

CHAPTER ONE

The Holly and the Ivy
When they are both full grown
Of all the trees that are in the wood
The holly bears the crown . . .

--Traditional Christmas song

In ancient Rome, holly was gathered to celebrate the solstice feast known as the Saturnalia, in honor of the god Saturn, whose season this was. The Romans believed that the shiny, sharp-pointed leaves of evergreen holly protected their homes against lightning bolts, and that the red berries repelled the witches and other mischievous or evil spirits who might seek indoor hospitality during the coldest weeks of the year.

Holly sprigs were also exchanged as tokens of friendship, offering a sincere wish that the recipient might enjoy a season free of bothersome bolts from the blue.

--China Bayles, "Hollies for Your Garden"
Pecan Springs Enterprise

"Well, what do you think, China?" Ruby took another turn. She was wearing silky green skin-tight pants and a gauzy, butterfly-sleeve knee-length tunic in red and green, studded with tiny gold stars that twinkled as she twirled. "I found it at Margo's Second Verse when I went out to lunch yesterday. I didn't mean to buy anything, but I saw it in the window and couldn't resist."

"It's pure Ruby," I said, adding another package of hand-crafted rosemary-mint soap to the tiered display I was building on the shelf in my shop. "Makes you look just like a Christmas tree." I reached over and turned down the volume on the CD player, which was giving us an old-fashioned rendition of "White Christmas." I gave her outfit a critical glance. "You know, what you need is one of those battery-powered strings of fairy lights. You could wear them as a necklace. Or in your hair. You could even get the kind that blink on and off. Green and red would be nice."

Ruby frowned. "You can stop teasing now, China." She sounded put out.

I was instantly repentant. Ruby is my best friend and business partner. I like to tease her, but I'd never do anything to hurt her feelings.

"I apologize," I said, putting down the soap and giving her a hug. "I love your outfit, Ruby. It's gorgeous. Really and truly. You should wear it to the party on Saturday night. People won't be able to keep their eyes off you."

She smiled, mollified. "You think?" She looked down at her strappy green high heels. "These go, don't they?"

“Perfectly,” I said. The heels boosted her to six-feet-three, at least. But when you’re already six-feet-something in flats, another couple of inches doesn’t much matter. Especially when the guy you’re dating is right up there in the stratosphere with you. I stood back, holding her at arms’ length, and looked her up and down. “It’s terrific, twinkle stars and all. Hark will love you.” Ruby has been seeing Hark Hibler, the editor of the *Pecan Springs Enterprise*. I have to admit that I’m rooting for Hark. He’s one of the good guys, about as steady as they come, which is a relief to Ruby’s friends, given the recent crashes in her love life.

Ruby pursed her lips. “Well--”

“Don’t tell me,” I groaned. “You haven’t broken up with Hark again, have you?”

“I’m considering it. He’s just . . . he’s so . . . I mean--” She sank down on the stool beside the counter, her gauzy sleeves fluttering like the wings of a wounded red-and-green moth. “He’s so *serious*.”

“That could be because he cares about you,” I said dryly. “Seriously. And anyway, what’s wrong with serious? Serious is steady. You can depend on serious.” Which is more than could be said for--

“I just wish he were more exciting, that’s all,” Ruby said petulantly. “Is that wrong? I mean, isn’t okay for a girl to like a little excitement?”

“Maybe you could do with a little less excitement in your life,” I said. I love Ruby dearly, but it’s my considered opinion that somebody who has her head in the clouds, the way she usually does, needs somebody with both feet on the ground, like Hark. He’s devoted. He adores her.

Ruby’s shoulders slumped and she sighed. “I just keep thinking of Colin and wishing--”

“I know,” I said sympathetically. Colin had been one of those truly dangerous men, the kind you love, lose, and long for until your very last breath. “But Colin has been dead since April, Ruby. Christmas is only two weeks away. The old year is almost gone. It’s time to look to the future, don’t you think?”

While Ruby is pondering my question, let’s take time out for introductions. Some of you already know me and have visited my shop a dozen times or more. Others--well, maybe this is your first visit, and you haven’t a clue to who we are or what we’re talking about.

So. My name is China Bayles. I am the proprietor of Thyme and Seasons Herbs here in Pecan Springs, just off I-35, halfway between Austin and San Antonio, at the eastern edge of the Texas Hill Country. I am a no-nonsense, wash-and-wear kind of person whose wardrobe is mostly made up of jeans, tees, and sneakers. I usually have garden dirt under my nails, and my hair is a nondescript brown, with a gray streak at my left temple. I am shortish and fairly stocky, although I can brag about losing a few extra pounds since I began keeping my bike at the shop and riding it to do errands around town, rather than driving the car--part of a personal effort to reduce the size of my carbon footprint.

