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in a
Desert
Garden

A Bea Rivers Mystery

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CHAPTER ONE

Bea Rivers was late to work. A gust of burning wind hit her like an enormous blow-drier, but she was cheered by this assault. The summer rains might not be far behind. She'd never liked June in Tucson—everyone was testy, checking the sky multiple times a day for the anvil-shaped clouds that meant the monsoons were coming.

Angus McFee greeted her with, "What do you think? Another week? Ten days before we get wet?" He was fixing a clogged drip irrigation emitter in the entrance garden, a collection of low-water-use shrubs and trees from around the world. His comforting presence was one of the reasons she was glad she'd quit her teaching job last summer to join the staff of Shandley Gardens. Angus had become a sort of grandfather figure for her kids, who ran to find him whenever they came to her office. He was gray-haired and gray-bearded under his broad-brimmed straw hat, held on against the wind by a drawstring under his throat. His skinny legs were as tan as the rest of him; shorts and long-sleeved denim shirts were his summer uniform. When he looked at her, as he did now, she noticed all the smile lines by his blue eyes.

As the volunteer and education coordinator, Bea got to do every day what she'd been able to enjoy on once-a-year outdoor field trips as a teacher. Of course, she'd taken pay and benefits cuts, and yes, she had to work some evenings and weekends, and finding childcare at those times was tough. But she'd traded a double-wide classroom trailer for fifteen acres of gardens and another twenty-five of wild desert, abutting Saguaro National Park East, which stretched to the Rincon Mountains' conifer-studded slopes.

“Did you have trouble finding Andy’s shoes again?” Angus asked.

“Am I that late? No, they were in his closet this time, not in the kitchen cupboard like last week. I just realized my tank was on empty and decided I’d better turn around and fill it up before I got all the way out here. My fault. So I guess I’d better get to work.” Bea waved and disappeared behind a green-barked palo verde tree beside the wooden front door, carved with dozens of many-armed giant saguaro cacti. The palo verde’s glorious yellow blooms were long spent, as were most of the flowering plants at this dry, dry, crazily hot time of year.

Bea pulled open the heavy door, where a brass plaque declared the building to be the “Administration Center” for Shandley Gardens. Angus told her he’d laughed when he had installed that plaque; it was such a grand name for Liz and Alan Shandleys’ former adobe home, which was the Gardens’ only building besides the tool shed. Bea wished she’d known Alan Shandley; he’d clearly been an inspired gardener. But he’d died five years ago, in 2003, long before she’d started this job, and a year before his wife Liz had turned their home into a public garden. Bea did know Liz. By all reports, she’d left the property and headed for town as soon as Alan died. This didn’t surprise Bea; Liz once told her she “didn’t care for gardening.” Which was a strange thing for a public garden founder to say, but Liz called the gardens “Alan’s thing.”

The local paper had enthused, “Alan Shandley was ahead of his time. When other Tucson gardeners were trying to imitate the East Coast and Midwestern landscapes of their youth, Alan embraced the desert. Some of the plants he found from desert landscapes worldwide are now beautiful mature specimens. And his wife is turning this jewel over to the public!” Liz did seem to care about the accolades she got for making the “jewel” public. It was wonderful that she’d made her longtime home a nonprofit botanical garden, except that there wasn’t quite enough money to pay the people needed to operate a fine public garden. Bea hoped they’d find some solutions to this rather crucial problem at

the upcoming board-staff retreat.

Bea passed the volunteer taking admissions fees in the hallway. He had a thick novel, which he bookmarked to greet Bea on her way in. Bea had advertised the admissions job as an “opportunity for people who love to read.” That should change when the Gardens started attracting more visitors.

“I’m rereading Tolstoy,” said the volunteer, a former English professor at the University of Arizona. “I don’t suppose I’ll get interrupted much in this weather.”

Bea’s boss’s door was open. His office had been the master bedroom, but it now sported a brass plaque that said, “Executive Director.” Liz Shandley had ordered the plaque before they’d even hired an Executive Director. Underneath, with white letters engraved in green plastic, it said “Ethan Preston.”

“Hey, Bea,” he said as she passed by. He looked at his watch and caught her eye. But then he continued in a voice that, fortunately, showed no irritation, “Short staff meeting at three o’clock, the witching hour. Did you see we’re going for a hundred and ten degrees today?”

