



ASPEN GOLD SERIES

Ryder's
Heart

*lizzie starr

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Chapter 1

“No. No...no,” Vianna Harrison moaned. Her oft-repaired car chugged to a stop at the crest of a Colorado mountain. Slow curls of steam oozed from under the hood. Inching the vehicle toward the side of the narrow road, she discovered a dirt pull off just long enough for her car and small trailer.

With a silent prayer, she turned off the engine but left the electrical system working and flicked her gaze between the billowing steam surrounding the small car and the temperature gauge, willing the indicator to inch from the red.

Vianna rested her forehead against the steering wheel and clenched her fingers around the worn leather. “It would have been all downhill from here, baby car. I know I’ve put you through a lot getting this far. Just give me a little more. Please, little car.”

Despite her pleas, the dashboard lights blinked once and faded, sounding a death knell for the aged vehicle. She couldn’t afford any expensive repairs. Expensive? She had no money for any repairs.

Forcing dismay to the back of her mind, she patted the steering wheel. “I know you gave it your best, baby. I’ll work this out somehow.” *I always do.*

Her frustrated huff stirred her bangs. Yeah, she always found a way but someday, please, someday, something needed to work out in her favor.

Vianna glanced in the rear view mirror and gave herself a sarcastic grin. Sitting here wasn’t going to get her anywhere. Literally. There hadn’t been much traffic on this old highway, but according to her last mileage check, she wasn’t far from her destination. She nodded once, then slid from the car. She could hike into town.

A glance back at the trailer changed her mind. Walking was a last resort. She couldn’t leave her book press and supplies unprotected on a mountaintop. If only the lock hadn’t broken last week.

If only... Too much of her life the past few months had hinged on if only. If only she could escape her parents’ influence and make a life of her own. If only her hand-

made books were as good as she thought they were. If only... the spirit world would leave her alone.

Vianna gave herself a shake and stepped to the edge of the pavement. The aspen lined road dropped in steep switchbacks to the valley and a small town highlighted in the bright sunlight. Her destination. Spencer, Colorado and the elderly artist who'd offered her hope, encouragement, and an open invitation.

Granted, the invitation had been simply a 'you should come to Spencer', but the honest sentiment behind the words and concern in the woman's expression was enough to pull Vianna off the art show circuit with a dream of settling somewhere safe. Somewhere no one had heard of how her parents bilked a comfortable living from believers of psychic phenomenon. Somewhere no one knew of her unwilling part in their schemes. Or that she really did receive communications from the dead.

A shiver traveled the length of her spine then settled with cool, light tingles at the back of her neck. She rubbed the spot, but nothing erased the presence of her spirit guides and guardian angels until she acknowledged them.

Vianna closed her eyes and spoke to the breeze. "Yes, I know you're here."

The feeling disappeared and she blinked. Spirits didn't usually leave her so quickly. Or without delivering a message. The cool breeze brushed soft fingers of acceptance along her arm, and caressed her cheek. She didn't always 'hear' words when a spirit communicated with her. At those times she simply knew. The spirits at the top of this mountain shared a welcome and an elusive feeling of safety and protection.

She'd made the right decision to come to Colorado. Now all she had to do was find a way down the mountain to Spencer.

The reverberation of a well-tuned engine rose behind her. She glanced at her poor little red car and turned toward the advancing pickup, lifting her hand to wave down the driver.

With no room in the turn out, the truck stopped while still mostly on the pavement. The driver reached out his window, placed a flashing light on top of the cab then jumped to the ground holding a small fire extinguisher. A middle-aged woman slipped from the passenger side and stood with her hands fisted against her hips, surveying the scene. The

couple stood a moment in silence watching the final trickles of steam float away on the breeze.

The man set the extinguisher down and took a step closer. "I'd ask if you're having trouble, but your smoke signal says it all."

Vianna laughed at the sardonic drawl and the man's arched eyebrow. "I made it to the top of the mountain at least."

