

## Chapter One

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*From Old Man Turner's Journal:  
In life, as in love, expect the unexpected.*

**O***h, brother!* The house her dearly departed Great-Aunt Evie had left her in her last will and testament reminded Abby of a Victorian horror film, complete with a set of ugly as sin gargoyles guarding the front porch entrance. Gingerly, Abby opened the front door, the hinges creaking as she pushed, with the set of keys that her aunt's attorney, Clark Biddle the Third, had mailed her. Clark Biddle was a crusty codger who had been in business since the invention of the American legal system, and her aunt's attorney for over forty years. Aunt Evie had never married and, in a way, must have felt a bit of a kinship with Abby, since she was the only one in her family line who was unwed and didn't have a passel of kids running helter-skelter on her sanity. While Abby remembered visiting here as a child, she had been five, shy, and really had not looked at anyone above their knees.

Unsure of what she might find, she had brought all the essen-

tials with her: wine, chocolate, toilet paper and bug spray, the important things—at least while she figured out what to do with all her aunt’s possessions and, in the meantime, finished her dissertation without her family constantly butting in and hovering with their judgmental, albeit well-meaning, interference.

As luck would have it, she’d been able to finagle an adjunct faculty position at the start of the fall semester at the local Echo Springs Community College, where she’d instruct bored freshmen in basic college composition classes with an American Literature Lecture series tossed in just to keep it from getting too snooze-worthy on her end. The previous professor, David Northrup, had eloped with one of his students at the end of last term. With the school being a small-town community college two hours from the nearest metropolitan area, they had been desperate to fill the spot on short notice.

Abby spent the next hour carting in her belongings from her well-used Land Rover. This baby had seen her through undergrad and then graduate school. It was a high school graduation present from her parents, two esteemed professors working in physics and engineering, as an attempt to bribe her into following in their rather forbidding academic footsteps.

And for a full year she’d let them guide her, until her sophomore year and what her parents had termed the unfortunate mistake. After that, Abby had switched majors and colleges, then entered a field that caused her parents to view her like one of their science projects instead of as their daughter.

Abby admitted that their dissatisfaction had created a distance between them. It wasn’t that she didn’t love them, she did, but she’d decided to live on her terms, which seemed to confound them on a daily basis. Now that she had been living the way she wanted, following her own star, she could never return to the listless, staid course her life had been on to please her family, not at the cost of her soul.

The inside of Great-Aunt Evie’s home was a cross between 1950s Cold War décor and Barnum and Bailey’s, with Victorian

architecture that had been spliced with *Little Shop of Horrors*. Abby imagined Dracula would feel at home and comfortable here. She knew her aunt had been rather eccentric, which was her parents' nice way of saying her dad's aunt had been bat-shit crazy.

Once she'd hefted the final box inside, Abby decided her best bet would be a quick tour of the place she'd be calling home for the next few months. Then she could break out the cleaning supplies, starting with whatever room she'd use as her bedroom.

The main floor had a living room parlor, complete with inlaid ebony wood shelves and an ivory marble fireplace in the front. In the rear of the house were the kitchen, dining room, and laundry room, which all had a nice filmy layer of dust coating every surface. She prayed dust was her only houseguest, and that it didn't extend to mice, cockroaches, or spiders.

Her aunt's home was located in the tiny mountain town of Echo Springs, Colorado. It was one of the many stops along the interstate leading to ski resorts, a strip of parceled land with the majority of its residents living in homes surrounding the two-mile stretch of Main Street. The bulk of the town was situated along the northern edge of the interstate, with the mountains beyond forming a natural crescent shape.

Her aunt's house was in one of the residential areas set farther inland and away from the civilization of the tiny strip. Her street boasted all of five homes on acre lots. The house backed up to one of the foothills, still large by her estimates, but a baby mountain among the fourteen-footers nearby.

There was a bit of contention with her parents over the fact that Evie had willed her estate to Abby and not her father, Phillip, as would have been the proper thing to do. Her parents objected to anything that was outside of normal, acceptable behavior.

