

ASPEN GOLD SERIES

# Finding Hope



Donna Kaye

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## Chapter 1

Samantha Kincaid drove into Spencer, Colorado after only two hours of sleep. Today wasn't one of her therapy days, but she hadn't been to visit her aunt Gladys Kincaid in the hospital for a couple of days. Samantha still couldn't believe her full-of-life, physically active aunt had fallen and broken her leg in three places. As much as she wanted to escape her own thoughts, the idea of being around people and situations she couldn't control, scared her. Okay, maybe scared was the wrong word. Unfamiliar situations made her uncomfortable.

Even before the accident Samantha hadn't been much of a talker, but now she was even worse. Her therapist back home had encouraged her to strike up casual conversations. Most strangers wouldn't push her emotions into areas that could create stress and trigger a panic attack.

Maybe today she'd venture outside of her routine in town. Turning right at the corner she headed into the main business district in Spencer. It was too cold for a stroll through the park or for Olde Town. A sign caught her eye, Rocky Mountain Book Store. Perfect. She needed a new mystery, and she'd find a couple of romances to take to her aunt.

Pulling into a parking spot, she turned off the engine, closed her eyes and took several slow calming breaths. She could handle this. Hell, she had handled a lot worse in Afghanistan. Grabbing her wallet from the seat, she unplugged her cell phone from the car charger, got out and headed toward the shop.

The pleasant tinkling from the bell above the door fit the cozy feeling inside. Samantha strolled the well-organized aisles until she found the mystery section. After finding a new release from one of her favorite authors, she went in search of books for her aunt. Ten minutes later, she still wasn't sure which one her aunt Gladys would like best. Samantha picked two and decided to ask the store clerk if she could recommend either.

The bell above the door sounded again and a tall man in a sheepskin coat and black cowboy hat strolled in. His broad shoulders tapered down to slim hips and a nice ass. Samantha stepped back and shook her head. A girl could appreciate the scenery. Maybe this was a sign, she was getting better. He strode toward the back of the store.

“Hey, Kate.” The man walked to the counter and leaned his hip against it. “What’s the flavor of the day?”

“You do realize that most people don’t refer to their coffee blends as flavors, don’t you?” The pretty woman behind the counter smiled.

“Yup, but I call it the way I see it.” He pushed his hat up his forehead and a lock of black hair fell forward. “What’re my choices today?”

“I’ve got a dark Sumatra roast, a hazelnut and a chicory roasted blend. Pick your poison?”

“I’ll try the chicory today.”

She put his coffee cup down and pointed toward an assortment of pastries. “Need anything to go with that?”

Samantha watched from the corner of her eye as the man studied the selection and choose an apple fritter. She hadn’t had one of those in ages. Was there a second one?

After paying, the cowboy strode over to a sitting area, placed his purchases on a coffee table and sat in one of several comfortable looking chairs. He removed his hat and placed it brim up on the table.

Well, now was her chance to start a small conversation and treat herself to a fresh pastry. Samantha walked to the back, but kept the man in her line of vision until she reached the counter.

The brown-haired woman smiled. “What can I help you with today?”

Samantha glanced up and spied one of her favorite teas on the menu. “I’ll have a chai tea.” She glanced at the pastries still available. Score. “I’ll have an apple fritter also.” So far today felt like a good day. She raised her gaze to find the woman watching her with a questioning look. “Sorry, I was wool gathering. What did you say?”

The other woman smiled. “I asked if you’d like me to ring up your books now, or do you want me to keep them for you while you eat?”

“I’ll pay here. Also, I don’t read romances, and I wondered if you would recommend the two I chose for my aunt, or are there some you think are better? She likes romantic comedies.”

Kate glanced at the two choices and nodded. “Both of these are great. Your aunt should enjoy them. If she doesn’t like these or has already read them, return them and I can help you choose something new.” Moving to the register, she scanned the books, added on the tea and pastry before giving Samantha her total. “By the way I’m Kate, I own the store.”

“Nice to meet you Kate, I’m Samantha.”

Kate handed over the change and receipt. “Do you want a bag for your books?”

Samantha shook her head. “No, thanks. I don’t need one.”

Leaning against the counter Kate directed a glance toward the man seated behind Samantha. “Ren, you need a refill yet?”

“Nope, I’m good.”

His smooth baritone matched what Samantha had seen of the rest of him. The man had the whole package--good looks, great body and one of the sexiest voices she’d heard in a long time. Too bad. The idea of getting close to someone was off the table. There was no way she could expose her scars to anyone. Her flaws would be even more glaring next to his perfection.

Tucking her books under her arm, she wrapped her hand around her teacup and palmed her pastry before heading toward the other end of the sitting area. Carefully setting everything down, Samantha sat on a wing back chair and glanced up to find the man looking her way. She gave him a nod, then reached for her fritter.

The pastry tasted even better than she’d imagined. One of the things Samantha had missed most when she was in Afghanistan were the little things. A good cup of specialty tea, an occasional piece of candy or a donut had been worth their weight in gold. A soft, sand free bed was unheard of and a cool shower after working outside in hundred-degree-plus weather weren’t even a remote possibility. She’d spent six months in the hospital and rehab center before being sent home. Then an additional two months of outpatient therapy.

