

## CHAPTER ONE

The Wormwoods . . . belong to the genus *Artemisia*, a group consisting of 180 species, of which we have four growing wild in England, the Common Wormwood, Mugwort, Sea Wormwood and Field Wormwood. In addition, as garden plants, though not native, Tarragon (*A. dracunculus*) claims a place in every herb-garden, and Southernwood (*A. abrotanum*), an old-fashioned favourite, is found in many borders . . . The whole family is remarkable for the extreme bitterness of all parts of the plant.

*A Modern Herbal*, 1931  
Mrs. M. Grieve

“You ought to go,” Ruby Wilcox said decidedly. She began stacking the plastic plates at the end of the picnic table. “Really, China, you’ve been through a lot the past few weeks. You need a break.”

“I agree,” Cass Wilde chimed in. She put a bowl on the table—cherry tomatoes and mozzarella balls, marinated in her famous tarragon dressing, with toasted Texas pecans added for crunch. “You haven’t had any time off since before Christmas. Ruby and I can take care of the shop and the tea room, and Laurel’s available when we need her. So go, China. *Go* already!”

I waved a fly off the plate of fried chicken. “I’m thinking about it,” I muttered.

“Good,” Sheila Dawson said. “Think hard.” She hefted a large picnic jug full of lemonade onto the table, Rambo at her heels. Rambo is the Rottweiler she recently adopted and who is now in training to become Pecan Springs’ first K-9 cop. “I agree with Ruby and Cass. You need a break. *We* need a break. You’ve been down in the dumps and generally snappish for weeks.” Her voice softened. “You owe it to yourself, China. Really.” Rambo barked and wagged his tail.

*They* need a break? *I’ve* been generally snappish? Well, I suppose I haven’t been very easy to work with. The past month has been one of the worst in my life. But still—

“I don’t see how I can get away,” I said flatly. “It’s June, and the gardens need work.”

“So what else is new?” Cass asked. “The gardens always need work. That’s the nature of gardens.”

This was true, although this year we’d had a lot of spring rain and the weeds were more enthusiastic than usual. I ignored her. “And it’s not like this is slack season at the shops,” I went on. “We’re busy—thank heavens. I mean, it’s nice to have customers, isn’t it? Would you prefer the opposite condition?”

“Don’t be sarcastic, China,” Ruby said gently.

“Well, would you?” I persisted. “And there’s the tea room and the catering service. Oh, and the Farmer’s Market.” The Pecan Springs’ Farmer’s Market is just getting started, and all the locavores—people who prefer to eat food grown in their local, hundred-mile “foodshed”—are loving it. They love locally grown herbs, too, so I’m selling at the market on Saturdays. “Even if I wanted to go to Kentucky, which I don’t, there’s no way I could.”

“Here it comes,” McQuaid called, going into his windup. Out on the diamond, my husband was pitching slow balls to my ten-year-old niece, Caitlin. Amy was on first, Kate was hanging out between second and third, and Brian was dancing around in the outfield. Marcia Sellers, Caitlin’s other aunt, was crouched behind the plate with a catcher’s mitt. Howard Cosell, McQuaid’s elderly basset, was lying flat in the dirt behind Marcia, calling balls and strikes with lazy flicks of his stumpy tail.

*Aunt*. It’s a new word for me. I still haven’t quite gotten used to the idea that I am Caitlin’s aunt. For that matter, I haven’t gotten used to the idea that Caitlin’s father—my half-brother, Miles Danforth—is dead, murdered. Come to think of it, I’ve barely gotten used to the

idea that I *had* a brother. Until the last few months, my mother and I had imagined that I was my father's only child. Silly us. Silly me.

*Swack!* Caitlin swung hard and connected. For an instant, she stood there, stunned at having actually hit the ball, until Marcia gave her a push, shouting, "Run, Caitlin! Run, run, run!"

Brian let the ball skitter away from him and lost it in the grass (intentionally, I was sure). Howard Cosell scrambled to his feet, trying to decide whether he should go help Brian locate the ball or chase Caitlin around the bases.

Amy and Kate—Amy is Ruby's daughter and Kate is her live-in partner—were jumping up and down and screaming, "Run, Caitlin, run!" while Rambo, tongue lolling, raced from the sidelines to dance alongside Caitlin.

McQuaid, hands on his hips, was wearing a pretend scowl. "Whose side are you on, anyway?" he demanded of Amy and Kate, as Caitlin scampered around second base, then third. Laughing, Brian finally found the ball between his feet, juggled it, dropped it, then lobbed it home.

