

## PROLOGUE

*There was a bridge. Narrow. Narrower than the anemic, winding road that led down to it from the slopes on either side of the canyon, a deep gash knifing through dry hills that on this moonless night were mottled with the shadowy forms of boulders and cacti, an army of silent desert sentinels. The bridge was old, cobbled out of crumbling gray cement and volcanic rock the color of dried blood. Its pavement was cracked and pebbly with wear and neglect. Gleaming glass shards littered the roadbed and the edges of the cliff, mirroring millions of stars that glittered overhead in a bottomless black sky.*

*The tiny night sounds of scurrying rodents and the predators that hunt them were suddenly obscured by the rumble of two cars approaching the bridge from the south. One produced a thin, strained whine. The other a more powerful noise, low and angry. With a resounding roar the larger vehicle gained ground on the smaller one and drew alongside it as they both neared the precipice. There was a pause, followed by a volley of explosions, metal and glass blasting through the chasm, the sound screaming up the mountainsides, rocking boulders loose, shaking cacti to their roots, startling sleep-drugged birds into shaky flight. In a cacophony of destruction, metal and rock clashed against each other time and again, as one of the vehicles bounded and tumbled into the barranca's depths, pursued by a shower of loosened stones and fractured glass, until at last it rocked to a halt in the dry stream*

*bed hundreds of feet below the bridge. A cloud of dust and smoke billowed out of the gorge, veiling the faint blue starlight.*

*A low animal sound, eerie and unearthly, feeble at first, gathered strength and rebounded through the canyon, in whose depths, where the vehicle lay crumpled and steaming, a light wind swirled like the stir of batwings. A rustle in the clumps of dried grass that lined the arroyo. A humid gust of breath, a wind whisper that shuddered up the canyon walls through the brush, ruffling the fur of tiny frightened animals crouched in its shadows. Higher and higher it rose, up over the bridge, over the mountains into the black void beyond.*

*Then the creak and ping of cooling metal in the ravine's depths, the whoo of a lone owl, and the light retreating step of a coyote that had watched it all from a craggy overhang.*

# 1

Like a drowning woman struggling toward the ocean surface, Nena Herrera-Casey willed herself awake from a bizarre, terrifying dream. Fear clutched her like a huge, cold hand. Her heart beat wildly. Her legs quivered and ached. Although she felt raw and hollow, she clenched her eyes shut and groped her way back into her slumber to piece the dream together again. If she could recall it, if she could make sense of it, she might be able to conquer its terror. Through the fog of sleep, parts of the dream slowly reappeared. A craggy, desert hillside, cacti standing like sentries in a black night, an old bridge, violent explosions. She saw a vehicle careen off the bridge and plunge into the deep arroyo beneath it. Was she in that car? Was it anyone she knew? The setting was not familiar, but Nena did remember a coyote trotting away in the dark. A gray ghost slipping through cactus.

Like an ebbing tide, the nightmare rapidly receded into her subconscious. Nena stretched toward the shore of wakefulness. As she blinked her eyes to clear them, the *latilla* ceiling of her bedroom changed from a striped blur to neat rows of split cedar in the dawn light. She tossed back the covers, swung her still-aching legs over the side of the mattress, and planted her feet on the Zapotec rug beside her bed. She rose slowly, shaking her head as if to dislodge the remnants of the disturbing dream from her consciousness. Her long, straight, shiny hair cascaded around the almond oval of her face like curtains of blue-black silk.

She dressed in her winter jogging gear and stepped out of her small adobe farmhouse for an early morning run. “Maybe a good workout will defuse the nightmare,” she thought as she jogged down the packed earth trail that paralleled the irrigation ditch near her house.

The blue December sky was still pale. Her breath left frosty puffs in her wake as she lengthened her stride and pushed herself a little faster, her heart drumming in time to her footfalls. Beyond the landscape of scattered houses and small farms to the east, a gilded sphere was rising above the Sandía Mountains, promising a clear, sunny day. The ditchbank ran ahead for miles, until it disappeared into the *bosque*, the dry tangle of trees, red willow, and brush along the Río Grande. In spring, this *acequia* would be brimming, transporting water from the river to the Corrales Valley’s parched fields and orchards. Now, in the middle of an unusually cold winter, it was dry and empty, serving only to ensnare vagrant tumbleweeds and trash.

At this hour, Nena had the landscape to herself. Only now and then a car or truck appeared, raising clouds of dust on the unpaved roads. As she jogged past a grove of skeletal cottonwoods, a coven of ravens cawed loudly to each other, bouncing up and down on the trees’ bare branches before flapping off into the translucent gold sky. On the far side of the river, Albuquerque’s early morning traffic roared like a distant waterfall.

A mile and a half down the ditch, Nena reached her turnaround point, where a paved road passed over a culvert. Abruptly, a coyote sped out of the *acequia*, vaulted the path in front of her in a blur of brown and gray, and dove into the chaparral. There he stopped, spun around, and studied her with slanted yellow eyes.

Nena had to smile. “Scared you, didn’t I, Señor Coyote!” She

laughed. Nonplussed, the coyote trotted away, his colors blending easily with the sand sage and chamisa.

She was thrilled to encounter coyotes on her morning jogs. Although Corrales was becoming a bedroom community for Albuquerque, coyotes, as well as rabbits, quail, road runners, bobcats, and other wildlife still made their home in the valley's hidden places.

When she was a little girl, coyotes frightened her. Her Apache grandmother, Libertad, cured her of that notion. "They're God's dogs, *m'hija*," she said. "Very special animals. Strong, quick, wise, and clever enough to get themselves out of danger. And they'll never hurt you. Don't fear them—be like them. They're survivors."

Nena developed a strong affinity for coyotes. She repeatedly drew them for school art projects, she cut pictures of them out of magazines, she even tried to imitate their howls and yips. Her older brother Luis began to call her *Coyota*, and so did the whole family. They still fascinated her. Now, nearly every night, as she drifted off to sleep, she felt comforted listening to the coyotes sing their undulating choruses to the moon.

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The jog home was always quicker, and soon, she trotted onto a narrow trail that led to her street, a potholed dirt track the locals grandly called Casey Boulevard. At the end of her driveway, she slowed to a walk and stooped to retrieve *The Albuquerque Journal* from its customary landing spot in a clump of currant bushes. Trailing plumes of steamy breath, she opened her back door.

The kitchen clock showed eight. She was nearly half an hour behind schedule, with barely enough time for a quick shower

before heading out the door to her appointment with U.S. Customs at nine. Maybe the nightmare that caused her to oversleep and feel sluggish had made her run slower than usual. Breakfast was going to be what she called a “Toyota Special”: a cold flour tortilla slapped with butter and jam, washed down with a bottle of orange juice as she drove her truck to the airport.

She kicked off her running shoes and headed for the shower.