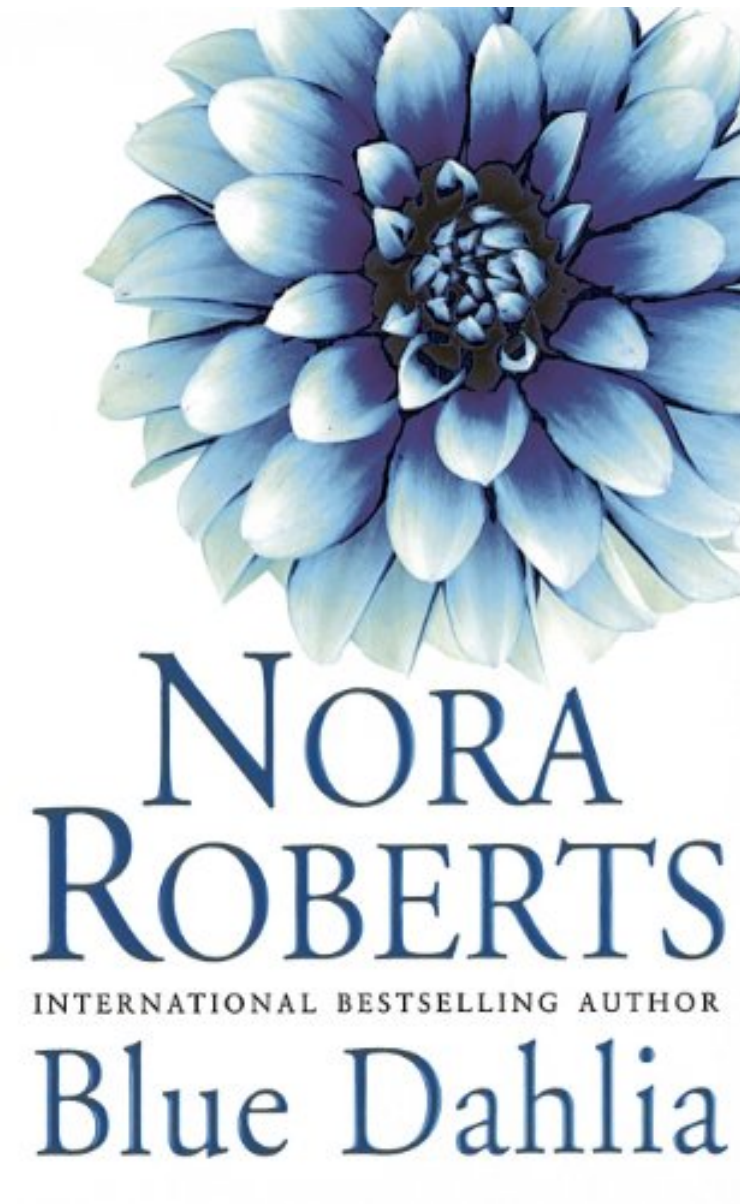


[E-BOOK] File size: 42.Mb

Blue Dahlia: Number 1 in series



Par Nora Roberts

**Download PDF | ePub | DOC | audiobook | ebooks*

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #402567 dans eBooksPubli le: 2010-05-11Sorti le: 2010-10-07Format: Ebook Kindle

[E-BOOK] Blue Dahlia: Number 1 in series

Par Nora Roberts : Blue Dahlia: Number 1 in series before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Blue Dahlia: Number 1 in series:

 Download

 Read Online

Description : Description du produitFrom #1 New York Times bestselling author Nora Roberts comes the first novel in the new In the Garden trilogy. Against the backdrop of a house steeped in history and a thriving new gardening business, three women unearth the memories of the past and uncover a dangerous secret-finding in each other the courage to take chances and embrace the future. Stella has a passion for planning that keeps her from taking too many risks. But when she opens her heart to a new love, she discovers that she will fight to the death to protect what's hers. Trying to escape the ghosts of the past, young widow Stella Rothchild, along with her two energetic little boys, has moved back to her roots in southern Tennessee-and into her new life at Harper House and In the Garden nursery. She isn't intimidated by the house-nor its mistress, local legend Roz Harper. Despite a reputation for being difficult, Roz has been

