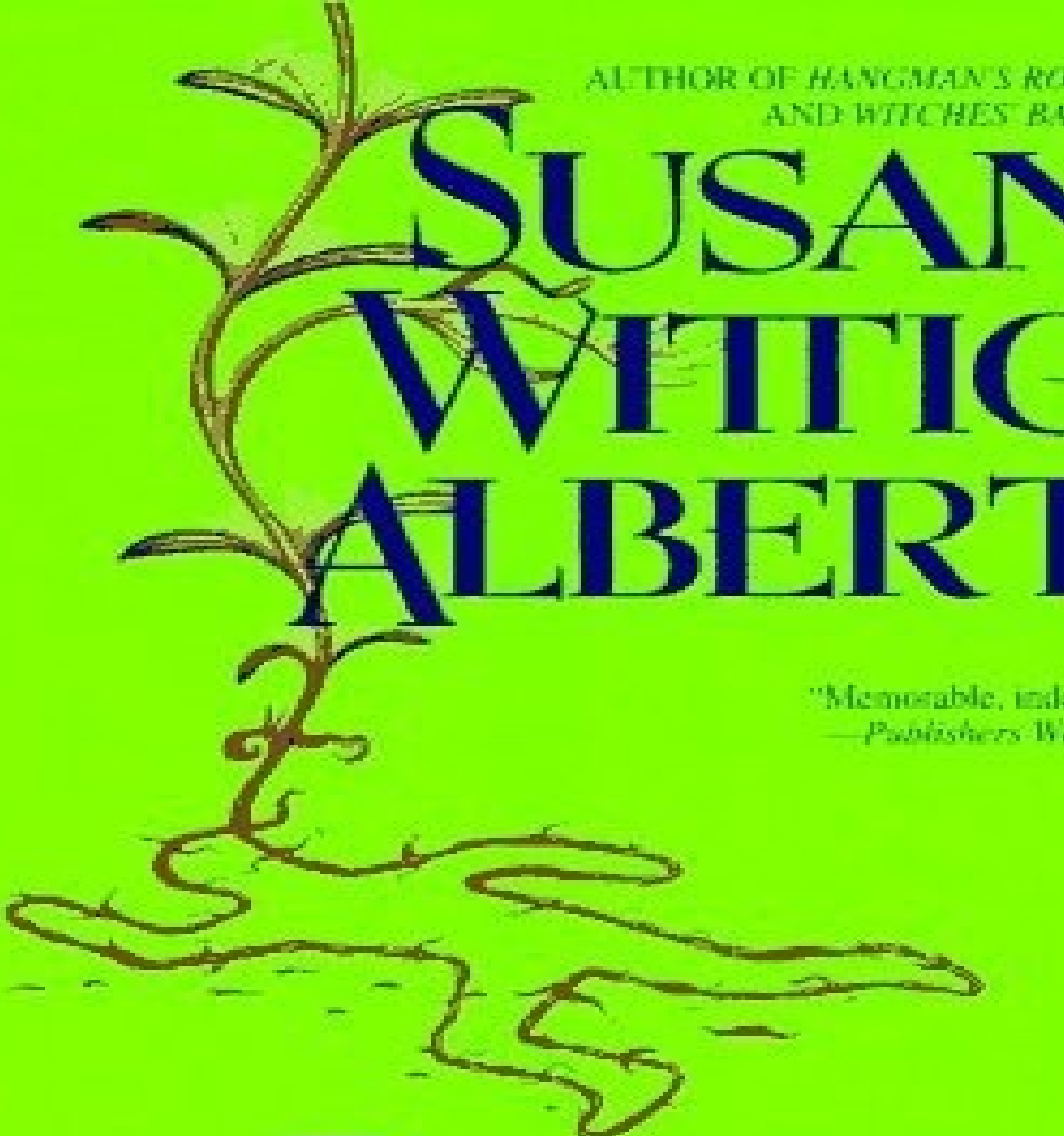



AUTHOR OF *HANGMAN'S ROOT*
AND *WITCHES BANE*



SUSAN
WHITIG
ALBERT

"Memorable, indeed."
—*Publishers Weekly*



ROSEMARY
REMEMBERED

A CHINA BAYLES MYSTERY

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Susan Wittig Albert

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is set in the imaginary Texas town of Pecan Springs, which incorporates a variety of fictitious elements, such as the campus of Central Texas State University and The Springs Resort

Hotel. If you're familiar with the central Texas Hill Country, please don't confuse Pecan Springs and its inhabitants with such real towns as San Marcos, New Braunfels, Wimberley, or Fredericksburg, or CTSU with any local university. You will also forgive me, I hope, for inserting Adams County between Travis and Bexar and adding the Pecan River to the eastern edge of the Edwards Aquifer. The fictional characters and events of this book are created entirely for pleasure; the occasional reference to real people, places, and events are intended only to lend depth and verisimilitude to the fiction and fool you into feeling that Pecan Springs is part of the real world.

CHAPTER ONE

Most of the herbs we use every day have a wonderful tolerance to heat and drought. In fact, it is often claimed that a dry, hot climate is ideal for herbs. The heat and aridity concentrates and intensifies the aromatic oils in the plants' foliage, so that the fragrance is clearer, the taste sharper.

China Bayles

A Book of Thyme and Seasons

For the past couple of weeks, Pecan Springs had been sizzling in a Texas-size heat wave. The red-orange sun skittered like a ball of flame across the cloudless morning sky, afternoon temperatures nudged one hundred, and the night air was a smothering blanket, hot and heavy. In this kind of weather, you never know what will happen. People burn down to a short fuse.

Take Constance Letterman and Ruby Wilcox, for instance. On this Thursday morning, Constance was standing at the counter in my herb shop, fanning her rosy face with a piece of junk mail and complaining about the heat. Constance is short and round, a Hershey bar or two away from Weight Watchers. She's usually as bouncy as a beach ball, but on this hot morning her tight brown curls were coming unfurled around her scowling face. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Hot 'nough to toast the toes off a horny toad." She spoke accusingly, as if Ruby and I were somehow to blame for this persistent meteorological phenomenon. "How people're supposed to *live* in this heat is beyond me. Cooks the soul right out of you."

Ruby Wilcox looked up from the box of herb conference programs she was unpacking for me. "I never saw the day that got one degree cooler because somebody bitched about it." Her tone was snappish. "And there aren't any more horny toads in this part of Texas, Constance. The fire ants ran them off."

Constance fanned harder, and her rosy face got rosier. "No need to get your back up, Ruby." She raised her chin and addressed a chili pepper wreath hanging from the ceiling. "Far as horny toads go, some folks jus' take things too literal."

I put down a large, fragrant bowl of just-clipped mint on the counter next to the phone. My name is

China Bay-les. Ruby Wilcox is my best friend and tenant, and this was probably the first time in Ruby's life that anybody ever accused her of being too literal. Her Crystal Cave shares space with my Thyme and Seasons in the century-old stone building I own on Crockett Street, a few blocks from Pecan Springs' town square. As you might guess from the name, The Crystal Cave is a New Age shop filled with incense and rune stones and space music and books on how to read your horoscope. As you might also guess, the Cave is Pecan Springs' *only* New Age shop, which makes Ruby something of a rarity. But she's a rarity on other counts, too. She's just over six feet tall (depending on which shoes she's wearing), with carrotty, every-which-way hair, freckles, and wide eyes, green or gray or brown (depending on which contacts she's wearing). This morning, her eyes were green and her orangy frizz was snugged back from her forehead with a green band. She was wearing a loose, lacy top, cream-colored; a flowing, ankle-length skirt in various shades of green; and flat, green sandals. Her toenails matched her hair, and her fingernails matched her toenails. Ruby is a real treat.

