

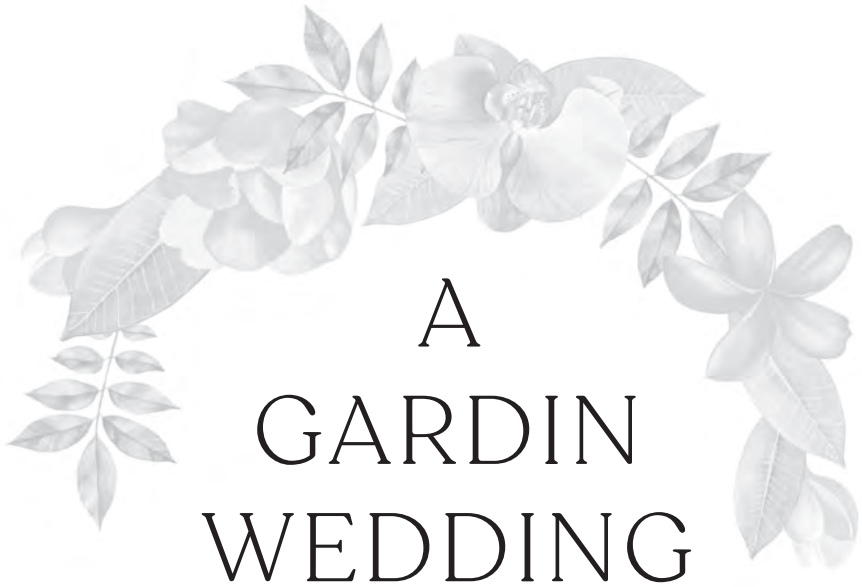


A GARDIN WEDDING

Readers Guide
Inside

*A Gardin
of Edin
Novel*

ROSEY LEE



A
GARDIN
WEDDING

A Novel

Rosey Lee



WATERBROOK

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Chapter One

Mid-June

Martha swept the sandalwood fan in her hand back and forth, not to cool her brow but to tame the nervous energy brewing inside her. Although almost everything was going according to plan, she couldn't shake the notion that things were about to get messy. Martha placed her mason jar on the coffee table and scooted closer to Oji. His constant reassurance had proven right so far. The day had gone exactly as he said it would. And now they were in the homestretch, chatting on a sofa like they did most evenings at his home or hers. But their surroundings were different on this cloudy late-spring evening as they sat on a rented sofa that was part of the lounge vignette at her aunt's outdoor wedding reception near the lake pavilion on the Gardin family estate.

"The Garden and Games theme is a big hit," Martha said, mindlessly repeating the same comment she'd just made as she slowed the speed of her fanning and scanned the east portion of the property. The wedding planners had turned the area into a floral wonderland in shades of pink and orange. Flowers lined the walkways leading to the pavilion and cascaded down its posts from the ceiling.

Oji gave her a comforting smile. "Want to go for a walk around the grounds to let off some steam?" he asked.

Martha coyly held the fan, a favor from the wedding reception, up to her face like a woman in one of the Regency-era dramas Oji pretended he didn't like to watch with her. "I would love to go on a promenade with you around the grounds, sir. But when we pass by one of those big lawn games, I'll have to beat you again. Which game do you feel like losing *this* time?" she asked.

"I kept letting you win because I'm a gentleman," Oji replied, smirking.

"Whatever you need to tell yourself to make it okay," Martha teased.

Oji burst out laughing, and Martha joined in, reveling in the serotonin release. *He always knows what I need*, she thought.

"That's all right. I'd prefer to stay here and talk with y'all," Martha said, accounting for her sister and her cousin by marriage, who sat chatting among themselves across from Martha and Oji. The women maintained an easy balance of having their own conversation, engaging with Martha and Oji, and watching the other attendees enjoy the festivities.

