

Chapter One

Nothing in the room was familiar. Bright light through thin curtains illuminated cracked plaster walls and a small nightstand with a lamp on it, the base made from a child's cowboy boot. Somewhere in the house, a window air conditioner rattled. Jamie's heart sped up and his breath grew shallow. Terror cut through the fog of the previous night's drinking. Somehow, he'd woken up in a strange bed, fully dressed—and his cat was in it with him.

He whispered to Gasser, "Where the fuck are we? How'd we get here?"

Had they been kidnapped? Was it *possible*? Who would want him? Jamie wasn't rich. And when it came to fame, he was off in the outer rings of the solar system. It made no sense. But in his half-drunk, half-hungover state, it was all he could think of.

He grabbed his phone from the nightstand. Call 911? Call his parents? His girlfriend? Mae had a level head. She could sort this out.

No signal. It didn't matter who he called.

Seized by another surge of fear, Jamie clutched the fat orange-and-white cat with one arm and bolted into the hall and out the front door, letting it slam behind him.

"Jeezus." Struck by a jolt of pain in his bad hip, he stumbled down the porch steps in sock-clad feet, landing on his knees in weeds and dirt. "Bloody fucking *hell*."

Gasser squawked.

"Sorry, mate." Jamie kissed his cat between the ears and eased his grip, then righted himself, an unsteady process. Dancing on his last tour had exacerbated his hip impingement, so he'd been using a cane, and he'd charged out the door without it.

Across the street stood the crumbling remains of a small adobe as well as several other old buildings that were in good repair, some made of stone, some of adobe. To his left, the town petered out into desert and a dry creek bed. To his right, additional old buildings lined the street until it came to a dead end in less than a mile.

Jamie sat on the steps and closed his eyes, holding his cat in his lap, trying to summon up the previous night. A fuzzy memory surfaced of curling in the back seat of Joe Wayne Brazos's Land Rover while they hurtled over a sickening stretch of roller-coaster country road in the dark.

Jeezus. You imbecile. You weren't kidnapped.

But where were they? It had been so long since Jamie had done any serious drinking, he obviously couldn't handle the grog anymore.

His fragmented recollections faltered as a woman emerged from the house next door, carrying a briefcase. Her house was nicer than the others in view, with a red tin roof and red trim, the exterior walls painted white except for the adobe bricks that fronted the porch.

She stopped, giving him a cold, haughty stare. "I'm a poet. I came here for solitude and silence. Not noisy neighbors slamming doors and cursing."

Her voice, low-pitched and slightly nasal, reminded him of Mae West, and there was a suggestion of West in her figure, too. Her face was striking, with pale skin, a strong jaw, and high cheekbones. Her hair, so blonde it was almost white, was pulled back in a severe twist. An unflattering beige skirt, topped by a short-sleeved blouse, flared from waist to hem, making her broad hips look even wider and drawing attention to her muscular calves. Attired differently, she might have been attractive in a robust, Slavic-Nordic way.

She asked, "Are you one of the yodeling yokels who woke me up last night?"

Yodeling? Had he and Joe Wayne been *yodeling*?

“Sorry.” Jamie snuggled Gasser against his shoulder and limped toward the woman, crossing from the unkempt yard where he’d landed to her neat patch of dirt. As his adrenaline faded, his headache surged. Extending one hand while his other arm grasped the twenty-pound cat, he smiled. “I’m normally better behaved than that.” He wasn’t sure it was true, but he wanted to be civil. “Jamie Ellerbee.”

Most people reciprocated an introduction, and they usually commented on his Australian accent or asked where he was from. But she didn’t shake his hand, just frowned. Was she prejudiced against dark-skinned people or simply annoyed with him? Or did she find him too strange? Her style was conventional and staid, while he had a cloud of crinkly ash-blond hair fluffing down to his collar, a dark goatee braided with a bead on the tip, and a gold tooth in his smile. His clothing, rumped from sleep, consisted of faded jeans and an Aloha shirt.

“I didn’t want neighbors at all,” the woman said. “You’ve been obnoxious twice already.”

“No excuse for last night,” Jamie acknowledged, relieved to know why she was unfriendly. He could clear things up. “But I panicked just now, because—” *I thought I’d been kidnapped.* He couldn’t say that. What was legitimately scary? “There was a rattlesnake.”

The woman gasped and clutched her briefcase in a throwing stance, her eyes darting around. “Where?”

Wrong choice of lies. Now he’d terrified her. “In the house. That’s why I ran out like that.”

The door of Joe Wayne’s decrepit dirt-brown adobe opened, and the famous country singer appeared, his sun-bleached hair in disarray around his shoulders, his beard-stubbed face

grim. He wore boxer shorts and cowboy boots. Nothing else. “Ain’t no snakes in Chloride,” he drawled.

Chloride. Jamie dredged up another memory. Joe Wayne had bought a house here. A retreat, he called it. In a ghost town, of all places.

“Aren’t any snakes,” the woman muttered.

“That’s what I said.” Joe Wayne crossed his tanned arms over his white chest, where a thick patch of golden-brown hair partially covered his well-toned pecs. “There *ain’t no* snakes.” He slid a mischievous look her way.

“How’s that possible?” Jamie asked. “St. Patrick come through when he was done with Ireland?”

The poet eased her grip on her briefcase and glanced back and forth between the two men, still wary. Her eyes lingered a bit longer on Joe Wayne, but then she stiffened her spine and set her jaw.

“Cats,” Joe Wayne replied. “People who run the museum invested in cats. No mice, no snakes. They move on to where there’s something to eat. I’m pretty damned sure you were dreaming.”

Jamie improvised. “It was in my bed.”

