

Chapter One

What in the world is wrong with Niall? And where is he going?

Mae Martin had come home from a morning run on the trails above the Rio Grande to find she was out of coffee. Walking through Truth or Consequences' small, historic, and summer-sleepy downtown on her way to get a cup, she was puzzled to see her father's pickup truck at the intersection of Foch and Broadway, its bed loaded with flattened cardboard boxes as if someone were moving. Niall Kerrigan, her father's life partner, was at the wheel. He lingered at the stop sign long after the lone car on Broadway had passed, staring ahead, not seeing her.

Concerned, Mae walked up and tapped on the window.

Niall jerked to attention and rolled the window down. "Trying to give me a heart attack?" His Maine accent, indestructible after fifteen years in New Mexico, flattened the *r* out of heart, making it sound almost like *hat*.

"Sorry. You looked kinda distracted. Are you okay?"

He shook his head and looked away. "Florencia Mirabal went into hospice yesterday. She wants me to clear out her house for her."

Mae had only met Florencia, a famous artist, once, but she knew how close Niall was to her. This request had to be overwhelming for him. "I've got the day free. Let me help you." Mae wanted not only to spare him a little of the grief but a lot of the heavy lifting. In addition to smoking over a pack a day, he never exercised outside of the demands of his work. Mae knew she was probably worrying too much, but she couldn't help thinking the combined exertion and emotional strain *could* give him a heart attack. "Why didn't you ask me?"

“It’s not like she’s exactly a friend of yours.”

“She’s *your* friend. And I liked her when I met her.”

“Did you?” Niall sounded skeptical. “I thought she was rude to you.”

On being introduced to Mae, Florencia had said mockingly, “Ah. Marty’s daughter. The health nut.” She’d looked her up and down and then up again as if Mae’s height were a marvel and said in her clipped pueblo accent, “Like the proverbial horse.” It had been at an Art Hop, the night the galleries stayed open late while musicians and fire dancers performed on the streets. Florencia Mirabal had been at Rio Bravo Fine Arts, her bald head crowned with an extraordinary beaded hat, her sagging face made up, her frail body clad in a bright red dress. Incurably ill, but still holding court with Truth or Consequences’ other famous artists.

Mae had felt insulted for a second, but then she’d remembered something one of her health science professors had said. *Health is a crown on a well man’s head visible only to the sick.* Florencia had lost that crown. “Not *that* rude. It was okay. I kinda knew where it came from. Let me give you a hand.”

Niall opened the door and slid over to the passenger seat. “Thanks. I guess you could tell, I can’t even think straight to drive.”

Mae got in and drove. Niall slumped and took a key from his pocket, clutching it and closing his eyes. Half a block up Foch Street, she pulled the truck over to the curb on the hill in front of the antique shop and patted his thin, ropy arm. “How about some coffee before we tackle the house? I was headed out to get some, and you look like you could use a little boost.”

He didn’t respond, but that was normal for him. Signs of affection from anyone but Jim Bob “Marty” Martin usually made him either cringe or freeze. Mae took his stillness as a kind of compliment.

“It’s a hundred degrees out.” He regarded the key in his hand, turning it over restlessly.
“Can’t you park any closer?”

She’d already parked as close to the coffee shop as she could get without driving around the block to face the right way on Main. “Come on. It won’t kill you to walk.” *Wrong choice of words.*

Niall put the key in one pocket and removed his cigarettes and lighter from another.
“Fine. I’ll have a smoke while we do it. Then you can tell me it *will* kill me.”

Mae didn’t say anything. She was sure her father mentioned the issue often enough. They climbed the hill at Niall’s slow pace and turned right on Main Street. Passing the brightly colored storefronts of an artist’s studio, a thrift store, and a space for rent, they reached the red door of Passion Pie Café. Niall started to give Mae money, but she told him it would be her treat and left him on the painted bench outside to finish his cigarette.

She joined the line for coffee. Misty Chino, the barista, was a young Apache woman barely out of her teens, with a long face, a prominent nose, and a lithe, fit figure. She sparkled and smiled as she took orders, her service a blend of speed and charm, as graceful as her fire dancing on Art Hop nights.

When Mae reached the counter, Misty held out her hand and displayed a diamond ring. The stone had a pinkish hue and was set in rose gold. Mae caught her breath. “Wow. That’s gorgeous. Congratulations. When am I finally gonna meet him?” Mae’s friendship with Misty was still developing, but the introduction seemed overdue.

“Good question. He works evenings, I work days, and he’s sure as heck not going running with us. Reno’s idea of a workout is a *stroll*.”

That didn't sound like a newly engaged woman, more like an old married lady putting up with her husband. Mae placed her order and asked, hoping to hear more enthusiasm, "Are you excited?"