With only ninety-six guests, the reception felt like the laid-back Juneteenth cookout the family hosted each year, except both the venue and the attendees were more spiffed-up. Following a dress code described as "comfy cocktail attire," wedding guests looked chic as they posed for photos in front of a massive floral wall. A few groups of people congregated at the reception tables or at one of three lounge vignettes overlooking the lake, but most rotated among the array of giant games—checkers, Jenga, Connect Four, and Etch A Sketch—spread across the grounds. Bursts of laugh-

ter filled the air as some men and women played like children, and other adults introduced their kids to the games they grew up with. But Martha fretted because the joyful occasion served as the first meeting for her family and Oji's since the couple began dating three months prior. And Martha wanted it to go perfectly.

Laughing with Oji assuaged Martha's anxiety for a couple of minutes, but it soon returned. She folded the fan and placed it on her lap as she leaned toward him. "I didn't expect your mom to talk so much to the other guests," she whispered. Her deep-brown skin glowed against the tangerine dress she wore. "I was looking forward to bonding with her as she got to know my family, but she's spent the whole reception meeting people instead of spending time with us."

"Since she and my dad don't get out as much as they used to, she can't help herself. She's just doing her thing," Oji replied in a hushed tone. "She likes you. I promise," he continued, squeezing Martha's hand.

"Okay," Martha replied as she caught a glance of her sister. She swung her head to her right, where Mary leaned back in a burnt-orange wingback chair that faced the lake. "What are you laughing at?" Martha asked in a perky voice. The long swoopy layers in her pixie cut framed her oval-shaped face perfectly.

"You two are cute together. It's good to see you happy," Mary said. Her hair cascaded down her back as she readjusted her body in the chair and smoothed the fabric of her flowy magenta midi dress.

"That's sweet of you to say," Martha said, blushing.

Because of their similar physical traits and fashion tastes,

the sisters had embarked on extensive discussions regarding their maid-of-honor dresses and hairstyles for the wedding to ensure they didn't end up with similar looks. This was intended to prevent guests who didn't see them regularly from confusing them as the same person. But mostly, it was important to Martha that everyone was clear about which Gardin sister was dating Oji Greenwald. She and Mary had the same complexion, prominent eyes, and pouty lips, but Martha was two years older at thirty-eight.

Oji stood and lifted Martha's mason jar from the table. The ice clicked against the otherwise empty glass. "Thanks, Mary. She makes *me* happy too," he said with a big smile. "I'm gonna get Martha another lemonade. I'll bring one for you and Ruth if you'd like."

"That would be great!" Mary said.

"No thanks," Ruth replied from the vintage chair positioned next to Mary. "I'm still working on mine."

As Oji walked away, the women made kissing faces at Martha behind Oji's back. Martha blushed and playfully rolled her eyes, but she didn't utter a peep to her sister and cousin-in-law until Oji was a safe distance away.

"Y'all are so embarrassing!" Martha whined. "You would swear I've never had a boyfriend before."

"It has been a while," Mary teased.

Martha turned her head to the side and narrowed her eyes at her sister.

"I have no plans to stop picking on you anytime soon. This is too much fun," Mary said, twirling her hair around her finger.

Ruth smiled. "I like that he's being so supportive. I've still got my eye on him, but he might be okay after all."

Martha sighed, but it wasn't because she was upset by the comment. She appreciated that Ruth was still willing to look out for her. The woman was a model of forgiveness in action, given Martha's previous attempts to wreak havoc in Ruth's professional life as well as in her personal one. She and Ruth were still in the rebuilding phase of their relationship, but they were on solid standing. "He's a good guy. I'm not worried about him. It's his parents. How do y'all think it's going?" Martha asked.

"It seems like it's going fine to me," Ruth responded. "It's not like the Greenwalds are total strangers. Well, today was our first time meeting Adam, but we met Eve at the Gardin Family Enterprises Christmas party. We got along smashingly then, and she's been just as personable today."

