

Blood Orange

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Chapter One

Today's commercial beers are almost exclusively brewed with hops, the female flowers of the hop plant (*Humulus lupulus*). The result is a uniform, easily controlled flavor.

But before hops began to be widely used (around the ninth century), beer was flavored, bittered, and preserved with an herb mixture called *gruit*. A brewer's *gruit* depended on what was locally available; hence, it was distinctive and often unique. The most important herbs in *gruit* might be sweetgale (*Myrica gale*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), ground ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*), horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*), and/or heather (*Calluna vulgaris*). Other herbs and spices might include chile peppers, juniper berries, black henbane, ginger, caraway seed, aniseed, nutmeg, cinnamon, vanilla, woodruff, cardamom, anise, and hops. Local beers were also flavored with seasonal fruits, such as raspberry, cherry, sweet and bitter orange, blood orange, cranberry, strawberry, peach—and even banana!

Modern artisanal beers—brewed to appeal to local tastes and traditions using locally preferred flavorings—are a return to the distinctive, unique beers of the past and a popular alternative to commercial beers. Blood orange beer, anyone?

China Bayles

“Botanical Drinkables”

Pecan Springs Enterprise

“Excuse me.” I put down my teacup. “I don’t think I heard that right, Ruby. I thought you said that Ramona has bought a *brewery*.”

“That’s exactly what I said.” Ruby sank into the chair opposite mine at her kitchen table and ran her fingers through her frizzy red hair. “My ditzzy sister has just bought a controlling interest in the Comanche

Creek Brewing Company, out in your direction.” She made a face. “You know the phrase, ‘more money than sense’? It fits Ramona perfectly.”

Ruby’s sister, Ramona, has her good points, I’m sure. (Don’t we all?) But I have to confess that her name doesn’t appear among the top ten on my friends list. In fact, I think of her as Ruby’s “evil twin,” and I usually agree when somebody says snarky things about her. Not this time, though.

“Comanche Creek does craft beer,” I said, “and craft beer is huge right now. People like it because it has much more flavor than mass-produced beer. And much more variety. I read the other day that there are almost four thousand small breweries in the U.S. and over a hundred right here in Texas. Ramona could be onto a good thing.”

“But she doesn’t *like* beer, China,” Ruby protested. She poured herself a cup of tea. “She hasn’t drunk enough of it to understand it.”

“That’s a good point,” I conceded. “But most of us don’t understand how the transmission works when we buy a new car. I doubt if many investors know the first thing about the nuts and bolts of the business they’re investing in. They’re just looking for a place to put their money to work.”

“I suppose,” Ruby said slowly. “But you know Ramona. She is a hands-on kind of person with very definite ideas. I can’t imagine her not being totally involved in a business she’s put her money into. And she’s had such a hard time making up her mind. Remember when she wanted to buy into the children’s bookstore next door to the shops? Then she was all gung-ho about the cupcake business. After that, it was the florist shop. And then she decided she’d buy *me* out.”

“That’s another good point,” I agreed. The previous summer, Ramona—who had gotten a substantial divorce settlement from her philandering doctor husband—had decided that her sister needed a rest. *She* was going to buy Ruby’s shop and her share of our tearoom and our catering businesses and go into partnership with *me*. That idea panicked me, until Ruby assured me that she wasn’t selling out to anybody, much less to Ramona. I have learned to be cautious about Ramona’s great ideas.

“You bet it’s a good point,” Ruby said. “This brewery is just another in a long string of impulses. Ramona has a habit of jumping into things without looking, and it gets her into trouble.” She picked up

her teacup and looked at me over the rim. “I have a bad feeling about this, China. My sister could be in for a hard time. And I don’t know what to do about it.”

I have learned to pay serious attention to Ruby’s bad feelings. She is highly intuitive, especially when it comes to reading people’s fears and motivations and anticipating what lies ahead for them. She tries very hard not to poke her psychic nose into the private affairs of people she cares for, but sometimes she can’t help herself.

