

ASPEN GOLD SERIES

*Whisper  
My Name*

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# Chapter 1

*Spencer, Colorado*

*Mid-November*

Laurel Whitaker could count on one hand the number of people she'd spoken with in the six months she'd been in Spencer. The only person she talked to with regularity was Dr. Bella Easton, whose office was on the third floor of the Medical Building that sat behind Edna Burnham Memorial Hospital. Laurel visited at 10 a.m. the second Tuesday of every month. Today as usual, she made herself a cup of salted caramel coffee and inhaled the aroma before putting on the plastic lid and taking a seat.

"Lovely dress," Dr. Easton said with a smile. "Ordered it online, didn't you?"

Laurel took a sip of the strong brew, the coping mechanism of routine keeping her centered. "I did."

Dr. Easton smiled. She was a tall, slender woman, probably in her early forties, with short-cropped hair who usually dressed in slacks and a lightweight cardigan. She seemed to have a fondness for greens and corals. Laurel was comfortable in her office and found her easy to talk with. "Last month I suggested it was time for you to start getting acquainted with the community. How have you done with that?"

"I had a conversation with the cashier at Martin's Grocery. We talked about how chilly it had been overnight. And I walked inside the bank to handle my transaction." Even though she could have used the drive-up window without undue duress. "The teller was wearing a blue blouse."

The doctor had suggested she needed to take these confidence-building steps. A social media advisor and manager with social anxiety might be ironically humorous, but Laurel was dealing with the disorder because the jobs she wanted required working with people at least part of the time.

"How did it make you feel going inside the bank?"

She knew what her therapist wanted to hear. “I sat in my car for a while and told myself I could do it. I needed to do it. I have things I want to do, and I’m tired of disappointing myself.” She paused and took a fortifying breath. “I deliberately exhaled evenly. I counted to fifty. Those actions worked down the apprehension, and I got out.”

Dr. Easton encouraged her with a nod.

“I’d never been inside the bank before so I looked around, grounded myself. A young woman at a desk right inside greeted me, and I went to the counter and completed my transaction. When the teller spoke to me, I replied. Something about how cold it had been the night before.”

“And how did you feel when you got back to your car?”

Laurel recalled the intense relief of having gotten through that experience. “I didn’t feel terrible. I can’t help the overwhelming sensation that something is going to happen. Something bad. In my head I rationalize it, and I know I’m going to be all right, but the dread is there anyway.”

“But you didn’t get that feeling inside the bank?”

“I started to...but I reminded myself I want to get better, and I walked to the teller window.”

“That’s really good, Laurel.”

“Oh, and I waved to the mail carrier five times.” Pathetic how she knew that. “Twice there were packages that didn’t fit into the box and he brought them to the door. I thanked him.” She flipped to the back of her planner where she’d written the list and studied her notes.

‘Socialization builds confidence. Exercise one: Talk to the person who delivers mail. Engage the check-out girl. Converse with the bank tellers.’

She’d written down these encounters as though she might forget. She was nothing if not thorough.

“You did well. I’m going to give you the entire list, but you’re only going to move to the next step when you’re confident with the current one.”

Confident might be a stretch. She crossed her ankles and sat a little straighter.  
“How many exercises are there?”

“Six. There’s no rush to get through them. No pressure. Take your time.”

“I’ve had time. I’ve had years.” Recognizing her frustration, she stopped and looked at her hands holding the cup. “I went to college and got two degrees. A couple of the classes were online, but not most of them. I’ve gone to interviews, and I’ve even worked in a couple of offices.” Laurel lifted her gaze back to Dr. Easton with a shrug. “But then something happens and I’m right back where I started. I’ve been doing this for too long.”

“You’re not back where you started now. You’ve come a long way. Temporary setbacks aren’t failures. You want to improve, and you are improving. There’s no scale to determine what’s normal and what’s not. Our goal is healthy.”

“But I see others who behave normally, and I know I don’t.”

“You can’t compare yourself—.”

