

Best Laid Plants

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Best Laid Plants



Katy Lee

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Library of Congress-in-Publication Data

Best Laid Plants / by Katy Lee

p. cm.

ISBN: 978-1-64025-818-1

I. Title

2019942860

AnniesFiction.com

(800) 282-6643

Victorian Mansion Flower Shop Mysteries™

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10 11 12 13 14 | Printed in China | 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1



“Quiet on set! And we’re rolling.”

After a few weeks on location with *Restaurant Restarts*, a reality television show filming in Turtle Cove, Washington, Kaylee Bleu no longer felt a thrill of excitement when the director announced that cameras were filming. Instead, she continued digging a hole in the soil where she’d soon place another heirloom tomato seedling, glancing up only occasionally to watch the proceedings.

“Welcome back to *Restaurant Restarts*,” host Gabe Forester said in his jovial, made-for-TV voice. “We’re on beautiful Orcas Island, bringing new life to the Madrona Grove Farm and Orchard. It was once a rundown, ramshackle property, but by the time we’re done with the barn and gardens, it’ll be the island’s premier farm to table restaurant!” Gabe flashed a grin crammed with gleaming white teeth and gestured behind him to an empty pasture bearing only a few patches of dried grass. “So, just how are we going to turn this barren wasteland into a profitable, sustainable eatery? Hard work, creativity, and a little magic.” He winked.

Magic is right, Kaylee thought wryly, raising an eyebrow at the mass of high-tech cameras, microphones, teleprompters, playback screens, and other equipment set up opposite the “barren wasteland.” Dozens of crew members milled around, as did a few locals who had been invited to take part in the show, including Kaylee and the rest of the Petal Pushers garden club: Mary Bishop, Jessica Roberts, and DeeDee Wilcox.

Accompanied by Kaylee’s adorable dachshund, Bear, who was basking in the warm May sunshine nearby, the women were

all on their hands and muddy knees in a garden plot beside the farm's massive red barn, enjoying the change of pace from their respective businesses—Kaylee owned a florist shop called The Flower Patch, where Mary worked as a part-time designer, while Jessica ran the bakery next door, Death by Chocolate, and DeeDee sold mystery books at her shop, Between the Lines. The women had volunteered their past few Sunday afternoons to help plant flower beds and vegetable patches around the property. With the tight filming schedule, apparently there wasn't enough time for the farm to mature naturally, so the Petal Pushers were helping it along. It was part of the hard work Gabe had mentioned, though Kaylee doubted their contributions were what he'd meant.

"Speaking of magic," Gabe continued, "there is an enchanted feeling on Orcas Island, and I've been in awe of its natural beauty ever since I stepped off the boat."

"Boat, my foot," Mary muttered just loud enough for the other Petal Pushers to hear. "We all know he arrived by helicopter less than an hour ago even though the rest of the crew hauled their gear over last month by ferry."

"At least he got here in plenty of time to have his hair varnished into a helmet." DeeDee brushed her own blonde locks out of her eyes. "I haven't seen a single strand budge in this wind."

"You have to admit, he's even more handsome in person than he is on TV," Jessica said, a grin on her pixelike face. "Mila would be so jealous right now."

Kaylee chuckled, sure that if Jessica's twentysomething daughter didn't live on the mainland, she would have been lingering around the set since the time filming had begun a few weeks prior, as many other area residents had been doing. Thinking about how long the crew had already been working, she said, "It's funny, isn't it? I've seen several episodes of this show, and I always thought that Gabe was on-site from start to

finish for every renovation. Turns out he just swoops in from California for a few days at the very end after everyone else has done all the work.”

“Well, like Gabe just said” — Mary waved her trowel like a wand — “it’s magic.”

Everyone laughed, then DeeDee nudged Kaylee with an elbow. “Didn’t you say Reese knows Gabe somehow? He must be excited to see his famous friend.”

Kaylee glanced toward the far end of the barn, where her boyfriend, Reese Holt, was climbing a ladder, paintbrush in hand. “They went to college together, but Reese has honestly said more to me about the new windows he’s installing than about Gabe.”

“He’s done an amazing job constructing new windows to match the old ones.” DeeDee reached for another bell pepper plant to place in the soil. “It’s a pity so many of the original windows rotted or were broken after the bank foreclosed on the farm.”