“Then you *were* dreaming. Rattlesnakes don’t get in bed with people. In the winter, they get in bed with other snakes.” Joe Wayne imitated Jamie’s accent as he added, “They brumate with their mates.” He lounged in the open doorway, one shoulder against the frame, arms still crossed, one ankle casually hooked over the other. “This time of year, they don’t need to seek heat. Now, granted, morning’s the right time of day for them to be active—”

The woman made a small sound of alarm, then composed herself. “I know that. But there was one in your house.”

Joe Wayne chuckled. “Either that was a dream, or it was the ghost of the last snake in Chloride. Or the first one to get killed here, maybe one that Harry Pye killed. Before the Apaches killed Harry Pye.”

Jamie squeezed Gasser again. The cat passed wind, then began wriggling, as if he wanted to take off and explore. Bad idea for a city cat who walked on a leash. “Someone *died* here?” The old house looked like it could be haunted.

“Pye didn’t die right *here*. He got killed out prospecting in the canyon. I was trying to make a joke about your ghost snake. First white guy to find silver and settle here, first snake to get killed for civilization. Anyway, people have died everywhere. What’s the big deal?”

“This is a ghost town. It has ghosts, right?”

“No,” Joe Wayne replied, “the town is a ghost of its former self. Not haunted. Used to have three thousand people, eight saloons, an armory, some brothels and boarding houses, a Chinese laundry, and all kinds of businesses.”

“And *snakes*,” the neighbor added.

“Yep.” Joe Wayne gave her a crooked smile. “And snakes. I’ll scout around. If there really is a rattler in the house, I can shoot it if I have to, but I’d rather put it outside alive.”

“You brought your *gun*?” Jamie was appalled. Two years ago, Joe Wayne had accidentally shot Jamie in his right forearm. It was Jamie’s only experience with guns, and it had left him with what he thought of as a healthy fear of them. “Why?”

“Common sense. It could take the sheriff—or animal control—up to an hour to get here. I don’t think an intruder, or a mountain lion, is gonna wait that long. Gotta be able to take care of a problem yourself.”

The poet’s eyes widened. “A mountain lion? In town? You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious. One walked right down the street and hid a deer carcass under a guy’s truck.” Joe Wayne gestured to the steep ridge across the street and to the hills behind his house. “Chloride is two streets, two graveyards, fourteen humans, and twenty-three cats in the middle of the desert.”

Twenty-three cats sounded nice to Jamie. Two graveyards, however, did not. The town had more dead people in it than living.

Joe Wayne gave the poet a wink. “Most people expect a little wildlife in the wilderness.”

Her face and manner grew guarded again. “I hope you young men won’t be part of it.”

“Have no fear, darlin’. We’ll be peaceful.”

“Don’t call me darling.”

“Okay, what should I call you?” Joe Wayne grinned. “You can call me J.B.”

As she had with Jamie, the poet ignored his introduction. Instead, she strode abruptly toward a white Saab sedan parked in front of her house, then changed directions with an exasperated sound and dashed back indoors.

“Not too sociable, is she?” Joe Wayne mused. “Guess we pissed her off. We did make kind of a ruckus last night. She’s lucky you were so shit-faced you fell asleep with your clothes on. Wonder what she would have said if you’d barged out cussin’ *and* nekkid.”

“Dunno. She didn’t mind you being half-dressed.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing her half-dressed, either.”

“Not much chance of that, mate. She won’t even tell us her name.”

Joe Wayne studied the house next door. “She must have just moved in. I didn’t think the people who owned that place ever rented it. Just took care of it and left it empty.” He rubbed his beard stubble. “Hope I don’t have to disguise myself.” The scruffy growth was part of his onstage persona. When he meant to be incognito, he shaved. “At least she didn’t recognize me so far.”

“She might have and didn’t care. Doesn’t seem the type to be a fan.”

“Or ... could be she’s famous herself, and that’s why she won’t give her name.”

“Nah, said she’s a poet. They aren’t celebrities. My mum’s about as well-known as poets get, and she doesn’t have to hide from the paparazzi.”

“I’m a big fan of hers. But you’re right. Our neighbor might be famous for some other reason.”

“She’s probably just misanthropic.” The word surprised Jamie. How had he dredged that up in his present condition? “What makes you stick to this *famous* thing?”

“I could swear I’ve seen her face somewhere. With a headline ... Can’t pull it up. But she’s doing what I’m doing, right? Got a place in Chloride where she can hide from it all.” He paused, then said, “Be nice for us both if that’s the case. We’d understand each other.”

Jamie cuddled his cat. “You’re deluding yourself. Being famous isn’t the only reason people hide.”

“Come on, are you saying she’s a criminal?”

“Could be. Or running from one. Isn’t that the myth of the old West, places like this? Somewhere to hide out and start over.”

Joe Wayne nodded. “I like that idea. Makes her mysterious.”

The neighbor rushed back out with her purse as well as her briefcase and drove off. Jamie had an image of her as the white rabbit from Alice in Wonderland, nervous, pompous, stuffily dressed, and frantic about being late. Driving her white Saab down a rabbit hole.

Joe Wayne squinted into the morning sun, stretched, and cracked his knuckles. “Guess I’d better go look for your bad dream.”

“Don’t bother.” Jamie followed him inside and set Gasser down. The cat made a miserable warbling sound and lumbered off to Jamie’s room. *Stressed out, poor bloke.* “I made it up.”

He made a quick trip to the bathroom. It was as sparse and basic as the bedroom. While he did his business and washed his face, he described his semi-blackout and panic, then fetched his cane from his room and returned to the hall, finishing his explanation. “I couldn’t tell her I thought I’d been kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped?” Joe Wayne’s low, goofy huh-huh laugh grated on Jamie’s hung-over nerves. “Sheeyit, man, that’s priceless. You do know where you are now, right?”