She guessed that was why Aunt Evie had left the home to her. She'd always enjoyed coloring outside the lines, preferred it over her parents' compartmentalized and sterile existence, and had corresponded with her aunt almost weekly. Their unlikely friend-

ship had come about through an assignment in fourth grade where she'd had to select a pen-pal. Instead of picking a perfectly acceptable grade-schooler her age, she had chosen her great-aunt. In recent years, their communications had declined some, but Abby had still found the time to write her aunt in the old-fashioned, letter-writing, non-computerized way. It had been Evie who had championed her desire to change majors, encouraging her to strike out and follow her own path in life.

Abby climbed the wooden stairs in the center of the house, wooden floorboards creaking under her weight as she ascended, the scrolled ebony wooden railing smooth from a lifetime of hands trailing over its surface.

The house boasted four bedrooms at the top of the double L-shaped staircase, with the master bedroom, her aunt's, at the rear of the hallway. Abby chose the second-largest room, which had a window that overlooked the gardens, and in the distance, she could spy her neighbor's driveway and darkened house beyond. The room held an old four-poster number, a chest of drawers, and an antique writing desk. She could set up camp with her laptop and work on her dissertation in here if she wanted.

The room also held a portion of her aunt's prized doll collection. Not the modern, plastic ones, but the old porcelain dolls, with creepy as hell faces. The damn things gave her the willies and would be the first casualty in her decluttering of the house. After setting her meager belongings on the bed, Abby carted and removed all the dolls from her room. She'd never sleep with all those beady eyes staring at her. And the ones with clown faces, forget about it—those suckers, she might just have to torch.

Abby spent the next hour cleaning her new room as best she could for the night. She'd work on the full house and give it a proper cleaning come morning, but she'd spent the better part of the day in her Rover and could feel the onset of fatigue settling in her bones. There was a semi-modern bathroom across the hall, with one of those claw-foot tubs she'd take advantage of when

she wasn't dragging her feet and ready to go horizontal for eight hours.

Settled in for the night, she made herself a small picnic of her wine and cheese offerings and added hitting up the local market for all the essentials to her to-do list for the morrow. Her parents would only shake their heads if they could see her in her thermal pajamas, drinking chardonnay directly from the bottle that hadn't even sported a cork, but a lid that twisted off.

She was toasting her own brilliance when she heard the creak of the front door opening. Grabbing her trusty nine iron, a little gizmo she'd inherited from an ex-boyfriend some years back, Abby cursed at her phone's low battery.

"Figures," she muttered under her breath.

She left her room, tiptoeing down the stairs, her movements muffled by her thick socks. She rounded the corner, and a beam of light blinded her.

"Gah!" Screaming, she swung the iron, ready to take on her intruder. All the self-defense classes her parents had scoffed at hadn't been for naught. Who knew that in a sleepy little mountain town, burglars and vagabonds were a problem? The golf club whizzed over the intruder's head.

"What the?" a deep baritone barked.

She swung again, determined to fend off whoever the hell thought he could invade her aunt's place with mischief on his mind. The shadowed outline of a large man loomed behind the beam of light. When he didn't back off, only kept advancing, her internal panic button hit overdrive. The nine-iron connected with flesh with a thudded whack.

"Ow, fuck, cut it—"

"Get out or I'll call the police!" she swore, her pulse hammering, her grip on the nine-iron so tight her hand was fusing into a claw formation. She reared back to strike again when his next words halted the forward progression of her swing.

"I am the police."

She blanched, almost dropping her weapon, but then thought

better of it. What if he'd lied to disarm her and then would attack?

Nice try, buddy. She wasn't falling for it.

"Prove it." She wasn't the atypical heroine who idiotically descended into the darkened basement, despite the light mysteriously not working, to investigate the strange noise. She'd studied horror films and knew she was not the dumb bimbo, but the smart woman who survived. His indicating that he was the police was a sub-plot straight out of a B horror film and was precisely the type of thing the killer would say.