"Relieved is more like it." Misty filled two cups. "We've been together so long it's about time, you know?"

The relationship sounded more like a habit than a romance. At a loss what to say, Mae resorted to the sugarcoated diplomacy of her Southern upbringing. "Well, he's got good taste in women and jewelry."

Misty took the compliment with a smile.

As Mae exited the café, the heat and sun of the desert summer day hit her like a wall of fire. Niall half-straightened from his slouch and mumbled his thanks, taking his coffee. Mae sat beside him, grateful that the cigarette was out.

"Misty got engaged to Reno Geronimo."

"Well, if that's not stupid, I don't know what is."

"Whoa. That's a pretty harsh judgment. You know him?"

"Ayeh." Niall's Maine affirmative came out as *yuh* with a trace of effort at the beginning, a sound that always reminded Mae of pulling out dandelions by the roots, though she couldn't say why. "Know him and his father. Orville's a successful artist, Reno's a starving artist. And I mean starving. He's a waiter who's never had a show. Not even one painting in a gallery here. I don't know what he does with his work. I never see it. And those kids are twenty years old. They need to live a little before they get tied down." He sipped his coffee. "Did you tell her you got married too young?"

“She knows, but it didn’t seem like the time to remind her. That would have been kind of a downer. She shows me her ring and I say, ‘When I was your age I was planning my first divorce?’ ”

Niall puffed out a weak laugh. “I guess not. Maybe his father will talk some sense into them. His first marriage didn’t last too long, either. In fact, Florencia is his ex. He married Reno’s mother later and that lasted, but Orville and Flo got married in college when they were twenty. Two artists in Santa Fe. Seemed romantic at the time, I’m sure, even if it was a mistake.”

“At least they went to college.”

“You thinking about yourself, or Reno and Misty?”

“Both, I reckon.” At age twenty-eight, Mae had finished her first year of college in the spring, finally getting started on the education she’d foregone with her marriages. “I’d hate to see Misty stuck where I was for so long.”

“She’s too bright not to go to school. Orville ought to talk with them about that, too.”

They returned to the truck and Mae followed Niall’s directions, driving up Foch and turning down a narrow side street to the gravel drive behind Florencia Mirabal’s home.

“Get as close to the front door as you can,” Niall said. “I don’t have a key for the back.”

Mae pulled the truck into the weedy patch of dirt that qualified as a side yard, drawing near to the porch’s side steps. The front steps led to a long, winding set of stone stairs set into a steep cliff, giving the little house the feeling of a castle. On their way in, she and Niall paused on the porch, looking down at Main Street and the view of the Rio Grande and Turtleback Mountain beyond the town.

Mae said, “This is such a perfect place for an artist to live. It must have been hard for her to leave.”

Niall made a grunting sound, an attempt to stifle his smoker's cough, and unlocked the door. Mae followed him into a small living room full of bright, overstuffed furniture and crammed book shelves. A collection of paintings filled every space on the walls. One of Niall's smaller scrap metal sculptures, a plumber made from pipes and wrenches, bent over in the classic posture in a corner, the crack of his pipe-elbow buttocks exposed above the metal sheath of his pants.

Niall closed the door. "She wants us to get rid of the books, the food, the dishes, the furniture—everything but the art."

Mae asked, "Are we sorting it into keep, sell, and give away? How do you want to do it?"

He shoved his hands into his pockets. His brown eyes looked large and distorted through his thick glasses as he stared at his own work. "I don't want to do it at all."

"I know." Mae squeezed his hand quickly, knowing he would only accept the touch for a moment. "It has to make you think about her dying."

"No." Niall's odd Yankee version of the word came out as a nasal, descending *daow* that bore little resemblance to anything spelled n-o. "I've seen that coming for a long time. It's the frickin' *work*. She had to know I'd hate doing this."

"It means she trusted you, though." Mae sensed he was covering deeper feelings with this complaint. "I'll do as much as I can. Tell me where to start."

He walked over to a chair and gave it a small shove. "Stuff's not bad. Jamie need anything at his place?"

"I think he does, but he painted his walls so funny not much goes with 'em. Anyway, it might bother him to get a dying person's furniture." Mae's boyfriend, a singer-songwriter who

lived in Santa Fe, had a few issues with death and dying—cultural, personal, and spiritual. “I can help you load the truck for the thrift shop.”

“*Daow*. Make ’em come get it. It’s a good donation.”

Mae looked up at a full-length portrait of a handsome blond cowboy angel in a striped shirt, a Western hat, and suggestively fitted chaps. He stood alone in a desert with distant mountains behind him, his boots planted on the hard red earth while his dusky wings spread in front of clouds that circled him like layers of stormy halos. She felt the artist must have intended the way her eyes were drawn to the cowboy’s dreamy blue eyes and blue-jeaned crotch about equally.

