

## Chapter One

Some herbs have hooks, designed to clutch and hold on to anyone or anything that comes near. One of the most interesting is cat's claw acacia, (*Acacia greggii*, also called devil's claw and wait-a-minute bush), which grows on alkaline soils in semiarid grasslands and chaparral from Central Texas westward into California and south into Mexico. It is a perennial shrub or small tree that produces numerous slender, spreading branches studded with stout, quarter-inch, recurved thorns. In spring, creamy-yellow flowers (much loved by bees and butterflies) bloom in two-inch spikes, producing gray-brown beans that may be as much as five inches long.

Cat's claw has been used by Native Americans as food, medicine, and fiber. But it is always the thorns that attract attention. They are sharp, strong, and clawlike, holding fast and refusing to let go. Writing about it in *Arizona Flora*, naturalists Thomas H. Kearney and Robert H. Peebles remark that the cat's claw acacia is probably the most hated plant in the region, "the sharp, strong prickles tearing the clothes and lacerating the flesh."

China Bayles

"Herbs That Hold Fast"

Pecan Springs *Enterprise*

Ruby Wilcox climbed onto the stool beside my cash register and propped her elbow on the counter. "I've been thinking, China."

“About what?” I asked absently, only half-listening.

I was online, on my laptop, wrapping up a reply email to the guy who manages the Thyme and Seasons website for me. I’d just finished telling him (in answer to his question) that he didn’t need a lawyer to deal with a stalker. If he knew the person’s identity, he could simply go to the Adams County courthouse and file a temporary ex parte restraining order. Four pieces of paperwork and a short hearing and he was done. The next time he spotted the stalker, he could pick up the phone and the cops would be on the case. On the other hand, if he didn’t know who the stalker was and he was seriously worried about the situation, he should go straight to the police. They used to dismiss stalking as a nuisance rather than a serious crime. Now, they take it more seriously. At least, that’s what they say. I haven’t had to test their claim.

“About our business,” Ruby answered. “I’ve just finished going over our books, China. I don’t want to be smug about it, but the bottom line for October looks really good, especially when you consider that the economy’s not that great right now.” Ruby traced out a dollar sign on the counter with the tip of a purple-painted fingernail decorated with silvery glitter. “We need to keep up the momentum. So I’ve been thinking about some of the things we can do to gear up for the holidays.”

I hit “send” and the email zipped off into cyberspace. I felt guilty because I was several days late in replying to Larry. My inbox was too full again (I really have to do something about this state of affairs) and I hadn’t noticed his email until just now. The situation worried me and I hoped he would do what I was suggesting. Maybe I was overreacting. But when it comes to stalking, experience has taught me that it pays to be a worrywart.

I turned my attention to Ruby. “The holidays? Oh, puh-leese, Ruby. Give us a break, can’t you?” I puffed out an exaggerated sigh. “I’m glad that you’re glad about the October bottom line. But let’s take a little time off before we start thinking about Christmas, okay? Relax for a few days. Catch our breaths.”

Our shop Siamese jumped up on the counter, stepped delicately past my laptop, and rubbed

his head against Ruby's arm, rumbling his deep-throated purr. Khat isn't a demonstrative creature, but he's especially fond of Ruby, who gave him his name. His first owner had the bad luck to die under unpleasant circumstances, so he came to me. At the time, he was called Pudding, which neither he nor I thought even remotely appropriate. I called him Cat, or The Cat. (As far as he is concerned, he is entirely singular. No other cats are fit to enter his imperial presence.) But Ruby objected that this wasn't nearly distinctive enough for such a regal being. She is a great fan of Koko, the talented Siamese cat-sleuth of the Cat Who mysteries, and has always wanted a cat who could tell time, talk to ghosts, and had fourteen tales. Which is how Pudding became Cat and Cat became Khat K'o Kung.

"Catch our breaths?" Ruby stroked Khat's charcoal ears. He purred even louder. "Well, sure, we could do that—it might be nice. But it's also good to be ahead of the pitch."

I frowned. "Pitch? What pitch?"

"In a manner of speaking." She leaned forward, her eyes glinting. "Listen, China, I got this great idea last night while Ramona and I were eating supper."