"This highway has defeated many a vehicle over the years."

Vianna waved her hand toward her vehicle. "I had trouble crossing Nebraska, so I suppose I'm lucky I got this far."

The man doffed a baseball cap, slapped it against his thigh and replaced it over his neatly trimmed, grey hair before holding out his hand. "Chet Dalton. I'm the fire chief down in Spencer. And this is Zoe Barlow, owner of the Blue Spruce Bed and Breakfast."

His handshake was simple and direct. And she liked the friendly, open smiles both wore. "Vianna Harrison. I'm hoping to stay in Spencer indefinitely. Once I get there."

"Let's unhook the trailer and I'll tow your car into town."

"Uh, would it be possible to tow the trailer instead? Everything that's important to me is in there. And, the lock's broken."

Chet stared into the distance for a few seconds. "I'll give Rollie at the garage a call and get him out here with his tow truck. Probably won't be until early this evening though. Don't like to speak for him, but he can probably give you an estimate on repairs sometime tomorrow."

"That's fine. I'm really not sure she's worth repairing again." The little car had served her well as she followed the art show circuit, but this trip through the mountains may have been too much.

"Let's let Rollie check 'er out." Chet unhooked the trailer. Then while Zoe chattered directions, he manhandled the awkward load away from the car. Only a few minutes later, her belongings were secure, and she climbed into the truck next to Zoe.

Chet took the switchbacks with the ease of long familiarity. Vianna made a conscious effort to not gasp and clutch the arm rest when she felt as though she was hanging in space. Zoe patted her knee, but the offer of comfort did little when she felt she would fall over the mountainside.

Once they entered the town, Chet retrieved the flashing light and cast her an expectant grin. "I've been driving these roads for over thirty years. You'll get used to 'em. Now, where are you staying?"

"I don't know. I don't have... And now..." Vianna leaned her head against the truck's side window. Her half-thought out plan had included sleeping in her car. With that option dead on the side of the road she needed to think of a few other options. "I'm tired of motels, but need someplace really cheap."

"Traveling awhile, huh?" Zoe asked.

"Since spring. I'm ready to settle in one place for a while."

"How'd you pick Spencer?"

"I'm an artist and I met someone from here at a show. She invited me."

Zoe nodded. "Willa's like that."

"You know Ms. Samuels?"

Brushing her shoulder length hair back from her face, Zoe nodded again. "Willa is one of our most prominent citizens. And I've known her all my life. Now, as I see it, you need a place to stay, but you're nearly out of money. And with a broken down vehicle to boot. So, you need a way to earn your keep, while still allowing you time to work on your art. What's your talent?"

Vianna squared her shoulders and fought to keep a defensive note from entering her voice. "I create hand bound books and journals. I make all the paper myself." Vianna waited for a disparaging comment or a disbelieving look. The couple were close to her parents' ages, so she expected similar, condescending reactions.

Chet merely nodded.

Zoe rested her palm against Vianna's arm. "Those should sell well down at the book store. Now, if you don't mind a little hard work, I know just the place to take you."

"I expect to earn my keep."

"Good. The Blue Spruce Bed and Breakfast--"

"I can't afford to stay at a B and B."

Zoe took a deep breath and arched one eyebrow silencing her denial. "As I was saying. I could use some early morning help at *my* place. I've got a couple of ladies who

come in to tidy the rooms and such, but I really need help preparing and serving breakfast. And occasionally for an evening event as well.”

A flash of hope warmed Vianna. “I’m not much of a cook, but I bake a great pan of cinnamon rolls.”

Chet patted his firm midsection. “If that’s true, I’ll be spending more time at the gym. Now, here we are.”

Straining against her restraint, Vianna peered past a small, manicured lawn and wide flower beds filled with a profusion of colorful mums to a massive stone Victorian. A covered porch flanking wide, flagstone stairs, wrapped two sides of the building in an architectural hug.

Chuckling, Chet stopped the truck. “Spectacular, isn’t it?”