“Yeah. Finally working with you. Song writing retreat. Three weeks. Didn’t think it would be here, though. We’re not staying the whole time, are we?”

Jamie examined his surroundings. On one side of the hallway was a kitchen, furnished with a blend of 1930s vintage fixtures and newer appliances. On the other side what should have been a living room had become his pets’ room. It held the parrot perches from his Santa Fe apartment and two covered cages, Bouquet’s large one and Placido’s medium-sized one. Their

toys lay in one corner. Gasser's toys lay with his travel carrier in another corner along with the parrots' travel cages. The litterbox the animals shared occupied another corner.

"Fuck me dead—we are staying here." Jamie wanted to get the birds out and talk with them, but they must have had a stressful night. They needed to rest. "Thought you'd be staying in Santa Fe."

Joe Wayne shook his head. "What kind of retreat would that be? Knowing us, we'd be out on the town. This is better."

"I'll have to call Mae. No—*fuck*—there's no cell signal."

"I've got a landline." Joe Wayne led the way into the kitchen and got mugs out of a cabinet. "But hold off on that call. I don't want a soul to know who I am or where I am. Wendy knows. That's enough. No visitors who might tell a friend who tells a friend, and next thing you know I'm being hounded. Anybody asks where you are, even Mae, be mysterious."

Jamie was relieved that his manager, Wendy Huang, had been informed. But he had to tell Mae, too. "You expect me to lie to her?"

"Naw, just be evasive. You called her while we were packing and, well, I intervened. You didn't seem to comprehend the necessity of my privacy." Joe Wayne slowed down, blending drawl and diction, as if savoring the taste of three-syllable words seasoned with Texas twang. Ordinarily, Jamie found the habit amusing, but this morning it irritated him.

He found a coffee grinder and a bag of coffee beans on the counter. The same brand he usually bought, even the same roast. A nice surprise. Most people didn't appreciate light roasts. He opened the bag and inhaled the aroma. It made him feel almost human. But still annoyed. "I don't remember phoning Mae last night, but it still pisses me off that you *intervened*. She already knows I'm doing a project with you."

“But not here.”

“Fuck, no. She thinks she’s coming up to see me this next weekend.” Scooping and grinding beans, Jamie noticed the grinder was the same make as his at home. Had he brought it with him? Drunk as he’d been, it was hard to say what he’d done, but he was surprised he’d brought anything except his toothbrush. “Who packed my stuff? And my animals? I couldn’t have done it.”

“You remember my personal assistants, Roxana and Diego? They packed all your shit. Diego loves your cat and had him ready to roll, but you did help pack the parrots. You were adamant they couldn’t go to your pet sitters because you’d missed them so much while you toured. Anyway, Roxana drove her truck here, and Diego drove us in my car. They unloaded, and then headed back to Austin. I’m having my place renovated, and they need to supervise—and take care of *my* animals.”

Spoiled rich man. “You didn’t exactly renovate this place.”

“Hell, no. I like it this way. You know me and history, especially the old west. This house was built in 1880, just one year after Pye found silver. I’d had my eye on it for years, and the lady that owned it finally wanted to sell. I had it cleaned, but I kinda want it to look like I’m poor. So, I kept some of the stuff that was already in it. Only added what I couldn’t do without.” With an irritable grunt, Joe Wayne leaned his backside against the counter and folded his arms. “Thought I had the perfect setup.”

“Don’t you? You get to play poor and write music with me.” Jamie started the coffee brewing. “You’ve only been after me to work with you for what—” How long had it been? “Two and a half years?”

“Yeah, I ain’t complaining about that. Though I’m stuck with your vegan cooking for three weeks, and that sucks.”

“Seriously? You didn’t bring meat or anything?” Jamie explored the fridge. Except for a supply of Lone Star beer instead of various New Mexico craft beers, it held the contents of his refrigerator in Santa Fe. And more. He checked the freezer. It was crammed with food he liked. “Thanks. I promise the tucker will be great. You’ll never notice—”

“Oh yes, I will. But I’ll live. What I’m objecting to is having a neighbor, especially one with a nice set of curves. She could be a distraction.”

“Way she dresses, I don’t think she wants anyone to notice the curves.”

“I’m an observant man.”

Jamie got out tortillas, peppers, an onion, and some vegan faux cheese. If there were beans on hand, he could make breakfast burritos. In the cabinet, he found—as he suspected he would—more vegan food and even some of his cooking equipment from home. He opened a can of black beans and drained the liquid into the cracked old porcelain sink, then found a small knife in a drawer full of random and inadequate utensils and began peeling the onion.

Joe Wayne stared at the coffee pot, watching its final drips. “Though I’m sorely tempted to pursue her, she’s here to write. And we’re here to work, too, not fool around. Seven days a week. We’ve got a major project to finish. So, no going out, no women, no nothin.’ ”

“Yeah, right, fine, seven *days* a week. But not seven *nights*. You can try your luck with the poet after dark, and I can head into Truth or Consequences to see Mae.” No, he couldn’t. Jamie put the knife down and turned to Joe Wayne. “*My car*. I don’t have my car. Or my bike. I’m—you *did* kidnap me. Got me rat-arsed and fucking kidnapped me.”

The country star filled a mug and raised it in a toast. “But I did it with your permission. You just don’t remember giving it.”

Jamie cored the pepper and chopped it with the onion, taking out his anger on the veggies. After pressure from his manager, he’d accepted that he had to do something commercial, outside of his usual genres. Even after two tours, his career was in limbo, stalled by the previous year’s cancer treatment and time out from performing. His aggravated hip trouble, leading to more time out and the inability to dance in his shows, had increased the need for a change.