But Caitlin and Rambo were already safe at home plate. He jumped up and licked her chin and she sat down with a thump, looking as though she couldn't believe what had just happened. Her first home run. The first of many in her life, I hope.

Cass and Ruby got up to cheer, and I stood, too. "Way to go, Caitlin!" I yelled excitedly, whistling around two fingers. "Way to go!" I sat back down on the picnic bench and added, to Cass and Ruby, "And I have to think of Caitlin, too, you know. Marcia's been sick. I don't think it's a good idea to leave just now."

Ruby picked up Baby Grace—Amy's daughter—from her playpen and put her into her high chair. She rolled her eyes. "Oh, for pity's sake, China. You're acting like you're going to *Jupiter*. It's just Kentucky, and it's only ten days. And Marcia says she's feeling better. She looks a lot stronger, don't you think?" She bent over and kissed Grace's nose. "Gwamma's favorite sweetie-kins," she murmured in that doting tone people reserve for babies and new puppies. "Gwamma's precious."

Marcia actually did look stronger, but I wasn't going to admit it. "It's not ten days," I said. "It's fourteen, counting drive time. And I'd have to drive, since Martha Edmond and I would be going together. That's two weeks, Ruby. Two whole weeks. Who'll look after the gardens? And what about the Farmer's Market? We're just getting started there. You can't get along without me."

"Now she thinks she's indispensable," Sheila said sarcastically, over her shoulder. It was her turn to bat, and she was headed for the plate, blond pony tail bouncing, Pecan Springs Police Department cap pulled low over her eyes. "Such arrogance."

Laura Riley brandished the grilling fork. "We can get along without you just fine, China." Her round cheeks were flushed from standing over the hot dogs and hamburgers. "We do it all the time, don't we?"

"Yes, but that's for just a couple of hours," I pointed out. Laurel fills in for us at the shops, whenever Ruby, Cass, or I have to be gone. "You can't get along without me for two whole weeks."

"You already said that," Cass retorted. "But the rest of us agree that you have become increasingly egotistical, arrogant, and overbearing, and that you need some time off to regain your humility and sweetness of spirit." She smiled sweetly. "What better place to do that than a Shaker village? So just shut up and fetch the pickles, will you? Ruby left them in the car."

Ruby tossed her red hair out of her eyes. "Humility?" she asked with a laugh. "'Sweetness of spirit' I might buy in a pinch, but China Bayles, humble? Not in your wildest dreams!"

I hoisted myself off the picnic bench. "I can see that my talents aren't appreciated here," I said darkly. "I'll get the pickles."

“Bless you,” Ruby said, as a cheer went up from the field. Sheila had bounced McQuaid’s pitch into Kate’s waiting glove, and Amy had tagged her out at first, retiring the side. “Oh, and there’s a bag of sliced onions—bring those, too. And please hurry. We’re just about ready to eat.”

While I am fetching the pickles and onions, I’ll take a minute to fill you in on who’s who here, in case you don’t have a clue. I’m China Bayles—I own an herb shop called Thyme and Seasons, here in Pecan Springs, Texas. I used to be a criminal attorney in Houston, but when life in the fast lane began to taste like leftover mashed potatoes, I cashed out my retirement plan and opted for the small-town life. I won’t get rich, but there are plenty of other satisfactions. I love being able to bike around town when I feel like it. I love working with plants, in the shop and in the gardens. And life seems quieter and sweeter here, although appearances often belie the reality. Like other small towns, Pecan Springs is no safe haven from crime, drugs, and family violence. But I’m happy, all things considered. I’m harbored by a loving family and close friends, wonderful friends, like the ones at the picnic today.

My friend Ruby, for instance, the tall, skinny redhead in the emerald green top, short green shorts, and outrageous green wedgies, who’s cooing at her granddaughter. (Look into her eyes and you’ll see that she’s wearing green contacts, so her eye-color matches her outfit.) Ruby owns The Crystal Cave, Pecan Springs’ only New Age shop, in the same building as my herb shop. Along with Cass Wilde, we’re partners in a tea room called Thyme for Tea.