She raised the nine-iron into a defensive position as the man moved to her right, flipping on the overhead light while pulling a shiny silver badge from his belt. He held it toward her so that light reflected off the silver star. Blinking as her eyes adjusted, Abby wondered if she was dreaming. Cornflower-blue eyes studied her, dressed in her flannel pink pajama bottoms, tank top, and fluffy purple robe. He was larger than the darkness had suggested, probably a good six-three, and lean. His dark midnight hair fell in curly waves to his jawline, which was covered in dusky stubble. There was a ruggedness to him, indicating that somewhere in his make-up he preferred life outdoors, and it showed. He reminded her of the men gracing the covers of the romance novels she'd hidden from her parents growing up, and still hid from her colleagues.

She'd always had a bit of a thing for men in uniform, but the only defining mark that even suggested he was an officer was his black jacket with an emblem embroidered into the right shoulder. Otherwise, he looked like a mountain man, in a button-up emerald flannel shirt and blue jeans that rode low over his muscular hips.

Then she focused on the badge. Oh, sweet heavens! The badge read: *Sheriff, City of Echo Springs*. Why did this have all the beginnings of a campy horror flick? Woman goes to the wilderness to find herself, makes acquaintance with the local law enforcement, and then the army of dolls stuffed inside the home

come to life, possessed by a demon spawn from hell, to try to kill the heroine.

This was why Abby needed to get away from her daily life. When a person started comparing her life to horror movies, she was on a one-way train to Crazyville.

He gave her an identical head-to-toe assessment. Abby felt his gaze clear down to her center, then he finally responded to her dare. “I’m Nate Barnes, Sheriff of Echo Springs. Would you mind telling me who the hell you are and why you are trespassing in Evie Callier’s home?”

She’d just assaulted the freaking sheriff! Great. Just perfect. Some of the wind deflated from her sails and her defensive stance slackened. She loosened her shoulders and grip a teensy bit. But she didn’t lower her nine-iron, just in case. This was always the part where the psycho killer did an *I’m just kidding* and sprang in for the kill. “Abby Callier. Evie was my great-aunt, and I’m here to help settle her estate.”

His stiff demeanor slackened somewhat. “I hate to ask this, especially at the risk of you beaming me with that thing again”—he nodded toward the iron she held—“but I need to see some identification to verify you are who you say you are. It’s procedure and all. We’ve had a rash of break-ins here recently.”

That tiny bit of news didn’t settle her anxiety any. What had she been thinking when she’d made the decision to come live in Evie’s place in the middle of nowhere Colorado? Granted, she could be in Denver inside of two hours, but still, she wasn’t the reclusive type. Much.

“Let me get my wallet. Stay here, please.” She gestured, holding her hand up while holding the nine-iron in her other hand like she’d stepped into the batter’s box and was waiting for the pitch. Abby was already wired up. The last thing she needed was to have him follow her up to her room. Her grip on the iron tightened again. Sheriff Barnes nodded as he clipped his badge back on his belt. Abby backed up, retracing her steps to her room. She raced up the top half of the stairs, her heart

thumping madly in her chest, like she'd just run sprints, from the adrenaline rush of the last few minutes. Her hands visibly shook as she dug in her purse and withdrew her license from her wallet.

Mentally, Abby added a new, heavier-duty deadbolt to her internal shopping list for the following day. With her New Jersey license gripped in one hand, holding on to the iron like it was a lifeline with the other, she left her room and headed back downstairs to Sheriff Barnes, who should be given an award for being one of the sexiest lawmen west of the Mississippi—so much so that in her mind, she had already dubbed him Sheriff Stud Muffin. That hunk of law and order was currently nosing through the living room, paying particular attention to the pile of dolls she'd deposited on the red velvet loveseat. The doll heap looked eerily reminiscent of a horror film, *Night of the Living Dolls*, or like sacrificial offerings to the Lord of Darkness, surrounded as they were by the dark burgundy red of the couch.

"I've got to ask. What's with the dolls?" Sheriff Barnes quirked a dark brow in her direction. The corners of his lips twitched as if he was trying not to laugh as she handed him her license while maintaining a reasonable distance between them. His long, piano-player fingers brushed against hers as he took the license to inspect it, and a zing whipped through her body.

