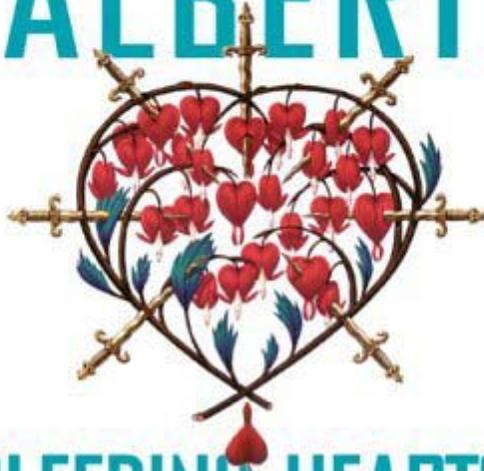


NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *A DILLY OF A DEATH*

SUSAN
WITTIG
ALBERT



BLEEDING HEARTS

Excerpted from *BLEEDING HEARTS*, by Susan Wittig Albert, the fifteenth China Bayles mystery, published by the Berkley Publishing Group (April 2006). For a press kit, reviews, and author interviews, please contact Julie Samara, Julie.Samara@us.penguin.com, or 212-366-2538.

What reviewers are saying about *BLEEDING HEARTS*

“Engrossing.”—*Publisher’s Weekly*

“China’s followers will delight in the complicated relationships, recipes, and historical flower information.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

Chapter One

Bleeding Heart (*Dicentra formosa*) is a shade-loving perennial herb, native to the Orient and happiest in cool, moist woodlands. The plant belongs to the *Papaveraceae* family (which also includes the opium poppy, from which morphine is derived), and has several cousins with descriptive common names, such as, Mary's Heart, Golden Eardrops, and Dutchman's Breeches.

Bleeding Heart takes its name from its unique blood-red flowers that

protrude from the upper

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herbs on the tables, large pots of cactus on the floor, and a long-horn cow's skull hanging over the door, its horns draped with ivy. A Texas-style tea room.

"It'll look finer when it's decorated." Ruby went on with her list. "And Cass and Janet need to check the Valentine's menus from last year. There's no point in reinventing the wheel." Pencil raised like a twirler's baton, she cocked an eyebrow at me. "The gardens? Anything you need to do out there?"

When Ruby gets into this mood, there's nothing to do but fall into line and march along behind her. "Oh, you bet," I said. "The pansies have to be set out, I'm going to pot up about four dozen scented geraniums, and we're expecting a shipment of assorted two- and four-inch herbs. Some go into the garden, some go out on the display rack. Oh, and the roses have to be pruned."

Here in the Texas Hill Country, roses start putting out their new growth in March, so it's a good rule to have the pruning finished by Valentine's Day. Since there are dozens of antique rosebushes in the herb gardens around the shops, I do a lot of pruning. And since I hate to wear garden gloves, my February hands are a sight for sore eyes. Which is a problem, since my husband and I celebrate Valentine's Day in a big way, with presents and a romantic dinner out. I was giving him a pair of new cowboy boots, with red stitching on the black leather tops. I wondered what he was giving me.

"If you're in the garden, will Laurel be in the shop?" Ruby asked.

I nodded. "Full time through Valentine's Day." Laurel Riley handles Thyme and Seasons when I have garden and landscaping work to do. A few months ago, she completed her certification as a Master Herbalist, so she is now an officially certified nutrition and health consultant. I encourage her to make contacts and hand out her cards to the customers, with the idea of building up her consulting practice. And of course, having a nutrition and medicinal herbs expert behind the counter is a very good thing. Between the two of us, we're able to answer any question we're likely to get.

"Laurel's great," Ruby said. She went back to her list. "Now, let's see. On the tearoom special events schedule, we have a tea for the executive board of the high school parent-teacher group, the Garden Guild luncheon, and the regular Valentine's Tea. And Party Thyme is due at the Martins on Friday night—" She stopped. "No, wait. Mrs. Martin cancelled that dinner—her mother has to have surgery—and I scheduled . . ." Frowning, she began shuffling through her notes. "Now, who did I put down for that date?"

While Ruby is trying to locate the name, let me take a minute to clue you in. Ruby Wilcox—a six-foot-something gal with a willowy figure, rowdy red curls, gingery freckles, and blue eyes (except when she's wearing her green or brown contacts)—is the proprietor of the Crystal Cave, a New Age shop where you can stock up on all the weird stuff you need for the serious exploration of inner and outer space: rune stones, astrological charts, crystal balls, magic wands, books about the healing journey, and so on. Ruby's personal style drives the Pecan Springs fashion police crazy. Today, she was wearing blue Spandex pants and a dark blue turtleneck tunic spattered with silvery stars, suns, and galaxies, accessorized with a floating scarf in shades of blues, purples, and silver, saucer-sized silvery hoop earrings, a silver belt, silver slippers, and blue nails sprinkled with silver. She was a vision from the edge of the universe.

