

ASPEN GOLD SERIES

For Keeps

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& \*lizzie starr

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Eyes gritty from lack of sleep, Jackson Samuels gazed out the small, open window. His tired mind barely registered the watercolor pinks and purples chased by ribbons of yellow welling over the mountains to streak the morning sky. He raked his fingers through his hair. It had been one hell of a night.

He turned to face Annie. A soft twinkle flashed in her big brown eyes. With a gentle hand, he brushed the hair from her forehead, traced the backs of his fingers over her silky cheek and down her graceful neck. She tossed her head then nodded.

He smoothed his hand along her side, tracing the swell of her belly. A rush of anticipation brought a smile to his lips.

Annie whinnied and snapped her tail toward Jack as if he were a pesky fly. The coarse hairs nicked his face like hundreds of tiny whips. Rubbing the sting from his cheek, he hunched his back against the repeated onslaught.

Most of the night the palomino mare had tried to lay down to relieve her pain. Now recovered, she was content to torment him. As usual. He had no idea why the horse hated him.

“Well, old girl. I’d say we’re done with this.” He removed the IV from the ornery mare’s neck and turned to the animal’s owner.

“That electrolyte drip did the trick, Matt. I’ll leave you an antibiotic. You know the drill.”

Matt Chandler leaned against the stable wall, his boots crossed. “She’s never had colic before. Ever. Why this summer?”

Jack moved cautiously to the biting end to check the condition of her gums. “I think it’s time this old girl retires from the trail ride business. It’s just too much for her now. She’s done her—” Annie snapped, narrowly missing his fingers. Jack jerked a step back and she gave him an innocent blink.

pasture. My boys can take care of her. She's taken a liking to Stevie."

Annie pinned her ears back and snorted. Before Jack moved, she stepped down hard on his foot. White-hot needles of pain shot up his leg. "Yeow!"

Matt yawned. "What?"

"Damn it. She's standing on my foot." Jack leaned into the mare until she shifted to lift her foot.

Moving to stand between the doctor and the animal, Matt stroked the white blaze over Annie's nose. "I don't get it, Jack. Annie loves everybody except you. I've never seen a horse take such a delight in tormenting someone."

"Very funny." Grabbing his jacket and bag, Jack hobbled from the stable and sat on a low pile of hay bales. He didn't dare remove his boot, so he rubbed the top of his boot. The action offered little comfort to his aching instep.

Matt walked Annie to the corral, unhooked her lead and closed the gate behind him. "Jack, have you talked to Kate recently?"

Jack's heart sank and he stared at the ground. Ever since he returned to Spencer, Colorado after completing his veterinarian training, he'd tried to talk to Kate. Really talk to her about what had happened nine years ago. For almost a year he hadn't been able to hold even a friendly conversation with her. She always shut him down.

Sure, they hadn't parted on good terms, but after all this time you'd think—"Nope."

Matt shrugged, though he eyed Jack curiously. "Thought you might want to ask her if she really has decided to sell the ranch."

The day before, the *Spencer Herald* had created a firestorm, speculating on the front page of the late edition that the Michaels' spread would soon be up for sale. "You can only believe half of what Hartwood prints in that rag."

Jack limped to his Jeep, opened the driver's door and slid behind the wheel. "Besides, you know what kind of a jerk Cale is. How he runs the paper since his old man retired. If that bastard doesn't have a story, he'll create one."

Matt glanced toward the ridge of the Rocky Mountains surrounding the valley and grunted. "That's no lie."

been responsible for his wife, Nicole's suicide. The pain still haunted Matt's eyes. Before Jack thought of something to say, Matt slapped the roof of his vehicle and strode back to the stables.

Jack put the Jeep in gear and was soon on Forest Lake Drive headed for town. Growing up, he couldn't wait to leave Colorado. Now after spending the better part of seven years back east in school, he'd been eager to return. Everyone and everything he loved resided in Spencer. It had always been his dream to open a state-of-the-art equine research and treatment center and the Michaels' ranch played the biggest part in that. He'd never considered building anywhere else. He had no plan "B".

He, his best friend Ryder, and Kate had been inseparable as kids. Now Kate barely acknowledged his existence and Ryder had disappeared to California. He was on his own. He had to figure this out himself.