nothing but kind to Stella, offering her a comfortable new place to live and a challenging new job as manager of the flourishing nursery. As Stella settles comfortably into her new life, she finds a nurturing friendship with Roz and with expectant mother Hayley. And she discovers a fierce attraction with ruggedly handsome landscaper Logan Kitridge. But someone isn't happy about the budding romance...the Harper Bride. As the women dig into the history of Harper House, they discover that grief and rage have kept the Bride's spirit alive long past her death. And now, she will do anything to destroy the passion that Logan and Stella share...

Prsentation de l'diteurRecently widowed, Stella Rothchild is no stranger to the ghosts of the past, but the move from Michigan back to her roots near Memphis, Tennessee is supposed to be about the future. Her two energetic young sons are thriving in their new school. Stella's got a great job managing successful nursery 'In the Garden' and an interesting boss and landlady in local legend Roz Harper. She even has a new friend in Hayley Phillips, the feisty young pregnant woman who turns up at Harper House, Stella's new home, looking for a job. More than that, Stella feels an instant attraction to 'In the Garden's' landscaper, Logan Kitridge, who gets under her skin and makes her feel truly alive for the first time in years. But there is someone at Harper House who isn't happy about Stella's growing feelings for Logan - the Harper Bride, an unidentified woman whose grief and rage have kept her spirit alive long past the death of her body. Love and loss broke her mind, and in her madness, she will stop at nothing to destroy the new passion that Logan and Stella have found.ExtraitTwoHarper HouseJanuary 2004She couldnt afford to be intimidated by the house, or by its mistress. They both had reputations.The house was said to be elegant and old, with gardens that rivaled Eden. Shed just confirmed that for herself.The woman was said to be interesting, somewhat solitary, and perhaps a bit difficult. A word, Stella knew, that could mean anything from strong-willed to stone bitch.Either way, she could handle it, she reminded herself as she fought the need to get up and pace. Shed handled worse.She needed this job. Not just for the salaryand it was generousbut for the structure, for the challenge, for the doing. Doing more, she knew, than circling the wheel shed fallen into back home.She needed a life, something more than clocking time, drawing a paycheck that would be soaked up by bills. She needed, however self-help-book it sounded, something that fulfilled and challenged her.Rosalind Harper was fulfilled, Stella was sure. A beautiful ancestral home, a thriving business. What was it like, she wondered, to wake up every morning knowing exactly where you belonged and where you were going?If she could earn one thing for herself, and give that gift to her children, it would be the sense of knowing. She was afraid shed lost any clear sight of that with Kevins death. The sense of doing, no problem. Give her a task or a challenge and the room to accomplish or solve it, she was your girl.But the sense of knowing who she was, in the heart of herself, had been mangled that day in September of 2001 and had never fully healed.This was her start, this move back to Tennessee. This final and face-to-face interview with Rosalind Harper. If she didnt get the jobwell, shed get another. No one could accuse her of not knowing how to work or how to provide a living for herself and her kids.But, God, she wanted this job.She straightened her shoulders and tried to ignore all the whispers of doubt muttering inside her head. Shed get this one.Shed dressed carefully for this meeting. Businesslike but not fussy, in a navy suit and starched white blouse. Good shoes, good bag, she thought. Simple jewelry. Nothing flashy. Subtle makeup, to bring out the blue of her eyes. Shed fought her hair into a clip at the nape of her neck. If she was lucky, the curling mass of it wouldnt spring out until the interview was over.Rosalind was keeping her waiting. It was probably a mind game, Stella decided as her fingers twisted, untwisted her watchband. Letting her sit and stew in the gorgeous parlor, letting her take in the lovely antiques and paintings, the sumptuous view from the front windows.All in that dreamy and gracious southern style that reminded her she was a Yankee fish out of water.Things moved slower down here, she reminded herself. She would have to remember that this was a different pace from the one she was used to, and a different culture.The fireplace was probably an Adams, she decided. That lamp was certainly an original Tiffany. Would they call those drapes portieres down here, or was that too Scarlett OHara? Were the lace panels under the drapes heirlooms?God, had she ever been more out of her element? What was a middle-class widow from Michigan doing in all this southern splendor?She steadied herself, fixed a neutral expression on her face, when she heard footsteps coming down the hall.Brought coffee. It wasnt Rosalind, but the cheerful man whod answered the door and escorted Stella to the parlor.He was about thirty, she judged, average height, very slim. He wore his glossy brown hair waved around a movie-poster face set off by sparkling blue eyes. Though he wore black, Stella found nothing butlerlike about it. Much too artsy, too stylish. Hed said his name was David.He set the tray with its china pot and cups, the little linen napkins, the