“Now that he’s painting them, I can’t even tell the difference between the old and new ones,” Kaylee said admiringly, proud of her talented — not to mention handsome — beau. “Although I think the showrunners told him to leave at least one of them bare so that Gabe can finish it.”

“Just like the corner of the barn roof left undone so that Gabe can ‘repair’ it on camera?” Mary rolled her eyes. “I’m sorry to say it, but I think ignorance was bliss when it came to watching this show. Now that I see how the sausage gets made, I’m not sure I’m as big a fan.”

“I’m reserving judgment until they edit it all together,” DeeDee said, tamping soil around the base of her pepper plant. “The wedding they have planned for the grand finale will certainly be worth tuning in to see — especially for the gorgeous flowers from The Flower Patch.”

“Josh and Savannah are a very nice couple from Eastsound,”

Mary said, her tone warming considerably. "Josh's dad, Preston Rutherford, is the president of the Orcas Island Historic Preservation Council."

"The council does such good work on the island," DeeDee said admiringly. "For instance, a Native American burial ground was uncovered near Steely Bay a few years ago during the early stages of a development. The council fought the investors all the way to court to protect the land. Fortunately, historic preservation won."

"Josh mentioned that he's hoping to follow in his father's footsteps on the council someday." Kaylee brushed a strand of her long, dark hair out of her eyes. "And Savannah expressed interest in helping Mary at the senior center. It's so nice that young islanders want to be involved, isn't it? I really enjoyed getting to know them during our wedding consultation last week."

Mary put a hand on her hip. "You mean the meeting the showrunners want us to repeat so they can capture it on camera?"

Jessica sighed melodramatically. "Too bad it's not someone we know getting married."

Kaylee caught the sparkle of teasing in her friend's almond-shaped eyes and waved her hand dismissively. "Reese and I are just dating," she said sternly, though she felt an electric thrill at Jessica's implication. "That's all."

Jessica nodded toward Reese. "Does he know that? Because judging by the way he's looking at you, I think he's hearing wedding bells."

Seeing that Reese did, in fact, have his twinkling blue eyes fixed on her, Kaylee beamed at him and waved, receiving a heart-fluttering grin in return before he continued with his work. Her smile wilted slightly as she thought of something. "He hasn't even told me he loves me, let alone mentioned marriage. And considering he's the one who got left at the altar by his ex, I don't think it's my place to bring it up."

"Technically I think Nicole broke their engagement months before the actual wedding day," Mary said as she dug a hole for a basil plant. "But I see your point." She paused with her trowel mid-scoop. "You aren't worried he still has feelings for her, are you?"

"No way is that possible." Jessica looked entirely aghast at the idea. "That look he just gave you? That's not a look a guy gives a girl when he's pining for somebody else."

"I can't argue with that," DeeDee chimed in. "He's head over work boots for you, Kaylee."

Although heartened by her friends' proclamations, Kaylee found herself growing distracted by activity near the barn. Reese was descending the ladder again, though he no longer had a carefree expression on his face. Instead, he appeared suddenly wary as Gabe approached him, a cameraman following close behind.

"And now I'd like to introduce a familiar face here on the island," the television host was saying. He chuckled. "Familiar to me, anyway. Our on-site craftsman, Reese Holt, is a buddy from my college days. It's nice to see he still bears the proof that he was once one of us." Gabe gestured at Reese's trademark Los Angeles Dodgers baseball hat. "You can take the boy out of L.A., but you can't take the L.A. out of the boy — isn't that right, pal?"

Reese tipped the brim of his cap. "The Dodgers will always have my allegiance, but my heart belongs here now." His gaze shifted beyond Gabe to Kaylee, and he smiled before ducking off camera and strolling toward the barn entrance.

"Come on back here, Reese," Gabe called after him. "Isn't it time to let bygones be bygones?" When Reese didn't react, Gabe remained still, a blank expression on his face, before finally yelling, "Cut!"

The host stomped off to a shaded area, and Kaylee thought

she heard him mutter something about the take being useless, but she was too far away to pick up all the words. There was one word she was focused on, however: what had he meant about bygones?