“He’s not your type,” Niall said, with a hint of a dry laugh.

“He’s pretty, though. Is it her work?”

“How long have you lived in T or C?” Niall turned to Mae, his head jutting out, modifying his habitual slouch into a more assertive posture. “Delmas Howe.”

“The guy that does the flowers?”

Niall exhaled noisily. “And the *men*. He’s a New Mexico state living treasure. This pretty cowboy is worth—jeez—thousands. *Thousands*.” He scuffed into the next room. “And her whole collection—she ought to have it stored somewhere secure. Get it out of the house.”

Mae lingered with the cowboy. She recognized the local artist’s style now. He rendered a winged, sexy man with the same depth and light that he used in painting petals and pistils. “Any idea what she plans to do with the art?”

“No idea. That’s between her and her lawyer.”

Mae joined Niall in the kitchen. The small table near the window was barely adequate to accommodate a single diner. “Where’s her family?”

“Acoma Pueblo, as far as I know. She doesn’t speak to them.” Niall opened and closed a few cabinets. Mae found something sad about all the cans and jars stocked up as if Florencia had not expected to die but to keep on cooking and eating. Niall closed a cupboard and squeezed the handle. “She said she’s giving instructions at the hospice that if her brother and his family try to visit, they aren’t allowed.”

“And she never got remarried or had any kids?”

“No. And no kids.”

The look of the house—no photographs, no signs of a social life—made Mae think Niall might be Florencia’s only real friend, the only person cranky and stand-offish enough to understand her. “She’s lucky she has you. It would be awful to be dying and not have anyone who cared.”

Niall ran his hand over the counter and then patted it. Mae sensed he was avoiding her eyes. “You want me to start clearing out in here?” she asked. “I can get the boxes out of the truck.”

“Thanks.” His voice was husky. “I’ll start in the living room.”

She went out and collected a stack of nested cardboard boxes from the back of the pickup.

A slender, brown-skinned young man of medium height strode up the back street and into the yard, staring at the truck. He wore his long black hair in a ponytail, and his face was perfectly proportioned, with brown eyes, a straight nose, high cheekbones, and full lips. He looked familiar, someone Mae had seen around town, but she couldn’t place him. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

If he had smiled, he would have been stunningly attractive, but his expression was sullen and his voice quiet and hard, as if Mae and Niall had intruded on *his* property.

“We’re helping Florencia. Packing up her stuff.”

“What? Who are you? Why would you do that?” His accent suggested he was a speaker of a Native language—Mae guessed Apache. Mescalero, where Misty was from, was the nearest reservation. Was this her boyfriend? “She didn’t die, did she?” He seemed anxious, as if he had urgent business with Florencia.

“No.” Mae set the boxes down. “She went into hospice.” She reached out to shake hands. His grip was soft. “I’m Mae Martin. My daddy’s partner Niall Kerrigan is a real good friend of Florencia’s.”

“Reno Geronimo.”

“Misty’s fiancé. She’s told me about you. Nice to meet you.” *Sort of.* Reno didn’t strike Mae as particularly suited to Misty.

“How long does,” he hesitated, “the woman who lived here have?”

“I have no idea. I think hospice is for when you have a few months, but Niall would know more.”

“If her time is short, please don’t say her name. We don’t speak the names of the dead. It calls back the ghost.”

“Sorry. I’ll be careful. My boyfriend has a taboo like that, too.” Jamie was half Aboriginal Australian, Warlpiri, on his mother’s side. “I didn’t know not to use it already, though.” Mae picked up the boxes again. “You want to come in and talk to Niall?”

Reno slipped his hands in his pockets and rattled keys and coins, frowning. After a moment, he said, “All right.”

They went around through the front and found Niall sitting on the floor beside a bookshelf, pulling things off it. Mae placed the boxes beside him and Niall began to assemble one, taping its bottom. Mae was about to explain that Reno had come to see Florencia, but the young man spoke first. “You’re not doing the studio?”

That was rude. No hello? No sympathy?

“Nope. It’s locked. And I don’t have a key to it.” Niall placed a book in the box. “She doesn’t want anything taken out of it. Thinks a museum might want it, the whole studio the way she left it. Her brushes. Her easel. Her work in progress. Legacy exhibit.” He looked up at Reno. “She talk to you about that?”

Reno nodded. “Yes. I just wanted to make sure. I should be going.” He left without further words.

Niall resumed packing books. Mae looked down at the top of his head, with the gray hairs curling through the black. “Was that a little weird? I could swear he had no idea she’d gone into hospice, but then he started acting like he was the caretaker here.”

