're the florist and baker I found," Amy said, then gave their names and a brief rundown of their qualifications.

"Well done, Amy," Bernard said. He turned to Kaylee and her friends. "Not that I expected anything less. Amy here is a treasure. Welcome aboard, you three. Or should I say four, counting the dog?" He chuckled, then glanced at the gold watch on his wrist. "When are the others arriving?"

"Any minute now," Amy said. "Shall I send Mervin over to

the air strip to collect them?"

"Let's all go," Bernard said. "It will be fun." His eyes lingered on Reese. "A real treat, right, Mr. Holt?"

Reese laughed, but his eyes were uneasy. "If you like airplanes, I suppose." Behind the producer's back, he glanced at Kaylee and Jessica and shrugged. Kaylee couldn't have said what it was, but she had to agree with Reese's unspoken assessment of Bernard. There was something . . . off about him.

Apparently the strip was only a short distance away, located in a field on the estate side of the causeway. Mervin took the car over so he could collect the baggage. Amy rode with him while the rest of them walked, Bernard pointing out features of interest with his gold-tipped cane.

He took them through elaborate flower beds, mostly dormant now, and past a tiled swimming pool filled with blooming *Nymphaea odorata*.

"White water lilies," Jessica whispered. "That is so creepy." She was right. The pool—the one where Lily had drowned?—was now filled with her namesake flower. They were an invasive species, but it was definitely odd that such a thing had been allowed when the rest of the grounds appeared to be fastidiously maintained.

"That greenhouse over there is where we grow rare orchids," Bernard called from his position in the lead. Kaylee and Jessica hurried to catch up. "I'll show you that later, Miss Bleu. We grow some very interesting specimens."

"I'd love to see them," Kaylee said. Her mind began to swirl with ideas. "I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts on floral design for the film."

"We'll go over that soon. I have preliminary sketches from an artist." He pointed his cane to a path that branched off. "That's the way to the sand beach. Wonderful place. We'll be filming there first."

A jet whined in the clear blue sky, the engine growing louder as

it approached. "There they are," Bernard said brightly. He moved marginally faster in the direction of the strip, his cane flashing.

By the time they arrived, the sleek, white aircraft was taxiing along the grass to where Mervin and Amy waited, the trunk of the town car open and ready.

When Kaylee, Bear, and her friends hung back, Bernard gestured them forward. "You must all be part of the welcoming committee. I insist." He waited, hands resting on the cane, while the door opened and the stairs came down.

First to emerge was a striking young woman with strong, well-defined features and short red hair. "That's Tanya Ackerman," Jessica told Kaylee. "She's a really good actress."

"I'm glad you approve," Bernard said, his expression amused.

After Tanya came Randall James, a tall, lean Quinault actor even Kaylee recognized. An older man Bernard called Gordon followed with a thin, tattooed youth lugging camera equipment. Gordon was the director as well as an actor in the production, Kaylee gathered, and the young man, Shane, was the cameraman. They all milled around while the pilot unloaded baggage.

Then a gorgeous, petite young woman dressed in jeans and a halter top appeared at the top of the stairs. Rhinestone-studded sandals sparkled on her feet, matching a headband holding back flowing blonde locks. She stood there grinning.

Reese's mouth dropped open when he saw her.

She came running down the stairs and threw herself into his arms. "Hello, Reese. Surprised to see me?"

2



Who was this lovely young woman, and what was her relationship to Reese? Kaylee didn't care to analyze too closely the feeling that swept over her. *Stop. We're just friends.* Good friends, but still. She had no claim.

Jessica had been chatting with Randall and Tanya, and her glance over at Kaylee and Reese was almost comically alarmed. Kaylee gave her a tiny shrug.

"Kaylee." Reese was talking to her, his arm still around the newcomer. "I want you to meet my cousin Blair. I just learned that she's starring in this movie. Blair, this is Kaylee Bleu. She's the florist for the sets. She runs a flower shop in Turtle Cove called The Flower Patch."

A movie star cousin? Reese was from Los Angeles, so that made sense. "Nice to meet you, Blair." Bear whined at their feet. "This is my dog, Bear."

The actress bent over and patted the dog, cooing. "What a sweetie." Bear's tail all but wagged off.

"I had no idea Blair was going to be here," Reese said with a laugh. He gave her another one-armed squeeze. "I was totally shocked."