“But I do.”

“Others haven’t had the same experiences, Laurel. You’ve done counseling with other survivors. Did that help?”

Laurel nodded. “I wouldn’t even be here if it hadn’t helped.”

“I see these exercises as reviewing the steps and growth you’ve already made.” She handed Laurel the sheet of paper. Laurel read it over.

Socialization builds confidence.

Exercise #1: Talk to the person who delivers mail, the check-out girl, the bank tellers.

*Check.*

Exercise #2: Join a group or take a class/lessons.

*In person? Okay, this isn’t so bad.*

Exercise #3: Make eye contact through 60-70% of a conversation.

*Holy crap.*

Exercise #4: Change your automatic reply from “no” to “yes” thereby opening growth potential. “Would you like to get a cup of coffee?”

*Holy crap.*

Exercise #5: Rather than only listening and asking questions, share something about yourself. Respond by linking your own experiences and knowledge.

*Call an ambulance. I'm having a heart attack.*

Exercise #6: Focus on the present, not the intimidating what-if possibilities.

*Right now, in the present, I'm going to screw this up.*

Exercise #7: Express emotions/fears out loud. Put negative emotions into words and thereby lessen that emotion's intensity.

“I can't do this.”

She'd said that out loud.

She looked up at Dr. Easton, who wore her reassuring smile. “You put feelings into words with me.”

“Because that's how therapy works.”

The doctor tilted her head. “Yes, it is. But you have all the other steps to work through until you get to that one. You understand what you're working toward and how cognitive behavioral therapy challenges you.”

Laurel nodded. “I'm challenging mistaken beliefs by confronting them.”

“Yes. Avoiding challenges—or people—won't make you happier in the long run. I didn't show you all the steps to intimidate you, but to prepare you.”

Laurel sipped her coffee. “My contentment is not dependent upon external forces or events, but upon me,” she recited. She could do this. She would do this. “Okay.”

“After you've spoken to a few more people and are comfortable with that, I want you to move on to exercise two.”

“All right.”

Her counselor nodded. “Good. You’re doing well.” She closed the folder on her desk. “Laurel, can you see a time in the near future when you might share your story with someone?”

A collage of disjointed images battered her senses, and she knew enough to let them wash over her in a wave and settle back into the ocean of her buried experiences.

“My story isn’t something someone brings up while making idle small talk with the bank teller or the mailman.” She took an even breath and thought a moment, imagining a future possibility. “If there’s ever someone I feel safe with, a friend or something, I might be able to tell them.”

“It’s good you were able to let yourself see that.” She gave Laurel an encouraging nod. “What are your plans for the rest of the day?”

Laurel worked remotely on three part-time jobs, earning enough to pay the rent on the lake house. She’d been thinking of another project though. “How much do you know about the history of Spencer?”

“I’ve been here twelve years, and I have a few friends who were born and raised here, but I don’t really know much of the history—well except what I’ve seen at the Pony Express Station and the restored schoolhouse in Olde Town.”

“That information caught my attention, too, and I did some reading about the Aspen Gold Lodge. I was considering researching local history.”

“As in for an article or a book?”

“That’s not really my thing. But maybe I could put something together for the tourism board to use on their website and sell it to them. Or sell the idea of revamping their website.”

“Sounds like a great idea. Are you prepared to talk to people?”

“Librarians and historians are talkers themselves. Once you get them started, you just listen.”

Dr. Easton laughed. “Sounds like my job.”

“Not at all.” Laurel shook her head. “You ask deep questions.”

“Okay, no comparison.” She pushed back her rolling chair, stood, and got her coat from a rack near the door. “I’ll walk you out.”

Laurel didn't make eye contact with the doctor's next patient in the waiting room. Her therapist accompanied her outdoors and wished her a good day. Pulling on her gloves, Laurel unlocked her vehicle and got in. She'd go home, collect herself and do a little research before deciding where to start locally.

