

A romantic couple embracing in a field of purple flowers under a sunset sky. The woman is wearing a light blue lace dress and large earrings, and the man is wearing a light blue shirt. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a vibrant sunset with orange, pink, and blue hues.

ASPEN GOLD SERIES

*Dancing
in the Dark*

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USA Today Bestselling Author

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Chapter 1

Steam rose from the jasmine-scented water in her clawfoot tub while Kendra hung her clothing on hooks, spread the fluffy mat and set a hand towel and her phone on the stainless steel stand.

She slid down into the water, stopping at her neck, so she didn't have to fix her hair again. She might want to drive into Spencer for groceries later. The relaxing warmth felt wonderful after her drive up the mountain. Closing her eyes, she imagined the first people she'd see and how long it would take for news of her arrival to spread. It wouldn't take long for her mother or her sister to learn she was in town. News traveled fast among the regulars.

She rarely gave herself over to thinking about growing up here, but she'd never severed ties either. Each summer something drew her back. This house that her Aunt Sophie had left to her. The community. Certainly not her mother or sister. Maybe she was just being obstinate and refusing to be run off. Maybe she was a sucker for punishment.

Eventually her bath cooled, so she warmed it, water trickling from the vintage faucet. Absently she held one foot under the stream, then the other. She rested her big toe on the side, admiring her red polish, then let the water run over it, playfully attempting to stop the stream with her toe, and getting squirted in the face for her foolishness. "Oh!"

She attempted to sit and reached for the hand towel, but her toe didn't budge.

Startled now, Kendra sat forward awkwardly and turned off the water to survey the situation. She had to bend up her knee to get a look because her toe was stuck in place. She gave a tug, and pain shot through the joint. She pulled again, harder this time, but more slowly. Her toe remained securely stuck in the faucet.

Panic set in immediately. What was she going to do? Tugging hurt too much to force it loose, and an injury to her foot would be a setback to her career. She rinsed herself off and pulled the rubber plug to let the water drain. No use turning herself into a prune.

This was a fine how-do-you-do as her Aunt Sophie would have said. Sophie would have had a good laugh over this one. Minutes ticked by. Finally Kendra admitted to herself she was

going to have to call for help. Who did she know? No matter how desperate the situation, she wouldn't call on her poisonous mother or her hateful sister for help. Eying the towels on the chrome rack—so near and yet so far—she pulled the hand towel toward her and dried as best she could, then reached for her phone. Neither of her relatives would have been any help anyway. She needed someone who could get her out of this dilemma, no matter how humiliating.

She had hired Glen Randall to take care of the monthly maintenance and evaluate the condition of the property after each rental. He had checked out everything before her return, so he knew she was in Spencer. She had no choice—the person she phoned was going to have to be a man. She scrolled for his number and touched the green call arrow. The phone rang and her stomach fluttered.

“Glen here,” he answered, out of breath.

“Glen, it's Kendra Price,” she said. “I'm afraid I'm in an embarrassing predicament, and I need you to come out right away.”

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, I'm fine—”

“Kendra, I'm at Burnham Memorial right now. My wife's having a baby this afternoon.”

“Oh! Well, congratulations.”

“Thanks. Tell you what. I have a friend I can call. We help each other out when we have emergencies. He won't mind. I'll give him a shout right now.”

“Okay.” She supposed one man finding her naked with goosebumps and stuck in her tub was the same as the next. “Okay, tell him there's a key under the gnome on the back patio.”

“You're not there?”

“I'm here, but—I'm stuck in the bathroom.”

“I'll tell him.”

“And ask him to hurry please.”

“Will do.”