sugar and cream, and the tiny vase with its clutch of violets on the coffee table. Roz got a bit hung up, but she'll be right along, so you just relax and enjoy your coffee. You comfortable in here? Yes, very. Anything else I can get you while you're waiting on her? No. Thanks. You just settle on in, then, he ordered, and poured coffee into a cup. Nothing like a fire in January, is there? Makes you forget that a few months ago it was hot enough to melt the skin off your bones. What do you take in your coffee, honey? She wasn't used to being called honey by strange men who served her coffee in magnificent parlors. Especially since she suspected he was a few years her junior. Just a little cream. She had to order herself not to stare at his face; it was, well, delicious, with that full mouth, those sapphire eyes, the strong cheekbones, the sexy little dent in the chin.

Have you worked for Ms. Harper long? Forever. He smiled charmingly and handed her the coffee. Or it seems like it, in the best of all possible ways. Give her a straight answer to a straight question, and don't take any bullshit. His grin widened. She hates it when people kowtow. You know, honey, I love your hair. Oh. Automatically, she lifted a hand to it. Thanks. Titian knew what he was doing when he painted that color.

Good luck with Roz, he said as he started out. Great shoes, by the way. She sighed into her coffee. He'd noticed her hair and her shoes, complimented her on both. Gay. Too bad for her side. It was good coffee, and David was right. It was nice having a fire in January. Outside, the air was moist and raw, with a broody sky overhead. A woman could get used to a winter hour by the fire drinking good coffee out of what was it?

Meissen, Wedgwood? Curious, she held the cup up to read the maker's mark. It's Staffordshire, brought over by one of the Harper brides from England in the mid-nineteenth century. No point in cursing herself, Stella

thought. No point in cringing about the fact that her redhead's complexion would be flushed with embarrassment. She simply lowered the cup and looked Rosalind Harper straight in the eye. It's beautiful. I've always thought so. She came in, plopped down in the chair beside Stella's, and poured herself a cup. One of them, Stella realized, had miscalculated the dress code for the interview. Rosalind had dressed her tall,

willowy form in a baggy olive sweater and mud-colored work pants that were frayed at the cuffs. She was shoeless, with a pair of thick brown socks covering long, narrow feet. Which accounted, Stella supposed, for her silent entry into the room. Her hair was short, straight, and black. Though to date all their communications

had been via phone, fax, or e-mail, Stella had Googled her. She'd wanted background on her potential employer and a look at the woman. Newspaper and magazine clippings had been plentiful. She'd studied Rosalind as a child, through her youth. She'd marveled over the file photos of the stunning and delicate bride of eighteen and sympathized with the pale, stoic-looking widow of twenty-five. There had been more, of course. Society-page stuff, gossipy speculation on when and if the widow would marry again. Then quite a

bit of press surrounding the forging of the nursery business, her gardens, her love life. Her brief second marriage and divorce. Stella's image had been of a strong-minded, shrewd woman. But she'd attributed those stunning looks to camera angles, lighting, makeup. She'd been wrong. At forty-six, Rosalind Harper was a rose in full bloom. Not the hothouse sort, Stella mused, but one that weathered the elements, season after

season, and came back, year after year, stronger and more beautiful. She had a narrow face angled with strong bones and deep, long eyes the color of single-malt scotch. Her mouth, full, strongly sculpted lips, was unpainted, as, to Stella's expert eye, was the rest of that lovely face. There were lines, those thin grooves that the god of time revealed in stamping, fanning out from the corners of the dark eyes, but they didn't detract. All