In my former incarnation, before I bought the herb shop and began spending a lot of time in the garden, I was a criminal defense lawyer in Houston, employed by a big firm that mostly represented big bad guys, the ones with enough bucks to buy a free pass out of the justice system. It was a fast life, full of thrills and chills, and it paid well, but as Ruby might say, it did nothing to satisfy my soul. I have never regretted leaving. Now, I

am happily married to Mike McQuaid, an independent private investigator and part-time faculty member in the Criminal Justice Department at Central Texas State University. McQuaid has a son, Brian, who is a high-school junior. And I have . . . we have legal custody of my brother's daughter Caitlin, who is just eleven. But that's a long story, and very sad, and there's not time for it just now. We'll get back to it later.

The tall, slim gal dressed in her holiday finery is Ruby Wilcox, my business partner. Ruby is a hoot, that's all anybody can say--and we certainly say it often enough. Her tipped-up nose is liberally dusted with sandy freckles, and her mouth is as generous as Hot Lips Houlihan's. Her hair is finely frizzed, the color of fresh carrots, and her eyes are variously brown, blue, or green, depending on which contacts she's wearing. Admittedly something of a flake, Ruby is a free soul with a habit of leapfrogging to the creative solution while I am rationally and systematically plodding through a list of alternatives. She owns the Crystal Cave, Pecan Springs' only New Age shop, next door to Thyme and Seasons, where she offers books on astrology, tools for divination, and classes on getting in touch with Your Innermost Self, channeling spirits, and using the Ouija board. If you have a question for the Universe, Ruby can help you find the answer.

Now, I'm a skeptic by nature, and communing with the Universe is not exactly my cup of tea. But Ruby has a strong sense of empathy and an intuitive streak that manifests itself every now and then, usually at the most unexpected moments. Like the time she received a horribly true message about a murder from a perfectly innocent Honda Civic, left in a parking lot in Indigo, Texas, with its lights on. A few minutes later, we found the owner's body in the basement of an abandoned school. Laugh if you will, but when Ruby pulls one of those psychic rabbits out of her hat, she can make a believer out of you. Out of me, anyway.

But there's another side to Ruby, the practical side. She is the co-owner of Thyme for Tea, our teasshop, which is conveniently located behind our shops, and my partner in Party Thyme, a catering service. And both of us are partnered with our good friend Cass Wilde in a personal chef business called the Thymely Gourmet.

Ah. You're wondering how in the world we manage to stay on top of this three-ring circus. Well, it's true that these enterprises keep us busy, and that sometimes I have the feeling that I'm in a car with no brakes that's about to dive over a cliff. But Ruby, Cass, and I aren't in business just for the fun of it--although it *is* fun, since we enjoy working together. It's our theory that business women who aren't busy are broke, especially when the economy is singing the blues, the way it is right now.

Across Pecan Springs, this holiday season hadn't been as profitable as previous years, and on top of our money worries, each of us is coping with her own personal challenges. Ruby has recently moved Doris, her mother, to a nearby senior care facility. From this vantage point, Doris (who has Alzheimer's) is slowly driving her daughter crazy. Cass took a tumble at the gym a week ago and is learning how much fun it is to cook with a broken right wrist. And I--in addition to dealing with the shop, the garden, and the holiday shop traffic (such as it is)--am getting on-the-job training as mom to my eleven-year-old niece, Caitlin.

So, yes. Ruby, Cass, and I are staying busy. And on this Tuesday morning in December, a little more than a week before Christmas, we are *not* singing the blues. We are staying optimistic. We love what we do, we're doing what we love, and we are confident that there are better times ahead. That's our story and we're sticking to it.

The bell tinkled and I turned to see a walking stack of cardboard wreath boxes pushing through the door. "Hello, hello," said a woman's voice behind the boxes. "Anybody here?"

I hurried to help with the door. "Good thing you got here, Donna. I sold your last wreath about an hour ago." I took half the boxes off the top of the stack and Donna Fletcher set the rest down with a thump.

"I was late getting away this morning," she said. "My help didn't show up and I had to pick the spinach by myself and drop off an order at Cavette's Market. But here are the wreaths I promised, along with your mistletoe. I've also brought the stuff for Cass. Spinach and bok choy. And a couple of pounds of fresh snow peas. Tell her that this is the last of the season."

