

ASPEN GOLD SERIES  
**SLEEPIN' ALONE**



**Bernadette Jones**

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## Prologue

*Chicago*

“He said he’d take care of me if I slept with him.”

“Who made that promise to you, Miss Winston?” the deputy district attorney asked.

“Sonny.”

Hunter Lawe stared in shock through the one-way glass at the two people in the interrogation room. He must have heard wrong.

“Sonny?” The young lawyer glanced at the window as though he could see the man watching from the other side. “You’re sure it wasn’t Ricky DeMitre?”

“No, it was Sonny Caniglia.” The young woman feigned surprise. “Sorry, you know him as Detective Hunter Lawe.”

The lawyer’s lips moved. Hunter couldn’t hear him over the pulsing roar in his ears. The seed of unease he’d experienced when MaryAnn had walked into the room doubled, filling his chest and squeezing his heart.

He hadn’t seen or talked to her in two days, not since she’d been taken into protective custody. When she walked into the debriefing room, he’d been surprised by her school-girl outfit. At first glance the juvenile clothes made her look about fifteen, but they did nothing to hide her lush athletic body or the worldly experience in her nineteen-year-old eyes.

When he’d met her, she’d seemed trusting and vulnerable, easy prey for the users and pimps on the city streets. Men like Ricky DeMitre.

Taking a deep breath, Hunter shoved down his emotions and forced himself to concentrate on the conversation in the other room.

“It wasn’t Ricky DeMitre who wanted your sexual favors?” the lawyer questioned again.

“No way. He’s the same age as my dad.” MaryAnn’s voice had turned churlish. “Besides, he’s like a godfather to me.”

“And you lived with him?”

“Who?”

“Miss Winston, do you live with Ricky DeMitri?”

“Yeah. Ricky’s nice like that. He’s got that big old house, and he lets all his friends stay there. Sonny stayed there too. Oops—the detective. He told everybody his name was Sonny Caniglia.”

“Did Ricky DeMitri ever threaten you?”

MaryAnn twisted a lock of dark hair around her finger and inched the hem of her skirt higher. Hunter’s stomach muscles clenched. She was going to lie.

“He got mad when he found out that Sonny—I mean Detective Lawe, and I had been together. You know, *together* together. Anyway, Ricky was gonna stop my allowance. But he changed his mind cuz’ I’m so young and impressionable. He said it wasn’t my fault.”

The door behind Hunter opened and closed. He didn’t take his eyes off the scene unfolding in the other room. There was only one man who would have joined him.

Graham Billings had been his friend before becoming Hunter’s boss. Hunter knew Graham would understand. Still, he needed to explain. “She’s lying, Graham. She always plays with her hair when she’s lying. And when she’s scared and lying, she swings her foot too.”

“I believe you,” Graham answered softly. “I heard the recordings *before* they conveniently disappeared.”

“I lost him, damn it. I lost him,” Hunter swore.

“We all lost him. We knew he was slick going into this. It’s not your fault. Let it go, man.”

It was his fault that DeMitri was going to walk. The case was falling apart quicker than a house of cards. With the recordings gone and MaryAnn changing her story, the case would never make it to trial.

“There’s no sense hanging around,” Graham stated. “Let’s get out of here. I need a beer. So do you.”

A beer wasn't going to fix what was wrong with him. Hunter glanced at his best friend.

Concern filled Graham's eyes.

"I'm alright. Give me some time. I'll catch up with you later."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." Hunter turned back to the one-way mirror. He heard Graham's reluctant sigh, heard him open and shut the door.

The deputy district attorney continued. "Did you tell Detective Lawe that you were afraid of Ricky DeMitre? That he hurt you.? That you needed protection?"

"I said a lot of things that he wanted me to say so he'd quit nagging. Hunter wanted me to see only him. I mean, he never wanted me to have any fun," MaryAnn whined and then paused thoughtfully. "He was controlling and manipulative."

He'd been in love. She'd said she loved him. She'd said she'd wanted to start over, get clean.

What a fuck-up. Blinded by his own needs and fantasies.

When had it all started going up in smoke? Where had he gone wrong?

He'd been undercover for five months when he'd finally earned some one-on-one time with the boss. That night he'd been invited to sit at the crime boss's table aboard his private yacht. His reward for saving DeMitre a chunk of change on a bad business deal. A deal the Chicago Organized Crime Unit had orchestrated. The extravagant meal had ended, and most of the guests were already pretty deep into the booze and cocaine when the party girls joined them. He sat with his boss in two bamboo lounge chairs overseeing the room.

DeMitre always broke in his new girls. Once he grew tired of them, he'd turn them over to his friends and family before putting them on the street. There had been five new girls that night.