Constance Letterman owns and manages the Craft Emporium, next door on the corner of Crockett and Guadalupe. The Emporium is housed in a huge old Victorian that somehow reminds me of an eccentric but charming maiden aunt, laden with bandboxes and wicker baskets, wearing a floppy straw hat heavy with cabbage roses, and smelling faintly of lavender and lilies of the valley. It's crammed to the rafters with craft shops and boutiques: Gretel's CandleWorks, Peter Dudley's antique dishes, The Vintage Boutique, and Blanche's Buttons & Laces. The next time you're in Pecan Springs, you really should stop and browse. And while you're in the neighborhood, drop in at Thyme and Seasons as well.

Even under the best of circumstances, Constance and Ruby are equally volatile, and when they rub up against one another, they heat up. Today, they were like a pair of prickly pear cacti trying to dance on a hot rock. I changed the subject.

"Did you go to the fireworks last night, Constance?"

Every Fourth, the Pecan Springs Chamber of Commerce sponsors a fireworks display at the Little League Park out at the end of LB J, behind the fairgrounds. Families sprawl on blankets on the grass or relax in lawn chairs in the backs of pickup trucks that flaunt the Texas star and bars and bumper stickers that say, "Buy American or Go on Japanese Welfare." The Lions Club sells chili dogs and nachos blanketed with jalepeno cheese and sweetened iced tea in white foam cups, while carnival honky-tonk blares in the background and everybody oohs and aahs at the cascades of fiery sparks that shower through the night sky. When the last Roman candle scorches the stars, it's time to dance country-western to a local band. Last night it was The Possum Brothers. They started with "Blue Eye Cryin' in the Rain." We wished. Anything to cool us down. A gully washer, a frog choker, even a hurricane.

Well, we got our wish. A passing shower had dampened us this morning, but the rain didn't bring down the temperature more than a degree or two. In fact, the leftover humidity was only turning up the scorch factor and making everybody more touchy.

"O' course I went to the fireworks." Constance answered me indignantly, as if I'd accused her of missing her mother's birthday. "Nobody stays away from the Fourth."

Constance is right. In Pecan Springs, the town turns out en masse for the holidays. Fireworks on the Fourth, the parade of homemade floats on Labor Day, the Pecan Festival every October, "Silent Night" around the Christmas tree on the square, taps at the cemetery on Memorial Day. If you come from New York or Chicago, these probably seem like small-potato pleasures. But people around here grew up on them, find them nourishing, and want to pass them on to their children. The Fourth and Labor Day and Pecan Festival Weekend are big events in the life of a small town, and we celebrate them together, knowing that we aren't really celebrating the occasion, we're celebrating each other and the hope that holds us together.

This sense of quiet community is a strong contrast to the competitive life I used to lead as a criminal defense attorney in a big Houston law firm. I once knew a famous defense lawyer who bragged that he went to court armed for hand-to-hand combat. When he walked out of the courtroom, he expected to leave the other guy stone cold dead on the floor. A metaphor, maybe, but not by much. Our adversarial system may not be literally bloody, but that doesn't make it any less murderous. As one of the adversaries, I whipped the prosecution in my share of battles, and got whipped in the rest. I lived like a junkie on the adrenaline rush of legal skirmishes and courtroom battles. But the job was a good one, the best in the city, at least according to my friends, who kept telling me how lucky I was to have it. My work pumped up my ego, paid *mucho dinero*, and promised to promote me to senior partner sometime before menopause.

I didn't quite make it. A few months short of forty, I realized that I was deeply disgusted with the whole thing, with the sleaze and the lies, with the criminals and, yes, with the courts.

Nine out of ten of my clients were guilty as sin, which meant that if I was good enough, smart enough, and aggressive enough to win ten acquittals, nine guilty people went free. I began asking myself whether I felt morally good about this, and when the answer began to come up no more times than it came up yes, I turned in my resignation and moved to Pecan Springs, where I used my ill-gotten gain to buy a small herb shop in a century-old stone building with living quarters in the back. I make a decent living, I love what I do, and I'm happy.

But I couldn't spend the morning congratulating myself for escaping the rat race. This was the weekend of the annual conference of the Texas Herb Growers and Marketers Association, which was being held at The Springs Resort Hotel just outside of town. I was on the planning committee, and there were still a couple of hundred loose ends to tie up. But before I could tend to any of them, I had to pick up McQuaid's truck, affectionately known as The Blue Beast. Yesterday evening, he had loaned The Beast to Rosemary Robbins so she could move a file cabinet and chair she had bought. I was driving over to her house this morning to get the truck so I could use it to haul rental tables to the hotel.

But first things first. I frowned at the stack of conference programs Ruby had unpacked. "That doesn't look like a hundred and fifty programs, Ruby. There must be another box somewhere."

Ruby shook her head. "That's it. The printer must have shorted you."

I sighed. Another problem to add to the list, as if it weren't long enough already. Setting up a conference for 150 people isn't a picnic. Other members of the committee were handling the awards banquet, the trade show vendors, the workshops, seminars, and round table discussions, and the herb spaghetti sauce contest that was always the high point of the annual conference. I was supposed to handle the Herb Bonanza Bazaar, which would be open to the public on Saturday, and work with the hotel to make sure that everything went smoothly.

So, sometime in the next few hours, I had to check out a list of details with the hotel, pick up extra tables for the bazaar, and chase down a gross of green tee shirts bearing the guild's logo, last seen on the wrong UPS truck, heading into the sunset at top speed. And on a weekend when hordes of out-of-town herbalists would be stopping in to see Thyme and Seasons, the shop's ancient air conditioner had begun to gasp and rattle as if it were dying of pneumonia. But herbalists are an understanding lot, the air conditioner was still wheezing out a few asthmatic BTUs, and UPS had phoned to say that the vagrant tee shirts had been apprehended in Lubbock and were being extradited to Pecan Springs. I could see light at the end of the tunnel.

I turned to Ruby. "I have to get moving, Ruby. Will you watch the store until Laurel shows up?"

Laurel Wiley gives me a hand when I need her, which has been pretty often lately, what with the conference and everything else. She's more than just a store-sitter, though. She's an expert on Southwestern herbs, and I rely on her for a lot of things I'm still learning about. If you're puzzled about *Lippia graveolens* or *Poliomintha longiflora* or *Coriandrum sativum*, Laurel will clear away the mystery.

"Sure," Ruby said. "Anyway, I owe you one. You subbed for me a couple of times last week."

"That's what's nice about having two shops under the same roof," Constance said. "You can trade off."

"Yeah." Ruby stood up. "We can have a life while we make a living."

