

Chapter One

Mae Martin was in her bedroom, changing into her bathing suit for a backyard hot spring soak with her ex-husband, when her cell phone rang. She grabbed it from her bedside table to see an unfamiliar number but a familiar area code—Eastern North Carolina. A place that haunted her at times. A place she was glad she had left. It was half past midnight there—ten-thirty p.m. in New Mexico, where Mae lived. Who would be calling her at this hour on Christmas Eve? She answered with a quiet, questioning hello, trying not to wake her twin stepdaughters, asleep in their room down the hall.

“Mae?” A woman’s husky alto came through. “This is Yolanda Cherry.”

Mae’s heart sped up. Given the time of night and Yolanda’s job as a Bertie County sheriff’s deputy, this wasn’t a social call. They’d been friends in high school, but that was ten years ago, and almost two years had passed since Mae moved away.

“Is something wrong?” Mae pictured Yolanda, a short solid black woman in a deputy’s uniform, standing outside her patrol car while its lights flashed into the darkness at the scene of a crime or an accident.

“I need to talk to Hubert. I can’t get hold of him. Is he at your daddy’s place?”

“He’s out in my hot spring.” Mae yanked the straps of her suit up. “Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“Caught a couple of very stoned ladies trying to use his washer and dryer.”

“They broke in to *do laundry*?” Mae’s relief there wasn’t an emergency changed to annoyance. Yolanda had interrupted a potentially romantic moment, the first in Mae and Hubert’s tentative reunion. “That’s seriously weird, but you called on Christmas Eve about *that*? Couldn’t it wait? It’s not like they stole anything.”

“You telling me how to do my job, Martin? There’s a home invasion, I notify the homeowner.”

Resisting the urge to argue, Mae padded to the living room and stepped into a pair of flip-flops on the mat near the sliding back doors of her converted trailer house. “How’d you get my number? Did Hubert give it to you?”

She wondered how much Yolanda knew about their situation. From her years in Tylerton, North Carolina, Mae recalled Yolanda sometimes stopping by the garage where Hubert worked to chat with the old men who gathered to gossip and drink coffee on the bench out front. No doubt they’d been talking about Hubert taking vacation to visit his second ex-wife. Number two out of three. His marriage to Mae had lasted the longest, years as opposed to months, and she’d raised his kids from his first marriage, so people were probably speculating what might come next.

Yolanda obviously knew more than gossip, if she was aware Hubert wasn’t staying with Mae but with her father and his partner. Hubert must have told her his plans.

“Got it from Hubert’s folks,” Yolanda said. “Back in October when the girls took off. Just in case it ever happened again.”

It had, though not where Yolanda could have done anything about it. The first time the twins ran away, escaping their conflicts with Hubert’s third wife, Yolanda had found them not far from home. The second time, later the same month, Mae found them much further off, by using her gift of the Sight. They’d been with her since then.

Leaving the doors ajar in case the children woke up, Mae crossed the deck and handed Hubert her phone. “It’s Yolanda. You had a break-in.”

Under a full moon, Hubert was sitting in the big metal tub, his head resting on the rim, his long wavy dark hair hanging back, the moonlight bright on his broad, sculpted shoulders, pale above faded T-shirt tan-lines. In spite of the stress of Yolanda’s call, Mae had a disorienting feeling, part excitement, part anxiety. *Hubert is actually here.*

He sat up and spoke to Yolanda. “Hey. What happened? Not exactly a Merry Christmas call, is it?”

Shivering, Mae eased down into the hot water. The special moment they’d planned was evaporating like the steam floating up off the tub. A thin veil of cloud slid over the moon, creating a rainbow effect. Was there some superstition about moonbows? Good luck? Bad luck? Omens?

Hubert listened to Yolanda and laughed. “You sure didn’t have to work hard for that one.” Then he sobered. “Yeah. That sucks. But thanks. Seriously. I owe you.” He listened again, then said, “Okay. I’ll see you soon. Want to say goodbye to Mae?” He handed the phone back to her.

