



ROSETTE

WR

Lilly's
Garden

Kimberlee R. Mendoza

Lilly's Garden

by

Kimberlee R.
Mendoza

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Lilly's Garden

COPYRIGHT © 2008 by Kimberlee Ruth Mendoza

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or The Wild Rose Press except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by *Kim Mendoza*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 708

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2010

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Norma Arwood. Thank you for always being there for me and my kids. I'm so glad you're in my life.

**Kimberlee is the winner
of the 2006 Sherwood Eliot Wirt Writer of the
Year Award for all of San Diego.**

"Her dialogue is excellent, very natural and smooth.
Her story telling is seamless."

(Vasiliki Scurfield--Between the Lines).

"Kimberlee Mendoza manages what many Christian
writers can't, to use religion in a story without
coming across preachy."

(Dakota Rebel--Sensual Reads and Reviews)

"Ms. Mendoza shows the reality of life, with trials
and heartache, through her characters giving them a
highly believable quality that her readers will
remember long after they read the last page."

(Bluegrass Romance Reviews)

“You look pretty, Miss Bethany,” Lilly said.

Bethany looked to where her neighbor’s little girl sat on the bed among a pile of rejected outfits.

“Thank you.” Bethany checked her reflection again. The cream suit hugged her size ten frame in all the right places and her burgundy shirt screamed power. *Yes, this says I want this position and nothing will stop that.* Not even Garrett Myers. *Jerk.*

For over two years he’d watched her every move, brown-nosed the bosses, flirted with the women staff, and basically did whatever it took to make himself popular. *Weasel.* But it didn’t matter. Today, Bethany would win. She had him. A national network wanted to work with *her.* *Watch him try to top that.*

“I like your hair down. It makes you look like a princess,” Lilly said.

Bethany eyed her long hair and frowned. “Yeah, but not today.” Today she needed to be more than a pretty face. She needed the men to take her seriously. She grabbed a clip from inside the drawer and proceeded to bundle it into a bun. *What’s that?* She leaned forward. *Is that a gray hair?* A wiry silver strand poked out from her auburn hair. She pulled at the intruding tress and winced. *Great. I’m not even twenty-five and Garrett is giving me gray hair.*

“I wish my hair was brown like yours.” Lilly fingered a red curl. “People make fun of mine.”

Bethany fastened her watch around her wrist and sat on the mattress to put on her pumps. “I don’t know why. I think it’s beautiful.”

“The boys say I look like a clown.”

“And boys are stupid.”

Lilly frowned. "Mommy says you shouldn't say stupid."

Whoops. Bethany bit her smile. "You're right, forgive me. It would be better to just say they're jealous of you because you're so pretty."

The pale girl nodded with a closed mouth smile. "Mommy says that too."

"I always hated having brown eyes." Bethany took the girl's hand and led her to the mirror. "Beautiful green eyes, fair skin, gorgeous hair—you're a knock out."

Lilly giggled.

A cell phone rang in Bethany's purse. She crossed to the night table and snapped it open. "Hello?"

"Hi, Bethany."

She grimaced. "What do you want, Garrett?"

"Where are you? The meeting starts in fifteen minutes."

She checked her watch. "It's only 8:30."

"Yes, it was moved up to 8:45."

Moved up? That pig. "No one informed me. But, I assume that's your doing." She imagined his sardonic grin.

"I thought you knew. That's why I'm calling."

Ugh. She couldn't stand him. "I'll be there in ten minutes." She snapped the phone closed, then grabbed her purse and keys. "I'm sorry, Lilly, I have to be somewhere right away. We'll talk later, okay?"

"Sure, okay." The girl jumped up, grinning. If she were disappointed, no one would ever know. She always smiled. Even after an asthma attack, which usually came around this time of year, she never lost a good attitude. Lilly walked across the hall to her apartment and waved. "Bye."

"See you later, my friend." Bethany hurried down the steps, as quickly as one could in heels, and briskly walked to her car. She prayed the traffic wasn't too bad.

She was in luck. Within eleven minutes, she stepped out of the elevator at work. From where she stood, she could see the men all sitting in the boardroom. However the hum of conversation indicated they hadn't started yet. *Good.*

She handed her briefcase over the counter to the receptionist and walked in.

"Ah, Bethany, how nice of you to join us," Charles, the CEO said. He was a hard man to read. Half the time he joked, the other half he fired. She hoped for the first one.

"Sorry, I guess I didn't get the memo about the meeting being moved up." She glared at Garrett, who stared at her with that annoying leer. The only chair open was across from him. *Marvelous.* She frowned. She'd have to stare at his dumb mug during the entire meeting. She sat and focused to the front.

Ten men, all dressed in designer suits, sat around a cherry wood desk. A big screen stood ready in the front.

