

A photograph of a man and a woman from behind, looking out at the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. The bridge's red towers and cables are prominent on the left. The water is blue, and a sailboat is visible in the lower right. The sky is a clear blue with some light clouds. The overall mood is romantic and scenic.

ASPEN GOLD SERIES

*Close to
the Heart*

Debra Hines

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Prologue

Cora Fleming smiled and accepted the flute of Prosecco Joyce Bennett handed her. “Thanks. Hopefully this will settle my nerves. I’m not used to being in the spotlight.”

Joyce, Spencer Historical Society’s newly-installed president, sipped from her own glass, branding the rim with her vibrant red lipstick. “You deserve to be honored for your service over the years. Now that you’re retiring and your new book on Spencer’s history is out, tonight’s celebration here at the restored schoolhouse is the perfect occasion.”

The cold, bubbly beverage tasted of crisp pears on a blistering summer afternoon. Cora stood behind the teacher’s desk and surveyed the people milling around the brightly-lit room. “I have you to thank, Joyce. Without your encouragement, editing and organizational skills, my book would have wilted on the vine.”

Joyce gave her a quick, affectionate hug. “As soon as I had a peek at your meticulously documented manuscript and the photographs you’d collected, I knew the book would be an asset, not only to the historical society, but as a marketing tool for Spencer’s tourist trade.”

“*Spencer, the Town and the People* was a labor of love. The booklets I’d written on Spencer’s colorful past and legends inspired me.” Cora raised her glass to Joyce in a mini-toast. “I’ll leave the commercial aspects to you and the chamber.”

She smiled to herself. Joyce was the P.T. Barnum of their thriving mountain town. The vivacious woman had migrated from the Chamber of Commerce to the historical society, infusing its flagging membership with her industrious enthusiasm. Once she’d determined Joyce’s heart was in the right place, Cora had endorsed her for president.

Cora frowned. “I’m getting butterflies in my stomach at the prospect of standing up and making my speech tonight.”

Joyce patted her shoulder, her tone breezy. “You’ll be fine. Drink the rest of your wine and try to eat a little. You’ve got about a half-hour until the program begins. We’ll show the video first. I’ll follow with the presentation, you give your remarks, sign copies of your book and you’re done.”

“Easy for you to say.” Cora sighed and shifted her cramped feet in the unfamiliar flats. She wished she’d worn her comfy sandals, but the beat-up leather footwear would’ve clashed with her tailored slacks and silky tunic top.

“Oh boy,” Joyce whispered. “I’m being summoned. Excuse me.”

Cora finished her Prosecco and eyed the buffet set up along the back wall. She toyed with the idea of cheese and crackers, heavy on the crackers, but her stomach revolted. Eating after the speech was a better plan.

Gazing around at the one-room schoolhouse’s freshly painted walls and the restored windows letting in the waning sun, Cora was filled with a sense of pride.

Once the society had gotten the ball rolling, the entire community had contributed to the renovation by pitching in with monetary donations as well as old books, report cards and other classroom memorabilia. The historical society had been able to move the derelict structure from the abandoned construction site to its present location in Olde Town.

Guests hovered between the rows of desks and engaged in animated conversation. Cora spotted her reclusive friend and neighbor, Jesse Webster, hands in his pockets, examining the class photographs displayed near the front of the room. Cora’s apprehension about her speech evaporated. Just the person she’d wanted to talk to.

“Jesse. What a nice surprise. Thank you for coming. I know social get-togethers like this aren’t your thing.”

The tall, elegant man turned at her greeting. A pleased smile animated his handsome face and pale blue eyes. “Cora, I’m always willing to make an exception for you.”

“Where’s Stuart?”

“He’s waiting in line to buy your book.” Jesse enveloped her in a friendly embrace. “Congratulations on both counts. Maybe now that you’re retiring I can convince Stuart it’s time to quit the gun business and start looking for our Italian villa.”

