

MOURNING GLORIA

Excerpt from Chapter One

A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books.--Walt Whitman

Flowers really do intoxicate me.--Vita Sackville West

Friday night's thunderstorm rumbled off to the west and the Saturday sun rose on one of those stunningly lovely June mornings that seem to happen only in your dreams or in the half-forgotten country of childhood, when you spent summers with your favorite grandmother--the one who never made you help with the dishes. Sunlight slanted through green leaves tender and innocent as spring, not yet baked brittle by summer's heat. Grasses glittered with dew, birds danced light as a song on the cool morning breeze, morning glories bloomed heavenly blue over the arbor--a lovely day to spend in the garden, once the dew had dried.

Caitie and I had been out there for an hour already, picking and tying up bunches of fresh dill, rosemary, sage, parsley, cilantro, thyme, and basil and stowing them in the big picnic cooler. As a general rule, it's best to pick herbs after the dew has dried, but I was making an exception this morning. Today was Saturday, Market Day, and these dew-fresh green bundles would be snatched up by eager customers before the morning was half over.

On an ordinary Saturday, Brian would have been in the garden with us. But on Monday, he left for a two-week session as camp counselor at Hill Country Kids' Camp. He hoisted his duffle over one shoulder, tucked his laptop under his arm, and pecked my cheek with his familiar goodbye kiss before he sauntered out to the van that had come to pick him up, a self-confident young man on his way to his first job. I'd made him promise to email us while he was gone, but I wasn't worried that he'd get homesick. His longtime girlfriend Jake was working as a girls' counselor at the same camp.

Howard Cosell and I (Howard is Brian's elderly basset hound) watched the van drive off. I don't know about Howard, but I had a largish lump in my throat and a film of tears in my eyes. Brian isn't my biological child. He's Mike McQuaid's son, by an earlier marriage, but he's been an important part of my life since he was a little boy. It's hard to believe that he's on his way to a life of his own, separate from ours--a separation made even more emphatic by the fact that he now holds his learner's permit. He's a responsible kid, but kids in cars are always a worry.

Since this was Saturday, McQuaid might also have been in the garden, except that he was away, as well. My husband (whom I have called by his last name since we met in a courtroom, where he was testifying against a woman I was defending) is a helpful sort of guy and has been known to lend a hand when he's nicely invited. But in addition to a part-time appointment as an associate professor in the Criminal Justice Department at

Central Texas State University, he is a private investigator. He left for Memphis on Thursday, to do some work for Charlie Lipman, a local lawyer. He wouldn't be back until Monday or Tuesday.

So it was just the two of us this Saturday, picking and packing in the early morning sunshine. Caitlin, eleven, is my half-brother Miles' daughter. She's been with us for less than a year, but it already feels like a lifetime. And there's an irony here. For decades I cherished an independent and solitary life, putting off marriage to a man I loved while I stubbornly hung onto my freedom. Now, improbable as it often seems to me, I am married, with two children. Life is full of surprises.

After a quick breakfast, Caitie and I loaded the cooler into the car and headed for town. Along Limekiln Road, we could see banks of cheerful daisies, drifts of gaudy yellow and red Indian blanket, winecups the color of rich burgundy, the delicate white blooms of prickly poppies, even a few tardy bluebonnets. In Pecan Springs, the gardens along the streets blossomed with June exuberance and the courthouse square was festive. Pansies, marigolds, and zinnias spilled out of the wooden half-barrels the Chamber of Commerce has installed on the street corners, and our green Farmers' Market banners--brand-new this spring--fluttered from the lampposts.

This is the market's first full year, and we have high hopes for its success. Especially me. I'm China Bayles. I own and manage an herb shop called Thyme and Seasons, located at 304 Crockett, just a few blocks east of the square and right across the street from Dos Amigas restaurant. The market is held in the restaurant's parking lot from nine to one on Saturdays, from May through early November.

Hosting the market is smart business thinking on the part of Janie and Janet, the two women who recently bought the restaurant. Smart, because it allows Janie and Janet to buy their vegetables from the vendors and advertise that they are serving farm-fresh, locally-grown vegetables. Also smart because when customers finish shopping at the market, they can have lunch at Dos Amigas. The neighboring merchants benefit, too, since the customers drift across the street to shop at my Thyme and Seasons or Ruby Wilcox's Crystal Cave and enjoy lunch in our tea room, Thyme for Tea, where we specialize in great veggie sandwiches, salads, and quiche. Then they can visit the quilting shop and the yarn shop at the Craft Emporium, next door at the corner of Crockett and Guadalupe. Or the Hobbit House Children's Bookstore next door on the other side.

Got the picture? On Market Day, everybody wins, customers and merchants alike. Green isn't just the color of fresh vegetables or environmentally friendly this-and-that, much as we value these things. Green is also the color of money. I don't want to sound crass about it, but money is what keeps our small businesses alive and thriving. If the Farmers' Market stays healthy through the heat of summer and into the fall, the enterprises in the 300 block of Crockett will be healthy and very happy.

Caitie and I had left home an hour before the market opened so we'd have time to set up before the customers flooded in. She's small for her age, with dark hair and the largest dark eyes I've ever seen--and sometimes the saddest. I often think that a child should never have such sad eyes. But there's a reason. She is still fragile from her mother's drowning three years ago, her father's murder last summer, and her Aunt Marcia's death from cancer earlier this year. A heavy weight of tragedy for a child.