*Well, hello, libido, you do still exist. I was beginning to wonder about you. Although, hormones and horniness in general typically preclude the mass-murdering zombie apocalypse, so...*

"Aunt Evie loved collecting those things, but I find them creepy as hell. There's no way I'd get any sleep tonight with those beady eyes watching me."

A hint of a grin shrouded his lips. "So, you're moving in?"

"More or less, for the time being. Until I decide whether I should keep or sell the house. If you think this pile of dolls is bad, you should see my aunt's room." She clamped her mouth shut on what had sounded like an invitation. She would not invite a strange man anywhere near her bedroom, or her aunt's. Even if Abby found Sheriff Stud Muffin incredibly attractive, she could



virtually hear the opening strains of a horror flick should she do something like have a one-night stand—not that she would, although it would be nice to be rid of her sexual dry spell. But that would tank any possibilities she had for this place and making it permanent. Abby didn't want to head back east only to have her parents greet her with their holier-than-thou *I told you sos*.

“Well then, let me be the first to welcome you to the neighborhood,” he murmured, handing her license back.

Abby accepted it from his outstretched hand. She avoided his touch this time, not wanting a repeat of the livewire current that had sliced through her system before. Wait, neighborhood? Between the wine and the eight hundred miles she'd driven today, her brain wasn't firing on all cylinders. “You live around here? And is this your normal MO? Sneak into a person's home and scare the crap out of them?”

“No, it's not typical, but I'm bound and sworn to investigate when I discover something out of place. I live next door to the left of you, noticed the light on in the room upstairs, and had not heard that any of Evie's relatives were moving in. Since no one came to the funeral, I just assumed.”

“I was out of the country, in England, when she died. My parents didn't let me know about her passing until after the services had occurred. If I'd known, I would have made the trip,” Abby explained, restraining her desire to fidget under his direct gaze. And if he was her neighbor on the left, that meant her bedroom window looked out directly over his home. She might have to rethink the location of her bedchamber.

Abby wasn't used to being observed so intensely, and his cornflower gaze roamed over her from head to foot. In fact, he did that to the entirety of the room as well. There was nothing that missed his stare, which she assumed was a good trait to have when you were the sheriff.

Normally, it wouldn't have offended her, but this made her feel like she was being dissected and judged, which got her back

up. Part of why she was here was to escape from her parents' constant judgment and condemnation of her life choices. They were hers. She didn't want to be a carbon copy of the exalted Doctors Callier, or try to make herself fit into their academic niche, which was why she'd struck out on her own. Yet even now, on the eve of her completing her dissertation and being awarded her doctorate, her parents couldn't seem to keep themselves from passing judgment on her choice of subject matter. The exasperation in her mother's voice during their phone call that morning as she'd enquired when Abby was going to stop all this nonsense and join a *more promising academic field* still smarted. It was her mother's code for the sciences or mathematics—none of the subjects like literature or, heaven forbid, philosophy, were considered up to par.

"I see. I'm truly sorry for the intrusion," he said.

"That's okay. Nothing like a little excitement before bed to get the blood pumping."

The man laughed outright. Crinkles appeared at the corner of his eyes. She'd thought he was attractive before, but his smile transformed him from merely handsome into a gorgeous hunk of man meat that made her ovaries give him a standing ovation. This was why she rarely went out. She had constant foot-in-mouth syndrome, where her brain chose not to connect with her mouth.

"I mean, um..." Abby stuttered and felt heat flush her cheeks, wishing there was a hole that would open up so she could crawl into it and hide from the embarrassment.

"Don't worry about it, Abby. I will let you get back to your evening. If you need anything, I'm right next door," Sheriff Barnes murmured, heading toward the door. "Make sure you lock the door behind me. Like I said, there has been a rash of burglaries in the area."

"I will." She followed him to the front door, holding it open as he stepped outside.