Samantha leaned forward, picked up her cup, took a sip and sighed. Considering how much she'd always enjoyed specialty teas, she didn't understand why she hadn't bought any since she'd been back. The familiar spicy flavor rolled across her taste buds and brought back memories of her aunt Gladys. When Samantha had been a teenager, her aunt had introduced her to a variety of teas. They drank teas for special occasions or based on the season, others were associated with certain foods, but all of them brought back memories of the love and laughter they had shared.

Leaning back in her chair, she sipped and enjoyed. She hadn't thought about the good times for years. Glancing up she caught the cowboy watching her. "Do I have something on my cheek?"

A slow smile spread across his face and he chuckled. "Not that I can see. Should you?"

She jerked in surprise. His answer was not what she'd expected. "Not that I know of, unless you know something I don't?"

He appeared to think about it for a moment. "Nope. I've got nothing." He took a drink of his coffee. "I did notice that you're also a fan of the apple fritters."

She nodded. "I haven't had one in years. This is a nice treat." After placing her cup on the table, she took another bite of her pastry. The fruity sweet taste mixed pleasantly with the spice from her tea. "When you were talking to Kate before, it sounded like you're a regular here."

"I don't know about a regular, but I make it to town about once a week, unless the weather gets too bad. Then not so much." He finished off his roll and stood. Placing his hat back on his head, he nodded and carried his cup back to the counter.

Well, so far today she had managed two short conversations and neither one had even mentioned the weather. Okay the last one had, but not to discuss it ad nauseam. She hadn't had an anxiety attack or resorted to the techniques her therapist had taught her to use to cope with her stress. Maybe she had improved. Or maybe she needed to get out of her own head more often and simply exist instead of constantly analyzing herself.

After she finished her fritter and tea, she headed back to her car and dropped off her books, then headed for the Hometown Pharmacy. She needed several of her prescriptions refilled. As much as she'd like to quit taking them, the idea of not having them available

if she did need them was not an option. Maybe one day soon she'd feel confident enough to stop altogether, but not yet.

Since she'd had her prescriptions transferred and set up for auto refills once a month, they were ready when her turn came at the counter. Okay, she was on a roll, having managed conversations with three people so far, and she hadn't even made it to the grocery store or post office yet. She paid and headed for her car.

Ominous clouds swept over the top of the mountains surrounding the valley. Maybe she'd better stock up on additional groceries to be safe. First, she needed to stop and visit Gladys, then finish her errands. Three more stops and she could head home--not her normal home, but the place she called home for now.

\* \* \*

Ren strode into the Wild Card and glanced to the reserved table. Two of the usual crowd were already seated. Ren grinned and headed toward them.

"Hey, look who's slumming." Gage nodded in Ren's direction. "I didn't think you came to town except occasionally on the weekends."

"Depends on my schedule. I'm picking up a shift for one of my crew this Saturday. He has a family thing." Ren shrugged. "Rick's a good kid and a hard worker. I can take a shift to give him a break."

Deke strode into Ren's line of vision. "Sometimes being the boss is more of a headache than it's worth."

"Funny I've never heard you complain about being in charge." Ren leaned back in his chair while Deke moved to the other side of the table. The other man moved a chair, so his back was to the wall, and Ren chuckled to himself.

"Not complaining. Just stating facts." Deke waved Ruby over.

After Ren and Deke placed their orders, Ren turned to Ace. "Now that Ruby's expecting, what are her plans? She going to keep working?"

Ace shrugged. "She said I'm stuck with her. Someone has to make sure I take care of myself, and she's ornery enough to do it."

Ruby approached the table with their drinks. "Everyone good for now?"

"Yup. I heard congratulations are in order." Ren flashed her a big smile. "I'm surprised Hunter isn't here."

Ruby's face lit up. "He left about ten minutes before you showed up." The door opened and Ruby glanced over her shoulder. "Let me know if any of you need refills."

Ruby greeted the young woman who entered, and he was surprised to recognize the gal from the bookstore earlier. He watched her head for the bar and noticed she had a slight limp, one most folks probably didn't notice, but he'd been around too many veterans with war injuries. Again, he wondered what her story was.

He returned his gaze to the guys at the table and met their speculative looks. "What?"

"See something you like?" Gage asked.

"I saw her at Kate's store this morning, that's all." Ren shot a quick glance to where Samantha sat at the bar. If she was military, he was surprised she hadn't sat at the end of the bar. Then he noticed her scanning the room through the mirror. Nice move, he brought his attention back to the conversation at his table.

"Hey, you rejoined the land of the living." Gage pointed to where Samantha sat at the bar. "Why don't you introduce yourself before one of the locals make a move."

Ren stared at Gage. "We talked earlier. Seemed like a nice gal."

"Only seemed like. Sure, you don't want to go say hello." Gage shrugged.

"I know you've already found yourself a lady, but you don't need to turn matchmaker for the rest of us," Ren said.

"No matchmaking. Just an observation. I've seen her glancing this way twice now. I thought you might want to explore the interest." Gage shifted his chair, so he had a direct line of sight to where Samantha sat.