Say goodbye? Hubert meant well, but it was awkward. Mae and Yolanda had been close years ago. They’d been on the track and field team together, Mae as a runner, the only white girl on the team, and Yolanda as a competitor in the throwing events. After graduation, though, they’d drifted apart as their lives took them in opposite directions: Yolanda to college, and Mae into an impulsive and unhappy first marriage.

“Um ... hope the rest of your holiday is good,” Mae said. “You’ll get to spend some of it with your family?” Yolanda was single, the youngest of a large family, and close to her widowed father, her brothers, and their wives and kids.

“Maybe.” She sounded distant. “Sorry to spoil y’all’s holiday. I need to go.” She paused, and warmth came into her voice. “Tell the kids Miss Yolanda said to stay out of trouble.”

“They will.” Mae tried not to sound defensive, but she didn’t want Yolanda to think the girls were still acting out. “They’re past all that now.”

“I’m sure they are. That was a joke, in case you missed it.”

“I got it. I’m just—I don’t know—being their mama.”

They said goodbye, and Mae set the phone on top of the housing for the pump that brought water from the hot aquifer.

Hubert slid closer to her and took her hand. “I wish that hadn’t happened. Not exactly what we’d planned for tonight, was it?”

“It sure wasn’t.” Mae looked down at their hands under the water, lacing her fingers between his. “Did they damage your house? Break a window or anything?”

“No, thank God. The skinny one wriggled in through the little window over the tub in my bathroom. Bigger lady must have boosted her up.”

The window was narrow and at shoulder height for someone standing in the old claw-foot tub, and it opened outward by cranking a handle. The handle was loose, making the window hard to shut all the way, although you could open and close it by pushing or pulling on it. “I’d have never thought anyone could get through it. That was one skinny burglar. How did Yolanda even notice they got in?”

“She was keeping an eye on things since both me and Ronnie are away.” Ronnie Farmer, one of Hubert’s next door neighbors, was the mayor of Tylerton, a small town not far from the Virginia border and the cities of Norfolk and Virginia Beach. “Reverend Daniels was doing the

midnight service, and those snooty people across the street go his church, so they were gone, too.”

“So she figured someone would break in, with no one at home on your block?”

“No, Ronnie asked the sheriff to have someone watch the neighborhood. He always does that when he goes to visit his daughter overnight. Yolanda was kind of annoyed the sheriff made *her* do it, but it worked out. The criminals were stupid enough to turn on a light, and she saw some movement.” He frowned, resting their clasped hands on her knee. “I hate to do this, hon. I’m sorry. But I’m gonna have to go back early. I’ll need to file a police report. My TV and laptop are still there, the stuff you’d expect them to take, and the women didn’t have anything of mine on them, but I still should double-check.”

Their eyes met, his questioning and concerned. Mae tried not to show her disappointment. She didn’t want to guilt-trip him over an event that wasn’t his fault.

“You understand?” he prodded.

“I do—yeah. You have to go, and I wish you didn’t. But I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at those stupid burglars. The whole thing is bizarre. It would make more sense if they took something. Why would anybody pick your house to use the washer and dryer, of all things? It’s not like other people don’t have them or like yours are special.”

“Beats me. But those were top of the line when they were new eight years ago.” He shifted his position, sinking lower in the hot water. “Wedding presents to me and Edie.”

“I never knew that.” His first marriage had been even shorter than Mae’s first marriage, and had only happened because Edie was pregnant with the twins. “I didn’t realize y’all’s wedding was a gift-getting kind of event.”

He shrugged. “Didn’t seem worth mentioning. She was gone. I had the washer and dryer.” He looked up at the moon. “Two babies and a washer and dryer.”

Mae turned toward him and stroked his hair, pulling it back from his face. “When do you want to leave?”

“I figure we’ll pack tomorrow. We’ll have Christmas like we planned, then me and the girls will hit the road first thing the next morning. Sorry. We just got started ...” His eyes searched hers. “Don’t let this throw us off course. I really want us to try again.”

“So do I.”

He put his arm around her. “You could come with me.”