Hunter had noticed MaryAnn immediately. Where the others were already thin and brittle looking, she appeared soft and naive. Her long hair was a thick, rich dark brown. The drugs hadn't started eating away at her appearance yet. The little bit of makeup she wore enhanced her beauty instead of trying to hide the ravages of experience. She looked so innocent. How had she gotten here?

He hadn't been able to keep his eyes off her.

Gradually, the guests and the girls started pairing off and disappearing. He'd watched as MaryAnn took the arm of a man old enough to be her grandfather. She'd glanced toward DeMitri with a desperate look in her eyes.

Hunter had looked away, only to have his attention brought back when the crime boss chuckled.

DeMitri met his gaze and smiled. "I knew you'd go for the long-legged brunette. You're like me. You like your women with dark natural hair and passion in their eyes, and curves in the right places."

With a wave of his hand, DeMitri had summoned the girl and old man to his side. He'd quietly arranged another companion for the guest and then motioned MaryAnn to straddle Hunter's lap.

DeMitri puffed on his cigar before wisely imparting advice. "Remember Sonny, every man has his type. He'll look at them all, even taste a few, but only one kind of woman gets to his soul. Knowing a man's preference in women may someday be your ace in the hole. A woman is every man's weakness."

"MaryAnn, show Sonny what you've learned," DeMitri said.

She'd slid sensuously down his body until she'd knelt between his legs. She'd reached for his zipper and he'd covered her hand to stop her. Damn, she looked like a kid.

DeMitri calmly blew out a billow of cigar smoke. "You don't like her? That disappoints me." He frowned at MaryAnn, a malevolent glint in his eye. "Perhaps she needs more training."

MaryAnn had raised stricken eyes to Hunter. He'd realized then that they were both being tested. If he said no, she would have been punished and DeMitri would lose trust in him for not participating in the lifestyle. If he said yes, he'd have his conscience to deal with. He was undercover. He had to play the game. "How old are you, really?"

At DeMitri's nod, she'd said nineteen.

He'd relaxed deeper into the cushion and rested his head against the chair pillow. Closing his eyes, he let her do what she'd been trained to do. All the while telling himself he could save her.

Now, four months later, MaryAnn sat on the other side of the glass. Hunter saw her clearly for the first time. He'd been blinded by her false innocence, beauty and the love she'd faked. MaryAnn had seduced then betrayed him.

DeMitri had played him perfectly, and now nine months of work was down the tubes. Slamming his fist against the wall, Hunter swallowed the rage constricting his throat.

Never again.

# Chapter 1

*Chicago*

*Two years later, middle of September*

Hunter Lawe wiped his face with a lightly callused palm and then rubbed his sleep-deprived eyes.

He stared at the photo on his desk. Another nude body had washed up on North Beach in the early hours of the morning. Just like all the others, the body had deliberately been dropped close to shore so the effects of the water would be minimal. She couldn't have been in the water for more than thirty minutes.

*You killed her*, the voice in his head taunted. This would have ended two years ago if he hadn't screwed up and let DeMitre get away. He swallowed the guilt with a gulp of bitter coffee.

The victim looked to be about fourteen. The needle marks on her arm told their own story. Drug use and prostitution hadn't yet had time to take their inevitable toll. Her parents, when he found them, would still recognize their little girl. Raped, beaten, and thrown into Lake Michigan like garbage.

The neat list of clinical details that described a once living, breathing person were printed on the bottom of the picture: Caucasian, red hair, blue eyes, five-five, one hundred pounds, between the ages of thirteen and twenty.

He ran a forefinger over the picture, tracing the fall of her hair. The muscles in his stomach tightened. His sister, Miranda, was a redhead. When was the last time he'd seen or talked to her? It had been right after the shithead left her. She'd talked about going to Spencer. He wondered if she had.

Driven by the need to hear her voice, he reached for the desk phone. With any luck, she'd answer her cell.

"Excuse me, detective, this just came for you."



Replacing the handset before he finished dialing, Hunter turned his attention to the young police assistant standing beside his desk, extending an ivory envelope.

“Some kind of special courier dropped it off,” John explained. “He said to get it to you right away. I was leaving for the night, so I offered to run it up.”

Taking the envelope, Hunter flipped it over and recognized the logo and scenic imprint of Aspen Gold Lodge, his family’s estate. Correspondence from the lodge was always strictly professional in appearance, yet this envelope was hand-written, the script unfamiliar. Who at the lodge would be writing him?

