

## CHAPTER ONE

### *SPANISH DAGGER*

by Susan Wittig Albert

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“Spanish dagger” is one of the many folk names for that striking, statuesque plant, *Yucca angustifolia*. A member of the genus *Agave* and one of the most common herbs of the Southwest, Spanish dagger can be seen along roadsides, in pastures and meadows, and across the arid plains. A plant of great and varied utility in many native cultures, it has supplied food, drink, medicine, clothing, footwear, and even construction materials to peoples throughout the Americas.

It’s possible to solve a mystery and still not know all the answers. It’s possible to know in detail what happened to Colin Fowler and Lucita Sanchez last week. It’s possible to know how it was done, and even who did it, and why. But knowing an answer to any question doesn’t mean that you know *the* answer. And knowing the truth doesn’t mean that there’s no unfinished business. There are always pieces of the puzzle that don’t quite fit, threads of story that can’t be neatly tied, answers that can’t be matched with the questions that still linger.

In other words, one mystery leads, inevitably and inconclusively, to another. The best we can hope for is a break in the clouds, a brief lifting of the fog, an interim solution and the promise of some sort of temporary and momentarily satisfying clarity.

It's a tough world, a crazy and chaotic world, this world we live in. But it is very good to be alive. And what happened in Pecan Springs this past week certainly reminds me of that indisputable fact.

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"Gosh, China," Carole said warmly, "this is a great place."

She looked around the spacious room, with its beamed ceiling, white plastered walls, and fieldstone fireplace, then glanced toward the kitchen, on the other side of the counter island. "It's absolutely perfect for a workshop. And this terra-cotta floor will clean up easily." She grinned. "Making paper is a messy business, as I'm sure you know."

I knew. I'd never been able to make paper without ending up with puddles of water and pulp on the floor. I opened the sliding glass door and we went onto the wooden deck. It was shaded by a large live oak tree, its April-green leaves fresh and glistening in the afternoon sun. "We can set up the beater and drying racks out here," I said. "And another table, if we need it."

"Perfect," Carole said approvingly. "How many folks have enrolled?"

"Twenty, with six on the wait-list."

"Then we've definitely maxed." Carole pushed her gold glasses up on her nose. "I like to be able to spend at least a half hour with each person. When there's more than twenty, somebody gets short-changed."

We went back inside, where I picked up Carole's suitcase. "Let's take a look at your bedroom." I led the way down the hall, past the bathroom. At the bedroom door, Carole pulled in her breath.

"Lovely," she exclaimed. "China, this is perfect! I'm going to love it here."

I hoped so. I've invested a great deal of time and thought in the decorating project and love the way it's turned out: an antique four-poster bed made up with lavender-scented sheets and covered with a Texas Star quilt and a scattering of pillows; a polished mahogany dresser and rocking chair; a red and blue braided rug on the gleaming oak floor; wood shutters at the

windows, even a small television set and VCR. And since the cottage is at the very back of the lot, away from the street, there's almost no noise—except, of course, for Miss Lula, the yappy little dog, as old and crotchety as her owner, who lives on the other side of the alley.

If you didn't know, you'd never guess that Thyme Cottage was built as a stable, in the long-ago days when everybody in Pecan Springs had at least one horse. It sits under a large pecan tree behind the two-story stone building that houses my herb shop, Thyme and Seasons, Ruby Wilcox's Crystal Cave, and Thyme for Tea, the tearoom that Ruby and I own together. The fully-equipped kitchen and spacious main room (fancifully called "the Gathering Room") make the cottage a great place for all sorts of workshops and classes. The newly-decorated bedroom, which looks out onto the gardens that surround the building, enables me to rent the cottage as a bed-and-breakfast when it's not otherwise scheduled. I've been getting quite a few rental requests lately, because the place is listed in the new Pecan Springs B&B Guide.

This week, Thyme Cottage was doing double duty: Carole Gaye, who lives and works near Taos, would be teaching a papermaking workshop and staying in the cottage. Carole is an accomplished paper artist with a national reputation, and always in demand as a teacher. I was only able to get her because she was a friend of Ruby's, so I was glad the accommodations pleased her.

I showed her the bathroom, then asked, "What else do we need to do before Saturday's workshop? Do you have everything you need?"

"Most of it," Carole said. "I'll set things up on Friday, but since tomorrow's only Thursday, I'm taking the extra day to relax. There is one thing, though. If you know where to find a few yucca plants, I'll collect some leaves. Yucca makes great paper, and since it's easy to find in this area, I want to show people how to work with it."