Until a few months ago, Thyme and Seasons was crowded into one twenty-by-twenty room and I lived in four rooms in the back. It was a large, lovely living space, but there wasn't much shop room. Then I moved into a house outside of town with my friend Alike McQuaid and his eleven-year-old son Brian and expanded the shop into the space where I used to eat and sleep. I still have to own up to some fundamental uncertainty about living *en famille*, but if I've traded away some of my personal freedom I've gotten some great shop space in return, not to mention a reliable relationship that's always there to come home to. I'm now trying to decide whether to turn my former kitchen into an herbal tea room.

With the added space, Thyme and Seasons is just about perfect—or will be, when the remodeling is finished. Wooden shelves along the stone walls hold large jars and massive stoneware crocks full of dried herbs, small bottles

of herb tinctures, and tiny vials of essential oils and fragrance oils. There are herbal seasonings,

vinegars, and jellies to bring new life to any cuisine, and herbal soaps, cosmetics, and aromatic oils to bring new life to body and spirit. Books line one wall in a cozy reading corner, baskets of pomanders and sachets sit in the corners, dusty-sweet bunches of yarrow and tansy and salvia hang from the ceiling, ropes of pungent peppers and silvery garlic braids festoon the walls, and wreaths of artemisia, sweet Annie, and delicate dried flowers are everywhere, lending a sweet, spicy fragrance to the air.

Outside, Laurel's sister Willow and I put in many long hours last spring transforming the entire yard, from Crockett Street back to the alley, into a collection of theme gardens: a silver garden, a tea garden, a butterfly garden, a dyers' garden, a kitchen garden. The work won't be done for a few more months — probably never, actually, since herb gardens have a way of inviting you to do just a little more here and a little more there. But the gardens are already paying off in increased plant sales, and they look lovely.

Constance stopped fanning and pushed her damp hair out of her eyes. "I'd better get back to the Emporium." She went to the door. "Rosemary Robbins is coming this morning to go over the books."

Rosemary Robbins. The same Rosemary who borrowed McQuaid's truck. She did my accounting work too, as well as Ruby's and Constance's and McQuaid's.

Speak of the devil. The phone rang as I was waving good-bye to Constance, and I reached for it, moving the bowl of mint aside.

"Hi," McQuaid said. "Have you collected The Beast from Rosemary yet?"

"I'm leaving this minute," I said.

"Okay." There was something different about Mc-Quaid's voice. "But be careful."

I laughed shortly. "Be *careful*? You're worried I'll put another dent in the poor old Beast?"

My half-sarcastic reply requires a bit of explanation. Mike McQuaid and I met when I was a defense lawyer and he was a Houston homicide detective — not exactly a match arranged by your average dating service. Although I was immediately attracted to him, I pushed the temptation out of my mind. I wasn't into relationships. They took too much time, and I was too busy being a defense lawyer, which made a relationship with a cop very much out of the question.

It wasn't long after I left my career and moved to Pecan Springs that I saw McQuaid again. He'd recently resigned from the police force, for some of the same reasons I had left the law. He was working on his Ph.D. and teaching in the Criminal Justice Department at Central Texas State University, on the north side of Pecan Springs. I still called him McQuaid, as I had when we worked on opposite sides of the judicial fence. But we weren't separated by our jobs any longer. One thing led to another, and we became lovers.

Our relationship has gotten stronger over the last three years, although I've dragged my feet hard enough to leave heel marks in the dirt. Love isn't the problem, for McQuaid is a gentle man with whom I share a great many mutual interests, some of them delightfully, deliciously sensual. The two of us are very good in bed together, and getting better all the time.

No, it wasn't my feeling for McQuaid that kept me from making a commitment. The problem was that I wasn't happy about the idea of a full-time, live-in relationship. I cherished my personal space. I loved having my own business and being my own boss. I refused to jeopardize either state of affairs, and McQuaid was double jeopardy. He was a single parent with a young son. What's more, he hadn't planned to stay at CTSU forever. He aimed at a full professorship at some big-city university that could pay him what he was worth. A long-term relationship with him meant not only becoming a mother but moving back to the city—neither of which I was prepared to do.

But last spring, McQuaid turned down an offer of a professorship at New York University and accepted tenure at CTSU. The same week, he and Brian lost their lease. After a lot of soul-searching on my part and some undue influence from McQuaid, I finally agreed to go halves with him in an eighteen-month lease on a five-bedroom house large enough for two adults and one child and their various belongings, including a fine library of herb books, one large gun collection, and an assortment of reptiles and spiders (including—you won't believe this—a tarantula named Ivan the Hairible). Not to mention Khat, a testy Siamese, and an irascible basset hound appropriately named Howard Cosell.

Living with McQuaid has surprised me. There is the ordinary rub of small conflicts, day to day, but overall it's soothing, this cozy cocooning, this enfolding of body and spirit in the pleasant warmth of home and hearth. But another part of me—the independent China—stubbornly insists that it's too soothing, too cozy. *If the feminist movement taught you anything*, I hear her whisper, *it taught you that there are board rooms to be invaded, career ladders to be climbed, financial killings to be made. So what are you doing washing the dishes and changing the sheets? Haven't you got anything better to do?*

And then there's Brian, who's eleven. I'm forty-four,

I've never been a mom, and life under the same roof with a preadolescent male requires some major attitude adjustments on my part. What's more, Brian has lived alone with his father for the five years since his parents were divorced. He naturally resents having to share his dad with an uppity and intrusive female who's used to having her own way.

And one more thing. For all of my adult life, I've been responsible to nobody, with nobody responsible for me. Now, though, I feel responsible to McQuaid. Worse, he seems to feel he's responsible for *me*. For instance, his telling me just now to be careful. It may seem to you like a small thing, but it bothers me and I get sarcastic, as I did a second ago. It usually doesn't accomplish anything. It didn't this time either.

His voice grew hard and measured: his pull-over-and-step-out-of-the-car voice. "I said *be careful*, China. Houston Homicide just called. Pardons and Paroles turned Jake Jacoby loose day before

yesterday."

That got my attention. Seven or eight years ago, Jake Jacoby killed his wife and mother-in-law and barricaded himself in his house. McQuaid talked him onto the porch and into the arms of the police. Jake was not grateful.

"I thought he got twenty-five years," I said. It had been a crime of passion and Jacoby had hired a good defense lawyer — not me, thank God. I had plenty on my conscience, but not that one.

"Twenty-five years?" McQuaid's chuckle was bitter. "You know better than that, counselor. The prisons are jammed. The prisoners are getting two days' automatic good behavior for every day served." He paused. "Where's your gun?"

"Forget it," I said. My gun—a 9mm Beretta—was behind the paneling in the storage room behind the shop.

I'd only used it for real once, and somebody—who, it doesn't matter just now—was dead. I wasn't going to use it again. Ever.

There was a silence. When McQuaid spoke, his voice was controlled. "Be reasonable, China. According to the prison grapevine, Jake's sworn to get even. I've given Brian his orders, and now I'm telling you. If Jacoby comes around the shop — "

"If he comes around the shop, I'll call the police," I said, being reasonable.

"The police!" It was McQuaid's turn for sarcasm. "You think Bubba's going to be waiting around the corner for you to scream?" Bubba Harris is the chief of the Pecan Springs police, a good old boy with a cigar and a beer belly. He's tough and he runs a tight town, but he's short on manpower.

