

Chapter 1

“Confess! You’re as bored as I am.” My companion in the elegant hot tub, surrounded by tiles hand-decorated by local New Mexican artists, shot me her signature saucy grin. “Let’s go climb a rock. I read there’s some great cliffs not more than an hour away.”

“Bored already? I’ve been in Truth or Consequences less than 24 hours, you and Frances only a half day more. Besides, we’re here to help your former nanny, not to be entertained,” I said, as haughtily as one could when immersed in warm, soothing mineral water. Mineral water that didn’t have the rotten egg smell of most geothermal water.

“Puh-leaze,” Kate whined. “There’s zip to do in a town this small.” Even pouting, Kate was gorgeous. She’d been bombarded with a lot of changes recently, but seemed to be bouncing back. Damp with steam, her skin glowed with health. She’d tied her blond hair up in a knot to keep it dry. Wasn’t working. If only it still didn’t look good.

“It’s a spa town. Perfect for relaxing. Not boring. Besides, this isn’t about us. It’s about Alice.” I’d pulled my hair back in an unfortunately low ponytail that was now dripping down my back.

“Be real, Madrone. Gramm and Alice dreamed this up so you’d have a calm, quiet place to heal and I’d have time to figure out how I want to squander my newfound wealth. Not to mention anyone could guess that you needed to escape from your mother’s anxiety.”

I leaned back against one side of the hot tub, resting my arms on the ledge that surrounded it, soaking up minerals from below and sunshine from above. September here remained warm, with occasional spates of welcomed rain. I loved Kate, but her enthusiasm and even the speed of her speech sometimes drained me. Other times, I found those traits energizing and often amusing. I forced a smile, even though her admission that she and her grandmother thought I needed rescuing rankled.

My reasons for visiting Truth or Consequences were not all good, but hey, I wasn’t alone. The small community near New Mexico’s western border had long served as a bolt-hole for those evading problems they couldn’t face, searching for a healing place of refuge, or exploring ways to exploit their creative talents.

Me? The plan was that I’d spend time with my friends Kate and Frances and recover from the unexpected trauma—emotional and physical—that followed my most recent guiding gig with Adventure Calls Ecotouring. And okay, yes, to escape my doting mother’s constant hovering. She meant well, and I adored her, but still, she could be suffocating.

The other part of the plan, which I’d shared with no one, was that these days of relaxation would help me redirect my life path, if ever I’d had a direction. It was time, now that I’d passed 30, to decide what color my parachute was. I couldn’t remain a part-chef, part-guide forever.

Where better to find my true direction than a new B&B in a tiny town with good friends, great food, and hot springs to soak away my worries?

Alice’s hot tub, heated by underground thermal springs that flowed beneath this area of town, was situated some twenty feet beyond the B&B’s back deck. Absent that sulphury smell that was a hallmark of most hot springs, the water contained minerals that I’d been told could cure all sorts of ailments. I doubted it would work on my indecisiveness, but it relaxed muscles made stiff by a day of painting and cleaning the new B&B.

A wide sandstone path led to a small, raised area near the tub, which held a table and four side chairs. The path continued beyond the tub to the back gate to the alley, but the rest of the yard

was gravel, dotted with cactus and other succulents. We'd left our towels on the table, our flip-flops beneath our chairs. Wise people do not walk barefoot in the Southwest.

"Make way!" Kate's grandmother, Frances O'Shea, trotted up the steps and seated herself on the wide ledge, ready to swing her legs around and into the tub. We scootched to either side, and she entered with a splash. The water level rose.

"You two look like swells," Frances said. "Taking the waters, I think they call it."

"A hundred years ago," Kate said.

"Hold still, you two." I stood and stretched out my hand to scoop up a butterfly floundering in the water. I sat back down, hand above water level, and we all stared as the little creature wriggled, then fluttered its wings, and eventually flew off.

"Monarch on its way to Mexico," Frances said. "Good save, Madrone."

"Might have been a Painted Lady," Kate said. "They look alike."

Frances stared at her. "Not to me, they don't."

"Shh." I put my finger to my lips and nodded toward the house. "Listen." Raised voices, both female, came from the other side of the B&B's fence.

"You need to tear that fence down. We both know it's on my property."

"Alice," Frances mimed, as if it weren't obvious. We'd been following Alice's orders all day, helping her with final touches before she opened her new Bed and Breakfast. Some of those touches required heavy lifting. Hence, the hot tub soak.