And he would, as long as Hartwood's pseudo-reporting was really only lies and attention-grabbing speculation.

*Kate.* His breath caught in his throat. No matter what trouble they'd gotten into as kids, Katie had always been there for him. Would she really sell the ranch? The land was her legacy. And her daughter's.

Jack glanced at his watch. So much for sleep. An hour would give him time enough to shower before starting his day at the animal clinic. He loved all animals, but horses were his passion. He had a sixth sense of what they needed, and they trusted him. His foot throbbed. All except Annie.

After parking behind the All Creatures Animal Clinic he gingerly hobbled in through the back door. Damn that horse. Why had that palomino taken such a disliking to him?

"Good morning, Dr. Samuels," Emily Curtiss, his office manager greeted him.

"If you say so." Jack yawned. "I spent most of the night with Annie."

"Then I don't need to ask why you're limping."

Muffled laughter from his vet tech filled the silence. Jack ignored him. "Em, when did you guys start coming in so early?"

the files. Remember? I told you we're establishing a color-code system as well as alphabetizing."

"Will the colors match your hair?" Jack waggled his eyebrows. Emily's hair color changed with her moods.

"Cute." She propped her hands on her ample hips. "You are the doctor. Your job is to tend to the animals, not to mess up my files."

Emily's ever-present grin stretched wider. She moved to the hallway leading to the treatment rooms and drew an imaginary line on the floor with the toe of her canvas shoe. "Now, pay attention. Dr. Jack's." She pointed down the hall then turned and gestured with a wide sweep of one arm to indicate the office and waiting area. "Emily's."

Feigning annoyance, Jack harrumphed. He'd be lost without her and they both knew it.

"Dr. Samuels, you have a full schedule starting promptly at eight. Aunt Cora and Agnes are your first appointment."

He leaned against the counter. Aunt Cora, the town busybody, and her demonic cat. "Why am I seeing Agnes?"

Emily dragged her finger line by line down the edge of the computer screen. "Aunt Cora said Agnes threw up a hairball the size of a boulder and has been cranky ever since. She wants you to take a look at her."

"Terrific. What a way to start the day," Jack said around a yawn.

Emily cleared her throat and continued, "Cleo will be here at eight-thirty."

"Cleo?" Jack shuddered and slumped against the wall. "I told Rollie I don't know much about reptiles. Besides, I hate snakes."

"Critters are critters, Indiana." Emily winked. "I reminded Mr. Weston that Dr. Fitzgerald in Denver was the closest expert on exotic animals, but Mr. Weston insisted you look at Cleo first. Seems he thought Cleo ate a rat two days ago, but now he thinks it might have been a rock."

Jack's nerves screamed for caffeine. "Sounds like another fun-filled day. I'm going up to shower before I run down the street for coffee. See you in a bit."

another one in the clinic's waiting area. There was no reason to go to the bookstore for fancy coffee. No reason.

Except Kate.

\* \* \*

Kate Michaels raised the old, dark green roller shades of The Rocky Mountain Book Shop. Glorious Colorado sunshine exploded into the room like golden confetti. Housed in one of Spencer's original buildings, the old brick and mortar structure had endured many different incarnations, the last being a general store and gift shop during the late twenties. The building had sat empty for several years before she used most of her savings to buy and restore the shop and design an expansive apartment upstairs.

Paying homage to the past, she'd spent days stripping paint from the original tin ceiling and refinishing the pinewood planked-floors and storefront. Now the building was her completed vision of a bookstore with a cozy tea and coffee area.

She unlocked the doors and flipped the sign in the window to 'Open'. But no one stood in the usual line waiting for their morning coffee. Kate glanced up and down the street before moving back into the shop. The aroma of blackberry sage, the tea of the day, danced around the room in an aromatic swirl with the hearty tang of Sumatra coffee. Her customers didn't know what they were missing.

"Mom?" Her eight-year-old daughter, Madison, bounced down the inside stairway from their comfortable apartment.

"I'm in here, honey."

Madison, with her ever-present stuffed tiger, bounded into the room, her energetic movements swinging her long auburn hair back from her cherubic face. She smiled and the entire room brightened. "Me and Caesar are ready for school."

"Caesar and I," Kate corrected gently.

The young girl pirouetted with her arms spread like wings. "I picked these clothes. Cool, huh?"