Stella could think was, Could I be you, please, when I grow up? Only I'd like to dress better, if you don't mind. Kept you waiting, didn't I? Straight answers, Stella reminded herself. A little, but it's not much of a hardship to sit in this room and drink good coffee out of Staffordshire. David likes to fuss. I was in the propagation house, got caught up. Her voice, Stella thought, was brisk. Not clipped; you just couldn't clip

Tennessee; but it was to the point and full of energy. You look younger than I expected. You're what, thirty-three? Yes. And your sons are . . . six and eight? That's right. You didn't bring them with you? No. They're with my father and his wife right now. I'm very fond of Will and Jolene. How are they? They're good. They're enjoying having their grandchildren around. I imagine so. Your daddy shows off pictures of them from time

to time and just about bursts with pride. One of my reasons for relocating here is so they can have more time together. It's a good reason. I like young boys myself. Miss having them around. The fact that you come with two played in your favor. Your résumé, your father's recommendation, the letter from your former

employer, well, none of that hurt. She picked up a cookie from the tray, bit in, without her eyes ever leaving Stella's face. I need an organizer, someone creative and hardworking, personable and basically tireless. I like people who work for me to keep up with me, and I set a strong pace. So I've been told. Okay, Stella thought, brisk and to the point in return. I have a degree in nursery management. With the exception of three years

when I stayed home to have my children and during which time I landscaped my own yard and two

neighbors I've worked in that capacity. For more than two years now, since my husband's death, I've raised my sons and worked outside the home in my field. I've done a good job with both. I can keep up with you, Ms. Harper. I can keep up with anyone. Maybe, Roz thought. Just maybe. Let me see your hands. A little irked, Stella held them out. Roz set down her coffee, took them in hers. She turned them palms up, ran her thumbs over them. You know how to work. Yes, I do. Banker suit threw me off. Not that it isn't a lovely suit. Roz smiled, then polished off the cookie. It's been damp the last couple of days. Let's see if we can put you in some boots so you don't ruin those very pretty shoes. I'll show you around. The boots were too big, and the army-green rubber hardly flattering, but the damp ground and crushed gravel would have been cruel to her new shoes. Her own appearance hardly mattered when compared with the operation Rosalind Harper had built. In the Garden spread over the west side of the estate. The garden center faced the road, and the grounds at its entrance and running along the sides of its parking area were beautifully landscaped. Even in January,