"But in a good way, right?" Blair asked, her lower lip thrust out in a pout. "This is a huge break. Bernard has done so much for me." She glanced over her shoulder at the producer, who was busy supervising the loading of the car.

Something in her pose struck Kaylee. *She looks just like Lily.* Finding an actress who resembled the late actress had probably been deliberate, since the film had been written for her. Now

Bernard's remarks to Reese made sense too. He'd known about the surprise.

"I'm sure it is a great opportunity," Reese said. "You'll have to tell me all about it later." Despite his encouraging words, he wore a worried frown while watching Blair sashay over to Bernard.

After kissing his leading lady on the cheek, Bernard waved the cane. "Onward to the beach." Someone groaned, and he said, "Whoever is tired can ride back to the house. But this old man with a cane is going to check the beach. We start shooting tomorrow." After that, everyone except Mervin went along.

The beach was a crescent of beige sand edged by woods and dotted with seabirds. Kaylee spotted tiny western sandpipers, two species of gull, and the common black-and-white pigeon guillemot, which paddled offshore. Bear barked in excitement at seeing the wildlife, and several of the closest gulls took to the skies, sounding the alarm.

Kaylee also noticed a small motorboat trolling the water. Two men were aiming something at the shore—long lenses? *Paparazzi*.

"That didn't take long," Randall grumbled. Standing beside him, Tanya wove her arm through his. Gordon halted on the fringe of the woods. Blair posed coyly, one hand on a hip, pointing a bare toe dangerously close to the cold, frothy water.

Bernard waved his cane. "Take your fill now, because that's all you're going to get," he shouted. The gulls wheeling overhead provided a squawking accompaniment to the producer's outburst.

Even from a distance, they could hear the journalists' laughter. After a few more shots they sped off, raising a wake.

"Blasted reporters." Bernard turned to his cast and crew. "No one is to talk to the press, understand? If this film is going to be a success, we need to control the story." His smile was smug. "They're all salivating for a scoop. We'll make them wait."

Kaylee didn't know much about the entertainment business, but it made sense that the press would be interested in the story. A beautiful actress drowns and her widowed husband decides to produce her final project? Even she could see the appeal.

Gordon, clearly a Californian to the core, shuffled over in sandals with thick leather straps. "Now that I've seen the beach, I was thinking we could set up the cameras near those rocks. Shoot in this direction." He pointed to a cluster of boulders at the end of the curve of sand, then swiveled with his hands in a box shape, as though framing a shot.

Bernard regarded him with narrowed eyes. "All in due time, Gordon. All in due time."

The other man rubbed a hand over his balding head. "Whatever you say," he muttered.

Randall took the older man's arm as he walked by. "Glad you're on board, man."

With a glare, Gordon shook off his arm and didn't reply.

"Burn." Randall waved his hand as if it hurt, making Tanya laugh. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. *They're a couple*, Kaylee thought. She wondered how serious they were about each other.

As for Gordon, he kept trudging along the sand. Halfway along the beach, he stopped, standing by himself with folded arms. Reese, always the peacemaker, went to join him.

Jessica, standing next to Kaylee, sent her a worried look. Kaylee shared her concern. While not naïve, she had been hoping the assignment would be fun, not rife with interpersonal conflict. *Some customers or jobs are going to be difficult, no matter what*. Her grandmother's words echoed in her head. *So smile and do your best*.

The producer, seemingly oblivious to his director's mood, waved his cane again. "On to the house. After everyone settles

in, we'll have a production meeting in the dining room. One hour from now." He began trudging through the sand, the ever-attendant Blair at his side. "Amy, do your magic with food, okay?"

The apparent Jill-of-all-trades watched her boss saunter off with the star, a troubled look creasing her smooth brow. Jessica approached. "Is there anything I can do to help?" She gave Amy a warm smile. "My skills go beyond baked goods. And it just so happens I brought some with me."

"That's right, the bakery boxes." Amy's expression brightened. "I'd be glad to have your help. In addition to helping Bernard, I maintain the gardens and cook all the meals. With the group here, it's going to be a lot of work." She gave a low laugh. "Did you ever end up somewhere in life you weren't planning to go? That'd be me. But I love it here, so I guess it all worked out the way it was supposed to."