But he’d expected working with Joe Wayne to be fun, with plenty of breaks to hear other musicians and for Jamie and Mae to get together on the weekends.

And then, there was his health. At home, he could get acupuncture for his pain. He might even have gotten up the nerve to see an orthopedic surgeon. He would have been able to take yoga classes, go to the pool, and ride his bicycle. Unable to walk any distance, Jamie relied on swimming and biking for fitness. Now, he was stranded in the middle of nowhere surrounded by dead people, and he couldn’t even exercise.

Bloody hell, I’m going to get fat.

No, he could fix this. With help from Mae, and maybe the poet.

“I was starting to worry.” Mae sounded relieved when she answered. “You hung up on me last night. There was all this noise, and people talking, and then you cut me off. And you didn’t answer when I called back.”

“Sorry. All Joe Wayne’s doing.” Jamie stretched the cord of the landline phone as far as it would go from the kitchen into the hallway so he could see his parrots. They snuggled together on a dowel perch, Placido, the green Eclectus, grooming Bouquet, the enormous hyacinth macaw. Unlike Gasser, they seemed happy despite the disruption. “He took me to Cowgirl for drinks. Getting me in the mood for country music. Feel like crap, but we got something done today, instrumental thing ... He’s taking a break for a walk ...” Jamie caught his mind drifting, dazed and delaying. He had to tell her the bad news. “Um—you couldn’t reach me because we left Santa Fe.”

“I was gonna ask about that. I didn’t recognize the number, but it’s southern New Mexico. Where are you?”

“He says I can’t tell you. Thinks fans will hunt him down, paparazzi, all that. Paranoid bastard. As if that could happen in a ghost town with no cell service.”

“Oh.” A long silence. “Gosh.” Another silence. Mae’s sweet girlish voice grew even softer. “I’ll miss you. I thought we’d get some time together. I wanted to do something special for your birthday.”

“Sorry. I’m bloody pissed at Joe Wayne.”

“Do you at least have your pets?”

“Yeah, they’re all here.” Jamie appreciated how Mae understood his need for his pets, even though Gasser didn’t like her. “Birds are okay. Think Gasser’s freaked out. I was too, when I woke up here. Can’t believe I agreed to this.”

“It’ll be all right. It’s not forever. Summer session starts tomorrow, and it’s pretty intensive. I’m taking two general education classes I put off while I was doing my internship.

Philosophy and Literature. They're not my strong points. We'll both focus on what we're doing and have one heck of a hot date in three weeks."

"No—wait." Jamie hadn't called to have her *agree* to the separation. "You still going to Santa Fe next weekend? JoNell and Mwizenge think we're coming over."

"I'd like to see them. And my English class is on gender roles in genre fiction. She could give me some insights."

Mwizenge played in a world music band with Jamie for local gigs, and his wife, JoNell, was a historical romance writer.

"Yeah, great idea. While you're up there, could you pick up my bike? I can't go three weeks without riding. There's no pool here—there's *nothing*. Two graveyards and more cats than people. I'm not supposed to tell you where I am, but I need my bike, and it'd be sort of on your way home."

"Sure. Y'all must be in Chloride."

"It's that obvious?"

"If you've been to all the ghost towns. There are a lot of 'em in Sierra County, but not many you could live in for three weeks or that have two graveyards. I did some day trips when the kids were visiting while you were on tour." Mae had nine-year-old twin stepdaughters from her second marriage. "It was fun. Chloride was the best for giving them a feel for history. And we went through two other ghost towns on the way."

"*Two more ghost towns?* How far out in the middle of nowhere am I?"

"It's about a forty-minute drive for me. Compared to three hours to visit you in Santa Fe, it's great. Or it would be if Joe Wayne would tolerate visitors."

“He might relent if I hook him up with our neighbor. Bit of a challenge—she’s not sociable, but he’s attracted to her. And she did look him over. I’ll give it a shot, so when you get here, he’ll have his own distraction.”

The poet’s Saab was back. Jamie considered knocking on her door, but she was too unfriendly. Better that she should see the parrots out her window and become curious on her own.

He stood at the edge of Joe Wayne’s front yard nearest her house and gave the birds their flight commands. As the leads stretched out, he began turning to allow them continuous flight. They passed within view of the neighbor’s front and side windows, and even a glimpse should be irresistible—Bouquet, bright blue with a four-foot wingspan, and Placido, smaller and green with red and blue under his wings and blue in his tail.

The silence amazed Jamie, nothing but the sound of the birds’ wings. No traffic. No planes. He’d only known such quiet before while camping. He could see why the neighbor had been bothered by his door-banging and cursing, not to mention the yodeling. She really did have peace and quiet.

The poet didn’t come to her windows or out on her porch. She could be taking a nap. It was a hot day, and her sleep had been disrupted.

Jamie’s hangover made rotating while the birds flew in circles dizzying, and his hip was complaining. He’d left his cane in the house again, unable to handle it and two flight harnesses. He called the parrots in to land on his arms. Bouquet settled and stared at him with one round, yellow-rimmed eye. Placido climbed to his shoulder and said, “Fly.”

“In a minute, mate. New route.” Jamie wondered if he could hold up for the full hour they needed for a good workout. Chloride was hotter than Santa Fe, a lot hotter.

He turned to face the old house. Its brown adobe bricks were eroding, the porch needed paint, and a juniper grew so close to one corner it seemed to be wrapping its arms around the post. He gave the birds their flight commands again, and they flew back and forth between him and the railing. The parrots’ feet gently latched onto him with each landing, and then their tropical colors flashed across the subtle desert hues. Behind the peaked tin roof, rounded hills rose against a naked blue sky, a blue almost as intense as Bouquet’s cobalt.