“I don’t understand why he didn’t sell his shops at the same time you closed your law practice,” Cora said.

Jesse shrugged. “I argued my case, but the stubborn man wasn’t ready. Maybe....” An expectant grin crossed his features. “Maybe Thursday, after he’s had a glass or two of wine, you and I can nudge Stuart a little closer to Italy. We’re having Frankie Spampnado’s deliver.”

Her friend's lighthearted conjecture regarding his spouse's cautious nature sparked another idea. "I was going to bring a new card game for us to try this month, but I'll gladly endure dominoes again if it'll butter up Stuart a little more."

Jesse laughed outright. "Good idea. I think fate is on our side."

Cora hoped Jesse was right and providence was in their corner. Her corner to be specific. A quick glance assured her their conversation would remain private. She touched his sleeve, inhaled a fortifying breath and lowered her voice. "Jesse—"

"Aunt Cora! Jesse!" Miranda Elliot strode towards them, still slim in dark slacks and a smocked top. Her green eyes brimmed with urgency. "I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation, but the photographer from the Herald is here and Joyce asked me to remind you the program begins in ten minutes."

Her news would have to wait. Unconsciously cupping her palm over the concealed ring beneath her blouse, Cora reluctantly switched the gears of her mind back to tonight's festivities.

"Calm down, Mandy. You'll get your baby all upset."

Miranda placed a hand on her abdomen. "I know. Don't tell Declan. He's already over-protective."

Cora planted a quick kiss on Jesse's cheek. "Let's talk later," she whispered.

He arched a white brow and retreated behind his amiable smile. "I'm happy for you, Cora. We'll see you Thursday night." He nodded at Miranda. "You're looking well, Miranda. Congratulations."

Jesse had given no indication he'd stick around after the festivities. She didn't expect him to, but she fervently hoped he would. Cora followed Miranda to the back of the building, fielding well-wishes from friends and acquaintances.

Immediately after the photo shoot, the overhead lights flickered and the program commenced. The video was a montage of photographs, chronicling her years with the historical society. The nostalgic images, paired with wistful background music, called to mind fond memories and past members she'd worked with, Grandma Binney among them. Cora's eyes misted.

John Lennon's song *Imagine* accompanied the last round of photographs in a moving tribute to the glory days of the schoolhouse. Class pictures from the educational structure's inception to the end of its years of service hovered and flashed off the screen in a series of

special effects. Her grade school classmates bearing toothy smiles evoked the piercing smells of chalk dust and leaded pencils. Snapshots of dances and academic events culminated in a Polaroid photograph taken at an end-of-year picnic at Brook Park.

The three of them stood in front of the gazebo, their arms casually draped around one another, David on the left, Cora in the center, and Murphy on the right. Carefree youth suspended for eternity. She'd worn her favorite yellow spaghetti-strap dress. Both the guys sported Madras shirts and cut-offs.

Cora clasped the ring she wore around her neck on a silver chain, her attention riveted on the tall, slim boy with the dark, curly hair and laughing eyes.

The video ended to polite applause. The blinding overhead lights blinked on, dispelling the image, but her sorrowful memory remained. Cora repositioned the ring beneath her neckline and, breathing deeply, struggled for composure.

Joyce called her up front where she was presented with an engraved plaque, a gorgeous bouquet of mauve roses and a gift certificate. Gazing out at the sea of friendly faces, her nervousness vanished and she spoke straight from the heart, her handwritten remarks forgotten in her pocket.

Humbled by the applause and relieved the ceremony was over, she had enough time to gulp a glass of cold water and eat a slice of cheese sandwiched between two crackers before Joyce whisked her off to sign books.

"Congratulations, Cora." Last in line, Willa Spencer approached, clutching a newly-minted copy of *Spencer, the Town and the People* for her to inscribe. "I can't wait to show the finished product to Jakob. He sends his regrets."

"The historical society owes him a debt of gratitude for his hand in moving this building and hiring Declan to supervise its restoration." Cora signed the title page and handed the book back to Willa with an appreciative smile. "Thank you for the cover art."