I had to concede that there was some logic to Mc-Quaid's concern. But it wasn't logic we were talking about, it was control. The emancipated China rose up in me, the China who hates to be told what to do by somebody who thinks he knows better. She was indignant, and she spoke for me.

"Look," she said, "I'm going to pick up the truck and get started on the seven trillion errands I have to run before noon. If you want to discuss this over lunch —"

"I don't want to discuss it at all. Go get your gun and put it in your purse. Jacoby's dangerous."

"I don't have a license for a concealed carry."

"Since when did you let a little thing like that stop you?" His voice was crisp. "I want you to watch out for him, China."

With an exaggerated sigh I said, "Okay. Who am I watching for?"

"He's six foot three, black hair, black mustache, five-inch knife scar on his right forearm, snake tattoo on his right shoulder and the right side of his neck. He thinks he's naked if he's not carrying a knife or a gun." McQuaid was grim. "I want you to be careful, China. *Very* careful."

"I'll be careful," I said. I hung up, being very careful not to slam the phone.

"What was that about?" Ruby asked. She moved the bowl of mint next to the cash register, pausing to sniff its fragrance.

I fished the keys out of my purse. "A man with a snake," I said. "And an ex-cop with a father complex."

CHAPTER TWO

For you there's rosemary and rue....

William Shakespeare *The Winter's Tale*

It was still early, but the heat was waiting outside like a ferocious tiger ready to pounce. Parked in the sun, my twelve-year-old Datsun was an oven, the seat scorching, the steering wheel too hot to grip. The air conditioner made a valiant effort, but the air on my face was a dry blast off the Sahara. I rolled the window down and the humidity rolled in. Texas in July. How did people survive here between the time the settlers built their log cabins and the first air-conditioning salesman knocked on the door? Especially the women, swaddled in long skirts and crinolines and buttoned into bodices so tight they could hardly breathe. Sheer torture, being confined like that.

Just so I could tell McQuaid I'd been careful, I cast a cursory glance around. No sign of a six foot three, black-mustached ex-con with a knife scar and a snake tattoo. Shaking my head at McQuaid's paranoia (once a cop, always a cop, always on guard against something), I pulled out onto Crockett, made a left, and drove a block to the courthouse square.

The tourists flock to the century-old stone-and-timber buildings in the center of Pecan Springs like pigeons to a roost. (In fact, the City Council recently built a public potty behind the library to meet their basic needs, a move which is said to have been instigated by Henry Hoffmeister of Hoffmeister's Clothing & Dry Goods, who got tired of providing toilet paper and a flush for the masses.) They come to Pecan Springs not just for scenic beauty but for a nostalgic taste of small-town Texas, which the merchants ladle out liberally. The square is decorated with flags, red-white-and-blue bunting, and posters announcing that the streets will be roped off on Saturday evening for the square dance competition.

This morning, a small group of silver-haired ladies in summery dresses and white shoes were standing

on the corner listening to Vera Hooper, the town docent. Wearing a denim skirt and yellow tee shirt hand-painted with green cacti. Vera was extolling the architectural wonders of the Adams County Courthouse, which was constructed a hundred years ago of 160 flatcar loads of pink granite, hauled in from Burnet County by rail. As I passed. Vera pointed across the street to the Sophie Briggs Historic Museum, which features (among other enticements) a dollhouse that once belonged to Lila Trumm, Miss Pecan Springs of 1936, as well as Sophie Briggs's collection of ceramic frogs. The Sophie Briggs Museum is a big draw in our town. It's amazing the interest people can have in ceramic frogs.

The square is the first stop on the Gingerbread Trail. After the ladies have admired the courthouse and availed themselves of the new public potty, they'll board an air-conditioned minibus, The Armadillo Special, and tootle south on Anderson Avenue to admire the fine old Victorian houses that line both sides of the street. Pecan Springs was settled by German immigrants in the 1840s, but the big building boom didn't come until the '90s. That's when the arrival of the railroad brought the money to build the courthouse, the gingerbread Victorians, The Grande Theater, and The Springs Hotel. An opulent era, but I'll bet the residents would have traded it all for central air-conditioning. I'll further bet that Vera Hooper's ladies wouldn't have been so enthusiastic about the Gingerbread Trail if they were required to hoof it, rather than riding the air-conditioned Armadillo Special.

I waved at Vera and headed down Anderson to Chisos Trail and made a right. A few blocks west, I drove into Pecan Park, a recently built development of expensive homes surrounded by synthetic green lawns, unnatural rock terraces, and landscaped garden pools. Pecan Park doesn't have much to do with Pecan Springs. As I drove along I was reminded of the Houston suburb where I used to live: green, serene, and empty. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that very few of the residents were around this morning to enjoy their upscale homes. Most of them probably had to work from before dawn to past dark to make enough money to pay their upscale mortgages.

Rosemary Robbins lived on a winding street a couple of blocks off Chisos Trail. Her house was set well back from the road behind a screen of cedar and yaupon holly, with a carefully arranged clump of purple crepe myrtle and plummy pampas grass surrounded by a bed of flaming red salvia, all heavily mulched with bark chips and without a single weed, compliments of Garcia's Garden Service. A cement drive looped behind the streetside clump of oaks and onto the street again. Through the trees, I could see McQuaid's Blue Beast, sitting sheepishly behind Rosemary's stylish gray Mazda. This was not the neighborhood where a battered old truck felt at home — or a twelve-year-old Datsun, either.

I swung into the drive, parked far enough behind The Beast to give myself maneuvering room, and got out.

McQuaid had asked Rosemary to lock the truck and leave the key in the magnetic box under the fender. I wouldn't bother to knock on her door. I'd just get in the truck and drive off. McQuaid and I could pick up my Datsun this evening.

As I stepped out into the heat, the cicadas began a loud metallic drone. Their high-pitched crescendo was counter-pointed by the sardonic clucking of a yellow-billed cuckoo, the bird that Leatha, my mother, called a rain crow. When I hear that sinister clucking, I remember summer afternoons when

was ten, eleven, twelve, reading a book in my favorite tree, Leatha on a chaise longue beneath me, her gin glass within easy reach. The rain crow is a bad-luck bird, Leatha always said, in her soft Southern drawl. When you hear it, watch out. Warnings like that were her defenses against the random perils of a world over which she had little control. Look for cars. Keep your hand on your purse. Lock the car doors. Don't let him touch you.

Perversely, I left the Datsun unlocked. I walked toward The Beast, wanting not to think of Leatha's warning — or of McQuaid's. Sure, Jacoby was a bad actor, and what he had done to his wife and mother-in-law was enough to curl anyone's hair. But Jacoby could be anywhere, Dallas or Houston or El Paso. Anyway, I reminded myself—or rather, the independent China reminded/?^ — Jacoby wasn't the real issue. I slipped my hand under the fender and took out the magnetic key box. The real issue was a power issue. The real issue was —

No key. Well, no problem. Rosemary had probably left it under the seat. And if the truck was locked, I could knock at the door. Her Mazda was here, so she was still at home.

But the truck wasn't locked. What's more, it wasn't even shut. I pulled the door open and saw her.

