

CHAPTER ONE

Nightshade is one of the many plants that belong to the *Solanaceae*. This plant family includes such edible plants as the tomato, potato, eggplant, and chile pepper; decorative plants such as the petunia; and toxic plants such as datura (Jimson weed), tobacco, henbane, mandrake, and deadly nightshade, also known as belladonna.

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At one time, when the entire nightshade family shared the bad reputation of its more toxic members, it was thought that eating an eggplant might drive you insane. This belief is reflected in the name Linnaeus gave to the eggplant, *Solanum melongena*. It is related to the Italian name *melanzana*, or “mad apple.”

“What’s this?” Brian asked suspiciously, pushing at his food with his fork.
“Creole Aubergine,” I said. “Cass gave me the recipe. She said it was really good.”
“Eggplant,” Brian said, in his voice of doom.

I sighed. The eggplant was disguised in a spicy Creole sauce, and I’d hoped to sneak it past him. “Did you know,” I said brightly to McQuaid, “that it was Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, who introduced the eggplant to North America?”

McQuaid frowned. “Isn’t he the one who’s to blame for Brussels sprouts?”

“Barf,” Brian said succinctly.

I put on a stern face. “Eat it anyway. Eggplant has a ton of antioxidants. Helps to lower cholesterol, too.”

“That means it’s good for you,” McQuaid translated, lifting a hefty forkful and smacking his lips to demonstrate how much he liked it. He winked at Jake—Jacqueline Keene, Brian’s girlfriend—who was sitting across from Brian.

“Yeah, right,” Brian said, with heavy sarcasm.

Jake, who is as smart and cooperative as she is cute, got the hint. “I think it’s great, China,” she enthused. “My mom never cooks eggplant.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Brian said, *sotto voce*.

“Thank you, Jake.” I ignored my stepson. At nearly sixteen, he is way too old to smack, which is something I’ve never done and wouldn’t do in front of company—although Jake isn’t exactly company. She and Brian went through a tough time together earlier in the year, when the Pecan Springs football coach was shot to death in front of them. She’s around so often that she almost qualifies as a member of the family. With a smile for her and a chastising glance at Brian, I added, “I’m glad you like it. It’s more fun to cook for people who sincerely enjoy the food.”

“What’s for dessert?” Brian asked.

“Cheesecake,” I said. “Low-calorie.” I’ve been trying to lose weight for the past couple of months—successfully, I might add. I am now down some fifteen pounds, by dint of dieting, jogging, and yoga. You should see me. I’m looking trim.

“Awesome,” Jake said. A girl after my own heart.

“I sincerely enjoy cheesecake,” Brian said. “Even low-calorie cheesecake.” He went back to his eggplant with a virtuous look and managed to get it down.

When dinner was done, the kids got their bikes and fishing rods and rode off into the balmy spring evening, while I cleared the table and McQuaid began to load the dishwasher. “Was it really that bad?” I asked, putting the leftover casserole into the fridge. There was a lot of it.

“Was what that bad?” McQuaid said absently.

“The eggplant. *I* liked it.”

“It was fine.” He looked up, the water running over the plate he was rinsing. “No, really, China. It was great. Fantastic. I mean, I could tell, you put a lot of effort into it.” He went back to rinsing the plate.

I think I’ll take eggplant off the menu.

While McQuaid and I are getting the kitchen cleaned up, I’ll take a quick moment to give you some background. I’m China Bayles and Mike McQuaid—dark-haired, blue-eyed, craggily good-looking—is my husband of nearly three years. Brian is his son. I got into the habit of calling McQuaid by his last name when we met some ten or eleven years ago. At the time, I was a defense attorney in a murder trial involving a battered wife whose husband wound up dead at the foot of the stairs. McQuaid was the Houston homicide officer who reluctantly testified against my client. When she was acquitted, he asked me out for a drink to celebrate. I like a good loser.