"My pleasure, Cora. The society put together a beautiful celebration. I loved the video, although I choked up a little. The music took me back to some tumultuous times."

Once Willa departed, Cora sagged back in her chair and closed her eyes. Willa's remark had hit home. The early seventies had not only rocked the country with social upheaval, but Cora's shattered personal life as well.

The small entry room where her table was set up was deserted. She stood and stretched. Joyce had brought her a piece of cake, but she was hungry for more of the cheese and crackers.

Jesse walked in from outside, a concerned smile creasing his face. “You were about to tell me something when we were interrupted.”

Cora’s spirits rose, her fatigue and hunger forgotten. “Jesse, thank you for staying. You don’t know how much I—”

“Joyce waylaid Stuart about some guns her husband inherited, but I don’t know how much time we have.” He sat on the spare chair and gently grasped her by the arm to join him .

The taxing events of the evening and the emotional impact of David’s image in that last photo brought unexpected tears to her eyes. Pressing her lips firmly together, she searched her friend’s compassionate features. “Jesse, I’m finally doing it. I’m searching for my baby.”

He nodded. A resigned smile deepened the lines around his blue eyes. “I figured you would eventually.”

“Two weeks ago, I engaged an online detective agency that specializes in locating children given up for adoption.” Cora twisted her hands anxiously. “I understand she’s a grown woman by now living a life of her own. I don’t know if anything will come of it, but I had to try. I couldn’t get her off my mind.”

Jesse cradled her hands between his. After a thoughtful silence, he spoke in a low, soothing tone. “Cora, I know you’ve been thinking about finding your child for years. It hasn’t been an easy decision.”

“I’m excited and I’m terrified. I had to tell someone.” Her gaze locked with his. “And you’re the only one left who knows my secret.”

Chapter 1

Cora Fleming finished sweeping the wide front porch and leaned against the broom. The balmy wedge of bright Colorado sunshine revitalized her. She stared at the blue-and-white for sale sign that the realtor had planted in her lawn earlier this morning. The woman had assured Cora that Spencer's flourishing summer tourist season was the perfect time to list her Victorian home and shop. Customers who treasured antiques and patronized The Attic would be Cora's key potential buyers.

The realtor had left Cora an embossed company folder containing her card and a recommended to-do list, including the name of a professional stager she highly recommended.

Cora harbored misgivings about her decision. She had never planned to sell the Victorian structure that had served as her home and antique business for over forty years. What would Grandma Binney say? Her beloved grandmother had left Cora the house and the shop. But once Cora had made the decision to find the baby she'd been forced to give up for adoption and engaged the detective agency, she'd sat down at her kitchen table and had taken stock of the direction her life was taking.

Next to locating her daughter, she'd always wanted to travel to far-flung places like the South Pacific while she was still active. If she was tied to the business, she couldn't take the time off. Determined to follow through on her travel resolution, she'd applied for a passport and called Hometown Real Estate.

She'd stay in town until she'd located her child. Cora had no control over how long the process would take, but if her daughter was searching for her biological mother that would speed things up. It had been only ten days since she'd put the ball in motion, but waiting was hard and contrary to her nature.

Cora religiously checked her emails each morning before opening the shop, and after she closed. Most days, The Attic and her active participation in the community had kept her busy enough that she hadn't had time to stew about all her unanswered questions.

Now she was retired. Her long-standing commitment to the historical society was officially over, as of today when she handed over everything to Joyce.

Oh crap. Joyce would be here any minute to pick up the executive binder and files. Cora had meant to bring them down with her this morning. Setting the broom aside, she pushed through the half-open door and nearly ran over Agnes. The cat leapt out of her way and vanished into the dim interior of the shop.

Bustling through the kitchen, Cora's hip connected with the heavy maple chair angled in front of the counter. She yelped a curse and massaged the throbbing joint as she climbed the back stairs to her bedroom. "You'd think I'd have learned to put things away by now."