Jamie was startled out of his contemplations by someone darting out of sight behind the house into the back yard, where only a fragment of low, rough-hewn, post-and-rail fence remained, leaving it open for anyone to walk in. *Fuck*. Was Joe Wayne’s paranoia justified? Had some fan or tabloid writer tracked him down?

Jamie called the parrots to him and carried them to a perch in the living room, then went to his bedroom and looked out the window.

The neighbor was peering back in.

“Jeezus. What the—” Jamie grabbed his cane and rushed as best he could through the hall and the kitchen, then out through the laundry room and tool shed to the back yard.

A fast walker, the poet had nearly reached her steps when Jamie caught up with her. “What in bloody hell were you doing?”

She stopped and glared at him. “You’re trespassing.”

“So were you. Least I’m not peeping through the fucking windows.”

“I have the right to know what sort of neighbors I have.”

“You want to get acquainted, ask us over for tea.”

“I don’t want to get *acquainted*. Just informed.”

She marched into her house and slammed the door.

Jamie stared after her. What was the matter with the woman? Just as well he’d blown his effort to fix her up with Joe Wayne. She would only be trouble.

Chapter Two

“Right on time, Ms. Martin.”

How did the professor know her name already? It was the first day of the summer session, Mae had never met him before, and she wasn't exactly a campus celebrity.

She took a seat in the front of the classroom for Philosophy 220, Eastern Philosophy. The professor, a stocky young man with a red Mohawk that added enough inches to make him possibly five-foot four, nodded at her and said, “Nice to have you in the class.”

He handed out syllabi, urged the students to read them, and then sat on the desk, his stubby legs swinging. A bushy beard and moustache hid half of his face, and a smile sparkled in the midst of all the fur. Bright little brown eyes made him resemble an alert forest animal, a cross between a fox and a small bear.

“I'm Dr. Granger. If you feel comfortable calling me Phil, please do. It's short for Philip, not philosopher.”

Mae was inclined to like him for the silly reason that he was her fellow redhead, and his corny joke made her warm to him more, though his youth made her slightly uncomfortable. At thirty, Mae was accustomed to being in a room full of younger students, but so far, all her professors had been closer to her father's age.

“Let me tell you about myself,” Phil said. “This is my first year at College of the Rio Grande, so I'm new to most of you, though I do see a couple of repeat offenders from my freshman seminar. Philosophical recidivists.” He paused as if waiting for laughter. Receiving none, he continued. “I think of philosophy as a practical field, which is especially true of Eastern

philosophy. It shows you how to live. I also teach logic and the philosophy of science. And I'm the faculty advisor for the newly formed Paranormal Activities Club."

Though she wouldn't have time to be part of it, Mae was intrigued that there was such a club. A few students murmured "Cool" and "Awesome," while others snickered.

A scruffy young man wearing a T-shirt, pajama bottoms, and bedroom slippers inquired, "You don't actually *believe* in that stuff, do you? Ghosts and psychics and everything?"

Back in rural North Carolina, Mae had often run into doubt and mockery like his. She'd heard less of it since moving to New Mexico, but it didn't surprise her. After all, she hadn't believed in psychics until she turned out to be one and hadn't believed in ghosts until she saw one.

Phil strolled across the front of the room. "From the Western perspective of logic and science, belief is irrelevant. What matters is evidence. There are people who don't think logically, disbelieving evidence, and then others who believe without it. Most Eastern traditions say that psychic and visionary experiences are side effects of spiritual development and potential distractions from further progress. However, for those who think these things are *cool*," he said the word as if it were funny, "that comes as something of a disappointment."

Mae appreciated the speech. Her gift was serious, not something for entertainment. But a young woman next to her asked, "Why have the club, then, if it's not cool?"

"The club itself *is* cool," Phil answered. "We received approval from the student senate at the end of the spring semester. We'll be applying scientific methods to the investigation of paranormal phenomena. For example, ghosts, psychics, mediums, and spiritual healers." He looked straight at Mae when he said *psychics*, giving the word a subtle punch.

Someone had told him about her. Mae wished they hadn't. She worked at the college fitness center as lead personal trainer and group fitness instructor, and she was careful not to mention being a psychic and an energy healer in case it seemed wacky or unscientific. Ideally, her skills in both areas would earn equal respect, but she hadn't figured out how to make that happen.

"So, you debunk them?" the pajamas-and-slippers student asked.

Mae bristled at the word. "You can only de-bunk something if it's actually bunk."

Phil said, "It's not a term I care for. I said *investigate*. A scientist never assumes an outcome. We have to entertain the possibility that just because something can't be explained, it doesn't mean it isn't real. If you have more questions about the club, come to the Activities Fair in the campus center tonight." Again, he directed his words to Mae, with a knowing little smile.

After class, Mae stood and waited while other students asked Phil about the readings and assignments. When the room had emptied, she approached him. "I got the feeling you were trying to get me interested in this club."

"I was. Will we see you tonight?"

"Probably not." At five-foot-ten, Mae towered over him. She sat down again in the nearest chair so he wouldn't have to strain his neck to make eye contact. "I like science and understanding things that are hard to explain, but I live in Truth or Consequences, so I don't stay late for campus activities. It's a long drive."

"Make an exception. You could help the group get off to a good start." His eyes twinkled. "They'd like to investigate you."

Shoot. No way. Mae imagined Pajama Guy and other cynics trying to test her. “Who told you I’m psychic?”

“If you are, wouldn’t you be able to tell?” Phil beamed expectantly. Another attempt at humor?