"Take five, everyone!" director Garth Sloan announced, an edge of irritation in his voice. He ran a hand over his balding pate, which was a stark contrast to his bushy salt-and-pepper beard. "When we come back, we'll do the Georgine Snowbird interview."

"Georgine Snowbird?" Kaylee repeated. "Is she a local?" Having moved to Orcas Island only a few years previously to take over The Flower Patch from her retiring grandmother, Bea Lyons, Kaylee wasn't as familiar with the island's residents as her friends who'd lived there much longer.

DeeDee nodded. "She's from the Lummi tribe."

"Really?" Kaylee's interest ramped up a notch. Her father, Chayton, was Quinault, another Native American tribe from the Pacific Northwest.

"Her ancestors have been on the island for generations and she lives close to the farm, so she's being interviewed about the history of Madrona Grove," DeeDee continued. "Or, I guess, about the land that was here long before any buildings were built on it."

"As if the more modern history weren't interesting enough," Jessica said with a sly grin, alluding to some criminal activity that had taken place on the property not many years before and resulted in the bank foreclosing on the farm. "I wonder if the Vanguarders knew anything about it before they bought it at auction."

Mary chuckled. "I doubt anything would have deterred Matt from buying this place."

Recent transplants from California, Matt and Vanessa Vanguard had purchased Madrona Grove sight unseen, then

swiftly relocated to Orcas Island with the intention of turning the property into a farm to table restaurant where, as Matt said, “you can see the farm from the table.” Having gotten to know the couple over the past few weeks, Kaylee had been impressed by Matt’s passion—he was an amateur farmer, but what he lacked in experience, he made up for in enthusiasm. Vanessa, the chef, was more reserved than her husband, but Kaylee had enjoyed spending time with her as the Petal Pushers helped plan and plant the gardens that would eventually fuel the restaurant’s menu.

“Okay, everyone, break’s over,” Garth called over a megaphone from his seat in a director’s chair beneath an oversize black umbrella. “Gabe, go to your mark. Ms. Snowbird, please join him.”

Pausing in her planting, Kaylee watched a woman of about sixty with a mature but unlined face unhurriedly step up beside Gabe. The woman’s sleek, black hair was parted in the middle and pulled into a simple braid down her back. She wore a woven coat featuring colorful stripes of varying thicknesses, and the back was emblazoned with a large eagle icon. Georgine focused on Gabe, but he gazed pointedly upward and shielded his face from the bright sun, a scowl on his unnaturally tanned face.

“Quiet on set,” Garth said, ignoring Gabe’s dramatic body language. “Cameras rolling. Action.”

A forced smile replaced Gabe’s glower as he squared his shoulders and addressed the camera. “I’m joined now by Georgine Snowbird, an expert on local history. Ms. Snowbird, please tell us more about the original inhabitants of Madrona Gr—” Before even finishing the sentence, Gabe let his artificially jovial expression drop. He shielded his face again and yelled, “Cut! Can someone get me a little shade? Don’t you people see the sun shining in my eyes? I can’t be squinting during an interview.”

Garth leaped up from his chair and edged around a small monitor that showed the camera's feed. "If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times, Gabe. I call the cues. Not you."

"Then do your job, Garth. Unless you're too relaxed under your little umbrella." Gabe's sharp glare shifted to the makeup artist, a young woman with stylishly short hair and cat-eye glasses. "Suzy, get me my sunglasses. It's too bright out here. And a water too while you're at it."

Suzy visibly tensed, but she did Gabe's bidding without vocal complaint. While the makeup artist scrambled toward the row of trailers set up behind the barn, Gabe retreated to his shaded spot under the barn's eaves.

The Petal Pushers exchanged glances. "Poor girl," Mary mouthed, then returned her focus to the row of herbs she'd started planting.

"I guess we're taking another five. Nino, was that as disastrous as it looked?" Garth asked the camera operator, a short, burly man named Nino Demarco.

"Nah," Nino replied casually, scratching at the dark stubble on his cheeks. "But Gabe will have to actually finish a sentence for the next take to be usable."

"Let's reposition the camera so he's not squinting into the sun anymore. If having his face shadowed is the price he's willing to pay for a little shade, so be it." Garth checked a clipboard. "Okay, after Ms. Snowbird's oral history, we'll bring out the Vanguard's to interview."