“Yes. We’ve got a kid tour first thing this morning and a bus full of German tourists coming at ten-thirty, so I’ve got two volunteers to split that one with me. But thank goodness nobody has scheduled a tour for this afternoon. Way too hot.”

“Volunteers giving tours in this heat should get combat pay. On top of their wonderful base pay.” Realizing his blunder, he continued, “Of course, you should get combat pay, too, Bea. On top of your base pay—which isn’t much better than what the volunteers get.”

She was a little embarrassed by this olive branch, so she ignored it. “Ethan, I think we need a few more water jugs around for visitors. There are a couple more of those big orange ones in the shed.”

“Good point. I’ll get Angus to put them out.”

Bea’s office door had no plaque, which was fine with her. She was tired of coming up with fresh responses to “Rivers, that’s an interesting name for someone who works in a desert garden.” She settled down at her pine desk, which had

been in the original house. Ethan had a modern office desk, but she was quite happy with her antique and the large floral watercolor paintings that had come with the room.

She barely had time to start in on her emails when she got a call from Dr. Bolson up in the entrance hall with Tolstoy. “Bea, there are several carloads of children arriving in the parking lot. Lord, it looks like about fifty kids and parents.”

Bea dashed out of her office and nearly ran over Angus, who was still trying to make sure that the entrance garden plants were getting enough irrigation. She herded the children around the side of the building to the brick patio where tours gathered. There seemed to be twice the number of people she’d been told to expect. As she was beginning her orientation talk, a lizard darted by. “It’s just like Jurassic Park!” shrieked a little girl with a dinosaur tee shirt.

“You have these in your backyard, I’ll bet,” Bea told them. “It’s a desert spiny lizard.”

A couple of the parents were standing well away from the lizards; they seemed actually afraid, unlike their kids. One mother said quietly to Bea, “Mine are more familiar with Kung Fu Panda than backyard wildlife.”

Bea decided to lead them straight through the landscaped grounds, across the lawn and through the eucalyptus grove to the wild Sonoran Desert area the staff called the “back forty.” After pointing out an emerald-green scarab beetle, she pulled some white webby stuff off a prickly pear cactus pad. She squeezed it between her fingers, which turned red.

“You’re bleeding!” a little boy shrieked. She said no, she wasn’t; this red stuff was cochineal bugs, which had been used to dye things thousands of years ago and still were. The kids all wanted to squeeze the bugs. Bea picked three “dye gatherers” to try it. Some of the parents looked like they wanted to quash this project; one in particular puckered his lips when his little girl offered him some cochineal. Another parent picked up her cell phone, after giving Bea a pointed look. Bea assured the parents that there was a hand-washing station on the way back.

The children were still full of energy as they scrambled

into their cars, although their parents looked ready for some air conditioning. As they pulled out, the German tourists pulled in. They were well equipped with walking sticks, hiking pants, and sensible wide-brimmed sun hats. They seemed most interested in photographing the giant cacti in the cactus and succulent garden—the saguaros, but also the tree cacti from Mexico—the multi-branched organ pipes, and the huge, heavy *cardones*. Nobody complained about the weather, but then it was just one day in their lives. These tourists weren't desert dwellers, be they human, plant or animal, who had to adapt to months-long blazing summers.

At 3:00 p.m. Bea headed for the staff meeting, which included Shandley's grand total of four paid employees. In addition to Angus and Bea, Javier was the third line staff, and Ethan Preston, immaculate, ultra-professional Ethan Preston was their boss. Javier was the oldest of them and by far the most experienced desert gardener. Like Angus he was gray-haired. Years in Tucson's sun had turned him dark brown and brought deep creases to his mouth and eyes.

Bea felt fortunate to have lucked into this team.

Ethan was a little late to the meeting, and Bea found herself looking at his bookshelves. They took up most of the wall space, leaving room only for a couple of enlarged photos of the boojum forest in Baja California. Ethan's horticultural and botanical library was neatly and systematically arranged. As Bea stood to pull out a book on the flora of Baja, Ethan walked in, sat behind his desk, and cleared his throat. She sat down quickly.

Her boss swallowed before starting with, "Hi, everybody. I hope you're all having a productive day. I'm going to get right to the point. I need to talk about this upcoming retreat. It's going to have to be a real come-to-Jesus meeting. You've seen the financials. Admissions revenues aren't coming in like we need. The winter and spring visitors just aren't carrying us through the hot months. And with this economic downturn, who knows what Tucson's tourism is going to do when the season starts back up in the fall." He looked around at his staff. They were nodding.