One thing eventually led to another (life has a way of doing that, doesn’t it?) and before long, both McQuaid and I had left our careers and moved to Pecan Springs, a small town halfway between Austin and San Antonio, at the eastern edge of the Texas Hill Country. McQuaid earned his Ph.D. and began teaching in the Criminal Justice Department at Central Texas State University. But after a couple of years, took a leave to write a book. At the same time, he went on an extended undercover assignment for the Texas Rangers, during which he almost wound up dead. And last year, because the thrill of the chase is much more exhilarating than faculty politics (although it is only slightly more dangerous), he hung out his shingle as a private investigator. So far, his new career has met with only moderate success, but we’re hoping.

As for me, when I arrived in Pecan Springs, I bought a small herb shop called Thyme and Seasons, then went into partnership with my friend Ruby Wilcox to start a tearoom called Thyme for Tea. When Cass Wilde came along with the idea for a personal chef service called The Thymely Gourmet, our duo became a trio. Ruby, Cass, and I are—as Texans colorfully put it—as busy as a stump-tailed cow in fly season. There are always too many flies to swat.

McQuaid closed the dishwasher. “Coffee on the porch?”

It was a loaded question. What he really wanted was to tell me what he’d found out on his latest trip to Houston, which I wasn’t eager to hear.

“Okay,” I said, not trying to cover up my lack of enthusiasm. Anyway, it wouldn’t have done any good to pretend. McQuaid and I have been together long enough to know what’s really being said, even when it isn’t. I poured two cups of coffee and we took them onto the screened porch. I sat in one wicker rocker. He sat in the other, propped his boots on the rail, and leaned back with a long sigh.

McQuaid, Brian, and I live in a large old Victorian house at the end of a lane off Limekiln Road, eleven miles outside of town. When we sit outside on a May evening, we don’t hear illegal mufflers or bickering neighbors or the bone-throbbing thump-*THUMP*-thump of the woofers in some jerk’s jacked-up pickup. We hear mockingbirds and wrens and cardinals singing their spring love songs, frogs droning with passionate pleasure beside the creek, hummingbirds whirring ecstatically in and out of the honeysuckle, and the breeze kissing the papery leaves of the big sycamore tree beside the stone fence.

Oh, and Howard Cosell, McQuaid’s elderly basset, snoring in the porch swing—although if you look closely, you will see that Howard is not quite asleep. One brown basset eye is open. Howard may have the shape of a lumpy couch potato, but he has the heart of a hunter, always on the alert for unwary bunnies. Should one be so rash as to hop up the back steps, Howard would have to wake up and figure out what to do, although that might take so long that the bunny would get bored and go somewhere else for adventure. While he has the heart of a hunter, Howard’s arthritis is catching up with him and his metabolism has slowed so that it approximates hibernation.

I sipped my coffee. “So how were things in Houston?” I asked, aiming for a neutral, off-hand tone.

“I should think you’d want to hear this,” McQuaid said, slightly aggrieved. “After all, he is your father.”

“*Was* my father,” I said callously. Sixteen years ago, my father was killed in an automobile accident. He’d been driving well over the speed limit and lost control of the car, according to a witness. He’d been drinking, according to the coroner. Drinking, driving, speeding—a lethal combination. My relationship with him had not been a happy one, for reasons I consider good ones. As the kids say, we had “issues.”

“And Miles Danforth is your brother,” McQuaid continued evenly. “He only wants to know—”

“*Half* brother.”

“Okay, half brother,” McQuaid conceded. “But he’s still your father’s son.”

I sniffed. “His *illegitimate* son. Whom I didn’t know until three months ago.”

Three months ago. That was when Laura Danforth died of cancer and her son Miles, a partner in the Austin law firm of Zwinger, Brady, Brandon, and Danforth, discovered that my father was *his* father too. And having learned this troublesome, untidy fact, what did Miles Danforth do?

Did he keep the painful knowledge to himself, knowing that it could only hurt any survivors our father had left behind—survivors who never guessed that Robert Bayles had led a secret life, with Laura Danforth and her son?