“Something came between them. She won’t say what. He might have come to try to sort it out. Too late. And it’s too bad. He was her student, her friend, the only person besides me that could put up with her.” He opened a book that had a bookmark in it, stroking the page. His voice cracked. “I gave her this for her last birthday.”

“You okay?” Mae asked.

Niall put the bookmark back between the pages and closed the volume. “Christ. Don’t know why I did that. She’s never going to finish it.” He dropped the book in a box and went outside.

Mae began her work in the kitchen, packing mismatched plates and utensils into boxes for the thrift store. A cast-iron frying pan sat on the stovetop as if Florencia was going to come back and cook breakfast. Mae paused as she started to pack it up. Jamie always complained about her cheap nonstick frying pan—but no, that would bother him, scavenging the dying woman’s stuff. She put the pan in the box.

The contents of the refrigerator, nothing but yogurt and applesauce, suggested Florencia had reached a point where she couldn’t eat solid food, but there was so much left, she’d overestimated either her appetite or her lifespan.

What would it be like to know it was the last time you’d go grocery shopping, the last time you’d do all your ordinary tasks? To have to stop and let go of your life? Mae had so many plans and goals. Everything that mattered hinged on having a *future*. What would it be like not to have one? The idea threw a blank wall in front of her mind. No matter how she tried to imagine the experience, she couldn’t—unless that faceless obstacle was it.

When Niall returned, a whiff of tobacco smoke came through the door with him. It bothered Mae more than ever, provoking an image of helping her father to put all of Niall’s stuff in boxes. Marty, a college track and softball coach, was fit and active. His fifty-one years looked like forty on him, while Niall, a year younger, could have passed for sixty. Mae was sure he had chronic bronchitis, and lung cancer could be next.

Soft thuds came from the living room, broken up with long pauses. Mae dropped the last expired yogurt into the trash and walked to the living room doorway. Niall was putting books in boxes, very slowly, opening pages, stopping to read passages. He coughed, sniffed, sighed. Mourning while Florencia was still alive. Reeking of smoke. Mae wanted to tear the cigarettes out of his pocket.

The urge crossed her mind again and again as the work stretched out through the day. While Mae was in the bedroom packing up the clothes Florencia had left behind, he cleaned the bathroom, with frequent smoke breaks and long pauses between bouts of activity. Mae felt the weight of those silences. He was slowed down by grief, and also by lack of breath.

The bedroom gave Mae a new impression of Florencia. A silk duvet. Satin-edged sheets. Small paintings on the wall and delicately painted pottery arrayed on the dressers. She'd cared about the beauty of her place of sleep. *I wonder if she had guests here, but not the kitchen.* Not lately, though. If she'd had a lover, Niall wouldn't have been the one she'd turned to for this final favor.

Mae went to check on one of Niall's silences and found him staring at a hairbrush. *Hair.* A reminder of when Florencia had been healthy. He glared at her. "Stop fussing over me. I need to be alone."

"Sorry."

Mae returned to work in the bedroom closet, trying to shut off an image of Niall sick and bald.

She noticed a few strands of Florencia's hair on some of the sweaters as she took them out of drawers. Sometimes it was long and dark; at other times it had been cut short and dyed fuchsia. *Fuchsia.* A lot of people cut their hair when they started chemo. Had she done that and then gone crazy with the color? Defying death? Mocking her illness? Another piece of the puzzle of this woman.

As the afternoon faded into early evening, Niall declared they'd done all they could for one day. They stepped out onto the porch and he locked the front door, a conventional lock plus a deadbolt. "We should check the back door."

On the rear of the house near the driveway, a former screened porch had been converted into a sunroom. All the blinds were drawn, as they were on most houses in the hottest months of the year. Niall tested the door knob and bent down to peer into the crack. “Both locks are on.”

“Is that the studio?”

“Aye.” He rattled the door again. “Secure as it’s going to get.”

As they walked to the truck, Mae said, “I’m surprised she doesn’t have an alarm system with that art collection.”

“Not many people know she has it. I guess you could tell she didn’t have a lot of visitors. Alarm’s a good idea, though. Or storage. I’ll call her tomorrow when she’s gotten settled.”

Mae drove to Niall and Marty’s adobe house on Riverside Drive. Their other vehicle wasn’t in the driveway. “I guess Daddy’s not back yet.” He ran summer softball camps at the College of the Rio Grande campus in Las Cruces. “I’ll wait with you.”

“No, go home. Get some rest. I could use some time by myself.”

Mae hesitated to leave. Though she understood the need to be alone, she wanted Niall to have someone within shouting distance if he changed his mind. “How about I start dinner for y’all?”

He put on a shocked look. “*You?*”

“Why not? A bad cook is better than none.”