She thought for a moment. Stamos Tsitouris, a fellow Exercise Science major and non-traditional-age student, was the only person on campus she’d shared her gift with besides her father, the head softball coach. He wouldn’t have discussed her with the professor, but Stamos could have taken one of Granger’s classes. And he had dated Mae.

In a caricature of a medium in a trance, she closed her eyes and intoned, “I see a Greek man, forty-two years old ...”

A velvety baritone with a faint accent said, “A very handsome Greek man?”

Startled, Mae opened her eyes. Stamos had come into the room. His sculpted body and classic features had earned him the nickname The Greek God, though Mae doubted any of the girls who called him that ever said it in his presence. He smiled at her and handed the professor a piece of paper. Mae recognized the small blue slip from the registrar’s office, an over-the-limit permission for a class that was full. Stamos wouldn’t take a second philosophy class any more than Mae would. There wasn’t room in their major for many electives. If he was trying to get into this class, he must have met the professor through the club.

“When did y’all start planning the club?” she asked.

“I began organizing it last year. While you were being, shall I say, distant? I hope you’ll be joining us, though.”

Due to an aunt who had premonitions, he was genuinely interested in paranormal phenomena, but did a man with his own Pilates studio have time for a campus club? He already

had a business degree, and like Mae, was certified in several fitness fields. Stamos was in school to improve his credentials, not to hang out with kids half his age. She hoped he wasn't trying to reconnect with her. As remote as she'd been, how could he think she'd be interested?

Students arriving for the next class began to cluster in the hall. Phil signed Stamos's over-the-limit slip, and the three of them exited together.

"She can't join the club," Phil said, "if she's the subject of our first investigation."

Stamos raised an eyebrow and angled his head up, studying Mae. He, too, was shorter than her, though only by two inches. "Did you agree to this?"

"No. I'm taking two classes, I work—" She almost said *two jobs*, but thought better of mentioning the second job as an energy healer at a Truth or Consequences spa. Phil might want to investigate her in that capacity, too. "And I'd rather people on campus weren't talking about me being psychic."

They descended the stairs past an influx of students ascending on the other side, Phil in the lead, Stamos next, and Mae behind. The light from a stairwell window shot through the vertical ridge of Phil's plumage, bringing out purple and gold in the spectacular red, and lit up threads of silver in Stamos's hair. He had a touch more gray than the last time Mae had really looked at him. Their relationship had come to an abrupt and awkward end in the middle of their freshman year, and she'd been avoiding him as much as possible since then, though they were often in classes together.

"Why not?" Phil asked. "You don't want to go on television and amaze people?"

"God, no. I want to have my own personal training business."

"Does it embarrass you, being psychic?"

"Only because people don't understand it."

“Think about being our subject, then, She Who Likes Science. Our goal isn’t debunking, remember? It’s understanding.”

They reached the landing, and Phil turned left toward the faculty offices, telling Stamos he would see him that evening. Mae and Stamos continued down a short flight to the right and he opened the door for her, as much the polished gentlemen as ever.

Outside in the desert sun, Mae took a visor hat and sunglasses from her backpack, and Stamos watched her put them on as if every ordinary, boring thing she did was fascinating. Her guard went up. She was past due to get over her discomfort with him, but she had to make it clear she wasn’t reviving their old relationship.

“Do you have some time?” she asked. “Can we get coffee?”

“An excellent suggestion.”

They got drinks at the coffee shop in the basement of the campus center and sat at one of the umbrella-topped tables in the sunken patio outside, surrounded by cacti and palm trees. The outdoor temperature was in the nineties already, but a breeze made it tolerable.

Mae couldn’t think of any way to beat around the bush, so she plunged in. “I know we broke up kinda badly, and there’s no chance it could have worked out—”

“No chance at all?” His brows arched and his eyes widened. “Not as I remember things.”

“I’m not trying to rehash all that.” Incompatible though they’d proved to be, they’d had chemistry at first. Now, the faint residual zing of physical attraction only made her more uncomfortable around him, a reminder of how disappointed she’d been. “I just want to see if we can be friends. We’ve only got one more year in classes together, and I’ve been too standoffish. I don’t need to act like that.”

“Thank you.” His words were stiff and forced, but he followed up with a softer tone. “I hope we will be at ease with each other again.” Stamos took the lid off his reusable mug, emptied half a packet of raw sugar crystals into his coffee, and stirred. “It was as much me as you, being distant. I was hurt, quite deeply. But doing no group projects together has been hard. I have had to work with young fools who procrastinate and have not read the textbooks.”

Mae drank coffee, stalling, uncertain how to acknowledge his hurt. “I have, too. The lazy ones always want to partner with me.” She did miss studying and doing projects with Stamos. He worked as diligently as she did. “If we have group work in the fall, we could team up.”

“And in Eastern Philosophy, as well?”

“Maybe.” Mae needed time to adapt to their being friends. “Let me think about it. Anyway, I might not be good at philosophy.”

“You’re good at everything you put your mind to. May I ask why you’re taking it?”

“I had to take a religion or philosophy gen ed, and my neighbors are seriously into yoga. They really live the philosophy. And Jamie does yoga, too. He lived in India and Japan and Korea as a kid, so he knows Eastern cultures.”

“Ah. Jamie.” The tension in Stamos’s face emphasized his firm jaw, outlined with a neat, short beard. “How is he?”

“He’s ...” What should she say? Nothing too personal. Jamie and Stamos disliked each other. “Working hard. He did two tours almost back-to-back, one for his new healing music album—that was mostly small venues like yoga studios. And then he did a college tour with his world music stuff. He’s only been back a few weeks.”