He went on, “Nobody on the board has really been willing to donate anything much, or ask for any substantial gifts, because the word is that Liz is considering a major endowment for us. Armando Ramos seems quite certain of this, although I’m not sure why.” Armando Ramos wasn’t Bea’s favorite board member, and she didn’t have much faith in his opinions.

“Well, Buffy’s been generous,” Bea said. It wasn’t as though all the board members were waiting for Liz to fund everything.

“You’re absolutely right, of course.” Ethan nodded at her. “I’ll get to her in a moment. As things stand now, I think we can make it another six months, and then we’ll need to cut back unless things improve. My position is the least essential; we need you two, Angus and Javier, obviously, and Bea, you’re coordinating volunteers that make up the equivalent of what? About four people?”

“Well, they average about three hours a week, minus a few weeks of vacation. So yeah, the fifty of them make almost four full-time people.”

“We might be able to hang on to your jobs if we can step up the fundraising. And maybe Shandley can keep an executive director if a number of things fall into place.”

Ethan said all this with remarkable calm, considering that he was discussing losing his job. But then, Bea had never seen Ethan ruffled. He always dressed in Oxford cloth shirts, creased khakis, loafers, and an occasional striped necktie. His short dark hair was well cut and never out of place, although she didn’t detect any mousse. He was a competitive runner, she knew, and he was certainly lean. She’d heard he was about forty, not much older than she was... but he looked younger. He seemed to have it all together, except she did wonder what he *really* thought. He was always gracious to board members, even when they were less than courteous. He asked about her children, but never volunteered anything about what *he* did in the evenings or on weekends. There weren’t any clues to his personal life in his office, either—no family photos, no vacation snap shots, no mementos.

She realized her boss was waiting for a reaction from his staff members about the disturbing scenario he'd just laid out.

"Liz doesn't want this place to be anything other than top notch. I can't imagine she'd accept going backwards," Angus growled. "And besides, can you see the board taking over your job and dealing with the day-to-day headaches. For free? None of them want that." Bea nodded energetically.

Ethan turned to Javier. He didn't usually volunteer opinions. He gave a one-stroke nod, and looked at his big, calloused hands. He'd done more than any of them to make Shandley Gardens "top notch." He'd been gardening on the property for thirty years. In the time between Alan Shandley's retirement and his death, he and Javier had been inseparable, putting in long days on the fifteen landscaped acres together. Angus knew them both in those days and said they'd been more of a team than employer and employee. Javier could tell stories about the history of every plant on the grounds. Angus was now nominally Javier's boss, but Angus was fully aware that Javier knew more than he did about Shandley, despite lacking Angus's Master's in Horticulture. Angus had told Bea that Javier had refused the supervisory position, saying he "just wanted to garden." It seemed to Bea that they'd worked things out well, to Shandley Gardens' advantage. Still, she sometimes wondered how Javier felt about reporting to somebody with less knowledge of the property than he had.

Ethan was talking. Bea hoped she hadn't missed anything important. "Well, the first part of the retreat is about the Events Center. As you know, we should be able to generate quite a bit of income once we build it."

"If Liz will let us build it where we need to," said Angus.

"As Bea said earlier, Buffy has been generous. You all know she's agreed to fund almost the whole thing. Thank the Lord. We're all going to walk out there with Liz and Buffy and talk about how the lawn is the perfect site." Ethan said this with more assurance than Bea thought he really felt. Maybe it was just more than she felt.

Buffy Jones was Liz Shandley's childhood friend and Liz

had recruited Buffy for the board (along with her own son, Myron Shandley) when she'd turned her home into a public garden. Since Buffy had pledged more than a million dollars for a beautiful state-of-the-art event building on the property, you'd think Liz would agree with the location that Buffy and the rest of the board favored.

"You know Liz thinks we shouldn't change any of Alan's original plantings," Javier said. They all nodded. "I wish she'd get it that our huge lawn is out-of-date. When he first put that lawn in, Tucson was a lot smaller."

"And a lot less concerned about its water supply," Bea said.

"Well, Liz cares a lot about what people think," said Angus. "And that article in the *Tucson Post* about local heavy water-users was plenty embarrassing."

"I agree," Bea said. She'd nearly choked on her toast when she read the story calling out Shandley Gardens as one of the top water users in town. Tucson was getting hotter all the time, and being careful with water was essential for multiple reasons. She turned to Javier. "You once mentioned some quote of Alan's about gardens and change, right?"