"Great. Let's get started." Charles pointed for his assistant to dim the lights, then turned on a PowerPoint presentation. "As you know, we've been custom designing meetings, events and conferences for years, but never what I'm about to show you."

Bethany's heart soared. This was her moment. Her baby. She'd brought them the project, so she'd be named manager.

"A new TV station will be launching in a few weeks. They're calling it RTV—Reality Television." He clicked a button and images of the station's logo flashed on the screen. "Most of what they plan to air will be reruns of old shows, as well as a few new series. One of these will affect us."

Bethany shifted in her chair, hardly able to contain her excitement.

"They would like to do a reality show about event planning. The first show will be the party that

will launch their show.” He clicked again and a picture of the Kodak Theatre came on the screen. “The finale will be behind the scenes at the Academy Awards.”

A few oohs and aahs echoed in the room. Bethany only smiled. She knew what he’d say next.

“We’ve been asked to support this endeavor. We will be training the contestants and dishing out the projects. This will require some new hires and position shifting.”

Several people exchanged looks. That always meant headaches for those in charge.

“One of our own brought us this project.” Charles’ gaze fell to her. “Bethany was running an event at the San Diego Convention Center a few weeks ago and had lunch with some of the executives from the studio.”

Approving nods and smiles. *I did good*, she gave herself a mental pat on the back.

He sighed. “Now, to dish out assignments.”

People sat straighter in their chairs, each probably hoping for the same thing—a management position to run with this.

“Because it is such a huge endeavor, I’m going to assign two people to head this up.”

Two? She glanced around.

“Bethany and Garrett.”

Her heart plummeted into her stomach. “Sir?” She couldn’t swallow. He wasn’t serious? “Are you sure we’d make a good team.”

Charles’ eyes flashed fire. No one ever dared to question him, and certainly not in a room full of his administrators. “You’re only on this assignment because they asked for you, Miss King. You’re barely out of college and Garrett has two degrees and twice as many years of experience. I have faith in him. Understood?”

“Of course, sir. I didn’t mean that...”

Garrett licked his lips, his grin daring her to

continue. Why did all the girls like him? So what if he looked like a model—messy dark hair, high cheekbones, and gorgeous hazel-green eyes. It didn't matter. He was jerk. Plain and simple.

"Good, the matter is settled." Charles clicked off the screen. "I will have Julie send you all the files and you can start on it today."

Garrett winked at her.

Her blood boiled. She didn't give him the satisfaction of a reaction. She gathered the paperwork in front of her and walked out.

The receptionist passed Bethany's briefcase back to her and handed her some messages.

Garrett came up and draped his arm around Bethany's shoulders. "Isn't this great? The two of us working together as a team."

Bethany shrugged him off. "Are you kidding me?"

"I don't know why you aren't excited. This is the biggest thing to happen to this company and we're going to manage it."

She entered her office and tossed her stuff on the desk, trying hard to calm her emotions. "This was supposed to be *my* gig."

Garrett shut the door and leaned against it, arms crossed with that stupid smile on his face again. "You don't like me much, do you?"

"What's to like? A brown-noser like you has everyone in this place fooled."

He stepped forward. "Except you."

She nodded. "That's right—except me. I see right through you."

He inched closer. "And what do you see?"

Weasel. Could she say it out loud? Why not? He asked her. "You're one of those guys who will step on whomever he has to on his way to the top. Being friendly with everyone, just so you can make your mark."

He stared at her a long moment which made her

uncomfortable. She started to say something when he finally responded.

“I’m offended by that.”

Not the response she expected. “Well, I’m sorry, but it’s what I see.”

“Why? Because I’ve moved up rapidly since I’ve come here? Because I’m nice to everyone?”

“Precisely. It’s not natural.”

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe there is something, or should I say, someone else to blame?”

What? She wrinkled her brow. “Who? Who’s to blame?”

He took a deep breath and sighed. “Since your opinion of me is so high, you may have a hard time believing this, but I’m a Christian. I’m nice to everyone because I’m supposed to be. Love others as yourself.” He walked next to her, close enough that she could smell his aftershave.

She tried not to breath. It was unnerving.

“I believe God has blessed me. I haven’t tried for anything beyond my God-given abilities. If you have an issue with that, take it up with Him.” He pointed up, then turned on his heel and walked out.

Bethany felt numb. She dropped into her chair, dazed. It took her a moment to focus on what just happened. She didn’t know exactly how to feel. Garrett was a Christian. How could she hate him now? *But I like hating him.* It had obviously been wrong to assume so much. Everything she’d felt about him over the past year now seemed stupid. She tried to replay the events in her mind. He wasn’t brown-nosing, but simply being nice? Was that even possible?

All her excitement for this position just melted into a new emotion. No longer hate for her new colleague, but embarrassment.

“Do you want some more pizza?” Bethany asked Lilly.

The small girl nodded.

