

ASPEN GOLD SERIES

Just My
Imagination



*lizzie starr

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Chapter 1

A pleasant warmth curled against Bonnie Zhang's stomach. A similar heat stretched along her side, pushing her toward the edge of her car's back seat. She grumbled then gasped when pressure against her bladder prodded her fully awake. "Really?" she complained.

Dim, diffused light barely brightened the interior of her packed vehicle, and she frowned. Shouldn't it be lighter than this at—she glanced at her watch—nine in the morning? Nine?

She struggled to dig her way out of her sleeping bag, finally gently pushing her small dogs toward the opened zipper. "Come on, kids. We've got to get going. I can't believe you let me sleep this late."

Normally the two dachshunds would have woken her not long after the sun rose, clamoring to get outside and explore their world before demanding breakfast. Today they squirmed toward the foot of the sleeping bag and watched her with wide, hound eyes.

"Won't work, sweeties." Cold air swirled around her as she shoved the thermal bag to her hips. "Yikes, it is cold. And look. Snow."

Once she'd donned her jacket and shoes, Bonnie blew out a long breath. There had been snow on the ground two days ago when she'd driven into Spencer. It was October in Colorado and at this elevation and close to the Rockies, there was always snow. This fresh fall made her search for housing urgent. She shivered. She couldn't keep herself warm, how did she expect to keep her tiny dogs safe and comfortable.

She pressed one hand to her lower belly. Or protect the tiny life growing in her.

She had to find somewhere to live, even if it meant digging into her savings and paying the extra pet deposit at a motel for a few nights. She'd discovered the few available apartments stating they allowed pets either had a huge extra monthly cost or balked when she'd explained she had two dogs. Even though with their dainty size, they barely made the weight of one 'normal' dog.

Maybe she should have stayed in Denver.

No, her future was here. She hoped. And perhaps she would discover a hidden part of her past as well.

A knock sounded on the window next to her head. A chorus of barking rose from the pair of doxies. Great, now what? She'd paid the camping fee, surprising the caretaker of the Streaking Moose Campground, but she wasn't desperate enough to park on the street to sleep. Not yet anyway.

"Hush now." She lifted one finger and the dogs stopped barking. They scrambled over her lap to stand on her leg to peer through the snow-covered window. Four tiny paws dug into her leg. "Come on, guys, let me get you hooked up."

With the ease of long practice, Bonnie attached leads to the dogs' harnesses and with the leashes wrapped around her hand, slowly opened the car door and discovered a police vehicle and tall, female officer.

"Uh, hi?"

The woman grinned at the wiggling mass of animals attempting to pull Bonnie from the vehicle. Bonnie gave a light tug, momentarily halting the advance.

"I'm Ivy Vaughn with Spencer police department. I noticed you've been parked here the past couple days. After the snowfall last night, I wanted to check on you."

Bonnie glanced around the otherwise empty camping area. A good three inches of fluffy white covered everything. She sighed. She couldn't put off finding a real place to stay any longer. She offered the officer a tentative smile. "Thanks. I'm fine. We're fine. Except these guys need to take their morning walk. Normally I just let them go. They never go far..."

Great. She was rambling and telling someone who could take her pups away she just let them run. Her brain must still be asleep.

The woman crouched and held out her hand toward the quivering dachshunds. She grinned at the canine exuberance. "I don't have a problem with that here. But keep them on their leashes when you're in town."

"Always," Bonnie confirmed as she unhooked the leads. "Too dangerous otherwise."

"So, I'm curious," the officer started.

“Why I’m sleeping in my car in an otherwise deserted camping park?”

“That’s a start.”

They both turned to watch the dogs bound through the snow, leaping over tiny drifts then burying their noses deep into the white. The wirehaired came up with a pile of snow on her muzzle, barked, then ran off to play with the dapple.

Both women laughed.

Bonnie glanced at the officer. “The one with the snowy nose is Schnoozel. Her brother is Ruatha Robinton.”

“He’s an odd coloration.”

“Not so much anymore. Breeders have been working toward that dapple coat. There are some concerns and health issues though. But he is a cutie. I love how he has one blue and one brown eye. They’re both certified therapy dogs and especially love visiting nursing homes. They’re generally well behaved, Officer Vaughn.”

“Please, call me Ivy.” She crossed her arms. “I thought doxies were difficult to train.”

“They are. These two are special.”

“So why are you camping out in Spencer in the winter?”

There it was. The question she’d been dreading. She’d been mulling over the whys herself. And come up with the only possible answer. She had no choice. “I was living with my mother to help her out.”

Ivy nodded. “Lots of folks do that.”

“Except she kicked me out when she found out I’m pregnant. Piled all my things on the driveway while I was running an errand for her. She even put the dogs in their kennel and added them to the pile. Luckily, I wasn’t gone too long. There wasn’t any snow in Denver, but it was too cold for these guys to be outside for a long time. Speaking of…” Bonnie snapped her fingers and dogs came running.

