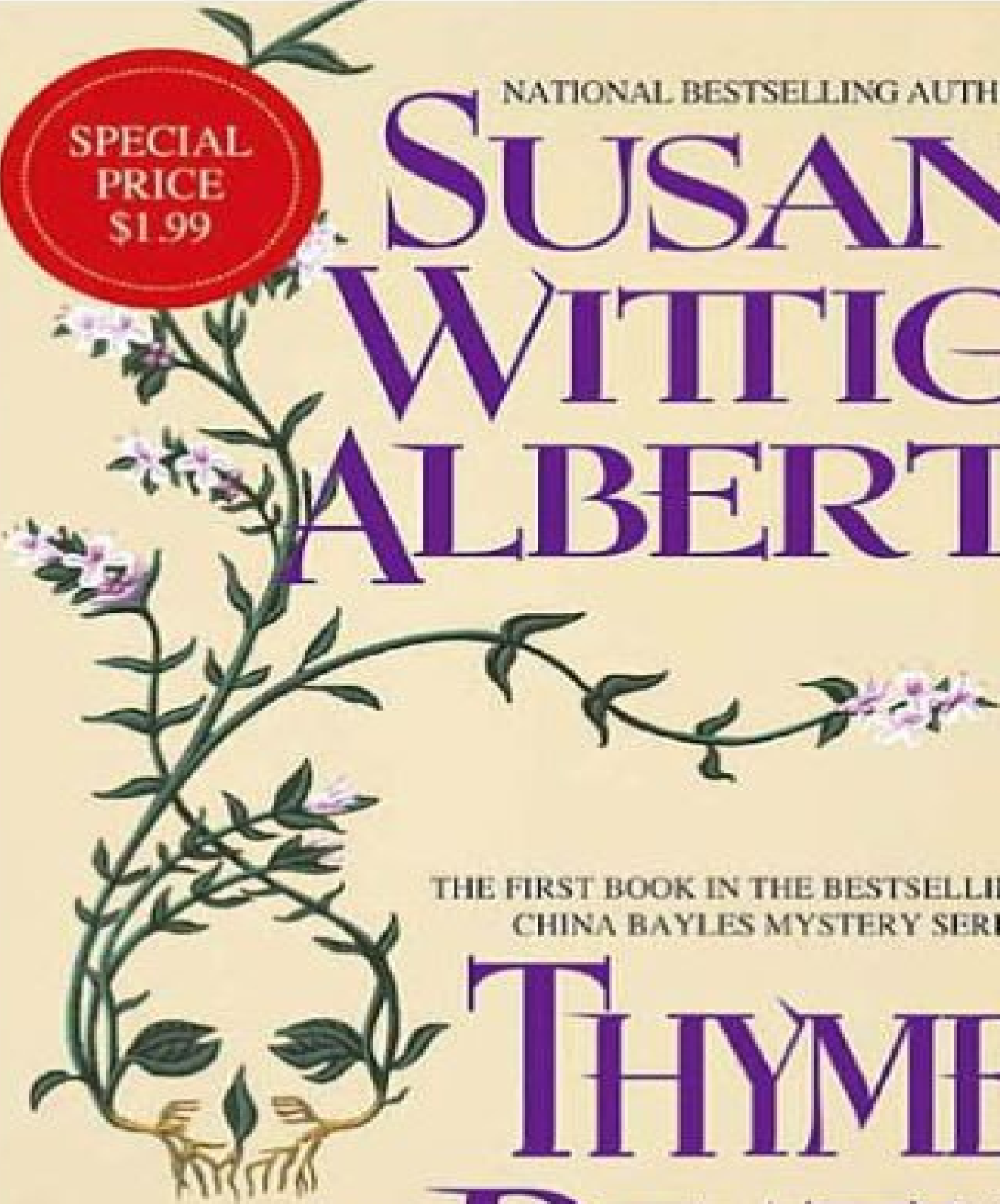




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Author's Note

This novel is set in the imaginary Texas town of Pecan Springs, which includes such fictitious elements as the campus of Central Texas State University and the Pecan River. Readers familiar with the central Texas hill country should not confuse Pecan Springs with such real towns and villages as San Marcos, New Braunfels, Wimberley, or Fredericksburg, or CTSU with local universities. The author has created the fictional characters and events of this book for the reader's pleasure, and intends no connection to real people or happenings.