“It sounds as though you scarcely see each other. You are what—just friends, now?”

“No, more than that.”

“It’s an extremely long-distance relationship.”

“Only sometimes. It works for us.”

Stamos frowned. “When Diana was away on deployments, I missed her terribly. You come across as quite comfortable with Jamie’s absences.”

“Do we have to get into this?”

“I’m trying to understand you.”

Mae moved her gaze to a tall, spiny ocotillo, its orange-red clusters of blooms contrasting with the blue sky. Did she want Stamos to understand her? She’d put a lot of effort into understanding herself, and she and Jamie had made conscious progress as a couple. Explaining to Stamos seemed unnecessary.

The students at the next table grew boisterous.

“Let’s take a walk,” Mae said. “So we can hear each other.” She took a gulp of coffee, and they carried their drinks with them to stroll down the sidewalk beyond the sunken patio. “I don’t feel like you need to know everything about me and Jamie. And you sounded like you were judging us.”

“Not judging, Mae. Caring. I want you to be happy. And ... I was probing to see if you had ... if you had room for other possibilities.”

“No. I’m with Jamie. Just because we’re taking it slow doesn’t mean we’re not together.”

“Please excuse my presumption.” Stamos looked away. “Are we still friends now?”

“Yeah, but I’m taking that slow, too.” Reaching the end of the walkway where it merged with the paths from several residence halls, they turned back toward the campus center. Mae finished her coffee and shook the last drops from her travel mug before tucking it into her

backpack. Slow progress into friendship meant nice, safe small talk. “What made you take Eastern Philosophy? Just needed a gen ed?”

“Yes. But I needed insight, too. Peace of mind. Wisdom.” Stamos took a final swallow of coffee and did the same routine with his mug. “I used to think my divorce provoked my midlife crisis. But now I think it began with you.”

So much for small talk. Mae put a few more inches between them. Compared to either of her marriages or her connection with Jamie, her former relationship with Stamos was a hill in the shadow of mountains.

“Me? You were married to Diana for sixteen years. And she ...” *Had an affair with Joe Wayne Brazos.* Mae was glad she hadn’t mentioned Jamie’s project with the country superstar. “I didn’t do like she did. I just got mad and broke up with you.”

“Yes, and since then I have questioned my capacity for love, my purpose in life, my chances of being loved ...” Stamos gave Mae a wry smile. “And Aunt Christina predicts it will always be that way.”

Relating to this new, emotionally open Stamos was confusing. What had gotten into him? Was he reading self-help books? Mae took the nearest conversational detour. “Maybe the Paranormal Activities Club should investigate your aunt.”

“In Norfolk?”

“It was a joke. Reckon I’m about as funny as Phil. But they can investigate someone besides me. I’m hardly the only psychic in New Mexico.”

Stamos stopped and met Mae’s eyes. “You might, however, be the best.”

“If you think that, this wouldn’t be an investigation. You already know what I can do.”

“But Phil doesn’t. Nor does an arrogant young man in the club who will benefit from being challenged. I have placed a bet with him, Mae. We have to win.”

“*We?*” Like they were together in some way? “I’m not part of this. You bet money on me like a horse?”

“Not money. I bet Percy that I will be right, and he will be wrong. He does not believe he could possibly be wrong.”

“Sorry. I might be willing to be part of a proper study, but not this.” Mae took an abrupt left toward the fitness center, though she didn’t have to be there until noon. “I’m gonna go check in with my boss. See you in class Wednesday.”

After a quick greeting to the fitness center manager, Tomás Rivera, Mae headed to the locker room. One of the perks of her part-time management role was having an assigned locker where she could keep clothes and shoes. She changed into running gear, then left by the back door. The adjacent athletic fields were empty at mid-morning in the June heat, perfect for a head-clearing solitary run.

During her laps of the soccer field, she let Stamos’s annoying intrusions rattle around in her head. He was so sure of himself, and so darned *polite* about it. Like he thought it was all okay as long as he spoke softly and opened doors for her. His unexpected new candor only made him harder to deal with. His faults hadn’t changed, nor had his virtues, but now he was—what? *Vulnerable?* Stamos? Vulnerable and yet still doing his alpha act. *Betting* on her, of all things.

Mae liked to compete and win. A young man came out the back door of the fitness center, and she sped up simply because he was walking past her. She’d played softball and run

track in high school, and still entered races now and then. Using her psychic gift to win Stamos's bet, though, was like showing off something spiritual. And she would be giving in to his take-charge assumptions. Not to mention spending more time with him than she wanted to.

Phil had made a good case for her participating in a study. But now she had even better reasons for saying no.

Or did she? Veering off the field and uphill onto a cross-country trail, Mae considered the study again. Her grandmother, a seer and healer, had suggested Mae might grow up to be a scientist who studied mysterious phenomena. In what had been their last conversation, they'd talked about life after death and whether there were ghosts. Twenty years ago. Granma had died later that day. If Mae could talk to her now, what would she advise?

Or, what would the person closest to Granma say?

After a shower, a long drink of water, and another change of clothes, Mae sat on a bench in the locker room and called her second cousin Kyle in North Carolina. He was old enough to have learned from Granma and become a healer like her, and eventually an expert on energy healing with crystals.

Mae explained the situation, emphasizing the dilemmas with Stamos and her on-campus reputation.

Kyle listened, then said in his deep, mellow, Appalachian-accented voice, "You seem to think being known as a psychic would be damaging."

"It could be. I'm going into a field that's based on science. Where you have to have certifications for everything."

"If you demonstrate your skill, it could be like a certification,"

"But some folks will still judge me. And there's the whole Stamos business."

“I can’t advise you there. But I can tell you that your grandmother never hid her gift.”