She liked this tourist town. People in Spencer, Colorado didn't ask many questions. The locals respected that tourists were temporarily escaping their everyday lives. She appeared as a tourist, and the anonymity suited her just fine. Twin Owl Lake was the quietest, most peaceful place she'd ever found. She headed north on Chickering Road East and followed until it became the highway that wound northwest past acres of bristlecone pines, blue spruce and cottonwood trees with leaves now turned to gold in the brisk November weather. She had no idea who her neighbors were, though she'd admired the house with the porch and the red roof. She'd seen several different vehicles parked in the side drive, and had assumed it was another rental.

The interior of the house she rented had been remodeled and was managed by a realty company for the owner, a man named Ben Rumford. Apparently, it had looked more like a cabin at one time, but the interior had been drywalled and painted, the kitchen and bathroom updated, the floors sanded and varnished, and a huge deck built on the back, offering a magnificent view of the lake.

There hadn't been mail delivery yet today, so with a plan in mind, she started a pot of coffee. While it brewed, she made herself a hot cup of tea. Grabbing a sweater, she carried her laptop and an afghan to the back deck and settled on one of the comfortable cushioned chairs. She could lounge out here in the sun forever, stay in this rented cabin and never go out again—if the groceries wouldn't run out. She had made a point not to search for grocery delivery. Okay, she could stay right here if there was FedEx pickup, and if her therapist hadn't assigned six exercises to complete. And of course, if she didn't want to get well.

At the sound of the mail truck winding up the road, she hurried in to the coffeemaker, poured steaming brew into a takeout cup and pressed on the plastic lid. What if the mail carrier didn't drink coffee? What if he liked sugar or cream? She ignored her naysaying insecurities and strode out the front door and followed the stone walkway to the road.



The dusty Jeep slowed and the driver hesitated at the point where he could reach her mailbox. Spotting her, he rolled the vehicle a few feet farther to hand her a few pieces of mail through the open window. "Afternoon, Miss Whitaker."

"Good afternoon." She accepted her mail with one hand and handed him the coffee with the other. "It's not sweetened, but I can go grab sugar if you like."

He raised his steel-gray eyebrows in surprise, but gave a shake of his head. "Nah, I like it black. This is a treat. Thanks. I usually don't get a hot cup until I finish the lake route and stop in Spencer for lunch. This time of day my Thermos has cooled off."

"Maybe you'd have preferred something cold."

"No, this is perfect. Thank you."

She didn't feel any ill effects from talking to this person. He was friendly and had a nice smile. "You're welcome."

"You've been living on the lake here about six months now?"

She nodded. Yes, and in all that time this was their first conversation.

"Name's Reuben," he said. "Reuben Trumbull."

"Laurel." But of course, he knew her name.

He nodded and turned aside, presumably to secure his coffee before looking back.

It was only a conversation if she said something more. "I was just starting to research Spencer online, but since you likely know a lot about the town, maybe you can tell me something."

"If I can, sure. I've lived here my whole life."

"I was wondering where I might start to do research on the town. I'm searching for special interest features."

"Aunt Cora would likely be a good resource for you. Cora Fleming is her name, but everyone calls her Aunt Cora. She wrote a historical book about the area, and she's president of the historical society."

"Where would I find her?"

"Aunt Cora's Attic. It's a home turned into an antique and collectable shop west on Silverville Road. You could find history there and probably at the library. Also, the *Spencer Herald*. There's an extensive records morgue in the basement. It's on the north side of Brook Park next to the VFW."

“That’s really helpful. Thank you.”

“Any time. Thanks for the coffee. The sky’s looking like a storm. I’d better get finished with my route.” He drove the little truck north toward the next neighbor.

She glanced at the blue sky and didn’t see anything except a few scattered clouds. Back on her deck, now wrapped in her afghan, Laurel googled the places he’d mentioned to search hours of operation. She called the number for Aunt Cora’s Attic and got a recording, so left a brief message.

The library closed early three days a week, so she tried the *Herald* and was told she could come any time before eight p.m. They were printing the weekly paper that afternoon.