"I know, but I wasn't there when y'all met. It's different this time," Martha grumbled.

"You really should calm down. You don't want Oji to see the snappish side of you, do you?" Mary teased.

"Oh, I bet he knows. She hasn't changed that much," Ruth said. The curls in her Afro shook as she laughed.

"Ha, ha, ha . . . Yes, he knows," Martha said. She attempted to hold it in, but she laughed too. And it felt good to let go. Even Martha could admit that she'd mellowed out since dating Oji. Her family teased her about it every chance they got. As proven by her stress over the meetup between the Gardins and Greenwalds, Martha hadn't totally abandoned her high-strung personality. But she was much more bearable, and her family was grateful.

"Mrs. Greenwald has always been kind to me when Oji takes her calls while we're hanging out," Martha continued. "And we've met his parents for lunch a couple of times too.

It's gone well, but she's never invited me over. It's odd because they're such a close family. I think Oji would've at least hinted if his mom didn't like me at all, but maybe she's saving a home-cooked dinner for someone she likes more."

"It's just been a few months. Give it a little more time," Ruth said reassuringly. The confidence in her voice should've calmed Martha down, but it soothed her only a little.

"How much time does she need? It's not like I'm expecting Oji to propose anytime soon, but I don't have time to waste," Martha bemoaned.

"Hey, I'm on your side," Ruth said, placing her hand at her collarbone and running it across the neckline of the orange and magenta A-line dress she wore as matron of honor.

"I know you're just trying to help. And it *is* helping, as hard as it might be to see it from my responses. I'm just nervous because I don't want anything to mess up what Oji and I have going."

"That's understandable," Ruth said. "I don't know if you've noticed that you two have been getting lots of admiring stares from people today. They're watching y'all almost as much as they're gazing at the couple who actually got married. Is that getting to you at all?"

"It's very thoughtful of you to notice," Martha replied. In the preceding months, she had grown accustomed to the endless inquiries about her future with one of Macon's most eligible bachelors, but attending a wedding with him in her neighboring hometown of Edin seemed to increase the usual interest in the couple. "Oji and I pick up on the looks too. I don't mind them so much, but it is a little weird when people make comments to us. Can you believe Sister Johnson told us she expects to hear about another Gardin

wedding soon? She is always getting in somebody's business. The first lady of the church should know better than saying that to us at a wedding, of all places! She—"

"Hold up," Mary said. "Have y'all started talking about getting married? As much as we've prepared for today, you never mentioned that. Not once!"

Martha thought carefully before answering. She didn't want to be untruthful, but she also didn't want to let on more than she was willing to share. Her sister and Ruth knew her well enough to read between the lines if she said too much, and she didn't want to seem shallow.

Although Oji hadn't explicitly agreed to it, they had talked about the future, and Martha had a feeling he was thinking about proposing. They had daily talks about issues that popped up in their families and in their relationship, as well as things at work. He had asked Martha's opinion about an offer he received to purchase his real-estate investment company, and he gave her objective advice about her role as the medical consultant for the teaching kitchen in Mary's new restaurant. Martha felt as if she and Oji had become each other's confidantes, and she valued the friendship at the foundation of their romantic connection.

Martha loved Oji, but, to help her, she also viewed their potential union as a fast track up the social ladder she so desperately wanted to ascend. Gardin Family Enterprises had done quite well over the past ten years, but Martha grew up comfortably not wealthy. She looked up to Eve, who had been born into one of Macon's wealthiest families. By marrying Eve's son, Martha would achieve her dream of being part of a power couple, which would provide the sta-

tus and influence she craved. And those things not only would bring her personal prestige but also could help with her work. As a Black female physician, Martha faced a myriad of daily challenges in her quest to improve health outcomes among people who were disproportionately affected by health conditions and had very limited access to health services. She had learned early in her career that it took more than goodwill to make change. She needed to know the right people who could help open the right doors.