Donna owns Mistletoe Creek Farm, on Comanche Road, south of Pecan Springs. She and her sister Terry used to operate the place as a flower farm, but Terry got into some trouble and hasn't been around for a while. Donna has recruited several local helpers and expanded into market gardening as a CSA--community supported agriculture. The climate in our part of Texas makes it possible to garden for a big part of the year, and cool-weather crops do well during our mild winters (milder, now that global warming is here). Donna supplies Cass with fresh produce and eggs, and her holiday wreaths and packages of fresh mistletoe are always big sellers at Thyme and Seasons. Plus, she sells memberships in her farm, allowing her subscribers a basket of fresh produce every week during the growing season.

"Cass is in the kitchen," I said. "Spinach salad is on today's menu, so I'm sure she'll be glad to see you."

"I'll get her order out of the truck," Donna said. She cocked an envious eye at Ruby. "Woo-hoo, Ruby. That outfit is really cool. I sure wish I could wear clothes like that." She sighed, looking down at her plaid shirt and denim overalls. "But if I tried, people would say I looked like a Christmas tree." She glanced up. "Not that you do," she added hastily. "You look great."

"It helps to be tall and thin," I put in. "Ruby can wear anything she likes and get away with it."

Ruby frowned down at herself. "I don't know. Maybe it's too Christmassy. Do you think?"

"Of course not," Donna and I exclaimed, in unison. "There's no such thing as being too Christmassy," I added heartily.

"All you need is a star on top of your head and some tinsel scattered here and there and you'll be perfect," Donna said, with a wicked grin. She turned to me. "Don't forget that I'm saving a Christmas tree for you, China. We're cutting tomorrow." Several years ago, when she bought some nearby acreage and expanded her operation, Donna planted twenty-some acres in several varieties of pine trees. They've just begun maturing. A few weeks ago, I went out to Mistletoe Creek Farm on an errand, spotted a tree that I thought would be perfect, and asked Donna to hold it for us.

"I haven't forgotten," I said. "McQuaid and I thought we'd bring the kids out tomorrow evening. Will that work?"

"That would be perfect," she said. "I've opened the Christmas shop, and we're planning a bonfire and a hayride for tomorrow night. There'll be caroling, too."

“Sounds great,” I replied enthusiastically. “The kids will love the hayride--it’ll be a first for Caitlin.” I grinned at Ruby. “Maybe I can talk Ruby into coming with us.”

“I’d love to,” Ruby said promptly. “I’ll get a tree, too.”

“Fantastic.” Donna grinned again. “Support your local tree farmer. Oh, and be sure and wear your Christmas outfit, Ruby. We’ll put you in the shop. You can be Mrs. Claus.” She headed for the door. “I’ll get Cass’s veggies and take them around to the kitchen.”

When she had left, Ruby got off the stool. “I’m going to change before the tearoom opens for lunch,” she said in a huffy tone. “I am tired of being mistaken for a Christmas tree.”

I chuckled and gave her a quick hug. “We love you, Ruby.”

“It’s a darn good thing,” Ruby muttered. “I’d hate to think what you might say about my clothes if you *didn’t* love me. Keep an eye on the shop while I change, will you?” With that, she headed for the door that connects Thyme and Seasons and The Crystal Cave. We keep it open during business hours to encourage customers to shop in both places.

At the door, she turned. “Drat. I forgot. I have to go to Castle Oaks to take Mom some cookies. You’ll be here all afternoon?”

“I’ll be here,” I promised. “Take all the time you need.”

Ruby’s mother’s senior care facility is only a ten-minute drive from the shop, which makes things simpler for Ruby--although her relationship with her mother has never been simple. Doris is one of those mothers who always have to have the upper hand. When Ruby was nineteen, unwed and pregnant, she made her daughter give up her newborn daughter for adoption. It was decades before Amy--the long-lost daughter--came back into Ruby’s life, and both deeply regret all the time they wasted.

But now, instead of having the upper hand, Doris has lost her grip. It all started when she was living in a retirement community in Fredericksburg, about an hour’s drive from Pecan Springs. She began mislaying her checkbook and car keys, forgetting appointments, and getting lost in familiar places. Then she bloomed into a full-fledged kleptomaniac with a deep-seated passion for pricey doodads—hand-painted silk scarves, jewelry, alligator bags. Apprehended by security guards on her way out the door, she claimed that she had forgotten to stop at the cash register, but Dillard’s surveillance videos told a different tale. There was more stolen merchandise stashed under Doris’ bed, too, which Ruby found and returned.