She became engrossed researching online and lost track of time. To prevent intentionally letting more time slip, she stopped and made herself a sandwich before filling her water bottle, grabbing her charger and her laptop case.

\* \* \*

Cale Hartwood, the slender owner of the *Spencer Herald* was in his late thirties, though he had thinning pale hair that he tried to stand up and scrunch to appear like more. When she’d asked to search information in the morgue, he’d turned a suspicious brown gaze on her. “I don’t have time to babysit you down there. I’m putting out a paper. Only the last twenty years are online. Everything before that is on film.”

“I don’t need a babysitter. I only need access to the files. They’re public, right? I know how to use a microfiche machine. Just point the way.”

“I’ll have to unlock the room for you. It’s climate-controlled to preserve the film and computers.”

“I know how to use a key, too.”

If he had more hair, it would have bristled. He pulled a face and looked her up and down as though measuring her trustworthiness. He finally took a key from his pocket and extended it. “Be back up here by nine. I don’t want to stay later than that.”

She accepted the key. “I will. Thank you.”

Laurel flipped up the light switch and yellow illumination lit a set of steep wooden stairs. As she descended, they creaked beneath her weight. The area immediately at the bottom of the steps was clean and smelled of ink and paper like the rest of the building.

Tall gray filing cabinets and plastic totes lined the walls of this outer room. She used the key to unlock the metal door leading to another room and pushed it open. Holding her breath, she groped along a brick wall and found the light switch. Thankfully, the overhead lights in here were bright, probably LED.

“This isn’t so bad.” She dropped the key into the pocket of her coat, glad she’d changed into jeans and her thick-soled boots. The floor was concrete and the temperature cool. The door stayed open on its own, thankfully. She set down her laptop bag and purse.

Several metal cabinets stood against one wall. Wooden worktables held cardboard boxes, an old-version microfiche machine, two desktop computers and a printer. Four well-used rolling office chairs provided adequate seating. Laurel turned on all of the electronics and took out her notes, notepad and laptop. Research fascinated her, so without a goal, she’d be perusing files forever. To prevent getting lost, she referred to the list she’d created earlier after a quick Google search.

She searched for Aspen Gold Lodge first, since the town seemed to have grown up around it. On microfiche she discovered that in the 1850s, a man named William Spencer won the land in a card game and built a stage station. William had one son, Thomas, and over time the waystation attracted other entrepreneurs. With the added businesses, the town of Spencer was born on the banks of the Gold River. Thomas Spencer had two sons; the eldest, Jakob, was still associated with the lodge. She found the younger son David’s name in the obituaries. A younger sister, Naomi, was still alive. With a head for business, Jakob had capitalized on the growing popularity of the Colorado mountains as a getaway for wealthy guests.

An old map intrigued Laurel, especially the area around the town square. She was certain she’d spotted an art studio now located where the old mercantile had been. Most of these original buildings were still in use. Thankful for Wi-Fi that reached the basement room, she used her laptop to find an aerial map and compared. She printed copies and would pay for them before she left.

An hour or more later, her stomach rumbled. She should have thought to pack an extra sandwich, but she kept a few granola bars in her bag. Soon drawn into another search, her hunger was forgotten.

“Anyone down here?”

The male voice startled her. She jerked upright on the chair and glanced at the bottom corner of her laptop screen. Ten? How had that much time slipped past? The mistrustful owner had told her to finish up by nine.

“Hello?”

If this was that Hartwood fellow coming to yell at her for keeping him past hours, his voice had changed. “I’m still in here,” she called. “Sorry, I lost track of time. I’ll lock up.”

An unfamiliar broad-shouldered man in a blue and gray jacket and uniform ducked to pass under the top of the doorway and took a few steps forward. Laurel’s heart leaped and the already-small room threatened to close in. The man between her and the exit wore a brimmed hat, and his silver badge glinted under the overhead lights. A black equipment belt around his hips held cases with flaps and a holstered gun.