The show's creator and producer—a well-dressed, energetic man with angular features named Sawyer Hawkins—nodded. "We can really play off their reaction to what the shaman woman says. Nino, make sure you get in tight on their faces. I want to make sure we capture their fear."

Kaylee frowned as she overheard their discussion. *Why on earth*

would Matt and Vanessa be scared after hearing anything Georgine has to say? And why does it sound like these guys want them to be?

Garth glanced toward Georgine, who was still standing stoically in front of the camera. “Ms. Snowbird, don’t go far. We’ll pick right up with you when we start rolling.”

Georgine replied with a single solemn nod, then said, “For the record, I am not a shaman. My grandfathers were, but I am simply an herbalist and storyteller of the history of my people.”

“Mm-hmm, yeah,” the director said distractedly as he returned to a conversation with Nino and Sawyer about technical aspects of the day’s shooting schedule.

Eager to meet another plant enthusiast, Kaylee decided to take advantage of the break to introduce herself to Georgine. She grabbed Bear’s leash and stepped carefully out of the garden, leading her dog over to the stoic older woman.

“Ms. Snowbird?” Kaylee smiled as Georgine gave a single nod. “My name is Kaylee Bleu, and this is Bear.” Her dog panted blithely at her feet and cocked his head as if in greeting.

“Hello,” Georgine answered.

“That’s a lovely coat you have on,” Kaylee said. “Did someone in your tribe make it?”

“Yes, long ago. It was my mother’s. The eagle on the back is the emblem of our nation.”

Kaylee glanced down and saw that the same emblem decorated a small leather pouch in the woman’s hand. “Is that for your herbs?”

Georgine loosened the strings of the cinched sack and poured the contents into her palm. “Dried lavender to calm my nerves. There is trouble here.”

“Trouble?” Kaylee echoed. She brushed a lock of hair out of her face as a fresh gust of sea wind hit her. She felt a chill. The timing of the gust and Georgine’s nebulous statement were just a coincidence—right?

Georgine lifted her chin and took a deep breath, but didn't elaborate on her comment.

Brushing off the eerie moment, Kaylee went on. "I'm a florist. I own The Flower Patch in Turtle Cove." Technically she was more than a florist—she held a PhD in plant taxonomy, had years of experience as a professor at the University of Washington, and occasionally served as a forensic botany expert for the local sheriff's department—but she didn't feel that someone as reserved as Georgine would care about her credentials. "Do you grow your own botanicals?"

"Yes. I grow a variety of herbs and plants, most for healing and peace of mind. My family before me has always provided medicine to our people."

Intrigued, Kaylee said, "If it's not being too forward, I would love to visit your garden and learn about what you have growing." Georgine hummed a noncommittal response as she returned the dried lavender to her sack, and Kaylee wasn't sure if it meant to come by or not. "My background is in science, but the use of herbs and plants as part of spiritual healing is certainly an interesting concept."

Georgine aimed a level gaze at Kaylee. "My grandfather was the last shaman of my people. I simply carry on the knowledge of the plants. I have no powers. If you want a magic show, you'll have to look elsewhere."

"Let's go, people!" Garth bellowed through his megaphone just a few feet away, startling Kaylee and eliciting a sharp yip from Bear. "We don't have all day. Places!"

Kaylee hurried out of the camera's line of sight, keeping Bear's leash short so he stayed close. Before she went back to the garden, she paused for a moment to watch Gabe, who was gazing admiringly at himself in a mirror Suzy held.

With a final approving nod, Gabe strode to his new mark

and smiled smugly at the camera, which had been moved a few feet so that Gabe was out of the sun. "That wasn't so hard, was it, Garth?"

Rolling her eyes, Suzy stomped past Kaylee, muttering, "There's only so much I can hide with makeup. He won't be able to pretend he's in his twenties for much longer."

Garth instructed Nino to start rolling, then indicated for the host to restart his interview with Georgine.

Gabe ignited his megawatt smile for the camera. "There is such a rich history on Orcas Island, especially when it comes to the Native American tribes who lived here long ago. We're pleased to have Georgine Snowbird from the Lummi Tribe with us to share all about her people. Welcome, Georgine."