Did he decide that whatever ugliness had darkened the past had been buried sixteen years ago, and that the kindest, sanest, most prudent thing was *not* to dig it up?

No, of course not. So he had hired my husband, who is a damned good P.I., to help him investigate the past.

And he had a reason for pursuing that investigation, a good one—or so it seemed to him. He had the idea that the car wreck that killed our father was not an accident at all. It was murder. In support of this argument, he gave me a collection of letters he had found among his mother’s papers when she died. Letters in my father’s neat, precise script. Letters Robert Bayles had written before his death to his secretary, Laura Danforth. Love letters.

At first I had refused to read them. When I was a teenager, I’d been aware that my father was having an affair with Mrs. Danforth—in the way that kids have a vague idea of what adults are up to without understanding much about it. I wasn’t aware that the affair had begun before I was born and ended only with his death, or that it had produced a child: Miles, whom I knew as Buddy, Mrs. Danforth’s sexy son, who had a summer job in the mail room at Stone, Bayles, Peck, and Dixon, my father’s law firm. I refused to read the letters because I didn’t want to know anything more about the affair than I knew already. I didn’t want to read about my father’s desire for a woman who wasn’t my mother, about his love for a child that wasn’t me. I intended to destroy the letters, thinking what a pleasure it would be to toss them, one by one, into the fire, to watch my father’s passion turn into dirty smoke and fly up the chimney.

But in the end, Miles’ persistence pushed me into reading them—that, and my growing recognition that there were things I needed to know. Who *was* my father, really? Was his relationship with Laura Danforth mostly sexual, or was there a tenderness inside him that I had never glimpsed? If he loved her, why didn’t he divorce my mother and marry her? Did he feel any remorse about his betrayal of his wife and daughter? Or did he rationalize his treason by telling himself that we wouldn’t be hurt by something we didn’t know, that his secret life was nobody’s business but his own? I knew what kind of father he was, but what kind of man had he been?

So I didn’t put the letters into the fire. One night, when I was all alone in the house, I sat down and read them, and was so moved that I wept. Rich with a long-held, deeply-cherished affection, a comfortable warmth, a shared tenderness, they were written in the way a man writes

to a woman he has loved for many years. They made me almost unbearably sad, because they were written to Miles' mother, not to mine, and because they showed me a side of my father that I hadn't known existed. They gave me a glimpse of a different man—a caring, thoughtful man I longed to know—who was hidden inside of the chilly, detached man in whose house I had lived until I grew up and went away to college.

But Miles had a different reason for insisting that I read the letters. My father had been working on a case that troubled him deeply, and some of the letters were written with an edgy, wary apprehension. In one, he told Laura to copy certain documents from the case file and put them into a safe deposit box she was to rent personally, under an assumed name. In another, he told her to set up an appointment with a man named Gregory, in Washington, D.C. In a third, he told her to begin planning to leave Stone and Bayles, to look for another job, rent another apartment. She was to say nothing about any of this to their son. And most importantly—he wrote this with a clear, compelling sense of urgency—should anything happen to him, she was not to undertake an investigation. Since my father was a calm, deliberate man not given to undue alarm, this latter instruction was chilling. And so was the fact that he had purchased a \$250,000 insurance policy on his life, in Laura's name.

Miles said he had found a few other things, besides the letters. Notes documenting an investigation his mother had begun after Dad's death, in defiance of his explicit instructions. A few names, some newspaper clippings, the renewal of a safe deposit box, the receipt for the purchase of my father's wrecked car—a blue Cadillac—which she managed to buy before it was sent to the crusher. According to Miles, she had squirreled it away somewhere, which was not a very rational thing to do, on the face of it. Ghoulish, my mother said, when Miles told her about it. Morbid, she said. Obsessive. Yes, Miles had insisted on involving her, and I had agreed. The damage had already been done, long ago. Trying to keep secrets could only prolong the pain.