The foreboding sensation that something bad was going to happen sucked the air from her lungs. She inhaled and exhaled evenly, forcing composure. “I—I’ve been doing research.”

He grinned. “That’s what folks usually come down here for. Haven’t had the pleasure of meeting you before.” He took a step closer.

Laurel couldn’t jump off the chair fast enough. She moved back several steps. “Sorry. I’ll collect my things and go.”

Obviously recognizing her unease, he halted. “No hurry. Hartwood let you in?”

She fumbled in her coat pocket and held up the key. Her fingers trembled ever so slightly. “He gave me the key and told me to finish up by nine. I lost track of time, and I guess he forgot about me.”

“That’s okay.” He nodded. “I’m Sheriff Cavanaugh. Joe. I was on my way home and noticed the lights down here. Not an ordinary occurrence, so thought I’d better come check it out.”

“If the place is closed up, how did you get in?”

“The janitor was just leaving, and I asked him to hold the door so I could check out the place.” He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “I’m not suggesting you have to leave, but the storm is picking up out there.”

“There’s a storm?” She glanced up at the windows, and indeed flashes of lightning brightened the blackness. She wasn’t challenging her mistaken beliefs; she was drowning in them, so she arrested her thoughts to make conversation. “I didn’t realize...I didn’t even know how late it was.” She gestured to the files open on the desktop computer and her stack of notes. “I got lost in what I was doing.”

“Easy to do. Are you staying in Spencer?”

She nodded. “Yes. I have a rental on the lake.” She gathered her wits and counted to ten. Twenty. What would a normal, not overly-cautious person do? Thirty. “I’m Laurel Whitaker.”

“Lodge side or the east side?”

“Excuse me?”

“Lodge rentals are on the northwest end of Twin Owl. Private properties on the east.”

“Oh.” *Oh?* This was not how normal people conversed, she was sure of it. “East side. The cabin belongs to a gentleman named Rumford.”

He raised and lowered a hand. He wore a watch with a wide black leather band. She couldn’t see his face well because of the shadow created by the brim of his hat, and that increased her discomfort. He was tall, over six feet. “We’re neighbors,” he told her.

“What? We are?”

“Yeah,” he said with half a chuckle. “My daughter and I live in an Airstream beside you to the south. I’ve wondered who was staying in Ben’s place. I’ve seen your car, but renters come and go.”

“Right.”

“You probably couldn’t hear the storm down here, could you?”

She shook her head. “No. I should be going.”

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Laurel. Spencer is a safe place, but if you’d like me to walk you to your car, I’d be—”

An ear-splitting crack and a bright flash of light cut him off. He turned toward the window, but she shrieked and backed up against the wall.

“It’s okay.” He held up his palm toward her. “Probably only a—”

The overhead lights flickered and went out, plunging them into darkness.

Laurel's heart rate accelerated. Something bad was actually going to happen. "I have to get out of here."

A loud hum sounded, followed by the creak of hinges and a solid snick as the door closed.

"Well, hell," the sheriff said into the pitch black. The reconciled tone of his voice sent a shudder of apprehension along her spine.

*'Focus on the present, not the intimidating what-if possibilities.'* She was nowhere near step five. The present was definitely intimidating. No amount of counting was going to settle her nerves at this point. The bad thing was happening now. "Wait. I have a key."

She fumbled in her pocket and came up with the key Cale Hartwood had given her. Groping the tabletop nearby, she found her phone, turned it on and used the light from the screen to make her way to the closed door.

She stared at the door, ran her fingers over the surface, finding nothing. There was nowhere to insert a key. Frantic now, the key made a clink on the concrete floor as she yanked on the safety bar. She tried pushing it. The only portal out of this basement room was securely locked. She silently cursed wave after wave of internal trembling that took over her knees and made her hands quake. Flattening her palms on the cold steel, she gripped it in an attempt to steady the quakes.

"We're locked in."

[END OF EXCERPT]

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# Cheryl