The doorbell rang.

Joyce. Cradling the binder and toting the portable file case, Cora cautiously descended the remaining steps to the kitchen.

"I'm coming." Giving the offending chair wide berth, Cora pasted a welcoming smile on her face and rushed into the entryway. "Sorry Joyce...."

The greeting died on her lips.

Stuart. Jesse's lean, silver-haired spouse stood in the doorway, his stricken face wearing a dazed expression. He pressed his lips tight together, but his chin quivered.

Cora's breath hitched in her throat. The file case hit the floor and tipped on its side. The binder slipped from her grasp, landing square on her sandaled feet. Ignoring the shooting pain, she pressed her hand over her pounding heart. "Stuart! What's wrong?"

"Jess...." his throat worked. "Jess is...." He raised a hand to his eyes. "He's gone, Cora. He died."

A summer afternoon, years ago, flashed in her mind.

David.

She blinked the image away and gathered Stuart in a clumsy embrace. Cora recalled her recent encounter with Jesse at the schoolhouse. She'd cherished his thoughtful silence, his compassionate, understanding ear. The light in his blue eyes as he'd laughingly recruited her help in convincing Stuart to retire.

Stuart wept soundlessly, his arms squeezing her as though she were a rag doll.

Cora pressed her cheek against Stuart's shoulder. She wept for Jesse, for Stuart, and for the fickleness of life.

Finally, Stuart heaved a sigh. Releasing her, he pulled a handkerchief from the back pocket of his jeans. He wiped his face and blew his nose. “Sorry. I can’t stop crying. Jess always said I was an over-emotional slice of humanity.”

Cora sniffed and nodded, searching the folds of her skirt for the pocket containing her own embroidered scrap of fabric. “He always did have a way of mixing the eloquent with the mundane.”

Stuart managed a shaky laugh. He folded his arms and looked down at the floor. “I came directly from the hospital. I wanted you to know....” His voice wavered.

He grimaced and cleared his throat. “I still have to call Jess’s brother on the west coast. I’m not looking forward to that.”

Cora nodded in sympathy. Murphy Webster was Jesse’s younger brother and David’s best friend. She hadn’t seen Murphy since he’d gotten married and moved to San Francisco. That had been a lifetime ago.

Stuart sighed again and squinted at the face of the grandfather clock standing sentinel at the entrance to the shop. “The bank will be open in a few minutes. Our papers are in the safe deposit box. Jess was the planner. He had me sit down and make my own will out as soon as we were married.”

Plunging his hands into his pockets, Stuart’s agonized gaze swept the ceiling, the walls. A muscle twitched in his jaw.

Poor Stuart. She knew how deep the pain of loss could cut. She couldn’t think about Jesse right now. Thinking about losing Jesse would invariably lead to thoughts of David. A stray tear breached her dammed grief and leaked from the corner of her eye. If Stuart stayed here much longer, she’d be swept away in another unbearable tide of the past and her own sorrow. She couldn’t give in to the feelings.

The clock struck the hour. Cora patted Stuart’s shoulder and managed a tremulous smile. Biting her lip, she stooped and retrieved the binder. “I had better open the shop. If there’s anything I can do—”

Such a trite, helpless phrase. She hated useless platitudes, but she didn’t know what else to say. She blotted her wet eyes with the crumpled hanky still fisted in her free hand. “I’ll brew us a pot of strong, black tea. It’s usually not too busy the first hour.”

Stuart shifted toward the door. “Tea’s not what I have in mind, but you’re an angel to offer. Guess I’ll head over to the bank. Then give his brother the call.”

Turning back to her, Stuart speared his hand through his hair. “God, I hate giving news like this over the phone.” He crushed her in another hug and planted a quick peck on her cheek. “Thanks for everything.”

Cora stood on the threshold, clasping the binder to her chest until Stuart crossed the street and climbed into his truck. She didn’t envy him having to call Murphy. Leaning against the doorframe, she closed her eyes, trying to remember Murphy’s face the last time she’d seen him.