So I wasn’t going to argue. Something was wrong, and Ruby sensed it. But both of us knew that there wasn’t any point in trying to get Ramona to change her mind. When she decides to do something, she is going to *do* it, come hell or high water. Or both.

“How did Ramona happen to get involved with the brewery?” I asked curiously. “Seems kind of strange.”

The oven timer went off. “It’s a long story.” Ruby put down her teacup and pushed her chair back. “I’ll get our muffins out and tell you while we eat.”

While Ruby goes to the oven to pull out the batch of muffins she’s been baking, I’ll take the opportunity to give you a little context for what’s happening here. It is early morning on the second Monday in April, and Ruby Wilcox and I (we’re business partners as well as best friends) are having our monthly planning session. Our shops—my herb shop, Ruby’s Crystal Cave, and our tearoom—are closed on Mondays, which gives us a chance to catch up on business matters without having to tend to customers. Last month, we met at my house. This month, we’re at Ruby’s. Both of us have brought our laptops and a list of topics we want to talk about.

I love coming here. Ruby’s Painted Lady—a gaudy old Victorian on Pecan Street—is dazzling, outside and in. The exterior is a wonderfully wild palette of smoke gray, spring green, fuchsia, and plum, and the wicker porch furniture is daffodil yellow with red tropical-print cushions. Indoors, Ruby has polished the pine floors to a shimmer and painted the walls in bright orange, yellow, and blue. The kitchen is a warm red, with a watermelon wallpaper border above a yellow-painted beadboard wainscot. A lamp with a green shade hangs over a red-painted table and four green and red chairs. Vintage tea-towel

curtains hang at the window, and clay pots of red geraniums bloom gaily on the windowsill. Ruby's house will make you blink.

Ruby makes you blink, as well. This morning, she had just gotten back from her extra-early yoga class and was wearing multicolored leggings vividly striped in a yellow and purple Aztec pattern, a loose purple tunic, and yellow open-toed sandals that displayed purple painted toes. Ruby has mile-long legs (she's six-feet-something in heels) and Orphan Annie—red hair, and the sight of her makes me smile. But Ruby makes everybody smile, whatever she's wearing. We're all just responding to her natural exuberance and love of life, and her ability to live fully in the present.

Ruby owns the Crystal Cave, the only New Age shop in Pecan Springs, which is adjacent to my herb shop, Thyme and Seasons. At the Cave, Ruby sells incense and rune stones and tarot cards and books; teaches classes in astrology and meditation and the tarot; and offers birth chart readings and Ouija board sessions. As partners, the two of us own and manage Thyme for Tea (our tearoom, directly behind our shops) and Party Thyme (our catering service). With our friend Cass Wilde, we jointly own the Thymely Gourmet, a meals-to-go food delivery service that Cass manages. She also manages the tearoom kitchen and helps with the catering.

And there's Thyme and Seasons Cottage, a remodeled stone stable on the alley behind the shops. Ruby and I used to use it for workshops and classes, but we recently cleaned up the loft over our shops and moved our workshops into that space. Now, I'm renting the cottage as a bed-and-breakfast.

In fact, it was rented right now. Kelly Kaufman, who works at our local hospice, has rented the cottage for the week—an unhappy family situation, she said, and mentioned that she was getting a divorce. Staying at the cottage would give her a breather while she got her act together and started looking for another place to live.

There was a time when I knew Kelly fairly well. She used to be a member of the Pecan Springs herb guild, and we had worked together often. But that had been several years ago, and we'd lost touch. Checking in on Friday, she had seemed unhappy when she mentioned the family situation. But I didn't pry. Kelly's reason for taking the cottage was none of my business. I was just glad the place was available

when she needed it and I could help her out.

So there you have it: what Ruby and I do for a living. “A three-ring circus,” Ruby calls it, and she’s 100 percent right. Ruby, Cass, and I are ringmasters, jugglers, acrobats, tightrope walkers, fire-eaters, and lion tamers. Sometimes we’re the lion tamers, too—and sometimes we’re the clowns. Running a small business is like that. Multiply it by several small businesses, all under one big top, and it’s even more so. To make this circus work, we all have to be very good friends.