She wore a pair of faded, paint-stained blue jeans, and a bright pink T-shirt covered with cute cat faces.

kitties, but you go up and change into some decent jeans.”

“Aww, Mom,” Madison protested, but she turned and stomped up the stairs. She reappeared several minutes later in better jeans as well as her favorite sparkled, high-top pink tennis shoes. Madison rocked back on her heels. “Okay?”

“You’re going to be the prettiest girl in school. But, you know Caesar can’t go with you.”

“I know.” Madison nodded. “Caesar don’t feel good. I think he needs a flu shot.” She cradled the tawny, well-loved stuffed tiger. “I’ll take him to Dr. Sam when I come home.” She handed Caesar to her mother.

“I’ll make sure he stays warm. Better go get your coat. Lucy and her mom will be here soon.”

Madison skipped into the back storage room.

Kate glanced at the barely recognizable tiger. “I think you’re beyond the good doctor’s ability.”

Spencer’s veterinarian. Her thoughts faltered over Jackson Samuels’ smile, his dark hair, and ever-changing hazel eyes. Her life had been fine until he came strolling back into town to take over the animal clinic. While she could never forget him, she believed she had placed him securely in the past. Where he belonged. But her daughter’s love of animals had naturally drawn her to Dr. Sam. Thankfully, he tolerated her daughter’s frequent visits and constant questions.

She shouldn’t have allowed them to become so close.

A loud honk from the street drew Kate’s attention.

“Lucy’s here,” Madison squealed. She ran to the shop door, stopped, and ran back to her mother. “I love you, Mom. See you after school. Bye.”

Kate kissed her reason-for-living on the forehead. “Have a good day, sweetheart.”

Waving, Madison raced through the doorway and directly into Jackson’s grandmother, Willa Samuels, nearly knocking down the slender elderly woman. Willa stooped, said a few words to Madison and tucked the little girl’s hair behind her ear. After kissing her on the cheek, Willa helped Madison into the mini-van. Shading her eyes with a folded newspaper, Willa waved as the van pulled from the curb.



“Morning, Willa.” Kate loved spending time with the elegant, older woman. An artistic, free spirit, Willa’s only concession to age was her short, gray hair. Her tendency to speak her mind was tempered by a quick smile and loving nature.

Willa draped her fringed wrap over one of the overstuffed chairs near the coffee bar. “Where does that daughter of yours get so much energy this early in the morning?”

“Beats the heck out of me.” Kate joined her at the bar. “Tea or coffee this morning?”

“Tea, most definitely.” Willa wrinkled her nose. “That coffee smells like turpentine brewing.” Willa took her customary seat on a wingback chair in the reading area.

“Very funny,” Kate answered.

Willa glanced around the empty store. “Business slow this morning?”

“Yeah, I don’t get it.”

Willa held out a newspaper. “Did you read last night’s *Herald*?”

“No, I haven’t read that rag since the hatchet job Hartwood did on Matt.”

Willa handed her the folded newspaper. “Dear, you need to read this.”

Kate glanced at the Willa and then at the paper. The bold headline jumped from the page to grab Kate by the throat. *‘Michaels Ranch For Sale?’*

Kate slumped onto the chair beside Willa’s. Tears burned her eyes. Her heart plummeted to the pit of her stomach. “That explains why there are no customers. Folks believe I’m a traitor to my dad and to Spencer. Or else they haven’t gotten the courage to face me yet. Why would that bastard print this? Where did he get that idea?”

Willa patted Kate’s forearm. “Kathryn, is this true? Are you thinking about selling?”

True? No, not yet. As much as she loved her bookstore, if she’d known how debilitating and expensive her father’s fall into dementia would become, she would have waited. Perhaps found some other way to provide for his care. But when he’d wandered from the ranch barefooted in January, then become violent when the sheriff finally found him, she’d known. He needed more care than she, or anyone in Spencer, could provide.

crumbling around her. “The costs of Dad’s care have just about taken everything. Soon I may have no choice.”

The bell at the front door sounded with a soft jingle.

“Hate to break up this female confab, but I was under the impression that you sell coffee here.” A hunched, steel-wool haired old curmudgeon stood at the counter.

Willa stood. “It’s Percival. Want me to get his coffee?”