But while she will always wear indelible scars, Caitie is a survivor. She has found friends and activities to keep her busy. She does well in school, enjoys photography and

soccer, and has fallen in love with the violin my mother Leatha gave her at the beginning of the previous school year--a three-quarter-size violin, somewhat scarred, that has been in our family for several generations. When I was Caitie's age, Leatha made me take lessons. These went on with increasing painfulness until it became clear (first to me, then to my teacher, and at last even to my mother) that I was utterly lacking in talent and even more deficient in interest. Happily, the violin survived my carelessness. It just fits Caitie, who seems to have a talent for it and enjoys practicing so much that the school orchestra teacher suggested private lessons. As it happens, Sandra Trevor, a regular customer at my shop, teaches strings at CTSU and supervises graduate students in Music Education. Sandra recommended one of her grad students, a young woman named Brenda, and every Monday afternoon, Caitie eagerly goes off for her violin lesson.

I unlocked the front door of the shop and stepped inside, Caitie behind me. I glanced around warily, remembering what had happened a couple of weeks before Christmas, when I was surprised by an early-morning intruder. We fixed the window where he came in, but that doesn't mean it can't happen again. I'm always on my guard when I come in.

Caitlin took a deep breath. "Mmm," she said appreciatively. "Smells yummy."

And so it does, as you'll notice the next time you visit the shop. The sweet, spicy, flowery scent comes from the baskets of handmade pomanders and sachets that sit on the counter beside the cash register, the bunches of tansy and yarrow that hang from the ceiling, the ristras of red chile peppers and braids of silvery garlic that decorate the walls, and the wreaths of artemisia, sweet Annie, and delicate dried flowers that bloom in every nook and cranny.

If you like natural fragrances, you'll see displays of essential oils and fragrance oils, bottles of herb tinctures, and large jars and heavy stoneware crocks full of dried herbs. Enjoy cooking? You'll find all the herbal seasonings, vinegars, and jellies you need to bring a new and tasty zip to any dish. You're a reader? Books line one wall in a cozy reading corner, beside the door to the tea room. Or maybe you'd like to find out what your horoscope has to say about your future, or buy a set of rune stones or a book about how to indulge your Inner Child or some herbal incense that will help you get in touch with your Higher Self. Just go through the door that leads to Ruby's Crystal Cave, and you'll find all the New Age lotions, potions, and notions you need to satisfy your soul.

And maybe you'd also like a bite to eat--food for the body, as well as the spirit. You're invited to Thyme for Tea, the tea room that Ruby and I own and manage, with the indomitable Cass Wilder staffing the kitchen. With luck and good weather, the tea room would do a brisk business this afternoon, and so would the shops.

And the weather did look good, not just for today but for tomorrow, when it was supposed to rain again--which was certainly okay with me. A rainy Sunday doesn't make everybody happy here in the Texas Hill Country. Lots of people like to go boating on the Highland lakes or tubing on the Guadalupe River or swimming in Barton Springs, which averages chilly 68 degrees year-round, even when it's 102 in the shade. But rain pleases the farmers and gardeners and ranchers. They don't care what day of the week it rains, as long as it *rains*.

I grinned at Caitie as Khat, the shop Siamese, jumped down from the window sill and rubbed against her ankles. “First order of business, feed Khat. Can you handle that while I get things organized for the market?”

“Sure,” Caitie agreed happily, picking Khat up and hugging him. But Khat is an imperious creature, and not very huggable. He jumped out of her arms and trotted off in the direction of the kitchen, casting a look over his shoulder to make sure she was following him. He knows which shelf his kitty liver lives on and which dish he always eats it from, but he can’t open the refrigerator door or turn on the microwave to heat it up.

While Caitie was tending to Khat, I got busy organizing the items for the booth. The evening before, I had loaded the metal five-shelf plant cart with trays of four-inch pots of seedlings of the most popular culinary herbs: thyme, basil, sage, chives, dill, lavender, rosemary. There were a couple of dozen larger potted plants, as well--Powys Castle, my favorite artemisia; several salvias, much loved by humming birds; and Texas tarragon, *Tagetes lucida*, also called *yerba anise*. It’s a much-coveted substitute for French tarragon, which sulks in the hot, humid summers here in Central Texas.

I balanced our two folding tables and our portable shelves on the red garden wheelbarrow and trundled the load across the street to our usual shady spot on the east side of the parking lot, under the chinaberry tree. Caitie followed me with the plant cart. We pushed the plant cart into position, set up the shelves and the tables, and covered the table tops with a red-checked oilcloth (easy to wipe off spilled dirt). I left Caitie to arrange the shelves and put out the bundles of fresh herbs while I went back to the shop for another load: packages of dried herbs and potpourri, handcrafted soaps and lotions, some homemade herbal jellies, packages of herbal teas, a few of the best ristras, wreaths, and swags, and books on growing and cooking with herbs, including a dozen copies of my own book, *The China Bayles Book of Days*. Oh, and the large painted Thyme and Seasons sign, and business cards and copies of our tea-room menus, as well as brochures for Cass’ Thymely Gourmet and Ruby’s and my catering service, Party Thyme. Ruby, Cass, and I are big believers in what Ruby calls our “multiple profit centers” and I call our three-ring circus, complete with clowns. But don’t get me wrong: I’m not making fun of the concept. All three centers may not show a big profit every month, but they do bring in business. I can live with that.

Back at the shops, Ruby was getting ready to open--she would manage both the Cave and the herb shop until I closed the booth. That’s the advantage of having side-by-side businesses: one of us is always around to keep an eye on things. In the tea room, Cass and Lisa, a young woman who comes in to help with the lunch crowd when we’re busy, were setting the tables. And at our booth, the shelves were filled, the tables were nicely arranged, and everything looked attractive. I brought over the cash box and the credit card machine, Caitie and I put on our Thyme and Seasons aprons, and we were open for business...