"Sure," I said. "There are quite a few yuccas along the railroad track. If you'll come to the shop about eight-thirty, we can drive over there." I'm usually at the shop just after eight, which gives me time to get a few things done—sweeping, dusting, even some garden work—

before customers start showing up at ten. Owning your own business has plenty of pluses, but sleeping until noon is not one of them.

Carole nodded. She was about to say something else, but she was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening and a loud “Yoo-hoo!”

“We’re coming, Ruby,” I yelled, and we went back down the hall to the Gathering Room. where, with bubbly squeals, Ruby and Carole—friends since they met at a yoga retreat a couple of years ago—fell into an enthusiastic embrace. With Ruby was our new partner, Cassandra Wilde, carrying a tray laden with breakfast goodies: fruit, juice, and a couple of Cass’s famous gingerbread waffles, to be warmed up in the microwave. Cass had also included a small pitcher of dark agave nectar for the waffles. It’s made from the heart of the wild agave plant and is higher in fructose than sugar-based syrups or honey, good for anyone who needs to watch the sugar. Carole would definitely not go hungry.

If you were here with us, you could meet everyone in person, but since you’re not (and since you may be new to Pecan Springs and in need of an orientation), I’ll take a few moments to tell you who we are. You’ve met Carole Gaye already—she’s the diminutive one, wiry and sturdy, with muscles developed from years of pounding plant fiber and toting buckets of pulp. Her attractive gray hair is cut like a boy’s, and she’s wearing gold granny glasses, khaki slacks, a neatly tucked-in black tee, sneakers, and not a smidgen of makeup.

The willow-slim, very tall gal (six feet plus-plus in her wedgies) is Ruby Wilcox, business partner and best friend. Makeup, yes, lipstick and eye shadow and liner as dramatic as any queen of the Nile. Hair in springy ringlets the color of fresh carrots. Eyes, blue, green, or brown, depending on her choice of contacts and eye shadow. Green today, complementing her spring-time outfit: calf-length cropped linen pants in a flowery yellow print, loose buttercup yellow tunic over a mustard yellow tee, straw sandals, and a saucer-sized sunflower pendant with matching sunflower earrings. Ruby in full bloom.

Ruby's Crystal Cave is the only New Age shop in Pecan Springs, which shouldn't be a surprise, since small-town Texans don't go ga-ga over tarot, incense, crystal balls, the I Ching, astrology, and spirit channeling. But Ruby, who teaches everything from Understanding Your Birth Chart to The Path of Rune Wisdom, has a loyal and loving following. Last Saturday, she taught a day-long class called Learning from Your Inner Teacher, which has something to do with trusting that part of yourself that is unconsciously plugged into the Cosmic Switchboard. The Gathering Room was packed with women, whose devotion to Ruby makes many male Pecan Springers nervous. Good ol' boys have a tendency to view Ruby as an Alien Being. The idea that their wives and daughters might tune into something other than Fox News or As the World Turns gives them the fidgets.

Ruby and I have been close friends for a long time, and I can testify that there are plenty of fascinating contradictions stowed away behind that in-tune-with-the-Universe facade. Yes, she's intuitive, so intuitive that it's often spooky. She can scan your stars and tell you things about yourself that you haven't yet discovered, and she can coax the Ouija board to tell more tales than a Baptist snitch in a Methodist choir.

But when it comes to business, Ruby is ruthlessly pragmatic. She knows to the penny how much cash came in through the register at Thyme for Tea—her brain child—last month. She can also tell you how many new clients we added to Party Thyme, the new catering service, locally (and humorously) known as Ruby's "traveling circus." She proposed starting that little enterprise because she had the idea that people who enjoyed their visit to Thyme for Tea might be happy to hire Party Thyme to cater their next big garden party.

And she's been right, by golly. Thanks to her firm and capable management, Thyme for Tea and Party Thyme are turning a healthy profit. Ruby may look like and act like a card-carrying member of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood, but there's an admirable brain beneath those bouncy red curls and an iron fist in that yellow velvet glove.

Cassandra Wilde—in the kitchen, stashing Carole’s breakfast goodies in the refrigerator—turned our duo into a trio when she joined our enterprise this spring. Cass is blond and bountiful and proud of it. “Sassy, brassy, and size twenty-two,” she coos seductively. “Wanna see my love handles, sweetie?” Her sense of style and color is as outrageous as Ruby’s, and since there’s some eighty pounds more of her than there is of Ruby, the effect can be . . . well, a little overwhelming. If you prefer shrinking violets, Cass’s in-your-face attitude will not win you over. On the other hand, her cooking will. Guaranteed.