She hung up and laid down her phone. Of all the stupid things she could have done. Why this? She gazed longingly at her robe on the hook across the room and imagined a chunky plumber in overalls showing up to find her like this. Now there'd be a new twist to the spreading news of her arrival. *Did you hear that other Price girl got stuck in her bathtub out there at her lake house?*

She picked up her phone again and opened her Facebook app. She'd occupy herself scrolling through her newsfeed. Memes of kittens and pictures of dancers didn't make her feel any more competent or less foolish, but they temporarily took her mind off the impending gossip. How long was it going to take Glen's friend to get here? A little bored and a lot impatient, she touched her camera icon and took a picture of her foot with her big toe stuck in the faucet. She looked at the image, almost deleted it, and then decided it might make a good story one day. Back to social media.

"Handyman!" Twenty-five minutes later a loud knock and the shout startled her. "Hello?"

Kendra laid down her phone and held the skimpy towel in front of her breasts, not hiding much. "I'm in the bathroom! Down the hallway and to the right!"

Boots sounded on the wood floor. "Glen Randall called me," came the shockingly familiar voice from outside the bathroom door. "Said you needed help with something?"

No. No, her mind was jumping to outrageous predicaments—more outrageous than this one. "Yes, I'm in here. Stuck in the tub unfortunately. As soon as you come in, will you please take the robe from the hook on the wall and toss it to me?"

The doorknob turned and the door swung open. "You need a robe?"

This was a predicament all right. Her heart lurched in her chest. She managed to push out a syllable. "Yes."

Six-foot-something of broad-shouldered sandy-haired male in a black T-shirt, slim-fitting jeans and workboots filled the opening. The flimsy towel shrunk even more. He had a good look before catching himself and diverting his attention.

More than embarrassment flooded her. Anger. Humiliation. She hadn't expected to have a man walk into her bathroom today, but the last person on the entire planet she'd expected to see was Dusty Cavanaugh.

The years had delivered his boyish handsomeness into dangerous maturity. She'd always envied his bronze complexion. The guy glowed after a day in the sun, while she blistered. His fair hair contrasted with his tanned skin, the ends becomingly lighter. It was short now, neatly styled, but she remembered it long and sun-bleached. "Dusty?"

"Kendra," he replied. His aquamarine blue gaze dropped to the hand towel she clutched at her breasts—and then as though remembering what she'd asked, he took a step and reached to grab her robe from its hook. "This pink thing?"

“Yes, thank you.”

The bathroom was at least ten by ten. Dusty had to take three steps to hand her the robe. Politely he turned away while she fumbled with the covering and the towel. “I heard you’d inherited this place from your aunt.”

“Half anyway,” she said.

“So it’s half yours?”

She got her robe sufficiently wrapped around herself. “No, I bought out Erica’s share.”

“I wondered about that.”

“I made sure she didn’t know the buyer was me.”

“You rent it out, right? I didn’t expect to see you.”

“I just arrived. I’m teaching at the Holling Campus again this summer. You can turn around now.”

His turned and his attention went to her toe, stuck in the faucet. “Can’t say I’ve ever seen this before.”

“I thought you were the operations manager or something at the Lodge.”

“Chief engineer. All my people were busy when Glen called, so I came myself. How did you manage to do this?”

“I put my toe in and it stuck. Can you get it free?”

He knelt and leaned over the side of the tub to inspect her foot. “Does it hurt?”

“Only when I try to pull it out.”

“We’ll get it out. I’ll try a couple of things. I’m going out to my truck. Be right back.”

“I’ll be here.”

He raised one eyebrow in response and turned away.

Dusty opened the back of his Dodge Ram and unlocked the tool chest. For the past five—nearly six years Kendra had avoided him, except for the occasional hello. And she had every reason to keep her distance. He didn’t blame her one bit. He was still angry with himself over what had happened between them. But he couldn’t go back in time and change it. He didn’t know if he would even if he could.

Seeing the way she looked at him carved away another piece of his soul. Never did a day pass that he didn’t think of her. Never a night arrived that he didn’t close his eyes as his head

touched the pillow and relive the disappointment on her face when she'd learned the truth. She hadn't deserved to have her heart broken.