Stella could see the care and creativity put into the presentation with the selection and placement of evergreens and ornamental trees, the mulched rises where she assumed there would be color from bulbs and perennials, from splashy annuals through the spring and summer and into fall. After one look she didn't want the job. She was desperate for it. The lust tied knots of nerves and desire in her belly, the kinds that were usually reserved for a lover. I didn't want the retail end of this near the house, Roz said as she parked the truck. I didn't want to see commerce out my parlor window. Harpers are, and always have been, business-minded. Even back when some of the land around here was planted with cotton instead of houses. Because Stella's mouth was too dry to speak, she only nodded. The main house wasn't visible from here. A wedge of natural woods shielded it from view and kept the long, low outbuildings, the center itself, and, she imagined, most of the greenhouses from intruding on any view from Harper House. And just look at that gorgeous old ruby horse chestnut! This section opens to the public twelve months a year, Roz continued. We carry all the sidelines you'd expect, along with houseplants and a selection of gardening books. My oldest son's helping me manage this section, though he's happier in the greenhouses or out in the field. We've got two part-time clerks right now. We'll need more in a few weeks. Get your head in the game, Stella ordered herself. Your busy season would start in March in this zone. That's right. Roz led the way to the low-slung white building, up an asphalt ramp, across a spotlessly clean porch, and inside. Two long, wide counters on either side of the door, Stella noted. Plenty of light to keep it cheerful. There were shelves stocked with soil additives, plant foods, pesticides, spin racks of seeds. More shelves held books or colorful pots suitable for herbs or windowsill plants. There were displays of wind chimes, garden plaques, and other accessories. A woman with snowy white hair dusted a display of sun catchers. She wore a pale blue cardigan with roses embroidered down the front over a white shirt that looked to have been starched stiff as iron. Ruby, this is Stella Rothchild. I'm showing her around. Pleased to meet you. The calculating look told Stella the woman knew she was in about the job opening, but the smile was perfectly cordial. You're Will Dooley's daughter, aren't you? Yes, that's right. From . . . up north. She said it, to Stella's amusement, as if it were a Third World country of dubious repute. From Michigan, yes. But I was born in Memphis. Is that so? The smile warmed, fractionally. Well, that's something, isn't it? Moved away when you were a little girl, didn't you? Yes, with my mother. Thinking about moving back now, are you? I have moved back, Stella corrected. Well. The one word said they'd see what they'd see. It's a raw one out there today, Ruby continued. Good day to be inside. You just look around all you want. Thanks. There's hardly anywhere I'd rather be than inside a nursery. You picked a winner here. Roz, Marilee Booker was in and bought the dendrobium. I just couldn't talk her out of it. Well, shit. It'll be dead in a week. Dendrobiums are fairly easy care, Stella pointed out. Not for Marilee. She doesn't have a black thumb. Her whole arms black to the elbow. That woman should be barred by law from having anything living within ten feet of her. I'm sorry, Roz. But I did make her promise to bring it back if it starts to look sickly. Not your fault. Roz waved it away, then moved through a wide opening. Here were the houseplants, from the exotic to the classic, and pots from thimble size to those with a girth as wide as a manhole cover. There were more accessories, too, like stepping-stones, trellises, arbor kits, garden fountains, and benches. I expect my staff to know a little bit about everything, Roz said as they walked through. And if they don't know the answer, they need to know how to find it. We're not big, not compared to some of the wholesale nurseries or the landscaping outfits. We're not priced like the garden centers at the discount stores. So we concentrate on offering the unusual plants along with the basic, and customer service. We make house calls. Do you have someone specific on staff who'll go do an on-site consult? Either Harper or I might go if you're talking about a customer who's having trouble with something bought here. Or if they just want some casual, personal advice. She slid her hands into her pockets, rocked back and forth on the heels of her muddy