"Good night, Abby." He gave her a small salute and saun-

tered off her porch. His police cruiser, an SUV, was parked next door in his driveway.

“Night, Sheriff,” she responded as she shut the door and flicked the lock. She tested it before she marched to the back door and made sure it was firmly locked as well.

Then, just to be on the safe side, since she knew it would be a while before she succumbed to the oblivion of sleep after the night’s festivities, Abby decided to check all the windows in the house and ensure those were locked up tight as well.

The last thing she wanted was to end up splashed across the local newspaper as a cautionary tale. Although, it would make her parents blow a gasket, which would be pretty satisfying. She could see the headline now:

*Evie Callier’s great-niece found slain! Local police suspect it was the army of undead dolls...*



NATE’S long legs ate up the distance between Miss Evie’s home and his. A sliver of moon shone down, casting the yard between their houses in a murky darkness. The nightly weather had begun to dip into colder temperatures even though it was only mid-August.

So, that was Abby. She wasn’t conventionally beautiful, with her big brown eyes and overly generous smile, but the combo was a knock-out punch to the gut. Miss Evie had mentioned her great-niece quite a bit, saying how she was just like Evie had been in her youth, after she’d asked him to go steady with her for the hundredth time. Miss Evie had been quite the town character. Many of the townsfolk had thought she was too over the top, but he’d always liked her quick-hearted wit, booming laugh, and zest for life. She had thumbed her nose at convention and never married.

He’d liked her. Nate had been the one who had discovered her in her bedroom after she’d passed in her sleep, and he’d

made all the funeral arrangements. Evie had asked him to years before, as she had no family in the area. It had been the right thing to do, the only honorable thing any self-respecting man would do. He certainly was going to miss the old broad.

Nate opened his oak front door, tensing as Rufus, his hundred-and-fifty-pound Great Dane, bounded toward him in exuberant glee. *Delicate* and *agile* were not two words he would use to describe Rufus, who was more in the overzealous and horrendously clumsy category. He'd once overturned all the shelves in the pantry while attempting to reach the biscuits Nate had stashed on the top shelf.

"What's up, bud?" Nate ruffled the fur between Rufus's ears and was rewarded with a thick, sloppy wet tongue.

"Go do your business, but leave the squirrels alone."

Rufus woofed in response and barreled past him. Nate stood at the front door, waiting for Rufus, who had this look of *finally* on his face as he emptied a long stream of urine into a nearby bush.

Nate leaned against the doorframe, yawning as Rufus greeted every bush and shrub in the yard. Nate shot his gaze up to the second floor of Miss Evie's and the light that still shone in the window like a beacon. He was going to have quite the bruise on his left arm from where she'd nailed him with the golf iron. Abby was no shrinking violet, he'd give her that. She was more like one of the mythic Furies sent down to avenge wronged women and eviscerate men.

All in a luscious little package that had stunned him, delaying his responses. Otherwise, she never would have gotten a hit in. She was a good foot shorter than he was, with the top of her head barely reaching his shoulder, but she was a power-packed dynamo with curves that made his mouth water.

Nate wondered how long Abby planned to stay. Most people didn't get past their first winter in the mountains. Living up here took a certain type of gumption that most people just didn't have. He'd have to keep an eye on his new neighbor, especially

once the weather headed south. Up here in the higher elevations, once the snow started, it could be days before you made it out. They should hopefully have some time yet before the weather turned, but once September hit, it could be sixty and sunny in the morning then twenty and snowing by evening.

When her light darkened, and the house seemed to blend with the night, he felt like he had done his civic duty for the day.

“Rufus, come on. Let’s get some dinner.” He whistled for the pup, who raced toward him like a horse in the Kentucky Derby. His midnight fur blended in with the dark night as he clomped up the porch and darted inside toward the kitchen.

Nate’s own stomach growled at the thought of food as he followed Rufus, who plopped his butt on the floor and waited next to his food bowl. There was a part of Nate that hungered for his entirely-too-sexy-for-her-own-good neighbor.

He really didn’t need or want the complication in his life, but then again, there was nothing wrong with being a little neighborly.