The only image she could conjure up was inextricably linked to the distant summer afternoon that David had died. Murphy had been wearing cut-offs and a white baseball shirt, his tanned, skinny arms hanging awkwardly at his sides. Before he’d opened his mouth, the haunted expression in his gray eyes had told her everything.

Cora inhaled deeply, shoving down the dark memory. She imagined Murphy would be coming back to Spencer for Jesse’s memorial service. The prospect of reuniting with her old friend after years of separation, sparked her boundless curiosity.

The rumble of a powerful engine split the silence. Stuart’s new Ram truck was a gas hog, spewing diesel fumes and carbon into the once-pristine mountain air.

Shaking her head, Cora planted her hands on her hips and stared after the obscene vehicle until it rounded the corner and disappeared. She’d better wash her face and get her ducks in a row before Joyce showed up.

Murphy Webster ignored the new ringtone announcing a call. He’d meant to mute his new, smarter phone before stepping aboard the *Stargazer*, but the buttons and commands were different. The gentle rocking of the boat beneath his feet reassured him. Life was good. The *Stargazer* was his and, with sails unfurled, she would take him around the world.

Palms flat, he leaned closer and squinted down at the chart spread out on the table. He fished around in his pockets and lifted the pile of papers on the nearby bench. Shaking his head, he laughed softly to himself. It didn’t matter how many pair of readers he had, he could never find them when he needed to see.

The phone rang again. He blew out an exasperated breath and stared up at the low cabin ceiling. Shannan and Trinity almost always texted him. It was probably a political robocall, or someone asking for money.

He'd run out to the car, trade out the phone for his emergency glasses in the glove box, and finally get back to plotting the first leg of his trip.

Murphy climbed out on the deck where a stiff breeze swept through his hair. The fog was rolling in, swallowing the light and warmth of the afternoon sun. He'd meant to come out in the morning, but after mowing the lawn he'd had to tie up some loose ends concerning his final legal aid case.

He was officially retired, but retirement wouldn't feel real until he cast off and sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge.

The damn thing went off again. He held the phone at arm's length and peered at the screen. Jesse.

Murphy grinned. A conversation with Jesse was a welcome interruption. His brother in Colorado rarely called. They'd trade legal war stories, he'd ask Jesse how the fishing was and Murphy would give Jesse an updated itinerary on his voyage.

Murphy pressed the phone against his ear. "This is a pleasant surprise."

"Hello, may I speak to Murphy Webster?"

It was hard to hear above the wind and the marina traffic, but it wasn't Jesse. The guy's voice sounded odd. Murphy frowned. "Speaking."

Silence. A deep sigh. "My name's Stuart Fiske. I'm a close friend of Jess's. There's no easy way to say this."

It sounded as though the man was crying. Murphy rubbed his neck harder. His stomach knotted. "Hold on a minute."

Rushing to get below, he missed a step and slid the rest of the way into the cabin. He scrambled to his feet and shut his eyes.

Don't say it.

"Jess passed away—early this morning." The guy choked.

No, not Jesse. Not his big brother. Murphy's throat tightened and his own voice sounded strangled. "How did it happen?"

He sank onto the cluttered bench. The amplified crackle of papers under his butt echoed in his ears.

“The doctors think it was an embolism.”

Murphy nodded as though the man was sitting across the table from him.

The friend cleared his throat. “I apologize. I hate doing this over the phone. Jess left specific instructions regarding arrangements. He wanted his body donated. His organs have already been harvested. There’s a sealed letter here with your name on it. He left me one too. He named you executor.”

Murphy gripped the table edge and rose to his feet. Papers and charts cascaded onto the floor. He crossed the narrow cabin to the galley, tore a ragged sheet off the paper towel rack and scrubbed his face. “I’ll book a flight.”

Doing something, even something as commonplace as booking an airline ticket was better than dwelling on his brother’s sudden death.