She headed for the purple front door. Niall, a few paces behind her, stopped when his cell phone rang. He answered. “Hmm?” Had to be Marty. Niall would at least say hello to someone less intimate. “Yeah. Good enough.” He pocketed the phone. “He got a table for us at Dada Café.”

“That was real thoughtful.”

“Ayeh. I’m not in the mood for it, but he meant well.”

Mae offered to drive, but Niall—though he had to be so exhausted he could hardly stand—grumbled about the wastefulness of returning in separate cars when they could walk a few blocks. She shook her head. In the morning she could hardly get him to walk a block, and now she couldn’t get him to rest when he was tired. If he held still, maybe the grief would overwhelm him.

They went inside for a quick cleanup, then took Pershing Street to Broadway and turned left toward the restaurant. The blue neon sign on the flat roof of the Ellis building displayed the name of its former owner, depression-era healer Magnolia Ellis, against a sky reflecting pink from the sunset. The sidewalks in front of it bore the imprint *WPA 1939*. Like much of downtown, the building dated to the years when the town, then called Hot Springs, had been a mecca for people seeking cures and even miracles. When Mae and Niall passed the two-story brick structure, she was startled to see a realtor’s sign in the downstairs window below the lettering advertising the current tenant’s chiropractic practice. She stopped and made sure she’d seen it right.

“What are you doing?” Niall asked, slightly out of breath. “Need to *rest*?”

“It’s for sale. I wonder if Dr. Freidan is gonna retire.”

“Want me to buy it for you? Set you up as the heir to Magnolia?”

There was no way Niall could afford to purchase the historic landmark. He was successful, but not like Florencia Mirabal, and though Mae had gifts as a psychic and healer, she was no Magnolia Ellis. Niall had to be kidding about buying the place. “You buy it for me, I’m setting up a personal training studio.”

“Nope. In T or C, there’s more call for healers.” The town had become Truth or Consequences and an arts center, but it remained a spa destination. “You want a personal training business, you’ll have to do that in Cruces.”

Niall crossed the Ellis building’s parking lot and studied the realtor’s sign in the window. Mae followed.

Maybe he hadn’t been teasing her. Niall liked to invest in real estate. He owned several rental houses, including the one Mae lived in rent-free while she was in college. The Ellis building would be a great investment, though not for Mae to use. She was nowhere near ready to set up a business, especially not as a full-time healer.

In the window of the office, her tall, athletic form reflected beside Niall’s. Both were five-foot-ten, but she took up more space with her curves and muscles than he did with his thinly covered bones. He coughed a few times and said, “I might look into this.”

What good was it to invest in a future he might not be around for?

Niall felt for his cigarettes.

Don’t do that. Please. Mae put an arm around him, interrupting the act. “You’re so sweet. You’d really buy me Magnolia’s building?”

“Maybe. If you want it.”

She didn’t, but the offer touched her, and she couldn’t help wrapping Niall’s hug-resistant frame in an embrace. *What I want is for you to quit smoking.*

Mae’s vision shifted. It was suddenly midday. The front windows of the building revealed a full waiting room. Old-fashioned cars lined up along the street, people sitting in them with their windows rolled down. More cars filled the parking lot. Mae felt a pure life force flowing through her like the brilliant light of New Mexico, like the hot springs under the city’s

skin. Her mind went as clear as the sky in her vision. A deep, glowing certainty filled her. Something moved from her to Niall, some of the infinite light.

He pulled back, and she let go. The strange image and feelings cleared. It was early evening again. The crowds were gone. Had she been in an altered state for more than a minute? It had been so deep, time had ceased. As a psychic, Mae could see someone's past by touching things that person had owned, but she normally had to concentrate and use crystals to do it. This moment from the town's history had come back uninvited, complete with what felt like the healer's energy.

Was it a sign? Mae looked up at the Magnolia Ellis sign and then at the "For Sale" sign and almost laughed. *A sign*. If it was, she couldn't take it too literally. It might be a reminder to keep working as a healer, but not to have Niall buy the building.

He took a cigarette out and lit up but didn't take his usual deep drag. Frowning at it, he put it out against a brick and slid it back into the pack.

Chapter Two

Why didn't Niall smoke the cigarette? Had the healing energy made him reluctant to light up? Mae wanted to know but didn't dare ask. He hated being nagged about smoking. They walked on to Dada Café in silence.

On arrival, they found Marty waiting for them in the main dining room of the eclectically decorated restaurant. He was still dressed for work, wearing track pants and a T-shirt featuring

the mascot of the College of the Rio Grande teams, the Tarantulas. His sandy brown hair, streaked with gray, was matted from wearing a ball cap all day, and his freckled arms were slightly burned.