Ruby and I met Cass six or seven months ago on the set for “A Man for All Reasons,” a local amateur theater production. After opening night, she came to us with a bright idea: a personal chef service called The Thymely Gourmet that would be an extension of Ruby’s other two bright ideas. That is, people who enjoyed the food at Thyme for Tea and subsequently engaged Party Thyme to cater their garden party would be happy to hire The Thymely Gourmet (that’s Cass) to put a dozen splendid dinners in the freezer. After giving the proposal some thought—and giving Cass a trial run in the kitchen—we said yes, and we two became we three.

Although I was initially skeptical about The Thymely Gourmet, I have to admit that the concept is a winner. Cass herself—a gifted cook who was recently certified as a personal chef by the American Culinary Foundation—is definitely a dynamo. She has no “off” button, her cheerfulness rarely wanes, and if you watch her too closely, you’ll get dizzy. Cass’ Thymely Gourmet has become, as Ruby puts it, “the third ring of our circus.” And even I have to admit that having Cass as one of the ringleaders makes the circus a lot more lively.

Which leaves me. I’m China Bayles. I’m five-four in my Birkenstocks, a bit on the hefty side (we will not say how hefty—some things are best left to the imagination). My hair is brown with a streak of gray, my nails usually have garden dirt under them, and I don’t have an ounce of interest in fashionable clothes: jeans, tees, and tennies, that’s me. I was a criminal attorney in Houston before I moved to Pecan Springs, single, on the scary cliff of forty, and desperately soul-weary. I was sick of playing games—the sort of dirty pool everybody has to play to make the

justice system work—tired of fighting and clawing my way up the ladder, and ready, oh, more than ready, to lead a kinder, gentler, less combative life.

So I opened an herb shop, planted a garden around it, and began collecting girlfriends. A few years into my new incarnation, I took a deep breath and said yes to a former Houston homicide detective named Mike McQuaid, whose marriage portion included his gun collection, his melancholy basset hound, his son Brian (now fifteen), and Brian's spiders, snakes, and lizards, who have staked out free-range privileges throughout our house. These collaborations have been challenging, since privacy, autonomy, and personal independence are high on my list of personal priorities. But I've managed, in spite of the difficulty in adjusting to Brian's geckos and McQuaid's guns—McQuaid is the name I used when we met on opposite sides of a legal issue, and it's stuck. It's been a good marriage, too, if a little scary sometimes, such as the day McQuaid announced that he was quitting his second career (as a professor in the Criminal Justice program at Central Texas State University) in order to hang out his shingle as a private investigator.

*Gulp.* Ruby says that I think too much and too logically about the possibilities, such as not being able to make the mortgage payments. She says I need to let go and listen to my Inner Teacher. But my Inner Teacher is also worried about the mortgage payments, especially because McQuaid's last case involved a rare book theft he investigated for Jeremy Paxton in March. We have now arrived at late April without a client, which is why I take heart when Ruby shows me our healthy bottom line. Two risky business ventures in one family is two too many. But by this time, Cass has finished in the kitchen, Carole and Ruby have caught up, and I am glancing at my watch. It is nearly five, time to help Laurel close up both shops.

"I hate to be a spoil-sport," I said, "but I've got company coming for dinner tonight." I was not looking forward to the occasion, but it could no longer be put off. There were questions that had to be answered. Old questions, maybe some new questions, none of which had any answers, at least as far as I was concerned. I wasn't looking forward to it.

“I guess that means you can’t join Ruby and Cass and me for an early supper,” Carole said regretfully.

“I’m afraid so,” I said.

“I’ll have to take a rain check too,” Cass said. “The Thymely Gourmet is serving an out-of-this world dinner to a pair of prospective clients. Well-heeled clients, I am happy to say.”

Ruby made a face. “I’m sorry, but I can’t either do supper, either, Carole. I’ve got a personal problem. Two personal problems, actually.”

“Only two?” I teased. I already knew about one. Ruby’s boyfriend had stood her up the night before, and she was fretting about it.

Actually, it is no longer accurate to say that Colin is Ruby’s boyfriend. She was madly in love with him for months—and when Ruby is in love, it’s a passionate, whole-hearted, hang-onto-your-hat, over-the-top affair. She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and steps into the void, plunging into total free-fall without so much as a bungee cord while her friends look on, wringing their hands in helpless dismay.

But in early April, after months of feeding the eternal fire of hope with scraps of poor excuses, Ruby decided that Colin would never be able to give her what she wants: love, commitment, and a future together. So she told him she was turning down the flame, for which I have to give her a great deal of credit. Who among us is capable of actually ending a love affair, even when it falls pitifully short of our great expectations? I know what it cost Ruby to put some distance between herself and Colin and to assert herself as an independent woman. I deeply admire her for taking herself out of what was beginning to be a toxic situation. And to give Colin credit, he agreed that breaking up was the right thing to do—with just enough regret to allow Ruby to feel he really did care, after all, but not enough to make her think she might have been just a tad too quick to push the eject button.

