

ONE

“ALL WE’RE MISSING IS a corpse.” I hadn’t realized I was thinking out loud until Mert Chambers, my best friend, stopped in her tracks. She turned and nearly crashed into me. We were both carrying heavy cardboard boxes of supplies, so our inept maneuver had a Keystone Cop clumsiness.

“Why, Kiki Lowenstein, I can’t believe you said that! I think all these flowers are beautiful,” said Mert, as we continued our trek down the short flight of stairs into a church basement. She smiled at the big pots of day lilies we’d purchased to give away as door prizes.

“It’s the smell,” I explained. “When my eyes are closed, all I see are caskets and corpses. Plus, I haven’t been in a church since my father died.” The slightly dank basement brought back horrible memories.

That said, I had to admit we’d been lucky Mert was able to find us a place so close to the Missouri Botanical Garden and willing to let us hold a crop—a scrapbooking event—in their basement for a small donation.

Our boss, Dodie Goldfader, wagged a finger at me. “Knock it off with the morbid talk. We can’t risk customers hearing you.”

Dodie owns Time in a Bottle, nicknamed TinaB by those in the know. At six feet tall, she towers over Mert and me and walks like that cartoon version of the Abominable Snowman.

After shushing me, Dodie glanced pointedly over her shoulder. Women were filing in, towing their picnic coolers and Cropper Hoppers, rolling suitcases full of papercrafting materials. “The shuttle bus from the Botanical Garden has arrived!” Dodie sang out with delight. “Ladies, did you enjoy your tours?”

Women nodded and chattered happily. They staked out places at long tables covered with white butcher paper to create a clean surface. Some opened their supplies and started to work on pages immediately. Others shared the photos they’d just taken by handing around their digital cameras. Many of our guests had never seen the Jenkins Daylily Garden in full flower. The women were chatting happily about the glorious sight of all 1,350 different varieties of *Hemerocallis* (Greek for “beauty for a day”) spreading their luxe petals toward the sun.

Nicknamed “Shaw’s Garden” after Henry Shaw, the Englishman who in 1859 opened his personal place of refuge to the public, the Missouri Botanical Garden is considered one of the three great gardens of the world. It’s the oldest continuously operating display conservatory in the United States. Part of my prep for this outing was spending an entire day roaming the grounds last week. I familiarized myself with what was blooming, taking photos to help me design page layouts, some of the best work I’d ever done.

I should have been in a great mood, but I wasn’t.

Dodie pulled me aside and whispered, “This is a prime money-making event for us. Don’t you dare spoil it! I’ve worked all year to be included in the Crop Around Missouri Program. When these scrappers think special events, I want Time in a Bottle to be the first name that pops into their heads.”

“I know, I know. Sorry.” I grumbled. I’d had a rough morning with my pre-teen daughter. Lately I couldn’t do anything right. Her hormones must be going bonkers because Anya had become increasingly moody. I was trying to stay calm, but geez, she was wearing me down.

And yes, I was sleep-deprived. Everyone associated with TinaB—Mert, Dodie, our new hire Bama, and I—had baked dozens of goodies for this gathering. I personally had contributed three dozen Snickerdoodles. We’d all delivered our treats to Mert’s house the night before. Because she’s such an early riser and because she had room in her truck, Mert offered to bring over our food, pick up more groceries, and with the help of her son, set up tables before the rest of us showed up.

That freed Dodie and me to concentrate on paper, supplies, and tools. Bama was in charge of working with the caterer. Scrapbookers are a hungry group, so relying on the caterer for the more complicated food items such as breakfast sandwiches, quiches, and crepes, would keep our costs down. In an effort to be “green,” we’d also arranged to rent glasses and plates rather than produce more paper waste.

Mert had seen Dodie corner me. She figured I’d been chastised. She came over and worked beside me. In a cheery voice she preached, “You know, they call it the present ’cause every day is a gift.”

“Thank you, Dr. Phil-lis.” She was right—but then, isn’t she always? It’s a quality both endearing and exasperating.

Despite the hormonal harpy living in my house, life was good, and so was business. Since coming to work at TinaB, I’d “grown” a small but dedicated following of customers. If things went well, this outing would bring more scrappers into the fold. My notepad listed the names of nearly fifty patrons—many new to our business. I’d designed papercraft kits—“make and takes”—for each of our guests to turn into dazzling pages.

That’s my job—I’m a professional scrapbooker. Ever since my husband, George, was killed last fall, my former hobby has supported me and my eleven-year-old daughter, Anya. Although we don’t live in the style to which we had been accustomed, we are getting by. Before George died, I used to be Dodie Goldfader’s best customer. And until recently, I used to be her best employee. That was another reason I was grouchy. She’d gone and hired Bama Vess without consulting me. Okay. So TinaB was a sole proprietorship, and Dodie was the owner. It still rankled. To add insult to injury, Bama didn’t seem to want to be friends. She simply did her work and went home.

That hurt.

Thank goodness for Mert.

Before my personal series of unfortunate events, I had employed Mert as my housecleaner. Now I work part-time in her dogsitting business. I’m comfortable with the change of roles. Mert’s a thick and thin friend, the type who stands by you no matter what. She was working the crop because Dodie needed the extra help.