And that’s Cass over there, setting out the tray of stuffed mushrooms. Where Ruby is tall and slender as a willow wand, Cass is very well rounded, with lots of luscious curves. “I’m large and I love it,” she likes to say, and adds, with a wicked grin, “Wanna arm-wrestle?” A very fine cook with the credentials to prove it, Cass manages our tea room. She’s also developed a personal catering service called The Thymely Gourmet that’s quite a hit in Pecan Springs, especially among the commuting crowd. The three of us, Cass, Ruby, and I, also manage Party Thyme, which caters weddings, reunions, library luncheons, and the like. Ruby calls these three-ring enterprises our “Flying Circus.” They do take a lot of time, which makes it hard for me to get away.

But Laurel Riley, the young woman with the plate of hamburgers in her hand and the long brown braid down her back (she’s part Cherokee), is a Master Herbalist and a terrific gardener. If there’s anybody I’d trust to take over the shop for two weeks, it’s Laurel. She’d love it, too, since every customer who comes in the door is a potential client for her newly-established consulting practice in herbal medicine and nutrition.

Let’s see, who else? Oh, McQuaid, of course, and Brian, who are trotting off the ball field, flushed with victory and the heat of a June afternoon in the Texas Hill Country. I’ve been married to McQuaid—the tall, dark, blue-eyed, almost-handsome guy with the crooked nose and the UT burnt-orange t-shirt—for nearly three years now. A former Houston homicide cop, he teaches part-time in the Criminal Justice department at Central Texas State University. The rest of the time, he works as a private investigator, although we could wish for a few more clients. (If you know of anybody who’s got a case that needs solving, you might put in a good word for McQuaid.) Brian, now fifteen and looking more like his dad every day, is our son—well, McQuaid’s son. Sally, Brian’s mother, shows up occasionally and stays just long enough to make us all wish she’d go away again. We haven’t seen her for nearly a year now, which probably means that she’ll be dropping in soon.

The beautiful blond with the long, slim legs who just got tagged out at first base is Sheila Dawson, Pecan Springs’ police chief—and believe me, she never gets tagged out in real life. Smart Cookie (that’s what her friends call her) is our town’s answer to the Texas Crime wave. Mess with her and you’ve got trouble. Double trouble, actually, since Rambo, who is a protective hunk of a dog, might just take a chunk out of your leg. The two gals who teamed up to tag Sheila out are Amy—Ruby’s wild child and Baby Grace’s mother—and her partner, Kate. They’ve been

together for over a year now, and Kate (who has her own business as an accountant) has been a settling influence on Amy. Or maybe having a baby has settled the both of them down.

Which leaves Caitlin, my niece, and Marcia Sellers, her aunt. Her *other* aunt. This is a terribly sad story, and the sadness is still brutally fresh, for all of us. Caitlin—the dark-haired little girl with the pixie haircut, celebrating her home run—lost her mother three years ago and her father three weeks ago. Miles Danforth, Caitlin’s dad and my half-brother, was killed in a hit-and-run in the parking garage near his firm’s law office in downtown Austin. The killer is being held without bond, and the man behind it all has already pled guilty to several lesser charges. Rather than face the wrongful death suit I threatened to file, he’s agreed to set up a substantial trust fund for Caitlin. His lawyer and I (I’m the executor of Miles’ estate) are still working out the details. The money will never compensate Caitlin for the loss of her father, but at least I can be confident that she will be well taken care of.

And Marcia will certainly see to that. Caitlin’s mother’s sister, she is now the little girl’s court-appointed guardian. Marcia has no children of her own, but she worked as a children’s physical therapist and she’ll be an ideal mother for Caitlin. Unfortunately, she hasn’t been well, although I was happy to see that she seemed better today—more animated, less fragile—than she’d been since Miles’ death. It has hit her hard, for she and Miles had been talking of marriage. He’s gone now, but she has his child.

As I say, it’s a sad story. The past few weeks were exhausting, and I am bone tired and heart sore—and yes, I suppose it’s fair to say that I’ve been snappish, too. Death is always a cataclysmic event in the lives of the left-behind, but murder is worse, much, much worse, and I am still tumbling and whirling in its emotional undertow. There’s grief, but there’s also anger and bitterness and fear and pain and guilt. My brother offered me the opportunity to know him better, and I didn’t take him up on it. I refused, and now I’m sorry. Deeply sorry. There’s no way to make amends except to Caitlin, and I’ll do whatever I can for her. There’s nothing more I can do for Miles.

