

Excerpt from *Elegance and Evil*

Chapter 1

New in Town

“Are you ready for this, Cleo?” Luc asked.

“Sure.” Beginnings were intimidating. But, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Luc pulled into the driveway of a traditional adobe house, typical of what I had seen here in Santa Fe, NM. A stocky man of medium-height, with hair pulled back in a small man-bun exited and locked the front door.

“Jon can be a bit insufferable sometimes, but his heart is usually in the right place,” Luc said. Jon was one of Luc’s closest friends, and a scientist who worked at a federal lab nearby. Luc was giving him a ride to the dinner party we were attending.

Jon swung open the back door of Luc’s car. “This should be fun,” he said sliding into the backseat.

I turned and smiled at him from the front passenger seat. “Hi Jon, it’s nice to meet you. Luc has told me a lot about you. I’m Cleo—”

“Cleo Cooper, I know. I’ve heard about you too. Anyway. Luc, did you get my email about the new grant I was awarded?” And Jon rattled on about the mega-grant he’d received for his latest research project.

Oka-a-a-y.

Luc pulled away from the curb.

“This grant will cement my spot at the top of the food chain at the lab. The Defense Department is really interested in my ideas on further miniaturization of key components,” Jon

said.

“That sounds interesting. What kind of components? And how small do you think you can shrink them?” I asked.

Jon’s gaze shifted to me. “You’re just a psychologist, right?”

“Yes.” But I suspected where this was going.

“Were your parents scientists?”

“No.” My parents ran a diner.

“Then it is a waste of my time to try and explain atomic physics to you. Luc’s parents at least taught him enough over the dinner table that he can understand the basics of my research. But a psych professor from a small university in the middle of nowhere—”

“Hey.” Luc interrupted. “Cleo is a scientist, a social scientist. And she has conducted some solid studies. And I’m a psychologist too. So no looking down your nose at us because we don’t get defense department grants. And, if you’re going to bring up my parents... they claim that any good scientists should be able to explain their work to someone outside the field.”

“And my university isn’t in the middle of nowhere. It’s in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, a gateway between East and West.” I was on sabbatical from my university on the Big Island of Hawaii, and I wasn’t going to let anybody talk smack about my island. Maybe coming to Santa Fe, NM to work with Luc for six months wasn’t such a great idea.

Jon sighed. “Whatever. I think I’d rather wait until we get to the party to explain my grant so I can see the look on Matias’s face when he realizes I’ll have the largest grant at the lab. He won’t be able to get rid of me now. And he’ll have to take me seriously.”

We reached downtown Santa Fe and Luc pulled into a parking garage. Butterflies took flight in my stomach. I was usually comfortable in new situations. But Jon’s obnoxious condescension

had me feeling jittery. On our short ride from Jon's house to the garage, his bombastic wit had overwhelmed me.

I'd left a secure, comfortable career as a psychology professor, and a secure, mostly uncomfortable boyfriend, to create a new life. I arrived a week ago, and this dinner party would be my first opportunity to meet people. A lot of movers and shakers were expected, including Luc. I contemplated the man strolling beside me, his striking bone structure and tousled black hair. He was influential in town, and his Institute for the Study of International Relations lined up perfectly with my research.

Luc, Jon, and I traversed a crooked sidewalk that undulated over roots of old Siberian elms. My butterflies flittered again, and I hoped the walk from the parking garage to our hostess's home on the other side of the Plaza would rein in my nerves. I glanced at Luc. He'd invited me here to work on his project during my sabbatical. I wanted to keep the relationship professional, but his dark, smoldering eyes, broad shoulders, and kindness made my heart beat faster.

Luc must have noticed. "We're almost there Cleo, not much farther."

Luc and Jon would know everyone at the party. Again with those damn butterflies. Luc smiled at me as we approached a crosswalk. Jon stepped off the curb ahead of us as a dark grey Lexus turned on to the street we were crossing and sped up.

"Watch out!" I grabbed Luc's arm to hold him back from the crosswalk. I winced, expecting the car to hit Jon who was already in the street but managed to maneuver out of the car's path.

"What the... that driver only missed you by inches." My hands shook from the adrenaline surge. The Lexus ran through a red light as it raced away. "Is someone out to get you, Jon?" I bit my lip as my heart thumped and my mind caught up with the fact I'd almost witnessed someone's death.

“Maybe.” Jon grinned. The 40-ish nuclear physicist bounded forward to the other sidewalk. His legs bounced with a child-like spring. As he stepped out of the street he threw his head back and let loose a loud “Ha.”

“I guess a brush with death has made him a little giddy,” I said.

“Either that or Jon has been taste-testing his marijuana cookie recipe again.” We took the last steps out of the road. “It was probably somebody texting while driving. You should have looked before you stepped into the crosswalk, Jon,” Luc said. “But, if Cleo’s right, and that driver was trying to run you down, the tough call is narrowing who does *not* want to knock you off.”

I took a deep breath to steady myself. “How can you guys joke? It scared me to death and I’m not the one who almost died.”

“Who’s joking?” Jon asked with a laugh. But his laugh wobbled. He blinked rapidly. “Luc’s probably right. It was somebody texting, or drinking. But both Matias and Kyle hate my guts, could be either one of them. What do you think, Luc?”

“A tough call. You annoy so many people.” Luc smiled fondly.

We resumed ambling down the sidewalk. The shaking in my hands subsided. I glanced up the street, but the Lexus didn’t reappear. Maybe it was my imagination and the car didn’t aim for Jon.

“Is Kyle still living with Ginger?” Luc asked.

“Surprisingly, yes. I thought she would have tossed him out by now. He’ll be there tonight, as well as Matias, to hear my big grant news. Jon’s grin returned. “This should be fun.”

Luc let out a low whistle, nudging me gently with his elbow. “Better keep your head down, Cleo. Sparks could fly.”

Great. I had hoped to meet some nice people and make some connections, so I wouldn't depend on Luc to get acclimated. Is everybody going to be at each other's throats?

"Here we are." Luc touched my elbow gently with his right hand while extending his left to open a wooden gate elaborately carved with a detailed mural of a Mexican village.

I looked beyond to the creamy pumpkin-colored pueblo structure. Old wood broke the adobe into sizable chunks, so while the house was large, it didn't devour a guest. Well-trained roses and wisteria wound up far above my head around high frames of mesquite wood which offered sweet-smelling shade. The front door was constructed from some exotic wood, with dramatic zebra stripes punctuated by a natural sunburst pattern in the grain. Bespoke, oversized windows appeared to curve with the walls. I'd never been in a house of such obvious wealth. My confidence faltered.

I looked at my companions.

"You first, my dear." Jon bowed with a dramatic flourish. "I want someone to hide behind if people start throwing things."