boots. Other than that, I've got a landscape designer. Had to pay him a fortune to steal him away from a competitor. Had to give him damn near free rein, too. But he's the best. I want to expand that end of the business. What's your mission statement? Roz turned, her eyebrows lifted high. There was a quick twinkle of amusement in those shrewd eyes. Now, there you are that's just why I need someone like you. Someone who can say mission statement with a straight face. Let me think. With her hands on her hips now, she looked around the stocked area, then opened wide glass doors into the adjoining greenhouse. I guess its two-pronged this is where we stock most of our annuals and hanging baskets starting in March, by the way. First prong would be to serve the home gardener. From the fledgling who's just dipping a toe in to the more experienced who knows what he or she wants and is willing to try something new or unusual. To give that customer base good stock, good service, good advice. Second would be to serve the customer who's got the money but not the time or the inclination to dig in the dirt. The one who wants to beautify but either doesn't know where to start or doesn't want the job. We'll go in, and for a fee we'll work up a design, get the plants, hire the laborers. We'll guarantee satisfaction. All right. Stella studied the long, rolling tables, the sprinkler heads of the irrigation system, the drains in the sloping concrete floor. When the season starts we have tables of annuals and perennials along the side of this building. They'll show from the front as people drive by, or in. We've got a shaded area for ones that need shade, she continued as she walked through, boots slapping on concrete. Over here we keep our herbs, and through there's a storeroom for extra pots and plastic flats, tags. Now, out back here's greenhouses for stock plants, seedlings, preparation areas. Those two will open to the public, more annuals sold by the flat. She crunched along gravel, over more asphalt. Shrubs and ornamental trees. She gestured toward an area on the side where the stock wintering over was screened. Behind that, closed to the public, are the propagation and grafting areas. We do mostly container planting, but I've culled out an acre or so for field stock. Waters no problem with the pond back there. They continued to walk, with Stella calculating, dissecting. And the lust in her belly had gone from tangled knot to rock-hard ball. She could do something here. Make her mark over the excellent foundation another woman had built. She could help improve, expand, refine. Fulfilled? she thought. Challenged? Hell, she'd be so busy, she'd be fulfilled and challenged every minute of every day. It was perfect. There were the white scoop-shaped greenhouses, worktables, display tables, awnings, screens, sprinklers. Stella saw it brimming with plants, thronged with customers. Smelling of growth and possibilities. Then Roz opened the door to the propagation house, and Stella let out a sound, just a quiet one she couldn't hold back. And it was pleasure. The smell of earth and growing things, the damp heat. The air was close, and she knew her hair would frizz out insanely, but she stepped inside. Seedlings sprouted in their containers, delicate new growth spearing out of the enriched soil. Baskets already planted were hung on hooks where they'd be urged into early bloom. Where the house teed off there were the stock plants, the parents of these fledglings. Aprons hung on pegs, tools were scattered on tables or nested in buckets. Silently she walked down the aisles, noting that the containers were marked clearly. She could identify some of the plants without reading the tags. Cosmos and columbine, petunias and penstemon. This far south, in a few short weeks they'd be ready to be laid in beds, arranged in patio pots, tucked into sunny spaces or shady nooks. Would she? Would she be ready to plant herself here, to root here? To bloom here? Would her sons? Gardening was a risk, she thought. Life was just a bigger one. The smart calculated those risks, minimized them, and worked toward the goal. I'd like to see the grafting area, the stockrooms, the offices. All right. Better get you out of here. Your suits going to wilt. Stella looked down at herself, spied the green boots. Laughed. So much for looking professional. The laugh had Roz angling her head in approval. You're a pretty woman, and you've got good taste in clothes. That kind of image doesn't hurt. You took the time to put yourself together well for this meeting, which I neglected to do. I appreciate that. You hold the cards, Ms. Harper. You can put yourself together any way you like. You're right about that. She walked back to the door, gestured, and they stepped outside into a light, chilly drizzle. Let's go into the office. No point hauling you around in the wet. What are your other reasons for moving back here? I couldn't find any reason to stay in Michigan. We moved there after Kevin and I were married. This work. I think, I suppose, I've stayed there since he died out of a kind of loyalty to him, or just because I was used to it. I'm not sure. I liked my work, but I never felt it never felt like my place. More like I was just getting from one day to the next. Family? No. No, not in Michigan. Just me and the boys. Kevin's parents are gone, were before we married. My mother lives in New York. I'm not interested in living in the city or raising my children there. Besides that, my mother and I have . . . tangled issues. The way mothers and daughters often do. Thank God I had sons. Oh, yeah. She laughed again, comfortably now. My parents divorced when I was very young. I suppose you know that. Some of it. As I said, I like your father, and Jolene. So do I. So rather than stick a