Rosemary. On her right side across the vinyl seat, face turned up, empty eyes open, glassy, sightless, staring. A neat, smooth, black hole under her left cheekbone, the seat under her head rusty with dried blood, furry with flies. Dark blood, like red ink, splattered all over the passenger side of the cab, the dash, the windshield. Blood and bits of something. Bits of the inside of Rosemary's head.

I gagged and stepped back. The cicadas were a hundred buzzing rattlers, the heat a hard, sweaty hand pressing on my head. I grabbed the door to steady myself, then yanked my hand back, hoping I hadn't smudged whatever prints there were.

After a minute I forced myself to look again, but not at Rosemary. The keys were in the ignition, Rosemary's purse on the floor, the wallet visible. A plastic grocery sack beside the purse spilled bars of soap, a carton of milk, a head of cabbage, all polka-dotted with blood. A Handy Jack Dry Cleaners bag full of clothing hung from the hook over the passenger door, blood-splattered. In the back of the truck I could see a gray metal file cabinet and a chair. Groceries, the dry cleaning, used furniture. Ordinary artifacts of ordinary, everyday life.

But for Rosemary Robbins, there was no more ordinary life, no life at all. The brassy rattle of the cicadas was suddenly swallowed up in her stillness. A sour sickness curdled in my throat. I swallowed it down and leaned over her body, clad in expensive beige slacks, creamy silk blouse, paisley scarf, to feel for a pulse at her throat. Nothing. Her skin was cool, her stillness utter, complete, final.

I looked down, feeling her separateness, sensing the absolute distance between us. Who had she been this woman I had admired but barely known? What had empowered her, brought her pain, brought her peace? What had brought her to this terrible end? And I knew with sad certainty that it was only here, only now, in this last, quiet moment, that Rosemary Robbins could be whatever woman she was. In a little while, she would be the coroner's corpse, the cops' homicide, the DA's murder victim, the

media's crime of the hour. Each of us, the living, would dissect her, construct her, imagine her, compose her as it suited our purposes, our needs. It was only in this moment, her death just discovered and not yet acknowledged, that she could be simply and purely herself, whoever she had been. Here, on the sly verge of death, I wished I had known her better.

I stepped back and took a deep breath, coming back to myself. Then I turned away and left the body in peace for the time it took to find a neighbor at home and call 911. When the PSPD showed up, I was beside the truck again, waiting, pacing, collecting observations: the door had been unlatched, the window was rolled up, unbroken, her wallet was still in her purse, there was no sign of a weapon. Unless the gun was out of sight beneath her, she hadn't committed suicide. If she'd been murdered, the killer must have shot her through the open door while she was sitting behind the wheel—last night, probably, just as she got home with her furniture, the groceries, the dry cleaning. I wondered whether she'd known what was about to happen. And wondered *why*, in God's name. Why Rosemary? My eyes of their own accord, went to the spattered blood, the bits of flesh. Why, why?

The first cop on the scene was a slight, nervous brown-skinned man with large spaniel-brown eyes and a name badge that identified him as Gomez, H. He took one look at the body and ran back to the car to radio for assistance. A few minutes later a second cop arrived, Walker, G., a broad-shouldered woman with a competent jaw, a gritty voice, and a look of twitchy impatience, like a second-string offensive tackle with something to prove — Grace Walker, promoted a couple of months ago from prisoner attendant at the jail to patrol officer. Grace's mother, Sadie Stumb, works at Cavette's Grocery, on the corner of Guadalupe and Green. "That girl," Sadie always tells me proudly, as she rings up my fresh produce, "that Grace, she's goin' far. Ever'body better git outta her way."

Grace looked at Rosemary, then back at me. "Friend of yours?" She turned once again to peer closer. "Sister?"

"Sister?" I was surprised. "What makes you say that?"

Grace raised her heavy eyebrows in a facial shrug. "You look kinda alike. Brown hair, square sorta face."

"Not a sister," I said. "A friend." But that wasn't true, either. Rosemary Robbins and I hadn't been close enough to be friends, except in the most superficial sense. "A business associate, actually," I amended.

I glanced at the still face once again. I hadn't even known Rosemary well enough to know who would be sad, now that she was dead. Who would find the world empty, now that she wasn't in it?

"What kinda business?"

"She was my accountant. She did my taxes, handled my business accounts, stuff like that." I could hear a siren in the distance. More police were on the way.

"Taxes, huh?" Grace moved her shoulder in an economical gesture, expressing understanding. "Maybe somebody didn't get what they thought they had comin', and they took it out on her. I read the other day that accountants are always gettin' threats from people who think they been ripped off. Like lawyers, you know? Lawyers are always gettin' theirselves killed. Somebody just busts into the office and starts shootin'." She sighed and lifted her cap off her head, wiping her sweaty forehead. "Doesn't hardly pay to get ahead, does it?"

The police car pulled up at the curb, and we both turned. If this had been Houston, the vehicle would have been a Mobile Crime Scene Unit, a large white van equipped with state-of-the-art portable forensic technology and manned by a half-dozen criminalists. But this wasn't Houston, and Police Chief Bubba Harris had brought only two uniforms with him. One of them began to loop yellow crime-scene tape across the drive while the other unpacked camera gear. Bubba (his real name is Earl but not even his mother uses it) conferred with Gomez for a moment, then with Grace Walker, putting them to work. Then he turned to me.

Bubba is in his mid-fifties, with hair going grizzled and a paunch that sags over his hand-tooled Western belt as if the last dozen plates of barbecue are still settling. His gray shirt was wet under the arms, and his unlit cigar — I've never actually seen it lit—was clamped in one corner of his mouth. He growled around it.

"McQuaid's truck, ain't it?"

I wasn't surprised that Bubba recognized The Beast. He and McQuaid, cop and ex-cop, have a fraternal relationship.

"I came to pick it up," I said. "Rosemary borrowed it yesterday evening about six to move some furniture she'd bought—what you see in the back of the truck. McQuaid offered to give her a hand, but she said she could handle it by herself." Typical Rosemary. She was the sort of woman who handled everything by herself. She didn't ask for a thing.

Bubba's heavily jowled face was dark, thick brows pulled down. Like most cops, he doesn't much like lawyers, even ex-lawyers. On the other hand, he likes

McQuaid, and the fact that McQuaid likes me complicates the matter somewhat. Over the several years we have known one another, he has grown more tolerant of me.

"Any idea who might've done it?" he asked. "Assumin' she didn't do it to herself."

I shook my head. A flash flared as the photographer did his work. Grace Walker was hunkered down beside the door, dusting for prints. Gomez was beginning a search of the area around the truck. A fourth cop was motioning to a passing motorist who had stopped his car to gawk, directing him to drive on. Bubba turned to the truck and Grace straightened up and stepped aside. He felt rapidly and deftly under the body.

"Doesn't 'pear to be a gun," he said.

"Wouldn't hardly be, I don't reckon," Grace said dryly. "Wound on the left side and the angle the way it is, she'd almost have to hold it in her left hand. It'd be in her lap or on the floor, and it isn't."

Bubba did not seem pleased that a mere female had noticed these things, but he only grunted.