"And here I thought you were cutting roses, not starting another spat. I thought we were leaving that decision to arbitration. It isn't what your grandmother would have wanted." This from the other woman.

"I imagine she would have wanted what's best for her family," Alice said. "I can't make a profit without the two casitas. And I for sure can't have that dog of yours running over here and startling my guests."

"Jonah is fixing the fence as we speak, so Loki won't be an issue."

"Loki is not the big issue. Why spend money fixing a fence that needs to be seven feet closer to your home?"

"There's no way he can move my casita *or* my carport. I can't afford the expense. I'd planned to rent out my casita. You're not the only entrepreneur."

"But apparently, the only one who understands the law." After a long silence, Alice spoke again.

"Here, have some roses. I apologize, Greta. There's no point in my bringing this up every time I see you."

"Seems to me, there must be, since that's about all you say when we meet. I don't need roses, Alice. I need some understanding. But I guess roses are easier. Even if they come with thorns." The three of us soaked in silence for some minutes, giving Alice and the mysterious Greta time to head back inside. I, of course, knew Alice, our gracious hostess and relentless project manager, but the other woman was a stranger.

"You know who this Greta is?" I eventually asked.

"Apparently, she's a neighbor who's having a property line dispute with my former nanny," Kate said.

I punched her lightly on the upper arm. "Thank you, Ms. Obvious."

"Alice didn't mention this yesterday," Frances said. "But then, she's a private person."

"Yeah, like, not sharing how she can afford all these gorgeous upgrades to her grandmother's home," Kate said.

Her grandmother scowled at her, but mumbled, "Like I said, she's always been a private person."

We'd sat up the previous night, talking, eating, drinking—possibly a bit more of the second two than I needed—until past midnight. Another justification for our hot tub time, if you needed one in this town formerly known as Hot Springs.

I'd missed ferocious Kate and her protective grandmother. Frances, pushing seventy, had a mouth like a long-haul trucker in a dive bar, and Kate grew up with her and inherited her fierce sense of justice and love for nature—and her potty mouth.

Kate's childhood nanny, Alice McKenzie, was our hostess. She'd inherited a home in Truth or Consequences from her grandmother and, after months of remodeling punctuated by political hurdles to get zoning approval, was launching it as a Bed and Breakfast in a couple of weeks. Extensive renovations left the outside pretty much original and the interior luxurious, comfortable, and efficient. The kitchen made my fingers itch to grab a knife—with only the best intentions, I'm a chef, after all—but I'd restrained myself so far. Since Alice had dinner in the oven when I arrived and breakfast was perfectly scrambled eggs with baked goods from someplace called Passion Pie, accompanied by Virgin Marys to soothe our hangovers, the temptations were few.

We slouched down in the water. Alice had told us that the minerals worked wonders on the skin, so might as well let it work on as much of the body as possible.

I must have drifted off, because I jerked awake at the sound of a dog's sharp, joyous bark and the scrabble of nails on decking. More yips preceded a huge splash. A medium-sized, tan and white dog bounced over to Kate, wriggling upward to lick her face. "Aww, this must be the beast Alice and her neighbor were arguing about," she said with a laugh. "Adorable, even wet."

Frances wiped her face. "I smell wet dog."

"What a sweetheart," I said. "Here, Loki." He dog-paddled the short distance to me and licked my face. About the size of a small Labrador, he had curly, golden-brown fur and ears with white tips. Possibly some kind of doodle? Heaven knew they were breeding poodles with just about every other breed of dog these days. Whatever its heritage, cute was on the list, along with affectionate. "So you're the critter who's been sneaking through Alice's fence." I imagined any disruption to Alice's plans would annoy the uber-organized woman.

"Alice is not going to be thrilled to see you," Kate said. "Wonder if there's some way to sneak you back home."

Alice came out onto the back porch of her new B&B. "Don't soak too long, ladies." She'd already warned us of the perils of getting overheated and dehydrated in the hot water.

Frances dragged herself out first, blocking Alice's view of me and our canine visitor. "I've been drinking lots of water, boss," she called. "I'm so relaxed, I could melt."

She stood and grabbed her towel. "You two figure out how to get him home. Alice is a wreck already without worrying about dog hair in her hot tub. I'll distract her."