"He used to say, 'a garden is always evolving.' I tried mentioning that to Liz once, but she didn't want to hear it."

"Maybe I can find a way to mention that quote at the retreat on Sunday," said Ethan. "But at any rate, the Events Center part of the day will be the easy part."

Angus picked up the cue. "And the hard part?"

"We are going to have a good three hours to talk about the financials and how to deal with the hole in the operating budget. Give it some thought. We need everybody's brain power."

Bea realized that whatever he might say, her job was at risk, too. The board couldn't fire her; they were Ethan's bosses, and he supervised the staff. But they could revise the budget to make layoffs inevitable.

"Okay, Ethan. I'm on it," she said.

CHAPTER TWO

Bea arrived at the Gardens the next day with her children in tow. It was a bright, cloudless, scorching Saturday morning. She often worked Saturdays since this was the best time to schedule classes. Today's offering, "You're Not in Kansas Anymore, Dorothy!" would be taught by another of Bea's volunteers, Dr. Joan Madsden, a retired University of Arizona plant sciences professor and that rare species of academic who communicated beautifully with the general public.

One corner of Bea's office was stocked with crayons, books, and building materials of various kinds, including the kids' "secret stash" of objects found in the desert—rocks, feathers, dried cholla cactus joints, snakeskins, and occasional human artifacts like smooth colored glass. Lately five-year-old Jessie had wanted to add plastic bottles and cans that she found in the desert. This offended her seven-year-old brother Andy's aesthetics, but Bea pointed out that they were recycling, after all. Andy bought that, since his second-grade teacher last year had dubbed her class "The Green Team." And so, the "stash" had become an unruly pile stuffed into the closet of the Shandley bedroom that was now Bea's office.

She left the kids to it as she greeted the students, mostly retirees and others new to Tucson who had learned, painfully, that they couldn't grow their Eastern and Midwestern garden favorites in their new desert home. The class was in the Shandleys' former living room, also known as the boardroom. Today it was set up with twenty-five folding chairs and a lectern, blackboard, screen, and LCD projector cast off

by the university during one of its renovations. The sketchy furnishings contrasted with the artwork on the walls. There were several woodcuts of tropical plants, and some fine oil paintings of Sonoran Desert scenes by a well-known local artist. Javier had said that Liz had taken all the “cowboy and Indians stuff” with her, but she’d left one “cowboy” painting. She and Alan were on horseback, facing each other, framed by the Rincon Mountains, two young, tall, beautiful people in full Western dress, complete with spurs and hand-tooled boots.

After Bea collected class fees from the walk-ins, she headed back to check on her children and nearly ran into Liz Shandley breezing through the hall with Buffy Jones, her buddy on the board.

Angus had told her (he’d heard it from Javier, who’d known Liz for the thirty years he’d been the Shandleys’ private gardener) that they were both around eighty years old, but thanks to Tucson’s finest dermatologists and hairdressers you’d never know it. Liz was nearly as blonde as she must have been in her youth. Her face was smooth, except for the distinctive cleft in her chin. But although she’d clearly done all sorts of work on her face, Bea had often noticed that Liz still had an old woman’s wrinkled, liver-spotted hands. She walked with a confident stride in her simple linen shift and name-brand sandals.

Buffy was a little more bent, and she was shorter to begin with. She was almost *too* slim. Her face was noticeably smooth, but her hair made some concession to age; it was silver, professionally streaked with gold. Buffy wore Bermuda shorts, a pink polo shirt, and sneakers.

“You’re here for the class?” Bea asked the two women. Class attendance would certainly be a first for them.

“Oh, no dear, we’re just headed out the back door to look over the Events Center site before it heats up today. Dear Ethan has scheduled our site visit for an *abominable* time of day tomorrow, don’t you think?” asked Liz. “We won’t want to stand out there long.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Bea knew that Ethan had polled

the board extensively about the best time for a four-hour retreat, and they'd chosen Sunday from one to five in the afternoon. It was definitely not Bea's first choice.