Hell. There was no way the guys were going to let this rest, regardless of which way he handled the situation. Might as well go reintroduce himself. It wasn't like talking with her would be a hardship, she was cute. Okay he'd admit she was more than cute she was gorgeous with her brown hair and hazel eyes. He'd might even ask her out. "Fine. You win."

He stood and wove his way through the tables. When he saw her glance into the mirror, he held his hand up in greeting. "Hey, Samantha."

She swiveled her stool to face him. "Hey yourself. I was surprised to recognize someone when I came in. I hadn't seen you here before."



“That was my line and since I think I’ve lived here longer than you. I think I own it.” He flashed her a smile. A flush crept up her neck. He didn’t think he’d ever met someone who still blushed.

She shrugged. “I come to town two or three times a week. My aunt fell and broke her leg. I’ve been visiting her today and didn’t feel like cooking.”

“Smart move. Cooking for one is a challenge. Most nights it’s not worth the effort.”

“Since you don’t appear to be undernourished, I have to assume you must eat sometimes.” Pink crept further up her cheeks.

He found her flushed face intriguing. She was not classically beautiful, but her girl-next-door fresh looks and hazel hair were appealing. “Every couple of weekends I make a large batch of one recipe, divide it into single meal size portions, then label and freeze. That way I have a variety to pick from and I can microwave a meal at night. How about you?”

“I haven’t had the need to do much cooking lately. I’m out of practice.” She glanced toward the table where he’d been seated. “Friends of yours?”

Refusing to glance that direction he nodded. “Only if they aren’t embarrassing me right now.”

“Other than an occasional glance, you’re safe.” Her voice had taken on a stilted edge to it.

He spotted Ruby heading toward his table with his meal. “I see Ruby’s got my supper ready. Good to see you again. I hope your aunt gets better soon.” He could almost feel her relief. The way her shoulders relaxed he was glad he’d resisted the urge to invite her to join them.

“Thanks. I hope so too. Nice to see you again. Enjoy your meal.”

He strode back and dug into his food. Maybe if he kept his mouth full the guys wouldn’t grill him.

Deke raised his eyebrows. “Why didn’t you invite your new friend to join us?”

“I got the feeling she was more comfortable where she is. I don’t think she wants company right now.” Ren was afraid he might even understand why. He had been there himself a couple of years ago. Risking a glance, he met her gaze in the mirror. She nodded, then glanced away.

He focused on the men's good-natured banter and tried to block his urge to help her. He remembered how he had reacted right after he got home. The anger, nightmares and lack of focus had made returning to civilian life a challenge.

Until he'd found his place at the lodge and finally come home. Both physically and emotionally. His had been a rocky road with numerous ups and downs. He wished her a smoother transition--one with all the support she needed. He hoped she was smart enough to ask for and accept help.

He hadn't been. At least not at first.

Ren excused himself around eight and headed home. Spending time with the gang was always enjoyable. He appreciated the good-natured ribbing and the down time, but for some reason he didn't hang out with them as much as Deke did. Hell, when had he become such a loner?

Bright lights hit his pickup's rearview mirror blinding him. Where had this guy come from? He hadn't seen any vehicles behind him since he left town. *Bam.* Ren jerked forward from a sudden impact. What the hell? Ren glanced at his speedometer. He was doing the limit.

*Bam.* The vehicle hit him again and the pickup's back end swung toward the edge of the road. Tightening his grip on the steering wheel, he fought to correct for the hit and keep the tires on firm ground. Glancing around to get his bearings, he was on a section of the road with a steep drop off and no guard rail. This wasn't good. If he got too close to the edge, his truck could go over. Shit. Ren floored the gas pedal and pulled away from the other vehicle. The driver gave chase.

Looking around Ren got his bearings. The entrance to the Michael's ranch should be coming up. A quick glance behind showed the other guy gaining. "Come on baby you can outrun this jerk."

*Bam.* The other vehicle hit him again and sent Ren's truck into a spin. Thanking Uncle Sam for teaching him evasive driving maneuvers, Ren corrected his vehicles movement. Another glance showed him the ranch's driveway in the headlights. Ren did a hard right and gunned his engine, steering onto the side road. The other vehicle sped past. Hitting the brake, Ren threw his truck in park and stepped out slamming the door shut to turn off the interior light.

Guessing from the vehicle's profile, it could be a Humvee. Ren waited until he was sure the other vehicle wasn't coming back, then called Hunter. Granted this area wasn't his friend's jurisdiction, but he'd rather talk to someone he knew. Hunter said he'd pass on the info, and since Ren's location was so isolated, he told him to head to the lodge and someone would meet him there to take his statement and assess the damage to his truck. Striding to the back of his vehicle he could make out the busted taillight and dents in his bumper and tailgate. Hell, he'd need to put his flashers on the rest of the way home to make sure people could see him.

Ren got back in and drove to the lodge without further incident. He didn't know what the road rage had been about, but his gut told him to watch his six from now on. Something felt off. These were the kind of gut checks he'd learned to listen to in Afghanistan. They'd saved his life more than once.

[END OF EXCERPT]

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