“Hey.” He stood and gave Niall a hug. To Mae’s surprise, Niall returned it and held on for a moment before they sat. Marty said, “I guess you had a day of it.”

Niall picked up a menu and flipped it open. “Mae helped a lot. I’ll have to finish up and meet the thrift shop truck there tomorrow.”

“You want me to do that?” Mae asked. “If they’re coming early, I can do it before I leave for Mescalero.”

“Thanks, but they didn’t give me a time yet.”

“Take it easy,” Marty said. “Let the truck take the furniture and whatever you’ve packed, and I’ll help you with the rest on Saturday.”

Their waiter was Reno. He appeared silently and placed a basket of bread on the table.

“Can I get you any drinks?”

Niall said, “In a minute.” He slid his fingers back and forth on the menu, then looked up at the waiter and spoke softly. “You left so fast this morning I didn’t get to ask you this. I haven’t talked to your father about Florencia yet. Have you?”

Reno took in a sharp breath. “Please, don’t use her name. I’ll see him tomorrow. What can I get you?”

Niall ordered a beer, and Mae and Marty ordered iced tea. When the waiter departed, Niall said, “I should have remembered that taboo, as many years as I’ve known Reno’s father. I expect you’ll meet him when you get to Mescalero.”

“I will?” It would be Mae’s first visit to the reservation where her friend Bernadette Pena had grown up. “I don’t know if Bernadette knows him. She hasn’t lived there for ages.”

Niall gave her an exasperated look. “He’s not as famous as Howe or Mirabal, but still ...” He shook his head. “She’ll know him. They probably went to high school together. He’s on the tribal council, and he helped Jamie’s father get his research with the tribe started. *Everybody* knows Orville.”

When Reno returned with their drinks, Niall said, “Mae’s headed to Mescalero tomorrow. Maybe you two could carpool.”

Startled, Mae glanced at Niall and then at Reno. What in the world had prompted that offer?

“I doubt it.” The young man gave her a perfunctory smile. “Are you ready to order?”

After they placed their orders and Reno left, Mae asked Niall, “Why’d you say he could ride with me? He’s about as friendly as a rock.”

Niall sipped his beer. “He won’t ride on Misty’s Harley. Scares him. And Reno drives the turquoise Rabbit.”

“Oh.” The ancient car was a T or C icon of sorts. With a duct-taped back window, more dents than smooth surfaces, and a layer of bumper stickers attesting to a long history of eccentric owners, it was often presumed dead, sitting on Austin Street for weeks at a time in front of a shabby turquoise-and-white trailer like a matching accessory. Then it would appear in the parking lot at Bullocks’ grocery or on Main Street in front of the coffee shop. Mae had sometimes heard other pedestrians marveling over the fact that it had moved. “Maybe I should offer again. I don’t think that ol’ thing could make the trip. And Misty might need a ride, too, if

they're going together. I can't blame him for not wanting to get on her bike with her. I've done it once, and she's kind of a crazy driver."

When Reno returned, Mae said, "If you do end up needing a ride, I live right behind Frank and Kenny's place." Her neighbors worked in Dada Café's kitchen. "They know how to get hold of me."

Reno served their salads and refilled water glasses. "Thank you, but I have other plans." He picked up his tray and started to walk off and then paused, almost smiling. With that slight thaw, he became as beautiful as Howe's winged cowboy. "You underestimate the Rabbit."

Maybe his beauty had made Misty fall for him. He didn't strike Mae as having any other charms.

After dinner, Niall did what he always did when they ate at Dada Café: sat on the bench at the corner of Broadway and Foch and lit up. Mae's hope that he might be quitting flickered and faded. She and Marty walked a few paces away to avoid the fumes.

"Got your things all packed?" Marty asked.

"Not really, no. Just some warm stuff for after dark. I'd rather come back here at night than pay for a motel."

"That's a lot of driving. Jamie okay with that?"

"We compromised. I told him I wouldn't mind getting a motel for one or two nights. But not four. I don't like having him pay for stuff like that—I like to split things. And that's as much as I can afford. Gas for the Focus is gonna be cheaper."

Mae noticed a lack of smoke and realized that Niall was doing the same thing he'd done at the Ellis building, putting the cigarette out and sliding it back in the pack.

"Daddy—did you see that?"

Marty nodded. He strolled over to sit beside Niall with a calmness that Mae admired. He had to be thrilled and hopeful inside. After a long pause, Marty asked, “You quitting?”

Niall held out the pack of cigarettes. “I can’t smoke. I just stare at the frickin’ things. I even light up. And I *can’t smoke.*”

Mae had made a commitment not to use her healing skills without asking first. Having made that mistake once with Jamie, she was careful now, but maybe the spirit of Magnolia Ellis had somehow sensed Mae’s wishes and helped. No—if she could do that, her parking lot would be like Lourdes or Chimayo. However, the place did have a legacy of healing energy. Mae must have activated it with the intensity of her desire for Niall to quit.