The "back door" Liz was headed towards consisted of two glass-paned French doors that led from the boardroom towards the brick patio where Bea gathered tour groups, and from there to the three-acre lawn. The class had already started, but the two women marched through it. Well, Bea thought, it *had* been Liz's house for years. Bea watched them walk through the patio and onto the lawn. It was framed to the right by Alan's rose garden, and to the left by the cactus and succulent garden, the same garden she could see out her own office window, a garden that sported not only the columnar cacti that the German tourists had loved but also masses of golden barrel cacti, a fifteen-foot-high Indian fig prickly pear hedge, a couple of boojum trees, and a whole bed of tiny South African "living stones," which looked exactly like they sounded. Tree aloes spiked through the whole area. Buffy paused for a moment before she went through the French doors and seemed to take a sweeping look at the whole area... lawn, roses, and cacti.

The class filed out a little before noon, many of them buying copies of the speaker's book—*Change Your Plant Palette!* Dr. Madsden had donated the day's decent proceeds to the Gardens. It was a successful morning, but something happened just before Bea went home that marred its smoothness.

While Bea was stacking the folding chairs after class, Buffy and Liz came back through the classroom. The two women didn't seem to notice that Bea was in the room. Buffy stopped near Bea, turned to Liz, and said, "Ethan is absolutely right on this one."

Liz just rolled her eyes and continued towards the front door. "Ethan's been wrong before, Buff," she said. Buffy noticed Bea and gave her an apologetic glance as she kept pace with her friend. Liz apparently thought Bea was one of the chairs.

Bea took her kids home, and they spent a typical Saturday

afternoon together. They did the weekly shopping and cleaning; they swam at the local pool, they made popcorn, they watched movies. She was lulled into a sense that their lives had gained some normality, after the chaos of last year's divorce. In those first few months after Pat moved out, the kids couldn't be together for ten minutes without a fight. Of course, it was their parents they were angry with, and Bea felt guilty about breaking up the family, even if Pat didn't seem to. But guilty or not, she was probably better off on her own.

The custody arrangements were even acquiring a faint regularity, after a year. Pat took them alternate Friday nights, although this weekend had been an "exception" like the dozens of exceptions those first few months. But things in Bea's personal life were improving, so maybe that pattern would continue, and the board and staff would solve the Gardens' financial problems, or at least come up with a plan they could all agree on. Bea slept better than usual that night.

* * *

"I'm glad we're still friends with the Rices," Andy announced when he got up.

"Why wouldn't we be?" asked Bea.

"Well, Mom, we're not still friends with some people we used to know," said Andy. He probably saw the guilt in her face before she forced a smile, because he continued, "But we have some new ones. Like Angus."

The best she could manage was, "You're right, Andy. Things change."

As she drove to Barb and John Rices' house, she thought about how couples always said that they'd stay friends with both of you after you divorced. This was either naïveté or a lie, depending on who said it. Bea's ex-husband had his own line of green cleaning products, and these days she never saw anybody they'd known from his work. On the other hand, she and Barb Rice had been friends since they'd both went to U.C. Santa Cruz, and Barb had been there for her solidly this whole last year of single parenthood, and the year before,

too, when Bea and Pat had been going to soccer practice and out to dinner and, yes, to bed together, even though Bea had the feeling the whole time that she was living in a movie set and Pat was going home somewhere after a few takes. She'd thought the disconnect was only in her mind, but Barb had forced her to ask herself if she was denying, not dreaming.

That Sunday morning, as they sat at the table by the pool, Barb wouldn't even let her clear the table of blueberry muffin crumbs and browned omelet shards. While the kids jumped into the pool, Barb poured Bea another cup of tea and told her to "sit and watch the saguaros fruit." The white crown of flowers on the giant cacti had turned to fruits since Bea had last been at the Rices' home; the juicy things would be ready for picking soon. She'd scheduled a class about gathering saguaro fruit. Thinking about work made her realize she'd better get going or she'd be late to the retreat.

As Bea picked up her handbag and gulped her last bit of tea, Andy climbed out of the pool and said, "You work too much." Would it have felt better if he'd said it while looking her in the eye, rather than mumbling it to the pool deck? Jessie was so busy jumping in and out of the pool that she barely acknowledged her mother's departure. Bea needed to carve out some time with Andy, alone. She didn't want him to feel abandoned by both parents, and Pat's on-again, off-again attention to them had to have had an effect. She pulled the wet little boy to her for a hug. Then he did look up at her. "Have fun," she said. I really have to go to this retreat. Wish I didn't."

In the car, she shook off her worries about her kids and tried to think of a way to fix the Gardens' budget woes. Maybe there was something lurking in her subconscious. Nope, there wasn't. The Gardens could hold the most popular classes more often, and hold more events like Ethan's latest fundraising scheme, a tour of home patio gardens. But those things weren't going to generate a lot of money. The kind of money needed to pay a staff member. She hoped the board members had some good ideas.