My name is China Bayles. I am short and stocky to Ruby's tall and willowy; I prefer jeans, tees, and anything wash-and-wear; and where Ruby has her head in the stars, I usually have both hands in the dirt. Eight or nine years ago, I left my practice as a criminal attorney in Houston and bought a century-old building on Crockett Street in the town of Pecan Springs, half-way between Austin and San Antonio, on the eastern edge of the Texas Hill Country. The ample yard is filled with gardens, which connect with the gardens around the Craft Emporium on one side and the children's bookstore, Hobbit House, on the other. At the back, on the alley, sits Thyme Cottage, a remodeled stone stable that I use for classes and workshops and rent occasionally as a bed-and-breakfast.

The two-story main building, built of locally-quarried limestone, now houses Thyme and Seasons Herb Shop, Ruby's Crystal Cave, and our tearoom, Thyme for Tea. The tearoom is located in the space that used to be my apartment, until I married Mike McQuaid and moved with him and his son Brian into the old Victorian house on Limekiln Road. Because I'm a skeptical realist by nature and inclined to see the darker side of any situation, I figured that Ruby and I would be old and gray before Thyme for Tea turned a profit—if it ever did. Ruby, on the other hand, is a starry-eyed optimist. She looked into her crystal ball and predicted that our enterprise would be a profitable one. She was right. When she does the books at the end of the month, she points out the bottom line with a twinkle and an I-told-you-so grin. The tearoom been up and down a few times, but the general trend is up, and even I have to agree that Thyme for Tea was one of Ruby's better ideas.

So I've learned to pay attention when Ruby dreams up something new. When she suggested expanding our business by adding a catering service called Party Thyme (which Ruby calls our "traveling circus"), who was I to rain on her parade? When we began this project, Party Thyme was just Ruby and I and Janet (our past-prime-time cook), with the help of several girls we borrowed from the Pecan Springs high school culinary arts classes. Unfortunately, just as business picked up, Janet's knees gave in, and Ruby and I were faced with the dismaying prospect of handling all the work ourselves. And then help arrived from an entirely unexpected quarter, in the person of—

The outside door burst open. A substantial form blocked the morning sunlight and a bright voice pealed, like a cheerful bell: "Hi, guys!"

It was the unexpected quarter herself. Cassandra Wilde. She was loaded with plastic grocery bags, and she wore a red chile ristra around her neck like an outsize feather boa.

"Hey, Cass," Ruby said, looking up from her notes. "Do you happen to remember who we put down for Friday night, after Mrs. Martin cancelled on us?"

"Sure," Cass said, over her shoulder. "The Duffys." She carried her bags into the kitchen and thumped them onto the counter. Hearing activity in the kitchen, Khat K'o Kung, the regal Siamese who lives at Thyme and Seasons, went to lend a helpful paw. Ruby, a wanna-be sleuth, named Khat in honor of Kao K'o Kung, Qwilleran's talented Siamese in the *Cat Who* mysteries. Khat insists that Ruby has it backwards, and that Kao K'o Kung is named after *him*.

"Oh, right," Ruby said, and scribbled something on her calendar. "The Duffys."

"Yeah, and I'm looking forward to it," Cass said. "I'm a major fan of Coach Duffy's, you know. And what's more, he's a new Thymely Gourmet customer. I ran into him when I stopped at the Diner this morning. He asked me to make a month of dinners and put them in the freezer at his house—a surprise for Mrs. Duffy." She paused, looking down at her feet. "Hello, Khat. What's on your mind this morning?"

Khat remarked that although he had had breakfast, a bit of something extra would not go amiss. He is a cat of action (his motto is "The early cat catches the early mouse"), but he is also a philosophical creature ("Every cat should rule his passions or his passions will overrule him"). So he assumed a meditative posture, curled his dark tail over his chocolate paws, and waited, the perfect picture of cat-in-the-present-moment.

"How about a bit of liver?" Cass opened the refrigerator, found a container of cooked liver, and zapped it briefly in the microwave before setting it down in front of Khat. He uncurled his tail, sniffed the liver twice, very delicately, and addressed it with the devout attention of a Buddhist monk at prayer. Cass poured herself a cup of tea from the pot on the counter and came to join us, carrying a paper bag. She grinned at me as she sat down.

"Jelly doughnuts, courtesy of Lila Jennings," she said, and I rolled my eyes. Of all the basic food groups—ice cream, chocolates, chicken fried steak, and artichoke hearts with hollandaise sauce—jelly doughnuts from Lila's Nueces Street Diner are my absolute favorite. Never mind that I'd already had cereal and orange juice at home, or that I really do try to curb my

consumption of fat and sugar. Show me a jelly doughnut and all my good intentions fly right out the window. “Save some for me,” she added, as I snatched the bag. “And Ruby.”