All she could see of her father was the back of his head, his broad shoulders and his long lean arms spread along the back of the bench. He rubbed Niall’s neck. “I can think of worse things to have happen.”

Niall stood, slipping out of the public display of affection. “Next thing you know I’ll be wanting to exercise.”

Marty rose and met Mae’s eyes, his raised eyebrow and cocked head asking if she was responsible. She shrugged and held her palms up.

They walked to the near-empty parking lot behind the restaurant.

“I’m thinking of buying the Ellis building,” Niall said as they approached his pale green Beetle.

Marty’s face showed surprise. “That’ll cost a pretty penny.”

“Good investment, though. Set Mae up.”

“That’s generous, but we should talk before you jump into anything.” Marty unlocked the car and looked at Mae quizzically. “You thinking about starting a healing practice?”

“No. I just pointed out the sign.”

“Good. Might be different if you were ready to graduate, but ’til then the only time you’re free to work much is the off season for this town.”

Niall grumbled, “Someone will have bought the place by the time she graduates. And who knows how long I’ll be around.”

That was a dismal thought. Mae and Marty exchanged glances. No words needed.

Niall took out his cigarettes and lighter and went through the ritual for the third time—lighting up, staring at the cigarette, and then putting it out against his car’s rear window and tucking it back into the pack. “Christ, this is *weird*. Feels like I ought to work at it if I’m not going to smoke.”

Mae took the pack from him. He didn’t resist. “Maybe some part of you *is* working at it. I mean, you just said you don’t know how long you’ll be around. Maybe you’re ...” She didn’t want to say it, even though it was obvious. “With Florencia being so sick ...”

“Confronting my mortality? Planning my legacy?”

“Something like that. You want me to throw these away for you?”

Niall’s lens-distorted gaze stayed on her a while. “You have anything to do with this?”

“Not on purpose.” She looked down, then met his eyes again. “I was wishing you’d quit, but I didn’t heal you on purpose or anything.”

“You did it by *accident*?”

“Sort of.”

Mae described her vision and sensations.

Niall chuffed a sound through his teeth and shook his head. “And you still don’t want me to buy you that building?” He tossed her the lighter. “You have a good night.” He got into the car and shut the door.

Marty said softly, “He really is confronting his mortality. Florencia’s situation scares him more than he’ll let on. Don’t worry about him actually buying that building.”

“Good. I don’t want it.” Mae wrapped her hand around the cigarettes and lighter. “But I’m real glad I stopped to look at it.”

“I’m glad you did, too. All our years together, I’ve been worried about losing him early. I know he’s a cranky sonofabitch, but he’s the love of my life.” He gave her a quick hug. “Maybe I’ll get to keep him a little longer. Thank you.”

Marty got in the driver’s side, reached over and squeezed Niall’s hand, and started the car.

With the feeling of completing some sort of ritual, Mae dropped the cigarettes in the trash can on the corner, then crossed Broadway and started down Foch in the direction of the river. Vacancy signs glowed on the spas she passed. Tourism fell off when it was ninety to a hundred degrees by day and creeping down to eighty at night. No one else was out walking except a cat scurrying into an alley. She strolled the half block of Marr to her house, looking up at the stars, brilliant above the dimly lit street. After fourteen months in the desert she still marveled at them. Tonight her sense of awe was deeper, as if her mind could float into the black spaces between the thousand blazing lights. Something extraordinary had happened, in a space where life, death, love, and time crossed threads and wove a small miracle.

A miracle by mistake. She couldn’t regret it, and yet it bothered her a little to be reminded that her gift could be beyond her control.

She let herself into the pea-soup green converted trailer and took off her shoes. Niall had put in silky-smooth bamboo floors and he didn't want a grain of dirt ground into them. Mae's only additions to the décor were pictures of her twin stepdaughters from her second marriage, at all ages ranging from one year to their current seven years. Otherwise, the place reflected Niall's taste, and what he'd thought people renting a house in T or C would like: fifties "antiques"—a pointy-legged turquoise couch and arm chair set, a boomerang-shaped coffee table and end tables, and two of his sculptures, a sheep made of old springs and horseshoes and a javelin thrower made of rusted scrap metal.

Mae sat on the couch and surfed channels until she found a Red Sox game. After a day like today, she needed some downtime, and baseball soothed her mind. Except when Jamie was around. She'd tried to get him to watch a game with her once and it had brought out a grouchy restlessness in him.