I sighed. No two ways about it, the last few weeks of my life had been focused on nothing else but the aftermath of Miles’ murder—discovering who had killed him and arranging the financial settlement for Caitlin, as well as trying to manage all the details of his extensive and complicated estate. And in that moment, I knew that Ruby and Cass and Sheila were right. I needed to get away. Yes, this was an inconvenient time. And yes, two weeks was too long to leave the shop and the gardens and the Farmer’s Market—and Caitlin and Marcia, too.

But going away would give me an opportunity to get some perspective on what had happened, a chance to step out of the situation and deal with my grief and guilt. When I came back, I’d be freshly energized and ready to tackle the tough issues I was facing—the details of Caitlin’s settlement, the probate of Miles’ estate, the trial of the man who killed him.

And I couldn’t have a better excuse for a getaway, actually. Martha Edmond had asked me to go to Kentucky with her. She was offering a couple of one-day workshops on Shaker herbs at Mount Zion Shaker Village, in northern Kentucky. I could help with the workshops (an extra pair of hands is always welcome), enjoy the gardens, relax in the mineral springs, let go, loosen up, unwind. I don’t know a lot about the Shakers, but what I do know is intriguing. I’d be glad to learn more about them. And I would certainly be glad to see Martha again. I’d met her when Leatha—my mother—and I were at Jordan’s Crossing, my mother’s family plantation, when we first found out that Aunt Tullie Coldwell was sick. Martha was now an email buddy, but we hadn’t had a chance to get together since—

“Hey, China, the pickles!” Cass yelled.

Oops.

We were halfway through lunch when Ruby brought up the subject again. “We’ve been telling China she has to go to that Shaker village with Martha Edmond,” she said, loudly enough to be heard over the hubbub of conversation around the table. “But she won’t listen.”

“I listened,” I said contritely. “I considered all your arguments, and I’ve decided—”  
“I’ve been telling her the same thing, Ruby,” McQuaid said, sitting next to me. “Brian and I can handle stuff at home. She doesn’t need to worry about us. But you know China. Stubborn as an old Texas mule.”

“You could leave out the ‘old,’” I said.

“I told her, too,” Brian put in. His voice is changing, and part of this came out in a squeak. “In fact, I made the mistake of telling her that we’d be glad to have her gone for a few days. It’d be fun for Dad and me to batch it by ourselves. Maybe that’s why she won’t go.”

“Hey!” I protested. “Isn’t anybody listening to me? I said I’ve thought it over and—”

“I just don’t understand it, China.” On the other side of the table, Cass was shaking her head. “You know, if somebody offered me an all-expenses-paid trip to a mineral spring spa in Kentucky, I’d be all over it like white on rice. Why can’t you—”

“I am GOING!” I roared, and slapped the table. “Will you all please listen? I have decided to go to Mount Zion. I will call Martha Edmond tonight and tell her. So everybody can just shut up about it, okay?”

There was a startled silence around the table. Then Ruby broke into a loud cheer. Cass clapped, Sheila whistled, and McQuaid gave me a quick hug. “This is good, baby,” he whispered. “You need some time off.”

“Yeah, right,” I said dryly. “Everybody is obviously eager to get rid of me.”

“We’re not eager to get rid of you, China!” Ruby cried, distressed. “We just want—”

“We just want you to come back as a kinder, gentler person,” Sheila said. She dropped Rambo a bit of chicken and reached for another ear of buttered sweet corn.

“Transformed,” Amy said, giving Baby Grace a carrot to chew on. “And totally de-stressed.”

“Rested and relaxed,” Laurel added, in an encouraging tone.

“And rarin’ to go to work,” Cass concluded, waving a drumstick. “Hey, this is really great chicken. Who brought it?”

“I did,” I replied, adding carelessly, “I like to cook when I’m feeling snappish. This is my secret recipe. Twelve herbs and spices.”

“Hey,” Kate said, “that’s one better than the Colonel!” She picked up the platter. “Seconds, anybody?”

“Me,” McQuaid said, taking another piece. He glanced down at Howard Cosell, soliciting under the table, and tossed him a chunk of dark meat. Howard, no slouch in the chicken department, wolfed it down and nuzzled McQuaid’s knee, begging for more. McQuaid grinned at me. “Hey. Howard and I will miss your chicken, babe.”

Caitlin, sitting on my left, didn’t quite understand that we were all just teasing. “We’ll miss *you*, Aunt China,” she said in a prim, little-girl voice. “I hope you have a really good time.”

“Thanks,” I said, and squeezed her hand. *Aunt China*. I could get used to this.