pin in a map, I decided to come here. I was born here. I dont really remember, but I thought, hoped, there might be a connection. That it might be the place. They walked back through the retail center and into a tiny, cluttered office that made Stellas organized soul wince. I dont use this much, Roz began. Ive got stuff scattered between here and the house. When Im over here, I end up spending my time in the greenhouses or the field. She dumped gardening books off a chair, pointed to it, then sat on the edge of the crowded desk when Stella took the seat. I know my strengths, and I know how to do good business. Ive built this place from the ground up, in less than five years. When it was smaller, when it was almost entirely just me, I could afford to make mistakes. Now I have up to eighteen employees during the season. People depending on me for a paycheck. So I cant afford to make mistakes. I know how to plant, what to plant, how to price, how to design, how to stock, how to handle employees, and how to deal with customers. I know how to organize. Id say youre absolutely right. Why do you need me or someone like me? Because of all those things I can and have done there are some I dont like. I dont like to organize. And weve gotten too big for it to fall only to me how and what to stock. I want a fresh eye, fresh ideas, and a good head. Understood. One of your requests was that your nursery manager live in your house, at least for the first several months. It wasnt a request. It was a requirement. In the firm tone, Stella recognized the difficult attributed to Rosalind Harper. We start early, we work late. I want someone on hand, right on hand, at least until I know if were going to find the rhythm. Memphis is too far away, and unless youre ready to buy a house within ten miles of mine pretty much immediately, theres no other choice. I have two active young boys, and a dog. I like active young boys, and I wont mind the dog unless hes a digger. He digs in my gardens, well have a problem. Its a big house. Youll have considerable room for yourself and your sons. Id offer you the guest cottage, but I couldnt pry Harper out of it with dynamite. My oldest, she explained. Do you want the job, Stella? She opened her mouth, then took a testing breath. Hadnt she already calculated the risks in coming here? It was time to work toward the goal. The risk of the single condition couldnt possibly outweigh the benefits. I do. Yes, Ms. Harper, I very much want the job. Then youve got it. Roz held out a hand to shake. You can bring your things over tomorrow mornings bestand well get yall settled in. You can take a couple of days, make sure your boys are acclimated. I appreciate that. Theyre excited, but a little scared too. And so am I, she thought. I have to be frank with you, Ms. Harper. If my boys arent happy after a reasonable amount of time to adjust Ill have to make other arrangements. If I thought differently, I wouldnt be hiring you. And call me Roz. She celebrated by buying a bottle of champagne and a bottle of sparkling cider on the way back to her fathers home. The rain, and the detour, put her in a nasty knot of mid-afternoon traffic. It occurred to her that however awkward it might be initially, there were advantages to living essentially where she worked. She got the job! A dream job, to her point of view. Maybe she didnt know how Rosalind call me Roz Harper would be to work for, and she still had a lot of boning up to do about the nursery process in this zone and she couldnt be sure how the other employees would handle taking orders from a stranger. A Yankee stranger at that. But she couldnt wait to start. And her boys would have more room to run around at the Harper . . . estate, she supposed shed call it. She wasnt ready to buy a house yet not before she was sure theyd stay, not before she had time to scout out neighborhoods and communities. The fact was, they were crowded in her fathers house. Both he and Jolene were more than accommodating, more than welcoming, but they couldnt stay indefinitely jammed into a two-bedroom house. This was the practical solution, at least for the short term. She pulled her aging SUV beside her stepmothers snappy little roadster and, grabbing the bag, dashed through the rain to the door. She knocked. Theyd given her a key, but she wasnt comfortable just letting herself in. Jolene, svelte in black yoga pants and a snug black top, looking entirely too young to be chasing sixty, opened the door. I interrupted your workout. Just finished. Thank God! She dabbed at her face with a little white towel, shook back her cloud of honey-blond hair. Mislplace your key, honey? Sorry. I cant get used to using it. She stepped in, listened. Its much too quiet. Are the boys chained in the basement? Your dad took them into the Peabody to see the afternoon duck walk. I thought itd be nice for just the three of them, so I stayed here with my yoga tape. She cocked her head to the side. Dogs snoozing out on the screened porch. You look smug. I should. Im hired. I knew it, I knew it! Congratulations! Jolene threw out her arms for a hug. There was never any question in my mind. Roz Harpers a smart woman. She knows gold when she sees it. My stomachs jumpy, and my nerves are just plain shot. I should wait for Dad and the boys, but . . . She pulled out the champagne. How about an early glass of champagne to toast my new job? Oh, twist my arm. Im so excited for you I could just pop! Jolene slung an arm around Stellas shoulders as they turned into the great room. Tell me what you thought of Roz. Not as scary in person. Stella set the bottle on the counter to open while Jolene got champagne flutes out of her glass-front display cabinet. Sort of earthy and direct,