You know that old saying about opposites attracting? It’s certainly true where Ruby and I are concerned. She has a wild sense of style, while I am a jeans-and-sneakers kind of gal. She is highly imaginative and often uncomfortably intuitive. I, on the other hand, am much more methodical. Where Ruby boldly goes, I am cautious. Where she’s associative and leapfrogs to unexpected conclusions, I’m literal and linear, taking things step-by-step. Maybe it’s my training as a lawyer, but when I finally reach a conclusion, I know how I got there and can document my sources.

My name is China Bayles. Some years ago, I cashed in my retirement account and left the large Houston criminal law firm where I was practicing. I moved to Pecan Springs, a friendly Texas Hill Country town halfway between Austin and San Antonio, where I bought an herb shop—Thyme and Seasons—in a century-old stone building surrounded by gardens. The business took several years of love, hard work, and long hours to build up, but now it’s something I can be proud of. Best of all, I recalibrated myself from the fast track to the slow, learned to appreciate real friendships, discovered who I was, and began to enjoy the work I do.

A few years after I bought the shop, I married Mike McQuaid, a former Houston homicide detective, currently a part-time faculty member in the Criminal Justice department at CTSU—Central Texas State University—and a more or less full-time private investigator in partnership with Blackie Blackwell. Blackie, a retired Adams County sheriff, is married to Sheila Dawson, the chief of the Pecan Springs Police. This makes for some interesting dinner table conversation when the four of us get together: a retired criminal defense attorney, two ex-cop private eyes, and a police chief. McQuaid and I are the parents of two amazing kids: his son Brian, now in his second semester at the University of Texas at

Austin, majoring in Environmental Science and minoring in girls; and thirteen-year-old Caitlin, my niece and our adopted daughter. Caitie plays the violin with a remarkably unchildlike virtuosity (which she certainly didn't get from my side of the family!) and runs a chicken-and-egg business on the side.

Ruby popped the muffins out of the tin and put them on a plate in the middle of the table with butter. We always have a little something to eat—usually a recipe we're trying out for the tearoom menu—and catch up on each other's personal news before we settle down to business. Our shops are so hectic that we don't have much time to chat when we're on the job, so getting together like this helps keep us connected.

"Tell me what you think about the muffins," she said. "And how about some more tea?" When I held up my cup, she filled it.

I broke the muffin and took a sniff. "Orange!" I said. "Smells yummy." I nibbled at one of the pieces. "Tastes yummy, too. Just enough orange. And there's also—"

"Rosemary," Ruby said. She sat down, watching me to see how I liked it. "Do you think they might work as a menu item?"

"Absolutely. Different, not too sweet. How about giving your recipe to Cass and see what she does with it?"

"I'll do it," Ruby said promptly. "I think they'd pair nicely with her quiche."

"I agree," I said. Cass' signature lavender quiche is a favorite in the tearoom, especially for Saturday brunch. It comes with a salad (whatever is in season), and a muffin would be a lovely addition. I spread butter on my muffin and took a bite. "So tell me about Ramona," I prompted, my mouth half full. "And how she got interested in the brewery."

"How do you suppose?" Ruby reached for a muffin. "She got interested in the brewmaster. A guy named Rich. A hunk, to hear her tell it, five or six years younger than she is and very, very sexy. On the one hand, they are madly in love." She paused, frowning. "On the other hand, he's married—although Ramona says that's only a temporary problem. His wife is being stubborn about the divorce. Ramona is hoping she'll change her mind soon, so she and her hunk can get married."

"Sounds tricky," I said.

Ruby's laugh was brittle "Sounds a lot like Ramona. You know what she's like when she makes up her mind to something. It's full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes. I hope this guy's wife really wants a divorce, because if that's what Ramona wants, it will happen."