When they sat at Bonnie’s feet and stared up at her, Ivy laughed again.

“How do you resist those eyes?”

“It’s not always easy. Do you mind if I give them breakfast?”

At the officer’s nod, Bonnie moved to the rear of her SUV and once the hatch was open, lifted the dogs onto a thick towel and wiped snow from their paws. She dug out a

plastic tub that was far emptier than she'd like and gave each pup a scoop of food. After pouring water into a bowl, she turned back to the friendly woman.

“Mother wouldn't even talk to me, except to scream through the door that anything I left would be destroyed. I didn't have much, but I lost a lot of my life, my past that day. I couldn't take everything.”

“Why didn't you find a place in Denver? Why Spencer?”

Bonnie rubbed her cold fingers. “That's a good question. I was working at a temporary position, so there wasn't anything to keep me there. I figured if I was starting over, I might as well really start over. I've heard about the new therapy riding camp that's opening here and hoped to get a job there. But trying to find a place to live has taken all my time.”

The officer tugged on her jacket collar and glanced toward her squad car. “Look, it's cold out here. Come sit in my vehicle and warm up. We'll talk.”

A fission of concern danced down Bonnie's spine. This probably didn't bode well for her possible life in Spencer. But what could she do? Besides, the soft rumble of the vehicle's motor meant the heater was already running. And she was colder than she wanted to admit. “What about the dogs?”

“Bring them along. No problem there.”

Bonnie gathered the dogs into her arms, hushing them and telling them to be good before following Ivy. Once settled into the passenger seat—thank goodness she didn't have to sit in the back behind that wire partition—the dogs scrambled to point their long noses directly into the heat vents.

The officer stood at the front of the kind of vehicle and made a phone call.

Bonnie's heart sank further. Knowing the call was about her, she hugged her companions to her chest. She had to make plans, concrete plans. And fast. There was that one place, a dirty, probably bug filled apartment...

The officer ended her call and entered the vehicle. She shook her head, turned up the fan and held out her hands for one of the dogs. Bonnie handed her Schnoozel, the calmer of the pair. “As much as they like playing in the snow, they love being warm better,” she explained.

“I’ll agree with them there. Now, about keeping you all warm. I know housing is limited, even in the off season. And finding a place for you dogs will be tricky. However, I might have a lead or two. Until one of those pans out, I have a proposition.”

“I’ve already checked almost every place that was advertised or had a sign.”

Bonnie hated the defeat she heard in her own voice.

“There might be a place that’s not officially on the market, if you don’t mind living above a store in Olde Town.”

“As long as the dogs are no problem.”

A soft smile relaxed Ivy’s face and she stroked Schnoozel’s rough coat. “I really don’t think they would be. But, until then, I have a friend who owns a private gym. He’s offered to let you stay there, you and the dogs, for as long as it takes to find a permanent housing solution. You’ll be warm and dry. And infinitely safer than you are out here.”

“I don’t want to cause trouble.” Bonnie stared at her feet. Keeping a low profile, at least for a while, would allow her to figure out how to best use the information she’d discovered stuffed in the pile of belongings on her mother’s driveway. She didn’t want to be one of those people who showed up on someone’s doorstep to announce her existence. She needed to know more about the people involved. There was a chance she’d never say anything. She just didn’t know.

“No problem. Owen Strong is a kind man, always willing to help out someone in distress. At least talk to him. Want to follow me over? Then if you feel comfortable, you can move these adorable little doggies right in. If not, come back here. Just remember I’ll be available if you have any concerns in either scenario.”

“Is everyone in Spencer this friendly?”

Ivy shook her head and dark, haunted shadows filled her eyes. “Wish I could say yes, but we’re no different than any other town. Of any size. I’d never steer you toward an unsafe situation. Okay?”

The sense of right and honesty flowed from the officer and Bonnie relaxed. Maybe this was the nudge she needed to start her future. She ached to find stability for herself and her canine charges. And for her baby.

“Okay,” she replied. “Lead on.”

Within an hour she'd met Owen and Keira Strong, had a tour of the gym and surrounding property, and had help carrying the few items she really needed into the old barn turned workout space. The couple set up a cot in a corner near the changing room and screened off the area with an odd assortment of hanging mat racks. Once they'd given her the gym's schedule for the day, and loved all over the dogs, they'd returned to their home above the gym and left her to settle in.

After another romp outside, the dogs had happily entered their crate and curled up under their favorite blankets for a nap. Bonnie watched them for a few minutes, then gathered a fresh set of clothing and headed for a much-needed shower.