“I’ve dropped a few hints, and I think he caught them. He’s started to say *we* a lot when talking about stuff. And remember him giving me this for my birthday?” Martha asked as she extended her arm to show off the gold bracelet with three large freshwater pearls that adorned her wrist. “It’s by a brand named Isshi. And it’s called the Someday bracelet. I found the website where he bought it from, and the description said something like ‘Embrace what will be.’ Do you think he was thinking about that and, uh . . . us . . . when he picked it out?”

“Maybe?” Mary said, with the inflection of someone who didn’t want the responsibility of chiming in. “Or maybe he just liked the bracelet. I don’t know.”

“Time will tell,” Ruth said. As she spoke, the string lights in the trees and those forming a canopy in the pavilion switched on, illuminating the expansive area on the estate under the cloudy skies.

“Talk about timing!” Mary proclaimed. “Apparently, Ruth is onto something,” she said with a giggle.

Martha leaned back on the sofa. She clasped her hands and drew them to her chin. Everything she desired seemed so close that she could almost touch it. But she felt like it

was just beyond her reach, and she suspected Eve Greenwald might have a little something to do with that.

“I’ve never dated a guy whose mom didn’t love me,” Martha said. “Usually, the mom is all in from the first time she hears about me, but the guy takes some time to figure out what he wants. Even when I made some recommendations about Mr. Greenwald’s health, Oji’s mom was polite but didn’t warm up to me. I just can’t get a good read on her. That’s why I was hoping y’all would be able to help me figure her out.”

“What did Oji say after you brought up the health stuff about his dad?” Ruth asked.

Martha tilted her head. “He actually said his mom and I are a lot alike, but I don’t really see it.”

“Is that so?” Ruth asked. “Most men are the last ones to see the similarities between their mom and the woman they’re dating. So if he sees it and admits it, my guess is it’s probably very true.”



“SEE, HERE’S MARTHA, and this is where we’re sitting,” Oji said as he and his father approached the end of their assigned reception table under the lake pavilion, where a lush runner of pink and orange bougainvilleas draped off the table and pooled to the floor next to the spot where Martha stood.

The first notes of “Cha Cha Slide” played over the speaker, but it didn’t prevent Martha from hearing the frustration in Oji’s voice. His emotion was hidden under the superficial layer of politeness and pleasantries that might

fool strangers but rarely worked on the people who know someone well. Something had shifted the lighthearted banter the father and son had enjoyed throughout the day. “Is everything okay?”

“Hey, Martha! Good to see you again. You having a good time?” Adam Greenwald asked. His voice was just as charismatic and melodic as it had been when he and Oji teamed up against Martha in a spirited game of checkers on the lawn before the two of them headed to the restroom. But given the mere fifteen-minute interval, Martha recognized Adam’s response as subtle evidence of sundowning, a phenomenon in which people with vascular dementia may experience confusion, agitation, or other symptoms in the late afternoon or evening.

“Hello there. Yes, a lovely time, thank you,” Martha said with a bright smile.

Oji leaned in close to Martha. “We had a little issue on the way back,” he whispered, “but we’re on the other side of it now. Let’s just enjoy the rest of the reception. I’ll fill you in later.”

A half-hearted smile spread across his face, alerting her that he was beginning to rebound from whatever happened during their brief time apart. “Okay,” she said as she squinted. Then she relaxed her facial muscles to remove the evidence of the apprehension building from not knowing what happened and how it might affect the rest of the evening.

Martha had never heard Oji use anything other than a pleasant tone with his father before. She wanted to know more about what happened to cause the sudden departure, but she resisted the urge to push for more information, de-

cluding instead to trust Oji's guidance when it came to his parents. Always the respectful and dutiful son, he spoke very highly of them to anyone who would listen. He'd explained early on that with one brother deceased and another estranged from the family, he shouldered a lot of responsibility for his parents. Martha admired the way he looked after them, even if she thought he doted on his mother too much.