"Thank you." Georgine said, yet offered no smile. "But I am not here to share about my people's past. Instead, it is a warning I give."

Kaylee swallowed hard, a cold sensation creeping into her middle.

"The spirits of the land are not happy you are here. They want you all to leave." Georgine stared directly into Gabe's eyes, her gaze steely. "Get out before it is too late."

2



Gabe laughed nervously and cleared his throat. "Sounds spooky."

"No." Georgine shook her head gravely. "Not spooky. I am not trying to scare you with ghost stories. This is real. The people have spoken."

"The people?" Gabe glanced at the camera, suppressing a smirk. "Your people?"

"No, our enemies from long ago." Georgine stood up straighter, her shoulders squaring off. "This land marks a place where two nations fought to live. Those who failed to claim the land left a curse behind. That is why it remains desolate to this day, why so much danger and evil have befallen it. The new owners should give up their plans and go back to where they came from. Find a new place to build their business. Madrona Grove is not it."

"I see," Gabe said, though wariness in his eyes indicated otherwise. "Unfortunately, I doubt Matt and Vanessa Vanguard will be willing to heed your warning. They've invested a lot into this land. And so has *Restaurant Restarts*. But thank you for your time, Ms. Snowbird. Cut!"

Garth groaned in frustration. "Seriously, Gabe?"

"This conversation was going nowhere," the host snapped, then backed away from Georgine. "Maybe you should leave now. I don't like the way you're looking at me."

"It's not me you should fear," Georgine said in her solemn way.

"All right, that's it. Get me away from this woman." With a final snort of disgust, Gabe stormed off toward the trailers.

As he was passing the kitchen trailer, a petite woman with golden blonde hair and a pert nose stepped out of it and collided with the host. Instead of apologizing, Gabe brushed her aside—a little too forcefully in Kaylee’s opinion. Bear seemed to agree, since he issued a bark of rebuke.

“Watch where you’re going,” Gabe growled, then continued to the next trailer. A moment later, the metal door slammed behind him.

Recognizing the woman, Kaylee started toward her. “Are you all right, Vanessa?”

But Vanessa Vanguard didn’t notice Kaylee. Instead, the shock and disdain on her face were aimed at a lean, muscular man with curly brown hair striding toward her—her husband, Matt, who had been milling around near the barn during filming. The married couple seemed to communicate with only facial expressions instead of words, and they soon disappeared back into the kitchen trailer.

“What was all that about?” Jessica asked, appearing at Kaylee’s side. “Did I hear Georgine say something about a curse?”

Considering Jessica’s penchant for conspiracy theories, Kaylee wasn’t surprised that the baker had latched on to that particular part of the interview. It was certainly concerning, but as Kaylee caught sight of Reese staring hard at Gabe’s trailer, she couldn’t help but feel as if there was more than one kind of trouble haunting the set of *Restaurant Restarts*.



Claiming that they were “losing good light,” though it was only midafternoon, Garth and Sawyer had canceled the rest of filming Sunday, sending all the volunteers and lookie-loos home

for the day. Since the Petal Pushers hadn't finished their planting, Kaylee returned to the farm a few days later to get their remaining seedlings in the ground so they'd take root at a similar pace to the rest of the garden.

As she pulled into the parking area at Madrona Grove, she saw a familiar white van already there. Holly Sampson, a local organic gardener, stood behind the vehicle, retrieving a large basket of produce from the cargo area. When she caught sight of Kaylee, she smiled and waved.

"I didn't realize you'd be here today," Holly said as Kaylee climbed out of her Ford Escape and led Bear over to the van. Holly gave Kaylee a hug, then stooped to pet Bear, and he leaned happily into her hand. "I would have brought some treats for my buddy here."

"A little attention is plenty of treat for him," Kaylee replied. She saw two bushel baskets overflowing with colorful vegetables in the back of the van. "Although it looks like you brought plenty of other stuff today. Making a delivery?"

Holly lowered her voice. "Yes, but it's hush-hush. The farm's plants obviously won't be producing soon enough for filming, so they're sourcing produce from me for the shoot. Vanessa ordered a list of things she's growing here so it'll match up with their footage of the garden."