"I'm afraid you're right," I said. I wouldn't say this to Ruby, but her sister is one of the most manipulative women I have ever met. Sipping my tea, I went back to the subject of the brewery. "McQuaid and I took a tour of Comanche Creek and tasted some of their beers. It's an attractive place. Have you been out there?"

The Comanche Creek Brewing Company is just off Limekiln Road, about ten miles west of Pecan Springs and just a couple of miles from my house. It occupies a large industrial-looking metal building with a smaller, limestone structure tacked to the front. The whole thing is parked on a stony hilltop, surrounded by a low forest of Ashe junipers, mesquite, prickly pear cactus, and bluebonnets, in season—all very Texas. The small stone building in front is the tasting room.

Ruby buttered her muffin. "I know where it is, but I've never been inside. I'm a wine girl myself. Beer is for guys."

"It might be a calorie thing," I said. "But when we did the tour, women made up about half the group, and they seemed to enjoy the tasting." I paused. "Tell me how your sister met her new guy. This brewmaster, I mean. Did she just happen to drop in out there for a taste or two?"

"Kate told Ramona that the brewery was looking for an investor and suggested that she consider it." Kate Rodriguez is the partner of Ruby's twentysomething daughter, Amy. Together, Kate and Amy have a beautiful little girl, Grace, now almost four, who is the apple of Ruby's eye. Kate is an accountant, and a good one. Ruby and I use her for our businesses, and McQuaid and Blackie are her clients, too.

"If Kate recommends it, the brewery must have something going for it," I said.

Ruby nodded. "Anyway, Ramona went out there to look around. The brewmaster took her for a private tour, and bam! She said it was like two magnets clicking together. A week later, she pulled out her checkbook and now she owns a chunk of the business. And you know Ramona. She rolled up her sleeves and began having ideas."

“Does this brewmaster own the place?” Buying into a business with somebody you’ve fallen for is not the brightest idea in the world, in my opinion.

“Half owner, I think. According to Ramona, his wife owns the other half.”

“Yeah.” I tilted my head. “That’s how it works in a community-property state. What’s ‘ours’ is half mine, half yours. This guy can sell his half, but he can’t sell his wife’s. If they split and the wife keeps her share of the brewery, Ramona may wind up in partnership with her boyfriend’s ex.”

Ruby made a face. “I wish I could feel good about what my baby sister is doing, China, but I just can’t.”

Ramona is three years younger than Ruby, which I guess qualifies her to be the baby sister. But as kids, the two of them weren’t especially close, mostly because they are . . . well, different. Sure, they have the same frizzy red hair and freckles, although Ramona is short, a little on the plump side, and highly competitive. And yes, Ramona shares what Ruby calls their “gift,” which they inherited from their Gram Gifford, who inherited it from *her* mother, who brought it with her from Ireland, along with the red curls and freckles that also seem to run in that family.

The “gift” is a certain psychic talent that Ruby tries not to use unless she is forced into it. In fact, she goes out of her way to avoid situations where she might be tempted to employ it. I know for a fact that she can quite often hear what people are thinking or connect with their feelings and desires, but that she makes a deliberate effort *not* to. And that she can occasionally be surprised by a compelling glimpse into the future—or the past—but that this aspect of her gift frightens her, especially when it descends on her unexpectedly. She’s afraid that she’ll get pulled (she says) into something she can’t get out of, like somebody who falls into deep water and can’t swim. She manages to be comfortable and even lighthearted with what she calls parlor tricks, like the readings she does with her Ouija board or the *I Ching* or the tarot cards. But she always sets limits for herself to keep from getting sucked in.

Now, I am an educated and logical person (Ruby says I am overeducated and exceedingly left-brained), and when I first began to glimpse her hidden talents, I was more than a little skeptical. But I have seen her in action often enough to know that whatever is going on here, it’s very real. It’s also a huge

drain on her physical and psychological resources, so I understand why she's so respectful of it—afraid, almost. It must be something like being suddenly charged up by an energy surge, and when the power's turned off, the energy ebbs, leaving her drained and limp. No wonder Ruby avoids it when she can.