“I can pick you up at the airport.”

“That’s okay, I’ll rent a car, but thanks. What number can I reach you at?” Murphy grabbed the pen he’d been using. “Stuart, right?”

“Yes, Stuart Fiske. You can call Jess’s phone. Figured I’d better look through his contacts and notify everyone.”

Murphy heard the distinct rattle of ice cubes against glass. A hefty splash of scotch would hit the spot right about now. He glanced at his watch. Normally, he had his first drink at five, but to hell with that.

“Jess only had three people listed in his phone, besides me.”

Stuart’s voice jolted Murphy back to the pressing matters at hand. Not surprising. Jesse had become pretty much of a recluse, especially since he’d retired and sold the family law practice.

“You, a Shannan Thomas—”

“Thompson. She’s my daughter, Jesse’s niece.”

“Sorry. Shannan Thompson, and his neighbor, Cora Fleming. That was it. You, me, your daughter and Aunt Cora.”

The ice rattled again and Stuart sighed. “I can see the bottom of my glass. Time for a refill.”

Murphy could feel his composure slipping.

“What do you mean by ‘Aunt’ Cora?” He fumbled in the compact cupboard over the bar and snagged a squat tumbler. “The Cora Fleming I knew had no brothers or sisters to have nieces and nephews.”

“Don’t have a clue, but years ago when I first visited Spencer and Jess introduced me, she referred to herself as Aunt Cora. I thought it was odd at the time, but the name stuck, and it fits her now. I’m going to go get that drink. I’ll wait to hear from you. Wish we could’ve met under better circumstances.”

He hung up before Murphy could thank him. Murphy frowned and tipped the half-empty bottle of scotch, filling his glass a third full.

Aunt Cora? He gulped a fortifying swallow of the smooth liquor as he opened the tiny freezer to get ice. The whiskey burned going down, leaving a consoling trail of heat in its wake.

Murphy splashed more liquor over the ice and sipped. Aunt Cora sounded like an old lady. The Cora Rose Fleming he remembered had been a tall slender girl with deep brown eyes, long russet hair and a very passionate heart. ‘Hippie heart,’ he used to tease her. A very passionate heart reserved for one man only, and that man hadn’t been him.

Braced against the counter, Murphy raised his glass and swallowed. The alcohol fumes stung his nostrils. Let’s not go down that road.

Phone in one hand and drink in the other, he concentrated on navigating across the swaying boat over to the sitting area.

He set his glass on the low table and thumbed his travel app. The glowing screen blurred. Damn.

Blinking hard, he dropped his phone in his lap and pressed the heels of his hands over his eyes as though to stem his gut-wrenching sorrow.

Losing Jesse was like losing Davey, Nan and the baby all over again. His best friend, then his wife and his infant son.

The muted chime of a notification roused him. His daughter, Shannan.

Dinner tonight? My famous clam chowder! Need 3 small sourdough bread bowls. Shannan and Trinity. His anchors. Murphy grinned. Wiping his damp palms on his slacks, he texted.

You bet. Usual time? He sipped his drink and opened his travel app. Another message appeared at the top of his screen.

Mom says yes. Add ice-cream for you and me. Murphy sent his granddaughter a thumbs up emoji, made his flight reservations and arranged for a rental car. Phones were a nuisance but they sure came in handy. He closed his eyes and smiled. The heaviness in his chest had eased. He wouldn't have to go home to his big, empty house and eat alone tonight.

His smile faded. He'd tell the girls about Jesse after dinner. Murphy cast a wistful glance around his boat's spacious living area. He'd been within spitting distance of his dream. Once again life had happened.

He rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. The delay couldn't be helped. He'd settle his brother's estate and pick up where he'd left off.

Murphy relaxed back against the cushions and savored another swallow. Spencer, Colorado. He hadn't been home in years. It would be nice to see Cora again. Had she changed as much as he had?

[END OF EXCERPT]

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