Shaking her head, Kate swiped at her eyes and crossed the room toward the old man. Percival O’Keefe had his weekly stack of free publications stashed under his arm. Several realtor listings, a new Spencer vacation guide, and the very latest cosmetics and jewelry catalog.

“Good morning, Mr. O’Keefe. The usual?”

He glanced over his half-moon glasses. “You okay, Katie?”

“I’m fine, Sir. You having the usual?”

“Nope, I’m gonna try some of that dark Sumac you’re always goin’ on about.”

Kate stared at his age-lined face for a moment. “Oh, you mean Sumatra.”

“Sumac, Sumatra. Your sign here says fuller body, robust, bold flavor—whatever the hell that means.”

“Coming right up.”

“Kate, now don’t forget, I want cream and five. . . no, six sugars.”

His querulous tone followed her to the antique French Samovar. He certainly wasn’t going to taste the coffee this time either. “Okay, you got it.”

Kate returned to the register, half afraid the coffee gods were going to strike her down for blasphemy. Why not? They could stand in line.

Mr. O’Keefe dug deep into his pockets and spilled a handful of change on the counter. “How’s your dad, honey?”

The weight of the world wrapped tighter around her shoulders. She dropped the change in the till and shut the drawer. “On the good days he wants to come home, and on the bad days he doesn’t know me.” Kate glanced out the window. “Seems now to be mostly bad days.”

his eyes. “I know, child. At the end, my Millie didn’t know me most of the time.”

Kate nodded. What would she do when she no longer had the money for the private home? The thought of allowing the state to take over her father’s care broke her heart. He’d worked too hard for that to happen. No matter what, she couldn’t allow anyone to move him into one of the overcrowded, state-run facilities in Denver. Of course, selling the ranch would take care of that, but for how long? How long would her father live in that dismal world of confusion?

Technically, to protect the land from being taken to pay for his care, her father had only ‘sold’ her the ranch when he received his diagnosis. She’d become the steward of their family’s legacy. Selling would betray her father’s trust in her. But, she had her store. She didn’t want the ranch, or the memories echoing there. She could grow a legacy for Madison here.

“Kathryn?”

She glanced at Willa and as Mr. O’Keefe strode purposely out the door, returned to sit with the older woman. “I’m sorry.”

Willa took her hand. “How serious is it?”

Kate drew a deep breath. This was a moment of truth. She trusted Willa wouldn’t spread rumors. “I have a realtor—a ranch specialist—coming out next week to give me an idea... just in case.”

“Well, that’s probably how Hartwood got wind of the possibility. I swear that man has informers everywhere. I hope he pays them well, but I doubt it. And as usual, he’s running with the information in the direction he thinks will sell the most papers. So, we’ve got a week to figure this out.”

Kate kissed Willa’s cheek. “Thank you, but this is my problem. I’m not going to burden you with this.”

Determination and something Kate didn’t recognize flashed in the depths of Willa’s dark sapphire eyes. “We’ll see.”

Willa glanced at the clock. “Oh, my Lord. I’ve got to go. Jakob Spencer donated several of my landscapes to the Denver Children’s Hospital charity auction. I’m needed

around her shoulders. “Don’t worry, Kathryn. I’m sure everything will work out.”

With a flourish of her calf-length skirt and a wave, Willa hurried out the door.

Kate gathered their cups and crossed to the tiny kitchen area. Madison would be devastated if she sold the ranch, but her daughter was young and resilient. Spencer’s residents might treat her differently for a while, although the store was a tourist draw as well as a hangout for locals. She might take a loss initially, but the store would recover. So would she.

Holding the cups against her chest, Kate leaned against the sink. Jack’s face appeared in her imagination. When they were kids, he’d had this really grown-up idea for a horse hospital. The two of them, along with their friend Ryder, had planned to run it together. On her ranch.

That had been years ago. They’d been idealistic kids. Now that the animal care center was doing well, Jack had other dreams. Her hands trembled. Dreams without her. Still, if she decided to sell, she owed it to him to tell him herself.

She glanced at her reflection in the window above the sink. “Excuse me Jackson, but guess what?”

“What?”

At the unexpected answer, she shrieked and dropped the mugs in the sink with a clatter. She whirled to discover a devilishly handsome, smiling Jackson Samuels leaning against the doorjamb.

[END OF EXCERPT]

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\* *lizzie.*