As Mert flitted around, she garnered plenty of admiring glances. She likes to “display the merchandise.” Her halter top was florid orange with red, tangerine, and pink bangles around the neckline. Her shiny chintz Capri pants were of a matching colorful print.

My attire sure could be more daring. I wore a pair of khaki slacks from Target with a Shirred cream short-sleeved blouse I’d rescued from Goodwill. I looked okay ... but a safe okay, just this side of drab.

Not that my employer cares. From behind, it’s tough to tell whether Dodie is animal, vegetable, or mineral. She’s hairy, lumpy and shaped like a rock formation. But she’s also a great person to work for and despite her terse manner, she’s a sweetheart.

Dodie asked, “Where’s Bama?”

Scrapbookers were flooding in and setting up their supplies. But Bama was nowhere to be found. That suited me down to the ground.

“Shoot,” Mert said when we had talked the day before. “You’re jealous. You liked being the one and only star at the store. You’ve got your panties in a wad because you have to share the lime-light!”

“Not so. I’m being protective of my employer. There’s something not right about that woman. Bama never looks me in the eye. I swear, what is she hiding? And she weaves like a drunk.”

That was my public complaint. My private beef was Bama had an art degree and I had ... bupkis. Everything I’d learned about scrapbooking came from trial and error, studying magazines, and educating myself about products and techniques. Seemed to me,

in a twisted sort of way, Bama earned her stripes too easily. Even so, I knew I wasn't being fair.

Mert had it right: I was jealous. I admit. I'm insecure. I was scared I'd lose my job. I've only ever been good at two things in life: scrapbooking and getting pregnant. For the first time in my thirty-three years, I was gainfully employed, responsible for my own welfare, and getting compliments. If I was overly protective of my new life, I had reason to be.

Dodie interrupted my thoughts. "I told Bama to be here no later than ten. The tours of the Botanical Garden should have ended. The last shuttle bus is due any minute. Where is she? These women are going to want to eat quickly and start on our special projects!"

She was right. I'd seen them eying the food on the serving table. They were being polite and waiting for us to give them the "go ahead," but we needed to get this show on the road. Bama was running late with the more substantial hot offerings.

Right on cue, Bama's dramatic voice echoed down the hall. "Set up warming trays along the far table." She waved a chart at workers who followed. A phalanx of young people with polo shirts bearing the name "The Catering Company" filed in carrying oversized metal pans. Our final shuttle bus must have arrived at the same time as the caterers because a handful of our guests had been pressed into service. Scrapbookers were balancing aluminum tins of food on the tops of their Cropper Hoppers and carrying coolers marked with The Catering Company's logo.

I'll give her this: Bama sure knew how to make an entrance. She also knew how to dress. Today pencil-thin black jeans scrunched over the top of pointy-toed boots. A sparkling brooch of jet-black beads gathered the simple neckline on her T-shirt into an asymmetrical

shape, forming a sort of jaunty, impromptu V-neck. She couldn't have projected an artistic image better if she'd slapped a black beret on the crown of her head and spoken with a French accent.

As Bama directed food placement, she steadied herself by keeping one hand on the edge of the tables or against the wall. What was it? Drugs? Booze? A part of me was dying to know while another part was ashamed of my mean-spiritedness.

The noise and activity level rose along with the sensuous aroma of bacon and cheese. The caterers finished lighting the Sterno and headed out of the building. I felt a rush of happy excitement. My efforts were about to pay off. I'm not bragging when I say that I had a bit of a reputation around town. My work has been published in all the big scrapbook magazines. The page kits I'd created for this outing represented my best efforts. Dodie had lobbied hard for membership in the Crop Around Missouri Program (CAMP), a coalition of area independent retailers. Since independents don't have the buying power or ad budget of big chains, we have to find other ways to keep our customers happy. So the store owners created CAMP to pool their resources. They all put aside their differences ... all of them, that is, except Ellen Harmon, owner of Memories First. Ellen seemed determined to cause dissension and trouble. Worse yet, Dodie and I had noticed whatever classes we offered, Ellen copied immediately—at a lower price.

Standing up and waving for attention, Ellen started the crop five minutes early. "Welcome everyone! Let me talk, then you can eat!" The women fell silent watching her expectantly. Dodie and I exchanged shocked glances. This was our crop. It was customary for the hosting store to start the festivities. Ellen had just robbed Dodie of the privilege of greeting the crowd.

Everyone's eyes were on Ellen as she announced, "As all of you know, the most prestigious contest in scrapbooking is the Scrapbook Stars competition held by *Saving Memories* magazine. Thousands of scrapbookers enter each year." Ellen paused to give her words full effect. "We are delighted to announce that one of our Memories First Design Team members has been named a Scrapbook Star! Let's hear it for ... Yvonne Gaynor!"

A cheer erupted from the crowd, and Yvonne stood to acknowledge the applause.

Ellen hadn't finished. "Yvonne's winning pages are on the magazine website. She'll be teaching exclusively for my store, Memories First. Class space is available on a first-come, first-serve basis." Here Ellen paused to stare directly at me. "Yvonne is a unique talent in an industry full of copycats."