I took a raspberry doughnut and handed the bag back to her. Cass, our new partner, is a beautiful, bountiful blonde, light of spirit and much lighter on her feet than you might expect from someone her size—“my sweet, sassy, sexy size twenty-two,” she says modestly. “All curves, and nothing to lose.” Cass is not shy.

“Ruby is organizing our lives from now until Valentine’s Day,” I said, licking the sugar off my fingers. “She’s making sure that every single one of our multiple enterprises turns a tidy profit. So we have to pay attention.”

“I’m all ears,” Cass said, taking a jelly doughnut and handing the bag to Ruby. “Where profit is concerned, I’m just as greedy as the next one. Remember, though, all work and no play makes us Party Thyme girls very grouchy. Be sure and schedule some R and R.”

I have to admit that bringing Cassandra Wilde into our partnership has been a good thing, although I wasn’t terribly crazy about the idea in the first place. Ruby and I have been together for nearly ten years. It’s like being married: I know what she’s thinking, she knows what I’m feeling, and we get along very well about ninety percent of the time. A third person, I feared, would inevitably change that balance. And it’s easier to get a divorce than it is to dissolve a business partnership that’s gone on the rocks. I worried that Ruby and I would find ourselves up to our eyebrows in a mess we couldn’t get out of easily. The cautious side of my nature reminded me that two’s company, while three almost always turns out to be a crowd.

But Cass had a smart idea and a great deal of persistence—“I’m your original pushy broad,” she said with a grin—and it was hard to turn her down. Her idea was another business enterprise: a personal chef service called The Thymely Gourmet, a spin-off of Party Thyme, which is of course a spin-off of Thyme for Tea and Thyme and Seasons, what’s known in the business world as horizontal integration. Cass seemed to have the perfect background for it. She’s been in the food industry for years and was recently certified as a personal chef by the American Culinary Foundation. What’s more, she has enormous energy, a reservoir of cheerfulness that never seems to go dry, and the ability to see what needs to be done and do it without fuss. After three months’ of working with her on a trial basis, Ruby and I were ready to make it official. Our twosome became a threesome, and the Thymely Gourmet became an integral part of our expanding business. But don’t think I accepted the idea without reservations. It was every bit as scary as getting married, with all the added complications of bigamy. Now there were three ways to go wrong, instead of just two.

“So Cass is doing Friday night at the Duffys,” Ruby said, making a note on her list. “And Saturday evening, China and I have a hanging party at Carol Bruce’s house, for the Scrappers.” The Pecan Springs Scrappers is the name of our local quilting group, of which Ruby is a long-time member.

“A hanging party?” I widened my eyes. “As in old westerns? Who’s getting hung?”

Cass snickered. “Maybe it was a Scrapper who got caught stealing another Scrapper’s quilt pieces. Or a Scrapper who can’t sew a straight seam. Or a Scrapper who—”

“The hanging party,” Ruby said, ignoring Cass, “will be held at Carol’s house, after the hanging—that is, the installation of our first annual quilt show at The Springs Hotel.”

“Oh, *that* kind of hanging.” I sighed. “Rats. I was hoping for a little excitement. Things have been pretty tame around this place lately.” It was true. There had been some thrills and chills about the time Ruby starred in *A Man For All Reasons* the previous October, but the intervening months had been dark and a little dreary. Dullsville, as Cass had put it.

“The Duffy party is the last event on the Party Thyme calendar,” Ruby said, studying her list. “We need to bring in some more business.”

“The Thymely Gourmet has two new customers, actually,” Cass put in. “So we’re doing okay there.”

“Two?” Ruby asked, impressed. “Wow. That makes—what? Twelve?” Of course, they aren’t all regulars. Some people ask Cass to come in to prepare a week’s worth of meals every now and then, while others have her stock their freezers every month. And occasionally she’ll get a wife who wants her to fix a husband’s meals while she’s out of town, or somebody who’s trying a new diet, or—

“Fourteen,” Cass replied. “Coach Duffy is Number Thirteen, and his neighbor, Chuck Manning, is Number Fourteen. He and the coach both want to surprise their wives. And Mr. Manning is the president of the Panthers Booster Club.” She grinned. “If he likes us, maybe he’ll spread the word to his Booster buddies.”

“If you run out of Boosters, you can come to my house,” I suggested helpfully. “I could sure use a couple of weeks of pre-cooked gourmet meals.”

“Of course she can,” Ruby said, closing her calendar. She gave me a benevolent smile.

“If you cross her palm with silver.”

“Hey, come on,” I grumbled. “The partners ought to get some perks.”

Cass handed me the paper bag. “Have another doughnut.”