“To Tylerton?” Mae knew her shocked tone sounded all wrong when Hubert was being so affectionate, but she couldn’t think of a good reason for her to go. “I’d have to turn right around and come back for work and school.” Although she was twenty-eight, Mae was only halfway through her belated college education.

“No, you wouldn’t. You’re on break until when?”

“The second week in January. But work—”

“Please, hon. If you go with me, we could still have New Year’s together. Arnie would be happy to have you.”

Mae’s stepfather *would* have been glad to see her, but he wasn’t home. “He’s with his sister in Roanoke Rapids for the holidays.”

“Okay. Well ...” Hubert ran his fingertips along her cheek and down the side of her neck. “I wish it wasn’t too soon for us to stay together. But my folks could put you up.”

Mae bit her lip and looked away. Staying in their house could be painful. It was a beautiful place, an eighteenth-century farmhouse full of antiques, but Mae had gone from being part of the family there to feeling as unwelcome as a leaky roof. She said, “I’m getting along

with them on the phone, and we're fine if I stay at Arnie's, but I don't think they're ready to have me in their house. We never really mended all our fences."

"That's an even better reason for you to come, then. I'll ask them."

"Slow down. Not yet. I'd have to check with my boss at the Charles, first." Mae worked at the Charles Spa as an energy healer. "I said I'd work New Year's Eve and New Year's Day."

"New Year's? It was nice of you to offer, but you won't have any clients on a holiday."

"Actually, I will. This is peak season for the spas. We get lots of snowbirds." Typical winter days in Truth or Consequences, locally known as T or C, were in the mid-fifties to mid-sixties and sunny. "I can't just take off."

"But we haven't had a chance to be together enough, nowhere near enough."

"I know we haven't. I said I'd have to ask Derek. And I'm not even sure I should. I promised him I'd work, and it's not like what happened at your place is an emergency. It's weird as all get-out, but you don't need me there to deal with it."

The breeze picked up, moving the clouds off the moon, clearing away the moonbow and chilling Mae's damp skin. She slid lower in the tub, and Hubert pulled her closer to his side. "Yolanda said it looked like they might have gone through my desk. One of the drawers was open. I have to see if they took anything."

"I thought they didn't have anything of yours on them."

"I still want to double-check."

How would he be able to tell what was missing? Hubert's desk, a lovely old mahogany antique from his parents' house, was a clutter repository. "That'll be a chore. But you still don't need me for it."

"Sure I do. I need a psychic to figure out why the heck two ladies broke in to use my laundry machines." His lips grazed hers in a tentative kiss. "You got something against me wanting you with me? It'll be easier on the girls if you're there. They've been with you for a while, and the last time they were in the house, they were fighting with Jen." His third wife had left in October, and the divorce was in progress. "And now it's been invaded."

Brook and Stream would probably think the break-in was exciting or funny rather than scary, but he was being a good father to take care of them. On the plus side for the trip, Mae would get extra days with her stepdaughters, and Hubert obviously didn't want to end his and Mae's time together yet. He was asking a lot, but if they eventually reunited, he would be leaving his home and his family roots for her. In comparison, this trip was nothing.

Though she still was uncomfortable with the prospect of staying with her former in-laws, she said, "Okay. I'll go. But I can't stay long. I have to be back for work."

"Thanks, hon." Hubert's face lit up, and he kissed her again. "That means a lot to me."

In the morning, Mae had to deal with the effects of her decision on everyone else. She dreaded disappointing the twins with the sudden trip home to Tylerton, interrupting their holiday plans in New Mexico. It would be even harder telling Jamie—Mae's friend, not-quite-boyfriend anymore—she would be traveling with Hubert. Jamie knew Hubert was visiting, but he wouldn't expect Mae to leave town with him.

While coffee brewed, the sun began to glow behind Turtleback Mountain in the distance outside her kitchen window. Mae sat at the yellow Formica table and e-mailed Derek, telling him she couldn't be on call during the week, but would be back for the New Year's weekend.