Unfortunately, Ramona doesn't know how to set limits, and she never seems to be bothered by the kind of energy ebb that Ruby experiences. While she can occasionally tune in to what other people are feeling or thinking, she usually misunderstands it or is careless with the way she uses the information. And when she loses her temper or gets spooked, weirdness happens. Things fly around the room, fall off shelves, or explode, as if a poltergeist is at play.

Really. I am not making this up. I've witnessed it myself, especially when Ramona is excited, nervous, or trying to hide something. Ruby has attempted to work with her sister to help her use her capabilities more responsibly, but Ramona isn't very cooperative, perhaps because there's a strong subtext of competition between the two sisters, especially when it comes to their "gift." Ruby says she suspects that Ramona secretly enjoys surprising and even disturbing people, and that she often does it just to get attention. This seems to me to have become more pronounced after Ramona moved to Pecan Springs and took up temporary residence in Ruby's guest room.

But after a couple of months, Ruby began to feel that her sister was taking advantage (it's easy to feel that way with Ramona), and that if she *really* wanted a new start, she ought to begin by getting a place of her own. That took a little longer, because it turned out that Ramona enjoyed living with her sister. (In large part, I suspected, because Ruby managed everything and all Ramona had to do was show up for dinner and put the dishes in the dishwasher afterward.)

Meanwhile, she's been looking for something she really wanted to do with her life. A "business opportunity," she says. "A place to watch my money grow." She certainly has plenty of it, thanks to that liberal divorce settlement. And now, according to Ruby, she's found a new opportunity—and a new guy into the bargain. Maybe.

"Tell me about him," I said. "Are they serious?"

"*She's* serious about *him*," Ruby replied slowly. "She says he wants to get married, as soon as he can

get unhooked from his current wife.”

“That’s not a very promising way to get started,” I said. Jumping out of one long-term relationship and into another is not a good idea, to my way of thinking. You can get into some serious trouble that way. “But of course, lots of people do,” I added, wanting to soften my remark.

“Courting disaster, if you ask me.” Ruby made a little face. “I don’t know much about him, and of course I’m clueless about the beer business. I just wish Ramona would think a little longer before she . . .”

Her voice trailed off, and I guessed that she was thinking of that “bad feeling” she had about the situation. I eyed her curiously, wondering if she was going to tell me. But after a moment’s hesitation, she decided to keep it to herself. Instead, she said, “She says he’ll be with her at Sheila’s birthday party next month. They’ve promised to bring the beer.”

Sheila Dawson and Blackie Blackwell live on Hickory Street, the next block over. As a couple, they are especially popular with their neighbors, who like the idea of having the police chief and her ex-sheriff husband living practically next door. At Christmas, Sheila had held a holiday open house for an overflow crowd. Now, Ruby had invited everybody in the neighborhood to a backyard potluck to celebrate Sheila’s birthday.

“I’ll meet him then, too,” I said. “McQuaid says he’ll be in town that week, so we’ll both be here. I’m bringing salad, right?”

“Right.” Ruby eyed me. “McQuaid’s been doing a lot of traveling lately, hasn’t he? Where is he this time?”

“Out in El Paso,” I said, “doing an investigation for Charlie Lipman. McQuaid didn’t give me the details, but I’m sure it’s the standard thing—Charlie asked him to develop a dossier on somebody who’s suing one of his clients.”

“In other words, dig up all the dirt,” Ruby said, pulling her mouth down. “Look for all the other guy’s human failings so they can be used to discredit him.”

“You got it.” I grinned wryly. “That’s what PIs do for a living, you know. Dig up dirt that nobody else knows anything about. That’s why they call them *private* investigators.”

“But at least that kind of work is safe,” Ruby said, “as opposed to some of the other investigations he might be involved in. Does he tell you what he’s doing?”

“Not so much, actually.” I shivered, remembering the trip that McQuaid and Blackie had made to Mexico to retrieve a small boy who had been abducted by his mother and taken across the border. *That* trip had been truly dangerous. I hated to interfere with his professional work, but I had asked him to promise that he wouldn’t take another case that required him to go across the border. And he had agreed.