He placed items he needed in his metal toolbox and carried it inside, taking a more detailed look. He'd spent plenty of time at Sophie's house as a boy, remembered it well. It looked like a different place with overstuffed colorful furniture, glowing wood pieces and refinished wood floors. An enormous colorful painting of a dancer in a bell-shaped skirt hung over the familiar mantle. He headed back to the bathroom with its original black and white tile. That enormous clawfoot tub was new.

"Let's try this first." He popped the lid from a jar of petroleum jelly, swiped a glob with his index finger, and rubbed it around her toe and the faucet opening. He took her toe between his thumb and forefinger and attempted to gently turn it one way and then the other.

It held fast.

Kendra gave her toe an extra tug and then yelped.

"Don't do that. We'll get it without hurting you."

She went still.

He glanced at her face, devoid of makeup, her wild copper hair caught in a knot with strands falling around her neck and ears. Her skin was flushed, her wide eyes divulging her mistrust. The sight of her did crazy things to his heart and his head. He'd known her since he was nine years old, and she was still the most beautiful girl he'd ever set eyes on. The best thing that had ever happened to him. One of the best things anyway. He'd loved her with his whole being, wanted to make her his wife, start and end every day beside her. Her embarrassment and humiliation wounded him. Shamed him.

We'll get it without hurting you. Thoughtless words. He'd already hurt her immeasurably. Deeply. Permanently. He couldn't fix the past or take it back. "Kendra—."

"What's your next idea?"

He dropped his gaze to the pulse at her throat, where she clutched the fluffy pink robe together. She'd always shined in pink, red and orange, shades other redheads would shy away from. Not Kendra. She made a statement with her clothing choices. She was unique. Magnificent. Had been from the first time she walked into the school cafeteria and earned a dozen boyish hearts with the sweep of her stormy gray-green gaze and the lift of her delicate chin. *I know who I am, and I don't give a crap who you are.*

But she'd let down her guard and trusted *him*. Loved him. Given him her heart. He'd thrown that trust back in her face and stepped on it. And he hadn't been able to make it up to her. "Say goodbye to that antique faucet."

"I like this faucet."

"Which do you like more?"

She looked at him.

He gestured with a forefinger. "The toe or the faucet?"

She gave a resigned sigh. "Do what you have to do."

He picked up the hacksaw and glanced at her pale leg. The robe didn't cover nearly enough. Her shapely calf was visible all the way to her knee, and thankfully she'd tucked the towel underneath her, so he didn't have to avoid letting his gaze wander that direction. He experienced that thought all the way to painful pleasure and back.

Jumping up, he grabbed another towel from a rack, unfolded it and draped it over her legs, leaving only her foot showing. "Might be some metal shavings," he said by way of an explanation.

He grasped the faucet with his left hand and drew the saw across with his right.

"You won't cut into my toe," she said.

He continued to saw back and forth. He was familiar with her toes. "Unless this one has grown longer than the other, I've left plenty of leeway."

"What if we still can't get my toe out even after you've cut that off?"

"Then we can get you to the hospital, which we couldn't do with a whole bathtub attached."

"I don't want to go to the hospital."

"I'm doing my best here, Kendra."

"I know." It probably pained her to acknowledge his effort.

"Just try to relax." He sawed. It wasn't a particularly warm day, but his skin grew damp. He sensed her focus on his hands, observing the motions of his arm and shoulder. When he got up today, this was the last thing he'd planned to be doing, and she was the last person he'd expected to see. He glanced at her. Her stormy gaze skittered up to his. "My sister works at the ER at Burnham Memorial," he said to make conversation.

"I heard. Brooke, right?"

He went back to his task. “Uh huh. She took FEMA courses and learned FAA regulations. That girl put in hundreds of flight hours in order to get all her certifications for the Life Flight Team. She’s done so many training hours and earned so many certifications, I can’t keep up.”

“You must be really proud of her.”

They hadn’t had a conversation this long—or this civil in years. The sound of her voice clawed another slice in his heart. “I am. Her most recent certification was so she can do solo flights with neonatal patients.”