A month or so later, the diagnosis was inescapable: Doris was suffering from dementia. As the colorful colloquial expression has it, she was a few fries short of a Happy Meal. Or, variously put, a few carrots short of a casserole or just back from surfing in Nebraska, or--

But of course, it wasn’t funny. Ruby moved her mother to Castle Oaks, here in Pecan Springs, so she could have better supervision, closer to home. Which does not please Doris--but then nothing has ever pleased Doris, even when she had all her marbles.

Ruby appeared in the doorway once again. “I forgot,” she said. “I ran into Alice Mitchell when I was at Margo’s yesterday. She wants Party Thyme to cater her New Year’s Eve party.”

“Three cheers for Alice!” I said. We’d catered for the Mitchells before. Their parties were a lot of work--planning, cooking, hauling, serving--but a party brought us as

much as we'd make in a day at the shops, especially in the slow couple of weeks after Christmas. "And for you, too, Ruby." Ruby is a go-getter when it comes to bringing in the clients.

"Thank you," Ruby said modestly, and disappeared.

Still thinking happily about the prospect of a big-ticket catering job, I opened the top box on the stack Donna had brought. I took out a fragrant herbal wreath, added a price tag, and hung it on the wall behind the counter. Donna and most of my other suppliers work on consignment. When their products are sold, I write them a check, minus my consignment fee. Good for them (their wares are nicely displayed for sale) and good for me (I can return what doesn't sell). Good for them, good for me. A fair deal all around.

Ten minutes later, I had hung the last wreath and was stepping back to admire the arrangement, when the bell over the shop door rang again and a pair of customers, both women, came in.

"Are we in time for lunch?" the one with the purple scarf asked brightly. "What time does your tearoom open?"

I smiled cordially. I love it when people arrive early for lunch. It gives them time to shop. "In about ten minutes. Please make yourself at home."

"Oh, look, Ruth!" the other one exclaimed. "There's some of that rosemary-mint soap I was telling you about. It's handcrafted, isn't it, China?"

"Yes," I said. "Sarah Paulson makes it. She lives in Wimberley."

"She makes it herself?" Ruth asked, impressed. "Isn't that awfully hard?"

"Sarah is a gifted soap maker," I said. "A good teacher, too. There are some of her cards by the cash register."

With a murmur, both of them moved toward the display I had just finished putting together. A few moments later, they had bought not only Sarah's soap, but her matching toilet water and one of Donna's holiday wreaths, as well.

While the ladies were making their purchases, the UPS guy brought in the day's shipment, a box of books and another, smaller box, a new product--not new on the market, of course, but new to the shop. Pepper sprays, tiny canisters filled with pure capsaicin, extracted from chili peppers and pressurized to make it aerosol. The canisters are packaged to resemble lipsticks, key rings, even rings, and while they might look like toys, they're serious weapons of self-defense. I was carrying them for a serious reason, too. There had been several rapes in the campus area over the past six months, and some of the coeds had asked me to start carrying the sprays. They're not legal in all states, but the Texas penal code permits the carrying of "small chemical dispensers sold commercially for personal protection." That's what these are, and while they're purse-sized, they pack a punch. Hot peppers for potent personal protection--so combustible that they're over the top on the Scoville Heat Scale, which is used to measure the heat in hot peppers.

By the time I finished putting the pepper sprays on a shelf at the back of the shop, safely out of reach of small fingers, several other people had come into the shop, ready for lunch. Ruby (who had changed into black pants and a red sweater cinched with a wide, shiny black belt) opened the door to the tearoom, announced that lunch was being served, and seated everyone, greeting most of them by name. Laurel Riley, who helps out in the shops when one of us is gone, was lending a hand with the serving. She lives a

block away, so it's easy for her to come in for just a few hours at lunchtime--which is especially good, since Cass is temporarily one-handed.

We don't offer a large menu, but our lunches (soups, mini-croissant sandwiches, Cass's specialty quiches, imaginative salads, and fresh fruit) are a welcome alternative to the fast food burgers and Tex-Mex cookery that is standard Pecan Springs lunch fare, and we've developed a group of loyal lunch patrons. The tearoom looks very nice, with hunter green wainscoting half-way up the old stone walls, green-painted tables and chairs with floral chintz napkins. At Christmas, the tables are decorated with mistletoe, holly, ivy, and rosemary--herbs appropriate to the seasons--and fat red candles that give off a cinnamon-scented glow. Cass leaves her Thymely Gourmet card at every table and hands out her menus and flyers on request--and Ruby is always glad to mention Party Thyme. It's our theory that each business helps to boost the others.