Vianna gnawed on her lower lip. She’d never fit in at such an elegant home.

Before she could voice her concerns, Zoe grinned at her. “I prefer offering my guests fresh baked pastries, but baking isn’t my talent.”

Chet gave a soft snort. Zoe turned a glare and a grin on him before continuing. “I’ve been getting rolls from the bakery in town, but I’m not convinced they always send me the best--or the freshest.”

Zoe touched Chet’s shoulder and he angled toward her. Silence stretched between them before Zoe spoke softly. “There isn’t a large enough workspace for Vianna here. But Ryder’s stables might be perfect.”

Zoe waited until Vianna lifted her gaze and offered a gentle smile. “My son’s place is about a mile further along this drive. Like his cabin, the stables aren’t quite completed, but there’s water. I’m sure you can find plenty of space to spread out and work.”

“But, what about--”

Zoe waved a hand in dismissal. “Ryder’s in California and hasn’t been home in five years. I’ll let him know next time we talk, but...” She grinned started digging through her large leather purse. With a triumphant exclamation, she held up a small key ring. “But his cabin and stables are still part of my property. I know. Why don’t you stay in the cabin? That will free up a room for paying guests.”

Obviously, once Zoe hit on an idea, she ran with it. Zoe talked over Vianna’s objections, swinging her attention between Chet and Vianna. “This is a great solution.

I've been concerned about the cabin being empty all this time, so you'll be doing me yet another favor. And listen. I've got an old golf cart stashed in a shed. Since your car is out of commission, you can use the cart to get back and forth. I don't want you walking in the early morning dark. If you bake delicious pastries for my guests—"

Chet laughed. "Zoe, slow down. You don't need to settle everything in five minutes. I've got to check in at the station soon, so let's take Vianna's trailer to the stables." He eased the truck to the rear of the massive house and on to a narrow gravel road.

Overwhelmed, Vianna sank back against the truck seat. Accustomed to secrecy and caution, the exuberant welcome from people she'd just met left her strangely numb. Their trust came far too easily for her to believe. Reminiscent of the blind faith the sorrowing had placed in her parents, Vianna feared they'd ask—demand—something of her she was no longer willing to give. Not knowing how to handle this situation, she wrapped her arms around her belly.

Zoe noticed her silent withdrawal. "Forgive me, Vianna. I do tend to get carried away. But, once you settle in, you'll see what a great solution this will be. For both of us."

Even though her guides' cool acceptance returned to caress the back of her neck, Vianna needed human confirmation. Zoe had just offered her someone else's home. "You're sure your son won't mind?"

Giving another wave of dismissal, Zoe shook her head, but sadness tinted her dark eyes. "He won't care. Ryder's on a different path now."

* * *

During her first week in Spencer, Vianna settled into a comfortable routine. While two pans of cinnamon rolls baked, she stood at a wide expanse of windows, looking out into the diffused gray light of the pre-dawn. A single lamp in the large great room reflected on the dark glass. This spectacular house was far from her idea of a cabin.

The timer dinged. She crossed to the kitchen and set her mug on the large island. The rolls needed another minute to reach the perfect golden brown, so she leaned her hip against the counter to wait.

When Zoe had unlocked the cabin, Vianna had hovered a long moment in the doorway, unable to accept how someone she'd just met would allow her, encourage her in fact, to live in such a grand home. It didn't matter that much if the interior was incomplete. Except for the downstairs great room and the master suite upstairs, the rest of the rooms were only roughed in walls, some adorned with un-taped drywall. Piles of trim and flooring centered each unfinished area.

Dust dulled the sheen of the stainless steel appliances and dark wood cabinets. The same abandoned feeling surrounded an overstuffed leather sectional centered before a huge television. The wide island separating the kitchen and living room had immediately drawn her attention. Even under a blanket of dust, the countertop sparkled. When she used a crumpled rag to swipe the dust, she exposed a myriad of colors that caught and danced in the light.