Oji held Martha's hand as they quickly made their way to their seats. Accustomed to the routine, Martha walked slightly ahead of him. The couple's positioning allowed Adam to stay in Oji's field of view while allowing him the independence of walking along the other side of the long rectangular table without a chaperone by his side. And being aware that Adam was sundowning, she also regularly turned her head to catch a glimpse of him.

Adam, a consummate Southern gentleman, greeted the sprinkle of wedding guests seated at the table as he strolled by them. "How do you do?" he asked each one with a nod although he'd already spoken with each of them several times over the course of the day. Martha didn't know if their seemingly pleasant responses meant they had picked up on Adam's diagnosis or whether they were just being kind, but watching the interactions warmed her heart regardless.

Having arrived at his seat with a few moments to spare, Oji kept an eye glued on Adam. As Oji watched, his head moved as if he were guiding his father's footsteps past the remaining open seats until he came to the chair across from the one where Martha had settled.

The DJ continued his stretch of line dance songs, and the

packed dance floor erupted into the Electric Slide. Martha called Oji and Adam's attention to the newlyweds, who executed all the steps flawlessly. But Martha had never doubted they would. Naomi and Nicholas always seemed to be in sync. After a whirlwind romance, they chose a wedding date two months after they became engaged. They opted for a simple church ceremony and a reception that prioritized fellowship and fun. After a seated meal, the couple's closest family members and a handful of special friends enjoyed a scrumptious three-tier lemon cake with sculpted ganache flowers descending across the front.

"They look good!" Adam exclaimed.

"They should," Martha said, laughing. "They made us practice the steps with them all week!"

"I forgot about that. Do you want to join them? I can stay with Dad," Oji said.

"I don't need a babysitter, Oji," Adam said firmly. "I'm ready to go anyway. Your mother is around here somewhere, and we're going to head home as soon as she gets here."

"It's fine. Everything is okay," Martha said, looking back and forth between the Greenwald men. "I'm having a good time sitting with y'all." She rubbed Oji's arm.

"Thank you," Oji whispered.

The trio watched in silence as the DJ transitioned to "Wobble," but it wasn't long before they were all moving in their seats.

As if on cue, Eve Greenwald sauntered up to the table as the song wound down. She walked with the confidence of someone who thought that everyone's eyes were on her, and she was usually right. Eve commanded attention everywhere she went. Tall and curvy, she maintained her figure

with a rigorous fitness routine, and her elegant wardrobe choices accentuated her hard work without being too showy.

“Did y’all miss me?” she asked as she approached the chair next to her husband.

Adam grinned as he jumped to his feet and pulled out the chair for her. “You know *I* did,” he said, gazing at her.

Martha imagined that he used a similar line on his wife when they first met. It was obvious that Oji owed his suave demeanor to years of studying his father.

Eve blushed as she settled into her chair. “Thank you,” she replied in an endearing voice. The floral appliqués on her off-the-shoulder dress glistened under the string lights strewn across the pavilion’s ceiling.

“Mr. Greenwald, do you think Oji will still look at me like that when we’ve been together as long as you and Mrs. Greenwald?” Martha asked.

“If he knows what’s good for him,” Adam replied.

Eve turned toward her husband. “Hush now, Adam. I think it’s much too soon for anyone to be talking about marriage,” she said as if Martha and Oji weren’t sitting across from them.

“If you say so.” Adam shrugged his shoulders.

Martha felt like she’d been stabbed in the heart, but she maintained her composure despite the unexpected verbal blow. “We definitely don’t want to get ahead of ourselves, but it’s nice to have such good role models,” she said without missing a beat. Her voice was as sugary as the remnants of sparkling lemonade in the mason jar that sat between her and Oji.

Eve smiled and tilted her head toward Martha. Her gaze was cool, but at least it acknowledged Martha’s presence.

“That’s a good point, dear. Very good indeed,” she said.