He tried to remember if his mother, Deirdre, had made a trip to the ‘spa’ recently. The spa was the family’s little euphemism for detox. Every time Deirdre dried out, she’d swing by the family estate and try to make amends for her latest screw-up.

Thoughts of his mother’s disastrous escapades, coming so closely after this latest reminder of his own failure, slammed into him like a two-by-four. Maybe he was genetically predisposed to be a screw-up. “Shit.”

“Something wrong, detective?” the assistant asked.

“No, it’s fine. Thanks for bringing it up, John.”

“No problem. See you.”

“Wait.” Hunter stopped the young man before he turned away. “You said a courier brought it. Which service?”

“Well that was kind of strange. He wasn’t dressed like a courier. High end suit, white-gray hair, and he left in a limo. He didn’t wear a uniform or anything. I don’t really know. He said to tell you it was a special delivery.”

Hunter nodded his thanks and studied his name scrawled on the front. Hunter Jakob Lawe. Slitting the envelope, he removed the letter and skipped to the signature. *Grandfather?* A harsh epitaph escaped his lips. No one called Jakob Spencer by the all-too-gentle title. Jakob had been Jakob, period.

*Hunter,*

*I’ve missed seeing you. I know the last couple of years have been difficult. I wish you’d consider coming home for a while. Maybe for the Halloween Gala. Everything you need is here. There are opportunities that may challenge you. Remember, your privacy is safe at Aspen Gold Lodge.*

*Love,  
Your grandfather,  
Jakob*

Skimming the letter, Hunter tossed it on the desk in disgust. He stood, grabbed his cell phone from his belt and headed to the stairwell. He needed some fresh air and privacy. Taking the steps to the roof two at a time, he tapped the speed dial number for his sister.

After the fourth ring, Miranda answered. "Hello."

"What's the old man up to? He never signs his own letters, or writes them for that matter. Is this some stupid idea of mother's?"

"Hi, it's good to hear from you, too. I'm well. I've been really busy since the last time I heard from you. When was that? Two or three months ago?"

"All right, all right, message received." He smiled. Miranda had a way of getting her point across. Sometimes with a gentle push, sometimes with a verbal club. He realized how much he missed seeing her. "I'm an ass."

"Yes, you are."

He blew out a deep breath, and rubbed his chest. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm not good company. How are you doing?"

"I'm in Spencer. I sold the house."

His twin Heath, half-sister Miranda, and Jakob were the only people in the world who still mattered to him. He missed them. But he couldn't face them yet. "Working for the old man?"

"Right now, I'm working for Aunt Cora and the Historical Society. I—I needed a change."

He *was* an ass. Her husband walked out on her and took the little boy she'd been raising for him. She loved that kid, probably more than his own dad did. Losing the boy had broken her heart. And the dick-wad got off scot free. "Look, I could find him. I could make him sorry. I could—"

"No. Let it go. When am I going to see you?"

"Speaking of that, was this letter your idea?" he asked.

“No, but I’m not surprised that you got one. So did Heath.”

“What’s the old man up to?”

“I think Jakob just wants to see everyone. It’s been a long time for some. Five years for Heath. How long has it been for you?”

“A little longer.” Closer to eight, since he and the old man had seen each other. Three years since they’d talked. He’d checked in on his own terms a couple times. “No lectures. You know I’ve been busy. I’m homicide. I’ve got cases.”

“Maybe that’s exactly why you should come.” Miranda’s voice had turned serious.

“Are you sure you didn’t put him up to this? You’re starting to sound suspiciously like his letter.”

“Why, what did he say?”

“That everything I need is at Aspen Gold.”

“Some peace and quiet wouldn’t hurt you. And neither would a couple days off.”

“Don’t nag, Miranda,” he snapped. “I’ve got it under control.”

“Hunter, you haven’t taken a day off in over two years. You can’t—”

Miranda stopped short. He knew what she’d been about to say. *Blame yourself*. But he could.

He did.

“There was another body last night. Six now. And every one is my fault. I let him get away.” He exhaled, trying to push the tightness from his chest. “Take care of yourself, Sis. And tell the old man I won’t be coming any time soon.”

“Hunter, wait. I—I don’t want to lose you.”

He missed his family. He missed being part of their lives. Talking and laughing with them. Absently, he rubbed his right hand over his heart. Six other families missed their daughters.

“I love you, Sis.” Hunter pushed the button to disconnect.

Retracing his steps, he rounded the corner to the squad room he shared with twenty other officers. An unfamiliar dark-haired woman sat beside his desk. He stopped in his tracks.

Impatiently, she checked her watch. Glancing around the room, she crossed her long legs, then unconsciously tucked a loose tendril of hair behind her ear.