I bit my tongue as I felt my face turn red. Boy, that was rich. Calling me a copycat? What colossal nerve!

Shake it off, I warned myself. You don't want these women to know how upset you are!

Ellen gestured at the serving tables. "Now ... we have lots of yummy food and fun pages for you. Yvonne, why don't you lead the way to *our* brunch?"



There we stood, Dodie, Mert, Bama, and I, feeling like uninvited kids sneaking peeks at a popular girl's birthday party. We'd organized this whole event—and for what? For Ellen Harmon to take over? For her to call me a copycat and slip in an advertisement for

her store? None of us spoke up because—how could we? Anything we'd say would make us come off like poor sports.

Bama, Mert and I shuffled off to one side.

Fortunately, Dodie knew how to handle this. Our boss tinkled a spoon against a glass and shushed the crowd. "All of us at Time in a Bottle want to add our congratulations. Let's hear it for Yvonne! Hip-hip-hooray!"

Mert and I followed her lead and raised our water glasses high. Bama hesitated before chiming in, plastering a painful grin on her face.

Now Ellen's expression turned sour. She knew exactly what we were doing. When giving credit, the rule is: The person giving credit has more stature than the person receiving. Time in a Bottle had regained the high ground.

"Please, help yourself to the food! Eat up!" Dodie motioned to the tables. "Kiki Lowenstein will explain our first project as soon as you all have food."

"Nice save," I muttered to my boss as women streamed past with plates in hand. At the front of the line was Yvonne, scooping up an obscene number of scones and cookies.

Her best pals, Nettie Klasser and Rena Rimmel, walked in the new star's wake. Rena piled her plate high but Nettie was more selective, picking only a few items and pausing to wipe her nose.

Dodie whispered in my ear, "I don't care what contest she won; I'm glad I fired Yvonne as a customer."

I remembered the day Dodie told Yvonne her business was no longer welcome. Her vow never to buy from us again came as a

relief. We were even more pleased when Yvonne's friends made it clear they didn't intend to leave with her.

"Hey, we know her faults," said Rena as she signed up for a crop. "We're her friends, but we aren't clueless."

"That's right. She's not a very nice person." Nettie was a shy scrapper who liked to stop by early mornings when our store was practically empty.

Now it was my turn to save face. Walking over to the new celebrity, I managed a warm smile. "Yvonne, that's great news about the contest. Congratulations again." Yvonne barely nodded to me and didn't stop eating.

But I was determined to be gracious. "Did you all drive over together?" They nodded. "How fun. Rena, is that the new stapler you can use anywhere on your page? I've been meaning to try that," I lied. Heck, I'd been using one for ages. "Hey, Nettie, good to see you. What are you working on today?"

"I'm sorting photos." Nettie removed her white cotton gloves so she could blow her nose. Dedicated hobbyists wear white cotton gloves to protect the surfaces of our photos from oil and dirt on our skin. Nettie sniffled and reached for a Mountain Dew. "Sorry. With all the rain we've had, the mold count is unbelievable."

"Why don't I take your empty plates so you can go back for more? Are you finished?" I was going to be helpful if it killed me.

Nettie nodded. Rena pointed to a stack of cookies and shook her head no. Yvonne was still cramming her mouth. She spread a hand over her orange scone to warn me away.

I had taken two steps toward the dirty dish cart when I heard a glass hit the floor behind me.

I whirled around to see Yvonne's hands moving across the table, searching blindly, knocking her plate and utensils to the floor in ineffective sweeps. I tossed the dirty plate at the cart and ran to her side. A wheezing sound rumbled deep inside her.

"Get help! Call 911!" I yelled to Dodie.

"Are you choking?" I asked Yvonne.

She answered by shaking her head, banging the table with her hands and whimpering. "Urs! Urs!" Nettie offered her friend a glass of water.

That flew all over us and the floor. Yvonne slammed against the back of her seat, legs moving wildly. Finally she grabbed her purse from under her chair. I watched her dump the contents of her handbag. Yvonne's fingers raced through the mess, discarding this and that. Tissues, lipstick, wallet, cell phone, pencil, notebook, checkbook all went flying by. Time seemed to slow down.

Yvonne pulled a yellow box from the clutter. Her skin was a dusky shade; her lips were trembling. She unscrewed a cap. A tube fell apart in her hands, exposing a syringe. Holding the implement like a hammer, she swung her arm wide and jammed the needle through her slacks into her leg. Her eyes were wide with fright.

With a clatter, the needle dropped from her hand and rolled across the floor.

Yvonne slumped to one side and slid toward the floor. Her friends and I grabbed at her, trying to soften her impact. She wheezed, bucked, and wheezed some more. I tried to raise her head, in the hope it would help her breathe.

The Emergency Medical Service crew arrived. They pushed us aside, stepping forward to work on her, asking questions, examining

one of those silver Medical Alert bracelets on her wrist, checking her vitals, and moving in a synchronized blur.

I stepped away, shaking my head in horror. Mert took me by the arm. “This don’t look good,” she said. “Not at all.”