But that didn't mean that I wanted to be personally involved in Miles' quest for truth and justice, whatever that meant. I might be intrigued by the mystery and I might even agree that my father's death was suspicious. But I wasn't inclined to take the matter any further. Did I resent Robert Bayles for failing to remember that he had a wife, even if she was an alcoholic? You bet. Did I hold a grudge against him for being an absentee father? Absolutely. And when he died, I had closed the book on those chapters of my past that involved him. If Miles wanted to open them for himself, that was his business. But he could count me out. I have my hands full with my family and my business. I am busy getting a life. I—

McQuaid dropped his feet onto the floor, hitched his chair around to face me, and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. There was tension in the lines that bisected the jagged scar across his forehead. His slate-blue eyes were troubled and deeply serious, and he spoke with the contained intensity I have always loved.

“Look, China. I understand why you are so angry at your father. The guy was a first-class jerk. He had a wife at home, another at the office, and kids by both. He cheated on your mom for thirty years, and he never took any responsibility for you. You might as well not have had a father, for all the attention he paid you.”

“I couldn't have said it better myself,” I replied, not even trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

McQuaid reached out and took my hand in his. “But none of that is exactly Miles' fault, is it?”

I frowned.

“Well, is it?” He gave me a crooked smile. “Think about it, babe. Whatever your dad did to you, he did it in spades to Miles. Your brother has been hurt as badly as you—worse, in a way.”

“Which is all the more reason Miles should let go of this obsession,” I said. “He has Caitlin to think about.” Caitlin is his ten-year-old daughter. He is raising her by himself, after his

wife, Karen, drowned during a family outing on Lake Travis. “He can spend time with her, instead of digging up old dirt.”

McQuaid turned my hand up and kissed my palm. “But maybe he has to dig up the old dirt before he can let it go. Maybe he has to understand what happened. Who his father was, what he was really like.” He dropped my hand and sat back. “Try to see Miles’ side of it, China. Yeah, sure. Your dad made sure the boy had everything he needed, growing up. Paid for his education, even gave his legal career a boost. But he never acknowledged him.”

“He didn’t acknowledge me, either,” I muttered. “He didn’t even come to my high school graduation.” How many days, weeks, months, years had gone by since that night? And yet thinking of it was like walking barefoot on broken glass. “As for giving my legal career a boost—” I laughed shortly. “A kick in the butt is more like it. He didn’t even want me in his firm.”

McQuaid wasn’t listening. “Do you have any idea what that can *do* to a man, China? Miles thought his father was dead—that’s what his mother told him. And here he is, in his mid-forties. His mother dies, and he finds out that she lied. Finds out that ‘Uncle Bob,’ her boss, the guy who was around so much of the time when he was growing up, was really his dad. And yet the man never cared enough to say ‘Hey, kid, you’re my son. Know what, boy? I’m proud of you. I’m really proud.’”

I pressed my lips together, thinking how important McQuaid’s father was to him, how deeply McQuaid cared for Brian. I thought of the patient, enduring love the three of them shared—grandfather, father, son—and the healthy pride they took in one another’s accomplishments. And I thought of what Miles had told me when I asked him whether he’d ever wondered why his mother’s boss went on camping trips with them, why all three of them went fishing together, why “Uncle Bob” was there on weekends.

He’d never asked, he said, and his mother never offered to tell him. It was something they didn’t talk about. It was the elephant in the room.

The elephant in the room. Yeah, well, we had a few of those in my house, too. And it wasn’t just my father’s frequent absences, his lengthy business trips, or his indifference. It was my mother’s boozing, her reckless and embarrassing behavior. There were lots of things we never talked about when I was growing up. Hidden things, dangerous secrets, skeletons in the closets, shadows in the corners.

“And then Miles reads the letters his mother saved,” McQuaid went on, “and he begins to figure it out. He knows now who his father was, who *he* is. But there’s still too much he doesn’t know. He sees how much his mother cared, and how important it was to her to find out what happened to his father. Can you blame him for wanting to continue her effort? To learn as much as he can?”