"That makes sense." Bear's leash in one hand, Kaylee reached for the handle of a basket with her other. "I'll help you carry them in before I get to work on the garden."

"Thanks, Kaylee." Holly grabbed the other basket and closed the trunk door, then the women started toward the kitchen trailer. "Do you think people will find out the farm didn't actually grow the food being shown on camera?"

"I doubt it. Everything seems to be a facade, and no one has caught on yet." Kaylee pointed to the mostly-repaired barn roof.

"They had Reese leave a small section of the roof unfinished so Gabe could do it on camera."

Holly's mouth dropped open. "Are you serious?"

"All this time, I thought the host was the carpenter." Kaylee pulled a face. "Turns out he just plays one on TV."

They reached the kitchen trailer, which would serve as Vanessa's cooking station until Reese and his crew completed her new, state-of-the-art kitchen at the back of the barn. Before Kaylee could knock on the metal door, however, it opened and Matt stomped out. He mumbled "hey" as he passed, but otherwise didn't acknowledge them.

Kaylee caught the door before it slammed behind Matt. She poked her head inside the cramped trailer, which was packed with kitchen appliances and smelled enticingly like sautéed garlic and fresh bread. Vanessa stood with her back against the refrigerator, her arms crossed in front of her chest and a scowl on her face. The frown lessened when she noticed Kaylee and Holly.

"Should we come back later?" Kaylee asked warily, though Bear was already straining at his leash to enter the trailer.

Vanessa waved her hand dismissively. "Don't pay any attention to Matt."

"Is everything okay?" Holly set her basket of vegetables on the counter beside two large serving platters topped with delicious-looking entrees. "He seemed upset."

"That's just because I told him he's got to clean up this mess he's gotten us into," Vanessa replied tartly.

"Mess?" Kaylee's brow furrowed. "Do you mean the show?"

Vanessa nodded sharply. "I'm the one who's got more right to be upset. That Gabe Forester is a real piece of work. We filmed him testing a few of my new dishes this morning, and he practically spit the food out. Told me it was garbage."

"How terrible," Kaylee said sympathetically as she handed

Vanessa the other basket of vegetables. She reeled in Bear's leash and reached down to pick him up, knowing he shouldn't be wandering free in a commercial kitchen, even if it was somewhat makeshift.

"I told Sawyer that there's no way I'm getting back on camera with that rat," Vanessa continued. "Gabe can hurl his insults at thin air from now on."

"Do you think it's all part of the show?" Holly asked. "Maybe he's supposed to tear you down at first, then *Restaurant Restarts* 'teaches' you how to create a better menu."

"It wouldn't be very kind of the showrunners to set you up like that, though," Kaylee said. "They should have at least warned you if that's the case."

"I should have been warned about a lot of things," Vanessa murmured, then started unloading the baskets into the sink. Her face brightened. "These veggies are gorgeous, Holly."

"I'm glad you're pleased," Holly said, her face brightening. Kaylee knew she cared about the plants in her greenhouse as if they were pets.

"Even the onions look like I could just take a big bite out of them." Vanessa appeared thoughtful for a moment, then her eyes lit up. "I know exactly what to make next. Maybe that know-it-all out there will like my Veggie Vigor juice."

"That sounds healthy," Kaylee said, absentmindedly rubbing Bear behind the ears.

Vanessa laughed. "It is, but it's also delicious. People line up for it in front of the trendy restaurant I work at in L.A." Her mirth faded in an instant. "Or I should say *worked* at before I packed up and moved here like an idiot. What a disaster. What was Matt thinking?" She shook her head in disbelief, then turned the faucet on to wash the vegetables.

"I take it moving here wasn't your idea," Kaylee said gently.

The chef shrugged as she washed a beefsteak tomato. "Don't get me wrong, I've always wanted to live on Orcas Island. And opening a farm to table restaurant is a dream that Matt and I have always shared, since it suits his interest in farming and my passion for cooking. But I'm a private person, and Matt didn't tell me he applied for the television show. It wasn't my idea, and yet I'm the one taking the criticism that know-it-all host flings at me."

"You're right, it doesn't sound fair," Holly agreed.

Vanessa set the tomato aside and picked up a green pepper. "But Matt will fix it. He promised to make all this go away so we can handle the renovation our own way. Some things he can't fix, but this he can."