When she pulled into the parking lot and rushed into the

building, her skirt flared in a gust of hot wind. The wind was much worse than she'd realized in the shelter of the Rices' walled patio. She was dreading making an all-too-public late entrance, but when she opened the meeting room door, she was surprised to see that there were only two people in the room. Angus was wearing his gardening clothes as usual, although he'd pulled out some very clean ones for the board retreat. He was talking with Alicia Vargas, the board president. Shandley's board of directors consisted of only five people. Alicia joined the group after the original three—the mother-and-son pair Liz and Myron Shandley, plus Liz's buddy Buffy—had decided they needed reinforcements. Setting policy and raising money for a “top-notch garden” took a lot of work, *unpaid* work, as Liz was fond of noting, and Alicia was an efficient businesswoman. She dressed the part, too. Her black linen pants fit her trim figure perfectly, her white linen shirt was not too wrinkly, and her Mexican Taxco jewelry shone with multicolored opals.

“Bea, welcome!” she said.

“I guess I'm not too late. Where is everybody?”

“They're making their way back from the lawn, slowly, I would guess, in this heat.”

Alicia was probably right about this, as she was about most things. Bea was a little in awe of Alicia's competence. She ran some fine and very popular restaurants that showcased local wild foods—things like mesquite bean flour and *nopalitos*, chopped, pickled young prickly pear cactus pads.

Within thirty seconds of Alicia's statement, Ethan strode in. Shandley's Executive Director looked energized, and Bea suspected he'd had some success in convincing Liz about the Events Center site and was marshalling his energies for the budget discussion. A couple of minutes later, Dr. Ramos walked through the door that opened onto the grounds. He was the fifth board member, a botanist. After Ethan had been hired, he lobbied for some plant expertise on the board and suggested Armando Ramos, one of his jogging friends. Dr. Ramos was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. “I'm not even the latest, for a change,” he noted with that

habit he had of twisting his mouth as if to say the joke's on *you*. Dr. Ramos—she couldn't call him Armando, although she didn't know why, she called the rest of the board members by their first names—Dr. Ramos and Ethan were as much a contrast in formality as Angus and Alicia had been when Bea first came into the room.

Buffy Jones, the esteemed donor for the Events Center, came in next, wearing pretty much what she'd had on the day before—Bermuda shorts and a polo shirt, lime green, this time, and sneakers. Her usually tidy hair was windblown today, and she looked concerned. Bea hoped the concern wasn't about her million-dollar donation. Buffy was talking to Myron, who towered over her, even with his stooped posture. He was a bit of an anomaly in this group—clearly not an outdoorsman, which was ironic, since he was the son of Alan Shandley, the Gardens' creator and a gardener extraordinaire. Myron's pallor was difficult to achieve in Tucson. He wore business clothes similar to Ethan's, but they didn't hang on him as well. "Very sorry, Alicia," he said. "Buffy and I were just checking out the night-blooming cereuses. She gives them about a week before their one-night bloom." He looked around. "Mother's not back yet?"

This was indeed the question. The other four board members were ready to start. There was widespread watch-checking: where was Liz?

"Well, we certainly can't start without Liz," said Alicia.

Bea wondered if the meeting would actually be easier without her.

They stood around and chatted for a couple of minutes—Angus gave Bea a quick rehash of the Events Center tour, which had gone well—until Ethan asked, "Bea, would you check the restrooms for Liz? Angus, could you just go out on the grounds and see if you can find her, tell her we're starting?"

Bea checked both restrooms. They were empty. When she came back into the boardroom, everyone turned to see what she'd say. She shook her head. Alicia pursed her lips, but Ethan said, "I'm sure she'll be here soon."

Five more minutes of desultory conversation followed.

“How are the roses holding up in this heat, Ethan?”

“Has anyone been to that new Indian restaurant on Swan?”

Angus came back through the French doors that led to the grounds. His skin had gone pale beneath his gardener’s tan. He looked at Ethan and pointed his head towards the patio beyond the French doors. The two of them stood out there as everyone watched. Angus said something, and then Ethan stared at him like he was crazy, and they broke into a run, heading through the lawn area to the eucalyptus grove behind it.