"Had her legs swung partway 'round like she was get-tin' out," Grace went on. She was about to say something else, but Bubba turned away. The EMS van had just pulled up at the curb, followed by another car, a green Oldsmobile. Maude Porterfield, Justice of the Peace, got out of the Olds, conferred with the EMS techs for a minute, then came up the drive toward us, leaning on a cane.

In Texas, the law requires that a JP rule on every suspicious death. This requirement sometimes gives law enforcement officials heartburn, but not when the JP is Judge Porterfield. At seventy-three, she has served the county for forty-two years. Her white hair may be a little thin, but her hearing and her right knee are the only things about her that don't work at an optimum level. In addition to being a JP she teaches criminal procedure in the seminars conducted by the Texas Justice Court Training Center headquartered in the Criminal Justice Department at CTSU. Judge Porterfield and I had met at one of the center's social functions and hit it off immediately. As we say in Texas, she don't take no bull.

"Mornin", Earl," she said. "Hot as a pistol." She straightened the shiny belt of her red watermelon-print dress and nodded at me. "Mornin', China. How you been?" Without waiting for my answer, she switched back to Bubba. "Got a problem here, 'pears like."

Bubba plucked his cigar out of his face and raised his voice two notches. The judge wears a hearing aid in her right ear. "Mornin', Judge Porterfield. A shootin's what it is.

The judge, who isn't much more than five feet high, rose on her tiptoes to peer through the open door of the truck. She made a tch-tch noise with her tongue against even white dentures. "Suicide?"

"Murder," Bubba said.

"Domestic violence?"

Bubba looked at me. "The gal was married?"

"Her name is Rosemary Robbins," I said. "She was divorced, or about to be." Rosemary had mentioned the divorce in passing, but hadn't elaborated. Our encounters, while pleasant, had been focused on business and rather hurried. She was always checking her watch, as if she had to get on to another business engagement. It was a restless habit that had reminded me of myself, in my former life. "She was married to Curtis Robbins," I added, offering up the last bit of personal information I had.

Judge Porterfield pulled her sparse white eyebrows together. "Robbins? Manages Miller's Gun and

Gomez came around the truck. "That's him," he said. "Too bad she didn't file a complaint when she had the chance."

"You been out here on a DV, Hector?" Bubba asked.

"Yeah. Back 'round Christmas. She phoned in a complaint, but by the time I got here, she'd decided not to press charges. Usual story."

The judge took a notebook out of her purse, which was red and shiny and shaped like a slice of watermelon. She looked at Gomez, obviously not accepting the "usual story" bit. "What did he say when you questioned him?"

Gomez colored. "He was gone, an' she didn't want me talkin' to him. Said she thought it might make him worse. She didn't want ever'body in town readin' in the paper 'bout her gettin' beat up."

Grace Walker shook her head gloomily. "Everybody'll be readin' about her now."

The judge looked from Grace to me. "She and Robbins have any kids?"

"Not as far as I know," I said. "She had a business. She was a CPA."

"Woman with a business probably doesn't *want* any kids," Grace remarked sagely.

Bubba gave her a warning look. "This their place?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I got the impression she lived here alone. Her office is in the back of the house." That much I knew, because we'd met there to go over my tax stuff.

"Mebbe we better take a look at the office, Yer Honor," Bubba said.

Judge Porterfield sighed. "Right, Earl. It'll get us out of this gol-durn heat." She and Bubba walked toward the house.

Gomez blinked. "Earl?"

"She used to teach the chief in Sunday School when he was a kid," Grace said. "Earl's his real name."

"Earl," Gomez mused. "How 'bout that."

Grace turned to me. "You wanta give me your statement now, Miz Bayles?"

When that was done, I promised to stop at the police station and leave my prints for elimination purposes, then got back in my furnace of a car. ABC Rentals would have to deliver those extra tables to the hotel, and McQuaid would have to rent a car. It'd be a few days before Bubba turned The Blue Beast loose. She'd done a lot of things during the course of her long and checkered career, but I'd bet this was the first time she'd been a murder scene.

By two o'clock, the temperature was an infernal ninety-nine, and the buildings and trees were shimmering under the blazing sun. I'd plowed through two-thirds of my list of things to do for the herb conference. Next was The Springs Hotel, where I needed to check on last-minute details. That's where I was headed now, the sun visor pulled low against the glare of the aluminum sky and the air conditioner turned up to gale force. Jeff Clark owned and managed the hotel, which had been a family business for several generations. I needed to talk to him.

But my heart wasn't in the herb conference any longer. I was remembering Rosemary Robbins, sprawled on the seat of McQuaid's truck, an obscene hole in her smooth cheek, flies buzzing in her hair. It was oddly intimate, this meeting in death, in contrast to the impersonality of our meetings while she was alive.

Tax accountants are a lot like doctors and priests. They plumb the secrets of your innermost being, peer into your most private places, probe parts of you that nobody else is permitted to see. Rosemary Robbins had explored all my hidden places. She knew where I was succeeding with the store, where I was failing, and probably (damn it) why. She knew about my investments, smart and stupid, and about the financial aspects of my living arrangements with McQuaid. And since she did his taxes as well as mine, she had a pretty clear picture of the two of us and our relationship. Visiting Rosemary was like making a trip to the confessional, leaving my sins behind, large and small, and taking away none of the priest's.

That was the interesting part. Rosemary knew a great deal about me, but I had only vague impressions of her, the way you know a doctor as a crisp figure in white jacket and stethoscope, or a priest as a dim shadow behind the confessional screen. The times we had met, she'd impressed me as a woman who managed her personal life like her business, with such competent organization that it demanded very little of her.

But judging from what Hector Gomez had said, Rosemary Robbins's personal life had been deeply shadowed, her cool orderliness a camouflage for a relationship out of control. There isn't anything paradoxical about this, actually. A dozen years ago, I defended a wealthy woman who had confessed murdering her husband, a well-known Houston optometrist. In her guarded self-control, that woman reminded me of Rosemary. For weeks, she refused to tell me why she had killed her husband, although she was perfectly willing to talk about *how* she had done it. At first I attributed her reluctance to some sort of confused consciousness of her guilt. But when she finally broke down and revealed the abuse that she'd undergone for over ten years, I understood why she guarded herself so closely. The woman was afraid of betraying her deep shame — not the shame of a murderer, but the shame of a victim. Had Rosemary Robbins been unwilling to reveal herself as a victim, fearing that this truth would compromise her public persona? Had her abuser become her murderer? Or was her killer someone else?

altogether, someone out of her past or her present? I was turning these questions over in my mind as I drove out to the hotel to talk to Jeff Clark.

The Springs Hotel is six miles north of town. It overlooks Pecan Lake, a three-acre man-made lagoon formed by a dozen crystal-clear underwater springs that geyser up out of the limestone of the Edwards Aquifer. The hotel was built by Nathan Clark as a resort for the wealthy back at the turn of the century, before anybody bothered to calculate the square-foot cost of air-conditioning and heating. The original building was a three-story Victorian wedding cake, decorated with turrets and towers and frosted with white-painted gingerbread. Mr. Clark owned and managed it for fifty years, adding a wing in 1916, another in 1925, and a nine-hole golf course and stables in 1928, on the theory that Texas oilmen and their families deserve to take a few days' respite from the tedium of pumping money out of the ground. The Depression took the starch out of the big spenders, though, and for a while it looked as if the hotel might not survive.