“Good for her.”

There was so much more he wanted to share with her. Questions he wanted to ask. He wanted to know what she’d been doing, what her life was like in Denver. He missed her so much it was physically, painfully debilitating sometimes. He had to take a deep breath and relax his muscles. Being this close to her was like being near an electrical force.

He didn’t have a right to expect anything, not even civility. So he sawed. Whenever he saw her mother, Lacey, he asked about Kendra as unobtrusively as possible. Lacey talked about her like she and her daughter were great friends, but he suspected she hadn’t seen much more of Kendra these past years than he had. He knew how Kendra felt about her mother, and the woman was still a piece of work. Bartended at the Wild Card, same as she had since they’d been kids, partied as though she was a twenty-something, always had a man staying with her. Nothing had changed. “Almost finished.”

He gave a final thrust and the piece of pipe broke off. Kendra lowered her foot to the bottom of the tub with a clink.

He reached for her hand. “Let’s get you out.”

She waved away his help. “I can do it.”

Gathering her robe around her, she stood, letting the towel fall into the empty tub. “I’m going to put some clothes on,” she told him. “There’s tea in the fridge.”

He gathered his tools and left the bathroom, headed for the kitchen, where he got ice and poured two glasses of cold tea. He opened cupboards, finding them neat and orderly, until he found the sugar and sweetened his drink. He took a long refreshing swallow, and the taste brought back a memory of drinking iced tea with Kendra and Sophie in this kitchen. He turned aside, expecting to see the wooden screen door and hear the whistling *do weep do weep* of the wood ducks’ screech, but the interior door was closed.

His chest ached with all the what could-have-beens crowding his heart. This wasn't how he'd planned his life—their lives. Seeing her made it painfully clear his feelings hadn't changed.

Hers had. And rightfully so.

The clink clink sound of the pipe caught his attention as Kendra hobbled to the kitchen. She entered the room, wearing bright orange-and-purple patterned exercise leggings and a little white top that showed the length of her supple arms, her slender neck and her collar bone. She still had a lithe dancer's body. She hadn't done anything to her hair, and he liked the messy unaffected look.

"I poured you a glass. No sugar."

"Thanks." She picked up her iced tea and took a sip. "Now what?"

He pointed to the jar of petroleum jelly he'd left on the table. "Now let's try this again. But first we'll ice your toe. It's probably a little swollen, and cold might help us slide off the metal."

"There's a bowl in that cupboard." She gestured.

He retrieved the large container and opened the freezer side of her refrigerator to fish for enough cubes to fill it halfway.

"Probably water, too, don't you suppose?" he asked.

"Okay."

At her nod he turned on the tap and added cold water. Behind the sink was a newly installed row of windows with a wide sill. Dusty glanced out and took in the view of Twin Owl Lake. He rarely saw it from this side anymore. He spent all his time on the Lodge side. "Is Sophie's old runabout still in the boathouse?"

"That's probably enough."

Okay. He turned and set the bowl on the floor at her feet.

She didn't look at him, instead keeping her focus on her foot. "How long?"

"At least a couple of minutes."

She stuck her toe with the piece of faucet into the cold water and grimaced. "Think that's long enough?"

"A little longer."

She had ignored his last question, so he didn't attempt to talk. He reached for his glass and took a long sip.

"Is this long enough?" she asked.

“If it’s going to help, that should be enough. Let’s dry it off.” He handed her a dish towel from a rack and removed the bowl.

She dried her foot, and gracefully rested her calf on the table, so he could reach from the other chair.

“I’d forgotten how you could do that so easily. Lift your leg right up there.”

Dusty opened the plastic jar and applied globs to her flesh inside and outside the piece of cold metal, using his finger to push the jelly as far under the edge as he could. Her skin was reddened from the frigid water. Her toes were topped with bright red nail polish.

He used the dish towel to wipe his hands, and then wrapped it around the metal piece. “Ready?”

“Do it.”