Ramona is Ruby's sister, younger by about three years. She's not as tall as Ruby (who is six feet and impressive in sandals, six-plus and stunning in heels) and she doesn't have Ruby's outrageous sense of style. But she has the same frizzy red hair and freckles and shares Ruby's weird interests: the tarot, the I Ching, and the Ouija board. Ramona was working in a Dallas advertising firm, but she received a large cash settlement when she and her doctor husband divorced. To get a new start, she quit her job and moved to Pecan Springs, where she's staying with Ruby while she figures out what she wants to do with the rest of her life. I'm sympathetic (I've been there and done that myself), but I am not Ramona's greatest fan. In my opinion, she takes advantage of Ruby's generosity. This time, she's been at her sister's house for three weeks and she hasn't contributed a penny toward expenses—even though the settlement left her with plenty of pennies.

Ruby was leaning forward with an eager look. "So here's my idea, China. How about if

we—”

“Stop!” I logged off the computer. “Don’t you think we’ve had enough on our plates for the past couple of months? And our November calendar is already full. Let’s not add any new events.”

“But, China, I wasn’t talking about adding events. I was talking about promoting—”

“But nothing, Ruby,” I said firmly, and closed my laptop. “Let’s just *don’t*, okay?”

Khat sat down, curling his charcoal tail around his four charcoal paws, regarding us thoughtfully, his blue eyes flicking from one to the other. He likes to hear us argue. He thinks it’s a game, like tennis or badminton. He keeps score.

Ruby wasn’t finished. “But really, China—this won’t take a lot of effort.” She fluffed her carrot red hair with her fingers. “And it’s got a huge payoff. Potentially, that is, with just a little extra work. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before now. And of course Ramona will be glad to contribute her—”

“No!” I put the laptop on the shelf under the counter. “Enough already, Ruby! I am not taking on any new projects. Meanwhile, it’s five o’clock. I am shutting up shop and then I am going home.” I waved her away. “Good-bye, Ruby. Scat.”

With an exaggerated sigh, Ruby unfolded her six-foot-plus self from the stool where she had been perched. She was wearing a gauzy raglan-sleeved top, brown and black with orange stripes, over an orange turtleneck and black leggings. She looked like a Monarch butterfly about to take flight—a disappointed Monarch. But she wagged her fingers to show that she didn’t harbor a grudge and disappeared through the connecting door that links our shops, Thyme and Seasons Herbs (mine) and the Crystal Cave (hers). Then she stuck her head back through and delivered a parting shot.

“Someday, China Bayles, you’ll come to me on your hands and knees and say you’re sorry. You just wait and see—you’ll grovel.”

Khat gave a commanding meow, directing me to grovel right now.

“I’m already sorry,” I muttered sarcastically. Khat flicked his tail twice, reprimanding me. Then he jumped down from the counter and went to take sides with Ruby. As far as he was concerned, she’d won that round.

It was Monday, and our shops were closed, which of course hadn’t meant that we’d taken the day off. Ruby had spent the day cleaning and dusting and restocking shelves, and I had come in to work in the garden and do some reordering and bookkeeping. Now, I finished up my chores and started putting things away. But by the time I was ready to leave, I was feeling thoroughly ashamed of myself. Ruby and I have been best friends for well over a decade and business partners for most of that time. In all those years, I have rarely known her to have a bad idea. Some of them may have been a little . . . well, flaky. But even those mostly turned out okay in the end.

After all, our tearoom—Thyme for Tea—had proved to be an outstanding idea, hadn’t it? Ruby had thought it up.

And our catering service, Party Thyme, which handles a lot of the weddings and parties and other big events in town? Ruby’s idea.

And Ruby had been the one who suggested joining forces with Cass Wilde, who runs her Thymely Gourmet meals-to-go service out of our tearoom kitchen and handles the tea room lunches and the Party Thyme food—an inspired idea, since Cass is an inspired cook.