I was on duty in the shops, so when things quieted down a little in the tearoom, Ruby brought me a lunch plate. I perched on the stool behind the counter, turned on my laptop, and settled myself to munch and work on a piece for my weekly garden page in the *Enterprise*. I've been doing these features for several years now, in return for free newspaper advertising. It's a good trade, especially in times when business is slow and I don't have as many advertising dollars to spend.

I was holding my sandwich in one hand and bringing up the file with the other when the bell tinkled again and the door opened. "Hi," I said, without looking up from the screen. "We're serving lunch in the tearoom, if you'd like step on through."

"I thought maybe you and I could have lunch together, China," a tentative voice said. "If you have time, that is."

"I afraid I don't, actually," I said. I glanced up and put on a friendly, half-rueful smile. The woman, in her late thirties, looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place her. Probably a customer who hadn't dropped in for a while. "Somebody's got to mind the shops," I added, "and it's my turn." I brandished my sandwich.

"That's too bad," the woman said. She dropped her canvas duffle bag and rubbed her shoulder as if it hurt. "I think both of us could use a little break. It's only been a couple of blocks, but it feels like I've been carrying this thing for miles."

"I'm sorry," I said slowly. "I'm afraid I don't--"

She tilted her head, with a little sidewise smile. "You don't recognize me, do you, China?"

I frowned. "Not exactly. I mean, you certainly look familiar, but--" I stared, disbelieving, as the light dawned. "Sally? Sally Strahorn? Is that *you*?"

"Yep, it's me." She grinned broadly. "Fooled you, did I?"

"You certainly did," I said, still staring. "Are you in disguise or something?"

It had to be a disguise. The woman wore jeans, a faded CTSU sweatshirt, dirty sneakers, and a well-worn denim jacket. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She wasn't wearing makeup, and her eyes looked naked.

This was not the Sally Strahorn I knew--my husband's first wife, Brian's mother. Sally has had her ups and downs. Lots of downs, unfortunately, but even when she was all the way down, she had always managed to look like she'd just come out on top. The last time I saw her, she had been wearing a chic, tight-fitting beige suit with a matching silk blouse, clunky gold jewelry, and beige stiletto heels. Her eyes were darkly lined, her

lashes were heavy with mascara, and her honey-colored hair was worn in a classy chignon, wrapped in gold net. She looked and acted like a million dollars.

But most of this, it turns out, wasn't Sally at all. She was a character named Juanita, Sally's other self. Juanita loved to party, dressed fit to kill, and spent Sally's money as if the sky was the credit-card limit. Juanita emerged, it seemed, whenever Sally was under a great deal of stress.

After we learned all this, McQuaid realized that he had met Juanita often during the few years that he and Sally were married, although the two of them were never formally introduced and he'd never known that this part of Sally's personality had her own name. After their divorce, Juanita began appearing with greater frequency--we saw her several times, although we still didn't know who she was. It wasn't until we found out that Sally had been diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder that we could begin to make sense out of some of the silly, senseless, and dangerous things that Sally--or was it Juanita?--had done in the past.

Ultimately, McQuaid learned that Sally was in treatment and that Juanita had finally (and permanently, it was hoped) gone away. We hadn't gotten that information from Sally, of course. She has always been very secretive about what's going on in her life. The news had come from her sister Leslie, who lives in a small town north of Austin and whom we see and hear from on a regular basis. Not so Sally. In the past year, Brian had received only a birthday card from his mother. It didn't have a return address, but it was postmarked in Kansas City, where--according to Leslie--her sister was working and living.

To tell the truth, Sally's prolonged silences aren't a problem for me, since I'm not anxious to have my husband's kinky ex-wife living in our laps. McQuaid doesn't find it a problem, either, for Sally is a raw reminder of a very bad time in his life. It's Brian who suffers. When he was younger, it was painful to watch his disappointment when his mother promised him something and failed to come through. Now he's a teen and "cool to the max," so he tries to pretend that he doesn't care whether she remembers his birthday or calls to congratulate him on his science project. But he does. He cares and he worries about his mother, although he knows there's nothing he can do that will change her. And when she finally does show up (usually without bothering to email or phone), he has to be even cooler, to keep from showing how much he cares--which probably makes her feel even less inclined to connect with him again. Funny how that works, isn't it?