confident. And that house! Its a beaut. Jolene laughed when the cork popped. My, my, what a decadent sound in the middle of the afternoon. Harper House has been in her family for generations. Shes actually an Ashby by marriage the first one. She went back to Harper after her second marriage fizzled. Give me the dish, will you, Jolene? Dad wont. Plying me with champagne to get me to gossip? Why, thank you, honey. She slid onto a stool, raised her glass. First, to our Stella and brave new beginnings. Stella clinked glasses, drank. Mmmmm. Wonderful. Now, dish. She married young. Just eighteen. What youd call a good match good families, same social circle. More important, it was a love match. You could see it all over them. It was about the time I fell for your father, and a woman recognizes someone in the same state shes in. She was a late baby I think her mama was near forty and her daddy heading to fifty when she came along. Her mama was never well after, or she enjoyed playing the frail wife depending on who you talk to. But in any case, Roz lost them both within two years. She mustve been pregnant with her second son. Thatd be . . . shoot. Austin, I think. She and John took over Harper House. She had the three boys, and the youngest barely a toddler, when John was killed. You know how hard that mustve been for her. I do. Hardly saw her outside that house for two, three years, I guess. When she did start getting out again, socializing, giving parties and such, there was the expected speculation. Who shed marry, when. Youve seen her. Shes a beautiful woman. Striking, yes. And down here, a lineage like hers is worth its weight and then some. Her looks, her bloodline, she couldve had any man she wanted. Younger, older, or in between, single, married, rich, or poor. But she stayed on her own. Raised her boys. Alone, Stella thought, sipping champagne. She understood the choice very well. Kept her private life private, Jolene went on, much to Memphis societys consternation.

Biggest to-do I recall was when she fired the gardener well, both of them. Went after them with a Weedwacker, according to some reports, and ran them right off the property. Really? Stellas eyes widened in shocked admiration. Really? Thats what I heard, and thats the story that stuck, truth or lie. Down here, we often prefer the entertaining lie to the plain truth. Apparently theyd dug up some of her plants or something. She wouldnt have anybody else after that. Took the whole thing over herself. Next thing you know though I guess it was about five years later shes building that garden place over on her west end. She got married about three years ago, and divorced well, all you had to do was blink. Honey, why dont we make that two early glasses of champagne? Why dont we? Stella poured. So, what was the deal with the second husband? Hmmm. Very slick character. Handsome as sin and twice as charming. Bryce Clerk, and he says his people are from Savannah, but I dont know as Id believe a word coming out of his mouth if it was plated with gold. Anyway, they looked stunning together, but it happened he enjoyed looking stunning with a variety of women, and a wedding ring didnt restrict his habits. She booted him out on his ear. Good for her. Shes no pushover. That came through loud and clear. Id say shes proud, but not vain, tough-minded but not hard or not too hard, though there are some who would disagree with that. A good friend, and a formidable enemy. You can handle her, Stella. You can handle anything. She liked people to think so, but either the champagne or fresh nerves was making her stomach a little queasy. Well, were going to find out. From Publishers Weekly Flower metaphors run amok in this first installment of Roberts's newest trilogy, which focuses on a quaint nursery called In the Garden and the haunted estate neighboring it. The book starts out at a plodding pace, with the sudden death of Stella Rothchild's beloved husband and her subsequent move, with her two young boys, from Michigan to the outskirts of Memphis. Fortunately, the pace picks up after Stella plants her roots at Harper estate and secures a job managing In the Garden, which is owned by Roz Harper, the same blunt, self-assured woman who presides over the estate. Though strictly regimented Stella forms a fast friendship with Roz, she clashes with Logan Kitridge, the nursery's sexy landscape designer. Logan is the antithesis of Stella brash and impulsive, he thrives on chaos but their enmity inevitably gives way to love. The scenes between them crackle with wit, charm and sexual tension, and are rivaled only by the warm relationships that develop among Stella, Roz and Hayley, a distant relative of Roz's who comes to the estate seeking a fresh start. Less effective is a subplot involving a ghost who doesn't seem to approve of Stella's relationship with Logan. This thread provides a few spooky moments, but it would have been more effective without the prologue's clichéd setup. While this book isn't vintage Roberts, it's a promising start to a new series. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.