There you have it. Thyme and Seasons, the Crystal Cave, Thyme for Tea, Party Thyme, the Thymely Gourmet. Five profit centers under one roof, three of them Ruby’s bright ideas. Of course, they’re not all hugely profitable every month. But enough of them are profitable enough to keep the bottom line from bleeding an ugly red all over our account books. And in lean times like these, with the Pecan Springs business community struggling to keep its collective head above water, showing a profit every month is something to brag about, even if we do have to work our fingers to the bone to make it happen.

I held out my hands and looked at them. They were a mess, as usual. Unless you wear

gloves, which I usually don't, the Hill Country's caliche soil will dry your skin and collect under your nails. But my fingers weren't exactly worked to the bone. I was exaggerating.

Still, it had been an exceptionally busy few weeks. For one thing, October is always a whirlwind where families with kids are concerned, with school and extracurricular activities and Halloween. And our family is no different. And the whirlwind that surrounds my two youngsters is no different: Brian, my husband's son, is a senior in high school and getting ready to choose a college. Caitlin, our adopted daughter, has just turned twelve and is practicing for another violin recital. (The adoption is a long story. I won't go into it now.)

October has been busy for my husband, too. McQuaid teaches part-time in the Criminal Justice Department at Central Texas State University and invests the rest of his working hours in his business: McQuaid, Blackwell, and Associates, Private Investigators. "Blackwell" is Blackie Blackwell, former Adams County sheriff and McQuaid's new partner. (Long story there, too.) Since Blackie joined the firm in August, the caseload has tripled. McQuaid says that having a former sheriff as a partner is very good for business.

And of course, autumn is busy in the shops and the tearoom. In addition to the day-in, day-out activities (lunches, teas, and other special events), Ruby and I offer a crafting series that runs every Saturday afternoon until Thanksgiving. There's the Pecan Springs Farmers Market, open Saturday mornings through the end of October—a great market that brings foodies and locavores (people who are trying to shop and eat locally) from Austin to the north and San Antonio to the south. We have a booth there, which is fun but a lot of work, even when Caitlin and Brian and Ruby's daughter Amy pitch in to help. And then there's the task of keeping the herb gardens around the shop looking halfway decent as the summer heat dwindles and the long Texas autumn begins. That's mostly handled by a group of volunteers, bless 'em. But somebody has to supervise, and since Ruby doesn't know a weed from a wonderberry, that somebody is me.

And then there was the wedding.

Ah, yes, the wedding. That was what really kept us busy in late summer and early fall. It

took place on a September Sunday in the garden, primed to perfection and looking its prettiest. I worried about the weather, because when McQuaid and I were married (also in September, several years ago), Hurricane Josephine nearly swamped us. But the day was bright and decently cool and the outdoor wedding was gorgeous. The reception was held in our tearoom and catered by Party Thyme, with a Texas-style buffet and table centerpieces of orange and yellow marigolds, purple gayfeather, sprigs of garden herbs, and colorful squash, as well as take-home favors: herbs in tiny terracotta pots, each herb labeled with the name of the plant and Sheila's and Blackie's names and wedding date. We had to hire six extra helpers and servers, and even then, we were stretched. But it was worth it, just to see Sheila Dawson and Blackie Blackwell finally become husband and wife. Or police chief and husband, as *Enterprise* editor and local wit Hark Hibler put it.

"I never thought they'd actually pull it off," McQuaid remarked, after the bride and groom had driven away for a short honeymoon at an undisclosed location, and the rest of the hundred-plus guests had wolfed down the last chipotle meatball, nibbled the last piece of wedding cake, and drunk the last champagne toast. The cleanup crew would be working for several more hours, but McQuaid and I were getting ready to call it a day.

"Sheila looked absolutely stunning, didn't she?" Ruby said, tossing a dustpan full of birdseed (a good substitute for rice) onto the grass.

She did. Sheila Dawson is beautiful at any time, any place, no matter what she is wearing: jeans and sandals, a chic suit with pearls and heels, or her trim blue cop uniform with a duty belt loaded with guns and gadgets. (I've always said that you have to wonder at somebody who looks like a homecoming queen and thinks like the regional director of the FBI.) Since she and Blackie had decided on "ranch attire" for their wedding, the bride was dressed in a sheer, off-shoulder, ivory blouse, western denim skirt, and cowgirl boots, with a wreath of rosemary and white rosebuds on her shining blond hair and a bouquet of lavender and white roses in her hand. She might have put Blackie off while they got their respective careers sorted out, but anybody with

eyes could tell that she believed that “yes” was the right thing to say at last, after several long years of “yes,” then “no,” then “maybe.” She was radiant.