CHAPTER 1

If I'd known how the week was going to turn out I would have sent it back first thing Monday and asked for a refund.

But Monday morning fooled me. It was the kind of day that thrills members of the Pecan Springs Chamber of Commerce right down to the pointy toes of their cowboy boots. The blistering Texas summer was fading fast, the cedar elms were coppery against a crisp blue sky, and as I came down the flagstone path to the street I was grinning. After two-plus years in Pecan Springs, I was still grateful for having escaped Houston with most of my sanity and some of my youth. I'd spent what seemed like an eternity there, give or take a few centuries, in a law firm that specialized in protecting the constitutional rights of bad guys - mostly *big* bad guys who had the wherewithal to pick up the tab for an expensive defense. At the weathered age of thirty-nine, I'd sold my yuppie condo-with-sauna and moved to Pecan Springs, Texas, population fifteen thousand, not counting the tourists and the students at Central Texas State U. I'd put my savings into a century-old stone building that housed a herb shop with the clever name of Thyme and Seasons Herb Company. Everybody in the law firm knew I'd gone nuts. Me, I knew I'd gone sane. I'm not saying I believed every second that I was doing the right thing, far from it. But I'd elbowed my way up the ladder and the view from the top wasn't pretty. I'd seen enough of the shadow side of justice to last me for the rest of my life.

Thyme and Seasons fronts on Crockett Street, a couple of blocks from the town square and a dozen blocks from the CTSU campus. Pecan Springs is a picturesque town, halfway between Austin to the north and San Antonio to the south. People who think that Texas is nothing but sagebrush and prickly pear flats are always surprised to see the cedar-blanketed Edwards Plateau that rises west into the hill country, and the flat fertile farmland that

spreads east to the Gulf Coast. West, too, lies the chain of highland lakes, strung like silver charms on the silver bracelet of the Colorado River, where Dallas and Houston money comes to play. Ten miles from town there's Canyon Lake on the Guada-lupe River, the site of several luxurious vacation communities, and the lovely San Marcos River rises from Spring Lake and winds crystal clear beneath massive cypresses and sycamores. While Pecan Springs may not be endowed with big-city cultural riches like opera and ballet, I personally prefer to live in a green and beautiful place, with blue lakes and limestone hills within biking distance. *And* after fifteen years of risking life and limb on the 1-10 into Houston, simply not having to drive to work every morning is something to feel cheerful about over breakfast.

Today was my day off. The shop was closed, and I was headed next door to the Craft Emporium, a rambling Victorian mansion that houses a jumbled warren of tiny craft shops, antique booths, and boutiques. As I opened the stained-glass front door, Gretel Schumaker

was hanging a fresh batch of hand-dipped candles in the front window of what was once the parlor. She was surrounded by her craft - a forest of scented candles in dozens of shapes and hundreds of shades.

"Hi, China," Gretel called. She is blond and sturdily buxom, like her mother and German grandmother, who also make candles. It's a family enterprise. "Hey, you got lavender oil? Mom wants to dip a batch tomorrow."

"Sure," I said. "Stop by and knock at the kitchen door in an hour or so, and I'll get it for you." I live behind the shop. As far as the neighbors are concerned, that means I'm never closed. Sometimes that's a nuisance. Mostly, though, it's okay.

Because I was on an errand, I only nodded at Peter Dudley, who was fussily dusting Depression glassware in what used to be the mansion's dining room and is now his upscale antique shop. If you do more than nod, you're lost. Peter's fund of gossip is only rivaled by that of Constance Letterman, who owns the Emporium. Peter wears a dark toupee that covers his bald spot, open-necked white shirts with the sleeves rolled up, and pastel slacks. He's a rare treat in Pecan Springs, where everybody's into jeans, tee shirts, and cowboy boots, which is exactly what I was wearing today. My tee shirt announced that behind every successful woman was herself.