Martha briefly made eye contact and smiled softly. Then she turned her attention to the middle of the lake pavilion, where the newlyweds walked to the dance floor.

“Mom, it’s getting dark. Don’t y’all want to head home?” Oji suggested pleasantly. There were no signs of the frustration he’d exhibited only a few minutes earlier. “Dad mentioned that he was ready to go.”

Oji gently placed his hand at the center of Martha’s back, but she didn’t turn around. She was too afraid she would cry. *How could he be so aloof? After all our discussions about marriage, why doesn’t he know that what his mom said hurt my feelings?*

“I said that?” Adam asked. “I guess it *is* getting late.”

Just as Adam finished speaking, the DJ made an announcement. “Calling all single ladies to the dance floor. It’s time for the bouquet toss.”

Martha slowly rose from her chair as she contemplated the direction of her next steps. She wanted some time to herself, but she didn’t want to disappoint Mary, who had already made it to the dance floor. And she especially didn’t want Eve Greenwald to think she’d gotten the best of her.

“Fine. We’ll leave after the bouquet toss,” Eve mumbled.



MARTHA WASN’T THE type of woman who cared about the wedding tradition of catching the bouquet. She just couldn’t get behind a belief that a bunch of flowers landing in her hands would bring her good luck, much less a groom. Martha didn’t believe in luck. She believed in blessings. She be-

lieved in hard work. She believed in planning and strategy. But social pressure was a force she could never resist. So as the sun began to set over the lake of the Gardin family estate, she glided toward the faux parquet squares in the center of the lake pavilion.

As Martha stepped onto the dance floor, her eyes fell upon Naomi, who giggled as Nicholas playfully pantomimed from the periphery how the bouquet should be thrown. Naomi stood in the middle of the dance floor, beaming in a stunning chiffon Hanifa gown. Its structured shoulders, along with the train formed by its dramatic white cape, made her look like both a bride and a superhero. With her hair pulled into a halo of bouncy gray curls, she radiated joy. It was contagious, and it was just what Martha needed.

Martha laughed along with her aunt and tucked her exchange with Eve into the back of her mind. She would process the uncomfortable conversation as soon as she had a moment alone or, better yet, discuss it with Oji as soon as she had a moment alone with him. It wasn't lost on Martha that sometimes men didn't pick up on the same cues that women detected. But she had seen, or possibly caused—depending on whom you asked—enough family drama to know that these sorts of things needed to be nipped in the bud so they wouldn't snowball into years of strife. Oji had some explaining to do. But now was not the time to sort through it. Much unlike the bouquet toss, figuring out how to handle Eve Greenwald and her son was not for public viewing.

“Last call for all the ladies who want to catch the bouquet,” the DJ announced.

Martha spotted Mary, who stood front and center among a group of four women who had scattered in self-selected spots that ranged from about six to ten feet behind Naomi. Martha braced herself as she walked toward her sister. To everyone else, Mary looked like she was merely gearing up to catch the bouquet, but Martha knew better. And she wasn't fooled by the fake smile on her sister's face. It was there just because everyone was watching.

"It took you long enough to get here," Mary said as Martha reached her, but Mary maintained a pleasant look on her face.

"I got up from the table as soon as the DJ announced it," Martha said. The words flew out of her mouth before she realized it would only further irritate her sister. *Mrs. Greenwald sure has knocked me off my game.*

Mary's eyes widened and her pretend smile fell away. "We agreed that no matter what came up, you were supposed to meet me by the dance floor at seven-thirty so we could get a good spot. And I texted you a reminder, so there had better be a good reason you're late. On second thought, never mind. That won't help us. We need to focus on where we are now. Are you sure you don't want to take off your shoes?"

"I told you I am not walking around barefoot just to catch some flowers," Martha scoffed. She had already compromised enough by agreeing to wear the slingback Shekudo mules that Mary chose instead of a shoe with a stiletto heel. The sculptural wooden block heels were supposed to give Martha some stability if she needed to scramble for the bouquet, but she liked them because the heel reminded her of the fancy finials on antique staircases and furniture.