Next, she started looking for tickets online, a one-way flight from Norfolk to either Albuquerque or El Paso. They would be driving east in a minivan Hubert had borrowed from a friend who'd gone to Florida for the holidays. He needed it to bring back all the clothes, toys, and books he'd shipped for the girls in October.

Though the trip to Tylerton would delay their separation a little longer, letting go of the twins was going to be hard for Mae, after having them with her for almost three months. The girls had been happy with her. But in a way, they'd been rewarded for misbehavior, for running away twice. Mae hoped she and Hubert parenting as a team again would give them more structure and safety.

The children emerged from their room, messy-haired and in flannel pajamas. Identical twins, they were small for their age, pale and thin, with intense dark eyes. Mae was often surprised when strangers assumed they were her biological children. She was big-boned, red-haired, and taller than average, with an athletic but feminine build. No resemblance at all.

They paused and stared sleepily at the purple artificial tree with pink and silver balls on it perched on the boomerang coffee table near the turquoise fifties couch.

"There's no presents under it," Brook said. They didn't believe in Santa, but they still liked gifts.

"We're opening presents with Niall and Grampa Marty at their house." Mae urged the twins into the kitchen and served them cereal and fruit, then told them what was going on.

"The thieves didn't take our cars, did they?" Stream asked with a mournful, worried look. They had a large collection of small, die-cast metal toy cars.

"They weren't really burglars, sweetie. They didn't take anything."

"Did Miss Yolanda *look* to see if our cars were there?" Brook persisted.

Mae doubted it. "She probably doesn't know you have them." As far as Mae knew, Hubert and Yolanda were friends because their parents were friends, but not likely to drop in at each other's houses.

"Yes, she does. She always stops by if she sees us playing outside. She gave us each a police car."

"That was nice of her." And unexpected. Mae had never pictured Yolanda liking kids. "Y'all can make sure everything's still there when you get home. It won't be long. We'll head out tomorrow morning."

"But we were gonna go to Santa Fe," Brook protested, dropping her spoon into her bowl. "We have to see Sekani before we leave."

Stream added, "And Jamie. We won't see them *forever* if we don't do it before we go. We have to give them their Christmas presents."

The visit would have been the first big challenge for Mae and Hubert, and they hadn't yet worked out the details. The girls were fond of Jamie, and Sekani Chomba, the son of one of Jamie's fellow musicians, was their best New Mexico friend. Mae hadn't told the twins the holiday with Hubert was potentially romantic, though she'd tried to explain how her relationship with Jamie was on hold. Tried, but it was hard for them to grasp. Jamie described their status as "Schrödinger's cat," in a state of suspension like the alive-and-dead-at-the-same-time thought-experiment feline. Hubert described it as weird and uncomfortable. It was, but Mae had made it clear to both men she wasn't ready to open the box and decide the fate of the cat.

"We can mail their presents," she said. "I know it's not the same, but you always come out to stay with me on spring break. You'll see them then. That's not forever."

“But why do we have to go home *now*?” Brook protested. “Miss Yolanda can take care of everything.”

Mae did her best to explain about Hubert’s desk, and how only he could tell if anything was missing from it. The women probably hadn’t been in the house long enough to pick out anything important from the chaos, but he had to be sure.

She said, “No fussing, sweeties. I know this isn’t what you wanted for Christmas. But we can do a little packing before we open presents. I’ll bring your clean clothes in off the line.” Mae had hung laundry out the day before and had been too busy to bring it in. Seeing Stream begin to pout, Mae added, “And please don’t complain to Daddy.”

“Can we call Jamie?”

“Not yet, sweeties. He doesn’t get up this early. We’ll call him after dinner.” When she thought about telling Jamie her change of plans, she had an attack of doubt, though the decision had felt right at the time.

After the girls picked at their meal as much as they were going to, Mae helped them haul their suitcases out of their closet and went to her room and got dressed.

Once she was ready, she grabbed a sun hat on her way out the door. Though the air was still chilly early in the day, the sun was so strong and she was so fair she never went out unprotected. As she plucked clothes off the line that ran from the carport to the laundry shed at the end of the driveway, dropping them into the basket at her feet, the morning light glared on the corrugated metal of the shed, and she started to go inside for her sunglasses. When she turned around, a man was staring at her.