“You gotta admit that Blackie looked pretty good, too,” McQuaid said with a grin. “Especially for a guy who lost his job in a coin toss.” McQuaid had been the groom’s best man. He and Blackie had worn open-collared white shirts, dark jackets, jeans, and cowboy boots. They looked like ranch hands who were cleaned up for Sunday church.

“Well, yes,” I said. “But you have to remember that he lost a job and won a wife.”

McQuaid is right, though. Throughout the ceremony, Blackie wore the stunned, disbelieving expression of a man who’d just learned that he’d won a ten-million-dollar Super Jackpot in the Texas lottery, instead of the regretful look of a man who had given up a job he enjoyed. He and Sheila had long agreed that two law enforcement careers in one family were a train wreck, so marriage hadn’t seemed in the cards. But when they decided (after several false starts) that they really wanted to get married, they couldn’t decide which one of them should quit.

If I’d been guessing, I would have said that Sheila (known to her friends as Smart Cookie) would be the one to hand in her badge. She has worked like the devil to break the brass ceiling, but while she doesn’t talk much about what goes down in her cop shop, it’s an open secret around town that the PSPD is not a congenial place for women. If she weren’t as stubborn and tough as she is—we sometimes call her Tough Cookie—she probably would have called it quits already. What’s more, the Blackwells count three generations of Adams County sheriffs in the family, and Blackie loved his job. He was good at it, too. The best sheriff that Adams County ever had, according to some.

Either way, each of them had a lot to give up. They had reached a serious impasse: a Mexican standoff, as it were. They wanted to get married, but neither Blackie nor Sheila was ready to quit. So a few months ago, after another frustrating evening of weighing pros and cons, they gave up trying to make a logical choice and decided to toss for it. Heads he’d keep his job as sheriff and she’d give up hers as Pecan Springs’ police chief. Tails she’d keep her job and he

wouldn't run for a third term.

The coin came up tails, and Blackie bowed out of the next election. But the toss is a close-held secret, known only to a few friends. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, Blackie had simply decided that he'd been in the sheriff's office long enough. He was leaving to join McQuaid at McQuaid and Blackwell. Now, a couple of months after the fact, he is a licensed private investigator. He seems to like the job.

McQuaid cocked his head, regarding me, his lips pursed. "You look pretty great, too, China." There was an admiring glint in his eyes.

I had been the bride's attendant. Sheila and I picked out a blouse exactly like hers, except it was a steel blue color that went with my denim skirt. I wore my red cowgirl boots and carried a bouquet of red roses, with lavender, mint, and rosemary. Justice of the Peace Maude Porterfield conducted the ceremony, and in the spirit of the occasion, wore a white cowboy hat, white pants and cowboy boots, and her best Dale Evans shirt. Judge Porterfield has been a JP in Pecan Springs for nearly fifty years and still leads a busy and colorful life, holding traffic court, issuing warrants, signing death certificates, and marrying people. She says she much prefers to marry people. It doesn't leave a bad taste in her mouth, like death certificates.

As long as they stay together, that is. Maude regards the ones who don't make it as her own personal failures. "I guess I didn't put enough emphasis on 'until death do you part,' " she says sourly, whenever she hears about the latest divorce. "Sad to say, but some are in it just for the good times. Married folks, they gotta be like that cat's claw acacia I've got growin' in my yard. Gotta grab hard and hold on tight when the going gets rough. Only way to get through the bad times. Grab hard, hold on, and ride. No matter what."