But “distance” does not necessarily mean closure, and while Ruby is no longer extending those hopeful invitations to dinner-plus-sleepover at her house, she is still accepting Colin’s



occasional evening-out invitations, on a just-friends basis. Not a good idea, if you ask me. Having been there and done that, it is my personal opinion that when a love affair dies, it ought to stay dead. Definitely, decidedly dead. If it threatens to rise again, it ought to be treated the way you'd handle a vampire, by plunging a dagger into its heart. Trying to resurrect it as a friendship can only extend the pain.

But as usual, Ruby is doing things her way. Or not, as the case may be. Colin had planned to drop in about ten last night to pick up a box he had left in her keeping, then stay for soup and sandwiches. He didn't show up, and she's been fretting all day. I feel for her, of course. It's no fun to be stood up, even if you've made up your mind that your heart is no longer in love. But failure to show up for a date was one of Colin's less agreeable habits, and Ruby ought to be used to it by now. Colin's unreliability is one of the reasons—but only one—that I am not his biggest fan.

“What's the *other* problem?” I asked.

Ruby's shoulders slumped. “My mother.”

“You can't solve your mother in one evening,” Cass said sympathetically. “What's she done now?”

Ruby's mother lives at Cedar Summit, a retirement village in Fredericksburg, about an hour's drive from Pecan Springs. Under the best of circumstances, Doris is not the kind of person you want to spend time with. She always wears a sour expression, as if life has not gone according to her expectations and plans: understandable, given the fact that no matter how much will power and muscle you exert over events and people, you can't dictate how everything turns out. Doris has definitely given it her best shot, though. Ruby was nineteen when she found out she was pregnant—the same week the baby's father was killed in Viet Nam. When she started to show, Doris packed her off to a home for unwed mothers in Dallas and insisted that the baby be given up for adoption, even though Ruby desperately wanted to keep her. It was years before Amy came back into her mother's life, and Ruby still mourns all those lost decades.

It is a sad irony that, in the past few months, Doris the super-controller has been losing her grip. She gets lost, she mislays her door key and her checkbook, she forgets appointments, and she has morphed into a kleptomaniac with a passion for scarves—and not your ordinary dinky dime store scarves, either. A couple of weeks ago, the security guard at Dillard's stopped Doris from walking out the door with a pricy alligator bag stuffed full of hand-painted silk scarves. Doris claimed that she'd merely forgotten to stop at the cash register to pay for the bag and its contents, but the security tapes told a different story. And when Ruby started snooping around her mother's apartment, she found silk scarves hidden in the closet, in drawers, in the refrigerator, in the oven. The conclusion is clear: Doris is losing her marbles. Or, as the colorful Texas expression has it, she's a few bricks shy of a load.

“What's happened now?” Ruby repeated in a depressed tone. “It's not pretty. I got a call from Melanie, the administrator at Cedar Summit. Maybe you remember that Mom can't drive her car any longer—she lost her license after she ran into that school bus last spring. But her car is still in the parking lot until we decide what to do with it. This afternoon, she took the keys from the board in the office, and when the guard wouldn't let her drive out of the compound, she locked herself in the car.”

“Oh, dear!” Carole exclaimed. “Is she all right?”

“Right as rain,” Ruby said ironically. “Melanie called a locksmith and they got her out within the hour. But she was . . . well, her language was even worse than it was after the car wreck.” She shook her head. “The school bus, the shoplifting, and now this—it's clear that Mom has some serious problems. Melanie is insisting that we move her into a supervised unit. She wants to schedule a psychiatric evaluation, as well. I talked to Ramona—my sister, who lives in Dallas—and both of us agree. I'm driving to Fredericksburg tonight to tell Mom what has to be done.”

Poor Ruby. Doris was not going to leave her apartment willingly. She wouldn't take kindly to "evaluation," either. "If you have to stay overnight," I said, "don't worry about the shop or the tearoom. We can cover for you here."

"I can stop by and feed your cats in the morning," Cass volunteered. "Call if there's anything we can do."

"Thanks," Ruby said. "I'll phone if I can't make it back." She gave us each a hug, trying to smile, but her worried look didn't disappear. If I knew Ruby, it wasn't the shop or Doris that was bothering her. It was Colin Fowler, and for a fierce instant I hated him for causing her pain, for treating her as if she didn't matter.

I straightened my shoulders. Where Colin is concerned, there is nothing I can do for Ruby except hope that she will stop seeing him altogether. And I certainly couldn't help her cope with Doris. Anyway, I had my own relatives to deal with tonight, and I sure as hell wasn't looking forward to it.