Bethany pulled another slice from the box and laid it on her plate. Garlic and cheese wafted up, making Bethany want another slice herself. "When is your mom getting home?"

Lilly shrugged. "Maybe seven."

Bethany poured herself some root beer, grabbed a slice, and joined her friend at the glass table. "So, how was school today?"

"I like first grade better."

"Why?" Bethany took a bite.

"The boys were nicer."

"I see." Bethany swallowed. "But isn't the year almost over? Soon you'll be in third grade."

"Yeah. Maybe the boys will like red hair in the third grade."

"Maybe." Bethany smiled.

"Mom says I can start a garden if I want. You want to help me?"

Bethany raised an eyebrow. "I don't know. I've never gardened before."

"It's fun. The dirt feels cool on my fingers."

"Yeah, I can imagine. But since we live in an apartment without a backyard, where will you do it?"

The girl toyed with a strand of cheese, thoughtful. "There's a box in front of the shed. The landlord told Mommy I could plant there."

"That was nice. Will you be able to do it with your asthma?"

She opened her mouth to answer, when someone knocked on the door. "Maybe that's Mommy."

Bethany glanced at the clock. It was only 6:30. Maybe Nancy was early. She crossed to the door and her breath caught. "Garrett. What are you doing here?"

He lifted a box full of files. "The boss said to bring these to you."

"What are they?"

"I don't know, but if you'd let me come in and set them down, I'd be much obliged to find out."

"Oh, of course." She moved back, allowing him to enter. A trail of spicy cologne followed him. "Just set them on the coffee table."

Lilly peeked around the dining room wall, her chin covered in tomato sauce. "Who's he?"

"A man I work with."

Garrett smiled and offered his hand. "I'm Garrett."

"I'm Lilly."

"Pretty name."

She beamed. "Thank you."

Garrett looked back to Bethany. "I didn't know you had a daughter."

"I don't." She turned to the box, not offering an explanation. "What do you suppose all of this is?" She flipped one open. A photo of a good-looking man was stapled to the top of what looked like an application. "Are these the contestants?"

"Looks like it."

She stared at the box. "All of them? That's a lot. What are we supposed to do with them?"

"Charles said to read through the files and get to know the people inside. Not sure what for, but it looks like a long weekend."

Bethany glanced at Lilly. "Are you sure it can't wait until Monday?"

"I don't think he would have called me if it could."

"He does realize this is Good Friday."

Garrett shrugged. "I'm guessing he's not a very religious man."

She sighed and looked at her little friend. "I'm sorry, Lilly. I guess our movie will have to wait."

"It's okay. Can I help?"

Garrett smiled. "You know your colors?"

"Of course, silly. I learned that in preschool."

He laughed and glanced at Bethany.

She smiled.

"How about you arrange the files?" Garrett pointed to a stack. "Put all the red ones in one pile. All the blue in another. And so forth."

"Okay."

Bethany smiled at him and for the first time it felt genuine. Okay, so she misjudged the guy—a lot.

For an hour, they skimmed the contents of the files. Lilly finished her task and moved onto watching cartoons until her mom arrived.

"Thanks so much for watching her," Nancy said, trying to hand Bethany a twenty.

As always, she waved her off. "Anytime."

"She really likes you, you know. Talks about you all the time."

Bethany glanced at Lilly and grinned. "Yeah, she's pretty special to me, too."

Lilly hugged Bethany good night and walked out the door with her mother. "Good night."

"Night."

"She's a sweet kid," Garrett said after Bethany shut the door.

"Her mom works a lot and her father left years ago." Bethany sat among the piles and sighed. "She's like a sister to me. Comes over a lot after school and eats dinner. Her mom always tries to pay me, but I won't let her."

His eyes locked with hers.

"What?"

"I don't know. I guess both of our perceptions were wrong."

Her back tingled. "Let me guess, you thought I was a cold-hearted woman with work as my only friend."

He crossed his arms and legs, reclining back against the side of the couch. "Yep, that about sums up what I thought."

"You'd be right."

He tilted his head slightly to the side. "Really?"

“Until a year ago when I met Lilly. She changed my world. Saved me, actually.” She offered him a tight smile. “I guess we should get back to it. We still have two piles left.”

For hours, they sorted through the files. The more they talked, the more she realized he really was a nice guy. How could she have been so wrong about someone?

He yawned.

“Don’t do that. I’m exhausted.” She reached for a file at the same time he did. Their hands touched. Electricity shot up her arm. She pulled back and giggled. “Sorry.”

That amused grin of his returned. “You’re cute when you blush.”

“Blush? I don’t blush.”

“You totally blushed.”

She picked up a red file. “It’s the reflection of this.”

He laughed. “If you say so.”

Need to change the subject. “So, tell me something about yourself that I don’t already know.”