“And I don’t ask about what he’s doing,” I added. “I’m just glad to be out of the crime business.”

It was true. I left the law because I was fed up to here with bad guys, who—as a criminal defense attorney—I had the responsibility of defending. Too many of them were guilty as sin, and when I got them off, I felt a) proud of myself for pulling off an acquittal in a difficult case; and b) guilty for having gotten away with murder—or theft or conspiracy or whatever. I was doing a damn good job, but the job was making me somebody I didn’t want to be. Every year since I bailed out, my hands have felt a little cleaner.

So since McQuaid hung up his shingle as a private investigator, I have rarely been tempted to get involved. I listen when he feels like telling me about a case he’s working on, and if I’m asked, I may even proffer a helpful suggestion or two based on my past experience with the dark side. But crooks, criminals, and investigations are *his* business. My business is Thyme and Seasons. Where I’m concerned, plants—and especially herbs—are the *good* guys.

Which reminded me of what Ruby and I were supposed to be doing. I finished my muffin, brushed the crumbs off my fingers, and reached for my list. “How about if we go over the workshop and class schedule for the next couple of months? We’re mailing the newsletter later this week, and I want to make sure I haven’t left something out.”

Ruby opened her laptop and booted it up. “Here’s my calendar,” she said after a minute, turning her laptop around so I could see the monitor. “There’s the class and workshop schedule”—she pointed—“and there are the special events Cass has cooked up for the tearoom. Can you think of anything I’ve left out?”

I scanned her calendar. Ruby was teaching her regular schedule of tarot, astrology, and meditation

classes, plus a class on making and using incense. Over the next two months, I was teaching classes on making herbal liqueurs and cordials, using dye plants, and crafting herbal ointments and salves. Ruby was leading a paint-your-own-teapot workshop, and I was following that up with a workshop on growing and blending your own herbal teas. We were going to be busy.

“I think that’s everything,” I said, turning her laptop back around. “I’m wondering about the liqueurs class, though. It’s the first time I’ve taught it. I hope we get enough people to make it worth the time I’m putting into the prep.” Since most liqueurs have to be aged for at least a month, I had already invested quite a few hours in those I planned to offer for tasting, and there was more work yet to be done.

“I don’t think enrollment will be a problem,” Ruby said confidently. “Since this is the first time you’ve offered it, you’ll have a good turnout.” She frowned. “I hope you’re going to include some nonalcoholic drinks, as well, though. Lots of our friends are teetotalers.”

“I’ve been thinking of that. Some of the liqueurs can also be made with vinegar instead of grain alcohol. They’re called shrubs. Back in the day, before soft drinks, shrubs were a favorite family treat. I think people will enjoy learning how to make them. And I’m following up with a class on herb teas. Lots of botanical drinkables.”

“Sounds good,” Ruby said. “If you think the calendar is more or less okay, how about if I send you the file right now? That way, you can just copy it into the newsletter, add whatever Cass gives you, and you’re good to go.”

“Super.” I booted up my laptop, and a few moments later I was watching Ruby’s calendar file land in my inbox, as if by magic.

At that moment, Ruby’s cell phone buzzed and she picked it up. She listened, then smiled happily. “Of course, Amy. Why don’t you bring her over right now, instead of waiting until after lunch? After China and I are finished, I’m going to the shop to do some restocking, and Grace can come with me.” She listened again, said, “See you then, sweetie,” and clicked off the phone.

“Babysitting today?” I asked with a smile. I’ve never been a huge fan of little kids, but Grace is a charmer. And Amy is finally growing up and settling down. Grace—and Kate, too—are good for her.

Ruby put down her phone. “Yes,” she said, fluffing her hair with her fingers. “I *love* Mondays. That’s when I get to be Grandma.”

I looked at her in her Aztec leggings, purple tunic, and mop of frizzy red hair. I shook my head. Grandmas are getting wilder all the time.