Her phone rang. *Jamie.*

"Wanted to let you know I'll be a little late tomorrow. Sorry—forgot I had Dr. G." His therapist. "And then, Wendy's going overboard being a manager. Wants me to get a new van for the tour. Have some time to get used to it, make sure it's good. I thought it'd be nice to find another old Aerostar, like a reincarnation, but she doesn't. She wants to go to the dealership with me and let her approve what I get. And tomorrow's the day she's free to do it."

"Then I guess you'd better buy it tomorrow. I know you loved the Aerostar, but Wendy's right. You don't need another *old* van. I'd feel better if you had something at least new-ish."

"Mm. Yeah. Guess. Might make friends with it by the time I leave."

"Are you getting rid of the Fiesta?"

“Fuck, no.” He sounded as if she’d suggested he get rid of a pet. “It’s my *real* car. Y’know? The van’s for touring.” A rustling noise, followed by crunching. Mae pictured the ever-present bags of blue corn chips and green chile pistachios in his kitchen. He talked around whatever he was eating, and his volume rose in delight at something that had entered his mind. “Yeah—just thought—yeah—oh—*great*. Fantastic.” He swallowed and spoke more clearly. “Perfect. I can use the van tomorrow. I’ll have a surprise for you.”

“The van?”

“Nah. You know I’m getting that. Something else.” His cat meowed in the background, and Jamie spoke a few words to him. “Got to spend some time with him tonight. Poor little bloke. He’ll feel abandoned. *Four days*. Wish I could bring him.”

Jamie took his cat on tour. He walked his cat on a leash. Gave the animal massages and Reiki. All of that was fine—but he slept with his cat, and Gasser was huge, flatulent, and jealous. “He’ll be okay with your landlady.”

“Yeah. I just worry, y’know?” More crunching, and then a pause and a snort-laugh. “Jeezus. That’s like saying I breathe.”

Mae could tell by Jamie’s shift into light fretting that he was going to talk a while, and not about anything in particular. Enjoying the ups and downs of his voice and his occasional hah-snort-hah at his own jokes, she let him ramble and responded when necessary while she watched the game. Jamie’s run-on chatter was like a hug of sorts, his lively tenor voice wrapping around her, and she expected that for him her fond though half-attentive listening was a kind of embrace as well.

When she rose to get a glass of iced tea on a commercial break, Jamie broke off his monologue, making her think he was winding down to say goodbye, but he got his second wind.

“Sorry, been yabbering—didn’t even ask. How was your day?”

“Kinda strange. Niall’s friend Florencia Mirabal went into hospice yesterday—”

“Bloody hell, I didn’t know she was dying. Guess I wouldn’t. I mean, it’s not like I knew her. Just—y’know—she’s *someone*. Sad for him. He holding up all right?”

Mae poured sweet tea and took a sip. “Packing her stuff was hard on him. But she doesn’t really have any other friends except maybe Reno Geronimo—”

“Reno’s in T or C? Jeezus. I still think of him as a little kid. Dunno why.”

“He’s been studying art with her. But I think something may have gone wrong between them, and something happened with her family, too. They don’t have any contact.”

“You’d think she’d want to fix all that. Dying.”

“Doesn’t sound like it.” She stood drinking her tea, watching lizards catching moths on her window screen. “I bet my mama wouldn’t speak to me if she was dying. Some people are good at grudges.”

“Hospice gives her time, though. She could think about it. Is it cancer?”

“Yeah. Breast cancer spread to her bones, her liver ... I think they caught it pretty late.”

“Jeezus. Awful way to go. Hate to say it, but I always think about Niall getting lung cancer and that he’ll die that way.”

“I’ve thought that, too. But he might not. He quit smoking.”

“You serious? That’s a fucking miracle.”

“It kinda was.” Mae described the events at the Ellis building and Niall’s inability to smoke. She knew Jamie would understand. He had a healing gift, too, though he limited his use of it.

“That’s beautiful. Weird, though. Dunno what I’d do if I suddenly *couldn’t* eat this whole fucking bag of chips.” Crinkling sounds. “You have a bad habit, you have a relationship with it. Deep one. If it just went away there’d be like a *hole* where the habit was.”

“I think there is. He kept trying to smoke and he couldn’t.”

“Skinny bastard. Maybe he’ll finally eat.” Jamie laughed. “Don’t heal me, all right? I might start to smoke.”

She laughed with him, told him she loved him, and that she was going to watch baseball now. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Whenever you get there.”

“Yeah. Dunno what time. Meet me behind the singers near the big tipi if it’s after dark. Best place to see the dances. Fucking *powerful*. Lightning will strike your bones.”

“That sounds wonderful. But—will you really get there after dark? Why would you be that late?”

“Got to prepare the surprise for you. Hooroo, love. Catcha.”