He pulled, twisting at the same time.

Kendra scrunched her face, but waved at him with one hand. “Keep going.”

He pressed his thumb against the end of her toe, applying counter-pressure and worked the circle of faucet toward him. It gave way and slid off.

Kendra released a pent-up breath.

There were abrasions on the toe and it had begun to swell again. He held her foot to gently wipe it with the towel, noting scabbed spots on her other toes and reddened joints on her littlest toes. Under his fingers her calluses, more pronounced than he remembered, lined the pad on the bottom of her foot. He had the barely-resistable urge to bring her foot to his lips and kiss it.

“Does it hurt?”

That was probably a foolish question to ask her.

She pulled away, tossed a clean towel on the floor and stood on it. Standing on tiptoes, she flexed her toes and arched each foot.

“Dusty,” she said, sitting back down and looking directly at him.

He flinched inwardly. She was used to sore feet, and he was making a big deal of it. “Yes.”

“Can this stay between us?”

“Sure.” He got up and washed his hands at the sink, gathered his things and headed for the front of the house.

“Send me a bill,” she called from behind him.

“I don’t want anything,” he replied and sailed out the front door. Now he could hear the wood ducks. The iridescent waterfowl always nested in trees in the tiny cove just to the south of Sophie’s place. The sound filled him with regrets. He and Kendra had been so young, so full of hopes and dreams. Even then he’d wanted to marry her.

He packed his toolbox and climbed into his truck, turning it around and heading up the long drive to the road. He didn’t look in the rearview mirror.

* * *

Kendra picked up all the towels and started a small load in the washer on the enclosed back porch. Out of habit, she used an antibiotic cream and wrapped her sore toe. She tidied the bathroom, rinsed the tub, and then poured herself a glass of wine. Carefully, she put on an old pair of canvas shoes to walk down to the shoreline. She sipped the wine. It could have been worse, she supposed. She never had visitors, and only Glen knew she was here, so if she hadn’t had her phone within reach, someone might have eventually found her skeleton in the tub.

Forgetting was easier in the city. She stayed to herself as often as she liked, had dinner and drinks with friends when she wanted company, joined troupes and performed as often as she preferred. Between theater and teaching, she was doing what she’d always wanted to do. She’d trained for this life. She was good at it.

But summers drew her back to the Colorado mountains, back to the house that had been her refuge during her adolescent years. Aspen Gold Lodge owned all the land and operated the cabins on the Spencer side of the lake, but the homes and cabins on the east side had been in families for years. When her aunt had left the cabin to Kendra and her sister, Kendra had held her cards close to her chest. If Erica had known she wanted it—had known she was trying to buy it, her sister would have hiked up the price, even though she had no interest in owning the cabin.

As darkness fell, Kendra went back to the house for the bottle of Pinot Noir and sat on the bank, where water lapped and frogs chirruped. This place was in her blood. She couldn’t stay away. No, she’d have lost weight before turning into a skeleton. Her toe would have thinned out and come loose. A little tipsy now, she laughed at herself. One by one lights came on in houses and cabins, and in the distance on the opposite shore, the enormous four-story lodge lit up like a beacon. Right now people would be dancing in the ballroom, enjoying five-star cuisine on the terrace and in the dining room. Celebrities, sports figures, rich and famous—those who could afford the anonymity and luxury—had stayed at the Aspen Gold Lodge since its early days. The

community of Spencer had grown and thrived with the tourist trade. Spencer was a tourist town, due to the lodge and Jakob Spencer, the patriarch who had built the hotel nearly fifty years ago, but the people who ran the shops and businesses were a tight community of families who had lived surrounded by the mountains for generations.

She'd never wanted to be rich, but she'd wanted to be comfortable, which she was. She'd never wanted to be famous, but to live her passion to the fullest and dance, which she did. And she'd wanted to marry Dusty, have babies and live happily ever after. Which would never happen.

Because Dusty'd had his own baby. Without her.

[END OF EXCERPT]

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