They talked a little longer, catching up on each other’s lives, and Mae thanked Kyle as she said goodbye, though their conversation left her with no greater certainty.

She knew from experience she didn’t like hiding the Sight, but revealing it caused trouble. Except with people like Stamos. And Jamie. People who understood. She could only hope some insight was growing in the back of her mind. Jamie trusted those hidden layers more than she did. Meanwhile, she couldn’t let herself worry about the Paranormal Activities Club until after she taught her class.

At a quarter to twelve in the group fitness studio, Mae unlocked the closet and brought out mats and gliding disks for her new class, Bodyweight Burn. She had worked hard on planning a killer workout without weights, and Tomás had promoted it heavily. Students, faculty, and staff who were regulars in her bootcamp class began arriving, along with some newcomers.

Happy to see a full house for a lunch-time summer session class, Mae introduced herself and the class format, and then asked the new people to introduce themselves. One was a student who said his name was Percy.

Stamos hadn’t described him, but could there be two people with that name on the small campus? Percy wore a mesh tank top, revealing toned abs and arms, and the tight posture of someone who only worked the mirror muscles. His legs were skinny below baggy shorts, and he appeared young, even for a freshman. His wavy brown hair was long enough to put in a ponytail for a workout, but he’d left it flowing loose, perhaps to hide the sticking-out ears that still nudged their way through.

Mae asked, “Does anyone have issues with wrists, backs, knees, ankles—any areas you need to be careful with? I can give you adaptations if you do.”

“You’re asking for private medical information in public?” Percy demanded. His golden-tan face was expressive, with large features and thin cheeks. Something seemed familiar about him, and yet Mae was sure she’d never met him before.

“Not private, no, just general—for safety.” She used a friendly tone. Perhaps he’d never taken a class before. “With a drop-in group exercise class, I can’t ask one-on-one with each new student unless they arrive real early.”

A physics professor mentioned his knees and said he already knew what he should modify. No one else had any issues. Or maybe Percy did but chose not to mention it. Which put Mae in a bind. She suggested to him, “We can step out for a minute and talk, if you want.”

Percy made a dismissive noise. “I know what I’m doing. I have a personal trainer at home.”

Did he really? He didn’t look like he did a balanced workout, but then, if he was the know-it-all Stamos had mentioned, maybe Percy didn’t listen to his trainer.

“Anyway,” he murmured, “You’re psychic, right? You don’t need to ask any questions.”

Startled, Mae took a breath, but she had to drop the topic and teach.

She put on her wireless headset, checked her mic, turned on the music, and started the warm-ups. “Once y’all get going with each exercise, I’ll walk around and give you some tips and check everybody’s form.”

During the warm-ups and the upper-body segment, Mae was glad to see Percy had reasonably good alignment and technique. She dreaded correcting him. Whenever she repeated a

cue in Spanish for a few staff members who weren't English speakers, he made a hurry-up gesture, whirling one hand. *Like I'm wasting his time?*

In the lower-body segment, Percy struggled. Mae showed easier alternatives for every exercise, urging people to listen to their bodies, but he attempted the most challenging variations. Not surprising. Guys his age tended to push too hard.

She paused in her tour of the room to stand beside him and offered some quiet suggestions.

Percy ceased his attempts. "I'm a visual learner. You're not teaching me by just talking."

"I'm happy to give you another demo." Mae executed the cross-over lunge again twice and then watched Percy, who stopped after another awkward rep, his eyes blazing.

Trying not to let his hostility distract her, Mae walked on, giving more tips, and told the class to change legs.

Some participants moaned or grunted, and some exclaimed that their butts and quads hurt, all in good humor. Percy stalked to the equipment closet, grabbed a ten-pound bar, and swung it onto his shoulders for standard squats. His form was shaky, knees rolling in and pushing too far forward.

"I'm so sorry." Mae channeled her annoyance into Southern sweetness. She couldn't correct him again. He would only argue. "It's a little crowded to be using that equipment."

Percy dropped the bar, glowered at Mae, and strode toward the door. "Fine. I'll leave and do a *real* workout. This is the worst class ever. I'm telling the manager."

When he left, several people let out sighs of relief. Imelda Estrada, the fitness center custodian, was in the front of the room, close to Mae, and mouthed a word she'd recently taught her. "*Pendejo.*"

Mae stifled a laugh, put the bar away, and carried on, but she was rattled as she cued the next exercise. She was grateful to have Imelda there, giving her supportive smiles.

Meanwhile, Percy planted himself on the slant board in the hallway, visible through the studio window, and flung into a series of high-speed sit-ups holding a weight plate to his chest. A few months ago, Mae and Tomás had agreed to get rid of the slant board—it was a back injury waiting to happen—yet for some reason it had returned. Percy’s grunts intruded over Mae’s instruction until he lay back in apparent exhaustion.

At the end of class as the participants were cleaning their mats, one of the bootcamp regulars approached Mae. Dr. Cora Frist, a tall, well-built, forty-something brunette, chaired the English department. “Don’t take it personally. Percy argues with everyone. He’s an English major, so I’ve seen a lot of him. He says he plans to be an editor so he can correct people for a living. I suspect he’s insecure, trying to overcompensate.”

“Thanks, Dr. Frist. If he complains to Tomás, though ...”

“I’ll stand up for you.” The professor’s warm brown eyes held Mae’s, steady and reassuring. “Percy nearly decapitated two people with that bar. And please call me Cora.”

Mae thanked her and put away the mats. At least Percy was unlikely to come back to her class. She felt sorry for the entire English department, though, having to endure his attitude. He had to be the person Stamos wanted to prove wrong. She was almost tempted to help him.

Almost.