Vanessa grew quiet as she vigorously scrubbed the dirt from a carrot. Kaylee thought she heard her sniffing back tears.

"Do you want any help?" Holly asked.

Vanessa sniffed again and shook her head. "No thanks. These awesome veggies are all I need." She forced a smile and joked, "If this juice doesn't shut him up, there's no hope for me."

After a round of goodbyes, Kaylee and Holly left the trailer, and Kaylee set Bear down. He snuffled at the ground, leading the women away from the trailer toward the barn.

"How do you suppose Matt plans to make all this go away?"

Kaylee thought of all the work so many islanders had already done, herself included, to make the Madrona Grove renovation a success. Many had volunteered for small projects, as the Petal Pushers had done in planting the garden, but others were expecting payment for their time. Reese and his crew had put in countless hours rehabbing the property, and Jessica and Kaylee had been contracted to provide services for the upcoming wedding. If filming was shut down and the wedding was canceled, would they still be compensated? "I don't know how Matt can make it

go away, but if he does, I hope it won't be at a great cost to the people who've been contributing their time and energy for weeks."

"It would be best if all this went away, no matter the cost." At the sound of an unexpected voice, Kaylee whipped around to find Georgine Snowbird standing in the shadow of a trailer, holding her little leather pouch again.

"Ms. Snowbird," Kaylee said. "I didn't expect to see you here again."

"No one has heeded my warning," the older woman replied. "This circus needs to go away. The spirits are not happy. They will have the last word." Georgine slipped further into the shadows and disappeared behind the trailer.

"What was that all about?" Holly asked, her eyes wide.

Kaylee quickly told her friend about Madrona Grove's history, the alleged curse on the property, and Georgine's warning about wrathful spirits.

Holly grimaced. "Why would she want to frighten people like that?"

Kaylee shrugged, unable to shake a feeling that Georgine actually meant well, despite her tactics. "Maybe she knows something we don't."

"Maybe." Holly glanced around. "Hey, do you think I can stay and watch for a while? I've never seen a TV show filmed before."

Kaylee nodded. "People from town pop by all the time. As long as we stay off camera and keep our voices down, we should be okay." After a cursory scan of their surroundings, she said, "It doesn't look like they're filming now. Do you want a tour of the farm?"

Holly agreed quickly, so Kaylee led her friend through the barn, where Reese and his small crew were putting up walls to section off the restaurant's kitchen. She didn't want to interrupt his work, so she just waved and smiled, receiving the same in

return, then guided Holly out to the large garden. After discussing the crops for a few minutes, they continued past the free-range chicken coop to a lush, green pasture where a small herd of cows grazed—a far cry from the sad patch of dirt Gabe had chastised on film, which was actually going to be the site of the new cowshed being built that week. Kaylee mentioned this untruth to Holly, who rolled her eyes.

Eventually, they ended up back near the front of the barn, where the crew had set up a camera aimed at a table containing dishes of food. Nearby, Suzy was touching up Gabe's makeup, and Garth, Sawyer, and Nino were clustered behind the camera. Matt leaned back against the barn, his arms crossed.

"Let's try this again, Gabe," Garth called as Kaylee and Holly edged closer for a better view. "On your mark, please."

Somewhat to Kaylee's surprise, Gabe did as instructed without comment and quickly plastered on a camera-ready smile. After a cue from Garth, he addressed the camera. "Today I'll be taste testing some recipes Vanessa prepared and offering her some friendly criticism to help her take her menu from ho-hum to 'holy cow!'" Gabe's face exploded into an animated expression as he said the last words—his catchphrase, if Kaylee remembered correctly.

The camera continued rolling as Gabe picked up a fork. "This first is a beet salad with arugula and fennel, all grown right here at Madrona Grove. It's topped with fresh mozzarella made with milk from cows on the farm." He took a small bite, grimaced, and swallowed quickly. "Terrible mix of flavors. And the arugula is a soggy disaster."

"He certainly isn't mincing words, is he?" Holly murmured to Kaylee. "Poor Vanessa."

