

|| RITA || Clouds hung over the mountains and the morning held an uncommon chill for summer. Rita sat on the front porch, nursing a cup of coffee. Miguel had been gone over two weeks, and it surprised her how much she missed him. They'd only seen each other a few times, but he already felt like part of her life. He'd called once from California, his voice strained, to tell her it was taking longer than he'd expected to wrap up everything. She knew it entailed more than closing his former practice. Although he had yet to talk about it, she sensed another woman still had a tight grip on his soul.

The sun failed to break through the bank of clouds. Sparrows clustered on the blue mist, the plant's slender stalks bowing under their weight. Their frenzied activity spoke of a pending storm. Rita's gaze drifted across the road. Not a single For Sale sign had appeared. Drew Stinson seemed to have changed his mind about developing the property. Or so she thought until she heard grinding gears, the churning of a bulldozer. But when she scanned the horizon, she saw nothing.

The noise stopped as abruptly as it had started, and Rita stilled herself by clasping the warm mug of coffee tightly in her hands. Then the grating sound started up again. It seemed to come from the hill to the north. The tears in her eyes surprised her. Rita had always prided herself on her strength, on the way she'd survived all kinds of setbacks. Surely she could withstand another encroachment on her land. Forcing herself to turn around, she looked at the houses to the south. Despite their varying shades of desert brown, they were too big to blend in with the landscape. They reminded her of an advancing army, immobile for the moment, but moving in closer and closer. All too soon, despite her wanting to believe otherwise, they would also approach from the east, for Drew Stinson was not a man to give up. If somebody built on the hilltop, too, she would be surrounded on three sides.

She couldn't let it happen. Walking out into the yard, she stood still, pinpointing the sound.

It definitely emerged from the ridgetop.

Enraged by the very thought of somebody building up there, Rita cut through the junkyard. Flojo and Loca tagged along as she headed toward the perimeter of old school buses, the furthest one painted in fading bold colors and psychedelic designs. Stepping beyond this border always felt to her like stepping into a fairyland. The land stood as it had for centuries, with no sign of people. Piñon and juniper trees reigned over the cactus-studded terrain.

A screeching noise ripped through the peaceful scenery, erasing her tears and raising her fighting spirit. Rita rushed through orange splashes of flowering globe mallow, their beauty obscured by her anger. It took her ten minutes to reach the arroyo that marked the edge of her property, the mechanical din accompanying her like a persistent headache. Finally she spotted the source—a bulldozer silhouetted against the gray sky.

Rita plunged down into the arroyo, slogging through the sand to cross it, and then scrambled up the opposite bank, the dogs racing ahead of her. It was a steep climb up the hill. She arrived short of breath at the top, where the bulldozer moved along, mowing down all the trees in its path.

Seeing her, the driver idled the engine and smoothed his mustache. It surprised her that even in her forties, she still caught men's attention. He took off his cap and ran his hands through his compressed hair, lessening the cap's mark. "What can I do for you?"

She skirted an uprooted piñon that had born its years proudly. "Why are you killing these trees?"

He shrugged, absolving himself from any responsibility. "Fellow told me to clear a road for a construction crew."

"A construction crew for what?"

"Gonna build a house down at the end."

Rita winced at the sudden pain in her chest. Telling herself not to vent her anger at this man, who was only doing what he'd been paid to do, she turned away from him. A rare fog had drifted in, blanketing everything within a few yards of her. She looked where she knew the Sangre de Cristos lay shrouded in the mist. Behind her would be the Jemez Mountains. A complete circle on a clear day, a view that had

brought her up here many times over the years. The kind of view that prompted people to erect houses. All along the other side of the hill, people had built expensive homes, but nobody had perched one on top, for lack of space.

"This can't be legal," she said.

"He showed me his building permit."

"Where is it?"

The man again shrugged, clearly having lost his initial interest in her and ready to get back to work. "Contractor probably has it."

"Building permits are supposed to be posted."

"Look, lady, I just run this bulldozer. I don't know nothing about the laws."

The churning sound of a car struggling up the rough road caught their attention. The man resumed his bulldozing, and Rita walked over to see who was coming up the hill. She watched as an old Honda Civic carefully avoided the larger rocks in the bulldozer's tracks, slowly advancing up the slope until it got stuck, the tires spinning in the dirt. A silver-haired man emerged from the car and gave her a chagrined look before kneeling down to see what had grounded him. He tried to dig a rock out from under one of the front tires, but it proved futile, and he stood up, brushing off his hands. "Mind helping me out?"