He was around forty, tall, slim, and slightly round-shouldered. His neat short hair, black-framed glasses, khaki pants, and tucked-in long-sleeved polo shirt said he wasn’t local, probably one of the tourists who came to the hot spring spas in December. Locals tended to dress more casually and more colorfully. Mae was wearing fitted workout pants, and she wondered if this stranger was giving her ass the once-over. Then his gaze went to her laundry. Did he have a thing for her undies and bras? Or worse, for little girls’ panties?

Before she could confront him, he moved on. If he was a Christmas tourist, he could be gone tomorrow and be no problem, or he could be in town through February or March. A lot of people escaped the North for months. Mae jogged to the end of the driveway. The man stood in front of the old, empty warehouse next door, writing in a small notebook.

“Were you looking for something?” she asked. “You took a pretty long gander at my place.”

He looked up with a start. “You’re from—are you from North Carolina?” His accent was Southern, though more subtle than Mae’s, like someone who grew up in a city around a lot of non-Southerners.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Do you have twin girls?” He sounded eager and hopeful. “Seven years old? Going on eight?”

Mae’s spine stiffened. This man was not only interested in her girls, he knew something about them. How? Had he been watching them? “You didn’t answer my first question. I don’t like some strange man staring at me and then taking notes and asking questions. Who are you, and why do you want to know?”

“I’m sorry.” He put the notebook in his back pocket, walked up, and offered her his hand. She didn’t take it, and he nodded and dropped it. “I’m Vaughan Fike.” He took a business card

from his wallet and handed it to her. Cecil Vaughan Fike was a pharmacist in Asheville, North Carolina. “Edith Ryder was a good friend of mine.”

He’d said *was*. Tenderly. Like she was dead. Could he possibly mean the girls’ birth mother? Edie Griggs? Her parents had been so country they’d named her Edie Marie, not Edith, and it was hard to picture her marrying again, but she might have. Or she could have changed her name. She’d been adamant the children shouldn’t try to find her when they grew up, like a closed adoption, only she’d left them with Hubert.

If Edie had changed her mind, she would have contacted him or made sure someone would call him when she died—put it her will or some such thing. He was easy to find. He’d lived in Tylerton his whole life. Assuming Edith Ryder was Edie Griggs, Vaughan Fike could be betraying her wishes by looking for the children.

Mae said, “I don’t know an Edith Ryder.”

“Are you sure?”

Vaughan pulled his phone from another pocket, thumbed through his pictures, and selected one. He showed Mae a thin, pretty woman in her late twenties with short dark brown hair. She was dressed professionally in a tailored blouse and sedate, classic jewelry, but there was fire in her dark eyes and a hint of mischief in her smile. Unmistakably the birth mother of Brook and Stream. Mae liked to think the girls looked like Hubert, but both he and Edie had the same coloring. The twins had his strong jaw instead of Edie’s pointy little chin, but they had her stick-straight hair and her bird-boned build. And something of her temperament as well.

Vaughan seemed to take Mae’s long gaze at the picture for what it was—recognition. He changed to another picture, a hug-a-friend selfie, Vaughan and Edie at a bar, raising glasses of red wine. “She died over a year ago. Late September.” He took the phone back and spent a moment regarding his late friend’s image before putting it away. “An accident on I-77 on her way back from a conference in Roanoke. And no, she wasn’t drinking. It was a rainy night with a lot of trucks on the road and one lost its brakes behind her. The driver said he saw her try to get out of his way, and she skidded straight into the side of the mountain. I was told she must have died instantly.”

Mae struggled to process the shock. Though she’d never been close to Edie, Mae nonetheless carried her as a brash, brittle ghost in the back of her mind, the woman whose children she had raised. And now Edie’s friend had somehow shown up with the news of her death. Strangely, he hadn’t driven across the state to Tylerton but come all the way to New Mexico. A year and several months after Edie died. His presence was as disorienting as his news, and raised more questions than Mae could put into words.