But even though Maude gave "until death do you part" her very best shot, it may not be enough. Sheila's and Blackie's careers in law enforcement have created a great many conflicts between them over the past few years, and after a couple of broken engagements, I'm afraid to be too optimistic. Or maybe I'm just realistic. I'm married to an ex-cop, and I understand why

McQuaid's first marriage ended in divorce. So did Blackie's, and while I don't know all the details, I'm guessing that it happened for pretty much the same reasons. I'm sure that he and Sheila will give it all they can, and I hope it works. Their friends and well-wishers gave them a great sendoff, and we all wish them the best. The rest is up to them.

I picked up my shoulder bag and paused for a moment before I switched off the lights, liking what I saw. Thyme and Seasons, the Crystal Cave, and the tearoom are housed in an old two-story building that is constructed of blocks of Texas limestone. The shops and the tearoom have stone walls, deep-set casement windows, and the original wooden floors. My shop is small and very full, but I like it that way—there's an intimacy about it that's lacking in larger, more open shops, seems to me, and the rustic space suits the down-to-earthiness of my wares. The ceiling-high shelves along the back wall display dozens of jars and bottles of dried herbs, salves, and tinctures. A corner rack holds herb, gardening, and cookery books, as well as copies of my own *China Bayles' Book of Days*. There's a display of essential oils, diffusers, and other aromatherapy supplies on an old wooden table—everything you need to create and enjoy herbal fragrances. Along another wall are herbal items from local crafters: jellies, vinegars, seasoning blends, and soaps. There are baskets of dried herbs in the corners, bundles of dried plants hang from overhead beams, and raffia-tied braids of red peppers and garlic are displayed on the stone walls. The air is rich with the sweet-spicy scents of patchouli, nutmeg, cinnamon, and sandalwood—fragrances that remind me of a lingering autumn. I won't start putting up the holiday items for another week or two. I absolutely hate going to malls and seeing the Christmas stuff up before Halloween. This is *my* shop, and I don't rush the season.

People sometimes ask if I miss my former profession—I was a practicing criminal attorney—or long for the excitements and entertainments of Houston, where I used to live. But I don't have to hem and haw and fumble for an answer. I love it here. I'm doing something that feels right and healthy for me, for my customers, and for the planet. I don't know what the future holds—nobody does. But I intend to do this for as long as I can.

I reached for the switch to turn off the lights. But before I could flick it, the door to the Crystal Cave popped open and Ruby stood there, her cell phone in her hand, her eyes round, her face white.

“It’s Ramona!” she gasped. “She’s just— She—”

“Uh-oh,” I said, under my breath. Ramona is a little ditzy. She collects weird accidents, like the time the car ahead of her on the freeway threw a hubcap through her windshield, or the afternoon she was sailing with a friend on a lake near Dallas and a big fish jumped into the boat and bit her toe. Aloud, I said, “What’s happened to Ramona now?”

Ruby gulped. “She . . . she’s found a body.”

“A dead one?” I was startled. Even for Ramona, finding a body is not something that happens every day. “Where?”

Ruby gave me a look that said, *Yes, dead, you dummy*. Into the phone, she asked, “Where?” After a moment’s listening, she said to me, “Three doors down from my house. In the kitchen. There’s a . . . a gun.”

I could’ve asked why Ramona was wandering through the neighborhood kitchens, but I didn’t. Urgently, I said, “Tell her not to touch a thing. Tell her to call nine-one-one, then go around front and stand on the curb until the cops get there.”

Ruby repeated my message. Ramona must not have processed it, so Ruby repeated it again before she closed the phone, biting her lip.

“She says she’s already done all that, and there are cops on the scene. I’ve got to go over there, China. Will you go with me?”

“No,” I said automatically. “I’m sorry. I’ve got to go home and cook supper for—”

And then I remembered. Brian’s school baseball team was playing at Seguin this afternoon, and McQuaid had picked Caitlin up after school to go and watch the game. Afterward, they planned to have supper with Mom and Dad McQuaid, who live in Seguin. I would have joined them after I closed the shop, but McQuaid hadn’t had a chance to spend an evening with the kids

lately.

Ruby was looking at me plaintively. “Please?” she whispered tremulously. “I don’t want to do this by myself. Ramona is— Well, you know.”

I knew. But hubcaps and toe-biting fish are one thing. Dead bodies are something else altogether.

“Okay,” I said, deciding. “Let’s go.”