As though he'd understood, Flojo charged down the hill, Loca following at his heels, their tails wagging. "Hey, pooches," the man said, bending over to rub both of them behind their ears. Even in the gray light, his silver head of hair shimmered, giving him a look of distinction. The hair initially made him appear older, until she got close enough to see that he was probably in his late thirties, with few lines in his face, except around his mouth, which curved into a sheepish smile. "I've always told myself one of these days I'd get into trouble for pretending my car was a truck." Although he was dressed in a tweed jacket and expensive boots, his faded jeans had a well-worn look. He wiped his right hand on his back pocket before holding it out to her. "Joe Oakes."

"Rita Vargas," she said, returning his warm handshake. Any man good with dogs and willing to dirty both his hands and his jeans

instantly earned a measure of her trust. "Looks like between the two of us, we should be able to push your car clear."

"I'd appreciate it," he said. "Let me put a couple of rocks behind it to keep it from rolling down the hill."

Rita joined him in hefting some of the larger stones from among those shoved aside by the bulldozer, anchoring them in the road a few feet behind the back wheels. "That should keep her in place," he said, and they walked around to the front of the car.

"Here we go." Rita stood beside him, their hands on the hood. It only took one push for the two of them to ease the front end of the small car over the buried boulder and bring it to rest against the rocks braced behind it.

"Ah, the advantages of a lightweight car," Joe said.

"What is it, an eighty-one?"

"Amazing! How'd you know that?"

"I own the junkyard on the other side of the hill."

He patted the car and whispered, "It's okay, Nellie. Don't you worry. I'm not letting anybody haul you off to a junkyard." Then he grinned at Rita, as though all men spoke affectionately to their cars. "Nellie and I go way back. I'd hold onto her forever if I could. We've promised each other she'd stick with me for at least another two years, until our twentieth anniversary."

"I didn't mean to imply she was no good. Any car lucky enough to hang around that long wins my admiration."

Joe leaned against the side of the car. "Yeah, somewhere along the line we quit honoring the notion of making things last, didn't we?"

Despite her fear that Joe was somehow connected to the bulldozing of the ridgetop, she found herself liking him. "So what brings you up here?"

"Any other day, I'd say it was the view, but you can't see a darn thing today, can you?" He peered off in the direction of the Sangre de Cristos. "It's unbelievable that nobody's built up here."

"There's no way!"

His black eyebrows shot up, in dark contrast to his silver hair. "What do you mean?"

Turning away from the questioning intensity of his eyes, she pointed up the hill. "There isn't enough land."

"Not for a gargantuan house like everybody below has, but something modest will sit well."

Fighting to breathe evenly so that her words wouldn't come out too shaky, she forced herself to face him. "Are you the one who's clearing this land to build a house?"

It was as though the sun had burst through the overcast sky, so bright was the joy in his smile. "That's me. Usually I remodel old houses. This'll be the first time I've built anything new." He rubbed his hands together the way Parker used to as a kid when he sat down to play with his Tinker Toys.

"You can't!"

"What?" His mouth drooped, but his eyes hardened. She saw his hands clench before he shoved them into his jacket pockets.

If she told him he couldn't build up there because it was her private sanctuary, he'd smirk and remind her the land didn't belong to her. But once upon a time it had been hers, and she'd been told the hill would never support a house. Desperate to convince herself, she said, "It won't meet city codes."

Joe had one knee bent, a boot resting on the car as he leaned against it. Now he shoved himself off and stood up, his stance unyielding. "I've done everything necessary to get this project approved."

Rita's backbone tautened, stretching to her full height, as though metal lined her spine. She hardly stood as high as his chest, but she threw back her head and met his eyes. "Sometimes the city makes a mistake. Gives out a building permit when they shouldn't have."

He shrugged, as though tossing off any concern, but she could see the corner of his left eye twitching. "Even if that was true, it's too late to do anything about it. The construction crew will be here any minute." He nodded his head in the direction of the bulldozer. "They've promised to have the house done in time for me to celebrate the new year."

"Don't count on it." She would do everything she could to stop him. Hilltops were sacred; they should remain an homage to nature, not monuments to human egos.

His eye began to twitch frenetically, but he still managed an easy smile. "Yeah, I've been in this business long enough to know how many things can go wrong. Especially here in the land of mañana."

She didn't believe he'd misunderstood her threat, but she chose not to clarify it. "I need to get going."