Hoping to establish rapport, Kaylee spoke up. "Me too. I used to be on the tenure track at a large university. Now I own a small business on an island."

The rest of the way to the main house, Jessica and Kaylee chatted with Amy about life on the island. Amy didn't talk much about herself, but she displayed the vegetable and herb gardens with pride. "I grow most of the produce we eat," she said, bending to pluck ripe tomatoes from lush green plants. She set them gently in a basket, then reached into her pocket and pulled out a pair of snips. "Cut me a few basil leaves, will you?"

While Jessica cut basil, Kaylee strolled around the herb garden with Bear. Amy had an extensive selection, including climbing purple *Passiflora incarnata*, cheerful yellow *Calendula officinalis*, and pungent *Monarda fistulosa*. The passionflowers, common marigolds, and bee balm, in conjunction with more standard choices, revealed that Amy might be quite sophisticated about

herbal medicine.

When Kaylee said as much, Amy said, "I try. I made my own concoction to ease Bernard's arthritis. He says it helps."

Blair popped out from behind a trellis at the edge of the garden, making Bear yip. "Sorry, boy," she said to him. Moving her attention to the assistant, she said, "It's Amy, right? Can you make me a weight-loss formula?" She clasped her hands. "Pretty please." As far as Kaylee could see, Reese's cousin didn't have a spare ounce to lose. *It must be a Hollywood thing.*

"Where'd you come from?" Jessica asked. "You startled us."

The actress waved a hand. "I've been wandering around checking things out. French doors from my room open onto the gardens."

Amy's movements stilled. "Which room is that?"

Blair's smile was catlike. "I think it's called the Sage Suite. And wow, is it nice."

Amy regarded Blair with a tinge of dismay. "That was Lily's room," she said softly.

Clearly Amy had had some affection for Bernard's second wife.

"Hello. Lily is dead." Blair tilted her head, one hand on a hip. "But to answer your question, Bernard put me in there. Any problems with that, talk to him." She swiveled around and stalked off.

With a sigh and a shake of her head, Amy picked another tomato. "I think that's enough."

Kaylee wondered if she was referring to more than the tomatoes.

While Bear watched from a chair across the kitchen, Jessica and Kaylee helped Amy slice rounds of baguette, which were toasted under the broiler, then slathered with goat cheese, tomatoes, and basil to make a delicious bruschetta. A dish of homemade hummus, crisp sliced vegetables, assorted cheeses, gluten-free crackers, and Jessica's decidedly not gluten-free brownie bites made up the rest of the snack spread. They laid

everything out on the long table in the great room's dining area. Through tall windows, the water beyond was visible.

"This should hold everyone over until dinner at eight," Amy said. "We're having local salmon with roasted potatoes and fresh mixed greens."

Jessica set a pile of napkins on the table. "That sounds awesome. You really know how to feed people."

"Thank you. I enjoy doing it." Amy smiled, her hands busy with the silverware she was sorting. She glanced at a huge clock on the wall. "It's almost time. Kaylee, would you mind going to fetch Bernard? He has a habit of losing track of time."

"I'll keep an eye on Bear," Jessica said.

Kaylee readily agreed to the errand, happy to have a valid reason to look around the spacious home. According to Amy, Bernard's office was on the lower level, reached by a set of stairs beyond the great room. As she strolled through the house, Kaylee was struck by the elegant simplicity of the construction and decor. Smooth, golden wood was everywhere, accented by cool colors on the walls and in the draperies and rugs. Some people associated beauty with elaborate design. Kaylee knew that often the opposite was true.

Amy had said the office was at the end of the hall. On the way, Kaylee passed several closed doors, and one that was ajar leading to a bathroom. Good to know.

Voices drifted down the corridor from another open door, and instinctively Kaylee's pace slowed. She really didn't want to barge in on a private conversation.

"Don't embarrass me like that again." It sounded like Gordon. Kaylee still squirmed remembering Bernard's blunt dismissal on the beach. "Next time I'll quit."

She halted. *Uh-oh*. She should probably come back later.

Bernard laughed. "You won't quit. Working on a project of

mine is a golden ticket to a career boost and you know that. How many of those have you come across lately?"

Gordon grunted. "Funny that you call it *your* project." His tone was filled with menace. "Be careful, Bernard. Someday you're going to go too far."