Refreshed by the luxury of hot water and her squeaky-clean hair, she sat cross-legged on the floor and stared at the address Ivy had written on a slip of paper. While stairs leading to an upstairs apartment weren't ideal for dachshunds, they'd make do. With the coming of winter's snow and even colder days, having a roof over their heads to keep them safe and dry had become imperative.

Bonnie dreaded taking advantage of the kindness of her hosts. If the shop owner agreed, hopefully she could move in right away.

Now, all she needed to do was build up her courage and brave the unknown once again.

* * *

Bonnie brushed the snow from a stone bench and stared into the rippling water of the mountain stream running through the town. Along with her lively dachshunds, she'd walked the length of Spencer's famous river walk. Twice. She couldn't put off the encounter much longer or evening would set in, the shop would close, and she'd lose her chance.

She tugged the ragged slip of paper from her pocket. *The Keltic Ranch. Konnor MacDhuibh*. An odd name. As she refolded the slip, she pondered how to pronounce that last name. Rather than using it and making a terrible mess of the word, when she introduced herself she'd give her name and wait for his response. Then she worried what he'd be like. Older probably, since he owned an entire building. Hopefully he'd be friendly and like dogs as much as Ivy had predicted.

Sensing Bonnie's distress, Schnoozel leaned against her leg and shivered. She rubbed the dog's ears. "I know, sweetie. We need to find a real place to live."

Determined to receive his share of attention, Ruatha yipped twice then rose on his hind legs to nudge Bonnie's hand.

"What would I do without you two?" Bonnie leaned forward to lift Ruatha to her lap. Impatient, the tiny wirehaired scrabbled onto the bench and snuggled on her lap as well. She laughed and tolerated the frantic kisses. "Good thing you guys aren't any larger, my lap wouldn't be big enough."

Bonnie sighed. "Okay, enough now. Sit."

Obedient, the pair sat one on each side of her hips, watching her, expectation shining in their eyes. Shaking her head, Bonnie dug in her jacket pocket for treats. "Because you're good dogs. And I need you to continue to be on your best behavior when we meet the landlord."

She hadn't taken the dogs with her when she'd visited other properties and the negotiations had gone well. Until she'd mentioned her pets. This time, there would be no accusations of trying to bring undocumented animals into an apartment. And no pleading on her part. She'd show her prospective landlord what good canine citizens her babies were, and how their presence in an apartment would cause no damage or problems.

She'd almost put their therapy dog harnesses over their sweaters, but echoes of her mother's condemnation rang in her head. How many times had her mother said the colorful designations were pretentious, and no one believed the mutts were proper dogs anyway? Far too many.

Bonnie hugged the doxies and stroked their heads. "I'll never let anything happen to you. No matter what."

Her mother had strong opinions about everything. And never backed down. No matter how much it hurt another— especially her daughter.

Bonnie was through trying to be the perfect daughter and make amends for some unknown event before she was even born. As of a few days ago, she had officially cut all ties with her mother. Yes, it made her sad for what might have been, but she wouldn't cry. In time she might attempt a reconciliation, but if the cranky old woman wanted to be

a part of Bonnie's world and share in the joy of a new grandchild, her mother needed to take the first step.

Bonnie closed her eyes and sighed. Online stories of someone coming home and finding all their belongings on the lawn had often made her laugh. She couldn't imagine how anyone could do such a thing to someone they claimed to have loved. Until her mother sent her on a long list of errands.

Moving back in with her mother hadn't been the best decision, but mother needed help keeping up with house maintenance, and the lack of rent provided Bonnie with a comfortable bank account. She hadn't thought she had many possessions—until everything sat in a pile in the center of the driveway. Her mother had even tossed a box of Bonnie's childhood drawings and mementos to the top of the stack. A clean break the bitch had shouted through the locked screen door.

Bonnie wanted to know about the other half of her heritage. She knew her mother's Chinese traditions backwards and forwards but knew nothing about her Caucasian side. She hadn't wanted to alienate her mother by asking about her biological father. The first simple 'who was he' question had ignited her mother's anger. Then when her mother discovered the positive pregnancy test in the garbage, hell had truly broken free.

Despite the screaming accusations and vicious prophecies of her downfall, Bonnie would not make the same mistakes her mother had. Her baby's father might not be in the picture, but that didn't mean she could ever hate her child.

"Here we go, kids." She stood and called the dogs to heel. Facing her destination, she swallowed past the lump in her throat. Lights twinkled in the shop window and the shadow of a tall figure moved about the rear of the store.

During her walk to delay this meeting, she'd heard tourists talking about *The Keltic Ranch*. Apparently one of the draws was a live pony dressed in fairy flowers. If the owner kept a horse in his store, he shouldn't be averse to dachshunds living upstairs.

Taking a firm grip on the dogs' leads, she crossed a narrow green space and entered the neatly organized shop. "Uh, hi? Is the apartment still for rent?"

[END OF EXCERPT]

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

***lizzie**