“Laura Danforth is dead,” I said stiffly. “I cannot see why finding out what happened sixteen years ago will help Miles deal with—”

“Hey, China.” McQuaid’s voice was soft. “Suppose Bob Bayles was murdered. That’s what Laura Danforth thought, that’s what his letters suggest. Suppose Miles finds out that his father was killed doing something—well, something noble. Something good. Suppose what he finds out helps to redeem the guy somehow. Isn’t that worth the effort?”

I chuckled sarcastically. “Yeah, right. Well, suppose his father was doing something sleazy? That’s a lot more likely, if you ask me.”

After I grew up and joined the Houston legal fraternity, I began to understand what was common knowledge in that gossip-driven oil company town: Robert Bayles and his partner Ted Stone had built their legal practice on dubious oil and energy deals, questionable land transactions, and political dirty work. Their clients included polluters, looters, and influence peddlers. Both Ted Stone and my father were frequent guests of the Suite 8F crowd, the group of influential conservatives who met on the eighth floor of Houston’s Lamar Hotel and collectively decided who was going to run for what political office, at the state level and beyond. To ensure that their picks—LBJ had been one of them—made it to the winner’s circle, Suite 8F slipped

wads of campaign cash into the necessary pockets. Their contributions decided which politicians moved into positions of power and influence.

And just as importantly, their money bought them preferential treatment when the bidding opened on lucrative government contracts for dams, ships and shipyards, oil pipelines, military bases at home and abroad, NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston. The Lamar Hotel was demolished in 1983 to make room for a skyscraper, but the political influence of Suite 8F lingers like a foul odor, a dirty fog. It's the subject of books, of doctoral dissertations, of documentaries. It's common knowledge.

I hadn't known any of this, growing up. But grown up and on my own in the legal jungle, it hadn't taken long to find it out. And when I had, it was one more reason (if I needed one) that I didn't want anything to do with my father. I hated his politics and I despised what he stood for.

"Stone and Bayles never claimed the moral high ground," I went on, with a glance at McQuaid. "In fact, it's very likely that Miles will find out that his father was killed in the process of doing something unethical, illegal, immoral, or just plain rotten."

"Even that," McQuaid said softly, "would be worth something, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it be worth it to you, too, China? Just to *know*?"

There was a space of silence, during which the only sound was Howard's sputtery snoring and the chirpy chatter of a mockingbird on the fence. I thought of the night, just a few weeks ago, that Miles had sat where I was sitting now and persuaded McQuaid to agree to help investigate Dad's death. I had been against it, of course, but my vote hadn't counted. My husband had connected to something within my brother—some urgent need to learn what had happened, to find out who had been involved—and I might as well be shouting into the wind. It was still true. I could resist all I wanted, but the two of them needed to know whatever there was to know. And they were going to drag me into it, like it or not.

And to tell the truth, there was something in me that wanted to know, too. Was Dad really nothing more than a philandering husband, a lousy father, and a sleazy attorney? Or was there something else, something that might yet redeem him?

"Okay," I said abruptly. "I give up. I concede. I surrender. I'm throwing in the damn towel. You and Miles intend to move heaven and earth to find out what went on sixteen years ago, and you think I ought to be on board. So okay. So I'm on board. What the hell do we do now?"

McQuaid laughed. "I'd rather you didn't come into this kicking and screaming, China."

His laugh was so deep and throaty, so rich with good humor and easy affection, that I couldn't help smiling. It's been like that between us since the beginning. I hold out against him as long as possible, but he can almost always talk me around to his point of view.

"I'm on board," I said gruffly. "You'll have to put up with the kicking and screaming." I stood, frowning. "If you're going to tell me what went on in Houston, I think I need another cup of coffee."

McQuaid began pulling off his boots. "Cheesecake?" He looked up at me with a grin. "I sincerely enjoy cheesecake, babe."

Howard Cosell lifted his head and opened both eyes very wide. He sincerely enjoys cheesecake, too. Even low-calorie cheesecake.