

Chapter 1

My reasons for visiting Truth or Consequences were not all good, but I wasn't alone. My pal Google told me that the small town hiding on the Rio Grande in New Mexico wasn't just a great place to find hot springs—seems lots of misfits had found it a hidey-hole to reclaim lives gone sour, or maybe only stale. So surely there'd be room for me. One recuperating tour guide, one smart-mouthed grandmother, and her equally outspoken granddaughter. My good buds.

The plan was I'd catch up with my friends Kate O'Shea and her grandmother, Frances O'Shea, and recover from the physical and emotional trauma that followed my most recent guiding gig with Adventure Calls Ecotouring. Kate, Frances, and I had bonded when murder stalked a training session with Adventure Calls some months back. 'Nother story.

Truth is, we all needed this time in T or C, as I learned the locals called it, and not just to soften our skin in the soothing mineral waters. I needed some time away from my mother's constant hovering. She meant well, and I adored her, but still, smothering was invented by a Latina mother. Plus, I was gaining way too much weight.

Frances and Kate needed time to let the huge change in their financial condition soak in, I guessed. Or maybe they had other secrets to escape, other hopes for this time in tranquil Truth or Consequences. Other truths to explore.

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

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

Seemed a great idea to me, but as we soaked in the elegant hot tub in the B&B's backyard, Kate's words conflicted with my intentions.

"Confess! You're as bored as I am. Let's go climb a rock. I read there's some great cliffs not more than an hour away." She wriggled against the wall of the tub.

"Not bored. Loving this," I said. I'd visited hot springs throughout the West, and I was savoring this mineral water, which didn't have the rotten egg smell of most geothermal water.

"Madrone Hunter, you're getting old. Losing your sense of adventure." 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.

I'd pulled my hair back in an unfortunately low ponytail that was now dripping down my back. I raised my eyebrows. "I had plenty of adventure in Cottonwood." I loved Kate, but her enthusiasm and even the speed of her speech sometimes drained me.

Her impatience turned to remorse. "Sorry. My bad. Gramm and Alice dreamed this trip 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 forced a smile, even though her admission that she

and her grandmother thought I needed rescuing irritated me. “I thought we were here to help Alice, not heal me.”

“Can’t it be both?”

I shrugged, giving up. No point arguing with Kate on a mission, plus, why not? I was not suffering.

Alice’s hot tub, filled with water from the underground thermal springs that flowed beneath this area of town, was situated some twenty feet beyond the B&B’s back deck. 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, where a table and four side chairs stood. 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, cactus country.

“Make way!” Kate’s grandmother 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.

“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, ready to initiate another of their endless but generally good-natured arguments. “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 McKenzie’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. Your grandmother would have hated our arguing.” 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.”

“Issue? Loki isn’t the issue. Why spend money fixing a fence that needs to be seven feet closer to your house?”

“There’s no way he can move my casita or my carport. I can’t afford it. I’d planned to rent out my casita. You’re not the only entrepreneur on the block.”

“Apparently, the only one who understands the law.” After a long silence, Alice spoke again. “I apologize, Greta. There’s no point in my bringing this up every time I see you. Here, have some roses.”

“Seems to me, there must be, since that’s about all you say when we meet. I don’t need roses, Alice. I need patience and 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, recognized the voice of Alice, our hostess and relentless project manager, but the other woman was a stranger to me.

“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. “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. Even though I hadn’t known them long, I counted them as good friends. Frances, pushing seventy but with a body that seemed at least a decade younger, had a mouth like a long-haul trucker in a dive bar. Kate grew up with her grandmother and inherited her fierce sense of justice and love for nature—and that 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 exterior largely 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 said 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 scabble of nails on decking. More yips preceded a huge splash. A medium-sized 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." She wrinkled her nose and let out a mild curse word.

"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 won’t be thrilled to see you,” Kate said. “Wonder if there’s some way to sneak you back home.”

Alice came out onto the large back deck. “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 our canine visitor and me. “I’ve been drinking lots of water, boss,” she called. “I’m so relaxed, I could melt.”

She stood and grabbed her towel. “I’ll distract her while you two figure out how to get him home. Alice is a wreck already without worrying about dog hair in her hot tub.”