Zoe had chuckled at her exclamation of delight then explained the counter had been constructed from recycled glass her son had spent a year picking up along the roads and mountain trails. Over the past week, Vianna had studied the colorful surface, picking out glass from an assortment of bottles, unusual bits of glass and what might have been a stoplight.

Vianna worried her lip between her teeth. The welcome, free of conditions or demands, had been so genuine, so comfortable, she had nearly admitted to a mind filled with the chatter of the spirit world.

Somehow she'd managed to block or ignore the spiritual contact most of the summer, and she'd been relieved when it seemed spirit had deserted her. Part of her hoped she'd left her curse and her past behind in Virginia Beach. Now, she wasn't sure what to think of the many times her guides warmed her with acceptance and well-being since her arrival in Spencer.

The lush aroma of cinnamon caught her attention. She pulled the rolls from the oven just before the pastry over-baked and set the pans on the long island to cool.

She'd missed the odd, soft mental caresses and cool physical touch. She tightened her vow to keep her psychic abilities hidden, but accepted this town with these amazing people was where she was supposed to be.

Later that morning Vianna rinsed the baking pan she'd washed three times then turned to find Zoe, hip propped against a counter, watching her.

"You can't avoid Willa forever, you know."

"I know."

"You've settled in at the cabin and you've got this baking routine down. You've set up the meeting, so stop wasting time. Take my car into town. I'll send a list with you."

Zoe grinned. "That way you have to go."

"I just—"

"Go see what Willa has to say. Don't worry about impressing her. The fact you're here at her invitation shows you already have. Now get going. Oh, and while you're at the bookstore ask Kate for a couple pounds of her special dark roast blend. Get some of that tea you like, too, the supply's getting low."

Zoe mumbled while digging through one of the many junk drawers in the expansive, modern kitchen. Vianna held back a chuckle. She could help her new friend get a little more organized.

With an exclamation of success, Zoe held up a narrow strip of paper then pressed the list and a set of car keys into Vianna's hand. Zoe arched one eyebrow.

"Thank you, Zoe."

"For what?"

"Making me feel at home. For being who you are and cheering me up and being so encouraging. Oh, just for a lot of things." That sense of right wrapped like a comforting hug around Vianna's shoulders. Even though she'd never felt like she belonged, even in her own family, it didn't mean she couldn't experience acceptance now. No one in Spencer expected anything from her she wasn't willing to give.

Yet.

Less than ten minutes later, she parked down the block from The Rocky Mountain Bookstore. Using the short walk to calm a fresh rush of nerves, she glanced into the wide, smudged windows of the local bakery. The uninspired display of sweets made her grimace. No wonder Zoe appreciated her fresh cinnamon rolls. She paused and made a quick decision. Tomorrow, she'd surprise the guests, and Zoe, with the addition of flakey, fruit-filled danish.

Mentally adding to the list in her pocket, Vianna stepped into the bookstore. The wooden floor squeaked a pleasant, well-worn welcome. The shelves filled with books and gift items called to her. She loved her tablet for reading, but sometimes nothing but the pleasure of turning actual pages sufficed. She could spend a lot of free time here.

The woman near an antique cash register waved one hand as she hung up the phone. When she stepped from behind the tall counter, a warm tide of familiarity washed over Vianna. It hardly seemed possible, but before her stood a friend she had yet to meet.

“Hi, I’m Kate. Welcome to The Rocky Mountain Bookstore. You’re Vianna?”

“I am.”

“Willa’s waiting for you in the coffee shop. Follow me. I’ll treat you to one of my special teas or coffees.”

“I could use a cup of tea.” Simply having a cup to hold might calm her nerves.

As though she knew Vianna’s thoughts, Kate’s smile widened and she lead the way through the well-organized store to a small area filled with clustered armchairs and small tables.

“So,” Willa drawled after Kate left to assist a customer. Seated in one of the comfortably shabby wingback chairs, she rested her tea on the wide arm. “You’ve made it to Spencer.”