"Thanks for your help." Joe held out his hand again, but she pretended not to see it and turned to walk back up the ridge. Flojo and Loca, ever loyal but frequently fickle, lagged behind, letting him tell them they were good dogs. They didn't rejoin her until after Joe started his car. He beeped his horn as he drove past, his hand out the window, waving.

Rita veered to the left and cut overland so she wouldn't have to watch him reach the top. It hurt too much to think of somebody claiming the hill. She and her father used to picnic up here. It had been their special place.

She started down the other side of the hill, hurrying, running to keep from falling, furious at the city for allowing anybody to build up there. When she'd sold the hill to Leroy, it had been with the understanding that the slope was too steep on her side and the top too narrow to support any houses. The hill was her last remaining buffer against the people who moved further and further out of town.

Her head filled with angry words, Rita swung her arms in keeping with her rapid pace and passed too close to a cholla, scraping against the needles. Cactus spines stuck in the back of her hand, stinging as she walked. Rushing across the junkyard, she practically knocked over Parker as he stepped out from behind an old VW van. He cradled several steering wheels in his arms. "Got any call for these?"

"Take them." She pushed past him, not noticing that he followed her.

"What's going on?" he asked, coming up behind her in the living room as she flipped through the phone book.

"Some guy's trying to build a house up on the ridge."

"How can he? There's no room."

She picked up the phone and punched in numbers. "Tell that to the city."

"As if anybody in the city would listen to us."

“Shit! Voice mail.” She paused, listening to the message. “Oh, how convenient. He’s out of town until next week.” Impatiently, she waited for the recording to end. “Gilbert, it’s Rita Vargas. You know why I’m calling. Get back to me first thing Monday morning.”

She thrust the handset into the phone’s cradle, only to have it fall to the floor. Parker shifted the steering wheels to one arm and bent down to retrieve it, calmly rehangng it on the wall. “Sounds like you’ve got a fight on your hands.”

“I can’t believe Gilbert allowed this.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. Look at the way his brother Leroy wheels and deals.”

“What’s happening to this town? I remember when people respected the land. Now all these rich folks are moving in, thinking they can do whatever they want.”

“No point in getting all worked up when there’s nothing you can do for now. Why don’t you come see my latest sculpture.”

Even before he learned to talk, Parker had had a knack for calming her. He used to climb up in her lap whenever she was upset, throwing his little arms around her neck, his head against her chest. She’d sometimes worried that being the only child of an unwed mother had forced him into an early maturity, cheating him out of a carefree childhood. Even after all these years, she kept bracing herself for him to take a bad turn.

They headed out behind her house, through the vegetable garden, out past the gnarled apple trees her grandparents had planted, down a path Parker had lined with some of his earliest sculptures, large figures made of everything from hot water tanks and mufflers to radiators and culverts. At night they looked like aliens patrolling the land, but in the light of day they reminded Rita of sentries, ever ready to protect her.

As she and Parker came around the hill, they saw a blonde woman in jogging clothes stroking one of the sculptures outside his trailer. Then the woman squatted down in front of the robotic figure, pushing on it, as though testing its stability.

“Go ahead, see if you can make it topple,” Parker said.

Alarmed by his unexpected voice, the woman jumped up. She had long legs and the thinness of a serious runner. “I had no intention of

knocking it over." Quickly recovering her composure, she held out her hand, her body rippling like quicksilver. "I'm Chloe Alexander."

Parker shook her hand, but Rita stood back. She had never trusted blondes. "You're trespassing."

"Come on, Rita," Parker said, "since when did you cater to property lines? You've walked over a lot of land owned by other people."

"Sorry," the blonde said. "I was running in the arroyo when I saw these sculptures, and I couldn't resist taking a closer look. I didn't mean to intrude."

"No problem. You can stop by here anytime you want. My name's Parker."

"Is this your work?"

"Or my folly, depending how you look at it." He grinned. Rita could tell the woman was charmed by him, as most women were. Parker only had to flash those white teeth of his or caress women with his brilliantly green eyes and they quivered. His easy smile, along with the emerald color of his eyes, were the only things he'd inherited from his father, a man who also had a way with women.

"This is the first time I've jogged out here, but you'll be seeing more of me." She pointed in the direction of the ridge. "We're building a house up on that hill."

Rita felt Parker's hand on her shoulder, turning her in the direction of his work shed before she could lash out at the woman. "It was nice meeting you, Chloe," he said, pressing Rita forward. "But if you'll excuse us, we have some work to do."

"Sure, don't let me interfere." She gave a wave and took off down the arroyo, running toward the ridgetop as the mist turned into rain.