Still frowning, Gabe grabbed for a water glass. After a swift chug, he continued with the next two dishes, giving similar

negative reactions to them. Finally, he spit his last bite into a napkin. “I can’t keep up this charade for you folks at home. This food is absolutely inedible. That disgusting pepper quiche was mush—and did that incompetent woman even wash the beets before she put them in that awful salad?”

Kaylee recoiled from the venom Gabe was spewing, and she would have stepped up to defend Vanessa in a heartbeat if her husband hadn’t done it first.

Matt stormed forward into the camera’s line of sight. “Vanessa is a fine chef,” he snarled at Gabe. “You haven’t given her a chance. All you do is criticize, trying to get her riled up. Well, I can get riled up too. We don’t need you.”

Gabe flicked a glance at the camera, then squared his shoulders. “That’s where you’re wrong, Matt. You do need me. You need a miracle if you think you will make it in the restaurant business. But don’t worry. Your miracle is here, and I plan to take your little half-baked pipe dream and make it a great success. The first step is making sure you have a great product to sell, or you’ll be serving ghosts at empty tables.”

His fist clenched, Matt appeared ready to take a swing at the host, but the moment was interrupted by the director calling “Cut!” Garth jumped up from his chair. “That was great, guys. Matt, I loved how you came roaring in to stand up for your wife. So romantic. The viewers will love it. But please, check with us in the future. We only have so much daylight to work with.”

Matt appeared aghast at the implication that he was putting on a show. “I meant what I said.”

Sawyer stepped in. “Of course you did. You meant every word. You would do anything for your wife. And you already have—you’re making her dream of owning a farm to table restaurant a reality, and you’ve asked us to make it world-class,

which is what we're trying to do. When we're done here, your reservations will be booked a year in advance."

"I certainly hope so." Matt's gaze went to the table, and he pointed to a tall glass of red liquid with a skewer of vegetables laid across the top. "You didn't try Vanessa's Veggie Vigor juice yet, Gabe. Why don't you use it to wash down all that 'inedible' food?"

"Yes, that's a great idea," Sawyer agreed. "It's her signature recipe, after all."

"Fine." Gabe grabbed the glass. "Let's go. It's past my break time."

"We'll try to get it in one take," Garth said. "Places!"

Gabe's charm returned as soon as cameras were rolling, and Kaylee fought back a sense of disquiet over the man's mercurial shifts.

Reading off the teleprompter, Gabe said, "In addition to the charm of dining next to the garden that grew your dinner, Matt and Vanessa's restaurant also focuses on health-conscious offerings, such as this Veggie Vigor juice, Vanessa's signature recipe. It contains a whole day's nutrients, and I'm told it also pairs well with steak." With a wink at the camera, he removed the long toothpick of veggies and bit a pearl onion off the end. He chewed it quickly, then took a long drink of the vegetable juice and swallowed hard. "Cut!" he yelled.

"Gabe—" Garth began, but the host interrupted him.

"This is disgusting." Gabe dumped the rest of the drink in the grass with a flourish. "No one will ever eat at this travesty of a restaurant if this is what you think qualifies as food." He slammed the glass back on the table with a loud *thud*. "I'll be in my trailer for when you're all serious about making something of this place. Until then, don't bother me."

"You don't call the shots," Garth said, jumping up from

his chair. "Be back in one hour. We still have the orchard to shoot at sunset."

If Gabe heard, he didn't respond as he stomped off to his trailer. Noticing that none of the other crew members seemed particularly bothered by the scene that had just played out, Kaylee wondered if the spectacle had been real. She didn't know where the show's Hollywood magic started or ended. "Is this typical for a reality television set?" she wondered out loud.

The cameraman, Nino, glanced up from the playback monitor at her question. He squinted at Kaylee for a moment, clearly trying to figure out how he knew her. "Wait, don't tell me. The plant lady, right?"

"Yes, Kaylee Bleu. And this is Holly Sampson, the produce supplier." After Nino nodded hello to Holly, Kaylee tilted her head and said, "I'm just trying to figure out what's real and what's not around here. What's true and what's made up for the camera."

"We have a saying in television, plant lady: If it didn't happen on camera, then it didn't happen." Nino smirked, then returned his focus to the monitor.

Kaylee got the picture. The truth was only what was filmed. But what if that wasn't the real truth?