Vianna perched on the edge of her chair and nodded. “Barely.”

Willa’s soft chuckle eased another portion of Vianna’s nerves. “I heard about your car troubles. You’ve settled in at the cabin?”

“I can’t believe everyone calls that amazing place a cabin. Even unfinished like it is. But, yes, I’m settled. There’s enough room in the stables to spread out my projects.” She tore a corner off the napkin she’d crumpled in her fist and fingered the smooth, pleasing texture. Maybe Kate would let her take a few to add to a slurry and experiment with—

“I knew it. You truly are an artist.”

Startled, Vianna lifted her gaze to the older woman’s knowing expression and satisfied grin.

“I saw that special something in you in Kansas City. Didn’t hesitate to extend my invitation.”

The encouragement to visit Spencer had surprised Vianna, and she couldn't imagine why Willa had singled her out in a huge show filled with talented artists. "Spencer is amazing and filled with inspiration every time I look around. So far, everyone's been friendly and helpful." *Even the spirits.*

"What are your dreams, Vianna? What hopes do you have for you and your art?" Expectation lighting her expression, Willa leaned forward and rested her palms against her paint splattered skirt.

Vianna drew her brows together. Dreams? Other than escaping the life her parents planned and plotted using her abilities, she hadn't consciously allowed herself any hopes or dreams. Willa waited for an answer, so she paused to listen to her heart, then said, "I suppose what any creative person wants—to survive on the merits of their talent and work. Other than my current lack of transportation, I suppose I've done that."

"Nothing more?"

Caught in the intensity of Willa's clear violet gaze, Vianna discovered a kindred soul. This woman would understand. Did understand. Vianna took a deep breath. "As much as I love the whole creative process, there's a need within me that goes beyond a finished project. Sometimes it's an all-consuming desire to share the joy of creativity. To help others discover the exhilaration within themselves. To discover... their soul, their heart." She dipped her head. "Sounds kind of fanciful and silly, doesn't it?"

"Not at all. I feel the same." Willa rested her hand over her heart and grinned. "Here. That's how I recognized the desire in you, and why I asked you to come to Spencer."

"I don't understand."

Willa's lips firmed to a thin line. "I think you do, young woman. But we'll leave that for now, shall we? Much like you, I have a dream I've not yet accomplished. For many years I've ached to provide a place for creatives such as yourself. A safe place for them to discover the art in their hearts and souls. To that end, I've been on the lookout for others who share my vision, and my dream."

The breath caught low in Vianna's throat. Surely Willa didn't mean—

"And you, my dear, are just the young woman to help me."

* * *

Head swimming with possibilities, Vianna arranged to return to speak with Kate about selling handmade papers and journals before leaving the cozy shop. She stopped outside the door and looked around. The town didn't appear any different than when she'd entered the store an hour ago. Somehow, she was different, and she saw the tourist-oriented town in a new light. She'd promised to let Willa know her decision the next morning, now she waited for a sign from her guides. But spirit was quiet, as though waiting for *her* decision.

She had Zoe's coffee in a cloth tote over one arm. It wouldn't take long to pick up her needed baking ingredients, so she put her decision on a mental back burner. Deciding to avoid the big grocery store on the edge of town, she crossed the town square to complete her grocery shopping.

Refusing to feel guilty at leaving only one pound of butter in the small store, despite the owner's assurances a truck was due the next morning, Vianna hurried back to the cabin to start her baking. Danish took a fair amount of time and energetic dough rolling, giving her the opportunity to work through the pros and perceived cons of Willa's offer.

Her conflicted thoughts continued, playing an interesting rhythmic counterpart to her actions, and her clean-up expanded past the kitchen into the already spotless living area. By the time she'd swept the deck and watched the moon rise, she knew her answer.

She'd remain here to work with Willa. Spencer was now her home.

[END OF EXCERPT]

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I can't wait for you to read the rest of it!

***lizzie.**