Caught off guard, a long-denied jolt of awareness rolled in Hunter's gut. A stunning brunette. Ruthlessly, he pushed it aside, letting anger take its place. DeMitri had to be behind this.

He watched as she straightened his name plate, then fingered a business card. Next, she angled closer and read the open letter he'd left on his desk.

"Do you always read other people's mail?" he asked, sliding up beside her.

The woman jumped to her feet and faced him. "I—I'm sorry." Her cheeks turned red. "I didn't. I mean. I've been waiting so long."

He didn't respond to her excuse, knowing that his silence may very well lead her to incriminate herself.

"That paper and logo are pretty. I've never heard of the place before." She glanced away, took a deep breath, and met his gaze once more. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Ruby Leigh Dupree."

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I'm here because my friend told me you were investigating Ricky DeMitri. And—"

"Who told you that?"

"Bagby, my friend. He's also my landlord."

"What does he have to do with DeMitri?"

"Well nothing, but—"

"Then DeMitri sent you." Just the name of his enemy had the power to make him see red.

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because, I was at a party with DeMitri and—"

Hunter sucked in a breath and clenched his jaw. He grabbed her upper arm and dragged her down the aisle between the desks past a group of stunned officers.

Reaching the door, he shoved her outside and up against the handrail. She stared at him; her smoky eyes open wide with fear.

“You tell DeMitri he can go to hell. The same cheap trick won’t work twice. I don’t care how good a lay you are. If he wants to get to me, he’d better come at me man to man. I’ll throw away the badge and it will be just him and me. Anytime. Anyplace.”

Jabbing his finger into the air between them, he punctuated his words. “And make damn sure he knows this won’t be over until one of us is dead or in jail.”

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A pulsing pain exploded in Ruby’s head. A groan escaped her lips. She felt as though someone was sitting on her chest. She could barely breathe. What was happening to her?

Her stomach cramped and bile rose in her throat. She was going to be sick. She hated being sick. She’d always hated it.

She had to make it to the bathroom. The pounding in her head wouldn’t stop long enough so that she could get her bearings. Her eyes hurt, and her whole body ached. She didn’t think she could move.

Suddenly the pounding ceased.

She sighed gratefully. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Everything remained black. Scrunching her eye-lids closed, she blinked rapidly several times and opened her eyes again. Still nothing. An acrid smell filled her nose. Disoriented, she fought for control.

She tried to take a deep breath, but the weight on her chest wouldn’t budge. The nausea struck her again, pulling another groan from her lips. She tried to curl into a ball. Something held her in place. The weight wasn’t only on her chest; it covered her whole body. Twisting and turning, she tried to move her hands. They were tied behind her back.

Panicked, she tried to kick free. She couldn’t move whatever was on top of her. She tried to inhale enough air to scream. Her lungs burned and a cough seized her.

Like the ripple effect of dominos tumbling one by one, the pieces of her living nightmare fell into place. She was on a hardwood floor with her hands tied behind her back. Her legs were bare. The weight blanketing her was a mattress. Smoke filled the surrounding air. She was caught in a fire.

She was going to die.

Terror pressed against her temples and the pounding started again.

“Ruby! Ruby Leigh, answer me. Ruby! You have to get out of there.”

Bagby.

“Help! Bagby, help.” Tears spilled from her eyes and ran into her hair. He’d never find her.

“Ruby Leigh! Ruby—”

A fit of coughing interrupted his shouts. Frantically, she kicked her legs, twisting from side to side as far as she could. If she could get a leg free from the mattress maybe he’d see her. Heat billowed along her outer thigh. Oh God, the mattress was on fire.

Suddenly, the suffocating weight lifted, and a strong hand grabbed her under her armpits and dragged her across the floor. She opened her eyes. Flames lunged up the walls and ate a path across the foot and middle of the mattress.

Bagby dumped her in the hall, then disappeared back into the apartment. Returning seconds later with a bundle, he lifted her and tossed her over his broad shoulder in a fireman’s hold. Her head swam, and her world went black.

“Ruby. Ruby Leigh, you got to wake-up. Come back, you hear? We ain’t got time.” A firm slap on her cheek sent a shaft of pain careening in her head.

Cautiously, she opened her eyes to take in her surroundings. Her vision swam, then slowly came into focus. A strange orange glow lit the sky, adding a fuzzy halo to everything around her. Her eyelids fluttered shut. She wanted to sleep.

“Come on girl, wake up.” Another slap struck her cheek.

“Don’t hit me.” she shouted. The force of her words sent a shaft of pain through her temples.

“Shh, quiet, girl. We ain’t in the clear yet.”