McQuaid, bless him, tries to make a joke out of Sally's occasional reemergence, calling her Sally-the-Bad-Penny and saying that she only turns up when she's broke or in trouble. But it's no joking matter. For a long time, he took the blame for the meltdown of their marriage, believing that it was his work as a Houston homicide detective that made Sally come apart at the seams. It was years before he could disconnect emotionally from the marriage and from his feelings of responsibility--and he still isn't there, not yet, not quite.

Personally, I don't share his view. Being a policeman's wife isn't easy, I grant you. Plenty of law-enforcement marriages have wrecked on the reefs of raw nerves, frequent absences, and the constant threat of injury and death. But it's my opinion that this was no excuse for Sally's dramatic and frequent misbehaviors. We're all responsible for our moral choices, and it's wrong of us to push the blame off onto anyone else. In his head, McQuaid knows this, although deep in his heart, it's a different story. He still feels

at least partially responsible for what happened to Sally and believes that he has an obligation to help her get back on the right track. Get the picture? His heart wants to help and his head wants to tell her to help herself, which makes for some pretty powerful conflicts. And in this case, the conflicts produce anger, which is what he usually feels when they're together--anger at himself, anger at her. Unfortunately, there's not much I can do about this, except to be as supportive as I can, even though the brutal truth is that I don't much like Sally, or Juanita, or whoever she is. She's made my husband unhappy, she's opted out of her son's life, and she causes trouble whenever she shows up.

I hope you don't think I'm not a compassionate person. I have as much sympathy for people in need as anyone else. But when it comes to Sally, I can't summon up a huge surge of good-will. I mean, here it is, Christmas. And not just any Christmas, but one of the most difficult we've faced. Sales at the shop are down. McQuaid is teaching part-time to patch together enough income to keep his PI firm afloat. Caitlin--fragile, vulnerable Caitlin--has only been with us for a couple of months, and we're trying to help her recover from her many sad losses. And now, just in time to celebrate Christmas with us, here comes Bad-Penny Sally.

Please. Give me a break, Sally. Give *us* a break. Tell me you're just passing through.

I swallowed my feelings and managed a smile. "Looks like you're on your way somewhere."

She gave a casual toss of her head. "Actually, I was thinking I might hang out here until after Christmas. In Pecan Springs, I mean. I'd like to spend some time with Brian."

"Oh, right," I said. "What's it been since you've seen him? Two years?"

She shifted her weight. "Something like that. Gosh, I'll bet he's grown."

"He has. Two years is a long time in a boy's life." I leaned forward, adding pointedly. "A very long time."

A burst of laughter and the scrape of a chair came from the tearoom, and Sally glanced over her shoulder. "Listen, China," she said in a lower voice. "I wonder if we could talk."

Rats, I thought to myself. *Here it comes*. "What do you want to talk about?"

She cleared her throat. "Privately. Not here."

I shook my head. "Sorry, Sally. I'm a working girl, and today is a work day. In about ten minutes, customers will be coming through that tearoom door and I'd love to see them buy a thing or two. In the meantime, I'm trying to finish an article for the newspaper. If you don't mind--"

"After work, then." Her voice thinned. "Look, China. I know how you feel about me. I know I haven't always been a good mom to Brian. I . . . I know I've caused you and Mike a lot of unnecessary unhappiness." She swallowed. "Please believe me. I wouldn't be here if it weren't important."

It's always important, I wanted to shout. *Important to you, that is. Brian isn't important, McQuaid isn't important, it's always you, Sally. Just you. Or Juanita, or whoever the hell you are today*. But I didn't. Instead, I said, as evenly as I could manage, "Well, okay, then. I can probably take a break about three-thirty or four o'clock. Want to come back then?"

Her face cleared, and she smiled. “Yes, sure. Oh, gosh, China, thank you!” She turned to go. “Three o’clock. I’ll see you then.”

“Don’t forget your duffle,” I said.

She bent over and picked it up. It was obviously heavy. I hesitated, and then relented. “If you want to leave it here until you come back, you can stick it behind the counter. I don’t think anybody will bother it.”

Her smile was broadly relieved. “Oh, thank you, China,” she said again. “You’re a life-saver.”

No, I’m not, I thought grimly. I am definitely not a life-saver. And whatever it is you’ve come for, Sally Jean Strahorn, you are not going to get it.

I was wrong. On both counts.