There was an unspoken consensus and everyone in the boardroom followed them. Bea was in the lead group. She felt foolish chasing her boss but wanted to go fast enough to see where he went. That also seemed to be the reasoning of her fellow runners, Alicia Vargas and Armando Ramos. Myron and Buffy hurried along behind them. When they got to the large grove of about fifty eucalyptus trees, the branches were rustling loudly in the afternoon wind, and leaves fell as if it were a fall storm in the mountains.

Leaves were falling on something Bea had never noticed before. It took a second to realize it was a gaudy mosaic portrait of a blonde woman, about two feet wide and three feet tall. It seemed to be glued onto a wooden board, propped up on a dowel. Bea realized with a shiver that it was Liz Shandley—you couldn’t mistake the cleft in her chin. She was young, with blonde hair and rosy cheeks, wearing a white cowboy hat and a white fitted western shirt with one tiny red rose on the collar. She had a bright yellow rose between her teeth. The artist either wanted her to look nasty or didn’t have the skill to make her look like a reasonable person.

Bea was so transfixed by the “artwork,” and so horrified that somebody had been so disrespectful to Liz—Liz was hardly her dear friend, but she didn’t deserve that kind of treatment—that it took her a moment to realize that Ethan and Angus were standing somewhere else. When Buffy let out a high-pitched scream, Bea turned her head to see the

two men kneeling over something. Some...*body*. It was Liz, the real Liz. The others had the same realization; there was a cacophony of short intakes of breath and a bunch of expletives from the usually proper board members.

About a hundred feet from the mosaic, father along in the eucalyptus grove, Liz was lying face up. Maybe she'd fainted at the sight of the nasty mosaic? But that was just Bea's mind trying to negate the sight of so much blood. A large branch lay beside Liz; it seemed to have broken off and hit her on the head, up near her right temple. So much blood. The branch was discolored, as if with some fungal disease.

At first Bea couldn't move a muscle, although she desperately wanted to look away. Then she was able to turn her head, but no sound came out of her mouth. This was just as well because she might have screamed even louder than Buffy had. She saw Myron, white and sweaty, rushing by her, and she turned back to see him kneel by his mother on the ground. Ethan was already kneeling there and had his hand under Liz's nose.

"She's still breathing. Here, Myron, call nine-one-one." He handed Myron his cell. Myron's fingers were shaking as they watched him punch it in. No one said anything. No one except Ethan had sprung from shock to action. Ethan half-unbuttoned and half-ripped his shirt off and used it to put pressure on the bleeding head wound.

Myron's voice was almost squeaky as he talked into Ethan's cell phone. "Yes. I will open the staff gate so the ambulance can get to the area where my mother is... lying. I'll wait for you there and get in and guide you."

Alicia rallied and assumed the Board President role. "Ethan and Myron are doing what can be done right now. I think the rest of us are in the way." She looked around at the wind-rattled branches and pulled a eucalyptus leaf out of her hair. "We should go back to the board room. We don't need anybody else getting hurt."

"Thank you, Alicia. I'll join you when the ambulance comes," said Ethan.

Bea turned around reluctantly, although she realized

Alicia was being sensible. Bea walked back with Angus because he was the one she trusted the most and wanted to be around in a crisis. She stumbled on the well-known garden path.

“Angus, I can’t imagine who would create such a horrible piece of art. And what’s even more confusing is why Liz would walk under the eucalyptus. The wind must be, what, twenty miles an hour right now?”

“I should have just cut the damned things down. You know I’ve tried to keep everybody safe from those trees!”

“I know. You even told the board that we should stay away if the weather’s bad. Angus, you put up signs telling *visitors* to stay away from the eucalyptus in high winds, and Liz is hardly a visitor.”

“I tried to get an arborist in to trim them last month. He broke his leg and had to cancel a lot of work. I should have just done it myself.”

“Didn’t you suggest that we get rid of those eukes, and Liz said no way?”

“It’s ironic. In a dark way. She didn’t want us to cut down mature trees, and she didn’t want us to cut down trees that Alan had planted. She said they’d had good times together in the eucalyptus grove, picnics when they were young, and it was the only shade around. Her reasons seemed good enough, so I didn’t push the matter. Lord knows I’ve been paranoid about something horrible happening to a visitor, much less a board member. But I was worried about rattlesnake bites or killer bee stings, not killer plants.”

He clapped his hand over his mouth at those last words, but Bea jumped in with, “She’s not dead. And Angus, it’s not your fault she got hurt!”