Bagby. The voice belonged to Bagby. She tried to lift a hand to her aching head. “Help me, Bagby, my hands won’t move.”

“It’s okay, I’ll take care of em’. Be still for a minute.”

He reached behind her, and within seconds her hands were free. She pulled them forward and rubbed one wrist, gasping as the raw flesh split and tore. Consciousness dimmed to a single pin-point of light.

“Stay with me. Don’t black out again.”

Slowly, she raised her eyelids and took in her surroundings with puzzlement. She was at the children's park around the corner from her apartment. She sat on the grass, leaning against a tree. She was covered with her grandmother's afghan. Her feet and legs were bare.

Bagby hunched in front of her. "You back with me now?"

"Back with you?" Something wasn't right. She was so tired, and she hurt all over.

"Ruby Leigh, look at me." Bagby's voice was sharp, demanding.

Her eyes flew open. Something bright blinded her.

"Keep 'em open." She flinched, but did as she was told. Bagby shifted the beam of light from one eye to the other. "I'm guessing you got a concussion. From the looks of you, I ain't surprised. How many fingers am I holding up?"

Fear stole into her heart. "What do you mean? What's wrong with me? What's going on?"

"Fingers?"

"Two. But—"

He shoved a bottle of water in her hand. "Drink this." She gulped the water greedily.

"You and I are in a shit load of trouble, Ruby Leigh." Gently, he brushed a lock of hair from her cheek. "And neither one of us is gonna make it if we hang around here jawing about it.

"I did what I could. What personal stuff you hadn't already packed in the car is gone. I got your purse, gym bag and that blanket thing you like so much."

"Gone? Bagby, what are you talking about?"

"Look, the bastard locked you in. When I told you, no one could break down that door I meant it. I had to go get the spare key. I barely got you out. Things can be replaced, Ruby Leigh.

"Now pay attention. It ain't safe for us to stay here. I'm sorry. I put your purse and stuff in your car and hid it under the old weeping willow at the back of the park. I know your head hurts. The rest of you too, by the looks of you. But you can't sleep. You got to get out of town. Now. Promise me, you'll go at least a hundred miles before you stop."

"But—"

“There’s no time, girl. Promise me. One hundred miles.”

Bagby was her friend. He never yelled at her. Tonight, his voice was tyrannical, his look harsh. “I—I promise.”

“Gimme your hand.”

Placing her hand in his large callused palm, she let him pull her to her feet. Her head swam, and she braced herself against the tree. After a moment her vision cleared. Bagby led her to her car and settled her behind the wheel. He watched through the open window and waited as she started the car. Leaning forward, he reached in and set the trip button to zero.

“Listen careful. You take this little VW and point it down the highway to the west. Don’t look back. Don’t come back. As far as he knows, we both died in that house fire. The only way we’re gonna keep living is if we stay dead. You got to hide. He leaned in closer. “Don’t use your credit cards or social security number. Ever. And get yourself a new name.”

“I don’—”

“Remember your promise, one-hundred miles.” He ran a dirt stained hand over his bald head and down his worry strained face. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think— Go start over Ruby Leigh. Forget me. Forget DeMitri. Forget you were ever here.” Bagby straightened and tapped the roof of the car.

He was gone.

How did someone as big and broad as Bagby disappear? It didn’t matter. He was gone, and she was alone. Slowly, so as not to jar her aching head, she drove through the park and onto the main street.

*Get on the highway.*

*Go west.*

*Don’t stop.*

*Don’t look back.*

*Hide.*

*One-hundred miles.*

*Hide.*



Ten miles. Twenty-five. Seventy-five. Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred miles ticked past as she continually checked the odometer.

A copse of trees came into view ahead. Slowing, she pulled off the highway and rolled to a stop between two huge trees.

*Hide.*

Wrapping her grandmother's afghan around her, she curled up on the seat. One-hundred miles: Now she could sleep.

*Forget you were ever here.*

\*\*\*

Ruby woke slowly. The hand where her cheek had rested was numb, her back ached and her legs felt permanently bent at the knee.

Well, that's what she got for sleeping in a Volkswagen Bug. Gradually, she untwisted her body and stretched. She must have been more exhausted than she thought; she didn't remember pulling off the highway.

Glancing out the window, she studied the trees surrounding her on three sides. The highway was a good two hundred yards away, and the sun was setting, not rising. A twinge of unease rippled over her. How long had she been asleep?

Why had she pulled off the road? Surely, she could have made it to the next rest area.

*Don't stop.*

Why had she driven so far into the trees?

*Don't look back.*

Ruby glanced into the rearview mirror, and her heart stopped.

[END OF EXCERPT]

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