Mary chuckled. "All right, all right. Here, I saved your

spot.”

“Thanks, but you can stay there. I’ll just stand next to you.”

“Martha, we’ve been over this twice,” Mary said, her voice returning to a serious tone. She moved about four feet to the right, creating space for Martha to assume the spot directly behind Naomi.

Martha hesitated. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed two of Nicholas’s nieces standing a few feet behind Mary. They inched toward the space that Mary had saved for Martha. Martha chuckled and squinted at them. They retreated, giggling.

“Three times. We’ve gone over it three times. I understand your marching orders. I promise,” Martha said. Although Mary had become annoying, Martha was secretly tickled by her sibling’s preoccupation with her catching the bouquet. After weeks of Mary’s persistent nudging, Martha had finally agreed to participate in the bouquet toss, albeit begrudgingly. While Martha had not been moved by Mary’s initial argument for solidarity with her and the other eight unmarried women who surrounded them, she believed her threat to drag her to the dance floor if she didn’t show up.

“Everyone ready?” the DJ asked.

Naomi pretended she was about to toss the hand-tied Biedermeier bouquet of pink and orange poppies, zinnias, and peonies over her head.

The women cheered.

“Okay,” the DJ continued, “I’m gonna count down, and the bride will throw the bouquet. Let’s go. Three . . .”

A rush of excitement overtook Martha. She tried to ig-

nore it, but she couldn't. She locked her eyes on the bouquet. With its brilliantly colored blossoms arranged in rings of alternating bands, the bouquet resembled a bull's-eye, and she felt like a skilled archer focusing on her target.

"Two . . ."

I'll just get ready in case it comes my way, Martha thought. She widened her stance and planted her feet. Her arms shot up in the air.

"One!"

Naomi leaned forward and flung the bouquet backward with both hands. But instead of it going straight, it veered to the right.

Maybe I can try a little bit. Martha kept her gaze locked on the blur of petals flying through the air. She lunged to the right and nearly lost her balance as the palm of her right hand made contact with the soft flower petals. She quickly made a fist, clutching the victory.

"I caught it! I caught it!" Martha yelled. With the petals still squished in the palm of her right hand, she supported the bunch of blooms with her left hand as she jumped up and down.

Mary, who stood with outstretched arms between Martha and one of Nicholas's nieces, rushed forward and wrapped her arms around her sister.

"I didn't think I'd care about catching the bouquet, but I do!" Martha said with her eyes squeezed closed.

"You did so great! I wish you could've seen yourself!" Mary exclaimed amid applause from the wedding guests.

"Thank you for coaching me!" Martha said, clutching Mary tightly. Although the duo still squabbled from time to time, they had mostly smoothed out the kinks in their rela-

tionship. With Martha no longer jealous of her sister's new restaurant near the hospital where she worked and comfortable with their collaboration on its teaching kitchen, the bouquet victory represented an acknowledgment of their progress. She kept her eyes closed, savoring the moment.

"Look! Martha, turn around," Mary said. Her voice sounded like a whisper against a round of cheers that broke out across the lake pavilion.

"Huh?" Martha said, opening her eyes.

She pivoted as instructed, and there was Oji on bended knee before her. Both his hands rested on his right knee. His lips were moving, but Martha couldn't hear anything he said.

She leaned down close to his ear and said, "Are you proposing? Is that what this is?"

Oji nodded and smiled. The cheering got louder.

Martha stood still. Her eyes blinked quickly. The bright flash from the wedding photographer's camera reminded her that she and Oji were surrounded by Naomi and Nicholas's wedding guests. Martha looked up at the camera. It flashed again, triggering a wave of dizziness. She tried to think quickly.

"Yes," she said breathlessly.