But with frugality and careful management, Mr. Clark — now *old* Mr. Clark — held on. He sold off forty acres of horse trails, shut down the stables, and closed a wing, and the hotel was still a going concern when he died in 1945. It went to his only son, Charles, whose tastes, unlike those of his frugal father, tended toward wine, women, and song, all in the pursuit of business, of course — or "bidness," as we say in Texas.

Over the next thirty-five years, Charles, or Big Chuck, as he was known, built a reputation as the most flamboyant host in all of Texas. He refurnished the hotel and reopened the wing his father had closed. He restocked the stables, built four lighted tennis courts, and piped the artesian water to a newly-built swimming pool. His friends and customers were wealthy, prominent, and legion. To suit their Texas tastes, Big Chuck threw dozens of Texas-sized parties: Superbowl parties featuring a half-dozen barbecued steers, rattlesnake canapes, and jalapeno-flavored vodka; political wingdings hosted by Lyndon and Ladybird, with country music by Willie and Waylon and the boys; a *Dallas* charity bash where guests came duded up in purple ostrich-skin boots, the caterer's crew were real Kiowas, and Larry Hagman auctioned off a Waterford cut crystal cowboy hat and a four-wheel-drive Land Cruiser rigged for the Ultimate Hunt with two phones, a stereo, and a wine rack complete with a magnum of Chateau Petrus 1961.

But even good parties come to an end. Big Chuck died and the hotel went to his son Jeff and daughter Rachel. The high-rolling days ended, too. By the late eighties, Texans were saying the R-word out loud and whispering the D-word in their sleep. The bottom fell out of oil, real estate, beef, high tech — everything but tumbleweed and fire ants. With \$93 million worth of personal debts, former Governor John Connally and his wife Nellie took Chapter 11 and auctioned off their personal belongings. Socialites filled up their Neiman-Marcus shopping bags with excess glitz and sent them with their maids to the consignment shops. I remember a bitter joke that made the happy-hour rounds in Houston in those nail-biting years: How do you become a Texas millionaire? Start off as a Texas billionaire.

With Big Chuck dead and the economy gone bust, The Springs no longer hosted outrageous parties. Jeff Clark had to struggle to keep the hotel alive — and it *wa**> a struggle, too, especially when his sister Rachel (who handled the advertising and part of the operations) was diagnosed with cancer.

When she died, she left her half of the hotel to her husband, Matt Monroe. Matt had increasingly involved himself in the business as his wife's illness progressed, and by the time of her death, he had taken over a big chunk of the day-to-day operations. The hotel was now owned jointly by Jeff and Matt.

It was Jeff I had come to see. I parked my Datsun under a feathery mesquite tree behind the hotel, picked up my folder of conference plans and notes, and crossed the patio to the office entrance. I like Jeff. It's true that he has the temperament of a red wasp, the social grace of an armadillo, and the imagination of a slide rule. But in spite of his flinty personality, Jeff is deep-down fair. And he's a friend of McQuaid, who once did a small security job for him. They keep up the connection over late night poker and on occasional early-morning or late-night fishing trips to Canyon Lake. Very occasional. Jeff doesn't seem to have much of a life except for the hotel.

I paused at the door to the main office. There were two desks, both empty. One belonged to Priscilla, the receptionist, the other to Lily Box, the office manager. Lily herself was at the Xerox machine, humming a tune while she filled the paper tray.

"Is Jeff busy, Lily?"

Lily turned around with a smile. "Oh, hi, China. He's gone fishing. Mart's around here somewhere, though. Or maybe I can help?" She pushed the paper tray back into the machine.

"Jeffs gone *fishing*? In the middle of the week?"

"Yeah. Surprised me, too." Lily raised the lid on the copy machine and put a paper on the glass, punching buttons. Lily is what every office needs. She's built as solid as a Mack truck, about as elegant and every bit as dependable. She was wearing black slacks, a white blouse, and an open vest that hung down over her hips, obscuring her actual size. "He went down to South Padre Island," she added, as the machine spat out copies. "Good fishing down there. Tarpon, red snapper, bonito, Spanish mackerel. My father used to go whenever he got the chance. Me, I'd settle for a beach-front hotel, a pool, and plenty of sun."

"South Padre?" The island's a nine-hour drive, as far south as you can get without bumping into Mexico. I began to feel frantic, thinking of the list of details and problems that needed immediate solutions. "I thought he'd be here for the conference. He didn't tell me he was going away."

Lily lifted the lid and deftly replaced the paper. The machine zipped out several more copies, fast. "Forgot, probably. The trip's been in the works for a couple of weeks now." She jiggled the copies to even them up. "What the heck, he's got it coming. He hasn't taken more than a few hours off since I've been here, and that's three years. Maybe a little relaxation will sweeten him up some." She glanced at my folder. "It's nothing to worry about. Whatever you've got, I can probably figure it out. And if I can't, Matt can."

"Sure," I said. Lily was right. Jeff could use the time off, and she could deal with just about anything. "But maybe I ought to check in with Matt. Where is he?"

"Right here," he said, from the door to his office. "At your service, ma'am."

Matthew Monroe is a charmer with a ready smile.

brown eyes, and brown hair—what little is left of it. There's a lot of shiny, freckled forehead between his eyebrows and his hairline. But surprisingly, his baldness isn't the first thing you notice. It's his easy amiability, his howdy-ma'am friendliness. Everybody says that big, beefy, back-slapping Matt, with his booming voice and hefty shoulders, takes after Big Chuck a lot more than Jeff does.

Matt thrust out his hand and I shook it. He was wearing an embroidered pale blue Western shirt and a bolo tie with a rattlesnake rattle tie slide, Western-cut blue slacks, snakeskin boots, and a belt with an ornamented silver buckle. He looked as if he'd just stepped out of *Texaj Monthly's* Twenty Texas Big Shots issue.

"Good to see you, Miz Bayles," he said heartily. "Sorry Jeff's not here. Everything shaping up okay for your big weekend?"

"More or less," I said. His face wasn't quite as ruddily affable as usual, and his grin seemed taut. I guessed that he wasn't entirely happy about Jeff's taking off to South Padre and sticking him with the work this weekend. I took my notes out of my folder. "I do have some questions about the table decorations for tomorrow night's reception."

"You'd like some herby-type stuff, I bet." Matt turned to Lily. "Hey, Lil, you got that list?"

Lily found a paper on her desk and handed it to him. He glanced at it. "Says here that Patty, over at Florio's Flowers, is making up wreath centerpieces with parsley, oregano, marjoram, lamb's ears, green and gray santolina, basil, and rosemary—all fresh, of course. Courtesy of the hotel."

I was surprised. "Hey, that's terrific!" Better than ter-

rific, it was a lifesaver. "Where'd you get the fresh herbs?"

"From a grower in San Antonio." Matt frowned. "I didn't screw up, did I? You don't market the fresh stuff out of your shop?"

"Not right now," I said. "By next spring, I probably will." Until McQuaid and I moved to the country, hadn't had room to grow fresh herbs as a sideline product. Now, I was considering planting a large herb garden in the backyard and marketing the produce to upscale restaurants and groceries in San Antonio and Austin. Basils, thymes, shallots, chives, oregano—they'll sell well, once people get used to having them available.