Buffy caught up with them. She was panting lightly. “Don’t beat yourself up about this, Angus. I suggested you were right about those trees, and Liz wouldn’t have any of it. One of those damned branches fell on the pavement in front of me in the street, near downtown. I was only about twenty feet away. Those awful things break off all the time. Alan wouldn’t have cared about them being taken out! If you’re to

blame, so am I.”

“How about we all stop blaming ourselves and pray for my mother’s speedy recovery?” Myron walked quickly by them, headed towards the locked vehicle gate. A siren was getting louder, and he broke into a trot. He unlocked the gate with his master key and the next thing they knew, the ambulance was speeding down the service road to the eucalyptus grove, presumably with Myron inside.

“That ambulance was blessedly quick,” said Alicia.

Everybody got back to the boardroom and sat down, hard. The chairs were something solid in an unstable world. Then because they had to do *something*, a few started packing up their papers, but Bea didn’t want to leave until Ethan came back. They heard the ambulance whiz by the building.

“I know we all want to hear what Ethan has to say,” said Alicia. People were studying their fingernails and their now-moot retreat agendas, anything other than each other’s eyes. Dr. Ramos pretended to read a scientific paper he’d brought with him.

“I’ll go lock the vehicle gate,” Angus said.

Ethan appeared about two minutes after Angus left, according to the wall clock, although it certainly felt like more than that. Bea forgot her boss would be shirtless. They watched him toss his bloody shirt into a trash can in the garden outside the French doors where they’d seen him talking frantically to Angus just a few minutes before. His hair was out of place for once, falling over one eye, and he had blood on his hands. His chest was muscled from his hours at the gym, but it was pale, and he looked less like a take-charge soldier than a swimmer who’d just been tossed by a big wave.

“What a horrible day,” he said with a grimace. “Alicia, I’m sure you agree with me that this board retreat is officially over. I’ll let you know how Liz is doing. Myron will update me.”

“What did the EMTs say?” asked Alicia.

“They just loaded her in as quickly as possible. I know we’re all pulling for her,” he said.

Bea wasn’t ready to leave. She couldn’t make the tran-

sition to home and children just yet. Ethan and Alicia were talking in hushed voices in a corner of the room; they were in no hurry to leave, either. She threw a comment their way about needing to go to her office, and she sent Angus a look. He showed up in her office with Javier, who had been out on the grounds taking care of plants; he always worked Sundays.

"I saw the ugly picture," Javier said. They hunched towards each other, seeking solidarity. The familiar, benign world of Shandley Gardens had shifted into a place they didn't recognize.

"This really is happening to us, right? It's not some surreal movie about Shandley?" Bea asked.

Angus grimaced. "Kind of like that surreal mosaic?"

Bea shook her head to rid herself of that image, and Angus continued, "I know what you're going to say, Bea. Whoever made that mosaic didn't like her. What is *that* about? And did she walk toward the trees because she knew to look for the mosaic somehow? We all know the eucalyptus grove isn't exactly on the way between the lawn and the board room."

Bea nodded and added, "Did somebody tell her about the portrait? That kind of seems like it would be somebody at the retreat, although nobody mentioned it. Or maybe somebody told her about it before she came here, and she decided to check it out. By herself, for some reason."

They were quiet for a moment, and then Javier said, "I hope she recovers."

"I can't even go there," Bea replied.

"I can't either," said Angus. "Go be with your kids and try to have a decent weekend. I'm going to put caution tape around the perimeter of that whole eucalyptus grove so that no visitors go near it when we open for business on Tuesday. That's at least something I can do that will lessen my guilt about Liz getting hurt there."

"For God's sake, be careful," said Bea.

Ethan poked his head in the door. He'd cleaned up, combed his hair, and found another shirt. Maybe he had a stash of them in his office. "There you all are. It's time we went home. It's Sunday, after all. Javier, I know you're sched-

uled to work today, but go ahead and leave after you finish the essential watering. I've called the police and reported the accident and the odd mosaic. Javier, you might want to bring it in out of the wind." He started to leave and turned back. "Javier, wear your gardening gloves when you move the thing."

Ethan left, and his three staff members looked at each other.

"Okay, I'll put the damned thing in your office for the evening, Angus. Just so you both know. And of course I'll wear my gloves."

"Good, Javier. And I suggest that none of us gives much weight to that last remark of Ethan's," Angus said.

"I'll try not to," Bea said.