He set the file in a pile to his left. “Something you don’t know...well, I gave you a big one this morning, didn’t I?”

She rolled her eyes. “Something else.”

“You’re not real good at the small talk, are you?”

“And you’re not real good at subtlety or tact, are you?”

“Okay, here’s something you probably don’t know.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I’ve liked you since the day we first met.”

Her heart fluttered. “But I didn’t like you.”

“I know.”

All those times she thought he was smiling at her to get her goat, was he actually flirting? She labored to breathe. “I think I need some water. You want anything?” She stood and started to the kitchen. When she turned from the refrigerator, he

was less than a foot away. Her pulse raced. Her vision blurred. She couldn't deny it now. He did something to her, too. Maybe that was why it was so easy to hate him. It helped her block out these annoying feelings. Now she knew he liked her. What did she do with that? She toyed with the ring on her finger. Maybe she never did hate him.

His lips moved close to hers.

She closed her eyes and inhaled.

Someone knocked on the door. She leapt back, flustered. "Um, I'd better get that."

They pounded again.

"Coming." She opened the door.

Nancy stood in the doorway shaking, her face ashen, her eyes red from crying.

"Nancy, what's wrong?"

"Lilly's having an asthma attack, my car won't start, my cell is dead..."

Bethany glanced at Garrett, who already had his cell phone out, dialing. She assumed, 9-1-1.

"If we wait for an ambulance, it may be too late," Nancy said.

"I can take her in my car." Garrett crossed to her. "Where is she?"

They ran across the hall.

Lilly wheezed, helpless, unable to get air in her lungs. Her face blue, her body quivering.

Garrett reached under her frail body and lifted her, then rushed to his car. The women followed and climbed in.

Nancy sat in the back with Lilly's head resting in her lap.

Bethany prayed. Hard. With each gasp from the small girl's lungs, she felt like the air was being sucked from her own.

The fifteen minute drive felt like fifty. When they got there, emergency personnel whisked the girl away.

Bethany just collapsed in Garrett's arms,

sobbing. "She looked so blue."

He touched her hair. She could feel his breath as he talked to God.

After several hours, Nancy walked into the waiting room, her shoulders slumped, her face pallid and drawn.

Bethany rushed to her. "How is she?"

Nancy didn't look up. Her voice wavered. "She didn't..." She shook her head, tears streaming down her face. "She's gone."

Bethany dropped to one of the plastic chairs, her body numb, her heart hollow. She sobbed, unable to process fully what she'd just heard. Everything she'd ever wanted out of life. All her goals and dreams, none it mattered more than that little girl.

The next morning, Bethany walked down the stairs and stopped at the planting box that was supposed to be a garden. Except for fresh-laid dirt, it still sat empty. She bent down, clutched a handful, and cried. Her heart ached. She wanted her friend back.

"Hi."

She spun around.

Garrett offered a consoling smile. "I came to check on you. How are you doing?"

"Not well." She sniffed and turned back to the dirt.

"I'm going to a special Easter service at Mount Soledad tomorrow morning; I thought I'd see if you wanted to go."

She allowed the soil to sift through her fingers. "This was supposed to be Lilly's garden. Now it will never see life."

Garrett crouched next to her and looked at the incomplete project. "Do you know the legend behind the Easter lily?"

She didn't respond.

"The night before Jesus died, he prayed in the

Garden of Gethsemane. The Bible says he cried so hard, he sweated drops of blood. The next morning, lilies grew for the first time in the garden.”

Bethany looked at him.

“Some people like to believe God allowed them to grow as a reminder of new hope. That though death started in the garden, not all was lost.”

“How could God take a little girl?” Her voice choked and her chest heaved. *How could He?*

Garrett touched her shoulder. “Death is always sad for those left behind, but she’s not sad. She’s rejoicing, playing with full lungs for the first time, running with the Savior.”

It was too much to process. Something about grieving felt good. Bethany knew Lilly was in heaven, but it hurt that she wasn’t here. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and stood. “Thanks for inviting me, but I’m not ready to go anywhere with a bunch of people.”

He got up and nodded. “Call me if there is anything I can do.”

“Yeah.” She wiped her hands on her sweats and walked back to the apartment. All she wanted to do was crawl into the fetal position and stay there. *Lord, I need to understand. Help me find peace.*

Monday morning, Bethany’s cell phone rang. Twice she’d allowed it to go to voicemail. This time she decided she should answer. She ran a hand over her face to clear her head and reached for it. “Hello?”

“Wake up. We have an important meeting in half-an-hour,” Garrett said.

She glanced at her clock and her heart lurched. Almost ten. “I overslept.”

“I’ll stall. Get down here.”

“Thanks.” She snapped the phone closed and ran for her closet. Any suit would do. She settled on a navy blue pinstripe. She quickly showered, dressed, tossed her hair in a bun, and applied a light layer of