"Let the kitchen know when you've got some," Matt said. "Featuring local products on the menu is good business. Oh, and on your way out, take a look at the back corner of the patio. We're installing a new fountain — artesian, runs off a spring, with the help of thirty feet of pipe." He grinned. "And since the Herb Growers and Marketers Association saw fit to honor our little country-hotel by having the conference here, Jeff thought we ought to plant an herb garden. He got Wanda Rathbot-tom to send over a bunch of plants from Wanda's Wonderful Acres. The garden crew is complaining that the heat is bad for the plants, but they aim to have everything in the ground by tomorrow."

"They're right," I said. "Heat's a killer for young plants. But it was nice of Jeff to think of putting in a garden. He actually took a few days off?"

"High time." Mart's pleasant laugh had an edge. "He's had the temper of a polecat lately. If this trip doesn't improve his state of mind, the staff s threatening to stage a lynching party." He paused. "No offense, but you look pretty done-in yourself. Bet you'll be glad when this conference is over."

"I had a nasty surprise this morning," I said, and told him about finding Rosemary. The news brought a cry from Lily.

"Rosemary! Oh, no!" Lily's face blanched and she sat down hard in her chair.

Matt stared at me, his jaw fallen. "You're kidding. Rosemary Robbins? Omigod!"

I looked from one to the other. "You knew her?"

"She's been working for us the past few months," Matt said. "I hired her to do an audit." He shook his head in disbelief. "God, poor Rosemary. Who could've done it?"

"I know who," Lily burst out furiously. "It was that ex-husband of hers. Curtis Robbins."

"Curt?" Matt pulled his eyebrows together. "He's a member of the Chamber of Commerce. Why would he—"

"Because he's a wife beater, that's why." Lily's face was puckered with anger. "He was here a couple of weeks ago, the day their divorce was final. He wouldn't leave her alone. She said he was always hanging around. Stalking her, was what she said."

"Oh, come on, Lily," Matt said soothingly. "Curt's a regular guy. Very pleasant, always a nice word for everybody. He's not the type to beat his wife."

I didn't say the obvious: that most men wouldn't know a wife beater from their brother. But Lily wasn't backing off.

"How do *you* know what he did and didn't do?" she demanded angrily. "Men don't beat their wives in

public. They wait until nobody's looking."

"How come she didn't call the police?" Matt asked.

"She did." Lily hunched her heavy shoulders and blew her nose into a tissue. "But she didn't press charges. She didn't want people knowing her private business." She wiped her nose. "In fact, she wouldn't have told *me* anything if she hadn't been so upset the day he showed up here. She just couldn't hold it in. Afterward, she acted like she hadn't said a word about it."

"It might be a good idea to phone the police department and tell Bubba Harris about Robbins coming here," I said. Bubba could add that bit of information to what he already knew about the husband's behavior. The outlines of the case were becoming clearer.

"You bet I will." Lily was fierce. "Robbins isn't going to get away with this." She darted an angry glance at Matt, as if he were a wife beater, too. "Chamber of Commerce or no Chamber of Commerce!"

Matt reached into his pocket, pulled out a slim address book, and turned the pages until he found what he wanted. "I'd better let Jeff know about this," he said, punching in some numbers on Lily's phone. "He and Rosemary were pretty good friends. He'll want to know that she — Pedro?" He slipped into a slurry Tex-Mex. "Hey, Pedro, *compadre*. Matt Monroe, up in Pecan Springs. Yeah, say amigo, my brother-in-law, my *cunado*, went out with Charlie on the *Sea Lion* this morning. I need to leave a message for him. SC, Clark. C-l-a-r-k. First name's Jeff. Short, not a lotta meat on him, kinda pinched nose, glasses." There was a pause, the flicker of a frown, then: "Well, okay. If he didn't make it this morning, he'll show up *manana*. When he does, tell him to get back to me right away." He paused. "Yeah, sure, *bueno*, you too. *Gracias. Hasta luego.*" He put down the phone and stood with his hand on it for a moment.

"He didn't go out on the boat?" I asked curiously.

He looked up. "What? Oh . . . no." He rubbed his bald spot as if he were polishing it. "Not yet, anyway. But he left pretty late last night. Probably checked into a hotel to get a few z's. Where's he staying, Lil?"

"I have no idea," Lily said numbly. "He didn't say."

"Well, Pedro works at the dock," Matt said. "He'll make sure Jeff gets the message." He pulled at his lower lip. "God, I can't believe she's dead. You say she was

Mrt"

"In the face. Whoever did it was standing beside the door of the truck."

"In the face!" Lily took another tissue. "It was him, I tell you." She wiped her eyes. "Robbins. You read about it all the time, men killing their wives."

Old hab its die hard. I hate to hear somebody condemned without benefit of jury. "It could've been somebody looking for drug money," I said. "Or a couple of kids playing Rambo. Even a drive-by." But drive-bys don't happen in Pecan Springs, and the kids' pranks are still mostly kid stuff. Robbery hadn't appeared to be a motive, either. I had to wonder whether Curtis Robbins had an alibi.

Matt was scowling at Lily. "If you ask me, the guy's got a right to his day in court." He turned as a pale, pimply young man wearing a white apron came into the office. "What d'ya need, Skip?" he asked, transferring his scowl from Lily to Skip.

The pale young man cleared his throat nervously. "Sorry to charge in like this," he said, "but there's a gross of Cornish game hens just come for the Saturday night banquet. Cook's out for the afternoon and the walk-in freezer's locked. What are we supposed to do?"

Matt started. "Oh, yeah," he said gruffly. "Yeah, well, I'll come and unlock. I've got the key."

"The key?" Lily asked. "Since when has that freezer been locked?"

Matt was fishing in his pocket. "Since this morning," he said. "We've been having trouble with it staying cold. I locked it to cut down the traffic in and out."

Lily was perturbed. "If we're having trouble with the damn freezer, let's get Harold's Air-Conditioning up here to fix it. It's nonsense, messing around with a key."

Matt gave her a dark look. "Last time I looked, I was the boss_here"

Lily muttered something under her breath. Matt ignored her. He clapped a hand on the pale young man's shoulder. "Come on, Skip," he said amiably. "Lily's upset. Now let's you and me get those chickens put to roost."

Lily blew her nose again, made herself a cup of coffee, and then called the police station and left a message for Bubba to call her. Then we got busy on my list. At the end of a half hour I felt better, at least as far as the conference was concerned. I thanked Lily, agreed for the third or fourth time that it didn't seem possible that Rosemary was dead, and left.

Walking across the patio to my car, I noticed the plumbing trench for the new fountain and the tidy area that had been dug for the herb garden. The setting was perfect, in a walled corner of the hotel grounds, although it certainly wasn't the best time of year for transplanting. Nursery flats of lamb's ears, santolina, yarrow, sage, thyme, and germander were sitting in the shade of the wall, along with several large balled plants, their burlap-ped roots covered with canvas. They had all been recently-watered. Among the lot I noticed several silvery Powys Castle artemisias, a half-dozen lavender

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